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Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Journey of Discovery

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As an English teacher in the Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School, I am constantly looking for ways to expand and enlarge the reading experiences of my students. Children are usually willing readers. That is, children will read whatever a teacher instructs them to read. However, our present teaching methods may be showing children that reading is only a means to an end, and that reading itself isn't a useful activity unless you have a test to prepare for, a list of words to memorize or a passage to analyze.

I hope to see my students enter the magical world of reading instead of the tedious world of preparation. I want them to realize that books are exciting and fun, that characters can become old friends and that their world can be expanded in understanding and insight. What would happen if we stopped using reading as an activity to get somewhere and introduced it to our students as a worthwhile and important activity in and of itself? I believe that reading opens you up to yourself, and that this is what we should be teaching: the art of seeing, thinking, and exploring on one's own through narrative. To require students to always come up with answers shuts the door on private and autonomous exploration. Yet, at the same time, we claim we want to teach our children to think. By insisting that they forever learn from what they read, we are saying in reality "learn to find the answers I want you to find." We are not giving them the chance to learn how to think on their own. It is exactly this over-emphasis on the analytical that critic John Holt refers to when he says, "This is exactly what reading should be and in school so seldom is—an exciting, joyous adventure. Find something, dive into it, take the good parts, skip the bad parts, get what you can out of it, go on to something else. How different is our mean-spirited, picky insistence that every child get every last scrap of 'understanding' that can be dug out of a book" (p. 227).

As children read about other children, in other times and other places, they can come to understand the common shared feelings of these children with themselves. As they grow to understand that certain values never change or lose importance, they begin to understand themselves. Reading can enable children to teach themselves just by giving them the chance to observe and question. We do not always have to prompt them. It is important for them to learn that they themselves will ask probing questions, and that the teacher need not always take on this function, nor need they always depend on the teacher. Thus, in this unit, I plan to create discussion sessions which give students a chance to share what they see and let the questions surface. My experience has been that children ask all the right questions: they want to know, what is important for the character in the story? What is important for me? Why is it important? The difference is the students are more invested in the answers because they are asking the questions, and it is the process of questioning that enables each child to develop self-knowledge.

I plan to have the students practice their writing throughout the unit, primarily with journal keeping. By keeping logs of reactions to events in the stories, by writing about their own feelings, the students will also grow to understand more about themselves and gain self-awareness.

My unit will center on two books, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and *Farmer Boy* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. I also plan to use a very short and lovely book, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan, as a transition between the two.

The Wilder books are classic fictionalized accounts of the early lives of Laura Ingalls and Almanzo Wilder. Children are usually familiar with the stories and settings because of the very popular television series, “Little House on the Prairie.” In fact, many times children feel they know the series of books and don’t have to read the actual writing because they have seen the series and thus “know” the books. However, once the students have started the reading they are hooked and read very enthusiastically. It is precisely because of that enthusiasm that I have selected these books. Children love them and read them with joy and zest. Since I want children to love to read, I feel my students will look forward to reading these and other stories.

On the Banks of Plum Creek is the story of the Ingalls family living just outside the town of Walnut Grove, Minnesota. Laura is about seven years old in the story, her sister Mary is nine, and Carrie is three. When the family first arrives at Plum Creek, their home is a dugout built along the bank of the water. The book details the three years the Ingalls family lived at Plum Creek. These were not easy years. We see all the hardships of pioneer life—the bitter cold, blizzards, grasshopper plagues, no work, no money, and fires. We also see the unyielding and tenacious spirit that moved these frontier people, and the strong family love that united them and kept them strong and unbowed.

How do you teach this? How do you get the students to understand the concepts found in a book like this? In a sense you don’t. You try to create the conditions for children to explore, but you don’t try to tell them what you want them to find. I think that first of all you begin by reading—both orally and silently. I plan to read about half of the book in class with the students and assign chapters for homework and silent reading. Of course many of the students will read ahead anyway and will be finished way ahead of schedule. Usually they generate even more enthusiasm. The other students want to know what they know.

