

**A Reader's Companion**

**to**

**A Wilder Rose**

By Susan Wittig Albert

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## A Note to the Reader

Writing novels about real people can be a tricky business. It is even trickier when one of the characters is an idolized literary heroine and icon of children's literature (Laura Ingalls Wilder) and the other is a writer unknown to most modern readers (Laura's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane), but who deserves the appropriate credit for the books she helped to construct, shape, polish, and publish.

Over the twenty years I've been thinking about and researching this project, I have considered many different ways to share with you what I have learned about Rose, Laura, and their decade-long collaboration. Because stories have so much imaginative power, I chose to use fiction—a form that Rose herself, so adept at turning real lives into fiction, would certainly appreciate.

But because I am a researcher at heart (and by training), and because the story I have to tell is both true and controversial, I want you to have this *Reader's Companion*. In it, I have presented my research, documented the primary and secondary sources on which I have built the story, and called attention to the factual basis for the fictionalizing I have done. And since no writers live and work in a vacuum, I have also included background material about the years covered by the story, along with references to general readings about the Depression-era world in which the Little House series was written. This may help you better understand the economic, social, political, and geographic environments that shaped the lives of Laura Ingalls Wilder (LIW) and Rose Wilder Lane (RWL).

I hope this *Companion* will help you engage more deeply with the story of these two fascinating women, each of whom was ahead of her time, and form your own opinions about their relationship and the long and complex collaboration that produced the Little House books.

### **The Sources for *A Wilder Rose***

My primary sources of insight into Rose’s beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and the daily events of her life are the unpublished diaries and journals she kept; published and unpublished letters she wrote to and received from various correspondents; and her short stories, novels, and other writings, published and unpublished. Most of these documents are archived in the Rose Wilder Lane Collection at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library. I transcribed her 1928–1939 diaries for easier reference. Working with these day-to-day entries, recorded in Rose’s firm, clear hand, I gained a familiarity with the details of her daily life and work that I could not have gotten from a casual reading of the nearly eighty-three thousand words. I must add, however, that the conclusions I have drawn from this material are entirely my own and in no way imply acknowledgement, endorsement, or approval by the Little House Trust, which holds the copyrights to many of the Lane and Wilder documents.

In addition, I read and compared the various texts of “Pioneer Girl”—the first-person autobiography that Laura wrote before she began work on the Little House books—as well as the manuscripts and printed texts of *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Farmer Boy*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, and *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, available on microfilm from the State Historical Society of Missouri. I chose these works because they were written during the period covered by the novel.

My most important secondary source was William Holtz’s (WH) excellent biography, the only book-length study of Rose’s life and work: *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose*

*Wilder Lane* (1993). Scholars of literature and history have written a great deal about Laura and the Little House books, and I have listed the many sources with which I worked in interlinear notes and in the bibliography. If I know that a particular document is online and accessible to the public (some are available only by subscription), I have included a link to it, current at the time of this writing.

Because so much of the material I worked with is unpublished and may be difficult for general readers to find, I have also included references to the more accessible sources. You may see a reference that looks like this: LIW to RWL, January 28, 1938, quoted by John E. Miller, in his book *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder*, p. 224. It is unlikely that you will be able to go to West Branch, Iowa, to read the original letter in the Hoover archive, but you will find the relevant part of it quoted, along with additional commentary, on page 224 in Miller's book, which is readily available in libraries and through online retailers.

### **Using This Book**

Most of the chapters of the *Companion* begin with some historical background in a section called "Time and Place." After that, the text is arranged so that the chapters and paragraphs of the *Companion* correspond to the chapters and paragraphs in *A Wilder Rose*. Simply look for the *Companion's* bold italic headings and match them to the text in your copy of the novel. For example, ***The back door opened*** (the first reference in Chapter One) is keyed to the seventh paragraph of Chapter One in the novel, which begins, "The back door opened . . ."

You can consult the *Companion* as you read the novel (it may answer your immediate questions of fact or interpretation), or you can read it after you've finished the novel for a more general idea. Best yet, you can reread the novel with the *Companion*, using the references cited as a guide to your own further study.

At the end of the *Companion*, you will find some questions for your individual use or for your book group; a list of the historical people who appear in the novel; a list of Laura's and Rose's books and those they coauthored; and a list of the resources, both general and scholarly, that I have consulted. Some of this material duplicates what's in the novel; some of it is expanded. I hope that you will use it to continue to learn as much as you can about the life of Rose Wilder Lane. Without her, the Little House books that you and I have loved since childhood would not have been published.

## PART ONE

### Chapter One

#### The Little House on King Street: April 1939

##### Time and Place

In March 1938, Rose Lane used some of her earnings from the sale of her magazine serial and book, *Free Land*, to buy a tiny, wood-frame farmhouse (552 square feet, 23 feet x 24 feet) on three acres of land on King Street, a few miles outside of Danbury, Connecticut, a small town about sixty miles north of New York City. William Holtz, Rose's biographer, describes the house in his book, *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane* (hereafter abbreviated as *Ghost*), pp. 283–284.

Rose had a long history of building and remodeling houses, flats, and apartments—even an Albanian villa. She once completely replastered, repainted, and redecorated her Paris apartment at 8 Square Des Nouettes, then cheerfully sublet it six months later and left for a trip through Eastern Europe. She sometimes felt that this urge to build and renovate was a curse, an addiction that cost her time, money, and energy. To her friend Dorothy Thompson, she wrote that houses had always been her “vice” (August 14, 1928, in *Dorothy Thompson & Rose Wilder Lane: Forty Years of Friendship*, hereafter abbreviated as *Friendship*, ed. William Holtz, p. 96).

The Danbury house was the first house she owned. She paid twenty-six hundred dollars cash for it and took out a nine-hundred-dollar-mortgage. Rose would have other temporary residences and even a winter home (in Harlingen, Texas), but the little house on King Street would be hers—renovated, remodeled, expanded, and loved—for the rest of her life.

All the King Street chapters of the novel take place in April 1939, at a crucial turning point in European affairs. Mussolini's occupation of Albania had recently begun. Rose had traveled and lived in Albania in the 1920s and had imagined it as an ideal pastoral escape from the stresses of modernity. In that way, she was following the path of other 1920s artists and intellectuals, who felt the need to retreat from the complexities and commercialization of modern America. She was wrong, as she learned after living there; it was neither pastoral nor an ideal, and she left when she realized the truth.

Already in 1939, Franco had assumed power in Spain. Hitler had begun building a huge naval fleet designed to crush Britain and was planning his fall invasion of Poland. Regular trans-Atlantic mail service was scheduled to begin. The New York World's Fair had opened. And Amelia Earhart had been declared dead.

### ***The back door opened***

During Rose's first year or two at King Street, Norma Lee Browning (NLB) and Russell Ogg were her houseguests for months at a time. Rose and Norma Lee had met in Columbia, Missouri, in 1936 and renewed their acquaintance in New York in 1937, after Norma Lee and Russell were married. In 1937–1938, Norma Lee was enrolled at Radcliffe College, taking classes and polishing her writing skills. From 1937–1939, Rose and the Browning-Oggs occupied neighboring apartments in a tenement in New York City, where Rose stayed when she wanted to connect with her city friends and live a city life. In 1942, they traveled together to Texas, where Rose became so enchanted by the Rio Grande Valley that she visited frequently and, in 1965, bought a winter home there. Norma Lee and Rose remained friends and correspondents until Rose's death (*Ghost*, p. 265).

There is no documentation to support my idea that Norma Lee saw the manuscript of *Plum Creek* or discussed *Silver Lake* with Rose. But she was certainly in a position to know about the work Rose was doing. In 1991, she asserted in a letter to Rose’s biographer that Rose “conceived [the Little House books] and wrote them” (NLB to WH, November 5, 1979, Holtz Collection, Herbert Hoover Library).

Rose’s fictional instruction to Norma Lee—“Just say I only do a little technical work on the manuscripts”—is based on a comment that Browning herself made after the publication of Holtz’s biography of Rose: “They were Laura's stories, though Mrs. Lane did put in an awful lot of the technical work . . . . She [Laura] and Rose Wilder Lane were collaborators” (*Orlando Sentinel*, March 5, 1993, “[Did Laura Ingalls Wilder Really Write the Little House Books?](#)”).

### ***Norma Lee put***

Early in their friendship, Rose was always “Mrs. Lane” to the younger woman. Rose permitted only very close friends to use her first name. Browning reported that she had once introduced an acquaintance to Mrs. Lane, who refused to see the young woman again after she called her Rose (NLB to WH, September 20, 1979, Holtz Collection, Herbert Hoover Library).

### ***That’s Silver Lake, I suppose***

In April 1939, Rose was working on the rewrite of *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, which she would finish in June for November publication. Mama Bess had not agreed readily to the changes Rose suggested. But the longer she thought about it, the more she could see that a little brush-up wasn’t going to do the trick—or she simply got tired of arguing about it and wanted her daughter to do the rewrite. “Do anything you please with the damn stuff,” she wrote, “if you will fix it up” (LIW to RWL, January 28, 1938, and undated [January 1938], beginning “Laura was

impatient . . . .” Quoted by John E. Miller, in his book *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman Behind the Legend*, hereafter abbreviated as *Becoming*, p. 224).

The discussion of the books usually followed the same pattern: Rose suggested changes to Laura’s drafts; Laura protested some of them, arguing for alternatives, then deferred to Rose’s expertise and experience. A comparison of the letters, the manuscripts, and the published books shows that Rose had the last word. Her polished, publishable text led Ursula Nordstrom, a Harper editor, to remark, “None of the manuscripts ever needed any editing. Not any. They were read and then copy-edited and sent to the printer” (quoted in Rosa Ann Moore, “Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Orange Notebooks and the Art of the Little House Books,” p. 118). At the time of Moore’s writing, the extent of Rose’s work on the books was still unclear.

Rose’s collaboration with her mother was only one of many such projects she undertook during her career. In 1918, she ghostwrote Frederick O’Brien’s *White Shadows in the South Seas* but was cheated out of the agreed-to royalties (*Ghost*, pp. 81, 88, 103–104, 160). *White Shadows* was made into a 1928 Academy Award-winning movie, the first MGM film to be released with a soundtrack. In 1930–1932, at the same time that Rose was working on *Little House in the Big Woods* and her mother’s draft of *Farmer Boy*, she ghostwrote at least five books for Lowell Thomas, a journalist best known for making Lawrence of Arabia famous.

The ghostwritten books for Lowell Thomas that Rose records in her diary are these, with the dates she worked on them in parentheses:

*Memoirs of a Soldier of Fortune: Rafael de Nogales*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1932 (December–January 1930–1931).

*Rolling Stone: The Life and Adventures of Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1931 (February 1931).

*This Side of Hell: Dan Edwards, Adventurer*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1932 (March–April 1931).

*Sir Hubert Wilkins: His World of Adventure: A Biography.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961 (June–July 1931).

*Born to Raise Hell: The Life Story of Tex O'Reilly, Soldier of Fortune, as Told to Lowell Thomas.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1936. (February–May 1932).

*Old Gimlet Eye: The Adventures of Smedley D. Butler, as Told to Lowell Thomas.* New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1933. (Unconfirmed by any diary notation; if she ghostwrote this, it was her first project for Thomas, completed in November–December 1930, during a period in which she recorded no diary entries.)

In March 1931, Rose wrote to her adopted son, Rexh, that she was working on two ghostwriting projects, close to 180,000 words in fewer than four months. Usually, writers of her reputation didn't do work like that, she added, but there was a time for everything—and she needed the money. Lowell Thomas paid her one thousand dollars per book; she received her first check from him in January 1931. (For the text of the letter, see *Ghost*, p. 224.)

### ***I don't want a share***

Rose's fictional statement to Norma Lee about the royalties for the Little House books is consistent with all her previous actions. When she left Mansfield to work in Kansas City, she sent home as much money as she could afford. In 1920, when her writing income increased, she began supporting her father and mother with a subsidy of five hundred dollars a year (*Ghost*, p. 100). From 1928–1936, she paid an additional sixty dollars a month rent for the Rocky Ridge farmhouse, while her parents lived in the Rock House that she had built for them. By 1939, Laura's annual royalty earnings amounted to about two thousand dollars, and Rose was able to discontinue her subsidy.

It wasn't until 1949, however, that Laura decided to share any of the book royalties with her coauthor. In July of that year, she wrote to their agent, George Bye, assigning 10 percent of the royalties to Rose (*Ghost*, p. 334). At her death in 1957, Laura's annual royalty income had

risen to twenty-six thousand dollars, of which twenty-six hundred dollars would have gone to Rose (*Ghost*, p. 413, n. 3).

***Yes, I know***

In the years between 1915 and 1920, Rose wrote five “as-told-to” newspaper and magazine serials, later published as books:

[\*Art Smith's Story: The Autobiography of the Boy Aviator\*](#). San Francisco: *San Francisco Bulletin*, 1915.

[\*Charlie Chaplin's Own Story\*](#). Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1916.

[\*Henry Ford's Own Story\*](#). New York: Ellis O. Jones, 1917.

[\*The Making of Herbert Hoover\*](#). New York: Century Company, 1920.

*He Was a Man*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1925. (The text of the original *Sunset* magazine article, “[Life and Jack London](#),” is available on the *World of Jack London* website.)

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, much newspaper writing was sensational, rather than factual. Feature writers like Rose were encouraged to dramatize and fictionalize their stories as a way of engaging readers’ attention—and selling newspapers. Rose was very good at turning life into interesting, compelling reading, but that often meant inventing material to fit her storyline. Henry Ford objected to what William Holtz calls the “fictioneering liberties” that Rose took with the facts of his life, as Charlie Chaplin and Charmian London, Jack London’s widow, appear to have done (*Ghost*, pp. 62–77). However, in all three cases, it is likely that Rose’s subjects primarily wanted to exercise control over all biographical material, in order to suit their own publicity purposes. Both the Chaplin and Ford books were withdrawn by their publishers, although at least one copy of each got out into the world.

In one sense, Rose’s fictionalizing strategy was perfectly suited to the publicity-seeking, self-aggrandizing presentation styles of Ford, Chaplin, and London. She made them larger than

life, exactly as they made themselves larger than life. Donna Campbell discusses this technique of narrative enlargement in her essay in *Studies in American Naturalism* (Vol. 7, No. 2, Winter 2012, pp. 176–192). Campbell writes that, in her *Sunset* magazine serial about Jack London (“[Life and Jack London](#),” October 1917–May 1918), Rose wove together factual details about London’s life and fictional incidents that he had created for his own autobiographical purposes, thereby creating a “romanticized portrait essentially similar to the self-mythologizing that London himself practiced.” When Charmian London refused to authorize the book-length biography based on the serial, Rose at first protested, then simply added more fictionalization and published the book as a novel, *He Was a Man* (1925). This “narrative enlargement” was essentially the same practice she followed with her mother’s drafts of the Little House books, which were drawn from the more factual “Pioneer Girl.”

Rose’s biography of Herbert Hoover was more restrained, befitting the modest, self-effacing style of the man who would be elected president in 1928. Hoover may have objected to Rose’s book (*Ghost*, p. 189), but it remained in print. Later, he admired her “Credo” and *The Discovery of Freedom*, and he and Rose remained friends throughout their lives. (Her papers are held in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.)

In 1919, at the end of her *Bulletin* days, Rose wrote an autobiographical magazine serial/novel titled [Diverging Roads](#). In both the serial (published in *Sunset* magazine) and the novel (published by the Century Company), the heroine is a working girl who is beginning to enjoy the fruits of an independent life. In the *Sunset* version, her unfortunate marriage dissolves (as Rose’s marriage to Gillette Lane had recently ended) and she is reunited with her faithful childhood sweetheart. In the book version, however, the newly divorced heroine rejects the childhood sweetheart and opts instead for a career as a journalist, a circle of women friends, and

life as a single and independent woman. Rose would later describe *Diverging Roads* as a “novel whose subject was the destructive effect of woman’s freedom (financial and personal) upon the old institution of marriage” (*Ghost*, p. 77). She would return to the subject of the confining nature of marriage some fifteen years later in the stories collected in *Old Home Town* (1935), which contain many autobiographical elements.

In fact, as Rose wrote to her friend, Mary Margaret McBride, she believed that all writing, like dreaming, has an autobiographical urgency. We are made up of multiple selves, she said. When we write, we write from one of those selves—and our writing self speaks for all the others (March 11, 1929, RWL Collection, Herbert Hoover Library).

## Chapter Two

From Albania to Missouri: 1928

### Time and Place

In April 1920, Rose went to Europe as a writer for the American Red Cross, assigned to research and write stories that might move American readers to open their wallets and support the charity's postwar work. Her European and Asian travels took her to Albania in 1921 and again in 1923; she wrote *The Peaks of Shala* (1923) about her mountain journey. She loved the country for its scenic beauty and for the pastoral and near-medieval character of its cultural life, which seemed to her to stand in sharp contrast to the mechanized and monetized materialism of America in the 1920s. When she ended her work with the Red Cross, she knew that she wanted to return to Albania to live.

Meanwhile, Rose had become close friends with Helen Dore Boylston, who went by the childhood nickname of Troub, short for Troubles. (Helen always seemed to invite—and survive—minor catastrophes.) The two women met on a train from Paris to Warsaw in 1920 and fell into an easy companionship. Troub joined Rose at Rocky Ridge in 1925, and in 1926, the two went to Albania, via Paris.

According to William Holtz, Rose and Troub shared an “enthusiasm for unconventional experience” that made it difficult for them to imagine becoming wives and mothers, and each had a strong sense of self-reliance that led them to choose travel and independent living. In a joint journal written for Rose's mother, Rose and Troub recorded their Parisian purchase of an automobile, a splendid maroon 1926 Model T, and their journey from Paris through southern

France and Italy, to Tirana, Albania, where they leased a house and settled down for a long stay, planning to live cheaply, invest what they could in the booming stock market back home, and enjoy Albanian life. The story of the trip from Paris to Tirana in the Model T is gaily told in *Travels With Zenobia*, edited by William Holtz (University of Missouri Press, 1983).

Troub had a small legacy that enabled her to live without working very hard. Rose earned her living by writing short fiction for the American magazine market; at the same time, she hoped to clear enough time to write something “worthwhile”—a repeated concern during this period. In letters, she sometimes described her magazine fiction as “hack work” and often depreciated her considerable skill for creating entertaining stories. To her friend Guy Moyston, she wrote playfully that she had no special art. She was a craftsman, she said; she made stories the same way she made biscuits or embroidered or wrapped packages (RWL to Guy Moyston, June 25, 1925, RWL Collection, Herbert Hoover Library).

This same self-deprecating view was often expressed by writers of popular “middlebrow” magazine fiction, especially women, who could not help comparing themselves to the more highly respected authors of “highbrow” literary fiction. This didn’t seem to have been the case with Rose, however. She wasn’t aiming for literary recognition or prestige. Instead, she said that she wanted to write something authentic, something that grew out of her feelings and her philosophy, out of an inner compulsion that gave meaning to her work (Diary, February 23, 1927). She would discover that authenticity in her political writings, beginning with “Credo,” published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1936.

During her Albanian stay, Rose was successful in selling to the American magazine market. Her collection of Ozark stories (*Cindy: A Romance of the Ozarks*) earned her ten thousand dollars from *Country Gentleman* (*Ghost*, p. 177). But the political situation became

problematic, the women found the country to be something other than they had expected, and when Rose was summoned back to Rocky Ridge by her mother, both she and Troub took it as a signal that it was time to go back to the States. Rose didn't record the exact nature of the summons, but it was likely to have been a health issue, either her mother's or her father's. Whatever the situation, Rose felt it was urgent and—a dutiful daughter—she decided it was time to go home.

***Troub knew it was time to leave***

Helen Boylston had stayed at Rocky Ridge for several months in 1924-1925, and had ample opportunity to form an opinion about Rose's mother. In 1981, three years before her death at the age of 89, Troub was interviewed by William Anderson. He reported the interview in his article, "[Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: The Continuing Collaboration](#)" (hereafter abbreviated as "Collaboration," pp. 92, 99). Troub remembered Laura very clearly. Rose's mother, she said, expected her daughter "to do everything, including mind what she was told on the instant . . . She bossed everybody, including her husband, the cat, the dog, and everyone else."

Others shared Troub's impression of Mrs. Wilder's forceful personality. Stephen W. Hines writes, "When I interviewed people who had known Mr. and Mrs. Wilder . . . there was universal agreement that Laura 'ran the show' at the farm. She wore the pants in the family, yet there was no record of Almanzo's having resented her assertiveness, which he seems to have taken as a matter of course, more an aspect of her strong personality than anything else" (*Laura Ingalls Wilder: Farm Journalist*, hereafter abbreviated as *Journalist*, edited by Stephen W. Hines, University of Missouri Press, 2007, p. 6).

In another collection of reminiscences, Hines reports a statement by Tom Carnall, a frequent visitor to Rocky Ridge in 1934 and later the mayor of Sparta, Missouri: “Laura was the boss of the place, no question about that in anybody’s mind. She ramrodded the whole thing . . . . Whenever she told Almanzo to do something, she meant it” (*I Remember Laura*, hereafter abbreviated as *Remember*, edited by Stephen W. Hines, p. 208).

Troub’s feelings about Almanzo were very different from her feelings about Laura. “He was a lamb,” she told Anderson. “He was a sweet, hag-ridden soul . . . .” His wife “nagged him, and yelled at him, howled at him, and adored him.” Almanzo told Troub that he had known Laura had a temper when he married her. “She still does . . . . You just get used to those things,” he said (“Collaboration,” p. 119).

### ***So when Troub advanced***

“Rose was very much her mama’s slave,” Troub told Anderson (“Collaboration,” p. 92). Both Holtz and Anderson speculate that Rose assumed this role out of guilt for leaving home—but also as a means of controlling her mother.

The control issue aside, any daughter who has seen her aging mother attempt to keep up the farm chores in all weathers will surely understand Rose’s feelings of obligation. In February 1924, during a stay of some months at the farm, Rose wrote to Guy Moyston, detailing the endless round of farm chores she was taking on for her mother. If she didn’t do the work, Mama Bess would do it, Rose said—and her mother was already too ill to manage. But after a full day of farm chores, Rose found she was too tired to do her own writing. (Rose’s letter is quoted in *Ghost*, p. 143). It’s not difficult to see that her work on the Little House books was, in part at least, a simple extension of the need she felt to help her mother.

### ***But she told me***

In 1939, after Laura was receiving regular royalties from the Little House books, she wrote about her dream to Rose, associating it with her lifelong family history of poverty. For years, she said, she had dreamed that she was walking fearfully down a long dark road, with trees looming on either side. But in a recent dream, she realized that she didn't have to go through that frightening wood—she could take another route. She attributed this recognition to the knowledge that she and Almanzo could now live on their earnings and she no longer had to fret about unpaid bills. (For the text of the letter, see *Ghost*, p. 293).

### *A safe haven?*

Rose might romanticize the natural beauty of the Ozarks, but she was realistic when it came to farm life. In a 1924 *Harper's* article that repeated many of the complaints that she noted in her letter to Moyston, she wrote:

Imagine a farmhouse besieged by storm, wood piles snowed under—wasn't it Whittier who thought them so poetic, the idiot!—water bucket frozen in the well, stoves to be fed with wood from the wood piles and shoveled out of ashes; potatoes to be peeled; floors to be swept and scrubbed . . . milk to be strained and skimmed and put into the chickens' bucket; food to be cooked for the pigs; lamps to be cleaned and filled and set away and taken down and lighted . . .

The article, called “Veal Cutlets” (*Harper's Magazine* 149, September 1924, pp. 542–543), outlines with a barbed and ironic humor the enormous amount of unprofitable work that goes into the farmer's production of a single piece of meat.

### *Yes, really*

The house that Rose saw in a magazine was the [Sears and Roebuck Tudor-style “Mitchell”](#) (Catalogue #3263). The design had already been available for several years when it was featured on the front cover of the 1929 *Honor Bilt Modern Homes* catalog. The homes were sold by mail order as “kit houses,” from 1908 through the first years of WWII. (I happened to

notice—and recognize—this house advertised in the 1929 Fall and Winter Sears Roebuck catalog, which I was using for research for a mystery series set in the 1930s.)

### ***Inviting friends had been***

William Anderson reports: “Only occasionally did irritation surface when his [Almanzo’s] house was filled with conclaves of Lane’s literary friends . . . . At such times, Boylston recalled, ‘Mr. Wilder used to sit and grumble, saying “Anybody couldn’t go to the john to save their life. There was always some hen on”’” (“Collaboration,” p. 120).

The Wilders installed an indoor bathroom in 1922, and Rose further modernized it in 1929. The modern bathtub was installed later. (I am indebted to William Anderson and LIW researcher Nancy Cleaveland for this information.)

### ***A couple of years before***

Helen Boylston trained as a nurse at Massachusetts General Hospital and volunteered for combat duty with the Harvard Medical Unit, part of the British Expeditionary Force in France. She reached the rank of captain. Her book, *Sister: The War Diary of a Nurse* (Ives Washburn, 1927), is lively, informative, and highly descriptive, an intimate recollection of the difficulties of providing comfort to the wounded in the chaos of war. It reveals Troub as a fun-loving young woman who was kind and sympathetic toward her patients, an excellent observer, and a highly competent writer. Here is a paragraph from the last pages of the book, written after her return to the States:

I would like to see one more sunset from the top of the range, the camp stretched out at my feet and Pat [the camp cat] cuddled contentedly in my arms, blinking at the sea with his amber eyes! The long evenings come back to me when I try to go to sleep at night—the long evenings by the fire, with the stories, the plans, the discussions, the old jokes and catchwords. And the drives, with their endless strings of ambulances. How we worked! We gave all we had to give, and life was glorious. Even numbed with fatigue as we were, we knew it was glorious. . . . I can't stand it here [at home] much longer, in this place where nothing ever happens and every day is like every other day.

