Pioneering or Politics?
Life in the *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder

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“The spirit of the frontier was one of humor and cheerfulness no matter what happened and whether the joke was on oneself or the other fellow.”

(From a speech delivered by Laura Ingalls Wilder at the Detroit Book Fair in 1937)
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Pioneering or Politics? Life in The Little House Books by Laura Ingalls Wilder

Introduction

The Little House books, credited to Laura Ingalls Wilder, still enjoy ample popularity, especially in the United States. While often seen as “a lasting record of a significant phase in American history” (Cooper, 702), they have also been described as “a consistently flawed description of American life that professes historical accuracy” (Tharp and Kleiman, 55). The issue is perhaps not so clearcut. As Maria Cimino suggests, Ingalls Wilder’s

“sympathetic insight into the urgent unrest that impelled men like her father to take part in the westward expansion and into the courageous patience of women like her mother who accompanied them, are but part of the sense of values and sense of fact that fill this record with the vital breath of full living” (Woodside, 152).

The complexity of these values and how they interact with fact indeed contribute to the lasting vitality of these literary works.

Since the 1970s, there has been a discussion among scholars about how much of the Little House books should be credited to Laura Ingalls Wilder, or “Mama Bess”, and how much of them should be credited to her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane (Wittig Albert, 275). One of the early articles discussing the matter is “Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Orange Notebooks and the Art of the Little House Books” by Rosa Ann Moore, which discusses possible involvement from Rose Wilder Lane by examining the differences in writing style (105–106). There is no clear consensus on the matter of authorship, which is further complicated by the fact that both mother and daughter denied any involvement from Wilder Lane for their entire lives. Some call the process an “intense collaboration” but take great care in pointing out Ingalls Wilder’s sense of eloquence and style (Miller, 2, 145). Others say Wilder Lane is responsible for “everything we admire” and list examples of her “transformation of the

1 Short for Laura Ingalls Wilder’s second name, Elizabeth.
manuscripts” (Holtz, 380). There are those who remark that Ingalls Wilder must have been born fully grown as a writer, because no development of style is seen through the series (Ward, 1025). This can, however, be attributed to a skilled editor or even a ghost writer. At the very least, Wilder Lane deserves credit for being a co-editor of the books.

Rose Wilder was the only child of Laura and Almanzo Wilder to survive more than a few weeks. She grew up in poverty while her parents struggled to find their feet after disaster upon disaster in the Dakota Territory. There was no money to pay any college education for the young Rose Wilder, but she was gifted. After completing high school, she worked her way from being a telegraph operator into becoming, according to reputation, one of the highest-paid female writers of the 1920s. As a correspondent for the Red Cross, Wilder Lane traveled extensively; she lived in Albania and went to Baghdad. She saw slums unlike those in the United States; she was even in the middle of a violent revolution in Albania (Holtz, 120). All of these experiences must have shaped the way she looked at the world. In 1939, she took a road trip in the United States with another political thinker, John Patric (Holtz, 291), and a few years after that, she published her political magnum opus, Discovery of Freedom.

However, long before the publication of Discovery of Freedom, Wilder Lane had made a number of political ideas shine through in the Little House books. While these books are credited to Ingalls Wilder alone, the influence of Wilder Lane is visible in some pivotal scenes and themes. The scenes/themes and what aspect of Libertarianism they represent will be discussed in Chapter 2.

The reason for the political views of Wilder Lane being present in the Little House books could well be that she saw her mother’s successful and widely read autobiography as a suitable channel to communicate her views. After all, two important characteristics of pioneers were self-reliance and an aversion to authority. These views also happen to be features of the Libertarianism that Wilder Lane advocated.
Mother and daughter had a complex relationship, but in the words of Christine Woodside, they

...overcame their fraught personal dynamic, came together, and made the Little House books. . . The books have represented the pioneer allegory’s triumphant side. Many of those pioneer homesteaders failed, and many were made miserable in failing. But all of us admire those who tried (202).

Wilder Lane must at least have edited the narrative heavily: while Pioneer Girl, the manuscript that started it all, is told by Ingalls Wilder from a first-person perspective, the published Little House books all use a third-person narrative. Laura² still tells the story for the most part, though. Another difference between Ingalls Wilder’s original manuscript and the published Little House books is that Pioneer Girl has adults as a target audience, while the Little House books are written for young (adult) readers.

Both Laura and Almanzo Wilder were opposed to government control, an aversion they passed on to their daughter. The federal assistance that the New Deal included was also a limitation of individual freedom. Wilder Lane may have reworked the past to fit her ideology (Tharp and Kleiman, 55), but that is not the main point. Instead, it is the reading of the Little House books as debate material to question the elements of the New Deal that puts them into a whole new perspective (Tharp and Kleiman, 56). Taking this approach to the series also sheds some light on passages where Wilder Lane is most likely to be the most influential contributor.

This essay will mainly examine authorship through a political perspective, not by examining writing style. The outspoken Libertarian message in the Little House books was a consequence of Wilder Lane’s influence, because while Ingalls Wilder appreciated freedom, her initial version of Pioneer Girl contains few political messages. The themes of freedom and cooperation are there, though, because they were core pioneer values. Some scholars

² Author’s note: Here, “Laura” refers to the character in the book; hence the first-name basis.
clearly approve of the influence of Wilder Lane, as in the case of Holtz (380), while others are anything but pleased (Tharp and Kleiman, 56).

Chapter 1 of this essay deals with the life of Wilder Lane in order to show how her experiences shaped her as a writer and political thinker. In Chapter 2, a thematic reading of the Little House books examines how Libertarian themes, such as self-reliance\(^3\), independence and freedom, are reflected in the series – and that the incorporated political ideas of Wilder Lane form the clues as to who wrote what rather than the writing style.

The restriction of self-reliance and freedom through government control, or interference, is seen as negative in the Little House books. There is only one good kind of control: self-control is seen as a virtue, and the lack of it is quite the opposite (Ward, 1026).\(^4\) Even the animals of the books will undergo some scrutiny, as a functioning team is one of the keys to success for the self-reliant pioneering farmer.

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\(^3\) The Little House definition of self-reliance is taking on almost any task from making cheese (Little House in the Big Woods, 187) to weaving fullcloth from homespun and dyed wool yarn (Farmer Boy, 3). What cannot be accomplished by the immediate family is either traded or shared. What the books seem to make a point of forgetting is the fact that both the Ingallses and two generations of Wilders had to depend on others. Most of the wheat the newlywed Wilders grew was meant for making money (The First Four Years, 50). Pa traded furs for supplies (Little House in the Big Woods, 101) and it was a joyful occasion when Almanzo’s mother managed to sell her butter at fifty cents a pound (Farmer Boy, 238).

\(^4\) Mother and daughter did not quite see eye to eye on the issue of self-control. While Wilder Lane wanted to express emotions, as she was accustomed to doing (Clair Fellman, 549). Her mother stressed the importance of pioneers being stoic when they encountered hardships – and Ingalls Wilder won over Wilder Lane regarding the issue (555).
Chapter 1: Rose Wilder Lane

1.1 Growing Up

Rose Wilder was born to Laura and Almanzo Wilder in the Dakota Territory in 1886. Her early years were very difficult for the family of three. In her prologue to *On the Way Home,* Wilder Lane reflected on the conditions of the pioneer farmers in general and her parents in particular:

For seven years there had been too little rain. The prairies were dust. Day after day, summer after summer, the scorching winds blew the dust and the sun was brassy in a yellow sky. Crop after crop failed. Again and again the barren land must be mortgaged, for taxes and food and next year’s seed. The agony of hope ended when there was no harvest and no more credit, no money to pay interest and taxes; the banker took the land. Then the bank failed. . . It was not a depression. It was 1893, when no one had heard of depressions (1).

