



# Audience Guide



By Laurie Brooks

Directed by Kari Steinbach

Audience Guide prepared by  
Education Director, Cassandra Proball

## Synopsis

In their poorest winter ever, when the crops have been devastated by locusts and the family must deal with the death of baby Freddie, Charles Ingalls backtracks his family to Burr Oak, Iowa, to take over the running of a hotel. And if things weren't bad enough, Ma tells Laura she must be nice to Johnny Steadman, "the worst boy in Iowa." When wealthy Mrs. Starr asks for Laura as a companion to read to her in the afternoons, Laura is overjoyed to be invited into such a fine house, but when she overhears Mrs. Starr offer to adopt Laura as her own daughter to ease the burden of so many children, Laura is certain that Ma and Pa will give her up. As Christmas morning approaches, Laura is faced with a decision: Will she choose what she believes is best for the family or will she find a way to stay with Pa, Ma, Mary and Carrie? This original play presents the poignant story of the "missing" two years in the life of the Ingalls family—the only substantial period that Laura chose not to write about in her *Little House* books. Told with period songs, humor and depth of character, *A Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas* tells a story of healing that celebrates the importance of enduring family bonds.

## Characters

**Laura:** 10 years old, the middle daughter of the Ingalls family

**Pa** (Charles Phillip Ingalls) - an adventurous pioneer farmer and head of the Ingalls family

**Mary:** 12 years old, the eldest daughter of the Ingalls family

**Carrie:** 7 years old, the youngest daughter of the Ingalls family

**Ma** (Caroline Lake Quiner Ingalls): hard-working but deeply saddened by the recent loss of Baby Freddie

**Johnny Steadman:** a sour, difficult young boy who walks with a limp

**Mrs. Starr:** a lonely widow and neighbor to the Ingalls family in Burr Oak



## Setting

In 1876, when Laura was nine years old, the Ingalls family left Walnut Grove, Minnesota, after suffering through two years of grasshopper plagues. They traveled to Burr Oak, Iowa, to help manage the Masters Hotel, owned by their friend, William Steadman, also from Walnut Grove. Burr Oak is often referred to as “The Missing Link” in the Little House book series.

Burr Oak, settled in 1851, is nestled in one of the most beautiful areas of northeast Iowa. By the 1880 census, there were over 800 residents in Burr Oak township and 200 living in the village. Two hundred, sometimes as many as three hundred, emigrant wagons passed through Burr Oak each day. Today, Burr Oak is an unincorporated village of about 160 residents.



Masters Hotel in the late 1800s

The first hotel in Burr Oak was built by Samuel Belding in 1851. The building, known as the Burr Oak House, was made of logs and was about 16x20 feet, with a loft that was reached by a ladder. After Belding sold the hotel to John Waggoner, it was renamed the Waggoner House. An addition was added to the hotel in 1857 and it became known as the Burr Oak House again. When William Masters purchased the hotel in 1873, it became the Masters Hotel. He sold it to William Steadman, from Walnut Grove, Minnesota. Charles Ingalls and his family moved into the hotel with the Steadman family in 1876.

The Masters Hotel is the only childhood home of Laura Ingalls Wilder that remains on its original site. It is registered on the National Register of Historical Places. After the Ingalls family moved away, the hotel changed ownership and names several times over the years. In the early 1900s, it became a private residence until it was unoccupied in the 1950s. In 1973, it was purchased by four private individuals who wanted to restore the hotel and open it as a Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum. After years of work by volunteers, and with money earned through grants, fundraisers and donations, the Laura Ingalls Wilder Park & Museum opened in June of 1976. Today, the museum sees over 6,000 visitors a year, from all 50 states and around the world.



The Masters Hotel as it is today - the Laura Ingalls Wilder Park & Museum



In *Pioneer Girl*, Laura Ingalls Wilder writes of walking in the Burr Oak Cemetery with a school friend on Saturday afternoons. She thought the old graveyard was a beautiful place and not at all sad. Ironically, she also described it as a place with tall dark evergreens, instead of the village’s namesake, the oak trees that grew along the banks of Silver Creek.