I haven't seen any documentary evidence that Rose had a hand in editing *Sister*, but I wouldn't be surprised if she had. That last sentence echoes Rose's feelings about life at Rocky Ridge, that whole days, even weeks, went by when nothing at all happened.

### ***So we packed bags***

Rose and Troub sailed for New York in February 1928, on the handsome passenger liner *Saturnia*. The ship, which was owned by the Italian line, began sailing in 1927, with the latest in Art Deco furniture and decor. Holtz's report (*Ghost*, p. 185) that Rose had to pay \$450 duty for Mr. Bunting results from a misreading of Rose's handwritten diary. The correct amount is \$4.50. LIW researcher Nancy Cleaveland noticed this error and commented to me: "Don't you think Rose would have r-o-a-r-e-d at having to pay twice her own trans-Atlantic fare to get the dog into the U.S.?"

### ***There was a certain sadness***

Rose's farewell note to Guy Moyston is wistful. She wrote that she was sorry that she'd hurt him and that she wished he might be able to say that the pleasure they had shared was almost worth whatever pain he felt. (RWL to Guy Moyston, undated [February 27, 1928], RWL Collection, Herbert Hoover Library. The text of the letter is quoted in *Ghost*, p. 185.)

## Chapter Three

Houses: 1928

### Time and Place

The boom year 1928 continued the optimistic expectation of unending prosperity that had boosted the nation's hopes for the future during the Harding and Coolidge presidencies. For a full account of the “ballyhoo” decade, the “big bull market,” and the revolution in manners and morals that marked the “flapper generation,” see Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*.

This expansionary vision did not translate into greater financial prosperity for farmers, however. During the postwar years, agricultural prices collapsed under the pressure of surpluses, and farming communities like Mansfield had a difficult time of it. Interest rates and taxes were high, and many small farms ended up in the hands of bankers. So while urban economies may have seemed to be growing as fast as the bull market, rural economies were stagnant, and rural people eyed with suspicion what they saw as the excesses of city dwellers.

The year 1928 was a year for “firsts.” Kellogg's Rice Krispies appeared on grocery store shelves. Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic; although she made the flight as a crew member, not the pilot, it was still considered a momentous event—and she did keep the flight log. Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin, the first in an era of antibiotic discovery. And General Electric's new television station, W2XB, began broadcasting the first regular schedule of television programs. The opportunities must have seemed endless.

### *Spring in the Ozarks*

Rose's fine eye for seasonal Ozark Mountain landscapes is especially evident in her Ozark stories, written during her stay in Albania for *Country Gentleman* magazine and refashioned as the novel *Hill-Billy*, published by Harper & Brothers in 1926. Here's a brief sample:

Beaver Branch road was a pale yellow track under the arch of oak and walnut boughs. The hazel and sassafras hedges on either side were edged with translucent green of single leaves in sunlight. Lavender horses'-mint and burning orange butterfly-weed were blossoming, and here and there tangles of wild roses interrupted the green of massed bushes with splashes of pink (p. 61).

And another:

The bays went tirelessly forward. The roadsides were gay with orange and purple and golden-hearted white of wild blossoms, and from grasses and weeds and leaves of the sun-steeped trees a shrilling of insects rose. The hot air was fruity with scents of ripening, and every curve of the road disclosed a new vista of golden and green and darkly wooded hills melting into blue haze. From the shoulder of Pea Ridge they could see on the loops of rust-colored road below them the last straggling wagons going toward Prairie Hollow (p. 79).

### ***Our family had fled***

Excellent resources for the Wilder family's life from 1885 to their purchase of Rocky Ridge Farm are the chapters "The Joys and Sorrow of Early Married Life, 1885–1894" and the first eight pages of "In the Land of the Big Red Apple" in John E. Miller's book, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder*. Another helpful source: Chapters 10, 11, and 12 in William Anderson's *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography*.

Rose is careful to point out, in her introduction to *On the Way Home* (Laura's journal of the 1894 journey from De Smet to Mansfield) that her mother didn't *have* to work: "My father was the provider." As she describes it, Almanzo's earnings supported the family, while Laura "worked to save" so they could afford to buy a farm (*On the Way Home*, p. 6).

In an article she wrote for *Cosmopolitan* magazine (June 1926, p. 42), Rose reported her recollection of setting the Dakota homestead claim house on fire: “I quite well remember watching the house burn, with everything we owned in the world, and knowing I had done it.”

Rose’s amused remembrance of “What is life without a liver?” is found in her afterword to *On the Way Home*, pp. 86–87.

It is possible that Rose did not know at this time (1939) about the death of her baby brother. For the purposes of the novel, however, I have assumed that she did know. While there’s no documentation, I find it hard to believe that her mother would not have told her of the death of her brother when Rose lost her own son.

### ***We traveled***

Nancy Cleaveland, who has done extensive research on the Cooley family, reports that Frank Cooley went to Wright County in April 1894, and arranged to purchase two farms near Norwood, Missouri. One was to be the Cooley farm; the other would be purchased by the Wilders (personal communication, March 13, 2013). But when the Cooleys and Wilders arrived in the area later that year, they discovered that they couldn’t get clear title to either of the farms, so they didn’t take possession. The Cooleys bought a house in town, and the Wilders bought Rocky Ridge.

In a *Ruralist* article published under Almanzo’s name but certainly written by Laura, she is said to have taken “a violent fancy” to Rocky Ridge. Almanzo himself was apparently unenthusiastic about the property, at least at first. It contained very little arable land and consisted mostly of “ridges . . . covered with rocks and brush and timber.” It required “heroic effort” to clear fields and set out the tiny apple trees that were included with the purchase (Wilder, *Journalist*, pp. 17–18). The trees needed careful and frequent attention, and they didn’t

produce a crop for seven years. Apple orchards have a productive life of twelve to twenty years; the trees the Wilders planted in the 1890s would have been in decline by the 1920s.

***Indeed, it has often***

In a 1920 journal entry, Rose wrote that her mother had inflicted so much misery in her when she was a child that she still felt it. In 1927, when she was living in Albania, she noted in her journal that she had experienced three major influences in her first sixteen years: a lack of affection, poverty, and a sense of inferiority. (See *Ghost*, p. 34 and p. 33 for the quoted text). Nearly thirty years later, in 1953, Rose was still thinking about the lack of love she had felt. She wrote to her friend, Garet Garrett, that too many babies don't get enough love and they go on experiencing that lack for the rest of their lives. Her biographer speculates that she has come "close to a truth about her own experience here" (*Ghost*, p. 375).

But we should be careful about viewing Laura as a cold and unloving mother, for (like all of us) she was a product of her time and place. In *Settlers' Children: Growing Up on the Great Plains* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), Elizabeth Hampsten relates the life stories of a number of children who grew up in South Dakota in the years when the Ingalls family settled there. Many of them reported that their pioneer mothers were too busy simply surviving to offer them physical or even verbal expressions of love—certainly understandable, given all they had to do and the nearly impossible situations in which they and their families had to live.

Laura herself was the first-generation daughter of pioneer parents, and while the Little House books create touching images of the Ingalls family's collaboration and cooperation and linger on nostalgic memories of Pa Ingalls's fiddle music, they are not rich in physical expressions of affection. In real life, every member of the Ingalls family had to work and money was a constant worry. Writing to Rose in late 1937, Laura relates how hard her parents worked

after they settled in De Smet. Her father served as a justice of the peace and picked up whatever other job he could find. Her mother took in washing, and Laura herself washed dishes and waited tables in the hotel and took care of Mamie Masters's baby. She withheld descriptions of the family's poverty, she tells Rose in the letter, because they did not belong in the portrayal she intended to create, perhaps out of family loyalty or respect for the parents who had worked so hard (LIW to RWL, undated [December 1939], RWL Collection, LIW Series, Herbert Hoover Library). In any event, a more realistic portrayal of Laura's growing-up years might have helped us better understand Rose's apparent perception of her as critical and unloving.

### ***The next spring***

In June 1920, when Rose was traveling in Europe, she wrote about her childhood school experiences in a letter to her then-lover, Arthur Griggs. The letter was never sent. A section of it appears, with a photograph of Rose and Spookendyke, the balky donkey, in *A Little House Sampler* (hereafter abbreviated as *Sampler*), edited by William Anderson, pp. 90–96.

Rose records another remembrance of her school days in a long and lively letter to Jasper Crane, December 13, 1961, included in *The Lady and the Tycoon: The Best of Letters Between Rose Wilder Lane and Jasper Crane* (hereafter abbreviated as *Lady*), edited by Roger Lea MacBride, pp. 275–280. In the letter, she tells of furiously slamming her books on the desk and storming home. “You really must sympathize with the pitiable teacher,” she adds.

### ***It came in the person***

Eliza Jane Wilder Thayer wrote about her years as a Dakota homesteader (1879–1885) when she was living and working as a government clerk in Washington, D.C., in 1890. You can read her lively account in *A Wilder in the West: The Story of Eliza Jane Wilder*, edited by William Anderson (Anderson Publications, 1991). Rose's year in Crowley, Louisiana, is

described in amusing detail in her December 13, 1961, letter to Jasper Crane and quoted extensively in *Ghost*, pp. 42–43.

### ***Absolutely not***

Laura's contrite comment to Rose about her rude rhyme on Eliza Jane's name appears in her handwritten draft of "Pioneer Girl," as an aside to Rose (LIW, "Pioneer Girl," p. 265 in the handwritten text). Rose omitted it from her two edited versions (the typescript she sent to Brandt and the one she left with George Bye).

### ***After I left***

John E. Miller (*Becoming*, pp. 109–110) describes Laura and Almanzo's years in Mansfield before and after Rose's departure, their purchases of additional acreage adjacent to Rocky Ridge, and their purchase and later sale of the house in Mansfield, as well as the expansion of the farmhouse, which was constructed by Ezra and Oral Dennis. (It is sometimes incorrectly said that the actual building was done by Almanzo.)

Laura tells the story of the building of the house—and her impassioned plea for the stone fireplace—in "The House on Rocky Ridge Farm." In "Summer Boarders," she describes earning extra income by bringing in city people to fill the upstairs bedrooms. She reports that she saved money by using "home products" (food raised on the farm) to feed her summer visitors, while her friends spent too much money serving "city style" meals. "The result," she remarks (in a not very charitable tone), "was that while I made money they lost it and the humor of the situation was that their boarders wanted to leave them and come to me." Both pieces appear in *A Little House Reader*, edited by William Anderson, (Harper Trophy, 1998, pp. 52–64 and 64–68).

### ***The tenant house***

Rose does not say when construction began on the tenant house. In her diary (May 29, 1928), she merely notes that the house was finished. I have assumed that she paid for the construction but have no evidence of that.

### ***But she held fast***

Troub arrived on June 9 in a car she had named Janet. Genevieve Parkhurst arrived on July 5. On July 14, Rose notes that Troub is very busy on the hillside, preparing a site for her tent, which Rose had ordered to serve as a study. She and Troub were captivated, she adds in that entry, by the idea of putting a Sears Roebuck house on the top of the hill. From that remark, I infer that the two women at this point may have given up the idea of building a house for Rose's parents and were instead considering building a new house for themselves (Diary, June 9, July 5, July 14, 1928).

Troub's tent arrived and was pitched on July 20, while Rose was working on her short story, "Harvest" (published in *Harper's*, January 1929). Troub's camp bed arrived on July 28, at which point Troub apparently began sleeping in the tent, and she and Rose enjoyed their coffee there (Diary, July 20, July 28, 1928). To visitors to the Wilder farm, it may have seemed a strange arrangement, but it perhaps eased some family tensions, at least for a little while.

### ***When's the next one***

Rose mentioned more than once that her mother didn't read her writings. To Guy Moyston (May 30, 1925), she wrote that Mama Bess's copy of *He Was a Man* (Rose's novel about Jack London) would sit untouched and unread on Laura's bookshelf because she objected to London's sexual exploits. "Oh, it isn't hard to keep Mama Bess from reading my books," she wrote. "She never reads 'em. She just likes to have 'em around" (quoted in *Becoming*, p. 195).

Rose also commented that her mother frequently urged her to write like Harold Bell Wright, whom Mama Bess admired both for his stories and for his enormous popularity (“Collaboration,” pp. 110–111). It’s not hard to imagine the message that Rose might have heard in this suggestion: *Write like Harold Bell Wright and earn lots of money.* Wright (1872–1944) was the first American author to sell a million copies of a novel and the first to earn more than a million dollars as a writer. He was the author of the perennially popular *Shepherd of the Hills*, an Ozark novel that was translated into seven languages, made into four movies, and is now staged regularly in Branson, Missouri.

Laura also liked to read Westerns, especially those written by Luke Short and Zane Grey. She seems to have been a little defensive about that preference: “People probably wonder why this is my type of reading,” she told her friend, Nava Austin, “but they are easy to hold and I just enjoy them” (*Remember*, p. 120).

### ***And then, a week after***

On the afternoon of July 31, Mama Bess suggested that the Wilders move to the Newell Forty—a move, Rose noted optimistically in her diary, that would solve all their problems. It is a phrase that rings with irony, given the many difficulties it caused between daughter and parents, or, rather, between daughter and mother. There is no record of Almanzo’s unhappiness with the move.

Laura and Rose immediately walked over to look at the site, and Rose committed herself to building the house, which she estimated would cost about four thousand dollars. The next evening, Rose and Troub sat with Bunting in Troub’s tent until dark, talking about their plan to remodel the farmhouse and live there, with hired help to do the cooking and cleaning for them and their guests (*Diary*, August 1, 1928). Fully aware of the comic expansiveness of her

schemes, Rose wrote to her friend and former *Bulletin* editor, Fremont Older: “I dream of lavish water-systems and oil-burning central heating plants with vapor and vacuum heat, and stone walls—miles of ’em—and other insanities . . . . You know, I would be an entirely different woman if it weren’t for the pernicious influence of houses” (quoted in full in *Becoming*, p. 175). Rose’s comment to Dorothy Thompson is in *Friendship*, p. 96.

It is not clear whether Rose actually purchased the house plans from Sears and Roebuck. On August 7, she writes that she has hired a Springfield architect, Mr. Eugene F. Johnson. On August 21, Almanzo decided that he would rather hire a contractor than contract the work himself, and Mr. Garbee, from Springfield, was engaged on August 22. Rose found this a relief but noted wryly that the house was going to cost her a mint.

Throughout the next four months, she was deeply involved with the project, selecting materials, meeting with the architect and contractor, overseeing construction, and correcting workmen’s errors. By September 19, the price of the house had risen from Rose’s original estimate of four thousand dollars to six thousand dollars (Diary, August 7, 21, 22 and September 19, 1928). Meanwhile, Laura was staying away from the job site. On October 31, Rose wrote to Fremont Older that, while her mother was looking forward to the new house, she didn’t want to be involved with the construction. Whatever her reasons for refusing to be a part of the process, Laura apparently saw the house for the first time, fully furnished and finally electrified, on December 22. Rose recorded that her mother was very pleased, although she later hinted at a puzzling scene that took place in the kitchen (Diary, December 22, 1928).

### *After several exhausting*

The parents now settled, Rose and Troub spent the rest of December cleaning the old farmhouse, painting the walls, and planning their remodeling. They were working so hard, Rose

recorded, that they didn't realize it was New Year's Eve until the radio reminded them (Diary, December 31, 1928). It would be the last joyful New Year's celebration for many years to come.

## Chapter Four

“This Is the End”: 1929

### Time and Place

The year 1929 not only marked the end of a decade, but also of an era: the end of the postwar boom that energized so many American citizens and businesses. Before the October Wall Street Crash, everything seemed to be coming up roses. The Bell Telephone Laboratory demonstrated its new color television with images of a bouquet of roses and an American flag. The first Academy Awards for film were held in Los Angeles, and the Museum of Modern Art opened in New York City. Commander Richard Byrd flew across the South Pole, and the German airship, *Graf Zeppelin*, began its first round-the-world flight. Closer to home, the Grand Teton National Park was authorized by Congress.

All this changed, however, at the end of October, when three huge drops in the Dow Jones average wiped out more than \$30 billion in value on the New York Stock Exchange. The amount was ten times greater than the federal government’s annual budget.

### *Although I had grown up*

Rose describes the Embroidery Club meeting in a comical letter to her friend, fellow Missourian Mary Margaret McBride, who in the late 1930s would become a celebrated radio personality. Holtz observes: “[Rose] could not but chafe under [Mansfield’s] narrow vision and occasional mistrust of her manners if not of her morals. It was worth her reputation to smoke in public, and as for the occasional male visitor, well . . . .” The letter ends with a funny aside about the gossip caused by their laundry. Surely there must be something scandalous going on in a house where the sheets have to be changed every other day! (*Ghost*, p. 199–200).

### ***But the world was intruding***

John E. Miller (*Becoming*, pp. 168–179) offers excellent descriptions of the changing economic and social conditions in Mansfield and other Missouri towns in the late 1920s.

### ***There were a few hot days***

The details in this paragraph come from Rose’s diary for the summer months of 1929. Other than her notes on her mother’s many visits, she does not remark on what Laura was doing with her time, now that she had no garden or livestock chores. There is no mention of any literary activity. As John E. Miller observes, Mama Bess seems to have given “little sign at this time that she was working on or seriously contemplating any major new writing effort” (*Becoming*, p. 179).

Rose, on the other hand, spent the months of February, March, and April working on a serial based on her Albanian experiences, called “Romance.” Catharine Brody thought the story reminded her of the *Prisoner of Zenda* and liked it (Diary, March 9, 1929). Carl Brandt was enthusiastic, too, but it didn’t sell—too exotic, perhaps, for the readers of American magazines. Undaunted, Rose simply put the manuscript aside and turned her hand to a half-dozen short stories that did sell. I am often astonished as I survey Rose’s remarkable professional output, especially when I reflect on the fact that she was using a manual typewriter (not a word processor!) and was working with constant interruptions through some of the hottest summers on record, in a house that had no air conditioning.

### ***Oh, there were dark moments***

Rose’s diary for the first half of 1929 records a time of minor ups and downs, the usual stuff from which lives are made. The Palmer account has more than twenty-two thousand dollars in it (June 6), with a “profit” of about eighteen thousand dollars, suggesting that she had put

about four thousand dollars of her own cash into the account (June 13). But the bills—construction and furnishings invoices from the Rock House, as well as the monthly bills—make Rose “sick” (June 3). She is surrounded by people but feels isolated and hungry to hear ideas discussed (July 1). Troub rides horses (she named her new Morgan gelding Governor, after a memorable horse of Almanzo’s), and Rose reads “stupid magazines” (July 19). Troub hires a cook-housekeeper (April 23), but the woman isn’t very regular; she comes and goes from Springfield on the bus and has to take time off to have all her upper teeth pulled (June 30). Rose and Troub may have decided against hiring a local woman because they didn’t like the idea of adding to the stock of Mansfield’s gossip.

### ***Ten thousand dollars***

It seems that few people had the wisdom to get out of the market ahead of its collapse. For an excellent survey of the national awareness of the situation prior to the crash, read Frederick Lewis Allen’s *Since Yesterday: The 1930s in America*. The first chapter is titled “Prelude: September 3, 1929.” That was the day that the “Big Bull Market” reached its peak and started back down.

## PART TWO

### Chapter Five

King Street: April 1939

#### *Norma Lee took*

Rose hinted at “that little scene in the kitchen” of the Rock House in her January 23, 1930, letter to Fremont Older. She should have been thrilled, she said, when her mother came into the new house for the first time, but something odd and surprising happened—something Rose might tell him in person but didn’t want to put down on paper.

Certainly I should have thrilled all over when my mother walked into the new house. I expected to, and would have done, but for a strange but unexpected turn of events, which I might tell you about, but won’t write. The longer I live, the more I am amazed and fascinated by the endless variety of living.

Rose’s letter is quoted by John E. Miller (*Becoming*, p. 178). Miller adds, “We might infer that Laura’s first reaction to her new home was less than enthusiastic.” Not necessarily: there are other inferences to be drawn. For instance, Laura might have been simply overwhelmed by the luxury of it. Or perhaps there was something to do with the car crash that afternoon, which is reported in Rose’s diary entry for December 22, 1928. I have preferred to leave the “something odd and surprising” a mystery, since I simply don’t have a clue. Laura left very few records of her feelings, and I have chosen not to make authorial guesses about them.

#### *“Affection,” Mrs. Lane said*

Laura’s letters to Rose are ritually affectionate, beginning “Dearest Rose” and ending with “Much love, Mama Bess.” In one revealing letter (Jan. 27, 1939), Laura describes her

gratitude to Rose at length, saying that she is grateful for the rental income from the house Rose built for them, and for the dividend checks (from the account that survived the Palmer bankruptcy), and for the royalties the books were earning. But at the end of the letter, the thank-you turns in a different direction, as Laura describes herself falling asleep under the down quilt that Rose had given her, thinking how wise *she* was to bear such a generous daughter. The letter was written ten years before Laura decided to give Rose 10 percent of the royalty income from the books.

Several friends and neighbors whom Stephen W. Hines interviewed for his book, “*I Remember Laura,*” spoke about Laura’s “reserve” and “aloofness.” She was described as “pleasant” and “gracious.” No one—not even Neta Seal, who was close to Laura in the decade before her death—used the word “warm” to describe her.

***Of course I did.***

Rose arrived at Grand Central on December 1, 1929, and was met by Genevieve Parkhurst. Her diary reports shopping, lunches, teas, and dinners with friends. She saw Guy Moyston briefly, but didn’t record any emotional response to their meeting. Once home, however, she noted that she spent a full day writing a letter—perhaps to Guy—that she decided not to send.

Rose refers to a portrait that her friend, Lydia Gibson, painted in San Francisco in 1917. You can see it hanging over the buffet in the “music room” at Rocky Ridge. A Socialist, Gibson contributed work to Max Eastman’s *The Masses* (a prominent left-wing literary magazine) and other similar periodicals. She was married to Robert Minor, an active member of the American Communist Party.

Rose's mention of Berta and Elmer Hader is important, for a year or so later, Berta was key to placing Laura's first book with Knopf editor Marion Fiery, the editor of one of the Haders' books. Rose returned to Mansfield on Christmas Eve, just in time to help Troub with their Christmas party (Diary, December 24, 1929).

## Chapter Six

### Mother and Daughter: 1930–1931

#### Time and Place

The year 1930 saw a number of firsts. The first three Nancy Drew mysteries were published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate, Chic Young's comic strip *Blondie* debuted in newspapers across the country, and Clarence Birdseye began marketing frozen fish, spinach, and peas in Springfield, Massachusetts, stores. People were listening to Fats Waller sing "Ain't Misbehavin'" and Satchmo grumble his way through "Body and Soul." President Hoover reassured the country that the worst effects of the Depression would be over in ninety days, then signed the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, throttling international trade by hiking import duties to protect American goods. And Rose's 1919–1920 ghostwritten project, *White Shadows in the South Seas*, the first MGM picture to be released with a prerecorded sound track, took home an Oscar for Best Cinematography. (The film was released in 2010 for home viewing on DVD.)

At the farm, it took a while for the reality of the Crash to sink in. For Rose, the first evidences of it were the difficulties that her agent, Carl Brandt, encountered in placing her work and the gloomy reports she received from her New York friends, many of whom were also in the writing business. By June, Rose's account with Palmer had lost half its value. Her plan for traveling or spending time in New York no longer seemed viable, and she began to realize that she was stuck at Rocky Ridge until the economy turned around. On February 16, she took stock, seeing both sides of the situation to which she was now committed and finding it, on the one hand, comfortable, and on the other, hateful.

#### *In the midst*

On Wednesday, May 7, Rose notes in her diary: “My mother came in the afternoon bringing her manuscript. She & Papa stayed to dinner.” The manuscript was “Pioneer Girl,” Laura’s factual first-person account of her childhood and teen years on the frontier. There is no indication in the diary that Rose was expecting it, but it seems likely that the two had discussed it. For decades, Rose had supported her mother’s wish to write the “story of [her] life thing” and had frequently urged her to write about her pioneer experiences.

### ***But by that time***

The best resource for this period in Rose’s life is *Ghost*, pp. 52–58. Holtz (*Ghost*, p. 51) says that Rose lost her child through a late miscarriage, or a stillbirth, or an early death, and that she required surgery after medical complications. In a consoling 1944 letter to a friend who had lost a child, Rose wrote that her own son had died thirty-five years before. In time, she said, one learns that unhappiness and loss are part of living.

### ***My mother had been writing***

John E. Miller’s chapter, “Building a Writing Career: 1911–1923” (*Becoming*, pp. 114–140), offers an excellent narrative summary of Laura’s development as the author of articles about rural life for the *Missouri Ruralist*. The articles themselves are available in Steven Hines’s collection, *Laura Ingalls Wilder, Farm Journalist*, to which Hines provides an excellent introduction. He notes that Laura’s editor describes her as a “farm booster,” a writer whose major intention is to promote the small family farm.

Laura published only six essays and one poem in the years 1911–1914, probably because she just didn’t have much time to write. She and Almanzo were completing the farmhouse, and she was keeping up her farm and household chores, in addition to attending to the needs of any board-and-meals guests who might have come in the summers. She wrote more regularly after

her visit with Rose in San Francisco in 1915, and she continued to write through 1924. But at the same time, she was still managing her chores and her chickens and making loans and doing the bookkeeping for the National Farm Loan Association. Her essays are short (typically less than a thousand words), but finding time to produce two of them each month must have taken a serious and dedicated effort, given her other responsibilities.

