

Is ‘Little House on the Prairie’ a children’s classic or a libertarian primer?

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Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Museum

Almanzo and Laura Ingalls Wilder in DeSmet, S.D.

One winter maybe a dozen years ago, my aunt brought back some pineapples from Hawaii. One was intended for my parents, who lived in a small town an hour from her home in Brookings, S.D. But how to deliver it?

A few phone calls established that a couple from my parents’ town planned to

attend a basketball game in Brookings and were willing transport the pineapple back home. My aunt delivered it to them in the stands, and later that night, my parents were awakened by a thud, then the sound of their front door closing. The next morning, a pineapple stood on their kitchen counter.

Brookings is a short drive from DeSmet, S.D., which proudly advertises itself as the onetime home of Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the popular “Little House on the Prairie” series. Born 150 years ago on Feb. 7, Wilder would have recognized the neighborly impulse that carried a pineapple 60 miles across frozen fields.

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Based on her family’s late-19th-century homesteading experiences, Wilder’s eight children’s books are stocked with examples of neighbor helping neighbor. A woman nurses the fictionalized Ingalls family through a severe illness; Pa Ingalls helps some passing cattle drivers move their herd; a bachelor acquaintance offers nails to aid construction of the family’s cabin.

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Facing down blizzards, fires, wolves, and Indian war parties, the Ingallses came to symbolize American self-reliance. But if

the lend-a-hand tradition remains alive in the rural Midwest, the ideal of self-sufficiency has taken a beating.

That’s partly because the subsistence farming of Wilder’s era has been replaced by large mechanized operations. In addition, an extensive subsidy system has developed to protect farmers from unpredictable weather and gyrating prices.

Still independent in spirit, the farmers I know frequently say they would prefer to take their chances on the free market. Some wryly describe their occupation as “farming the government.” In South Dakota, resentment of government handouts has always run deep.

If this heartland backlash sounds familiar, it should. The resourceful pioneer family of Wilder's books has become the ur-myth among libertarians everywhere. They claim that ever since the New Deal, politics have corrupted this virtuous American fable.

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New scholarship on Wilder tracks how her books may have been deliberately engineered to fuel the limited-government movement. In a just published work, "Libertarianism on the Prairie," Christine Woodside fleshes out earlier arguments that Wilder's only child, Rose Wilder Lane, edited the Little House series to reflect her own political leanings.

Lane was an established writer who served as editor and agent on the books, though for years she kept her role largely hidden. She had grown up humiliated by the poverty on her parents' farm, and left home at an early age. Making her way to San Francisco, she found work as a journalist, married, and divorced. She traveled abroad and sampled life in New York before rejoining her parents in 1928, on what turned into a years-long stay.

Despite their fruitful collaboration on the books, the mother-daughter relationship was often tense. Lane's private writings complain of a lack of maternal love.

As the Depression unfolded, her politics turned sharply rightward. Along with Ayn Rand and Isabel Patterson, she is considered one of the "founding mothers" of libertarianism. In letters, Rand and Lane quarreled over the desirability of neighbor helping neighbor. Rand thought mutual aid was for weaklings. Lane regarded community support as positive.

Lane's views fully flowered in her 1943 tract, "The Discovery of Freedom: Man's Struggle Against Authority," which became a staple of the libertarian movement. She used royalties from the Little House books to support a "Freedom School," established in the 1950s near Colorado Springs. Among

those attending were Charles and David Koch. At her death, in 1968, Lane directed future royalties to her protege, Roger Lea MacBride — the Libertarian Party candidate for president in 1976.

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Lane's libertarian proclamations may help explain why the Little House books have been enlisted repeatedly in the conservative cause. Meghan Clyne argued in the conservative publication *National Affairs* that Wilder is a role model whose books illustrate the worth of self-reliance. She called for building a historical-appreciation movement around them, to counter what she sees as a growing dependence on government.

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But while the Little House vision of the past may appeal to libertarians, the reality of pioneer life muddies the picture. Like so many settlers, the Ingalls family obtained free land under the 1862 Homestead Act. Their failed attempts at farming kept them moving from place to place.

Moreover, Wilder's seeming indifference to the expulsion of Native Americans from the land can inspire a distinct chill. The cabin memorialized in "Little House on the Prairie" was erected illegally on land set aside for the Osage tribe. The Ingallses were eventually forced to abandon it.

While some have tried to claim the books as conservative propaganda, others have seen a subtler process at work. A 2008 book by Anita Clair Fellman, "Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture," suggests that the books subconsciously influence Americans to be more receptive to conservative principles, such as resisting federal regulation.

As a loving family that overcame tremendous odds to survive in the wilderness, the Ingallses are not just quintessential American heroes. They

are the epitome of American longing — possibly the perfect poster family for today's values voters. No surprise, then, that Ronald Reagan reportedly called the 1970s TV series based on the Little House books his favorite show.

A century and a half after Laura Ingalls's birth, South Dakota children are still schooled in the genuinely grim hardships of early settlement days. But, unlike in my childhood, they also learn about the cruel losses dealt to native tribes.

Although Wilder's books continue to enchant, most readers realize that there's no going back to the frontier. Many also realize that self-reliance, however desirable, may be a stretch. Global economic forces can defeat the most determined self-made individual, as the 2008 financial crisis painfully illustrated.

Rose Wilder Lane clung to her libertarian views to the end, taking her self-sufficient stance on a few acres in Danbury, Conn., and scheming to avoid taxation. Her feelings of deprivation growing up may have driven her politics. But they may also have been the vital sauce that brought a cherished set of children's classics to life. Somehow, they merged with her mother's stories, leaving a small house that continues to loom large in the American imagination.

M.J. Andersen is a former editorial-page writer for The Providence Journal and the author of the memoir "Portable Prairie: Confessions of an Unsettled Midwesterner."

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