Burr Oak Cemetery, 2006

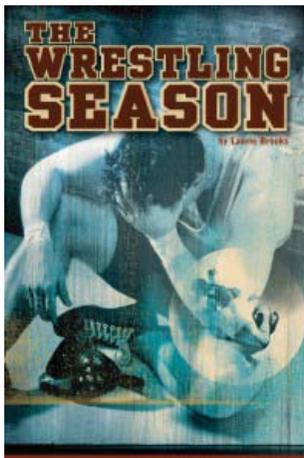
## The Playwright



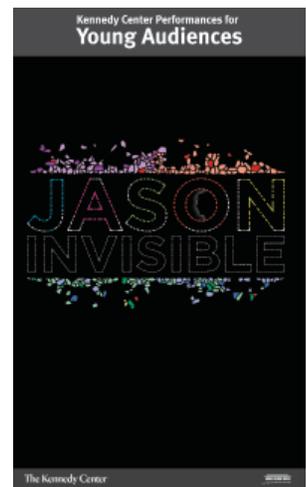
**Laurie Brooks** is an award-winning playwright and young adult fiction author whose innovative After-Play Interactive Forum designs are changing the way theatres engage audiences. Awards include TCG’s National Theatre Artist Residency Program with the Coterie Theatre, Kansas City, Mo.; AT&T Firststage Award; and three Distinguished Play Awards and the Charlotte B. Chorpenning Cup from AATE. She has received grants from New York Foundation for the Arts, Children’s Foundation of America and Irish Arts Council (with Graffiti Theatre, Cork, Ireland). Brooks’ Lies and Deceptions Quartet of plays for young adults includes *The Wrestling Season*, commissioned by the Coterie Theatre, featured at the Kennedy Center’s One Theatre World, printed in *American Theatre* (November 2000) and winner of “Best of” awards in Kansas City, Seattle and Dallas. Additional award-winning plays include *Deadly Weapons*, *The Tangled Web*, *Selkie: Between Land*

*and Sea*, *Devon’s Hurt*, *The Match Girl’s Gift: A Christmas Story*, *A Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas*, *Franklin’s Apprentice*, *Triangle*, *The Lost Ones*, *Atypical Boy*, *ALL of US* and *Everyday Heroes*, commissioned and premiered by the Kennedy Center Imagination Celebration and Salt Lake City for the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. *Brave No World: Community. Identity. Stand-up Comedy.* was commissioned and premiered at the Kennedy Center in 2006.

Brooks has worked extensively in Ireland, where four commissioned plays were developed with Graffiti Theatre. She served as assistant professor and playwright in residence at New York University for 10 years, where she also served as literary manager for the historic Provincetown Playhouse, and was playwright-in-residence for the Houston Young Professionals Endeavor Institute at the Alley Theatre in Houston. She has been guest lecturer at University of Missouri-Kansas City and University of Texas at Austin and playwright-in-residence at Arizona State University. Her article “Put a Little Boal in Your Theatre: A New Model for Talkbacks” appeared in *American Theatre*, and she was a featured artist at the 2007 TCG National Conference at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Alfred A. Knopf published Brooks’ book for young adults, *Selkie Girl*, in 2008. Current projects include *Jason Invisible*, a new play commissioned by the Kennedy Center, which will premiere in March 2013.



*Selkie: Between Land and Sea* at Illinois State University



## The Author



**Laura Ingalls Wilder** (1867 - 1957) was born in the log cabin described in *Little House in the Big Woods*. As her classic Little House books tell us, she and her family traveled by covered wagon across the Midwest—from the deep forests of Wisconsin to the vast Kansas prairie and the rich plains of Minnesota. The Ingalls family finally settled at the end of a railroad line in the brand-new town of De Smet in the Dakota territory.

During their journeys they faced many hardships, including a plague of grasshoppers, extreme drought, severe blizzards, and malaria. Through it all the Ingallses stuck together and persevered as a family. After a particularly severe winter Laura observed, “There is something about living close to the great elemental forces of nature that allows people to rise above small annoyances and discomforts.”

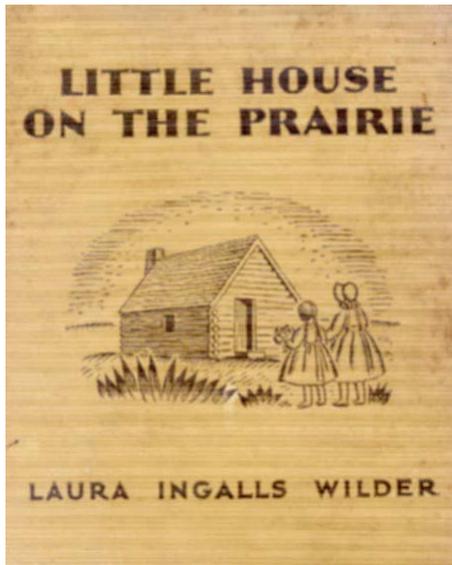
Besides helping her family with chores such as churning butter and rounding up cattle, Laura was an excellent student. She was especially gifted at history and writing. In the dim light of her kitchen at age fourteen, she started writing poetry. Laura also helped her sister Mary prepare for the Iowa College for the Blind. “I wanted an education so much myself that I was very happy in thinking that Mary was getting one.”