### ***After I went to work***

Laura's visit to San Francisco is documented in her letters to Almanzo, edited by Roger Lea MacBride and published as *West From Home: Letters of Laura Ingalls Wilder to Almanzo Wilder, 1915*. Almanzo had remained behind at Rocky Ridge to manage the farm chores; in one letter, Laura instructs him in the proper preparation of chicken feed. She usually signs herself "With love, Bessie," or "Love to you and Inky" (their dog). She told Almanzo to save her letters, in case she wanted to use some passages in other writings. The collection rewards careful reading, both for the descriptions of the city and the Panama-Pacific International Exposition and for a glimpse into Laura's feelings about writing. The letters also allow us to see the easy, comfortable way in which she and Rose shared ideas and material.

### ***At the same time***

Laura's comment about preferring to raise chickens rather than work as hard as Rose worked at her writing can be found in a postscript at the end of her October 4 letter to Almanzo (*West from Home*). Rose obviously intended to use her *Bulletin* assignments to improve her skills and her standing as a professional writer, and when Rose became interested in something, she invested her time and energy in it, holding nothing back. It's easy to see why Laura, for whom writing was at best a part-time occupation, might have decided not to measure her own efforts

against her daughter's unflagging commitment and achievements in work that she herself aspired to.

### *Aside from making time*

I am indebted to LIW researcher Nancy Cleaveland for noticing the similarities between Rose's "Quarrels of the Proverbs" (*San Francisco Bulletin*, February 12, 1915) and Laura's "When Proverbs Get Together" (reprinted in Hines, *Journalist*, p. 157, dated September 5, 1918). Rose's short newspaper pieces have not been compiled or even (to my knowledge) fully catalogued; a comparison of them to Laura's *Ruralist* writings might reveal many more shared ideas and actual material.

To encourage her mother's efforts to increase the family income by writing, Rose continually fed her mother ideas. John E. Miller (*Becoming*, p. 122) quotes a lengthy example, then adds: "Another time Rose suggested that Laura could take one of her own pieces about certified milk in California and simply 'change a name or a sentence here and there and resell it' as a Missouri story."

For both these women, writing was only incidentally an expression of personal interests and desires; it was first and foremost a means of earning money. For Rose, writing was her profession and her sole support; for Laura, it was her only way to earn off-farm income. Laura's letters to Rose during this period are not preserved, so we have no way of knowing how she responded to her daughter's often urgent nudges to think of a piece of writing as a commercial commodity that could be sold first to one market, then (slightly revised or under a different byline) sold to another market—to behave, that is, like a professional writer.

But Rose kept at it, even suggesting that Laura use her letters to her mother and sisters as the basis for the autobiography that her mother has apparently mentioned to her and that may

have some commercial appeal. It might have been Rose's repeated urgings that finally resulted in the manuscript of "Pioneer Girl" that Laura brought to Rose on May 7, 1930.

### ***In 1918, at the end of the war***

Rose's editing of her mother's article for *McCall's* is described in *Ghost*, pp. 85–86. The same episode is also related by John E. Miller (*Becoming*, pp. 139–140) and, from a slightly different angle, by Pamela Smith Hill, in her book *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life* (hereafter abbreviated as *Life*, pp. 115–117). Hill's reading of the situation is valuable for its acknowledgement that Rose, with her background as a newspaper feature writer, comes out of an "aggressive editing tradition" and has "every right to be self-confident" in her writing and editorial abilities. I would add that Rose's work on the *Bulletin* would also have taught her the importance of mentoring, collaborating, and sharing story material. Rose did not learn to write in an ivory tower.

For a helpful approach to the subject of authorial collaboration, read William Holtz's "Ghost and Host in the Little House Books." Jack Stillinger takes a long historical look at the subject in *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford University Press, 1991). His chapter, "American Novels: Authors, Agents, Editors, Publishers," is worth mentioning, especially his discussion of Maxwell Perkins's extensive editing of Thomas Wolfe (pp. 145–148). If it were not for the injury to Wolfe's authorial ego and Perkins's habit of editorial self-effacement, Stillinger suggests, Perkins might very well have been named as the coauthor of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and *Of Time and the River* (1935).

### ***The same thing happened***

For the details of Rose's work on her mother's draft of the kitchen article for the *Country Gentleman*, see William Holtz's reconstruction (*Ghost*, p. 148):

Rose took the amateurish effort in hand and simply reconceived and rewrote it from beginning to end . . . . She revised the lead, cut out detail, reorganized the development, and invented a dramatic interlocutor to emphasize a country-city contrast. Mama Bess complained rightly that it was now Rose's article, but Rose argued that she was offering instruction, by which her mother might break into the national market.

The article was published under Mama Bess's name and the \$150 check (minus Carl Brandt's 15 percent commission) was made out to her.

### *After a few years*

We can only speculate why Laura stopped writing for the *Ruralist*. A study of the table of contents in Steven Hines's valuable collection of her articles reveals that she produced ten to twenty-four newspaper pieces each year in the years 1916–1924. Her last piece appeared in December 1924, after a six-month publishing hiatus. Rose was at the farm for about six months during 1924–1925; Guy Moyston and Troub came to stay for three to four months (at different times), so Laura may have been preoccupied with family and guests. Politics may have taken her time, too: in March 1925, she ran unsuccessfully for the paid position of township collector.

Around that time, she wrote to her aunt Martha Carpenter to ask for recipes for an article that she (and probably Rose) had in mind for the *Ladies' Home Journal* and to request family stories. She didn't write the article for the *Journal*, but it's possible that she may have already begun writing "the story of [her] life thing."

### *My mother and I*

At this time, the Rocky Ridge farmhouse was full of writers. Rose, Troub, Genevieve Parkhurst, and Catharine Brody were in residence, their typewriters clacking away on the upstairs sleeping porch. Laura was in the habit of dropping in at the farm almost daily; she, too, may have caught the "writing bug" from these busy professionals.

The “Pioneer Girl” manuscript consists of more than three hundred handwritten pages of lined tablet paper (“Pioneer Girl,” Folder 2, LIW Home Association, Microfilm ed., LIW Papers, 1894–1943, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Ellis Library, University of Missouri, Columbia MO). According to her diary, Rose worked on it from Thursday, May 8, through Saturday, May 17, with a day off to “rest” her eyes and another day off to weed and work in her rose garden. Her diary (May 7–17, 1930) records that she was “copying” (that is, transcribing) the handwritten materials, although a close comparison of Laura’s manuscript and Rose’s first typescript demonstrates that she didn’t simply transcribe her mother’s work. She couldn’t resist doing a fair amount of editing while she was at it, starting with the very first words in the very first sentence.

On May 9, Rose sent Carl Brandt what she called a “sample” of her mother’s edited work. On May 17, Brandt replied that the sample was “very fine.” That same day, Rose sent the full manuscript of 160 pages, “as is,” to Brandt “for his opinion,” as she noted in her diary. During this period, while Rose records many small details of her daily life (including a dog that barked all night and the capture of a bank robber), she does *not* record any visits from her mother, at which time Rose might have shown her the typed version of “Pioneer Girl.” The emendations on the typescript that went to Brandt are clearly in Rose’s hand. Mama Bess may not have seen the typed, edited version that Rose sent, and there is no indication in the diary that Rose obtained Laura’s permission to send it.

Of course, the two women talked frequently on the telephone, so it is quite possible that Rose said something like, “Oh, by the way, I sent Carl a copy of the typed version of that story of your life thing, just to see what he thinks about it.” And Laura might have replied: “Oh, thank you, dear. I hope Mr. Brandt likes it. I wonder, did you notice whether the red rose is blooming

by the garden?” Personally, I suspect that Rose didn’t want her mother to know what she was doing with the work, given the bad feelings her earlier rewrites had engendered. I think she might have reasoned that it would be easier to tell her after the fact—after her agent or an editor showed an interest.

Rose’s typescript of “Pioneer Girl” exists in three versions: 160 pages, sent to Brandt on May 17, 1930; a “revised draft” of 126 pages, with the Big Woods material taken out; and 203 pages, left with George Bye in March 1931 (RWL Collection, Herbert Hoover Library). Each version includes more narrative expansions and represents a substantial step away from Laura’s handwritten manuscript. Neither Rose’s diary nor the typescripts themselves suggest that Mama Bess had any hand in what Rose was doing with the work.

### *And as if in another dream*

Here’s the first paragraph of “Reynard Runs” (*North American Review* 230, September 1930: 354–360). A beautifully written piece, the essay demonstrates Rose’s ability to set a memorable scene in time and place, in a lyric mode that was suited to the style of the literary magazine for which she was writing:

The moonlit nights of the ripening year are nights made for hunting the Ozark foxes. In April and May the woods are newly burned over, and the best of hounds will lose the scent when his nose is stung by the fine ashes. In June the sudden thunder-shower may roll up its cumulus clouds, obscuring the moon and drenching the hills in a downpour which sets the creeks to roaring. July is haying time, and men are weary when cool darkness comes to the shimmering fields. But the clear, still nights of the August moon are the hunter’s joy.

### *A month after I sent*

On June 6, Rose noted in her diary that she had received no word from Brandt about “Pioneer Girl” and comments that it may have been mishandled. On June 21, Brandt returned the manuscript to her, with a list of the magazines that had rejected it: *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies’*

*Home Journal, Atlantic Monthly, and Country Home* (Diary, June 6, June 21, 1930; Miller, *Becoming*, p. 182).

My idea that Rose was angry with Brandt for sending out the draft manuscript (which she had sent him only for his “opinion”) arises from my own long-time personal experience with agents. A quick glance through the Brandt typescript of “Pioneer Girl” shows penciled corrections, insertions in Rose’s handwriting, and words and sentences lined out. By no means was it ready, or intended, for editorial submission.

If my agent had submitted a work-in-progress draft on which I had requested only an “opinion,” I would be looking for another agent, too.

## Chapter Seven

“When Grandma Was a Little Girl”: 1930–1931

### Time and Place

The year 1931 was a year of push and pull. Pressure to repeal the Eighteenth Amendment was mounting, but President Hoover would have none of it. He vetoed the Bonus Loan Bill, which would have allowed veterans to obtain cash loans up to 50 percent of the bonus certificates issued in 1924, but Congress pushed back, overriding his veto. Opposed in principle to governmental involvement in private ventures, Hoover also vetoed the Muscle Shoals Bill, which would later become the basis for Roosevelt’s Tennessee Valley Authority.

People went faster and farther in 1931. Wiley Post and a co-pilot flew around the world in 8 days, 51 hours, and 15 minutes. The George Washington Bridge, newly completed, dramatically shortened the commute between New York and New Jersey. Al Capone went to prison; Billie Burke won the U.S. Open by one stroke after two 36-hole playoffs; and Robert Frost won a Pulitzer for poetry. Readers were enjoying Willa Cather’s *Shadows on the Rock* and Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth*, and moviegoers praised *Frankenstein*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Cimarron*, starring Richard Dix and Irene Dunne. Edna Ferber, on whose novel the film was based, must have been terribly embarrassed by the lurid movie poster and RKO’s \$1.5 million budget.

But the economy was in serious trouble. Many banks had loaned money to stockbrokers, and six hundred had failed. The boom industries of the 1920s—automobiles, construction, and consumer goods—were steadily weakening, and steel production had fallen to 30 percent of

capacity. During the year, unemployment rose dramatically, from 8.9 percent in 1930 to 16.3 percent in 1931. People were beginning to realize that they were in for a difficult time.

### *It's not wasted*

On July 31, 1930, Rose began “rewriting” (her word) “Pioneer Girl.” In her diary, she notes that she visited her mother that afternoon. “She says she wants prestige rather than money,” Rose recorded. Holtz, quoting this remark, observes that prestige “was a luxury she herself could not afford (*Ghost*, p. 221). The next day, Rose wrote to Brandt, asking if “Pioneer Girl” might be suitable for entry into contests—an idea, perhaps, that might help her mother gain some “prestige” for her work.

In her rewrite, Rose took a different approach. She worked for six days (July 31–August 5, 1930), pulling out the material that would become “When Grandma Was a Little Girl” and rewriting it as a third-person narrative for children. The change in audience (the first-person “Pioneer Girl” had been written with an adult audience in mind) was likely Rose’s idea. She may not have been familiar with the current juvenile market (as she notes in a later letter to Marion Fiery), but she certainly knew how to write for young readers. Her first regular newspaper articles appeared in the “Junior Section” of the *San Francisco Call*, where she worked for about six months (1908–1909) before her marriage to Gillette Lane. And in 1920–1921, when she was traveling for the American Red Cross, she wrote at least four short stories for the *Junior Red Cross Bulletin*. A sample of her *Call* titles: “Ups and Downs of Modern Mercury,” September 20, 1908; “The Constantly Increasing Wonders of the New Field of Wireless,” November 22, 1908; and “Seals,” February 27, 1909. The Junior Red Cross stories are “Basil the Monk,” November 1920; “Stanyke’s Christmas Eve,” December 1920; “The Boy Cobbler of Albania,” November 1921; and “Sadik Hassen of the Mati,” December 1922. (I’m indebted to LIW

researcher Nancy Cleveland for these bibliographic entries. And in the spirit of full disclosure, I should add that when I was starting out as a freelance writer in the early 1960s, several of my short stories were published in the *Junior Red Cross Bulletin*. As I recall, I was paid a nickel a word—and was glad to get it.)

Rose then set her mother's project aside to work on two stories of her own. One, titled "[A Man in the House](#)," was bought by *Good Housekeeping* and published six months later in March 1931. On August 15, she returned to "When Grandma Was a Little Girl," finishing it on August 18. She mailed her twenty-two-page typescript to her friend, children's illustrator and juvenile book author Berta Hader, referring to it as her mother's "juvenile." The opening is strikingly similar to the first few sentences of *Little House in the Big Woods*.

When Grandma was a little girl she lived in a little gray house made of logs. The house was in the Big Woods, in Wisconsin. The great dark trees of the Big Woods stood all around the house, and beyond them were other trees, and beyond them more trees. As far as a man could go to the north in a day, or a week, or a month, there was nothing but trees. There were no other houses. There were no roads. There were only trees, and the wild animals that lived in the Big Woods.

Every word of this paragraph is Rose's creation; nothing remotely like it exists in Laura's "Pioneer Girl." Rose did here what she does throughout the books: she takes bits and pieces of her mother's factual, anecdotal material and enlarges and embellishes them, embedding them into a narrative that she herself creates, in the same way that a jazz musician enlarges and embellishes a simple melody, recreating it in a way that its original composer can scarcely recognize. Her rhythmically lyric prose establishes the oral story style of the narration of *Little House in the Big Woods*—and the tone of all the other books to come.

Rose spent the afternoon of August 14 with her mother, but it does not appear that they discussed what Rose had done, at least not in sufficient detail for Laura to remember it. She didn't even have a copy of the piece. We know this because in February 1931, when Knopf

editor Marion Fiery became interested in the project and asked to have it lengthened, Rose had to tell Mama Bess what it was and where to find it: the Pa Ingalls stories that she (Rose) had taken out of the “Pioneer Girl” manuscript and filed away in a drawer (quoted in *Ghost*, p. 224).

The next day, having taken care of the shorter piece, Rose returned to the longer one, “Pioneer Girl,” but without enthusiasm, for she now understood that it wasn’t likely to sell. Nevertheless, she plowed steadily forward, putting in nine working days on the substantial revision and finishing it on September 2 (Diary, August 19 to September 2, 1930). The rewritten text now amounted to nearly two hundred typewritten pages. But she didn’t send it to Carl Brandt; she had already decided that it was time to look for a new agent.

### *I hadn’t yet told Carl*

Rose had asked Mary Margaret McBride’s advice about the situation at the Brandt agency. In an undated letter (“Rose darling—you’ve no idea . . . .” [September 1930], RWL Collection, Herbert Hoover Library), Mary Margaret replied that other authors were deserting Brandt because he wasn’t doing a good job for them in the current market climate. Finding a new agent was high on Rose’s to-do list.

In New York, dropping in on editors, Rose made an effort to sell her mother’s “Pioneer Girl,” without success. However, Graeme Lorimer, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, expressed an interest if it were fictionalized. And Thomas Costain, the *Post*’s fiction editor, mentioned that he would like to see her father’s story (Diary, October 13, 1930). These remarks may have led to Rose’s writing of her own two pioneer novels, *Let the Hurricane Roar* and *Free Land*, both of which were published in the *Post*.

The events of Rose’s productive New York trip—her get-togethers with friends, her agreement to work as a ghostwriter for Lowell Thomas, her stay at the Sinclair Lewis home—are

all documented in her diary, although much of November and December are blank. Also documented: the February meeting with Knopf editor Marion Fiery, which was arranged by Berta Hader and resulted in Fiery's offer to publish "When Grandma Was a Little Girl," Rose's rewritten excerpt from "Pioneer Girl." Fiery requested a new title (Diary, February 15, 1931). On February 16, Rose wrote to her mother, telling her where to find the copy of the typescript and suggesting that she begin writing down more material to lengthen the little book. She added, "I have said nothing about having run the manuscript through my own typewriter, because the changes I made, as you will see, are so slight that they could not even properly be called editing" (quoted in *Ghost*, p. 224).

I find this sentence to be remarkably and deliberately misleading. If I were the author of "Pioneer Girl" (and if I had read Rose's revisions closely), I would say that her "slight changes" amounted to a complete rewrite. But it is typical of Rose's attempts to minimize the extent of her work when she discusses it with her mother. In the case of Laura's *McCall's* and two *Country Gentleman* magazine articles that Rose had rewritten, she had similarly insisted to Laura that she did only what any editor would do—even though she did far more, essentially acting as a coauthor, or as William Holtz calls her, a ghostwriter.

We should not be taken in by Rose's protestations because we can see the true extent of her work, if we take the trouble to look. But Laura, who had almost no experience with professional editing, either believed her daughter, or pretended to. I think she accepted Rose's explanation both because she wanted to and because she *had* to. (What other choice did she have?) I believe that she told herself that Rose's work was merely "editorial." This allowed her to lay claim to authorship with a clear conscience—at least at this early point. As time went on and their subterfuges—their efforts to disguise Rose's role in the work—became elaborate, she

surely must have wondered about it. But if she and Rose ever discussed their reasons for concealing their collaboration and insisting that Laura was the sole author of the books they produced together, they didn't do it in the letters to which we currently have public access and there is no mention of it in Rose's diaries.

### ***The rest of that winter***

The typescript of "Pioneer Girl" that Rose had sent Carl Brandt contained 160 pages; the one she left with Bye contained 203 pages. (Both are in her papers in the Herbert Hoover Library.) They would become the ur-document from which Laura and Rose would draw the storyline for seven of the eight Little House books. (*Farmer Boy* was separately conceived and written, perhaps before the idea of the "series" fully dawned on the two coauthors.) Rose would also use several incidents from the document in *Let the Hurricane Roar* and *Free Land*, as well as in the short story, "Home Over Saturday" (*Saturday Evening Post*, September 11, 1937).

In 2012, the South Dakota State Historical Society Press announced that it would publish "Pioneer Girl," edited and annotated by Pamela Smith Hill, in June 2013. In February 2013, the Press announced that publication would be delayed indefinitely, citing unanticipated "new discoveries about Wilder and her early work." As of this writing (June 2013), "Pioneer Girl" remains unpublished. The website <http://pioneergirlproject.org/> publishes updates on the progress of the project.

## Chapter Eight

### *Little House in the Big Woods: 1931*

#### **Time and Place**

In 1931, Americans were trying to pretend that everything was normal. Nevada legalized gambling to raise tax revenue, and people flocked to the state with the hope of a big win. The Empire State Building was completed in New York City, and Charlie Chaplin's film, *City Lights*, was released. Dick Tracy, Chester Gould's comic strip detective, debuted in the *Detroit Mirror*. Jane Addams became the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and "The Star-Spangled Banner" was adopted as the United States national anthem.

But the normal of 1931 didn't feel very normal. Austria's largest bank collapsed, bringing down banks all over Central Europe. The United Kingdom abandoned the gold standard, and in the United States, a run on banks resulted in a wave of bank failures and deposit losses that served to contract the money supply. The U.S. gross national product declined by nearly 9 percent. President Hoover was sure that the economy was about to turn a corner, but most people were afraid of what was around the corner.

#### ***The news wasn't a shock***

Rose's six-year relationship (1921–1927) with Guy Moyston was an on-and-off affair. They spent some weeks together in London, Paris, at the farm, and in Nyack, New York, but the relationship seems to have been conducted chiefly by correspondence (*Ghost*, pp. 111, 113–114, 145–149, 151–152, 185). The full description of Moyston's harrowing Irish adventure appears in Oliver Gramling's [\*The Story of News\*](#).

#### ***I was in Paris***

Rose's brief relationship with Arthur Griggs began in 1920 and lasted through May 1921. Griggs was an American living in Paris and working for the Agence Littéraire Française as liaison with the American newspaper and magazine market. He arranged for Rose to translate several stories written in French by Sarah Bernhardt, then in her seventies. Rose's biographer notes that her reading knowledge of French was "adequate to the job; she had, moreover, a reputation for salvaging troublesome manuscripts" (*Ghost*, p. 95). Her "translations" may not have been all that close to the original, but knowing Rose's abilities, I would venture the guess that she substantially improved the stories. In any event, they appeared in *McCall's* from May 1920 to May 1921: "Daughter of Normandy," "Heart of the Rose," "Hearts Unreasoning," "Temptation," and "The Untold Story." She also translated Lysiane Bernhardt's "Ma Grandmere Sarah Bernhardt" (*McCall's*, November 1920).

During the time of her relationship with Griggs, Rose was traveling in Europe and the Balkans, so this affair, too, must have been carried on primarily by correspondence. Griggs apparently had problems with alcohol. When she broke up with him on her return to Paris, she noted in her diary that she was miserably unhappy but deeply relieved (*Ghost*, pp. 95–110).

### ***What was this road?***

In Albania, taking stock of her marriage to Gillette Lane, Rose wrote in her journal that she had wanted to marry Gillette because she "wanted sex" and because she believed that he represented professional success and money and the "high cultural level" of newspaper journalism. (Her phrase is probably ironic. By the time she wrote this, she knew that newspaper journalism was lowbrow.) She added that she was also tired of working and wanted the "freedom and fun" of a home—also an ironic observation. The story of her (somewhat mysterious)

marriage is told in the chapter, “Bachelor Girl, Married Woman,” in *Ghost*, pp. 50–59. For the divorce, see *Ghost*, p. 71.

***I want to tell the true story***

The source for this invented dialogue is a letter Rose wrote to her mother from New York when she was attempting to interest editors in “Pioneer Girl.” She reported Lorimer’s suggestion that “Pioneer Girl” might be publishable if it were fictionalized, but added that she knew her mother didn’t want to turn her autobiography into fiction—an early acknowledgement of Laura’s tendency to value fact (or what she saw as fact) over fiction. The letter is quoted in *Ghost*, p. 223.

At several points in the novel, I have expanded this suggestion, which is reinforced by Laura’s later insistence in her Detroit Book Fair speech of October 16, 1937, on the literal truth of her stories: “Every story in this novel [the Little House series], all the circumstances, each incident are true. All I have told is true but it is not the whole truth” (quoted in Anderson, *Sampler*, pp. 215–224). In a letter written January 21, 1938, Rose reminds her mother of the paradox of truth-telling in a letter. The truth, she says, is the meaning on which the facts rest—the writer chooses the facts that best explain and demonstrate the truth, leaving some out, emphasizing others.

Laura’s declaration that each incident in the books is factually true is not borne out by a comparison of the published novels with the known historical facts of the Ingalls family’s journeys across the Great Plains. Most of the fictionalizing, however, was done by Rose, who heavily embellished the drafts produced by her mother, altering timelines, reconstructing some incidents, and adding others. One important example: Laura’s manuscript describes Carrie’s birth in Indian Territory. However, Rose’s version (and the book, *Little House on the Prairie*,

published in 1935), places Baby Carrie in Ma's lap as the Ingalls's wagon travels into Indian Territory.

This prompts the question: did Laura actually *read* Rose's typescripts and the finished books—especially *Little House on the Prairie*, which was published just two years before her Detroit speech? If so, how could she declare, in good conscience, that every incident was true? It also makes Rose's vehement insistence on the literal truth of the books seem ironic—and irrational. In 1966, William Anderson sent her an advance copy of his manuscript about the Ingalls, in which he mentioned that the family had settled with a few nearby neighbors in Dakota Territory. Rose retorted in an angry letter: "I object to your publishing a statement that my mother was a liar. The Ingalls family spent their first winter in Dakota Territory [1880–1881] approximately sixty miles from any neighbor." In a subsequent letter to Anderson, she made the unreasonable assertion that, "if my mother's books are not absolutely accurate, she will be discredited as a person and a writer" (William T. Anderson, "The Literary Apprenticeship of Laura Ingalls Wilder," hereafter abbreviated "Apprenticeship," pp. 288–289).

Rose's claim about the Ingalls family's isolation isn't true—and anyway, it was not her mother's representation, it was hers. In "Pioneer Girl" (in Laura's manuscript and in both the Brandt and Bye versions), the Ingalls family is described as spending the winter of 1880–1881 in the surveyors' house, where they took in a boarder named Walter Ogden. Mr. and Mrs. Boast had a homestead just two miles away; they arrived from the East at Christmas and for the rest of the winter lived in a nearby building.

