

[A Wilder Rose: Rose's Autobiography](#)

Rose Wilder Lane

Autobiographical Sketch, the Works Progress Administration's Library of Congress Folklore Project (1938-39)

I was born in Dakota Territory, in a claim shanty, forty-nine years ago come next December. It doesn't seem possible. My father's people were English county family; his ancestors came to America in 1630 and, farming progressively westward, reached Minnesota during my father's boyhood. Naturally, he took a homestead farther west. My mother's ancestors were Scotch and French; her father's cousin was John J. Ingalls, who, "li[k]e a lonely crane, swore and swore and stalked the Kansas plain." She is Laura Ingalls Wilder, writer of books for children.

Conditions had changed when I was born; there was no more free land. Of course, there never had been free land. It was a saying in the Dakotas that the Government bet a quarter section against fifteen dollars and five years' hard work that the land would starve a man out in less than five years. My father won the bet. It took seven successive years of complete crop failure, with work, weather and sickness that wrecked his health permanently, and interest rates of 36 per cent on money borrowed to buy food, to dislodge us from that land. I was then seven years old.

We reached the Missouri at Yankton, in a string of other covered wagons. The ferryman took them one by one, across the wide yellow river. I sat between my parents in the wagon on the river bank, anxiously hoping to get across before dark. Suddenly the rear end of the wagon jumped into the air and came down with a terrific crash. My mother seized the lines; my father leaped over the wheel and in desperate haste tied the wagon to the ground, with ropes to picket pins deeply driven in. The loaded wagon kept lifting off the ground, straining at the ropes; they creaked and stretched, but held. They kept wagon and horses from being blown into the river.

Looking around the edge of the wagon covers I saw the whole earth behind us billowing to the sky. There was something savage and terrifying in the howling yellow swallowing the sky. The color came, I now suppose, from the sunset.

"Well, that's our last sight of Dakota," my mother said. "We're getting out with a team and wagon; that's more than a lot can say," my father answered cheerfully.

This was during the panic of '93. The whole Middle West was shaken loose and moving. We joined long wagon trains moving south; we met hundreds of wagons going north; the roads east and west were crawling lines of families traveling under canvas, looking for work, for another foothold somewhere on the land. By the fires in the camps I heard talk about Coxey's army, 60,000 men, marching on Washington; Federal troops had been called out. The country was ruined, the whole world was ruined; nothing like this had ever happened before. There was no hope, but everyone felt the courage of despair. Next morning wagons went on to the north, from which we had been driven, and we went on toward the south, where those families had not been able to live.

We were not starving. My mother had baked quantities of hardtack for the journey; we had salt meat and beans. My father tried to sell the new—and incredible—asbestos mats that would keep food from burning; no one had ten cents to pay for one, but often he traded for eggs or milk. In Nebraska we found

an astoundingly prosperous colony of Russians; we could not talk to them. The Russian women gave us—outright gave us—milk and cream and butter from the abundance of their dairies, and a pan of biscuits. My mouth watered at the sight. And because my mother could not talk to them, and so could not politely refuse these gifts, we had to take them and she to give in exchange some cherished trinket of hers. She had to, because it would have been like taking charity not to make some return. That night we had buttered biscuits.

These Russians had brought from Russia a new kind of wheat—winter wheat, the foundation of future prosperity from the Dakotas to Texas.

Three months after we had ferried across the Missouri, we reached the Ozark hills. It was strange not to hear the wind any more. My parents had great good fortune; with their last hoarded dollar, they were able to buy a piece of poor ridge land, uncleared, with a log cabin and a heavy mortgage on it. My father was an invalid, my mother was a girl in her twenties, I was seven years old.

Good fortune continued. We had hardly moved in to the cabin, when a stranger came pleading for work. His wife and children camped by the road, were starving. We still had a piece of salt pork. The terrible question was, "Dare we risk any of it?" My father did; he offered half of it for a day's work. The stranger was overjoyed. Together they worked from dawn to sunset, putting down trees, sawing and splitting the wood, piling into the wagon all it would hold. Next day my father drove to town with the wood.

