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“HUNGER IS THE BEST SAUCE”: FRONTIER FOOD WAYS IN
LAURA INGALLS WILDER’S *LITTLE HOUSE* BOOKS

BY

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“HUNGER IS THE BEST SAUCE”: FRONTIER FOOD WAYS IN
LAURA INGALLS WILDER’S *LITTLE HOUSE* BOOKS

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University of Nebraska, 2013

Adviser: Kenneth Winkle

This thesis examines Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* book series for the frontier food ways described in it. Studying the series for its food ways edifies a 19th century American frontier of subsistence/companionate families practicing both old and new ways of obtaining food. The character Laura in Wilder’s books is an engaging narrator who moves through childhood and adolescence, assuming the role of housewife. An overview of the century’s norms about food in America, the strength of domesticity as an ideal, food and race relations, and the frontier as a physical place round out this unexplored angle of *Little House* scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION: AT THE TABLE IN *LITTLE HOUSE*

The nine books comprising the *Little House* series are beloved classics among children. The first of the series, *Little House in the Big Woods*, was published in 1932. The books follow the fictionalized family of Laura Ingalls Wilder—Pa, Ma, Mary, Laura, Carrie, and Grace—across the Midwest in the last third of the 19th century.

The family leaves backwoods Wisconsin for Indian Territory (unsettled Kansas), and then moves near a small town in Minnesota. Next, the family heads for Dakota Territory, and ends up settling at the De Smet town site in what is now South Dakota. The chronology is circa 1871-1889. The books are *Little House in the Big Woods*; *Little House on the Prairie*; *Farmer Boy*; *On the Banks of Plum Creek*; *By the Shores of Silver Lake*; *Little Town on the Prairie*; *These Happy Golden Years* and *The First Four Years*.

A brief interlude chronicles the late childhood (ages nine and ten) of Almanzo Wilder. The real boy grew up to be Laura Ingalls' husband, but his story *Farmer Boy* is similarly fictionalized. This book takes place in upstate New York circa 1866. Finally, there is the posthumously-published *The First Four Years*, which is presented in its unedited form. It chronicles the first four years of Laura and Almanzo Wilder's long and happy marriage. In this story they live on a South Dakota land claim from 1885-1889.

"Many" of the scholars of Laura Ingalls Wilder and her work, purports Anita Clair Fellman, were "devoted fans" as children.¹ This author is no exception. To paraphrase Fellman, though, "this work has two origins: one personal," one

¹ Anita Clair Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 1.

gastronomic.² Of the many aspects of the *Little House* series analyzed by Wilder scholars, a key one that has been curiously ignored is *food*. Many a page in each book fairly brims with food. Descriptions of food entail where it came from, how it was prepared, and whether it was consumed or preserved. Readers can imagine how the food must have smelled and tasted and what it looked like. These various foods, which range from apples to bear meat to hominy and more, were acquired in a few ways. They were gathered or hunted, raised or grown, bartered for or purchased. How all these foods must have *tasted* is what enthralled this author as a child, reading about boiling vats of maple sugar and syrup in *Little House in the Big Woods*, or the coarse plain bread chewed in cold silence during *The Long Winter*, or the stewed jackrabbit cooked over the open fire in the tall grass in *Little House on the Prairie*.

That others have been obsessed by the lost gastronomic experience of the frontier, specifically as depicted by Wilder, is clear. There is a movement to reconstruct the food ways of the *Little House* series. The movement appears in blogs: “My conviction that I was going to enjoy some well prepared rabbit—I’d never had rabbit before—came straight from Mrs. Wilder.”³ It also appears in personal recollections: “I wanted dead rabbits brought home for supper. I wanted to go out into the backyard and just, I don’t know, grab stuff off trees, or uproot things from the ground, and bring it all inside in a basket and have my parents say, ‘My land! What a harvest!’”⁴ Those two specific

² Fellman, 1. Fellman’s own twofold purpose for writing her book was “one personal, one political.”

³ Linda Tobin. This quote came from her April 10, 2006 blog post “ ‘Preserved’ Pears, Rabbit, and the Best Sauce” on http://www.lindystoast.com/2006/04/cooking_the_bun.html

⁴ Wendy McClure, *The Wilder Life: My Adventures in the Lost World of Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011), 6.

manifestations—blog and memoir—are the most recent incarnations of the modern movement to reconstruct foods from the various “little houses.” An older incarnation is a published cookbook. In 1979, Barbara M. Walker wrote *The Little House Cookbook: Frontier Foods from Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Classic Stories*. She “found herself” cooking “pancake men” from *Little House in the Big Woods* with her then-four year old child.⁵ The *Cookbook*’s recipes range from apple turnovers to salt pork, hasty pudding to roasted wild turkey. They all represent a bygone era of cooking in which there were “basic connections among the food on the table, the grain in the field, and the cow in the pasture. Between the food on the table and the sweat of someone’s brow.”⁶ Walker was aware of the recipes’ allure for a modern audience. Her *Cookbook* has been reprinted since the late ‘70s, and its steady popularity begs the question: why do some modern cooks feel compelled to recreate (sometimes in approximations) the frontier foods of Wilder’s childhood?

This thesis attempts, for the first time, to analyze the food ways present in Wilder’s books in a historical framework. Wilder’s books are unique repositories for descriptions of 19th century food ways on the American frontier. The books’ descriptions of foodstuffs and how they were acquired, prepared, shared, or preserved fit neatly into the definition of *food ways*. This is a relatively recent term in historical archaeology and history scholarship. Because of this, scholars in the dominant disciplines surrounding the *Little House* series and Wilder since the 1970s have not had cause to pay it attention. The fields of *Little House* and Wilder scholarship revolve around race, class and gender,

⁵ Barbara M. Walker, *The Little House Cookbook: Frontier Foods from Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Classic Stories* (New York: HarperCollins, 1979,) xiv.

⁶ Walker, xiv-xv.

along with the authorship controversy and biographies. The *Little House* series is also extensively studied for its classification as children's literature. Over the decades scholars of Wilder and her works have employed weakened and incomplete approaches, because they have ignored food as a key aspect in the books.

Scholarly works up to the present day focus on either the author or the books, with some overlap. Scholars have discussed since the 1950s the questions and issues surrounding the books' authorship. While still in manuscript form, the material for *Little House* was heavily edited by Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane. From 1970 to the early 1980s, scholarship addressed Wilder's works as examples of how early settlers lived in the Midwest. In 1970, Polly Russell addressed this topic in her thesis, "The Children's Literature of Laura Ingalls Wilder: a picture of life on the Midwestern frontier." Her focus was narrower than Debra Reed Airheart's would be in 1982. Russell had examined *Little House* through the designation of children's literature. This potentially problematic designation for Wilder's book series will be discussed later. Airheart followed with the thesis "Laura Ingalls Wilder and the *Little House* books: an example of the pioneers' life on the frontier." In his 1988 master's thesis for English literature, Alan M. Musilek again turned to the authorship question. He examined Wilder's writing career in "Agrarian trepidation as seen through Laura Ingalls Wilder."

In the field of history, the mid-1980s emergence of the new Western history theory led to new questions and interpretations of how the American West was settled. Questions developed over the accuracy and finer philosophical meanings of terms such as manifest destiny, concepts such as the West having been conquered in any sense (environmentally, physically, ideologically, spiritually), and whether physical spaces like

borders or frontiers were ever demarcated neatly. As the entire American frontier was being reconsidered by historians, some scholarship emerged that sought these anxieties and answers within the *Little House* books. Two articles, “Laura and Pa: Family and Landscape in *Little House on the Prairie*,” and “Vastness and Contraction of Space in *Little House on the Prairie*” seem to tap into some aspects of appropriate ways to redefine the American West—this time as a physical space that contains within it created spaces, which alter the landscape—while addressing other concerns. These articles will be referred to again later. Another article’s subject matter allows historians to tackle the themes of nostalgia, boosterism, and accuracy in historical fiction—“Closing the Circle: The American Optimism of Laura Ingalls Wilder.”

When looked at as unique repositories for 19th century frontier food ways, the *Little House* books are particularly hospitable to a theory from the late 1980s that places food ways within the larger category of the culture hearth. The books can successfully broaden culture hearth theory. The potential for serious scholarship that Wilder’s food descriptions hold will only strengthen by being grounded in this theory. The “culture hearth” theory is historian David Hackett Fischer’s from his 1989 book *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. He makes a convincing case, through the study of food, religion, dress, and family structure, that America’s settlement by groups from the British Isles set into place lasting folkways and civic models. His groups of settlers are the Massachusetts Puritans, the Virginia gentlemen, and the Scottish, Welsh and Irish

emigrants to the backcountries of both the Delaware Valley and Appalachia. His time period is narrow: “during the very long period from 1629 to 1775.”⁷

The impermanent nature of theories allows for them to be altered. When Laura Ingalls Wilder’s works are applied to Fischer’s theory, her books’ food ways will be strengthened. Wilder’s permanent place in American history as a particularly famous pioneer will broaden Fischer’s geographic range and time span, not to mention the types of food discussed. Fischer’s “culture hearths” are transmutable, able to be removed from New England and the Anglicized South and placed in the Midwest. New considerations of geography, time period, material culture, and food ways will be added to it. An important point to note is that previous discussions of frontier food ways do not mention culture hearths as a term. It is thus arguable that in the field of food ways, a vital component has been missing. Studying Wilder’s food descriptions will allow a more well-rounded idea of how and why pioneers ate what they did. The Wilder family, as the subject of their own book series, is the perfect case study for a much deeper analysis of material culture.

According to the section entitled “Folklife: Foodways: An Overview” in the New Georgia Encyclopedia, *food ways* is defined as “a comparatively recent term, the study of the procurement, preparation, and the consumption of food. Put another way, food ways is the study of what people eat and why they eat it.”⁸ American food ways studies date back to at most the 1970s with Sam Bowers Hillard’s 1972 book *Hog Meat and Hoecake*:

⁷ David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 6.

⁸ The New Georgia Encyclopedia, “Folklife: Foodways: An Overview,”
<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h687>

Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860. Food ways specific to the history of western settlement appeared in 2008, in Reginald Horsman's *Feast or Famine: Food and Drink in American Westward Expansion*. Scholarly interest in the food ways of Americans in the past only makes sense. Food ways are one part of broader folk life, so why should it not be studied? It gives historians or historical archaeologists one more dimension of how people in the past lived. Food is vital and basic, and its sluggish arrival in the study of its role in national history is puzzling.

The *Little House* series lends itself quite well to food ways analysis. Food ways analysis will contribute something new to *Little House* scholarship. The food described in the series, studied for its own sake, is an interesting topic outright. Previous research of *Little House* has encompassed gender roles, race, and the life story of Laura Ingalls Wilder. This thesis will examine some of these topics—some old, some new—through the specific medium of food. Food can lend creative and substantial insights into the topics of race and ethnicity, class, economic and social changes and their impact on the family unit, male and female gender and work roles, children's play, and the role of nature as a physical force on the frontier.

Some current analysis of *Little House*—some of its themes and characters—even without food ways study, shows that as an author, Laura Ingalls Wilder did heavy mythmaking. The frontier childhood of her character Laura is idyllic to the point of discomfort for historians. Wilder's characters display racism and aggression, arrogance and greed, foolish idealism and a stalwart trust in the idea that their conditions will always improve. Her characters are portrayed in ways which blunt some of these ideas. When they are eventually realized it is shocking. For example, the idea of Ma being racist

is highly incongruous with her serene, gentle personality, yet she is: “‘What Indian’? Ma asked him. She looked as if she was smelling the smell of an Indian whenever she said the word. Ma despised Indians. She was afraid of them, too.”⁹ The fact that some characters’ true colors are a shocking discovery is proof that Wilder’s mythmaking succeeded. As late as 1987, overwhelmingly positive reviews for the series were coming in. Charles Frey feels *Little House on the Prairie* is grand indeed. “In the strength of its writing, the color and variance of its lively incidents, and its deep, deep affection for the life of all being, *Little House on the Prairie* stands and will stand as writing for children that has few equals and no superiors.”¹⁰ Wilder’s mythmaking created an iconic and widely read book series, an achievement in its own right. The *Little House* series was her chance to contribute to mythologies of the settlement of the American west. *Little House* gives readers wide-open grasslands and clear-flowing creeks, with the sun beating down hot and the buzz of insects thrumming all around. Her characters’ “little houses” are unusually isolated little structures, and the family within them is cut off from society to an almost extreme extent. The Ingalls family’s isolation eases somewhat by the third book of their saga, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, but they remain throughout fiercely self-reliant characters. A trope that disturbs serious historians of the American frontier is Wilder’s portrayal of Native Americans. Alongside the family’s isolation, this is the most serious problem. The family’s isolation has some implications for American western history that intertwine seamlessly with the subject of food.

⁹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 64.

¹⁰ Charles Frey, “Laura and Pa: Family and Landscape in *Little House on the Prairie*,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 12 (1987), 128.

First, perhaps the most endearing and enduring attribute of *Little House* is its portrayal of such a family: insular, isolated, self-reliant. Pa and Ma are merry, loving, and never *too* stern, and everyone's eyes twinkle with excitement. Laura gets into trouble while Mary is busy being good, and Baby Carrie (and later Baby Grace, too) toddles around. Whether rambunctious or quiet, big or small, the Ingalls girls are always fed meals that highlight Ma's ability to transform *make-do* into *delicious*. This is quite important. Ma is astonishingly resourceful, able to take the sparest or dullest ingredient and incorporate it into a tasty dish. Ma's resourcefulness places her in situations both accurate and inaccurate for the various settings and locations. For example, she skillfully raises chickens, but does not sell their eggs—bypassing an opportunity to participate in the frontier market economy. This market economy is indicative of the liminal nature of frontier communities—they straddle obsolescence and modernity.

The family unit is the paragon of virtue and is the overwhelmingly heartwarming aspect of this book series. “For many fans, Wilder’s writing evokes a nostalgic sense of family togetherness, a wholesome way of life, a bygone era,” writes Anna Thompson Hajdik.¹¹ These powerful feelings are still driving a type of *Little House* consumerism. This non-gastronomic consumerism’s boom is as indicative of the books’ enduring popularity as Walker’s *Cookbook* is. Hajdik writes in her dissertation that “the modern realities of industrialized agriculture have sparked a desire for highly romanticized visions of farming, particularly tourism to rural places that promise temporary pastoral

¹¹ Anna Thompson Hajdik, “Agricultural Romance: Consuming and Constructing Rural Life in Modern America,” (Ph.D dissertation, the University of Texas-Austin, 2011), 140.

transcendence to consumers.”¹² Hajdik thinks the “rural idyll”¹³ dream is the attraction for tourists who visit several of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Sites each year. These sites are scattered across the Midwest. They include the Dugout Home site, run by Stan and Hazelle Gordon in Minnesota and the Ingalls Homestead that lies “just east of De Smet,” South Dakota, run by Tim and Joan Sullivan.¹⁴ Hajdik’s analysis of “consumption”¹⁵ of Laura Ingalls Wilder analyzes the psychological and intellectual impacts that the Home Sites have on the books’ fans, who nostalgically consume place and time.

To further understand any connection between nostalgia—a state of mind—and food—a vital substance—it must be understood that nostalgia always emerges from some type of discontent with the status quo. Hajdik’s point is that nostalgic feelings for some type of idealized rural American past have arisen from modern agricultural and livestock-raising techniques: “searing images of factory farms, mistreated livestock, and genetically and chemically modified crops.”¹⁶ When readers of *Little House on the Prairie* immerse themselves in an early-1870s Kansas prairie filled with jackrabbits hopping under the hot sun, they are able to imagine something that was, that never will be again. Even if *Little House on the Prairie* fans today can’t have Wilder’s version of a Kansas prairie, they can

¹² Hajdik, *viii*.

¹³ Hajdik, 160.

¹⁴ Hajdik, 162-163, 175-176. Hajdik writes that both the Gordons and the Sullivans have made little restoration, construction, or alteration at the sites. The Gordons live near the Dugout Home site, and the original dugout “caved in long ago.” Stan Gordon’s parents had “discovered that their property had once been home to the Ingalls family” when they bought the land in 1947. The Sullivans’ attraction, “Laura’s Living Prairie” is all contained on Charles Ingalls’ original 160-acre land claim.

¹⁵ Hajdik, 138. Her chapter title is “*Consuming* Laura Ingalls Wilder and *Little House*.”

¹⁶ Hajdik, 10.

still thumb through Walker's *Cookbook* and find a recipe for Stewed Jack Rabbit and Dumplings. The population of both jackrabbits (the "long-legged, long-eared fellow"¹⁷) and "his cousin the cottontail"¹⁸ are plentiful enough that they are hunted and eaten, but Walker acknowledges the lure of convenience. "If you can't find a hunter" to provide a rabbit (or are not a hunter yourself) a "packaged frozen" cut-up rabbit might be available at a grocery.¹⁹

The topic of discontent with modern agriculture and livestock raising and slaughtering practices are tangential, but the roots of these industries' current conditions—particularly that of livestock raising and slaughter—were actually laid down in the 19th century. The rise of food processing and slaughterhouses plays an important role in highlighting Wilder's mythmaking. The fictionalized Ingalls family's journey westward, as well as the fictionalized Wilder family's backstory, originates in the eastern United States after the Civil War. The east was, for men like Pa Ingalls, a place to be scorned and abandoned for all its vices and empty promises. The west was the new land of opportunity inside national boundaries. Troublingly, the west and the (simultaneously associated, but ambiguous) *frontier* were often conceptualized in contemporary thought as female or feminine. This allowed for a hyper-masculinity to develop around this miniature, bordered colony. Because of this historians of the American west have steadily worked to dismantle tropes such as the noble savage, the Edenic garden metaphor of the

¹⁷ Walker, 37.

¹⁸ Walker, 37.

¹⁹ Walker, 37-38. Walker's preferred option to the frozen cut-up rabbit would be "a farm-raised rabbit at a German butcher shop."

land, and the loaded connotations of female/feminine/ passive/conquered and male/masculine aggressive/dominant attached to the frontier lands.

The frontier often was a punishing place, and the actual Ingalls family suffered numerous personal and financial setbacks that were directly linked to the environment. Still, because “it is better farther on” in Wilder’s words, the fictionalized nuclear family in the “little houses,” wherever they may be, must persevere and overcome all that is lacking. Ma strives for gentility and urbanity and hopes her girls will one day be proper, marriageable young ladies. Pa cares more for wide open spaces and the ego boost that good marksmanship gives him, but he compromises. He makes sure his daughters go to school—even if they *do* arrive dusty and barefooted at a one-room country schoolhouse. The fictionalized family’s troubling isolation is augmented by its liminality. Its members are 19th century but often assume 18th century roles when necessity looms large—which is quite often. Ultimately, the family will be analyzed for its contributions to Wilder’s mythmaking.

Wilder contributed to the vast stereotypes and inaccuracies about 19th century American western settlement. She did it very well with a jumble of literary devices. “Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs.”²⁰ The opening sentence of *Little House in the Big Woods* follows the classic fairy tale formula “once upon a time.” While Laura Elizabeth Ingalls was indeed a real girl born in 1867, she would set up her first novelized memoir in the folkloric formula when she was well past middle age. Researchers have examined the

²⁰ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers), 1932. 1. The series was reissued in 1953 with Garth Williams’ iconic illustrations.

work of eminent, late psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim (1903-1990). Some are skeptical of his scholarship on fairy tales. Alan Dundes is one who is troubled by Bettelheim's work. His 1991 article in *The Journal of American Folklore* asserts that Bettelheim's major work was flawed. Bettelheim had written *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Uses of Fairy Tales* in 1976. Dundes maintains that Bettelheim ignored critical source material. "If one wished to write a book devoted to the psychoanalytic study of folktales, one would in theory wish to consult two sets of sources. The first would be the folkloristic treatments of the tales under consideration and the second would be previous psychoanalytic exegeses of the same tales. From his footnotes, we can easily determine that Bettelheim did examine some relevant sources, but that he failed to read many of them."²¹

Bettelheim also, according to Dundes, did not distinguish between story types. Due to a "lack of familiarity with conventional folkloristics,"²² Bettelheim blurred the definitions and common identifiers that technically separate *myth* from *folk* or *fairy tale*. Dundes explains that "almost every society distinguishes between stories that are true and stories that are fictional. A myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and its human inhabitants came to be in their present form. It is set in the remote past. Folktales are fiction as signaled by an opening formula such as "once upon a time" and they are set in no particular place or time."²³

²¹ Alan Dundes, "Bruno Bettelheim's *Uses of Enchantment* and Abuses of Scholarship," *The Journal of American Folklore* 104, no. 411 (1991), 75-76.

²² Dundes, 75.

²³ Dundes, 76.

Folklore scholars are correct to address the discrepancies in Bettelheim's assertions, and this subject's discussion here is appropriate because of *Little House in the Big Woods*' opening line. Most significantly, this is the first time any *concrete* connection has been made between the stock formula of the folk or fairy tale and the *Little House* series. In her article "Civilization and Her Discontents," author Holly Blackford *does* describe *Little House in the Big Woods* with the aid of some familiar terminology. She mentions that the line "'once upon a time' announces that fairy tale takes precedence over historical specificity" and that the character Laura is a "little girl of a mythic forest" living with a mother who is a "goddess-witch" of domesticity.²⁴ Blackford's analysis lacks concrete connection to folklore studies, which would give her appraisal throughout of Ma Ingalls, as someone whose perfection is mysterious to her young daughter, more strength.

Blackford attempts a feminist reading of *Little House in the Big Woods*. "I confess that while rereading I would skip the chapters with Pa's stories, an ironic instance of revisionist reading . . . Wilder herself described her first juvenile novel as paying homage to her father's stories, suggesting a desire to equate her talent with his. I preferred the long, descriptive sections enumerating food preparation, rhythmic like the sound of my mother's rolling pin . . . I did not know it but I absorbed and came to embody little Laura's conflicted sentiments about her mother."²⁵ By picking up on the anxiety the *character* Laura Ingalls has about the *character* of her mother, Blackford also tries to

²⁴ Holly Blackford, "Civilization and Her Discontents: The Unsettling Nature of Ma in *Little House in the Big Woods*," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 29 no. 1 (2008), 147.

²⁵ Blackford, 147.

wind a Freudian thread throughout Wilder's prose. Freud's connection to folklore studies is his 1911 essay "Dreams in Folklore." He and other early-20th century psychoanalysts—Bettelheim included—had "a common thread in their applied psychoanalytic writings": "a fascination with folklore."²⁶

By highlighting Bettelheim's careless definitional blurring of myths, folk and fairy tales, the weakness of Blackford's analytic approach can be seen. Blackford falls into the same trap as Bettelheim, but unknowingly, not having cited his *Uses of Enchantment* nor Dundes' critique. Words and themes from myths, folktales and fairytales are used interchangeably by Blackford in "Discontent." The cabin where Laura lives is inhabited by a "goddess-witch" and it is located in the middle of the forest. Ma is "mythic" and when she grew up, Laura Ingalls Wilder "[turned] her life into a myth."²⁷ The manifest destiny *myth* is present. The parent characters are idolized and adored by Laura the character. Ma and Pa have an epic clash, like gods, every time they uproot: "each subsequent move West seems an attempt to dissolve the kingdom Ma has built in each domicile," writes Blackford. The little girl's parents put talismanic protections over the houses. Despite this, Pa is always trying to "unravel" the domestic goddess's powers.²⁸

Whether the character Pa truly tries to render his wife, the good witch, powerless is an intriguing question. Rather than agree with Blackford, this author thinks that Pa is not trying to outdo his wife or overwhelm her domestic accomplishments with frequent

²⁶ Dundes, 74.

²⁷ Blackford, 147-149.

²⁸ Blackford, 147-149.

moves westward. Charles Ingalls' transformation into a book character by his daughter resulted in the flattening of a real man's personality and experiences. The same condensing and reshaping of reality that occurred with him, occurred with each member of the Ingalls family during Wilder's writing process. So, Pa is more accurately and believably seen as working in tandem with Ma but in the so-called separate spheres of the 19th century household. Pa, however, becomes in the *Little House* series equally mythologized with his wife. Blackford dislikes what she thinks is a male-centric narrative in *Little House in the Big Woods*, but the book's male-centric aspect usefully demonstrates the 19th century male purview of hunting. *Little House in the Big Woods* may not be as male-centric as Blackford thinks. As the narrator, the character Laura dominates readers' experiences of the story. Readers experience the entire book *Big Woods*, let alone the series (*Farmer Boy* excluded), through Laura.

The drawing power of *Little House in the Big Woods* is special, as it is the only book in the series to begin with "once upon a time." This book's seamlessly blended elements create an appealing type of story. Literary and historical scholarship can attempt to parse out these elements. If Blackford did not use various terms interchangeably, then "myths" and "goddesses" would be separate from the fairy tale cottage in the woods where the girl character lives "once upon a time" with "the witch." Blackford, though, as merely an assessor of the work, is not to be held accountable for the original jumbling, which occurred at the book's writing and editing.

Laura Ingalls Wilder intentionally blurred genre in her first work. Arguably, with the help of her daughter Rose, Wilder purposely blended unreality and memory. The legacy of this blurring has been an inability among scholars to concretely classify her

works. In this study they are appraised for historical value as novelized memoirs. In many others, they have been analyzed for historical value as children's literature. That particular analysis examines historical value for a particular age set, which narrows its value in the field. In other "grown up" studies, such as Blackford's, Fellman's (which examines the books vis a vis politics), or Ann Romines' (which studies gender roles, race, and materialism), the problem of flawed analysis emerges because each author grasps at the confused genres but cannot distinguish them. Particularly in Blackford's case, the inability to fully encompass the idea of fairy and folktales as separate from myths forces the genre question to stay unsolved.

If the *Little House* books do not contain every element from traditional folk or fairy tales, and they do not contain elements of myths in the classical sense, what is their most prevalent element? It is arguable that they were conceived of as *new* folk tales at their publication. Here comes the mythmaking that Wilder strived for. Laura and her husband Almanzo Wilder transmitted very conservative values to their only surviving child, Rose Wilder Lane.²⁹ Fellman writes that "politics had always been one of the bonds" between mother and daughter, and in 1932, "watchful and at first neutral, Wilder and Lane became increasingly alarmed by President Roosevelt's efforts to combat the Depression."³⁰

From her grandparents and aunts, Rose Wilder Lane absorbed self-reliant life ways that by the time of the Great Depression were beginning to wane. In 1935, 6.8

²⁹ A son was born to the Laura and Almanzo in 1888, but died.

³⁰ Fellman, 55.

million families farmed.³¹ Today, “there are fewer than 2 million,”³² but when Rose’s mother was a child, most people outside eastern cities were farmers. The industrialization that caused a massive economic shift took place early in the east around 1810. The same shift did not move westward until 1830. Rose can be attributed the confused fairytale-myth terminology usage. In the 1930s and ‘40s Wilder’s daughter was a “goddess-witch” of her own making, having “stowed away jars that glowed like jewels in the cellar”³³ filled with home-grown, hand-canned produce. “The preserved produce fed her lavishly—she even had crates to share with friends—during the food-rationed years of World War II. Rose herself would not accept a ration card from the government.”³⁴

The *Little House* books fit perfectly into an ethos that still suggested self-reliance and the inevitability of white Euro-American success in the American west. William Holtz helpfully calls it “American optimism” and favors mythology. “Laura Ingalls Wilder had committed herself to a material, a method and a myth . . . The Wilder books are, in style and as individual works, realistic novels, but the unifying structure of the series is that of a romance that tends toward myth.”³⁵ Understanding the principles of serious history, as well as the differences between folk and fairy tales and mythology, can help reveal the *Little House* series’ essence. In this study mythologized or fanciful

³¹ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press-Macmillan, 1988), 146.

³² Hajdik, 10.

³³ Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane, *A Little House Sampler*, ed. William T. Anderson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 240.

³⁴ Wilder and Lane, *A Little House Sampler*, 240.

³⁵ William Holtz, “Closing the Circle: The American Optimism of Laura Ingalls Wilder,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 4 (1984), 79.

overtones' most powerful moments in analysis come when they are juxtaposed against history.

Though food ways study here is essentially a new visitation on older topics in Wilder and *Little House* scholarship, it also allows the field of food ways scholarship within history to be critiqued. This is likely one of the few times literary works have been tapped for their food-related content, and *Little House* yields a treasure trove of such material. The study operates under the assumption that the food ways described—the foodstuffs, their preparation, their consumption pattern, their origins—are accurate to the last detail. Essentially, the kernel of truth lies embedded in Wilder's prose, which elevates the frontier saga to such mythic proportions. Exactly how the kernel of truth remains comes down to a word on how the books are classified in this study.

Designating them *novelized memoirs*, as opposed to either *children's literature* or *children's fiction* will actually help historians utilize them for their food ways presentations more easily. By acknowledging the personal narrative aspect of the books—the fact that they were autobiographical in nature—one is able to view them as records not unlike a diary or journal yet significantly different. They are indeed the recollections of Laura Ingalls Wilder about her pioneer childhood, though she “omits and alters some facts.”³⁶ The intense collaborative effort between mother and daughter to produce all nine books necessitated some degree of artistic license, and it can be read about in detail elsewhere. The special quality of Wilder's books is that they are drawn

³⁶ Debra Reed Airheart, “Laura Ingalls Wilder and the *Little House* books: an example of the pioneer's life on the frontier,” M. A. thesis (East Texas State University, 1982), 5.

from her real, daily experiences from ages five to 22.³⁷ Imprints of concern over a monetary bottom line and audience satisfaction are easily seen when *Little House* is analyzed alongside unembellished corollary material from the 19th century, and even research on Wilder herself. The nuances of the publishing world were not the only determining factors in altering details about real people, places, or events. Many times, Wilder's memory simply failed her so creative reconstruction of memories resulted. Interestingly, in the particular case of Mary Ingalls' illness, when facts were altered the far-reaching consequence was that for decades millions of readers thought her illness had been scarlet fever, although this was inaccurate.³⁸

Records are available, from Wilder's time and geographic location, that detail food ways—everything from hunting methods, to preservation methods, to descriptions of family dinners. All the recording of mouthwatering (or off-putting) culinary adventures and accomplishments occurred in diaries and letters. Trailblazing groups observed Native American food ways even as they scrounged for their own food. Settled housewives cooked on hearths under sod roofs or in roughly hewn cabins. Farmers often recorded, in a terse exhaustion by evening's last light, what they had accomplished in the

³⁷ The character Laura turns five in the first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*. Laura is 22, married with a five-year-old daughter Rose at the end of the last (posthumously published) book, *The First Four Years*.

³⁸ Recent research assumes that the cause of Mary Ingalls' permanent blindness as a teenager was meningoencephalitis. This rules out both scarlet fever and a stroke. Laura Ingalls Wilder had been told, by their mother, that her sister had suffered a stroke. As an adult, however, Wilder wrote to her daughter Rose. Her letter said Rose's Aunt Mary had endured "spinal sickness.. Michelle Castillo's news article summarizes the medical research published in *Pediatrics*. Castillo writes that the medical researchers found the letter to Rose, and newspaper clippings. These documents indicated that the 19th century medical field was aware of meningoencephalitis, but called it "spinal sickness" or "brain fever." When Wilder was in publishing successfully, though, Mary's illness suddenly became scarlet fever. Wilder's publishers believed children reading *By the Shores of Silver Lake* could understand and relate to scarlet fever. It is a virus that does not affect eyesight. For the full report see Michelle Castillo's "Brain infection, not scarlet fever, may have caused Mary Ingalls' blindness," CBS News, 02-04-13.

field or at market that day. These first-person records will not be pulled into the orbit of this thesis, as they lie outside it. Acknowledging their existence, though, provides the needed counterweight to the suspended belief that comes with reading fiction. The nomenclature of novelized memoirs places Wilder's books on the same par as diaries or other written records from the 19th century. Though they were written in the following century, they are the product of a 19th century woman—one, at least, who began to write only toward her later decades. Wilder wrote only when she was well into her sixties. Despite the passage of so much time, readers and scholars can especially trust her food ways descriptions because food was not what she sought to write about.

Food was a secondary part of her story. Each book examined in this project can be viewed as an encapsulated piece. *Little House in the Big Woods* is perhaps the best example of encapsulation. Wilder wrote that her desire to publish *Big Woods* came from wanting to tell her father's stories to a new generation. "Wilder told a friend that her editor had asked her to put 'meat' on the 'bones' of Pa's stories."³⁹ Wilder saw her first book, an homage to her father, spark the growth of the beloved series. Although *Big Woods* centers on the character Pa and his stories, food arguably plays an integral role in shaping atmosphere and character traits. This is also true in the rest of the books. Readers looking for depictions of gender roles, for example, will immediately find them in *Big Woods* and its character Ma Ingalls, who is nearly always handling food, though the father character was foremost in Wilder's mind during the writing process.

³⁹ Ann Romines, *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 52.

Food's status in the *Little House* series has been wrongly relegated to the background. It is very much at the forefront of the books. Especially when the series is acknowledged as a group of novelized memoirs, the ability of the reader to trust food ways descriptions as accurate, unembellished memories of what Wilder really ate becomes very easy. There is no suspended belief. Wilder's abilities as a writer carry the reader away to a bygone era, where the wind rustles the tall grass and the sun beats down on little Laura's face. Ma reminds her to put her sunbonnet back on. Dinner is cooked over the open fire, and served in tin plates. What was on those little tin plates, what it smelled like and tasted like, and how it was cooked, are all ascertained through Wilder's memory.

This thesis begins with an overview of 19th century American life in the eastern United States, where most people lived. Pre-and post-war economic shifts impacted the evolution of the family unit. The family evolved from its subsistence roots to one rooted (less firmly in the case of the slums or the frontier) in a commercial setting. Changing labor and production patterns forever created a new ideal type of family. The ideal one was a working father, a stay-at-home mother, and children who received steadily more education, and who were given greater freedoms, before they set out to work. Money-market fluctuations occurred even before the Civil War, but the war's impact was so unprecedented that it caused population, labor, and consumption patterns to change drastically. Easterners were flooding out of cities as early as 1862, when the Homestead Act was enforced and the promise of cheap, good land was strong. Even later, circa 1868, is when the actual Ingalls family headed west. In *Little House on the Prairie*, though, the character Laura is much older and the setting is later. The staunchly eastern Wilder

family, from upstate New York, moved west eventually, too. As it was in life, the Wilder family's story is tied to the Ingalls family's in the book series, but in the books many of the Wilders are peripheral characters. The main focus for most of Wilder's prose is on the Ingallses—the Wilders do not appear outside *Farmer Boy* until *The Long Winter*, which is set in and around De Smet, Dakota Territory.

Chapter One discusses the eastern states and lays a broad factual framework for the settings of the *Little House* books. Subsequent chapters will analyze the fictionalized Ingalls family's way of life, which includes their food ways. Chapter Two, Initial Settlement, marks the start of the family's adventure. Their time in Kansas circa 1871 sees them supremely isolated in their rough-hewn cabin, stalked by wolves as they live off the land. Chapter Three, Domesticity, examines in-depth the character Laura as she navigates childhood—one of the century's new concepts—and proves indispensable at male labor. Laura grows up in this chapter from a curious little girl to a mischievous adolescent. Demarcations of childhood and adulthood, body image concerns, and Laura's role as a young woman in the “cult of domesticity” are discussed. Laura and Ma's relationship centers curiously well around food. Childhood versus adulthood, or more accurately, the former leading into the latter, is critical to understanding the character of Laura as she progresses through the book series. Central to the demarcation on the side of childhood is little Laura's perception of her parents as towering figures. (It should be

noted that Laura Ingalls, in the stories, is a “literary persona” according to Hajdik, and similarly, a “character” according to Airheart.⁴⁰)

Chapter Four, Native Americans, discusses the problematic characterization of Wilder’s Native American characters. They are depicted as sneaky and desperate—and are nearly all-male. They steal settlers’ food. They have no agency as human beings and are displaced from their own life ways and food ways. The final chapter, Chapter Five, explores the frontier as it is depicted by Wilder. It is an extremely dangerous place, yet it is romanticized as part of Wilder’s agenda to contribute to myths of the American west. Weather and other natural elements dominate the landscape, and human beings are dwarfed. The Ingalls family challenges the land itself to get the food it needs to survive. The series of novelized memoirs will then be tied back to Fischer’s culture hearth theory. Finally a conclusion will assess how this study is significant for *Little House* scholarship and historical food ways scholarship.

⁴⁰ Hajdik discusses both Wilder’s mystique as a writer and mentions her “literary persona” on page 149 of her thesis. Airheart calls “Laura” a “character” when she explains her choice to refer to “Laura” while discussing the books and to “Wilder” when discussing the writer.

I. FOOD IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICA

Laura Elizabeth Ingalls—who became Laura Ingalls Wilder—was a real girl who lived in a specific time. Folklore scholar Alan Dundes writes that fairy and folk tales characteristically take place “in no particular place or time.” Dundes’ definition is especially critical because tales that begin “once upon a time” reveal nothing specific about calendar years or geographic locations. By obscuring specificities when she began *Little House in the Big Woods* with “once upon a time,” Wilder sought to create her own fairy or folk tale.

Wilder was born on February 7, 1867 near Lake Pepin in Wisconsin.¹ The real child’s mother was not the “goddess-witch” of Holly Blackford’s interpretation. Caroline Quiner Ingalls was a town-raised woman. Like countless other women on the Midwestern frontier, she strived for a level of domesticity in wild places that was above basic scrounging. There was no magic involved in Mrs. Ingalls’ butter churning or cheese making, only hard physical labor and success through repetition. Mr. Ingalls’ prowess with the rifle supplied his family with meat. In the *Little House* series the young Laura character feels safe in those “little houses,” snug with Pa’s rifle, his fiddle, and his deep

¹ John F. Case, “Let’s Visit Mrs. Wilder,” in *A Little House Sampler*, ed. Anderson, 7. John Case had corresponded with Wilder. Wilder wrote of the local lore near her birthplace. “I was born in a log house within 4 miles of the legend-haunted Lake Pepin.” Lake Pepin sits on the Minnesota-Wisconsin state line. The Lake is the site of a supposed suicide. The Winona Legend was recorded by explorer Zebulon Pike in 1805. Pike wrote “I was shown a point of rocks from which a Sioux maiden cast herself, and was dashed into a thousand pieces on the rocks below. She had been informed that her friends intended matching her to a man she despised; having been refused by the man she had chosen.” The story changes: sometimes the girl Winona is Ojibwe, and refuses a Frenchman named Raymond. In the version where the girl is Sioux, the man she loves is Ojibwe. Winona is also called Oola-Ita. See G. Hubert Smith, “The Winona Legend,” *Minnesota History* 13.4 (1932).

voice telling her to sleep. The real Ingallses were a normal nuclear family in the 19th century social structure.

Once literary convention is stripped away, the fictionalized Ingallses become clear approximations of the real family, set to paper from Wilder's memory with a healthy dose of imagination. The real family was so normal that it partook in several of the great paradigm shifts of the 19th century. Each of these shifts would dramatically impact the United States' food ways. The first was the American family's evolution from economic (household) unit to companionate (democratic) unit. The second was the impact on the country of the vegetarian and dietary reform movements. The third was the confluence of foodstuffs and mechanized manufacturing. The fourth was the Civil War and the 1862 Homestead Act.

Wilder's parents, Caroline Quiner and Charles Ingalls, were born in 1839 and 1836, respectively. Caroline was born in Brookfield, Wisconsin, and Charles was born in upstate New York. Brookfield, Wisconsin was a town site. Charles's family farmed in the small agricultural outpost of Cuba, New York. Caroline Quiner Ingalls is described in personal notes by her daughter as extremely well-educated. Researcher Anne Romines writes that Caroline's mother and father had been well-to-do: "a Connecticut dressmaker who later emigrated west and a man who attended Yale University."² In her adulthood, Caroline accordingly "married down" into Charles Ingalls' farming family.³ As first an impressionable child, and later as a writer, Laura Ingalls Wilder would absorb and

² Ann Romines, *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 113.

³ Romines, 112.

process anxieties regarding social class, education, appearance, marriage and motherhood. Blackford highlights the unease Ma Ingalls brings out in little Laura in *Little House in the Big Woods*. The mother character is entirely unrelatable when she is cast as the “goddess-witch” of the woodland cabin. Wilder’s real parents, though, were thoroughly human—a dressmaker’s educated daughter and the restless man she married. As a book character, Pa Ingalls is entirely opposed toward cities.

The births of Caroline Quiner and Charles Ingalls came when the American family and the country were both changing structurally. It is impossible to say whether the changes in family dynamic or the changes in industrial and economic structure happened first. They may have been simultaneous, or had such temporal closeness that different speeds are imperceptible. Perhaps a more appropriate explanation is that people pioneered industry, and industry impacted people in various ways. Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg acknowledge this in *Domestic Revolutions*. “Factories, mills, mines, and farms” were all altered by industrialization and urbanization. “Poverty, filth, stench and disease” were the hallmarks of progress, especially in cities, where many people might live in squalor. In New York City, the largest hub in Charles Ingalls’ home state, “over 18,000 people lived in damp, ill-lit unventilated cellars containing from six to twenty persons in each room.”⁴ This was reported in 1850, when Charles was just 14. Over a century and a half earlier in the 1790s, city dwellers’ daily atmosphere had been “cramped and modest.”⁵ It was rapid industrialization, though, that created the 19th

⁴ Mintz and Kellogg, 84-85.

⁵ Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 43.

century's overcrowding and poverty, a type distinct from the squalor of medieval and Renaissance Europe.⁶ A fast pace and stress accompanied the new types of poverty and crowding, brought on by the mass production of goods through labor saving technologies.

The 19th century ushered in *modernization* and *urbanization* as well as *industrialization*. These words are understood to be the creators of trade and commerce, living and working conditions, and business as they are today. Richard D. Brown points out distinctions between the words that are crucial to understanding 19th century America. Modernization, urbanization, and industrialization are not synonymous. But “the fact that they overlap in some respects—specialization, for example, is a key part of all of them—leads some to conclude erroneously that they are indistinguishable. In fact, *urbanization* refers primarily to settlement patterns that are not necessarily modern or industrial . . . *Industrialization*, which is surely a manifestation of modernization . . . refers only to modes of production and has . . . been carried on as well in the countryside as in the city.” *Modernization*, Brown writes, “is far broader [encompassing] not only production but also diverse phenomena such as scientific analysis” and rapid communications.⁷ The American economy, family, and workplace culture were all changing in the 19th century, and it was work culture that drove the restructuring of the family.

Before the creation of the textiles industry (that is, mechanized looms), the family unit first in Europe and then in the American colonies had been what scholars call

⁶ An excellent source about pre-modern urban conditions is Emily Cockayne's *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England, 1600-1770* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁷ Richard D. Brown, “Modernization: A Victorian Climax,” *American Quarterly* (1975). 534. Emphasis added.

economic or *household*. Economic family structure strived to meet the basic subsistence needs of every family member. Needs were met through every member of the family, including children aged seven and over, working to produce goods they needed from within or without the home. Women rarely bought cloth until 1850, as it generally was not a commercial item for purchase before then. Instead, they carded and spun wool, spooled the resultant yarn, and sewed or wove the resultant cloth. A family member might have two changes of clothes per year. A passage specifically describing 18th-century farming families' food ways is general enough to also describe the food ways of more urban families, because the emphasis was on subsistence. Families "generally enjoyed few luxuries. Housewives burdened with tasks of spinning and weaving, soap and candle making, as well as measures connected with food preparation such as pickling and sausage making, threw together hastily prepared meals of home-grown staples. Hardly any food was purchased."⁸

The textile industry originated in England. The industry's increasing success and expansion led to clashes precipitating many of the first emigration waves to the colonies. Working class groups headed to Virginia, while middling classes sought out cities like Boston. This occurred because back in England, landowning nobles found more profit in closing off farmland—hence the term Enclosure Movement to describe this process—and turning it into fenced pasture to raise sheep for their wool. The wool supplied the water-powered textile mills with raw materials. This mill work brought the first structural changes to families in England and in the colonies, because men went to the mills to

⁸ Richard Osborn Cummings, *The American and His Food: A History of Food Habits in the United States* revised edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 13.

work. Women and children stayed at home, doing piece work with fabric and continuing to raise subsistence crops or livestock.

Women and finally children replaced men as textile mill workers as the decades rolled on into the 19th century. By the time of Charles Ingalls' adolescence in 1850, 60 percent of "out-workers"—Americans who worked in factories or mills removed from home textile production—were young unmarried women who brought the money home. Before Charles was even born, this transition between home and factory, between older ways and modernizing industry, had taken place. In 1823 the Lowell mills opened in the eponymous Massachusetts town. The Lowell mill enterprise closed in 1840, but its impact on urban American work culture was enormous in the 17 years the mills were operational. Urban work culture had permanently transformed, reshaping the economic structure. The female mill workers were as "neat and regulated" as the dormitories they lived in and the floors they worked on. Lowell's labor experiment gave Americans new ideas about neatening up for working days and going about their tasks in a time-based manner. The "order, punctuality of meals, cleanliness and general arrangements . . . and mutual good will" found within the Lowell mills became the ideal scenario for other workplaces, "and for a while it worked."⁹ New schemas were developed regarding work hours and wages in other industries, but mills remain the originators of such regimented, clock-based work culture. In one South Carolina "mill village" "strict observance of work rules" was reinforced by "a huge clock for all to see."¹⁰ No longer enough to keep adequate food on the table, the old work method of piece work at home yielded to hourly

⁹ Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* ed. Eric Foner. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 31.

¹⁰ Laurie, 33.

wage work. In urban and suburban families, someone—the wife, the husband, the children, or any combination—worked in a business or trade. Single people of course participated in wage work. Wage earners lived and worked in a reshaped social environment. The idea that the hours in a day could and should be maximized for production and profit was at odds with subsistence farming and piece-work craft and trade. There were more people now to feed, clothe, hire, and pay. “Between 1820 and 1860 the national population grew from just under 10 million to slightly over 30 million, an increase of 230 percent.”¹¹ Brown highlights division of labor as a highly successful workplace strategy. Divided labor let multiple people work on one task—for example, shirt making—and produce far more products than one person traditionally could. In the new “wildly competitive industry of garment work, “teams of two or three” worked on “several layers of cloth at a time.” At the end of a work day “four dozen shirts” were managed because “cutters methodically carved out sleeves, collars and other components, which were passed to trimmers” and so on.¹² Though many products, from shoes to shirts to food, would be quickly produced en masse in assembly-line work culture, the bounty came with a price. Because traditionally valued labor skills were “cheapened” by this assembly-line out work, “the line between capital and labor”¹³ was blurred. Brown writes that contemporary observers discussed the conditions in Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*: “squalor and misery.”¹⁴ The new pace of work in cities and towns was a hard adjustment

¹¹ Laurie, 33.

¹² Brown, 39-40.

¹³ Brown, 40.

¹⁴ Brown, 31.

for some to make, especially workers from rural areas. “Poor, illiterate, and fresh from the countryside”¹⁵ was the pick of some task-masters at mills, shops and warehouses. Brown highlights specifically “Southern operatives” as “preindustrial workers ignorant of the new ‘rules of the game’ and not avid to learn.” But “all novice workers everywhere” in the United States “brought older customs” to work with them.¹⁶

Work could be exhausting. It was believed that the pace of urban life wore down working men who were husbands and fathers. Middle and upper-class wage earning men, especially, needed to soothe their minds, so no matter if the wife herself worked, she was expected to keep an immaculately clean home and provide plenty of nourishing food. As the American work culture and family structure both changed, so did the home. Houses ceased to be simply physical structures. An idea arose glorifying the *home*, idealizing and romanticizing it. Glenna Matthews finds the beginning of this sentimentalizing—which wraps houses, mothers/wives, husbands/fathers, and children all together—at the close of the 18th century’s political upheaval. The family structure of the 19th century had begun to take shape in the 18th, with the idea of Republican motherhood replacing older ideas about a strong leading role for men and fathers in an intensely Puritanical patriarchal structure.

With their break from Britain secured, Americans—as they suddenly found themselves—in the 1790s stared into an abyss devoid of precedent. Matthews writes that “widespread concern over how best to socialize citizens” was the problem with “the largest impact. There were no precedents for a republic on the scale of the United States.

¹⁵ Brown, 31.

¹⁶ Brown, 32.

Many people believed that the new nation would require the support of a uniquely public-spirited citizenry. If citizens must learn to place a high value on the public interest, this was a lesson they would need to begin in childhood. Thus the home became crucial to the success of the nation.”¹⁷ In short, good character—both civic and moral—began at home, but only if that home was the right kind of home.