But when Rose worked her revisionary magic on her mother's draft of the chapter "Breaking Camp" in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, she puts these dramatic words into Pa's mouth: "So far as I know, we won't have a neighbor nearer than Brookings. That's sixty miles."

And that's what Rose remembered when she lectured William Anderson: not her mother's facts, not the "Pioneer Girl" text, but her own fictionalization. In *her* book, there was no neighbor nearer than sixty miles.

The *Little House* books are remarkably factual, yes, particularly when it comes to the details of pioneer work and life, which the coauthors were careful to describe accurately. But the books are fiction, designed to present one particular family's experience from the point of view of a child—and from the perspective of a mother-daughter pair of coauthors working in the rural Midwest, under what seemed to them to be the triple threats of the New Deal, encroaching Socialism, and the weakening of the American frontier spirit.

### ***One dreary afternoon***

Rose's Albanian traveling companions went on to make names for themselves. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Elizabeth (Betsy) Cleveland Miller wrote three children's books about Albania: *Children of the Mountain Eagle* (1927), *Pran of Albania* (1929), and *Young Trajan* (1931). Margaret Alexander Marsh taught at Smith College and conducted research in the field of foreign investments.

The full story of Rose's 1921 Albanian journey is told in [\*The Peaks of Shala\*](#) and outlined in Holtz's chapter, "Come with Me to Europe" (*Ghost*, pp. 108–110), where her meeting with Rexh Meta is also described. The book gives us a wonderful glimpse not only into the life of the mountain people but also into Rose's experience of it. Here's a sample:

Everything that makes our ordinary lives was already as far from us as another planet. It was as though we had dropped through a hole in time and fallen into the days when men were wild creatures in the forests.

One reads in books of dizzying trails twelve inches wide, on which travelers climb precariously between the sky and sudden death. Long before dense darkness had risen to meet the shadow of the mountain wall between us and the rest of the world we would have welcomed a twelve-inch trail as though it were the Champs-Élysées. We were in a

land where a twelve-inch trail is to the people what the Twentieth Century Limited is to America.

My memories become incoherent here. I recall a thousand-foot slide of decomposed shale, the color of an American Beauty rose. The flakes of it were as large as a thumbnail, and the mass of them tilted at surely thirty-five degrees, sloping to a sheer cliff that dropped I cannot say how far. The stone houses looked like children's blocks at the bottom of it. Across this we made our way on foot, and at every step a considerable quantity of the shale sped away beneath the pressure and plumped over the edge. The fourth time I slipped I remained on my hands and knees. It seemed simpler (*The Peaks of Shala*, pp. 15–16).

The ritual greeting and response, “How did you come here? Slowly, slowly,” is found in *The Peaks of Shala*, p. 32 and elsewhere. I found one phrase especially striking: “Glory to your lips and to your feet.” I’ve incorporated it into the novel, where, at important junctures in her narrative, Rose repeats it, as a kind of mantra.

### ***Mama Bess had been working***

Rose’s diary for Thursday, May 21, 1931, reports that Laura came over at breakfast time and they “roughed out” the additional fifteen thousand words that Knopf editor Marion Fiery had requested.

The diary doesn’t tell us what notes or other material Mama Bess might have brought for her daughter. But Rose’s typescript of “Grandma” (the one that Berta Hader showed to Marion Fiery) ends with the sentence that appears at the end of Chapter Six in the published *Little House in the Big Woods*: “Then there would be no more stories by the fire at night, but all day long Laura and Mary would run and play among the trees, for it would be spring” (RWL Collection, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library). The new, additional section begins with Chapter Seven, “The Sugar Snow.” The material in those chapters would have come from Laura and was edited and revised by Rose.

### **My rewrite of “Little House”**

Rose notes that she produced 5,600 words on Friday, May 22; worked all day Saturday; and was almost finished on Saturday afternoon, when Laura came to read the rewritten section, then (with Almanzo) stayed to dinner. On that day, Rose gave her mother a check for \$500, noting in her diary that she was now “paid up” until 1932. She doesn’t note whether it was the \$60-a-month rent or the annual subsidy that she was paying. Between the two, Rose was supporting her parents to the tune of \$1,220 a year, the equivalent of \$20,261 in 2012 dollars. And this was in addition to the substantial work she was doing to make her mother’s writing publishable.

On Sunday, May 24, Rose finished the draft and went back to the beginning of the original text (that is, *her* version) to make a clean copy. She worked all day Monday; on Tuesday, she started at 5:30 a.m., again worked all day, and finished at 4:30 p.m., when Laura came over and read the “final chapter.” Rose readied the typescript (now totaling around 35,000 words) for Mama Bess to mail on Wednesday (Diary, May 21–27, 1931).

That same day (May 27) she wrote her own letter to Marion Fiery, the Knopf editor, saying that her mother’s book was finished and she hoped Fiery would like it. She added that she found it difficult to say exactly where she fitted into the picture, but she did, in one way or another, since she and her mother discussed everything related to her mother’s writing. She also told Fiery that George Bye would be handling the contract (quoted in “Apprenticeship,” p. 325).

With her letter, Rose enclosed a list of suggested titles, including *Trundle-bed Tales*, *Long Ago Yesterday*, *Little Pioneer Girl*, and *Little Girl in the Big Woods*. A draft among her papers in the Herbert Hoover library lists twelve entries. Typewriter strikeouts (Rose’s typical way of excising typed material) exclude “Long Ago in the Big Woods,” “The Days before Yesterday,” and “Little Girl in the Wild West.”

### ***While they were gone***

Bunting's various accidents and illnesses were a constant source of concern and distraction. Troub and her friend Beck had driven to Bagnell Dam for a few days, so Rose had to take Bunting (who had an eye problem) to the Springfield veterinarian fifty miles away. On Sunday, June 21, she produced twenty-five pages of the ghostwritten Wilkins book. Then she left with Bunting on the 7:15 p.m. bus to Springfield and stayed at the Colonial Hotel overnight. On Monday morning, she took Bunting to the vet, then had lunch with Docia Karell (a reporter for the *Springfield Leader*), and left on the 4 p.m. bus, arriving at home around six to find Troub and Beck taking it easy. The next day, she noted that she was so tired and out of patience that she couldn't help nagging Troub, presumably about doing her share of the work. (When I read a string of diary entries like these, I find myself shaking my head at the amount of time and effort required to do the ordinary things—taking the dog to the vet—that nowadays take us no more than an hour or two.)

Rose's ghostwriting project, the Wilkins book, kept her busy through June and July. It was difficult because of the technical nature of much of the narrative. George Herbert Wilkins went to the Antarctic with Ernest Shackleton's last expedition in 1921, made pioneering air flights in the Arctic and Antarctic, and commanded the submarine *Nautilus* in 1931. She submitted it (not quite finished) on July 24, noting in her diary, that she had done the best she could. Lowell Thomas returned it to her six months later in February 1932; she worked on it full time for about two weeks before finally completing it. This was her fourth project for Thomas.

### ***It's hard to know***

Troub made her offer to leave on July 3, 1931. In her diary, Rose wrote that she was *accablée*—overwhelmed, overcome, stricken—by the prospect. But there was more. She was

under a great deal of pressure from Lowell Thomas to meet a deadline on the Wilkins book, which seems to have been the most difficult ghosting project she ever undertook. (Lowell Thomas shelved the book for nearly thirty years, then submitted the manuscript to Lady Suzanne Wilkins, who wrote the final chapter. It was published in 1961.) As well, she was suffering from the heat, since the summer was extraordinarily hot—no air conditioning, of course. Although there are only hints in the journal, it's easy to imagine that the prospect of Troub's departure was extraordinarily painful.

Reading about Rose's close relationship with Troub, some have wondered if they were physically intimate. I have read the diaries and journals closely and do not see any recorded suggestion of this, although it is clear that her friendship with Troub was a mutually supportive one and that they were seen by their New York friends as a "couple." However, there is no surviving correspondence with Troub, which is itself a curious thing since Rose (like her mother) kept her correspondence. Did Rose destroy Troub's letters, or were they destroyed by Roger Lea MacBride, before he deposited Rose's papers in the Herbert Hoover Library?

Speaking personally, I think it likely that their emotional intimacy extended to a physical intimacy. But since Rose kept that aspect of their friendship strictly to herself, in the novel I have respected their privacy.

### ***It was the middle of September***

Fiery had been traveling in Europe over the summer and did not see Laura's submission until she returned at the end of August. It took another two weeks for a contract on *Little House in the Woods* (the book's new title) to be produced. When Rose reviewed the contract on September 25, she replied on her mother's behalf, objecting to the clause that tied Mama Bess to two more books at the same royalty rate as *Little House*. This two-book option may have been

news to Rose and Mama Bess, and I have chosen to portray it that way in the novel. This book was Rose's introduction to the juvenile book market, where multi-book contracts are standard procedure; she does not mention receiving an option clause in the contracts for her own novels, all of which were stand-alones (single, non-series novels). The royalty issue in Mama Bess's contract turned out to be moot, however, since this contract was never signed.

In a letter (October 5, 1931) to George Bye about the contract, Rose told him that Laura was writing her second juvenile under the Harper contract and had the third one planned ("Apprenticeship," pp. 326–327). There is no indication that this is true, although Rose and her mother may have discussed some possibilities for the second book. It is more likely that Rose simply wanted to remind Bye that this was a three-book contract and enlist his aid in making sure that Harper took up the option on the second and third book.

### ***But I had come up***

George Bye was a cheerleader—a wonderful trait in a literary agent. When "Vengeance" was rejected because it was "too grim," he wrote to her humorously, asking her for something "blithe" (Diary, June 15, 1931). He wrote again a few weeks later, asking for a story, "please." In response, Rose wrote "Immoral Woman," which he almost immediately sold to *Ladies Home Journal*. She then cleaned up another piece that she had worked on earlier, "The [Dog Wolf](#)." Bye sold it to *Good Housekeeping* some months later.

Now, urged once again to produce a story, she started to work on "Courage," which would become her best-selling book, *Let the Hurricane Roar*. She put in four days' work on the project (October 8–11), then laid it aside to take the train to St. Louis for dental work, shopping, and movies. She didn't return to "Courage" until December 14, then put it away over the holidays, starting work on it again on January 9.

But she was interrupted by the arrival of the proofs of *Little House in the Big Woods* and by the return of the bothersome Wilkins ghostwriting job for Lowell Thomas, which she had submitted, incomplete, at the end of the previous July. Like many of us, Rose had a tendency to allow the needs and demands of others to pull her away from her own work. But in this case, the *Little House* proofs had to be corrected, and Laura seems to have felt inadequate to the task. In fact, Rose corrected the proofs for every book in the series. Moreover, she was obligated to Thomas to finish the Wilkins job. “Courage” would have to wait.

### ***I remember telling Clarence Day***

Clarence Day, the author of *Life with Father*, 1935, was one of Rose’s letter-writing friends. Day admired the energy and verve of her letters and had suggested that they coauthor a collection of their correspondence. Rose didn’t warm to that idea, but she did discuss other possible writing topics, telling Day on June 6, 1928, that although she had grown up listening to her parents and grandparents talk about their days as pioneer settlers, the stories had never ignited her imagination (*Ghost*, pp. 187–188). But her work with Mama Bess’s family history had introduced her to the subject in a highly personal way, and Thomas Costain’s expressed interest in a pioneer story and George Bye’s cheering encouragement were lighting the slumbering sparks.

Rose’s comment at the end of the conversation with her mother is based on a diary entry that records an afternoon walk to her mother’s house, thinking that in twenty years, she would be her mother’s age, and that if she stayed at the farm, she might become as limited and narrow as her mother (Diary, October 7, 1931). For the record, she didn’t come to that. Rose’s older years were much more intellectually expansive and socially engaged than her mother’s.

She began work on “Courage” the next day.

### ***But our rejoicing***

On November 6, the same day that George Bye wired that “The Dog Wolf” had been sold for the premium short story price of twelve hundred dollars, Marion Fiery dropped her bombshell: Knopf was closing its juvenile department. It wouldn’t be wise, Fiery wrote, for Rose to encourage her mother to sign a three-book contract with Knopf since there was no way to predict what would happen in the next three years.

Rose replied that her mother had no idea what to do and that she herself couldn’t offer any suggestions since juvenile fiction was completely out of her experience. The letter seems to have been designed to impose upon Fiery’s sense of obligation both to Rose, whom she had met personally, and to the project (RWL to MF, November 1931, undated draft, RWL Collection, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library). Rose added that she was reluctant to ask George Bye to seek another publisher because his 15 percent of the royalties, small as they were likely to be, would hardly compensate for his marketing efforts (“Apprenticeship,” pp. 326–327). She was obviously hoping that Fiery would shop the book herself.

Rose’s strategy worked. The story of the Thanksgiving Day reprieve is partially told by Virginia Kirkus, the Harper editor who agreed to take on the project. “The reason why that decision was an emphatic ‘Yes’ lay in the manuscript itself,” Kirkus wrote in “The Discovery of Laura Ingalls Wilder” (*Horn Book Magazine* 29, December 1953, p. 428). “The real magic was in the telling. One felt that one was listening, not reading.” The “magical telling,” of course, was Rose’s doing, as she rewrote her mother’s stiff and unimpressive narrative in her own smoothly lyrical story-telling style.

On Thanksgiving Day, after the good news was received at Rocky Ridge, Rose wrote in her diary that she was grateful.

And so are we.

***Just when I thought***

The distressing (but not unexpected) letter from Palmer arrived on November 19. The next day, Troub wrote to Foster Kennedy, a physician with whom she had served in France, looking for a job. She left for the East Coast on December 2. Rose told her mother about the Palmer failure on December 10, two days after the arrival of Kirkus's formal letter of acceptance of *Little House*.

It was a time of mixed blessings. In the midst of all this, Rose spent four more days on "Courage," but was derailed again by the holidays.

## PART THREE

### Chapter Nine

King Street: April 1939

#### *Of course I defeated him.*

Rose tells the story of the photographer and the carnelian ring in her foreword to *On the Way Home*, her mother's diary of the trip from De Smet to Mansfield. On page 3 is a photo of an unsmiling and determined little Rose, wearing a calico dress with a crocheted collar and tatted cuffs, with her left hand placed over her right. Under it, this text:

I was 2 years 4 months when this picture was taken in April, 1889. I remember the picture-taking well, was impressed by the photographer's stupid pretense that there was a little bird in the camera. The photographer also kept putting my right hand on top of the left, and I kept changing them back because I wanted my carnelian ring to show. And in the end I won out.

The amusing irony here, however, is that the original of the photo is marked "Spring Valley, Minnesota"—and the Wilders did not arrive there until May 1890. Rose would have then been at least three, perhaps even four. Her memory for facts and dates is not as good as she insists that it is. Holtz (*Ghost*, p. 389, n. 23) credits William Anderson with this recognition; I am indebted to Nancy Cleaveland for pointing it out to me.

#### *Those were hard times*

Almanzo had proved up on his original 160-acre homestead claim the year before he married Laura and had filed on an additional 160-acre "Tree Claim"—land that would become his if he planted trees on ten acres of it and raised them successfully. To pay for the house he built on the tree claim for his bride, he had taken out a five-hundred-dollar mortgage, and then

there was the farming equipment he needed: a plow, a binder, a mowing machine, a hay rake. In *The First Four Years*, pp. 57–58, Laura describes herself as appalled at the debt they were accruing. She adds it up:

There was the [note on the] binder that had been used to cut only fifty acres of oats; there was the sulky plow and the mower and rake, the seeder that had sown the grain in the spring and the new wagon. There was too the five hundred dollars still due on the building of the house . . . . Five hundred and two hundred was seven hundred, and the wagon and the mower . . . . She must stop counting it or she would have her head queer.

Like all farmers, Almanzo was gambling on good crops to make the installment payments and pay the interest. And like many farmers' wives, Laura shuddered at the accumulating debt.

Between the drought and the hailstorms, the crops did not thrive, and when both Laura and Almanzo contracted diphtheria and Almanzo suffered a stroke, things became even more difficult. They moved from the house Almanzo had built on the tree claim to a less comfortable house on the homestead claim in order to rent out the tree claim for a little cash income. In July 1888, their renter left and they moved back to the tree claim. Almanzo sold the homestead claim the next month. He had planned to "prove up" the tree claim in August 1889 (that is, complete all requirements and gain title to the land). But the trees were not flourishing, so he relinquished the claim and re-filed on it as a preemption. This was a cash purchase (for \$1.25 per acre) with a six months' residency requirement and up to two years in which to pay for the land.

But they ran into another streak of bad luck. Their second child died and the house burned, and within a few months, they decided to leave Dakota. They went to Spring Valley and stayed with Almanzo's parents while they decided what to do. Almanzo sold the preempted tree claim for two hundred dollars while they were living with the Wilders.

Laura tells part of this story in *The First Four Years*. John E. Miller puts her account into the larger context of the social and environmental climate of the 1880s and 1890s on the Great

Plains (*Becoming*, pp. 71–90). I am grateful to Nancy Cleaveland for clarifying and correcting some of the details about Almanzo’s claims.

## Chapter Ten

### *Let the Hurricane Roar: 1932*

#### **Time and Place**

The year 1932 was a transition year, bridging the old and the new. Americans were intrigued by the idea of a “New Deal,” a term that FDR used in his July acceptance speech, when he accepted the Democratic nomination. By that time, the Bonus Army had already occupied Washington, and Hoover made the terrible mistake of letting MacArthur, Patton, and Eisenhower attack them, demolishing any hope of a Republican victory in the November presidential election.

Other changes were in the air. In May, Amelia Earhart became the first woman to pilot a plane, solo, across the Atlantic, from Newfoundland to Ireland. Telephone service was established between Hawaii and the mainland, and Marconi successfully tested the first shortwave radio. Gary Cooper thrilled moviegoers in *A Farewell to Arms*, and the Marx Brothers tickled them with *Horsefeathers*. The “March King” John Philip Sousa died, and the kidnapped baby of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh was found, murdered. Jack Benny broadcast his first radio program, Lou Gehrig hit four home runs in one game, and *Little House in the Big Woods* was published.

#### ***But I was underpaid***

Bye’s remark about the dark hour is quoted in *Ghost*, p. 228.

#### ***And then, in the late spring***

The treatment of the Bonus Army confirmed many Americans’ assessment of what was wrong with the Hoover administration: unsympathetic, unconcerned, out of touch, and unwilling

to offer help to those in desperate need. After the debacle was over and MacArthur's soldiers had forcibly routed the veterans and their families, Hoover issued a statement: "A challenge to the authority of the United States Government has been met, swiftly and firmly. The Department of Justice is pressing its investigation into the violence which forced the call of army detachments, and it is my sincere hope that those agitators may be brought speedily to trial in the civil courts." The military action was not only unconscionable, it was also politically foolish. The Bonus Army may have been defeated in July, but it helped to rout Herbert Hoover in November.

For a full-scale study of this event, its context, and its aftermath, read *The Bonus Army: An American Epic* by Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen (Walker, 2006). Dickson and Allen argue that the march and the official violent reaction to it transformed the nation's attitude toward military veterans and pushed Congress, in 1944, to pass the GI Bill of Rights, one of the most important pieces of social legislation in U.S. history.

### ***And to make a bad year much worse***

On the eastern edge of the Dust Bowl, Missouri saw less dirt in the air than did Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. But Missourians certainly experienced the impact of the long drought and terrible heat on their crops. Across the Great Plains, the effects were catastrophic. The best history of the period (what the *New York Times* calls "a classic disaster tale") is Timothy Egan's *The Worst Hard Time* (Mariner reprint edition, 2006). The section titled "Betrayal, 1931–1933" reports on the first years of the Dust Bowl. Rose may have suffered from sadness and feelings of helplessness during the apocalyptic years of the Dirty Thirties, but so did a great many people.

### ***I replied, commiserating***

This material is paraphrased from a letter Rose wrote to Mary Margaret McBride in March 1930. The letter gives us some insights into the plight of writers who were dependent on the magazine market for their livelihood. With her characteristic humor, Rose writes that she wouldn't like it to get around the New York gossip shops that her work is failing to sell. She wonders whether the magazine market has dried up completely, or whether there is something terribly wrong with her stuff. She is, she adds, totally paralyzed by the situation, and all she can think of is money. But she makes a joke of her lament. She was just another one of those money-hungry Americans, she wrote, unable to stop thinking about money for even one moment.

To which (on March 31) Mary Margaret replies, more seriously, that she feels just as Rose does. "I think of [money] all the time but I don't see how we're to do anything else with things as they are." (The McBride letters are among the Lane Papers in the Herbert Hoover Library.)

### ***Of course you're scared***

Mary Margaret's heavily ironic phrase, "All we have to do is remain invincible" is quoted in Rose's diary entry, August 3, 1930.

### ***At Rocky Ridge, the warm winter***

Troub sent frequent letters throughout the spring of 1932 and, on July 10, wrote that she wanted to come back to the farm. Rose answered the next day. The letter does not exist and her diary doesn't record her reply, but presumably, she told Troub to stay where she was. The situation at Rocky Ridge was so difficult that Rose likely decided that she had enough on her hands without having to cope with Troub, whose harum-scarum nature was fun during the good times but not necessarily comfortable over a long and deepening crisis.

### ***It was a spring and summer of illnesses***

In early April, Rose noted that Laura was ill. She had telephoned that the barns were on fire. Rose hurriedly called the doctor and spent the day with her mother (Diary, April 6, 1932). Laura's hallucinations may have been associated with her diabetes, but if Rose knew about the illness at the time, she doesn't say so. On April 11, she writes that she and Dr. Fuson went to the Rock House, where her mother had experienced another attack, which she blamed on over-exertion and an improper diet. Diabetes afflicted Laura's two sisters, Carrie and Grace, both of whom are reported to have died of the disease: Grace in 1941 at the age of 64; Carrie in 1946 at 75.

And Rose's own health was a constant challenge: headaches, gum and tooth infections, insomnia, depressive episodes. On March 31, she wrote that the past three months had physically aged her. Throughout this time, she continues to note bouts of ill health and other calamities in her diaries so often that it becomes a gloomy litany.

### ***Now, looking back***

Seeing Rose's situation in the context of the Crash and the Depression explains, to some degree, her continuing bouts of the blues. In her journal (May 14, 1932, quoted in *Ghost*, p. 217–218), she remembers her confidence before the Crash and the effect of the growing balance of the Palmer account on her plans to help her parents, build a house for them, and establish a household at Rocky Ridge. She also considers her continuing obligation there:

The boom, the famous “1929 bull market,” did this for me: it took me out of the irresponsible “artist” class into the responsible householder class. The crash left me with nothing to support this position, yet because it is an obligation to my parents, to my servants, to—idiotically—the dog Bunting and the horse Molly—I can not bring myself to abandon it. Otherwise I would be rejoicing in going back to the days when I earned my daily bread usually the day after I had eaten it and lived wherever I happened to be.

A personal note: My own parents lived through these years, and my mother told me of the long periods of depression that she experienced as she tried to decide how to juggle her obligations to

her elderly parents (like the Wilders, living alone on a Missouri subsistence farm) and try to make a decent life for herself. “It was just indescribable,” my mother wrote to me once, remembering those days. “We were all half-crazy. Really, we were going nuts with fear and uncertainty. I don’t know how we managed to survive.”

### *I am sure I’ve improved*

We have no record of conversations between Laura and Rose about *Farmer Boy*, only Rose’s numerous diary and journal entries regarding her work on the project. This scene is my reconstruction, based on Laura’s later correspondence with Rose about *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, where it is clear that she hoped to be able to reduce the amount of work Rose had to do on her draft. If her manuscript could go to the Harper editor with just a few touch-ups, she wrote, it would give Rose time for her own work (LIW to RWL, January 28, 1938, quoted in *Ghost*, p. 279).

The clearest description we have of the process of creating *Farmer Boy* is that provided by William Anderson (“Collaboration,” pp. 124–143). In Anderson’s reconstruction, Laura and Rose worked together to prepare the first manuscript that was submitted to Ida Louise Raymond at Harper and rejected; they then worked together to revise the manuscript that was finally accepted. “What travail led to the neat pencil draft of *Farmer Boy* written by Laura Ingalls Wilder from the sketchy few pages of plans can only be imagined by the researcher today,” Anderson observes (“Collaboration,” p. 126). What travail—yes, indeed.

My reconstruction of this episode differs somewhat from Anderson’s. I believe that Laura—her confidence buoyed by the success of *Little House*—compiled the stories and anecdotes that Almanzo had told her over the years, arranged them in a seasonal order (like that suggested by Rose for *Little House*), and presented her orange tablets (no longer extant) to Rose,

with the instruction simply to type them. Rose did this, copying a chapter a day—and clearly noting, in her diary, that she is in fact *copying* (Diary, May 5, 1932). That she cannot do more is clear from her resentful lament in her journal (June 8, 1932; quoted in *Becoming*, p. 194, and by almost every scholar who has commented on this issue):

My whole trouble was that I am not master of my material in writing my mother's second juvenile. It was a little job that seemed inconsequential—and is—and therefore it was able to do all this to me without my knowing it—the truth is that for better or worse, no matter how hopelessly a failure, I am a writer . . .

By “not master of my material,” I believe Rose means that her mother has forbidden her to make the revisions to the book—the substantial revision that she knows, as a writer, *must* be done—that would make the project acceptable to the publisher. On August 17, in her journal, Rose notes that she has finished *Farmer Boy* and it is ready to go to Harper. But she has no expectation that the book would be accepted.

