On the Way Home: The Diary of a Trip from South Dakota to Mansfield, Missouri, in 1894 Study Guide

On the Way Home: The Diary of a Trip from South Dakota to Mansfield, Missouri, in 1894 by Laura Ingalls Wilder

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The book is a composite of two authors, Rose Wilder Lane and Laura Ingalls Wilder, a daughter-and-mother pair. The introductory chapter, by Rose Wilder Lane, establishes a setting in De Smet, South Dakota, and introduces the remainder of the book. The second chapter, by Laura Ingalls Wilder, is a day-by-day journal discussing events on a family relocation trip from De Smet to Mansfield, Missouri, during the summer of 1894. The third and final chapter, by Rose Wilder Lane, picks up the narrative where the journal leaves off and attempts to complete, or at least to round off, the journey. The voice and tone of Chapters 1 and 3 are similar while that of Chapter 2 varies. This is in part due to a different author, but is also due to the different method of construction, the bracketing chapters being narrative while the middle chapter is a reproduction of a journal.

The Wilder family, comprised of Laura, her daughter Rose, and her husband Almanzo, has encountered difficult economic times due to a combination of a national economic panic, a prolonged regional drought, and a bout of serious illness. Although Wilder's parents and aunts live in De Smet, Almanzo determines that the area is unsuitable for a long-term attempt at financial rehabilitation. Lured by photographs and letters telling of bounteous crops, the Wilders determine to relocate to Mansfield, Missouri—a place they refer to as the Land of the Big Red Apple. The family makes the voyage in companionship with another small group, the Cooley family. They set out with sufficient time to make the journey, relocate, and get established before winter arrives.

The journey itself is largely unremarkable. The group averages about sixteen miles of travel each day, spends Sundays resting, and passes through generally settled areas. There are a few minor mishaps with horses or wagon wheels, but nothing exceptionally difficult. Wilder keeps a daily journal in a small notebook and the entries are fairly short and generally consist of observations more than introspection. Throughout the trip Wilder notes crop conditions, water availability, the weather and temperature, the type and character of towns and residents, and the price of land and food. Little attention is paid to narrative structure or continuity, as would be expected in a journal.

Upon arriving in Mansfield Wilder discontinued her journal, but Lane picks up the narrative and relates how a suitable property was located and purchased. Subsequent homesteading activities followed to clear land, build structures, and establish a farm. Obviously backbreaking, the work continued without serious incident until the family indeed became established in a long-term locale. Thus, the entire adventure is highly interesting, very accessible, but largely unexceptional.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

The book is a composite of two authors, Rose Wilder Lane and Laura Ingalls Wilder, a daughter-and-mother pair. The introductory chapter, by Rose Wilder Lane, establishes a setting in De Smet, South Dakota, and introduces the remainder of the book. The second chapter, by Laura Ingalls Wilder, is a day-by-day journal discussing events on a family relocation trip from De Smet to Mansfield, Missouri, during the summer of 1894. The third and final chapter, by Rose Wilder Lane, picks up the narrative where the journal leaves off and attempts to complete, or at least to round off, the journey.

Chapter 1, authored by Rose Wilder Lane, presents a photograph of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Almanzo Wilder, shortly after their marriage in De Smet, South Dakota; and also a photograph of Lane, as an infant. Within the chapter are photographs of Lane's church class; Wilder and Almanzo as newlyweds; Wilder and Almanzo in 1894; a sewing box made by Almanzo; and Wilder's parents' house in De Smet. Lane provides Chapter 1 as a setting development to establish the subsequent diary entries in time and place. Note that the writing style of Chapter 1 is markedly different from that used later in the book, even by Lane, and she attempts to mimic the wonderment of an eight year old child commencing a voyage of change. For example, instead of reporting her parents sick with diphtheria, she reports them stricken with "diff-theer-eeah" (p. 3). Likewise she reminisces about learning of the three so-called Miss States, namely "Miss-issippi, Miss-consin [e.g., Wisconsin], and Miss-ouri" (p. 10). These construction devices make the introductory chapter accessible and intelligible as the viewpoint of a young child remembering a specific period in time.

Lane states that from c. 1884 to 1894 draught conditions existed in South Dakota. The prolonged draught caused crops to fail repeatedly, leading to widespread bankruptcy and foreclosure until, eventually, even the banks collapsed. From 1890 to 1894 a worldwide and national financial panic exacerbated the local situation in De Smet leaving many families without homes. The Wilders were severely impacted and decided to leave their relatives and journey to Mansfield, Missouri, and make a fresh start. Lane, then seven years old, was an accomplished reader, reading several levels above grade. She had lived with grandparents and aunts for several months during which her parents suffered through an attack of diphtheria that left her father crippled, or "stricken" (p. 5) as she puts it. Lane recalls some of her assigned homework as well as popular songs and establishes somewhat the scene of De Smet. Lane recounts Almanzo's fortunate selection for jury duty whereby he earned about seventy dollars over five weeks. By comparison, Wilder is reported routinely to have worked seventy-two hours a week as a seamstress for one dollar in pay. The Wilders have managed to save one hundred dollars cash for their trip; the funds are consolidated into a single one hundred dollar bill, which is secreted in a writing desk.

An acquaintance, Mr. Sherwin, had long ago relocated to Mansfield, Missouri, and since reported that it was a land of plenty. The Wilders referred to it as The Land of the Big Red Apple because of Sherwin's photographs of apple orchards. Another family, the Cooley family, has also been persuaded to relocate by Sherwin's photographs. The Wilder and Cooley families have determined to travel together. Almanzo has converted a two-seated hack into a type of covered wagon by removing the rear seat and building a square frame over the platform. The rig is painted shiny black and outfitted with black oilcloth blinds and stands in fairly obvious contrast to the more-conventional Conestoga wagons pictured in most pioneering artwork. The Cooley family, apparently better off financially, has two conventional covered wagons that are not fully described. The expedition uses horses to draw the conveyances. Wilder prepares for the journey by baking hard tack. Almanzo prepares to trade for food and assistance on the trip by purchasing a box of asbestos fire mats. The mats can withstand direct fire without damage and can be used to separate cooking pots from open flames, thereby eliminating burned food and so forth. They are considered to be a great technological advance and are only recently available on the market. The wagon is otherwise packed with conventional goods—bedding, a table, kitchen utensils, rope, and so forth. The expedition readies to leave in time to make the journey before winter sets in—and on July 17, 1894, the Wilder family and the Cooley family set out from De Smet as emigrants.

