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**Re-Writing the Frontier Myth:
Gender, Race, and Changing Conceptions of
American Identity in *Little House on the Prairie***

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Submitted Spring 2012

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Introduction

The Little House books are stories of long ago. Today our way of living and our schools are much different; so many things have made living and learning easier. But the real things haven't changed. It is 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. Great improvements in living have been made because every American has always been free to pursue his own happiness, and so long as Americans are free, they will continue to make our country ever more wonderful.¹

In this letter to her fans around the country, Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the classic children's book series *Little House on the Prairie*, echoes the loving sentiments, traditional values, and nostalgia that fill the pages of her books. As an elderly farmer's wife and former pioneer woman, she set out to write the story of her childhood in conjunction with her daughter, Rose, as a tribute to her deceased mother and elder sister. Over the course of eight books, the reader follows the Ingalls family from the Big Woods of Wisconsin to Indian Territory, Minnesota and South Dakota, all while learning about their values, work, and lives as pioneers in the late 1800s. These books have resonated with children since the publication of *Little House in the Big Woods* in 1932, and continue to resonate in 2012. Today, more than sixty million copies of the *Little House* series have sold worldwide in over thirty-three languages. In 2001, the complete series was recognized on a list of all-time best-selling children's books, and most of the books have earned such honors as the ALA Notable Children's Book Award and Newberry Honor Book Award.²

Beginning in the 1970s, *Little House* culture expanded beyond the confines of the book series. Upon Wilder's death, her friends and fans founded two separate memorial societies in her

¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder to her Fans, 1954, *Dear Laura: Letters from Children to Laura Ingalls Wilder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 151.

² Anita Clair Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 5.

honor; by the end of the 1970s, living history museums, archives, pageants and festivals had independently surfaced in each location associated with the Ingalls or Wilder families.³ In 1974, NBC also began broadcasting the television version of *Little House on the Prairie*, produced by Ed Friendly and directed by Michael Landon. The show proved extremely popular; over the course of an average week, 17.5 million households would tune in during prime time to watch the latest episode.⁴ It remained in the top twenty-five shows for seven seasons, won multiple Emmys, and has frequently been listed among the best family-friendly television series ever created.⁵ Reruns, special edition boxed DVD sets, and television show collectibles testify to its continuing resonance with contemporary audiences.

Little House resurfaced again in the late 1990s and early 2000s when HarperCollins commissioned various children's authors to write stories about Laura's relatives. As a multitude of new books flooded the market, memoirs, collectors items, and new television adaptations also helped to introduce a new generation to the world of *Little House*. My third grade teacher first introduced me to Laura and her life on the prairie during the height of this resurgence, and I found myself immediately captivated. I proceeded to read the entire series over the course of the next two years, as well as any other *Little House*-related book I could find. Indeed, reflecting upon my own reaction to *Little House* was what caused me to begin to question America's continuing love of this story.

This thesis explores why *Little House* has remained relevant to multiple generations over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially those living through times of

³ William Anderson, *The Little House Guidebook* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 65.

⁴ Classic TV Hits, "TV Ratings: Top 30 Shows for each year, from 1950 to 2000," <http://www.classictvhits.com/tvratings/index.htm> (Dec. 12, 2011).

⁵ The Internet Movie Database, "Little House on the Prairie," <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071007/> (Oct. 19, 2011).

social and political unrest. Though a simple, fairly traditional story, it has appealed to a large swath of the population, and has affected most sectors of popular culture. Why has it remained so popular? Which aspects of this memory and narrative have allowed it to flourish and resonate despite major changes within American society? What about the particular moments of the 1930s, 1970s, and 1990s spurred the creation and resurgences of this narrative?

The exploration of *Little House*'s continuing popularity also raises more fundamental questions about the nature of memory and of identity formation in American society. If representations of the past change according to contemporary needs and desires, what can these changes tell us about the political climate of the times? Do they merely reflect, or can they also influence political debates and beliefs? How do people locate a specific narrative like *Little House* within broader American myths? While this is nearly impossible to pinpoint exactly, by closely examining *Little House* products as cultural and historical sources, we can begin to grapple with these questions.

This thesis argues that much of *Little House*'s popularity can be attributed to its association with one of the foundational myths of America, the frontier myth, as well as its expansion of that myth. The frontier myth, one of America's strongest and most enduring narratives, has been retold through the years in various guises, though perhaps most famously by Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History*, where he laid out the significance of the West to the development of American identity.⁶ At its most recognizable level, it is "the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious,

⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920).

self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top.”⁷ By incorporating certain elements of this myth in each incarnation, *Little House* has reinforced and drawn on a story that has appealed to Americans and helped them to affirm their identities from the founding of the country. While many narratives incorporate aspects of a romantic American West, *Little House* has distinguished itself because its narrative has been expanded to include new groups at moments of societal questioning and anxiety, particularly during the 1930s, 1970s, and late 1990s. Yet, the story has not lost either its nostalgia for simpler times or its inherent conservatism. In short, *Little House* shows how America can expand and be more inclusive while still retaining its most essential qualities. This combination has allowed *Little House* to resonate with Americans at different historical moments, as well as provided them with a structured, safe space to question and examine the changing nature of American identity.