### ***Aunt Grace was ill***

In her diary (February 5–6, 1932), Rose notes that Laura had a letter from her sister Grace asking for money. Mama Bess came over the next day to discuss the matter with Rose, who remarks that Grace was destitute and desperate but does not record whether or how she or Mama Bess responded to the request for funds. At this time, it appears that Grace had been diagnosed and was being treated for diabetes. According to William Anderson's booklet, *The Story of the Ingalls* (p. 29), Carrie had come to visit Grace in the Huron, South Dakota, hospital, bringing Laura's *Little House in the Big Woods* to read aloud. Perhaps Carrie thought her older sister might be able to help, now that she had joined her daughter Rose as a successful published author. Laura had kept her mother and sisters updated on Rose's achievements.

### ***I flinched***

During her 1925 visit, Rose wrote to Guy Moyston that her mother still thought of her as a child, even hesitating to allow her to bring the butter from the spring, fearing she wouldn't do it right (quoted in *Ghost*, p. 155). Laura, for her part, in her September 15, 1921, *Ruralist* article, mentioned her inability to see Rose as an adult: "my daughter, who will always be a little girl to me, no matter how old she grows" (*Journalist*, p. 260).

On January 29, 1933, Rose wrote in her journal that her "half-angry reluctance" to work on *Farmer Boy* arose, in part, because Mama Bess hated to depend on her authorial skills, which Rose believed she was offering out of a blend of practicality (everything her mother earned would be in the family) and generosity. But she saw her mother as clearly resenting her generosity. "It is a striking scene in a tense family drama," Holtz writes (*Ghost*, p. 239) and quotes Rose's journal entry.

But there can be no genuine pleasure in generosity to my mother, who resents it and does not trouble to conceal [her] resentment. Generosity stripped of all selfish pleasure *should* be left pure generosity. In fact, it also becomes resentment (quoted fully in *Ghost*, p. 239).

This complicated assessment is Rose's personal reading of her mother's feelings, of course. It's a pity that Laura left no written record against which we can test it. In many ways, Laura is as much an enigma to us as she was to her daughter. We have no way of knowing whether the resentment that Rose perceived was real or imagined.

On June 3, Rose noted in her diary that her mother had come for breakfast. Later that day, "in despair," she resumed her work on *Farmer Boy*, but without much success, apparently unable to create a logical narrative out of her mother's badly constructed materials—without substantially altering the original. Baffled, she stopped and went out to pull weeds in the garden.

***The project had turned into***

Graeme Lorimer's comment that there would be no chance of a serial at the *Post* was reported in a letter from George Bye to Rose, August 9, 1932 ("Collaboration," p. 130). It must have come as a bitter blow, for Rose had written the story with the *Post* in mind, and there were very few other suitable magazine markets

### ***The Sunday night before***

The story about the change of title (from "Courage" to "Let the Hurricane Roar") was related to William Anderson by Mansfield residents ("Collaboration," pp. 103–104). Rose simply reports in her diary (July 29, 1932) that she spent the evening with her parents and follows this the next day (August 1) with a note that she has changed the title—no explanation. Months later, Mama Bess wrote to her sister Carrie, asking her to copy the words of the song from a family hymnal. Carrie provided them and Rose sent them airmail to Jane Terrill, Maxwell Aley's assistant at Longmans Green, the publisher of the book version of *Hurricane* (February 2–3, 1933). The words may have been needed for advertising copy.

### ***And then, on the Tuesday after***

On September 6, Bye telegraphed Rose that the *Post* would publish *Hurricane*, in two installments, for three thousand dollars. "Low bow of homage," he added.

Several months later, Rose would respond to a letter in *Better Homes and Gardens* (December 1933, p. 19), describing her reasons for writing "Hurricane." It was, she said,

a reply to pessimists. It was written from my feeling that living is never easy, that all human history is a record of achievement in disaster (so that disaster is no cause for despair), and that our great asset is the valor of the American spirit—the undefeated spirit of millions of obscure men and women who are as valiant today as the pioneers were in the past.

"Disaster is no cause for despair." It was quintessential Rose. *Sweet are the uses of adversity.*

### ***Two weeks later***

There is no record of the conversation between Rose and her mother about the rejection of *Farmer Boy*, and Ida Louise Raymond's rejection letter is not in the Hoover collection. I have based the scene on my experience as an author; on my understanding of the dynamics of this mother-daughter team of writers; and on William Anderson's thoughtful remark ("Collaboration," p. 139):

For Laura Ingalls Wilder, the *Farmer Boy* rejection had been an important lesson in the nature of her dependency on her daughter. . . . *Farmer Boy* forced her to acknowledge that even her abundance of engrossing story-telling material needed the shaping and smooth plot development that her daughter's experience as a novelist could provide.

What it needed, more specifically, was Rose's deft hand with characterization, plot structure, pacing, and particularly with dialogue, for Rose had the gift of making written speech sound natural and easy. It was a gift her mother did not share and never seemed able to develop, even with practice.

You can read Laura's writing, without any revisions by Rose (but with other, substantial editorial revisions), in *The First Four Years* (HarperCollins, 1971). On December 20, 1937, Laura had described her idea for the book in a letter to Rose. It was to be an adult novel. She adds, "I could write the rough work. You could polish it and put your name to it if that would be better than mine" (quoted in "Apprenticeship," p. 295).

Rose was cool to the idea and politely declined to "polish" it. Either Laura had already written the little book or decided to write it without Rose's help, perhaps with the idea of offering it to Harper. It would likely have been rejected. We can see, in the published *First Four Years*, a clear support for Troub's comment to Anderson in their 1981 interview ("Collaboration," pp. 132–133): "Mama Bess had very good story ideas, but then she couldn't write for sour apples . . . . And Rose wrote like nobody's business." To which Anderson adds his own candid assessment: "One of the team [of LIW and RWL] possessed the experiences and

impressions; the other responded with the structure, the professional skill, and the marketing ability.” Exactly.

In any case, someone—perhaps Roger MacBride, perhaps a Harper editor, or both—has done some substantial editorial work on *The First Four Years*, for Laura’s original manuscript (held in the Herbert Hoover Library) differs in a great many respects from the published book. I rather think the revisions must have been done by Roger MacBride, for while the changes help to provide transitions and clear up some of the narrative confusion, they don’t demonstrate a high level of writing skill. What happened, I believe, is that MacBride discovered the manuscript among Rose’s papers very soon after her October 30, 1968, death. He saw that the book might be a valuable addition to the existing series, both in terms of its literary significance and as a boost to the sales of the previous books, the royalties for which were coming to him. He must also have seen, however, that it was unpublishable (as were all of Laura’s drafts) and set to work to “fix it up” as he thought Rose would have done. He then submitted the typescript to Harper, whose editors may have done some additional polishing. It was published in 1971.

To take my speculations a little further: I have always wondered why Harper decided to publish the book, since its authorial voice is so very different from the voice to which we’d grown accustomed in the eight books of the Little House series. Wouldn’t they have been concerned that the publication of a ninth book that might be criticized as “inferior” would damage the reputation of the other eight books?

But something else was going on at the time *The First Four Years* was being considered. Roger MacBride was opening discussion of the television dramatization of the Little House books with NBC executive Ed Friendly. That discussion resulted in the 1973 production and the March 1974 airing of the pilot of the long-running television series *Little House on the Prairie*.

Harper may have felt that the book would be a popular tie-in to the television series and promote the sales of all nine Little House books; the publisher's interest in sales might have overridden any editorial concerns about quality.

They were right. By the time the ninth book joined the canon, along with the television productions, the Little House series had become a brand, and over the years, so many spinoffs have been produced (often of even more dubious quality than *The First Four Years*) that it is hard to keep up with them.

And if you're wondering whether I see the irony of my own contribution to the fictionalization of the Wilder/Lane lives—I certainly do. I hope, however, that my fiction has shed light on these fascinating women and their books, rather than further obscuring them.

### ***But I found the farm***

The conversation with Mrs. Lamson is reported in Holtz, *Ghost*, p. 235. And, yes, it appears to be true that Laura made off with Mrs. Lamson's pie tin back some forty years before, although I invented her return of a tin and the gift of the crocheted doilies. But Laura hated to be beholden to anyone, so it's very likely that she sent an apology gift.

### ***The divorce itself***

Parts of this conversation originated in a letter Rose wrote to her friend Dorothy Thompson in 1925, after Dorothy's first marriage had failed (*Friendship*, pp. 39–41). At the close of the letter, Rose writes:

Dear Dorothy, it isn't the end; it's only the end of one of you, the close of a chapter. A character goes out, and doesn't come into the story again. But there's the story, going on.

There were many chapter closings in Rose's life. When she finished *These Happy Golden Years*, the last of her mother's Little House books, her fiction-writing chapter closed. That character (Rose, the writer of fiction) left her story and didn't return. But Rose's story continued

just as creatively as it had before. She was a political philosopher, a newspaper columnist, a book reviewer and editor, a friend and mentor, and (of course, and always) a writer of letters.

To return to an earlier metaphor of hers, the roads diverged, and she took a different one.

### ***We found the old farm***

The Wilder farm, like many of the Ingalls family's "little house" sites, is now a museum. Rose's visit must have been an inspiration for her, since it was the setting for her father's stories about his childhood, the happiest part of his life. Rose was always deeply impressed by a sense of place, and one of her great strengths as a writer is the ability to describe what she sees (or visually imagines) in a way that draws the reader into the scene. Her rewrite, as William Holtz observes (*Ghost*, p. 239), turns her mother's first draft of *Farmer Boy* into "what it should have been before it was sent out initially, a proper companion piece to *Little House in the Big Woods*." It's too bad that we don't have Laura's first draft, the one that Rose was not permitted to "master."

### ***I was in New York***

John E. Miller (*Becoming*, p. 197) reports Roosevelt's local margin of victory. While the citizens of Missouri and most of the Midwestern and Plains states may have voted for Roosevelt in 1932 and even in 1936, they were conservative and staunchly opposed to "big government" in any form. With that in mind, the opposition of Rose and her parents to Roosevelt and his New Deal programs should not come as a surprise.

The story about the chant of "Hang Hoover!" when the president's train pulled into Detroit is told by Jonathan Alter in *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope* (Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 133. For an account of election night, 1932, read Jean Edward Smith's *FDR* (Random House reprint edition, 2008), pp. 287–288.

### ***It was late January***

Laura arrived for tea with her rewritten draft of *Farmer Boy* on January 19. This scene is based on my notion that Laura had learned “an important lesson in the nature of her dependency on her daughter,” as William Anderson puts it in “Collaboration,” p. 139. It was a lesson that she would have to repeat, in varying degrees, with every book.

At some point, Rose would have shown Laura the painting of W. H. D. Koerner’s illustration for the first installment of “Let the Hurricane Roar,” when it was published on October 22, 1932. Perhaps she even had it framed and gave it to her mother for hanging in the Rock House. In any event, the painting now hangs beside the front door in the Rocky Ridge living room.

Over the course of his career, Koerner completed nearly two thousand magazine illustrations, as well as drawings for books and advertisements. He primarily illustrated Western-themed fiction, which was enormously popular during the early decades of the twentieth century, and his highly realistic work appeared in *Collier’s*, *Country Gentleman*, *Harper’s*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and many other magazines. Rose would have been pleased by Koerner’s assignment as the illustrator of her story and seen it as an affirmation of the *Post’s* high regard for her work.

### ***The Ingalls family itinerary***

In *Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder*, Donald Zochert provides an excellent fact-based study of the Ingalls family’s wanderings. He includes, in detail, the episodes that Laura and Rose omitted. For the story behind the story that Rose and Laura created, his book is the place to start.

***“But I can’t pretend,”***

In 1934, Aubrey Sherwood, the editor of the *De Smet News* wrote to Laura, asking for her reactions to Rose's popular new book, *Let the Hurricane Roar*. Laura replied, with an almost audible sniff of disdain, "It is of course fiction, with incidents and anicdotes [*sic*] gathered here and there and some purely imaginary. But you know what fiction writing is" (quoted in "Collaboration," p. 110).

Neither Laura nor Rose ever admitted it, but the books that bear Laura's name are indeed works of fiction, based on "incidents and anecdotes" gathered from the Ingalls family treasury of oral history and embellished with "some purely imaginary." However, it is only in recent years that teachers have begun to present the books to children as anything other than a "reliable portrayal of the past," as Anita Fellman points out in her excellent study, *Little House, Long Shadow* (pp. 144–147, hereafter abbreviated as *Shadow*).

### ***I heard footsteps overhead***

Rose was often offended by her mother's repeating of small-town gossip. William Holtz reports her description of Mama Bess's objection to the idea of going to a party that would also be attended by a couple involved in a locally notorious divorce case:

So she [Mama Bess] said we girls [Rose and Catharine] could do as we pleased, of course, but she wasn't going. I asked her why . . . . She said, "Well, I can tell you my point of view. If we go, it will be printed in the paper, it will go to Hartville . . . . Everybody will read it, all those people that heard all that divorce trial . . . . It's bad enough now because I drink beer, but still, in a way, it does something for beer because Mrs. Wilder drinks it, but if we are at a party with Reuben Williams [involved in the divorce] they'll just say, 'The Wilders have gone tough.'" She repeated that a couple of times, "gone tough," with explosive force as though the word "tough" were obscene (quoted in *Ghost*, p. 243).

This sharply satiric depiction comes from Rose (Journal, July 9, 1933); unfortunately, we don't have a corrective view from Laura. I am assuming that Rose's report is more or less accurate.

Rose saw and heard this kind of parochial pettiness, not just in her mother but all around her. At the time of this conversation, she was describing and quietly satirizing similar instances of Mrs. Grundyism in the magazine stories that she would later collect in *Old Home Town*. Her habit of close observation and satirizing may have been the source of some of the continuing local antagonism toward her. Holtz comments that the subject of these stories was the “grip of small-town respectability on the spontaneous impulses of the human heart . . . a deeply ambiguous assessment of the impress of [Rose’s] mother’s generation upon her own.” (*Ghost*, p. 238). It wouldn’t be any surprise if the local folk resented her depictions of them.

### ***I had planned to start***

William Anderson (“Collaboration,” pp. 131–139) offers several helpful comparisons of Laura’s manuscript of *Farmer Boy* with Rose’s 266-page typescript. Rose reorganized, restructured, and completely rewrote her mother’s draft, demonstrating, as Anderson says, “an awareness of the unique craftsmanship demanded of children’s writers.” This was not the job of an editor who would smooth and polish a few rough edges. It was the work of an engaged, experienced co-author who knew how to construct a story from rough-cast materials and understood how to write for children.

As I noted earlier, Rose’s first published work at the *San Francisco Call* in 1908–1909 was in the newspaper’s “Junior Section,” and in the early 1920s, she wrote for the *Junior Red Cross Bulletin*. On May 10, 1932, she told George Bye about her idea for some travel books that would be related to a “series of juveniles” she had pitched to Marion Fiery, now an editor at Putnam. (Two years later, George Bye would bring her an offer from Robert M. McBride to write a travel book about the state of Missouri.) Rose apparently didn’t pursue the “series of juveniles” she says she offered to Fiery, or Fiery did not find the idea appealing.

### ***On March 2, I finished***

It wasn't the last Rose would see of *Farmer Boy*. Three months later, on June 2, her mother came for tea, bringing the proofs of the book for Rose to correct. On March 20, Rose had already written to their agent with an assumed breathless enthusiasm, carrying on the fiction of sole authorship and reporting that Mama Bess was now writing her third book, this one about the Ingalls's experiences in Indian Territory. It was going to be even better, she asserted—*much* better—than *Little House in the Big Woods*.

### ***With the cooperation of Congress***

On April 20, Rose noted in her diary that “controlled inflation” had begun, with the government's embargo on gold. New currency legislation was pending in Congress and the stock market was beginning to rise in response. Her interest in politics, at least as it is recorded in her diary, dates from around this time, likely stemming from conversations at home and with Mansfield residents about the doings in Washington.

The new legislation was sweeping. On April 5, 1933, Roosevelt had ordered all gold coins and certificates to be surrendered to the government in return for \$20.67 per ounce, paid in currency. On June 5, Congress formally canceled creditors' right to demand payment in gold, taking the country off the gold standard. With the exception of an embargo during World War I, the United States had been on a gold standard since 1879. But Britain had dropped it in 1931, and in the United States, bank failures had provoked people to hoard gold, to the point where the standard seemed unsustainable. There was another powerful incentive as far as the government—and big business—was concerned: going off the standard would allow the currency to inflate, which the Roosevelt administration (influenced by Keynesian economic theory) believed would help the economy.

For those who feared inflation, this was a frightening move. Until now, Rose had for the most part suspended judgment on Roosevelt; in her diary, March 12, she assessed his first “Fireside Chat” as competent and straightforward. But his new monetary policy cemented her growing distrust and dislike of his policies, and she went straight to her typewriter. Her timely and amusing parable, “A Little Flyer in Inflation,” was published by *Harper’s* in September 1932. Readers could not fail to draw the parallels.

For a description of Roosevelt’s actions with regard to the currency and the country’s response, see Jean Edward Smith, *FDR*, pp. 327–329. For a broadly dissenting view (a view closer to that of RWL herself), read Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (Harper Perennial, 2008), especially pages 155–166. To fully understand Rose’s development as a political philosopher, we need to see her in the context of her time and place and be sensitive to the issues and actions that provoked her and other rural Midwesterners to suspicion and mistrust of an increasingly powerful government.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should add here that I am politically progressive, and I do not agree with all of Rose’s theories. But I was raised in the Midwest by Republican parents who were suspicious of every move the Roosevelt administration made, so her concerns and arguments are familiar to me. (My mother’s suspicions extended to Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as her husband. As a little girl, whenever I demonstrated what today would be called “leadership,” my mother would caution me not to be “bossy or a meddler, like Eleanor.”)

## Chapter Eleven

### A Year of Losses: 1933

#### Time and Place

The year 1933 was—to put it simply—a time of continuous, unceasing turbulence. In the first two weeks of his presidency, FDR signed a bill authorizing the sale of beer and wine, and within the year, Prohibition was dead. By that time, the gold standard was gone, and legislation made it illegal for American citizens to own gold. In his first hundred days, hoping to prove to a doubting nation that the federal government could actually do something to ease the dire economic situation, FDR pushed through fifteen major bills. Will Rogers was amused:

“Congress doesn't pass legislation anymore—they just wave at the bills as they go by.”

Some of FDR's initiatives were popular, like repeal and (eventually) the Works Progress Administration, designed to provide employment on public projects. Others—the Tennessee Valley Authority, for instance, a massive regional planning agency—were highly controversial because they expanded the powers of the federal government into policy areas controlled by the states. It was this intrusion that distressed Rose and her parents. But clearly, something had to be done to put people back to work: the unemployment rate had risen to 24.9 percent, the highest during the Depression years. In an attempt to deal with the crisis, many communities issued scrip, using it to pay people for public works and enabling them to buy food and clothing for their families.

Discoveries, inventions, and seemingly sinister events also unsettled people. Microwave transmission was established (radio waves seemed to be both a boon and a dangerous hazard); a researcher at the University of Chicago announced that susceptibility to cancer was inherited;

and the accident-prone dirigible *Akron* crashed, killing seventy-three and ending the Navy's rigid airship program. Adolph Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany and withdrew the country from the League of Nations. Japan quickly followed suit.

Other events were far more welcome. Construction commenced on the Golden Gate Bridge; the Lone Ranger began riding the Western plains; King Kong clasped Fay Wray and climbed the new Empire State Building. Ethel Waters belted out "Stormy Weather" at the Cotton Club in Harlem, and the Chicago World's Fair, celebrating "A Century of Progress," amazed the nation (and my mother).

### *Am I trying to lighten*

Rose's fictional observation, "My journal is bleaker by far than my lived life," seems to have been an accurate statement. Her biographer, William Holtz, describes her inner life, revealed in her diaries and journals, as complex and dark. "Most who knew her would have been surprised to find, beneath the witty and self-confident charm she had developed as her public character, the fears and doubts that occasionally sent her spinning into circle after circle of self-analysis" (*Ghost*, p. 96).

Rose is remembered by friends and colleagues, however, as lively, engaged, gay, and cheerful, even those acquainted with her during the difficult years of the Depression. Indeed, Norma Lee Browning, who knew Rose better than anyone else from 1936 to her death, felt that Holtz's biography did not describe the woman she knew. In a letter to Holtz, written on May 13, 1991, after she read the manuscript of *Ghost*, Browning remarks:

Perhaps it's not possible to reconstruct a person's life from letters and diaries. People confide to diaries all their innermost thoughts and apprehensions at low times in their lives, but this is only one side, the dark side, and not always, or generally, a true and balanced picture (William Holtz Collection, Herbert Hoover Library).

I admire Holtz's biography for the view it gives us of Rose's life and work, but I agree with Browning that he may have given too much weight to his subject's "fears and doubts." Yes, she was deeply troubled by the circumstances of her time. But a close reading of Rose's diaries makes it clear that she pushed herself to continue writing during some of the most difficult and challenging years of our nation's history, even during times of ill health and deep grief and loss. She felt terrible, yes, but she kept on showing up at her typewriter to produce saleable work—a commitment that every writer has to respect.

Unfortunately, Rose's private notes to herself, as they are selected and emphasized and analyzed by her biographer, make it appear that her depressions threaten her mental stability. This also results in unfortunate representations like this one, by a critic who has read the biography but not the diaries and journals on which it is based:

Rose was a frumpish, middle-aged divorcée, who was tormented by rotten teeth and suffered from bouts of suicidal depression, which she diagnosed in her journal, with more insight than many doctors of the era, as a mental illness ("[Wilder Women](#)," by Judith Thurman, *New Yorker*, August 10, 2009).

True, perhaps, although Rose exaggerated her single self-reported suicide attempt, when she was in her twenties and in an unhappy marriage. But it's not even close to the whole truth of a talented, complex, many-faceted woman caught in a situation from which she could not extricate herself without (she felt) abandoning her parents and other obligations.

And for most Americans, these months were indeed bleak. The New Deal programs were still a glimmer in the president's eye, and the world seemed a terrifyingly uncertain place. Many might have written in their journals, if they had them, "I'll be glad to die."

### ***Roosevelt gave his first radio talk***

In *The Roosevelt Myth* (Fox & Wilkes, reprint edition, 1998, p. 5), journalist and anti-New Deal critic John T. Flynn writes:

Salvation was in the air. Repeal, also, was in the air. Two weeks before, the lame-duck Congress had turned a somersault and voted the amendment to the Constitution ending Prohibition. The wets were making merry with applejack, bathtub gin and prohibition hooch. “Beer by Easter,” they cried. Forty-one legislatures were in session for the chance to approve the wet amendment and to slap taxes on beer and liquor to save their empty treasuries . . . . The country, the states, the towns needed money—something to tax. And liquor was the richest target.

In the context of a dark, dark time, repeal was cause for great celebration, and people looked to Roosevelt as a savior. After years of what was perceived as Hoover’s laissez-faire approach to the calamitous declines in the economy, they were on the president’s side, as Will Rogers says, even if he was wrong. The quote is from Rogers’s March 5 “Daily Telegram,” the day after Roosevelt was inaugurated. It begins “America hasn’t been as happy in three years as they are today.”

### *I wasn’t cheering*

Rose’s distrust of the Roosevelt administration and its New Deal programs largely grew out of her perception of the injustices and ill effects of the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Her views were widely shared across the Midwest, the Great Plains, and the rural South. One frequently voiced criticism was the waste of food that was created by certain provisions of the Act, at a time when people were hungry. As Thomas Sowell writes (*Basic Economics*, Basic Books, 2007, p. 56):

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, agricultural price support programs led to vast amounts of food being deliberately destroyed at a time when malnutrition was a serious problem in the United States . . . . For example, the federal government bought 6 million hogs in 1933 alone and destroyed them. Huge amounts of farm produce were plowed under, in order to keep it off the market and maintain prices at the officially fixed level, and vast amounts of milk were poured down the sewers for the same reason. Meanwhile, many American children were suffering from diseases caused by malnutrition.

For a broad summary of the opposition to the New Deal agricultural policy, see the entry at [Conservapedia.com](http://Conservapedia.com). The Act was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (6–3) in 1936; Congress restructured it in 1938.

One of the most effective critics of the New Deal agricultural programs was Gareth Garrett, who, beginning in 1935, became an important figure in Rose’s personal and philosophical life. Garrett was a major contributor to the anti-Roosevelt *Saturday Evening Post*, which had serialized *Let the Hurricane Roar* and would prove one of Rose’s major magazine markets from 1933–1938. Garrett’s article, “The Political Curse on the Farm Problem,” offers a larger view of the farmers’ plight in a rapidly modernizing world. (The article is reprinted in *Salvos Against the New Deal*, edited by Bruce Ramsey, Caxton Press, 2002, pp. 151–166.)

### ***I didn’t fool myself, though***

In her diary for March 8, 1933, Rose notes the encouraging text of a telegram from George Bye. She adds sadly that she wished she could believe Bye’s words, but she couldn’t. Her pessimism was wide of the mark. *Let the Hurricane Roar* had sold ten thousand copies by June, which in that economic climate was quite an achievement—especially when the *Post* had already serialized the story.

### ***But I was beginning***

As Holtz points out (*Ghost*, p. 274), Rose’s 1933 scheme for a ten-volume fictional history of American settlement was echoed by her mother in her 1937 speech to the Detroit Book Week celebration. Laura said:

Then I thought of writing the story of my childhood in several volumes—a seven volume historical novel for children, covering every aspect of the American frontier . . . . When I told my daughter . . . about it, she said it would be unique, that a seven volume novel for children had never been written.