Chapter 2 - South Dakota

Chapter 2 - South Dakota Summary and Analysis

Lane reports that the contents of Chapter 2 were originally written "in a little 5-cent Memorandum book, writing with pencil on both sides of the pages" (p. 17). The chapter is presented verbatim as a daily journal, running from July 17, 1894, through August 30 of that year. The journal includes daily entries during the period indicated except for August 11—it is unclear whether the party traveled on that day or not. The contents report on the progress of a journey from De Smet, South Dakota, to Mansfield, Missouri, made by two families—the Wilder family and the Cooley family—traveling in three horse-drawn wagons. The contents are brief and contain mostly personal observations and reflection. From a historical perspective, the journal is useful because it communicates a vast amount of information about land and food prices, land availability, farming and weather conditions, and usual customs. As would be expected for material of this type, the journal entries are sparse and somewhat dry reading. In this they contrast markedly with the surrounding material, and yet a professional writer who is consistent in style and observation writes them.

The entire journey spans some 650 miles and took forty-five days. The party did not travel on the six Sundays and thus made a rate of travel of approximately sixteen and one half miles a day. Most days consisted of travel from about 8:00 AM to an unspecified time in the late afternoon which may be assumed to have been about 4:00 PM, yielding eight hours of travel in a day and indicating a wagon speed of slightly more than two miles per hour. Today, of course, the entire voyage could be made in a single day of automobile travel. Although the Wilder and Cooley families make the journey together, they do not remain in lockstep the entire way. Often, the two family groups will briefly separate to pursue individual tasks, and later rejoin. For the most part, however, they travel together and apparently camp next to each other on every night of the journey. The voyage through South Dakota lasts about one week.

The families start out in the early morning as typical for the entire journey. They soon leave the county and continue on through scorched and parched fields. The grain is only a few inches high and Wilder estimates it will harvest only 1-½ bushels to the acre. The wind is hot and dry. The next days bring much of the same, and most farmers have already put in next year's crop without bothering to harvest the current year's crop. A rain shower comes after a few days but it is short and light. Wilder records the day as "cool and pleasant" (p. 20) but also gives the temperature as 92º F, indicating a relative degree of coolness. One day a man informs them that his neighbor won't allow people to camp on his property, so they move on. Given the huge numbers of immigrants and unemployed wanderers, the man's reticence is understandable. The horses perform well though occasionally sustaining minor cuts on barbed wire. Usually, the party waters the horses at a public well or open river. Throughout McCook County, Wilder records crops gradually improve and wells become more common and more reliable—but conditions are still very harsh. In Hutchinson County the trend continues and the party

encounters a large and established gathering of Russian immigrants living in adobe houses. Through Hutchinson County the temperature is about 100º and land is valued at slightly more than $17 an acre. Occasionally the horses will run or other minor troubles prevent an early departure.

In Yankton County the party approaches the James River—Wilder often refers to it as the Jim River. Near the river trees grow but appear scorched and stunted. Crops are vastly improved from those in De Smet, but they are still not considered good crops and they appear small, sparse, and scorched. Near the river the party buys fish from boys—a large fish costs a dime. The party spends their first Sunday resting, and bathes in the James River. The current is fairly swift so the bathers take the precaution of tying a rope around their waist. The Russian settlers travel to the party's temporary camp and watch everything. Wilder comments at length upon the dress and habits of the Russians, writing one of the longest journal entries. They exchange pails of fresh milk for one of Almanzo's fire mats. The Russians have a large dog that impresses the party, but they will not part with any puppies. The next day, the party leaves early and crosses the James River. Wilder comments on the beauty of the scene behind them, though even the cottonwood trees seem stunted and burned. By early morning, it is 101º in the shade. Wilder reports that land here costs about $21 an acre, doubtlessly more because of the proximity of reliable water. The party passes through Yankton and observes the large insane asylum—Almanzo desires to tour it but Wilder refuses. For all its impressive size, Yankton is devoid of medicine, food and fodder but Wilder manages to get her revolver repaired of an unreported problem. Hay costs $9 per ton in Yankton. The wind in Yankton transiently is so severe that the wagon must be pointed into the wind and the rear wheels lashed to stakes in the ground to prevent it from being flipped over or carried away. The Missouri is a mile wide and muddy, and the party traverses it on a ferry. Wilder is pleased that the horses behave across the ferry. This section of Chapter 2 begins with a photograph of De Smet, South Dakota c. 1900 and concludes with a map of the entire journey—the map is quite useful for those unfamiliar with the areas discussed.

Chapter 2 - Nebraska

Chapter 2 - Nebraska Summary and Analysis

The voyage through Nebraska lasts about two weeks. When near rivers, the traveling party frequently supplements their food by fishing—sometimes they catch fish and sometimes they don't. Wilder comments on the strange attraction large bodies of water—such as the Missouri River—have for nearly everyone. Across the river the party sees oak trees and a variety of wild fruit trees. Away from the river, however, Nebraska runs into repetitive bluffs and Wilder finds them desolate, monotonous, and unappealing. Almanzo finds Nebraska to be unappealing, too. The temperature climbs to 110º in the shade and the hot wind is persistent, blowing thick dust over everything. The party typically camps in a ravine or hollow between bluffs to escape some of the force of the wind. The towns in Nebraska are fairly close and the group often passes through two in a day, making haste to get through the windy, hot, dusty area. While traveling, they very often meet other groups of travelers, some quite large. All of them are going to and fro across the middle states, and many come from Missouri, which they pronounce to be no good. One family returning from Missouri characterizes it as a backward land of hovels—"Why, hardly any of the houses have windows in them, just holes, and lots of the women have never seen a railroad train nor an organ" (p. 37). Land in the area around Beldon, Nebraska, sells for $25 an acre. The party is generally treated kindly through the area, and it common for them to receive a pail of fresh milk or other food items. Cooley argues that the party should have taken a more western route to avoid many hills and the hot, stifling wind.

Nebraska does not have county line signs, and from time to time there is some minor confusion about what county the party is in. By Stanton County, the fields are often fenced and the party is pleased to see fat cows, good corn crops, and orchards of apple trees. Even though the extensive corn crops appear good to the travelers from De Smet, the local farmers tell them that without rain soon the crops will wither and be lost. Even so, Wilder marvels at a single ear of corn that measures 10" in length and 7 ½" in circumference. However, she also records the temperature at 126º in the shade! A few days later they indeed pass fields of withered and abandoned corn. The party arrives in Stanton and Wilder observes that it is almost entirely populated by Germans—even the signs are in German. The Elkhorn River is crossed on a bridge. On July 27th the party maneuvers for some time before camping to avoid a camp of horse traders. While Wilder does not explain why, it is apparent that the horse traders were deemed poor neighbors. Washing is done as needed. One day, the Cooley's dog is discovered to be missing. The party continues on while Mr. Cooley backtracks to retrieve the dog. In his absence, Almanzo determines to take a ridge road that winds back and forth but does not go up and down—this, he feels, spares the horses. Temperatures drop below one hundred degrees and the party reaches the Shell River and makes a nice camp sight.

