

# Laura Ingalls Wilder, Part III – “Productive, retirement years at Missouri farmhouse”

*This is the conclusion of the series. (Part I & II were in the Mar. 31 and Apr. 14 NewsHopper).*

CONNIE PETTERSEN

The tour of the Wilders' white farm home as described by the tour guides: (No cameras are allowed inside buildings).

According to the guide at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum and Home in Mansfield, Missouri, Laura started her *Pioneer Girl* manuscript at the Rock House in 1931. In 1936, Laura and Almanzo moved back to their original farmhouse. The Rock House was rented out and eventually sold.

Laura completed her children's classic at the white farm home. The original manuscript was about 400 pages long, penciled on lined school paper, and later published as the *Little House* series. When royalties began to come in, they helped modernize their farmhouse.

Some conveniences in the house Laura liked, others she did not. The guide said she had a three-burner electric stove in the kitchen. However, Laura often complained, "Nothing ever tasted as good as what I cooked on the little

Laura's kettles, green tin canisters and favorite Blue Willow dishes are on display. "If she had known then how expensive they got to be as antiques, she might not have been as generous with them!"



The cemetery in Mansfield, MO. Laura and Almanzo's graves are on the left, Rose Wilder Lane's grave is to the right. CONNIE PETTERSEN PHOTO

the guide said. "When she passed away, her daughter, Rose gave things to the Association and they started doing tours."

Guests visiting Laura in her kitchen often sat at her window seat, which also held handy staples like flour, sugar and meal. The guide said Laura hated kneading bread. She baked twice a week most

came the brooms from the broom closet, and in came the refrigerator. They added an extension outside to make room."

Laura had a window "pass through" between the din-

ing room and kitchen. "That saved her many trips back and forth to set and clear her table as it was right by her kitchen sink where she washed everything up."

A narrow, steep stairway near the living room goes upstairs to Rose's childhood room. Visitors were not allowed upstairs, but the guide said there are bedrooms and a junk room up there. "Laura always said everyone should have a junk room."

A spry woman, Laura continued to go up those steps until she was in her 80s. One of the bedrooms was a company bedroom. It has lace curtains, a white bedspread and white furniture. Laura's sister Carrie stayed in it when she visited. Author Helen Boylston, who wrote the "Sue Barton" career nurse books, used the room from 1928-1931.

On a downstairs wall, Laura's original 1957 calendar is opened to February, the month of her 90th birthday, which was on the 7th. A sampling of the 1,000 birthday cards she received for that birthday are also on display. "Her books were getting quite popular at the time of her death, which was three days after her 90th birthday," said the guide.

Almanzo enjoyed working with wood, making shelves, cabinets, lamps, tables and her wooden rocking chair. "He made it little and low, and she could use the chair's wide arms for her nickel school tablets," said the guide. "That's where she did some writing of her books."

In the wintertime, Laura's chair was a cozy spot to sit since the house had no insulation and she could be near the fireplace or oil burning stove they had purchased by catalogue. The guide said

Laura often sat in her rocking chair to read her mail. "She received about 50 letters a day from fans. She always thought it was very important that she answered her mail."

Almanzo would wind the Christmas Clock, one of the few furnishings saved from the house fire in De Smet, before bed every night. "We wind it every morning when we come to work," said the guide. "It is over 100 years old, still keeps good time and chimes on the hour."

The Wilders' bedroom is at the back of the house. "After they returned from the Rock House, which was in the later part of their life, Almanzo was not very well and that was the reason for the twin beds," said the guide. Laura's sewing box is there along with her dresser containing hats and clothing. "Laura was always particular about wearing a hat and when she went anyplace, she always dressed up."

Laura had taken several pictures from an old Courier and Ives calendar and framed them for the walls as they reminded her of her childhood. Her favorite was the horse-drawn sleigh since it brought memories of when they were dating.

Besides Almanzo's bed (he passed away in 1949 at age 92) was a medicine chest still containing his old-fashioned remedies and bottles that Laura "couldn't bring herself to throw out."

To the west of their bedroom is Laura's sunny writing room. Above her desk was a framed photograph of her father's fiddle. "That fiddle was very important to her," said the guide, "she inherited it after his death and it's here at the museum."

Almanzo took a battery-operated radio apart when it was no longer working, saying the container was too nice to throw away. He removed the insides and Laura used it to store things. "The Wilders had radios, but no television. Laura always said she never had time for TV."

The fainting couch in her office is the oldest piece of furniture in the house. The guide said Laura would sometimes wake up at night and recall a memory she wanted to write about for the manuscript. When she was done, she didn't want to come back into the bedroom and wake her husband because he was a light sleeper. "She would lay down on her little couch. It was short, and she was, too."

