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opening extract from

Little House on the Prairie

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Egmont

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Laura Ingalls Wilder

Illustrated by Garth Williams

EGMONT

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I

Going West

A LONG TIME AGO, when all the grandfathers and grandmothers of today were little boys and little girls or very small babies, or perhaps not even born, Pa and Ma and Mary and Laura and Baby Carrie left their little house in the Big Woods of Wisconsin. They drove away and left it lonely and empty in the clearing among the big trees, and they never saw that little house again.

They were going to the Indian country.

Pa said there were too many people in the Big Woods now. Quite often Laura heard the ringing thud of an axe which was not Pa's axe, or the echo of a shot that did not come from his gun. The path that went by the little house had become a road. Almost every day Laura and Mary stopped their playing and stared in surprise at a wagon slowly creaking by on that road.

Wild animals would not stay in a country where there were so many people. Pa did not like to stay, either. He

liked a country where the wild animals lived without being afraid. He liked to see the little fawns and their mothers looking at him from the shadowy woods, and the fat, lazy bears eating berries in the wild-berry patches.

In the long winter evenings he talked to Ma about the Western country. In the West the land was level, and there were no trees. The grass grew thick and high. There the wild animals wandered and fed as though they were in a pasture that stretched much farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. Only Indians lived there.

One day in the very last of the winter Pa said to Ma, 'Seeing you don't object, I've decided to go see the West. I've had an offer for this place, and we can sell it now for as much as we're ever likely to get, enough to give us a start in a new country.'

'Oh, Charles, must we go now?' Ma said. The weather was so cold and the snug house was so comfortable.

'If we are going this year, we must go now,' said Pa. 'We can't get across the Mississippi after the ice breaks.'

So Pa sold the little house. He sold the cow and calf. He made hickory bows and fastened them upright to the wagon box. Ma helped him stretch white canvas over them.

In the thin dark morning Ma gently shook Mary and Laura till they got up. In firelight and candlelight she washed and combed them and dressed them warmly. Over their long red flannel underwear she put wool petticoats and wool dresses and long wool stockings. She put their coats on them, and their rabbit-skin hoods and their red yarn mittens.

Everything from the little house was in the wagon, except the beds and tables and chairs. They did not need to take these, because Pa could always make new ones.

There was thin snow on the ground. The air was still

and cold and dark. The bare trees stood up against the frosty stars. But in the east the sky was pale and through the grey woods came lanterns with wagons and horses, bringing Grandpa and Grandma and aunts and uncles and cousins.

Mary and Laura clung tight to their rag dolls and did not say anything. The cousins stood around and looked at them. Grandma and all the aunts hugged and kissed them and hugged and kissed them again, saying good-bye.

Pa hung his gun to the wagon bows inside the canvas top, where he could reach it quickly from the seat. He hung his bullet-pouch and powder-horn beneath it. He laid the fiddle-box carefully between pillows, where jolting would not hurt the fiddle.

The uncles helped him hitch the horses to the wagon. All the cousins were told to kiss Mary and Laura, so they did. Pa picked up Mary and then Laura, and set them on the bed in the back of the wagon. He helped Ma climb up to the wagon seat, and Grandma reached up and gave her Baby Carrie. Pa swung up and sat beside Ma, and Jack, the brindle bulldog, went under the wagon.

So they all went away from the little log house. The shutters were over the windows, so the little house could not see them go. It stayed there inside the log fence, behind the two big oak trees that in the summertime had made green roofs for Mary and Laura to play under. And that was the last of the little house.

Pa promised that when they came to the West, Laura should see a papoose.

'What is a papoose?' she asked him, and he said, 'A papoose is a little, brown, Indian baby.'

They drove a long way through the snowy woods, till they came to the town of Pepin. Mary and Laura had seen it once before, but it looked different now. The door of the

store and the doors of all the houses were shut, the stumps were covered with snow, and no little children were playing outdoors. Big cords of wood stood among the stumps. Only two or three men in boots and fur caps and bright plaid coats were to be seen.

Ma and Laura and Mary ate bread and molasses in the wagon, and the horses ate corn from nosebags, while inside the store Pa traded his furs for things they would need on the journey. They could not stay long in the town, because they must cross the lake that day.