Discussions will play an important role in understanding the book. I usually try to let the students lead. They ask the questions, because they know what they do not understand. I also let the other students answer the questions or try to explain to students what it is that they understand. Even though they faced hardships and difficulties, the Ingalls and especially Laura did not feel sorry for themselves and really enjoyed their lives. Why? What did Laura enjoy? How do you know she liked something? How is it that the student knows that Laura loved her life, that she found it exciting and adventurous? Is this important to the student? Because my primary focus is on the enjoyment of the books, I plan to be careful not to impose what I feel is “important” to the understanding of these books. I want the students to do the thinking and the digging and deciding on what concepts they find important. Usually, children arrive in their own way in just the direction that I hoped, as long as they feel the teacher is permitting freedom to explore on their own.

Discussion is not the only way to provide for that exploration. Some especially vivid scenes lend themselves to be acted out or even re-written as skits for role-playing. Laura and Mary’s first day at school, the country party at Laura’s house, and Nellie’s town party are three scenes that come immediately to mind. Children, of course, love the conflict between Nellie and Laura (as they did on the television series), and love to see Laura get the better of the spoiled Nellie. My students really wish that Laura weren’t so well brought up, that she could say a little more of what she feels. As angry as Laura gets, she really holds back, because of Ma and her

teachings. However, my students respect that and realize that Laura really valued the good opinion of her parents.

Another scene that really makes an impression on my students comes near the beginning of the book. Laura has been told not to go to the pond by herself. She is so hot on one day, that she starts to walk the path to the pond. She is stopped and frightened by a badger, so frightened that she goes home and never does go near the pond. However, her conscience bothers her badly. Even though she did not disobey her father, she really did, because she intended to go to the pond. No one knows and no one would ever know. But that bothers her even more. Her mother and father think she is trustworthy and she knows she is not. Finally at night when she can no longer stand it, she tells Pa what she has done. This is an interesting discussion for the students. How many would do what Laura did? How many feel that she really did not disobey her father since she did not go to the pond? Who would feel guilty and still not tell on themselves? Have they ever done anything like that? Have they ever done something they knew they shouldn't do, and confessed it, even though they wouldn't be caught? This makes a wonderful writing assignment as well as a journal entry, and provides for an examination of self.

Holidays on the prairie are detailed and interesting. We see three Christmases in this book and each one is very different. The students can compare the simple gifts of the first Christmas to the more elaborate second celebration, including a Christmas tree at the new Walnut Grove church. They cheer with Laura as she receives a soft fur cape, the nicest one, nicer even than Nellie's. They watch her inner-conflict and intense desire for the cape as she sees it on the tree (because it is nicer than Nellie's) and guilt as she feels she is not going to be an angel if she is so selfish and greedy. Why is Laura so torn? Is this normal? Would you feel that way? Have you ever felt so divided? This can be a good area for discussion and also an excellent journal assignment.

I think that children get a real idea of what pioneer life was like. I think they see the schools, the church, the chores, the kinds of work that people did, the food they ate, and the adventures and hardships they had. Each chapter in this book has a new event from sliding down straw stacks, to runaway cows to the terrible coming of the grasshoppers, and the noisy clicking of their jaws as they ate everything in sight. Each chapter has some event from life, from the real life of Laura and her family. I think that even more than a picture of a pioneer family, that children finally get a sense of a very warm loving family—a family whose love, humor and devotion sees it through hardships and calamities.

After the rather lengthy *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, the students should enjoy turning to the next book, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan. It is a short, gentle, fifty-eight page book about the need for loving family relationships. Anna and Caleb are motherless pioneer children. Their father Jacob has advertised for a wife in the newspapers. An answer has come from Sarah who lives in Maine by the sea and describes herself as "plain and tall." The two children eagerly write to her and then agonize over her answers. Sarah loves the sea and sea colors. Will she miss the sea too much? Will she be able to stand fields and grass and sky and not much else? Caleb has never known his mother. All he knows is that she sang every day. He longs for a mother to sing to him and in his letter to Sarah asks her if she sings.

Sarah comes for a trial visit. The children worry about her being too lonely. They are alone on the prairie with no near neighbors. Caleb loves Sarah immediately and talks to her all day long. He has been waiting for a mother and is happy with her. Anna and her father Jacob are shy with Sarah although love and trust start to build. Sarah sings and teaches them new songs. Sarah wears overalls and fixes roofs and learns to ride and to drive the wagon by herself. She shows herself to be as independent and self-reliant as any pioneer woman.