With the very forces of nature against them, the young and newlywed Wilders struggled with crop failures, rising mortgages on farm machinery, and subsequent poverty. They had two claims, registered by Almanzo Wilder: a homestead already proven, and a tree claim, where they were expected to grow a forest (Holtz, 6). During Wilder’s first years as a homesteader, weather conditions had been more favorable, but the droughts struck around the time the Wilders were married. The “free land” offered by the United States government to individuals often ended in a ruined financial situation and thus was anything but free. The *Little House* book that describes this time is *The First Four Years.* Its original manuscript, hand-written in pencil by Ingalls Wilder in a number of No. 6 writing tablets, was found after her death, and it is the only book of the series, with the exception of the two travel accounts

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5 Author’s note: The works of Laura Ingalls Wilder have consistently been referenced by their name for practical reasons, mainly concerning legibility.
6 Free Land happens to be the name of one of Wilder Lane’s fictionalized novels, built on material from her mother.
7 A type of notebook.
(On the Way Home and West from Home) where Ingalls Wilder’s written word has definitely not been edited by her daughter (Holtz, 8). However, Wilder Lane added an introduction of her own, and an epilogue, to On the Way Home.

At the beginning of The First Four Years, Laura\(^8\) says that she does not wish to marry a farmer (3–4). Her childhood had been characterized by financial and other hardships, since Pa Ingalls did not manage to stay in the same place long enough or get a prosperous farm when he did. There is no mention of grasshoppers (On the Banks of Plum Creek, 195) or of blackbirds (Little Town on the Prairie, 99) eating entire crops during the book that covers part of Almanzo’s childhood, Farmer Boy. This may account for Laura’s worrying about money in The First Four Years, when Almanzo, or Manly (2), seems to have a more carefree attitude towards the matter: “There had been so many dry seasons now that surely next year would be a good crop year” (132).

Initially, the Wilders lived on their tree claim, but after a while no more mortgages could be taken except for on the homestead (The First Four Years, 58), so they had to move. Due to a fire in the stove left unattended, the shanty on the homestead burned down in 1889 (The First Four Years, 129), adding yet another hardship to the growing list. Wilder Lane took the blame for the fire later on (Woodside, 14). She wrote: “‘I quite well remember watching the house burn, with everything we owned in the world, and knowing I had done it’” (Holtz, 21).

Rose Wilder arrived in Mansfield, Missouri with her parents\(^9\) and received some schooling there. However, for her final year of high school she studied in Crowley, Louisiana, living with her aunt, Eliza Jane Wilder Thayer.\(^10\) The year spent with her aunt came about because the school Rose Wilder attended in Crowley had much more of a curriculum to offer

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8 Again, the character Laura is implied.
9 This journey is described in On the Way Home, one of two published travel accounts by Laura Ingalls Wilder.
10 Eliza Jane and her relationship with Laura is discussed as anything but favorable in Little Town on the Prairie.
than Mansfield. If the family gossip is any indication, though, there was another reason: her parents also wanted to get her away from her beau at the time, namely her Latin tutor. In Crowley, Rose Wilder continued to prove herself as a bright student: she managed three years of Latin in just one year (Holtz, 42).

1.2 Early Career and Marriage

After Rose Wilder graduated, her parents were unable to afford college; her first employment was in Kansas City as a telegraph operator. She taught herself to touch-type at a typewriter and worked long and frequent shifts until the telegraph strike of 1907, where she was probably among the protesting union picketers, but she returned to Mansfield after the union gave in. Her visit was brief: she was soon posted to Mount Vernon, Indiana, as manager of the telegraph station with Western Union (Holtz, 46–49).

During this time, Wilder met Gillette Lane, a journalist, and the two were married in 1909. She soon gave birth to a son, but he was either stillborn, miscarried or died in his infancy. Subsequent surgery probably left her unable to have more children. While the two were still married, Wilder Lane was “underweight, ill, depressed and … on opiates” (Holtz, 51–52). During her married years, Wilder Lane tried to commit suicide and about fifteen years later published an article in the June 1926 issue of *Cosmopolitan*: “I, Rose Wilder Lane, Am the Only Truly Happy Person I Know, And I Discovered the Secret of Happiness on the Day I Tried to Kill Myself” (Woodside, 24).

Wilder Lane was hired by another journalist friend, Bessie Beatty, as an editorial assistant at *The San Francisco Bulletin*. She soon advanced from smaller writing tasks to serials and features; these blended fact and fiction and, among others, included Henry Ford; the serial about him was made into a book and published in 1915. Wilder Lane sent money to her mother to buy a train ticket to California (Woodside, 24).11

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11 Ingalls Wilder’s letters from her visit to her daughter and son-in-law were published in *West from Home*.  

7 (40)
At the time of Ingalls Wilder’s visit to San Francisco, the Lanes were probably already far along the road of separation, but their divorce was finalized in 1918. Wilder Lane now found new friends among intellectuals and bohemians, and she was infatuated with Eugene Debs (Holtz, 70), a union leader who established The Socialist Party of America and was five times a Presidential candidate (Encyclopædia Britannica Online).

1.3 Developing Writer; Travel Days

In her thirties, Wilder Lane had already experienced struggling, personal loss, and political activism. She had honed her writing skills to include fictionalization of real people and events, and she wrote romantic serials as well. In 1918, her days at The San Francisco Bulletin came to an end when there were layoffs. However, she was not unemployed for long: she was offered a position at the Red Cross publicity bureau in London (Holtz, 82). She combined the employment with freelance writing work and traveled extensively in Europe and even went to Baghdad (Holtz, 139); she bought a Model T Ford with Helen “Troub” Dore Boylston, a novelist belonging to the same writer’s colony as Wilder Lane (Miller, 50). Wilder Lane wrote travel articles during her time in Europe and the Middle East, but she had contracted malaria during her travels, and she returned to her parental home in Mansfield, Rocky Ridge Farm, in poor health and in poor financial condition (Holtz, 142).

While Wilder Lane traveled both inside and outside the United States during her adult life, her childhood travels due to unexpected conditions were much fewer than that of her mother. Although the Ingallses were pioneers and settlers, Ingalls Wilder’s upbringing had been everything but settled. There is no mention in the Little House books of the Ingallses living in Wisconsin and Minnesota twice, and the time in Burr Oak, Iowa is omitted altogether (Zochert, 221–222). For a map of the main locations related to the Ingallses, the Wilders, and the Little House books, please refer to the Appendix on page 37.

12 Short for Troubles; Wilder Lane’s nickname. The two women spent nearly seven years together (Wittig Albert, 124), and Wilder Lane launched Boylston as a writer (Holtz, 157).
1.4 Return to Mansfield

Wilder Lane returned to Mansfield after her travels with the objective of regaining her health, but she soon found herself attending to the needs of her parents rather than herself; the relationship with her mother was the bigger problem (Holtz, 143). The nature of the relationship between the two women is discussed by Anita Clair Fellman in “Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: The Politics of a Mother-Daughter Relationship”. Clair Fellman states that Lane was tethered to her parents by a sense of obligation and her financial difficulties (535–536). She attempted to market her mother by rewriting an article on her kitchen at Rocky Ridge Farm (Holtz, 148); “Mama Bess” was not appreciative of being instructed and having her work rewritten, and this was the second time. The first time Wilder Lane rewrote her mother’s work, which had triggered the same kind of reaction, was when Ingalls Wilder had written “Whom Will You Marry?” (Holtz, 86). The kitchen article and a story by Wilder Lane appeared in the same issue of Country Gentleman. Ingalls Wilder was paid 150 dollars for her daughter’s reworked version (Holtz, 149).