The enormous lake stretched flat and smooth and white all the way to the edge of the grey sky. Wagon tracks went away across it, so far that you could not see where they went; they ended in nothing at all.

Pa drove the wagon out on to the ice, following those wagon tracks. The horses' hoofs clop-clopped with a dull sound, the wagon wheels went crunching. The town grew smaller and smaller behind, till even the tall store was only a dot. All around the wagon there was nothing but empty and silent space. Laura didn't like it. But Pa was on the wagon seat and Jack was under the wagon; she knew that nothing could hurt her while Pa and Jack were there.

At last the wagon was pulling up a slope of earth again, and again there were trees. There was a little log house, too, among the trees. So Laura felt better.

Nobody lived in the little house; it was a place to camp in. It was a tiny house, and strange, with a big fireplace and rough bunks against all the walls. But it was warm when Pa had built a fire in the fireplace. That night Mary and Laura and Baby Carrie slept with Ma in a bed made on the floor before the fire, while Pa slept outside in the wagon, to guard it and the horses.

In the night a strange noise wakened Laura. It sounded

like a shot, but it was sharper and longer than a shot. Again and again she heard it. Mary and Carrie were asleep, but Laura couldn't sleep until Ma's voice came softly through the dark. 'Go to sleep, Laura,' Ma said. 'It's only the ice cracking.'

Next morning Pa said, 'It's lucky we crossed yesterday, Caroline. Wouldn't wonder if the ice broke up today. We made a late crossing, and we're lucky it didn't start breaking up while we were out in the middle of it.'

'I thought about that yesterday, Charles,' Ma replied, gently.

Laura hadn't thought about it before, but now she thought what would have happened if the ice had cracked under the wagon wheels and they had all gone down into the cold water in the middle of that vast lake.

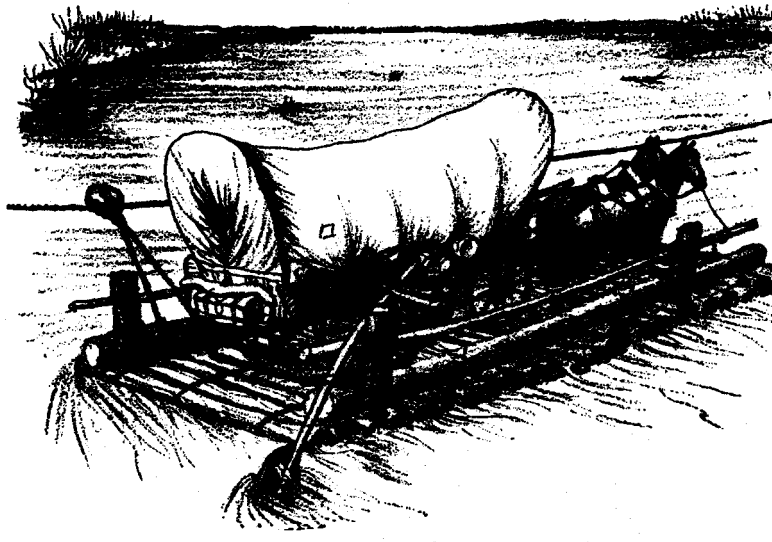
'You're frightening somebody, Charles,' Ma said, and Pa caught Laura up in his safe, big hug.

'We're across the Mississippi!' he said, hugging her joyously. 'How do you like that, little half-pint of sweet cider half drunk up? Do you like going out west where Indians live?'

Laura said she liked it, and she asked if they were in the Indian country now. But they were not; they were in Minnesota.

It was a long, long way to Indian territory. Almost every day the horses travelled as far as they could; almost every night Pa and Ma made camp in a new place. Sometimes they had to stay several days in one camp because a creek was in flood and they couldn't cross it till the water went down. They crossed too many creeks to count. They saw strange woods and hills, and stranger country with no trees. They drove across rivers on long wooden bridges, and they came to one wide yellow river that had no bridge.

That was the Missouri River. Pa drove on to a raft, and



they all sat still in the wagon while the raft went swaying away from the safe land and slowly crossed all that rolling muddy-yellow water.

After more days they came to hills again. In a valley the wagon stuck fast in deep black mud. Rain poured down and thunder crashed and lightning flared. There was no place to make camp and build a fire. Everything was damp and cold and miserable in the wagon, but they had to stay in it and eat cold bits of food.