The living room has huge solid oak beams across the ceiling that came from their

(continued on page 14)

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LAURA INGALLS WILDER

woodburning stove." The house is preserved as it was at the time of her death in 1957. Her kitchen cabinets are a cheerful yellow, the walls a patterned paper. Laura was a short woman – only four feet eleven and Almanzo five foot four, so he built her cabinets low. Almanzo was very inventive. He used gravity to pipe spring water into the barn and the kitchen wood-stove reservoir and sink, so they had running cold and hot water in the kitchen before they had electricity.

of her life, yet she gazed out at the pasture while kneading. "Rose said 'her mother had windows in her mind.' Laura's curtains usually hung straight down, not covering her pictures outside," said the guide, "because she loved watching the day changing and wildlife scampering across their yard." Rose gave her mother a 1956 General Electric refrigerator a year before Laura passed away. "But Laura did not want to lose any floor space to put in that refrigerator," said the guide, "so out

- Laura Ingalls Wilder home sites:**
- Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, Pepin, WI- www.pepinwisconsin.com
  - Little House on the Prairie, Independence, KS - www.littlehouseontheprairie.com
  - Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum, Walnut Grove, MN - www.walnutgrove.org
  - Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, Inc., De Smet, SD - www.liwms.com.
  - Ingalls homestead in De Smet, SD: http://www.ingallshomestead.com
  - Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane Museum & Home, Mansfield, MO - www.lauraingallswilderhome.com
  - Spring Valley Historical Society, Spring Valley, MN - www.springvalley.govoffice.com
  - Wilder Home Association, Malone, NY - www.almanzowilderfarm.com

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## Laura Ingalls Wilder (continued from page 13)

farm. The Wilders built most of their home themselves, hiring help with difficult projects like installing those beams. Off the living room is the library Almanzo built for about 300 books.

horses and returned with a load of bricks in hopes of changing her idea about the fireplace.

“Guys, you ever tried to change a lady’s mind when she got’s her heart and mind

The Wilders were married 63 years before his death in 1949. Laura remained at their home, enjoying the company of friends and neighbors who would look in on her. She received about \$10,000 a year in royalties. The guide had said that was a lot of money for that day, but she remained her more simple self and never got extravagant with money.

After writing her manuscript, Laura admitted she had led a very interesting life. It had been one of “sunshine and shadow.” She also said, “If we expect to enjoy our life, we will have to learn to be joyful in all of it, not just at stated intervals.” Although she loved their Missouri farm, she never quite forgot the beauty of the prairies.

Laura had lived an interesting life. Born in one century as a pioneer girl traveling by covered wagons, she died over half way through a second century at the dawn of the space age. (The Cold War Man High balloon launches began in 1957).

Her life spanned an era including the birth of flight with the Wright brothers, past Henry Ford’s invention of the automobile, and across two world wars. She eventually



The back porch and entry to the kitchen at the farm house on the Wilder Home and Museum in Mansfield, MO. Museum steps are on the left. **CONNIE PETERSEN PHOTO**

*A feeling of pleasure in a task seems to shorten it wonderfully.*

Laura Ingalls Wilder

The original framed art from Rose Wilder Lane’s Saturday Evening Post serial “Let the Hurricane Roar,” is also on the wall. At the completion of the serial, the artist gave it to Rose as a gift.

Also on display are some of Laura’s original needlework projects. One winter Almanzo decided he wasn’t going to just sit around and do nothing, so he took up hooking rugs. Two of his hand-made rugs are there.

The living room has a massive stone fireplace, something Laura wanted out of stones from their farm. According to the guide, Laura found some large rocks, but when she took Almanzo to see them, he said they were too heavy to transport. The next day Almanzo took off to town with his wagon and

set on doing things a certain way?” asked the guide in a southern drawl. “Well, Laura was no exception. She said she had to shed some tears to get those rocks in, but admitted it was worth it!”

The Wilders ended up with a 10-room farmhouse that was completed in 1913. The guide ended the tour saying, “They were both very hard workers. In their leisure time and evenings, Laura and Almanzo enjoyed music, reading and watching wildlife. They would listen to the radio or sometimes take their car to town or attend church and socials. “They kept the name Rocky Ridge Farm because Almanzo said it reminded them of the hard work they’d done and the battles won.”

**In summary**

became one of the “tin can tourists,” as she had called those who traveled around in early automobiles when most everyone else had horses.

Laura had been a hard working woman who valued time, wasted little, and enjoyed much, like God’s creation and beauty of a prairie rose. She could worship her Lord daily in places like a sunrise and sunset.

Personal tragedies didn’t destroy her religious faith or positive attitude. Laura once said, “The true way to live is to enjoy every moment

as it passes. Surely it is in the everyday things around us where the beauty of life lies.”

Fifty years after her death, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s words

continue to sow seeds of contentment.

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