

Village School Children's Book of the Month

Reviewed by George Bennett, Village School 5th-6th grade teacher

The Little House on the Prairie by Laura Ingalls Wilder

"The Little House on the Prairie," by Laura Ingalls Wilder, was first published in 1935, but the story remains enthralling and the themes it encompasses continue to be relevant, as the Village School 5th-6th grade class discovered recently when it was read aloud as part of the class's study of the American West.

The book is the second in the seven-volume sequence that Ingalls Wilder wrote about her pioneering childhood in the 1870s and '80s. It tells the story of her family's migration in a covered wagon south and west from the log cabin in Wisconsin which was featured in *The Little House in the Big Woods*. We learn what it was like to travel in a single-family group across the vastness of the western prairie, as the family overcomes a series of near-disasters before deciding on a suitable place to build a new log house and farm.

As Laura's Pa plans the new house, we're shown that neither of Laura's parents cares very much that they may be trespassing on Indian land, because Pa says he has had word 'from a man in Washington' that Indian Territory would soon be opened up to settlement. It's a carelessness that later comes back to trouble them.

We follow the whole process of building a new house, from felling trees and hauling them from the nearby creek bottoms, to splitting shingles and making a roof. We get only a hint of how hard this must have been for one man to do by hand: 'Day after day,' Laura writes, 'Pa



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hailed logs', but it must have been week after week. We also see how few resources the family has, and how careful they are not to waste anything. If Pa springs a nail while fastening the shingles on the roof, Laura and her sister Mary have to search the prairie grass until they find it.

Gradually the house comes together, and Pa and Ma establish a garden and the beginnings of cultivated fields. Life remains risky, however. The family is threatened by a large pack of prairie wolves and the work of digging a well nearly ends in disaster. So too does a prairie wild fire that threatens to destroy everything that Pa and Ma have built.

Gradually, however, we learn that the family's new home is under threat of a different kind. It turns out that the new house is on Indian land, and right next to a Native American trail, along which Indians pass without even acknowledging the house's presence. At other times they come inside it, and we discover how much Ma and her neighbors are frightened of them. Only Pa sees Indians in a positive light, and tries to communicate with them.

Gradually the tension ratchets up, as various groups of Indians camp along



the nearby river, and carry on a series of increasingly noisy and threatening meetings, which the family can hear, but don't understand. Ma, who was brought up during a series of 'Indian wars' back east, is more frightened than anyone, and even Pa stays up at night with his gun at the ready.

How the situation is resolved comes as a surprise, but the book shows how difficult and, ultimately one-sided, was the relationship between Native American tribes and the incoming settlers, even as it demonstrates the resourcefulness and self-reliance of the Ingalls family, and settlers like them.

The Little House on the Prairie - and the whole series - continues to give a vivid and personal insight into the challenging life of western pioneers, and remains a fascinating read. This particular volume also goes into the most detail about the interaction of settlers and Native Americans, and for this reason alone, is one of the most interesting of the series.

You can read it as a stand-alone book, but you'll probably want to read the rest of the series to follow Laura's life to young adulthood. At the Village School, books from the series are read aloud from kindergarten to 6th grade, and most children from 3rd grade onwards will be able to read them for themselves.