1.5 Writer’s Block; Financial Difficulties

Most writers face writer’s block at one time or another, and Wilder Lane was no exception. She kept coming and going at Rocky Ridge Farm, sometimes summoned by her mother, sometimes voluntarily. It may have been writer’s block or the distractions of cooking, baking and embroidery (Holtz, 186) that kept her from producing to her full potential. She did, however, write many letters and was convinced to publish a serial, Cindy, in book form, to help pay for a retirement home that she was planning for her parents (Holtz, 188). However, she lost most of her investments in the stock market crash in 1929, and she needed to write enough to pay for her spending (Holtz, 218).
1.6 Ghost Writing

Ghost writing was below the level of what Wilder Lane considered worthy work (Holtz, 217). However, when her mother brought her the manuscript of *Pioneer Girl*,\(^\text{13}\) Wilder Lane submitted the manuscript for consideration as a serial. She then reworked part of it into a children’s book and asked Berta and Elmer Hader\(^\text{14}\) to help her find a publisher (Holtz, 220). Ultimately, she took Pa’s stories from *Pioneer Girl*, strung them together, and formed what was to become *Little House in the Big Woods* (Holtz, 224–225). This was the start of an undertaking which would be her most lucrative project.

When the book was finally accepted by Harper Brothers, it was an instant success, giving Ingalls Wilder a national audience. At the time of its publication, Wilder Lane was already working on another manuscript from her mother about Almanzo Wilder’s childhood entitled *Farmer Boy* (Holtz, 228). The third book slated for publication in Ingalls Wilder’s name would become *The Long Winter* (Holtz, 231).\(^\text{15}\) While Wilder Lane remains officially uncredited for the *Little House* books, she got a considerable amount of inspiration for her own fiction. She used episodes from *Pioneer Girl*, especially from Plum Creek, in her novel *Let the Hurricane Roar*, which retold the struggles of her grandparents. Published in 1932 as a serial, *Let the Hurricane Roar* was considered “wholesome medicine” for those who were complaining about the Depression in comparison to the strifes that the young Wilders and the Ingallses had faced (Holtz, 231, 232). When Ingalls Wilder saw the serial published by her daughter, her reaction was not at all favorable; she considered her materials exclusive (Holtz, 239).

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\(^\text{13}\) *Pioneer Girl* was aimed at grown-ups; the *Little House* books were for young readers.

\(^\text{14}\) A couple illustrating some 70 children’s books, about half of which they penned.

\(^\text{15}\) Originally called *The Hard Winter*, a title that was disliked by the publisher, but it is called “the Hard Winter” when Almanzo and Laura walk and converse in *Little Town on the Prairie* (280).
1.7 Mother-Daughter Conflict

The collaboration between mother and daughter was far from simple and far from smooth. While conflicts are usually inevitable when there is cooperation, the conflict between mother and daughter influenced their working relationship as well.

From the early married years of the Wilders, money was a constant worry for Laura, with all the purchases made that kept raising their mortgages. One of many examples in *The First Four Years* is the new harvester, where the crop fails and the debt just increases (50–54). Ingalls Wilder reacted to her financial worries with being constantly irritable (Clair Fellman, 542), which in turn must have affected Wilder Lane deeply; children tend to ask themselves if irritable behavior from a parent implies that they have caused it. When her father suffered a heart attack late in life, Wilder Lane stayed away because she felt that she was in the way; she considered her parents to be complete without her presence (Woodside, 152).

In the 1930s, Wilder Lane had built a retirement home for her parents and accommodated a friend, Corinne Murray, in their original house. Her “friendship with Corinne was intense, perhaps as intense as the one with Troub had been” (Woodside, 89).\(^{16}\) Wilder Lane herself spent most of her time in Connecticut, and her mother was very disgruntled regarding both that and her friend’s residence at Rocky Ridge Farm. Reportedly, Ingalls Wilder asked Wilder Lane to clear out the original house, which did not happen, so the conflict escalated to the point where Ingalls Wilder told a hired hand to kill her daughter’s dog (Woodside, 95). In spite of everything going on, this was the time when Wilder Lane published “Credo”, the first of her political works, telling of the freedom she had grown up believing in, as had her parents before her. There is positive proof that Wilder Lane did contribute to her mother’s autobiography from this period: she sent her mother a letter about the completion of *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (Woodside, 96). Another example of proof of

\(^{16}\) Both Troub and Corinne were companions to Wilder Lane as well as friends. Any further speculation on the nature of the relationships is left to the reader.
her involvement is that in 1939, before the Wilders left for South Dakota, Ingalls Wilder also asked her to finish *Little Town on the Prairie* (Smith Hill, 179). In fact, what we can derive about who did what requires scrutiny of Wilder Lane’s diaries and the correspondence between mother and daughter.

1.8 Forming Political Thoughts and Works

Before politics can be included in books, they need to take shape. Wilder Lane began forming her political theories at Rocky Ridge around 1930 (Holtz, 191–194). The trip to New York where she tried to market *Pioneer Girl* gave her a full-blown picture of the Great Depression (Holtz, 222). She saw the strife of fruit growers selling apples and remembered the strife of her parents. Apart from her own experience there, she must have been present when Laura Ingalls Wilder and Gillette Lane, Rose’s then-husband, discussed profit margins on farms. This discussion is mentioned in *West from Home* (35).

*Give Me Liberty* is Wilder Lane’s story of becoming a Libertarian. It was first published in shorter form as an article, “Credo”, in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1936 and then expanded to comprise Wilder Lane’s transition from Communism to *laissez-faire*. Wilder Lane wrote: “In 1919, I was a Communist … I was never a member of The Party. But it was merely an accident that I was not” (Wilder Lane, *Give Me Liberty*, 3). She goes on to say that in Communism, the state has merely replaced capitalists who profit on laborers and thus is no better (Wilder Lane, *Give Me Liberty*, 5–6). During a conversation with her Russian host in a small village, she realized the centralization and bureaucracy could be compared to Congress (Wilder Lane, *Give Me Liberty*, 9). In her eyes, Lenin was not the man of the people he sought out to be originally but simply a new tyrant:

Other governments have existed to keep peace among their subjects, or to amass money from them, or to use them in trade and war for the glory of the
men governing them. But the Soviet government exists to do good to its people, whether they like it or not (Wilder Lane, *Give Me Liberty*, 13).

Wilder Lane did not like any kind of government meddling in the affairs of free individuals. Her declaration of Self-Reliance seems to be as follows:

>[A]nyone whose freedom has been, as mine has always been, freedom to earn a living if possible, knows that this independence is another name for responsibility. The American pioneers phrased this clearly and bluntly. They said, “Root, hog, or die”\(^\text{17}\) (Wilder Lane, *Give Me Liberty*, 23).

While a great dislike for government interference is evident in the *Little House* books, a great love for the country shines even clearer. This love dates back to Pa and Ma; readers will never doubt that they loved what they were doing, in spite of the hardships they went through (Kies, 112).

1.9 Discovery of Freedom

After the *Little House* books had been completed, Wilder Lane wrote no more fiction; she completely focused on political works. During the Second World War, Wilder Lane completed her non-fiction book, which she thought would be her “magnum opus” (Woodside, 139), *Discovery of Freedom*. It was published during the same year as *These Happy Golden Years*, which was originally slated to be the final *Little House* book. While Ingalls Wilder’s *These Happy Golden Years* was met with great joy from the fans almost immediately, Wilder Lane’s *Discovery of Freedom* received no attention (Woodside, 140). Over time, however, it did gain Wilder Lane recognition as one of the founding mothers of the Libertarian movement in the United States. *Discovery of Freedom* is mentioned alongside Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* and Isabel Paterson’s *The God of the Machine*; all three are considered

\(^{17}\) This catchphrase refers to self-reliance and dates back to the 18\(^{th}\) century, when colonists let pigs run loose, leaving them to fend for themselves. Incidentally, Pa had a hog that ran wild in *Little House in the Big Woods* (10).
keystone Libertarian works. It is very likely that Wilder Lane had the strife of her parents in mind when she wrote the following:

The energy of heat, cold, storms, floods, drought is the deadly enemy of every human being. His second enemy is the living energy of other creatures, the animals, the plants, that kill him and that he kills for his food and other uses.