A quintessentially American home toward the beginning of the 19th century possessed an item of extreme symbolic subversion of the old ways and the old mother country. This most subversive item was the cookbook. The patriotic American housewife cooked from books written in “an American vernacular.” She cooked “Indian pudding” and baked “rye n’ injun bread” and even “Election Cake, Independence Cake, and Federal Pan Cake.”¹⁸ These cookbooks lent American homes intense power: “the home in effect gained a function so political that the domestic sphere could influence the outcome of history . . . By the 1790s American cuisine had diverged from that of the mother country because it utilized many native ingredients.”¹⁹ The new republic’s children, the sons and daughters of the good mothers who fed them Independence Cake, benefited enormously from the new, emerging paradigms. The family unit’s structural shift from economic to companionate enabled children to be seen as members of society with unique needs. In a later discussion about this, Mintz and Kellogg will be called on again. But for now, it will suffice to say that there was suddenly “value placed on

¹⁷ Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7-8.

¹⁸ Matthews, 7-8.

¹⁹ Matthews, 7-8.

nurture”²⁰ in child-rearing. The 18th century closed on a newly-formed nation whose food ways were irrevocably altered through altered group thinking. As the 19th century dawned, American food ways would continue to change, although the American family stayed true to its newest incarnation of nurturing adults and nurtured children. Children may have continued, for a while at least in some homes, to eat Independence Cake. So the home was now a haven. This new schema of nurture and Nation affected the upbringing of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s parents, and indeed, her own. The ideas of *nation* and *destiny* would continue to expand with the country’s population and progress. This would lead to the great moves westward.

The changing structures of the American family and the family home encompassed what Brown calls “the Victorian personality.” The two closely-linked ideas—the companionate family with role-model parents and malleable children, and the home as a haven or refuge—took on, in the 19th century, an almost feverish importance as they culminated in their most utilized forms. The 1800s were destined to be “a better era morally, socially, and materially.” High-flown ideas about how to govern were the purview of “critics” who favored “the order of hereditary aristocracy or the individual liberty of natural anarchy.” But “a massive commitment to modernization, glorified as ‘progress’ pervaded American society.”²¹ So Progress, personified as the hard-working husband and the moral wife, guided American families, whether “common working people or the wealthy and educated elite” with a mix of “patriarchy and nostalgia.”²²

²⁰ Matthews, 10.

²¹ Brown, 535.

²² Brown, 535.

Brown lists common stereotypes applied to the Victorians—“hidebound, repressed and old-fashioned . . . romantic sentimentalism and cultivation of the patriarchal family, as well as their reliance on human and animal-powered agriculture.” He thinks they were actually in place during the era for a specific purpose. Rigidity, high-flown morality, and a dual wariness and embrace of technology were “actually self-conscious attempts” for the people “to soften the edges of modernization, to reduce its psychological stresses.”²³ The “broad involvement”²⁴ of this Victorian personality meant that the same concerns—morality, progress, order, efficiency—went into every aspect of life, from the home to the workplace, from politics to the economy. For better and worse these ideas changed the United States. When this “personality” became disturbed problems big and small could result. While both effected massive change, the technological revolution was an extreme positive, and the Civil War was an extreme negative.

The Civil War impacted industry, agriculture, and finances, as well as an emergent factory culture. The urban population concentrated in the Northeast was seriously altered, while the South was all but remade. But before the war, there was still direct correlation between individuals’ or families’ social class and how well—even how often—they ate. The eating experiences of urban people therefore varied widely. The quality and amount of food would have been directly related to how much money they brought home. On the whole, though, no matter class or occupation, city workers in America were “probably better fed” than their European counterparts. Even so, wages

²³ Brown, 535-536. Brown acknowledges that Americans of the century were not “Victorian” in the strictest sense of the term, meaning under the rule of Queen Victoria (r. 1837-1901).

²⁴ Brown, 535.

were so low at the beginning of the century that average pay for “unskilled workers” was “two shillings a day at a time when corn was three and wheat more than eight shillings a bushel.” Unskilled workers in the early 1800s “rarely tasted fresh meat more than once a week. They ate much bread, one of the cheapest sources of energy.”²⁵ Until the end of the 19th century, urban life was overcrowded and less than sanitary. “Germs were unthought of, and the causes of epidemics of cholera, yellow fever and typhoid which raged in the centers were mysteries. City life appeared to contribute directly to ill-health.”²⁶ Cummings writes that people who moved to cities from rural areas encountered disease and death on a large scale. Many of these diseases were due to lifestyle factors that included “sedentary habits and overstimulating diet.”²⁷

The major concentration of people in the pre-war period was in the northeastern United States, so only a small geographical area was densely settled. The readily acknowledged overcrowding and disease often drove people out of cities. Despite these negatives, the successes of Jacksonian-era industrial development brought positive changes to the economy. Improvements in the money market impacted people’s long-term buying power for food and other goods. When times were good, money was almost always in hand. The Jacksonian economy was one of wild fluctuations. It opened in 1832 with the political row over creating a national bank. When the Second Bank’s bill of re-charter was vetoed, “a credit boom” resulted when state banks utilized “the federal

²⁵ Cummings, 27.

²⁶ Cummings, 26.

²⁷ Cummings, 26.

deposits Jackson removed”²⁸ from the National Bank. The country’s economic structure “became increasingly speculative and unsound.”²⁹ When the markets were sound, great things happened. Strong economic intervals fostered developments that helped the United States continue setting post-Revolution precedents. Expansions of economy and geography “required the rapid creation of transportation facilities, first railroads and rivers, then supplemented by canals and railroads.”³⁰ People had come to understand “the prospect of economic rewards” and this urged modernization on.³¹ The interconnectedness of towns and cities with rural areas via first rivers and later railroads was enough to make men like Charles Ingalls, whose preference for unsettled places is exaggerated in Wilder’s character Pa—head away from it all.

The feeling of urban claustrophobia in cities like New York, Boston and Philadelphia was eased with the creation of suburbs. Even as large swaths of easterners would move very far west when the 1862 Homestead Act went into effect (with some even leaving before), most easterners who wanted to breathe a little freer did not wander far. The fact that overflow occupants lived near cities meant that despite any negatives, the cities were thriving places that received the human labor that kept them in goods, services and sales. With their row housing structure, suburbs emerged as eventual competitors to the original cities. Boston, for instance, was transformed. The city “underwent a physical rearrangement,” a jostling so that the “tightly packed sea port” in

²⁸ Peter Temin, “The Jacksonian Economy” in *The Many-Faceted Jacksonian Era: New Interpretations* ed. Edward Pessen. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 103.

²⁹ Temin, 104.

³⁰ Brown, 538.

³¹ Brown, 538.

1850 could eventually sprawl “over a ten-mile radius and [contain] thirty-one cities and towns” by 1900.³² Before the war, this “pedestrian city,” so called because everything residents needed was within walking distance, experienced much of the same growth patterns as New York or Philadelphia. There was still what Blumin calls an “artisanal”³³ vein of economics and business. This remnant artisanal economy competed still with mechanized labor. This co-existence would disappear. The post-Civil War economy, which would initially negatively impact the country’s food supply, eventually saw “massive industrialization” that included “railroading, mining, and heavy industry.”³⁴ The industrial boom left little room for artisanal work and food ways—instead, it created a consumer culture based on money, time, convenience and quantity.

Such prosperity from the post-war boom is the simple reason that “prosperous city dwellers who spent more for food than the wage-earners or farmers had a far more varied diet.”³⁵ More money had always bought more and better food, though. Decades before the turn of the century, foods affordable to the urban wealthy were derided by poorer folk. White bread, for instance was only “a special dish like cake for rural dwellers”³⁶ but for urban people with money it was eaten in more forms, more often. In the 18th century John Adams, “fresh from a rural environment,” remarked on “Philadelphia dinners,” calling them “mighty,” “elegant” and “sinful feasts” because they contained “many

³² Sam Bass Warner, Jr. *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston (1870-1900)*, 2.

³³ Blumin, 259.

³⁴ Blumin, 259.

³⁵ Cummings, 29.

³⁶ Cummings, 30.

delicacies—jellies and trifles, fruits and nuts, syllabubs and sweetmeats.”³⁷ The 19th century saw the same type of extravagant eating in cities, but with new trends. French cuisine was so delightful in the early 1800s that even the middling and lower classes tried to keep up with it. “The French influence was also discernible in boarding houses, the homes of many young couples who could not afford ‘to keep house in expensive fashion.’”³⁸ This is revealing for two reasons. First, it shows that people in the middling classes aspired for the literal tastes of those in the higher classes. Second, it highlights again the importance of the ideas surrounding domesticity. A *house* was merely shelter. It could be nice, or it could be rudely furnished in a crowded section. There was always the aspiration that homeowners (and even tenement dwellers) would not serve “dismal” food like that found in the more common boarding houses.³⁹ Rather, the idealized *home* was a place where a sense of tranquility could be found over nutritious meals. The idea that there should be refinement in furnishings, conversation, and food was not new, but 19th century middle and upper-class urbanites “formed a ‘fashion of conspicuousness of expense.’” “Thus Grund found a young lady who sat next to him in New York calling her oyster patties *pate aux huitres* and demanding that, according to French custom, her vegetables be served in separate dishes. The ‘very sight’ of so many things in one plate being sufficient, she said, to take away her appetite.”⁴⁰ Those conscious of the latest trends in food, like the unidentified female diner, “entered heart and soul into every

³⁷ Cummings, 30.

³⁸ Cummings, 32.

³⁹ Cummings, 32.

⁴⁰ Cummings, 33.

sumptuary rage they encountered. Evidence of their rise is found in increased use of sugar, tea, coffee, fruits, vegetables and ice.”⁴¹ Cummings writes that by 1830 per-pound, per-capita coffee consumption was up to three and a half pounds and had surpassed tea. Certain vegetables such as broccoli suddenly became popular by that year. People were less convinced about the tomato—the ‘love-apple’—but were starting to eat it sliced on salads instead of in sauces.⁴² High-class Americans “entertained certain kinds of aspirational fantasies linked to ‘epicureanism.’”⁴³ This attitude toward eating was in full form when economic times were good: “One remaining emblem of privilege was eating kinds of game and seafood that were becoming scarce to the point of extinction, especially diamondback terrapin, canvasback duck, and the outrageously overfished lobster. Available supplies of all three were eagerly snapped up by elite retailers, restaurant purveyors, and private chefs to the rich.”⁴⁴ The rich had eating patterns and preferences beyond the abilities and desires of more ordinary people. For most everyone else, beyond the mid-century mark, whimsy had changed yet again.

In 1867, the *Chicago Tribune* claimed that peaches caused “the gripes” (sudden, acute intestinal pain and distress.) The August 8, 1867 issue claimed that “someone passing a fruit stand laden with spoiled peaches” would almost certainly get the gripes. “The conclusion was reached that “if bare proximity to those peaches caused him so

⁴¹ Cummings, 33.

⁴² Cummings, 35-36.

⁴³ Anne Mendelson, “Goodbye to the Marketplace: Food and Exclusivity in Nineteenth-Century New York,” in *The American Bourgeoisie: Distinction and Identity in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Sven Beckert and Julia B. Rosenbaum (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 21.

⁴⁴ Mendelson, “Goodbye to the Marketplace: Food and Exclusivity in Nineteenth-Century New York, 21.

much pain” he would surely die if he ate them.⁴⁵ In the 19th century this was part of a common schema of food hygiene, nutrition, and illness. The claim was within the century’s theories about the origins of common diseases. Fruit was seen, both before and after the war, to be a prime carrier of cholera. That is now known to be an infectious disease caused by fouled water. “Camp fever,” or similarly-waterborne typhoid, ravaged the country’s divided troops two years before the *Tribune* cautioned against peaches. The place of fruits on American dining tables was precarious for a long time, and the specific claim that fruits caused cholera helped one of the most influential dietary reformers launch his career. Sylvester Graham held views regarding bread and vegetarianism that almost certainly impacted the real Ingalls family. In fact, passages in two of the *Little House* books can be read as positive echo chambers for “Grahamism.” In both urban and rural communities the specter of malnutrition was ever-present. Malnutrition and hunger persisted despite late-century innovation, a flush post-war economy, and improved scientific and nutritional knowledge. Malnourishment was also present in western territories, somewhat ironically. Escaping the crush of cities, pioneers found a new hardscrabble lifestyle in which the old problems—quality and quantity of food— still directly impacted their physical health.

Lack of nutrients was an egalitarian problem, affecting urbanites as well as rural people, those with money and those without. Cumming’s “country people” could well be considered the frontier pioneers as well as farm families, affected by “lacks of milk, fresh fruit, and vegetables.”⁴⁶ He reveals that on the frontier, malnutrition’s dominance was

⁴⁵ Cummings, 44.

⁴⁶ Cummings, 25.

directly related to a lack of fresh produce. “Breaking the plains of the West” involved both heavy labor and a heavy reliance on meat, particularly pork. Sweeteners like honey and sorghum were consumed, and wild greens were foraged. Turnips were heavily consumed in the winter, he writes. The specific lack of fruit variety is revealed. “The plains dwellers were happy to have” homemade preserves each year of wild plums and other fruits, but the preserves were “sour and unpalatable” having been preserved in barrels of spring water “over which a scum quickly formed.” He writes that “children tired of the monotonous diet and cried for other things to eat. Some . . . had scurvy because of a lack of vitamins; bodies at times were covered with sores.”⁴⁷ The vegetarian and diet reform movements undergirded the century’s fledgling nutrition science, but many people simply knew instinctively to look forward to fresh produce, even if it was only sour wild plum preserves.

By the time of Wilder’s birth in 1867, despite still-rampant malnutrition, Americans—“prosperous city dwellers . . . farmers and wage earners [appeared] to have gained in health and physique.” Lifespan had increased by “15.6 years by the [1880s]. More meat for wage earners meant more protein, and on this basis . . . Americans had better quantity and quality of food than Europeans.”⁴⁸ This research compiled by Cummings contradicts the claims of malnourishment and disease in the frontier population. But perhaps the discrepancy can be explained by city dwellers’ easier access to a wide variety of foodstuffs via train deliveries to stores. Still, for city dwellers, access meant nothing if there was no money to purchase foods delivered by train—as this

⁴⁷ Cummings, 87-88.

⁴⁸ Cummings, 88.

summarization of contemporary journalist Horace Greeley's account proves. "Scattered bits of information give something of the picture. During the depression of 1837 Greeley saw children burrowing in a cellar, 'a prey to famine on the one hand, and to vermin and cutaneous maladies on the other.' In 1850 he warned young men away from the cities where 'many perish every year, not perhaps of absolute starvation, but of diseases induced by hunger, want, and exposure.' Descriptions of overworked children of the factories, sleepless at night and early victims of consumption, indicate not only lack of fresh air and sunshine but also the existence of complaints which today might be classed as nutritional."⁴⁹ Growing up near New York City Charles Ingalls avoided living in squalor like Greeley's cellar children. Ironically Charles Ingalls, like other westward pioneers, walked into the potential danger of malnutrition *away* from the cities when he moved his family west. The hunger depicted in Wilder's *The Long Winter* is caused by the town site's distance from a train depot. Though a great many Americans were hungry no matter where they lived, advances in physique and lifestyle continued at a rate both unforeseen and never before experienced in human history. In America this culminated in a post-war population so healthy and prosperous that the urge to leave cities behind pushed the national thinking beyond its limits. Americans grew taller. Their food supply became less localized, more processed, and available out of season. Their cities grew even more crowded, with poverty and corruption lurking beneath innovation and material consumption. The philosophy of the family and individual shifted in national thinking. Americans became restless and relentless in the drive for progress.

⁴⁹ Cummings, 29.

Cummings cites more facts indicating American robustness in the aftermath of the Civil War, writing that immigrant soldiers had been shorter than native-born soldiers. A finding of more general height gain is that “the mean stature of Union troops” was “a half-inch greater than that of soldiers between 1839 and 1855.” Other statistics on height place wage-earners, who had jobs in stores and factories, at the lowest point. “The children of city wage-earners” were the most pitifully undernourished, yet somehow a bit healthier than their English counterparts in 1875.⁵⁰ Despite the fact that many were malnourished and sickly in their industry-wrought poverty, all was not lost for the population as the 19th century’s material progress continued apace. Two physiological paradigm shifts in addition to height gain occurred. These were the fertility and mortality revolutions. In short, just as less people were being born, less people were dying.

Mintz and Kellogg cite the work of an earlier researcher, Robert V. Wells, in their discussions of the fertility and mortality revolutions. All three authors conclude that both demographic phenomena, though particularly the drop in birth rates, are “easier to describe than explain.”⁵¹ New ideas concurrent with innovation seem to have caused the drop in births: “children were no longer economic assets who could be productively employed in household industries or bound out as apprentices or servants.”⁵² The newly companionate family structure simply had no room, and no need, for holdovers from the economic unit. This is a full-circle result of the stirrings of change in national thinking in the 1790s. Matthews indirectly refers to the fertility revolution when she mentions one of

⁵⁰ Cummings, 89-90.

⁵¹ Mintz and Kellogg, 51.

⁵² Mintz and Kellogg, 52.

the key ideas that shaped the new, improved child-rearing and parental roles. The “highest duty of loving parents was to create an affectionate home so as to provide optimal nurture for their children.” Childhood “began to garner more attention.”⁵³ Matthews thinks that historian Jay Fliegelman’s analysis of John Locke’s *Education* holds the key to the “attention” childhood was suddenly paid. *Education*, says Fliegelman, was “perhaps the most significant text” from the 18th century “because it taught people to place a new value on nurture and to esteem a consensual rather than authoritarian style of parenting. Locke’s empiricism, with its view of the human mind as a tabula rasa at birth, implicitly made the affectionate home the mold of intelligence as well as character.”⁵⁴ Within families, children were paid steadily more attention. Parents were able to devote such time and effort because their number of offspring was fewer.

Family size had decreased dramatically by the time Wilder was born in 1867. In 1800, a woman might have six or seven children, in the economic family pattern. The typicality of Wilder’s family is further reinforced in her parents’ limiting their number of children. An urban woman, though, would have had even fewer children than Caroline Quiner Ingalls’ five. The Ingalls family was large for the time, but it is arguable that the frontier families shared many holdovers with their forebears, remaining in an (albeit newfangled) type of subsistence unit. The shrinkage of family size allowed mothers to assume their domestic roles, which will be discussed later. What is important to note now though, is that within these smaller families, lifespan increased dramatically toward the end of the century. The mortality revolution—the decrease in child and adult deaths—

⁵³ Matthews, 9.

⁵⁴ Matthews, 9.

began in 1850. This trend's marring by the war's catastrophic number of deaths is an outside factor. Overall however, death rates decreased dramatically. The century's medical system and sanitation efforts managed to provide adequate education about, and prevention of, infectious disease.

Wilder's childhood was stalked by infant mortality. When she was nine, her baby brother died. Ten-month old Freddie Ingalls' death could possibly have been caused by a certain degree of malnutrition. Cummings writes that in this era babies and small children would suffer ill effects from "the small use of milk, fresh fruits, and leafy vegetables." Since milk from cows was only abundant "when pastures were green"⁵⁵ it is possible that at certain times during the year, frontier families like the Ingallses—who in the book series own one cow at a time—lacked fresh milk. The real family never lived in cities, where for the first time milk was sold as a commodity. This milk was sold in bottles or cans and was of vastly inferior quality to fresh-from-the-pail milk. This often-tainted "swill milk" came from cows fed with distillery mash and stabled within the city limits" around 1840, and by 1843 the same poor-quality milk could travel longer distances. "More than three million quarts" of swill milk traveled the Erie Railroad alone, serving the New York area—by the close of the decade "more than nine million quarts were delivered."⁵⁶

The other source, human female breast milk, might have been scanty or lacking in nutrients if a nursing mother lacked certain food groups or was overworked. Such "small

⁵⁵ Cummings, 18, 23.

⁵⁶ Cummings, 53.

use of fresh fruits and leafy vegetables” would tax a woman’s overall health. The character Ma in the *Little House* series is always at some domestic task and food in the series is eaten seasonally with little variety. Schmitt writes that in omitting her mother’s “multiple pregnancies” for the series, Wilder avoided including “any of the difficulties [her mother] would have faced as a pregnant woman on the frontier.” Schmitt writes that in Wilder’s books all the children who make up the perfect literary nuclear family are already born. Ma is never pregnant. The real Mrs. Ingalls, though, gave birth to Carrie, Grace, and Freddie while in windswept wilderness.⁵⁷ Keeping children adequately nourished on the frontier proved a challenge, as Cummings writes, and infants who lacked enough milk might die or suffer complications. It is unknown why Freddie Ingalls died, but malnourishment linked to breast milk quantity and quality may well have been a factor. “Improper methods of infant feeding—the young were given meat before they had their teeth—possibly made for the high death rate among children”⁵⁸ when other nourishment was absent.

Remarkably, however, morbidity and mortality continued declining from its formerly chronic rate. Advances in medicine and nutrition co-existed alongside poor information and practices, yet less people died than in the previous two centuries combined. Whether this stronger grip on vitality compelled people to scrutinize the American diet, or whether nutritional scrutiny helped people live longer—is a puzzle.

The general dietary reform movement and the vegetarian movement are intertwined and

⁵⁷ Jennifer Rea Schmitt, “Frontier Fiction: The Work of Laura Ingalls Wilder,” (honors thesis, Smith College) (Northampton, MA, 1992), 32-33. “Carrie was already born at the outset of the series, and Grace appeared in between *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and *By the Shores of Silver Lake*,” the author writes. She also writes that the primary reason the real Ingallses moved into Walnut Grove, Minnesota was so the town doctor could monitor Caroline’s pregnancy with Freddie.

⁵⁸ Cummings, 23.

had a pervasive influence over the American diet during the century. These movements had roots in England but crossed to the New World and evolved. Because the real Ingallses were products of their time, they were undoubtedly influenced by these movements, and some of Wilder's passages reflect this. Many of the key practitioners and promoters of the lifestyle were ridiculed as quacks. Their emergent theories about the human body's nutritional needs and their critiques of contemporary mechanized food processing went against contemporary notions of progress and the idea of modernity. Mechanized food processing was completely unparalleled, and food ways were never quite the same after it. The changes wrought on American food ways continue today, as mechanization has matured. In the 19th century, however, because mechanized food processing had no parallel, people could never have assumed that their food ways may be altered forever, or even see very far into the future regarding the mechanization process. Foresight was sometimes surprisingly accurate, though.

Indeed, regarding refrigeration, after the first refrigerator was patented in 1803 its creator Thomas Moore, "a Maryland farmer . . . was led to predict a great future for the invention. It would be used, he believed, for the carriage of dairy products, meats and other perishables to the markets; the marketmen [sic] in turn would place their supplies in refrigerators until the time of sale, and consumers would use refrigerators for home preservation until mealtime."⁵⁹ Refrigeration eventually became common enough that

⁵⁹ Cummings, 36-37. Ice was purchased wealthy Americans and Europeans "for cooling beverages and making ice cream." Moore "solved the problem of keeping and transporting his dairy products" with his invention. His might have been based, Cummings writes, on a 1789 design in a London magazine. "A pattern is given in [Hepplewhite's *Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*]" consisting of "a cooler made of wood or copper in the form of a covered vase. It contained an inner partition for drinking water with was surrounded by an outer partition containing ice." Moore's was "a vessel of tin, a good conductor, [set] within a larger oval tub of wood." The gap was filled with ice and the whole thing was covered with rabbit pelts "for insulation."

there was cold storage in homes and in train cars. Reliable refrigeration directly impacted Americans' consumption patterns of produce and meat. Considering that out-of-season produce was commonly available to large cities by 1855, the lifestyle of the fictionalized Ingallses is exceedingly quaint.

Strawberries were a test-case product for cold-storage shipping in 1847 New York. A milk train on the Erie Railroad brought “on a single night . . . eighty thousand baskets” of strawberries to New York City. “By 1855 the strawberry business of the city was said to be the largest in the world. When this trade first began to expand, it was feared that overproduction of fruit would result in a drop of prices, but it was found that demand increased faster than supply.”⁶⁰ Rather than “see their crops rot,” farmers all over the country took advantage of refrigerated rail cars when they could. Ten years after the first strawberry delivery, frozen and chilled produce was popular and practical. “Such progress had been made in methods of production and transportation by 1865” that certain foods’ traditional availability had been radically changed. “Strawberries, for example, which had been on sale for only about a month in northern city markets thirty . . . could be had for four.” Grapes were available for six months, and so were peaches. The feared tomato “which had been sold only during four months in 1835, [was] vended throughout the year in 1865,” and the seasons for corn and green beans increased to five and six months.⁶¹ The Ingallses—both in their real lives and in fiction—remained severed from this progress. As will be seen, in the book series *Laura* and her family rely

⁶⁰ Cummings, 57.

⁶¹ Cummings, 59.

exclusively on produce that they grow or gather themselves. They are sometimes precariously close to the malnourishment Cummings talks about.

When springtime arrives in 1881 after seven months of blizzards in *The Long Winter*, teenaged Laura badly needs sunshine, fresh air, and tender green things to eat. “Laura wanted nothing more than just being outdoors. She felt she never could get enough sunshine soaked into her bones. . . . So when the morning’s work was done, Laura took Mary walking over the prairie . . . They liked the long walks together in the wind and sunshine, picking violets and buttercups and eating sheep sorrel. The sheep sorrel’s lovely curled lavender blossoms, the clover-shaped leaves and thin stems had a tangy taste. ‘Sheep sorrel tastes like springtime,’ Laura said. ‘It really tastes a little like lemon flavoring, Laura,’ Mary gently corrected her. Before she ate sheep sorrel she always asked, ‘Did you look carefully? You’re sure there isn’t a bug on it?’ ‘There never are any bugs,’ Laura protested. ‘These prairies are so *clean*! There never was such a clean place.’ ‘You look, just the same, said Mary. ‘I don’t want to eat the only bug in the whole of Dakota Territory.’”⁶² While the fictionalized Ingalls family happily eats wild edible plants, Cummings writes that many frontier and rural people distrusted or outright disliked wild edibles. This seems counterintuitive, given what is known about fairly high malnutrition. “Della Lutes in her account of farm life in [19th] century Michigan states that, except for cowslips, her father did not like spring greens and contemptuously referred to them as ‘fodder.’”⁶³ Even so, many farm families “ate wild greens such as

⁶² Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 4, 8-9.

⁶³ Cummings, 21.

dandelion, pigweed, cowslips, and also turnip tops.”⁶⁴ Perhaps even more puzzling in the face of stated health conditions is that not every bit of available fruit or vegetable was preserved (by pickling, home canning, sugaring, or drying) in the far reaches. “Peaches not infrequently were left to rot on the ground or fed to the hogs after day-to-day appetites had been satisfied. Apples, however, could be kept for several months after the growing season and so were an exception.”⁶⁵

Wilder’s *Little House* series, featuring a mother character who incessantly preserves food, is clearly a neatly packaged mythology when the above knowledge is considered. Wilder’s growing-up places are windswept, and the few human inhabitants take from nature only what they need. They prudently spend time preserving those foods they cannot use right away. The Ingalls family’s environment is one of perfect natural balance, and keeping this balance requires the family to exist apart from the booming industrialization taking place in communities around them. The family’s pioneer lifestyle isolates it from urbanity, and in its isolation it is not as careless as Della Lutes’ father to scoff at sources of food. Realizing that the *Little House* books present a romanticized, primitivized hunter-gatherer-agriculturalist paradigm enables us to acknowledge the dark underbelly of the industrialization that carried on around the real family.

Industrialization’s impact on foodstuffs had unforeseen benefits as well as unforeseen consequences. Without mechanized canning, thousands of pounds of food would never have fed troops in the Civil War. Improvements to the canning process that

⁶⁴ Cummings, 20.

⁶⁵ Cummings, 20-21. The entire dandelion plant, from flower to root, is edible. “Pigweed” is amaranth.

tailored it specifically to the factory assembly line, writes Cummings, made bulk canning possible. In the century's early years, canning with "hermetical sealing" had been "gradually improved" upon and by wartime "milk, fruits and vegetables" in cans were part of field rations.⁶⁶ Soldiers enjoyed the condensed milk that Gail Borden had patented in 1856. Borden's patent was approved "just after the outbreak of the conflict, and the government commandeered its output for the army." Condensed milk was so popular that "the soldiers who grew to like [it] helped to educate the public as to its value."⁶⁷ Commercially-canned foods proved immensely popular for consumers who had access to them, and as a result, people were eating more fruits and vegetables—the so-called "protective foods"⁶⁸ that diet reformers championed. The actual Ingallses canned their own food. In cities, people much more readily abandoned home canning for factory-made, cheap canned produce. Rural and frontier families used "canning supplies sold by country stores—glass bottles and earthenware jars . . . the self-sealing can, sealed by screwing the cover upon a rubber compress or by warming the cover and pressing it on a rim of cement."⁶⁹

Though commercially-canned fruits, vegetables, condensed milk and meats were a convenience-food marvel to many urbanites, commercial canning had serious health and sanitation drawbacks. The canning industry—like the milk industry and the meat industry—let shockingly unsanitary practices go on in its facilities. "Adulterating foods

⁶⁶ Cummings, 67.

⁶⁷ Cummings 67.

⁶⁸ Cummings, 118.

⁶⁹ Cummings, 85.

by adding inferior materials or mixing diseased with sound substances and then concealing the poor quality by special packaging or processing⁷⁰,” was all too common. Perhaps this proves that human labor and watchfulness could not keep pace with machines’ cold efficiency and profit’s cold bottom line. Canned peas had been artificially colored with copper⁷¹ to make them greener, and it was years before the process was perfected that led to the first “processed cheese”—sold in cans. Without just the right admixture of ingredients and additives, spoilage was a problem with J. H. Kraft’s “processed cheese.”⁷² The fights against adulterated food “in the period 1865-1886 were not merely a rehearsal for reform, but anticipated the issues, the arguments, and even the solutions of the Pure Food and Drug Act”⁷³ of 1906. This piece of legislation is outside this study’s purview. But the fact that consumers were deeply concerned with food and medicine’s integrity long before the Act’s drafting and passage suggests that enthusiasm for the new products—canned foods, meat shipped from all corners, bread from processed flour—did not exist in any sort of vacuum. This “developing consumerism” related to food had a “complex, carefully structured, worldwide distribution network”⁷⁴ working to its benefit—and monetary bottom line—but it was at times widely and harshly rejected.

⁷⁰ Cummings, 96.

⁷¹ Cummings, 103.

⁷² Cummings, 103, 107.

⁷³ Mitchell Okun, *Fair Play in the Marketplace: The First Battle for Pure Food and Drugs* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), ix.

⁷⁴ Olive R. Jones, “Commercial Foods, 1740-1820.” *Historical Archaeology* 27 (1993), 25.

The meat industry's public health failures prove, once again, that the world inhabited by the Ingallses in the *Little House* series is quaintly pastoral. Pa and Ma's cow Ellen lives on "the Dakota prairie . . . so warm and bright under the shining sun" and her calf learns to drink milk from Laura's instruction. "The wobbly-legged baby calf" licks skimmed milk—milk from which Ma has removed the cream—off of Laura's fingers. "She had to teach it how to drink, because it didn't know. She dipped her fingers into the milk and let the calf's rough tongue suck them, and gently she led its nose down to the milk in the pail. The calf suddenly snorted milk into its nose, sneezed it out with a whoosh that splashed milk out of the pail, and then with all its might it butted into the milk. It butted so hard that Laura almost lost hold of the pail. A wave of milk went over the calf's head and a splash wet the front of Laura's dress."⁷⁵ *Little Town on the Prairie* takes place in the spring of 1881, after the "long winter." Here the episode of fourteen-year old Laura, the calf, and the milk is humorous and quaint. The fictionalized family is portrayed as completely severed from the bustling urban world. The author's frontier mythology is best served when readers can enjoy a passage like the one above without thinking about the meat-packing and milk industries that served millions of Americans with tainted products.

In a town site such as De Smet, Dakota Territory, the meatpacking industries of Omaha and Chicago were the nearest, and cattle were delivered to markets there. Even decades earlier, cattle penned within city limits for their meat and swill milk had been driven through the streets. Ma and Pa's cow Ellen lives in paradise on the prairie between the pages of *Little Town on the Prairie*, while crowds of cattle in urban meatpacking

⁷⁵ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 5.

centers were close together, sometimes horribly diseased. William Cronon describes the growth of the Chicago meatpacking industry in *Nature's Metropolis* and writes that by century's end, the city's meatpacking facilities—and thus their output—were “gigantic.”⁷⁶ The owners of these facilities so heavily influenced business that it is impossible to view the pastoral narrative present in *Little Town on the Prairie* regarding the one-family, one-cow system as anything but highly in decline for the time period. Wilder's narrative is more easily seen as mythologized when one questions how the real family could not have been impacted at all by the commercial meat industry.

Cronon takes Cumming's tactic when describing Midwestern meatpacking. He does not mince words. While Cumming's cattle have their horns and tails rotted away by cutaneous disease and are “emaciated, maimed and diseased,”⁷⁷ Cronon's meatpacking workers who handle such pitiful beasts are only doing their job in an atmosphere of unparalleled and poorly regulated capitalistic success. “The packers,” according to contemporary meat magnate Philip D. Armour, “are making beef more palatable, attractive, and wholesome, by a proper and advanced system of refrigeration, than it was when the small slaughterer butchered a steer during the night and hung the still warm carcass in the market next morning, and are distributing this beef throughout the country at the lowest possible charge for the service rendered.” Operations like Armour's—described so euphemistically—were taking place in “immense, vertically integrated

⁷⁶ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 254.

⁷⁷ Cummings, 96.

corporations capable of exercising managerial control” over food.⁷⁸ Cummings writes that people far from the Midwest who ate this beef “were satisfied until they learned what was happening in the packing centers.” The sick cattle’s meat—full of blood “black as ink” from carcasses “turned purple after a few hours’ hanging”—was splashed with disinfectant, packaged, and shipped. “Paradoxically enough the evil of adulteration was aggravated by the advance in bacteriology. Carbolic acid, boric acid and borax, benzoic acid and benzoates” were used to ‘clean’ meat and other foods.⁷⁹

Animal products such as meat and milk were not the only foods adulterated in factories. The philosophy of Grahamism decried the adulteration of flour while it promoted other theories about foodstuffs, diet and digestion. “Grahamism” evolved out of its namesake’s chronic health problems. Sylvester Graham self-treated his symptoms by eliminating from his diet meat and most flours. Sylvester Graham believed that “bread should be made from unbolted flour”⁸⁰ but until awareness of food adulteration became urgent in the early 20th century, Graham and his “Grahamites” could have little faith in commercially sold flour. “Millers made dark flour white as the finest patent by mixing it with nitrogen peroxide. They prepared this gas electrically and claimed in defense of the process that they just mixed the flour with air which had been purified in the same way in which lightning is said to purify the atmosphere.”⁸¹ Flour’s adulteration by chemicals was a separate issue from Graham’s belief that the wheat germ should be left intact during the

⁷⁸ Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, 254-255.

⁷⁹ Cummings, 96-97.

⁸⁰ Cummings, 102.

⁸¹ Cummings, 102.

wheat milling process. Bolting or bromating wheat heads lowers flour's nutritional density. "By the 1830s millers were beginning to 'bolt' flour to make it white. Bolting removed the bran, or outer casing from the grains, but in doing so also removed many of the nutritive elements. Whiteness—a value associated with luxury—was perceived to be debilitating by Graham."⁸² Interestingly, the most frivolous foods described in the *Little House* series are white. The coarse bread that kept the Ingallses alive in *The Long Winter* was made from flour not at all similar to this.

Exploring some of the century's major innovations—and their drawbacks to nutrition and public health—regarding food helps the agenda of Wilder's books be more solidly understood as a mythology that promotes clan self-sufficiency in a pastoral environment with little or no outside help. The family may not "live like kings" as Pa boasts, but wherever the family settles, it is in a sparsely inhabited place where nature dwarfs mankind. The putrid smells of meatpacking, the sour tastes of swill milk or beef that has traveled far—and even the *Chicago Tribune's* feared moldy peach—never encroach on the Ingallses. Milk and butter are cool, sweet and fresh. Meat is fresh and beautifully marbled with fat. Vegetables are patiently foraged for or tended, raised and picked. The fictionalized Ingallses represent the real family's demographic—pioneers—with attendant hardships, but never any encroaching urban ills.

The urban scene's food ways were more disorderly, with lower quality standards than perhaps expected by a population at the forefront of industrial progress. Alice Ross writes that the century "moved from relative chaos toward scientific order" regarding

⁸² Susan Williams, *Food in the United States, 1820-1890* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 196.

nutrition. Contemporary historians argued that Americans' stature and height as well as overall dental condition had improved, she writes.⁸³ This is ironic given what is now known about commercially processed flours and sugars, which became available then. Ross's article lays out the century's "confusion" over "multiple conflicting and coexistent theories and practices"⁸⁴ regarding health and diet in a population familiarizing itself with convenience foods and the availability of out-of-season produce and mass-slaughtered grain-fed beef.

Technological innovations were dizzying—refrigerated rail cars that transported all types of food and even just ice, the availability of exotics like lemons and olives, the development of canning, the improvements made to stoves and ovens. 19th century people lived in a paradise of foodstuffs and technology compared to their grandparents. Cummings' "burdened" housewives working at spinning and weaving and "hastily" preparing meals from home-grown ingredients may well describe the older generations. The overall integrity of foodstuffs was undoubtedly compromised during the 19th century, yet humanity prevailed, with Americans growing inexplicably taller and the mortality rate decreasing. The hale and hearty characters in Wilder's *Little House* series are not the nightmare of Grahamites and other vegetarians and general diet reformers. British Parliament members described Americans as "lantern-jawed, lean and sickly," with New Englanders appearing "careworn" and stiff-jointed, soft-muscled, pale

⁸³ Alice Ross, "Health and Diet in 19th Century America: A Food Historian's Point of View," *Historical Archaeology* 27 (1993), 43, 51.

⁸⁴ Ross, 51.

complexioned.”⁸⁵ These unexercised, malnourished, pale, sallow and tired urban easterners are a contrast with rural easterners. In Wilder’s third book in the *Little House* series, *Farmer Boy*, the characters are—if it is possible—haler and heartier, rosier-cheeked and healthier than the Ingallses in the other books. *Farmer Boy* relates the fictionalized childhood of Almanzo Wilder, who Laura Ingalls marries in 1885. *Farmer Boy* pointedly upholds the 19th-century rural easterner, specifically the farmer, as the best kind of person.

Ann Romines provides a fairly lengthy study on portrayals of gender roles in *Farmer Boy*. And her analysis of “real men”—parsing who they may be—reinforces that in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s authorial treatment, rural and frontier people are to be considered better—more resourceful; more closely connected to family; more moral; more traditional in the face of innovation—than their urban contemporaries. Arguably, their “Victorian personality” is quite strong. For Romines, the figure of James Wilder, young Almanzo’s father, is someone towering and worthy of respect. The nine-year old Almanzo character has “nearly worshipful”⁸⁶ feelings for his father character, while just admiration and love will have to do for his mother character. In Wilder’s writing, the character James Wilder is just as patriarchal as her Pa Ingalls character, but in a different way. James Wilder lives near neighbors, friends, and acquaintances just outside of Malone, New York. Malone is far upstate near the Canadian border, and is an agrarian outpost against New York City’s thrumming industry. When James Wilder “drove into Malone, all the townspeople spoke to him respectfully . . . his word was as good as his

⁸⁵ Cummings, 51.

⁸⁶ Romines, *Constructing the Little House* 38.

bond.” For Romines, this signifies “what James Wilder *owns*: farm, livestock, money, respect.”⁸⁷ This community-earned respect for hard work and integrity is absent from Pa Ingalls’ life due to his family’s isolation. Because *Farmer Boy*’s father and son characters specifically symbolize this ideal rural maleness, they can illuminate more general symbols bound up in this book, which is an anti-progress narrative.

“Archaically traditional”⁸⁸ indeed are all the characters. Almanzo’s Mother—merely beloved, not worshipped—is Cumming’s housewife “burdened with tasks of spinning and weaving, soap and candle making” as well as cooking and cleaning. Romines and this author both conclude that Mother Wilder’s “work proceeds as if the Industrial Revolution had never happened.”⁸⁹ The family’s farmhouse is dimly light by candles at night, and life revolves around the soil. Mother Wilder lives near the seat of progress—New York City—but unlike Ma Ingalls, she turns raw materials into clothing. “Although she makes the clothing for her entire family, there is no mention of a sewing machine or of any assistance . . . she spins and dyes the thread and weaves the cloth that she cuts and sews. The Wilder family produces its own wool from sheep.”⁹⁰ Mother Wilder has no need for store-bought cloth. Despite the time constraint of from-scratch clothes production, she provides her family with calorie-rich dishes at every meal. Farmers worked hard in the days before mechanization, and ate heartily to maintain their energy.

⁸⁷ Romines, 38.

⁸⁸ Romines, 39.

⁸⁹ Romines, 39.

⁹⁰ Romines, 39.

Even just a noon-day meal taken to school—shared between siblings Eliza Jane, Alice, Royal, and Almanzo—contains starch, protein, fat, and sugar that the hungry, growing farm children need. The dinner pail holds “bread-and-butter and sausage, doughnuts and apples, and four delicious apple turnovers.”⁹¹ This lunch is eaten well after the typical farmers’ breakfast. Breakfast is eaten after the pre-dawn work, at about seven o’clock. The Wilders’ table holds pancakes on “the big blue platter” and “plump brown sausage cakes” sit in “brown gravy” . . . there was oatmeal with plenty of thick cream and maple sugar. There were fried potatoes, and the golden buckwheat cakes . . . there were preserves and jams and jellies and doughnuts.”⁹² There is even apple pie, which Almanzo likes “best of all” to top off his breakfast—two slices instead of just one.⁹³

The Wilders are clearly middling-to-well-off farmers to have such abundance for both the dinner pail and on the breakfast table. Poor farmers were certainly an exception, and even for successful ones secure fortunes were not guaranteed. The fortunes of the real family of Charles Ingalls’ family may be bound up in *Farmer Boy*’s descriptions of the farm and the delicious food. It is not known how Charles Ingalls’s parents fared on their New York farm, but they moved when he was very young to Wisconsin. The fictionalized Wilder family’s comfortable lifestyle with so much food for four growing, hard-working children is a perfect tool for Laura Ingalls Wilder to employ while fostering myths of an idyllic Western frontier settlement. The type of man James Wilder is, and

⁹¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Farmer Boy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933), 10.

⁹² Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 37-38.

⁹³ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 9-10, 36.

the type of young man his son Almanzo is—hard-laboring farmers who eat prodigiously from endless bounty—is the foil to the type of man Pa Ingalls is. The character Pa is the brash frontiersman who often finds himself in a bind without means or material to feed his family. Though Pa valiantly strives to woo bounty from Nature, she often toys with him, withholding what he needs most. If Ma Ingalls is the “goddess-witch” able to transform *make-do* into *delicious*, then James Wilder is the sorcerer who bewitches the land and the animals, making himself endlessly prosperous. His son Almanzo is the sorcerer’s apprentice learning the craft. James is indeed “delighted”⁹⁴ when Almanzo decides at age ten to become a farmer. Almanzo craves the social esteem the profession has given his father—he wants too to be “an important man” with “a good farm” and “the best horses.”⁹⁵ Ultimate manhood for both characters, according to their creator, is found in “glorifying *the* most traditional of male professions.”⁹⁶

The womanhood of Mother Wilder and her daughters Eliza Jane and Alice is immediately identifiable as somewhat antiquated. Mother Wilder works in a pre-industrial fashion with her wool, her weaving and her sewing. But as a hostess with a parlor she is firmly 19th-century. The parlor as a showpiece of gentility pre-dates Almanzo Wilder’s birth in 1857, so perhaps Mother Wilder can’t be seen as entirely current. The furniture indicates that this parlor—and its occupants—are not dusty ghosts. In the 18th century, many a parlor had the master bed in it, writes Richard Bushman. Toward the turn of the 19th century, this custom disappeared. “Over the [18th] century,

⁹⁴ Romines, 36.

⁹⁵ Romines, 38.

⁹⁶ Romines, 40.

an increasing number of estate inventories record parlors devoid of beds, leaving the space to chairs, tea tables, and ceramics.”⁹⁷ Almanzo and his siblings loathe sitting in the family parlor with grown-up company. 1800s parlor chairs and couches “were often attacked for being too high, hard, and slippery.”⁹⁸ The Wilder’s parlor features chairs covered in unappealing haircloth (horse hair). Scratchy *and* slippery, they are the children’s least-liked chairs. “When company came and they had to sit in the parlor, they kept themselves on the slippery chairs by pushing their toes on the floor.”⁹⁹ Their child-sized legs must hold out for the duration of genteel conversation, or until they are excused. Mother Wilder proves a competent hostess, telling guests “take the big chair, Mr. Webb, and make yourself comfortable. Sit right here, Mrs. Webb, and make yourself comfortable.” Mrs. Webb compliments, saying “you have such a beautiful parlor, I declare it’s almost too fine to sit in.”¹⁰⁰ The children would say it’s not worth sitting in. The young female characters are Eliza Jane and Alice. Almanzo is annoyed by Eliza Jane’s take-charge attitude. Romines writes that the girls’ characterizations call into question whether Wilder wrote *Farmer Boy* with intent to glorify farming and the pure, honest masculinity that she thought farmers possessed.

The portrayal of Almanzo’s sister characters “raises questions about these values” of Wilder’s, writes Romines. This is because both Eliza Jane and Alice (but especially the former) are portrayed as outspoken and very aware of the limitations of gendered tasks

⁹⁷ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 121.

⁹⁸ Bushman, 271.

⁹⁹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 217.

¹⁰⁰ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 224.

and education, respectively. “Bossy”¹⁰¹ in Almanzo’s estimation (though she is behind eldest brother Royal in age), Eliza Jane “is the only one to challenge Father Wilder” about any topic.¹⁰² The younger girl Alice is portrayed, for an instant, as almost troublingly androgynous. Romines highlights the fact that Wilder describes the little girl as “about the same size and age” as Almanzo.¹⁰³ Alice is ten, one year older than her brother, so she must be small for her age. She wears girls’ clothes—inexplicably, hoopskirts while planting carrot seeds. But she says “yes” when “Almanzo asked her if she wanted to be a boy.” She quickly changes her answer, though. “Then she said no, she didn’t.”¹⁰⁴ Romines takes this passage to mean that Alice desires to remain in her gender role and understands she can never leave it. “Neither of them questions that Alice must wear her cumbersome hoop skirts, even though they impede her while she is doing field work. . . Alice . . . wants to be pretty, to dress in conventional feminine style, to do the traditional domestic work at which her mother excels, *and* to be her brother’s equal at field work.”¹⁰⁵

Young Alice Wilder is a contrast to how young Laura Ingalls will be presented later—Laura wishes at times that she could be anyone but herself. Laura wants to be a boy—or at least a more rough-and-tumble type of girl. She wants to be an Osage girl, and later she wants to forgo corsets. Alice Wilder does not ever question her biological sex in

¹⁰¹ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 2.

¹⁰² Romines, 40.

¹⁰³ Romines, 40.

¹⁰⁴ Romines, 40.

¹⁰⁵ Romines, 40.

relation to her gender role, even if it means tugging on her hoopskirts and stooping down to plant carrot seeds¹⁰⁶ while her younger brother moves blithely ahead in his patched trousers. With that, the comparison and contrast between the sickly urban easterners of Cumming's and Greeley's estimations, and the always-hungry, robust, farming Wilders—also easterners—is complete. An original ending to *Farmer Boy* that was excised exemplified Wilder's goal as an author to promote self sufficiency, prosperity after adversity, and the shunning of technology and progress. This "original ending" had the Wilders moving to Minnesota after selling their upstate New York farm—"as [Almanzo] Wilder's parents actually did."¹⁰⁷ Even with this plot removal, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series still succeeds as a food-centric manifest destiny saga. All that was wrong with the urban childhoods of New York City children, or possibly with Charles Ingalls' upstate New York farming childhood, is righted in the character Almanzo's. No slum children or pale, unexercised adults fit into the author's schema of rural hardiness. Charles Ingalls' parents' farm was unsuccessful, prompting the move to Wisconsin's "big woods," but the Wilder farm in Malone has the magic of the sorcerer, James Wilder. Because every landscape in the *Little House* series is awe-inspiring to its child characters, the prosperous Wilder farm looks, to the children, "very big and empty"¹⁰⁸ at one point.

Mother Wilder's piece-work sewing and sales of butter make her family almost pre-date its chronology. The actual Almanzo James Wilder, ten years older than his

¹⁰⁶ Romines, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Romines, 36. The Wilders follow an emigration pattern similar to the Ingallses. They settle first in Minnesota, then move to Dakota Territory. Laura and Almanzo first meet in De Smet.