Laura was right: such a thing had never been written. But while Mama Bess was still trying to figure out what she was going to do for her third book, Rose was already thinking about a multi-volume historical novel that spanned the entire American frontier, as it moved westward (*Ghost*, p. 240). It is probable that the concept of a multi-volume series began with Rose, who dropped the idea as impractical for her own work but suggested it to her mother as a framework for the children's series. In any event, Laura claimed the idea as her own and made it the point of her Detroit speech.

Laura's 1937 comment about a "seven volume novel" was based on the plan that the last book (which she called *Prairie Girl*) would incorporate material that was later broken into *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years*—hence, eight books instead of seven. We have no record of how that came about, but it seems likely to me that Rose managed it in the process of rewriting her mother's "Prairie Girl" draft. The completed series of eight books was extended to nine by the posthumous publication of Laura's *The First Four Years*.

***Really, I shouldn't be hurt***

I have based this scene on Rose's journal entries for January 23 and 29, 1933. My interpretation differs from that of William Holtz and others. Holtz says, "Clearly, Mama Bess has read nothing of Rose's story; clearly she resents Rose's intrusion into her material and the liberties fiction has taken with the facts of her parents' lives" (*Ghost*, p. 239).

I agree that Laura had not read *Hurricane* (or that she pretends not to have read it) and that she deeply resented the "liberties" that fiction takes with what she considered a true and factual story. (She was still thinking of that in 1952, when she wrote to Clara J. Webber, a librarian at the Pomona, California, public library, that *Hurricane* "creates confusion" ("Collaboration," p. 110). But there's no evidence in the scene—at least as Rose records it in her

journal—that her mother resented her appropriation of Ingalls family material. At the time, Laura was still trying to sort out what material to include and how to handle the necessary fictions in her “Indian book” (*Little House on the Prairie*). There is no indication in Rose’s diary or journal that her mother was thinking beyond that third book or that she had staked a proprietary claim to the Ingalls stories.

The tale of Laura’s unhappiness with Rose’s use of “her” material can be traced to informants who spoke with William Anderson nearly fifty years after the publication of *Hurricane*. Based on conversations in 1981, Anderson reports (“Collaboration,” pp. 109–110) that people in Mansfield had “caught a whiff” of “tension” over Rose’s book. Local gossip had it that *Hurricane* “caused a rift” between Laura and Rose and “even that a legal action had occurred.” The citizens of Mansfield would certainly have enjoyed trading similar bits of back-fence gossip and magnifying them throughout a half-century of retelling. And as I noted earlier, Rose’s portrayal of small-town cruelties in her magazine stories of 1933–1935 may have angered some, especially women, who felt the edge of her satire.

In later letters, Laura occasionally stakes her claim over a scene or an episode that she intends to use, but more frequently points Rose to “family” material that would be appropriate for her work. One example is found in a letter from Laura to Rose, February 5, 1937. Laura points to an incident of cheating on railroad hauling contracts that she couldn’t use in a story for children, but that Rose could use in her writing for grownups.

### ***The first involved***

Rose’s journal entry documenting this scene (April 10, 1933) almost vibrates with bitterness and clearly underscores the longstanding central issue between these two women: the mother’s necessary dependence on the daughter’s financial support and the daughter’s sensitivity

to perceived criticism that she isn't providing *enough* support. Mama Bess resents the fact, Rose writes, that her daughter is her only source of support and blames her for falling down on the job, for not providing enough. Holtz observes that in this "harrowing domestic drama, we can glimpse the strategies of martyrdom Rose had been struggling against as long as she could remember." (See *Ghost*, pp. 244–245, where the full text of the journal entry is quoted.) Rose also relates the palm-reading episode in this entry.

### ***The malaria of Albania***

The cause (or causes) of Rose's 1932–1933 recurring illness is not clear, but the illness itself was nearly as debilitating as the malaria of the decade before—and may very well have been related to the previous malarial infection. In 1935, after she has many of her teeth pulled, Rose becomes healthier, so dental infection may have been a contributing factor.

### ***I wrote to George Bye***

In considering the payment to Caldwell (or Caldwell's agent) as a "bribe," Rose mischaracterized the option agreement. But it didn't matter, for the deal didn't work out.

The story is told in *Erskine Caldwell: A Biography*, by Harvey L. Klevar (University of Tennessee Press, 1993, p. 135). In May 1933, Caldwell, who was as desperate for money as any of the writers of the time, had signed a \$250 per week, three-month contract as a scriptwriter with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. He was assigned to adapt *Let the Hurricane Roar* for the director, King Vidor. Caldwell was working on Rose's project when Vidor left MGM and *Hurricane* was dropped.

This was unfortunate, for at the time, Vidor was working on what Raymond Durnat and Scott Simon describe as his "back-to-the-land trilogy" (Durnat and Simon, *King Vidor, American*, University of California Press, 1990, p. 11). The three films were *The Stranger's*

*Return* (1933); *Our Daily Bread* (1934, financed by Vidor himself to the tune of \$150,000, with a script revision by Charlie Chaplin); and *The Wedding Night* (1935). *Hurricane* would have fit easily into this sequence. The three films did not do well at the box office, however, as testified by *Variety*'s famous (or notorious) headline: "Sticks Nix Hick Picks" (*King Vidor, American*, p. 96).

It would be up to Rose's entrepreneurial "adopted grandson" and agent, Roger MacBride, to arrange for the filming of *Hurricane*. In 1976 (ten years after Rose's death and two years after the production of the popular television series, *Little House on the Prairie*), the book became *Young Pioneers*, a pilot produced by ABC. There was a sequel (*Young Pioneers' Christmas*, 1976) and a three-episode miniseries that appeared in 1978. *Little House on the Prairie* had a twelve-year run (1974–1982).

In an article called "[Little House on the Bottom Line](#)," Christine Heppermann comments, "It is rather ironic that the original nine Little House books, those totems of pioneer something-from-nothing resourcefulness, now stand at the mouth of a raging merchandise river." And Anita Fellman (*Shadow*, pp. 200–202) quotes a senior editor at Harper as saying, in 1998, "It's been an extremely profitable program for us." Fellman adds, "It has been profitable too for the heirs to Wilder's literary estate, which is now estimated to be worth millions of dollars."

### ***It wasn't swell fun.***

According to the diary (July 24–August 8, 1933), Rose and Lucille (not her real name) left Rocky Ridge on July 24, driving through the first rainstorm in some weeks. They got back on August 8. The sign greeting Roosevelt is described in Timothy Egan's book, *The Worst Hard Time* (Mariner reprint edition, 2006, p. 135). For more about this environmental calamity, read Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, reprint

edition, 2004). If you're still interested (and brave enough), go on to *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (Penguin, 1993) by Marc Reisner.

I've built the scene with the hitchhiker on a July 30 entry in Rose's diary. She notes only that they picked up a boy hitchhiker and doesn't give us any details of the encounter.

### ***Back at Rocky Ridge***

The *Post* had an astonishingly fast turnaround of material from author to published page. Rose finished her article on August 23; it appeared in the September 23 issue—without her by-line (“Wheat and the Great American Desert,” *Saturday Evening Post* 206, September 23, 1933, pp. 10–11, 81–82).

It is possible that the article was not written by Rose, after all, for there is no manuscript copy among her papers, and she notes in her diary that her work was “no good.” If she wrote it, she reverted to a practice she honed in her *Bulletin* days, crafting the piece in the first-person voice of a fictional “grain trader” on the Chicago Board of Trade. The article, in line with the *Post*'s strong anti–New Deal stance, opposed government intervention in farm commodities and followed logically from Rose's shorter essay, “A Little Flyer in Inflation,” which appeared that same month in *Harper's*. The administration's tinkering with the value of gold had sent speculators fleeing to commodities. “Some of these new buyers were eager for profits,” according to the *Post* article: “Some of them were merely afraid of money. ‘Get out of money,’ they told each other. They bought all the grains—wheat, corn, rye, flax.”

If the article was written by Rose, it shows a sophisticated awareness of the interplay between farm production, the commodities markets, the stock market, and the deteriorating (and fast-disappearing) soils of the Plains. The drought, heat, wind, and grasshoppers were doing “on

a large scale what the Government in Washington was trying to induce farmers to by subsidy.”

For the *Post*, the piece was a perfect fit.

## PART FOUR

### Chapter Twelve

King Street: April 1939

#### *It's tough for the kid*

Rose's seven-year relationship with John Turner is described in Holtz's chapter, "Free Land, New Homes, Lost Sons" (*Ghost*, pp. 280–298). John had been enthusiastic about Rose's purchase of the Danbury house, writing from Paris, where he was enjoying a stay funded by Rose: "Now we will have a place we can call home."

But after his return to the States, John was unable to find his way. He failed at Lehigh University, could not locate work in Danbury or New York, decided to marry and then decided not to, and finally (in 1940), broke with Rose altogether. But military action gave him a fresh start: he enlisted in the Coast Guard and earned a wartime commission as lieutenant commander. After the war, he went on to complete three degrees and build a successful career as an engineer, life options he would not have enjoyed if Rose had not taken him in and cared for him when he was one of the "boxcar kids." But he did not communicate with her again.

#### *Don't be too sure*

In 1939, Rose devoted much of her time to energetic campaigning for the Ludlow Amendment and writing against the war. Her published antiwar articles in that year alone include these six pieces, in five different magazines:

"Who Shall Say When We Shall Go to War?" *Good Housekeeping*

"Long May Our Land Be Bright," *Cosmopolitan*

“And on Earth, Peace, Goodwill,” *Country Gentleman*

“War: What Women of American Can Do to Prevent It,” *Woman’s Day*

“We Who Have Sons,” *Woman’s Day*

“Why I Am for the People’s Vote on War,” *Liberty*

Writing against the war gave Rose an opportunity to try out her political voice, a voice she would use exclusively (in print, at least) for the rest of her life.

***Mrs. Lane held out***

The letter is paraphrased from John’s final letter to Rose written at the time of his Coast Guard enlistment, after his twenty-first birthday. Years later, John would tell William Holtz, “I was sponging off her and losing my self-respect” (*Ghost*, p. 298).

It’s ironic that Rose, who insisted so strongly on people’s need to be independent and avoid reliance on the government or on other people, created life situations where her mother, Troub, John and Al Turner, Rexh Meta, and even Roger Lea MacBride came to rely heavily on her and (in different ways and to different degrees) to exploit her willingness to help. In the end, each seems to have achieved his or her independence. Rose, too, achieved hers, but it was not an easy journey.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Mother and Sons: 1933–1934*

### Time and Place

The Dirty Thirties deserved the name. In October and November of 1933, dust storms stripped the topsoil from drought-stricken fields in the Great Plains, where farmers had plowed up the prairie grasses to plant wheat. The following May, a strong, two-day storm whirled enormous amounts of soil into the air and blew it eastward, depositing an estimated 12 million pounds of dust on Chicago. Two days later, the same dust and grit reached Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C. That winter, a reddish snow, colored by Oklahoma's red dirt, fell across New England.

Other dirty business was afoot. Violent crime soared, but the criminals were beginning to get their comeuppance. Bonnie and Clyde were ambushed and shot in rural Louisiana. Federal agents shot John Dillinger outside Chicago's Biograph Theater. And "Pretty Boy" Floyd met his bloody end on a farm in East Liverpool, Ohio.

Abroad, too, there were ugly events. In Russia, Stalin launched the Great Purge in which a million people were killed and many others imprisoned or sent to Siberia. In Germany, President Paul von Hindenburg died and Adolph Hitler declared himself president and chancellor of the Third Reich. In many German cities and towns, Jewish children were prohibited from participating in school sports clubs, orchestras, and other extracurricular activities and banned from playgrounds, swimming pools, and parks.

The American entertainment industry, however, flourished. *Cavalcade* won the Academy Award for Best Picture, Charles Laughton won Best Actor for his role as Henry VIII, and Katherine Hepburn got her first Best Actress Oscar for *Morning Glory*. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender*

*is the Night* was published—at last—by Scribner. He had begun working on it in 1925, after the publication of *The Great Gatsby*. And Shirley Temple appeared in her first movie, *Bright Eyes*. She was just what the nation wanted, and her cheerful song, “On the Good Ship Lollipop,” was soon on everyone’s lips.

### ***John wasn’t the only young boy***

For a comprehensive view of the situation of the “boxcar kids,” read *Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move During the Great Depression* (Routledge, 2003) by Errol Lincoln Uys. It is the companion book to the documentary film, *Riding the Rails*, which provides strong and compassionate visual images of this outward-bound multitude of “new pioneers,” on the move across the United States.

### ***And John was himself***

The paragraph is paraphrased from Rose’s journal entry (December 16, 1933, quoted in *Ghost*, p. 249). There would, of course, be much to lose in the end, and it would be years before Rose understood how much she had gained. Holtz observes: “She would always give more than she got in personal relationships, and expect more than could be returned” (*Ghost*, p. 249).

### ***After one big blow-up***

The journal entry is March 21, 1934. In diary entries for February 14 and 16, Rose describes her feelings for John as a mother-son love affair. And later, she wrote that her infatuation for him might help her to achieve things that seemed impossible (Journal, April 8, 1934, quoted in *Ghost*, p. 252). John gave her a compelling reason to do what she knew she needed to do: write and earn money.

### ***In March and April***

The typescript of Rose's story, "The Hope Chest," is held in the Herbert Hoover Library. She began the project on February 20, then had to lay it aside the next day when the garage burned down. Over the following ten days, Rocky Ridge was hit by a series of disasters, large and small. The electricity was out and the furnace and pump weren't working. The temperature dropped to two degrees below zero, there was an ice storm, and the batteries froze in the cars.

Rose got back to the story on March 7. On March 14, she recorded in her diary that she had put in a good day's work, which brightened her mood, but that she'd been too tired to help with dinner and the dishes and hadn't had a chance to talk to John, who was assigned to kitchen cleanup. She put the project aside and when she returned to it (April 9), she was discouraged again. She felt she was wasting time on it.

When she sent it to Bye, she had no confidence that it would sell—and it didn't. It was too long for *Harper's*, where her O. Henry-style stories had appeared before. According to Julia C. Ehrhardt, the *Saturday Evening Post* found the ending "unsatisfactory," and Helen Duer Walker at the *Pictorial Review* wrote that her audience didn't want to read about "hard times" ("Stand Entirely on My Own Feet," in Julia C. Ehrhardt's *Writers of Conviction: The Personal Politics of Zona Gale, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Rose Wilder Lane, and Josephine Herbst*, p. 129).

Nevertheless, "The Hope Chest" is an important social document that describes the effect of the Depression on young people who plan to marry and can't and offers a view of the young couple's scanty alternatives that is at once realistic, hopeful, and profoundly ironic—the same kind of ending that she offers in *Free Land*. The beacon at the end of "The Hope Chest" reminds me of the famous "[Lindberg Beacon](#)," a high-intensity arc light, the "largest lamp ever mounted as an aerial beacon," that was installed on the thirty-seven-story Palmolive Building in

downtown Chicago in 1930. It was designed to guide airplanes to nearby Midway Airport and seemed to many a national symbol of hope in the future. A similar but less powerful “Lindberg Beacon” had been installed atop the new Los Angeles City Hall in 1928. Ironically, it was ruled dangerous to air traffic and the color of the light was changed from white to a warning red.

It’s easy to see why Rose’s story was rejected by the usual magazine markets, but it’s a shame that it wasn’t published.

### ***But High Prairie is the third book***

Looking back over the completed series from our vantage point in time, it is hard for readers to imagine that the books were not all conceived at once. In a sense they were, of course, since the story sketches were embedded in Laura’s original “Pioneer Girl,” and the narratives follow the Ingalls family’s travel itinerary (more or less) and Laura’s growth from childhood to adolescence.

But it’s important to remember that the books were written as individual books, and the economic situation was so uncertain that neither Rose nor Mama Bess could confidently expect that there would be a “next” book, at least in the beginning. While Laura’s contract for *Little House in the Big Woods* offered two optional books, she couldn’t be sure that Harper would exercise its options—or (given the challenges facing publishing houses in those difficult days) whether the publishing house would still be in business. Ida Louise Raymond would not encourage Laura to start planning a fourth book until she had seen the manuscript of Book Three, *Little House on the Prairie*, which Rose rewrote (that’s the only word for the extensive work she did on her mother’s draft) and Laura submitted in late June (Raymond to LIW, August 27, 1934).

### ***And we drank water out of the creek***

This confession is contained in a letter from Laura to Rose, July 2, 1935, when Rose was living at the Tiger Hotel in Columbia, Missouri, and rewriting her mother's draft of their fourth book, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. Because the spring (which Rose has suggested they substitute for the unboiled creek water) is imaginary, Laura tells Rose that she can locate it wherever it is "convenient": on the other side of the plank bridge, or where Pa watered the oxen. So much for an insistence on literal truth.

### ***But when I sat down***

The extent of Rose's rewriting of her mother's draft can be seen by doing a line-by-line comparison of the published text with the manuscript preserved in the pages of the orange tablets ("Little House on the Prairie," Laura Ingalls Wilder Papers, 1894–1943, Folder 1, State Historical Society of Missouri). I spent several weeks hunched over a computer screen in the Burnet County Library, doing just that: comparing the manuscript (borrowed on microfilm from the State Historical Society of Missouri) to the printed book. Before I began, I had an idea of what I might find—but even so, I was surprised.

In the full month that Rose worked on her mother's material, she restructured, reorganized, deleted, expanded, invented, and altogether rewrote the handwritten draft, correcting Laura's shifting points of view and problems of perspective as she went along. In a lengthy defense of her argument that Laura is the chief author of the books, Pamela Smith Hill describes Rose's efforts as "simply part of an editor's job" (*Life*, p. 159). This is incorrect, for a close reading of the texts shows that Rose's role here, as with the two previous books, is that of a co-author—a privileged co-author who is freely reorganizing, restructuring, and rewriting the draft material she has been given by her collaborator. There is no indication in the diary that Laura did any corrective work on the typescript that Rose produced. If she had, some pages

would have had to have been retyped. There is no mention of this. Laura seems to have submitted the pages that Rose sent to her.

I have avoided the word “ghostwriter,” which William Holtz used to describe Rose’s work. It is a fair description, if you look only at the work Rose was doing, which was exactly the same kind of manuscript reconstruction she did for Lowell Thomas. But Rose herself seems to have reserved that term to describe work that she was paid for—that is, ghostwriting-for-hire. She never uses it to describe her work on her mother’s manuscripts. As she saw it, she was making a gift of her energy and experience with the aim of producing the best possible book, under her mother’s name, so that her mother could collect the royalties she needed and gain the recognition she wanted—and that Rose wanted for her.

For a more extensive treatment of the issues involved in literary collaboration, you might want to read Jack Stillinger’s *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford University Press, 1991). Stillinger develops case histories in collaborative authorship for Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and T. S. Eliot, as well as in many American novels, plays, and films. He demonstrates that collaborative authorship is a widespread but rarely recognized phenomenon. His chapter “American Novels: Authors, Agents, Editors, Publishers” is valuable and highly readable.

Again, in deference to disclosure: I began my writing career by working as a ghostwriter in the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series, as well as several other young adult series. I understand the limitations—and the freedoms—of ghostwriting-for-hire. I also understand the process of collaboration, for my husband and I worked together on some of those ghostwritten books. Under the pseudonym of Robin Paige, we also co-authored a dozen Victorian-Edwardian mysteries, published between 1994 and 2006. As a writing team, we worked collaboratively on

every aspect of every book, from beginning to end: deciding on characters and plots, drafting, rewriting one another's drafts, taking turns reading the text aloud, redrafting and polishing. Reflecting on the process, I remember it as truly collaborative—and a truly wonderful period of our life-partnership.

In contrast, the Little House writing team appears to have worked very differently, and almost entirely separately. Laura created a draft. Rose worked from the draft and from Laura's additional material written in answer to her queries. Laura then submitted Rose's work. I can understand why Holtz called this "ghostwriting."

### *Altogether, I worked*

According to her diary (May 20–June 25, 1934), Rose began rewriting the manuscript of "High Prairie" on May 20, starting at seven or eight in the mornings and working until four or four-thirty. During this five-week period, Rose reports seeing her mother just five times: on May 28, when Laura was in bed with what was apparently a gastric upset ("too many strawberries," according to Dr. Fuson, or perhaps a diabetic episode); on June 9, briefly, with a visiting friend; on June 16, in the afternoon; on June 21, for a social evening at the Rock House; and on June 23, for a discussion of financial matters. If Laura read Rose's typescript of "High Prairie" on any of these occasions, Rose doesn't mention it, nor does she mention any corrections Laura might have asked her to make. Since Rose records so many daily events in her diary, I believe that if the two had worked together, or had even consulted about the text, the event would have been noted.

Rose completed her rewrite of "High Prairie" on June 25. As I reconstruct the process, the draft was independently written by Laura, then independently and substantially rewritten by Rose, with no or little input from Laura. Rose's typescript was then submitted to the Harper editor via George Bye, evidently without any corrections by Laura. (Rose mentions no retyping,

which would have certainly been required if Laura had asked for changes.) The next time the book is mentioned is March 1935, when Rose was correcting the proofs for the 1935 publication. At that time, she also sent proofs to *St. Nicholas Magazine* for a possible excerpt. (In August 1933, the magazine had published an excerpt, “Keeping House,” from *Farmer Boy*. None was forthcoming in this instance, however; *St. Nicholas* was in the midst of yet another editorial change—four editors in five years, under two owners.)

On June 26, and in spite of the record-breaking heat, Rose returned to her own work, beginning a pioneer Dakota story she called “Jed Master’s Wife” and then retitled as “Object Matrimony.” She put in eight working days on the project and mailed it to Bye on July 9. On July 17, he wired his congratulations. The *Post* had bought it for twelve hundred dollars.

At some point, the Mansfield rumor mill produced the story that mother and daughter took a research trip about this time to the area some forty miles from Independence, Kansas, where Laura supposed the Ingalls family’s cabin to be. Donald Zochert heard the tale from a Mansfield resident and included it in his biography, *Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (p. 37):

. . . she went off one day for an automobile ride with her daughter. She didn’t say where she was going, or why. But she did say later that they had car trouble in a little Oklahoma town. That little town was exactly forty miles from Independence [Kansas], and it doesn’t take much to guess what she was looking for.

If Laura took such a trip to Oklahoma, however, she did not go with her daughter. There is no record of any such adventure in Rose’s diary, in which she was making daily entries. What’s more, a trip to Oklahoma would have taken not one day but at the least two, perhaps even three, if they were to do any searching at all.

Rose and Laura *did* find the time for an automobile day trip, however, some four months later, on October 27, 1934. In her diary, Rose recorded that she took her mother on the drive she

had been promising, in the direction of Bradleyville, Rome, and Thornfield, small towns in far south Missouri, not in Oklahoma. They did have car trouble—the carburetor quit and Rose had to walk for help—and they got lost, so they didn't get home until after supper. Either Laura did not accurately represent her day trip with Rose or the Mansfield gossip hotline got it wrong—or maybe a little bit of both.

In any event, Laura would not have found her little house on the prairie, since it was located in Kansas, not in Oklahoma—and just thirteen miles south of Independence, not forty. As Zochert tells the story (*Laura*, pp. 35–36), Margaret Clement, a bookseller in Independence, discovered the location of the Ingalls family cabin near Wayside, Kansas, in Rutland Township, Montgomery County. Clement's search of the census records enabled her to identify the quarter section of Section 36 on which the cabin had once stood. A small museum is now located on the site. Laura can be forgiven for not knowing where her family lived, of course, since she was not yet three years old in 1869, when Pa attempted to settle his family in Indian Territory. Her stories of their time there can only be retellings of her parents' explanations of what happened.

But the story is much more complicated than Laura knew or than Rose might have guessed. Scholars have reconstructed the Ingalls family's stay in Kansas within the historical framework of the conflicts between squatter settlers and the Osage Indians during this troubled period. Penny T. Linsenmayer, in [“Kansas Settlers on the Osage Diminished Reserve: A Study of Laura Ingalls Wilder's \*Little House on the Prairie\*”](#) (*Kansas History*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 169–185), describes the economic, geographic, and political contexts for Charles Ingalls's decision to move his family to the Osage Diminished Reserve in the autumn of 1869, before the area was officially open for settlement. Another helpful view is provided by Frances W. Kaye in [“Little](#)

[Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's Kansas Indians](#)"

(*Great Plains Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring 2000, pp. 123–140).

Both Linsenmayer and Kaye do much to correct the family retellings that Laura must have heard so often and used to construct her narrative. The story she tells—her father decides to abandon the land rather than be evicted by soldiers—is based on Charles Ingalls's mistaken understanding of the situation. If he had stayed, and if he had had the money to pay the preemption price of \$1.25 per acre, he could have gained clear title to the little house on the prairie. Linsenmayer (p. 185) suggests that the return to the Wisconsin property (on which the purchaser had defaulted) "made more financial sense to Ingalls than attempting to secure financing to pay the preemption rate on the Kansas claim."

Rose made an attempt to correct or confirm her mother's information about the government's removal of the settlers, but because Laura was so sure that the cabin was in Oklahoma (and hence deeper in Indian Territory), the researcher reinforced their misunderstanding of the settlers' removal (Linsenmayer, p. 183). Laura didn't have any better luck when she tried to confirm the name of the Osage chief. Frances Kaye (p. 134) speculates that Charles Ingalls, in telling this story, happened to remember the name of an Osage named Soldat du Chêne who entertained some of Zebulon Pike's explorers in 1806, and brought him into the story to make it more dramatic. Fact-checking, in those pre-Google days, must have been a challenge.