In Schuyler the tires must be re-set and while waiting Wilder meets and befriends a Canadian woman from the West Indies. They swap stories until it is time to go. Later,

the party crosses the Platte River on a bridge that is half a mile long; the book includes a photograph of the wooden structure. On the far side of the river Wilder and Almanzo spend some time having fun and exploring, and she records several minor observations. The party then reaches Lincoln and Wilder marvels at the hugeness of the city. She comments that a newfangled motorcar spooks one of the Cooley's horses. Leaving Lincoln, the party turns off the road and proceeds along a telegraph route to Beatrice, passing through many orchards. The temperatures drop to 74º but on the 5th of August Wilder records that the thermometer has been lost. From Beatrice the roads are excellent and the travelers make good progress. Orchards become increasingly common and the party finally reaches the Nebraska-Kansas State line on August 7.

Chapter 2 - Kansas

Chapter 2 - Kansas Summary and Analysis

The voyage through Kansas lasts about two weeks and textually is the longest segment of the journal running to about twenty pages. Wilder finds Marysville, Kansas, a beautiful town with impressive structures; the book includes a photograph of the town. The roads in Kansas are good and they travel 27 miles one day. The drive through Kansas is initially pleasant as the party travels through elm, oak, ash, hickory, butternut, and walnut trees. Wild fruit is plentiful and welcome. They pass over the Blue River a few times, once on a 300' long bridge. Land in the area sells for $15 to $15 per acre. Soon, however, the roads return to hills and through Pottawatomie County land drops to $4 per acre. Near Louisville they travel through the driest land yet encountered. They pass so many emigrant wagons that they don't even stop to talk to several of them. Wilder finds Saint Mary's a strange and Catholic town though the people are very hospitable. In Rossville the train spooks Prince, the horse, and he runs through several obstacles before calming down—fortunately he is not injured. The wind is persistent and the dust is omnipresent and oppressive, being up to 5" deep on the roadways. August 11th is omitted form the journal—the only day during the voyage without an entry.

Topeka impresses Wilder with electric streetcars and motorcars; a photograph of the town is included in the book. She comments at length about the amazing properties of an asphalt road—she calls it "asphaltum pavement" (p. 58). She states that it is much easier on the horses' feet than the stony trails they have been following. They take a minor detour to view the Kansas Capitol and Wilder makes a passing remark about the war in the legislature—presumably referring to the formation of the Wyandotte Constitution. The Kansas River is crossed on an iron bridge that is about 450' long. In mid-August Wilder finds a black-and-tan dog in the road. The dog is lost and inquiries find no owner, so Wilder adopts it. At first shy, it grows into a reliable guard dog and she names it Fido. The dog completes the journey with the family though it is seldom mentioned again in the journal. In Douglas County Almanzo sells and trades numerous fire mats. Land in the area costs $20 to $40 per acre. Coal sells for $1.25 per ton. Castor Beans are sold for about $1.50 per bushel. The party passes through North Ottawa and South Ottawa, divided by the Maradegene River, and Wilder cryptically comments on the political machinations resulting in Ottawa becoming the Franklin County seat. The horses are re-shod in Lane and Wilder notes that black people have become common. At this point, Wilder begins to comment on the purchase price of established farms—one nearby costs $4,300 for 150 improved and good acres with a nice house. Sunday is spent repacking and relaxing. In Mound City tomatoes cost 30 cents a bushel. Near the Missouri border they meet some people leaving Missouri; they do not like the area and state '"Right there is the place to go if man wants to bury himself from the world and live on hoecake and clabber."' (p. 67), apparently intended as a damming condemnation. Hoecake is a type of thin corn meal cake, easy to prepare but not particularly desirable, clabber is a type of curdled milk somewhat like yogurt,

with a strong and sour flavor. Thus, Missouri is apparently condemned as a place without genteel food.

The party arrives at Fort Scott, the last Kansas city on the voyage. There they find vast numbers of emigrants going to all parts of the Midwest. Although the city is busy, the land around it is often unworked—Wilder assumes the locals are shiftless. Almanzo inspects much of the land and announces it to be good; the locals respond by saying there is no economy and crops raised cannot be sold. Coal, which "is lying around on top of the ground and cropping out of every bank" (p. 70) sells for $5 per bushel, probably about 75 pounds. Near Douglas County coal sold for $1.25 per ton—probably a long ton at 2,240 pounds. Thus, it seems easily-available coal in Fort Scott sells for about $160 per ton, or nearly 130 times as much as it brings about one hundred miles away where it must be mined. Either Wilder has reported erroneously, a transcription error has occurred, or the economy of Fort Scott is out of balance. Further, just a few hours out of town coal is delivered to the house for $1.25 a ton. In Fort Scott the Wilders receive three letters, two of them from their family in De Smet. Unsurprisingly, the US Mail has outpaced the Wilder and Cooley families on the trip from De Smet to Fort Scott. Land in the area costs from $10 to $25 an acre, depending on the state of improvement. Wilder is impressed passing through the last of the Kansas cornfields, but Missouri, just ahead, is more beautiful yet.

Chapter 2 - Missouri

Chapter 2 - Missouri Summary and Analysis

The voyage through Missouri lasts about one week. The tone of the journal changes completely after the party passes into Missouri. Everything up to Missouri is described factually as Wilder experiences it. Across the Missouri State Line, however, Wilder views the world through rose-tinted glasses. Descriptions become longer and more superlatives are used; everything in Missouri is better: "Exactly at 2:24 ¾ P.M. we crossed the line into Missouri. And the very first cornfield we saw beat even those Kansas cornfields" (p. 71). When inquiring about Mansfield—their predetermined destination—a man calls it "one of the finest countries in the world" (p. 71). Liberal, one of the first towns in Kansas, is declared the nicest small city of the trip. While all this may be true, it is interesting to see how Wilder's portrayal changes in fundamental ways in this concluding segment of the journal.