But will Sarah be happy on the prairie? Can she bear to leave the sea to live on the flat rolling prairie with no waves? Can a new environment replace a beloved known one? Can a new family ease the change from an old one? Sarah finally decides that as much as she misses Maine, she would miss her new family more. She will stay and make her home with them.

This is a charming story, simply told, full of love and warmth. The small joys of petting sheep, raising chickens, baking stew, picking flowers, telling stories, and loving children are touchingly evoked.

One of the connecting links in this story to the other stories is that of decision, the decision to change a life by changing environments. The Ingalls have already done this and will do it again; the Wilders will do it later; and Sarah is in the midst of making such a decision. How do people make such decisions? How do they affect children? How would the students feel if they were changing environments? How many have already moved here and have had to adjust to a new neighborhood? I feel that this is a concept that is important to children and one we will introduce into discussion.

Another area for discussion is the intense desire of the children for a mother. They are so ready to accept Sarah, they are so anxious for her to stay. Is this usual? Do the students understand how important having Sarah for a mother is? How do the frontier children learn what she is like? They first get to know each other through letters. How would the students tell someone about themselves through a letter? How would they introduce themselves, “put their best foot forward”? Another writing activity would be to have the children write a letter to someone, maybe a relative that they haven’t met or seen in a long time and tell about themselves.

Farmer Boy is the story of the childhood of Almanzo Wilder, the husband of Laura Ingalls. The story takes place on the Wilder farm in upstate New York near Malone. Almanzo Wilder was a middle child of six children. At the time of *Farmer Boy*, Almanzo was about nine, and is depicted as the youngest of four. The vivid chapters show the hardworking lives of farmers, their wives, children and contemporaries. We learn of Almanzo’s chores, his schooling (or lack of it), his likes and dislikes, his animals and his responsibilities.

The students will read this book orally and silently with discussions in class, role playing, and acting out of certain scenes. The school scenes in particular lend themselves well to acting out, as does a wonderful scene of the Wilder children, Royal, Eliza Jane, Alice and Almanzo left in charge of the house. They had all kinds of problems, mainly in getting along, and Almanzo got especially angry at Eliza Jane for being “bossy” to him. What happens when your older brother or sister is left in charge of you? Or you have to be in charge of someone else? Or someone is just very bossy with you? The children have all had experiences with just this very problem and will be happy to share them. They will understand just what Almanzo went through.

The students will notice immediately a contrast with the school as described by Laura. In Walnut Grove the teacher was treated with respect. However, in Almanzo’s town big bullies came to the school. They came to beat up the teacher, not to learn. They had kept any teacher from finishing the winter term, and Almanzo, in his first year of schooling, was afraid for the new teacher. He looked too young and too slim to be able to stand up to the bullies. Almanzo was so worried he went to his father about his fear, but James Wilder merely said the teacher had contracted to do a job. However, when the bullies attacked the teacher, he was ready with a blacksnake whip and beat the bullies instead. Almanzo was thrilled when he learned it was his father’s whip, that his father had helped the teacher defend himself against five large bullies. He felt, as Laura did about her Pa, that Father had to be the smartest man in the world.

Almanzo’s father’s farm is a large prosperous one. We see different activities in every chapter. Sheep-

shearing, calf-training, berry-picking, ice-cutting and haying are described so vividly that one can picture, smell, feel and taste everything that is going on. A description of the Wilder family Saturday night bath is particularly enjoyable. Almanzo didn't mind the Saturday night ritual, but given his choice, would have waited until spring. His father, James Wilder was very fond of horses, and had several horses and colts to train. Almanzo is given two calves to train on his ninth birthday, but it is the colts which really interest him. One day he will be old enough to help father with the colts.

Almanzo's mother is very busy on the farm, weaving and sewing and preserving food. However, it is her meals and Almanzo's appetite which stay with us. Every chapter has at least one description of a meal, even a description of popcorn, which is so mouthwatering that one wants to be there. Almanzo loves to eat. He loves breakfasts of oatmeal with maple sugar, fried potatoes, golden buckwheat cakes, sausages and gravy and doughnuts. He loves the lunch his mother packs for school, of bread-and-butter and sausage, doughnuts, apples and apple turnovers. He loves his suppers of baked ham, baked beans, boiled potatoes with ham gravy, mashed turnips, stewed yellow pumpkin, plum preserves, strawberry jam, grape jelly and spiced watermelon-rind pickles and a large piece of pumpkin pie! These are everyday meals. The holiday feasts are even more elaborate and hearty and delicious sounding.

