

Lessons in Liberty from Laura Ingalls Wilder

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AMERICA IS A NATION obsessed with its founders. Histories of the Revolution and biographies of its leaders have been consistent bestsellers for decades; a few years ago, HBO's miniseries on the life of John Adams was an unlikely pop-culture craze. The most relevant form of this founder-worship is surely the Tea Party: From Gadsden-flag bumper stickers to lawmakers' frequent homages to the founding era, the movement has rekindled in some corners of our politics a devotion to the Constitution and its framers.

This popular enthusiasm for the revolutionary era is surely salutary. The men who forged our nation exhibited extraordinary courage and a genius that has stood the test of time; their accomplishments are worthy of remembrance and honor. Yet there is a risk in our veneration of the founders as well: They are the easy Americans to love, having thrown off the yoke of a detested oppressor and insisted on the promise of liberty. And at a moment when our own government seems to overstep its proper bounds, we have come to think that our time demands the type of response theirs did—and so look to the revolutionary model to guide our actions today.

But the task before today's Americans is not to launch a new order. We are called, rather, to live out the liberty the founders made possible for us. The challenge of self-government, after all, is a long-term one: Simply to shake off tyranny—be it hard or soft—is not enough. As Edmund Burke noted in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, “The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk

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congratulations which may be soon turned into complaints.” In other words, attaining—or reclaiming—freedom is only the beginning of the story. The founders themselves understood as much; Benjamin Franklin famously told a woman who asked what type of government had been settled upon at the Constitutional Convention, “A republic, madam, if you can keep it.” The essence of our freedom, then, is the task of maintaining it—exercising liberty constructively, responsibly, in order to preserve it for ourselves and our heirs.

This is a much more subtle and difficult challenge. Success in this endeavor doesn’t involve spectacular gestures like throwing tea into Boston Harbor or signing a Declaration. It isn’t marked by a clear beginning and end. And it isn’t carried out by a small band of extraordinary heroes whose antics are well-sung. Rather, it happens, for the most part, invisibly, almost unconsciously—in the quiet patterns of the everyday lives of free, self-governing people.

In America, the essential ingredient for preserving and living out our freedom has been self-reliance—the heart and soul of self-government. Critics since the ancient Greek philosophers have warned of democracy’s tendency to enable the many to take from the few and, in the process, to undermine citizens’ capacities for virtuous independence. Throughout our history, however, Americans have insisted that our peculiar spirit of self-reliance would counteract that tendency, and so make possible a virtuous republic. The maintenance of our liberty has therefore rested on each citizen’s striving to provide for himself and his family through his own labor; at the same time, it has rested on citizens’ coming together to provide directly, and of their own initiative, for common needs and wants. In our society rooted in the promise of self-government, the endurance of freedom depends on each citizen’s deep desire to avoid being beholden to, reliant on, and thus reigned over by others.

Unfortunately, in America today, self-reliance is in short supply. The staggering statistics on government expenditures and welfare-state redistribution offer powerful evidence of this fact, as does the scale of dependence on public support. More than 50 million Americans receive Medicaid benefits, 48.7 million are on Medicare, more than 50 million are on Social Security, and 45 million receive food stamps or other nutrition benefits. In 2010, according to an analysis by *USA Today*, “[a] record 18.3% of the nation’s total personal income was a payment from the government for Social Security, Medicare, food stamps, unemployment

benefits and other programs. . . . Wages accounted for the lowest share of income — 51.0% — since the government began keeping track in 1929.” According to the Census Bureau, in the first quarter of 2011, 49.1% of the population lived in a household in which at least one member received some type of government benefit.

More subtle forms of dependency are no less damaging. Consider the implications of government’s growing entanglement in ever more numerous and important aspects of our lives — from the provision of food and shelter to higher-order concerns like finance, education, charity, and even leisure and culture. The result is an unhealthy shift in Americans’ attitudes toward the state: We have been cowed into thinking that reductions in government’s activity and scope would spell disaster, as no other agent — certainly not uncredentialed, unregulated individuals acting on their own initiative and relying on their own skills — could keep our economy and society humming along.

In the face of these trends, how can we recover the habits of self-reliance — or, at the very least, an appreciation for our ability as free people to survive and flourish without utter dependence on government and its associated agents? We can begin by borrowing a page from the millions of Americans obsessed with the founders, and seek to be instructed by models of lived liberty. After all, as the Tea Party has sagely realized, the heroes of the past whom we choose to elevate and imitate can shape our understanding of our own responsibilities, of our own strengths, and of our own place in history.

Who in America’s past, then, can show us the way to a mature, sustainable democratic life — one defined not by the rebellious seizure of liberty, but by the consistent and wise exercise of it through a dedication to self-reliance? The answer is the men and women who extended the freedoms articulated in Philadelphia and secured at Yorktown out to the Pacific Coast: the pioneers.

Their history has, sadly, been under-appreciated. This is due in part to the fact that the academy — which does most of the work of professional history — dismisses them as plunderers and marauders, despoilers of pristine environments and native civilizations. But it is also because the pioneers’ history is complicated, and does not lend itself to easy summary through the deeds of a few extraordinary figures. The history of the pioneers is, for the most part, the story of average people who pursued typical American desires: greater prosperity, breathing room,

adventure, religious liberty. In fact, it is their very ordinariness that makes them such promising examples for today's Americans seeking models of self-reliance and self-government.