Everyone must constantly be defended against these enemies. Farmers and sailors and doctors always know this. (Wilder Lane, *Discovery of Freedom*, vii)

In *Discovery of Freedom*, Wilder Lane starts with the thesis that human energy is free (vii) and goes on to describe how everything that restricts it is evil, from bureaucracy to government control. One example in the book intended to illustrate bureaucracy is how French merchantship practice is described as dating back to the days of Napoleon and employing a ridiculous number of people to sell a buyer a simple spool of thread. This episode is one of several that are discussed in both works (Wilder Lane, “Give Me Liberty, 20, *Discovery of Freedom*, 46). In essence, *Discovery of Freedom* incorporates *Give Me Liberty* and then expands on it, and *Give Me Liberty* was originally an expanded version of *Credo*.18 To further drive the message home, the bureaucracy in France surrounding the purchase and ownership of a car Wilder Lane bought in real life to drive to Albania a second time with a journalist friend, Dorothy Thompson (Holtz, 163), is featured in *Discovery of Freedom* (48–50). This episode further emphasizes how government control can make life troublesome for individuals.

Wilder Lane discusses “the old world”, meaning Europe, and what she sees as the problem with any piece of Old World history: “Human energy could not get to work at its natural job of providing for human needs, because whenever men began to develop farming and crafts and trade, the Government stopped them” (*Discovery of Freedom*, 27).

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18 This is an indication that the true forte of Wilder Lane was not to create new materials but rather to rework texts, whether she had written them herself originally or received them from other writers.
Government, according to her, exists only because the governed accept being governed. She then moves on to the subject of war, stating that the United States came about as a result of “unprovoked military aggression” (57) against the ruling power of Great Britain, thus resisting the situation of being governed.

The final part of *Discovery of Freedom* discusses three attempted revolutions. The first two attempts have in common that they both came about because of religion. Wilder Lane lists three instigators: Abraham (73) and Christ\(^ {19} \) after him (77) for the first attempt, and Mohammed (83) for the second attempt. All three, according to Wilder Lane, taught that men are free (73). Lane departed from mainstream Islam, though, in stating Mohammed to be one of God’s prophets (83), not the final and greatest one, as the Islamic creed states\(^ {20} \). Wilder Lane discusses in several passages that the failure to let citizens be free destroys a society (81) and that power struggles with the intention of controlling subjects leads to the same result (94).

The third attempt, according to Wilder Lane, began with the American Revolution; the Founding Fathers wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal. This attempt at implementing freedom was ongoing at the time of publication (1943). Wilder Lane, like her parents, disliked the policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt, but in particular, she vehemently opposed the New Deal, and she was more outspoken than they were about the matter (Miller, 183). Government subsidies and welfare, which some saw as an added security, Wilder Lane saw as removal of individual responsibility and a risk factor – a nation could be overgoverned (Clair Fellman, 555).

It is with the essence of all these ideas in mind that the reader needs to approach the *Little House* books: that pioneers, like anyone else, were made to be free. The restriction of their ideas, their creativity and their values will only produce negative results.

\(^{19}\) This is a title used by Christians, indicating that if Wilder Lane was not of the Christian faith, she either accepted its terminology or used it so that a Christian reader would feel at home with the discussion.  
\(^{20}\) The *shabada*, popularly called the Islamic creed, is as follows: “There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God”.

15 (40)
Chapter 2: Libertarian Political Elements in the *Little House* Books

With the shaping of Wilder Lane’s political ideas in mind, the presence of them in the *Little House* books will be addressed. This chapter discusses how her Libertarian themes, including self-reliance, independence and government interference, are featured in the *Little House* books, and how they are merged and intertwined with the pioneer spirit.

In the *Little House* books, the importance of pioneers being cheery or stoic is emphasized, depending on the occasion. Work is portrayed as strenuous, but since the members of the family share the work, it becomes a uniting factor. This is especially evident in *The Long Winter*, when no trains came and the Ingalls family had to think of ways to replace kerosene and coal, two commodities that ran out when there were no deliveries. There were no local resources for making either of them, and in terms of food, the family even had to grind their own flour to survive.

2.1 Self-Reliance

A very important theme in the *Little House* books is self-reliance – because it tells the story of the pioneer way, but there is also a political message here: individuals have no use for government or other outside influences when they can manage on their own. Part of this is the trading of work, such as when it is butchering time: “Then one day Uncle Henry came riding out of the Big Woods. He had come to help Pa butcher. Ma’s big butcher knife was already sharpened, and Uncle Henry had brought Aunt Polly’s butcher knife.” (*Little House in the Big Woods*, 12–13)
Butchering livestock and preserving the food that is produced means no one needs to go to a store and buy meat; it is right there in or around the house. It is one way of being independent. The only instance discussed where the Ingallses are dependent on others is possibly when dealing with the hide of the animal; while there is no mention of Pa trading leather, he does trade furs from game he has trapped in the Big Woods for goods (Little House in the Big Woods, 101).

At the time of harvest, the issue of self-reliance is evident, too. Either there were no hired hands available, or self-reliance was supremely important. There was also the size of the fields cultivated to consider and the harvesting machines available. Evidently, the fields of the Ingallses were big enough or there were not enough machines around, thus creating the need for help:

Pa and Uncle Henry traded work. When the grain got ripe in the fields, Uncle Henry came to work with Pa, and Aunt Polly and all the cousins came to spend the day. Then Pa went to help Uncle Henry cut his grain, and Ma took Laura and Mary and Carrie to spend the day with Aunt Polly. (Little House in the Big Woods, 199)

In order to be self-reliant, there was also the need for flour to make bread, but in Little House in the Big Woods, there is no mention of making any kind of flour. Pa and Uncle Henry harvested oats (209), probably mainly used to feed horses and to make oatmeal and oat cakes. If the Ingallses used any other kind of flour than ground oats, maybe Pa traded furs for it. Even though he bought the flour in a sense, he still managed by using the resources he had been able to gather.

Even a self-reliant pioneer farmer needed some education: reading, writing and arithmetic were necessary skills for a farmer. Either, families needed to live in a place big enough to host a school, or they were home-schooled. Ma’s involvement here in caring for the children is not mentioned in the early Little House books: as she had been a schoolteacher
before she met Pa (Kies, 110), she taught them during extended periods of time when there
were no schools around. Education was important to her, and it was her wish for one of her
girls to teach school. When Mary Ingalls went blind, Laura had to follow that path instead
(Kies, 111). When Laura started teaching and earning better money than from sewing
(These Happy Golden Years, 99), she could help keep her older sister in college.22

Self-reliance is not an absolute term, since butchering time and the time of harvest
require teaming up with family or neighbors. But as long as there is help to be had from a
friendly neighbor, there is no reason to hire anyone else and become dependent on them in
the process, keeping pioneers free and independent, just like Wilder Lane thought they should
be.

2.2 Community

The community of pioneers was important; ironically enough, sometimes being self-
reliant required the help of outsiders. When there were no relatives around, and when it was
time to build a house, such as in Little House on the Prairie, it was good to find a friendly
neighbor:

Pa came merrily whistling up the creek road. . . As soon as he saw them he
shouted: ‘Good news!’