¹⁰⁸ Wilder, *Farmer Boy* 204.

eventual wife Laura Ingalls, was born in 1857. The lifestyle his character leads as an upstate farmer's son seems better suited to his own parents' youth. His sisters wear hoop skirts and he wears a waistcoat of "dyed fine wool as red as a cherry."¹⁰⁹ Almanzo's father runs livestock in the middle of the snowy January night so that they will keep warm.¹¹⁰ Lacking store-bought boots the aspiring boy farmer rubs his hand-made moccasins with chunks of yellowish-white tallow (fat rendered from cuts of beef) to keep them supple.¹¹¹ His father drives a sleigh or a wagon, depending on the season, to town. Wearing that red waistcoat, Almanzo attends school infrequently. School is taught by an itinerant school master who boards with the rural families "for two weeks"¹¹² at a time, with time off for the lengthy sowing and harvesting seasons.¹¹³ Overall, the characters in *Farmer Boy* inhabit an agricultural schema that appears pre-war. Older modes of agriculture were passing quickly on by 1867, the year of Laura Ingalls' birth.

The Civil War wrought havoc on agriculture, both North and South, but most heavily in the South, whose agriculture was based on slave labor. Due to its portrayal as a practically 18th-century economic agricultural family unit, it cannot be said that the Wilder family as portrayed by Laura Ingalls Wilder was typical or atypical for its time period. It seems atypical though, and on the wane. How such a family unit—one with heavy interactions with a rural township—would have fared during the war is unknown.

¹⁰⁹ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 3.

¹¹⁰ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 36.

¹¹¹ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 30.

¹¹² Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 6.

¹¹³ Wilder, *Farmer Boy* 5-6.

The Wilder family, circa 1866, does well enough for itself after the war in a market economy. The family trades or sells eggs and butter for other goods—five-hundred pounds of Mother Wilder’s butter is sold for two hundred and fifty dollars. It is sold to the itinerant “butter-buyer” who drives away with it to New York City, where people “would eat it, and say to one another how good it was, and wonder who made it.”¹¹⁴ The butter-buyer is part of the century’s modernizing farm economy—goods are transported remotely (five hours to New York City.) The family makes most of its money selling wool from “prize Merinos”¹¹⁵ and various produce including apples and potatoes. Agriculture as a national occupation in both North and South suffered greatly. Food production’s stability after the war was so altered that westward emigration began in earnest.

Before the war left survivors hungry and in some cases displaced, agriculture had competed with industry, which had changed the family unit. The fictionalized Ingallses are more exaggerated in their gender roles, and these will come into play in the next discussion. Wilder was born long after the redefined economic structure of the family had settled into place. The system of the companionate family, with the father at work, the mother at chores or small sales from within the home, and the child in school was still young when war broke out in 1861. Economic stability teetered, toppled under the weight of even the rumor of conflict. Prior to the Civil War farming “had passed beyond the

¹¹⁴ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 238-239.

¹¹⁵ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 158.

subsistence phase and become commercial.”¹¹⁶ This is why the Wilder family, portrayed as it is in *Farmer Boy*, seems so strangely antiquated.

Father Wilder shuns progress—though strictly related to *farming*—more zealously than Pa Ingalls. “Almanzo asked Father why he did not hire the machine that did the threshing. Three men had brought it into the country last fall, and Father had gone to see it. It would thresh a man’s whole grain crop in a few days. ‘That’s a lazy man’s way to thresh,’ Father said. ‘Haste makes waste, but a lazy man’d rather get his work done fast than do it himself. That machine chews up the straw till it’s not fit to feed stock, and it scatters grain around and wastes it. All it saves is time, son.’”¹¹⁷ Older patterns of cooperative work in harvesting, which persisted to some degree on the frontier, do appear in *Farmer Boy*. But these patterns are extremely antiquated compared to the Ingallses. Father Wilder and two French neighbors cut hay with *scythes* and rake it into piles.¹¹⁸ This is nowhere near the scale of efficiency—squarely within Brown’s “Victorian personality”—of the Ingallses and the “wonderful machine.” In Wisconsin’s “big woods” people help each other during harvest time. Pa, Laura’s Uncle Henry, Grandpa Ingalls and a neighbor, Mr. Peterson, all help separate oat heads and wheat heads from their stalks with a machine powered by horses. “The big machine was called the separator, and the rod was called the tumbling rod, and the little machine was called the horse-power. Eight horses were hitched to it and made it go . . . all this machinery made an enormous racket” but “bundles” of oats and wheat were made, “golden-brown” piles

¹¹⁶ Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer’s Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1966), 350-351.

¹¹⁷ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 308.

¹¹⁸ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 229.

of them.¹¹⁹ Speaking specifically about this thresher, Pa says “‘I’m all for progress . . . It would have taken Henry and Peterson and [Grandpa] and me a couple of weeks apiece to thresh as much grain with flails as that machine threshed today. We wouldn’t have gotten as much wheat, either, and it wouldn’t have been as clean.’”¹²⁰ In *all* other aspects, though, Pa is opposed to technologies that encroach on his primitive frontier. Though “‘prairie farmers followed a long tradition of frontier cooperation,”¹²¹ less and less of this kind of collaborative labor will be seen as the *Little House* series picks up the Ingalls family’s adventures.

Farming and some of its attendant traditions, such as shared labor, would persist—to a degree not fully shown in *Little House*—on the frontier after the Civil War. But farming’s condition *during* the war arguably is very important. The post-war ruination of much of the country’s agriculture spurred the great moves westward. Farming populations were only first enumerated by census takers in 1920. From existing records, though, it was calculated in the 1960s that by 1860, “59.7 percent of the workers of the country were on the farm” which was 10,699,000 people. So “three-fifths” of the total population, which was over 31 million, farmed before the war.¹²² Arguably, agriculture’s secure post-subsistence status became irrelevant to post-war westward migrants, who left both cities and rural areas behind. By definition, they were subsistence agriculturalists wherever they settled.

¹¹⁹ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 222-225.

¹²⁰ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 227-228.

¹²¹ Robert H. Vine, *Community on the American Frontier: Separate But Not Alone* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 104.

¹²² Shannon, *The Farmer’s Last Frontier*, 350-351.

The war rocked markets and pummeled trade. Many factors causing the war were economically based. As the war dragged on people across the (divided) nation would see food requisitioned for troop use. Non-essentials of all kinds were ill-advised. “‘Business of all kinds has been paralyzed, and the majority of persons will suffer heavy losses,’ the *Staunton Spectator* admitted in June. Only months after soldiers had gone into the field, Staunton newspapers were urging their readers to economize. . . . No money should now be expended for luxuries or mere display.”¹²³ In rural areas, farmers’ fields were often requisitioned. “While their slaves ran away, Augusta farmers found the Confederate government impressing their food and other goods to feed the army, taking what they needed and offering in return whatever the army thought fit,” a process that made agricultural prices dizzying to keep straight and fair.¹²⁴ All this was in addition to the mass production of canned goods that fed the troops—Borden’s condensed milk being especially popular.

For Almanzo Wilder, the farm is his entire world—and he wants to have one just like it when he grows up, with “the best” horses. The Wilder family finds comfort in its nightly ritual of popping popcorn by candlelight.¹²⁵ Every morning after field and stable chores are done, Almanzo eats one of Mother’s rich, substantial breakfasts. If the real Wilder family ever suffered wartime rationing or confiscation, it would not be known from the pages of *Farmer Boy*. On these pages the character Almanzo eats and eats, so

¹²³ Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America 1859-1863* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 209.

¹²⁴ Ayers., 374.

¹²⁵ Wilder, *Farmer Boy*, 31.

much that Romines judges him to be “an epic eater.”¹²⁶ He is surrounded by a particular type of riches—rural, agricultural utopian “excess” and “abundance.”¹²⁷

During the war settlers flooded west to take advantage of the 1862 Homestead Act and other opportunities. Many had powerful cases of wanderlust just like the character Pa Ingalls, whose real counterpart desired the west as Wilder describes. Mintz and Kellogg estimate that one-quarter to 500,000 people moved West by 1870,¹²⁸ when Wilder was only three years old. This was a huge increase from “the first company of 100 migrants” to Oregon in 1840.¹²⁹ Rural people in the 19th century—that is, farmers and homesteaders—seem typical of the population. Farmers had been the majority. It is safe to say that certainly by the post-War period hopeful would-be settlers outnumbered city dwellers. “Just three Americans in ten” lived in urban or suburban areas. “More families made their livelihood farming . . . than worked in all of the nation’s factories.”¹³⁰ The motivations for a larger portion of the population to abandon the urban structure were economic at times, but colored with a hopeful idealism that often did not come to fruition. The *Little House* series recounts the devastating blows nature deals the fictionalized Ingallses. Suffice it to say now that the *Little House* series’ characters were extremely adaptable and hardy folk. This was to their benefit.

¹²⁶ Romines, 38.

¹²⁷ Romines, 38.

¹²⁸ Mintz and Kellogg, 96.

¹²⁹ Mintz and Kellogg, 96.

¹³⁰ Mintz and Kellogg, 96. They include digging coal, “laying rails, cutting timber” as rural occupations. These were means to make money which many frontier settlers actually engaged in.

Pioneers' records indicate that desires to move west involved idealism and the idea of a fresh start on (supposedly more) pure land with (much) fewer people. Indeed, the character Pa Ingalls voices these thoughts through Wilder's storytelling. At the close of *Little House in the Big Woods*, it is winter again. "They were going to the Indian country. Pa said there were too many people in the Big Woods now. . . . In the long winter evenings he talked to Ma about the Western country. In the West the land was level, and there were no trees. The grass grew thick and high. There the wild animals wandered and fed as though they were in a pasture that stretched much farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. Only Indians lived there. One day on the very last day of winter Pa said to Ma, "Seeing you don't object, I've decided to go see the West. I've had an offer for this place, and we can sell it now for as much as we're ever likely to get, enough to give us a start in a new country."¹³¹

Any failures of the New York farm owned by the actual Charles Ingalls' parents are non-existent in *Little House in the Big Woods*. In fact, the childhood stories the character Pa tells are not those of a "farmer boy." The stories that little Laura loves so much place Pa, in the role of a young child, as the central character in large landscapes. "When I was a little boy, not much bigger than Mary, I had to go every afternoon to find the cows in the woods and drive them home. My father told me never to play by the way, but to hurry and bring the cows home before dark, because there were bears and wolves and panthers in the woods."¹³²

¹³¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 1-3.

¹³² Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 53. This is "The Story of Pa and the Voice in the Woods."

In his recounting in *Big Woods*, Pa shirks his father's advice. His story "The Story of Pa and the Voice in the Woods" ends with his child character sprinting home without the cattle. He is breathless, sweaty, wide-eyed with fear. His trousers are torn, his legs are scratched from thorns and briars, and as he runs barefoot "one big toe-nail had been torn clean off."¹³³ The cattle are already home, waiting to be driven into their pen. His father lectures him and thrashes him with a switch.¹³⁴ He had been scared in the dark woods by the rustle of branches and leaves and the hoot of an owl.¹³⁵ Pa Ingalls' deliberate storytelling method shows his determination to impress Laura (who listens closely) that Pa is thoroughly an explorer and a frontiersman. Even as a nine-year old farm boy, he would rather explore the woods before driving the cattle home. At that same age the other "farmer boy" Almanzo Wilder is seriously single-minded about becoming a farmer. The "farmer boy" that Pa could have been is gone in his vivid storytelling. In *that* boy character's place stands a boy with a single-minded desire to explore—a little boy with the determination of an adult, a man filled with wanderlust and perhaps a genuine streak of misanthropy. New York was unsuccessful, and its biggest city kept getting more crowded, dirtier all the time. His parents found respite in Wisconsin, but now for Charles—who has become "Pa"—woodland life is losing its secluded charm. The "Indian country" is his only recourse.

¹³³ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 55-56.

¹³⁴ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 55-56.

¹³⁵ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 56-57.

II. GLITTERING STARS: THE INGALLS FAMILY'S INITIAL SETTLEMENT

The closer the Ingalls family drives its canvas-covered wagon to Kansas Territory, the more Pa's descriptions of the uninhabited areas come to life. Wilder describes the scenery through her girl character. Five-year old Laura narrates *Little House on the Prairie*, although in actuality Wilder had been too young to remember much of the journey. Wilder ages the Laura character up¹ to make her a competent and believable narrator. The child Laura is aged up for *Little House in the Big Woods* and its loose-ended plot, continued in *Little House on the Prairie*. This device works well. Little Laura, barefoot and in a faded calico dress, is an instantly appealing narrator. Little Laura describes the changing terrain she sees on the journey, which takes many days. "It was a long, long way to Indian territory. Almost every day the horses traveled as far as they could; almost every night Pa and Ma made camp in a new place. . . . They crossed too many creeks to count. They saw strange woods and hills, and stranger country with no trees. They drove across rivers on long wooden bridges, and they came to one wide yellow river that had no bridge. That was the Missouri River . . . Kansas was an endless flat land covered with tall grass blowing in the wind. Day after day they traveled in Kansas, and saw nothing but the rippling grass and the enormous sky." At night "large stars hung from the sky, glittering so near that Laura felt she could almost touch them." The journey seems endless and "the grass waved and the wagon jolted and nothing else happened for a long time." For days they continue to travel. They pass the tree line. The

¹ Donald Zochert, *Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1976), 25. Zochert asserts that Charles Ingalls' brother Henry and his wife Polly travel with the family. The group travels through Missouri, and Henry and Polly decide to return to Wisconsin. Charles and Caroline (with Mary, Laura and Carrie) continue on to Kansas.

wagon floats over a creek. The midday sun is hot and “enormous.” At last Pa finds an ideal spot for a permanent home.²

Laura’s landscape descriptions provide accurate geographical information for Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas. As a writer Wilder allowed the father character to express ideas from the century’s manifest destiny belief. Pa’s remarks bind the physical landscape with human ambition and beliefs—specifically, those of white settlers. “Filled with the expansive energy of the age, encouraged by laissez-faire economics” settlers moved west.³ Walt Whitman thought that the western frontier was the best place. People there had “simple diet and clean and sweet blood . . . litheness, majestic faces, clear eyes, and perfect physique.”⁴ While the more obvious undertone of Pa’s remarks is that the family has every right to move into Kansas Territory while “only Indians live there,” a less obvious undertone is much more basic to human survival. That is the dominance of human beings over animals and other edible resources. Humans in this “potent empire”⁵ are often at odds with nature as they attempt to overtake it.

The Ingallses in *Little House on the Prairie* exercise basic survival skills with the relative luxuries of life in the 19th century. The characters in this book—indeed in all of them—exploit the land for its maximum resources while striving to maintain equilibrium.

² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 10, 13, 15, 26.

³ David G. Pugh, *Sons of Liberty: The Masculine Mind in Nineteenth-Century America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 40.

⁴ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 45.

⁵ Smith, 9.

“Pa pulled all the grass from a large, round space of ground. There was old, dead grass at the roots of the green grass, and Pa would take no chance of setting the prairie on fire. . . . When the space was clear of grass, Pa laid a handful of dry grass in its center. From the creek bottoms he brought an armful of twigs and larger twigs and wood. He laid small twigs and larger twigs and then the wood on the handful of dry grass, and he lighted the grass. The fire crackled merrily inside the ring of bare ground that it couldn’t get out of.”⁶

After fire and water, the next major resource that ensures the family’s welfare is food. Pa undertakes hunting, another basic survival skill that was still a part of rural life in the 19th century. But it was one that would become increasingly at odds with urban sprawl and commodity-market foods. For Pa, though, urbanity could not be farther away from what a man—a real man, exercising his influence over nature—could truly want. The wide-open Kansas grassland is all he needs. “‘We’ll camp here a day or two,’ said Pa. ‘Maybe we’ll stay here. There’s good land, timber in the bottoms, plenty of game—everything a man could want.’”⁷ Fairly early in the novel he loads himself with weapons: his “sharp hatchet,” a powder horn, and a rifle. Later, at the close of the prairie day’s “great, warm, happy silence” Pa returns with “the largest rabbit [Laura] had ever seen, and two plump prairie hens. ‘This country’s cram-jammed with game,’ he tells her. ‘I saw fifty deer if I saw one, and antelope, squirrels, rabbits, birds of all kinds. The creek’s full of fish.’ He said to Ma, ‘I tell you, Caroline, there’s everything we want here. We can live like kings!’”⁸

⁶ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 28-29.

⁷ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 31.

⁸ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 41, 49-50.

Pa's exuberance over seemingly endless resources echoes similar language from earlier explorers and settlers. Traveling along the Ohio River in 1785, Richard Butler wrote "I cannot help here describing the amazing plenty and variety of this night's supper. We had fine roast buffalo beef, soup of buffalo beef and turkeys, fried turkeys, fried catfish fresh caught, roast ducks, good punch, madeira, claret, grog and toddy."⁹ Pa's declaration that his family can "live like kings" on the prairie is overconfident—years later Pa will be haunted by scarcity of game. He can only feed his family reliably if there is an unchanging rhythm to the ecology. Indeed, a disturbance in this balance is the plot of *The Long Winter* when Laura is much older than she is on the Kansas prairie.

At the present moment in *Little House* chronology however, when Laura is still a young child, her father's statement still rings of boasting. Compared to Butler's meal, which included five dishes and five beverages, the Ingallses supper is scanty—hardly of royal caliber—though satisfying. They relish their first opportunity on the trail to enjoy wild game. Usual suppers are comprised of foods they eat almost daily—salt pork and coffee particularly—throughout the whole book series. The supper of "tender, savory, flavory" game meat is "wonderful."¹⁰ It satisfies little Laura so well that she "didn't want anything more in the world."¹¹ A regular supper—on the trail or in the house—of fried salt pork, coffee, and cornmeal cakes is satisfying too, but not a rare treat. On these

⁹ Reginald Horsman, *Feast or Famine: Food and Drink in American Westward Expansion* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 9.

¹⁰ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 50.

¹¹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 50.

occasions Laura will not eat “until she could eat no more,”¹² but she is always willing to eat. The little girl grows “hungrier and hungrier”¹³ at the smell of cooking food, regardless of whether it is sliced salt pork or whole rabbits and prairie hens. The food’s unparalleled deliciousness comes from Ma’s kitchen witchery. Anything and everything always tastes good. But the freshness of game meat contrasted to preserved salt pork has no comparison. Over the course of *Little House on the Prairie*, the fictionalized Ingallses build a snug little cabin from hand-hewn logs, plant a garden, and even dig a well. Little Laura is fascinated watching her parents reconstruct civilization, but the wild grassland works its particular charms on her.

To contrast a post-war westward migrant with someone exploring America decades before, such as Richard Butler in 1785—he of the five-meat feast—is to see a dramatic change in foodstuffs taken on the journey. Butler and his party—it is unknown how many there were—hunted, gathered and foraged. Pioneers westward in the post-war period, and even prior to the war on the 1840 Oregon Trail, purchased large quantities of long-lasting foods. This included hardtack biscuits that were little more than flour and water, and barreled bacon or salt pork. These purchases, made at general stores and sometimes traded to other settlers, reflect the persistence of a modernizing economy, although it had been ravaged by conflict. Many of the goods purchased at general stores were commercially canned. These foods would have been pioneers’ last link to the hectic, unrestricted urban food ways before they turned to primitive modes of hunting and gathering and, once at their destinations, home canning.

¹² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 50.

¹³ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 50, 30.

The different western destinations of settlers—from Minnesota to California and Oregon—highlight an important point that Brown makes. He calls the whole geographic area of the Great Plains and far West “the free west.” In “the free west, where the economic emphasis was on agriculture,”¹⁴ conditions could vary wildly. Where the Ingalls family goes—an isolated spot in the Kansas tall-grass prairie chosen at random—“settlement” is certainly not “established.” Brown writes that communities that “had been established for a decade or more” centered around “market agriculture.”¹⁵ The fictionalized Ingallses may experience a little of this in Minnesota, but by the time they get to De Smet in Dakota Territory they become entrenched in this. This “market agriculture” is more prevalent in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* than it is in *Little House in the Big Woods*, although both books feature the annual “going to town.” *Big Woods* is so much a paean to hunters and forests, though, that the chapter “Going to Town” seems incidental. In *Plum Creek* there is more material culture and this will figure into a later discussion of Laura’s late childhood. For now, though, both *Big Woods* and *Plum Creek* display cooperative community and the odd blend of subsistence and commercial living that was the frontier town.

The town of Pepin, Wisconsin near Wilder’s actual birthplace is still today a tiny township. The Ingallses inhabit a traditional subsistence economic and familial structure as they “go to town.” Ma and Pa barter for what they need. Laura’s parents “traded for a long time” for cloth, “some tobacco . . . a pound of tea, and a little paper package of store sugar to have in the house when company came. It was a pale brown sugar, not dark like

¹⁴ Brown, 542.

¹⁵ Brown, 542.

the maple sugar Ma used for everyday.”¹⁶ While Ma Ingalls sews aprons, shirts, dresses and even “sheets and underwear”¹⁷ from bolts of store-bought cloth, she is more modern than Mother Wilder, who produces her own cloth from raw materials. When the Ingalls family moves to Kansas Territory, it leaves little Pepin, an outpost of civilization, far behind and enters a literal wilderness.

Pre-and post-war westward migrations were as long and hard as the character Laura describes. Williams writes that women baked bread or corn cakes on hot rocks and cooked over dried buffalo chip fires. This was hardly in line with domestic skill, but even in the wilderness a woman had certain tasks squarely within her “sphere.” “It is very trying on the patience to cook and bake on a little green wood fire with the smoke blowing in your eyes so as to blind you, and shivering with cold so as to make the teeth chatter,” wrote Esther Hanna.¹⁸ On the journey to California territory in 1849, Catherine Haun described a middle-class kitchen and pantry piled into a wagon. The list of dry goods and utensils indicates that in the pre-war decades even middling folks such as the Hauns in Iowa—hardly the bastion of urbanity—lived in contemporary comfort. An *entire* wagon contained kitchen and pantry goods. In Wilder’s fictionalized recollections, her parents do not have half that in only *one* wagon, granted they travel as a single household unit. Haun’s group was “large, well-equipped, and experienced” and secured what it needed by “begging, buying, or borrowing.”¹⁹ “[Household effects] consisted of

¹⁶ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 168-170.

¹⁷ Wilder, 170.

¹⁸ Williams, 138.

¹⁹ Haun, “A Woman’s Trip Across the Plains in 1849,” 166-167.

cooking utensils, two boards nailed together, which was to serve as our dining table . . . We had a very generous supply of provisions. All meats were either dried or salted, and vegetables and fruit were dried . . . For luxuries we carried a gallon each of wild plum and crabapple preserves and blackberry jam. Our groceries were wrapped in India rubber covers and we did not lose any of them.”²⁰ The Haun’s overland provisions indicate that the party had ample money for provisions. The provisions that were from grocers or dry goods salesmen specifically indicate a successful market system change-over, one in which imported goods (such as oysters, tropical fruit, and nuts) were stable sellers. The older artisanal foods Blumin mentions were waning.

By comparison, in the literary retelling Laura’s parents are paupers although Pa wants a kingship. Laura and Mary share one tin cup for every meal on the trail to Indian Territory, although “each of them had a tin plate, and a steel knife and fork with white bone handles.”²¹ The only foods the family packs are salt pork, pork rind, salt, coffee beans, and cornmeal.²² Such impoverished migrations may have been typical for real post-war migrants. The integrity of the fictionalized Ingallses coffee is something trusted, but it could have been a coffee substitute. Circa 1871, real coffee was probably being consumed again, especially in the North. But during the war and in its immediate aftermath, in the South one was hard-pressed to find real coffee—sweet potatoes, “brewed”²³ would do. Shortly before the war ended in 1865 “the North daily exchanged

²⁰ Haun, 138.

²¹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 30-31.

²² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 30-31.

²³ Andrew F. Smith, *Starving the South: How the North Won the Civil War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 101.

10,000 pounds of bacon and other supplies, such as sugar, coffee, molasses, and codfish, for fifty bales of cotton, and this transaction was just one trading scheme”²⁴ in a permanently altered economy. The fictionalized Ingallses coffee may be the real thing, as it smells good and strong. “The coffee boiled . . . [Laura and Mary] drank water. They could not have coffee until they grew up.”²⁵

As little Laura grows up to become Mrs. A. J. Wilder in the book series, she is a piece in a vast unforgiving terrain. But she has the stabilizing force of family around her. In the books, her environs are magical places, as the tropes in *Little House in the Big Woods* make clear. In reality, there is little magic in the vast western landscape—so little, in fact, that the region has been variously reconstructed and deconstructed by historians trying to understand and interpret what drew people to the region.

The west is not magical or enchanted, but for little Laura in *Little House on the Prairie* it certainly is. She sadly leaves Wisconsin’s enchanted cottage, but on a hot Kansas day she feels a new magic. “The wind sang a low, rustling song in the grass. Grasshoppers’ rasping quivered up from all the immense prairie. A buzzing came faintly from all the trees in the creek bottoms. But all these sounds made a great, warm happy silence. Laura had never seen a place she liked so much as this place.”²⁶ In this endless flatness, stars hang like jewels at night. In daytime the sun is a great burning ball. On this magical prairie Laura is soothed and transfixed. In reality, the vast landmass, the heat and

²⁴ Smith, *Starving the South*, 116.

²⁵ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 30-31.

²⁶ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 48-49.

cold, and the aridity all kept the Plains and far West from being settled for quite some time. The aridity complained of across the stretches of Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and the Dakotas was one foundational tenet of Stephen Long's contemporary theory that the Plains were unsuitable for habitation.

Long decided during his early 19th century travels that the area "[four hundred miles square] between 96 and 105 degrees of west longitude, and between 35 and 42 degrees of north latitude" was "wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence" because of a lack of timber and water.²⁷ Indeed, many overland trail emigrants wrote of monotonous views and dry air on the way to Utah, Oregon and California. They also wrote about eating from their stored goods and scrounging this supposedly "uninhabitable" land for food along the way. Like virtually all overland trail groups, Haun's "experienced" party relied on a skilled hunter. This Mr. Bowen, who "furnished his own saddle horse" and "whose business" included hunting in addition to gathering firewood and scouting, proved himself "invaluable" to Haun. From out of Long's "wholly unsuitable" landscape he fed the others "much of the time" with "buffalo antelope or deer meat, wild turkey, rabbits, prairie chickens, grouse, fish or small birds."²⁸ The dry air helped Haun's party successfully preserve sliced buffalo meat. "After being cut into strips about an inch wide it was strung on ropes on the outside of the wagon cover and in two or three days it was thoroughly cured. It was then packed in a bag and in the Humboldt Sink, when rations

²⁷ Stephen Long, "The Stephen Long Expedition's Report of a Frontier Barrier, 1821: Of the country situated between the meridian of the Council Bluff and the Rocky Mountains" in *Major Problems in the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 120-121.

²⁸ Haun, 167.

were low, it came in very handy . . . spite of having hung in the Alkali dust and being rather shriveled looking, it was relished for when hunger stares one in the face one isn't particular about trifles like that"²⁹ she noted.

But what alternative was there for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people disturbed and disrupted by a war that had undermined the nation's food supply and jostled the money markets? What did a man like Charles Ingalls, who grew up near New York City's polluted, crowded early industrial heyday, have to lose by striking out to where "there were no settlers," as he had told Ma? The real Caroline Quiner Ingalls and Charles Ingalls need to be analyzed in order for the characters based on them to be better understood. Uncovering more about the real people will help cement their typicality in the patterns and trends of post-Civil War westward migration. If one were to raise the point that perhaps pioneers were somehow atypical of the country's demographic patterns, we need only examine the depth of upheaval to agriculture and trade that the war caused. Then we can see that the wide open, seemingly uninhabited West was a viable option for people, although it may have been less than a veritable game paradise. This viable option in some cases even proved fairly secure and profitable for a small number of settlers, but not for the overwhelming majority. Still, they set their feet and wagon wheels westward.

From the farm in Cuba township, located in southwestern New York State, Charles Ingalls' father was always struggling to shake *something*. Readers never get to know him like they get to know the character based on his son. While Charles Ingalls

²⁹ Haun, 176.

clearly seems misanthropic, readers are never privy to what made “Grandpa Ingalls” so disconcerted. So it can be said with only vague confidence that Lansford Ingalls suffered from the same thing. Misanthropy, rather than the fear of progress that shapes *Farmer Boy*, seemed to shape Lansford “Grandpa” Ingalls’ decision to uproot his family from rural New York. “Grandpa Ingalls watched with restless eyes as his family grew around him. Like the country, it was growing larger. . . Every year thousands of families from the eastern states” headed west. “They all hoped for room to stretch, for better and for richer land, for more opportunity.”³⁰ This is a strong pre-war migratory pattern, at least in Zochert’s estimation. His “thousands” of migrants, placed in a vague chronology (we can calculate that young Charles is about nine) come from a nonspecific “east.” Mintz and Kellogg’s estimation that in 1840, only 100 people had moved west hardly matches Zochert’s prodigious estimation. Nonetheless, people *were* moving west in steadier and steadier streams even before the war, drawn by advertising’s promises: “*KANSAS FARMS! Neosho Valley Lands. 1,300,000 Acres for Sale to Actual Settlers. . . . ‘the richest, finest, and most inviting valley for settlement in the West. One-third of the labor required at the East in the culture of farms will inspire here double the amount of crops. For orchards, grape culture, and small fruit in general, it is unequaled.’*”³¹ Zochert’s research is problematically presented, as he footnotes no sources. He does provide a backstory on Wilder’s parents, and is one of the very few sources to do so.

The family of Charles Ingalls settled briefly in Illinois, to farm again “close to Chicago but closer still to the river town of Elgin.” About five years later in 1850 a

³⁰ Zochert, 4.

³¹ Zochert, 21.

census taker appeared. Young Charles was fourteen—and he was the only family member who gave an accurate age to the census taker.³² The family left Kane County, Illinois a few years later. They settled near Brookfield, Wisconsin. The “Ma and Pa” parent characters seem, between book-bindings, to have always been married and eternally together. But the woman who inspired “Ma” had a backstory, too.

Caroline Lake Quiner was born in Brookfield, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin in 1839. Her parents were both from New Haven, Connecticut. Perhaps her *parents’* Yankee roots are why Wilder wrote the Ma character as coming from “the East.” Ma’s best dress is a symbol of beauty and female power for young Laura. It is made by “a dressmaker” “in the east, in the place where Ma came from when she married Pa.” Her finest dress, Ma wears it over a corset pulled breathlessly tight and three layers of successively fuller and more rigid petticoats—flannel, plain, and stiff. Ma is still “very fashionable,” indeed.³³

The confused maternal family history that Wilder relates as Ma’s in *Little House in the Big Woods* has become standardized—the confusion has, that is. Allan M. Musilek attributes an education at “a Boston female seminary” to Charlotte W. Quiner (nee Tucker), Caroline’s mother.³⁴ Wilder’s biographer Zochert omits Charlotte’s education, so this “female seminary” goes unnamed. The character Ma is written as extremely well-educated, but she is clearly based off of a town-educated woman. In Zochert’s telling

³² Zochert, 6.

³³ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 128-140.

³⁴ Allan M. Musilek, “Agrarian Trepidation as seen through Laura Ingalls Wilder.” Master’s thesis (University of South Dakota, 1988), 21.

about tiny Brookfield, Caroline appears to have little or no time for much schooling or visiting “the largest town around”—Watertown, Wisconsin. “She was a girl without a father, and without a father there was plenty of work to be done.”³⁵ So with plenty of chores to occupy her time, and much less formal schooling than Wilder credits her with (as “Ma”), Caroline Quiner in Zochert’s estimation is different from the character she inspired. The real woman taught school “prior to her marriage”³⁶ but her own level of educational polish was clearly below that of her parents. That aside, Wilder successfully perpetuated the idea that her mother had “illustrious origins” and was highly “educated and cultured.”³⁷

The real Caroline is harshly described. She is deemed very plain by Zochert, if not downright unattractive. Then Zochert all but calls *her* daughter a radiant beauty. “Ma was never pretty in the way that Laura was pretty. . . . But as with most of us her face was merely plain. She squinted a lot and her face did not have the grace and lift and easy lines that Laura’s did.”³⁸ In contrast, Blackford is so spellbound by the grace and beauty of Wilder’s “Ma” character in *Big Woods* that she holds her at a safe distance in her scholarly analysis. Ma is a “goddess-witch,” unpredictable in her powers and beautiful and perfect. The issue of two scholars’ feelings on female beauty and appeal aside, in the new era of companionate marriage, Charles Ingalls wooed his younger neighbor and married her in 1860. Matthews writes that the companionate marriage system arrived

³⁵ Zochert, 9.

³⁶ Musilek, 20.

³⁷ Musilek, 21.

³⁸ Zochert, 9-10.

circa 1830 and allowed for “greater autonomy” among young courting couples. “The relationship became more egalitarian and was based on mutual esteem and respect rather than on family property considerations.”³⁹ That said, in the *Little House* series Ma takes a “fall into Pa’s preferred lifestyle” of frontier isolation, writes Blackford. Her best dress “achieves enormous significance, alluding to an inverse myth” of her higher-class past.⁴⁰ Ma’s higher-class upbringing is mythological—highly so in Wilder’s interpretation of it—because the real woman’s childhood was spent fatherless, far from urbanity.

Wilder’s real parents seem both typical and atypical for their time and place. They both fit into the pre-war migration patterns and the companionate marriage norm. All atypicality rests with Caroline, largely due to how her biographical information was fictionalized. In *Big Woods* Ma is so powerful a figure of education and refinement that she drives a mother-daughter angst that reaches a climax point in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. In *Silver Lake* we glimpse the young woman Laura is slowly becoming—less educated and clumsy, casting warped spells of kitchen witchery. So the real parents of the real Laura Ingalls Wilder head southwest to Kansas Territory from Wisconsin, and in Kansas they will encounter an ordinary landscape. In her writing, their daughter equates the land with dreams of profit and prosperity for the Pa character, so nothing less than magic will do to describe it. Magic pervades the entire *Little House* narrative so thoroughly that its connection with an abnormal failure of Pa’s sets up a multi-faceted study. The topics of vegetarianism, the winter of 1880-1881, and a recounting of the misfortunes that plagued the actual Ingallses—and did not all appear in the *Little House*

³⁹ Matthews, 9-10.

⁴⁰ Blackford, 150.

series—will be explored and will show that frontier settlement was hardly the isolated idyll Wilder depicts.

Pa's boast in Kansas about being able to eat well for a long time is extremely overconfident because the man who says it once chose not to kill game. Pa has the skills, patience, and aim to bring down rabbits, birds, bears, and deer. His kills usually outnumber his failures. Indeed, it is a gloomy aspect that descends on the "little house in the big woods" once, when Pa fails to bring home venison and bear meat. The man who is resolute to feed his family lets emotion override a baser instinct to kill. "Now I'll tell you why you had no fresh meat to eat today," the father tells his children—"Laura on his knee" and "Mary [close] in her little chair." A male deer with "great, branching horns" appeared first. After a bear went by, "a doe and her yearling fawn came stepping daintily out of the shadows. . . . They stood there together, looking at the woods and the moonlight. Their large eyes were shining and soft. I just sat there and looked at them, until they walked away among the shadows." Pa concludes matter-of-factly, "then I climbed down out of the tree and came home."⁴¹

This occasion with the deer is singular for a few reasons. First, another hallmark of the fairy tale is present: the enchanted forest. The forest that night is bathed in soft moonlight. The autumn time of year makes the frost twinkle jewel-like. Pa falls asleep.⁴² Falling asleep is something that often happens in fairy tales right before an enchantment, or as the result of one. He wakes, and the animals come. The three deer and a bear are

⁴¹ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 235-236.

⁴² Wilder, *Big Woods*, 232.

oblivious to man-smell, even though Pa is “near enough to shoot any animal.”⁴³ Pa describes them anthropomorphically, noting their intelligence and grace. The male deer’s head “was up and he was listening”⁴⁴ but he seems too willful to kill. “It was a perfect shot. But he was so beautiful, he looked so strong and free and wild, that I couldn’t kill him,”⁴⁵ the father tells his girls. The bear stands on its hind legs like a man, “perfectly still, looking all around him.”⁴⁶ Perched in a tree, Pa watches the bear intently. The spell breaks when the bear is “waddling away”—only then does Pa realize he “forgot all about his gun.”⁴⁷ The doe and her fawn appear on the moonlit ground and Pa can only stare.⁴⁸

Pa tells the story while trying to rationalize his actions. How could a hunter not kill his prey? Laura is aware of the magic, for she whispers gleefully into her father’s ear “I’m *glad* you didn’t shoot them!”⁴⁹ Indeed, a reading of the passages suggests that Pa was enchanted. These events match the formulaic opener of the story, “once upon a time.” At the end of it all, Mary shatters the spell’s remnants by saying “consolingly” “we can eat bread and butter.”⁵⁰

⁴³ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 232.

⁴⁴ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 232.

⁴⁵ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 232-233.

⁴⁶ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 233.

⁴⁷ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 233-235.

⁴⁸ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 235-236.

⁴⁹ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 236.

⁵⁰ Romines, 32.

In *Constructing the Little House*, Ann Romines rightly identifies the preceding passages from *Big Woods* as a story. She suggests that Pa tells it while struggling against the “lapse” of returning empty-handed, and also suggests that all his stories reinforce a dominant patriarchal structure. Pa’s explanation “both continues and counters” the set values.⁵¹ In this particular analysis of Pa’s failure however, although lapsed masculine behavior is critiqued, another critique can be made. The Ingalls family temporarily identifies positively with the 19th century’s surprisingly pervasive vegetarian movement. On its own Mary’s comment about “eating bread and butter” has a positive tone within the text passage. Mary is the ultra-conformist sister. She has an easygoing personality. She does not enjoy rough and tumble games instead “cowering.”⁵² Contextualized with vegetarianism as a popular movement, however, Mary’s comment takes on a more loaded significance.

It signifies that circumstance alone, and not choice, could force people to stop eating meat, albeit temporarily. Mary’s comment is oddly prescient—years later near starvation in *The Long Winter*, the family chews flavorless coarse bread. Butter is so scarce that when it shows up months later in the Ingalls home—as a gift from a neighbor—fourteen-year old Laura hardly believes her eyes. “Laura turned to the cupboard and saw on the shelf a package that had not been there before. ‘What’s that, Ma?’ she asked. ‘I don’t know. Look and see,’ Ma told her, and Laura undid the paper.

⁵¹ Romines, 32.

⁵² Romines, 29.

There on a small plate was a ball of butter. ‘Butter! It’s butter!’ she almost shouted. They heard Mrs. Boast laugh. ‘Just a little Christmas present!’ she called.”⁵³

Butter, normally eaten on a regular basis by the Ingalls family, is precious and momentarily unfamiliar to Laura by *The Long Winter*’s hopeful conclusion. This animal product is as delicious as the “savory, flavory” game birds and rabbit she ate years before as a five-year old on the Kansas prairie. The butter becomes a new gastronomic experience. Though it has been eaten before, at the belated Christmas dinner the butter has transformed into a delicious unfamiliarity. If meat had been as scarce in Laura’s entire life as butter had been during that one bitter winter, the Ingallses may have held a different set of ethics and eating customs. Meat for the family is plentiful throughout the book series, a staple in its diet. Indeed, the passages on garden produce throughout the *Little House* series seem secondary compared to the almost quotidian descriptions of meat.

Passages about vegetables are relatively short, and often the vegetables are subsumed as nouns in verb-filled sentences, while meat is sometimes lingered on with adjectives. One example of vegetables as background material takes place at the close of *Little House on the Prairie*. In an anticlimactic turn of events, the spring garden recently planted at the homestead is abandoned when the family moves abruptly. “I’ll not stay here to be taken away by the soldiers like some outlaw!”⁵⁴ Pa exclaims to their neighbor Mr. Scott, when they learn that all white settlers must leave Osage land or be forced off

⁵³ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), 331.

⁵⁴ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 316.

it. In the kitchen, secondary to the action, Ma and the girls are washing, cleaning and ironically chattering excitedly about the tender green things they will soon eat. “Little crumpled leaves of peas came up” and “the beans themselves popped out of the ground,” the potatoes and onions were growing, and “they were very tired of just bread and meat.” “Laura liked peas best and Mary liked beans. Suddenly they heard Pa’s voice, loud and angry.”⁵⁵ The prospect of eating the spring produce is destroyed by the move. They drive away, and as they make distance from the house, the garden slowly disappears. Disappointment aside, the family is likely lacking in nutrients from a winter diet based on meat and bread.

The philosophies of the vegetarians and Grahamites are curiously well-reflected in selected portions from the *Little House* series. This analysis shows that Wilder absorbed, even while growing up on the frontier, some of the century’s very pervasive ideas. The real family were avid readers, so outside knowledge about the latest food fads reached it in newspapers and magazines. Wilder’s book characters, though, sometimes display so perfectly the traits of the food reformers—and the views opposite them—that the comparison is impossible to overlook.

Vegetarianism had emerged in the late 18th century because of a changing view among philosophers and religious scholars of the natural world and mankind’s place in it. There were ideas that the land itself was imbued with life giving and sustaining properties. The dichotomy that would emerge in the following century—vegetarianism versus meat-eating--was arguably based on differing understandings of the landscape and

⁵⁵ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 316, 315-314.

its resources. Vegetarians saw land as pastoral paradises, with sentient animals off-limits for consumption. Conversely meat-eaters saw landscapes as domains overtaken, with resources available for their use, including animals for food. Along this line of thought, it is easily seen that Pa throughout the *Little House* series is a substantial force in creating a certain ethical view on eating habits for his children. Little Mary is humble and undisturbed at the prospect of making do with “bread and butter” after her father backslides in his patriarchal role as hunter. Little Laura, on the other hand, clearly savors meals that contain meat. She finds bear meat tastiest,⁵⁶ but salivates equally over sizzling salt pork and bacon.

As the book series’ writer, Wilder had a unique opportunity to recall memories—with artistic flair, of course—of her childhood in America’s wild places. It was her privilege, then, to linger long on descriptions of food, particularly meat. Phrases such as “[the pig’s tail] sizzled and fried, and drops of fat dripped off it and onto the coals”⁵⁷ have aural and olfactory qualities. Laura’s excitement comes across as well. “Laura burned her finger, but she was so excited she did not care.”⁵⁸ Though she loves meat, Laura tenderly regards the animals that become part of her diet. In Wisconsin she becomes upset when autumn signifies butchering time. She feels so sorry for the same pig whose tail she will eagerly roast, but she is very upset indeed. “When the water was

⁵⁶ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 11. “Laura was sorry Pa did not get the bear. She liked bear meat so much. Pa was sorry too, but he said: ‘Anyway, I saved the bacon.’” Pa was retelling the previous night’s events, when a bear got into the pig pen.

⁵⁷ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 16.

⁵⁸ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 16. Roasting the pig’s tail was exciting but kept the children close to hot oil and a hot object. “Their hands and their faces got very hot . . . At last it was done. It was nicely browned all over, and how good it smelled! They carried it into the yard to cool it, and even before it was cool they began tasting it and burned their tongues.”

boiling [Pa and Uncle Henry] went to kill the hog. Then Laura ran and hid her head on the bed and stopped her ears with her fingers so she could not hear the hog squeal.”⁵⁹ Another time, the following spring, Laura fears Pa might harm juvenile animals. ““You wouldn’t shoot a little baby deer, would you, Pa?’ ‘No, never!’”⁶⁰ he answered. The middle Ingalls daughter knows that all of nature exists in harmony. She even asks her father if tapping maple trees for syrup damaged them.⁶¹ Laura’s awareness of the natural world does not disrupt her meat eating.

On the other hand, none other than Benjamin Franklin had become, more than a century earlier, disturbed about eating meat. Throughout his life he moderated into a peripatetic vegetarian. “Franklin had decided not to eat meat when he was 16 years old,”⁶² but went back to eating meat later. He was friends with others who kept “the vegetable diet,” such as Johann Conrad Beissel, founder of the Ephrata Community, a vegetarian Protestant Christian movement.⁶³ Whether Franklin knew of any health benefits from vegetarianism is unknown. A dinner he served, described in *The Stirling Observer*, showed a method of food combining meant to “preserve the health of the body”: “cucumber, a pot of butter, a jug of spring water, a loaf of bread, lettuces, leeks, a cheese,” and lastly, “foaming beer more brisk than strong.”⁶⁴ Before embarking on

⁵⁹ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 13.

⁶⁰ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 159.

⁶¹ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 123. Pa assures her that tapping the trees doesn’t hurt them, “no more than it hurts you when you prick your finger and it bleeds.”

⁶² Karen Iacobbo and Michael Iacobbo, *Vegetarian America: A History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 2.

⁶³ Iacobbo and Iacobbo, 3.

⁶⁴ Iacobbo and Iacobbo, 2,

vegetarianism, Franklin had read books that exemplify the shortening gap between emergent science and emergent understanding of the body that created 18th-century nutrition science. William Tryon's 17th century treatise *The Way to Health, Long Life and Happiness, or, a discourse of temperance and the things requisite for the life of man and Wisdom's Dictates; or, aphorisms and rules physical, moral and divine; for preserving the health of the body, and the peace of the mind* brought Franklin to his decision.⁶⁵ According to Tryon, foods should be properly combined and never include meat, because meat disrupts digestion, leading to poor health. "All meat dishes . . . quite discommode us and bring no small injury." Instead, a proper diet includes "wheat, buckwheat, potatoes, cabbages, greens, fruits" and also eliminates dairy, according to Franklin's acquaintance Beissel.⁶⁶

Tellingly, Franklin went back to eating meat. One wonders if he was like the character Laura—irresistibly drawn to greasy, rich-smelling meat. Very fresh meat satisfies Laura's hunger in a way that no other food can. After all, it is after eating fresh, plump prairie chickens and rabbits that Laura pushes her plate away with a happy sigh.

The vegetarian movement—which cannot be classified as one overarching set of beliefs—proved its staying power. In the 19th century it merged with general dietary reform to redefine and clarify—perhaps even to modernize—nutrition science. Nutrition science had always focused on which factors adversely affected human digestion. At the beginning of the century it "was hardly a new concept" and it contained "vestiges" of

⁶⁵ Iacobbo and Iacobbo, 2-3.

⁶⁶ Iacobbo and Iacobbo, 3.

older theories such as the “ancient Greek humoral theory.”⁶⁷ Health science gradually modernized during the century, arguably because people were so concerned with making the most and best of the age, which was far more technologically advanced than those previous. Nutrition science was stalled between forward-thinking and backward-looking. The paramount importance of vegetables was absorbed into the broader dietary reform movement. The most well-known dietary reformer of the century was Sylvester Graham, who worked in an age where adulterated food and patent medicines seriously damaged people’s health.

As the century progressed, later followers of vegetarianism, especially Graham, would take existing literature on vegetable-based nutrition, medical training, and their own reversed health problems to push nutrition studies further. Nutrition science’s advance was hindered from the beginning by incomplete knowledge of basics about how the body functioned. There were gaps in knowledge regarding the finer points of digestion, proteins, starches, and carbohydrates.⁶⁸ The general public clung fiercely to its views that animals should be consumed. This same public, in the most densely populated urban areas at least, ate tainted meat from large factories that were supposedly sanitary and progressive. While fresh, quaintly-slaughtered meat is lingered on by Wilder in many of the *Little House* books, in *The Long Winter* bread is the focus. In *The Long Winter* eldest sister Mary eats coarse bread all winter long without complaining, precisely within the bounds of her personality and perhaps unaware that her long-ago comment is now self-fulfilling. She now eats “bread and butter” because the situation has come down to it.

⁶⁷ Alice Ross, “Health and Diet in 19th-Century America: A Food Historian’s Point of View,” *Historical Archaeology* 27.2 (1993), 42.

⁶⁸ Ross, 42.

The Long Winter is highly accurate. Recent research reveals that the book, set in the winter of 1880-81, accurately described that brutal winter that began early (October) and ended late (April), wreaking havoc on the De Smet town site in what is now South Dakota. Dan Vergano writes in “Science Snapshot” for *USA Today* about a climate scientist, Barbara Mayes Boustead, and her quest to determine whether the record-shattering cold really happened the way Wilder wrote it. “As part of her research into climate impacts and assessment at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, [Boustead] realized she would be able to check the veracity of the seven months of snow described in the book. ‘I thought going into this that since it was fiction a lot of it would be made up. But [Wilder] was dead-on in her memory, in a lot of cases.’” Boustead discovered that snowfall records at the time were measured in “temperature and melted inches of precipitation” and calculated from those records that events unfolded almost exactly how Wilder described.

Vergano writes “A blizzard that almost traps the children in a schoolhouse on Dec. 6 in the book appears to have actually taken place Dec. 2-4. . . . A blizzard on Christmas of 1880, a turning point in the story, also seems to have really occurred. All trains stopped running to De Smet in the book after Christmas, as the Chicago & Northwestern railroad line really did that year when blocked by snow. The book also tells of an unsuccessful antelope hunt conducted when it had stopped snowing but temperatures were ‘40 below.’ Actual weather records at the time point to -29 degree Fahrenheit temperatures that lasted Jan. 6 to 14. Maybe with wind chills, it just felt a bit colder. The snow storms blur into each other in the next few months in the story, just as they really did in 1881. The book’s tale of a rescue trip for food mounted by Laura’s

future husband Almanzo Wilder seems to match a cold, clear day with a full moon, Feb. 16, 1881 that really happened and seems possible for just about the distance that horses could travel in the snow then.”⁶⁹

How accurate, then is the Ingalls family’s quest to stay alive? The days blur into a maddening, depressing monotony for Laura, who will soon turn fourteen. She and her sisters try to keep warm and take turns grinding hard red seed wheat through a hand-crank coffee mill. Ma’s daily bread from the supply of seed wheat is something to chew, but it is tasteless, thick, and dense. It would have to be anyway. As a writer Wilder makes it seem tolerable—at least for a while. For seven months the family eats brown bread. The first few months’ bread is from purchased flour. It is whole-wheat flour from the local grist mill and not Graham’s nightmare white flour. Ma tips “the good-smelling loaves from the pan onto a clean white cloth.”⁷⁰ Slowly, as every hope the family has of getting groceries from the general store or incoming trains dwindles, Laura is old enough and sharp enough to realize that starvation is imminent.