Fortunately, there is one pioneer life that has been preserved in exhaustive detail—a life with which many Americans, though not enough, are already familiar. This life belongs not to someone known for authoring a governing document, achieving heroic feats on the battlefield, or amassing a staggering fortune. Rather, she is known and beloved precisely for giving Americans a sense of ordinary pioneer lives through the example of her own.

Through the *Little House* books of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Americans have access to the history of the pioneers, and of one pioneer family in particular that exemplified the connection between self-reliance and the preservation of freedom. Were more Americans—especially the young audiences for whom the books were intended—to become familiar with Wilder's works, and through them the example of the pioneers, the cultural effects would surely be beneficial. Much as the Tea Party renewed Americans' appreciation of the freedoms that are our birthright, a historical-appreciation movement built around Wilder and her fellow pioneers could help Americans recover the habits of self-reliance that, in their waning, have put those freedoms in jeopardy.

FRONTIER FREEDOM

The story of the pioneers follows directly from the concerns of America's founders, and especially those of the author of the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson understood that the morals and character of citizens matter enormously to the success of self-government: "It is the manners and spirit of a people," he wrote, "which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution." Particularly degenerate, Jefferson argued, were those citizens who proved themselves to be insufficiently self-reliant. "Dependance," he wrote, "begets subservience and veniality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition."

To Jefferson, the most self-reliant citizen—the one who best exhibited the virtues on which the republic's success would rely—was the farmer. He deeply admired the "husbandman's" ability to provide for his own subsistence, and believed that this ability gave farmers unique moral fortitude. "Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a

phaenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example,” he wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson further understood that, in order to preserve these virtues, the new nation would have to provide its people with access to the vast frontier, and encourage them to conquer it. “I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries,” he wrote to James Madison in 1787, “as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe.”

To this end, Jefferson had worked with others to dispatch an expedition to the Pacific in 1783, before the Revolutionary War had ended, and again in 1786 and 1792. As president, of course, he sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their successful journey to Fort Clatsop and back. The “Corps of Discovery” officially opened the gates to the west and made the United States a Pacific nation—but it also made possible the way of life that exemplified Jefferson’s agrarian independence, and helped furnish the nation with the self-reliant ethos that is now so crucial for us to revive.

In the decades after Lewis and Clark completed their expedition, waves of Americans would follow them westward—making use of the freedom of the frontier to reap whatever fortunes their talents and efforts, as well as luck, could supply them. In his classic essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” historian Frederick Jackson Turner traced the advance of the frontier through the 19th century. “By the census of 1820,” he wrote, “the settled area included Ohio, southern Indiana and Illinois, southeastern Missouri, and about one-half of Louisiana. . . . The frontier region of the time lay along the Great Lakes, where Astor’s American Fur Company operated in the Indian trade, and beyond the Mississippi, where Indian traders extended their activity even to the Rocky Mountains; Florida also furnished frontier conditions. The Mississippi River region was the scene of typical frontier settlements.”

The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 allowed for new avenues of settlement, and by the middle of the 19th century, the frontier line had been pushed to the eastern boundary of Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Kansas. “Minnesota and Wisconsin,” Turner noted, “still exhibited frontier conditions, but the distinctive frontier of the period [was] found in California, where the gold discoveries had sent a sudden tide of adventurous miners, and in Oregon, and the settlements in Utah.”

At the urging of California engineers and businessmen, Congress passed a law in 1862 to support the development of a Pacific railroad. First the Central Pacific and then the Union Pacific began to lay tracks with the aim of connecting the continent, which they did (to great celebration) in Promontory, Utah, in May 1869. The work of laying the railroads brought people out to the prairies, as did the travel and opportunities for trade and commerce they opened.

Indeed, Turner explains that, after the railroads “gridironed the region,” “the unoccupied lands of the Middle West were taken up by a migration that in its system and scale [was] unprecedented.” He observes that in 1870 the Dakotas had 14,000 settlers; just two decades later, in 1890, the number had risen above 510,000. In that same time, Nebraska’s settler population climbed from 123,000 to 1,059,000 and Kansas’s from 364,000 to 1,427,000. With pioneers there assured access to the lumber and fuel needed for subsistence, and guaranteed an outlet for their produce, the conquest of this last unsettled frontier could begin. Between 1880 and 1900, according to Turner, the amount of land newly settled and farmed included a territory equal to the areas of France, Germany, England, and Wales combined.

Who answered the call to settle these newly opened lands? In his second volume of *The Americans, The National Experience*, Daniel Boorstin explains that, influenced by our understanding of the Gold Rush, many assume that most pioneers went west with a specific goal in mind—mining, trapping, farming, and so forth. In truth, the motivation that drove people westward was usually much more ephemeral. “When we look more closely, following the fortunes of individual men and communities,” Boorstin writes, “we discover that they were often vague and unsure of purpose: enterprising perhaps, ambitious perhaps, but ever uncertain where their enterprise and ambition should be invested. . . . Americans thus valued opportunity, or the chance to seek it, more than purpose.” The movement of the pioneers, in other words, was spurred by the very possibility of rising and falling by dint of one’s own talent and labor—the chance to practice self-reliance.