Laura’s first teaching job came in 1882, when a school board member from a little settlement twelve miles south of De Smet asked her to teach a two-month winter term. Each weekend Almanzo Wilder drove her back and forth in his sleigh between her family’s house and the settlement. When she turned seventeen, they were engaged, and in 1885 they were married.

When Laura was in her fifties, she began to document her childhood memories. Laura chronicled her extraordinary life as a pioneer girl, her early adulthood as a teacher, and her marriage to the quiet farm boy Almanzo Wilder. Laura said, “For years I had thought that the stories my father once told me should be passed on to other children. I felt they were much too good to be lost. . . . Also, to my surprise, I have discovered that I have led a very interesting life. Perhaps none of us realizes how interesting life is until we begin to look at it from that point of view.”

Laura’s books prove to be both a realistic and gripping account of nineteenth-century frontier life and a timeless tale of a strong and loving family working together in the face of hardship.

*(biography from Harper Collins publisher)*



Original 1933 book cover

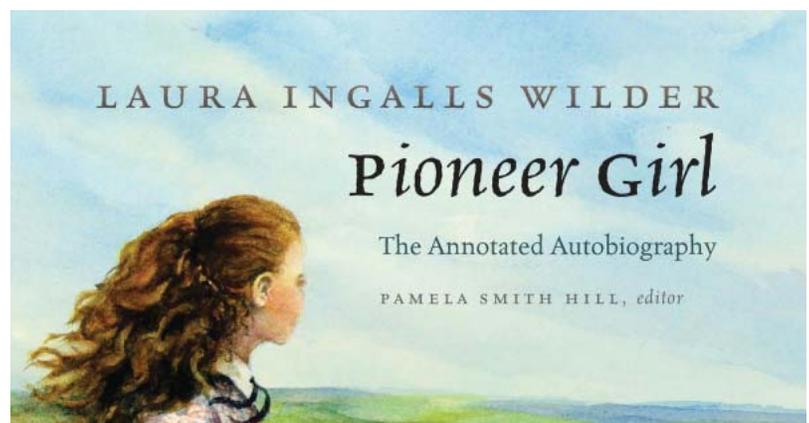
*Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas* was co-commissioned by the Coterie Theatre, Kansas City, MO and Nashville Children’s Theatre, Nashville, TN in 2002. The play is based on both the *Little House on the Prairie* books series as well as drawn on original source materials about the Ingalls family and pioneer life. In 1929 to 1930, already in her early sixties, Wilder began writing her autobiography, tentatively titled *Pioneer Girl*. At the time, it was rejected by publishers, and was never released. At her daughter’s urging, Wilder rewrote her memoirs in the form of children’s stories and the result was the Little House book series.

Although many academics and fans speculated about what happened and why Ingalls did not include her time in Burr Oak in her series, it was not until 2014 when the Little House Heritage Trust granted the South Dakota Historical Society Press exclusive rights to publish a comprehensive, annotated edition of the

Laura Ingalls Wilder autobiography, *Pioneer Girl*, that more information about her life came to light. Wilder details the Ingalls family’s journey through Kansas, Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, back to Minnesota, and on to Dakota Territory— sixteen years of travels, unforgettable stories, and the everyday people who became immortal through her fiction. Using additional manuscripts, diaries, and letters, editor Pamela Smith Hill adds valuable context and explores Wilder’s growth as a writer.

*Pioneer Girl* includes stories that Wilder may have felt were inappropriate for children, such as an incident of extreme violence of a local shopkeeper against his wife, and she describes previously unknown sides of her father’s character. According to the Pioneer Girl Project, “Wilder’s fiction, her autobiography, and her real childhood are all distinct things, but they are closely intertwined.” The South Dakota Historical Society Press wanted to publish an annotated edition that would explore the differences, including incidents with conflicting or non-existing accounts in one or another of the sources.

The annotated autobiography also explores the history of the frontier that the Ingalls family traversed and the culture and life of the communities Wilder lived in. The book features over one hundred images, eight fully researched maps, and hundreds of annotations based on census data and records, newspapers of the period, and other primary documents.



## Lyric Arts Set Design

by Jane Ryan



Inspirational Image - first production meeting

During the set design process, a designer will often start with inspirational or research images that help communicate the mood or tone of the design. Next, they'll create color renderings of the design, including multiple looks if the set changes throughout the show. Lastly, they'll build a scale model of the set so that the director, cast, and production team can see what the set looks like in three dimensions. The design may change throughout the process to meet the evolving needs of the production. Here are some examples from Jane Ryan's set design for our production of *A Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas*.



Digital color rendering - The Hotel



Digital color rendering - The Gravesite



Digital color rendering - The Starr House



Color Model - Pre-show

Harper Collins, the publishing house for the *Little House on the Prairie* books, has an excellent classroom activity guide for the entire series. We've uploaded their guide to our website, but here are a few activities that we've modified that might work well for your classroom during your field trip to a performance of *A Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas*. We can also create custom-tailored curriculum to meet state or national standards for your classroom or bring an artist to your school. More information available at [www.lyricarts.org/education/teachers-and-schools/](http://www.lyricarts.org/education/teachers-and-schools/).

