



PHOTO: PATTY DOWD SCHMITZ

A modern-day photo shows rolling hills and prairie grasses that are features of the Ingalls' land along Corron Road in Plato Township, Kane County, Ill.

# Little House on the Illinois Prairie

BELOVED AMERICAN AUTHOR LAURA INGALLS WILDER'S  
CONNECTION TO NORTHERN ILLINOIS

IN HER SERIES of nine “Little House” books (and later, through the TV series of the same name), famed author Laura Ingalls Wilder chronicled the real-life westward journey of her pioneer family across the Kansas and South Dakota prairies in the 1870s. She brought to life, for generations of young boys and girls, the tall, waving grasses, hot prairie winds, and punishing blizzards that were the hallmark of this harsh, yet beautiful landscape.

But before Laura and her family took their covered wagon out West, it was the lush and colorful prairies of Illinois that first drew the Ingalls pioneers away from their farm in New York State,

then a part of the “civilized” East.

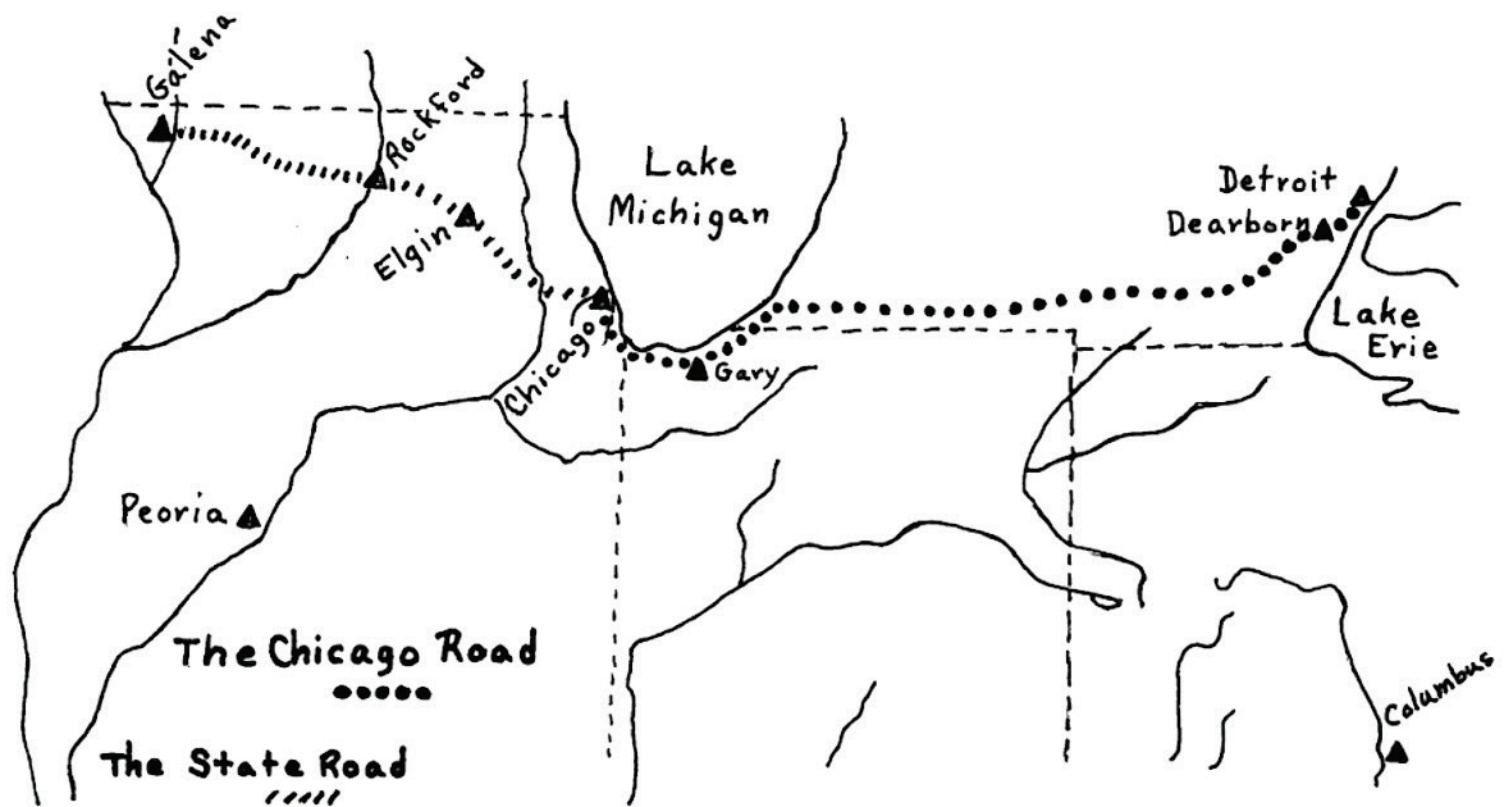
Unbeknownst to most followers and fans of the Little House books, Laura’s father, Charles “Pa” Ingalls, had a real-life connection to northern Illinois, where he lived for several years during his adolescence. Two of Charles’ uncles were among the very first settlers of Kane County in the late 1830s, and Charles’ father, Lansford (the “Grandpa” character in the Little House books), brought a young 9-year-old Charles and his siblings to join them shortly after, in about 1844. They lived just a few miles west of Elgin, between what is now Randall Road and Illinois Route 47, along Corron Road. Today, a small gravesite