It was dark before we heard the wagon coming back. I ran to meet it. It was empty. My father had sold that wood for fifty cents in cash. Delirious, I rushed into the house shouting the news. Fifty cents! My mother cried for joy.

That was the turning point. We lived all winter and kept the camper's family alive till he got a job; he was a hard worker. He and my father cleared land, sold wood, built a log barn. When he moved on, my mother took his place at the cross-cut saw. Next spring a crop was planted; I helped put in the corn, and on the hills I picked green huckleberries to make a pie.

I picked ripe huckleberries, walked a mile and a half to town, and sold them for ten cents a gallon. Blackberries too. Once I chased a rabbit into a hollow log and barricaded it there with rocks; we had rabbit stew. We were prospering and cheerful. The second summer, my father bought a cow. Then we had milk, and I helped churn; my mother's good butter sold for ten cents a pound. We were paying [5?] per cent interest on the mortgage and a yearly bonus for renewal.

That was forty years ago. Rocky Ridge Farm is now 200 acres, in meadow, pasture and field; there are wood lots, but otherwise the land is cleared, and it is clear. The three houses on it have central heating, modern plumbing, electric ranges and refrigerators, garages for three cars. This submarginal farm, in a largely submarginal but comfortably prosperous county, helps support some seven hundred families on relief. They live in miserably small houses and many lack bedsteads on which to put the mattresses, sheets and bedding issued to them. The men on work relief get only twenty cents an hour, only sixteen hours a week. No one bothers now to pick wild berries; it horrifies anybody to think of a child's working three or four hours for ten cents. No farmer's wife sells butter; trucks call for the cream cans, and butterfat brings twenty-six cents. Forty years ago I lived through a world-wide depression; once more I am living through a depression popularly believed to be the worst in history because it is world-wide; this is the ultimate disaster, the depression to end all depressions. On every side I hear that conditions have changed, and that is true. They have.

Meanwhile I have done several things. I have been office clerk, telegrapher, newspaper reporter, feature writer, advertising writer, farmland salesman. I have seen all the United States and something of Canada and the Caribbean; all of Europe except Spain; Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq as far east as Bagdad, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan. California, the Ozarks and the Balkans are my home towns.

Politically, I cast my first vote—on a sample ballot—for Cleveland, at the age of three. I was an ardent if uncomprehending Populist; I saw America ruined forever when the soulless corporations in 1896, defeated Bryan and Free Silver. I was a Christian Socialist with Debs, and distributed untold numbers of the Appeal to Reason. From 1914 to 1920—when I first went to Europe—I was a pacifist; innocently, if criminally, I thought war stupid, cruel, wasteful and unnecessary. I voted for Wilson because he kept us out of it.

In 1917 I became convinced, though not practicing communist. In Russia, for some reason, I wasn't and I said so, but my understanding of Bolshevism made everything pleasant when the Cheka arrested me a few times.

I am now a fundamentalist American; give me time and I will tell you why individualism, laissez faire and the slightly restrained anarchy of capitalism offer the best opportunities for the development of the human spirit. Also I will tell you why the relative freedom of human spirit is better—and more productive, even in material ways—than the communist, Fascist, or any other rigidity organized for material ends.

Personally, I'm a plump, Middle-Western, Middle-class, middle-aged woman, with white hair and simple tastes. I like buttered popcorn, salted peanuts, bread-and-milk. I am, however, a marvelous cook of foods for others to eat. I like to see people eat my cooking. I love mountains, the sea—all of the seas except the Atlantic, a rather dull ocean—and Tchaikovsky and Epstein and the Italian primitives. I like Arabic architecture and the Moslem way of life. I am mad about Kansas skies, Cedar Rapids by night, Iowa City any time, Miami Beach, San Francisco, and all American boys about fifteen years old playing basketball. At the moment I don't think of anything I heartily dislike, but I can't understand sport pages, nor what makes radio work, nor why people like to look at people who write fiction.

"But aren't you frightfully disappointed?" I asked a stranger who was recently looking at me.

"Oh, no," she said. "No, indeed. We value people for what they do, not for what they look like."

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