

Surviving a Dakota Winter

By Gregory LeFever

AS A GIRL OF 13, LAURA INGALLS WILDER LIVED THROUGH THE WORST WINTER ON THE GREAT PLAINS SINCE THE ARRIVAL OF WHITE SETTLERS, AND HER ACCOUNT REVEALS THE STRENGTH OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY.



*Snow reaches the roofline of this Dakota Territory house following a blizzard in the 1890s. Two men stand nearby, both holding shovels.
(Courtesy North Dakota State University Libraries, Institute for Regional Studies)*

Settlers on the American Great Plains during the 1800s quickly learned their lives were governed by the weather. And with the weather, there were no guarantees, nothing could be taken for granted.

Summer could be sunny and interspersed with enough rain to produce bountiful fields and lush gardens. Or, summer could be a drought that parched the soil and withered every crop. At the other end of the calendar, winter could be mild yet providing enough snowmelt to replenish the soil and streams as people went on with their daily routines. Or, winter could be brutal beyond belief.

The worst winter on record to hit the American plains began in October of 1880 and lasted until late April of 1881, becoming known as “the hard winter” or “the winter of the big snow” or “the starvation winter.” One of the most earnest, evocative, and accurate accounts of these desperate months appears in the popular and charming narrative of 19th-century American pioneer family life, the “Little House” books by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

“The Long Winter” is the sixth in the nine-book series covering the years of Laura’s youth. In this book, Laura is thirteen. Pa Ingalls had moved his family a year earlier to De Smet, a town just being formed in south-central Dakota Territory, where he’d filed a homestead claim. The Ingalls family moved into in a rickety shanty on the homestead and worked the fields that first year, through a blazing hot September. Then one morning in October, Laura awoke to a surprise.

Laura’s nose was cold. Only her nose was outside the quilts that she was huddled under ... The air was freezing cold. Ice crackled on the quilt where leaking rain had fallen. The fire was blazing without warming the air at all. The window was a white blur of madly swirling snow. Snow had blown under the door and across the floor and every nail in the walls was white with frost.

To Pa, the early blizzard was a warning. He examined muskrat dens and found their walls thicker than usual. The dark autumn skies were unseasonably threatening. In town, an aged Indian one day walked boldly into the general store and warned the settlers of the harsh winter to come. Pa told his family about his fears.

“It’s going to be a hard winter,” Pa said. “If you must have the truth, I’m afraid of it. This house is nothing but a claim shanty. It doesn’t keep out the cold, and look what happened to the tarpaper in that first blizzard.”

Pa moved his family from the claim shanty into De Smet, where he had a store building with enough room to house his family. A year earlier, no town had existed there, but by that October, Pa estimated there were eighty people in De Smet and it would be better to be close to them, close to other stores, and close to the school if the winter was going to be a bad one. It was a decision that probably saved the lives of his family.

Accurate Recollections

A couple of years ago, Barbara Mayes Boustead, a young meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Omaha Valley, Nebraska, and a longtime fan of the “Little House” books, researched the accuracy of Laura’s weather recollections in “The Long Winter.” She examined records from the 1880s from weather service offices in Minneapolis, Omaha, and Des Moines – the offices nearest to De Smet in the 1880s – as well as Dakota Territory military forts located nearer to the town.

“The winter of 1880 to 1881 was notable enough that several town histories in the plains area mention it,” she explains. She also used computer modeling and even entries in journals kept by other Dakota settlers of the period. “By assembling all of these pieces of evidence, I was able to fill in the picture of what happened during the long winter, which I was able to compare to Laura’s story,” she says.

The first blizzard Laura mentions likely began on October 16, according to the sources Barbara Boustead examined. “Snowstorms became more frequent during late November and early December,” she found. “Usually snow fell for a day or two and then strong winds followed behind, which created blowing snow or ground blizzards.”

Laura wrote the book much later and published it in 1940, nearly sixty years after the events of that winter. So how did Laura do? “It turns out that Laura was remarkably accurate in her recounting of the winter of 1880 to 1881,” Boustead says.

Blizzards and Snowdrifts

Having moved into town, Laura, her sisters, and Ma and Pa set up house in the store. Their larder held the food they were storing for winter: five bushels of potatoes, one bushel of beans, some



Artist Charles Graham drew “Banking Up for Winter in Dakota” for an 1886 issue of Harper’s Magazine. He captured the threatening skies with snow clouds on the horizon, as settlers stash away food and fuel for the winter months. In “The Long Winter,” the Dakota blizzards began in October and cut short the settlers’ time for storing up, creating winter shortages.

(Courtesy North Dakota State University Libraries, Institute for Regional Studies)

corn, and six pumpkins. Pa figured he'd provide meat by hunting on the surrounding plains.

