

AMERICANA UNLIMITED

Laura Ingalls Wilder

Art Form: Storytelling/Historical Character

Style: Contemporary

Culture: North American

MEET THE ARTIST:

Actress **Judith Helton** literally steps into the past when she goes to work. Since 1976, she has brought history to life with her intriguing portrayals of women of accomplishment and artistic talent. Her versatile repertoire of one-woman shows consists of three from American history -- First Lady *Abigail Adams*, Gold Rush entertainer *Lotta Crabtree*, pioneer author *Laura Ingalls Wilder* -- and England's author/illustrator, *Beatrix Potter*. Each portrayal is meticulously researched from an historical perspective. Ms. Helton's professional theatre credits include work in resident acting companies in Baltimore, Milwaukee, Houston and San Diego. Internationally she has performed at the Edinburgh, Scotland "World Theatre Festival," and in Dublin and Cork, Ireland. Ms. Helton's commitment to authenticity in her performances has led her to master such specialized skills as spinning, weaving, banjo playing and antique costume construction. She so truly 'becomes' the women she plays, that it is little wonder when leaving her home she is asked by neighbors, "Who are you today?"

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

"I wanted children now and in the future to understand more about the beginnings of things – what it was that made America I understood that my own life represented a period of American history. I had seen the whole frontier: the woods, the Indian country, the frontier towns, homesteaders and farmers... I realized that I had seen and lived it all."

Fortunately, Laura Ingalls Wilder preserved her stories for all time in the "Little House" series of books. Judith Helton brings this famous author to life by portraying Laura, telling stories of her pioneer girlhood on the prairie.* Tales are told of covered wagons, sod houses, homesteading, blizzards, plagues of grasshoppers and wild animals. Through all adversity, the courage, laughter and the Ingalls family's strong ties of love endure. Photographs and maps help you visualize the real people and places the stories are based on. After the performance students can ask questions and learn little known facts about "Laura's" 90 years of life. *Laura Ingalls Wilder's* visit will be remembered for a long time to come.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Sodbusters in the Heartland: Thousands upon thousands of emigrant wagons traveled through the great central prairies and plains before pioneers thought of actually settling there. The vast region--stretching from the Missouri River to the Rockies and from the Canadian border to the Texas Panhandle--abounded in reasons for pressing on. It was treeless, matted with dense sod in its eastern reaches, arid farther west, and everywhere possessed of a climate that ran to brutal extremes of hot and cold. Summer droughts, when the thermometer rose well above 100 degrees and hovered there for weeks on end, could char a pioneer's corn crop as effectively as a blowtorch. In winter, when temperatures sometimes plunged to 40 degrees below zero, horrendous snowstorms struck so suddenly that a man might lose his way between his house and barn and freeze to death.

After the Civil War, pioneers swarmed onto this desolate expanse. They were farmers from the increasingly crowded Mississippi valley, disappointed gold seekers returning from California and the Rockies, and wave after wave of immigrants from Europe. The first newcomers built their homes in the lush, well-timbered river bottoms of eastern Kansas, Nebraska and Minnesota. In the late 1870s, after the choicest lands had been filled, settlers spread out into the surrounding prairie. In the absence of wood and stone, the only building material for a house was sod stripped from the soil. The only fuel was the dried manure of buffalo or cows. Droughts and grasshopper plagues brought havoc to crops. Finally, settlers moved westward into the semiarid uplands of Colorado, Wyoming and the Dakotas.

These pioneers would not merely survive; they would convert the bleak expanse into some of the most productive farmland the world has ever known. As one young Nebraska settler wrote to his mother back East: "Ma, you can see as far as you please here and almost every foot in sight can be plowed." In only two decades, more new U.S. terrain was brought under cultivation than in the previous two and a half centuries.

* Based on the *Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Presented by arrangement with the copyright owner, Little House Heritage Trust.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Think about the stories you heard in the performance. Which one was your favorite? Why?
- Have you ever visited any of the states where the Ingalls family lived? (Wisconsin, Kansas, Minnesota, South Dakota, Missouri). Find those states on a map. How do they differ from California?
- What kinds of houses did people live in on the American prairie in the 1870s and 1880s? Find pictures of sod houses, dug-outs and log cabins. How were they constructed? (See *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and *Little House on the Prairie*.)
- What kind of hardships did pioneers face on the frontier? How did people survive the harsh winters? (See *Little House in the Big Woods*.) What happened if they ran out of firewood? (See *The Long Winter*.)

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SOCIAL SCIENCE:

Nothing affected the outcome of the pioneers' journey more directly than the wagons that had to carry them across thousands of miles of wilderness. A wagon had to be light enough not to place undue strain on the oxen that pulled it, yet strong enough not to break down under loads of as much as 2,500 pounds.

Find diagrams of a "prairie schooner" showing its various parts: the wagon bed, the undercarriage and the cover. Have students imagine they are pioneers going on a wagon train journey. Have them make lists of the various types of provisions they would need on the trip: bedding and tent supplies; cooking utensils; medicine and notions; weaponry; tools; food; clothing; luxuries.