Ironically, Laura realizes starvation is near just as her father brings home four pounds of beef from a neighbor’s slaughtered ox. “Laura tried to think of the good brown smell and taste of the beef for dinner tomorrow . . . There was half a bushel of wheat that they could grind to make flour, and there were the few potatoes, but nothing more to eat until the train came. The wheat and the potatoes would never be enough.” Unconsoled by the package of beef, she anxiously asks her father if there is any more wheat, or why

⁶⁹ Dan Vergano, “‘Little House’ author right on 1880’s winter,” *USA TODAY* (August 21, 2011).

⁷⁰ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 63.

he has not shot any rabbits.⁷¹

Here Laura displays a change of temperament. Gone is the five-year old who was so delighted that her father spared three deer in a clearing. At nearly fourteen now, her anguish at the facts of slaughter is gone too as she indirectly signals her frustration that no animals have been killed. She craves fresh meat as she fixates on the sensory aspects of the next day's meal. She realizes there is little food left to feed a family of six. She slips into a hunger-induced lethargy as the winter drags on. "I'm not hungry, honest, Pa" is Laura's response to a meal of "potato that had grown cold on the cold plate." "Laura had to choke down mouthfuls" and "broke a small piece" from the ubiquitous bread—but only after her father commanded her "kindly but firmly" to do so.⁷² Her sister Carrie turns frail and very pale over the months, and has lingering health effects.

Even Ma loses her serenity. Blackford's "goddess-witch," the woman ascribed jumbled powers of both mythology and fairy tales, is powerless against hunger. When Pa tells her on January 1, 1881, that trains still can't make it to the town site, she briefly becomes unhinged. "'Patience! What's [the superintendent's] patience got to do with it I'd like to know! How does he think we are going to live until spring? It isn't his business to be patient. It's his business to run the trains.'" "Now, Caroline," Pa said. He put his hand on her shoulder and she stopped rocking and rolling her hands in her apron."⁷³ Ma's finest moment comes when she devises a way to use the seed wheat. None of the family has ever processed wheat by hand in small batches, but the grist mill is unavailable now.

⁷¹ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 215-216.

⁷² Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 252.

⁷³ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 214.

She puzzles over the wheat in its organic state for a moment or two then puts some through the hand-crank coffee mill. “Wheat will grind just like coffee,” she announces, but she is overconfident. “She looked into the little drawer. The broken bits of wheat were crushed out flat. ‘Not like coffee, either,’ Ma said. ‘The wheat hasn’t been roasted and has more moisture in it.’”⁷⁴ Undaunted, she bakes endless loaves of the crude stuff so her family can have something else to chew and swallow. Bread was an “unstimulating food, one that would not tax the body’s digestive energies or lend itself to aggravating the nerves.”⁷⁵ So this horrid stuff is weirdly perfect for this brutal winter. The family’s other food is salt cod, two tins of oysters, potatoes and four pounds of beef. At this point the home-canned produce is long gone. So the witch of the little forest cottage, the hearth goddess, regains blunted powers. Ma’s family is forced into an eating plan that is hardly an ersatz vegetarianism, though the near-total absence of meat and the organic state of the seed wheat would doubtless please Graham. The legendary winter of 1880-1881 was probably the only time of near-starvation for the real Ingallses.

It seems that each place the real family migrated held some force that, once unleashed, wrecked fortunes or brought grief. Wilder disclosed some of these hardships, though she altered them in her fiction. The fourth book in the series, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, holds the second major setback. The first force unleashed on the family was the government in *Little House on the Prairie*, but the grasshoppers that destroy two years’ worth of wheat in *Plum Creek* are an organic force more potentially devastating. A

⁷⁴ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 194.

⁷⁵ Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 62.

natural enemy like grasshoppers destroys the ability of the people to feed themselves, while the man-made enemy government simply forces them to find more land. As a writer, in *Plum Creek* Wilder lays out “an erosion” of the family’s hopes⁷⁶, writes Jennifer Rea Schmitt. This litany of crumbling fortunes for the real family was much more devastating than Wilder depicted, Schmitt argues. She points out that Charles Ingalls’ success in employment after the first wheat ravaging was meager. “In contrast to the fictional account, in 1874, Charles Ingalls did work the harvest east of the land affected by grasshoppers, but he did not earn enough to pay off the family debts.”⁷⁷ This contrasts with the “joyous and fruitful homecoming” of Wilder’s book, which leaves the reader thrilled that there was enough money for “new food supplies, new shoes for Mary, and fabric for clothes.”⁷⁸ In *Plum Creek* Laura is seven, Mary is nine, and they are both far too young to fully understand such hardships as faced the real family—so Wilder transforms the actual bitter disappointments into “joyous and fruitful” resolutions. There will be an unexpected “going to town.”

With their crop devastated and hopes of fortune gone, the real Ingallses moved back to family in eastern Minnesota. Caroline’s little sister Eliza Ann Quiner Ingalls and her husband, Charles’s brother Peter Ingalls, took the family in. In 1876, after the death of baby Freddie Ingalls, Charles and Caroline moved their family to Burr Oak, Iowa. Even while helping run a hotel there, the family was insolvent. Wilder’s father was in “constant” debt and worked “at many jobs that were not up to the ideals of the pioneer

⁷⁶ Jennifer Rea Schmitt, “Frontier Fiction: The Work of Laura Ingalls Wilder,” (honors thesis, Smith College) (Northampton, MA, 1992), 29.

⁷⁷ Schmitt, 29.

⁷⁸ Schmitt, 29.

standard,” “perhaps as a carpenter or clerk in one of the stores.”⁷⁹ Quoted by Schmitt, Zochert reveals a dark side to family ties in the 19th century’s wild places. “Often parents did give up their children to strangers, especially when they were pressed by hard times.” Schmitt reveals through Zochert’s research that Wilder was fought over by her parents and another couple, A. H. Starr and his “barren wife” in Burr Oak.⁸⁰

The debts incurred by Charles Ingalls, mirrored in the fictionalized account, are partly for “lumber for the house.”⁸¹ In *Plum Creek* Pa is able to get lumber from a saw mill and build a real house—one more genteel than both the log cabin in Kansas and certainly the dugout home the family lives in now. Seven-year old Laura is delighted. “Yes, flutterbudget, we’re going to have a whole house built of sawed lumber. And it’s going to have glass windows!”⁸² The presence of a saw mill in or near (it is not indicated which) Plum Creek’s settlement indicates that it has Brown’s “market agriculture” longevity marker.⁸³ Plum Creek is indeed the most civilized urban outpost that the fictionalized Ingallses have seen yet. It is bigger than Pepin, and its Scandinavian settlers will be focused on in the next chapter as a specific type of community. The Ingallses are able to buy things at both Fitch’s general store and the Oleson’s mercantile shop that were unavailable in Pepin.

⁷⁹ Schmitt, quoting Zochert, 32-33.

⁸⁰ Schmitt, 32-33.

⁸¹ Schmitt, 29.

⁸² Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 109.

⁸³ Brown, 542.

Here nine-year old Mary's new shoes are "so new and shining"⁸⁴ that Laura, stuck with Mary's old pair, is jealous. Laura gets to pick out brown cloth and red ribbon for her next dress—she has grown so much that her old dress simply won't do. "The winter before, Ma had let out every tuck and seam . . . this winter it was very short, and there were holes in the sleeves where Laura's elbows had gone through them because they were so tight."⁸⁵ Romines writes that Plum Creek, Minnesota is a new frontier of consumerism for the Ingallses. "As a married woman born before 1850, [Ma] is the most vulnerable consumer . . . committed to traditional consumption patterns and yet constrained by them."⁸⁶ The "traditional consumption patterns"⁸⁷ of Ma's own youth were barely out of the subsistence vein, but her family managed to retain middle-class sensibilities even on the Wisconsin frontier. Ma is a woman of finer tastes, and she is exerting "influence"⁸⁸ over her family even as she helps Laura pick out pretty fabric and ribbons. Stuart Blumin writes "It was partly through these consumer goods"—everything from clothing to household furnishings—"that women exerted their influence. Increasingly, as women exerted responsibility for the management of the home, the purchase of those goods that helped define the middle class household (and refine male behavior) became a female function and prerogative."⁸⁹ Pa may build the "little houses"

⁸⁴ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 241.

⁸⁵ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 241.

⁸⁶ Romines, 112.

⁸⁷ Romines, 112.

⁸⁸ Romines, 111-112.

⁸⁹ Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 185.

but Ma sophisticates them, and the people in them. With greater refinement of houses came greater refinement in eating. None of the fictionalized Ingallses are ever slovenly eaters, but Blumin writes that when many middle class (and aspiring) women began to refine their homes, “the wife might have compelled her husband to eat more slowly, and with a fork rather than a knife.”⁹⁰ This was because “more refined and elaborate meals”⁹¹ became the norm. On the frontier, though, hardly any of the Ingallses meals are “refined and elaborate.” Even with fabric for new dresses and one new pair of shoes between them, Laura and Mary must continue to move smoothly between hard labor and the pursuits of childhood.

The condition of children on the frontier has been studied, but perhaps not to any great extent that would lend new insights into familial conditions. Children were used for labor in the wild places, simply helping their families survive. Essentially, the 19th century American family on the frontier resembled greatly the colonial family. It may be more insightful to say that while the frontier family existed within the new framework of the companionate or democratic family it was brought down several notches simply because of the environment’s harshness. Wilder herself was “put out” to work at age nine, helping her older sister wait on customers at the Burr Oak hotel. Writing about westward migrations and children, James E. Davis asserts that it was highly *usual* for families in the North and Northeast to only take “perhaps the strongest” child, “and the

⁹⁰ Blumin, 185.

⁹¹ Blumin, 185.

others were temporarily farmed out to relatives and friends”⁹² until the family had settled successfully. The fictionalized Ingallses, then, are aberrant according to Davis’s study because they always travel together. The realistic conditions faced by the actual Ingalls family were tough to take. They faced eviction from squatting on Native American land. They dealt with destroyed crops and lost income by living off of the kindness of family. They endured the sudden death of a son and put their girls out to work only to nearly lose one. It is imperative that the real events be understood as vital forces that influenced Wilder as a writer. They were so bleak that she either omitted them entirely or ascribed them happy endings. The real events also show that the real family was so incredibly typical of the time period and environment that it was unremarkable. It is within the pages of the *Little House* series that the characters become larger than life, more colorful, more superhuman. Ma is bewitching and works magic with raw materials and foodstuffs. Pa is a mighty hunter. Laura is held rapt by his stories and Mary is uncomplaining. The talismanic protection of the godlike parents is present in each “little house” and everyone stays together. The fictionalized family’s loving bond is the biggest thing around in its isolation. It is fierce, boisterous, and overwhelmingly positive, able to get them through anything. “Don’t worry, Charles. We’ve always got along,” the character Ma says reassuringly. “Never mind Charles . . . we’ve been through hard times before.”⁹³

Wilder’s father was actually mediocre at business and a poor wheat farmer. His dreams of wide open space with few neighbors and accumulated wealth from working the land were far bigger than his abilities. Her mother was remembered as “sincere, deeply

⁹² James E. Davis, *Frontier America: 1800-1860: A Comparative Demographic Analysis of the Frontier Process* (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1977), 48.

⁹³ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 201.

pious” by her granddaughter Rose Wilder.⁹⁴ Wilder recalled that her mother’s speech patterns reflected her good education. “Her language was precise and a great better language than what I ever used. She was well-educated for that time and place; rather above Pa socially.”⁹⁵ Both Caroline and Charles stressed education for their daughters—first Mary, then Laura, then little Caroline (Carrie) and lastly Grace. Caroline did not share her husband’s desire to travel and forbade him from moving the family further west than Dakota Territory. Ma Ingalls of Wilder’s stories embodied the ideal 19th century wife—the “angel in the house” who raised moral children, obeyed her husband, and kept a sparkling home, which entailed heavy labor for cooking and cleaning. On the frontier, domesticity suffered but prevailed.

Many small journeys took the real Ingallses to their permanent home at the De Smet town site. In the book series, after *Little House on the Prairie* the journey is unfortunately far from over. Just as little Laura is spellbound, the spell must be broken. Making their way to western Minnesota in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, the fictionalized Ingallses fare no better, and next end up in Dakota Territory. At last the journey is over. Laura and her sisters can focus all their energies on growing up. Ma seeks to tame young Laura, who is her father’s “flutterbudget,” into a responsible, proper young woman even though she lives in wild places. Food plays a surprisingly large and centric role in this process of turning the bright-eyed rambunctious child into a young woman suited for marriage. Laura’s relationship with Ma is a subject which has received a fair amount of

⁹⁴ Wilder and Lane, 58.

⁹⁵ Laura Ingalls Wilder quoted in Allen M. Musilek, 21.

scholarship. Specifically reexamining this relationship through the media of various foods will allow new insights to be gained and old insights to be improved upon.

III. DOMESTICITY IN THE WILD

From their earliest interactions Ma and Laura are adversarial. Ma constantly coaches Laura's behaviors. Ma worries the wild environs will strip her daughter of all manners and decorum. In the peculiar companionate family structure on the frontier, all four of the Ingalls girls must contribute to tasks that will not only help them meet their needs, but will satisfy Ma's yearning for a bit of urban domesticity to be imparted to them. Laura certainly does all she can to help meet the family's immediate needs, but this "flutterbudget" frequently flouts Ma's rules for young girls.

As the rambunctious younger sister, Laura contrasts greatly with Mary, but in the end attains what proper Mary cannot—marriage and a household of her own. In the interval before Mary's blindness Laura seems to be the sister more suited for singlehood because she so frequently rejects rules of ideal behavior. Mary, comfortable in the female role, never marries while Laura somewhat reluctantly steps into the roles of wife and mother. Wilder makes her fictionalized self—the character Laura—strongly opinionated in her views of marriage, and Wilder also carefully crafts the character of Laura's future husband Almanzo Wilder. Almanzo is amused by Laura's behavior but nonetheless undisturbed by it. Wilder creates two characters whom are somewhat uncomfortable with their societal roles, and perfectly matches them.

The best way to examine domesticity vis a vis food ways in the *Little House* series is to move chronologically, from the time Laura is five in *Little House in the Big Woods* to the time she is married at eighteen in *These Happy Golden Years*, then progressing into her twenties in *The First Four Years*. Ultimately, no matter how

strenuously Ma imparts to her middle daughter the values of 19th century housewifery and motherhood, Laura's early married years are calamitous. A series of disasters escalates in severity to test the couple. But they only make Laura and Almanzo more deeply committed to one another than ever. The domesticity concern arising in the *Little House* series is mainly how Laura either shuns or accepts gender roles prescribed for girls and women. *Domesticity* means "home or family life" but in the 19th century it meant an overarching system of values. In both Europe and America it was most strongly felt in middle and upper-class circles. Domesticity occupied a woman's days if she was relatively well-off economically and socially. If a woman was poor, the labor force—mainly factory work or employment as household help—occupied her days. The aspiration was for a state of domestic bliss. Glenna Matthews writes that 1850 marked the start of domesticity's "golden age." "Political, religious, emotional, and social"¹ connections could now be made within families in the home. On the Midwestern frontier, bliss is far from the reality experienced by pioneering families—but in Wilder's treatment, each "little house" of the Ingallses is benevolently bewitched.

What were Ma's particular concerns? The places where Laura grows up—Wisconsin's woods, Indian Territory, a dugout home in Minnesota, a claim shanty in Dakota Territory—are worrisome for Ma, whose flesh-and-blood basis Caroline Quiner Ingalls was described as "rather above Pa socially." The real woman's refinement was turned into attributes of housewifely witchcraft by Blackford. While Caroline Quiner Ingalls may have followed her husband on pioneering journeys, she clearly sought to

¹ Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 35.

usurp his rougher deportment when it came to raising their children. Matthews writes that domesticity's golden age let fathers have more positive involvement with their children than ever before. Men "helped create and perpetuate" "the ideology of domesticity."² This is only appropriate given companionate marriage's emphasis on equal partnership. Pa and Laura's relationship is largely positive and will undergo a shift as Laura gets older. Ultimately, her mother has the most influence over her, and the most contact with her. Ma is wary of anything that even suggests appreciation of cultural otherness. She is fanatical about appearances even when her family is the only one for miles. She watches anxiously to see if Laura, Mary, Carrie and Grace will inherit her wise-woman craftiness in the home, and even uses food to impart social lessons. As a teenager Laura finally appreciates her mother's tranquility spells and later is dismayed that the same spells fail in her own house.

Laura progresses through the book series from solely an observer of food ways and a literal consumer of food, to a producer of food but still a consumer. The division of childhood from adulthood is crucial in *Little House* chronology because it is a factual element in Wilder's frontier mythmaking. The American child's place in society changed drastically during the 19th century, and as a character Laura is liminal between work and play. Ma and Pa's efforts to tame their environment, and also their children, can be analyzed. If Wilder had grown up urban perhaps her personality regarding domesticity and the female role would have been different. "*MARRIED. WILDER—INGALLS.—At the residence of the officiating clergyman, Rev. E. Brown. August 25, 1885. Mr. Almanzo J. Wilder and Miss Laura Ingalls, both of De Smet. Thus two more of our respected*

² Matthews, 35.

young people have united in the journey of life. May their voyage be pleasant their joys be many and their sorrows few."³ Speculation in the face of facts is useless however, and Laura is such that she seems ill-suited to city life. She needs endless land, a rough-hewn home, and a fascination with cultural otherness in order to thrive.

Very early in the book series as a five-year old Laura displays curiosity about Native Americans. Her constant questions about them exasperate her mother. Laura firsts asks Ma about them while she is eating cold corn bread spread with molasses. The family is camped in Kansas, alone as far as the eye can see, but this place is, after all, *Indian country*. Native American characters as problematically portrayed eaters of settlers' food will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. For now, Ma's insistence "I just don't like them" paired with her instructions: "don't lick your fingers, Laura"⁴ merely show that Ma is desperately impatient for her daughters to be in any other situation than this one. Little Laura sits dwarfed in the tall prairie grass. She is barefoot and wearing her faded red calico dress. As she eats her slice of corn bread she licks the dripping molasses. Worst of all, she asks her annoying questions with her mouth full. Days into the legendary Indian country, and Ma's daughter is losing her manners. Ma ultimately fails to keep Native Americans away from her family, but her goddess-witchery attempts to make living conditions—and concurrent manners, education, and socialization—more than merely passable. She will create havens—the "little houses."

³ Wilder and Lane, 39. "*The De Smet News and Leader* carried this announcement of Laura and Almanzo's marriage." The last sentence lacks punctuation.

⁴ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 46-47.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, the family lives in a cabin built by Pa and Ma's own hands. The next book to pick up the Ingallses (after *Farmer Boy's* digression), *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, sees them living in a dugout home in Minnesota until they can afford materials for a new house. The interval between the middle of *Little House on the Prairie* and the beginning of *Plum Creek* sees little Laura up close and personal with Osage Indians on the Kansas prairie, and this encounter has shaken Ma's confidence that she can control her daughter. Along peaceful Plum Creek in Minnesota, Ma confronts more intercultural assault on the senses, but here she is hard-pressed to object too strongly because their neighbors are white Europeans.

Ma's most fretful concern, of course, with intercultural relationships lies with food taboos. In *On the Banks of Plum Creek* there are no Native American characters. With no dangerous outside forces, the Ingalls girls can once again focus on becoming proper 19th century American ladies. Foods that are shared in this novelized memoir include sweets, and the settings of this sharing—birthday parties and Christmases—reinforce proper values. *On the Banks of Plum Creek* contains two extremes regarding food ways—excess, even frivolity, contrasted with loss. It also encapsulates the urgency Ma feels for early-childhood reinforcement of ladylike behavior. The novelized memoir displays the precarious place of girls on the frontier, with little access to refinements. The delicate situation is further reinforced in the subsequent book, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*.

The Ingallses situation in the opening pages is hardly refined—it is rather rugged and crude. “The Door in the Ground” is *Plum Creek's* first chapter, and it relates how the family purchased a dugout home from Norwegian neighbors, the Hanson's. Dugout

homes were quite common on the frontier and were nightmarish for pioneers' wives. In a typical sod house in a place like Nebraska the "dishes, pots, pans" needed for cooking were often used to catch water after rains because sod houses "leaked." Dugouts were literally cut into hillsides or created from thick, surprisingly sturdy slabs of sod. Roofs were usually "poles and a sheeting of brush; a layer of prairie grass covered this . . . The settler who could afford it put a frame roof on his sod house."⁵

Homesteader's wives who used cookware as water catchers were often accustomed to the comparative luxury of homes in eastern cities (or, like the Hauns, in Iowa). Life in a dugout was the psychologically trying end of a long wagon journey west. "Mrs. John Cashland, of Fillmore County, Nebraska, did what a good many others of her sex no doubt did. When she first saw the dugout her husband had prepared for their home she was so discouraged she burst into tears. . . . Mrs. George Shafer of Delphos, Kansas, objected strenuously to living in that kind of hole in the ground like a prairie dog, but finally consented to do so. Like many other pioneer women, she sacrificed her ideals for expediency."⁶ The women in these descriptions could easily be substituted for the actual Caroline Quiner Ingalls. However the character Ma is too resolutely serene to let this mole hill-like home annoy her. When an ox's hoof goes through the roof, she merely says "but there's no great damage done."⁷

⁵ Everett Dick, *The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890: A Social History of the Northern Plains From the Creation of Kansas & Nebraska to the Admission of the Dakotas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1937), 113-115.

⁶ Dick, 111.

⁷ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 50.

Laura's environs are still wild and she acts accordingly, swimming in the creek and running herself ragged exploring. At seven years old, she should have a little more focus on domesticity, but her parents' parallel involvement in her life makes exclusively female tasks and behavior impossible for her. When Laura has run home one day after agitating a badger—an animal she had never seen before—Ma exclaims “Goodness, Laura! You’ll make yourself sick, tearing around so in this heat.”⁸ Laura “could run fast,”⁹ as evidenced in her red-cheeked, sweaty reappearance at the house. Laura has brazenly poked the badger with a stick, while “all that time, Mary had been sitting like a little lady, spelling out words in the book that Ma was teaching her to read.”¹⁰

Sitting still is impossible for Laura in Minnesota, which, like the prairie and the woods before it, has magical charm. The dugout home site shares the same quality of classic fairy tale enchantment. The dugout home suggests the habitation of little creatures such as elves or fairies. “All around that door green vines were growing out of the grassy bank, and they were full of flowers. Red and blue and purple and rosy-pink and white and striped flowers all had their throats wide open as if they were singing glory to the morning. They were morning-glory flowers. Laura went under those singing flowers into the dugout. It was one room, all white. The earth walls had been smoothed and whitewashed. The earth floor was smooth and hard.”¹¹ The house is hidden, which adds

⁸ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 32.

⁹ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 32.

¹⁰ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 32.

¹¹ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 10.

to its charm. ‘Goodness,’ said Ma. ‘Anybody could walk over this house and never know it’s here.’”¹² Of course the real dugout home was probably rather less than enchanting.

Her parents have equally strong parallel pulls on Laura’s life. From the age of five she has subverted the wholly female role. “She had helped [Pa] make the door for the log house in Indian Territory. Now she helped him carry the leafy willow boughs and spread them in the dugout. Then she went with him to the stable.”¹³ She proves so indispensable that “Pa often said he did not know how he could manage without Laura.”¹⁴ While so crucial to her father, Laura is not so “indispensable” to her mother. Their relationship is not one of shared work, but one of Ma’s gentle criticisms. When Mary and Laura are finally sent to school while living on Plum Creek, Laura is absent from both parents but learns socialization from another female figure, her teacher.

Laura gradually adjusts to school. She is illiterate and at her age she is behind the learning curve. The Ingallses display something that cannot be called poverty, but is hard to pinpoint. Perhaps it is efficiency, to keep their children out of the house for the entirety of the school day. Mary and Laura are the only students who do not return home for the noon meal. Instead they take “their dinner pail” to “the grass against the shady side of the empty schoolhouse” and eat homemade bread spread with fresh butter.¹⁵ The Ingallses *are* struggling financially while they wait for their wheat to grow, so they are technically poor. But by keeping their children out of the home during the school day, the

¹² Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 11.

¹³ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 14.

¹⁴ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 14.

¹⁵ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 154.

fictionalized parents display thoroughly middle class values. Parents, particularly mothers, stressed “courtesy, honesty, orderliness, industriousness, duty, and self-discipline.”¹⁶ Sending children to school for the entire day allowed the children to practice these values weekly. The school environment was a way to preserve the “innocence and insulation from the corruptions of the adult world”¹⁷ while providing instruction. Musilek writes that good schools were one thing the real Caroline wanted for her daughters, and Charles shared his wife’s ambition that the children succeed. Charles had been “sporadically educated” but “developed a keen fondness for literature.” The parents “had an ardent and vehement desire” for their children’s success.¹⁸

Success at the Minnesota country schoolhouse came with some attendant problems of childhood socialization. The Ingalls girls are jeered at on their first day because of their bare legs. Laura’s are more tanned than Mary’s, but both girls’ legs are spindly under too-short, threadbare dresses. They look like wobbly-legged birds, and the other children shout “Snipes! Snipes! Long-legged snipes!” until another stops them—while Nellie Oleson sniffs derisively and mutters “country girls.”¹⁹ Nellie Oleson is not as problematic as *Little House on the Prairie*’s Osage Indians, because she is similar enough in background to the Ingallses. The significance of her and her family in *Plum Creek* is that within the rigidity of the century’s society, food can be exchanged between them and the Ingallses without any problems of the food taboo.

¹⁶ Mintz and Kellogg, 121.

¹⁷ Mintz and Kellogg, 114.

¹⁸ Musilek, 21.

¹⁹ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 146, 148.

Nellie Oleson is the mercantile store owner's daughter. Her family is upper-middle class and ascendant. At almost eight years old Nellie wears clothing that is elaborate by Ma's standards, made of expensive material. "Her yellow hair hung in long curls, with two big blue ribbon bows on top. Her dress was thin white lawn, with little blue flowers scattered over it, and she wore shoes."²⁰ Dress, deportment, and occupation differentiate the Oleson's from the other Scandinavian settlers. The Hanson's, from whom Pa buys the dugout, appear oafish. Nellie is dainty when contrasted against the others. Mr. Hanson can only say "Yah, yah!" and is big-boned. His hair is "pale yellow, his round face was as red as an Indian's and his eyes were so pale they looked like a mistake."²¹ Another family, the Johnson's, has a son Johnny who drives cattle. Johnny's interactions with Laura are similarly incoherent, as he cannot speak English. He is constantly moving, as if not allowed by the author to ever be still.

The less-assimilated Scandinavians are more problematic for the Ingallses and their food ways than the Oleson's. The Nelson's give the Ingallses a cow. Such a gift is laden with symbolic importance, because one female cow can give so many food products: milk (which can be turned into cream and butter), meat, and veal (in the form of juvenile calves). It is not suggested in *Constructing the Little House*, but perhaps the Nelson's personally work to ensure the Ingallses survival by giving them the cow. Besides being freighted with symbolism regarding all the food it can give, the cow is a symbol of cultural otherness. Robert H. Vine suggests that "ethnic communities" regularly sought to keep outsiders *out*. He draws on Norwegian novelist Ole Rolevaag's

²⁰ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 148.

²¹ Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 2.

Giants in the Earth. “A knot of potential colonists, five Norwegian families facing the hostile prairies, agree to stay together and not let ‘anyone get in between us.’ The ethnic bond—racial, national, cultural—had to be strong enough for identity, strong enough to separate the colony from those who might ‘get in between us.’”²² Here the Ingallses are *outsiders* given a cow by *insiders*. The cow is given while Pa is still working for Nelson. “I’m paying him by day’s work. Nelson’s got to have help, haying and harvesting.”²³ The Nelson’s could have given the Ingallses any other gift, but they give them a cow. This is not to say that the more insular ethnic communities left perceived outsiders with no recourse. In fact, Vine suggests that within *and* without the ethnic communities, overarching values usually negated reluctance and prejudice. Quintessentially American values, feelings, and theories were “partly local cooperation and barter, partly capitalistic investment, and partly involvement in wider economic markets.”²⁴ In the case of winter threshing-time, “If the [threshing] machine was owned by a Swede and you were the only non-Swede in the area, your turn might well come last”²⁵ but you *got* a turn. In a similar vein, the Oleson’s must buy, sell, and trade among everyone, the Ingallses included, and Nellie must socialize with Laura and Mary. Returning to the Nelson’s cow highlights the Ingallses as similarly clannish.

The Ingallses seem astonishingly dense as they try to figure out the name the Nelson’s gave the cow—Wreath of Roses—because “wreath” comes out “reet.” While

²² Robert H. Vine, *Community on the American Frontier: Separate But Not Alone* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 175-176.

²³ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 41.

²⁴ Vine, 175-176.

²⁵ Vine, 108.

Wilder as an *author* makes Johnny Johnson look stupid because he “grinned, and did not say anything. He couldn’t,”²⁶ the Ingallses are remarkably slow as *characters* to figure out Mr. Nelson’s attempt at English. “Pa’s big laugh rang out. ‘Her name is Reet.’ ‘Reet?’ Ma repeated. ‘What outlandish name is that?’ ‘The Nelson’s called her some Norwegian name,’ said Pa. ‘When I asked what it meant, Mrs. Nelson said it was a reet.’ ‘What on earth is a reet?’ Ma asked him.”²⁷ Laura figures out that the name is Wreath of Roses because of the cow’s reddish spots. The family laughs, and Pa declares that “*our kind of folks is pretty scarce*” though their neighbors are good ones.²⁸

The Ingallses “kind of folks” are Fischer’s Scottish backsettlers of the 18th century in America, only in a broader place and later time. The exclusivity of their ethnic background is overcome by Ma’s yearning that her daughters gain exposure to some manners and socialization. So naturally, the first major socialization they get is with Nellie Oleson. Her family’s Americanization is obvious and, because of its wealth, misguided. The Olesons live above their mercantile shop. Every morning Nellie and her brother Willie go downstairs and take candy from the counter. “They grabbed all the candy they could hold and stood cramming it into their mouths.”²⁹ Laura and Mary see them like this one morning when they buy a slate pencil. “They haven’t got one penny,”³⁰ Nellie sneers to her father around a mouthful of candy. Mr. Oleson ignores his

²⁶ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 38.

²⁷ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 44.

²⁸ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 43-44.

²⁹ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 155.

³⁰ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 155.

daughter, and finishes the transaction. Laura and Mary are disgusted and stand quietly while they are “not even offered one piece.”³¹ The next time all four children are together, the food is lavish and Nellie’s manners are better, if only for pretense because it is her birthday.

The chapters “Town Party” and “Country Party” highlight the disparity in morals and manners between the Oleson and Ingalls children. As the mother was the arbiter of good behavior, it is clear that Mrs. Oleson has somehow failed this calling within the so-called cult of domesticity. Nellie’s party is the Ingalls sisters’ first party. It overwhelms Laura. “She could hardly say ‘good afternoon, Mrs. Oleson,’ and ‘yes, ma’am and ‘no, ma’am.’”³² As Nellie’s motive for inviting Laura, Mary and their friend Christy becomes clear—she does not like them at school—Laura shuts down socially until Nellie’s mother offers her some books. “Laura had not known there were such wonderful books in the world. On every page of that book there was a picture and a rhyme. Laura could read some of them. She forgot all about the party. Suddenly, Mrs. Oleson was saying ‘Come, little girl. You mustn’t let the others eat all the cake, must you?’”³³

Recalling Williams, who writes that whiteness symbolized luxury, it can be seen that Nellie’s birthday cake is a multi-layered symbol. It is “a beautiful sugar-white cake” atop a table covered in “a glossy white cloth.”³⁴ There is also white sugar in

³¹ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 155.

³² Wilder, 161.

³³ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 167.

³⁴ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 167.

the lemonade—“Laura had never tasted anything like it.”³⁵ Nellie’s cake symbolizes the character’s own whiteness—her luxurious lifestyle. The excess of refined sugar—something costly—at the table suggests conspicuous consumption, as does Nellie’s shouting “I got the biggest piece!”³⁶ and her fistfuls of candy. The cake and the sugary drink are too rich for Laura and Mary, who have a much plainer diet. Laura eats only “a bit of the sugar-white off her piece of cake.”³⁷ Laura’s reluctance to eat her entire piece of cake shows that she rejects full participation in the Oleson’s lifestyle. Their home is combative, as this exchange between mother and children reveals: “‘Now, Nellie, bring out your playthings.’ ‘They can play with Willie’s playthings,’ Nellie said. ‘They can’t ride on my velocipede!’ Willie shouted. . . . ‘Don’t you touch her!’ Nellie screeched. ‘You keep your hands off my doll, Laura Ingalls!’”³⁸ The Oleson siblings’ quarrelsome natures dampen any enthusiasm Laura has for upper-middle-class life. Ma Ingalls holds “dissatisfaction with pioneer life and [has a] reverence for imported products.”³⁹ But unlike her Ma, Laura has never known anything but the pioneer life and therefore cannot appreciate the Oleson’s lifestyle. Ma is so refined as to have come from “the east” and had fine things. Nellie Oleson’s childhood is therefore an approximation of Wilder’s mother *character*’s own childhood, although in reality Ma is a conflation of facts about Wilder’s mother and grandmother. The important distinction between Laura’s rowdiness and Nellie’s rowdiness is that Laura’s is always humble—she is in thrall to her

³⁵ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 167.

³⁶ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 167.

³⁷ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 167.

³⁸ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 162, 166.

³⁹ Blackford, “Discontent,” 169.

environment—while Nellie’s is self-aggrandizing—she is in thrall to inflated self-importance and materialism. The more troubling aspects of Wilder’s fictionalized Ingallses—racism, ethnocentrism, and a blind faith in market capitalism—when paired specifically with incidents involving food, can be seen more thoroughly for what they are. Ma may be patently racist toward Native Americans, but what bothers her most is the Osage men eating *her family’s* food, and the possibility that Laura could eat *their* food. Little Laura, at age seven, is very uncomfortable in the Oleson’s materialistic home and is unable to eat their food. The middle Ingalls girl is thus rejecting laissez-faire capitalism’s end result—material possessions (lots of them) and rich food (that tastes bad). Considered by her parents to be more *American* than the Scandinavian-American Oleson’s, Laura Ingalls has just observed a pitfall of assimilation. The Oleson’s have earned their upper-middle class lifestyle through fair, honest hard work. But the children, Nellie and Willie, display imprudent behaviors.

Plum Creek is not a solely “ethnic” community according to Vine’s parameters. It is more like Vine’s example of a majority-Scandinavian cluster among which live non-Scandinavians (who might need to borrow a threshing machine). Author Robert C. Ostergren discusses the “social organization” among Swedes in Isanti County, Minnesota as one example of a truly ethnic community. “There were also a good many American farms out along the fringe of settlement to the west, but few Swedish settlers were in day-to-day contact with the American population. They were in contact, for the most part, with other Swedes.”⁴⁰ Plum Creek, Minnesota in the *Little House* narrative has a large

⁴⁰ Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835-1915* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press), 225.

cluster of Scandinavians at its center. The Oleson's have much more than the Hanson's, Johnson's, and Nelson's "modest level of participation in American society."⁴¹ While Nellie is so typical of the transplanted Scandinavian pattern that she attends public school,⁴² her level of acculturation may be so high that she forgoes "parochial Swede schools, an auxiliary educational system set alongside the public schools. Children were expected to attend both."⁴³ She and her brother consume all-American food—candy, lemonade and cake. Ostergren leaves food ways largely out of his book, but does write that on holidays Swedes in Isanti County were "eating and drinking traditional holiday fare"⁴⁴ and would halt agricultural work often—"the harvest celebrations around St. Michael's Mass, yuletide, Epiphany, and the Easter holidays, just as they had done in Sweden."⁴⁵ These traditional periods of rest were "reaffirmations in America of another place and a particular past,"⁴⁶ but the Oleson family in *Plum Creek* is portrayed by Wilder as hyper-American. *Plum Creek*'s Nelson's, Johnson's, and Hanson's are families living in the traditional, transplanted agriculturalist model, while the Oleson's assume such American occupations and roles as store-owner, upper-middle class housewife, and spoiled children.

⁴¹ Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, 227.

⁴² Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, 299.

⁴³ Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, 229.

⁴⁴ Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, 228.

⁴⁵ Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, 228.

⁴⁶ Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted* 228.

Ingalls family values come into play in the next chapter, “Country Party.”

Arguably, it is not without considerable forethought that Ma makes vanity cakes for her daughters’ schoolmates. “They said they had never tasted anything so good, and they asked Ma what they were. ‘Vanity cakes,’ said Ma. ‘Because they are all puffed up, like vanity, with nothing solid inside.’”⁴⁷ Ma has been a good witch. After her daughters tell her about Nellie’s party, she merely says that they must reciprocate hospitality.⁴⁸ Nellie gets her comeuppance when Laura tricks her into wading into a dark part of Plum Creek, which is filled with leeches. “Muddy brown bloodsuckers were sticking to her legs and feet. She couldn’t wash them off. She tried to pick one off, and then she ran screaming up on the creek bank. There she stood kicking as hard as she could, first one foot and then the other, screaming all the time.”⁴⁹ Nellie and the other girls scream so loudly that Ma comes running. The implacable woman says “a few leeches are nothing to cry about” before inviting everyone in for milk and vanity cakes.⁵⁰ She never reveals knowledge of Laura’s personal revenge plan, but obviously Ma made vanity cakes to impart a lesson to Nellie.

Vanity cakes have puzzled those obsessed with re-creating *Little House* food ways. Many blogs report that they were unsuccessfully re-created, even from Walker’s recipe. A blogger named Janet Reeves attempted the recipe in 2011, without success. “You put a big lump of dough in the fryer and it all of a sudden magically disappears and

⁴⁷ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 176.

⁴⁸ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 168.

⁴⁹ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 174.

⁵⁰ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 175.

turns into a big bubble? I don't buy it."⁵¹ What matters more is that they are a simple treat for a settler family, whose paucity of pantry staples is evident when compared to Haun's, and glaringly so when compared to the Oleson's. Wilder describes vanity cakes as "honey-colored." They are made "with beaten eggs and white flour," then "dropped into a kettle of sizzling fat. Each one came up bobbing, and floated till it turned itself over, lifting up its honey-brown, puffy bottom. Then it swelled underneath till it was round, and Ma lifted it out with a fork."⁵² Sugarless, they are as spare a treat as the fresh butter the family obtains after *The Long Winter*, but just as cherished. As they are in accord with Laura's typical diet, she happily helps her friends eat them all.

Besides birthdays, the major social event of the year involving food for the Ingallses is Christmas. It is usually a spare affair for them, with a typical dinner and possibly treats or gifts from neighbors. On Plum Creek, the major change in the family's Christmas schema is that there is a tree decorated at their church, with piles of presents for the congregation. The items they receive are not food items. But the material gain—mittens, a shawl, a rag doll, a fur cape and muff, a coat, a china dog, popcorn balls⁵³—makes the Ingalls girls aware that the closer they move toward towns and cities, the more goods there are to be bought. Awareness of this goods-laden urban world beyond their frontier world—indeed, converging upon it—helps make Laura and Mary more conscious of the need to navigate *both* successfully. Mary and Laura's cultural views are

⁵¹ Janet Reeves, "Laura Ingalls Recipes: Vanity Cakes," Thursday May 19, 2011 on the blog "This is Beige: The Blog of the Ordinary." <http://thisisbeige.blogspot.com/2011/05/laura-ingalls-recipes-vanity-cakes.html>

⁵² Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 170.

⁵³ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 253-257.

changing. Daniel Walker Howe considers the 19th century in America as a time when American Victorianism flourished closely but apart from British Victorianism. He defines American *culture* “as an evolving system of beliefs, attitudes, and techniques, transmitted from generation to generation, and finding expression in innumerable activities people learn.”⁵⁴ This goods-laden Christmas reshapes the Ingalls girls’ cultural schema. They can desire middle-class material goods because the market economy around them is expanding to accommodate more of the century’s materialism. “Economy”—here, the success of a burgeoning capitalist market economy based on currency—describes “the relationship between society and the material resources it uses.”⁵⁵ Plum Creek’s residents are economically successful. The Ingallses belong to the local Congregationalist church. The Reverend Alden moves between Plum Creek in western Minnesota and another congregation further east in the state. His return to Plum Creek with gifts is the result of congregation and community effort to provide western settlers with goods. Most of the gifts are secondhand. “When I told them about our church out here . . . they gave all the things they had. The little girls who sent your furs and Mary’s coat needed larger ones,” he tells Laura.⁵⁶ “Hospitality itself was largely an exchange of goods and services,” writes Vine, and holidays often brought entire communities together or sometimes just small groups of neighbors.⁵⁷ Depending on how deeply the communities were entrenched in larger commercial interests, activities might

⁵⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, “American Victorianism as a Culture.” *American Quarterly* 27 (1975), 509.

⁵⁵ Howe, “American Victorianism,” 509.

⁵⁶ Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 257.

⁵⁷ Vine, 111.

range from the more rustic and practical (quilting bees and threshing) to such dazzling displays of material wealth as Christmas at the Plum Creek church. Plum Creek seems balanced between the “immature economy”⁵⁸—which predominates during the grasshopper plagues—and a more mature economy. An earlier immature economy also manifests itself in the trade of day labor for a cow. For Romines herself, Christmas was always “a crash course in the language of *things*”⁵⁹ and the very public Christmas gathering at Plum Creek is something similar for Laura, Mary, and even tiny little Carrie. Romines writes that at first the scene “may seem like a celebration of unmitigated greed, as the Ingalls girls receive and receive without feeling any desire or obligation to give.” Since “their major gifts have been contributed . . . goods are redistributed and reused through the medium of a large, noncommercial institution.”⁶⁰ Plum Creek is thus easily seen as liminal between the day’s modernizing capitalism based on cash exchange, and an older barter economy. The little town is “communistic” in the most original sense of “community”—“for a moment Laura glimpses what it might be like for her family to live in an egalitarian community.”⁶¹

In the family’s two years along Plum Creek, grasshoppers destroy Pa’s hope that there will be “a crop of wheat that will amount to something.”⁶² This crushes hopes of much in the way of material goods. It also crushes hopes for a more varied diet. Before

⁵⁸ Vine, 111.

⁵⁹ Romines, 128.

⁶⁰ Romines, 130-131.

⁶¹ Romines, 131.

⁶² Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 53.

the grasshoppers Pa boasts about soon being able to afford “salt pork every day. Yes, by gravy, and fresh beef!”⁶³ It is not specified, but it is assumed that the “fresh beef” probably will come from a local cow—either Reet or a neighbor’s cow Pa would purchase or trade for. But it is entirely possible that Pa hopes to afford store-bought beef that had traveled by rail. This last scenario is highly unlikely given the pastoral idyll Wilder makes the *Little House* series out to be. After all, during *The Long Winter*, the family eats beef from a neighbor’s ox, slaughtered too quaintly for Armour’s sensibility. Pa has great aspirations for wealth from Minnesota: “This is great wheat country, Caroline! Rich, level land with not a tree or a rock to contend with. . . . Hanson’s no farmer, his wheat is so thin and light.”⁶⁴ But after all, the actual Charles Ingalls was a mediocre farmer. More about the relationship of mankind versus nature will be discussed later. But for now, suffice it to say that the crop devastations force the Ingallses closer to civilization. Specifically, where they go next, they encounter a type of civilization different than that of Plum Creek. The community is not majority insular and ethnic as Plum Creek seems to be. It is filled with the commercial and industrial ambitions that signal the eventual end to Pa’s beloved isolated frontier. The next book in *Little House* chronology takes the family to Dakota Territory. There, the way Laura eventually comes into full orbit of civilizing influences is haphazard. *By the Shores of Silver Lake* thrusts the Ingalls girls into a rough, male-dominated railroad camp. Laura barely has a grasp on domesticity when she is presented with alternatives. But gradually she comes to understand that her place is indeed “the woman’s sphere.” Following *Silver Lake*, *The Long Winter*’s relative lack of action keeps it as an interlude reinforcing Laura’s will to

⁶³ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 139.

⁶⁴ Wilder, *Plum Creek*, 6.

survive and thrive. At a remove from *The Long Winter*, *Little Town on the Prairie* sees her immersed in both the commercial world and courtship, while *These Happy Golden Years* and *The First Four Years* are her points of maturation as fiancée, housewife, and mother.

Back to the present moment in *Little House* chronology, though, when Laura is only seven. *On the Banks of Plum Creek* is the book that begins to demarcate Laura into two halves. At seven years old she is at the traditional age of “putting out to work.” When families needed cash,⁶⁵ both in cities and on the frontiers they put their children to work. Often this money bought “raw materials” for the family to then “make such articles” as it needed.⁶⁶ Schmitt notes that the extra money was needed specifically to help Charles Ingalls pay the debts for store-bought lumber and other goods and services. With this in mind, it is easily seen that the actual Ingallses straddled modernity and obsolescence. Young Laura and Mary were working in the Burr Oak Hotel so their father could pay up—they were not working for money to be spent on food and other goods. The real family encountered on Plum Creek a modern way of living. Unlike in Pepin, people in Plum Creek worked for wages and paid debts in cash—this was the American Victorian culture—“Purchase. Buy. . . the parlance of the free market economy, in which the exchange of goods and services for money was taken for granted.”⁶⁷ In the *Little House* series, because the fictionalized family shifts between modernity and obsolescence, Laura

⁶⁵ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 50.

⁶⁶ Mintz and Kellogg, 50.

⁶⁷ Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 24.

is still useful as a helper to both Pa *and* Ma. After all, Pa has always had her tag along to help with his tasks. In some ironic foreshadowing, it is while Laura is shirking responsibility and playing that she interacts with material she will later frantically labor over. It is better to analyze what comes *after* this foreshadowing *first*, in order to show Laura's domestic roles and the impacts of the century on pioneers' lives.

The Long Winter opens in 1880 with a boiling hot Dakota Territory summer. Because Mary had gone blind while the family lived near Silver Lake, the family is short one pair of hands. Laura begs her father to let her help with the haying, which is a traditionally male task. Pa realizes he will never do it all alone—he needs the help, whether the feet stomping down the hay are female or not. Even though thirteen-year old Laura is “not very big nor strong”⁶⁸ she makes good work of the hay. “Under her feet the hay climbed higher, trampled down as solid as hay can be. Up and down, fast and hard, her legs kept going, the length of the hayrack and back, and across the middle. The sunshine was hotter and the smell of the hay rose up sweet and strong. Under her feet it bounced and over the edges of the hayrack it kept coming . . . Laura was very high up now and the slippery hay was sloping down around her. She went on trampling carefully. Her face and neck were wet with sweat and sweat trickled down her back. Her sunbonnet hung by its strings and her braids had come undone. Her long brown hair blew loose in the wind.”⁶⁹ At day's end, the haying is done. Laura's role in the male task is noted as indispensable. “‘She's been a great help,’ said Pa. ‘It would have taken me all day to stack that hay alone, and now I have the whole afternoon for mowing.’ Laura was proud.

⁶⁸ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 4.

⁶⁹ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 5-7.

Her arms ached and her back ached and her legs ached, and that night in bed she ached all over so badly that tears swelled out of her eyes, but she did not tell anyone.”⁷⁰ The next day she helps stack more, and likes “to see the stacks she helped to make.”⁷¹

While helping make the hay, Laura drinks ginger-water. This is a drink that had long been part of farm food ways before the 19th century. Her younger sister Carrie, at ten years old, is firmly in the female role when she carries the jug out to her father . . . and sister. Ginger-water “would not make them sick, as plain cold water would when they were so hot.”⁷² Ginger-water is a drink that marks the divide between 19th century modernity and the past, because Ma has “sweetened the cool well-water with sugar, flavored it with vinegar, and put in plenty of ginger to warm their stomachs.”⁷³ Sally Fallon writes that sugar and vinegar were not original ingredients for this drink, commonly called switchel. This is “a non-alcoholic drink prepared for farmers during long, hot days of scything in hay fields. By Laura Ingalls Wilder’s day, ginger drinks were flavored with sugar rather than with natural sweeteners, such as maple syrup or honey; and the tart taste was obtained from vinegar rather than from lacto-fermentation.”⁷⁴ Even frontier food ways were being altered by contemporary diet reform efforts and new products. Wilder does not specify if the sugar in the characters’ ginger-water was less-refined brown or refined white. What matters more is that the traditional

⁷⁰ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 9.

