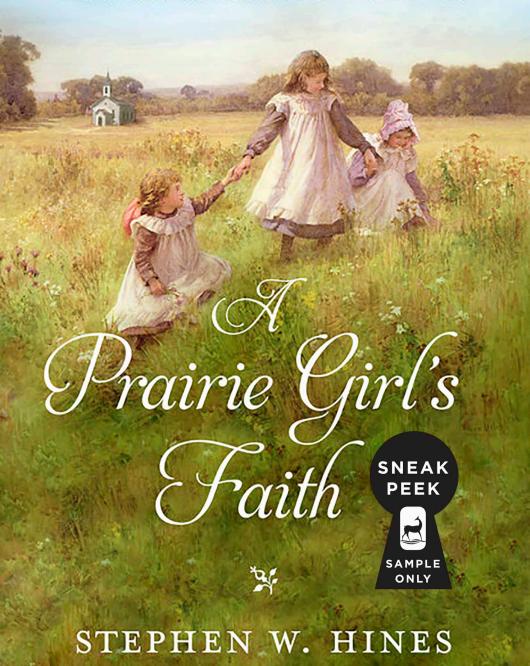
THE SPIRITUAL LEGACY of LAURA INGALLS WILDER



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STEPHEN W. HINES





A PRAIRIE GIRL'S FAITH

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For Gwen—who else?

Contents



	Introduction
I	Pioneer Faith5
2	Still Looking for the Promised Land
3	Partners in Faith
4	Shadows on the Grass
5	A Mary and Martha Mix
6	Laura and Rose 61
7	Building the Little House
8	Songs in the Night
9	The Church Potluck
10	What Laura Means to Us
	Appendix 1: Remembering the De Smet of Old 163
	Appendix 2: An Interview with Laura's Friend Neta Seal 175
	Acknowledgments
	Notes
	Bibliography
	Index 211



Introduction

As a child I learned my Bible lessons by heart, in the good old-fashioned way, and once won the prize for repeating correctly . . . verses from the Bible.

-LAURA INGALLS WILDER

y the fourth grade at Victory Elementary School in Miami County, Kansas, I was mostly literate but had run out of reading material. I was tired of *Silver Chief: Dog of the North, White Fang*, and *My Friend Flicka*. The youth culture of my age was fixated either on Lassie or on young teens living impossible adventures, like the Hardy Boys. I couldn't identify with these characters.

Down the road from our old two-room schoolhouse, which bulged with a student population of fifty-two, I could see the older one-room schoolhouse, made of stone to last forever, that was now a hay shed. The hay it held was probably a grass that is known as little bluestem. We called it buffalo grass, and I'm sure the buffalo did eat it when they roamed the prairie. Up and down both sides of the road that led to school were stone walls behind which "tall" buffalo grass grew and further completed a very rustic picture of our school environment. We



thought we were children of the plains and were inspired by some books from Bobbs-Merrill Publishing Company titled Childhood of Famous Americans, a series that assured us we came from excellent heritage and sterling stock.

Is it any wonder then that I should pick up a book off our thinly stocked library shelves, one I hadn't noticed before with an illustration of a young girl skipping across the top of an old dugout house covered with grass and snuggled into a bank by a stream?

On the Banks of Plum Creek was my own little secret discovery. It looked like a girls' book, so I probably didn't display it much when I became absorbed in its pages. But it was unlike any book I'd read up until then. Laura Ingalls was telling her story from her personal point of view, and every family member seemed as real as the people I knew around me. We didn't have any sod shanties about, but we sure had a lot of rugged-looking land! That is why the tone of Laura's personal narrative made me warm to her immediately.

Geography was not one of my better subjects in school, so when I first came across the book *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, I associated the title with the creek that ran only a quarter mile from our church. This thinking seemed natural to me: Plum Creek Methodist Church was where I attended, and, of course, Laura must have settled nearby. Why, I knew she had lived in Kansas at one time, so my conclusion seemed logical for a fourth grader! It didn't take me long to figure out the error of my ways, but that feeling of kinship with Laura had only grown.

Most of all, what drew me further into the world of Laura and her family was that the more I read of her pioneer life, the more I felt I had met a kindred spirit who, if we ever met, I would know at once as a

Introduction 3

friend. Laura and I were imaginary playmates, after a fashion. Why, we even shared some Methodist experiences and probably sang some of the same hymns.

I am a descendant of pioneers myself. The first Hines—so far as I have been able to determine by the records my father gathered—takes us back to the American Revolution and to somewhere in the East, maybe Virginia, but no farther. I have to settle for that. We can't all have come over on the *Mayflower*.