They had a neighbor, only two miles away on the other side of the
creek. Pa had met him in the woods. They were going to trade work and that
would make it easier for everyone. (Little House on the Prairie, 62–63)

In Little House in the Big Woods (97), Laura celebrates her fifth birthday; she is
perhaps six or seven in Little House on the Prairie. Mary is a year or so older than Laura and
baby Carrie is very small in both books. With three young children, it is a feat to butcher
(Little House in the Big Woods, 12), harvest (209), or even build a house, as in the case of

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21 The story of Laura’s road to becoming a schoolteacher is told in Little Town on the Prairie.
22 Mary Ingalls went to the Asylum for the Blind in Vinton, Iowa; the name was changed to “College” in the
books.
Little House on the Prairie (53). The real-life Laura Ingalls Wilder was three and a half years old when the events of Little House on the Prairie took place, meaning that the “historical fact” has to come from the recollections of Charles and Caroline Ingalls. Carrie Ingalls was born in Kansas (Kaye, 131), making help from a neighbor invaluable, given both the time and the location.

Zochert comments on the trading of work being part of the pioneer way in Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder (17). The caring for children must have been a challenge, both in a forest full of bears, panthers and other wild animals, and on such wide open spaces as the Kansas prairie. Allegedly, the real-life baby Carrie was born in Kansas (Wittig Albert, 160), probably making life even harder in the beginning, when there was no house and the family had to camp out using the canvas cover of the wagon for a tent.

Trading work with a neighbor is yet another way of being self-reliant, or at least not relying on government subsidies. It also helps form bonds between neighbors, creating a micro-community of sorts where authority has no say, and where the members can still feel independent. There are critics who consider The Little House on the Prairie overstated in terms of self-reliance and find it to be a collection of “how-to essays” (Tharp and Kleiman, 56), but it seems more relevant to look at those passages as a fascinating and credible account of pioneer life. The how-to essays are motivated in their own right, though, because they paint a picture of the times and provide edutainment for younger readers (Ward, 1026). They also reinforce the message of self-reliance by showing Ingalls Wilder’s – or Wilder Lane’s – interest in pioneering. The trading of work ties in closely with another theme, namely sharing the work.
2.3 Sharing the Work

Sharing the work is another aspect of self-reliance (at least outside government interference) and of uniting the family or the micro-community. When there is a cold snap during Almanzo’s childhood, as described in *Farmer Boy*, the entire family rallies to the rescue and saves about three-fourths of the corn crop (170–171). Having accomplished this feat saves the family the trouble of asking for help from outsiders, and provides not only a sense of accomplishment but also of belonging and unity.

The farmer boy and pioneer girl both had lessons in family unity. At the beginning of *The Long Winter*, Laura, short though she may be, tramples hay with all her might and saves Pa many trips that way (5–6). Her help turns out to be important very soon: when the kerosene and coal run out (143), Pa starts twisting the hay for fuel and teaches Laura how to make sticks so that she can make herself useful and the Ingallses can survive without coal (189–191).

The availability of coal and kerosene is progress, but progress that causes dependence is bad progress (*The Long Winter*, 192–193). To save on – and to be independent of – kerosene, Ma makes a button lamp (197). An example of good progress is the purchase of a sewing machine in *These Happy Golden Years* (241). The family becomes more independent with being able to make clothes more easily. The sewing machine definitely had to be purchased and probably came via train; these are traits of dependence, and there was no mention of servicing it later on, either. That would have ruined the image of self-reliance. There had been enough dependence on trains, or rather the lack of them, in *The Long Winter*.

*The Long Winter* also marks a shift in Laura’s relationship to her parents. Before this novel, she is pictured as Pa’s girl through and through, but in *The Long Winter*, she starts turning to Ma. Ma’s resourcefulness helps the family get through tough times: she hoards food to keep surprising the family, and she makes do with limited resources (Romines, 180).
With no trains, there was no flour, either, so the members of the family took turns grinding meal for brown sourdough bread at the coffee-mill (*The Long Winter*, 194–195, 260). The activities not only kept them alive; with a sense of cooperation and pitching in came a sense of unity and also the sense of self-reliance.

### 2.4 Family Values

Another theme of the *Little House* books is family values, yet another aspect of self-reliance. Passing the family trade on to future generations creates a sense of vocational pride, and some vocations are clearly more noble than others. Towards the end of *Farmer Boy*, Almanzo is offered apprenticeship with Mr. Paddock, the local wagon maker. His mother’s reaction to the offer is fast and furious:

> “Well!” Mother snapped. . . “A pretty pass the world’s coming to, if any man thinks it’s a step up in the world to leave a good farm and go to town! How does Mr. Paddock make his money, if it isn’t catering to us? I guess if he didn’t make wagons to suit farmers, he wouldn’t last long!” . . “It’s bad enough to see Royal come down to being nothing but a storekeeper! Maybe he’ll make money, but he’ll never be the man you are. Truckling to other people for his living, all his days — He’ll never be able to call his soul his own.” . . “I won’t have Almanzo going the same way!” (*Farmer Boy*, 366–367)

The farmer is seen as more noble than a trader, because a trader will always depend on someone else, which is what Almanzo’s mother abhors so much; it is highly likely that the real-life Almanzo Wilder was raised with self-reliance and the nobility of the farmer as family values, but Wilder Lane made sure these values were emphasized in the books. Fred Erisman comments: “Money in the larger society plays a central role, as the very affluence of the Wilders attests. Farmers they are, to be sure, and they depend upon their crops and much of
their food and clothing, but family operations also depend upon their selling the goods they produce” (“‘Farmer Boy’: The Forgotten ‘Little House’ Book”, 126). Neither Ingalls Wilder nor Wilder Lane would have liked to admit this. A mother’s declaration of farmer independence from Farmer Boy, especially when paired with the Fourth of July celebration, conveys a clear message that the farmer, while a struggling soul, is more noble than a tradesperson because of this independence and self-reliance.

2.5 Anti-Authority

Being self-reliant means that dependence on others is seen as negative. Therefore, the inferiority or even dishonesty of tradespeople is discussed in the Little House books. In The Shores of Silver Lake, the railway workers in the Dakota territory try to claim pay in advance from a storekeeper with the threat of hanging. Pa simply brushes the severity of their behavior off: “‘It’s a big store and it had already taken in most of what the men had been paid; they spend as fast as they get’” (121–122). Evidently, the railway workers helping themselves is not seen as inappropriate behavior. These workers are also protesting the paycheck system in a very hands-on manner without much care for authority or possible later consequences. In the process, they are making life harder for a businessman; Wilder Lane considered businessmen to be “sellouts and opportunists” (Beito and Beito, 561).

There is also the question of the have vs the have-nots; this message is more or less repeated, although with much less violence, in The Long Winter, when the first train comes through and Woodworth breaks into the emigrant car, handing out food. The supposed have, in this case the railroad company, need to share their profit:
“I’m past caring what he ought to do!” Pa said savagely. “Let the railroad stand some damages! This isn’t the only family in town that’s got nothing to eat. We told Woodworth to open up that car or we’d do it. . . Now if you’ll boil some potatoes and fry some meat, we’ll have us a dinner” (*The Long Winter*, 322).

To reinforce the message even more, there is the scene where Pa steps up to the front as a spokesperson for the town earlier on in *The Long Winter*. Almanzo and Cap Garland have gone to get seed wheat for the town and the storekeeper, Mr Loftus, wants to sell it for three dollars a bushel, which is far above the price Almanzo and Cap paid for it ($1.25). They charged nothing for making the long and perilous trip (*The Long Winter*, 299), and Almanzo’s feet froze badly (302). Instead of behaving like the angry mob of railroad workers, Pa informs Mr. Loftus that he depends on the goodwill of his buyers come summer, even if the market happens to be his during a hard winter (304–306).