PHOTO: PATTY DOWD SCHMITZ

Eliza Ann Ingalls’ grave is in a small family cemetery that was on the Ingalls property along Corron Road and it still remains today. Eliza was Charles’ first cousin and died at age 9 in 1850 of “inflammation of the brain”.





This illustration shows the old, 1830s "State Road" that the Ingalls family traveled between Chicago and Elgin before they settled just west of what is now Randall Road.

along Corron Road marks the grave of Eliza Ingalls, Charles' first cousin, who died of "inflammation of the brain" in 1850.

Lansford "Grandpa" Ingalls and his family lived here until the early 1850s, throughout Charles' adolescence. While living in the frontier lands of Illinois, Charles Ingalls developed a passion for the prairies and a wanderlust for travel, two traits that would last throughout his lifetime and that he would pass along to his equally wandering daughter, Laura, who would, at age 60, begin to chronicle them in a best-selling series of books.

### THE INGALLS FAMILY JOURNEY TO ILLINOIS

As the state of Illinois embarks upon a celebration of the bicentennial of its founding in 1818, it's an apt time to examine what drew Eastern settlers such as the Ingalls family to the newly open lands in Illinois during the 1830s and 1840s.

When Laura's father Charles was just a toddler living in New York State, the Panic of 1837 devastated the country with bank failures and rapid economic decline. Times were hard, and within a year after the Panic, Charles' father Lansford watched his two older brothers, James and Samuel, take their young families and move west toward the

frontier town of Chicago. There they settled on newly opened lands along the Fox River in Kane County, just west of Elgin, a thriving river town.

As was often customary at the time, several members of a family would blaze a trail west, then "send for" their relations in the East if they found the land to their liking. Thus, Lansford hung back for several years in New York while James and Samuel forged the path into Illinois in 1838. But by 1844, Lansford had decided to follow his brothers' lead. He and his wife, Laura Colby Ingalls (the "Grandma" character in the Little House books), gathered up their brood—now consisting of five children, including 9-year-old Charles—to begin their westward journey. They were not alone.

### THE ILLINOIS LAND RUSH

The many battles of the Blackhawk War of 1832 pushed Indians out of Illinois to resettle in Kansas, clearing the way for a rush into Illinois along with other surrounding lands. When planning their trip, the Ingalls family might have looked to several important publications of the time that were published just before the Panic of 1837, and encouraged Eastern settlers to migrate west to Illinois: John Mason Peck's "Gazetteer of Illinois"

(1834) and "Guide for Emigrants" (1836), as well as Samuel Mitchell's "Illinois in 1837". Pioneers of the day relied upon publications like these to make their way across the unknown frontier lands of the United States.



Charles "Pa" Ingalls in 1860. Laura's father developed wanderlust for travel and for the vast prairies during his adolescence spent on the prairies of Illinois.



Laura Ingalls Wilder



Rocky Ridge Farm

## A PRAIRIE AND PUBLISHING PIONEER

In Mansfield, Mo., pioneer girl Laura Ingalls Wilder would blossom into a highly accomplished contemporary woman of her time. When Laura, her husband Almanzo, and daughter Rose moved to Missouri in 1894, she began giving back to her community and eventually the world. Laura excelled as a parent, teacher, cook, journalist, farmer, activist, and a staunch democrat. She served as the secretary treasurer of the Mansfield Farmers Loan Association, processing more than a million dollars in government loans. It

is also here at Rocky Ridge Farm where Laura would become an internationally-acclaimed author and publishing pioneer with a series of children's books. Laura's life in Mansfield serves as an essential foreword to the stories she would come to tell about the pioneering life she led in her Little House books. A National Historic Landmark and a National Register of Historic Places site, the Laura Ingalls Wilder home in Mansfield, Mo., is preserved as a museum that is open to the public seasonally (reopens March 1, 2018). To learn more, visit [www.lauraingallswilderhome.com](http://www.lauraingallswilderhome.com).

