

[A Wilder Rose: The Little Houses](#)

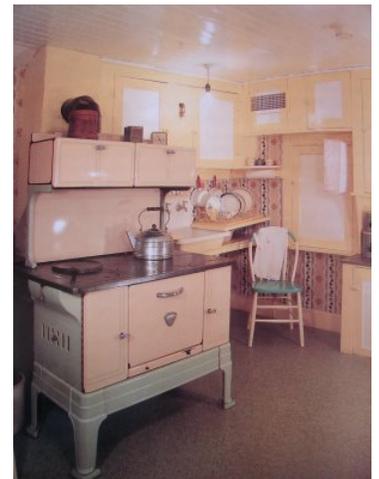
Rose Wilder Lane loved to travel, but she was also fascinated by houses, both the physical dwellings and their emotional significance. When she was remodeling a villa in Tirana, Albania, she wrote to a friend, Dorothy Thompson, “Houses are the abiding joys; they are the most emotion-stirring of all things.” During her adult life, Rose was intimately involved with three houses: the farmhouse at Rocky Ridge, the Rock House, and her little house on King Street outside of Danbury CT.

The Farmhouse at Rocky Ridge



The farmhouse, Laura said, “evolved.” It began as a two-room house built by Almanzo around 1897. A dozen years later, Laura sat down with pencil and paper and drew the house she wanted: ten rooms (including the original two), three porches downstairs and a sleeping porch upstairs, a fireplace, a beamed sitting room, and an open Craftsman-style stairway. The chimney and fireplace were built of native rock. The logs were cut from the wooded hillsides, sawn, and laid aside to season in 1911. Working under Almanzo’s supervision, two local carpenters, Ezra Dennis and his nephew Orel, built the house in 1912-1913.

The kitchen was remodeled numerous times, over the years. It has plenty of windows for light and the cupboards and counters built so that Laura, a short woman, could work comfortably. There was running water piped from a spring, and a wood/coal-fired “Blue Ribbon” range that came from the Montgomery & Ward catalogue. The pass-through between the kitchen and dining room was designed to make it easy to serve meals, and the closed cupboards (unusual for that day) kept the dust off the dishes. Laura painted the walls and ceiling a shiny white. “The convenience and whiteness are a continual joy,” she wrote. “It is a kitchen to be happy in.”



Rose, an excellent cook herself, also knew how to use that challenging range. She wrote this to a friend:

I will now take out the angel-food, or would you rather have the butter-rolls fresh this morning? Or pie? I make perfectly scrumptious pies, all varieties, with crust—SUCH crust, mm! And I will make a pot of tea and we will have tea right here. The flour bin and the sugar bin . . . are window seats with hinged tops, under the north windows; and between them is the mixing cabinet with convenient zinc top . . . So you sit on the flour and I sit on the sugar and with Montgomery Ward’s finest American semi-porcelain

between us we'll take tea. [Quoted in *The Laura Ingalls Wilder Country Cookbook*, commentary by William Anderson, p. 78.]



In this early photograph of the sitting room, you can see Laura's fireplace. When the house was being built, Almanzo got tired of hauling rock for the fireplace chimney and decided that the fireplace itself would be brick. Laura would have none of it. "I objected strenuously," she wrote. "I argued; I begged; and at last when everything failed I wept." Her tears won out. The fireplace is constructed of two large cut stones supporting a massive rock slab. Off the sitting room to the right is a small shelf-lined library.

The organ now sits in the music room. The portrait of Rose was painted by Lydia Gibson in 1917, who gave it to Rose in 1929. The organ did not belong to Laura's sister, Mary; no one seems to be sure where it came from.



Between 1928-1935, Rose rented the farmhouse from her parents for the then-princely sum of \$60 a month. During this time, she used the upstairs sleeping porch as her writing studio. You can see it in this photo. When her writer friends visited from New York, there could be as many as four typewriters clacking away at once.

While Helen Boylston was living at Rocky Ridge (1928-1931), she had the small yellow bedroom upstairs; after she left, the room was used as a guest room. Rose had this pretty white room, also upstairs.



After Laura and Almanzo moved to the Rock House at Christmas, 1928, Rose modernized the farmhouse, installing electricity, hot water, and an electric refrigerator; an indoor toilet and bathtub; and a furnace. She lived there until August, 1935, when she went to Columbia MO to do research for a book. Laura and Almanzo returned to the farmhouse in 1936 and lived there until their deaths.

After Laura's death, her Mansfield friends created a nonprofit organization and transformed the house into [a museum](#). When Rose provided funding for the project, she wrote, "Nothing would have pleased [my mother] more than knowing that Mansfield people want to keep her house in memory of her."

The Rock House



Rose began to imagine building a retirement cottage for her elderly parents in 1927, when she was still living in Albania. She had seen a magazine advertisement for a Sears Roebuck Tudor-style cottage called "The Mitchell." She thought it would be the perfect place for retired people: no stairs to climb, central heat, hot water and indoor plumbing, electricity and refrigeration.