## Language Arts - Themes

### Home and Family

Though the Ingallses live in many different places, in the books Pa often sings “Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam, Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.” Before the seeing the play, ask students to write about the difference between a house and a home. After seeing the play, ask them to describe what makes the Ingallses feel at home, whether they're traveling across the country in a covered wagon or living with the Steadmans at the Masters Hotel.

In times of hardship or disaster, all the Ingallses pitch in to help. Before watching the play, ask students to pay close attention to the performances of the actors and how they portray each member of the family. After watching the play, ask students to think of each member of the Ingalls family and describe a time when he or she helps out the family. What can they tell about the characters' personalities by the ways that they handle difficult situations? How do these personalities work together?

### Memories

As an adult, Wilder thought back to her very early childhood and wrote detailed accounts of her life. These accounts have helped people today understand what life was like in the 1800s. Before watching the play, ask students to pay close attention to how the Ingalls live their everyday lives and notice how they are the same or different from how we live today. After the play, ask students to find a friend or family member who lived in a time period before they were born, and talk about his or her life. Ask students to list the similarities and differences they notice compared to their own lives.

## Theater - Performance

### Hot Seat

After watching the play, ask students to choose a character and write down as much as they can remember about that character's life: family, friends, things they did, what they said, etc. Then, split the students into small groups and have each of them take turns answering questions as if they are one of the characters from the play. They must answer based on what they learned from the play, even if it means making up an answer that would fit with the time period and the personality of the character. Lastly, ask for volunteers to do the same thing in front of the classroom, i.e. sit in the “hot seat.”

*A Laura Ingalls Wilder Christmas* provides a good opportunity to speak with young people about facing loss and the different ways people show their love for each other. Here are some questions that you can discuss around the dinner table before and after you see the show.

## Before the Show

1. Have you ever read any of the *Little House on the Prairie* books? What do you remember about the Ingalls family and how they lived from the books? Based on what you've read, what do you expect you might see onstage?
2. Why do you want to come to see this show? Why come to see it at Lyric Arts?
3. Seeing a play is very different from reading a book or watching a TV show or a movie. Discuss how seeing live actors might be similar or different to watching the same story on TV or in the movie theater. Have they seen the 1970s television show, *Little House on the Prairie*?



- Parents may have seen the original broadcasts as children, while children may have seen re-broadcasts or on DVD collections. Based on what you've seen, what do you expect you might see onstage?
4. The play is written to be performed very simply - with just a few boxes and crates. How do you expect the design elements like props, costumes, set, sound, and lighting will help to tell the story?
  5. Have you ever seen any of the film or television adaptations of -----? If so, what do you expect to be similar or different than the play?

## After the Show

1. In your own words, what happened in the play?
2. What was the most moving to you? Did anything make you cry or laugh out loud?
3. What surprised you the most? What, if anything, confused you?
4. Which design elements were the most memorable? Why?
5. What, if anything, about the show changed how you feel about pioneer life?
- 6: Thematic questions: What does "bereft" mean and why do Ma and Mrs. Starr feel this way? Why might Johnny Steadman choose to bully other children? What do you think might be an answer to Laura's question to Pa, "Why is it so hard to be good?" How are Laura's family and Mrs. Starr's family similar or different? How is living in the 19th century different from living today?

The information in this study guide was pulled from the following sources.

Dramatic Publishing website: [http://www.dramaticpublishing.com/p813/A-Laura-Ingalls-Wilder-Christmas/product\\_info.html](http://www.dramaticpublishing.com/p813/A-Laura-Ingalls-Wilder-Christmas/product_info.html)

Harper Collins Publisher Teacher's Guide for the Little House on the Prairie book series: <http://files.harpercollins.com/PDF/TeachingGuides/0064400026.pdf>

Herbert Hoover Presidential Library: <http://www.hoover.archives.gov/>

Laura Ingalls Wilder Park & Museum: <http://www.lauraingallswilder.us/>

National Trails website: <http://www.nps.gov/mopi/learn/management/nts.htm>

Photography sources: <http://www.redwineandapplesauce.com>

The Pioneer Girl Project, a website dedicated to preserving and publishing a detailed edition of Laura Ingalls Wilder's autobiography: <http://pioneerproject.org/order/>

The Wilder Life: My Adventures in the Lost World of Little House on the Prairie, By Wendy McClure.

Wikipedia articles about Laura Ingalls Wilder: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laura\\_Ingalls\\_Wilder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laura_Ingalls_Wilder)