In order to understand how American identity can be linked to a simple children’s story like *Little House*, this study draws on theories developed in the academic discipline of historical memory. Here, scholars concern themselves with how people remember their pasts, and how they integrate history into their lives. They examine who is creating historical narratives, for what purpose, and what the gap between memory and the historical record suggests about contemporary political and cultural concerns. Historians undertake these studies based on the assumption that representations of the past matter. According to a study conducted by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen for the book *The Presence of the Past*, 99% of the people surveyed had participated in some form of historical activity in the past year. In the same survey,

⁷ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1800* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 5.

many also expressed their active dislike of academic, classroom history.⁸ The manner of presentation can significantly alter the impact the past has in people's lives.

These representations are important not only in the kinds of information and knowledge they impart to the public, but also the ways in which they aid the process of identity formation. As Michael Kammen states in his book *Mystic Chords of Memory*, "critics adhering to diverse ideological persuasions have suggested that societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and that they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind – manipulating the past in order to mold the present."⁹ The past is not static; societies alter their conceptions of historical events to help them understand current situations. In Rosenzweig's and Thelen's study, people consciously turned to the past to define their identities, and to understand how they could make a difference in the future.¹⁰ By providing collective political and psychological meanings and connotations to a particular memory, people can both actively and subconsciously draw on that memory as a framework for how the world works now, influencing their sense of themselves and their worldview.¹¹

Often, these memories acquire political and psychological meanings because certain individuals with enough time, money, and influence create a specific version of that past. Owen Dwyer and Derek Alderman, who study the memory of the Civil Rights Movement, would define these individuals as "memorial entrepreneurs," or those who attempt to use their resources

⁸ The historical activities included such diverse activities as watching movies about the past, writing in a journal, and taking photographs to preserve memories, among others. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1998), 19, 31.

⁹ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1991), 3.

¹⁰ Rosenzweig and Thelen, 37, 81.

¹¹ Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002), 184, 189.

to influence the meaning of certain memories.¹² These “memory makers” emphasize certain elements while ignoring others, manipulating the past in order to shape public opinion to certain political or social agendas.¹³ In the case of *Little House*, Wilder and Landon will be considered “memory makers” as the creators of the book series and television show, respectively.

However, there is no guarantee that the public will passively absorb these meanings. Just as “memory makers” are one key player in the creation of a specific past, “memory consumers,” who alter or ignore elements of the past presented to them, are just as key.¹⁴ The audience comes to any presentation of the past with its own concerns; it can miss the main point, or create an entirely new narrative. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka put it best when she stated that “individuals are perfectly capable of ignoring even the best told stories, of injecting their own, subversive meanings into even the most rhetorically accomplished ‘texts.’”¹⁵ Therefore, when possible, it is important to differentiate between the narratives presented and those received and incorporated into people’s lives.

This thesis focuses on the creation and various adaptations of *Little House* as a way to explore the historical memory surrounding America’s frontier past. Specifically, it uses close examination of the cultural sources themselves, as well as recurring elements within individuals’ recollections of *Little House*, to understand how *Little House* reflects changes in America’s sense of the past and how it has helped to construct a certain version of American history. In addition to *Little House* products, then, this study draws on web sites, blogs, published memoirs, reader and viewer statistics, newspaper and magazine articles, and letters in an attempt to obtain as

¹² Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (Chicago: The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2008), 6.

¹³ Kansteiner, 180.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 4.

complete a picture of the memory formation process as possible. Kammen's *Mystic Chords of Memory*, especially his exploration of democratization of memory, has proved essential to my understanding of *Little House*'s legacy. He never explicitly defines this concept, but I will use this term to mean the expansion of a narrative to new groups, as well as the process whereby memory has been placed in the hands of and is directly applicable to the public.¹⁶

Currently, few scholars have integrated historical memory to examine why *Little House* has remained so popular for over eighty years or what that popularity might tell us about constructions of American myths and identities. Academic studies of *Little House* typically fall into three categories. Biographies of Wilder, among the first scholarly literature on the subject to appear, are the most common and have been useful in understanding Wilder as an historical figure and her writing process.¹⁷ The second category, literary analysis, favors the book series and analyzes them from a literary perspective. These have proved particularly helpful when analyzing and finding themes within the books.¹⁸

Finally, there are a few works that focus on the social and cultural implications of the books. Most notably, Anita Clair Fellman's *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture* examines the effects of *Little House* in the classroom, home, and public discourse. She then attempts to place this narrative within the recent renaissance of conservatism in America. In so doing, she examines such diverse sources as classroom projects,

¹⁶ Kammen, 7.

¹⁷ This thesis has referenced William Anderson, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); John Miller, *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008); John Miller, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman Behind the Legend* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998); William Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

¹⁸ For example, see Ann Romines, *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

children's pretend play, visits to historic sites, postage stamps and memorial highways.¹⁹ Her methods, structure, and cultural research have influenced my own structure and methods. Rather than focus on *Little House* and the rise of conservatism in America as Fellman does, however, this study focuses on its expansion of the frontier myth.

Chapter one explores how *Little House* fits into the larger frontier myth. This chapter begins by tracing the development of the frontier myth and its most recognizable components. After briefly introducing the story of *Little House*, it then focuses on how Wilder and the writers of the television show located this narrative within the wider myth. The public responded enthusiastically to this framework, and the chapter also chronicles some facets of this reaction.

Chapters two and three act as case studies for how *Little House* has simultaneously democratized aspects of the frontier myth and remained traditional in response to major transitions in society. Chapter two focuses on *Little House*'s expansion of the frontier narrative to celebrate women's roles, stories, and voices, particularly in the books. It also places this new feminine emphasis into the context of expanding roles for women in the 1920s and 1930s, and to a lesser extent the women's liberation movement of the 1970s.

