

Changing Places

America was changing in the late 1800's. The experience of the Civil War had left America hungry for democracy. And it was women, that urgently answered this call. They were no longer satisfied with second-class subservient roles. They wanted full participation in the American dream. They wanted the right to vote. And as the political status of women was transformed, so too, was their roll in society. No longer limited to the home, women began to enter the work place. In a small town in southern Missouri, a young mother began to imagine a new future for herself. She had some stories to tell; she wanted to be an author. Her name, was Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Remember the TV show, Little House on the Prairie? That show was based on the books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and she wrote them right in this very house, in Mansfield, Missouri. I can't believe I figured out how to play this thing.

Laura and her husband Almanzo, built this house together around the turn of the century, but the road to Mansfield wasn't easy.

Both Laura and her husband Almanzo came from pioneering families who had moved around the Midwest staking claims and experimenting with different crops. Each one of Laura's moves provided her with materials for her books. But it was not an easy life. From Wisconsin, her family went on to Missouri, Kansas and Minnesota, before settling in South Dakota. It was there Laura Ingalls met and married Almanzo Wilder. For seven years they tried to farm the prairie: but fires, droughts, hail storms and disease that left Almanzo crippled, drove them away. They moved on to a gentler climate, the Missouri Ozarks, in 1894. Laura had always been in the habit of recording her adventures in a big chief notebook, with the stub of a pencil, a testament to her thrifty upbringing. Her move to Missouri was no exception.

"We're in the Ozarks at last. Just in the beginning of them, and they're just beautiful. Almanzo says we could almost live on the looks of them. Mansfield is a good town of three or four hundred inhabitants, in a good central location, where it should grow fast. There's everything here already that one could want. There's a good school, around the square are two general stores, two drug stores, a bank and a livery stable."

Laura's daughter Rose was also a writer. She convinced her mother to jot down some of her memories of childhood.

The Little House books are stories of long ago. Today our way of living, and our schools, are different. It has been many years since I've beat eggs with a fork, or cleaned a kerosene lantern. Many things have made living and learning easier. But the real things have never changed. They can never change. It's still best to be honest and truthful, to make the most of what we have, to be happy with simple pleasures, and to be cheerful and have courage when things go wrong.

Just as Laura Ingalls Wilder's role of farm wife was transforming into a noted author, the role of women throughout the nation was changing in the early 1900's. Most significantly, women were demanding equal participation in the American democracy. They wanted the right to vote. National women's rights leader Elizabeth Caty Stanton, summed up the feelings of the day with her forceful speeches.

We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men and women are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. Now in view of this entire disenfranchisement of

one half of the people of this country, their social and religious degradation, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of these United States.

After a difficult political battle, women gained their right to vote in national elections in 1920. A dramatic monument to this important time in our countries history still stands in St. Louis. The City Hall of the Municipality of University City was originally the headquarters of the Women's Magazine, which boasted a circulation of well over a million copies a month in the early 1900's. Called by some, the Capital of the Women of America, this unique structure was built in 1906, by businessman E.G. Lewis. It housed not only the Women's Magazine, but also the American Women's League, a group of over 100,000 members, dedicated to promoting educational, cultural and business opportunities for women. Lewis' magazine publishing empire collapsed in 1912 and the building passed into private hands before becoming the City Hall of University City. But momentum created by the American Women's League continued and eventually helped to win the vote for the women of Missouri in 1920.

The Wilders' Mansfield home, Rocky Ridge Farm, is open to the public and its contents are impressive. They saved everything of hers, her books, her rolling pin. This is her lamp. Her...glass things. She needs more coffee. This is the library and the parlor with handmade beads. I am so excited that I finally found somebody my size. Laura was only 4'11", and her husband, Almanzo, graciously built her this kitchen to her heights. Each year, thousands of visitors come here to stand in Laura's own little house. From a simple frontier farm wife, to a world-famous author, Laura symbolized in her own small way, the tremendous social changes taking place in the early 1900's.

Got it.

Rocky Ridge Farm is open to the public. Come see where Laura Ingalls Wilder lived, and wrote her books. It's a part of our Missouri heritage.