The Missouri road is lined on both sides with shady, sturdy oak trees. The weather is cool, the roads are good, and the cities are pronounced nice, clean, and hospitable. The land has many brooks and good soil is common. Ominously, they see few schoolhouses. For the first time since departing South Dakota a heavy afternoon rain falls. The roads become muddy. In South Greenfield the Wilders speak with land agents and learn that Sherwin was in town only a week ago. He had traveled to the Mansfield area but returned to Cedar County to settle. The land agents state that Wright County contains much good land too. Wilder finds the Ozarks beautiful and compelling. The first Sunday in Missouri is spent almost entirely writing letters home expounding on the beauty of Missouri. Almanzo receives an offer for employment, but the family pushes on. At Ash Grove, twenty-pound watermelons cost only five cents. Springfield is found to be a thriving city with fine houses and excellent businesses. The Wilders spend most of the afternoon shopping. Later, Wilder comments at some length on the beauty and spectacle of Jones Spring, which pours clear water out of a large cave. The farther the party travels into Missouri the more they like what they see—Wilder calls it "simply glorious" (p. 77), and Almanzo states "'This is beautiful country'" (p. 77). Land in the region can be found for as little as $10 per acre. Wilder reflects on earlier negative comments about Missouri spoken by various emigrants and dismisses them as erroneous, writing "Oh no, we are not out of the world nor behind the times here in the Ozarks" (p. 79). She fancifully imagines she hears the cows playing a popular song with their cowbells. Wild fruit is abundant and diverse—Wilder does not even know what a few of them are. Split, corded, and delivered seasoned oak fetches one dollar a cord.

On the final day of the journey the party travels upward on rough roads, passing through vast farms and orchards. At 11:30 AM they arrive in Mansfield in a line of ten immigrant wagons. Mansfield's population is about 350, has a train depot, and is the terminus of two stagecoach lines that run away to neighboring county seats. The only deficiency is that of a Congregational church—though the town features a Methodist church and a Presbyterian church. There is a school, two general stores, two drug stores, a bank, a

blacksmith, a stable, and other businesses. There are many big houses, and a flourmill near a millpond. Almanzo looks over a house on the first day but decides against it. The book includes a photograph of Mansfield taken about 1894, showing either a Memorial Day or a Fourth of July parade. The journal ends at this point.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3, authored by Rose Wilder Lane, attempts to conclude the biographical and autobiographical narrative established in the move related during Chapter 2. The Wilder and Cooley families arrive in Mansfield without incident and live out of their wagons while arrangements are made. The wagons are located close to woods and Lane, Paul, and George, find the woods intriguing and exceptionally fun-filled. Lane spends a considerable amount of time considering the experience of being a child in the woods. During this time, Almanzo worked with various land agents to locate a suitable farm that could be purchased with a one hundred dollar down payment.

Finally a suitable property is located and Almanzo and Wilder dress in their best clothing before visiting the land agent office and closing on the purchase. Their final act is to retrieve the one hundred dollar bill from the lap desk, but to everyone's horror it cannot be found—the money is gone. Lane is the primary suspect and her parents apparently feel that she has lost the money by accident. In any case, it cannot be found and the Wilders travel to town to relay the bad news. The chapter presents two photographs of the lap desk that once held the money. The Wilders wonder what to do; Almanzo frets and fumes and Wilder determines to get to work with what is available. For several days they subsist on wild fruit and then they suddenly gather in their belongings and set out—Lane then learns that they had located the money, slipped into a seam in the desk. They have purchased the house and move to the property.

Lane describes the layout of the town in some detail. Their house is about a mile or so out of town, and consists of many acres of uncleared timber. The purchase included hundreds of apple seedlings that need to be replanted to form an orchard, as well as a simple house with an unglassed window. The book presents a photograph of the land after most of it had been cleared of trees. Two additional photographs show the log cabin with Almanzo and a horse team and Wilder standing in a ravine. In the ensuing days Almanzo begins to clear the land while Wilder makes house. Lane is assigned chores and carries water from a creek. A photograph shows Almanzo at a neighbor's cabin.

Soon after arriving, Almanzo meets a destitute family who is verging on starvation. He enlists the family's father's help in clearing land and the two men haul the wood to town and sell it, splitting the proceeds of fifty cents. The unnamed man remains for several months and proves to be a reliable and hard worker. When winter arrives he leaves, his family's situation much improved. This episode is perhaps the most intriguing element of the book. Almanzo continues alone and over the years clears the land, designs and builds a house, and becomes successful. Lane attends school and grows up as the mortgage is paid down and, finally off. The apple orchards mature. The book closes with photographs showing the farm at the time of publication, Lane as a child with a donkey

named Spookendyke, and home currently preserved by the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association of Mansfield, Missouri.

Characters

Laura Ingalls Wilder

Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867 - 1957) is the author of Chapter 2 of the text. Born in Wisconsin, Laura's father moved several times before settling in De Smet in the Dakota Territory when Wilder was about twelve-years-old. Wilder attended and taught school in De Smet until marrying Almanzo James Wilder in 1885. She gave birth to Rose in 1886 and an unnamed son who died soon after birth in 1889. The Wilders left South Dakota in 1890 and lived in Minnesota for about a year and then moved briefly to Florida. They returned to De Smet in 1892. Almanzo worked as a day laborer and Wilder worked at a dressmaker's shop. In 1894 the Wilders again left De Smet, traveling to Mansfield, Missouri, and establishing a farm, which would eventually prove profitable. Their final departure from De Smet was caused by a combination of negative influences, including a national economic panic, a prolonged regional drought, and a serious bout of illness with diphtheria.

Wilder provides scant autobiographical data in the book, confining her journal entries primarily to observations made during the journey. The chapters authored by Lane provide much more biographical data. Wilder is presented as a fully capable and resolute woman who looks toward the future and brushes aside unfortunate incidents as insignificant to future development. She works hard throughout and plans well for the future. Lane states that Wilder's hair was so long that it brushed the ground and, even when tightly braided dropped to her waist. Wilder is presented in several photographs in the book and is a striking woman with a penetrating gaze. Indeed, it is easy to see within her countenance the steadfast heroine embodied in her semi-auto-biographical later works that made her so famous.

Rose Wilder Lane

Rose Wilder Lane (1886 - 1968) is the author of Chapters 1 and 3 of the text. Born in De Smet, South Dakota, Lane moved with her family several times before living again in De Smet and then leaving for Mansfield, Missouri, on the journey recorded in the book. Lane was the first, and only surviving, child of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Almanzo Wilder and is about eight years old during the voyage described in the book. Lane attended school in De Smet and attended high schools in Mansfield and Louisiana. In her latter life, not discussed in the book, she became famous as an author, journalist, and political theorist. Lane's autobiographical contributions to the book consist entirely of recollections of her childhood and her parents' early lives.