Chapter three investigates changing portrayals of Native Americans and African Americans in *Little House*, with particular emphasis on their increasing importance and centrality in the television show. While the books have been deservedly criticized for their narrow portrayal of Native Americans and African Americans, this chapter begins by examining how the books integrated a certain degree of nuance and ambiguity into the story. It then focuses on the much greater interventions in the television show, and how it fits within post-Civil Rights racial dynamics of the 1970s.

¹⁹ Fellman, 4.

Ultimately, this children's series has something to tell us not only about the workings of narrative, but also about the nature of American identity. By comparing the story of *Little House* with the larger themes of the frontier myth, we can see how Americans have redefined themselves and their pasts over time in reaction to certain social and political trends. However, we can also begin to glimpse some of the most enduring aspects of American identity through themes that have survived through generations of change. While *Little House* might be a simple children's tale, its larger role within American consciousness is complex, dynamic, and influential.

“Go West, Young Man!” The Frontier Myth in American Society

Every summer, crowds of young girls and their families descend on a living history museum, Old World Wisconsin, for their annual Laura Ingalls Wilder Children’s Day. Clad in sunbonnets and pioneer garb, often with a rag doll in hand, these two thousand-odd children storm the grounds to recreate Wilder’s childhood days as portrayed in the *Little House* book series. Over the course of the day, visitors have the opportunity to participate in over twenty events, whether it is learning how to churn butter and plane wood or watching a fashion show of the most iconic dresses from the series. The museum’s stated goal for the day is to ensure that, “every interpretation, event, and area reflects the words of Laura Ingalls, using the family life she described in her books to impart to children the concepts of ‘history’ and ‘the past’ by making them tangible.”¹ If the enthusiasm of the young participants is any indication, the museum must be succeeding on some level. Perhaps the example of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Children’s Day can provide some clues to *Little House*’s enduring appeal.

This celebration at Old World Wisconsin highlights a few key aspects of the *Little House* narrative: it embraces both the storytelling and historical aspects of the books, and emphasizes the story’s placement within the pioneer period. Indeed, *Little House*’s positioning within a popular, often mythologized period provided the necessary foundation for its ongoing resonance with new generations of Americans. The frontier myth, in which the pioneer plays a key role, has been an integral part of American identity formation since the beginnings of the country. *Little House* appeared on the scene at a time when the frontier was at the forefront of intellectual debates, and concern about the closing of the frontier was still fresh; while the anxiety over the frontier has since faded away, the potency of the myth has not. By its placement within this

¹ Margaret T. Dwyer, “Little House at Old World,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 85 (2002): 5.

narrative of the frontier, *Little House* resonated immediately and deeply with audiences, not merely by being a good story, but by reaffirming a myth central to American society.

To understand *Little House* and its popularity, we must begin by understanding the role of myth, particularly a myth about the importance of the frontier, in American history. In his book *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin defines myths as “stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness – with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain.”² For the purposes of this thesis, myth is a story based in an historical truth with varying levels of fictional components; it has endured over time yet remains malleable. Because *Little House* falls in the murky area between historical narrative and fictional creation, and has lasted through multiple generations, it is best categorized as a myth. More importantly, myth refers to a story or narrative that has become ingrained within a society’s psyche; when this story is brought up, certain essential elements and connotations come to mind, giving it immediate meaning and relevance.

Societies need myths in order to understand the world. They can help societies to explain problems they encounter in the course of human experience.³ They allow people to act as though the world made sense. Myths can also legitimate a particular version of history that is helpful to society at a given moment.⁴ When taken together, myths influence how a particular group of people act based on their mutual understanding of the stories and connotations they have grown up surrounded by.

² Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 5.

³ *Ibid*, 6.

⁴ *Ibid*, 17, 25.

The story of westward expansion is a perfect example of a key American foundational myth. It is one of the most enduring yet flexible myths in American culture. Furthermore, until Frederick Jackson Turner's revolutionary thesis, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, in which he examined the West's unique historical role in shaping American life, it was a region that had been overlooked by traditional historians. Yet, the importance of the West to some sense of American identity is evident in popular history and entertainment, featuring such figures as Davy Crockett, Buffalo Bill Cody, Louis L'Amour, and Clint Eastwood. As Richard White argues in an article on the figurative meeting of Buffalo Bill Cody and Turner in Chicago in 1893, the "cultural utility" of the frontier had long been apparent to Americans because most aspects of their lives, including folklore, music, and politics, already incorporated it.⁵ It is precisely this combination of entertainment, historiography, and ideology that has made the frontier myth so potent.

The frontier myth, in its simplest form, is the idea that those individuals who were strong and resourceful enough could get ahead by moving to the open land of the West, where there were unlimited opportunities for advancement. According to the myth, these opportunities made America exceptional; anyone who could prove themselves in the wilderness, not just those with money, could make a new life for themselves. From the discovery of America, but particularly in the Revolutionary Era, early versions of this idea began to emerge, intertwining its origins with the founding of the country.

⁵ Richard White, "When Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody Both Played Chicago in 1893." In *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?*, edited by Richard W. Etulain. *Historians at Work*, edited by Edward Countryman, 45-57. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. Originally published in *Frontier and Region: Essays in Honor of Martin Ridge*, edited by Robert C. Ritchie and Paul Andrew Hutton (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 50.