⁷¹ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 9.

⁷² Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 8.

⁷³ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 8.

⁷⁴ Sally Fallon, *Nourishing Traditions: The Cookbook that Challenges Politically Correct Nutrition and the Diet Dictocrats*, second ed. (Washington, D. C.: New Trends Publishing, 1999), 586.

preparation methods of healing or beneficial foods—in this case a special drink that helps replace lost electrolytes and prevent dehydration—were changing.

To return to Laura, aged seven, living along Plum Creek, Minnesota—she frolics with Mary, and they destroy their father’s careful haystacks. Laura shakily lies, saying they weren’t playing in the hay, but he knows and berates them. “Pa’s voice was terrible. ‘Tell me again, did you slide down the straw-stack?’ . . . This marked the end of their playing on the straw-stack.”⁷⁵ Their scolding is important. The unstructured play time that led to it highlights one of the core tenets of the 19th century—that children needed to play games and receive education, rather than work all the time at either domestic tasks or for wages. Mintz and Kellogg write that the seeds of this realization—that children were not miniature adults—began *prior* to the century, but it reached its full form *during* it. There was “greater freedom from parental control, greater latitude in expressing their feelings” but still an emphasis on the idea that children were blank slates ready to be imprinted with the best of morality.⁷⁶ Wilder had a childhood, and approximated it in her books—getting back at Nellie Oleson, sliding down the haystack, swimming, playing with her doll Charlotte—but many of her urban peers would not have had childhoods, to call to mind the working slum children Horace Greeley found huddled in a cellar. Sliding down the hay in *On the Banks of Plum Creek* is the last time the character Laura plays as a child in *Little House* chronology. Indeed, a few years later in *The Long Winter*, she is almost fourteen and helping create what she had earlier destroyed. As Laura moves further into young adulthood she gets more education and submits to more of Ma’s

⁷⁵ Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 59-60.

⁷⁶ Mintz and Kellogg, 114.

advice on domestic arts and womanly behavior. A gulf widens between Laura and her beloved Pa. It is by immersing her in a male world, next, that Pa inevitably contributes to widening this divide. In the years before *The Long Winter*—circa 1873-1879—the fictionalized family eventually leaves Minnesota for Dakota Territory.

By the Shores of Silver Lake opens in 1878 when Laura is twelve, five years after the action in *Plum Creek*. Though the actual family had moved between Minnesota and Iowa, that is not the case here. The fictionalized family still lives along Plum Creek, Minnesota. *Silver Lake* opens with the family ravaged by scarlet fever, which Laura and Pa have escaped. Oldest sister Mary is now blind. The family's horrible circumstances bring Ma's sister Docia to their doorstep. Laura and Ma stare at her uncomprehending, disheveled, dejected. "‘I wondered if you'd know me,' the woman said. ‘A good deal of water's gone under the bridge since you folks left Wisconsin.' She was the pretty Aunt Docia who had worn the dress with buttons that looked like blackberries, long ago at the sugaring-off dance at Grandpa's house in the Big Woods of Wisconsin.'" ⁷⁷ Docia persuades them to move near her, by "the railroad camps in Dakota Territory."⁷⁸ They readily agree because even faced with Mary's debilitating condition, Pa Ingalls is restless. Plum Creek is still providing for them, but barely so. "There was bread and molasses and potatoes. That was all. This was springtime, too early for garden vegetables; the cow was dry and the hens had not yet begun to lay their summer's eggs. Only a few small fish were left in Plum Creek. Even the little cottontail rabbits had been hunted until they were scarce. Pa did not like a country so old and worn out that the hunting was poor. He

⁷⁷ Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1939), 3.

⁷⁸ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 4.

wanted to go west. For two years he had wanted to go . . . And there was no money. Pa had made only two poor wheat crops since the grasshoppers came; he had barely been able to keep out of debt, and now there was the doctor's bill.”⁷⁹

Facing eventual dearth of food and money, the family follows Docia to the De Smet town site's railroad camp. While Pa makes a difficult but honest living earning fifty dollars a month, Laura and her sisters face a male-dominated world as they mature into proper young women (Ma hopes so, anyway). The railroad camp is a rough place filled with tents, metal, smoke and noise. While Laura has always found her mother's cooking to be comforting and wholesome, the food at the railroad camp proves surprisingly good—as does the hospitality with it. A train brings Ma, Laura, Mary, Carrie, and the youngest sister Grace to a railroad depot near where they will settle. This conveyor of people and goods serves as a metaphor. The train is modernity, pulling the Ingallses out of a thoroughly frontier lifestyle and placing them in one that was rapidly industrializing. The chapter is called “End of the Rails” and this train ride may well be seen as the “end of the wilderness.” Ma and the girls eat a meal at the hotel near the depot, and get their first taste of cooking done by someone else. “All over the table, thick on the white cloth, stood screens shaped like beehives. Under every screen was a platter of meat or a dish of vegetables. There were plates of bread and butter, dishes of pickles, pitchers of syrup, and cream pitchers and bowls of sugar. At each place was a large piece of pie on a small plate. The flies crawled and buzzed over the wire screens, but they could not get at the

⁷⁹ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 2-3.

food inside. Everyone was very kind and passed the food. All the dishes kept coming from hand to hand up and down the table to Ma.”⁸⁰

“The modern hotel came to America with the opening of the City Hotel in New York City in 1794. The seventy-three rooms of this building set it apart from the earlier and smaller inns. . . . But the era of the luxury hotel did not begin until 1829 when the Tremont House opened in Boston. With its granite façade, 170 bedrooms, ten large public rooms with marble floors, and other innovations, the Tremont House set a new and high standard,”⁸¹ Richard J. Hooker writes. The “strange depot”⁸² that Ma and the girls disembark at is extremely rustic, situated as it is at a railroad camp. The “hotel” is more likely a clapboard boardinghouse. In this rustic environ, however, the five female diners are served a meal that follows the “fixed courses”⁸³ design of many contemporary American hotels and boardinghouses. “Only rarely were the dishes elaborate”⁸⁴ and in *Silver Lake*, the meal is hardly fancy. The element of novelty perhaps makes it taste better. The Ingalls girls have always helped prepare their own food, so a table laden with various dishes seems like something out of a fairy tale.⁸⁵ “A dish of pickles”⁸⁶ is on the

⁸⁰ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 33.

⁸¹ Richard J. Hooker, *Food and Drink in America: A History* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1981), 141.

⁸² Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 29.

⁸³ Hooker, *Food and Drink in America*, 142.

⁸⁴ Hooker, *Food and Drink in America*, 143.

⁸⁵ There is a Russian fairytale about a magic tablecloth. The “*skatert-samobranka*, a self-spreading tablecloth on which food miraculously appears. All you have to do is unfold it and a lavish feast fans out before your eyes: *Skazano, sdelano!* No sooner said than done!” This tale’s protagonist is Ivan Tsarevich, who finds the cloth and has other adventures, according to Darra Goldstein, “A Magic Tablecloth.” *Russian Life* 55 (2012), 60. In another version, Ivan is given the cloth and told to intone “Magic cloth! magic cloth!” and ask for a meal.

table. Romines notes that pickles are “once-a-year treats” for the Ingalls family.⁸⁷ The family eats pie more often than it does pickles, but pie at the De Smet depot hotel takes on special significance. At most hotels and boardinghouses in 19th century America, “pies usually led the list of desserts.”⁸⁸ The Ingalls women are each getting a literal slice of the culinary mood that dictated “eating out,” a phenomenon “more and more people found . . . necessary, convenient, or pleasurable.”⁸⁹ In the range of reasons why people ate food not cooked and served at home, “large-scale migrations, especially from east to west”⁹⁰ is one. Fourteen-year old Mary is now blind, but is uncomplaining and unembarrassed that her *little* sister must cut “her meat into small pieces for her” and spread butter on her bread.⁹¹ This is a heartbreaking display of a young woman’s independence taken away at a symbolic gateway or threshold of so *much* independence. At this “end of the rails” Laura will have many opportunities to explore a cash economy and work force, homesteading, and courtship as she grows into young adulthood, while Mary will remain dependent.

While in real life the actual Laura Ingalls lived and worked at a hotel in her late childhood in Burr Oak, Iowa, it is here, at the Dakota train depot hotel, that the character Laura encounters an outpost or extension of all the urbanity that lies around her. Places

⁸⁶ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 33.

⁸⁷ Romines, 106.

⁸⁸ Hooker, 143.

⁸⁹ Hooker, 141.

⁹⁰ Hooker, 141.

⁹¹ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 34.

like De Smet had progress in mind. "Progress was a town value at railroad outposts. . . All would agree that the town should be linked with the railroad and it should have as many rail connections as possible . . . They would push the community into wider orbits."⁹² In her adolescence in this testosterone-fueled place young Laura is tugged away from Ma's admonitions of ladylike behavior by a female cousin who is even less inhibited than she is. "Laura liked her," Wilder wrote of her character's appraisal of her cousin Lena. "Her eyes were black and snappy, her hair was black as black can be, and it curled naturally. The short wisps curled around her forehead, the top of her head was wavy, and the ends of her braids were round curls."⁹³ Ma dislikes Lena and her tomboyish influence almost as immediately as Laura takes to her.

Lena works hard, however, washing dishes at the camp "three times a day for forty-six men, and between times the cooking."⁹⁴ It is a strange domesticity that occupies her time, a commercial one, impersonal and en masse. One horrifying aspect of camp life comes in the form of "the homesteader's wife," who presents to all the assembled teenaged girls the prospect of a decidedly unrefined future. This woman greets Laura and Lena "lugging a basket of washing. Her face and arms and her bare feet were as brown as leather from the sun. Her hair straggled uncombed and her limp dress was faded and not clean. 'You must excuse the way I look . . . My girl was married yesterday, and here come the threshers this morning, and this wash to do . . . Lizzie got married yesterday . . .

⁹² Vine, 143.

⁹³ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 41.

⁹⁴ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 46.

Her Pa says thirteen's pretty young but she's got her a good man and I say it's better to settle down young.”⁹⁵

Ever independent-minded, the character Laura is loath to marry. In 1885 she becomes a wife willingly but with a degree of awkwardness. At the present moment, though, this encounter with an exhausted, greasy woman makes almost-thirteen-year old Laura decide quickly that “I’d rather let Ma be responsible for a long time yet. And besides, I don’t want to settle down . . . I’m not ever going to get married, or if I do, I’m going to marry a railroader and keep on moving west as long as I live.”⁹⁶ After this encounter, it is perhaps to clear her head that Laura acts *most* unladylike. She jumps onto the pony hitched to the cart that holds clean laundry, yelling, “yi, yi, yi, yip-ee . . . All the way back to camp across the prairie . . . whooping and singing.”⁹⁷ The freedom to do such a thing is quickly curtailed as the family moves away from the camp and into the vacant surveyor’s house.

In all of the books thus far, Laura has helped Ma with some aspect of food preparation or other domestic task. The surveyor’s house has a pantry laden with goods that will make Laura’s future domesticity more exciting. “A squeal of excitement came out of her mouth and startled the listening house. There before her eyes was a little store. All up the walls of that small room were shelves, and on the shelves were dishes, and

⁹⁵ Wilde, *Silver Lake*, 49-50.

⁹⁶ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 50. Laura turns thirteen by *Silver Lake*’s conclusion. In *The Long Winter*, she turns fourteen. In these two books, Mary turns fifteen and sixteen respectively.

⁹⁷ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 51. This is a horse, not a pony. “Indian pony” was the descriptor settlers gave to the wild horses, descended from the loosed horses brought by the Spanish to the New World. These wild North American horses were smaller, lighter, and faster.

pans and pots, and boxes, and cans. All around under the shelves stood barrels and boxes. The first barrel was nearly full of flour. The second held corn meal. The third had a tight lid, and it was full of pieces of fat, white pork held down in brown brine. Laura had never seen so much salt pork at one time. There was a wooden box full of square soda crackers, and a box full of big slabs of salted fish. There was a large box of dried apples, and two sacks full of potatoes, and another big sack nearly full of beans.”⁹⁸ Laura’s delighted reaction to this pantry foreshadows her eventual happiness when she marries Almanzo Wilder. The day they move into their home, he asks, “Like your pantry?” and she says, ‘yes.’⁹⁹ Laura’s delight at the food crammed into the pantry at present, though, signifies that she is shedding girlhood and ready to become more involved in domesticity than ever.

The pivotal moment when Laura is at ease in her female role comes at Christmas. Mrs. Boast, the same neighbor who will provide them with butter more than a year later after the brutal winter of 1880-1881, is present at Christmas circa 1878. For their breakfast “Laura . . . helped Ma set on the table the big platter of golden, fried mush, a plate of hot biscuits, a dish of fried potatoes, a bowl of codfish gravy and a glass dish full of dried-apple sauce. . . . Mrs. Boast was great fun. She was interested in everything, and eager to learn how Ma managed so well. ‘When you haven’t milk enough to have sour milk, however do you make such delicious biscuits, Laura?’ she asked. ‘Why, you just use sour dough,’ Laura said. . . . “But how do you make the sour dough?’ Mrs. Boast

⁹⁸ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 144.

⁹⁹ Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1943), 288.

asked.”¹⁰⁰ Several things happen in this scene that pinpoint Laura as a capable young woman of her time.

Mrs. Boast’s lack of knowledge and skill immediately lowers her in Laura’s and Ma’s estimations though they do not say so. While processing the fact that their friend lacks a basic skill Laura only replies politely. When Mrs. Boast indicates that she has never done the initial process—prepared sour dough—Laura again withholds judgment and explains. “‘You start it,’ said Ma, ‘by putting some flour and warm water in a jar and letting it stand till it sours.’ ‘Then when you use it, always leave a little,’ said Laura. ‘And put in the scraps of biscuit dough, like this, and more warm water,’ Laura put in the warm water, ‘and cover it,’ she put the clean cloth and the plate on the jar, ‘and just set it in a warm place,’ she set it in its place on the shelf by the stove. ‘And it’s always ready to use, whenever you want it.’”¹⁰¹

Laura starts her lesson with a fresh batch. “It was fun to show her. Laura measured out the cups of sour dough, put in the soda and salt and flour, and rolled out the biscuits on the board.”¹⁰² The fact that Mrs. Boast asks *Laura* about the biscuits, while her general thought is learning “how *Ma* got along so well” indicates that she is fully aware of Laura’s age and capabilities. Her hostess is at the proper level of refinement and skill for nearly thirteen. Mrs. Boast herself “[does] not look much older than Mary,”¹⁰³ who will

¹⁰⁰ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 195.

¹⁰¹ Wilder, *Silver Lake* 196.

¹⁰² Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 195.

¹⁰³ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 184.

turn fifteen. By asking the daughter instead of the mother, Mrs. Boast is initiating Laura into “the cult of true womanhood.”

The Ingalls family’s wanderings end at the De Smet town site. They move into a claim shanty after wintering in the surveyor’s home, so all is settled while Laura moves further into domesticity. Her wild yearnings are residual, however—or so Romines thinks. Romines interprets Laura’s descriptions to her blind sister of a mixed-blood man nicknamed Big Jerry as holding overtones of romantic or sexual desire. *By the Shores of Silver Lake* is, in Romines’ estimation, the first “novel of adolescence: With [it] the *Little House* books began to look different. . . . The last four books took on the standard shape, thickness, and print size of novels for adults.” “Gender issues intensify in these books,” she writes, because the plots entail “Laura’s early adult experiences as a schoolteacher and a bride . . . In the earlier books, despite her mother’s scruples and care, young Laura is allowed many freedoms. She runs, shouts, and plays uproariously in the creek; her father takes her fishing, swimming, and exploring and allows her to shadow him when he works near the house.”¹⁰⁴ Romines has reached the same conclusion, then, as this author that the books are split between childhood and adulthood, with *On the Banks of Plum Creek* being the last dedicated to childhood.

Laura’s family still lives at the rowdy railroad camp when she notices Big Jerry. She describes him innocently enough to Mary. Big Jerry, gambler and horse thief, “looked like an Indian. He was tall and big but not one bit fat, and his thin face was brown. His shirt was flaming red. His straight black hair swung against his flat, high-

¹⁰⁴ Romines, 139-140.

boned cheek as he rode, or he wore no hat.”¹⁰⁵ Mary chides Laura’s enthusiasm. Laura has exclaimed hyperbolically “‘Oh, Mary! The snow-white horse and the tall brown man . . . They’ll go on in the sun around the world.’ ‘Laura, you know he couldn’t ride into the sun.’”¹⁰⁶ Romines uses her interpretation of Laura’s thoughts on the man to say that “Laura . . . is having first thoughts of her own heterosexual future” and Big Jerry “is the most compellingly romantic figure in this book . . . He rekindles the western images of ‘wild men’ that first attracted Laura in Kansas.”¹⁰⁷ Romine’s interpretation is just one, though. This author agrees that the character of Big Jerry instantly reconnects Laura at almost thirteen with Laura at five, because at both ages the same girl is held rapt by the Indians’ lean, tall, dark looks. What is less certain here is whether Laura regards Big Jerry with any other emotion or feeling than fascination, just as when she was staring at naked Osage men when she was five—she was merely transfixed at their strangeness. This suggestion outweighs Romines’ uncomfortable one, if for no other reason than Laura has already said that she never wants to marry.

In Dakota Territory, because of the presence of both Big Jerry and cousin Lena (who is Aunt Docia and Uncle Hi’s stepdaughter), Ma must act again as she does with Native Americans. Ma’s goal is to prevent her middle child from becoming irretrievably lost, so she plays the role of classical goddess Demeter. Food is not the main problem this time—this time the taboo is Lena’s rowdiness. It threatens to undo all that Ma has done for Laura’s domestic training. The day the girls ride ponies, Laura bloodies her nose, falls

¹⁰⁵ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 64.

¹⁰⁶ Wilder, *Silver Lake*, 65.

¹⁰⁷ Romines, 85.

twice, grows hoarse “from laughing and screeching” and scratches up her legs on “sharp grass.” “Ma looked at Laura in shocked amazement and said mildly, ‘Really, Docia, I don’t know when Laura’s looked so like a wild Indian.’ ‘She and Lena are a pair,’ said Aunt Docia.”¹⁰⁸ “Laura is again at risk . . . liable to transgress boundaries of gender and propriety with Lena,”¹⁰⁹ Romines acknowledges. But she fails to make another, critical connection.

Lena’s physical appearance entrances Laura. Her dark eyes are reminiscent of those of the Osage baby in *Little House on the Prairie*. Lena has a degree of exoticness about her that makes her an even riskier companion, because her connection to cultural otherness—not only through appearance, but through her lifestyle—is so strong. This is why “Laura liked her.” Lena represents an escape from housework and domestic refinement, just as the “homesteader’s wife,” a greasy, unkempt shadow of a proper woman, represents how those things can go so horribly wrong. In the end though, Laura returns to the fold. She embraces domesticity so well that she cheerily demonstrates biscuit making. This is an initiation into “the cult of true womanhood” because Mrs. Boast inquired of her, *not* her mother. And what of Lena? “Lena is such a threatening character that Wilder and Lane *must* dispose of her if the *Little House* narrative is to survive”—Lena departs for “the West. Maybe even to Oregon.”¹¹⁰

Just as fairy tales have good witches, they also have bad ones. In Wilder’s *Little House* series, there are bad witches. The nameless homesteader’s wife in *Silver Lake* is

¹⁰⁸ Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 54-55.

¹⁰⁹ Romines, 156.

¹¹⁰ Romines 156. Emphasis Romines’. Quoting *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, page 130-131.

one. The other is Mrs. Brewster in *These Happy Golden Years*. The dark spells they cast shake Laura's newfound resolve in her domestic sphere. The homesteader's wife has already been analyzed as a figure represented a wasted or wrecked life. She slowly fades, colorless, into the brilliant prairie landscape. Her namelessness suggests that if marriage and housekeeping are taken too lightly the very essence of a woman—right down to her name—can disintegrate. She married almost as young as her own daughter—around age thirteen—and it has earned her a squalid, overworked life. A woman's reputation follows her, and this character's namelessness suggests that lackluster domesticity earned her no accolades. In contrast, Ma is adored—by Laura, from a distance (“Laura is afraid to touch her”¹¹¹)—and by Laura and Mary's friends, who eat up all the vanity cakes.

The nameless woman also stresses, by her remarks about her daughter, the importance of a marriage that is on good standing. Laura ends up marrying Almanzo Wilder, a farmer's son, instead of “a railroad man,” like she quickly tells Lena. All that impresses Laura about Almanzo—and all her love—is summed up in *These Happy Golden Years*. “‘Laura,’ Mary asked soberly, ‘do you really want to leave home to marry that Wilder boy?’ Laura was serious, too. ‘He isn’t that Wilder boy anymore, Mary. He is Almanzo.’”¹¹² By equating her future husband's qualities and character with his good name, Laura severs him from his father's house, though in Mary's mind Almanzo is still a boy. The *Little House* series' patriarchal structure that Romines discusses earlier is dissolving here. Laura's future husband stands alone from his father, able to provide material goods and a strong bond of affection. Marital harmony may be the end result for

¹¹¹ Blackford, 147.

¹¹² Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 246.

Laura Ingalls Wilder, but while she is still unmarried in *Little House* chronology, she lives with the highly unsettling Brewster clan.

These Happy Golden Years opens with fifteen-year old Laura teaching school in Brewster Settlement, not far from her family's home in De Smet. They've all survived *The Long Winter*. Everything about the Brewster school and home is unsettling. The icicles that hang from the family home look "like huge, jagged teeth" and there is dirty snow on the ground "where dishwater had been thrown."¹¹³ The school itself is rather isolated, an abandoned shanty that Laura trudges to every morning.¹¹⁴ In Brewster Settlement Laura is the good witch's apprentice, but she is dangerously close to veering off the path of competent domesticity. Her days in the Brewster household are discouraging. Wilder describes Mrs. Brewster as demeaned: "a sullen-looking woman . . . stirring something in a frying pan. A little boy was hanging onto her skirts and crying. His face was dirty and his nose needed a handkerchief."¹¹⁵

Over the course of Laura's stay, even acquired magic from her "goddess-witch" mother cannot alleviate the situation. "Mrs. Brewster let the housework go. She did not sweep out the snow that Mr. Brewster tracked in; it melted and made puddles . . . She did not make their bed . . . Twice a day she cooked potatoes and salt pork and put them in on the table. The rest of the time she sat brooding. She did not even comb her hair."¹¹⁶

Romines quickly surmises that this character is depressive, but also notes that Mrs.

¹¹³ Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 4-5.

¹¹⁴ Wilder *These Happy Golden Years*, 4.

¹¹⁵ Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 5.

¹¹⁶ Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 46.

Brewster during this winter is an extreme contrast to Laura's Ma in *The Long Winter*.¹¹⁷ *The Long Winter* was two books ago in the chronology, but the gap between them only serves to heighten the gap in *character* between the characters: Ma's resoluteness in the face of adversity versus Mrs. Brewster's insane desires.

Mrs. Brewster at one point favors death over her life on the isolated, windswept land claim. She threatens her husband with a knife one night, claiming she might kill either him or herself.¹¹⁸ Ma never despaired that deeply during "the long winter" of 1880-1881. Instead, she found ways to keep her family alive while remaining firmly in her role. Romines writes that "in some ways, Mrs. Brewster's narrative . . . retells the story of the long winter [sic] . . . as a qualified triumph of survival for the Ingalls family and especially for Ma. Here, the story is framed in terms of a homestead wife's furious resistance to her role as Western housekeeper."¹¹⁹ Laura is frightened and seeks solace in her weekend visits home. To get back home, Laura accepts sleigh rides from Almanzo Wilder, and thus begins their courtship. As satisfying as the company of an intriguing, brave young man is for Laura, nothing is as good as her mother's cooking.

The Brewster family's problems—cranky child, distant and gruff husband, depressive wife—likely had a nutritional base. Throughout Laura's stay—"twice a day"¹²⁰—fried salt pork and potatoes are eaten. Sometimes, her hostess is so useless that Laura cooks the rather dull meal. She eats Mrs. Brewster's salt pork without gusto in an

¹¹⁷ Romines, 226.

¹¹⁸ Romines, 226.

¹¹⁹ Romines, 226.

¹²⁰ Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 45.

awkward atmosphere. She eats just to alleviate hunger. Her mother's salt pork has always whetted Laura's appetite, as she hears it sizzling in the pan and grows "hungrier and hungrier" while smelling it. Mrs. Brewster's cooking is the final attribute that separates her from Ma as a domestic figure on the frontier. The combative and unpredictable domestic environment in Brewster Settlement unnerves Laura so much that sometimes on weekends home she is "more hungry for talk than food." Ma notices that she is thinner and asks if she is eating enough. Laura is quick to deflect her mother's worry, saying "Oh yes! A great plenty! But it doesn't taste like home cooking."¹²¹ For eight weeks, Laura teaches on the claim. When her term is over, she receives a certification, and is just as quickly "put out to work" again.

Her next job is claim sitting with a neighbor, and though the season is warm this time the claim is still isolated and lonely. Her term there ends too, and by the end of it all, she is thin, worn, and very hungry. Laura lacks vitamin and mineral-rich variety. She replenishes herself with the health reformers' "protective foods," dairy products and fresh produce.¹²² Deficiencies have likely set in. "It was good to milk the cow, and to drink all she wanted of milk, and to spread butter on her bread, and eat again of Ma's good cottage cheese. There were lettuce leaves to be picked in the garden, and little red radishes, too. She had not realized that she was so hungry for these good things to eat."¹²³

Laura has seen a gamut of domestic situations. Arguably, the most formative are the most depressing and far-flung. Laura retreats gratefully back to her family and the

¹²¹ Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 60.

¹²² Cummings, 118.

¹²³ Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 123.

familiar rhythm of its food ways because she sees in the other situations—the Oleson’s rich fare and quarrelsome nature, the rowdy railroad camp, the Brewsters’ dangerous and neglectful home, the neighbor’s truly lonely shanty—the corrupting nature of materialism and excess, the impersonal nature of commerce, the pitfalls of failed ambition, and sometimes even potential chaos. The chapter title “East or West, Home is Best” plays on the adage “there’s no place like home.” It signifies that as an author, Wilder recognized her character in herself—Wilder understood as a middle-aged author what she really felt as a teenager. Laura’s next step is to forge her own domesticity and charm her own “little house” with magic.

Before this is discussed, though, it is prudent to move out of the chronology to briefly discuss how food ways in many of the “little houses” impact characters’ self-image. Body image in the 19th century is a topic that is little-addressed at the present time. Its relationship to domesticity and food ways links it to mother-daughter relationships. It is therefore important to examine the character Laura physically to assess overall the success of Ma’s efforts to mold her into a proper young lady. In *The Long Winter* both Laura and Carrie are described as petite. Thirteen-year old Laura is neither “big nor strong” and alternately “not very big.” Carrie is small for her age at ten. In *A Little House Sampler*, a photograph validates these descriptions. The fabric of the girls’ dresses hangs on their frames as if it is a little too much. Mary’s dress sleeves clearly have excess drape, and all three sisters’ wrists seem lost in sleeve cuffs that are slightly too wide. Still, though the drape of their dresses may be partly due to lack of tailoring, the girls are slender. Laura and Mary are dressed alike in the photograph in matching

gingham—even their hairdo is the same. Their outfits differ only by the ribbons pinned at their collars—Mary’s is a floral pattern and Laura’s is solid, perhaps a dark color.¹²⁴

The 19th century’s ideal body image shifted as food fads changed. In the early part of the century, as Cummings mentions, French cooking was the new sensation. Americans were eating things they never had before, and were altering their cookbooks to include on-trend recipes—the “cosmopolitan diet” in the cities. “Anthony Trollope in the [1850s] put it more strongly than this, stating that [Americans] imitated the French in their ways of eating. . . . *bouillon*, *café au lait*, *consommé*, and *hors d’oeuvre*. Expressed concretely, the French influence made for better preparation of food materials and for greater uses of ices, ice cream, and green vegetables.” As industrialization only made more efficient for food the use of mechanization and mass-marketing, “food fashions spread quickly among the newly rich whose members increased greatly.”¹²⁵

The whim of food fads and fashion dictated at times how men and women should look, with fluctuations between “ethereality” and plumpness occurring. On the frontier, though, people could hardly be too bothered, as they were often battling nature for their very lives. Photographs of overland trail migrants show them looking ragged and rather care-worn. That said, Blackford’s assessment of Ma as frightening in her cool, distant beauty is thought-provoking. Wilder’s characters never appear careworn. In illustrations by Garth Williams that are now iconic, they appear as the very picture of health—they are rosy-cheeked, with more body fat, for example, in comparison to their Osage

¹²⁴ Wilder and Lane, 25.

¹²⁵ Cummings, 33.

neighbors. When Laura is little Ma “hulls corn for three days but [looks] pretty” in a “pretty dress.”¹²⁶ Perhaps referencing her own upbringing, Ma tries to interest her girls in the latest fashions that they can obtain on the frontier.

As Laura gains confidence in her cooking and baking skills, she slowly begins to feel comfortable wearing the constricting fashions of her day. She has precious little body confidence at age fifteen, thinking of herself in *Little Town on the Prairie* as “still as round and dumpy as a little French horse.”¹²⁷ By this time in the mid-1880s, Laura wears corsets under her good dresses. Her everyday dresses are faded and threadbare calicos, but she makes more effort with her appearance, especially as she “[works] in town.”¹²⁸ She treats her body differently than Mary treats hers. An exchange between Carrie, Ma, and Laura reveals that Laura rejects conforming to urban fashions—and also to modernization—because she loathes corsets. “‘I’m glad I don’t have to wear corsets yet,’ said Carrie. ‘Be glad while you can be,’ said Laura. ‘You’ll have to wear them pretty soon.’ Her corsets were a sad affliction to her, from the time she put them on in the morning until she took them off at night. . . . ‘You should wear them all night,’ Ma said. Mary did, but Laura could not bear at night the torment of the steels that would not let her draw a deep breath. Always before she could get to sleep, she had to take off her corsets. ‘What your figure will be, goodness knows,’ Ma warned her. ‘When I was married, your

¹²⁶ Blackford, 147.

¹²⁷ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 121.

¹²⁸ Wilder, 2.

Pa could span my waist with his two hands.’ ‘He can’t now,’ Laura answered, a little saucily. ‘And he seems to like you.’”¹²⁹

Since she always conforms totally, it is no surprise that Mary wears corsets twenty-four hours. Laura’s sprightly will forbids her to do something so uncomfortable. Her comment to her mother indicates that Ma’s physique has changed over the decades, and it more subtly tells the reader that body image during the century has always upheld the ideal of an impossibly small female waist. Health, disease, body image and diet are integrally linked in Nancy M. Theriot’s *Mothers & Daughters in Nineteenth- Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity*. Theriot’s important work breaks ground on the forces that made women view themselves in certain ways—in front of the looking glass as well as more abstractly—their place in the world as creatures consigned to “the woman’s sphere.”

Theriot’s chapter “The Physical Roots of Ideology” in *Mothers and Daughters* suggests that women’s physical bodies were crucial aspects of this viewing process. The specific “biological phenomena of fertility control, pregnancy, birth and lactation are never merely biological; they are experienced in the rituals, expectations, and technology of a particular time and place.”¹³⁰ In Wilder’s lifetime these “biological phenomena” were the catalysts for the fertility and mortality revolutions. Wilder had been ambivalent toward marriage and was extremely unsure of her prowess as a housewife, and she imparted these traits to the character she based upon herself. Regardless of whether

¹²⁹ Wilder, 87.

¹³⁰ Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers & Daughters in Nineteenth- Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 40.

Wilder really loathed corsets and the wasp-waist aesthetic, what better way to imbue her character Laura with the shifting values surrounding women in the century's last decades? Laura's clash with Ma over corsets shows that at fifteen she is no longer so awed by her mother's beauty that she is "afraid to touch her." That long-ago night in Wisconsin when Laura was five had her enraptured with her mother and Aunt Docia. She was particularly fascinated by the way "their little waists rose up tight and slender in the middle" of "large round skirts."¹³¹

Rejecting the corset is also Laura's final embrace of cultural otherness. She had longed to be an Osage girl "bare naked in the sun and wind"¹³² when she was little. In *The First Four Years*, when Native Americans invade *her* "little house on the prairie," Laura reacts with frightened anger, proving that her childhood fascination with these people is gone. The food and other goods in Laura and Almanzo's home are *theirs* and no one else's. She stands between the familiar and the unknown and makes it clear to the strangers that they—the cultural unknown—are not welcome. In an ironic twist to her childhood desire to be an Osage girl, one of the Native men asks her, "with a sweep of his arm to the west . . . 'You go—me—be my squaw?'"¹³³ Readers assume that Mrs. Wilder is properly corseted during this incident, though "her head was bare and her long brown braids of hair blew out on the wind."¹³⁴ She acts affronted that the men have gathered,

¹³¹ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 141.

¹³² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 307.

¹³³ Wilder, *The First Four Years*, 33.

¹³⁴ Wilder, *The First Four Years* 33.

presumably to steal her horse—she slaps one of the men,¹³⁵ which earns her laughs and the insulting question.

Shifting back to Laura still unmarried and hating corsets, she is ready to embrace her own body the way it is, and not conform to faddishness. In her teenaged years she has good health and a good diet filled with more variety than many, such as the Brewster's. She has avoided serious illness and injuries, and came through the 1880-1881 winter thinner but not debilitated. Her sister shows more of the century's predisposition of many girls to debilitated health. After the hard winter, Carrie is still not well long past the next summer. "She had never been strong. . . . They spared her all but the lightest housework and Ma coaxed her appetite with the best there was to eat. Still she was thin and pale, small for her age and spindly. Her eyes were too large in her peaked little face. . . . Carrie grew tired before they reached the schoolhouse. Sometimes her head ached so badly she failed in her recitations."¹³⁶ Studying Theriot's examination of one of the century's female illnesses can help shed light on Carrie. Chlorosis, or "the green sickness," was a fashionable affliction. Though "named for the greenish color of its victims, medical historians believe this symptom was not actually characteristic. . . . The most common explanation has been that chlorosis was a type of anemia."¹³⁷ Anemia would explain Carrie's pallor and weakness, and the other symptoms of "pronounced disturbance of appetite" and "loss of weight"¹³⁸ fit also. Chlorosis "was an illness unique

¹³⁵ Wilder, *The First Four Years*, 33.

¹³⁶ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 134.

¹³⁷ Theriot, 103.

¹³⁸ Theriot, 103.

to adolescent women,” Theriot writes.¹³⁹ The reason Theriot thinks it was somehow fashionable or desirable to have chlorosis is because she details “adolescent role conflict”¹⁴⁰ that was particularly acute during the century’s later decades as women’s work and role expectations began to transform. Carrie Ingalls knows she must abide in a few years’ time by a very old set of rules—wearing corsets. But she sees her older sisters Laura and Mary out earning wages and attending college, respectively (Mary attends college for the blind in Vinton, Iowa). Carrie turns then to their mother, whose education surpasses Pa’s, and whose role all these years has been homemaker and loyal pioneering wife. Carrie may feel torn between the widening world and the more restricted world of her mother. She is too young to remember Grandma Ingalls, but that woman’s role had been homemaker and provider of food in a society that was more patriarchal and less companionate (also hardly industrialized). Carrie does not understand her future role, and controls her inner turmoil by remaining in her “long winter” body—one of attenuation.

Another young woman more conformed to society than Laura is Nellie Oleson, who reappears in *Little Town on the Prairie*, having come to De Smet via both Plum Creek and New York. Wilder makes paleness Nellie’s most distinguishing physical feature. “Her skin was white.”¹⁴¹ Nellie has always been surrounded by other symbols of “privilege, shelter, protection and confinement”¹⁴²—the white-flour cake topped with white frosting and the white sugar for lemonade—whiteness is, Williams says, associated

¹³⁹ Theriot, 103.

¹⁴⁰ Theriot, 103.

¹⁴¹ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 139.

¹⁴² Romines, 58.

with luxury. The food at Nellie's childhood party—its whiteness—foreshadowed her own physicality as a young adult. Wearing “deep pleated ruffles” and “a full jabot of lace”¹⁴³ teenaged Nellie is almost like a confectioner's creation. She has designs on Almanzo Wilder, but he ultimately chooses Laura, who “did so love to run and jump and catch the ball” and whose male friends said that “she isn't a sissy, even if she is a girl.”¹⁴⁴ Nellie Oleson and her family represent conspicuous consumption in *Plum Creek*. In *Little Town on the Prairie* teenaged Nellie carries this further into a representation of spoilage of youth. Romines says Nellie in particular represents “greed and competition” remarking wryly that as a teenager “her preferred commodities are men.”¹⁴⁵

Forever Laura's rival, Nellie Oleson represents also one ethnic community-raised child's rejection of that upbringing's values. Nellie goes after “the Wilder boy” who is not of Scandinavian descent. The Oleson family has come to De Smet after a few years in New York. Pa tells Laura, who is dismayed that her old rival is back, that Mr. Oleson lost a great deal of money. “He hasn't a thing in the world now but his homestead claim, and they tell me his folks back East are helping him out, or he couldn't hang onto that until he makes a crop. Maybe Nellie feels she's got to brag a little, to hold her own.”¹⁴⁶ Laura loses confidence in her physical appearance, sizing herself up to Nellie. ““But she had such pretty clothes,” Laura protested. And she can't do a bit of work, she keeps her hands and face so white. ‘You could wear your sunbonnet, you know,’ said Ma. ‘And as for her

¹⁴³ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 122.

¹⁴⁴ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* 135.

¹⁴⁵ Romines, 110-111.

¹⁴⁶ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 126.

pretty clothes, maybe they come out of a bag.’”¹⁴⁷ Nellie has lost material wealth and has seen how “women in the East”¹⁴⁸ comport themselves. These hardships and value judgments have conflated to make her resent her ethnic community origins. She insists on oblique generalities, telling De Smet girls that her family comes “from the East, from New York State.”¹⁴⁹ Plum Creek, then, was not as strong an ethnic community than a place like Danneborg, Nebraska. Vine quotes Alfred Nielsen, who grew up in Danneborg, as thinking of his own people and “strangers” who “lived in the great darkness” beyond the Danish-American settlement.¹⁵⁰ A place like Plum Creek, where the Ingallses stand out as non-Scandinavians, nonetheless has less of the barrier mentality. Wilder never indicates how big or small Plum Creek was, but her presentation of its ethnic makeup creates a mythology that the Ingallses are outnumbered. This land is filled with Nelsons—“Yah! Yah!” and Hansons—“reet”—and Olesons, whose super-Americanized children symbolize irresponsible capitalism and material consumption. “The larger the ethnic colony, the higher were the barriers raised around it; the more distinct the cultural differences between colony and prevailing society, the greater its longevity. Hardship generally aided the cooperative community, but sometimes economic decline forced the breaking of ties with the old ways in order to survive in the new.”¹⁵¹ Indeed, there is little *cooperation* in the face of hardships at Plum Creek—Pa walks east for work. Years later Mr. Oleson fails to find success either in Minnesota or New York. Plum Creek, for the

¹⁴⁷ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* 126-127.

¹⁴⁸ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* 125.

¹⁴⁹ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* 125.

¹⁵⁰ Vine, 175.

¹⁵¹ Vine, 176-177.

very little Wilder describes it in her writing, seems at once an ethnic community of Scandinavians, but also a community balanced so carefully between subsistence and commerce that its residents often can find no stability in it. In rowdy De Smet the Americanized, disdainful Nellie Oleson makes Laura feel inferior physically and socially. She has the power to unsettle even though she *might* be wearing a charitably cast-off fancy dress. Shaking off Nellie's imperious glares eventually works to restore Laura's confidence. Finally comfortable with her body, Laura assumes the roles of housekeeper and cook when she marries Almanzo Wilder.

Up to the point of her marriage, Laura's one attempt at keeping house—that is, thoroughly cleaning it—had her in the highs of competence and the lows of being overwhelmed. When Ma and Pa drive Mary to college in Vinton, Laura is left in charge of Carrie and Grace. Grace is maybe six, and she overwhelms her second-oldest sister by calling “happily. ‘I’m helping!’”¹⁵² but her help really makes more work for the older girls. “There had never been such a busy time in all Laura's life. The work was hard, too. She had not realized how heavy a quilt is, to lift soaked and dripping from a tub, and to wring out, and to hang on a line. She had not known how hard it would be, sometimes, to never be cross with Grace . . . It was amazing, too, how dirty they all got, while cleaning a house that had seemed quite clean. The harder they worked, the dirtier everything became.”¹⁵³ Eventually the house is sparkling, but not before Laura has bruised her head, bruised her ankle, and curled up on the floor wailing, “Oh, Carrie, I just don't seem to

¹⁵² Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 111.

¹⁵³ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 109.

know how to manage the way Ma does!”¹⁵⁴ Deep-cleaning the house is done in addition to Laura’s regular chores. Ma reiterates these before they drive away: “Remember to keep the chickens’ water pan filled, Laura, and look out for hawks, and scald and sun the milk pans every day.”¹⁵⁵

Raising chickens for eggs and meat is something Ma excels at (naturally). Mrs. Boast gives the Ingallses a laying-hen. Specifically, she is “setting eggs” for them, giving them hen *and* laid eggs.¹⁵⁶ There is no thought to the potential monetary value of this hen. Instead of thinking about money that could be made by selling eggs and chicks, or about any useful bartering, the family daydreams about its own exponential household-economy wealth. In this subsistence economy framework, hens and eggs mean one thing only: *mealtime*. “If they could raise the chicks, if hawks or weasels or foxes did not get them, some would be pullets that summer. Next year the pullets would begin laying, then there would be eggs to set. Year after next, there would be cockerels to fry, and more pullets to increase the flock. Then there would be eggs to eat, and when the hens grew too old to lay eggs, Ma could make them into chicken pie.”¹⁵⁷ The Ingallses have been in De Smet for over two years. But they are just now taking up chicken-raising with no plans to commercialize this venture. Chickens “represent an important female occupational tradition and are entirely Ma’s responsibility. She mixes their feed and supervises their

¹⁵⁴ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 112.

¹⁵⁵ Wilder, 108. Pa and Ma’s wagon journey with Mary to the College for the Blind in Vinton takes a week.

¹⁵⁶ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* 28.

¹⁵⁷ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 28.

care, assigning tasks to her two younger daughters.”¹⁵⁸ On the fateful housecleaning day, Laura is given instructions as to the chickens’ care. She and her sisters prove capable enough—thoroughly in a subsistence mindset, one of work for the family’s immediate needs and comforts. But in a few years’ time when she is to be married, Laura feels useless as a contemporary wife. By this time, it is a few years since she looked down on Nellie for not doing any housework or fieldwork. But Laura herself may as well be only pretty to look at, as she is terribly clumsy in the kitchen.

After Laura and Almanzo are married, Laura’s level of proficiency in the kitchen never equals her mother’s. Ma Ingalls is truly the “goddess-witch” of Blackford’s interpretation. From the time she was a little girl in Wisconsin, Laura was normalized around the objects and tasks of domesticity. Children “received rigid educations in gendered behavior.” Laura “worked with her mother and sisters on domestic tasks every day: sewing, housekeeping, gardening, cooking.”¹⁵⁹ Laura’s relationship with her mother, though, is the knot Blackford tries to untangle. In the end she can’t really untie it. She leaves readers of “Civilization and Her Discontents” with the impression that Laura will by turns adore and fear her mother’s practical magic. From an early age Laura feels insignificant. In Laura’s understanding Ma is “so mythic, so complete, and so far above her” in the domestic arts that Laura remains “insufficient and unworthy” both in childhood (tearing her dress pocket out), and in adulthood (unable to bake a pie).¹⁶⁰ While another scholar argues that Ma’s representation is not tied to questions of defining

¹⁵⁸ Romines, 213.

¹⁵⁹ Romines, 50.

¹⁶⁰ Blackford 147-148.

the West or debunking Western mythology—“In the terms of the Manifest Destiny myth, we have inherited no plots that would cast Caroline Ingalls as a hero of Western history or as the Great Mother in a Western myth”¹⁶¹—Blackford asserts that Ma “daily [recreates] civilization.”¹⁶²

It is worth noting that once she marries Almanzo, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s own “little house” symbolizes the continuation of her family’s story in the west. Since the “little gray home” belongs to such individuals as they, it represents another domestic revolution. Laura and Almanzo find one another to be opinionated, lively and intelligent. Laura has always chafed at societal restrictions. Almanzo is at odds with his older brother by choosing farming over business. The young Wilder couple’s home is one where fast-reaching post-Victorian modernity can thrive. Laura’s awkward fumbblings in the kitchen reveal her to be a woman of her time, ill at ease with the old-fashioned methods of cooking her grandmother and mother taught her, as well as with newfangled methods. Perhaps one reason why she is so overwhelmed is that housewives in 1885 had a bewildering array of new products and theories bombarding them. Even on the frontier, “true womanhood” does not escape assault from nutritionists and diet reformers, inventors, and businessmen.

There was “a pervasive middle-class anxiety about the new urban-industrial society,” writes Glenna Matthews. “Big railroads, big steel, big oil, big finance all changed the scale of doing business in the United States. Entrepreneurs scrambled to find

¹⁶¹ Blackford, 148. Blackford paraphrases from Elizabeth Jameson’s “In Search of the Great Ma,” published in *Journal of the West* in April 1998.

¹⁶² Blackford, 148.

new ways of consolidating their industries so as to avoid ruinous competition. In response, workers joined groups based on class interests. Farmers came together in various alliances . . . Professionals, too, formed organizations to defend their interests . . . What many of these groups had in common was fear: fear of the rapacious economic order, fear of social unrest unleashed by those who were the victims of rapid change. To cling to the redemptive power of home under these circumstances would have seemed like a sentimental evasion.”¹⁶³ As a writer Wilder certainly makes each “little house” redemptive and safe. When writing her Depression-era book series, Wilder understood audience fears, so she and her daughter strived to make *Little House* sentimental and reassuring. Her characters, however, unconsciously reflect the author’s long-ago fears about the 19th century. The century is drawing to a close in 1885 when Laura marries.

Laura’s kitchen is better equipped at the outset than her mother’s ever was. Indeed, in both *Little House on the Prairie* and *On the Banks of Plum Creek* there is great excitement when Pa installs new metal stoves. Laura already has “Almanzo’s bachelor cook-stove” in her kitchen, with “pots and pans” hanging on the walls.¹⁶⁴ “By the 1820s, cookstoves had begun to appear, and gradually made fireplace cooking a thing of the past. Although box stoves had been around since the 18th century, they had been used mainly for heating rather than cooking. At the outset many women resisted cookstoves, in part, because they were skilled in open-hearth cookery and did not see any need to change. . . . One important outcome of the shift from fireplace cooking to stove cooking

¹⁶³ Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 93.

¹⁶⁴ Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 286.

was that on a stove, a woman could more easily cook multiple items at once. As a result, ordinary family menus became more complex, involving more courses and more complicated recipes.”¹⁶⁵ Even though Laura’s Grandma Ingalls grew up knowing fireplace cooking before stove cooking, and even though Laura’s first home comes with a stove, her own mother outshines her at cooking and baking. Thus, a woman as thoroughly 19th century as Laura does not necessarily feel comfortable with her rapidly industrializing life—or kitchen.

Ma’s meals for the major holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas are the best example of contemporary stove-top proficiency. For the Thanksgiving dinner in the dugout home in Minnesota—the most rustic situation since the open fire in Kansas—the stove has no oven, but Ma works magic. “Ma had to stew the goose . . . but she made dumplings in the gravy. There were corn dodgers and mashed potatoes. There was butter, and milk, and stewed dried plums.”¹⁶⁶ Contrast this with Laura’s attempt, the day after her marriage, to cook an equally large—perhaps larger—meal for a group of threshers. “So early next morning she began to plan and prepare the dinner. She had brought a baking of bread from home, and with some hot corn bread there would be plenty. Pork and potatoes were on hand and she had put some navy beans to soak the night before. There was a pieplant in the garden; she must make a couple of pies. The morning flew too quickly . . . [The threshers] were all very hungry but there was plenty of food, though something seemed to be wrong with the beans. Lacking her Ma’s watchful eye, Laura had not cooked them enough and they were hard. And when it came to the pie—Mr. Perry, a

¹⁶⁵ Williams, 56.

¹⁶⁶ Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 81.

neighbor of Laura's parents, tasted his first. Then he lifted the top crust, and reaching for the sugar bowl, spread sugar thickly over his piece of pie."¹⁶⁷

Laura's first meal for company is a disaster. Her situation is worse than the one Mrs. Boast had been in. Rather than not knowing how to make a dish and asking for instruction, Laura forges ahead with too little care, ruining her meal. It is not to say her initiation into "the cult of domesticity" was a mistake. Rather, Laura proves that she is simply *human*. She may be the "goddess-witch's" daughter, but in Laura's own house, the spells don't take. They bounce off the walls misspoken and warped. Laura must forge her way as a cook without the use of magic.