To reach Illinois, most likely the Ingalls family would have driven their wagons from their home in Cuba, New York, to Buffalo, on the eastern shores of Lake Erie. There, they would have embarked upon a long steamship journey across the Great Lakes via Lake Erie and Lake Michigan, disembarking at Chicago. They would have then loaded their possessions into a wagon or stagecoach to follow what was then called the "State Road," a dirt trail that extended from Chicago through Elgin and Rockford to the booming mining town of Galena.

The Elgin area along the Fox River in Kane County was a natural stopping point on this route, as it was one long days' drive by wagon (40 miles) from Chicago. Many settlers, like the Ingalls families, decided to make Kane County their permanent home during the 1830s and 1840s, at least until the itch to move farther west took over. Others went on to Galena to try to find their fortunes.

Here in Kane County, they found some of the best farmland in the country and rivers and streams aplenty, all dotted with the magnificent oak forests common in our area, which provided much-needed shade and timber.

In 1834, John Mason Peck had written about this land in his "Gazetteer of Illinois":

*"In no part of the United States can uncultivated land be made into farms with less labor than in Illinois. An emigrant may purchase a quarter section for \$200, a proportionate supply of timbered and prairie land, and have a large farm under cultivation in a short time. His cattle, horses, and hogs will run upon the range around him, and find feed nine months in the year, and a small amount of labor will provide a supply of winter food. Hundreds of families, who have not the means to purchase, settle on public lands, make their farms and live unmolested. Any laboring man, with reasonable industry and economy, with a family, may arrive here without any capital, and in a half a dozen years be the owner of a good farm, with stock in abundance. The prairies and woodland would furnish range until his farm was made."*

When the Ingalls clan chose their homesteads in Plato and Campton (then called Fairfield) Townships in Kane County in the 1840s, they could not have made a better choice than the land where they staked their claim. Lying on

a section of beautiful, rolling farmland west of the Fox River and Randall Road where the Chicago Suburbs end and many of the original farms of Kane County remain, most of the Ingalls' land also remains untouched and in its natural state today, though it has been annexed by Elgin and is now owned by a developer.

The land lies on either side of Corron Road between Bowes Road and McDonald Roads. Two creeks, Bowes and Stony, frame the land to the north and to the south. The Ingalls family cemetery, where Charles' first cousin Eliza Ingalls is laid to rest, lies just to the east of Corron Road at Sturbridge Way. The cemetery is on private property but is tastefully maintained inside a white picket fence by the home's owners. It can clearly be seen from Corron Road up on the hill.

When Charles' family arrived here, the views they saw of their land are much the same as the views we can see today by standing on Corron Road and looking west. Beautiful rolling hills or "mounds" dot the landscape to the west, creating a serene effect that is stunning at sunset and that must have pleased them when they scouted this relatively flat land, looking for their homesteads.





In this novel authorized by the Little House Heritage Trust, Sarah Miller vividly recreates the beauty, hardship, and joys of the frontier in a dazzling work of historical fiction, a captivating story that illuminates one courageous, resilient, and loving pioneer woman Caroline Ingalls, “Ma” in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s beloved Little House books. The book was published in 2017, the 150th anniversary of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s birth.

During the six years that he spent on the Illinois prairies, young Charles “Pa” Ingalls would grow from a boy of 9 into a teenager of 15. He spent his time surrounded by a multitude of Ingalls uncles, aunts, and cousins, learning how to trap furs along Otter Creek and the Fox River; learning how to cultivate the land to grow corn, wheat, and oats; and learning how to build a log cabin to protect his family. He also cultivated his love of music, likely purchasing or being given his beloved and famous fiddle in the thriving town of Elgin, which had developed into an important commercial hub for watch companies, dairies, and even musical instruments.

### PRESERVING THE PRAIRIE PIONEER LIFE

In the early to mid-1850s, the Ingalls clan was ready to move once again. Lansford and his family picked up stakes and followed the Fox River north into Wisconsin, where they settled in the tiny town of Concord near Oconomowoc. There, a young Charles Ingalls met Caroline Quiner (“Ma”), and married her in 1860. Their daughter, Laura Ingalls Wilder, was born in Pepin, Wis., in 1867, and thus began the wandering pioneer journey that she would chronicle in her books more than 60 years later.

From his time in Illinois, Charles Ingalls learned to love the prairies, and this love would stay with him for the rest of his life. In Laura Ingalls Wilder’s first book, “Little House in the Big Woods”, the account of her family’s time in Northern Wisconsin, Laura regularly recounts Pa’s dislike of the vast forest and trees that he must grub to make a living on the land. He yearns to travel farther West, where the open prairies beckoned to him—the open prairies that he began to

love while growing up here in Illinois. U



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