Lane held her parents in high regard, portraying her father as an unstoppable workaholic driven to self-earned success, and her mother as an incredibly beautiful and cultured young woman with determination and grit. Both portrayals are accurate. Lane appears to have easily made friends and had a keen desire for education, reading

several grades above her age. Aside from establishing a love of adventure and nature, Lane provides scant autobiographical details in her portions of the book.

Almanzo (Manly) James Wilder

Almanzo James Wilder (1857 - 1949), usually referred to as "Manly" in the text, is the husband of Laura Ingalls Wilder and the father of Rose Wilder Lane. He was about ten years older than Wilder at their marriage—a custom age disparity common enough as the time to be unremarkable. Through various circumstances largely unaddressed within the book, Almanzo's fortunes are not good and he borders on insolvency in De Smet, South Dakota. Even though surrounded and supported by Wilder's natal family, Almanzo desires to make a fresh start in a better place and fixes upon Mansfield, Missouri, as offering extended promise.

Just prior to the journey, Almanzo and Wilder had contracted diphtheria and suffered a serious bout of illness. During the early stages of recovery Almanzo's stubborn streak caused him to arise and pursue hard work well before such a course of action was prudent; Almanzo relapsed and was sick for far longer than Wilder. Almanzo's relapse caused permanent neurological debilitation and he walked with a noticeable limp throughout the remainder of his life.

Almanzo is presented in the text as hard working and intelligent, fully devoted to succeeding on his own merits and through physical labor. Throughout the early portions of the book Almanzo works at various odd jobs including a long stint on a jury. He was apparently quite handy as he converted a two-seated hack into a traveling wagon and made various other improvements to the conveyance. On the journey, Almanzo performs admirably and meets every situation with calm assurance. Upon reaching Mansfield, Almanzo located and purchases a farm and then sets about clearing it. Demonstrating a truly generous spirit, he enlists the unneeded but useful assistance of another man whose family is bordering on starvation and splits his own wages with the man for nearly an entire work season.

Mr. and Mrs. Cooley

Mr. and Mrs. Cooley are the traveling companions of the Wilder family on the journey described in the book. Mr. and Mrs. Cooley are entirely dependable and appear to be very typical for the time and place described. They are apparently wealthier than the Wilders, because they have two wagons and teams, and the wagons are apparently purpose-built instead of extemporized. They also have a dog and during the trip make or attempt to make several purchases which the Wilders eschew. In Mansfield, the Cooley family settles near the Wilder family until permanent residences can be arranged. Mr. Cooley quickly apprentices his boys to the local hotel and then locates good farmland. Aside from incidental data, little biographical material is presented for either Mr. or Mrs. Cooley.

Paul and George Cooley

Paul is oldest of the two Cooley brothers, and is ten-years-old at the time of the journey; George is younger and his age is not established except that he is older than Rose Wilder Lane. Lane describes Paul as a big boy and states that he never lies. Paul drives the second Cooley wagon for most of the trip, though Mrs. Cooley drives the second wagon through towns and over bridges—which greatly annoys and somewhat shames Paul. Paul proves an entirely dependable youth. At Mansfield during the first few weeks, Lane and Paul are inseparable in their exploration of the woods. Later, Paul and George are apparently apprenticed to be hoteliers and go to live in the Mansfield Hotel. Little substantive biographical details are offered.

Grandpa, Grandma, Aunt Mary, Aunt Carrie, and Aunt Grace

The five enumerated relatives represent the natal family of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Rose Wilder Lane was raised for approximately one year by her grandparents and various aunts, so even at the age of seven departing was difficult. Little biographical data are offered for any of the individuals. Grandpa and Grandma are apparently well situated in De Smet and have somehow managed to survive the years of financial hardship and draught; a photograph of their house is included in the book. Mary is noted as having beautiful blue eyes, but is also blind. Lane notes that Mary knits well, however. The family writes letters to the Wilders and they are received in Fort Scott, Kansas.

Mr. Sherwin

Mr. Sherwin is a family acquaintance who lived for some time in De Smet before moving to Cedar County, Missouri. He subsequently sends back enthusiastic letters with photographs of orchards and other abundant crops. The photographs cause the Wilders and others to refer to Missouri as The Land of the Big Red Apple. Although Sherwin does not appear directly in the journal, he is mentioned in the August 25, 1894 entry as having judged Cedar County land superior to Wright County land.

The Russians

Early in the journey the traveling party spends a Sunday in the locale of a large Russian settlement, and they attract the attention of the local immigrants. The Russians are quite fascinating to Laura Ingalls Wilder who describes their dress and behavior in detail and at considerable length. The Russians don't speak much English and communication is therefore limited. The Russians brings gifts of fresh milk and fresh-baked biscuits. The biscuits are, curiously, transported inside of a Russian woman's blouse and held against her bare skin. This method of transportation is apparently typical, because they attempt to have Wilder receive them into her own blouse—she declines. Later, Wilder discards

the biscuits with the rather cryptic comment that they could not be used. The Russians are just one of the groups of people discussed in the journal, though certainly one of the most colorful.

Land Agents

Various land agents are discussed in the text; land agents were, at the time of the book, equivalent to today's real estate brokers. The various land agents appear to all be hard-working and honest men. Almanzo Wilder deals with land agents soon after arriving in Missouri and then more extensively upon reaching Mansfield, Missouri. The land agents work with Almanzo to locate an affordable property. They are otherwise not discussed in the book.

The Thin, Scraggly Workingman

Shortly after arriving at their newly-purchased property, the Wilder family is greeted by a thin and haggard looking man that asks for work. When informed that no work is available, he is persistent. He haltingly informs the Wilder family that he, his wife, and their five children, are homeless, penniless, destitute, and verging on starvation—and he does not think he can make the one-mile journey into town. Almanzo reacts with a truly expansive and generous spirit, and divides the Wilder family's own meager rations into equal parts, giving the man bacon and cornmeal. As arranged but not as expected, the man returns early the next morning and works hard all day long at clearing timber from the Wilder land. For the next several months, the man works alongside Almanzo and proves to be utterly dependable and hard-working. For his assistance, Almanzo splits the proceeds of selling firewood. Rose Wilder Lane reports going to school with the children but having no substantive recollection of them in her latter life. As winter comes on, the man and his family depart, their situation much improved because of Almanzo's kindness.

Objects/Places

De Smet, South Dakota

De Smet, South Dakota, was Larua Ingalls Wilder's home for several years and was the birthplace of Rose Wilder Lane. It is described in some detail during Chapter 1 of the book, and forms the initial setting of the text. De Smet is described as economically depressed and suffering from a prolonged drought. There are many emigrants, including the Wilder and Cooley families.

