

[A Wilder Rose: Laura's Biography](#)

by Susan Wittig Albert

Laura Ingalls Wilder was born in a log cabin in the woods of northern Wisconsin on February 7, 1867. Her pioneer parents, Charles and Caroline Ingalls, moved their family—daughters Mary, Laura, Carrie, and Grace—numerous times during the next twelve years, finally settling in De Smet, Dakota Territory, in 1879. There, Laura attended grade and high school. To help support the family, Laura began teaching school at the age of fifteen. In 1885, she married a local homesteader, Almanzo Wilder, whom she called Manly. (Laura's childhood and teen years are described in the fictionalized *Little House* books. The first four years of the Wilders' marriage are depicted in Laura's posthumously published book, *The First Four Years*.)



Figure 1: Left to right: Carrie, Mary, Laura Ingalls



Figure 2: Laura and Almanzo

The Wilders began married life in a small house Almanzo built on his tree claim. Their daughter Rose was born there on December 5, 1886; a son was born two years later but did not survive. Crop failures and an illness that left Almanzo crippled brought an end to their homesteading effort and they left Dakota in early 1891. They spent some months with Almanzo's parents in Spring Valley MN, moved to Florida, returned to South Dakota, and then, in 1894, moved to Mansfield MO, where they bought a small hill country farm that Laura named Rocky Ridge.

Their purchase included a small cabin where they lived for several years. With a great deal of effort, the Wilders cleared enough land to plant an apple orchard and pasture the family's dairy cows. The cabin was turned into a barn, and a two-room house built, later (around 1911) expanded and rebuilt into the farmhouse still on the property. Around 1897, the family moved to Mansfield for several years, where Laura cooked meals for local boarders and Almanzo worked as a hauler for the railroad. A gift and a legacy from the Wilders gave them a little more financial security, and after Rose graduated high school and left, they moved back to the farm.



Figure 3: Laura on the steps of the house in Mansfield

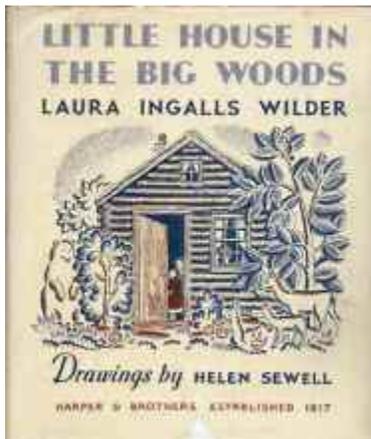


Laura began taking an active role in farm organizations and became known for her skill in raising chickens. She came to the attention of the editor of the *Missouri Ruralist*, a farm journal to which she began sporadically contributing brief essays. Her output increased substantially after she went to San Francisco in 1915 to visit her daughter, Rose, at the time a feature writer for the *San Francisco Bulletin*. With Rose's substantial editorial assistance, she also wrote several articles for *McCall's Magazine* and *Country Gentleman*. She continued as a bimonthly columnist ("As a Farm Woman Thinks") for the *Ruralist* through 1924, and also worked for the Farm Loan Association, assisting local farmers with small government loans.

In 1928, Rose and her friend Helen Boylston returned to Rocky Ridge from Albania, where they had been living. Almanzo was now 71 and Laura 61 and it was difficult to keep up the farm work and maintain the house they had built. Rose, now a much-published and highly-paid writer, persuaded them to move to a smaller, modern house (called the Rock House) that she built for them, and Rose and Helen settled into the farmhouse. The Crash, however, changed everyone's plans. Rose, Helen, and Laura lost their investments in the stock market, selling to the magazines became a challenge for Rose, and life was difficult.



Figure 4: Laura and Almanzo with Nero at the Rock House



In 1930, with the hope of earning some money, Laura produced a handwritten manuscript she called "Pioneer Girl," about her childhood and teen years in Wisconsin, Kansas, Minnesota, and Dakota Territory. Rose shaped part of the manuscript into a 22-page piece for children, which she sent to a friend in New York, Berta Hader. Hader showed it to editor Marion Fiery at Knopf. Fiery and Rose met in New York in February, 1931, and Fiery agreed to publish an expanded version. Knopf closed its children's department, however, and the project, retitled as *Little House in the Big Woods*, was published by Harper & Brothers (1932). Over the next ten years, mother and daughter worked together to coauthor six more books in what has come to be called

the *Little House* series.

Rose left Rocky Ridge in 1935 and never returned to live there. Laura and Almanzo moved back to the farmhouse (which Rose had also modernized), and first rented, then sold the Rock House. After Almanzo died in 1949, Laura continued to live there, quietly, with the help of nearby friends and occasional visits from Rose, who had purchased a small house near Danbury CT. Laura died at Rocky Ridge in 1957, just a few days short of her ninetieth birthday. Her friends in Mansfield proposed to create a non-profit corporation to purchase the house and grounds from the farmer to whom Laura sold it, with the idea of turning it into a museum. After an initial reluctance, Rose agreed and donated the funds for the purchase and continued upkeep. Rocky Ridge Farm is now a popular tourist destination, hosting 30,000 visitors a year.



Figure 5: Almanzo and Laura, 1948