How different are the lives of Laura and Almanzo from each other? Is this difference the result of where they live? Both are hard working children with responsibilities and chores. How similar are their lives and families? How similar are they to the children of *Sarah, Plain and Tall*? How are Pa and James Wilder alike? What about Ma? Is she like Angeline Wilder? What about sibling relationships? How do brother and sisters get along? How do Laura and Mary get along? Can the students find reasons for differences and similarities? Does it have anything to do with the somewhat harsher life of the Ingalls? These are all questions worth asking as the students seek to understand their experience of reading these books.

The Wilders had what seemed to be a very prosperous farm in New York. They certainly didn't want for anything, they obviously had plenty of food, and would have been considered fairly well-to-do. Why then did they leave their farm for the uncertainty of the west? What made them leave? This is a question worth discussing and speculating on although there is no obvious answer. Only letters provide clues. James Wilder had brothers and sisters who had gone to Minnesota and wrote glowing letters describing the land. Perhaps he wanted to join his brothers, perhaps he wanted to do something different. None of his six children were settled, so he was not uprooting them. It is interesting to think about why the family would leave this rich farm and venture to the unknown. The students may speculate about how they would feel if their parents decided to move. They may also wish to read more about Almanzo Wilder and his family and try to decide the reasons for themselves.

The differences between Laura and Almanzo and Anna and Caleb and children of today are clear, but what are the similarities? Where can the children find likenesses and compare themselves? My hope is that my students will be able to look beyond the obvious and really understand how they are alike. The students will find in the characters of Laura and Almanzo children of today—children with likes and dislikes, children who didn't always get along with everyone, children who got tired of doing chores, children who argued with their brothers and sisters, children who had fun playing, helping, learning—children. The students will see the strong sense of family that kept everyone going. I hope that my students will come to see that Laura and Almanzo were not that different as children from themselves.

The fact that Laura Ingalls wrote these accounts of her own life is a fascinating one to children. They want to learn more about her, to see pictures of her and her family, to read her letters and to read accounts of her and

her family. If children are interested, they can research her life or accounts of pioneer families on the frontier. I have several small books written about her and her life after the books ended. Many materials are available from various Laura Ingalls Wilder museums located throughout the country at the site of her various homes. Two videotapes are available for rental from DeSmet, South Dakota, one on "Dakota Women" which includes the story of Caroline Ingalls, Laura's mother, and the "The Ingalls of De Smet". A recording of an interview Laura gave, one of the few recordings of her voice, is also available. The young researcher could also send for slides, postcards and maps, an excellent exercise in writing a business letter. Further, an interested student could create a map of the Ingalls various wanderings and homes. I will have in my room a cardboard model (unassembled) of the Wilder family farm, and hope that some students would want to both assemble the model and add to it by learning more about what the farm would have been like. These are all activities designed to enhance the students' experiences of reading, rather than make them afraid because they don't know the "correct answer" for a test. I will offer the students choices and options and encourage the students to learn more about Laura, Almanzo and frontier life or simply to read more.

Another approach to interesting students in further study is to look at the related areas of genealogy and autobiography, both of which are important in the Ingalls books. In some of the stories that Laura wrote about herself, she was obviously too young to have remembered them herself. How did she know what happened? How did she know what her life was like, where they went, and how they lived? She had to listen to stories of her parents, she had to ask questions and remember what was said. How did she select what went into the stories? She wrote about the hardships of pioneer life, yet she left out many very sad events as well. How did she pick and choose? What do we learn from her stories? What do we learn about Laura that could teach us about ourselves? She regarded life as a gift, a gift to share with others and to be treasured. Each person is a unique individual worth exploring. Each child, each student is a special person. As he or she can develop and gain self-knowledge, special qualities will emerge.