Mansfield, Missouri

Mansfield, Missiouri is also known—to the Wilders—as the Gem City of the Ozarks and the Land of the Big Red Apple. It was Rose Wilder Lane's hometown during her childhood years and is the destination of the journey described in the book. The town is described in considerable detail during Chapter 3 of the book, and forms the final setting of the text. Mansfield is described as a booming town with many modern conveniences.

The Hundred-Dollar Bill

Almanzo and Laura Ingalls Wilder manage to save one hundred dollars during their time in De Smet. They earn the living doing difficult jobs—Almanzo performs day labor and Wilder works long hours as a seamstress. The money is changed into a single one hundred dollar bill that is hidden in a lap desk and thereafter not discussed. When the Wilders attempt to buy property near Mansfield the hundred dollar bill is discovered to be missing. It is apparently discovered some days later upon a closer re-inspection of the lap desk. Not mentioned in Wilder's journal, the money forms an integral narrative component of Lane's contributions to the book.

Rocky Ridge Farm

The Wilder family eventually purchases a farm after their journey from De Smet. The farm comes to be known as Rocky Ridge Farm and includes land on a gentle slope in the Ozark Mountains. When purchased, the farm is timbered and slowly cleared by Almanzo and at least one other assistant.

Coxey's Army

Coxey's Army was a colloquial phrase used to denote large numbers of unemployed drifters who apparently were moving from the west toward Washington, D.C., to demand improved economic conditions. Like any large body of people, Coxey's Army was composed of some good people and some bad people, but in general they were not

adverse to stealing food or belongings. They were excluded from government establishments, generally by armed troops, and Lane reports they were frustrated in their attempts to reach Washington, D.C., by deliberate transportation stoppages. Coxey's Army was named for Jacob Coxey, putatively a demonstration organizer.

Asbestos Fire Mats

Almanzo purchases a box of fire mats and uses them to trade along the trip. They are a light gray board about the size of a cooking pot and fabricated from asbestos bound with a tin binding. They are used to sit between flames and cooking pots to prevent food from burning. They were quite new at the time of the journal and most people had not seem them before. Many were incredulous that the material would not burn.

The Thermometer

Wilder has a thermometer on the early half of the voyage and frequently records the temperature which usually hovers about one hundred degrees—once spiking to about one hundred twenty degrees. Just after passing through Lincoln, Nebraska, however, the thermometer is lost.

Pet, Little Pet, and Prince

Pet and Prince are the Wilder's two draft horses. Pet is entirely reliable but Prince spooks once, running through a barb wire fence twice but surprisingly not being seriously injured. Prince is apparently a good-looking horse and is commented on by passersby. Little Pet is Pet's colt and walks beside the wagon. On several occasions, Wilder rides Pet bareback during the evenings.

Fido

Fido is a small black-and-tan dog that Wilder finds on the road in mid-August. The dog is thin and forlorn and inquires do not find an owner. Wilder adopts the dog and gains its trust. Fido proves to be a reliable guard dog and completes the voyage with the family.

Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay

Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay is a vaudeville song that was very popular at the time of the novel. Originally performed c. 1891, the song had become the veritable hit of the day. On several occasions it is referred to somewhat as the height of fashion. Upon arriving in Missouri, Wilder concludes the land to be current with the times when she imagines she hears the cows using their cowbells to tap out the melody.

Themes

Travel

The core of the book is a day-by-day journal focusing on the experiences of a group of families traveling through the Midwest. The journal features observations and commentary on travel nearly to the exclusion of personal introspection. As such, it reads much live a travelogue or a triptych and is entirely devoid of maudlin commentary common to some diaries. The book covers a period of about two months and notes miles traveled, bridges and rivers crossed, towns traversed, and the local road conditions obtaining. Wilder notes other families on the road, frequently offering the count of emigrant wagons passed during the day. She comments on the inhabitants and appearances of towns passed through, the types and health of crops seen, and the cost of land and food in the areas traversed. In this sense, the major theme of the book is the theme of travel and indeed the very point of the journal is to document the travel. The introductory and concluding chapters contribute heavily to this theme by establishing the sense of place for the "there and then" and the "here and now" for, respectively, the place of departure and the place of arrival. In the book, the travel is the theme and the destination is the purpose. Note that Wilder's journal begins on the first day of travel and ends on the last day of travel and makes scant mention of prior events or expected future events. Travel is thus the dominant theme of the book.

Crops

The stated rationale of relocating from De Smet, South Dakota, to Mansfield, Missouri, is to seek a sustainable economic situation for the Wilder family through the process of farming. To this end, Wilder notes almost daily the type and condition of crops seen on the journey. She provides exacting details such as the height of crops, the types of soil and water available, the yield-per-acre of crops, the prices crops bring at market, and the cost of various types of farmland. Indeed, Wilder's journal is very focused on crops and farming possibilities and the tone of her focus indicates a sincere desire to find a place that will yield enough crops of whatever kind to support the family economically. Specific crops discussed are oats, wheat, and fruit orchards—predominantly apple orchards. Additionally, wild fruits are commented on and often sampled. Obviously, for a farmer during the period of the book the sustainability of crops and their yield per acre are of major import. The lack of profitable crops, after all, is what spurred the Wilder family to move from South Dakota to Missouri.

The destination of Missouri was selected because of information that available land there was exceptionally fertile. The family refers to Missouri as The Land of the Big Red Apple because of its abundant apple orchards. Indeed, when the Wilders finally purchase a family farm they select a location that already has hundreds of apple seedlings prepared for final transplanting into orchards. It is interesting to note that as apples do not grow breed-true from seedlings, the Wilder apple orchard was certainly

destined to produce a single marketable commodity—hard apple cider (if they produced edible apples for fruit their trees would not have been seedlings but grafts).

Relocating

A major theme of the book is that of relocating; in the instance from De Smet, South Dakota, to Mansfield, Missouri. The purpose of the family move was to seek economic security in a place known for yielding good crops and offering available and affordable land. The destination is openly vituperated by several travelers met on the road, but this does not overtly worry Wilder who had determined that Missouri must be a suitable place at any hazard. Thousands of families relocated during the same time period, across the same roads, and for the same or similar reasons; Wilder notes meeting many hundreds of individuals immigrating to locations with perceived advantages.

The theme of relocation is strongly developed in Chapter 3 of the book. Mansfield is described fully, with the town layout specified and even some stores enumerated. The family farm's location relative to the town is given and the character of the family farm is developed in some detail. This is all provided as exciting new information obtained only upon arrival. The fact that the destination became the successful family home for many, many years adds to the retrospective excitement and enthusiasm about arriving and relocating. For anyone who has ever moved to a distant and strange place, the book's development of the theme of relocating will be enjoyable and familiar.