Interestingly enough, Almanzo had seed wheat of his own hidden in his wall (*The Long Winter*, 104, 166), but the amount of it was far less than two full sleds, and the real-life Almanzo Wilder did make the trip, at least according to his obituary (*Laura’s Prairie House*). Fetching the seed wheat that helps feed the town at great personal risk means that he is not only saving his future damsel, Laura, but the entire little town of DeSmet, which is in great distress. This feat establishes him as a true hero worthy of his heroine. Perhaps he felt some remorse about keeping his own seed wheat – although Pa figured his storage out (*The Long Winter*, 248) and bought some of Almanzo’s wheat for his starving family.

2.6 Lack of Self-Control

While outside control is seen as very negative – since it comes from authority, it stifles individuals – self-control is of the essence to pioneer life in the *Little House* books. In *The Long Winter*, a herd of antelope is spotted and a hunting team goes after them on
horseback in hope of getting some extra, badly needed, food on the table for the settlers of the town. One of the townspeople, Mr. Foster, gets to ride Lady while Almanzo rides Prince. When Mr. Foster gets over-excited, he does something very foolish and counterproductive: he jumps out of Lady’s saddle and fires his rifle. This brash act not only scares the antelope away and with them any chance of meat, but threatens to rob Almanzo of a treasured team member when Lady runs after the herd. Again, we have the teamwork message; Prince and Lady are a perfectly matched team – and very treasured by their keeper (*The Long Winter*, 206). In *Farmer Boy*, it is established how much Almanzo loves horses – to the point of protecting Starlight, a colt, against his cousin Frank, who does not know any better (320–321), and ultimately, he gets Starlight for his own to break and gentle (372).

A great show of emotion or lack of self-control is connected to “undesirable behavior” (Clair Fellman, 556). More examples of lack of emotional control include the Reverend Brown’s preaching (*Little Town on the Prairie*, 277), Laura’s wood-swearing (*Little Town on the Prairie*, 211–212), and the fight during the rush for the claims (*By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 236–237). On the same note, there is the scene where Nellie Oleson goes for a buggy ride and, at a moment where the horses are misbehaving, screams and clutches at Almanzo (*These Happy Golden Years*, 174). Laura loosening a flap almost certainly started it, but the message is that Nellie should have behaved differently. Lack of self-control will ultimately mean that authority will step in to control it, and that is something that should be avoided at all costs according to Wilder Lane (Clair Fellman, 555).

2.7 Freedom and Independence

The themes of freedom and independence are explored at length in the *Little House* books, since both of them are closely tied to self-reliance. In the published version of *Little Town on the Prairie*, Laura has a revelation during the Fourth of July celebration:
... Laura stood stock still. Suddenly she had a completely new thought. The Declaration [of Independence] and the song [My Country, ’Tis of Thee] came together in her mind and she thought: God is America’s king.

She thought: Americans won’t obey any king on earth. Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, there isn’t anyone else who has a right to give me orders. I will have to make myself be good.

... This is what it means to be free. It means, you have to be good.

*(Little Town on the Prairie, 76)*

In his autobiography of Wilder Lane, Holtz has published Ingalls Wilder’s draft of about the same point in time. It cannot be found in the printed version of *Pioneer Girl*, placing it at a point where the manuscript had at least left the earliest notebook stage, and it reads:

...the speakers were all coming onto the platform.

They were all strangers to Laura. She listened carefully while one read the Declaration of Independence. He was a tall man with a grand manner, and his voice boomed out strongly as he read —

“When in the course of human events [it] becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another” —

Then another speaker talked about “our glorious country” and how our ancestors fought, bled and died that we might be free as the Declaration said we should be. How they, a mere handful of ragged patriots, had beaten the whole British army and won our independence. (Holtz, 383–384)
These excerpts show that both women are addressing the same themes, but while Ingalls Wilder seems to mainly be stating that freedom is a grace not to be taken for granted, Wilder Lane is squeezing views of non-interference, self-control, and man’s struggle against authority into the same passage. Both passages describe freedom; they simply cover different aspects of it – and they use different approaches. Man’s struggle against authority is a main theme in *Discovery of Freedom*, making Wilder Lane the more likely main author of this particular passage that made it through to the published version.

In *Farmer Boy*, the Fourth of July celebration is also a central part of the book in that Almanzo’s father James teaches him that money is the result of hard work when he gives him half a dollar, which can buy him ten glasses of lemonade, or a sucking pig (184). Almanzo, seemingly well on his way to becoming a prudent farmer, buys himself a sucking pig (185). It is also the chapter in which James Wilder states that farmers made America:

... BOOM!

The cannons leaped backward, the air was full of flying grass and weeds. Almanzo ran with all the other boys to feel the warm muzzles of the cannons. . .

“That’s the noise that made the Redcoats run!” Mr. Paddock said to Father.

“Maybe,” Father said, tugging his beard. “But it was muskets that won the Revolution. And don’t forget it was axes and plows that made this country.” (*Farmer Boy*, 188)

When Almanzo asks for an explanation, his father says that the colonizers were soldiers (from Spain), fur-traders (from France), or busy fighting wars elsewhere (from England), but that the people who stayed in America were farmers who “wanted the land” (*Farmer Boy*, 189).
This establishes the nobility and independence of being a farmer and explains why Almanzo’s mother is so upset when Royal wants to amount to nothing but a storekeeper. Again, the themes of self-reliance and freedom are evident. And freedom should not be quenched by any person walking the Earth.

2.8 Religion

Religion is very present in the *Little House* series, but it is a two-faced theme. On the one hand, it is a defining character trait of Ma, Laura’s main female role model, and being in church is one way of joining a micro-community. On the other hand, a church can exercise control over individuals, which is negative. In Laura’s early years, she is positively inclined:

There were no more long, dull, tiresome Sundays, because there was always Sunday school to go to, and to talk about afterward. The best Sundays were the Sundays when the Reverend Alden was there. He always remembered Laura, and she remembered him betweentimes. He called Mary and Laura his “little country girls” (*On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 188).

Although Laura “thought he would never stop talking” (186), “[h]is eyes were warm and blue” (187). However, when Laura has entered adolescence, as a great contrast to how she views the Rev. Alden, there is this passage from a revival meeting in the Dakota prairie town of DeSmet:

Reverend Brown’s preaching went on with the throbbing and swinging. His voice rose and fell, thundered and quivered. His bushy white eyebrows raised and lowered, his fist thumped the pulpit. “Repent ye, repent ye while there is still time, time to be saved from damnation!” he roared.

Chills ran up Laura’s spine and over her scalp. . . The words no longer made sense, they were not sentences, they were only dreadful words. For one
horrible instant Laura imagined that the Reverend Brown was the Devil. His eyes had fires in them. (*Little Town on the Prairie*, 277)

The Rev. Brown is partially redeemed in Laura’s eyes, though, when it becomes evident that he does not use the word “obey” in the wedding ceremony between her and Almanzo (*These Happy Golden Years*, 270).23

Laura’s views on the two Reverends could depend on how old she was when she met the Rev. Alden and when she met the Rev. Brown. As she was around eight or nine when she met the Rev. Alden, she must have enjoyed Sunday school and the children’s activities; one of the highlights must have been the church Christmas tree with presents for the members of the congregation (*On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 251). However, she was around fifteen when she met the Rev. Brown, which is an age at which anything will be questioned, religion included. Ingalls Wilder herself had Bible verses for many occasions, and she “treasured the Bible verses she learned in Sunday School in Walnut Grove” (Zochert, 126). There are quite a few references through the books that could be discussed as being Biblical; the most obvious example is the infestation of grasshoppers in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (194).24

The attitude of Rose Wilder Lane to religion must be taken into account, though; she pictured herself in the place of The Wandering Jew (Holtz, 26).25 Her grandmother, Caroline Ingalls, is pictured as pious in the *Little House* books (Moore, 115). She chides Pa for saying “I swear” (*Little Town on the Prairie*, 22) and does not approve of puns (*Little Town on the Prairie*, 20).