This framing of America drew on the earliest colonists' hopes for the New World, as they imagined America as a Garden of Eden full of virgin land, a land free of the sins, corruption, and social problems of Europe at that time.⁶ In *The End of American Exceptionalism*, David Wrobel argues that the frontier myth really began to come to fruition after the Revolution, when thinkers such as Benjamin Franklin, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, and Thomas Jefferson linked a more generic garden myth to the ideals of democracy set forth in the Constitution. To Jefferson, it was essential to retain and expand into vacant land in order for the country to remain agricultural. Only if the country remained agricultural, composed of yeomen farmers, could it retain its integrity and righteousness.⁷ This argument highlights that from the beginning, the success of America's political experiment was tied to wilderness and the ability to expand into, conquer, and cultivate it.

Through most of the nineteenth century, new land acquisitions outpaced population growth, allowing the myth to flourish, largely unchallenged.⁸ The Louisiana Purchase, the annexations of Texas and Oregon, and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo at the close of the Mexican-American War all ensured continued access to new land; as more Americans moved to these territories, the myth directly applied to common people's lives and experiences. Gold rushes and the Oregon Trail, trading opportunities, a chance to rebuild and unify post-Civil War, and the Homestead Acts all provided opportunities for people to start over, and to fulfill the American dream. Of course, once settlers arrived, they realized that the land was far from empty, and had its own history and peoples. It is not surprising, then, that this period began to explicitly link violence, conquest, and the struggle of the individual to survive in a hostile environment

⁶ David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 4.

⁷ Ibid, 5-6.

⁸ Ibid, 5.

with the agrarian myth. Descriptions of farmer, explorer, pioneer and fighter intertwined, creating a multi-layered vision of the expanding frontier.⁹

This romantic story of westward expansion may have been particularly potent because it developed within a printing press society that could easily disseminate the idea. Popular images quickly eclipsed the political and philosophical versions of the frontier myth.¹⁰ The widespread dispersal of such diverse media as advertising, folk songs, and dime novels, has also meant that the founding myth of America has been national in character to an unprecedented degree. From the early days of the republic, the importance of westward expansion has been a defining feature of the national character of America, giving it a potency to shape beliefs across the country rather than merely in regional pockets.

Frontier literature typically focused on one key, archetypal male hero. These heroes proved their masculinity by being smart and skilled enough to tame the wilderness, overcome wild beasts, and foil Indian attacks.¹¹ The stories centered on violence, but these figures remained the heroes of the narrative by modeling such characteristics as bravery, self-reliance, and independence.¹² According to history professor Kent Steckmesser, beginning with the creation of the legend of Daniel Boone in 1784, “these writers [of frontier literature] have been adept at creating the kinds of legends that people want to believe about the frontier and its heroes. They have done their job so effectively that Americans now revered the legends more

⁹ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Kent L. Steckmesser, “The Frontier Hero in History and Legend,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 46 (1963), 168-175.

¹² *Ibid.*, 168.

than the truths.”¹³ The importance of the lived reality of the frontier diminished as these legends became more fanciful and more ingrained into the American psyche.

Throughout the 1800s, the market for these stories rapidly expanded. Davy Crockett, politician, frontiersman, and soldier, became a star while still alive, his mythic status overtaking his historical persona.¹⁴ Dime novels appeared centering around the Mexican-American War, and romantic versions of the Indian Wars dotted the headlines of major newspapers everywhere.¹⁵ “Boy heroes” such as Ragged Dick and Tom Sawyer played out coming of age stories in the mythic land of the frontier.¹⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, cowboys and Indians, massacres, and the image of the lone frontiersman had filled the pages of popular literature, allowing the myth to flourish on a larger scale.

The academic and popular visions of the West collided beginning in the last two decades of the nineteenth century with a growing anxiety over the perceived closing of the frontier. Hints of concern surfaced in the 1880s, as the U.S. Census revealed that there were now more tenant farmers in the United States than in any European country, and John Wesley Powell, the explorer and geologist, warned that traditional farming techniques would not work in the still relatively unsettled semi-arid western regions. People returning east after attempting to homestead became a common sight, with “In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted,” chalked on their covered wagons.¹⁷ What was hinted at in the 1880s became a reality at the turn of the twentieth century. The 1890 U.S. Census officially declared the frontier closed, and governmental policy began to

¹³ Ibid, 179.

¹⁴ Richard R Flores, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 130-152.

¹⁵ Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 51-80, 191-208.

¹⁶ Ibid, 499-530.

¹⁷ Wrobel, 11-24.

look into expansion beyond America's traditional borders in order to keep some form of frontier open to settlement.¹⁸

Yet even as the era of westward expansion came to an end, the period from the 1880s through the 1930s proved that the frontier myth had been deeply ingrained in the popular imagination. Many Americans believed that the frontier had provided unlimited opportunities for employment, and that without these opportunities the American dream itself would come crashing down. For example, William Dean Howells, an author and literary critic, believed that "if a man got out of work...he went west, preempted a quarter section of public land, and grew up with the country. Now the country is gone...and the hand that turned itself to something else has lost its cunning."¹⁹ More than the loss of opportunity, the populace worried that the end of the frontier would also signify the end of American citizens' exceptional qualities and individualism. Theodore Roosevelt, in his book *The Winning of the West*, suggested that the "Pioneer Spirit" that developed in the open wilderness of the frontier was essential to the creation of a strong democracy cultivated by masculinity and self-reliance. To him, without the frontier, America would become a weak nation.²⁰ Philip Ashton Rollins, in his 1922 *The Cowboy*, argued that the qualities of self-reliance, individualism, and an anti-classist attitude made America uniquely great.²¹ These themes would later prove to be particularly important in Rose Wilder Lane's and Laura Ingalls Wilder's conceptions of individualism and the role of government in their portrayal of the pioneer days.