George Washington Hines (or perhaps Hinds) sired four sons who served in the Civil War. At least I have a note to that effect in the family archives. One of his sons, Henry, born in 1846, lived to be ninety-two and died in 1938, well after my own father had been born. My dad served in the Marine Corps during World War II and right after that got married and began farming in eastern Kansas.

Although it was after World War II, Victor W. Hines was also a pioneer. Dad bought forty acres and our house for about \$2,000 back in 1948. We moved into that place with no plumbing, no electricity, and no furnace. It was a cold frame building, heated by wood, and in some spots in the wall you could see right through to the outside. After all these years that still seems sort of like pioneering to me and is why I take up the story and values of Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series so earnestly.

Knowing more about Laura's homesteading experiences has become a lifelong pursuit, and my conviction has grown that her Christian pilgrimage is important to us all. Pioneer values of hope, endurance, courage, and religious conviction, shaped by our Lord and his teaching, have given us a vision of America that we should strive for. Some recent books have tended to dismiss the past as presented to us

by Mrs. Wilder, but I myself cannot feel this way. Our forebears were not perfect examples of what Christians should look like; nevertheless, this woman and her beloved family give us a picture of a healthy, loving faith. And they can guide us all into the future as we grow in our faith.

Let us begin Laura's journey, which is our journey as well.

Pioneer Faith

There is no turning back nor standing still; we must go forward, into the future, generation after generation toward the accomplishment of the ends that have been set for the human race.

-LAURA INGALLS WILDER

irtually every reader and fan of Laura Ingalls Wilder's children's books comes to realize that her religious faith is woven into her family's story of pioneering in the old West. Throughout the eight original titles there are, in the foreground, references to Scripture, hymns, and prayer—to a daily life that experienced the reality of God.

We are no more than twenty-three pages into the first title, *Little House in the Big Woods*, before Pa is playing his fiddle from which poured such standards as "Rock of Ages," "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand," and "A Shelter in the Time of Storm," songs that were in the hymnals of my youth but are seldom found sixty years later.

To find the roots of Laura's faith, we must, of course, discover



what we can about the spiritual journey of her parents, Charles and Caroline.

The Family That Travels Together Stays Together

Fortunately, Dr. John E. Miller, professor emeritus of history at South Dakota State University, has noted their journey and gives us some insights into early Ingalls and Quiner (Ma Ingalls) beginnings. Any recounting would be almost a blank without his work, but even he cannot tell us everything. (For example, we know that Ma's father drowned in Lake Michigan when Ma was only four, but we do not really know the overall effect this had on her.)

What Miller does tell us is that both the Ingalls and Quiner families, along with many other families of their day, saw almost all their hopes for economic gain to be in traveling west. There needed to be a movement from the crowded East into the vastness of the "wilderness." Their faith and family backgrounds certainly went with them on the journey.

Grandma and Grandpa Ingalls (Laura and Lansford) migrated all the way from Cuba, New York, to the woods of Wisconsin. Both of them would have grown up in a sort of mixed Puritan and Congregational background common to the times. They would have considered themselves in the mainstream of Protestantism of that day, with elements of reformational teaching of the Bible as an absolute authority on doctrine, supplemented by attitudes that came out of the Great Awakening led by Jonathan Edwards (1703–58).

Edwards believed, in part, that God was wrathful and impatient toward sinners and ready to kick butt, so to speak. Later revivalists of

7

the era following the Civil War were more likely to emphasize God's love and mercy as reasons to live the Christian life.

The background for Henry and Charlotte Quiner (Ma and Pa Quiner) was much the same, except that during their migrations they spent time in Connecticut, Ohio, and Illinois before ending up near Pepin, Wisconsin, which is near the border with Minnesota.

The Quiner and Ingalls families were neighbors, which most likely explains how Caroline and Charles met. They were married on February 1, 1860, in Pepin and were still residing there when their first child, Mary, was born in 1865. Laura came next on February 7, 1867.

Later in the family's story the Congregational Church was to become a happy home for both Charles and Caroline Ingalls, but during these years in Pepin we know only of a Methodist church in the town.

What we do know is that Pa and Ma and the girls lived about seven miles from town, and it is unlikely any formal Christian schooling began there. More likely Pa played the music for the hymns they learned, and Ma likely conducted Bible study and helped the girls memorize Scripture verses. Over time Laura learned by heart over a hundred Bible verses.

Ma was a gentle instructor and wanted her children to be good, both in the sense of being obedient, as well as acting properly, as was expected of young ladies. She applied that old rule that said women had the responsibility for maintaining community standards for sobriety and honesty. Some men thought that feminine nature civilized their "natural" unruliness.