If Wilder Lane disliked government meddling – and that is putting it mildly – she must have abhorred any attempt to control the free individual coming from a church.

Although there is no direct conflict between libertarianism and religion, it is fully possible to

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23 Until 2006, the Anglican wedding ceremony included the wife promising to love, cherish and obey her husband.
24 The reader who is well-versed in Biblical matters will draw a parallel to the locusts that plagued Egypt in *Exodus*.
25 The Wandering Jew, called Ahasver, was a man who taunted Jesus on the way to the crucifixion according to legend; he was, therefore, doomed to wander the Earth until the Second Coming.
dislike religion as a libertarian (Block, 63). Given Laura’s revelation during the Fourth of July celebration (Little Town on the Prairie, 76), Wilder Lane had no particular quarrel with God. She did, however, have a problem with the middleman, namely the Reverend Brown. If members of the congregation had come forward spontaneously, it would probably have met with more approval. It is more likely that the act of commanding human beings and thus robbing them of their freedom was the issue to address. No one should come between humans and their freedom.

2.9 The Uncooperative Team Member

Part of freedom is to have a functioning team, and for that reason, even the behavior of animals undergoes scrutiny in the Little House books. In On the Banks of Plum Creek, one of the oxen that came with the dugout has his rebellious moments. Normally, they are a working pair, but there is one instance where the dissident ox, Bright, could have jeopardized lives. Ma, Pa, and Carrie have been out for a drive and are returning home at breakneck speed:

The big oxen galloped nearer and nearer the steep edge. Bright was pushing Pa off it. They were all going over. . . Pa shouted a terrible shout. He struck Bright’s head with all his might, and Bright swerved. . . Then the wagon, Ma, and Carrie, all flashed by. Bright crashed against the stable and everything was still. . .

“Pshaw!” Pa said. “It was good old Pete. He wasn’t running away. Bright was, but Pete was only going along. He saw the stable and wanted his supper.” (On the Banks of Plum Creek, 74–77)

Pete is pictured as the faithful team member here, while Bright is out of control, which goes back to the message of lack of control being negative, even in an animal. In The Long Winter, Pa needs to haul the hay that he and Laura made, but the grass below the deep
snow creates air pockets that collapse into hollows when anyone steps on them. That, and Sam the horse, who is uncooperative, results in the drives to collect the hay taking longer than anticipated:

“Oh, I got him out finally,’ said Pa. “David followed me as gentle as a lamb, stepping carefully and coming right on up. . . But I had to hang onto Sam the whole time.” . . .

“When [David] breaks through the snow he stands still until I trample a solid path up. Then he follows me up out of the hole as carefully as if he understood all about it and I bet he does.” (The Long Winter, 156–157)

To a farmer in the pre-motoring days, cooperative working animals – oxen and horses – could help make or break success. The books are primarily for the entertainment and education of young readers, but there is definitely a lesson hidden here about teamwork and control. If anyone went out of control, biped or quadruped, there would be some kind of trouble. If the team cooperated, the work got done much faster. With fast work and cooperation, there was less trouble and more independence for the farmer. A possible dream scenario for Wilder Lane would be for farmers to have such efficient resources that they did not depend on anyone except for the close community. Farmers would probably have admitted being more dependent on the outside world, but Wilder Lane did not share or relate their views; there is no mention at all of any kind of government aid, which was very much a part of the pioneer farmer’s reality according to Tharp and Kleiman (56).

Part of the reason for this may be that Wilder Lane did not know much about farming, although she grew up on a farm (Woodside, 94). This will strike the critical reader as strange, considering the fact that both of her parents were trained in the trade from early years. However, Wilder Lane did know about the strife of her parents. Since the crops on Almanzo’s original claim kept failing around 1890, it may have meant that there was not much work where a child could take part. It should also be considered that Almanzo suffered a stroke
after diphtheria when Rose was very young (The First Four Years, 89). making him a very different kind of father from Pa in the Little House books. With a life-long limp, the real-life Almanzo Wilder would not have been able to carry great loads or do the work that Pa does and Laura admires so much.

2.10 Government Interference

To the individual who desires freedom, government interference is seen as stifling in the Little House books. There are several passages about government policies that cause trouble for individuals. The most prominent example deals with Laura herself and her immediate family. This is the forced resettlement of the pioneers in Kansas Territory when the negotiations with the Osages take a new turn (Little House on the Prairie, 316). The government steps in because the settlers were there illegally (Kaye, 125), which can be read between the lines when the West is described by Pa: “[o]nly Indians lived there” (Little House on the Prairie, 2). This particular excerpt is rather unsettling, as one of its interpretations is that no one cared if there were a few native Americans; it was just a matter of civilizing the territory and they would move on. Some of the stereotypes in Little House on the Prairie conveniently contrast the tribal (non-libertarian), native lifestyle with that of the pioneers, something that surely needs to be problematized (Kaye, 139). Ma’s relationship with native Americans would be called racism today, and there are critics who have problems with both Ma and the explanation of the treatment of the Indians (Kaye, 125). Ma dislikes anything that is wild; Pa, while he is generally the more stern of the two, is the tolerant parent (Campbell, 117). In Little House on the Prairie, he is an admirer of the Osage chief Soldat du Chêne (Kaye, 132). Most native Americans, though, are described as less than human (Kaye, 133), and during one of their visits to the Ingalls house, they are described as smelling horrible (Little House on the Prairie, 137). The explanation appears later: they are wearing skunk skins for loincloths (138). Wilder Lane looked unfavorably upon Indians: “The
American Indians were Communists” (Discovery of Freedom, 6), and an ideology she had abandoned in favor of Libertarianism would not do. Pa decided to go to Kansas to have a chance of his pick of land before there would be many settlers, meaning competition. He almost did not get the claim site he wanted near DeSmet. This was because of a rush for claims that started in the spring after the Ingalls family arrived (By the Shores of Silver Lake, 235).

In These Happy Golden Years, Laura’s Uncle Tom tells the story of soldiers burning a settler stockade in French Creek (108–109), located in the Black Hills of what was the Dakota Territory. Taking the pioneer point of view, the story he tells is the version of the settlers. Cavalry soldiers were sent to burn the stockade because it was built before the land was open to legal settlement. The settlers were looking for gold when they were evicted, which is likely to have made them resent the government interference even more than if they had been plain squatters.26

On the topic of government interference, there is also Mrs McKee’s apparent dissatisfaction with having to hold down the claim so her husband can work and make money, when she could have contributed to the family income as a dressmaker instead (These Happy Golden Years, 118–119). She wants to be a professional individual rather than a side-kick to her husband (Romines, 214). Being part of a team, with that high a price to pay, was not something she desired, although she did comply with her husband’s wishes to help a family dream of a piece of land for free. As many examples have shown, the land was far from free, as there was always some price to pay in the end.

26 Historical note: Another settler, Annie D. Tallent, has described the “terrible experience” of the settlers being evicted from the stockade in The Black Hills: Or, The Last Hunting Ground of the Dakotahs (96). Thomas Quiner is mentioned in the book (23); Quiner Ma’s maiden name (Smith Hill, 4), so this adds to the historical authenticity, with the exception of the timing of Uncle Tom’s appearance. To be historically correct, Tom should have appeared in Little Town on the Prairie; however, at the time, Ingalls Wilder did not think anyone would bother to check on the authenticity of the information (Smith Hill, 178). This change of timing proves to be convenient, though; it allows for Almanzo to be jealous of him, giving the reader another piece of the puzzle in the budding romance between the future Wilders (These Happy Golden Years, 112).
Conclusion

Laura Ingalls Wilder would not have reached the country-wide and, later on, Western world fame she managed to reach without the aid of her daughter. Wilder Lane in turn got material for countless articles and a few novels out of reading her mother’s manuscripts; the latter is something Holtz does not emphasize enough in his biography of Wilder Lane, *The Ghost in the Little House*. Wittig Albert, however, is particular about mentioning the material Wilder Lane received in return in her introduction to her novelized biography, *A Wilder Rose* (2).