¹⁸ Ibid, 42, 58-65.

¹⁹ William Dean Howells, "A Traveller from Altruria," *The Alturian Romances* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 121 in Wrobel, 33.

²⁰ Ibid, 66.

²¹ Ibid, 105.

Frederick Jackson Turner published his seminal work, *The Significance of the American Frontier*, in the midst of these worries in 1893; this became the widely read *The Frontier in American History* in 1920.²² Turner was born in Portage, Wisconsin in 1861, and grew up, as he later professed, experiencing the frontier first hand. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin and completing his PhD at Johns Hopkins University, he quickly became one of the most noted western and frontier historians of his time.²³ Turner's concern over the closing of the frontier led him to formulate his own version of the frontier myth within an academic setting.

Turner brought together many themes to provide a cohesive argument from an historian's perspective on the importance of the American frontier to the development of the nation. He linked the westward movement of America with its national character, arguing that American society's ability to begin again on the frontier, or "this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character."²⁴ In this articulation, he put forth the version of American exceptionalism that would hold sway in the academic world for decades to come.

Most significantly when looking ahead to the frontier the mythical world *Little House* inhabits, Turner laid out a series of frontiers in a process of social evolution, with the taming of the wilderness as the focal point. With influences from Loria, an Italian economist, Turner divided the frontier into six stages.

It begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization; we read the annals of the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of

²² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), xvi.

²³ *Ibid*, xvii-xviii.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 2-3.

corn and wheat in sparsely settled farming communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organization with city and factory system.²⁵

Though many do not first think of this aspect of Turner's argument, Laura Ingalls Wilder would later explicitly echo these six stages of frontier development when discussing her unique placement as historian and storyteller of westward migration.

As Richard White argues, in Turner's version of the American frontier, despite multiple stages of frontier advancement, the true American pioneer was the farmer who peacefully conquered a largely empty continent, rather than the frontiersman who conquered by killing the native population.²⁶ Turner offered an academic argument for the frontier's importance, one that historians would latch on to and revere for many decades, yet he placed his argument within the popular west full of iconographic log cabins, covered wagons, and retreats into the primitive wilderness.²⁷ In the end, White suggests that Turner brought together many different strands of the frontier myth to create a cohesive vision of a peaceful, empty frontier, one in direct opposition to the violent, cowboy-and-Indians version of the frontier popularized by such figures as Buffalo Bill Cody.²⁸ However, Turner did not envision a bright future for America; he concluded his essay with the rather dim, "And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history."²⁹ Despite this conclusion, Turner was essential in keeping the frontier myth alive in the twentieth century, and has since influenced most aspects of its generation and diffusion, including *Little House*.

²⁵ Ibid, 11.

²⁶ White, 47-48.

²⁷ Ibid, 51-52.

²⁸ Ibid, 47-48.

²⁹ Turner, 38.

With the end of frontier days and the transition of America into a largely urban, industrialized society, one might expect the frontier myth to fade away. On the contrary, however, the frontier became mythologized even further, ensuring its continuation through and applicability for the twentieth century audience. Indeed, with the advent of cinema, the genre of the Western boomed. Beginning with Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, the silent film industry quickly incorporated the frontier myth in the form of the Western, and as quickly realized its commercial potential. It proved so lucrative that by 1914 some reviewers were beginning to complain that Westerns were "already old hat."³⁰ By the 1920s, the Western had evolved into epics, feature films that "set a dignified and 'significant' historical fable in Western dress....The epics also promulgated a consistently 'progressive' interpretation of frontier history."³¹ During the worst of the Depression, Westerns became less popular, but within a decade experienced a renaissance that lasted until 1973.³² At this point, traditional Westerns temporarily faded into the background as the nation became more conscious of the consequences of western expansion and imperialism for Native Americans.³³

The frontier myth endured not only in film, but also in books and political rhetoric throughout the twentieth century. During the height of children's historical fiction writing in the 1920s and 1930s, most series greater than four books involved at least one story set in the West. Series westerns such as Zane Grey, though frowned upon by librarians as unsuitable children's reading, remained exceedingly popular.³⁴ In later decades political figures frequently used the untamed West as a metaphor in speeches. For example, Kennedy incorporated language of the

³⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 231.

³¹ Ibid, 253.

³² Ibid, 278.

³³ Ibid, 628-633.

³⁴ Anita Clair Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 121-123.

frontier in a speech about the importance of fighting Communism around the world.³⁵ Over the course of the twentieth century, the frontier myth thus became both more abstract and visible. The invention of cinema and immediate popularity of the Western reinforced the frontier's placement at the heart of American identity. At the same time, as the reality of westward expansion faded, the myth could become an abstract concept to be used for completely different political purposes.

Little House on the Prairie is one example of the frontier myth's enduring popularity and power. Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote the *Little House* books about her childhood in the 1930s, a time when the public continued to be anxious about the close of the frontier and its implications for American society. Though Wilder did not spend the majority of her life as a writer, in the late 1920s she and her daughter Rose drafted an autobiographical story of her childhood entitled *Pioneer Girl*. This manuscript was designed as an adult-oriented story composed of Wilder's childhood and adolescent memories.³⁶ When her memory failed her, they simply undertook research to reconstruct significant aspects of her time in a particular location.³⁷ After multiple publishers rejected the book, Lane pulled out the most vivid stories that Wilder remembered her father telling around the fire, and combined them into a new manuscript titled *When Grandma Was a Little Girl*. Once reworked into a children's story of the Ingalls family's time in Wisconsin, HarperCollins published the first book in *The Little House on the Prairie* series,

³⁵ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 490.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39-68.