The first four years of her marriage—the subject of her last, posthumously published book—detail a series of hardships. Roger Lea McBride, formerly a lawyer for Rose Wilder Lane, writes about *The First Four Years*. Wilder's original manuscripts of it "in three orange-covered school tablets" were found and published verbatim. "After considerable thought . . . the editors at Harper and I all agreed that [Wilder's] original draft should be published" as it was written. McBride says "My own guess is that she wrote this one in the late 1940's and that after Almanzo died, she lost interest in revising and completing it for publication."¹⁶⁸ The prose's raw quality conveys well the tragedy and misfortune Laura and Almanzo endure.

Very soon after the couple's newborn son has died, an untended stove fire burns down the house. Laura and her toddler daughter Rose barely escape alive. "The fire was

¹⁶⁷ Wilder, *The First Four Years*, 19. "Pieplant" is rhubarb.

¹⁶⁸ Roger Lea McBride, "Introduction," in Wilder, *The First Four Years*, xiii-xiv.

so fierce” that it devoured the house too quickly. “Burying her face on her knees she screamed and sobbed, saying over and over, ‘Oh, what will Manly say to me?’ And there Manly found her and Rose, just as the house roof was falling in. . . . The top of Laura’s head had been blistered from the fire and something was wrong with her eyes.”¹⁶⁹ Laura recovers. The pace of life picks up so that there is no time to mourn long either the loss of the house or the death of their infant son. The series of mishaps and tragedies that plague the Wilders, recorded in *The First Four Years* cement Laura—still a literary character here—firmly in a frontier schema. Throughout the book series, she experiences serious illness, prairie fires, starvation, crop devastation, and thievery. After seeing the worst of what man and nature can unleash on the homesteader, she freely elects to live with her beloved “Manly” in this harsh place. As a housewife her world is infinitely more complicated than Harriet Beecher Stowe’s. Stowe, a contemporary of Wilder’s, had a nervous breakdown—over her duties as a housewife—so severe it sent her into a sanitarium.

Stowe was “sick of the smell of sour milk, and sour meat, and sour everything, and then the clothes *will* not dry, and no wet thing does, and everything smells mouldy [sic]; and altogether I feel as if I never wanted to eat again.”¹⁷⁰ Stowe was urban, and never experienced the harshness of the frontier. It is even “hostile” in Vine’s rendering. “The environment was a common hazard” best dealt with by community action. “Prairie fires . . . wolves, jackrabbits and rattlesnakes” dealt with by individuals and

¹⁶⁹ Wilder, 130-131.

¹⁷⁰ Matthews, 30.

communities¹⁷¹ were a far cry from damp laundry and sour milk. But these last things were universal items of complaint for women. A housewife anywhere without a servant did all the following and more: “lighting stoves and fireplaces, preparing meals, making beds, diapering babies, serving meals, dusting, sweeping, laundering, and ironing.”¹⁷² During the century, even though “women’s contribution to the family was increasingly understood ‘in emotional and psychological (rather than economic) terms,’ the long-run trend was to privilege male wage labor and to devalue women’s domestic labor.”¹⁷³ Women like Stowe sometimes could not cope once they realized that their work was still coupled with “diminishing respect”¹⁷⁴ even though ideas such as Republican motherhood and equal roles in parenting had helped transform the American family. In the *Little House* series female characters are valued for, and praised for, their labors. Laura is “as stout as a little French horse”¹⁷⁵ and a great help to her father. Ma’s cooking prowess—turning *make-do* into *delicious* is legendary. The Ingallses are as startlingly contemporary, at times, as they are backward. 19th century progress shines through in the appreciation shown to female characters. But the family’s isolation and subsistence methods mark them as somehow pre-Victorian, even as they exemplify the time period’s perfect nuclear family. Though the character Laura has no breakdown, when her home burns she is allowed a moment of weakness and ineffectiveness. She huddles on the ground and sobs into air thick with ash and prickling with heat. She is at the least

¹⁷¹ Vine, 100.

¹⁷² Steven Mintz, “Housework Demystified,” *Radical History Review* 19 (1991), 360.

¹⁷³ Mintz, 360. Mintz quotes Jeanne Boydston.

¹⁷⁴ Mintz, 360.

¹⁷⁵ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 9.

composed she has ever been in the book series, but it is her defining moment. Her mother's defining moment as a housewife came when she devised a way to prepare hard red wheat into bread so her children would not starve. Laura's moment comes when all but a few possessions are lost. She will wipe away ash-streaked tears and continue on in her domestic role, hardened by experience—her pots of beans adequately soft and her pies adequately sweetened, and the fire in the stove always minded.

Analyzing food ways more or less chronologically throughout *Little House* has provided insights into how the books accomplish a few things at once. Their descriptions of food revolve around people, sometimes delineated by biological sex. Only women and girls prepare or preserve food (“Mary could sometimes churn [butter] while Ma rested, but the dash was too heavy for Laura”¹⁷⁶) but everyone consumes it. The prevailing notion that home was a haven from the harsh working world resulted in special care being taken to provide the head of household with nourishing food. This was almost as important as his loving family (“Pa pushed back his empty plate and Ma gave Laura a look that said ‘Now!’ . . . Laura set down the pie . . . [Pa’s] surprise was even greater than they expected.”¹⁷⁷)

Americanized—that is to say, in step with the century’s knowledge of nutrition, its trends, and its offerings—food ways are the only acceptable ones. Eventually shaking off her attraction to Native American culture, Laura embraces her century’s ideals of womanhood. She shakily navigates marriage, motherhood, and housekeeping, but

¹⁷⁶ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 31.

¹⁷⁷ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 35-36. The women of the house make a pie as a surprise for Pa—they have to salvage frost-damaged garden produce and manage to make an apparently delicious pie from a green (immature) pumpkin.

eventually masters it all. She does not inherit her mother's kitchen witchery. This is just as well, because, as she comes of age and responsibility in the twilight of the century, she can only look forward—with the rest of the nation—to the coming century, and any changes it may bring to the kitchen and the hearth. Her lack of powers makes her thoroughly post-modern, freed from the cloying sentimentality that is the stereotype of the Victorian housewife. As a character in wild settings, Laura Ingalls Wilder provides us an antidote to Marmee March,—and, with a twist of irony—Ma Ingalls and other super-womanly housewives of American literature. Ruined pots of beans make a woman much more realistic.

IV. UNWELCOME EATERS: NATIVE AMERICANS IN *LITTLE HOUSE*

The scene in *Little House on the Prairie* has been set: little Laura asks about Native Americans around a sticky mouthful. “Where is a papoose, Ma?” the five-year old asks. Her mother replies, “don’t speak with your mouth full, Laura.”¹ “So Laura chewed and swallowed, and she said, ‘I want to see a papoose.’ ‘Mercy on us!’ Ma said. ‘Whatever makes you want to see Indians? We will see enough of them. More than we want to, I wouldn’t wonder.’ ‘They wouldn’t hurt us, would they?’ Mary asked. Mary was always good; she never spoke with her mouth full. ‘No!’ Ma said. ‘Don’t get such an idea into your head.’ ‘Why don’t you like Indians, Ma?’ Laura asked, and she caught a drip of molasses with her tongue. ‘I just don’t like them; and don’t lick your fingers, Laura,’ said Ma. ‘This *is* Indian country, isn’t it?’ Laura said. ‘What did we come to their country for, if you don’t like them?’ Ma said she didn’t know whether this was Indian country or not. She didn’t know where the Kansas line was. But whether or no, the Indians would not be here long.”²

Ma responds to her daughter’s curiosity—that belies an earnest interest in the culture—by dismissing it quickly. Her syntax holds both horror—“mercy on us”—and comfort—“no! don’t get such an idea into your head”—as well as superiority, for seeing Indians will be wearisome—“we will see . . . more than we want to . . . the Indians would not be here long.”

After this exchange Laura learns that her father’s attitude is more tolerant. “The first signifying mark the child recognizes in the prairie grass is an old trail near the site

¹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 46.

² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* 46-47.

where the Ingallses begin to build a house. The trail motivates Laura to ask yet again when she will see a papoose.”³ Pa’s reply is that he doesn’t know, and “you never saw Indians unless they wanted you to see them.”⁴ Pa’s reply does not dismiss his daughter’s desire to see “a little, brown Indian baby”⁵ as absurd. Pa might share his daughter’s curiosity. Still, he certainly has a better grasp than his wife on the sophistication, complexity, and variety of Plains tribes’ cultures. While he had remarked back in “the big woods” that “only Indians” lived where they were heading, here he takes care not to trivialize either his daughter’s question or the cultures.

Ma’s reaction from here on, whenever Native Americans appear, is to busy herself with some task. After Laura asks her question Ma begins to iron her daughters’ clothes. “She spread a blanket and a sheet on the wagon seat, and she ironed the dresses.”⁶ She strives for proper 19th century decorum. But no one else is around to see that her iron “smoothed all the wrinkles out of the little dresses,” as she and the girls are situated “to the very edge of the world.”⁷ Ma never uses her imagination or openly gazes at Native Americans—at least, not the way Laura does. Laura lets her gaze linger and lets her other senses help her take in these people who her mother forbids her to think about.

³ Romines, *Constructing the Little House*, 61.

⁴ Romines, 61.

⁵ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 6.

⁶ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 47.

⁷ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 48.

When Ma sets to ironing, Romines writes, she desires “a colonial outpost of Anglo-American propriety on the Great Plains.”⁸

Several chapters later there are close encounters. These events begin the escalation of Laura’s sense of wonder. These events reflect profound anxieties. The first escalation is not an encounter, but a remark by Pa. He suggests that Ma wash clothes in the creek like “Indian women do.”⁹ It is hard to tell if he is teasing or serious. He is doing hard labor building the cabin and has just agreed to dig a well when he hauls in a bucket of creek water for his wife’s washing. Ma’s harsh retort indicates that she has nothing but scorn for a life she views as wild and unsanitary. “‘If we wanted to live like Indians, you could make a hole in the roof to let the smoke out, and we’d have the fire on the floor inside the house . . . Indians do.’ That afternoon she washed the clothes in the tub and spread them on the grass to dry.”¹⁰

Once again, Ma copes with Native Americans by immersing herself in housewifery. Her children will come perilously close to crossing cultural lines when their father takes them to an abandoned Osage camp. Before this can happen, the security of the home is breached by two Osage men. *Little House on the Prairie* depicts settler-Native interactions in Osage territory as unusual. Romines counters this depiction. She quotes historian Glenda Riley: “there was actually considerable interaction between white

⁸ Romines, 58.

⁹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 76.

¹⁰ Romines, 76.

and Native” people.¹¹ What occurs in the Ingallses cabin has been analyzed well by Romines, but because food ways remain unconsidered, the analysis is incomplete.

That day, Pa chains the dog Jack to the side of the house before going hunting. The girls are outside with the dog when they see the Osage men. “Two naked, wild men . . . went out of sight, on the other side of the house.”¹² When Laura and Mary realize they have gone inside where their mother and toddler sister are, they panic. “Laura began to shake all over. She knew she must do something. She did not know what those Indians were doing to Ma and Baby Carrie . . . ‘We mustn’t leave Ma in there alone,’ Mary whispered. She stood still and trembled.”¹³ The girls gather enough courage to creep through the open doorway. Laura hides behind a slat of wood.¹⁴ Laura’s senses are overpowered by the sight and smell of the Osages, but, curious child that she is, she stares at them.

“First, she saw their leather moccasins. Then their stringy, bare, red-brown legs, all the way up. Around their waists each of the Indians wore a leather thong, and the furry skin of a small animal hung down in front. The fur was striped black and white, and now Laura knew what made that smell. The skins were fresh skunk skins. A knife . . . and a hatchet were stuck into each skunk skin. The Indians’ ribs made little ridges up their bare sides. Their arms were folded on their chests. At last Laura looked again at their faces . . . Their faces were bold and fierce and terrible. Their black eyes glittered. High on their

¹¹ Romines, 79.

¹² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 134.

¹³ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 134-136.

¹⁴ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 137.

foreheads and above their ears where hair grows, these wild men had no hair. But on top of their heads a tuft of hair stood straight up. It was wound around with string, and feathers were stuck in it. When Laura peeked out from behind the slab again, both Indians were looking straight at her.”¹⁵ Their eyes “glittered” and “shone and sparkled.”¹⁶

The physical descriptions of the two Osages that Wilder writes are based on memory. Any five-year old would have felt small next to the adult intruders. Their physicality is tall and well-muscled but sinewy without any excess. In the European-American population at one time, corpulence was synonymous with good health and status. “Downright gluttony” of both alcohol and food was a serious issue for reformers.¹⁷ “The food habits of even the prosperous were far from conducive to good physique or health. Ethereality of appearance was fashionable among both sexes,” at one time—the opposite of plumpness—with women scorning “corpulent” men.¹⁸

Because of burgeoning industrialization in urban areas, these people performed little physical labor. Urbanity had conditioned the American family into a routine of working father, stay-at-home mother, educated children and, if money could buy it, servants. Money could also buy those goods that working-class urbanites, farmers and certainly pioneers could not have afforded so easily—commercially-canned produce; exotic fruits such as lemons; white sugar and flour; pastries and cakes; meat shipped from all quarters. The actual Ingallses did a lot of hard labor to get their meals. It was often a

¹⁵ Wilder, 138-139.

¹⁶ Wilder, 138-140.

¹⁷ Cummings, 50.

¹⁸ Cummings, 51.

“monotonous round,”¹⁹ so they could hardly have imagined eating rich foods or luxury foods with regularity. But the fictionalized family displays no consequences from incomplete nutrition. Its members are not “gaunt,” “wan” “sickly,” or fat—neither are they lethargic, “languid, listless . . . yawning, lounging.”²⁰ The fictionalized Ingallses, contrasted against their Osage neighbors, are a picture of rosy-cheeked health despite rough circumstances. Ma is described in *Little House in the Big Woods* as having “plump white” arms, “cheeks so red” “dark hair smooth and shining.”²¹ Laura and Mary, with light-colored eyes and hair, contrast starkly against the Osage children they see at the close of *Little House on the Prairie*. Although all are well-nourished, the Osage people’s physicality is still vastly more honed than the settlers’.

Richard Steckel and Joseph Prince calculate, from 19th-century anthropological data, that the century’s premier (and later controversial) anthropologist Franz Boas’ conclusion was correct: during the century, Native American tribes of the Great Plains were “tallest in the world.” Steckel and Prince use “height data originally collected by” Boas. “We show that the Plains nomads were tallest in the world during the mid-nineteenth century, a result confirmed in travelers’ accounts and by the skeletal record.”²² Boas’ “survey goals were merely to depict accurately the anthropological characteristics of the Plains tribes.”²³ In a geographic area stretching from central Canada to northern

¹⁹ Cummings, 12.

²⁰ Cummings, 10-11.

²¹ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 220.

²² Richard H. Steckel and Joseph M. Prince, “Tallest in the World: Native Americans of the Great Plains in the Nineteenth Century.” *The American Economic Review* 91 (2001), 287.

²³ Steckel and Prince, 287.

Texas, Boas's survey sample was "1,123 adult men" the majority of whom were "the Sioux and the Crow"²⁴ of lower Montana, upper Wyoming, and the Dakotas. The representative sample came from a Plains tribal population that "was probably well under 100,000 . . . thus the Plains were sparsely settled in relation to area and to the primary food source, buffalo."²⁵ At the end of the original investigation, Boas and other anthropologists concluded that "Native Americans of the mid-nineteenth century were 3 to 11 centimeters taller than contemporary Europeans, and slightly taller than European Australians. The available record" in chart form "therefore indicates that Great Plains Native American men were tallest in the world," concur Steckel and Prince.²⁶

Long before Steckel and Prince worked to confirm it, 19th-century observers had noted Plains Indians' extraordinary heights for themselves. The Osage tribe, a Siouan-language group tribe located along the Missouri River, would have fit Stephen Long's report. Natives of that region were "in stature, equal, if not somewhat superior, to the ordinary European standard; tall men are numerous,"²⁷ he wrote in 1823. George Catlin wrote that "there were none superior in stature, *excepting the Osages* to the northern Cheyenne" who were "six feet in height" or taller.²⁸ Steckel and Prince next include Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* as an equal anthropological source. The book

²⁴ Steckel and Prince, 287-288.

²⁵ Steckel and Prince, 288-289.

²⁶ Steckel and Prince, 289. Prince tabulated Boas's data in chart form in 1998, with "average heights" rounded to nearest 0.1 centimeter."

²⁷ Steckel and Prince, 290.

²⁸ Steckel and Prince, 290. Emphasis added.

“confirms the considerable stature of men in the Osage tribe.”²⁹ So Wilder’s novelized memoir can attest for the physical appearance of Osage men. They are not yet on a reservation or allotment policy land, but they so clearly lack for food that they steal it from settlers. Traditional measures of economic performance³⁰ allow other groups’ purchasing power with food to be studied. For a nomadic society that hunts, gathers, and (increasingly) trades and uses American goods, this is impossible. So, Steckel and Prince conclude that “the nutritional status”³¹ of 19th-century Plains Native groups is hard to determine. What is able to be concluded is that they were quite tall. They were also “remarkably ingenious, adaptive, and successful in the face of exceptional demographic stress” even with “lives in disarray”³² as the reservation system encroached. In *Little House on the Prairie*, the Osage men who surprise all the female Ingalls characters are interesting to look at. Their single-minded purpose is to obtain and eat food.

These strangers who have no body fat to spare fascinate Laura with their “glittering” eyes. Romines writes that glittering or shining eyes are a “recurrent motif” in the *Little House* books. She emphasizes that the Osage men’s eyes unsettle Laura. Because they are first described as snake-like, they are “frighteningly alien to [Laura’s] humanity.”³³ It is what the strangers do, though, that settles any doubts about their humanity. Laura may find it difficult to meet such unflinching gazes with her own, but

²⁹ Steckel and Prince, 290.

³⁰ Steckel and Prince, 287.

³¹ Steckel and Prince, 287.

³² Steckel and Prince, 287.

³³ Romines, 66.

she notices every detail of what comes next. They direct the girls' mother to give them food.

“The Indian made two short, harsh sounds in his throat. The other Indian made one sound, like ‘hah!’ Laura hid her eyes . . . She heard Ma take the cover off the bake-oven. She heard the Indians squat down on the hearth. After a while she heard them eating . . . [The] Indians ate the cornbread that Ma had baked. They ate every morsel of it, and even picked up the crumbs from the hearth. . . . When every crumb of the cornbread was gone, the Indians rose up.”³⁴ They leave so silently that “their feet made no sound at all.”³⁵ When the little house is free of these odoriferous visitors, the women take time to process the event. Romines processes it too, reading into it implications that are powerful and discomfiting. Yet she manages to miss a key one.

Romines seizes the suggestions of racial tension, sexuality and gender-related power that can be read into Wilder's prose. Romines interprets little Laura's furtive glances into Osage eyes as a “warring fear and desire to see and comprehend [the men]. Also, “this extremely complex scene [is] an attempt to convey, from a white girl's viewpoint to a readership of children, the extraordinary stresses and tensions that burdened even the simplest contact between Euro-American females and Indian men.”³⁶ These freighted interactions are their own frontier narrative and merit extensive research. But for the purposes of this study, it is enough to say that in writing *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder tried to grasp for herself—and transmit to an audience—a schema to

³⁴ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 141.

³⁵ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 140-141.

³⁶ Romines, 67.

understand this male/female, white/Native, stranger/family, occupant/interloper encounter from her childhood.

Romines explores the power of sexuality and gender in this scene, writing that Ma, kneeling as she prepares the bread, is “in a posture that suggests sexual and domestic submission.”³⁷ Romines says that “by bringing actual Indian men into the Euro-American world” of her story, Wilder [evoked] powerful fears of violated boundaries, fears that have been expressed in the [19th and 20th] centuries in the United States through hysteria about the possibility of interracial rape of white women . . . The girls are shaken with amorphous fear about what could happen in the house.” The men wear precious little in the way of skunk skins. “Their scanty attire . . . is a refusal of the layers of rigid clothing by which Ma is determined to mold her girls into Victorian ladies,” Romines writes of all the Osages in the novelized memoir.³⁸ The practically naked strangers, though, fascinate little Laura. She forces herself to overcome fear and stare at them. For all intents and purposes Ma avoids looking at them until they leave. When the mother character does look, it is with startled fear.³⁹ Laura is compelled to stare because she sees humanity and intelligence in the men’s “glittering” eyes. The family is in a literal “borderland” but Laura in particular is in a mental one. Arguably, Laura’s mental borderland is a demarcation between what she *wants* and what is *expected of* her. When the Osage men “return her gaze” she has her “most difficult lesson: [they] share her space

³⁷ Romines, 65.

³⁸ Romines, 65.

³⁹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 141.

and her humanity.”⁴⁰ It is not proper for a small white girl to gaze so openly at adult Native men, but she does anyway.

Ma has been forced to perform a rather ordinary task. She never comments in the story whether she felt dread or any other emotion. Being compelled to give the Osages food would have gone against the actual mother’s contemporary values. The actual Ingallses were a rather well-read family. After all, Caroline Quiner Ingalls was fairly well-educated and apparently, not without money before she married. She was likely familiar with captivity narratives. Musilek writes that when the Ingallses migrated they packed along their books. They “were prized enough” to go: “Works of Shakespeare, George Eliot, Henry Ward Beecher, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Mary S. Holmes mingled with religious studies, biographies and historical travel books. From the *Little House* books themselves it is evident that the Ingalls family read and re-read newspapers and magazines obtainable in their remote home sites and they eagerly awaited mail bringing bundles of back-dated magazines and on occasion newspapers.”⁴¹ It is not known for certain if the most famous captivity narrative of the 17th century—Mary Rowlandson’s Puritan melodrama—was among the parents’ books, specifically the “historical-travel books.”⁴² But it is likely that Wilder’s parents knew the famous tale. Purely circumstantial evidence to support this emerges in Wilder’s novelized memoir, when Ma becomes agitated at talk of massacres.

⁴⁰ Romines, 66.

⁴¹ Musilek, 21-22. Wilder’s parents had “an ardent and vehement desire for their children to have some success,” he writes. Romines reiterates that Wilder’s mother was “a self-supporting, self-possessed young woman who could afford dress-made clothes” before her marriage to Charles Ingalls (Romines, 69).

⁴² Musilek, 22.

In the spring following the incident with the corn bread, the neighbors discuss the noisy activity of a large gathering of Natives in the area. The settlers are nervous. Unease and suspicion ripple through the days and nights. Pa reassures Mr. Scott that the gathering of several tribes is likely some kind of peace parley. Scott replies “Well, maybe you’re right about it, Ingalls. Anyway, I’ll be glad to tell Mrs. Scott what you say. She can’t get the Minnesota massacres out of her head.”⁴³ Mr. Scott’s wife is probably remembering the 1862 New Ulm Massacre. Whether the Scotts existed or were created by Wilder, Lane, and editors does not matter as much as the facts of the New Ulm massacre. The most deaths occurred on the Sioux side at the hands of the Army.

A group of Dakota Sioux had raided food storage warehouses on the edges of New Ulm because they were starving, forced onto allotted reservation land not nearly big enough to comfortably contain their population.⁴⁴ Violence ensued with the food raids, and the Army was called into quell it. Ultimately, President Abraham Lincoln pardoned 265 Sioux men who were condemned to hang—38 *were* hung—on December 26, 1862. According to the newspapers, 90 white women had “witnessed the murders of their husbands and sons” before being captured—a fate “that was infinitely worse than death.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 284.

⁴⁴ Hugh J. Reilly, *The Frontier Newspapers and the Coverage of the Plains Indian Wars* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 2. The infamous words “*So far as I am concerned, if they are hungry, let them eat grass*” are attributed to Andrew Myrick. Myrick represented “traders” among the Dakota bands in Minnesota. Myrick was “among the first killed . . . caught while trying to escape through a window. His body was later found with grass stuffed in his mouth.” (Reilly 2-3).

⁴⁵ Reilly, 14.

Wilder's child-friendly book has Laura and Mary sitting "still as mice"⁴⁶ while their mother socializes with Mrs. Scott. Here the circumstances of the literary character and the actual mother conflate so neatly that they are indiscernible. Caroline Quiner Ingalls had been raised in a sociable community and had spent her early married years in one. So, too, had her approximation, rendered as the "Ma" character: "A young woman still in Kansas Indian Territory [she] had previously lived in a closely knit Big Woods community that included sisters and many other women." In the flat expanse of Osage land, she finds herself "almost entirely isolated."⁴⁷ The subject, then, during Mrs. Scott's visit seems unnervingly outside the bounds of genteel conversation. Indeed, Mrs. Scott—who readers do not know closely as a cultured woman like Ma—has few schematics to process the information she relates to Ma. "She said she hoped to goodness they would have no trouble with the Indians . . . She did not know why the government made treaties [with them.] The only good Indian was a dead Indian. The very thought of Indians made her blood run cold. She said, 'I can't forget the Minnesota massacre. My Pa and my brothers went out with the rest of the settlers, and stopped them only fifteen miles west of us. I've heard Pa tell often how they—.'⁴⁸ Rayna Green writes that "land-hungry settlers' passions were for dead and dying Indians" and that ignorance of their culture "predicted Indian demise."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 211.

⁴⁷ Romines, 69.

⁴⁸ Wilder, 211-212.

⁴⁹ Rayna Green, "Native American Women," *Signs* (1980), 249.

Ma halts her neighbor's conversation with "a sharp sound in her throat . . .

Whatever a massacre was, it was something that grown-ups would not talk about when little girls were listening. After Mrs. Scott had gone, Laura asked Ma what a massacre was. Ma said she could not explain that now; it was something that Laura would understand when she was older."⁵⁰ Ma's refusal to explain is part of her tactic of ignoring and evading things she prefers not to discuss.

Ma knows, though, what massacres are. Perhaps the shockingly visceral way that they bring together opposing groups upsets her. Laura recognizes at a young age the inherent humanity of the Osage visitors. They are engaging in (albeit nonviolent, quotidian) acts such as eye contact and eating. It is unclear what Ma sees in them except maybe the potential for murder. Massacres bring together human bodies with remarkable force. In the aftermath, survivors on both sides retool their schemas for functional lives. The captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson begins on February 10, 1676 in Lancaster, Massachusetts. It opens with a massacre of Puritans by Nipmuck tribesmen. It ends with the return of Rowlandson, one of many captives, to her home and family. But it is the interval's activities that would have unnerved Ma the most. "For the next three months, Rowlandson, the wife of a prominent Puritan minister, lived among the Indians; *she ate Indian food*, slept in Indian wigwams, learned Indian ways."⁵¹

Rowlandson has been caught short in the doorway of her home. Several Nipmucks holding "glittering weapons" slick with blood coax her "come go along with

⁵⁰ Wilder, 212.

⁵¹ Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1998), 125. Emphasis added.

us.” Rowlandson’s sister has been fatally shot, but Rowlandson steps over her body and is led away.⁵² “Rowlandson, curiously, admitted she was ‘willing to go along with them.’ True, she was wounded and terrified, and had clearly been threatened; still, captives were not supposed to be ‘willing.’”⁵³ Jill Lepore explains that many colonists would have rather died, because captivity was so horrifying.⁵⁴ She also explains the Natives’ tradition of abductions. “[The] main purpose of taking captives was to adopt new members into their communities; many captives, especially children, became thoroughly Indianized, living out their lives with their new Algonquian families and losing even the ability to speak English. Some later resisted rescue and refused to return to live with their English families. While prominent captives, like Rowlandson, might be traded for ransom money or swapped in an exchange of prisoners, most who survived the initial hardships were expected to abandon English ways and to become, eventually, wholly Indian.”⁵⁵

The same “hysteria” of the 19th century—as Romines has noted—over white females being raped and otherwise sexually assaulted by non-white males was also the 17th century’s worst cultural subsumption. Rowlandson allays her colonial Puritan audience by writing “not one of them ever offered the least abuse or unchastity to me, in

⁵² Mary Rowlandson, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682)*. City University of New York. <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/rownarr.html>. No page. Rowlandson wrote that her sister “*was struck with a bullet and fell down dead over the threshold.*”

⁵³ Lepore, 128.

⁵⁴ Lepore, 128-129.

⁵⁵ Lepore, 129.

word or action.”⁵⁶ This line is incredibly important. With it, Rowlandson as an author succeeds in making the horrible—captivity—more palatable. *The Sovereignty [sic] and Goodness of God* benefited greatly from this selling strategy. First published in Boston in 1682, it quickly sold out and reappeared in second and third editions—“within months,” notes Lepore—and even gained attention in England that November. “It would become America’s first best-seller. Today, the *Sovereignty and Goodness of God* is considered a foundational work in American literature; it is better remembered than any other account of King Philip’s War and is more widely read than any other Indian captivity narrative.”⁵⁷

What really happened to Rowlandson will never be known, but she chose a tactic that helped her “[reconcile] herself to her captivity” although by writing about it, some may have thought her “immodest.” She “wrote her way out of captivity . . . freeing herself from memories of life among savages.”⁵⁸

No matter how eloquently she wrote of the surreal aspect of Nipmuck men with “glittering weapons” telling her “come go along with us,” her memory would never have truly purged the three months spent with them in the wilderness. For one thing, being *alive* during that time, she would have had sensory experiences, although the days may have blurred into simply an *existence*. Gazing around her, she sees nothing but

⁵⁶ Mary Rowlandson, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682)*. City University of New York. <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/rownarr.html>. No page.

⁵⁷ Lepore, 125. Print runs in the colonies and abroad were small. Setting type and printing was a painstaking task. Paper, ink, and binding were also incredibly expensive. Readership would have been confined to a literate segment of the population, but oral retellings probably spread the story as well. Lepore writes that *Sovereignty*’s second edition was riddled with misspellings, and this has given scholars of King Philip’s War reason to believe that a Nipmuck man trained in printing—James Printer—put together that edition.

⁵⁸ Lepore, 148, 130.

wilderness, but the sight of a trodden cow path makes her think “I could have freely lain down and died.”⁵⁹ During this time she *eats Nipmuck food*. She has nothing but contempt for it, calling it “filthy trash”⁶⁰ in her writing, but it keeps her alive. Actually, there is no indication that she refuses to eat.

In fact, there is an opposite indication—one that she is being intentionally starved. For nine days Rowlandson and her wounded child get nothing to eat. Her “master” is a “sagamore” named Quinnapin.⁶¹ Rowlandson has “heart-aching thoughts” and buries her dead child.⁶² Then she thinks of little else but food. “My head was light and dizzy . . . The first week of my being among them I hardly ate any thing [sic]; the second week I found my stomach grow very faint for want of something.”⁶³ She finds it hard at first to swallow their “filthy trash.” It is strange food like undercooked horse liver, boiled “old horse’s leg” or “a mess of wheat”⁶⁴ but these things become “sweet and savory”⁶⁵ to her after a while.

⁵⁹ Lepore, 130.

⁶⁰ Lepore, 130.

⁶¹ Mary Rowlandson, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682)*. City University of New York. <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/rownarr.html>. No page.

⁶² Mary Rowlandson, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682)*. City University of New York. <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/rownarr.html>. No page.

⁶³ Mary Rowlandson, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682)*. City University of New York. <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/rownarr.html>. No page.

⁶⁴ Mary Rowlandson, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682)*. City University of New York. <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/rownarr.html>. No page.

By only holding sexual violation to be the most serious act of cultural subsumption, scholars like Romines miss the significance of food exchanges. Just as Rowlandson became part of Nipmuck culture by partaking of its food, so the two Osages in Ma's cabin absorb a little bit of the family's culture. The human body in these two colonial cultures—the former in the 17th century, the latter in the 19th—is a thing tightly constrained in clothing and behavior. Mary, Laura, and Baby Carrie are never to *see* Native Americans because *their* bodies are uninhibited, let alone witness them *eating*—and eating their Ma's food, at that. Laura, though, remembers what she sees—nakedness, intelligence—perhaps kindness—and hunger.

To try and pinpoint what is so frightening about the food of one culture being in the hands—and mouths—of another is to hit barriers to common sense and shared humanity. These ideas are illogical. But just like the feared “love apple” tomato and the overripe peach were deemed dangerous during the 19th century, the food of “the other” was especially to be shunned. Ma's bigotry is especially uncomfortable because it stems from food preparation and sharing. For most families the creation and enjoyment of meals is associated with nurture.

Pa's remark, “only Indians live there,” when talking about the Great Plains circa 1870 implies that Native Americans are so insignificant that perhaps they do not eat. After all, in Wilder's treatment the Ingallses are the only humans for miles upon arrival. The abundant game animals and fresh water seem to have been waiting, just so *they* could “live like kings.” Much later, Ma grudgingly acknowledges the Natives' presence—and

⁶⁵ Mary Rowlandson, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682)*. City University of New York. <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/rownarr.html>. No page.

their hunger—by giving them corn bread, but early on Pa seems to gloss over their significance. Wilder does not provide hints of irony during the corn bread episode, but because the cultural other was so feared at the time one would think the greatest horror would have been giving the Osages some patently Euro-American food. Instead, Ma is speechless and blanched while giving them *corn bread*. That settler staple was originally a Native food way. Cornmeal was often called “Indian meal.” Williams writes that corn bread was most commonly baked in the early part of the century, and then grew less popular. The development of more sophisticated ovens and stove ranges—“free standing cast-iron”—allowed for poorer, less-urban housewives to continue baking their own bread. But the success of store-bought bread (with infamously bromated flour) led to less home baking as the century wore on.⁶⁶ Williams’ assertion further reiterates the awkward position of the Ingallses—actual and fictionalized—as simultaneously contemporary and backward.

Because the Osages are not fed Euro-American food like salt pork or white-flour bread, they retain their cultural autonomy. But if little Laura’s “naughty wish to be a little Indian girl . . . bare naked in the wind and sunshine”⁶⁷ ever comes her cultural autonomy will be jeopardized. Drawing on the Greek myth of Hades and Persephone, if Laura is to ever eat Osage food, she may be lost to her mother wholly or partially. On the prairie Ma acts as Demeter, bargaining—in this instance with her child—to keep her within the fold. If Ma can discourage Laura from interacting with Osages, she can save her. The “goddess-witch’s” powers are blunted, though. There is no way Ma can keep her

⁶⁶ Williams, 18.

⁶⁷ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 307.

girls from *all* exposure to the Osages because after all, *they* walk freely, naked, into her home. Pa plays the dark god Hades. He draws his girls into the underworld of the cultural other. Ma's Demeter persona can only vaguely protest when he suggests they visit an abandoned Osage camp. "It is so far, Charles. And in this heat,"⁶⁸ is a measure too weak to blunt the girls' curiosity. Wanting badly to commune with another culture, Laura lets her sunbonnet "dangle down her back"⁶⁹ on the long walk. That there is no food leftover at the abandoned camp is just as well. In this vein of Greek mythology, eating food from another culture signifies an incremental death of selfhood in the person who eats it. Mary Rowlandson survived captivity. But her thoroughly Puritan outlook—the selfhood she had been sure of—had died, or been seriously altered.

Laura and Mary become approximations of Osage girls at the camp. In a lesson that Romines calls "an important lyric sequence . . . in the rudiments of sympathetic ethnology"⁷⁰ the girls examine tracks. Pa tells them about "tracks of big moccasins and smaller moccasins . . . and tracks of little bare toes . . . tracks of rabbits and tracks of birds and wolves' tracks."⁷¹ The girls correctly identify rabbit bones when Pa asks them to "tell him what had cooked in that pot."⁷² One can almost see five-year old Laura absorbed in her fantasy of being an Osage, placing her own bare little feet into the footprints left by a woman at the cooking fire. "An Indian woman had squatted there. She

⁶⁸ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 173.

⁶⁹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 174.

⁷⁰ Romines,, 61.

⁷¹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 176.

⁷² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 176-177.

wore a leather skirt with fringes; the tiny marks of the fringe were in the dust. The track of her toes inside the moccasins was deeper than the track of her heels, because she had leaned forward to stir something cooking in a pot on the fire.”⁷³ The girls even examine the remnants of the cooking spit: “Then Pa picked up a smoke-blackened forked stick. And he said the pot had hung from a stick laid across the top of two upright, forked sticks. He showed Mary and Laura the holes where the forked sticks had been driven into the ground.”⁷⁴

Tanis Chapman Thorne writes that the Osage shared language and kinship ties with the Omaha and Ponca as well as the Kansa, Otoe and Missouri. These tribes, part of the Dhegihan Central Siouan language group, all split up “during a lengthy period of migration and displacement” that was “violent and chaotic.”⁷⁵ The splitting of the Omaha-Ponca people into two groups is the most well-recorded incident of this period, which was sometime between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷⁶ The Osage found their way to land approximating what is now Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas. Like their relatives the Omaha, the Osage “became intermediaries in the trading network” of horses and calumet pipe materials—an area of trade “from the lower Mississippi watershed to the Great Lakes and from the woodlands to the plains in the late 1600s and early 1700s.” The Osage were located “between horse-rich tribes” and they and their kin were “horticulturists who grew crops of squash, sunflowers, beans, and corn in their villages

⁷³ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 176.

⁷⁴ Wilder, 176.

⁷⁵ Tanis C. Thorne, *The Many Hands of My Relations: French and Indians on the Lower Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 23.

⁷⁶ Thorne, 20.

along the river terraces. They were also hunters of buffalo, deer, elk, bear, and other game, so theirs was a dual subsistence economy.” They had “annual or semiannual tribal buffalo hunts” and a complex social ranking system.⁷⁷ In *Little House on the Prairie* the abandoned Osage camp is symbolic of a once thriving culture that is now ailing under the new, imminent reservation system. The Ingalls girls’ exploration of the camp yields nothing but speculation— How many days ago did the camp disperse, based on the freshness of the rabbit bones? What were the people’s reasons for leaving—a summer buffalo hunt? A gathering? Or something more ominous? The federal government forces the Osage to leave the area at the end of the book. They march off the page and Laura never sees them again.

Wilder’s Osage characters at this point—*between* what Linda Murray Berzok calls “reservation food ways” and the culture’s traditional food ways—are so liminal that they are rarely seen. And when they are seen they are rarely heard. The character Laura describes the bread thieves as extremely tall, rather thin and sinewy. Berzok remarks that “gluttony was taboo” in Native American cultures.⁷⁸ The Osage practiced a gatherer-hunter lifestyle punctuated by agriculture. Berzok highlights *gatherer-hunter* instead of *hunter-gatherer* in her research on Native American food ways, explaining that the emphasis should be on *gatherer* because “the bulk of the calories came from foraged materials.”⁷⁹ From *Little House on the Prairie*, readers can’t know any of this, because a

⁷⁷ Thorne, 14-15, 45.

⁷⁸ Linda Murray Berzok, *American Indian Food* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 128.

⁷⁹ Berzok, 172.

settler's children have temporarily claimed the camp as their (albeit instructional) playground.

The Ingalls girls return home, not having ingested pomegranate seeds like Persephone, but with handfuls of trade beads. These goods are not enough to keep them locked in an Osage underworld, but Ma and Pa must carefully mind that their middle daughter not be so thrilled by the Osage. This is why Laura's incoherent sobbing at the sight of the departing Osages alarms her parents.⁸⁰ They have already done well, though, to keep her from wandering and eating Osage food. This makes up for Ma's inability to avoid feeding the two Osage men.

The Osage men are problematic. In *Little House on the Prairie* four Osage men breach the family home. The first two direct Ma to make corn bread, effectively stealing the result of her labor. Months later the second two raid the pantry. They steal stale corn bread, furs Pa plans to sell, and tobacco.⁸¹ Both incidents highlight the fact that the Osage characters are given little or no agency by Wilder. In each case the men are portrayed as silent—or mostly so—takers of food. They obtain food by demand and force. Perhaps it is better to say that they get their food by demand and *intimidation*. After all, they do not press Ma's hand to the bake-oven and force her to prepare corn bread for them. She moves swiftly through the actions of baking simply because she is frightened, with her "big eyes" that cannot even meet her intruders'. Ma prepares bread for the first two intruders mainly to hasten their departure. The second incident occurs toward the end of the novelized memoir, *after* the visit to the Indian camp but *before* the peace parley

⁸⁰ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 308-310.

⁸¹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 233-234.

frightens Mrs. Scott. The Osages this time do not charm little Laura with their exotic looks. Though they are the same “red-brown” coloring and “thin . . . and bare” as the others, the men who steal food and furs are “dirty and scowling and mean.”⁸² Their only speech capabilities are “harsh sounds at each other in their throats.”⁸³ Twice the Ingallses have had their security invaded. The Osages have “[conscripted Ma’s] labor, [interrupted] her cherished routine.”⁸⁴ These encounters destroy Romines’ hope for “the possibility of a shared culture, of mutual acculturation.”⁸⁵

The ability to verbally communicate may be gone—Pa finally gives up trying to talk to an Osage man who stops by a few days *before* the house is robbed. “All this time nobody had said anything. But now the Indian said something to Pa. Pa shook his head and said, ‘no speak.’”⁸⁶ The remaining attribute that hovers between the Ingallses and the Osage men in *Little House on the Prairie* is the need for nourishment. In the second treatment the experience of hunger makes the Osage look brutish. The new intruders grab fistfuls of bread, rumpled piles of furs, and clumps of tobacco. Their act of tearing pieces from bread loaves mirrors the Oleson siblings’ greedy grabbing of candy. The Osage men are in a dual haste—to go undetected and to satisfy their hunger, which may be acute as they are “thin.” The descriptor “mean” can be doubly interpreted to signify their lowly circumstances. The furs and tobacco can possibly be bartered later for more food. The

⁸² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 233-234.

⁸³ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 233-234.

⁸⁴ Romines, 69.

⁸⁵ Romines, 63.

⁸⁶ Wilder, 228. The Indian speaks French to Pa, which he does not know. This highlights the prior influence of French trappers and traders in the Midwest. Non-French European settlers colonized the area very late. They often encountered complex societies of mixed Native-French people, many of them socially ascendant. For more on the subject see Thorne.

absence of intelligible speech—“harsh sounds”—and rough manners are signifiers, from the *author*, that the *character* Laura’s fascination with the Osage must end. The intruder characters must be written as only human-*like* to make room for the continuing story—Laura’s maturation into a capable 19th-century housewife.

The solution preventing further struggle between Ma as Demeter and Pa as Hades to keep Laura out of an Osage underworld—where she would remain after eating Osage food—comes from the federal government. *Little House on the Prairie* ends with the Ingallses abandoning their cabin, in which they have been squatting on land that will go to a reservation. The theme of tension between cultures continues in the next installment, which examines food ways in *Little House* vis a vis the environment—Nature herself. The frontier that is so enchanting to little Laura holds hostile people, animals, and weather. These things make the quest for urbanized, cultured white settlement rather quixotic. The most important struggle is the daily one for food and other resources, and this is often made in competition with Native Americans. The ultimate fate of human settlement in the *Little House* series is triumph—white settlers win over the West—but this is only logical given Wilder’s agenda in writing the series. Although Native American characters do have a place in Wilder’s novelized memoirs, this place is overshadowed by her settler characters’ needs to upstage everything they encounter, including the land itself.

V. MAN VERSUS NATURE

Laura Ingalls Wilder's transformation into a contemporary housewife throughout the *Little House* series is a process of change. Readers get an alarmingly settler-centric narrative of Western settlement. This narrative is also heavily female character-centric. When Blackford writes that she is disturbed by Wilder's descriptions of the "Ma" character as thoroughly serene and beautiful despite the harsh elements, her argument is undermined by her own admission that she skipped thorough readings of male-centric portions of the narrative. These were mainly the bulk of *Little House in the Big Woods*, which consisted of many "chapters with Pa's stories." She admits that this act was "an ironic instance of revisionist reading"¹ as she grasped desperately at a female-centric tale and protagonist. Blackford undermines the strength of her argument—that the only unsettling character in the series is Ma Ingalls—by ignoring any complexities that might be present in the male character, Pa Ingalls. Pa Ingalls brims with complexity. He is a hyper-masculine male who is struggling to find his purpose in a female Nature. One of the most unsettling metaphorical images of westward settlement is that of power-hungry males dominating a landscape perceived as somehow female or feminine.

Fellman acknowledges a perception "of the frontier as a place of conquest." By claiming that this view is held by a majority—calling it "*our* perception"²—Fellman gives this metaphor—tropes of conquest/dominance, male/female, Man/Nature—prime placement. It is at the forefront of the deconstruction process dedicated to the frontier myth of *Little House*. Analyzing Pa Ingalls through gender is as important as similarly

¹ Blackford, *Civilization and Her Discontents*, 147.

² Anita Clair Fellman, "'Don't Expect to Depend on Anybody Else': The Frontier as Portrayed in the *Little House* Books," *Children's Literature* 24 (1996), 101.

analyzing Ma, Laura, and her sisters. In “Civilization and Her Discontents” Blackford does not consider whether Pa could possess unsettling qualities. Rather, Blackford is concerned with the mother-daughter relationship, but uses jumbled fairy tale and mythology tropes to describe it. Blackford therefore unnecessarily convolutes the mother-daughter relationship. The character Pa is much more complex, in his construction, than the character Ma is in hers. While Ma is squarely 19th-century, Pa shares traits and accoutrement with James Fenimore Cooper’s 18th-century frontiersman Natty Bumppo, alias Hawk-Eye. Pa is otherwise rooted in the 19th century—his relationship with Laura demonstrates proper family roles.

Overall Pa’s characterization is not from fairy tales or classical mythology. Instead, because Pa shares some stock characterization with Hawk-Eye, he embodies the role of the male figure wandering through Nature, who is personified as female or feminine. The role of the Man in Nature is to strike a balance with her, but also to exert his dominance and display his masculinity. The scene of rowdy males subduing or wrecking a feminine Nature and her inhabitants is one troubling undercurrent in Western mythology deconstruction. Studying Pa within a careful framework of the frontier as a physical space will aid the deconstruction of Wilder’s frontier and West.

The frontier that exists between the pages of the *Little House* series is a milieu for the competition between Man and Nature for food. Wilder certainly never explains that the father character competes with not only Nature, but other men, for his family’s food. The tension of competition is what makes comparisons between Wilder’s and Cooper’s characters crucial to establishing how the frontier as a physical place helps forge characters’ personalities. This will be discussed with ideas about the differing degrees of

masculinity the characters demonstrate. Pa's role as a man of his time was written when Wilder sought to create an enduring addition to mythology about the American West. Pa Ingalls is by turns breadwinner and hobbyist-hunter, and is in competition for food and resources with other male characters—specifically, Native American men. These latter characters are extremely important, as they are given no agency by Wilder. They showcase the settler-centric world that Wilder created, a world where only settler food ways were described in any detail. The natural world that Wilder's characters inhabit is one that deserves its own study. For this study's purposes the frontier was truly a place of either "feast or famine" a la Horsman. All these elements combine to present an environment in which mankind is pitted against all that Nature has to offer. Oppositional forces appear as man, beast, insect, and weather. By laying these obstacles, Nature either benevolently provides food, or cruelly withholds it. Linked to people's success or failure to obtain food is the concurrent success or failure of their life ways and culture.

Perhaps it is best to begin the discussion with the landscape itself. After all, the wild places Pa tramps through—with a rifle on his shoulder—are so richly described by Wilder as to be magical. The harshness of all these places distresses Ma. As a character, Ma Ingalls appears rather one-dimensional because her driving desire is to instill 19th-century middle-class American values to her daughters, who live in wild lands. Her potential success is blunted by this physical world—it is one that her middle child can move through with abandon precisely because it is so primal. Ma's spells of refinement are countered by the spells of the ultimate female figure. Nature is the ultimate Mother. She bewitches Laura so strongly that at her maturation, Ma is lucky that her own magic has had any effect at all. Because this natural world is so instantly recognizable, so

iconic—as part of the frontier myth—it is intuitively understood as primal, and not magical. This is a necessary distinction. When Bettelheim’s tropes are stripped away, Wilder’s tall-grass prairie no longer sings in the wind, and stars are not glittering diamonds. So the frontier in Wilder’s books becomes ordinary. But what, exactly, is the frontier?

Wilder unleashed her books on a Depression-era audience. This audience hungered for a new type of mythologized American saga, filled with stalwart characters. In a word, Wilder cannot help scholars come any closer to re-imagining, in a somehow “correct” way, what concepts such as “the West” and the “the frontier” and “Nature” really are—or more specifically, how they should be viewed through the studies of cultural geography, ethnography and anthropology, and history. The frontier saga that Wilder created is astonishingly mythologized in execution, and the people and places in it remain highly romanticized.