A few groups in particular responded to these opportunities. Some, like the Mormons, had religious motivations. Others were New Englanders and New Yorkers dissatisfied with their conditions at home (the Ingalls and Wilder families were both from this stock). In *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, Ray Allen Billington and

Martin Ridge point to the especially strong response of three groups: former slaves, residents of the Mississippi Valley pushed onward by overcrowding, and immigrants drawn from Europe by the promise of a fair chance to thrive.

This ethic of open opportunity was enabled by, and codified in, the rare federal policy that encouraged habits of self-reliance rather than undermining them: homesteading. The Homestead Act, signed by President Lincoln on May 20, 1862, allowed any adult citizen—or any alien who intended to become a citizen and had taken steps toward that goal—who had never borne arms against the United States to file a claim for 160 acres of government land for a fee of just \$10. Over the five years following the filing of the claim, the homesteader had to reside upon and cultivate the land, improving it by erecting a dwelling. If after five years the homesteader could prove to a local land office that he had met the requirements, he could file for final title on the land and become its rightful owner. According to the National Archives, by 1934, more than 1.6 million homestead applications had been processed and more than 270 million acres had passed into the hands of individuals (among them the parents of Laura Ingalls Wilder).

A key advantage of the Homestead Act was the type of people it lured westward—precisely the kind of people Jefferson had hoped would settle the nation's open lands. As Billington and Ridge note, "Distance and inadequate training in agricultural pursuits closed the frontier to eastern workingmen; instead America was settled by successive waves of farmers who were already skilled in wresting a living from the soil."

It was thus experienced farmers who truly settled and civilized the west; it was their way of life that took root and gave that part of America its culture. This was surely fortuitous, as a class of people less accustomed to hardship would have struggled mightily to survive in that untamed terrain. The conditions that the frontier furnished left those who hoped to conquer it no other choice but to be resourceful and persevering; to be insufficiently self-reliant was to meet with disastrous, possibly fatal, consequences. As Billington and Ridge explain:

Life was hard in a land where nature provided few comforts needed by man; every necessity must be painfully fashioned from inadequate materials by back-breaking toil. How to build a house where there was no timber, how to obtain water where there were

no springs, how to keep warm where there was nothing to burn, how to battle the elements where there was no shelter — those were the problems faced by families on the Great Plains. Many failed to solve them and fled back east; those who stayed on conquered obstacles that would have defeated people of lesser stamina.

That stamina was often matched by inventiveness and ingenuity, and by an ethic of mutual support among the settlers. The pioneers relied heavily on their neighbors; their way of life was made possible by institutions of community, often created on the fly. But this banding together — through informal acts of neighborly charity, as well as through the formation of higher-level associations like schools, churches, organizations for keeping order, and so forth — originated with them and was carried out by them. Free, independent citizens made the choice to come together for the purpose of mutual aid and common action. It was the natural extension of self-reliance — of recognizing the value to each individual in forming and sustaining communities, and establishing civilization, in a place that lent itself to neither.

But these means of common action were something altogether different from our top-down welfare state. “From the beginning,” Boorstin notes of the frontier, “*communities* existed here before there were governments to care for public needs or to enforce public duties. This order of events was hardly possible in modern Europe; in America, it was normal.” Because of this evolution, Boorstin argues, the rules of the community, which pre-dated those of formal government, remained superior in the pioneers’ eyes to those rules imposed from without.

They had a particular distaste for a distant federal government, the laws of which, Boorstin notes, could not “keep pace with the demands of these settlers on the spot.” The pioneers thus preferred what Boorstin calls “do-it-yourself governments,” which “were not surrounded with an aura of mystery or tradition; all over the country they were formed beneath people’s very eyes, and for everyday purposes. Nothing could have been more unlike the Old-World governments of sanctified vicegerents of God whose authority was rooted in antiquity, untouchable because of the ‘divinity that doth hedge a king.’”

Whether by building shelters out of sod, taking on Washington’s challenge to “prove up” a homestead claim, banding together in communities to provide mutual protection and aid while crossing the open

plains, or forming local ad hoc “governments” to supply law and order where the state could not, the entirety of the pioneer experience centered around one concept: That which these men and women needed — from the basic ingredients of physical sustenance to the more abstract institutions of human civilization — these men and women had to provide.

AN UNLIKELY HISTORIAN

It was this experience that Laura Ingalls Wilder sought to convey in her books. As she explained in a speech in Detroit in 1937, “I understood . . . that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history.” And she wished for children growing up after the frontier had closed “to understand more about the beginning of things . . . what it is that made America as they know it.” To that end, she authored gripping stories of her life among the pioneers that, she believed, could help teach key American virtues.