³⁷ Ann Romines, *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 60.

Little House in the Big Woods, in 1932.³⁸ Even during the creation of the series, then, Wilder and Lane constructed a nostalgic, pioneering framework for *Little House*.

As part of this framework, each character fills a specific role within the pioneering family. Pa is the traditional frontiersman, as he hunts, trades furs, and builds whatever is necessary for the family. He is also the ultimate father figure – he protects Laura and her sister Mary from wolves, adequately provides for the family, and makes work and chores into adventures with his creativity and sense of humor. Ma, on the other hand, is gentle, firm, and loving. She always seems to be working, whether she is mending clothes, cooking or cleaning. She also maintains the role of civilizer for the girls, reminding them to act in a ladylike fashion and adhere to proper Christian values.

The story centers on Laura. First introduced at the age of four, she is energetic, curious, and loves active, outdoor games. She always wants to help Pa with whatever he is doing, whether it is making a smokehouse to cure deer meat or the daily chore of cleaning and loading the gun. Mary, Laura's older sister, enjoys being a lady. She prefers quiet, indoor games, happily spends the day sewing, and always keeps her temper. However, they both generally get along, playing house in the attic with the gourds stored for the winter or taking care of their rag dolls.

Over the course of the series, the Ingalls family moves to many new places, all with slightly different connections to the frontier. In *Little House in the Big Woods*, the Ingalls family lives off the land in the forests of Wisconsin, with the exception of a few store-bought supplies. It is described as an empty land, but it quickly becomes clear that both family and other neighbors live relatively close by. Though they live in a land where bears and panthers still roam,

³⁸ John Miller, *Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: Authorship, Place, Time, and Culture* Missouri Biography Series, edited by William E. Foley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 23-41.

the frontier has really moved past them at this point. The reader is introduced to the frontier more through Pa's stories of his own childhood than from Laura and Mary's adventures. Indeed, it is the overabundance of people scaring away game and taking the best farming land that drives the Ingalls family to move west.

The Ingalls family next moves to Indian Territory, portrayed in the most well known book of the series, *Little House on the Prairie*.³⁹ Pa decides to move the family to Kansas after hearing that new land would be open to white settlement under the Homestead Act, granting farmers 160 acres for free if they homesteaded and cultivated the land for five years. After travelling in a covered wagon from Wisconsin to Kansas, they find a place to settle, with rootless land to plow and overflowing wild game. With Pa's promise that they could live like kings in this land, they build a log home and begin to homestead. In the process, they fight off a prairie fire, hide from a rogue panther, and see a cattle drive. They survive Indian plans for war, a bout of malaria, and a blizzard through Christmas. Overall, they prove themselves worthy pioneers, independent spirits surviving by the grace of God and with the mutual support of their few neighbors. At the end of their first year, however, they are forced to leave by federal troops; seemingly, Washington has changed its mind and will not be opening Indian Territory to settlement.

After backtracking to settled country for multiple years in a small town in Minnesota, Walnut Grove, the family decides to move west when Pa receives an offer to work on the railroad. Once again, the ability to start over and make a new life simply by moving westward, a central theme in the frontier myth, proves too appealing to resist. *By the Shores of Silver Lake*

³⁹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1935).

recounts this journey.⁴⁰ Laura, now thirteen, focuses on depicting the changing, open landscapes of the prairie, as well as the chores and challenges of setting up a homestead and living as a family amidst the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of railroad shanty-towns. In this way, the reader can begin to get a sense of life on the frontier from a more adult perspective. Once again, the Ingalls family has moved to the edge of settlement in South Dakota, but in so doing they have simultaneously helped to construct the transportation lines that will eventually bring industrialization to the West and close the frontier.

The final three books, *The Long Winter*, *Little Town on the Prairie*, and *These Happy Golden Years*, all take place in the rapidly growing settlement of De Smet.⁴¹ They follow the Ingalls family as Laura grows into a young woman, becomes a teacher, and gets married. The stories also expand to include other townspeople's lives to an unprecedented extent. In essence, these books are the embodiment of the end of the frontier, and of the Ingalls family's pioneering days.

While the 1970s television series is set in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, it most closely resembles these three books. It focuses on the life of a settled prairie town, using this backdrop for a variety of anachronistic adventures. However, by making Walnut Grove a very small, rural town, and by introducing such archetypal western elements as interactions with Indians, a gold rush, mining, and railroading, Michael Landon and his crew managed to retain *Little House's* frontier niche.⁴²

⁴⁰ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1939).

⁴¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Long Winter* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1940); *Little Town on the Prairie* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1941); *These Happy, Golden Years* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1943).

⁴² *Little House on the Prairie* (originally aired 1974-1982), Youtube, www.youtube.com/ (accessed April 25, 2012).

There is no question that *Little House on the Prairie* echoes themes and utilizes iconography of the frontier myth, particularly Turner's crafting to make the farmer the true pioneer. There is also ample evidence to suggest that *Little House* "memory makers" have consciously used these themes and encouraged the narratives' placement within the myth. Wilder herself wrote,

I wanted the children now to understand more about the beginning of things...to know what is behind the things they see – what it is that made America as they know it. Then I thought of writing the story of my childhood in several volumes...covering every aspect of the American frontier...I understood that in my own life I represented a period of American history...I had seen...the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of railroads in wild, unsettled country, homesteading and farms coming in to take possession.⁴³

In this quotation, Wilder reaffirmed *Little House's* placement within the realm of historical memory, though Wilder would not have described her project in those terms. She also directly mirrored the multiple stages of frontier development laid out in Turner's thesis. Some, such as *Little House* historian John Miller, have suggested that Wilder had a unique connection to Turner because she grew up in the same general area and time period as he did.⁴⁴ However, while we know from Lane's letters that she had read and commented on Turner's work, there is no direct evidence to suggest any deeper relationship between Wilder and Turner. Finally, Wilder echoed the frontier anxiety that she would have grown up with and that continued to be a concern in the 1930s. This is evident in her desire to encapsulate her frontier experience and share it with future generations who would never have the opportunity to see the unsettled frontier for themselves.