Next day Pa found a place on a hillside where they could camp. The rain had stopped, but they had to wait a week before the creek went down and the mud dried so that Pa could dig the wagon wheels out of it and go on.

One day, while they were waiting, a tall, lean man came out of the woods, riding a black pony. He and Pa talked awhile, then they went off into the woods together, and



when they came back, both of them were riding black ponies. Pa had traded the tired brown horses for those ponies.

They were beautiful little horses, and Pa said they were not really ponies; they were western mustangs. 'They're strong as mules and gentle as kittens,' Pa said. They had large, soft, gentle eyes, and long manes and tails, and slender legs and feet much smaller and quicker than the feet of horses in the Big Woods.

When Laura asked what their names were, Pa said that she and Mary could name them. So Mary named one, Pet, and Laura named the other, Patty. When the creek's roar was not so loud and the road was drier, Pa dug the wagon out of the mud. He hitched Pet and Patty to it, and they all went on together.

They had come in the covered wagon all the long way from the Big Woods of Wisconsin, across Minnesota and Iowa and Missouri. All that long way, Jack had trotted under the wagon. Now they set out to go across Kansas.

Kansas was an endless flat land covered with tall grass blowing in the wind. Day after day they travelled in

Kansas, and saw nothing but the rippling grass and the enormous sky. In a perfect circle the sky curved down to the level land, and the wagon was in the circle's exact middle.

All day long Pet and Patty went forward, trotting and walking and trotting again, but they couldn't get out of the middle of that circle. When the sun went down, the circle was still around them and the edge of the sky was pink. Then slowly the land became black. The wind made a lonely sound in the grass. The camp fire was small and lost in so much space. But large stars hung from the sky, glittering so near that Laura felt she could almost touch them.

Next day the land was the same, the sky was the same, the circle did not change. Laura and Mary were tired of them all. There was nothing new to do and nothing new to look at. The bed was made in the back of the wagon and neatly covered with a grey blanket; Laura and Mary sat on it. The canvas sides of the wagon-top were rolled up and tied, so the prairie wind blew in. It whipped Laura's straight brown hair and Mary's golden curls every-which-way, and the strong light screwed up their eyelids.

Sometimes a big jack rabbit bounded in big bounds away over the blowing grass. Jack paid no attention. Poor Jack was tired, too, and his paws were sore from travelling so far. The wagon kept on jolting, the canvas top snapped in the wind. Two faint wheel tracks kept going away behind the wagon, always the same.

Pa's back was hunched. The reins were loose in his hands, the wind blew his long brown beard. Ma sat straight and quiet, her hands folded in her lap. Baby Carrie slept in a nest among the soft bundles.

'Ah-wow!' Mary yawned, and Laura said: 'Ma, can't

we get out and run behind the wagon? My legs are so tired.'

'No, Laura,' Ma said.

'Aren't we going to camp pretty soon?' Laura asked. It seemed such a long time since noon, when they had eaten their lunch sitting on the clean grass in the shade of the wagon.

Pa answered: 'Not yet. It's too early to camp now.'

'I want to camp, now! I'm so tired,' Laura said.

Then Ma said, 'Laura.' That was all, but it meant that Laura must not complain. So she did not complain any more out loud, but she was still naughty, inside. She sat and thought complaints to herself.

Her legs ached and the wind wouldn't stop blowing her hair. The grass waved and the wagon jolted and nothing else happened for a long time.

'We're coming to a creek or a river,' Pa said. 'Girls, can you see those trees ahead?'

Laura stood up and held to one of the wagon bows. Far ahead she saw a low dark smudge. 'That's trees,' Pa said. 'You can tell by the shape of the shadows. In this country, trees mean water. That's where we'll camp tonight.'



2

Crossing the Creek

PET AND PATTY began to trot briskly, as if they were glad, too. Laura held tight to the wagon bow and stood up in the jolting wagon. Beyond Pa's shoulder and far across the waves of green grass she could see the trees, and they were not like any trees she had seen before. They were no taller than bushes.

'Whoa!' said Pa, suddenly. 'Now which way?' he muttered to himself.

The road divided here, and you could not tell which was the more-travelled way. Both of them were faint wheel tracks in the grass. One went towards the west, the other sloped downward a little, towards the south. Both soon vanished in the tall, blowing grass.