Wilder’s books are not strict non-fictional accounts. Nevertheless, while “not a history” (to use her own description), they are “a true story founded on historical fact”; they convey the realities of pioneer life because they follow closely the details of her own life. Wilder was born on February 7, 1867, in the Chippewa River valley area of Wisconsin. The valley — home to the “big woods” Wilder would later immortalize in her first book — had been an important lumber district since the 1840s. As John E. Miller notes in *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder*, it was the prospect of economic opportunity that brought the families of Charles Ingalls and Caroline Quiner from New York and Connecticut, respectively, tracking the migration pattern by which many Northeastern families made their way to the frontier areas in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Ingalls and Quiner had married seven years before Laura’s birth, in Jefferson County, Wisconsin; their first daughter, Mary, had been born in Pepin in 1865. After Laura, the Ingallses would go on to have three more children: Caroline (“Carrie”) in 1870, Charles Frederick (“Freddie”) in 1875, and Grace in 1877. Readers of the *Little House* series will recognize the names of Wilder’s sisters, but their brother — who died at the age of nine months — was never mentioned in the books.

In Wilder’s novels, her father is a man of many trades — principally a farmer, but also at times a carpenter, businessman, and railroad worker. The real Charles Ingalls did indeed practice all of these occupations, and also others, including work as a butcher and hotelier. The family’s

financial situation was often precarious, and it was typically necessity that forced Charles Ingalls to move from one job to the next, and the family from one home to the next. In the course of Laura's childhood, the Ingallses traveled from her birthplace in Wisconsin to the Osage Indian Reserve in southern Kansas, then back to their Wisconsin property; they crossed the frozen Mississippi River to reach Walnut Grove, Minnesota; fled to the town of Burr Oak, Iowa, after two years of crop failure; returned to Walnut Grove, and finally followed the promise of the railroads out to the Dakota Territory. Following the pattern of many pioneers, their earlier travels were by covered wagon; later, Caroline and the girls traversed the Dakota prairie by train.

Along the way, illness, crop failure, business failure, and even a plague of locusts all conspired to produce the transient nature of Wilder's childhood. But it was also her father's hunger for free, unsettled places that pushed the family westward. In *These Happy Golden Years*, Wilder describes the side of her father that so many of the pioneers shared — the inexplicable desire to head still further west, to chase yet one more opportunity, to lead an unhindered life in truly wide-open land:

"I would like to go west," he told Ma one day. "A fellow doesn't have room to breathe here anymore."

"Oh, Charles! No room, with all this great prairie around you?" Ma said. "I was so tired of being dragged from pillar to post, and I thought we were settled here."

"Well, I guess we are, Caroline. Don't fret. It's just that my wandering foot gets to itching, I guess."

It was only his deal with Caroline, who clearly craved civilization and stability, that pegged Charles and his family firmly to their homestead near De Smet, South Dakota. This was where Laura met her husband, Almanzo Wilder, and married him in 1885; it was where Charles, Caroline, and Mary Ingalls spent the rest of their lives.

Wilder's decision to chronicle her family's travels was clearly driven by a sense of admiration for what her parents, and their fellow pioneers, had accomplished. Chief among those accomplishments was their kindling of "the spirit of the frontier," which Wilder believed her mother and father had "possessed . . . to a marked degree." But Wilder was also motivated by the sense that, at the time when she was

writing her books—during the Great Depression and the New Deal—that spirit seemed to be fading away.

At the heart of that deteriorating ethic was self-reliance; it was that virtue, above all, that Wilder intended to communicate in her fictional books (she also wrote non-fictional accounts of her travels as an adult). The series started with *Little House in the Big Woods*, first published by Harper & Brothers in 1932, which tells the story of the family's origins in Wisconsin. Then came *Farmer Boy*, published in 1933, about the childhood of Almanzo Wilder in upstate New York. 1935 saw the publication of *Little House on the Prairie*, tracing the Ingalls family's move from Wisconsin by covered wagon to Indian Territory in Kansas. *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, published in 1937, tells of the family's settlement and attempt at farming in Minnesota; in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, published in 1939, the Ingallses depart the failed farm in Minnesota and follow the railroads to Dakota Territory. *The Long Winter*, published in 1940, chronicles the privations endured during the epic blizzards of 1880-81. *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years*, published in 1941 and '43, respectively, cover the Ingalls family's development of their homestead and Laura's transition into adulthood, as well as her employment as a teacher and courtship with her future husband. The last of her fictional works, *The First Four Years*, depicts the beginning of their married life together and the couple's efforts to prove up on a claim of their own. It was published in 1971, long after Laura's death in 1957, and so was never developed by the author herself beyond the first-draft manuscript.

The years during which the eight main books in the series were written and published are crucial to understanding their character and aims—as is the fact that Wilder's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, was involved in their development. Lane, an accomplished journalist, editor, and author in her own right, served as Wilder's editor, and it was her publishing contacts that made the series possible. Lane's political views were well established even then: She is credited with having helped give rise to the libertarian movement in America, and expressed a philosophy of individualism in her 1943 book *The Discovery of Freedom*, published in the same year as Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*. When Lane's critical comments that year about Social Security prompted a visit to her Connecticut home by the FBI, she published a pamphlet titled "What Is This—The Gestapo?"