While the *Little House* books did benefit heavily from the knowledge of Wilder Lane both in writing and marketing, Ingalls Wilder was a writer in her own right, as the following pastoral scene illustrates:

“A sweet contralto voice rose softly on the air above the lighter patter of the horses’ feet, as horses and buggy and dim figures passed along the way. And it seemed as if the stars and water and roses were listening to the voice, so quiet were they, for it was of them it sang. . . For it was June, the roses were in bloom over the prairie lands, and lovers were abroad in the still, sweet evenings which were so quiet after the winds had hushed at sunset.” (*The First Four Years*, Prologue, xx)

As *The First Four Years* was published after Ingalls Wilder’s death and without any editing – or complete rewriting – from Wilder Lane, there is no doubt about who is responsible for this detailed description of Almanzo’s and Laura’s drive, where Laura is singing. Interestingly, this exact passage is used to state an example of the novel’s “relative flatness, the lack-lustre quality of its language, the very different character of Laura from the one [we have] learned to know and love, the disheartening series of misfortunes” (Moore, 105). Regardless of the reason for Moore’s choice of scene from the Prologue, it is hardly
suited to denounce the stylistic qualities. Ingalls Wilder has painted a beautiful verbal picture that sets the scene for her courting days with Almanzo; not much imagination is needed to actually visualize what the words are saying. The unknown narrator is seeing out loud for the reader.

While the characteristics of the Little House books that readers have come to know and love are not as clearly present in The First Four Years, the setting has a similar type of detail that is part of the charm of the series. The writing style from the Prologue is not quite the same as in any other book of the series, but it is at least as easy to visualize for the reader as another scene brought up by Moore, this time to illustrate the easy flow of the language of the rest of the Little House books (106):

Laura began to see out loud for Mary. “The road’s going down a low bank to the river, but there aren’t any trees. There’s just the big sky and grassy land, and the little, low creek. It’s a big river sometimes, but now it’s dried up till it’s no bigger than Plum Creek. It trickles along from pool to pool, by dry gravel stretches and cracked dry mud flats. Now the horses are stopping to drink.” (By the Shores of Silver Lake, 58)

As for the “series of misfortunes” brought up by Moore, the seasoned Little House reader will immediately counter this statement with questions: What about the grasshoppers in On the Banks of Plum Creek (194), Laura feeling defeated in The Long Winter (309), and the blackbirds in Little Town on the Prairie (99)? They were certainly hardships, too. In the case of the grasshoppers, Ma comments on that at least they will not need to buy feed for the hens (On the Banks of Plum Creek, 199), and she makes pie out of the blackbirds (Little Town on the Prairie, 105). Fair was fair in the pioneer world; the blackbirds and grasshoppers took food, or feed, from the Ingallses, so the Ingallses or their hens fed on them.

If the reader approaches the Little House books from a political perspective instead of looking for differences in writing style, there are some very visible changes that Wilder Lane
must have made. In Ingalls Wilder’s original manuscript for Pioneer Girl, the blackbirds were not as many, nor did they eat the whole of the corn crop, and Mary received tuition to go to the College\textsuperscript{27} for the Blind in Iowa (239). When her parents left with Mary, Laura was not left to care for her younger sisters alone as is told in Little House on the Prairie, either (114–122). Wilder Lane may well have changed all of that to reinforce how the Ingalls family overcame their hardships, and Ingalls Wilder must have agreed, as it made her seem quite the heroine at a young age; she was spunky in real life, too, and her mostly stiff upper lip is just one of her many characteristics. If Wilder Lane had stuck to the original Pioneer Girl version of the story, the political message would have been weakened along with the heroism of the Ingalls family in facing the numerous hardships sent their way.

In order to know whose opinion is in the books, the question of who learned from whom needs to be answered. Did Wilder Lane teach her mother to write, as Holtz claims, or was it closer to the other way around – that she took her mother’s material and simply made the necessary changes to make the stories more marketable? The scholars can only agree to disagree, putting the truth somewhere in between: the Little House books are neither exclusively Ingalls Wilder’s nor Wilder Lane’s creation but the fruit of the work of both women and their successful collaboration in spite of their complex personal relationship. It is most likely that many of the views expressed are the Libertarian ideals of Wilder Lane, and this essay has presented numerous examples of them, but if Ingalls Wilder had not agreed with them, they would not have been there; “Mama Bess” got what she wanted (Holtz, 239) (Clair Fellman, 556). There are many examples of this: when Wilder Lane wanted to switch focus to Carrie Ingalls after a few novels, Ingalls Wilder put her foot down (Romines, 240).

There are two years of Laura’s childhood missing from the Little House books; her family lived in a hotel in Burr Oak, Iowa from 1876 to 1878 (Smith Hill, 26). This puts the story between On the Banks of Plum Creek and By the Shores of Silver Lake, and it was

\textsuperscript{27} Changed from the real-life term “Asylum”.
during this time that Grace, the youngest Ingalls sister, was born (Smith Hill, 29). The family had lost an infant boy, Freddie, just before the family’s departure (Smith Hill, 26). There are instances of dark humor amid the sadness, though, such as when Mr Bisbee, the landlord from whom the family rents their quarters, keeps pumping water into a bottomless bucket to extinguish a fire (Pioneer Girl, 105). Either the contract did not allow for a book about the Burr Oak days, or both Wilder women thought there were enough books and fires.

The series of books required that the two women collaborated and made concessions here and there, putting both their personal and political differences aside. The tales of Ingalls Wilder’s childhood, fictionalized and all, would never have made it past the scrutiny of the publishing company editors without the collaboration between a mother and her daughter, either. They needed Ingalls Wilder’s memories and Wilder Lane’s ghost writing skills. Collaboration was the key to writing the Little House series, making it marketable and actually getting it published.

Incidentally, collaboration, or teamwork, is one of the recurring themes of the Little House books, too: it gets the job done. With all the differences between the two women, the two of them managed to create a lasting legacy together: a series for young adult readers that has survived more than half a century, and it is likely to carry on for at least as long as its fanbase continues to talk about the living history lessons in naturally flowing language that this series has to offer. The two women not only made the writing of the story look easy; moreover, there is always the “incurable optimism of the farmer” (The First Four Years, 133). And for as long as readers like to cling to hope side by side with hardships, the Little House books will continue to fascinate readers. These books deserve to be read and re-read, because with every re-reading, the reader will find new evidence of the influence of the Wilder women, both of whom were very strong and independent.
Appendix: Places from the *Little House* books and of the Ingalls/Wilder Family


3. Walnut Grove, MN. Location of *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. (Anderson, 114).

4. Burr Oak, IA. Not mentioned in any of the *Little House* books; however, life in Burr Oak is described in the original *Pioneer Girl* manuscript (Anderson, 114).

5. De Smet, SD. Location of *By the Shores of Silver Lake, The Long Winter, Little Town on the Prairie, These Happy Golden Years* and *The First Four Years* (Anderson, 114).


7. Mansfield, MO. Location of Rocky Ridge Farm; Ingalls Wilder’s diary of the trip from De Smet to here is found in *On the Way Home* (Anderson, 114).


9. Danbury, CT. Rose Wilder Lane lived here during the final thirty years of her life (Anderson, 115).
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