'Better go downhill, I guess,' Pa decided. 'The creek's down in the bottoms. Must be this is the way to the ford.' He turned Pet and Patty towards the south.



The road went down and up and down and up again, over gently curving land. The trees were nearer now, but they were no taller. Then Laura gasped and clutched the wagon bow, for almost under Pet's and Patty's noses there was no more blowing grass, there was no land at all. She looked beyond the edge of the land and across the tops of trees.

The road turned there. For a little way it went along the cliff's top, then it went sharply downward. Pa put on the brakes; Pet and Patty braced themselves backward and almost sat down. The wagon wheels slid onward, little by little lowering the wagon farther down the steep slope into the ground. Jagged cliffs of bare red earth rose up on both sides of the wagon. Grass waved along their tops, but nothing grew on their seamed, straight-up-and-down sides. They were hot, and heat came from them against Laura's face. The wind was still blowing overhead, but it did not blow down into this deep crack in the ground. The stillness seemed strange and empty.

Then once more the wagon was level. The narrow crack down which it had come opened into the bottom lands. Here grew the tall trees whose tops Laura had seen from the prairie above. Shady groves were scattered on the rolling meadows, and in the groves deer were lying down,

hardly to be seen among the shadows. The deer turned their heads towards the wagon, and curious fawns stood up to see it more clearly.

Laura was surprised because she did not see the creek. But the bottom lands were wide. Down here, below the prairie, there were gentle hills and open sunny places. The air was still and hot. Under the wagon wheels the ground was soft. In the sunny open spaces the grass grew thin, and deer had cropped it short.

For a while the high, bare cliffs of red earth stood up behind the wagon. But they were almost hidden behind hills and trees when Pet and Patty stopped to drink from the creek.

The rushing sound of the water filled the still air. All along the creek banks the trees hung over it and made it dark with shadows. In the middle it ran swiftly, sparkling silver and blue.

'This creek's pretty high,' Pa said. 'But I guess we can make it all right. You can see this is a ford, by the old wheel ruts. What do you say, Caroline?'

'Whatever you say, Charles,' Ma answered.

Pet and Patty lifted their wet noses. They pricked their ears forward, looking at the creek; then they pricked them backward to hear what Pa would say. They sighed and laid their soft noses together to whisper to each other. A little way upstream, Jack was lapping the water with his red tongue.

'I'll tie down the wagon-cover,' Pa said. He climbed down from the seat, unrolled the canvas sides and tied them firmly to the wagon box. Then he pulled the rope at the back, so that the canvas puckered together in the middle, leaving only a tiny round hole, too small to see through.

Mary huddled down on the bed. She did not like fords;

she was afraid of the rushing water. But Laura was excited; she liked the splashing. Pa climbed to the seat, saying, 'They may have to swim, out there in the middle. But we'll make it all right, Caroline.'

Laura thought of Jack and said, 'I wish Jack could ride in the wagon, Pa.'

Pa did not answer. He gathered the reins tightly in his hands. Ma said, 'Jack can swim, Laura. He will be all right.'

The wagon went forward softly in mud. Water began to splash against the wheels. The splashing grew louder. The wagon shook as the noisy water struck at it. Then all at once the wagon lifted and balanced and swayed. It was a lovely feeling.

The noise stopped, and Ma said, sharply, 'Lie down, girls!'

Quick as a flash, Mary and Laura dropped flat on the bed. When Ma spoke like that, they did as they were told. Ma's arm pulled a smothering blanket over them, heads and all.

'Be still, just as you are. Don't move!' she said.

Mary did not move; she was trembling and still. But Laura could not help wriggling a little bit. She did so want to see what was happening. She could feel the wagon swaying and turning; the splashing was noisy again, and again it died away. Then Pa's voice frightened Laura. It said, 'Take them, Caroline!'

The wagon lurched; there was a sudden heavy splash beside it. Laura sat straight up and clawed the blanket from her head.

Pa was gone. Ma sat alone, holding tight to the reins with both hands. Mary hid her face in the blanket again, but Laura rose up farther. She couldn't see the creek bank. She couldn't see anything in front of the wagon but water

rushing at it. And in the water, three heads; Pet's head and Patty's head and Pa's small, wet head. Pa's fist in the water was holding tight to Pet's bridle.