We have the Little House books themselves to testify to these goals. Laura is told not to be selfish but to share her doll with others. Mary gets away with a certain amount of meanness by knowing just how to play the game of being good, but she torments Laura about her plain brown hair and bosses her around. Mary is also good at not being caught, but Laura is never very good at hiding her misbehavior.

In *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura rebels against all the rules connected with Sunday. In fact, she declares that she hates Sunday. This is a pretty bold statement for any child of that age to make, and Pa has to gather Laura tenderly to himself and tell her of how his own father and his brothers had disobeyed and snuck out on a Sunday to play on a sled. A squealing pig gave away the misdeed when they struck it as they were careening down a hill. They were caught in the act, and the punishment followed.

Pa tells Laura that those times in his youth were even stricter for girls, who weren't allowed to run outside and play at all. When Laura falls asleep, it is to the sound of her father's fiddle playing hymns such as "Rock of Ages." His counsel has given her at least some comfort.

Laura was what I would call "God conscious" from early on in her life. From Laura Ingalls Wilder's manuscript entitled *Pioneer Girl*, edited by Pamela Smith Hill, we learn that Laura as a child was warned of the dangers of licking icicles—one might fall on a girl's head and injure her. Laura at first obeyed the rule but gave in little by little until she licked an icicle and then felt terribly guilty about it because she had disobeyed Ma. Her heart ached for days over what she had done before she finally confessed to Ma. Here's what happened next, as quoted in *Pioneer Girl*:

It was such a comfort to tell her [Ma] all about it. She smoothed my hair and said of course she would forgive me, because I had told her I was sorry and that now I must say a little prayer and ask God to forgive me too. She told me to say "Dear God please



Pioneer Faith 9

forgive me for telling a lie?" [sic] And when I did, Ma said she was sure I would never be so naughty again, then she tucked me in kissed me and went away. The fiddle was singing again as I went to sleep.

In 1868 when Laura was just a year old, the family moved from Wisconsin to Kansas Territory. Since Laura was still so young, Ma and Pa would have continued to guide her spiritual formation. In fact, all the information we have on this time comes from the memories of Pa and Ma, who related them later to Laura when she could understand them.

Sundays would have been observed at home, as they lived thirteen miles from the nearest town of Independence, Kansas. The "now I lay me down to sleep" prayers would have been said to the sound of coyotes barking and wolves howling in the company of the lonely dark. The fact is, the struggles inherent in the pioneer life tended to drive most folk to a dependence on God. It aided in character development to have a little fear of the wild. One wanted to be independent and to achieve success, but it helped when a neighbor was handy. The elements of nature were certainly out of one's control, and a thunderstorm or prairie downpour was often thought of as a frightening act of God.

I do not mean to suggest by all this that the little family on the prairie was perfect. Hardly. They shared the same prejudice toward the Native Americans as did many other settlers. And it would have been advanced religious thinking indeed for them to realize the European and the true American were brothers under the skin. Here and there an occasional missionary might speak against injustices to the Indians. Indeed, a number of Office of Indian Affairs agents spoke up against the way their "charges" were treated.



But the doctrine of Manifest Destiny—that the white man had a right to all the territory across America to the Pacific—was well established. Laura and Mary were instructed to never let their dog, Jack, loose when Indians were around, but we never hear Pa saying they should never have moved into Indian Territory in the first place. No, I'm afraid many a pioneer felt that God must be white or like Holman Hunt's painting of the time, which showed a rather Gentile-looking Christ knocking at heart's door.

Naturally, the pioneers sought the help of God, even though their choice to move and live in an often harsh frontier environment was the reason they were in harm's way. Certainly, the beloved hymns of the nineteenth century reminded them that God was a defense and shelter, and Pa would have played many a tune on his fiddle to keep the spirits of his family up.

Pa had his hopes. He was certainly counting on the government to declare the Indian land open to settlement, and history would have led him to believe this would happen, so his wait-and-see attitude made some sense.

At their crude cabin in Indian Territory, the family was too far away from Independence to visit, except to gather supplies. That journey was always made by Pa. Ma Ingalls and the children were left virtually isolated from civilization. A twenty-six-mile round trip with three small children (Carrie was born there in 1870) would have been nearly impossible and certainly not undertaken on a weekly basis to attend church.

Even if Ma and Pa could have made the trip, the churches in Independence—most likely Methodist or Baptist—might not have been a good fit for them. At this point in their lives, Methodism might well have been a bit too emotional, and the Baptist faith just hadn't



been in their past experience at all. (Ironically, in later life Laura did become a Methodist, but her appreciation for privacy in religious expression never changed.)