Children could start researching their own childhoods, early experiences, asking parents about events they are too young to remember. Could they write up an event in their lives that they cannot remember as if they did? What are their first memories? What are their most vivid memories? What do they remember first? Sight, sound, taste, smell? Feelings? Can these trigger a sharp memory?

Children will be keeping daily journals in my class to record these memories and their activities and feelings of today. We will use these journals as diaries, to keep track of events, to read over and then to recreate from the journal. Like diaries, journals are private and are records of a person's feelings and thoughts. They will have first impressions, sometimes inarticulate thoughts, misspellings and other errors. I will not correct the journals. I will have conferences with the students on the writing and on the thoughts and feelings that led to the writings. When a student feels proud of a piece, he or she may wish to rework and expand it. Another aspect of journal keeping and conferencing is peer conferencing. Two or three students may wish to read and discuss each of the other's writings. Individual students may wish to read a piece of writing to hear opinions from classmates. I have found that children listen very intently to their peers, and offer very positive and constructive advice. However, the most important area of writing journals is that the student feels comfortable and secure.

One aspect of the Wilder books that really impresses my students is Laura's stunning sense memory—sounds, smells, tastes, textures and sights are vividly recreated. Can my students recreate their own experiences with such a vivid sense memory? Can they describe an event so that others can sense it and understand and feel it? Journal writing can perhaps help them develop this aspect.

Children can also try to discover some of their own roots. They can begin by interviewing immediate members of their families, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, for information about their past and about their earliest memories. Families of two or three generations from the New Haven area will have more accessible information.

Many children have roots from out-of state. How can they learn more? They can write letters to relatives asking questions about family history and see what photographs they can find. They can make maps depicting family homes and places of residence. I think children will find it fascinating to learn about family members, even if they can go no further back than grandparents. I hope that by discovering more about their families, my students will discover more about themselves.

I look forward to teaching this unit with my classes. I hope that as they read about the everyday problems of Laura and Almanzo as well as Caleb and Anna, the students will come to understand the common shared feelings of these children with themselves, and realize that despite the distance in time and place, certain values never change or lose importance. I consider this unit of study a journey of discovery and self-discovery. In the end, what we teach to children of most value is the means to find out for themselves, rather than depend on us to tell them what to think.

LESSON PLANS

Basically what I plan to have the students do is to read, discuss and write. The reading comes first, of course. We will read aloud part of the time in class, although much of the reading will be done at home because the two Wilder books are so long. Because I want the children to initiate the discussion concepts, the questions I would ask would be only to start a discussion going.

1. Reading and Sharing

How can the book become alive for the children? One of the ways I will use is role playing and acting out the story. The chapter on the first day of school for Laura and Mary is ideal for this because there are several characters. I would divide the class into four groups and tell them to present that chapter to the rest of the class. The students could choose any method they wanted, from writing down parts, to narrating while the others went through the motions, to creating their own modern dialogue. In this way, the children could compare and contrast not the quality of the performances and productions, but the emphasis and the focus. Which skit emphasized the conflict between Nellie and Laura? Which emphasized Laura's feelings about meeting new children and her fears? Which showed what went on in school? Were there other facets that could have been brought out? Usually there will be this difference in focus and as the children understand it, they also come to realize that more than one meaning or level is all right and even more interesting. A journal writing assignment or suggestion could be to remember back to their first day of school. What do they remember? How can Laura remember so much? What details does she include? What stands out in each student's memory? Can the students make a list of what they remember? What was the most important event of that first day of school? Do they remember friends they knew then?

As students read about the lives of Laura and Almanzo, the children of the frontier often seem removed from them. How can we bring them nearer or the students closer to a discovery of their own about likenesses and differences? One such exercise could be a collective one, a chance for the students to work together, to share ideas and to learn from each other. The students would be asked to create a story about a girl or boy who

lives in New Haven today. What are the hazards he or she faces today? What are the excitements, the joys, and the simple pleasures that he or she might have? What are some of the routines, the chores, the responsibilities and the problems that he or she would have to deal with? This is a group story, one that the class should plan orally and then work out details. The story can be acted out and discussed. Students in groups may even wish to write out chapters. The students should be able to see and sense for themselves that they are both similar to and different from Laura and Almanzo.