Style

Perspective

The book presents a complex perspective that is not immediately apparent because of the overtly simple construction of the various chapters. The construction of Chapter 2 is fairly simple; it presents a personal journal written day-by-day and is purportedly free of any revision except minor formatting for publication such as spelling and punctuation standardization. Chapters 1 and 3, however, are more complicated. First, they are written by a different author but one who is obviously involved in the legacy of the family. This subjective viewpoint is obviously appropriate to auto-biography but is not commonly found in biography; nevertheless it is acceptable. It is also complicated by the fact that the text was written some fifty years after the events described and relies entirely upon the memory of the author—who was a very young child at the time. The author acknowledges this, but also seeks a style that mimics the interpretation of a young child—the style is somewhat artificial and also occasionally clashes with the information presented.

All difficulties aside, the perspective used is one that is generally accepted for auto-biography and biography, and is easily accessible. The narrative complexity is masked by simple language and construction, and the book is suitable for a wide range of readers.

Tone

The book's tone varies considerably across the three chapters. The initial chapter presents a lighthearted tone that is somewhat at odds with the serious financial situation being faced by the family. This is done deliberately to create the sense that a child is narrating the events and establishing the setting. In brief, the picture that emerges is one of difficulty being adroitly managed by an extended family and support network. The tone of the second chapter—the journal segment—is an abrupt shift. The narrative elements and style of construction used in the first chapter are not present and instead Wilder uses a typical day-by-day format to enter observations and make minor commentary. It is obvious that Wilder intends the journal to a type of travelogue or triptych more than a diary; entries are brief and fact-filled, noting temperatures, places, distances, and the cost of land and food. Special emphasis is placed on the cost of land and the condition of crops—details of obvious import to a family relocating to farmland in a distant state. Wilder makes no attempt to fuse the journey into an over-arching narrative form and probably never intended the journal to be presented to a wider audience.

Chapter 3 returns to a narrative style with several elements common to fiction. These include character development, setting development, and an attempt to forge meaning out of life experience. Lane is obviously aware of her mother's profoundly significant

literary contribution and seeks to place the journal within that framework. To this end, she uses an accessible and appropriate tone to describe her natal family and the locale of her upbringing.

Structure

The 120-page text is divided into three enumerated chapters. Chapters 1 and 3 are authored by Rose Wilder Lane and serve as bookends to the actual journal, which comprises Chapter 2 and is authored by Laura Ingalls Wilder, Rose's mother. Chapter 1 takes place almost entirely in De Smet, South Dakota, while Chapter 3 is set almost entirely in Mansfield, Missouri. Both of these chapters are identified as 'settings', and their function is to establish a sense of time and place in which the journal—Chapter 2—can be interpreted. Chapter 2, as expected, begins in De Smet and ends in Mansfield and encompasses roughly two months of time, 650 miles of travel, and four states traversed. As a journal, it is free of typical narrative construction and instead presents a day-by-day travelogue. Wilder confines herself almost entirely to making observations which typically include temperature, weather, crop condition, and the prices of land and food.

The two authors of the book provide remarkably distinct narrative styles. While Wilder is factual and confines herself to observable phenomena, Lane is much more expansive and uses several construction elements more commonly found in fiction than autobiography. She attempts to establish the journey as a significant part of a larger family story—indeed it was—and she uses several techniques to portray herself as a child at a specific period of life. Indeed, the otherwise simple text presents a complex construction and structure that is accessible but also open to critical exploration.

Quotes

For seven years there had been too little rain. The prairies were dust. Day after day, summer after summer, the scorching winds blew the dust and the sun was brassy in a yellow sky. Crop after crop failed. Again and again the barren land must be mortgaged, for taxes and food and next year's seed. The agony of hope ended when there was no harvest and no more credit, no money to pay interest and taxes; the banker took the land. Then the bank failed. (p. 1)

Around and under these pictures on beautifully shiny paper I read that The Gem City of the Ozarks was in The Land of the Big Red Apple in Missouri. Now I knew three Miss states: Miss-issippi, Miss-consin, and Miss-ouri. Paul said, scornfully, that it wasn't Miss-consin, it was Wis-consin, but Wis didn't make sense to me.
Paul and George Cooley were coming with us to The Land of the Big Red Apple. Paul was oldest, George was next, and I was only the youngest but they had to let me boss because I was a girl. We had always known each other. Their father had two big teams and two big covered wagons, and Paul would be allowed to drive one of them; he said his father said he could. I did not want to believe this but I knew that Paul would never lie. He was a big boy, too, going on ten years old. (p. 10)

July 19
It rained in the night but did not blow. Nothing in the wagons got wet except one horse blanket. We had fried chicken for breakfast and got a late start at 9:15. Weather is cool and pleasant, wind in the north and dust laid by the rain. Groves are thick and look so nice but farmers are mowing their grain for hay.
We found a good camping place down in a ravine, out of the wind and nearly out of sight. Cooked our supper and ate it. As we were washing the dishes a man came and said if the man that owned the place saw us he would make us trouble, and as he lived just over the hill we thought we would move across the road and be all right there. So we hitched up and drove across. It was a nice camping place. In the evening two men came up to talk. The thermometer stood at 92º.
Mrs. Cooley and I went to a house to buy milk. It was swimming with children and pigs; they looked a good deal alike. (pp. 20-21)

July 22
...
When we were leaving a woman opened the frontof her dress and took out a baking of cold biscuits from right against her bare skin and gave them to me. The man told me to put them in my shirt, but I carried them in Manly's clean handkerchief instead. The man said it was hard for people to cook when travelling. They are very kind people. A pity to waste the biscuits but we could not eat them. (p. 27)

July 24
...
We have been going over the bluffs, the most desolate bare hills I ever saw, without houses or fields or trees and hardly any grass. Manly said he would just as soon own the whole of Nebraska as not, if it were fenced. Judging from all he has ever seen of the state it might do for pasture if he did not keep much stock. So far Nebraska reminds me of Lydia Locket's pocket, nothing in it, nothing on it, only the binding round it.
We meet covered wagons going north. Manly talked to a couple of men traveling from Kansas to South Dakota. They said there is nothing in Kansas.
The hens are laying yet. Temperature 110º. (pp. 34-35)

Sunday, July 29
Cooked breakfast and bathed and lay around in the shade of the wagons. Temperature 96º. Rested all day and went to bed early.
July 30
Started at 8 and crossed the line into Colfax County twenty minutes later. Went through Leigh at 10 o'clock, a lively little town that has not outgrown country.
Crops are still the same but roads are not so hilly.
We camped on the bank of Shell Creek in the woods. A lovely place, even better than our camp on the Jim River. The children and Mrs. Cooley and I went wading. The bank was so steep that we had to steady each other down, and pull and push each other up. We paddled and played in the rippling cool water. Rose sat down in it, splash! We found two large live clams. (pp. 41-42)