Her narrative is almost painfully settler-centric, as further analysis of Native American male characters will show. Patricia Limerick was at the forefront of “new Western history” which emerged long after *Little House*. Toward the late 1980s historians suddenly addressed the troubling depictions of the 19th century American frontier. These depictions—to name but a few key ones: Native-white relations, environmental degradation and exhaustion versus industrial progress, and the obvious questions *What is a frontier?* and, *Where is the west?*—deserved new thought and analysis and got them with the new line of study. For Laura Ingalls Wilder—the actual woman—the *frontier* existed in the vast geography of *the west*. Wilder’s family was but one in the estimated 500,000 migrants westward by 1870. “The ability to push ever

westward, away from settled areas in quest of cheap land hacked out of the wilderness”³ drove thousands of people to the country’s unsettled parts. Fellman writes that Americans saw themselves in this endeavor as “restless, innovative, individualistic, pragmatic, buoyant, and willing to take risks.” Her question of why “the frontiering experience” came to be viewed, by the time of Wilder’s adulthood, as “the dominant influence in shaping American civilization”⁴—although a provocative one—does not have room to be answered here. Instead, a more relevant consideration is the fine line—indeed, the borderland or *frontier*—between *Little House*’s fictionalized depiction of the Midwestern frontier and a more accurate depiction. The promise of the West, though, was an ephemeral concept. Men dreamed of “a place of conquest, escape to freedom, lawlessness, individualism,” while women dreamed of “the making of the garden, the building of the home.”⁵ For the actual Ingallses and the thousands of other pioneers, the west was where urbane life ways were replaced by rougher ones.

One reason why Blackford may obsess over Ma’s unruffled appearance and demeanor in *Little House in the Big Woods* is that this depiction is almost completely fictitious. The “Ma” character never coughs with watery eyes, as Esther Hanna did, over a “little green wood fire,” but the real mother of Laura surely did. Wilder’s frontier is a borderland in the sense of the word used by Romines. Romines quotes Gloria Anzaldua, who defines a borderland or a frontier as “a vague and undetermined place created by the

³ Fellman, “Anybody Else,” 102.

⁴ Fellman, “Anybody Else,” 102.

⁵ Fellman, “Anybody Else,” 105.

emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.”⁶ In writing the *Little House* series, Wilder’s creative process balanced between actual memory and imagination. Ma was rosy cheeked but never sweaty or careworn, and Pa was a mighty hunter. The truly complicated drama of the actual frontier—the messy borderland of politics, racism, sex, and ecological exploitation that was Western settlement—had little place in Wilder’s books. So, Wilder’s frontier was full of idyllic landscapes where mankind held a delicate balance with wildlife. This holds fast even if Ma’s only explanation is “I just don’t like them” regarding Indians, and if Pa seems genuinely misanthropic in his wish to distance himself from others. Nature remains the most powerful “goddess-witch” captivating Laura with her spells, distracting her from her destiny as a 19th century housewife—albeit an alarmingly ordinary one.

Each book chronicles the passing of time, as well as the passing of landscapes each time the family moves. Topography and climate vary in each place, but there is enough similarity between each place that readers never doubt that the places Laura inhabits are untamed and isolated, filled with danger and adventures. Each “little house,” then symbolizes Ma’s attempt to encapsulate Laura from the seductive pull of Nature. For Laura, the role of competent housewife is precarious but her ultimate grasp of this role proves that womanhood can be won in the west. She and her family live on a frontier or borderland of the mind as well as the body. Laura’s fascination with Native American culture, her refusal to wear corsets, and her lukewarm outlook on marriage, highlight this balance she keeps. Only on a “frontier” would this be acceptable behavior. If the

⁶ Romines, *Constructing the Little House*, 58.

fictionalized Ingallses were presented as any more urbane, the character Laura would lose her credibility as a liminal person in a liminal place—the frontier.

What readers and scholars do not know, at any rate, is how Wilder conceptualized these ideas—questions of *What is the frontier?* and *What is man's place in Nature?* There is no indication, through biographies or Wilder's letters and notes, of how the woman perceived the West she grew up in. We cannot know, then, whether Wilder conceived of these broad concepts in any other way than they are delineated and described in the books. Indeed, her settler-centric stories do not even take the time to attach serious definitions to these concepts. The *Little House* characters' environment is instantly recognizable and iconic even when little serious thought is given to defining this environment. Wilder was not aware of the definitional problems that would be raised by the New Western historians some sixty years after her first book's publication.

Limerick asserts that the west has “an unbroken past” and “a legacy of conquest.” The latter is true certainly, as first Native Americans, and then settlers of all ethnicities, tamed the landscape. The former statement, though, that the west has some kind of “unbroken past” calls into question what the west's patterns are (these that remain unbroken) and what existed before a “past” time period could be pinpointed. Here the “unbroken” theme of the 19th century American frontier is humans' struggle to secure adequate food. The story of humanity anywhere is one of control over the environment. Wilder's magic, of course, does not exist in Limerick's treatment of the angst-riddled post-modern west. Limerick blunts the west's powers to enthrall, and hopes this strategy will halt all romantic treatments of the 19th century frontier. It is easily seen that the quotidian eating habits of 19th century settlers left little poetic room.

“In 1883 Nannie Alderson married, left her home in Virginia and traveled to her new life on a ranch in Montana. Reminiscing about those years, Mrs. Alderson noted a particular feature of Montana cuisine and landscape. ‘Everyone in the country lived out of cans,’ she said, ‘and you would see a great heap of them outside every little shack.’”⁷ *Little House* characters are never such slovenly eaters and poor stewards of the landscape. Even some of the Osage men, depicted as little more than animalistic eaters of other people’s food, fastidiously pick up corn bread crumbs from the cabin’s floor. To be sure, Wilder as a writer eliminated the sloppy side of frontier life. All references to trash and outhouses are gone. She makes the fictionalized approximation of her family conscientious—it never wastes food. The dog Jack is a convenient disposer of all food scraps. He enjoys “the last of the batter”⁸ from cornmeal pancakes while the family is camped on the Kansas prairie. Only the Brewster family, in its menacing little house on the Dakota prairie, is depicted as slovenly. This family foils the pristine stewardship of the Ingallses in their environment. Perhaps the Brewsters would resonate in Limerick’s mind with the sloppy Montanans of Alderson’s recollection—heedless of the mark they left on the land.

Limerick was concerned with dismantling any and all tropes of “noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness.”⁹ Wilder’s *Little House* series destroys Limerick’s hopes that nostalgia will no longer collide with fact. So Limerick is best left off, but not before stating that arguably, *Little House* is still relevant to the

⁷ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 17-18.

⁸ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 41.

⁹ Limerick, 19.

wishes of people like Limerick. The real, raw state of *the frontier* is the contest between man and Nature for food—with the occasional collision of man with man. Because Wilder’s fictionalized frontier clearly lacks many facets—slovenly eaters, outhouses, waste of food and other resources—and contains magic—the discussion of man versus Nature becomes all the more interesting.

Within the confines of the *Little House* series, man struggles “quaintly”—as Limerick writes—against Nature for his sustenance. Out of all the family members, Pa struggles hardest, wresting food from Nature the most strenuously. How quaint indeed is Pa’s foolish declaration that his family will “live like kings” off of what it can hunt, gather, and grow. Wilder’s depiction of the struggle for food is so quaint that it is dangerously lopsided in favor of settler culture. Scholars like Romines have tried to correct this sharp angle. Romines’s study “Indians in the House: A Narrative of Acculturation” in her book *Constructing the Little House*, which proved so fruitful for the examination of Native American characters, proves again helpful here. “The best land, Laura’s parents imply, is a blank page, smoothed flat by the settler’s plow, from which all traces of Native American habitation have been erased.”¹⁰ This sentence has an implication Romines misses. The settler’s plow primes the land for acceptable foodstuffs, to be harvested and eaten only by settlers—except on occasions when Native Americans steal that food. The extent to which actual pioneers and Native Americans had to grapple with the Plains environment is shockingly dramatic, given that the area was commonly thought of for so long as completely uninhabitable. This idea—Stephen Long’s desolation theory, is illustrated in Wilder’s series through a food metaphor.

¹⁰ Romines, 73.

Ma tells Laura and Mary that the moon is barren of life. She tells them this one hot summer afternoon in Wisconsin, while they watch her make cheese. Ma begins her story only because Laura and Mary eat the bits of unripe rind she has cut off the new cheese—the cheese-making process involves cutting off some hard bits *before* the cheese is sewn into butter-rubbed cloth, but *after* it comes out of the round hoop mold. Laughing at her girls “for eating green cheese,” Ma says, “‘The moon is made of green cheese, some people say.’ The new cheese did look like the round moon when it came up behind the trees. But it was not green; it was yellow, like the moon. . . . ‘Is the moon really made of green cheese?’ Laura asked, and Ma laughed. ‘I think people say that, because it looks like a green cheese. . . . But appearances are deceiving.’ Then while she wiped all the green cheeses and rubbed them with butter, she told them about the dead, cold moon that is like a little world on which nothing grows.”¹¹

The “dead, cold moon” might as well have been the Midwestern frontier of the 19th century in the suppositions of Stephen Long and others. The vast frontier was not dead, but very much alive, hosting complex ecosystems that teemed with organisms: tall grass prairie, short grass prairie, prairie wetland, arid badlands, forests, rivers and streams. As just one example, Jefferson County, Nebraska, lies on land surfaces impacted by “glacial drift.” These lands have different soil varieties—drift, silt loam, and loess--, fast-flowing rivers and creeks, and in the 19th century a variety of crops—corn, wheat, oats, and barley—grew here.¹² Such “an intra-county diversity of crops”¹³ could not have

¹¹ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 190-191.

¹² Martyn John Bowden, “Changes in Land Use in Jefferson County, Nebraska 1857-1957,” (master’s thesis, Geography, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, June 1959), 13-14, 33.

come from dead earth. Much of the Great Plains still sits atop prehistoric groundwater sources, which lie deep in the earth. Bearing in mind the enormous quantity of life on the Plains, juxtaposing Pa Ingalls with Stephen Long is significant. When Pa digs a well on that prairie, the “clear and cold and good”¹⁴ water that rushes up is ancient, pure groundwater. Long’s assertion is most powerfully proven wrong by the characters’ ability to enjoy a water source “whenever” they are thirsty. It is not “stale, warm water from the creek.”¹⁵ Because groundwater bubbles up from deep within the earth’s crust, it is the ultimate proof of the potential for life.

The family succeeds in an environment thought untenable. This is part of the book series’ promotion of a settler mythology that appeals to a popular target audience. The *Little House* series prettifies and simplifies the harshness of 19th century frontier life. But perhaps the *environment* is the other aspect, along with food ways, that Wilder as a writer left unaltered. Her “little houses” exist in different locations in the series. But regardless of *where* it is, the family overcomes harsh elements. Since recent research reveals that Wilder did not soften the deadly winter of 1880-1881, it is safe to say that all other descriptions of weather and nature—especially grasshoppers and prairie fires—also are uncensored.

Wilder’s pioneer childhood was one of cyclical existence. Romines acknowledges this, writing that *Little House in the Big Woods*’ action revolves mainly around nature’s

¹³ Bowden, 2.

¹⁴ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 160-161.

¹⁵ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 161.

cycles: “*sugaring-off, butchering, and harvest.*”¹⁶ Readers are led through spring, summer, fall and winter in each book. What might be called *the mankind cycle* can be seen in this rotation with one last discussion of a primarily female task, that of preserving food. Preservation of food—fruits, vegetables, and meats—at first is seen as a process that thoroughly disrupts the natural cycle. Recall that many a pioneer would let fruit fall from trees and rot. It simply returned to the soil. Does the process of preserving food for the winter with contemporary techniques mean that 19th century settlers were destroying the cycle of nature—turning the expectation of rot and decay into something unnatural?

Indeed, by 1875, according to Abby Morton Diaz, “canning and preserving fruit; making sauces and jellies, and catchups [sic] and pickles” were so often undertaken as to be some of the “more frequently occurring tasks.”¹⁷ Matthews does not tell us any more about this Mrs. Diaz, where she lived, how many children she had, or what her social class was. Regardless, Mrs. Diaz’s categorization of canning, jellifying, and pickling as “frequent” tasks signifies that contemporary housewifery—in this case, probably in the urban sphere of Boston¹⁸--took preservation very seriously. Indeed, Blackford recalls that Louisa May Alcott’s character Meg March Brooke becomes distraught when she “cannot make her jelly *jell*.”¹⁹ Preservation’s inclusion in the plots of popular novels of domesticity indicates, on a deeper level than even Diaz’s advice manual, that post- Civil War notions of feminine competence included food preservation. If fictional female

¹⁶ Romines, *Constructing the Little House*, 32. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 98.

¹⁸ Diaz’s 1875 book, *A Domestic Problem: Work and Culture in the Household*, was published in Boston under J. R. Osgood.

¹⁹ Holly Blackford, *Civilization and Her Discontents*, 148.

protagonists were preserving food, two key things were happening in 19th century American society. First, characters emphasized its practical importance. Second, perhaps more housewives would attempt pickling, jellifying, and canning if they saw their favorite characters doing so. Jelly-making's appearance in *Little Women*—a wildly popular serialized novel—suggests that popular culture potentially had the power to emphasize food preservation as a vital practice, even in urban areas where technology and the economy rapidly altered lifestyles.

For most middle- and upper-class urban women in the post-war east, jellifying and pickling were part of the hospitality repertoire. “Tea offered the possibility of a mid-afternoon social event.” At teas and other occasions, the most rustic item was “simply bread, butter, and preserves” but “cakes, cookies, tarts, biscuits . . . sweetmeats, relishes, and delicacies” surpassed these.²⁰ Society saw a proliferation of sweet foods. Within the context of *Little Women* as a highly-read serialized contemporary novel, Meg's failed currant jelly is something comical. In the context of Wilder's *Little House* series, though, the preserving of fruits and other foods is sobering, as the characters focus on ensuring winter survival. At any rate, Ma Ingalls the “goddess witch” blunts winter's weapon of starvation with her kitchen witchery. She uses the task of filling the larder as a teachable moment for her daughters. By having them help preserve fruits and other food at a young age, Ma ensures that Laura and Mary have the necessary skills to repeat this process in their own households. Even Pa values instruction, having Laura help him build a

²⁰ Williams, *Food in the United States 1820-1900*, 161-162.

smokehouse. At five years old, Laura's job is to bring him pieces of hickory wood—"new, clean, white ones."²¹

So from her earliest years, Laura observes and practices food preservation. The smokehouse in Wisconsin's "big woods" is little more than a hollow log stuffed full of lit hickory chips. Venison is smoked in it, and after several days when it is done "Ma wraps each piece neatly in paper"²² and stores them in the attic. Excess whitefish is "salted down in barrels for the winter."²³ The pig is slaughtered only when the weather is cold enough to "keep the pork frozen,"²⁴ as the family lacks the primitive contemporary urban refrigeration. Vegetables are stored in the attic as well. Depending on their type, they are either stored as-is or allowed to dry. The peppers, which will dry out, are "wreaths of red"²⁵ tacked above whole pumpkins and squashes. These gourds are "piled in orange and yellow and green heaps in the attic's corners."²⁶ Cheeses keep if they are rubbed with butter and sewn into cheesecloth, "stacked on the pantry shelves."²⁷ Onions hang in papery ropes "braided together by their tops."²⁸ The Ingallses attic is nearly filled, but there is still room for preserved meats.

²¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 7.

²² Wilder, *Big Woods*, 10.

²³ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 10.

²⁴ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 11.

²⁵ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 12.

²⁶ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 12.

²⁷ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 12.

²⁸ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 12.

Meat preservation is accomplished by smoking, which dries it out, or pickling, or sausage-making. The Ingallses either pickle pork or turn it into sausage. The same pig whose tail Laura and Mary eagerly roast is cut into even more pieces. Ma renders lard from its fat: “all that day and the next . . . the big pots simmered and boiled.”²⁹ To make a gelatin-based sausage called headcheese, Ma boils the pig’s head separately after “carefully” scraping and cleaning it. It boils until “all the meat fell off the bones. She chopped the meat fine with her chopping knife in the wooden bowl, she seasoned it with pepper and salt and spices. Then, she mixed the pot-liquor with it, and set it away in a pan to cool. When it was cool it would be cut in slices, and that was headcheese.”³⁰

This gelatinous stuff must be eaten quickly. But Ma also makes a type of sausage that can last the winter. She lets the bitter cold freeze the sausage—it is not a smoked sausage that is enjoyed here. For these meatballs, Ma uses “the little pieces of meat, lean and fat that had been cut off the large pieces . . . chopped and chopped until it was all chopped fine. She seasoned it with salt and pepper and with dried sage leaves from the garden. Then with her hands she . . . molded it into balls. She put the balls in a pan out in the shed, where they would freeze and be good to eat all winter.”³¹ Here the meat is raw. All the smoked meat—“hams and shoulders”—rests tied in paper in the attic, while “big jars of lard and the keg of white salt-pork”³² share shed space with the frozen sausage balls.

²⁹ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 17.

³⁰ Wilder, 17-18.

³¹ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 18

³² Wilder, *Big Woods*, 18.

When the family moves to Kansas, there are ample opportunities for Laura to help her mother preserve fruit, but there is no bounty of food to equal that from the “big woods” they’d left behind. The family must begin again the food storage process. It is not indicated if the family takes what is left of the attic’s food supply on their journey south. In the “hot afternoons” of Kansas in early summer, blackberries are gathered. Thick clouds of mosquitoes whine around Ma and Laura, “but every day they brought home pails full of berries, and Ma spread them in the sun to dry.”³³ Not one berry is wasted. “Every day they ate all the blackberries they wanted, and next winter they would have dried blackberries to stew.”³⁴ Ma does not think jellying and candying fruit is important. That is just as well as those two processes take equipment—canning jars and a large pot to boil water—and an expensive item—sugar—that the family does not have in Kansas. Berries dried on clean sheets in the tall grass would have to do. Later, in Minnesota, small wild plums are gathered and dried in the same manner, to be eaten stewed.

Jellied and candied fruits are frivolous. They are appropriate for Alcott’s Marches, who are in genteel poverty during and after the Civil War in Concord, but they have no place in the Ingallses post-War frontier lives. Laura and Mary eat bread and *butter*, not bread and *jam*. The only time Ma expends the time and material for jellies is during the belated Christmas meal at the end of *The Long Winter*, when she makes “a mass of crimson jelly”—“Laura and Carrie picked over the cranberries and washed them.

³³ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 183.

³⁴ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 183.

Ma stewed them with sugar.”³⁵ A little sugar separates Wilder’s Ingalls women from Alcott’s March women in terms of class status and attitudes toward food. Sugar is heavily symbolic—it denotes whiteness, which calls to mind gentility and female body image. It was costly at the time and was produced largely by unethical labor. Sugar had a “centuries-long association with slavery, and with other forms of domination after slavery was abolished.”³⁶ Even so, by the 19th century sugar—from cane or sugar beet harvesting, to refinement, to export and sale, to consumption—had become “one of the massive demographic forces in world history.”³⁷ Sugar had been enjoyed much longer in Britain, but in America it was now “the kingly luxury of commoners.”³⁸ In America’s consumer-driven marketplace, sugar became “a paradigmatic commodity” in national and “world capitalism.”³⁹ In the *Little House* series sugar is a rare treat. Its use or disuse in the *Little Women* and *Little House* storylines shows its relative importance to the respective books’ characters.

In *Little Women* the recently married Meg March Brooke frets over her failed currant jelly. “Half a barrel of sugar” is wasted and the dark little fruits are still hard and sour. Indeed, the amount of currant jelly Meg seeks to make seems rather large: “a small boy” is hired “to pick currants for her” from the bushes around the house, and “four

³⁵ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 328.

³⁶ Steven Marcus, “Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History by Sidney W. Mintz,” *American Ethnologist* 13 (1986), 378.

³⁷ Marcus, 378.

³⁸ Marcus, 378. Sugar had been used in Britain in “five general uses or ‘functions’: as medicine, spice or condiment, decorative material, sweetener, and preservative” since the Middle Ages.

³⁹ Marcus, 378.

dozen” jars are lined up on the counter.⁴⁰ In contrast, the child Laura Ingalls can hardly enjoy refined sugar—she picks at a piece of Nellie Oleson’s heavily-iced birthday cake. Cranberry jelly is made and eaten only at the highly social Christmas feast—once a year. Meg’s husband John Brooke, in Alcott’s novel, is a relatively comfortable professional used to eating well. When he and Meg do not have much money to spare he jokes “shall I send some veal or mutton for dinner, darling?”⁴¹ In *Little House*, expensive cuts of meat the Ingallses certainly have not. In an urban setting, the Brooke’s in *Little Women* eat well often. John is “so fond of jelly”⁴² that Meg does not consider the potential for a considerable waste if her jelly-making were to fail. She thinks jars and jars of it would look rather nice, “so well on the top shelf”⁴³ of the pantry. So she goes headlong “with more energy than discretion”⁴⁴ into jelly-making, and fails. When *she* is newly married Laura Ingalls Wilder, on the other hand, forgets the sugar for rhubarb pie served to company.

While Laura’s accidental omission of the sugar was read earlier as a bumbling cook’s forgetfulness, it can now be juxtaposed against fellow housewife Meg March Brooke’s currant jelly failure. Laura’s omission is now revealed as a subconscious

⁴⁰ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Project Gutenberg EBook #514) Chapter 28 “Domestic Experiences.” No page.

⁴¹ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Project Gutenberg EBook #514) Chapter 28 “Domestic Experiences.” No page.

⁴² Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Project Gutenberg EBook #514) Chapter 28 “Domestic Experiences.” No page.

⁴³ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Project Gutenberg EBook #514) Chapter 28 “Domestic Experiences.” No page.

⁴⁴ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Project Gutenberg EBook #514) Chapter 28 “Domestic Experiences.” No page.

rejection of an upper-middle class, expensive urban foodstuff. She rejects the premise that sugar had become, by the 19th century, “the first mass-produced exotic *necessity* of a proletarian working class.”⁴⁵ Laura’s childhood unease around material and culinary excess cemented her dislike of refined sugar. Her family has never viewed sugar as necessary. Conversely Meg March Brooke’s aspirations for a more urbane lifestyle suggest that for her family, refined sugar was a mark of status and a treat to be eaten often. Though it is her youngest sister Amy who expresses the most outlandish desires for upper-middle class gentility, Meg and her husband’s fondness for sweets makes Laura Ingalls Wilder look more provincial than ever. After all, Laura can barely suppress her excitement as a thirteen-year old in *The Long Winter* when she surprises her beloved Pa with a pie made from green pumpkin—hardly the sweet treats of either Nellie Oleson’s or the March sisters’ liking.

The associations Laura makes about different foods during her life shows that the frontier’s physical harshness makes her realize that food is a very serious thing. Nowhere in Wilder’s books do the characters, with the exception of Nellie and Willie Oleson, have such frivolous attitudes about food as Meg March Brooke. Food on the pantry shelf is instead, for Wilder’s characters, the difference between life and death. The preservation of fruits, vegetables, and meats on the frontier, then, is strict pragmatism for the Ingallses. Preserved foods are still delicious in Wilder’s telling—salt pork sizzles crisp and hot in the pan. Stewed dried blackberries are pleasantly tart. Stored nuts that have been roasted taste rich enough. The hams, sausages, peppers and onions provide savory contrast to the

⁴⁵ Marcus, 378.

carefully root-cellared potatoes all winter long. “‘You can’t beat hickory-cured ham,’ Pa said.”⁴⁶

Food storage is a common trait shared by people and some animals, but only in the hands of humans is it extremely sophisticated. Pa converts a hollow tree, such as one used by bees for storing honeycombs, into a smokehouse. In Wilder’s books mankind is dwarfed on the frontier. This much is clear, even through the angle of domesticity, to choose just one. Ma can only sigh and say “I don’t know when Laura’s looked so like a wild Indian”⁴⁷ as the teenager rejects female propriety. The frontier has loosed Laura’s true personality. Wilder’s ancient landscape of breathtaking beauty and harshness shows that Wilder is hyper-focused as a writer on nature itself. Laura constantly is outdoors, but not just because she flouts the rules of Victorian girlhood. She feels the magic, and thus feels the natural cycle’s rhythm. This magic that the wilderness possesses is not strong enough to hold back obstacles to human success that lurk in the wilderness. Because Nature is the ultimate wise woman, she interweaves dark and light magic to foil the human interlopers.

The *Little House* series holds a series of obstacles to Laura’s final success. Man has risen above Nature perhaps in all places *except* the frontier. The fictionalized Ingallses battle many of the Midwest’s harsh elements. But perhaps the most psychologically devastating are the grasshopper infestations during their years in Plum Creek and the record-shattering winter of 1880-1881 on the De Smet-area prairie.

⁴⁶ Wilder, *Big Woods*, 14.

⁴⁷ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 55.

In *The Long Winter*, when fourteen-year old Laura asks her mother if they will starve, her character has made a vital arc in maturity. She can see through her mother's quick bluster of "we won't starve, no," because her mother sharply tells her "be quiet, Laura. Carrie and Mary were coming downstairs."⁴⁸ Laura reacts with fear at the prospect of starvation, but her sharpness here was something only just being formed seven years earlier in Plum Creek, Minnesota.

When Laura is seven, and again the next summer when she is eight, grasshoppers destroy the wheat crops in Minnesota in a hundred-mile radius. "There's no great loss without some gain" is all Ma can say when she observes their hens gulping down grasshoppers. "We won't have to buy feed for the hens."⁴⁹ With the garden destroyed—"the potatoes, the carrots, the beets and beans . . . the cornstalks"⁵⁰—along with the wheat, the family has only the supplies it has laid in. This supply is nowhere near the bounty of the "big woods" where every winter the attic became a packed cornucopia. Laura is frightened of the ugly insects and their destruction—"their eyes bulged and their horny legs took them hopping everywhere . . . They ate the whole prairie bare and brown."⁵¹ The second summer, the grasshoppers eat during a drought that leaves Laura, Mary, Carrie and Ma miserable. "They could feel the heat of the day beginning . . . there was no rain . . . Poor little Carrie's skin was red with heat rash. Laura and Mary were

⁴⁸ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 243.

⁴⁹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 199.

⁵⁰ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 199.

⁵¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 261.

sweltering.”⁵² During this hot period, Laura wants to be a Native American girl who “. . . didn’t have to wear any clothes.”⁵³

The drought and the incessantly chewing grasshoppers make young Laura aware—though yet not acutely—that her family’s survival depends upon the whim of Nature. When the grasshoppers suddenly depart, and when summer storms roll in, Ma, at least, is quick to praise God: “Ma went into the house and threw herself down in the rocking-chair. ‘My Lord!’ she said. ‘My Lord!’ The words were praying, but they sounded like ‘Thank you!’”⁵⁴ Laura notices that Spot the cow is thin because her only food is “willow sprouts and plum brush and a little dead, dry grass left from last summer.” Though her mother tries to shield her from hardships with cheerful words, Laura can tell immediately by Pa’s withdrawn personality that the second grasshopper summer will be worse than the first. “He did not smile at [her]. ‘The grasshoppers are laying their eggs . . . there’s thirty-five or forty eggs in every pod. There’s a pod in every hole. There’s eight or ten holes to the square foot. All over this whole country.’”⁵⁵ By laying their eggs the first summer, the grasshoppers ensured destruction of all crops the next. Ma cannot handle Nature. The good witch is outdone. “Ma dropped down in a chair and let her hands fall helplessly at her sides”⁵⁶ at the news of the grasshopper eggs. The

⁵² Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 218.

⁵³ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 261.

⁵⁴ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 218, 266.

⁵⁵ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 207-208.

⁵⁶ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 208.

family is somewhat psychologically prepared for the second grasshopper summer. But it is utterly unprepared for prairie fires.

In both *Little House on the Prairie* and *On the Banks of Plum Creek* the Ingallses fight sudden, scorching summer fires. In *Little House on the Prairie* Mr. Scott worries the Indians set the fire “on purpose to burn out white settlers. Pa didn’t believe it. He said the Indians had always burned the prairie to make green grass grow more quickly, and traveling easier.”⁵⁷ The Ingallses fight the fires aggressively. The fire in *Little House on the Prairie* is efficiently tamed by Pa. He has the two horses hitched to the plow when it breaks out, and plows a fire-break ring around the cabin. “Pa plowed a long furrow west of the house and south of the house, and back again east of the house,” but he thinks it will not be enough: “I couldn’t plow but one furrow; there isn’t time . . . That fire’s moving faster than a horse can run.”⁵⁸ The fire-break is effective, though, because the roaring fire swallows itself up in the furrow.⁵⁹

Laura and Mary cower against the side of the cabin and squint through the smoke at their parent’s frantic dance in the flames. Ma is in the role of aggressor against the fire. While her husband is also, he is the mastermind, thinking quickly of what to do and barking orders. “Prairie fire! . . . Get the tub full of water! Put sacks in it! Hurry!”⁶⁰ Fighting fires is a masculine role that Pa takes to immediately, unconsciously. Firefighting can be seen as male aggression and temper beating back at the female

⁵⁷ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 283-284.

⁵⁸ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 277.

⁵⁹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 278-282.

⁶⁰ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 278-282.

Nature, who is showing her own displeasure. In *Plum Creek* the second prairie fire occurs when Laura's father—the protector, the aggressor—is away. Pa has walked east to find work in an area the grasshoppers have not destroyed. Ma and the girls only narrowly escape the fire, thanks to Mr. Nelson. Nelson, the Norwegian neighbor who is only allowed by Wilder to say “Yah! Yah!” saves the family home in a role that of course, does not require him to speak much.

Fire has jumped the prudently already-dug fire break around the Ingallses cabin. Laura, Mary, and Ma cannot beat out the flames fast enough with their wet burlap sacks. They cough and squint through the smoke and slap at “the fiery swift wheels” that lick noisily around the haystacks. Nelson's “grey colt came galloping . . . He grabbed a pitchfork and shouted ‘Run quick! Bring wet rags!’”⁶¹ They fling wet sacks at him and run to get more. Nelson spears some sacks on a pitchfork's tines and extinguishes a flaming haystack. Laura regains her courage and she “beat that burning wheel” of tumbleweed “to death”⁶² close to the house.

A few things are worth noting. One, that Mr. Nelson's English is given an improved treatment here by Wilder. Proximity to English-speaking neighbors improved Nelson's English by this second year in the *Plum Creek* chronology, but a more nuanced reading can also be made here. Mr. Nelson is in the hyper-masculine role of a male actor against a female Nature. His actions speak louder than his words and the situation requires little verbal direction to Ma and the girls. Only instinct and active cues are needed to successfully fight this fire. A second point to be made is that Laura's act of

⁶¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 274

⁶² Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 274.

aggression against a flaming tumbleweed is both foreshadowing and an instance where she is free to act in a more male way.

When a fire consumes her and “Manly’s” “little grey home in the West” in *The First Four Years* Laura is poorly in both mind and body. Her newborn son has died. Her toddler daughter makes demands that strain her grief. She is absent-minded. She inhabits several female roles here—the distracted wife, the grieving mother, the post-partum woman—so as the fire destroys her home all she can do is sob. Her childhood self—the eight-year old living on Plum Creek—fights fire with a masculine aggression, beating out flames “to death.” Nature would not overpower little Laura if she could help it, but Nature catches grown-up Laura off-guard and wins. Nature’s dark magic duels in Laura’s young years against her mother’s white magic of domestic order and harmony. Interestingly, little Laura is the one who beats out flames very near the house during the Plum Creek fire, and not Ma. This instance with Laura and the fire shows that she is very much within her female role of protector of bounty. No fire will make it near the home—the symbol of safety and plenty—if Laura can help it.

Why the adult character is so alarmingly unequipped to deal with Nature and to provide for her family is no mystery. As a literary character Laura Ingalls Wilder is written as a foil to the “angel in the house” of the 19th century. Her wild surroundings make her inappropriate for any other role. Someone like her, or even her mother, who experienced some finer things, would automatically find the overwhelming power of Nature too much to handle at times. In contrast, Meg March Brooke is the ultimate housewife, raised with expectations of gentility. The eldest daughter in *Little Women* echoes prevailing sentiments of the time on housewifery: in her urban setting, with no

capricious Nature to contend with, she is free to be the “model housekeeper.”⁶³ One of her “obstacles”⁶⁴ is unintentional waste of food. She finds homemaking, marriage, and children overwhelming at times, too, but her challenges pale compared to Laura’s. Meg March Brooke’s concerns range mostly over how industrious it would look to have jars full of jelly in the pantry. She does not need to give the room—the pantry—much more thought. For Laura Ingalls Wilder and her family, however, pantries, cellars, and attics are highly symbolic little rooms.

Pantries, cellars, and attics were places where food and cooking tools were stored. With the advent of commercially canned and boxed goods, many a pantry in the 19th century was stocked in a more modern way. The Ingallses, though, transform their Wisconsin cabin’s attic into a cornucopia by stuffing it full of rustically-stored goods—paper-wrapped meats and such. Each pantry, attic or cellar in the *Little House* series continues in this tradition of obsolescence. Ma occasionally hides a contemporary surprise in these places, such as the tinned oysters and the box of salt cod in *The Long Winter*. But until the family takes ownership of the pantry in the surveyor’s house in *By the Shores of Silver Lake* it is solely responsible for hand-packing shelves and corners with foods that it grew or hunted.

Though Nature uses her best weapons to overpower mankind, the fictionalized Ingalls family survives, because it is the centerpiece of Wilder’s novelized memoirs. It overcomes obstacles with resourcefulness and good cheer—and thanks to Wilder’s

⁶³ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Project Gutenberg EBook #514) Chapter 28 “Domestic Experiences.” No page.

⁶⁴ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Project Gutenberg EBook #514) Chapter 28 “Domestic Experiences.” No page.

unwitting use of Bettelheim, a little magic. Since Ma and Pa are equals in the 19th-century formula of husband and wife, they are complimentary opposites. Each inhabits his or her own sphere of influence. It is important for the food ways discussion to get a treatment of the male sphere—the forest, the open plain, and the rifle. Pa Ingalls has his own magic, his own ability to charm the little houses. His prized possession is his “long rifle.” It protects the houses from its post above the door. More importantly, it provides the family with fresh game meat. Its use by Pa helps him be parsed as a character. Pa Ingalls is the idealized rough-cut frontiersman in the mold of James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, the main protagonist in *The Leatherstocking Tales*. Cooper’s Bumppo (specifically in *The Last of the Mohicans*, where he is known as Hawk-Eye) and Wilder’s Pa Ingalls will be compared and contrasted. It will be revealed that both authors draw male characters who are mock-heroic, to use Romine’s term.

The theme of predation on the frontier is central to the plots of Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* and Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*. The frontier is such a perfect setting for predation—of humans by other humans, of humans by animals, of animals by humans—precisely because it is a liminal place. In the 19th-century setting of *Little House*, the frontier is extremely liminal because it is the last place that men like Pa can feel happy away from the city. It is not even until the series nears its end, with *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, that the Ingallses come into contact with anything resembling the day’s modernity or technology. In urban areas, the only predator against man is his fellow. In wild places animals could attack with sudden ferocity. Humans were still, in these places, the interlopers on animals’ habitats. Stripped of the literary convention of magic, Wilder’s frontier is extremely dangerous. Cooper’s frontier is more intensely

romantic with only subtle undercurrents of danger. The predators and pests that plague the Ingallses are the unsung characters of Wilder's series. They show that no matter how larger than life the family seems between the book-bindings, it is insignificant on the vast landscape.

Sometimes, the frontier's predators stalk the night—wolves gather in an eerie congress, backlit by a large moon, in *Little House on the Prairie*. They seem near enough to send their howls “right in Laura's ear.” “There in the moonlight sat half a circle of wolves. They sat on their haunches and looked at Laura in the window, and she looked at them. She had never seen such big wolves.” They had “pointed ears . . . strong shoulders,” coats of “shaggy gray” and eyes of “glittering green.” They “sat so near her, shifting their paws and licking their chops.”⁶⁵ The wolves are significant for a few reasons. First, the unsettling quality of their sheer number is heightened by their seeming intelligence or craftiness. They possess those “glittering” eyes which lend them agency. Five-year-old Laura is driven from bed into her father's arms by the chilling yips and yowls. Her father holds her up to the window—which does not have glass panes yet—and the two of them watch. ““They are in a ring clear around the house,’ Pa whispered.”⁶⁶ In this scene the humans are interlopers on the wolves' territory, and the wolves are perhaps trying to make it known by surrounding the little house. The rough-hewn cabin could be near a den site or a hunting ground, or simply be in the wolf pack's favorite howling spot. The wilderness cabin and the wolf in the *Red Riding-Hood* tale come to mind. The wolf in that story eats a human interloper—Red Riding-Hood's

⁶⁵ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 96.

⁶⁶ Wilder, 96.

grandmother—who lives in a little wooden house, unawares she is constantly observed by the wolf. There is no need, in *Little House on the Prairie*, for an anonymous woodsman with burly arms and heroic timing to hack at a wolf's carcass to free any ingested humans. No chance of wolf attacks can generate in the house Laura's parents built, because it is protected by their talismanic qualities. Pa's rifle is propped against the wall, unneeded. What is far more important at this moment is for his daughter to be able to see the magnificent, hair-raising sight that a pack of howling wolves surely is. Valerie Fogelman writes that "as the United States expanded westward, the number of wolves decreased dramatically" first "in settled areas and finally in wilderness areas" because "wolves were 'the natural enemies to civilization.' They were 'a stain, a foul stigma, on . . . civilization and enterprise.'" ⁶⁷ For centuries wolves had been described by "European naturalists" as "treacherous, deceitful, cruel, cowardly and ravenous." ⁶⁸ In Wilder's treatment, they are, like everything else, larger than life, and clearly the dominant force on the landscape.

Pa's rifle, as an object in the *Little House* series, can have a little study of its own. It is a smooth-bore black-powder rifle, long and straight and made with the preceding century's workmanship. A word on the invention and evolution of firearms is needed because the imagery of Pa and his rifle is so strong. It immediately calls to mind the imagery surrounding Hawk-Eye of *The Last of the Mohicans*, part of *The Leatherstocking Tales*. Gunnar Brusewitz explores the history of firearms in his

⁶⁷ Valerie M. Fogelman, "American Attitudes Towards Wolves: A History of Misperception." *Environmental Review* 13 (1989), 67.

⁶⁸ Fogelman, "American Attitudes Towards Wolves: A History of Misperception." *Environmental Review* 13 (1989), 70.

comprehensive book *Hunting*. Brusewitz traces the evolution of firearms, beginning with the earliest—and inconvenient—type “in the middle of the fourteenth century.” This prototype rifle was so tedious—with a slow match of a “length of burning hemp rope”—that “it is self-evident that it was not possible to take careful aim with [it] since the shooter was fully occupied with the business of getting the priming powder to ignite.”⁶⁹ The use of gunpowder, sometimes called “black powder” would continue until well into the 19th century despite the eventual prevalence of cartridge-loading mass-manufactured rifles and pistols. The reasons Pa Ingalls’ character evokes so strongly the character of Hawk-Eye from Cooper’s *Mohicans* are his seeming inability to misfire, and the very nature of his rifle.

Using Brusewitz’s descriptive text and illustrations, it is easily seen that the rifles belonging to both Pa Ingalls and Hawk-Eye are virtually identical. Both frontiersmen’s rifles are smooth-bore, barrel-loading musket-types that use both powder and shot. Pa Ingalls’s rifle, then, is an antique. Incidentally, Hawk-Eye’s mystique transfers so strongly into Wilder’s first novelized memoir that she calls the relevant chapter “The Long Rifle.” The only difference between the character’s rifles may be that Pa’s uses a percussion mechanism. Cooper does not describe “Killdeer,” Hawk-Eye’s long rifle, in any great detail for readers to know if it uses a percussion mechanism. But this would have been unlikely. Brusewitz asserts that percussion caps appeared in 1786, which is more than two decades after the events in *Mohicans*. That story takes place in 1757, so Killdeer is eerily similar to Pa Ingall’s (unnamed) rifle in all but its firing mechanism.

⁶⁹ Gunnar Brusewitz, *Hunting: Hunters, game, weapons and hunting methods from the remote past to the present day* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), 78. This book was first printed in Sweden in 1967.

Cooper's Hawk-Eye is the consummate 18th-century frontiersman. Hawk-Eye radiates a hyper-masculinity that, consciously or not, Wilder infused into the character Pa Ingalls. Coarse, uneducated, and pragmatic Hawk-Eye—whose real name is Nathaniel Bumppo—is rarely apart from his rifle throughout the *Leatherstocking* saga. In *The Deerslayer* the character is still young. Despite his youth he is already known as a crack shot in the white settler, Mohican, and Delaware communities. One day in the woods his companion Henry March (“Hurry Harry”) tells him to eat heartily of venison—“this poor devil of a doe.” “Fall to, lad, and prove your manhood . . . with your teeth, as you’ve already done with your rifle.”⁷⁰ Bumppo/Deerslayer (later to become Hawk-Eye) acknowledges somewhat humbly his “quick eye and [active] foot”⁷¹ that so often allows him to secure food.

Wilder writes in “The Long Rifle” in *Little House in the Big Woods* that Pa also has this “quick eye.” “When he shot at a bear or a panther, he must kill it with the first shot. A wounded bear or panther could kill a man before he had time to load his gun again. But Laura and Mary were never afraid . . . They knew he could kill bears and panthers with the first shot.”⁷² The unusual swiftness and accuracy that both Hawk-Eye and Pa possess become ever more obvious in a close reading of this passage in *Big Woods*. These musket-type barrel loaders were rather cumbersome and time consuming to use. Pa Ingalls (and Hawk-Eye too) had a set procedure. “Whenever [Pa] shot at a wild

⁷⁰ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, in *The Leatherstocking Saga*, ed. Allan Nevins. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), 45.

⁷¹ Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 45.

⁷² Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods* 52. “Panthers” are mountain lions (a. k. a. cougars, pumas, catamounts—*Puma concolor*).

animal he had to stop and load the gun—measure the powder, put it in and shake it down, put in the patch and the bullet and pound them down, and then put a fresh cap under the hammer—before he could shoot *again*.”⁷³ At the rasp of metal-on-metal when the ramrod was inside the barrel, or at the hissing sound of powder going down the barrel, or even the smell of smoke from recently-fired powder and shot—animals could exit the area, or hostile humans could fire their own weapons. The forest and the plain were filled with potential food *and* potential danger while the hunter’s mind was filled with concentration—one eye on the prey or the target, the other on the loading or re-loading process.

The conflation of qualities between Hawk-Eye and Pa Ingalls can be seen easily as coincidence, but it is likely not. Because Wilder wanted to promote a new American myth, her choice of the ultimate frontiersman character as a model makes sense. This infusion is one of several areas in which Wilder’s series and Cooper’s series eerily overlap. The landscape, character’s personalities, as well as tropes such as the expert marksman and the sinister Indian are present in both series. This provides provocative analysis. It is safe to question whether Cooper’s *Tales* ever inspired Wilder to steep her father character in a little of the charisma and marksmanship of another, overwhelmingly masculine frontier character.

While Pa is not so praised for his marksmanship to ever earn a nickname—Natty Bumppo is called both Long Rifle and Hawk-Eye in *The Last of the Mohicans*—Pa and Cooper’s character share the same never-miss-a-mark quality. Hawk-Eye/Bumppo has

⁷³ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 52. Emphasis added.

the philosophy “one shot, one kill”⁷⁴ guiding his use of Killdeer. Pa simply seems toweringly heroic in this same romantic vein to Laura and Mary—he could kill potentially vicious animals with “one shot.” Even if Wilder did not consciously choose Hawk-Eye as a pattern to base her father character upon, it is clearly evident that Hawk-Eye serves well as a model. After all, the *Little House* series purposely romanticizes the frontier. Cooper’s characters are on the original frontier in all five *Leatherstocking* novels. In both works cultures collide and separate, and the physical landscape is lingeringly described. Without a doubt, Cooper’s frontiers are intensely romantic.

One bit of fruitful analysis in the speculation over whether Wilder was influenced by Cooper is that the very plot of *The Last of the Mohicans* deals with a captivity interlude. The analysis of Rowlandson’s *Sovereignty* shows the towering dangers of white-Native interactions. This (albeit factual) book may have been read by the Ingallses. In *Last of the Mohicans*, four European characters—Duncan Heyward, a Scottish soldier; music teacher David Gamut; and Cora and Alice Munro, are abducted by a revenge-seeking Huron named Magua (himself once held captive by the Mohawk). Rather than a straight telling of Europeans in the throes of Native-initiated peril—like Rowlandson’s true account—Cooper’s story is more complex because many of the characters fluctuate between racial and ethnic lines. The character Cora is the daughter of a white father and a mixed-race mother from the Caribbean. Hawk-Eye himself is white, but is close with two Mohican tribesmen, Uncas and his father Chingachgook. Hawk-Eye and Cora have awkward fates in the vast wilderness. Hawk-Eye moves with fairly little repercussion between Native and settler cultures. His many aliases, though, paired with his various

⁷⁴ Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 45.

skills and deeds speak perhaps to a constant search for selfhood. Perhaps the man more willingly assumes identities given to him, than really owns one. Cora must be killed off by the author—but why? Is her repulsion at the thought of being carnally linked to Magua too unbelievable a scenario, because she herself is the product of a racially-mixed relationship? Her somewhat naïve half-sister Alice—helpless and in a faint for most of the novel—is allowed to live and marry Major Heyward. Alice is thoroughly European. The younger Miss Munro is not racially or ethnically threatening to Heyward’s stolid Britishness. One of the most spirited characters must die, while the gentle but easily overwrought one may live. Alice is too good-natured and too frail for the wilderness, while Cora is aware of malice lurking in both the landscape and people. Ironically she is also strong enough to survive it. Ultimately, at equal odds with Cora’s hardiness is the man Uncas’s admiration of her. Any relationship between them is taboo—again weirdly, given Cora’s background—and he must die along with Cora. Lastly, the character Magua shows the ancient tradition of inter-tribal captivity raids and trades.

The settler family in Wilder’s *Little House* series also navigates mutable boundary lines between racial groups, but none of them must die. The influences of gentility and urbanity are strong enough to snap Laura out of the desire for another culture’s life ways. This is evident at the moment Laura fully embraces her role as 19th century housewife is in 1885. She slaps the Sioux man who “laid his hand” on her arm while asking “You go—me—be my squaw?”⁷⁵ in *The First Four Years*. Like Cora Munro, Laura is strong and spirited, reacting violently to even the suggestion of a carnal link between herself and a Native man. Laura as an adult displays the same wary disgust that both her mother

⁷⁵ Wilder, *The First Four Years*, 33.

character Ma, and Cooper's characters Cora and Major Heyward, show toward Native Americans. However Cora, early in *Mohicans*, snaps angrily at Heyward over his opinion of their Native guide. "Should we distrust the man because his manners are not our manners, and that his skin is dark!"⁷⁶ Ultimately the final affront to Cora is when her abductor insinuates marriage. Magua has "soiled" hands—this is not unlike the description of Wilder's second two Osage characters who are "dirty and mean." Cooper's antagonist also physically touches a non-Native woman. The sinister Magua "uttered a yell of pleasure. 'Come,' he said, laying his soiled hands on the dress of Cora, 'the wigwam of the Huron is still open. Is it not better than this place?' 'Away,' cried Cora, veiling her eyes from his revolting aspect."⁷⁷ In *Little House* Laura's wariness as an adult goes beyond cultural otherness. She is no longer spellbound by her environment. Laura's wariness of man and nature is not shared by Hawk-Eye, Alice Munro, and even Laura's younger self.

The character Alice Munro in *Mohicans* is as overjoyed by nature as little Laura is in the early *Little House* books. Teenaged Alice is awestruck by the wilderness, much as young Laura is, though Alice is so pale as to have a "dazzling complexion"⁷⁸ while Laura constantly risks turning "brown."⁷⁹ Alice is certainly the "credulous and excited traveler [sic]"⁸⁰ at the beginning of Cooper's novel. Her half-sister Cora does not pay attention to

⁷⁶ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, in *The Leatherstocking Saga*, ed. Allan Nevins. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954) 288.

⁷⁷ Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 371-372.

⁷⁸ Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 286.

⁷⁹ Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, 150.

⁸⁰ Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 281.

the landscape during a long trek to Fort William Henry. Cora's thoughts are "abstracted from the scene around her,"⁸¹ while Alice animatedly questions Heyward about their guide Magua and "the woods" they travel through. Major Heyward curtly replies: "You mistake the place of real danger."⁸² Real danger lurks, though Cooper describes the New York territory's wilderness as bucolic. "A breathing silence, which marks the drowsy sultriness of an American landscape in July" in a "secluded spot, interrupted only by the low voices of the men, the occasional and lazy tap of a woodpecker, the discordant cry of some gaudy jay, or a swelling on the ear, from the dull roar of a distant waterfall."⁸³ Allowed a burst of energy at this early point in the novel, Alice is even "the first to dash aside the slight branches of the bushes, and follow the runner along the dark and tangled pathway" after giving her horse "a smart cut of the whip."⁸⁴ She returns the frontier's embrace as happily as little Laura does, try as Laura's mother might to check her behavior. Returning to the settler family in *Little House*, it is clear that two characters—Laura and Pa—share some qualities with some of Cooper's characters. The differences between them lie in their time periods, their geographies, their class and rank, and their roles. Their copious differences outweigh their fewer similarities, but these differences do not render the similarities irrelevant.

If the *Little House* series was to succeed in contributing to the mystique of 19th century Western settlement, what better vein to do it in than one which is Cooper-esque?

⁸¹ Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 287.

⁸² Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 288.

⁸³ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 291.

⁸⁴ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 289.

