

33. *Never Too Late*

Little House In the Big Woods—Wilder, 1932

ARE LAURA AND Mary and Almanzo dear friends of yours? If not, then you are to be both pitied and envied. You are to be pitied because you have missed all this time the pleasure which thousands of American children have found in reading about the way boys and girls lived two generations ago, and envied because you have before you the thrill that comes when first you read about Laura and her family and friends. No matter what your age, you are neither too young nor too old to enjoy Laura Ingalls Wilder's series of stories. A word of warning, however: if you are going to read them, you might as well begin with the first one, *The Little House in the Big Woods*, for if you start with one of the later ones, you will undoubtedly want to know what went before. Eventually you will read them all, so you had better begin with the first one and go right on through to the last, *These Happy Golden Years*.

This series of true stories about real people is one of the most popular with boys and girls ever written, be-

cause each book is a good story, absorbing from the first page to the last, with characters who become well-loved friends. And the books are equally popular with the adults who choose books for children, because they are more than good entertainment: they are an education in American ideals. Yet these excellent books would never have been written if their author had been willing to accept the convention which decrees that a person's creative life is over when middle age is passed.

In 1932 Laura Ingalls Wilder was sixty-five years old. She had had a busy and active life. Before she was sixteen she had begun teaching school. At eighteen she had married a farmer, and the years which followed were full ones indeed, with the manifold duties of farmer's wife and devoted mother to crowd each day to the brim, plus the worries and suffering brought by seven years of drought, serious illness, the loss of their son, and the burning of their house.

The last few years, however, on their two-hundred-acre farm near Mansfield, Missouri, had been relatively peaceful and free from want, with the farm prospering and her husband Almanzo well and happy. But there was always plenty to keep Mrs. Wilder busy, with a ten-room farmhouse to look after, chickens to care for, churning and cooking and cleaning to do, besides the many farm women's clubs she had organized and the Mansfield Farm Loan Association she had managed for years.

Yes, at sixty-five, Laura Ingalls Wilder could truth-

fully say, if she cared to, that she had lived a full and active and useful life. Her daughter was grown, her work ended—so most people felt. Now she was surely entitled to a few years of rest and ease.

But nothing was farther from her thoughts. Instead of cutting down on her work, now that she was past middle-age, Mrs. Wilder took on more work. She began to write.

At first she wrote short articles for farm magazines, then special articles for national magazines. Everything she wrote was accepted for publication, and she began to be recognized as an expert on farm topics.

But another sort of writing had been beckoning to this white-haired beginner. For years Mrs. Wilder had wanted to write down the stories her father had told his daughters about his childhood.

What a wonderful storyteller Pa had been! Mrs. Wilder remembered his stories vividly. She could hear him now, his rich, gay voice; she could see his vital, expressive face. And then his fiddle—his precious Amati—would she ever forget the music of that fiddle? Through the years the golden notes came echoing down to her, telling her, as they had when she used to listen to them as a child, that life was good, no matter what danger threatened or trouble brewed.

More and more, as she went about her work straining milk, feeding chickens, going for the mail, writing farm articles, playing cribbage in the evenings with Almanzo, Laura Wilder wished that she could preserve for future generations Pa's stories. It would be a shame

to let them be forgotten. Perhaps she should write her autobiography. She decided to try.

However, she soon abandoned the autobiography. It did not satisfy her. Such a book would be read by adults, and it was children she wanted to reach. Pa's stories belonged to the boys and girls of America, because they were about the life of children in an earlier America, when boys and girls had less of material riches than the average child of today, but more of security and genuine happiness than many young people know in this busy, hurrying twentieth century. Yes, she would write for children.

So, when she had a free moment between farm chores, Mrs. Wilder began her story. In a big, rough school tablet she wrote with a pencil, "Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods—" Memories, living memories, crowded in upon her, memories of her own childhood and of Pa's stories about his.

Day after day, when time permitted, she kept on writing in the big tablet. When it was filled, she began another. And then another. Soon she had enough for a book.

After working over her material painstakingly, revising and polishing it and verifying dates, she copied it and sent it to a publisher.

Mrs. Wilder was not particularly surprised when her manuscript was accepted the first time out. (She had never had anything refused and did not realize that many writers try over and over again before they succeed in getting their work accepted.) But she was

deeply pleased. Now Pa's stories would not be forgotten. Now other children would enjoy them as she, too, had loved them as a child. Now she could stop writing. Her self-appointed task was finished.

But Mrs. Wilder soon found that she could not stop. When *The Little House in the Big Woods* was published, children all over the country loved it immediately. They took Laura and Mary and Carrie to their hearts. And they wanted to know more about them. Letters began to come to Mrs. Wilder asking, "What happened next? Please tell us."

Then other memories crowded upon her—memories of pioneer days in new country, in the prairies of western Kansas and South Dakota, and in Minnesota. She remembered hardships that were somehow not hardships because of the spirit in which they were faced. She remembered the work and struggle that went into making a new country safe and civilized.

So Mrs. Wilder wrote another book to tell what happened next. . . . And then another. . . . And another. . . . And so on until she had finished the story of Laura's childhood.

Laura Ingalls Wilder made her own wish come true. Her Pa's stories will never be forgotten so long as there are children to read her books. But more than that, Pa himself will never be forgotten, nor will Ma or Laura or Mary or Almanzo or any of the other people who live in Mrs. Wilder's books as they lived in her own early life. Furthermore, Laura Ingalls Wilder proved that it is never too late to do something that is worth doing.