The television series also explicitly placed itself within the frontier myth. Urban legend has sprung up surrounding Michael Landon's attention to detail, wanting to truly place viewers

⁴³ Laura Ingalls Wilder in William Anderson, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); 13-14.

⁴⁴ Miller, 94-109.

within the Old West. According to one site, he spent many hours examining photographs to get every detail of the costumes, farmhouses, schoolhouses, and churches correct.⁴⁵ Since Landon's vision of a fictionalized, sentimentalized version of prairie life drove the representations of *Little House* in the television show, the look of the series remained firmly within the romanticized, iconographic frontier that has appealed to Americans for hundreds of years.⁴⁶

Finally, newer incarnations of *Little House* have built upon the foundations laid in the 1930s and 1970s. HarperCollins now offers authentic pioneer cookbooks and other memorabilia designed for the sentimental frontier crowd.⁴⁷ The *Little House* sites' main purpose is to enliven and elucidate pioneer life and how the Ingalls family actually would have lived. The Laura Ingalls Wilder Wayside "paints a charming and historically-accurate picture of where Laura was born and what prairie pioneer life was really like," while visiting the Little House on the Prairie Museum, Inc. "is like stepping back in time."⁴⁸ The creators of *Little House* narratives from the 1930s through today actively placed it within the traditional frontier myth.

The larger public has accepted this framing of *Little House* as a story about the American frontier experience. Children have written to Wilder over the years, saying, "I have read all of them and liked them because...I think the life of our early pioneers is interesting and makes us appreciate our modern conveniences," or "We like them because it makes us forget that we are

⁴⁵ Lennon Parker, "History of the NBC Little House on the Prairie Series," Prairie Fans <http://www.prairiefans.com> (Feb. 2012).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ For example, see Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The Little House Cookbook: Frontier Foods From Laura Ingalls Wilder's Classic Stories* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), or *My Book of Little House Paper Dolls* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), among many others.

⁴⁸ Pepin Area Community Club, "Pepin Attractions," Welcome to Pepin, Wisconsin: Birthplace of Laura Ingalls Wilder http://www.pepinwisconsin.com/cgi-bin/viewncontent.cgi?nlarticle_id=2 (Feb. 2012); Little House on the Prairie Museum, Inc. http://www.littlehouseontheprairiemuseum.com/Little_House_on_the_Prairie_Museum.html (Feb. 2012).

sixth graders in Longfellow School and makes us feel as if we were pioneers on the prairie. Some of us who didn't like History before now like it a great deal."⁴⁹ A young boy named Guy perhaps best articulated the allure of the frontier when he stated, "I do wish that I were you, because I'd like to run and play on the vast prairie instead of living in a crowded city."⁵⁰ The frontier as brought to life in Wilder's prose proved appealing in these cases because it offered an escape from the modern, industrialized world, creating a realistic fantasy world in which children could envision themselves.

Current uses of the television show and other modern incarnations of *Little House* show people also embraced their framing as stories of the frontier. The tagline in the Internet Movie Database for *Little House on the Prairie* reads, "The life and adventures of the Ingalls family in the 19th century American West."⁵¹ Teachers utilize *Little House on the Prairie* not only in their English classes, but also in their history and social studies classes to create interdisciplinary units on frontier life.⁵² The museums continue to appeal to people because, as the De Smet Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society puts it, "visitors like to imagine they're doing the same things the Ingalls did."⁵³

While this might at first glance appear to be trivial or trite, it is essential to understand that by placing *Little House* within the confines of the frontier myth, the public has located it within multiple centuries of imagery, fascination, and romanticization. Without its historical

⁴⁹ Martha to Laura Ingalls Wilder, May 27, 1943, and 6th Grade Longfellow School to Laura Ingalls Wilder, Jan. 6, 1974, in *Dear Laura: Letters From Children to Laura Ingalls Wilder* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996) 57, 74.

⁵⁰ Guy to Laura Ingalls Wilder, Nov. 12, 1947, in *Dear Laura*, 80.

⁵¹ The Internet Movie Database, "Little House on the Prairie," <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071007/> (Feb. 2012).

⁵² Fellman, 119-154.

⁵³ Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Homes <http://www.liwms.com/> (accessed April 25, 2012).

roots in the 1800s, without people's nostalgia for American exceptionalism, and without the frontier anxiety present amidst the initial book release, it is highly unlikely that *Little House* would have endured as it has.

Little House, then, resonates with Americans specifically because it is located within a myth that has endured from the 1700s through today. Embracing a vision of the frontier with echoes of Turner's thesis, Wilder crafted well-honed versions of her childhood memories to commemorate this transitional phase of American culture, playing directly into Americans' tendency toward nostalgia. Themes central to American identity formation run throughout the overarching *Little House* narrative and have been further enhanced by the television show. Though the frontier myth has changed over time, its enduring power and the need for a foundational myth have not. *Little House*'s ability to tap into the longing for the frontier can explain a good deal of its popularity.