This includes a romanticized landscape and characters with larger-than-life personalities. Cooper used what Wilder's contemporaries would have seen as quintessentially "American themes." "In *The Leatherstocking Tales* he showed [19th] century Americans how to live in or near the American wilderness," doing more "in his works than understanding, expressing and criticizing the American mind. Of course he sought to entertain, but he also attempted to inform and instruct his readers so they could share his understanding and be cognizant members of the national psyche."⁸⁵ Cooper contributed to the first wave of romanticizing Western settlement. It is likely that Wilder and her publishers simply followed his trail. It is quite likely that any editorial use of *Tales* would have come from her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane. Lane wrote in a recollection, "The Ozark Years," of her school days. She recalled reading all but one book in the town library, and one of the books she *did* read was *Tales*.⁸⁶ So, Rose was exposed at an early age to this "national psyche" of Cooper's. What this psyche was bears directly on the masculinities Pa Ingalls inhabits as a character. *Masculinities*, and not *masculinity*, is an important distinction to make here because upon close examination, the character is extremely liminal.

Pa Ingalls is an infinitely more complex character—*unsettling*—than Blackford ever realizes. He has roles that his marksman twin Hawk-Eye never assumes. Yet he uses an antique model of rifle whose only technological improvement is a percussion cap. Pa is unsettling because he shifts the paradigms of both *father* and *frontiersman*. The reader

⁸⁵ Russell T. Newman, *The Gentleman in the Garden: The Influential Landscape in the Works of James Fenimore Cooper* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 6.

⁸⁶ Wilder and Lane, "The Ozark Years," *A Little House Sampler* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 96.

is at first glance left with a “Pa” who is warm and loving. But then there is Pa displaying some diluted prejudice, and Pa boasting about taking resources with abandon versus Pa displaying good stewardship. Perhaps readers’ strongest impressions come concurrently: Pa the hunter and Pa the restless westward traveler. Pa has qualities and attributes that pit him against other male characters who are also trying to subdue Nature just so they can live. Pa comes out as one half (with Ma as the other) of the powerful force that perpetuates Wilder’s settler-centric saga.

Writer Dennis McAuliffe is convinced that the actual Charles Ingalls, staring out from an old tintype photograph, is a nightmarish fiend. He thinks Charles Ingalls’ “dark, narrow, hard, glassy, chilly, creepy eyes” and “two-foot-long vinery of beard”⁸⁷ are terrifying. Granted, the beard the Ingalls patriarch wears in the photograph is *hardly* near two feet long. *Little House* studies have given us photographs of the actual man alongside Garth Williams’s iconic 1950s illustrations. The “illustrated Pa” is remarkably warmer and more lifelike than the actual man in the photographs. Literally *viewing* Williams’ interpretation of Pa’s masculinity allows for a complete study.

Williams’ illustrations were commissioned some twenty years after the *Little House* books began to appear serially. Arguably, the call for these illustrations highlighted the books’ burgeoning popularity. In Williams’ charcoal drawings, we see the robust, rosy-cheeked health of the Ingallses and the spare leanness of the Native American men. We see Laura’s vigor contrasted with Nellie Oleson’s pale girlishness. In the popular view, these are not imagined bodies, but real ones—they are as real, as

⁸⁷ Romines, *Constructing the Little House*, 261. Note 9 for Chapter 2, “Indians in the House.”

central to the mythmaking Wilder accomplished as her prose. So the Ingallses are hale and hearty, snug in their “little houses,” wherever those may be. Illustrated, Pa is either with his daughters or out hunting with his rifle. When this character’s two powerful symbols—offspring and rifle—are combined into one setting, Williams’ illustrations show Pa in the dual role—at once—of indulgent parent and protector/mighty hunter.

Pa can barely hold back indulgent or proud smiles as he interacts with his daughters. Particularly, in an illustration accompanying Wilder’s *Big Woods* chapter “Long Rifle,” as Laura hands him the powder horn, the barely-suppressed smile threatens to spread on his face. His eyes, drawn on a downward line of sight to meet Laura’s face, surely twinkle with love and appreciation as the lines around his eyes start to wrinkle up. The father character appears proud to be letting his daughter participate in a male ritual—rifle cleaning and loading. In this scene, the more reserved Mary handles participation in the male ritual with enough interest. Arguably, nowhere in the *Little House* series is Pa more heroic and reassuring than when he is depicted handling his rifle. This is because the “long rifle” is, of course, so imbued with protective powers. When Wilder writes that “Laura and Mary always helped him” with small tasks during the times he cleaned and loaded the smooth-bore, she indicates that this demonstration—calm, measured, deliberate—of masculine behavior is indeed heroism to the two little girl characters. The girls want to commune with this masculinity, this patriarch’s privilege of “making bullets for [the] next day’s hunting”⁸⁸ and cleaning the rifle. Laura and Mary “put their fingers in their mouths to cool them”⁸⁹ after impulsively touching piping-hot bullets. The “shining

⁸⁸ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 45.

⁸⁹ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 46.

pile”⁹⁰ of bullets was one pretty distraction from the laborious process of cleaning and loading the smooth-bore. Cleaning musket-type rifles well into the 19th century, even, involved boiling water; ramrods jammed up and down the barrel; greasing and polishing; the pouring of powder from “the smooth, polished cow-horn full of gunpowder”⁹¹; ramming a greased cloth down the barrel and plugging the space under the rifle’s hammer-pin with a percussion cap. “Now the gun was loaded, and Pa laid it on its hooks over the door.”⁹² The final act in the process has ritual significance. The little house is now protected. The talismanic quality of Pa’s “long rifle” can now be assessed.

In contrast to Cooper’s Hawk-Eye, as a settled patriarch Pa Ingalls in the early 1870s hangs hunting gear over the door. The rifle’s removal from its place is significant in *Little House on the Prairie* when the wolves surround the cabin. Pa’s long rifle is a physical extension of himself that symbolizes his patriarchal role as provider for, and protector of, each little house’s occupants. When it is hung over the door of the prairie cabin it is a talisman. How Laura possibly feels safer with it loaded and hung away shows the child character’s comfort in patterns of ritual. The slightest disruption of the pattern makes her aware that on this night, there is danger. The hunter is trapped in the house, but his rifle is ready for the wolves that stalk just outside. Here, the humans are less powerful than the animals. Laura feels uneasy because not only is the hook over the door bare, but the horses “Pet and Patty were restlessly walking around and around, inside the barn” and

⁹⁰ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 46.

⁹¹ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 48.

⁹² Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 45-51.

Jack the dog “walked around the campfire.”⁹³ Perhaps much more successfully than any other passage about the rifle, save the descriptive one detailing how it was loaded, this passage about the wolves showcases the specific type of masculinity Pa embodies. His masculine role is defined by two opposing forces—one, 19th century patriarchy, the other, the environment of the frontier.

Settlers in the 1800s were at odds with their rustic and wild surroundings while simultaneously trying to make them more urbane. The male role of the time period was accurately evoked, for most of America’s population, in the *urban* man because the majority of the country’s population remained behind in cities. Urban men—regardless of class—were “breadwinners,” “expected to earn the income that supported the family and to provide for his wife and children after his death.”⁹⁴ However, what was considered to be proper manhood was much more complex than this simple designation—breadwinner—allows.

The “separate spheres” of the century, designed to keep men and women in proper gender roles, were poorly designed barriers to angst. Both sexes experienced nail-biting anxiety about their roles and purposes in the dizzyingly innovative time they lived in. “There was more than one kind of anxiety. It could be rational or realistic, produced by inner stresses or by objective warning signals,” writes Peter Gay. Gay mentions specifically *masculinity* in this discussion, classifying “the Victorians’ manly ideal” as

⁹³ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 93. At this point the family cooks outdoors.

⁹⁴ Mintz and Kellogg, 53.

“complete fearlessness.”⁹⁵ So, if women fretted over body image, inequality to men, marriage, and competent housewifery skills, men conversely fretted—mostly about ideals of manliness that shifted in definition and popularity over the decades. Men everywhere—even on the frontier—had these anxieties over balancing emotional expression with physical aggression, practicing good business sense, Godliness, and politeness while they forged their way in an ever-changing world. They were co-parents with their wives, no longer expected to “break the will”⁹⁶ of the child. Instead, they hoped for their children’s health and success, and were in some ways tasked directly with this by being the earners. Though much of the neuroses were probably universal regarding the era’s manliness, masculinity on the frontier was a unique problem. Throughout the *Little House* series, Pa is placed in settings—all encapsulated in the frontier environment—that showcase masculinity. Circumstances sometimes bring to the fore qualities that either eschew or embrace the century’s technological progress. For example, Pa’s personality in seemingly depopulated Kansas differs from his personality in the crowded De Smet-area railroad camp. Pa early on is arrogantly overweening in his ability to feed his family. By series’ end he has experienced failed crops, Mary’s blindness, and the unstoppable march of technology. It is “Pa the hunter,” though, who has survived to be analyzed here, much as “Pa the storyteller” survives in Romines’ analysis. “Pa the hunter” then, can be analyzed within this specific masculine trope, along with four other frontier characters, one from the books he inhabits, the other three from Cooper’s *Mohicans*.

⁹⁵ Peter Gay, *Schnitzler’s Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture 1815-1914* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 130.

⁹⁶ Mintz and Kellogg, 15.

The men in *Mohicans* exist in the original, prototypical romantic frontier. Hawk-Eye, Uncas, and Duncan Heyward are all radically different masculine types. In *Little House on the Prairie* a (presumably Osage) man—who does *not* steal food like the four—shares hunting in common with Pa, but he too is radically different. So, an unnamed Native American man who shoots a mountain lion in *Little House on the Prairie*, and Hawk-Eye, Uncas and Heyward in *Mohicans* all use rifles and other weapons. Pa Ingalls and Hawk-Eye share whiteness. Uncas and Wilder's mountain lion-killer share Native American heritage. Heyward, too shares whiteness with both Hawk-Eye and Pa Ingalls, but he is the only highly-educated and highly-trained military man of the three. Precisely how their masculinities shape their actions shows that masculine use of the rifle and other weapons for killing game—and sometimes people—is the foil to female domesticity.

Discussion of masculinities will lead back to Wilder's Native Americans as problematic characters. In *Mohicans* Uncas is alarmingly portrayed at one moment as hyper-violent. "When Uncas had brained his first antagonist, he turned, like a hungry lion, to seek another."⁹⁷ Uncas is here a hyper-masculine, overly aggressive version of himself. He is normally quiet and still. Heyward thinks Uncas' "manner" is "disdainful, if not a little fierce, and that he suppressed passions that were ready to explode," and Uncas usually paid "deference" to white men.⁹⁸ He usually approaches people and animals with "wary movements" and "utmost care."⁹⁹ In the heat of battle, though, all carefully

⁹⁷ Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 333.

⁹⁸ Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 341.

⁹⁹ Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 297.

cultivated aspects of his masculinity, which can be described as efficient and utilitarian, are cast aside. Uncas becomes not the “noble savage” of Limerick’s dread—but an animalistic caricature of a Native American, like the four Osage thieves in Wilder’s *Prairie*. By comparing his character directly with an animal—a lion—Cooper not so subtly betrays his opinion that Native American men inhabited a masculinity that was different from white men’s.

Stolidly British Major Heyward even “hurls” a “tomahawk”¹⁰⁰ but his masculinity remains firmly within the bounds of gentility, specifically gentlemanly solicitude. He is overly attentive to syncope-prone Alice. After a fainting spell, Alice protests “Now let me make an effort to walk.” Duncan’s only response is ‘Nay Alice, you are yet too weak.’”¹⁰¹ The violence that Heyward partakes in is tightly regulated through military training, and even though the restraint slips in the forest so that he “hurls” a weapon with as much animalistic force as Uncas would, he remains a gentleman. The masculinity of Hawk-Eye is more problematic, and its mired nature corresponds most closely to Pa Ingalls’s masculinity. In *Mohicans* Hawk-Eye’s masculinity is the one most complexly convoluted, because the environment—the landscape itself, has insinuated itself into Hawk-Eye’s being differently than it has the other male characters. Consequently, the environments in which Wilder’s “little houses” exist will torque similarly into Pa Ingalls’ being.

¹⁰⁰ Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 333.

¹⁰¹ Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, 418.

The frontier of Cooper's imagination is, of course, *the* original romantic frontier. It is Edenic, lush and beautiful with only the faintest hum of danger running through it—the hum that people like Alice Munro cannot hear. If the land itself is Eden, then those who populate it—Hawk-Eye, Uncas, and his father Chingachgook—are the first created men in this place. They live in a harmony with the landscape that Limerick and others lampoon as the trope of the “noble savage”. Appropriately enough, Russell T. Newman waxes long on the metaphor of the Garden in Cooper's works.

“The American landscape was the perfect milieu for the emergence of [a] ‘new gentleman’ because of its rolling hills and rich farmland that lay in close proximity to both the wilderness and the city. Cooper could take the best of the wilderness (the Edenic qualities) and the best of the cities (refinement) and merge them into the characteristics of the American gentleman. These [lands] were what Thomas Jefferson had termed ‘the middle state’ or a garden.”¹⁰² Hawk-Eye/Natty Bumppo is willing to focus much of the time—at least in Newman's estimation—on his surroundings' Edenic quality. The character is “an example” under Cooper's pen to “nineteenth-century Americans” on “how to live in or near the American wilderness . . . the proper actions of one living close to nature. First, Natty had a profound love of God and considered the woods His temple; since God created the beautiful land and trees, where better to worship Him? Natty also had a tremendous respect for nature. He led a frugal lifestyle, never taking more fish or game than he needed for food and raiment.”¹⁰³ He gives his thoughts on murder when

¹⁰² Russell T. Newman, *The Gentleman in the Garden: The Influential Landscape in the Works of James Fenimore Cooper* 2.

¹⁰³ Russell T. Newman, *The Gentleman in the Garden*, 6.

still young and known as Deerslayer. Hurry Harry asks him if he ever used his rifle “on an inimy [sic] that was capable” of killing him. Deerslayer replies, with “uprightness of heart”: “To own the truth, I never did . . . seeing that a fitting occasion never offered . . . and I hold it to be onlawful [sic] to take the life of man, except in open and generous warfare.”¹⁰⁴ Such warfare occurs in 1757. Hawk-Eye is nearby when his friend Uncas “brains” an antagonist and the awkward and distrustful Heyward “hurls” an axe. When he is quite elderly, the legendary frontiersman’s disgust at the harsh killing of pigeons echoes his younger self’s opinion that excessive force is only acceptable man-to-man, not man-to-animal.

In *The Pioneers*, set many decades after *Mohicans*, the now-elderly frontiersman is known again as Nathaniel Bumppo. He displays disgust at the frenzied slaughter of hundreds of pigeons by other white settlers. “The heavens are alive with pigeons” when a hunting party goes out for them, but Bumppo disapproves of the method of shooting, done with “every species of firearms”.¹⁰⁵ Heaps of the birds lie scattered across the ground. They have been violently struck down with long poles as they flew very low, speared, shot with arrows, or blasted by gunfire. Bumppo watches with unease, and another man, Mr. Jones, “disdained”¹⁰⁶ the proceedings for their violence. Bumppo scolds the hunters in a religious overtone. This solidifies Newman’s characterization of him as someone who views his environment as Edenic. “It’s much better to kill only such as you want, without wasting your powder and lead, than to be firing into God’s creatures

¹⁰⁴ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer*, 45.

¹⁰⁵ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* 678-679.

¹⁰⁶ James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* 679-680.

in this wicked manner.”¹⁰⁷ The rough-cut frontiersman flaunts a moral superiority that makes him mock-heroic, to use Romines’ term.

Natty Bumppo has lived a long life. He has had as many aliases as adventures. He was peerless in his youth as an expert rifleman, but in his old age he is waning. “Between [Billy Kirby, a young man] and [him] there had long existed a jealous rivalry on the point of skill with the rifle.”¹⁰⁸ Kirby could be regarded as Bumppo’s “equal” though Kirby humbly says he pulls “the second best trigger in this country.”¹⁰⁹ Hawk-Eye/Bumppo is mock-heroic precisely because he displays none of the feebleness of old age. Though he is called “old man” throughout *The Pioneers* he seems somehow immortal as a superhuman marksman and hunter. Romines has used the term “mock-heroic” to refer to Pa Ingalls, though, so a juxtaposition of the two hunters must be made.

Romines feels that Pa is mock-heroic—that is, embellishing tales from his childhood to an appropriate crowing point—only in his storytelling. Because Romines never examines Pa as a hunter—a provider of food for his family—she does not make the connection that the man’s stories of his childhood, which deal with wilderness exploration and amateur hunting and tracking, relate directly to his self-image in adulthood as a hunter.

How his daughter Laura sees him, though, as a hunter shows a maturation arc. Laura as a five-year old is dazzled, fully believing the mock-heroism of her father’s stories. She is overjoyed that he feels the magic of the woods and does not kill some deer.

¹⁰⁷ Cooper, *The Pioneers*, 680.

¹⁰⁸ Cooper, *The Pioneers*, 663.

¹⁰⁹ Cooper, *The Pioneers*, 723.

As a teenager during *The Long Winter*, though, she is dumbfounded by her father's failure to kill game. She realizes that all along, he has been a mock-heroic hunter/trapper/tracker, just like Hawk-Eye/Bumppo. Her father's easy bravado and his uncanny ability to kill with "one shot" are maybe not quite accurate. Laura the character has been molded, by Wilder, to first accept, and then reject, Cooper's archetypal frontiersman.

This leaves little room to doubt that one way or another—likely through Rose Wilder Lane—Cooper's archetypal frontiersman insinuated his way into the "Pa" storyboard. That said, Pa is somewhat different from Cooper's man of many aliases. These differences highlight his awkwardness as an individual. Pa is burdened with 19th century cares, but marginalizes himself as an imitation of Hawk-Eye through the use of an antique-model rifle. Because the Americans who moved westward were, they believed, "restless, innovative" types, a reinvention of self was possible. Did Wilder make the Pa character so insecure that he must compensate by absorbing Hawk-Eye's archetypal mock-heroism? Pa absorbs it selectively, of course. The *Little House* patriarch is thoroughly within his time. So he is rational instead of religious, and he is a family man. The character is brash and bold about his hunting prowess, and sorely overconfident about his farming skills. Pa the hunter displays much less reticence regarding the taking of game than Hawk-Eye. If Pa was any less masculine, his insecurities would overshadow contemporary gender perceptions. According to Romines, in contrast to his storytelling, Pa's less-heroic actions of hunting and trapping are "repetitive."¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Ann Romines, *Constructing the Little House*, 26-27.

These repetitive roles were the norm, though, and Pa struggles with many male roles. He perhaps wishes to be Cooper's archetypal frontiersman, but his century's progress and crowding forbids it. Pa has a liminal masculinity, because he is not the brash "Bowry Bh'oy . . . young, single, fast with his fists"¹¹¹ of Blumin's estimation. Nor is he quite like some of the men profiled as "jolly fellows" by Eric Stott—those Westward miners, flatboat-men, keelboat-men, and prospectors.¹¹² Pa is married with children. So his role is that of provider of food and protection, and his joy comes from familial love. He is mock-heroic, then, not only in his storytelling, but also in his abilities to provide. He is neither Cooper's Enlightenment-styled forest-worshipper, nor middle-class city man.

He does, however, live in a place where the "two consciences of kindness and cruelty . . . were powerful." In the west, men might "divide their last potato with you,"¹¹³ or kill you. "Those viewed as outsiders were treated with contempt and cruelty."¹¹⁴ The "drinking, fighting, and gambling"¹¹⁵ of the west irked the actual Charles Ingalls so much that the family left rowdy Burr Oak, Iowa shortly after the Starr's tried to adopt young Laura. Wilder was so young at the time that she recalled Burr Oak as "a lovely place." Her recollection showcases childhood's obliviousness. "The bullet hole in the door was thrilling to us children . . . It was made when the young man of the house, being drunk,

¹¹¹ Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, 111.

¹¹² Eric Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 195.

¹¹³ Stott, 205.

¹¹⁴ Stott, 205.

¹¹⁵ Stott, 195.

shot at his wife who slammed the door between them as she escaped.”¹¹⁶ Eric Stott makes an important distinction in his definitions of “the west” and “the frontier” that will round off effectively the discussion of Pa’s masculinities.

Stott identifies as “Western” frontier areas only those places with skewed sex ratios. “The western mining, railroad and cattle towns such as Deadwood, Cheyenne and Dodge city in the last thirty years of the [19th] century. . . . most of the locations were disproportionally populated by young men.” Stott quickly counters that “a demographic determinism that automatically equates disorder with a tiny female population would, however, be misleading” and provides statistics for Deadwood and Dodge City. “By 1880 35 percent of Deadwood’s population was female. In Dodge City in 1880 . . . 44 percent of the permanent residents were women.”¹¹⁷

A second distinction that Stott makes, which is only subtly apparent, is that his “frontiers” are only in “the Wild West.” The “Wild West,” in turn, is “only a part of the American West.” The entirety of the American west, to Stott, is summed up as “a special place . . . a peculiarly male romance . . . the frontier has long been a place associated with freedom and license, a province of both promise and menace.”¹¹⁸ Based on Stott’s definitions, then, the frontier that the Ingallses inhabit is not a noisy, bustling, mostly-male place like Deadwood—so it is not Stott’s frontier. Wilder’s frontier is more aligned with Cooper’s—but it is hyper-dangerous instead of hyper-romantic. The isolated cabins in *Big Woods* and *Prairie* are in the romantic vein of Cooper, but only *just*. Instead of

¹¹⁶ Wilder and Lane, “Burr Oak, a Lovely Place,” 26.

¹¹⁷ Stott, 198.

¹¹⁸ Stott, Jolly Fellows, 197.

dominating the landscape like Uncas and Hawk-Eye, the Ingallses are very small within it, surrounded by wolves and mountain lions. Their frontier therefore qualifies as ultimately liminal. It cannot fit all of the given parameters.

Pa moves easily through nature with an assured stride as his rifle rests across his shoulders. He dominates his small corner of nature. When Pa is in nature apart from his family, he is dominant. It is only when the family is *gathered* as a unit—surrounded by wolves, fighting fires, beset by grasshoppers, close to starving—that it becomes powerless. This is curious. It is as if the combined powers of Ma and Pa are weakened, but when they are exercised separately they can sometimes best Nature. Man versus Nature, in this case, is the classical antagonistic relationship where man overpowers the grass, the wood, the animals to get the resources he needs to live. How else, of course, can the Ingalls family “live like kings” if Pa does not shoot as well as Hawk-Eye? The relationship of man versus Nature can be taken a final step further while examining whether Pa Ingalls displays some of the calm respect for Nature that Hawk-Eye does—though in a less spiritual vein. That most disturbing metaphor of male conquerors dominating a female Nature comes into play here. Just as he strives to live in equanimity with his wife, Pa never lives in a wholly discordant fashion with the wilderness. He reassures a young Laura that he would never shoot juvenile animals, and he only takes as much game as he needs, though he does boast early on that everything he can lay eyes on is his family’s. He displays prudent use of resources by saving a rabbit pelt to make a child’s winter hat, and he intends to “make soft leather” of deer hides to sell later.¹¹⁹ He hates the encroachment of technology and crowds on the landscape. He is out of his

¹¹⁹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 6.

hunter element when he works for wages in the railroad camp during the *Silver Lake* storyline. His masculinity is not urbane, but it is gentlemanly enough to recognize that Nature has a will of her own—she even bests him several times, with the grasshopper infestation and the starvation winter, not to mention a chase by wolves in *Little House on the Prairie*.

Pa Ingalls is more modern than Hawk-Eye, understanding Nature not through the veil of religion, but through the lens of a more sophisticated reciprocity. If his beloved frontier is to survive the invasion of the progress he so loathes, he must treat it with respect and learn not to underestimate its dangers. Hawk-Eye does not have to contend with this rowdy, noisy, profit-driven progress. Pa's attribute of frontiersman is thus precarious, in danger of rapidly becoming obsolete by the time the family moves to De Smet.

The Native American characters in both *Mohicans* and *Little House on the Prairie* prove integral in the struggle between man and Nature. With none of Uncas's hyper-aggression, an unnamed Osage man shoots a mountain lion that has stalked the Ingalls' settlement for weeks. Pa merely says that "we can't have panthers running around in a country where there are little girls."¹²⁰ His affirmative reply to Laura's question, if a panther would eat an Indian baby,¹²¹ shows that for Pa, the safety of all human life is what matters here. What does not matter is that this opportunity to kill—this display of masculinity directed at a female Nature—was taken away from him. Though Pa

¹²⁰ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 262.

¹²¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 262.

continually underestimates the frontier's dangers and his own potential for failures, the (primarily male) Native American characters in *Prairie* do not fall for this ego trap.

Indeed, the Native American characters in *Little House on the Prairie*—nearly all male—so utterly lack any type of agency that they appear animalistic. They can only instill fear, kill, steal, eat, and leave. The utter lack in Wilder's books about Native American food ways is the most glaring indicator that her narrative is completely settler-centric. Only settler's food is described—how it is prepared and shared, grown, hunted, or preserved. In *Mohicans* the Native characters have personalities and emotions, though these qualities border on the melodrama of the “noble savage,” the stock character who Limerick loathes.

Little Laura never does see Osages doing anything but stealing, eating, and leaving the area. The hungry men who eat corn bread so neatly as to pick up the crumbs and eat those, too, are likely representative of actual Osage on the annuity payment system of the time. So too are the unwashed, grabby pair who tear chunks of bread from the pantry. Never getting enough to eat on government rations, Wilder's anonymous men are so thin that little Laura can see their ribs. “Little ridges up their bare sides,” and they have “stringy” legs.¹²² Especially noticeable now through the discussion of the illustration medium—the Ingallses look practically rosy-cheeked and plump next to the Osage men, whose harder lifestyle expended more calories. However, for tribes during the removal process, food was hard to come by anyway. This made sinewy thinness a potentially dangerous condition. Linda Murray Berzok writes that, for example, in 1830

¹²² Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 138.

“President Andrew Jackson . . . ordered [the Cherokees] crops burned.”¹²³ Laura and Mary would never have known that the Osage were settled farmers and occasional hunters as they explore the abandoned camp. They are able, though, to be “cohabitants”¹²⁴ for a few moments with the departed camp occupants. Laura can play “grown up” as she places her feet in the footprints and imagines herself as an Osage woman, stirring the pot of rabbit over the fire. They are cohabitant with the departed Osage in more than one way, just as Cooper’s white and Native characters are in his stories.

The complex networks of trading, begun long before the 1800s, allowed Native Americans in the Plains region to acquire tools and weapons from settlers. “The Plains Indians acquired copper kettles, steel knives for skinning bison and metal scrapers that speeded up the fleshing of hides. Metal hunting traps were also a popular item. In the 18th century, the iron hoe was introduced to replace the digging stick.”¹²⁵ So, though the “settler’s plow” might make the land desirable in Romine’s estimation, clearly, for a long time the Plains tribes had been taking advantage of more modern tools. The absence of the Osage at the camp—in the entirety of *Prairie*, a somewhat lengthy scene—may be just as well because there is a glaring lack of bison. *Bison bison*, or buffalo, was a primary foodstuff for tribes across the Great Plains. By the time the Ingallses make it to Kansas, it is the early 1870s. By then buffalo had been largely hunted out. With the development of mass-produced, compression-cap pistols and rifles that were cartridge-

¹²³ Linda Murray Berzok, *American Indian Food* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005).

¹²⁴ Anne Romines, *Constructing the Little House*, 62.

¹²⁵ Berzok, *American Indian Food*, 26.

loading, hunters and sportsmen could slaughter massive amounts of buffalo. “Free ammunition was provided to any hunter on request” between 1872 and 1874. White professionals and tourists alike¹²⁶ were encouraged by the government to speed the killing. Buffalo’s absence meant that less-recalcitrant tribes, with little to eat, would go quietly onto allotment and reservation lands¹²⁷—or so it was thought.

To Laura’s peppery questions about Native Americans, her parents provide answers that are well within the schema they know, which is government propaganda and news. With “the major resource for food and trade”¹²⁸ hunted out, Native Americans began practicing what Berzok labels “reservation food ways.”¹²⁹ The Osage in *Prairie* are at a precarious half-way point. They are *not* yet on a reservation or allotment, but they *are* clearly in need of other people’s food. So they make a regular habit of stealing it. What the masculinities are of the four Osage men who steal from the Ingallses is a provocative question. They are unable, it seems, to hunt for their own food. Unlike the other (also anonymous) Osage who kills the mountain lion, the four thieves have no weapons. Effectively emasculated, with only knives slung through their belts, they appear impotent against both Nature’s dangers and her bounty. Reduced to eating someone else’s corn bread and stealing furs and tobacco, they have both the silent, stealthy deportment of Uncas and the sneering slovenliness of Magua. They lack Uncas’s thoughtful manner before he speaks. The Osage men, then, exist in a liminal masculinity.

¹²⁶ Berzok, *American Indian Food*, 26.

¹²⁷ Berzok, *American Indian Food*, 30.

¹²⁸ Berzok, *American Indian Food*, 30.

¹²⁹ Berzok, *American Indian Food*, 30.

Wilder's Osage men are not in their traditional roles, either, because they are unable to practice their culture and life ways. They are shadows of their former hyper-masculine selves. Perhaps most liminal of all is the Osage who kills the mountain lion.

He shoots it. Wilder only describes the Osage's weapon as "his *gun*."¹³⁰ This is telling, because Pa's weapon is clearly an antique model described in much detail as a *rifle*. Readers cannot know, therefore, whether the mountain lion-killer has a mass-produced, cartridge-loading shotgun. It would be logical that he did carry one of these, because if Native Americans were not stealing or eating reservation food—(little more than coffee, bleached and bromated flour, and salt pork¹³¹)—they were hunting for their game, as well as gathering what they could. Contrasted against settlers like Pa Ingalls, Native Americans were full-time, as opposed to hobbyist, hunters. Reliable modern firearms were therefore a necessity. Pa *does* acquire a modern shotgun at the end of the book series. The De Smet area land claim is slowly transforming into a farm. He uses it in a quixotic quest to kill the swarms of blackbirds that are eating the family's corn crop. "When he had shot away his cartridges, the swirl of wings seemed no thinner."¹³² Wielding a shotgun makes Pa hopelessly liminal—he is an ineffective hunter/protector with it. If the anonymous Osage who killed the mountain lion indeed used one, it suggests ironically that a white man is hopelessly behind the times. A super-liminal character—a male Indian—might succeed with such a symbol of progress. Perhaps the situation of Wilder's Native characters is that they are best suited to the plots'

¹³⁰ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 262.

¹³¹ Berzok, *American Indian Food*, 30.

¹³² Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 94.

background, taking the century's technology freely while they submit unwillingly to the government's orders. The end of the masculinities discussion leaves this study back in the man-versus-Nature line of thought.

On the whole, the discussion of man versus Nature has provided insight into how humans in the frontiers of Wilder's recollection—and creation—have acted vis a vis food ways. Though the Plains and the Wisconsin woods are brimful of danger, they are also brimful of food. If one knows how to preserve that food for either the short or long term, then the daily act of eating becomes something secure. For little Laura, Ma's cooking is as soothing and ritualistically familiar as the "long rifle" over its hook on the door. Though Laura experiences near-starvation during *The Long Winter*, she emerges from it somehow stronger, determined to always have food—this is why losing her house in *The First Four Years* is so considerably upsetting. The home is the repository of foodstuffs—in the cellar, the pantry, and the attic. As her home is razed by flames, Laura knows she will never have the stuffed cornucopia that was her parents' attic in the "little house in the big woods." The harshness of all of Laura's growing-up places—tornadoes, fires, blizzards, drought and hungry grasshoppers, menacing wolves and mountain lions—temper within her certain attitudes about food. Refined sugar is laughably urbane and she would sooner leave it out of a pie. Though stealing is wrong, she observes that the Osage men must be hungry as they eat on her mother's hearth and raid the pantry. She believes that her father's rifle can both protect and provide for her. Her mother can make delicious meals out of some of the most mundane ingredients. In the end, perhaps Laura Ingalls Wilder is left exhausted, wrung out by Nature's blows. Nature dwarfs even her and

“Manly”. Pa’s “little half-pint of cider all drunk up” cannot survive the frontier unscathed.

The frontier as a physical place is one of organic violence, instinctual predation, and instinctual survival. Wilder’s fictionalized settler family strives for the “feast,” actually experiences the “famine” and ultimately grows content with some middle ground. Laura realizes in *By the Shores of Silver Lake* that her family has by all accounts succeeded, survived, outwitted. Yes, the Ingalls family wins its own corner of the frontier. “‘The buffalo are gone,’ Laura thought. ‘And now we’re homesteaders.’”¹³³ Scrimping and scrounging for every bite of food throughout her life, Laura has won a feeble food security for herself and her family.

¹³³ Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 285.

VI. LITTLE HOUSE ON THE CULTURE HEARTH

A final examination about the frontier and Wilder vis a vis food ways will lead the study back to David Hackett Fischer to see what conclusions have come out of the transposing of his culture hearths theory to the 19th century Midwest. The relative success of the expansion of the culture hearth theory can be quickly analyzed.

The *Little House* books encapsulate a mythologized, idealized culture hearth. The fictionalized Ingallses are their *own* culture hearth, as they live voluntarily apart from large numbers of other people. The family both can and cannot be fit into Fischer's culture hearth theory regarding "backcountry" settlers of Scottish and other British Isles descent. The family *can* be fit into an extended version of the theory because the "kind of folks" comprising it are, in part, from Scotland. "By George, Caroline, nothing can beat the Scotch!" Pa exclaimed," when Ma adds the tinned oysters to a scanty meal during *The Long Winter*.¹ Fischer writes that "Scotch-Irish" is "an Americanism, rarely used in Britain and very much resented by the people to whom it was attached."² Pride, but certainly not resentment, is the feeling attached to Pa's use of this Americanism as he refers to his wife's ethnic origin. Here, Ma merely "put the codfish in the open oven to thaw, and took the coffee mill"³ from Pa after his exclamation. Elsewhere in the *Little House* series, Ma's Scottish origin—and its influence on her family—is highlighted. Feeling especially merry one "happy winter evening" in *Silver Lake*, teenaged Laura "got

¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 253.

² David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 618.

³ Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 254.

up and pretended to be wading across a creek, holding her skirts above her ankles and laughing back over her shoulder, singing: ‘*Ilka lassie has her laddie/ Nane, they say, ha’e I/ Yet all the lads they smile at me/ When coming through the Rye.*’” The next song the family sings, “Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines,”⁴ is most decidedly American.

The next summer there in De Smet, when Laura is not yet fourteen, she and Almanzo Wilder will meet. The young man won’t be “coming through the rye” to smile at her, but the setting of their meeting is still pastoral. *The Long Winter* features thirteen-year old Laura and her sister Carrie lost on an errand. It is a very hot summer day. They have returned from the hardware store with a metal implement for Pa’s mowing machine (the only piece of technology he ever embraces). Seeking a shorter path to where he is in the hay field, the girls walk through a tangle of tall prairie grass and become more lost. Laura and Carrie are trapped and thirsty. In a clearing Laura finds an orderly hay field. There she meets her future husband Almanzo Wilder, who is with his older brother Royal. A decade older than Laura, Almanzo sits sunburned and lazy atop a pile of hay. He is amused that Laura and Carrie are lost. Their exchange suggests that neighborliness is indeed deemphasized in the *Little House* series. Wilder strived to make the fictionalized Ingallses supremely isolated and self-reliant. Her character Laura’s conversation with the Wilder brothers reveals that though her father may prefer an isolated life, he has made a small effort to get to know his neighbors. Pa’s effort is so small, though, that the four young people don’t know to whom they are talking. Almanzo has a clue, though.

⁴ Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 155.

“He had black hair and blue eyes and his face and his arms were sunburned brown. He stood up on the high load of hay against the sky and saw Laura. He said ‘Hello, there!’ . . . She wanted to turn and run back into hiding. ‘I thought Pa was here,’ she said . . . [Royal Wilder] said, ‘we haven’t seen anybody around here. Who is your Pa?’ [Almanzo told Royal] ‘Mr. Ingalls. Isn’t he?’ he asked Laura. [Almanzo] was still looking at her. ‘Yes,’ she said . . . ‘I can see him from here. He’s just over there,’ the boy said. Laura looked up and saw him pointing. His blue eyes twinkled as if he had known her a long time. ‘Thank you,’ Laura said primly and she and Carrie walked away.”⁵ The Ingallses interaction with neighbors has been extremely limited. In Laura’s youth, the marked insularity of Fischer’s North Britain settlers in the 18th century is most clearly displayed.

These “mixed people”⁶ of the Ozarks, Appalachians, Carolinas, Tennessee, West Virginia and Kentucky had kinship ties so intense as to be “intensely resistant to change and suspicious of ‘foreigners’” as well as “profoundly conservative.”⁷ *Foreigner* in relevant studies of Appalachian and Ozark culture is defined “in its Elizabethan sense of someone who is the same nationality as the speaker, but not from the speaker’s immediate area. All the world seemed foreign to the backsettlers except their neighbors and kin.”⁸ When the character Laura is still a little girl in *Big Woods*, her awareness of the world—*her* world—is formed but does not remain totally constant throughout her

⁵ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 20-24.

⁶ Fischer, 621.

⁷ Fischer, 650.

⁸ Fischer, 650.

life. Little Laura, on the night her mother and Aunt Docia look so pretty in their fancy dresses, is in a room with a cousin also named Laura Ingalls. They are looking at all the sleeping babies on the bed. “Ever so many babies were lying in rows on Grandma’s bed.” The other Laura Ingalls is the daughter of “Uncle James and Aunt Libby.” “The two Lauras leaned on the bed and looked at the babies, and the other Laura said her baby was prettier than Baby Carrie.”⁹

Romines examines the two little cousins’ argument. She writes that *Big Woods* “is dominated by family and family relationships. The Ingallses exchange (rare) visits almost exclusively with family members and—because Ma’s sister Eliza Quiner has married Pa’s brother Peter Ingalls—the closest relationships are doubly intense, and Laura’s favorite cousins are *double* cousins. In the large, extended Ingalls family . . . the babies all look indistinguishably alike, and even Laura’s name is not exclusively her own; there is another child named ‘Laura Ingalls’ in the family. In the course of the book, Laura almost never exchanges a word with a person who is not her relative. Thus Wilder and Lane’s first book portrays a profoundly endogamous world.”¹⁰ This may be an example of a “serial or stream migration” where families in the new land grouped together “as clans.”¹¹ In *Big Woods*, though they live in a different region, the Ingallses live in the same type of endogamy as Fischer’s North Britain backsettlers. They are *all* “remarkably even-handed in their antipathies” to “all strangers.” Pa is so resentful of people—

⁹ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 142.

¹⁰ Romines, 28.

¹¹ Fischer, 655.

“foreigners” in the Elizabethan sense, perhaps?—encroaching on what he views as *his* “big woods” that he uproots his family.

Once severed from kin, the Ingallses are in a different type of endogamy. Their number has been subtracted from over and over until only five people remain. There are no more “double cousins” to play with. Here, the endogamy’s intensity lessens so much that Laura can daydream about being an Osage girl. Her mother remains stolidly in the Scottish backsettler role, intensely “xenophobic.”¹² The family’s neighbors the Scott’s share “the same nationality.” Mr. Scott expresses xenophobia with the mountain stereotype of “violence of its expression.”¹³ He says “the only good Indian is a dead Indian.”¹⁴ Arguably, these prejudices show a widening of this particular culture hearth into 19th century America. This widening is literally only *textual*. Laura allows herself to grow in her enchanted prairie, and so longs to be an Indian. She is fascinated by the tall, dark strangers who take her family’s food. Her fascination with these people is of course unacceptable. What’s more, it runs counter to ancestral xenophobia. “A strong mood of conservatism” linked with distrustfulness creates the opportunity for “an Appalachian woman” to note with “an air of pride” in a 1975 study “we never let go of a belief once fixed in our minds.”¹⁵ In the *Little House* world, such a tenacity of ideas certainly exists,

¹² Fischer, 651.

¹³ Fischer, 651.

¹⁴ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 284.

¹⁵ Fischer, 651. These attitudes recorded in various ethnographic researches have led Fischer to conclude that “the people of the southern highlands would become famous in the nineteenth century for the intensity of their xenophobia, and also for the violence of its expression. In the early nineteenth century, they tended to detest great planters and abolitionists in equal measure. During the Civil War some fought against both sides. In the early twentieth century they would become intensely negrophobic [sic] and antisemitic [sic]. In our own time they are furiously hostile to both communists and capitalists.”

and Laura flouts it. When she is young Laura absorbs “the widest possibilities of North American cultures”¹⁶ that her parents and adult neighbors are in “denial”¹⁷ of.

The fictionalized Ingallses continue in the North Britain backsettler model right down to the homes they live in. Fischer cites the Scandinavian origins of the log cabin¹⁸—that structure that has become so iconically *American*—citing H. B. Shurtleoff. Shurtleoff is “the leading authority on this subject” and says that “the Scotch-Irish who began coming over in large numbers after 1718 seem to have been the first . . . to adopt it” noting it was unpopular among English colonists.¹⁹ In each place the Ingalls family lives, a priority is building “a little gray house made of logs.”²⁰ Romines feels that this *act* of building—construction—is so powerful, that her book title is *Constructing the Little House*. Her “constructs” of Wilder involves the enshrinement of this series as something quintessentially American. The series is “a passion, potent as a drug”²¹ to Romines. But it is not so sacred that it cannot be dismantled. The Ingallses cabins in Kansas and Minnesota are Anglicized fortresses of familiarity and security in the midst of “chronic insecurity,”²² of the type that plagued earlier North British settlers further east in

¹⁶ Romines, 67.

¹⁷ Romines, 67.

¹⁸ Fischer, 655.

¹⁹ Fischer, 655.

²⁰ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 1.

²¹ Romines, 1.

²² Fischer, 656.

the mountains and valleys. These original settler communities were “on the borders,”²³ just as the truncated Ingalls family unit would be from Kansas onward. The family cabins are Ma and Pa’s enclosures for Laura’s free-spirited nature, but the only man-made enclosures that finally trap her are those already built. In Dakota Territory, every house the family has is not of its own construction. First the tents at the railroad camp, then the surveyor’s house, and then the claim shanty house the family, with a brief interlude in the back upstairs portion of Pa’s store during *The Long Winter*. When Laura marries, she and Almanzo have a “little grey home in the west” waiting for them.

So similar, yet so different, are the Ingallses from Fischer’s North Britain backsettlers, that perhaps further comparison and contrast is not warranted. The Ingallses are, of course, promoting the new American myth for Wilder the author. All the component parts of this new myth—wide swaths of land once thought uninhabitable, the Civil War and the homestead claim rush, hostile and friendly Indians, Scandinavian neighbors, and the relentless pace of technology and the unprecedented reach of the government—have no place in Fischer’s assessments. The food ways present in *Little House* are thus too forward in time for much to be said on the inefficacy of further application of Fischer’s North Britain culture hearth. However, technology’s impact on food processing in 19th century America, by being excised from *Little House* by Wilder, puts the fictionalized Ingallses much closer to a North Britain backsettler’s mode of living in the 18th century. Wilder’s pastoral, “rural idyll” mythmaking is at its best in *Little House* regarding food ways.

²³ Fischer, 656.

CONCLUSION: “HUNGER IS THE BEST SAUCE”

For scholars of the *Little House* books and Wilder herself, the conclusion that “Hunger is the Best Sauce” brings is that they now have a chance to *consume* in a more literal way what they have devoted their work to. Examining *Little House* for its food ways in a literary or children’s literature context could prompt comparative studies of other, similar literatures and the food ways displayed in them.

For the historian, the work of “Hunger is the Best Sauce” leaves much room for discussion. Thoroughly examining the food ways of *Little House* gives the series a new, different gravitas. Wilder’s novelized memoirs differ in tone and presentation style from contemporary, first-person accounts—such as the California diaries of Catherine Haun—they are refreshing. Historians can examine these undeniably complex, though enjoyable, literary characters—and their environment—and find the traits that make them so thoroughly representative of 19th century *consumers* of the American Midwest.

Since nostalgia is elusive and abstract, all historians of food ways have, with *Little House*, is the record. Wilder leaves a record of cyclical livestock raising and slaughtering, as well as cyclical planting and harvesting patterns. Food preservation methods, hunting techniques and technology, and cooking technology are all addressed. Wilder never intended to focus on descriptions of food in her books, but the richness of these descriptions makes them stand out, and makes their thorough study here possible. Food ways in historical study has been refreshed.

Assessing the *Little House* series as novelized memoirs has allowed the books to be mined for their descriptions of the Ingallses food ways from circa 1871 to 1889—

Little House in the Big Woods through *The First Four Years* (with a brief departure to Malone, New York circa 1866 to assess the Wilder family's food ways in *Farmer Boy*). No other critique has done this.

Frontier food ways are presented here with an implicit trust in Wilder as their recorder. This allows for the historical analysis. The fictionalized Ingallses lived off the land synergistically, working in a communal fashion to preserve meats, fruits and vegetables for winter. Everyday meals were usually spare. Salt pork and potato made up a large percentage of the Ingallses diet. Foraged vegetables like purslane, cowslips, and sorrel were eaten every spring. Gardens were valuable sources of lettuces, beans, peas, gourds, onions, and potatoes. Eggs, only available from the family's hens during summer, were but one valuable foodstuff gained from chicken-raising. When the meat on the table was not salt pork, it was chicken in summer. Beef, game birds, venison, bear, or pork was eaten in the fall and throughout the winter.

Analysis of food ways in *Little House* spans major arcs in 19th century Americans' eating habits. Through Cummings, Cronon, Williams, and Beckert and Rosenbaum, we see that from 1810 to 1890, French cuisine's richness, with heavy sauces, expensive and rare shellfish, and multi-course menus, gave way to vegetarianism, which had varying degrees of asceticism attached to it. Partaking of various food trends—based on their income and livelihoods—Americans fluctuated between fat and thin, healthy and wan. Cooking technologies and techniques moved from the hearth to the stovetop and the bake-oven. Bread and vegetables take on special significance in *Little House* for their uses throughout the century's diet reform—centered around the adulteration of flour and other grain products—and vegetarianism.

Pa's hunting skills are legendary. But he is in line with the century's rural and frontier subsistence eating patterns. Families hunted, gathered and grew what they needed and rarely purchased expensive or frivolous goods. While tinned oysters and pickles—purchased at the local general store—are rare treats for the Ingallses, sugar and desserts made with it are sooner replaced with sugarless vanity cakes. The simplicity of many of the family's favorite dishes—pumpkin pie, roasted game birds, stewed berries, vanity cakes, salt pork and potatoes, and corn bread with molasses—attest to the rough, wild places it lives in. Such foods are terribly provincial and would not have much appeal to urban, more monied diners. In the hands of Wilder as a writer, they are appealing even on the page—her prose evokes an idealized nostalgia for a loving family's hour around the dinner table. *Laura* is ideal in these wild places throughout her life because she is so free-spirited (and steadfast, though she is “not very big nor strong.”¹) Only a girl like this could thrive so well in such vast spaces. Laura stays with readers forever. “When we as adult readers of children's literature encounter a certain image, we become suddenly aware that the image has ‘touched the depth before it stirs the surface,’” writes Hamida Bosmajian.²

At first an energetic, rough-and-tumble child, Laura Ingalls Wilder grows into a refreshingly flawed housewife and a mediocre cook. This character is a wonderful narrator and is at the center of her own story. Her transformation into a housewife (who makes excellent biscuits but poor pots of beans) is the true heart of the *Little House*

¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter*, 4.

² Hamida Bosmajian, “Vastness and Contraction of Space in *Little House on the Prairie*”. *Children's Literature* 11 (1983), 49.

series. Close to this heart of *Little House* is the factual record surrounding food. Pre-and post-war impacts on consumption patterns, the shifts in technology that impacted the family and the labor force all spurred westward migrations. In the Plains region of Wilder's telling, the century's expectation for female behavior and work revolved around proper preparation of nourishing and delicious food. Laura cannot escape Ma's desires and expectations for her table and her future.

The frontier milieu in *Little House* is a dangerous one, where people can starve to death and where Native Americans disrupt settlers' already precarious food security by taking their food. Nature can revoke her bounty at any time through fire, insect plague, or snow. In short, what *Little House's* food ways provide is a fully nuanced expression of what and how settlers ate. And it also provides a full, rich maturation arc of one young woman. Wilder's *Little House* series beautifully evokes this bygone era of American cooking and eating.

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Laura and Mary help Pa clean the rifle. Image Credit: Little House in the Big Woods. HarperCollins.



Beautiful, forbidding Ma teaches little Laura to make cheese. Image Credit: Little House in the Big Woods. HarperCollins.



Laura and Mary play in the attic of the "little house in the big woods." Image credit: Little House in the Big Woods, 1932. HarperCollins.



This photograph shows Charles and Caroline Ingalls in 1865. Photo credit:
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Almanzo and Laura Ingalls Wilder with baby Rose. Image Credit: The First Four Years. HarperCollins.