Tell students they are allowed to take only two things of their own, such as a toy, doll, book or a musical instrument. What would they select? Why? Have them note their preparation lists in a diary and write entries as Laura Ingalls Wilder did from points along the trails.



Legend:

- ⦿ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▮ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⦿ Discuss the "five W's" used in the performance (who, what, where, when and why). For each featured story about the Ingalls family, make a list identifying the main characters, the location, the time frame, and the main idea or plot.
- ❖ Create frontier characters and role-play situations that may have been typical of their lives.

Suggestions for characters: blacksmith, pioneer mother, sheriff, railroad worker, Cheyenne Indian, rancher, etc.

Suggestions for settings: on the wagon train, in town, around the campfire, at the schoolhouse, at a fort, in the dug-out, etc.

Suggestions for situations: packing to leave home and bidding good-bye to neighbors and friends; keeping watch on the wagon train at night; hunting for food and water along the journey; a day of rest or festivities at a fort or town on the way; braving a winter storm; building a sod house; digging a well, etc.

- ▮ Research and cook an authentic frontier recipe such as "Johnny Cake." Preparing meals was very hard work. Describe how pioneer housewives had to obtain ingredients such as cornmeal (stoneground) or buttermilk (churned). Where and how did they get sweeteners like maple syrup and honey?

⇒ Discuss the impact that the Laura Ingalls Wilder stories had upon you. Compare and contrast the kind of hardships that the Ingalls family endured with the challenges you face today in your own life. How did you respond to the simplicity of their possessions and their forms of entertainment?

* When the day's journey on the wagon train was over, the campfire was the gathering place for weary travelers. Here they relaxed, swapped stories, sang songs and dreamed of the new lives they would find. Hold a classroom "campfire." Ask students to sit together in a circle as they share a piece of family history, a favorite song they can sing or play on the guitar or harmonica, a fable or story with a lesson, a joke or funny memory or some sage advice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Anderson, William. *Laura Ingalls Wilder: Pioneer and Author*. The Kipling Press, New York, New York: 1987.

Walker, Barbara M. *The Little House Cookbook: Frontier Foods from Laura Ingalls Wilder's Classic Stories*. Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, New York: 1979.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: LAURA INGALLS WILDER (1867 - 1957)

Laura Ingalls Wilder looked back to her own pioneer girlhood on the American plains and used these memories to create the much loved "Little House" books. She was born in Wisconsin in 1867 in a home which became known in her book *Little House in the Big Woods*. As a young girl, Laura Ingalls traveled with her family by covered wagon to the Indian Territory in Kansas and experienced the hardships and excitement of prairie life. Years later, her book *Little House on the Prairie* was based on these adventures. Indians, prairie fires, and wild animals all found their way into her stories -- stories which she had lived.

Her next book, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, told of life in a sod house near Walnut Grove, Minnesota. The Ingalls' home was actually a dug-out carved into a riverbank and covered with sod, dirt with grass still growing in it. The roof looked just like part of the prairie! It was here that Laura watched grasshoppers rain from the sky and eat all of their crops.

The Ingalls left Minnesota when Pa got a job as paymaster with a railroad that was being built in the Dakota Territory. The setting became the basis for her book *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. Living in a railroad shanty (a small house), Laura watched the building of the town of De Smet in what is now South Dakota.

It was in De Smet that the Ingalls spent the extremely harsh winter of 1880-81 when some of the worst blizzards ever known hit the Dakota Territory, plunging the temperature to 40° below zero. The supply train could not get through until spring, which was months away. Pa and Laura twisted hay for fuel, and the family kept up their spirits by singing and by Pa playing his fiddle. This story of survival is documented in her book *The Long Winter*.

De Smet was the Little Town on the Prairie. Laura went to school there and sometimes worked as a seamstress to earn extra money for the family. When she was 15 Laura got a job as a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in which 3 of the 5 pupils were older and taller than she was.

It was in De Smet that Laura met a young man named Almanzo Wilder. She wrote about their courtship in *These Happy Golden Years*. Laura and Almanzo were married in 1885. *The First Four Years* is a record of their joys and hardships as they tried to farm despite hailstorms, lack of rain, and a fire which burned their house to the ground. Both Laura and her husband loved the land and knew they would always be farmers. She wrote a book called *Farmer Boy* about Almanzo when he was a little boy back in New York state.

Eventually the Wilders and their daughter Rose moved to Mansfield, Missouri, where they bought a farm called Rocky Ridge. The diary that Laura kept of their journey there by wagon in 1894 is contained in *On the Way Home*. They lived on this farm for the rest of their long lives. When Laura visited Rose in San Francisco in 1915, she wrote letters back to Missouri that are found in *West From Home*.

Laura wrote articles for farm publication for many years, but she did not write her first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, until she was 63 years old! When it was published in 1932, it met with instant success, and children from all over the world wrote asking "What happened next?" The rest of the books answered the question.

Laura Ingalls Wilder lived to be 90 years old. The spirit of those years is recorded in her many books and is there for generations of children to read and enjoy.