Laura could faintly hear Pa's voice through the rushing of the water. It sounded calm and cheerful, but she couldn't hear what he said. He was talking to the horses. Ma's face was white and scared.

'Lie down, Laura,' Ma said.

Laura lay down. She felt cold and sick. Her eyes were shut tight, but she could still see the terrible water and Pa's brown beard drowning in it.

For a long, long time the wagon swayed and swung, and Mary cried without making a sound, and Laura's stomach felt sicker and sicker. Then the front wheels struck and grated, and Pa shouted. The whole wagon jerked and



jolted and tipped backward, but the wheels were turning on the ground. Laura was up again, holding to the seat; she saw Pet's and Patty's scrambling wet backs climbing a steep bank, and Pa running beside them, shouting, 'Hi, Patty! Hi, Pet! Get up! Get up! Whoopsy-daisy! Good girls!'

At the top of the bank they stood still, panting and dripping. And the wagon stood still, safely out of that creek.

Pa stood panting and dripping, too, and Ma said, 'Oh, Charles!'

'There, there, Caroline,' said Pa. 'We're all safe, thanks to a good tight wagon-box well fastened to the running-gear. I never saw a creek rise so fast in my life. Pet and Patty are good swimmers, but I guess they wouldn't have made it if I hadn't helped them.'

If Pa had not known what to do, or if Ma had been too frightened to drive, or if Laura and Mary had been naughty and bothered her, then they would all have been lost. The river would have rolled them over and over and carried them away and drowned them, and nobody would ever have known what became of them. For weeks, perhaps, no other person would come along that road.

'Well,' said Pa, 'all's well that ends well,' and Ma said, 'Charles, you're wet to the skin.'

Before Pa could answer, Laura cried, 'Oh, where's Jack?'

They had forgotten Jack. They had left him on the other side of that dreadful water and now they could not see him anywhere. He must have tried to swim after them, but they could not see him struggling in the water now.

Laura swallowed hard, to keep from crying. She knew it was shameful to cry, but there was crying inside her. All the long way from Wisconsin poor Jack had followed them so patiently and faithfully, and now they had left

him to drown. He was so tired, and they might have taken him into the wagon. He had stood on the bank and seen the wagon going away from him, as if they didn't care for him at all. And he would never know how much they wanted him.

Pa said he wouldn't have done such a thing to Jack, not for a million dollars. If he'd known how that creek would rise when they were in midstream, he would never have let Jack try to swim it. 'But that can't be helped now,' he said.

He went far up and down the creek bank, looking for Jack, calling him and whistling for him.

It was no use. Jack was gone.

At last there was nothing to do but to go on. Pet and Patty were rested. Pa's clothes had dried on him while he searched for Jack. He took the reins again, and drove uphill, out of the river bottoms.

Laura looked back all the way. She knew she wouldn't see Jack again, but she wanted to. She didn't see anything but low curves of land coming between the wagon and the creek, and beyond the creek those strange cliffs of red earth rose up again.

Then other bluffs just like them stood up in front of the wagon. Faint wheel tracks went into a crack between those earthen walls. Pet and Patty climbed till the crack became a small grassy valley. And the valley widened out to the High Prairie once more.

No road, not even the faintest trace of wheels or of a rider's passing, could be seen anywhere. That prairie looked as if no human eye had ever seen it before. Only the tall wild grass covered the endless empty land and a great empty sky arched over it. Far away the sun's edge touched the rim of the earth. The sun was enormous and it was throbbing and pulsing with light. All around the

sky's edge ran a pale pink glow, and above the pink was yellow, and above that blue. Above the blue the sky was no colour at all. Purple shadows were gathering over the land, and the wind was mourning.

Pa stopped the mustangs. He and Ma got out of the wagon to make camp, and Mary and Laura climbed down to the ground, too.

'Oh, Ma,' Laura begged, 'Jack has gone to heaven, hasn't he? He was such a good dog, can't he go to heaven?'

Ma did not know what to answer, but Pa said: 'Yes, Laura, he can. God that doesn't forget the sparrows won't leave a good dog like Jack out in the cold.'

Laura felt only a little better. She was not happy. Pa did not whistle about his work as usual, and after a while he said, 'And what we'll do in a wild country without a good watchdog I don't know.'