August 12
Today was not as monotonous as common. 3 emigrant wagons passed us going south, and one going north. Manly and Mr. Cooley took turns talking to the people. Five wagons were going to Missouri or Arkansas, one to Arkansas, one to Indian Territory.
We had a good camping place on a little headland by the river. I rode Little Pet awhile, bareback, not going anywhere—she was turned loose to feed. Two emigrants talked to me, a young man and his mother in their wagon. They used to live in Missouri, went to Colorado, are now going back to Missouri to stay. (p. 55)

August 22
A good start at 7:15 and this morning we are driving though pretty country. Crops look good. Oats are running 30 to 60 bushels to the acre, wheat from 10 to 30. All the wood you want can be had for the hauling and coal is delivered at the house for $1.25 a ton. Land is worth from $10. an acre up, unimproved, and $15. to $25. when well improved, 12 miles from For Scott.
Exactly at 2:24 ¾ P.M. we crossed the line into Missouri. And the very first cornfields we saw beat even those Kansas cornfields.
We met 7 emigrant wagons leaving Missouri. One family had a red bird, a mockingbird, and a lot of canaries in cages hung under the canvas in the wagon with them. We had

quite a chat and heard the mockingbird sing. We camped by a house in the woods. (pp. 70-71)

Finally my mother said, "Well." She meant, No use crying over spilled milk. What can't be cured must be endured. My father told her not to blame herself, it wasn't her fault. Carefully she peeled off her thin kid gloves. She turned them right-side-out finger by finger, smoothed them. She said that he'd better go explain to the banker.
Somehow the worst was over when he tried to put it off, saying something might turn up, and she flared out that he knew as well as she did, "nothing turns up that we don't turn up ourselves." Then she told me to run away and play, and I remembered the unwashed dishes. She had forgotten them. (p. 94)

Nothing more was to be seen there. But I hadn't noticed that in the narrow room the logs of the wall around the door were papered with newspapers. Large black letters in curleycues stopped me; I stood and read: "Carter's Little Liver Pills," and a philosophical question which I kept trying and failing to answer for so long afterward that I have never forgotten it: What is life without a liver?
That problem was too much for me; for the moment, I postponed the struggle with it. (p. 103)

The man began to talk quietly, slowly, almost dreamily. They had to get something to eat, he said. His wife and five children were down in the wagon by the creek. They had been traveling all summer looking for work. They could not go on any longer. This was the third day they'd had nothing to eat. He had to get work so he came up the wagon tracks—They couldn't go on without something to eat.
He stopped, there was nothing more to say. Nothing to do. Now I knew what happened when you had nothing to eat. What happens is, nothing.
Suddenly, my father was talking and moving quickly, not deliberate at all. He said he needed help making wood, provided the man would come help him tomorrow, he'd divide what little—He was reaching into the wagon. At sight of the slab of salted fat pork my mother cried out, "Manly, no! We've got Rose." He paid no attention. The butcher knife in his hand cut through the white meat. He opened a corner of the sack and poured cornmeal into the little tin pail. He was asking, did the man have a good ax? He said they'd start early, at sun-up, put in a good day's work and if the wood sold he'd treat the man right. Bring an ax if he had one. Be sure to bring back the pail. That's all right, don't mention it, see you tomorrow. (pp. 106-107)

She woke from the dream with a start and a Goodness! it's chore-time! I'd better take the milk pail to my father, she said, and feed the hens before they went to roost; don't forget to fill their water-pans, and bring in the eggs; be careful not to break one. Oh, now that we had the cow, we'd have a treat for Sunday supper, French toast with that wild honey, to surprise my father. How wonderful it was to have a cow again.
While I scattered corn for the hens, fetched water from the spring to fill their pans, and

hunted for eggs that the broody hens hid in the haymow, in the straw stack, and even in the wild grasses, I heard her whistling in the cabin, getting supper. (p. 120)

Topics for Discussion

Imagine traveling from De Smet, South Dakota, to Mansfield, Missouri in the present day. How long would the approximately 650 mile trip take in a private automobile? Contrast the experience of the Wilder and Cooley families with a typical trip today.

The book begins with a 'setting' and ends with another 'setting'; the settings bracket the journal entries. Discuss the narrative function of the two settings. Explain how they work to establish the journal in space and time.

Of the various states traveled through—South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri—which did you find to be the most interesting? The least interesting? Why?

When Wilder enters Missouri she begins to use many superlatives and positive words in her writing (for example, finest, nicest, clearest, prettiest, contented, luscious, lavishness). Do you think that Missouri really was the nicest, finest, prettiest place in the world? Or was Wilder finding what she wanted to find? Discuss how anticipation and expectation can influence one's mental state.

The Wilders had a hidden $100 bill that they intended to use to purchase land in Missouri. Upon arriving, however, the money could not be found. Later on, Wilder told Lane that the money had been located upon a second search. Do you think that the money was ever actually located? Or was Wilder trying to smooth over a difficulty with the least amount of contention possible?

In Missouri, Almanzo assisted a destitute man and his family by offering him food and, later, employment. What would likely have happened to the man and his family if Almanzo had not been so charitable?

People often speak of the past as a simpler time. After reading the journal entries, do you think that living in the past really was simpler and easier? Why or why not?

Within the book roles and expectations are often set by a person's gender—for example, George Cooley drove a wagon but Mrs. Cooley generally did not. When strangers were passed on the road Almanzo or Mr. Cooley addressed them while the women did not. Upon reaching Missouri, Wilder focused on cleaning out the cabin while Almanzo focused on clearing land. Discuss how gender roles have changed since the time of the book.

The book offers several examples of class—from the destitute unemployed man befriended by Almanzo to the wealthy store owners in Lincoln, Nebraska. Discuss how class functions within society—especially when society is seriously impacted by negative economic times. For example, who travels from place to place during times of crisis?

Wilder notes passing through Russian settlements and German settlements on the voyage, and also mentions meeting colored (e.g., African American) people in various towns. Why do you think that Russians and Germans had ethnic population concentrations while African Americans were dispersed throughout the population? Discuss how race functions within the book.

What was your favorite part of the book?

Upon arriving in Mansfield, Wilder notes with approval that there are two churches—Methodist and Presbyterian—and notes with some disappointment that there is not a Congregationalist church. What other religious references can you find within the book? After reading the book, would you consider religion to be an important part of the life of the Wilder family?