Laura wasn't so sure. Rose broached the idea soon after her arrival at Rocky Ridge in early March, 1928, but her mother didn't agree to the scheme until late July. Almanzo found a site he liked on the "Newell Forty," Rose located an architect and a contractor, a well was drilled, and construction got underway in September. At that time, Rose estimated that the house, the materials for which she could have purchased from Sears for around \$2,000, would cost over \$4,000. When it was finally built and furnished and the electricity lines brought out from Mansfield, the house cost more than \$11,000.



But Rose, who had stashed a tidy sum of money in the stock market, wasn't sparing her pennies. From her writing desk on the sleeping porch of the farmhouse she wrote to Dorothy Thompson:

August 14, 1928

I am building a house. Houses are my vice; without houses, who knows? I might have been a writer. I am my own worst enemy. I can't take houses, or leave 'em alone. This house is a five-room English cottage (anyway, rather English) which shall—Inshallah!—be all that both my father and my mother have wanted in houses. It's building on another part of this farm, and when, if ever, it's done, they

shall live in it. I then inherit this house, which shall no doubt be remodeled from foundation to ridge . . .

Laura and Almanzo moved into the Rock House just before Christmas, 1928. Laura wrote “Pioneer Girl” and drafted the first four *Little House* books there. In 1936, after Rose had left for Columbia, she and Almanzo moved back to the farmhouse. But in their last years, the ten-room house with four porches was too large for them, and they lived in the kitchen, dining room, and bedroom—a little house once more, not much larger than the tiny two-room house they had built at Rocky Ridge in the late 1890s.



And the Rock House? It was rented for several years, then sold. The Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association repurchased it in the late 1990s and it is now open to visitors. You can reach it down this pretty green trail.

The Little House on King Street



Figure 1: Photo courtesy of William Anderson

In 1938, Rose used some the proceeds from her best-selling book, *Free Land*, to buy a small house and several acres at 23 King Street, just outside of Danbury CT. There were fruit trees, space for a garden, and daffodils, forsythia, and lilacs. Here’s how she described it for *Woman’s Day*:

My little farmhouse, when I bought it, was close to a lazy country road . . . [It] measured 23’ by 24’. The genius of those unnoticed New England farmers, who invented modern functional architecture, had put into that small space a living room, dining room, kitchen, three upstairs bedrooms and a store room that had become a bathroom, and had made them all seem spacious. A bay window brought outdoors into the dining room, and the narrow porch roof continued over a lean-to, widening the kitchen . . .

Well, I had read Thoreau and I was living a simple life, but you know how it is. Every woman in every house is always dreaming of making it over. So, looking from my little kitchen at the back kitchen’s almost level floor, and the refrigerator, and the honeysuckle vine that had got in somehow and was wandering palely over the cupboards, I often thought: If the pantry were gone, I wonder how big? I do like a BIG kitchen. That west wall all windows; afternoon sunshine flooding in. A sunny big kitchen, with a fireplace. Knotty pine, red-checked gingham. Oh, well. But just to take down a wall and put in some windows; that wouldn’t be much, would it?

Of course it would—and over the next thirty years, Rose would spend a great deal of time and energy and money remodeling this house. It is likely that she would have gone on remodeling forever, if she'd been granted the time.

Rose once wrote an article arguing that owning a home was one of the greatest of life's privileges—and responsibilities. "Little by little," she wrote,

in eternal battle with the eternal impermanence and fading and decay of obsolescence of all material things, you shape a bit of the world in your own image. Your character, your tastes, your increasing knowledge, your memories, are built into this wood and stone and plaster, and stamped into this earth. . . Home is the meaning that you build into these constantly perishing, constantly renewed things. Your own home is dear to you as your own body, growing, changing, limiting, troublesome, imperfect, and yours; expressing and giving visible form to your life.

Books were among the possessions that were the visible expression of Rose's intellectual life. From childhood, she had been a voracious reader, and when she moved into her King Street house, she had to find room for thousands of volumes. At her death, her ten-thousand volume library went to her adopted "grandson," Roger Lea MacBride. This is her Danbury study, with her desk, typewriter, and comfortable reading chair.

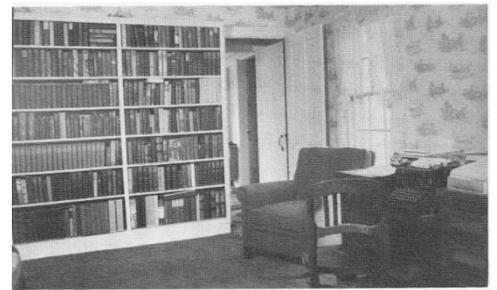


Figure 2: Photo courtesy of William Anderson



In 1965, Rose bought a second home, at 435 Woodland Drive, in Harlingen TX. She first visited the Rio Grande Valley in the winter of 1941-1942, and was there when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1942 and Hitler declared war on the United States four days later. Those events likely compelled her to begin her book, *The Discovery of Freedom*. She began a draft of that book while she was camping in a trailer park in McAllen TX and finished it back home in Danbury. She loved the climate and the flowers and birds of the Valley and spent several happy, comfortable winters there. But the little house on King Street would be the home of her heart for the rest of her life.