There had been a few more snowstorms that autumn, but one day in December – while Laura and her younger sister Carrie were in school – the winter took on a new fierceness. With snow and winds pounding the schoolhouse walls, the children are sent home.

They could hardly walk in the beating, whirling wind. The schoolhouse had disappeared. They could see nothing but swirling whiteness and snow and then a glimpse of each other disappearing like shadows. Laura felt that she was smothering. The icy particles of snow whirled, scratching into her eyes and smothered her breathing. Her skirt whipped around her so tightly that she could not step. She held onto Carrie, and Carrie, struggling and staggering, was pulled away by the wind and flung back against her. "We can't go on this way," Laura thought. But they had to.

Even worse, the Ingalls and their neighbors in De Smet soon learned that massive snowdrifts farther east were blocking the railroad. One of the reasons the Dakota Territory was settled later than most other parts of the West was due to the long winters, the large expanses of open land, and the reliance on westbound trains for life's necessities. In De Smet, the availability of kerosene, coal, clothing, considerable food and other important domestic and agricultural items all depended on the Chicago & North Western Railroad.

"Trains indeed stopped running as far west as De Smet by late December, not to return until early May," the meteorologist Boustead confirms. "Newly built towns like De Smet were forced to make do with what they already had, and citizens in many locations pooled their food and fuel sources together to help everyone survive the winter."

A Make-Do Christmas

As Laura recalled, Pa returned from the general store one December day with news that there was no more coal in De Smet and that the lumberyard was selling lumber for people to burn, but at prices so high the Ingalls could not afford it. Kerosene supplies were exhausted and meat was gone. Laura saw the shortages first hand when she and her sister visited the general store a few days before Christmas.

Next day, when their morning work was done, Laura and Carrie crossed the snowy street to Mr. Harthorn's store. Mr. Harthorn was there alone and the shelves were bare. On both long walls



This drawing from Leslie's Illustrated News in 1888 shows a rescue party finding schoolchildren stranded in a South Dakota blizzard. Settlers from other parts of the country often were caught off guard by the suddenness and fury of snowstorms on the Great Plains.

(Courtesy North Dakota State University Libraries, Institute for Regional Studies)



Prominent South Dakota artist Harvey Dunn (1884-1952) painted "After the Blizzard," depicting the deep snowfalls typical of winters during the 1880s settlement of the plains states, much as described in Laura Ingalls Wilder's "The Long Winter."

(Courtesy North Dakota State University Libraries, Institute for Regional Studies)

there were only a few pairs of men's boots and women's shoes and some bolts of calico. The bean barrel was empty. The cracker barrel was empty. The little brine in the bottom of the pork barrel had no pork in it. The long flat codfish box held only a little salt scattered on its bottom. The dried-apple box and the dried-blackberry boxes were empty. "I'm sold out of groceries till the train gets here," Mr. Harthorn said.

Though Ma told the girls that Christmas would be scanty that year, what followed is one of the book's most endearing depictions. Ma had set the table and put a little red-and-white-wrapped box at each setting.

The boxes contained bits of Christmas candy she'd saved, and there were small gifts – pieces of lace, some religious prints, suspenders for Pa – for each family member. Pa managed to scrounge two cans of oysters and Ma joyfully prepared a watered-down oyster soup for Christmas dinner.

"Hurrah for Santa Claus!" Pa sang out. "The old fellow made it in, even if the train didn't." "Oh, what a lovely Christmas," Carrie sighed. Laura thought so too. Whatever happened, they could always have a merry Christmas.

Of course neither Pa, Ma, Laura, her sisters nor anyone else in town had any idea that the trains would not reach De Smet for nearly another five very long months.

Survival by Ingenuity

By early January, the family's supplies had dwindled considerably. They had only enough food and fuel to last a few more days. With no kerosene left in De Smet, there was no fuel for lamps to penetrate the deep darkness of the snowy nights. It was then – with starvation and a freezing death staring the family in the face – that Ma and Pa used their pioneer ingenuity to fight for their lives.

During breaks in the blizzards, Pa could still get to the prairie hay he'd stockpiled for winter, so he hauled piles of it to their home where he and Laura spent nearly every day twisting it into "hay sticks." These tightly wound bundles of hay burned rapidly in the wood stove, but still gave off enough heat to fend off the frost and enable Ma to do some cooking. He managed to buy some of the last seed wheat in town and brought it home to see what Ma could do with it. She asked Laura to bring her the family's crank-handled coffee mill.

"The black iron hopper in the top of the mill held half a cupful of the grain. Ma shut its top. Then she sat down, placed the square box between her knees to hold it firmly, and began turning the handle around and around. The mill gave out its grinding noise. "The wheat will grind just like coffee," she said.