The Family That Makes Music Together Stays Together

The Ingalls family most likely found emotional release from the tensions of their frontier situation in the old hymns of the church. The songs of a writer like Charles Wesley would have indeed provided a welcome relief and been found in any hymnal. Familiar verses such as these, from various hymns, would have brought much comfort and encouragement:

O for a thousand tongues to sing My great Redeemer's praise.

Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven to earth come down.

And can it be that I should gain An interest in the Savior's blood?

The certainties of one's heavenly home go far when each new day can bring new peril. *Little House on the Prairie* tells of one instance when the family was awakened by the terrible screams of a panther prowling near the Verdigris River. Pa's singing helped calm his family's fears.

Dr. Dale Cockrell, former Vanderbilt professor of musicology and American and southern studies, has noted that music from Pa's fiddle played a key role in developing the Ingalls family's identity and unity. In *The Happy Land Companion*, written to supplement information for his CDs containing songs sung by the Ingalls family, he reported that there are at least 126 songs in the Little House series, with references to hundreds of other tunes scattered throughout the eight books. He noted,

There are parlor songs, stage songs, minstrel show songs, patriotic songs, Scottish and Irish songs, hymns, spirituals, fiddle tunes, singing school songs, play party songs, folk songs, a Child ballad, broadside ballads, Christmas songs, catches and rounds, and references to "cowboy songs" and "Osage war dances." Throughout, the guiding musical spirit is her father Charles Ingalls (1835–1902), a musician who passed up few opportunities to sing and play his fiddle. It is "Pa's fiddle," carefully wrapped, stowed in its fiddle-box and cushioned by pillows, that accompanies the Ingalls family through all its adventures and comes to symbolize the endurance of the family unit in an often wild and threatening frontier world.

As the family camped on the Kansas prairie, waiting to see if the Osage Indians would agree to release their land to the American government, Pa kept the family singing. Hymns gave promise of rest and security, if not now, then "In the Sweet By and By."

There's a land that is fairer than day, And by faith we can see it afar; For the Father waits over the way To prepare us a dwelling place there.



In the sweet by and by
We shall meet on that beautiful shore;
In the sweet by and by
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

On the lighter side, Pa seems to have been the merry prankster of the family, and he used his extensive fiddle repertoire to keep family spirits high. The humorous tune "The Arkansas Traveler" is referenced in more than one Little House book. It was certainly played during their Kansas sojourn, for it was one of Pa's favorite comedic tunes.

The music itself has no words, but the accompanying story, which is related when the fiddler pauses, tells of a weary traveler who needs shelter during a rainy night. When he asks a man living in an old shack for directions to the nearest town, the homeowner tells him he's never been that way and doesn't know what lies beyond. When the traveler notices that the shack is leaking in every corner, he asks the owner why he doesn't fix the roof. The owner replies that he doesn't need to fix it when it isn't raining and to fix it when it is raining is foolish. The dialogue goes on like this until at last the weary traveler moves on.

Perhaps the most-played lighthearted melody of the time was "Captain Jinks." The song is referenced many times in Laura's remembrance of pioneer days. Interestingly enough, for such a religious family, the Ingallses rejoiced at Captain Jinks, who seemed to have no scruples at all.

Jinks at first admits that he feeds "[his] horse on corn and beans and sport[s] young ladies in their 'teens," though he is too old to be anybody's beau. By the second verse we find out he's "not cut out for the army" because he can't stand the discipline. He also admits to disgracefully having run from the enemy in battle. And his officers want to "kick him out of the army."

However, Jinks gets the last word: "Gentlemen! Kick me out! That's a very good joke, upon my word; I'll retire without being kicked out, and with the most profound reciprocity of feeling, you will ever find me Yours very truly," and then he sings his outlandish chorus again.

I regret that this song was not a part of my own family's repertoire, because Mom could play the piano quite well, and it would have been a favorite.

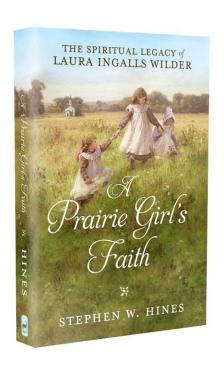
At the conclusion of *Little House on the Prairie*, the army acts by moving the settlers off of Osage Indian land. This was one of the few times when our federal government actually honored a treaty with the Indians—at least temporarily. Within another year, Washington, DC, reversed course and moved the Osage elsewhere.

In any case, Pa did not wait to be thrown off Indian land but in 1871 defiantly left the little cabin he had built (a replica now stands in its place near Independence) and moved the family once more.

The Ingalls family pilgrimage was not over. In fact, it was barely begun.

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