Both Lane and her parents strenuously opposed Franklin Roosevelt's Depression-era policies and the New Deal. Miller recounts, for instance,

a story told by Lane of a visit paid by an Agriculture Department functionary to her parents' farm in Mansfield, Missouri (where Laura and Almanzo settled in 1894 and spent the rest of their lives). The government agent told Almanzo Wilder that federal regulations prohibited him from planting more than two acres of oats; Wilder responded, "I'll plant whatever I damn please on my own farm, and if you're on it when I get to my gun, by God I'll fill you with buckshot."

Wilder began writing her books during that same period, and not by coincidence. In *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture*, Anita Clair Fellman notes that, in 1937 remarks to Missouri's Mountain Grove Sorosis Club, Wilder offered the frontier ethic as the antidote to Americans' lack of confidence and independence during the Depression. The pioneers' "old fashioned character values are worth as much today as they ever were to help us over rough places," Wilder observed. "We need today courage, self reliance and integrity. When we remember that our hardest times would have been easy times for our forefathers, it should help us be of good courage, as they were."

Fellman suggests that it was precisely out of concern for the character of the nation in the Roosevelt era—which Wilder and Lane saw as a time of growing dependence on an increasingly intrusive government—that the books played up (in Fellman's view, excessively) the pioneers' independence from government and outside help. By the time of the Great Depression, Fellman notes, most Americans were living in urban areas, and thoroughly dependent on wages for their daily bread; to be unemployed was to risk starvation. "This vulnerability provoked fears at the personal level about economic dependence," Fellman writes, "resulting in a period of intense 'frontier longing.' Popular literature about the mythic West proliferated in these years, offering anxious Americans fantasies of self-sufficiency."

The reality of the Ingalls family's self-reliance was probably somewhere between the enthusiastic frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner (which Fellman believes influenced Wilder's writing) and Fellman's own cynicism. But the relevant point for using Wilder's books as a basis for cultural and historical rediscovery is less the strict facts of her biography and more the moral of her stories. To that end, it is worth noting that, in Wilder's effort to produce, as she put it, a "true picture of the times and the place and the people," it was the virtue of independence that she wanted her readers to understand and remember

above all. Indeed, as Wilder stated in the Sorosis Club speech, “Running through all the stories, like a golden thread, is the same thought of the values of life. They were courage, self reliance, independence, integrity and helpfulness.” To Wilder, these values defined the pioneer experience.

SELF-RELIANCE AND COMMUNITY

In countless ways, Wilder’s books aim to demonstrate by example how ordinary citizens, through the pursuit of self-reliance, can make fruitful use of the particular freedoms that existed on the frontier—and of the freedoms that all Americans have inherited as their birthright.

Perhaps the most consistent way in which Wilder emphasizes this theme is through the innumerable acts of self-provision described in the books. Here, today’s Americans who feel that everything must be provided with some help or oversight from the state can get a confidence boost: The *Little House* books are replete with descriptions—some in exhaustive, “how-to” levels of detail—of the ways in which simple people with few resources manage to provide for themselves a broad array of both necessities and luxuries. Many are activities that today’s adults would never dream of attempting, especially not without some kind of government regulation or aid; in Wilder’s day, however, they were routinely performed by children.

Across the series, a reader learns how to feed himself off the land. He is told how one hunts, kills, and skins a deer; how to smoke and preserve meat in a hollowed-out tree; how to butcher a hog and turn it into ribs, hams, head cheese, and a toy balloon (out of the pig’s bladder). Descriptions are included for milking a cow and churning butter and making cheese, as well as for tapping maples and turning sap into syrup, sugar, and candy. One learns how to make flavoring out of wintergreen leaves and whiskey; how to find honey and harvest oats; how to properly plant potatoes and sow grain and pick and harvest apples, and how to preserve fruit and vegetables so that they last throughout the winter. Instructions are given for baking sourdough bread; a reader learns how to make and set a fish trap, and then to gut and scale and cook the catch.

Clothing, shelter, medicine, and a slew of other necessities are supplied by the families’ own hands. Through Wilder’s descriptions, a reader learns how to melt lead to mold bullets and clean and care for a gun; how to train two calves to work as a team of oxen; how to carve furniture out of

boards; how to make shingles out of oak logs; how to fashion whips out of moosewood boughs and a rocking chair out of willows; how to turn oak trees into a bobsled and then haul logs with it; how to saw pond ice into slabs and then blocks in the winter, and store them in sawdust so they keep until summer. Wilder provides training in how to make soft-soap out of ashes, pork rinds, and beef fat; how to dig and build a well; and how to treat a child covered in bee stings with mud and cloth bandages.

Regardless of whether Wilder played up her own family's independence, these were all certainly things that the Ingallses and the pioneers did for themselves, by themselves. In Wilder's universe, whether one sinks or swims in the act of pioneering—or in life more generally—is thus up to each individual. "The Lord helps them that help themselves" is a constant refrain in the books; in *These Happy Golden Years*, when Laura is fretting about finding work as a teacher, Ma tells her: "A body makes his own luck, be it good or bad...I have no doubt you will get as good as you deserve."