So began the daily chore of grinding wheat into meal that Ma could use – along with her sour-dough bread starter – to bake hefty loaves of brown bread. This coarse bread and the few potatoes the Ingalls had stored became the family's only food for several weeks and kept them from starving.

As for providing light when no kerosene was available, Ma created make-do candles when Pa was able to scavenge some wagon-axle grease.

Ma told Carrie to bring her the ragbag. She took some of the axle grease from the box and spread it in an old saucer. Then she cut a small square of calico. She put a coat button in the center of the square of calico. She drew the cloth together over the button and wound a thread tightly around it and twisted the corners of calico straight upward in a tapering bunch. Then she rubbed a little axle grease up the calico and set the button into the axle grease in the saucer.

. . . She lighted the taper tip of the button lamp. A tiny flame flickered and grew stronger. It burned steadily, melting the axle grease and drawing it up through the cloth into itself, keeping itself alight by burning. The little flame was like the flame of a candle in the dark. "You're a wonder, Caroline," said Pa. "It's only a little light, but it makes all the difference."

Using hay in place of firewood, grease in place of kerosene, and wheat seed in place of flour saved the Ingalls family that winter.

The Blank Whiteness

Much has been written about the terrible desolation settlers encountered on the American prairie. Even in the mild months, the seemingly endless expanse of rolling grasslands devoid of most landmarks could create a dizzying sense of dislocation. Winter storms exaggerated the situation even more by wiping away the familiar colors of earth and sky, creating a featureless horizon of white. Plus, for Laura, the blizzards erased the biggest benefit of living in town – the comforting closeness of neighbors.

Laura lay awake listening to the wind's wild tune and thinking of each little house in town, alone in the whirling snow with not even a light from the next house shining through. And the little town was alone on the wide prairie. Town and prairie were lost in the wild storm that was neither earth nor sky, nothing but fierce winds and a blank whiteness.

Weather records from the period again substantiate Laura's account. "From late January through the month of February, storms became more frequent," according to Boustead's research. "Across the four-state area of South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Iowa, snow was reported in at least one place virtually every day. Numerous windy days were recorded as well. It is during this period that Laura's recollections in her book become less specific as the storms blended together."

As March turned into April and the blizzards continued, Laura – along with many other settlers suffering through that excruciating winter – developed the listlessness often associated with cabin fever.

She felt that the blizzard must stop before she could do anything, before she could even listen or think, but it would never stop. It had been blowing forever. She was tired. She was tired of the cold and the dark, tired of brown bread and potatoes, tired of twisting hay and grinding wheat, filling the stove and washing dishes and making beds and going to sleep and waking up. She was

tired of the blizzard winds. ... Laura seemed to have forgotten summer; she could not believe it would ever come again.

Records show that Laura did not exaggerate the interminable snow and wind storms simply to make her book more exciting. Contemporary historians and meteorologists believe the winter of 1880-81 to be the worst for eastern South Dakota and western Minneapolis since white settlers first arrived on the Great Plains.

“Even conservative estimates of snowfall and melted precipitation would make it the snowiest winter since settlers first arrived,” says Boustead. “Journals and town histories quote amounts of 11 to 14 feet of snow through the course of the winter, well exceeding records in the area of 7 to 8 feet for a seasonal total snowfall.”

A Sudden Spring

Suddenly, one night in April, everything changed. Laura awoke in the darkness to the sweet sound of water drops coming from snow melting in the eaves.

The Chinook was blowing. Spring had come. The blizzard had given up; it was driven back to the north. Blissfully Laura stretched out in bed; she put both arms on top of the quilts and they were not very cold. Winter had ended. In the morning the snow was nearly gone. The frost was melted from the windows, and outdoors the air was soft and warm.

Boustead says weather records confirm the arrival of the warm Chinook winds in April, bringing the blizzards to an abrupt end.

“Though the winter is often known as the starvation winter, in truth few deaths were documented as resulting from either exposure or starvation during the winter of 1880 to 1881,” she says. “People were cold and hungry for sure, but they survived.”

Laura notes that the days were still difficult until May, when the stranded trains finally reached De Smet. The second train into town brought supplies, including a barrel containing the family’s Christmas presents shipped from stores in regions to the east. There were gifts and plenty of groceries, including the still-frozen Christmas turkey. The next day, they celebrated a belated Christmas dinner and sang songs as Pa fiddled.

And as they sang, the fear and the suffering of the long winter seemed to rise like a dark cloud and float away on the music. Spring had come. The sun was shining warm, the winds were soft, and the green grass growing.



Laura Ingalls Wilder, shown here in 1918, was born in 1867 and began writing for farming publications in the early 1900s. After the Depression wiped out her family savings, she began writing recollections of her pioneer childhood. The “Little House” series became very popular, appearing in 40 languages, as the books related the Ingalls family experiences on the American frontier. She died in 1957 at the age of 90.