

## Abstract

The purpose of this project is to investigate the reality of Laura Ingalls Wilder's experience that has been immortalized through her book series, *Little House*. The research uncovers Wilder's omissions from the series and explores how a full knowledge of her experience deepens the meaning of the books' themes. Additionally, the research addresses the controversial elements that Wilder included in her stories and the criticism she faced; this backlash is so severe that critics are calling for the removal of her books from schools. To explain these omissions, the themes they reinforce, and the books' controversial elements, this project utilizes extensive research that ranges from books to scholarly journals. The project first outlines the shocking events of Wilder's life that she excluded, such as her family's stay at Burr Oak, the death of her brother, and the death of her son. Although Wilder omitted these details, she controversially allowed racist attitudes to remain in her stories; the historical conditions of Wilder's lifetime influenced the way she depicted Native Americans. Although the words and actions of the characters in *Little House* are often full of prejudice, a positive portrayal of the relationship between the settlers and the Native Americans would be dishonest to the truth of the ugly conflict between them. This research project explores how a deeper understanding of Wilder's life and the historical context provides added meaning to the themes she emphasizes in her stories. The themes include contentment amidst hardship, the value of familial bonds, and the importance of hard work. Rather than erasing the truth of *Little House*, through the study of Wilder's life and an acknowledgement of the beautiful and the ugly details, readers may learn from the life of an incredibly complex and resilient woman who gave her stories to the world to cherish.

## Introduction and Research Question

**Research Question:** How does the reality of Laura Ingalls Wilder's experiences and values influence the messages of her stories and the way her stories continue to impact audiences today?

**Thesis:** The combined knowledge of Wilder's omissions from the series and the reality of the racism present in her books give readers an honest portrait of life on the prairie; this understanding lends to a deeper appreciation of the enduring themes beautifully illustrated in Wilder's books such as poverty, family bonds, and the value of hard work.

## Research Methodology

- Textual analysis of Laura Ingalls Wilder's series, *Little House on the Prairie*
- Textual analysis of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Prairie Girl* to examine the differences between the information included in her children's series and her autobiographical novel
- Analysis of existing research, books, articles, and interviews on Wilder's life and work
- An analysis of the history of conflict between Native Americans and white settlers to gain a deeper understanding of the historical context surrounding Wilder's books



Fig. 1. Shelly. "Laura Ingalls and Almanzo Wilder, circa 1885." 4 July 2010. Photograph. Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/cat-sidh/21688943561>. Accessed 18 March 2024. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 DEED.

## Results and Conclusions

### Results:

- When Wilder wrote *Little House*, she decided to omit certain details from her story to cater toward a younger audience and to preserve a positive tone
- These omissions include:
  - Her family's stay at Burr Oak
  - The death of Freddy Ingalls
  - The death of Wilder's son
  - Possible encounter with serial killers
- Although she omitted parts of her childhood, she controversially decided to include racist sentiments that led to severe backlash
- The evidence for racism includes:
  - Racist language throughout
  - The view of Native Americans as a threat
  - Dehumanizing language/attitudes
- An understanding of the historical context provides a rationale for Wilder's inclusion of these controversial elements:
  - The Homestead Act led to a years-long explosive conflict between the Native Americans and the white settlers, contributing to the racist atmosphere that Wilder accurately and honestly portrays in her novels
- The truth of Wilder's childhood, the good and the bad, gives added weight to the enduring themes in her stories that still influence audiences today
- These themes include:
  - Contentment despite hardship and poverty
  - Sacrificial love and the importance of familial bonds
  - The importance of faithful labor and the value of hard work

### Overall Conclusion:

- The grim truth of what Laura experienced makes her bright, positive themes more meaningful and impactful because, despite what she endured, she chose to look on her life and her childhood with love

## Future Work

- Scholars should explore how the *Little House* books were received during Wilder's lifetime
- It would be fascinating to uncover more evidence on how the conflict between the white settlers and the Native Americans directly influenced the Ingalls family and just how much of it she reveals in her stories
- It would be interesting to explore how Wilder's upbringing influenced her turbulent relationship with her daughter Rose

## Works Cited

- Fraser, Caroline. *Prairie Fires*. Henry Holt and Company, 2017.
- Heldrich, Philip. "'Going into Indian Territory': Attitudes Toward Native Americans in 'Little House on the Prairie'." *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2000, pp. 99-109. *ProQuest*, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/going-indian-territory-attitudes-toward-native/docview/1311903219/se-2>.
- Lifson, Amy. "Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder Is Not the Same When You're a Parent." *HUMANITIES*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2014. <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2014/julyaugust/feature/reading-laura-ingalls-wilder-not-the-same-when-youre-parent>.
- Miller, John E. *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman Behind the Legend*. E-book ed., University of Missouri Press, 1998.
- Smith, Pamela Hill, editor. *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*. South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014.
- Thurman, Judith. "Wilder Women." *The New Yorker*, 3 August 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/08/10/wilder-women>.
- Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *Little House on the Prairie*. Harper & Row, 1935.