The key to making one's own luck, of course, is in responding well to circumstances beyond one's control. Disaster may strike, and often does, but the test is in how people deal with it—in how they use their freedom to discipline themselves, drive themselves, and adapt themselves in order to provide for themselves in the face of adversity. And throughout the books, Wilder offers instruction in making lemonade out of lemons without relying on outside help.

The *Little House* book that most highlights the importance of making do in the face of adversity is *The Long Winter*, which chronicles the family's shortages and hardships amid interminable blizzards that shut down the railroads. Indeed, Pa presents their troubles partly as the result of having become too dependent on outsiders for their basic needs: "Railroads and telegraph and kerosene and coal stoves—they're good things to have but the trouble is, folks get to depend on 'em." And as fuel and meat and other supplies of food run low, the family must draw on its own resourcefulness and strength to survive. Once the town's flour is gone, Ma uses a coffee mill to grind seed wheat to make bread; when the kerosene supply is exhausted, she uses a patch of calico, a button, and axle grease to make a lamp. When coal and lumber run out, Pa teaches Laura to twist the hay into tight sticks so that it can burn long enough to provide heat in a stove. "We will have to contrive," Pa tells Laura. "We'll manage it! Needs must, when the devil drives."

Wilder, perhaps echoing Turner and channeling Jefferson, views such resilience and self-reliance as distinctive to the pioneers. When an unexpected April blizzard strikes in *Little Town on the Prairie*, Pa tells of two men who were caught in the storm and killed, found frozen to death beside a haystack. “‘Being from the East, they didn’t know what to do,’ said Pa. ‘If they had dug into the haystack and plugged the hole behind them with hay, they would have kept each other warm and they might have lived through the blizzard.’” And in *The Long Winter*, when the railroad superintendent gives up on trying to get trains through the snow banks and blizzards — effectively leaving the settlers on the other side to freeze and starve — Pa explains: “Just because he couldn’t get through with shovels or snowplows, he figured he couldn’t get through at all and he quit trying. Well, he’s an Easterner. It takes patience and perseverance to contend with things out here in the West.”

Sometimes, of course, things out in the west were too difficult to be handled by the individual or family alone. In those circumstances, however, there were neighbors — the supports of community. But these relationships, too, are presented by Wilder as the fruits of individual effort and exceptional self-reliance — of time and energy spent in building community, of reciprocating neighborly kindnesses, and of obeying unwritten rules of solidarity in times of trouble. Much as Boorstin observed, the pioneers in Wilder’s books create their own support systems that allow them to avoid being completely needy and dependent on some wholly external source of aid (like the distant federal government). Self-reliance and community-mindedness are not in tension, but are instead thoroughly complementary.

The creation and development of community manifests itself in a few ways in Wilder’s books. One is Laura’s description of how the residents of the various pioneer communities in which she lived came together, of their own initiative, to meet the higher-order needs essential to human flourishing — providing not just daily bread for the body, but the things hungered for by the soul.

In *Little Town on the Prairie*, for instance, Wilder emphasizes the degree to which the pioneers joined together to both provide their own amusement and nurture ties of friendship in a new and growing community. The church Ladies’ Aid hosts the first dime sociable and a town Thanksgiving dinner. The town starts up a literary society that gathers at the schoolhouse; its first activity is a “spelling match,” in which the town is

divided into two teams, and the teacher gives words to each contestant until errors eliminate one of the teams (Pa spells down the whole town). The society hosts games of charades, musical and theatrical performances, and a debate (“Resolved: That Lincoln was a greater man than Washington”). The climax of *Little Town on the Prairie* is the School Exhibition, in which Laura and her friend Ida must “recite the whole of American history, from memory” before the entire town. Laura’s recitation of America’s founding and early history is a smashing success met with wild applause; indeed, her performance earns her her first job as a teacher.

Education is another higher-order good that is self-supplied, and one especially prized by the Ingallses. When the family lives in isolation, Ma effectively home schools her girls using her own textbooks. When the family lives among others, schools are “raised” by townspeople, who choose their own teachers and assume the responsibility for their room and board. That everyone must contribute to the higher cause of learning is emphasized throughout; to misbehave in school, and thereby keep others from learning, is a grave sin. In a day before Pell Grants and Sallie Mae, Laura works several jobs—as a teacher and as a seamstress—to help send her sister Mary, who has been rendered sightless by scarlet fever, to a college for the blind in Iowa.

Even religion is a bottom-up enterprise. In *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Pa has three dollars to buy new boots, as his are cracked and in desperate need of replacement. When he returns home without the boots, Pa explains: “I saw Brother Alden and he told me he couldn’t raise money enough to put a bell in the belfry. The folks in town had all given every cent they could, and he lacked just three dollars. So I gave him the money.”

This inclination to mutual aid touches on the most significant manifestation of community in Wilder’s books, which is her repeated emphasis on the code of neighborliness. There is an unspoken ethic of “help and be helped”; good neighbors are consistently praised as such, and bad neighbors roundly criticized. In *The First Four Years*, for instance, Laura complains about Ole Larsen, “the neighbor across the road,” who earns the young wife’s derision because he “was always borrowing”; moreover, after using the Wilders’ tools to butcher his hog, “he did not bring over a bit of the fresh meat as good neighbors always did.”