2. Writing

Journal writing will be a very important part of this unit, and actually part of my English class for the year. Journals are valuable records of student growth and development, not just in writing, but in self-awareness and willingness to express that self. My daughter is lucky enough to have kept journals in school from Grade 1 through 6, and it is fascinating to read and follow her development. Her growth in these journals, as a writer and as a young interested learner, strengthens my feelings about journal writing for my students, many of whom have never kept a journal.

Children care about writing when it is personal and interpersonal. Children may claim they have nothing to write about, but all children have memories, feelings, concerns and ideas. It is important for children to realize that their lives and feelings are worth writing and reading about. Because journals are personal logs, students become involved with them more fully. When children choose their form, voice and subject, they invest themselves, they become as personally responsible for their writing as they are for their reading and learning. It becomes important and meaningful to them. Children then become both readers and writers.

The time given for journal writing will vary of course, but children should be encouraged to write in journals at least three times a week. Having a regular time is best because the children can think about their writing and plan for it. Not all the journal writings of my students will be assigned. Many times the students will pick their own subject, but often students like the chance to react to something we have just read or discussed.

Beginning journal writing can be done by a technique called clustering. Clustering is a form of brain-storming similar to free association. It opens up the mind to all the possibilities that we can include. Too many times children say they don't know what to write about. Clustering is a first step in freeing the mind from putting up blocks. Usually it is easier to start with the person the student knows best, himself. In the middle of a page in his journal he writes "me" or his or her name and circles it. Then very quickly, he surrounds that circle with everything he does or is or can think of about himself to connect with that circle. One activity may branch off to another, in a linear connection. After a few minutes of this brainstorming, the students stop and look at their circles. They may see some other connections and relationships that they hadn't thought of. The students then use these circles to write about the central figure or topic in the circle.

(figure available in print form)

After clustering around a loved person such as the example above, the student starts to create sentences using each idea, or combining some. He may discard an idea or image because it doesn't fit. The student may think of even more ideas he can use as they flow naturally while he writes.

Students do not have to use clustering for every writing exercise, but they will find it helpful when they need to generate ideas or find inspiration. They can cluster around "school," "Laura," "grasshoppers," or fragments such as "I am afraid of," "In some of my worst nightmares," and "in some of my best dreams." Clustering can be particularly effective for sense images. Students could pick an image with great sensory appeal—a food, such as pizza, and write all the images that come to mind while trying to visualize, taste and smell the pizza.

3. Looking at the Past

One of the first activities students can become involved in is in recreating their own immediate past. One way to do this is by making a time line showing the events most important to the student. Although this may appear easy, sometimes students need some help in remembering.

Ideas to jog memories:

- Your very first memory
- Your first toys
- When you began school—Can you remember your teacher's name?
- The first book you read by yourself
- When you learned to ride a bike, whistle, play a musical instrument
- When you met your best friend
- When your first tooth fell out

Students may wish to try to create family trees and to try to learn as much as they can about their own family. They can start with their parents and ask questions about the past their own parents remember.

Types of questions that could stir memories are:

- Where were your mom and dad living when you were born?
- Did your father fight in any wars? Where were they?
- How old were you when I was born?
- Did your father have a car when you were young?
- What was your favorite food when you were my age?
- Can you remember your first television set? What programs were on then?
- Did your mom and dad ever talk about their parents and grandparents?
- Have you got any pictures of your parents? Grandparents?
- What are the names of your aunts, uncles and cousins?
- Where do they live? What was your father's work? Where did he work?

Photographs, documents, letters, family traditions, newspaper articles and clippings are all parts of the bits and pieces that make up a family history. Children may go as far as their interest and investigative ability takes them.

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Laura Ingalls Wilder Museums and Homesites

The Franklin County Historical Society and Museum

5 1 Milwaukee Street

Malone, New York 12953

Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, Inc.

Pepin, Wisconsin 54759

Little House on the Prairie, Inc.

Box 110

Independence, Kansas 67301

Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, Inc.

Box 344

DeSmet, South Dakota 57231

Laura Ingalls Wilder—Rose Wilder Lane Home and Museum

Mansfield, Missouri 65704

Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum and Tourist Center

Walnut Grove, Minnesota 56180

Laura Ingalls Wilder Park and Museum

Box 43

Burr Oak, Iowa 52131

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