***I stopped work***

The earliest mention of Talbot Mundy in the diary occurs on March 4, 1930, when Rose notes that his book, *Cock o' The North*, came for Mama Bess. Rose read the novel. She does not say what she thought of it, but she wrote to Mundy on March 28. By June 1934, they seem to

have been occasional correspondents, and Rose was urging Mundy to compile his magazine stories for publication as a book.

The best biography of this author is Brian Taves's *Talbot Mundy, Philosopher of Adventure* (McFarland Books, 2005). Mundy's collection of stories, *Tros of Samothrace*, was published late in 1934 and dedicated to Rose. Her visit to the Mundy cottage on Casey Key and her continued association with Talbot Mundy are described in Taves's biography, pp. 206–208.

Rose's trip to Florida with John and his friend and their visit to Cuba (including her conversation with John in her hotel room) are detailed in her diary, July 24–August 27, 1934.

### ***The weather had already changed***

Molly's accidental death is mentioned in Rose's August 27 diary entry; the purchase of the Nash (for \$275 and the trade-in of her Willys) on September 4; and Laura's "hysterics" over Almanzo's purchase of goats on September 6. The arrangement with Al took place (and is described) on October 30 and November 1. Laura was not in favor of the addition of another "adopted son" to Rose's growing family, but Al's presence made a substantial and generally positive impact. He was cooperative and pleasant, unlike his brother John. Ironically, though, Rose's heart belonged to John.

### ***And at the same time***

In December 1933, actor-director-producer Crane Wilbur obtained the dramatic rights for Rose's short story, "Hired Girl," which had appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, November 11, 1933 (Diary, December 12, 1933). Rose must have been cheered by this news because a dramatization of her story—particularly by Wilbur, who may have intended to cast himself as the male lead—opened the very real possibility that the story would be made into a movie.

The play was to be produced in Hollywood by the West Coast Theater Guild. According to an associate of George Bye who wrote to Rose about the project, the Guild had access to plenty of Hollywood stars who were looking for something to do between films (Jasper Spock to RWL, February 15, 1935). George Bye, ever the effusive cheerleader-agent, wrote, “Here’s hoping that ‘Hired Girl’ makes a great hit in Hollywood and New York and brings thousands of dollars to my lovely client” (Bye to RWL, March 15, 1935). Rose had received several promising progress reports on the play production in 1934, so the funding failure must have come as a disappointment—but perhaps as no surprise. The economy was still in a downturn, and such enterprises were risky, to say the least.

And the chances for *Hurricane* as a movie were slim. Formed in 1933, Twentieth Century Pictures produced only five films that first year, eight in 1934, almost all of them in urban settings. *Hurricane*, which takes place on the Dakota prairie, would have been a departure for the studio, which merged with Fox Film Corporation in 1935.

### ***And by the end of 1934***

Assembling and linking a collection of short stories was not a new undertaking for Rose. *Peaks of Shala* is a revised version of a series of travel pieces she wrote for the *San Francisco Bulletin* in the early 1920s. In 1926, she had assembled the novel *Hill-Billy* from a group of short stories she wrote for *Country Gentleman*, featuring native Ozark idiom and mountain folkways. The stories were centered around the character of Abimelech Noah Baird, a shrewd and clever Ozark boy who becomes a successful small-town lawyer. The structure of *Old Home Town*—linked short stories with common characters, setting, and themes—was already familiar to her.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Escape and *Old Home Town*: 1935

#### Time and Place

In early January, the year got off to a swift start when Amelia Earhart became the first person to fly solo from Honolulu, Hawaii, to Oakland, California. In March, *It Happened One Night* (starring Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert) swept the Oscars, and in Germany, Hitler instituted mandatory military service. April brought the first round-the-world telephone conversation, from New York to San Francisco, Indonesia, Holland, England, and back to New York. In the same month, NBC debuted *Your Hit Parade*, and *Fibber McGee and Molly* aired their first show on the Blue Network. On April 14, 1935, “Black Sunday,” blizzards of black dust raged across the Plains.

Babe Ruth retired in June with 714 home runs and 5,973 bases under his belt. During baseball season, Congress got busy: in August, the Social Security Act was passed, establishing old-age retirement insurance and a federal payroll tax to finance federal-state unemployment insurance. The nation was shocked and saddened that same month by the deaths of humorist Will Rogers and aviator Wiley Post in an airplane crash near Point Barrows, Alaska. People were still mourning Rogers and Post when Senator Huey Long was assassinated in September in the Louisiana State Capitol building.

October brought the opening of George and Ira Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* and the dedication of Boulder Dam, even though plenty of people still called it Hoover Dam, a name that was later made official. In Africa, Italian troops invaded Ethiopia, and FDR invoked the newly passed Neutrality Act prohibiting the export of “arms, ammunition, and implements of war” from the United States to foreign nations at war.

In December, the new DC-3 airplane astonished air travelers by taking them nonstop across the country in a record-breaking fifteen hours. And back on the ground, Charles Darrow applied for a patent on a new game that was all about power and money. It was called Monopoly.

### ***And there was my mother***

Laura depended on Rose to read and correct her proofs and do the typing and secretarial work involved with submissions to editors, such as the excerpt for *St. Nicholas* magazine and the “short short” for *Child Life* (Diary, February 1–2, March 4, 1935).

### ***Mama Bess and I***

For some of the local political background, see John E. Miller’s discussion in *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder*, pp. 197–198.

### ***My father was a good example.***

The story of Almanzo and the AAA agent is related in Rose’s letter to Mark Sullivan, August 16, 1938 (Box 11, Lane Papers). It was no doubt embellished in the telling.

### ***Lucille’s tears subsided***

Laura’s refusal to see Catharine is relayed by William Holtz, based on a conversation with Mansfield resident Irene Lichty LeCount (*Ghost*, p. 254).

### ***Small things***

Black Sunday is documented in Timothy Egan’s *The Worst Hard Time* (pp. 198–221). Ken Burns’s film *Surviving the Dust Bowl* offers a compelling video documentary, with oral histories from people who were children at the time. The term “dust bowl” first appeared in a story written by Robert Geiger, an Associated Press reporter, on April 15, 1935, the day after Black Sunday. “Three little words achingly familiar on a Western farmer’s tongue rule life in the dust bowl of the continent – if it rains.” However, the term was actually coined by Edward

Stanley, Kansas City news editor of the Associated Press, in his rewrite of Geiger's story—another example of collaborative writing. The website [Weatherwise](#) offers an excellent description of the event and documents Stanley's coining of the term.

***It was true.***

Ye Olde English Inn in Hollister, Missouri, is on the National Register of Historical Sites. Rose lived there for a month. Working without interruption during her productive stay, she wrote the preface to *Old Home Town* and two new stories for the collection, as well as revising the others to fit within the story sequence (Diary, March 28–April 29, 1935).

***The stories I planned***

For a discussion of the stories of *Old Home Town*, see *Ghost*, pp. 254–257. Holtz writes:

The various victims of communal and parental authority, punished for seeking unsanctioned fulfillment of heart's desire, were all enacting the revolt against Mansfield values that had driven Rose in her original flight.

To put it a different way, the stories of the escaping women were highly autobiographical. And speaking personally, I can't read these stories without imagining Laura as Ernestine's mother, who is an ambiguously sympathetic character and a spokeswoman for the town's narrowly parochial values.

In another discussion ("Rose Wilder Lane's *Old Home Town*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 26, Fall 1989, pp. 479–487), Holtz places Rose in the company of Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Edgar Lee Masters. *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), he suggests, is the "structural model" for *Old Home Town*. According to her diary (June 1, 1932), Rose had read and reread John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, which used a similar form of overlapping stories with recurring characters and settings. While Rose made a point of reminding readers that her stories were set at the turn of the century, nearly forty years before, she had plenty of current examples of the

destructive effects of small-town Puritan morality among Mama Bess's contemporary circle of Mansfield acquaintances, who scrutinized Rose and her friends for transgressions of their code.

***And then another opportunity***

George Bye was always on the lookout for possible work for his clients. In the spring of 1935, he found a publishing opportunity for Rose in the person of Robert M. McBride, a publisher of foreign travel books who was contemplating a series on the states of the United States. Bye, a consummate pitchman, had suggested Rose as the author of the Missouri volume (George Bye to RWL, April 26, 1935). The fifteen-hundred-dollar advance would have been an important incentive, for Rose, as usual, was cash-strapped. And her month in Hollister may have convinced her that the only way she could do any serious writing was to leave the farm.

It's an interesting minor irony, I think, that Rose's escape from Rocky Ridge came about because of a travel book. But Bye would have had no problem selling McBride on the idea of Rose doing a book on Missouri. McBride could gain a good idea of her skills in travel writing by reading *The Peaks of Shala*, which had been published twelve years earlier. It is perhaps her best book.

***Therein my escape.***

From July 1935 through June 1937, Rose lived in Suite 916 at the Tiger Hotel, built in 1928 and known as Columbia's "first skyscraper." The misadventures with the Missouri book are described in *Ghost*, pp. 258–259. Rose apparently did not have to return the fifteen-hundred-dollar advance. It seems to have been repaid to McBride by Longmans Green, which anticipated publishing the manuscript under the title *Call It Mizzoury*. That didn't happen, and the book remains unpublished.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Credo”: 1936

### Time and Place

The year 1936 was one of beginnings and endings. FDR ended his first term of office and was elected to his second, defeating Republican Alf Landon, governor of Kansas, in a landslide. In England, King George V died, after twenty-six years on the throne. The new king, Edward VIII, began his reign on January 20 and ended it on December 11, abdicating in order to marry the American divorcee, Wallis Simpson. The United Kingdom was ruled by three kings that year, for Albert, Duke of York, became King George VI upon his brother's abdication and began a reign that would last until his death in 1952.

There were other beginnings that year. The Santa Fe Railroad inaugurated the all-Pullman sleeping-car Super Chief passenger train between Chicago and Los Angeles. The 1936 Summer Olympics opened in Berlin, with the first-ever live television coverage of a sports event. Viewers of the Games witnessed another first: African-American athlete Jesse Owens won four gold medals. And Margaret Mitchell's one-and-only novel, *Gone with the Wind*, was published. Years later, asked what might have become of Rhett and Scarlett after the novel ended, Mitchell said she had no idea. “For all I know, Rhett may have found someone else who was less difficult.”

And there were other endings. In London, the Crystal Palace, built for the Great Exhibition of 1851, was destroyed in a fire. Richard Hauptmann, convicted of the 1932 kidnapping and murder of the toddler Charles Lindbergh III, was executed by electrocution. And Bess Houdini, the widow of the Great Magician, held the last of her ten annual Halloween

séances, hoping for Houdini's reappearance. Later, she was quoted as saying, "Ten years is long enough to wait for any man."

### ***I met Garett Garrett***

The *SS Leviathan* was launched on her postwar (WWI) career on July 4, 1923. Rose and Garett's meeting took place in late November of that year. A history and photos of the sumptuous interior [are available online](#).

### ***The luxury of the Leviathan***

Rose's years of traveling and writing in Europe are described in detail in two chapters of Holtz's biography, "Come With Me to Europe" and "The Road to Baghdad" (pp. 94–141). Her Red Cross stories were syndicated and widely published under her byline in American newspapers. I am indebted to LIW researcher Nancy Cleaveland for this sampling of the titles of Rose's Red Cross articles:

- "American Woman Invades Regions Little Known: Writer Tells of Red Cross Relief Work in Balkan Countries"
- "An American Girl Who Saves the Skins and Souls of Little Albanians"
- "Red Cross Worker Describes Unique Invasion of Europe"
- "Gray Sweaters Work Miracles: What American Garments are Doing for Albania"
- "Balkan Peasant an Aristocrat"

The story of the feast in Etchmiadzin is told by Rose in "Where the World Is Topsy-Turvy," *San Francisco Call and Post*, August 20, 1923, and reported in *Ghost*, p. 129. Her moving story, "[Christmas in Erivan](#)" appeared in *Good Housekeeping* (December 1924, pp. 48, 151–154, 157–158) and was mentioned in several newspaper articles.

### ***The years traveling abroad***

In her introduction to *Old Home Town* (p. 9), Rose mentions the symbolism of the white aster. With a gentle irony, she writes that to the townsfolk, the white aster represented William

Jennings Bryan, “whose free coinage of silver would have taken us back to prosperity. But Bryan was defeated by the soulless corporations and our country was forever ruined.”

### ***In high school in Louisiana***

Rose mentions distributing Debs’s campaign literature in her November 16, 1928, letter to Fremont Older (RWL Collection, Herbert Hoover Library). Holtz describes what she called her “furthest swing to the left” (*Ghost*, p. 92), noting that she might have attended a Communist meeting with Jack Reed in New York. “She knew Floyd Dell and others of the Croton-on-Hudson circle of which Reed was a part” (*Ghost*, pp. 407–408, n. 20). Her Socialist friend Lydia Gibson, who painted the portrait of Rose that hangs in the Rocky Ridge farmhouse, was married to Robert Minor, an active member of the American Communist Party.

### ***And then, some four years after***

Rose tells the story of the Russian peasant in “Credo” (reprinted in several editions, including “This I Believe,” published by the Laura Ingalls Wilder-Rose Wilder Lane Home Association, 1977). Rose may have created it as an exemplary parable.

### ***Those were the sorts***

For a biography of Gareth Garrett, read Bruce Ramsey’s *Unsanctioned Voice: Gareth Garrett, A Journalist of the Old Right* (Caxton Press, eBook edition, 2010). Ramsey calls Rose Garrett’s “political soulmate.” Ramsey has also edited and assembled a selection of Garrett’s *Saturday Evening Post* articles in *Salvos Against the New Deal* (Caxton Press, 2002).

### ***We were both dismayed***

The example of the potato is based on Garrett’s article, “Plowing Up Freedom,” written after his return from the trip he took with Rose and published in the *Saturday Evening Post* on

November 16, 1935 (pp. 16–17, 68–70, 72). The Pope County, Illinois, situation is described on pages 69–70.

There was a great deal of local controversy over the condemnation of land (both marginal and productive) for the Shawnee National Forest and over the administration's removal and resettlement program. The government's aims may have been laudable, but the program was perceived by many in the region as bullying and coercive. Rose may have seen the removal action as similar to what she mistakenly believed to have been the removal of settlers from the Osage Diminished Reserve, described in *Little House on the Prairie*. She certainly viewed all the New Deal programs as the "overreaching" of government into the private affairs of citizens.

The farmers' attitudes are also documented by Lorena Hickok in her 1933 reports to Harry Hopkins, as a "confidential investigator" for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Hickok's candid assessments of the successes and failures of the administration contain many remarkable observations about the lives of ordinary people trying to find their way through an extraordinary experience. (*One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression*, edited by Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley, University of Illinois Press, 1981.)

### ***Rose, dear***

The fictional letter is a paraphrase of several of Garrett's letters to Rose, available in the Lane Papers and quoted in *Ghost*, p. 268. It is clear from her diary entries that she was in love with him for some time after their trip. His letters to her reveal that it was a relationship that he both desired and feared. There is no documentary evidence of a physical relationship between them; I have inferred it from the diary entries.

Garrett was married three times. On January 17, 1900, he married Bessie Hamilton; he divorced her in 1905. In 1908, he married Ida Irvin. They separated in 1914 but did not divorce until 1947, when he married his personal secretary, Dorothy Goulet. By that time, whatever intimacies Garrett and Rose might have shared were clearly ended, although the two remained correspondents and friends (Ramsey, *Unsanctioned Voice*, eBook edition, locations 527, 541, 1524, 3786). Garrett died in 1954.

***But they did come around***

The importance of “Credo” to Rose, as a declaration of her philosophical beliefs, cannot be overstated. It was the key that unlocked her later political writings, and it was Garrett Garet who turned the key. In some sense (not necessarily the fictional one I have described, but perhaps close to it), he gave her permission to use her voice—and the more she used it, the more confident and sharper (and, some would say, more strident) it would grow. It was the voice that dominated her published writing and her letters in the last three decades of her life.

The writing of the *Post* version of “Credo” and its publication as a popular booklet is described in *Ghost*, pp. 261–263. It was an extraordinarily popular piece. In a letter to Jasper Crane (*Lady*, November 7, 1963), Rose says that she received more than three thousand personal letters about the article, “all but a dozen or so (which threatened my life) were enthusiastic about it.” Graeme Lorimer of the *Post* told her that he had never seen such a large reader response. But according to Rose, he also cautioned her that he didn’t want another “political word nor inference” from her, “even in fiction.” After Roosevelt was elected for a second term, Lorimer retired and the *Post* softened its editorial stance toward the administration.

One version (there are several) of the text of the [original article is available online](#).

## Chapter Sixteen

*On the Banks of Plum Creek: 1936–1937*

### Time and Place

The year 1937 brought unsettled times. The promising economic recovery faltered, then stalled, and the country entered another recession. Roosevelt, stymied by a conservative Supreme Court, proposed to appoint six additional justices, one for every justice over the age of seventy; the Senate rejected his proposal in July, but the bitterness continued to fester. More than four thousand strikes idled almost two hundred thousand workers, who lost some twenty-eight million days of work. And Amelia Earhart, attempting to be the first woman to fly around the world, was lost in the Pacific, somewhere off Howland Island.

There were troubles abroad, as well. Franco assumed dictatorial power in Spain. German warplanes bombed the Basque town of Guernica. The Duke of Windsor visited Germany at the invitation of Adolf Hitler, who had just deprived all Jews of the right of municipal citizenship. In the Far East, Japan launched all-out war on China; by November, Japanese troops occupied Shanghai.

But in the arts and entertainment, it was business as usual—and a very good year. Margaret Mitchell won a Pulitzer for *Gone With the Wind*; Man o'War took the Triple Crown; the Yankees beat the Giants four games to one in the World Series; the Glenn Miller Orchestra debuted; and *On the Banks of Plum Creek* was published.

### *They're not a burden*

Laura had never made any secret of her dislike for the two Turner boys or for the unconventional collection of “family” and friends at Rocky Ridge, where Rose continued to pay

rent during her first year in Columbia. Acquaintances of the family spoke to Holtz about Laura's disapproval of the boys (*Ghost*, p. 408, n. 23).

### ***I understand***

As an agent, Bye seems to have enjoyed developing a personal relationship with his clients—at least, he did so with Rose. He encouraged her toward new work, nagged and prodded her, and dangled intriguing possibilities in front of her. His frequent letters during the spring of 1937, especially those that described the reactions of various editors to her work, helped pull her back to New York. On May 18, he wrote more sternly, saying that she needed to get away from Missouri at once and suggesting the possibility of an apartment in Gracie Square for the summer. A few weeks later, she was on her way.

### ***I turned away***

The accusation of the theft of water from the Rocky Ridge well is contained in a letter from Laura to Rose, June 25, 1936, about a year after Rose left the farm. The letter is a litany of complaints against Eddie and Lucille Murphy (not their real names) and John and Al Turner—likely the same complaints that led Rose to write, in fury, “Have to finish my mother’s goddam juvenile [Plum Creek], which has me stopped flat . . . . This week is all shot to hell by my mother’s yowls. I have written [Lucille] to take everything on the farm and I will close the place. End 9 years of an utterly idiotic attempt” (Diary, July 15, 1936, quoted in *Ghost*, p. 164). The “attempt”—hardly idiotic on the face of it—was to settle her parents in a more comfortable house and to ensure that they had enough money to keep them comfortable. She achieved both goals, but the achievement did not bring the satisfaction she hoped for.

About this obviously unhappy domestic situation, Holtz (*Ghost*, p. 264) writes that Laura told Rose to come back to the farm and throw the Murphys (not their real name) out—or move

out herself. Laura also “ordered the hired man to kill Rose’s dog, which he did.” Rose took this eviction as a final release from her bondage to her parents and to the farm. She would not return until her father’s death in 1949.

When the house was vacated, Laura and Almanzo moved back in. Not long thereafter, they rented out the house Rose had built for them.

***Here it is, Rose, dear***

The extent of Rose’s rewriting of *On the Banks of Plum Creek* can be judged by comparing Laura’s handwritten manuscript with the published text. Rose’s letter of June 13, 1936, requests additional information needed so that she can restructure, reorganize, and rewrite her mother’s material. Laura provides the requested information in three lengthy letters (LIW to RWL, July 2, July 3, August 6, 1936, and undated notes, State Historical Society of Missouri).

In the July 3 letter, Mama Bess is stuck for several pages on a single question: When Ma goes out to the barn during a blizzard, how can young Laura (the point-of-view character) describe what is going on in the storm when she’s too little to be allowed to go along? At another point, she charmingly excuses her inability to remember a fact that Rose has asked for, saying that she was only six at the time and “very busy” about her “affairs”—as of course all six-year-old girls are. Rose took only a few of her mother’s suggestions for rewrites (none of them are very satisfactory) and solved the narrative problems on her own. However, she uses some of the details Laura offered in her letters to provide color and texture to the story.

Pamela Smith Hill (*Life*, p. 169) describes part of this back-and-forth communication but misunderstands the nature of the relationship between the two co-authors. For instance, she describes Rose’s June 13th letter to Mama Bess as an “editorial” letter. This is incorrect and misleading. An “editorial letter” (written by an editor to the author of a book or article) gives

specific instructions to the author, so that *the author* can reconstruct the submitted manuscript and make it acceptable to the editor. The editor makes the suggestions: the author makes the revisions. An author who can't make the requested revisions will get a rejection letter. It's as simple as that.

In this case, Rose is soliciting information from her co-author that will enable her (Rose) to produce a final manuscript that the book's editor, Ida Louise Raymond, will find acceptable. This distinction is critical to an understanding of the process that produced not only *Plum Creek*, but also all the other books. Working independently, Laura produced a rough draft, which she left with Rose. Working independently, Rose produced the typescript (with some input from her co-author). It was Rose's typescript that was submitted, without further revisions, to the editors at Harper.

At one point in her work on *Plum Creek*, Rose apparently told her mother that there was too much narrative material, and Laura responded with a long list of scenes that could be cut. Rose accepted almost none of her recommendations. And a good thing, too, for Laura's suggested cuts included the town party, the prairie fire, and the ox running over the roof of the dugout. If Rose had followed her co-author's suggestions, we would have none of these memorable scenes.

In other regards, Rose simply did as she thought best with the draft material, as a comparison of Laura's admonitions and Rose's finished text clearly shows. And even Hill (*Life*, p. 171) has to agree that Laura is appropriately regretful about the extent to which her draft needed "fixing." She quotes Laura's apology: "I should think you would be so sick of this darned story, you would gag. Sorry it has been so troublesome" (LIW to RWL, undated note [July 1936], quoted in *Life*, p. 171).

When Rose had completed her rewrite, she retyped the whole thing. Then she delivered the typescript to her mother with the usual cover letter (including Rose's suggested request for more favorable royalty rates) for Laura to enclose when she sent it to George Bye. Bye, in turn, relayed it to Miss Raymond at Harper's.

*On the Banks of Plum Creek* would be named a runner-up for the Newbery Award for 1938—the first of five Newbery recognitions that Laura would receive. (In 1971, the runners-up were given the title Newbery Honor Books.)

“Prestige” is what Laura had said she wanted, and prestige is what she got, thanks to Rose's sensitive and skillful rewriting of her mother's rough draft.

### ***But Roosevelt won***

Holtz (*Ghost*, pp. 267–268) describes Rose's and Garrett's concerns for and reactions to the Roosevelt landslide of November 1936. To Garrett, Rose wrote, with a sharp sense of finality, that what they valued had been completely rejected by the electorate. This definitive shift in perspective, new and radically alienated, allowed Rose to view herself as an outsider to the American political system. It strengthened her dissenting voice, and every time she used it, she became more confident and more powerful. She was, at last, speaking from her very heart.

### ***And by the following fall***

Rose's short story, “A Song Without Words,” was published in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, 54 (March 1937), pp. 11–13.

### ***And then I was back***

In June 1937, Rose left Columbia on the bus, bound for New York. John traveled with her, and then went on to join his brother Al and a companion in Montreal, where the boys would sail for Europe (*Ghost*, pp. 272–273). Rose was not free of the family obligations she had

assumed, however. She would support John and Al for another year and rewrite four more of her mother's books. But she was back in New York at last. And she was free to give all her time to her new project, *Free Land*.

## Chapter Seventeen

King Street: April 1939

### *I needed the money*

Always short of *cash cash cash*, Rose was in particularly dire straits when she arrived in New York in the summer of 1937. Her claim to be down to her last seven dollars is made in her letter to George Bye (May 30, 1937, quoted in *Ghost*, p. 272).

The short story “Home Over Saturday” (*Saturday Evening Post*, 210, September 11, 1937, pp. 5–7) is an excellent example of Rose’s reworking of a frightening scene that was originally sketched out in “Pioneer Girl” and would appear later, sanitized for young readers, in *These Happy Golden Years*. Rose apparently wrote the story from memory, however, rather than from the “Pioneer Girl” manuscript, which she did not have with her at the time. In late 1938, Laura asked George Bye to send the typed copy to Rose, who had given it to him in early 1933, so that her daughter could “have it for reference” (LIW to RWL, September 26, 1938). Rose needed it for her revisions of Mama Bess’s draft of *On the Shores of Silver Lake*.

### *Willa Cather and her friend*

The Grosvenor Hotel was home to Cather and Edith Lewis from 1927–1932. It is now a New York University dormitory.