Wilder also illustrates how, on the frontier, caring for those in need was truly a communal activity—not just one neighbor to another, but

the responsibility of many. In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, for instance, Wilder explains how Ma and Pa, the “half-breed” Big Jerry, and the railroad company all play distinct roles in caring for the elderly and sickly water boss, Old Johnny.

The most dramatic example, however, is surely the heroic climax of *The Long Winter*. When individual townspeople and families have run out of food, a rumor spreads that a settler some 20 miles from town is sitting on a cache of wheat that he had harvested in the fall. To make a run for the wheat would be suicidal: A 40-mile round trip during a winter that had seen only a day or two between blizzards was enormously risky, for to be caught on the prairie in such a storm meant certain death. And yet death by starvation was no less certain for the people of De Smet. Laura’s future husband and another young man, Cap Garland, make the wheat run. Almanzo’s brother warns him against it; he replies: “[T]his is a free country and I’m free and independent. I do as I please.” In going after the wheat, Almanzo demonstrates his understanding that that same freedom comes with obligations—that if men and women are going to live as free human beings out on the frontier, surviving in the midst of innumerable dangers, each person must take care of himself but also do his part to sustain the community.

The way in which this understanding of freedom differs from stark individualism and radical libertarianism is further emphasized by Wilder and Garland’s interactions with the settler who raised the wheat, Mr. Anderson. Anderson doesn’t want to sell the wheat; he needs it for seed to raise the next season’s crop. Almanzo replies that women and children are starving to death.

“That’s not my lookout,” said Mr. Anderson. “Nobody’s responsible for other folks that haven’t got enough forethought to take care of themselves.”

“Nobody thinks you are,” Almanzo retorted. “And nobody’s asking you to give them anything. We’ll pay you the full elevator price of eighty-two cents a bushel, and save you hauling it to town in the bargain.”

Wilder plants the reader’s sympathies clearly with Almanzo and Cap as they try to persuade Anderson away from his indifferent stance and toward greater community-mindedness. But the interests of the many are

not advanced through coercion or forced redistribution of the wheat. Rather, they are pursued through the use of incentives: Almanzo and Cap persuade Anderson that cash in his hands is better than the mere possibility of a crop next year, which could always fail—and they meet his eventual asking price. The men’s concern for the community trumps Anderson’s stubborn selfishness, but they use the mechanisms of free and independent people—the supply-and-demand pricing of markets, and the power of free dialogue—to achieve their victory.

In this example, as in countless others across the series, Wilder takes pains to distinguish between the self-centeredness of the pure individualist and the self-reliant ethic of responsible, free *citizens*.

FREE AND INDEPENDENT

To be an American pioneer—and indeed to be an American citizen—often comes down to one key concept for Wilder, an idea that appears throughout the books: that Americans are “free and independent.”

In its simplest sense, this means that Americans do not appreciate being pushed around by their government. Disdain for Washington, and for politicians more generally, is a recurring theme of the books. In *The Long Winter*, Almanzo Wilder—now 19 and having claimed a homestead—reflects on the regulations involved in making homesteading claims:

Almanzo looked at it this way: the Government wanted this land settled; Uncle Sam would give a farm to any man who had the nerve and muscle to come out here and break the sod and stick to the job till it was done. But the politicians far away in Washington could not know the settlers so they must make rules to regulate them.... None of the rules worked as they were intended to. Almanzo knew that men were making good wages by filing claims that fitted all the legal rules and then handing over the land to the rich men who paid their wages. Everywhere, men were stealing the land and doing it according to all the rules.

Perhaps the saltiest expression of disdain for Washington’s meddling comes from the Ingalls family’s friend and former neighbor Mr. Edwards, who, in *The Long Winter*, notes that in the Dakota Territory “[t]he politicians are a-swarming in already, and ma’am if’n there’s

any worst pest than grasshoppers it surely is politicians. Why, they'll tax the lining out'n a man's pockets to keep up these here county-seat towns! . . . Politicians, they take pleasure a-prying into a man's affairs." Clearly, in the pioneer voices Wilder channels, the notion of an intrusive, micromanaging federal government is incompatible with a vision of democracy in which citizens are given their freedom, and entrusted to know how to make the best use of it.

And it is that relationship that is at the heart of Wilder's notion of "free and independent" citizens: the close connection between the liberty that belongs to every American, and what he decides to do with it. In a number of the most didactic passages in the books, Wilder presents this as a choice: whether a man exercises his freedom in a way that is lazy, sloppy, careless, profligate, and therefore makes him dependent on others, or whether he is disciplined, hardworking, thrifty, and self-reliant—in a way that allows him to preserve his freedom.

This concept of choice is articulated near the beginning of *The Long Winter*, when Pa gets his first sense that a difficult season is coming as he and Laura observe the thickness of the muskrats' lodges. Laura wants to know how the muskrats anticipate a hard winter; Pa replies, "God tells them, somehow, I suppose."

"Then why doesn't God tell us?" Laura wanted to know.

"Because," said Pa, "we're not animals. We're humans, and, like it says in the Declaration of Independence, God created us free. That means we got to take care of ourselves."

Laura said faintly, "I thought God takes care of us."

"He does," Pa said, "so far as we do what's right. And He gives us a conscience and brains to know what's right. But He leaves us to do as we please. That's the difference between us and everything else in creation."

"Can't muskrats do what they please?" Laura asked, amazed.

"No," said Pa. "I don't know why they can't but you can see they can't. Look at that muskrat house. Muskrats have to build that kind of house. They always have and they always will. It's plain they can't build any other kind. But folks build all kinds of houses. A man can build any kind of house he can think of. So if his house don't keep out the weather, that's *his* look-out; he's free and independent."

Laura returns to this theme later, providing a much more concrete connection between the liberties secured by the founders and the challenges of living those freedoms taken up by Wilder and her fellow pioneers—and, indeed, by any American. These reflections come during a Fourth of July celebration (Independence Day is consistently honored throughout Wilder’s works) described in *Little Town on the Prairie*. After a stirring patriotic speech on the theme of freedom, a reading of the Declaration of Independence (which Wilder excerpts heavily), and a communal singing of “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” Laura contemplates the meaning of the day’s proceedings.

Suddenly she had a completely new thought. The Declaration and the song came together in her mind, and she thought: God is America’s king.

She thought: Americans won’t obey any king on earth. Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn’t anyone else who has the right to give me orders. I will have to make myself be good.

Her whole mind seemed to be lighted up by that thought. This is what it means to be free. It means, you have to be good. “Our father’s God, author of liberty—” The laws of Nature and of Nature’s God endow you with a right to life and liberty. Then you have to keep the laws of God, for God’s law is the only thing that gives you a right to be free.

Even a teenage Laura recognizes that freedom is a conditional gift—conditional on citizens’ upholding their part of the bargain, living responsibly and prudently, taking care of themselves and fulfilling their responsibilities to community, country, and God.

The particular means for doing so are best described in *Farmer Boy*. In the story of her husband’s youth on a farm in upstate New York, Wilder implicitly advances Jefferson’s argument that “those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God . . . whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.” In so doing, she also makes the case for why the pioneer farmers—just as much as the founders, if not more so—can and should serve as models of American freedom well-lived.

One of the clearest examples comes during a Fourth of July celebration in *Farmer Boy*, when Almanzo Wilder's father and a friend, Mr. Paddock, discuss the ceremonial firing of the town cannons. "That's the noise that made the Redcoats run!" Paddock observes. "'Maybe,' Father said, tugging his beard. 'But it was muskets that won the Revolution. And don't forget that it was axes and plows that made this country.'" Here, Wilder wants her readers to understand the distinction between attaining freedom and preserving it; between those who secured liberty and those who made possible an American way of life. And this appreciation for the pioneer farmers' achievement points to the key teaching of her books: that, by honoring the importance of work and the value of independence, ordinary Americans can build thriving families and communities without the restraint of government regulation, and without the crutch of government support.

SUSTAINING MYTHS

To be sure, the frontier—and, with it, Wilder's world—disappeared long ago. Few would mourn its passage: It was a world of hardship and danger that most of today's Americans are, understandably, grateful to have been spared. But though Wilder's stories may be rooted in a vanished pioneer past, and though they were originally intended for the bygone era of the Great Depression, her message—her lesson in liberty—is no less crucial and true today than it ever was. It is a lesson, above all, about the proper aspirations of a free people—and, as such, is bound to be timeless.

The dependence on government that pervades American life today is, more than anything, a threat to those proper aspirations. It too often leaves us looking to others to meet our needs and wants—from the basic materials required to sustain life to the higher-order pursuits yearned for by the mind and spirit. It subtly persuades us that we cannot fend for ourselves without state-sponsored support—and so saps our willingness to try. When trouble arises, today's Americans are too infrequently willing to roll up our sleeves; instead, we fold our arms and wait for an official.

Among the effects of such an attitude can be a loss of personal liberty, as the government we permit to act for us constrains our options and pushes us around. This has tended to put us in mind of the tyranny our nation's founders sought to overthrow, and so has led some

Americans to imagine that we are in the same position. But we are not: Our problem is not a foreign oppressor, but rather our own failure to grasp the preconditions for truly living free. It is not that we are denied our liberty, but that we do not want it—that we do not aspire to live as self-reliant citizens.

The historical model we need, therefore, is not so much an example of overthrowing tyranny as one of living out our freedoms. That is what we require to keep the American spirit alive, and the American experiment running. Fortunately, we have just such a model at hand: We can, and should, look to the pioneers, and learn from their most gifted chronicler.

Our time calls for a renewed appreciation of Laura Ingalls Wilder as a teacher of liberty. Her books make accessible to the rising generation a vision of freedom deeply rooted in virtue: a vision that posits a balanced ideal of ordered liberty between the extremes of overbearing government and radical individualism; a vision of the free life that is also a vision of the good life. Among American writers, Wilder's work is exceptional as a means of interpreting our political inheritance, and of teaching our children how to be free. Hers is precisely the lesson in liberty we need.