### *Rose frowned.*

The reviewer was Fred T. Marsh, in the *New York Times Book Review*, May 15, 1938.

## Epilogue

### The Rest of the Story: “Our Wild Rose at Her Wildest”

#### *At some point*

I am one of those who believe that Laura wrote *The First Four Years* in 1937 and that it was already (or nearly) finished when she proposed the idea to Rose in December 1937. The book demonstrates about the same level of compositional skill as her draft of *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. This was during the time that Rose was writing *Free Land*, and the flurry of letters that flew between New York and Rocky Ridge, with Rose’s questions and Almanzo’s and Laura’s answers, might have prompted Laura to decide to undertake her own adult version of the Wilder story—compelled, perhaps, by a feeling of competitiveness or by a wish to set the record straight with her “facts,” in contrast to Rose’s “fictions.”

John E. Miller (*Becoming*, p. 242) agrees: “At some point, probably in the late 1930s, she [LIW] had written a manuscript from an adult point of view about her and Almanzo’s first four years of living on the farm.” Pamela Smith Hill (*Life*, pp. 78–79), reading *The First Four Years* in the context of Rose’s adult novels, argues that Laura’s adult book is a “kind of sequel” to *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933). Hill’s suggestion puts the writing of the book between 1933 and 1937, probably earlier.

Others have explained the book’s stylistic clunkiness and narrative problems by suggesting that Laura wrote it even earlier. LIW researcher Nancy Cleaveland has pointed out that some of the pages are written on the backs of papers that date from the writing of *Farmer*

*Boy*, in 1932–1933. But Laura was a frugal person who saved every scrap of paper for later use; it's no surprise that paper from 1932 or 1933 would have found its way into a later project.

If Rose *had* wanted to rewrite her mother's book for publication, it could not have been done until after she finished work on *These Happy Golden Years* (late 1941). But by that time, war had broken out, she was writing a weekly column for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and she was already deeply involved in her book, *The Discovery of Freedom*. She would have had no time for it. And there is no evidence that her mother pressed the issue with her.

### ***But while Free Land was the last***

Rose was joined by many in her anti–New Deal, antiwar stances. Lynne Olson's book, *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America's Fight Over World War II, 1939–1941* (New York: Random House, 2013) provides an excellent framework for understanding where Rose fits among the many passionate opponents of American entry into the war, as well as the continuing opposition to many of FDR's legislative programs. She was by no means an isolationist (like Charles Lindbergh, for example); her years of work and travel abroad had, in many ways, made her a staunch internationalist and gave her a broad perspective on many European challenges, such as the rise of Mussolini's Fascism. But she strongly opposed military intervention against the Axis powers on the grounds that America must defend only American, not foreign, interests. Her magazine articles in 1938 and 1939 are a barometer of her increasingly fervent beliefs and her sense that voices must be raised to halt the growing threat of European entanglement.

But as the possibility of war loomed larger and darker, Rose fell into one of her periodic depressions and returned to her old strategy of journal keeping. Something had to be done to enable her to write and sell enough fiction to cover the bills, she told her journal in April 1940.

But she had no ideas, no motivation, no stories—and no desire. Later, to newspaper reporter Helen Warden, she would claim that she stopped writing fiction because she didn't want to pay taxes on her writing income: "I don't want to contribute to the New Deal." Warden's article was titled "Novelist Has Given Up Writing and Income to Fight New Deal" and appeared in the *New York World-Telegraph*, April 3, 1944. Holtz quotes several paragraphs (*Ghost*, pp. 319–320).

But while Rose felt herself unable to craft fiction, she had plenty of energy for other kinds of writing. Beginning in the early 1940s, Libertarian advocacy and activism, as Brian Doherty observes in *Radicals for Capitalism* (hereafter abbreviated as *Radicals*, Public Affairs, 2007, p. 129), became the center of Rose's life. Doherty names her as one of the "three furies" of Libertarianism: Isabel Paterson and Ayn Rand are the other two. He quotes David Boaz (*The Libertarian Reader*, Free Press, 1997, p. 31): "In 1943, at one of the lowest points for liberty and humanity in history, three remarkable women published books that could be said to have given birth to the modern libertarian movement." Rand's book was *The Fountainhead*. Paterson's was *The God of the Machine*. Rose's was *The Discovery of Freedom*.

Doherty also quotes Albert Jay Nock, one of the spokesmen of the Old Right (the branch of American conservatism that vehemently opposed both the New Deal and the entry into World War II). Nock declared that the works by Rose and Isabel Paterson were "the only intelligible books on the philosophy of individualism that have been written in American this century." The two women writers, he wrote, showed the "male world of this period how to think *fundamentally*. They make all of us male writers look like Confederate money. They don't fumble and fiddle around—every shot goes straight to the centre" (*Radicals*, pp. 113–114).

*The Discovery of Freedom*

Rose wrote *Discovery* in a rush of energy during the summer of 1942. Her growing concerns about the future of the United States were sharpened by the election of Franklin Roosevelt to a third term and the continuation of the New Deal, the growth of governmental war powers, and what she saw as Americans' too-easy acceptance of collectivism and government interference under the threat of war. For Holtz's discussion of the book, see *Ghost*, pp. 308–312. For Doherty's take on it, see *Radicals*, pp. 129–131. Summing up, Holtz writes (*Ghost*, p. 377) that the virtue of Rose's vision lies in its "romantic readiness for challenge, a perennially youthful optimism that is particularly American . . . a heritage that let Rose savor adversity for sake of the victory it permitted and that made the ambiguous ending of *Free Land* grimly true."

Indeed. *Sweet are the uses of adversity*, both for the individual and for society.

### ***Instead, beginning in 1943***

With a national circulation of almost two hundred thousand, the *Pittsburgh Courier* was at the time the country's most widely circulated black newspaper. It sought to empower African-Americans economically and politically and encouraged African-Americans to take an active role in their communities.

A casual correspondence with the *Courier*'s editor and publisher, Robert Vann, led to "Rose Lane Says," a weekly column. "Here, at last, is a place where I belong," she wrote of her new job. "Here are the Americans who know the value of equality and freedom." The words ring with an intense authenticity: Rose understood that she had found a community of souls as alien as she to the mainstream American culture.

With her usual enthusiasm for individual freedom, creative work, and entrepreneurship, she focused on black success stories, carrying out her familiar, favorite rags-to-riches bootstrap theme (as in her early books on Charlie Chaplin, Henry Ford, Herbert Hoover). In one column,

she wrote that editor Robert Vann’s remarkable career demonstrated the opportunities offered by a “capitalist society in which a penniless orphan, one of a despised minority, can create the *Pittsburgh Courier* and publicly, vigorously, safely, attack a majority opinion.”

In an article titled [“Selling Laissez-faire Antiracism to the Black Masses: Rose Wilder Lane and the \*Pittsburgh Courier\*”](#) (*The Independent Review*, v. 15, n. 2, Fall 2010, pp. 279–294), David T. and Linda Royster Beito remark that this period is the “most remarkable, but least-studied phase of her career.” The *Courier* gave her an “exhilarating opportunity” to showcase her message of the supremacy of the individual and free enterprise over abstract collectives, such as race and class. While she advocated free-market capitalism, she was suspicious of capitalists—the “Big Boys,” she called them—who undermined the free markets and destroyed true capitalism. In response to what she saw as the increasing invasiveness of state-directed welfare programs, she offered “uniquely American . . . neighborliness” as a solution (*Courier*, July 17, 1943). And in many of her columns, she warned that the wartime controls imposed by the government threatened individual liberty. On this last, she took direct action, growing and preserving her own food on her small Connecticut acreage and scorning the sugar ration by using honey instead. Her chief income was the sixty dollars a month she earned for her weekly column (*Ghost*, p. 319).

### ***Rose had always paid taxes***

On the proposed trust, see *Ghost*, p. 319. Taxes were one thing; Social Security was something else again. Holtz writes (*Ghost*, pp. 316–317) that she saw the Social Security program as an “unfunded national obligation that operated like a Ponzi scheme and she was appalled that her government should presume to choose for its citizens how they should prepare for their old age.” In a letter to Jasper Crane (*Lady*, January 1, 1955), she calls Social Security

“the Mississippi Bubble fraud.” In another (*Lady*, May 9, 1958), she describes, with her characteristically amusing hyperbole, her adamant refusal to accept a Social Security number.

Adelaide Neall’s October 4, 1940, comment on Rose’s letter, “Our wild Rose at her wildest,” is quoted in *Ghost*, p. 305. The *Post* had moved back toward the center after Lorimer’s departure, and Rose’s polemics were not welcome.

### ***The war, which Rose had resisted***

The remark about the pig may be found in Helen Warden’s article, “Novelist Has Given Up Writing.” The story about sitting out the war without a ration card is quoted in *Ghost*, p. 322, from an October 1946 *Chicago Tribune* article. Rose’s comment about Aladdin’s cave is in an interesting letter to Jasper Crane (*Lady*, March 21, 1965), where she describes herself as “an incorrigible food-hoarder” who lived a life of crime during the war by refusing to get a ration card and compounded her crimes by “giving away case after case of Mason jars full of foods.”

### ***She continued to say***

Holtz (*Ghost* pp. 347–348) describes Rose’s connection with the Freedom School, beginning in the mid-1950s. Robert LeFevre himself tells about her contributions to the enterprise in his 1977 introduction to a pamphlet reprint of “Credo,” titled *Give Me Liberty*. For a full discussion of LeFevre and his Freedom School, see *Radicals*, pp. 312–322.

### ***Over the years***

For the details about John Turner’s life, see *Ghost*, p. 298; for Al Turner, see p. 276; for Rexh Mehta, pp. 276–277 and 346; and for Norma Lee Browning, p. 364.

In the early 1990s, Al Turner spoke to Steven Hines (*Remember*, pp. 210–215) about the years he spent with Rose. He recalled that it was

fun living with Mrs. Lane. She supported us all the time in whatever we did. We did a lot of “experiments.” If we were interested in electronics, she’d finance some of our little projects, tubes and things . . . .

Really, Mrs. Lane became our family. She took care of whatever we needed . . . . She could sure tell stories. We’d have regular meals if we weren’t going anywhere. Then supper was a time when we’d sit and listen to her tell stories. She’d tell stories every night if we were there . . . . She told a lot of stuff about her life as a story, a lot about her travels . . . .

The most memorable thing about staying with Mrs. Lane was that we had fun. She had an outgoing personality, and she made it fun for us.

Tom Carnall, a friend of both John and Al, reminiscing for Hines (*Remember*, pp. 204–210)

recalls:

Now Rose was a master storyteller. She could absolutely enthrall you by the fascinating way she could describe a situation and get you right into it. One night I happened to turn around while she was talking and looked at the group. There must have been twenty of us. It was the first time I ever saw high school kids so interested in a thing that a lot of them had their mouths open like little kids of five and six years old.

### ***The most important addition***

Rose met Roger MacBride in 1943, when he was fourteen years old. Soon he was calling her Gramma and spending weekends helping her in the garden and doing other chores while they talked. (For details of their twenty-five-year relationship, see *Ghost*, p. 325, 338, 342–346, 355–356, 371, and 376.) MacBride arranged for the TV production of *Little House on the Prairie* and Rose’s *Let the Hurricane Roar* (retitled as *Young Pioneers*). More than a dozen children’s books about the life of young Rose have been published under his name.

Brian Doherty (*Radicals*, pp. 393–397) describes MacBride’s political life. A Republican, he was elected to one term in the Vermont House of Representatives (1962); two years later, he tried unsuccessfully for the party’s nomination for governor. In 1972, when Richard Nixon won the popular vote for his second term as president, MacBride, a “faithless” Republican elector, cast his electoral vote for Libertarian nominees John Hospers and Tonie Nathan (who thus

became the first woman to receive an electoral vote for vice president). In 1976, MacBride himself became the Libertarian presidential nominee. He piloted his personal jet (dubbed *No Force One*) around the country, campaigning. He was on the ballot in thirty-two states and polled 172,533 votes. In the 1980s, MacBride helped establish the Liberty Caucus, a group promoting libertarian principles within the Republican Party. He died in 1995.

### ***Rose's parents lived comfortably***

Laura knew that Rose was perennially short of money and occasionally offered a loan. From one point of view, that might be seen as small recompense for the months of work that her daughter devoted to her books. If, on average, Rose spent sixty working days on each of the eight books, her total investment would have been some seventeen months, just short of a year and a half. Just as importantly, this effort was made at the cost of Rose's own work, at a time in her life when she was actively pursuing her own writing career.

Laura's 1949 assignment of 10 percent of the royalties is described in *Ghost*, p. 334.

### ***Holtz remarks that***

Sheldon Jones's comment is quoted on p. 141 in *Remember*.

### ***In Mansfield, others were puzzled***

Hines's remarks appear on p. 61, *Remember*.

### ***Almanzo's life***

Almanzo's comment about disappointments appears in a March 23, 1937, letter to Rose. It is quoted in *Ghost*, p. 281.

### ***Needlework had always***

Rose saw her writing on American needlework as a political act. Regarding the articles that appeared in the early 1940s in *Woman's Day* (but not under Rose's byline), she wrote to Jasper Crane (*Lady*, November 7, 1963):

We [*WD* editor Eileen Tighe and I] concocted a pro-American anti-socialist series on needlework. It was quite successful, not disappointing, but [the] response was almost wholly about patterns, materials, etc.

In 1962, Tighe approached her about repeating the success, and Rose reworked her earlier pieces. The articles provoked a huge response. Rose says that the “patriotic, individualistic, anti-Welfare State response” so overwhelmed the editorial staff that twelve typists had to be added to the “Answers-to-Readers Department.” Seven publishers bid for the project in book form. Rose received a fifteen-thousand-dollar advance for *Woman's Day Book of American Needlework*, which was published by Simon and Schuster in 1963.

Rose opened her introduction to her new book with this sentence: “Needlework is the art that tells the truth about the real life of people in their time and place.” She closed it with a retelling of the familiar legend of Betsy Ross, which is just about as true—but every bit as fun to read—as the stories in the Little House books. General Washington and others have agreed that an army in battle must have a flag, and they go to the shop of Mistress Betsy Ross, an upholstery shop on Arch Street.

She never had made a flag, she said; of course she would try. She studied their hasty sketch and said that, for her part, she would not choose six-pointed stars; five-pointed stars would make a pattern more to her taste. They thought that five-pointed stars were too difficult to make.

Mistress Betsy took a bit of paper, deftly folded it, and with one snip of her scissors made a five-pointed star. General Washington accepted it with no more words. The gentlemen said they would send her a colored sketch at once.

A breathless messenger brought it, drawn and colored by the renowned artist, William Barrett. Mistress Betsy threaded her needle and made the flag. She made it of patchwork: thirteen five-pointed stars set into a blue square, thirteen strips of red and white sewed

together. Clear, gay colors, white for purity, red for courage, blue for faith; stars for light, and straight lines to ripple strong and free against the sky. This was the tradition of American patchwork, and this is what Mistress Betsy's grandchildren and their grandchildren, and theirs, would tell of the making of the star-spangled banner.

In the tradition of American patchwork she made the flag that stands today, with its fifty stars, for the inalienable liberty and human rights of every human being, the flag of the Revolution that already has carried the New World far around this earth and some day will help banish the last tyranny and free all mankind.

Rose's story of Betsy Ross is based on the legend that Betsy's family perpetuated over the years. It is, according to historians, pure fiction. But in Rose's telling, it is pure magic. And some readers will no doubt remember the stars that Laura and Mary cut out of strips of brown paper to edge the shelves behind the stove in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*—repeated here in Rose's story of the first American flag.

***It's difficult and perhaps even painful***

In her excellent book, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture*, Anita Fellman discusses the difficulty that some of Laura's fans seem to have in dealing with the idea advanced by scholars and historians that someone other than their heroine played a major role in the creation of their favorite books. (See especially pp. 222–224.)

Fellman observes that Laura Ingalls Wilder's position in American literature can be measured by the public reaction to William Holtz's assertion that Rose was the ghostwriter behind the books (*Little House, Long Shadow*, p. 222). ““Claims of Ghost in “Little House” Upset Wilder Fans’ ran one headline that accurately described the initial popular reaction to Holt’s thesis,” she writes and goes on to quote a review titled “Debunking a Myth: Was It ‘Little Fraud on the Prairie?’” published in the *Washington Post*, July 11, 1993. The reviewer, Nancy Watzman, wrote that discovering Rose's role in the creation of the Little House books was “like

being told that Grandma Moses' paintings may have had a workover by Andy Warhol. Even if you still like the paintings, they mean something entirely different.”

Do they? Do the books really “mean something entirely different”? I don't think so. I believe that they are still the very same books and can be read with the very same pleasure, no matter how they were written or by whom. But I also believe that an understanding of the circumstances of the writing is essential to a full understanding of the books themselves—and that understanding how and why and by whom they were originally written only adds to our appreciation and pleasure.

And I very much hope that readers will take it as a challenge to set aside what Fellman calls the “prevailing myth” of Laura as an “instinctive artist writing on her own” (*Little House, Long Shadow*, p. 222) and see the books instead, as they are: the remarkable work of a pair of remarkable women, who persevered through a difficult time to create stories that we continue to cherish, some eight decades after their publication.

## Historical People Who Appear or Are Mentioned in the Novel

(in alphabetical order)

*Boylston, Helen Dore (Troub)*, (1895–1984), RWL’s friend, travel companion, roommate, and confidante. Author of the young adult series, *Sue Barton, Nurse* (1936–1952) and *Carol Page, Actress* (1941–1946).

*Brandt, Carl*, RWL’s literary agent, 1920–1930.

*Brody, Catharine*, friend and frequent guest of RWL, author of several best-selling novels in the 1930s, including *Nobody Starves*, *Cash Item*, and *West of Fifth*.

*Browning, Norma Lee* (1915–2001), close friend and confidante of RWL from 1936 until Rose’s death. Born in Missouri and educated at the University of Missouri and Radcliffe. Award-winning *Chicago Tribune* feature writer and columnist for thirty years, author of more than a dozen books. Married (1937) to Russell Ogg, who became a well-known newspaper photographer.

*Bye, George*, literary agent for RWL and LIW after 1930. His client list also included Eleanor Roosevelt, Charles A. Lindbergh, and Frank Buck.

*Fiery, Marion*, editor and head of the children’s department at Knopf, who first (1930) agreed to publish “When Grandma Was a Little Girl” (the material that became *Little House in the Big Woods*).

*Garrett, Garet*, anti–New Deal critic, lead political writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*, close friend of RWL after 1935.

*Hader, Berta*, friend of RWL, children’s book illustrator. Berta introduced Marion Fiery to Rose to promote “When Grandma Was a Little Girl.” Married to Elmer Hader, her co-author/illustrator.

*Kirkus, Virginia*, director, Harper Books for Boys and Girls, who agreed (1931) to publish “When Grandma Was a Little Girl” after Fiery left Knopf.

*Lane, Rose Wilder* (1886–1968, RWL), only surviving child of Laura and Almanzo Wilder. Author of *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1932), *Free Land* (1938), *The Discovery of Freedom* (1943), and other fiction and nonfiction; unacknowledged co-author (with her mother, Laura Ingalls Wilder) of the Little House series.

*MacBride, Roger Lea*, Rose’s “adopted grandson,” friend, attorney, agent.

*McBride, Mary Margaret*, friend of RWL, later a famous radio talk show host. Rose stayed often in New York City with McBride and Stella Karn.

*Meta, Rexh*, the Albanian boy whom RWL met in 1921 and adopted informally. She sponsored his education in Tirana and at Cambridge University and helped to support his family through the rest of her life.

*Neall, Adelaide*, fiction editor at the *Saturday Evening Post*, with whom Rose worked on her stories in that magazine.

*Palmer, George Q.*, New York stockbroker for RWL, LIW, and Helen Boylston.

*Parkhurst, Genevieve*, friend and occasional guest of RWL at Rocky Ridge. Editor at *Pictorial Review*.

*Raymond, Ida Louise*, editor, Harper Books for Boys and Girls, who oversaw the production of the Little House series.

*Thayer, Eliza Jane Wilder*, Manly's sister. Invited RWL to live with her in Crowley, Louisiana, and attend high school.

*Turner, Alvin*, John's brother, Rose's third adopted son.

*Turner, John*, Rose's second informally adopted son, who was cared for and sponsored by Rose from 1933–1939.

*Wilder, Almanzo* (1857–1949), married (1885) to LIW. Known for his farming skills and horsemanship. Called "Manly" by LIW.

*Wilder, Laura Elizabeth Ingalls* (1867–1957, LIW), daughter of Charles and Caroline Ingalls. Author of articles for the *Ruralist* and other farm publications; co-author (with her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane) of the Little House children's books. Called "Bessie" by her husband, "Mama Bess" by Rose.

\*The names of some of the Wilders' neighbors and friends have been altered to protect their privacy.

## Discussion Questions

Here are some questions that may help you to focus your thoughts about the novel, *A Wilder Rose*, and about the time and place in which the writing of the Little House books took place.

1. Have you read any of the Little House books? If so, which ones? Do you have any impressions of them? What do you remember about them?
2. Did you have any impressions of Laura Ingalls Wilder before you read this book? What made you think of her in those ways?
3. Rose's childhood was a difficult one, marked by poverty and a felt lack of affection. How do these experiences seem to affect her adult life?
4. Laura's childhood was rather different from Rose's childhood; for instance, the Ingalls couldn't seem to settle in one place. But in other ways—especially the family's poverty—it was similar. How did these experiences—the rootlessness, the poverty—affect Laura's adult life?
5. The writing of the Little House books, as it is reported in Rose's diary, is one of the novel's central storylines. Were you surprised that Rose was so deeply involved in every aspect of those books? Did this knowledge change your perceptions of the books?
6. It is clear that Rose deliberately concealed her major role in the writing of the books from her literary agent and the Harper editors. It is also clear that Laura participated in that deception, carrying it on long after the Little House series was completed. Do you accept Rose's explanations for why she did what she did? Why do you think Laura agreed to go along with the deception?

7. If you had been Laura, would you have insisted that Rose's name appear on the books? If you had been Rose, would you have wanted to claim your work? What do you think of the bargain the two women worked out?
8. One of the central themes of *A Wilder Rose* is the mother-daughter relationship and the efforts of each to manage and control the other. What evidences of Laura's control over Rose do you see? What evidences of Rose's control over Laura? Who do you think was the more controlling?
9. The theme of management/control opens a central "situational" irony in the novel—and in real life: the more Rose tries to help her mother achieve independence (financially and in her writing), the more dependent Laura becomes. If you had been counseling either or both of them, what strategies might you have suggested to ease the situation?
10. Rose and her mother both have a deep and lasting attachment to houses. Why do you think this is so? What are some of the positive effects of this affinity in their lives? What are some of the negative effects?
11. The people of Mansfield, with their traditional small-town values, play an important role in both Laura's and Rose's lives. How is this role different for mother and daughter? How is it the same?
12. Throughout *A Wilder Rose*, what we know of Laura is filtered through Rose's point of view. When the author was asked why she chose not to include Laura's point of view in the novel, she replied that there were too few traces of Laura's inner life (letters, journals) on which to base a fictional characterization. What do you think of her response? Do you think she should have tried to represent Laura? If you had been writing the novel, how would you have portrayed Laura?

13. Most of the story of *A Wilder Rose* is told from Rose's point of view, with the exception of three scenes in the Danbury house. These three scenes are told from Norma Lee's point of view (Chapters 5, 9, 12). What do we learn about Rose in these scenes that she herself might not be willing to tell us?
14. Rose became increasingly interested in political theory and practice after 1935; after she completed the Little House series (1942), that's where she devoted all her writing energy. Does this seem to you to be a logical continuation of her earlier concerns and interests, or a move in a new direction? Why?
15. Rose's life is marked by relationships with young boys in which she assumes a maternal or caregiving role: Rexh Mehta, John Turner, Roger Lea MacBride. Why do you think she became involved in these relationships? What is positive about them? What is negative?
16. Rose and Troub (Helen Boylston) had a six-year relationship (1926–1932). What do you think attracted each woman to the other? Is Rose's relationship to Troub anything like her relationship to Rexh, John, and Roger? Is her relationship with Norma Lee similar, or different?
17. How does the time—the 1930s—and the country's economic situation influence what happens in Rose's and Laura's lives? Do you think the Little House books would have been written if the Crash had not occurred?
18. Rose is a markedly different person in 1939 than she was in 1928, when she returned to Rocky Ridge with the idea of building a house for her parents. In what ways has she changed?

19. Do you think Laura changed during the same time (1928-1939)? What evidence of change do you see?
20. Rose gave her mother the gift of prestige and recognition—exactly what Laura said she wanted. What other gifts did she give her? What did Laura give to Rose? What does this say about the relationship?
21. At one point in the novel, Rose describes a scene that takes place in Mansfield. Mrs. Watson, who fancies herself something of a seer, looks at Laura’s palm and tells her that she can always count on getting what she wants. Laura is not surprised. “I always have,” she says. (In the novel, this scene is depicted exactly as Rose describes it in her journal.) What does this say about Laura’s experience of her life? In what ways did Laura “get what she wanted.”
22. Almanzo, on the other hand, wrote to his daughter that his life had been “mostly disappointments.” What disappointments might he have had in mind? What does this tell us about his outlook on life? About his relationship with his wife?
23. In the book’s epigraph, Rose writes, “We are never aware of the present; each instant of living becomes perceptible only when it is past, so that in a sense we do not live at all, but only remember living. ” Is this true, in your experience? What are the implications of her phrase “[we] only remember living?”

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