However, *Little House* is not an entirely traditional evocation of the myth. In both incarnations in the 1930s and 1970s, its "memory makers" expanded and democratized the narrative. The idea of the West, particularly the version portrayed in *Little House*, is adaptable, changing to fit the needs of society. Over the course of the twentieth century, it had to modernize as America modernized in order to remain relevant. Foundational myths like that of the frontier had to be updated in order to reflect contemporary political and cultural concerns. In the 1930s, as society adjusted to the changes brought about by the first wave of feminism and the economic hardships of the Great Depression, *Little House* expanded girls' and women's places within the frontier myth.

Balancing Feminism and Femininity in *Little House*

“A long time ago, when all the grandfathers and grandmothers of today were little boys and little girls or very small babies, or perhaps not even born,” Almanzo Wilder and Laura Ingalls began to court each other.¹ She was teaching in a town twelve miles away, and he, with the finest team of horses and the lightest buggy in the county, would come and fetch her home each weekend. After the school term ended, Almanzo continued to drop by the Ingalls household each Sunday to take Laura for long rides on the prairie. Sometimes they would sing, or work to tame the two new colts Almanzo had bought. During the week, each would work their respective jobs, Almanzo farming, Laura teaching, but both cherished the weekend time they spent together. One spring afternoon, Almanzo proposed, and they began to make plans for a simple ceremony.

As Laura and Almanzo announced their engagement, Eliza Jane, Almanzo’s bossy, independent older sister, began making elaborate, expensive plans for them. Upset by all the fuss that would ensue and the financial burden it would place on the Ingalls household, Laura and Almanzo decided to marry the very next week, foregoing a ceremony and even a wedding dress. However, Laura refused to compromise on one detail of the ceremony, saying, “Well, I am not going to say I will obey you,” to which Almanzo replied, “Are you for women’s rights, like Eliza?”² Laura replied that she was not, that she had no interest in voting, but did not want to

¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1935), 1.

² Laura Ingalls Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1943), 269.

make a promise when she knew she would not obey an order that went against her own better judgment. They quickly settled the issue, and were married the following week.³

This surprising interlude towards the end of a fairly conservative courtship tale told in *These Happy Golden Years* at first appears as an unexpected rupture in the narrative. However, when examined in the broader context both of the *Little House* story, and the creation and marketing of the series in the 1930s and early 1940s, the story offers a perfect example of the balance present in *Little House* that has allowed it to become and remain so popular. On the one hand, this is an entirely traditional courtship for the time period. On the other hand, it is a courtship tale within a frontier narrative, a realm usually reserved for single men conquering the wilderness. The story provides a suitably sentimental, romantic ending to the series, with Laura's marriage symbolizing her final transition to adulthood. At the same time, Laura maintains a degree of authority and agency, declaring that she will not obey Almanzo. This interaction is just one example of a larger trend within the books. *Little House* is at once a traditional, explicitly conservative narrative while also remaining adaptive, flexible, and relevant. It bridges these two narratives with a unifying tone of nostalgia and longing for a simpler time period.

This chapter focuses on the inclusion of women and the feminine domain into a previously explicitly masculine narrative, primarily in the original book series. Through the collaboration of two women, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane, *Little House* presents to young girls a frontier story designed specifically for them, filled with feminine appeal, where girls and their stories are important. Wilder and Lane shared a common set of conservative beliefs, yet they also embodied and engaged with the early twentieth century rhetoric of a new woman. The stories themselves are filled with traditional portrayals of women, and often have an

³ This is a snapshot of the relationship between Laura and Almanzo as portrayed in Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*.

explicitly libertarian ethos. At the same time, they included girls and women in the male sphere of the frontier, thus expanding the traditional American mythic narrative and pushing the boundaries of acceptable practices at the time. In so doing, *Little House* provided a safe space for girls of the Depression Era to play with female characters and storylines in a new, engaging setting without breaking any major boundaries. While the narrative changed to become more conservative and male-dominated over time, this balancing act has proven successful time and time again.

The 1930s was a decade of changes and questioning for Americans. The Great Depression and the New Deal both exacerbated and halted social movements begun earlier in the century, as well as introduced tensions and changes in their own right. The economic makeup of the country drastically changed after the stock market crash of 1929. Between 1929 and 1932 the national income was halved; by 1934, national income was approximately thirty-two billion dollars less than in 1929.⁴ Agriculture was particularly hard hit, with farm prices dropping twenty percent in 1930. Farmers had surpluses, yet no one could afford to buy the crops.⁵ Many Americans had to completely alter their lifestyle, often cutting back significantly just to make ends meet. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, he introduced far-reaching legislation in an attempt to counter the effects of and halt the depression. With such programs and reforms as the Social Security Act, the National Labor Relations Act, and the National Recovery Administration, the federal government entered the average American's social and personal life in ways previously unheard of, engendering strong opinions both positive

⁴ United States Department of Commerce: Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Survey of Current Business*, August 1935, Vol. 15, no. 8, 16-19.

⁵ Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*, American Women in the Twentieth Century, edited by Barbara Haber (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), xii.

and negative.⁶ Americans were forced to question some of the core values of their society, namely independence and individualism, and the validity of the American dream in a time of great need.

This was an especially fluid and divided time for women and their place within American society. Ten years previously, in 1920, women had been given the right to vote, the epitome of a surge of early feminism pushing for the same political and economic rights as men. The idea of a new woman emerged over the course of the 1920s. According to Mary Ryan, a scholar writing on movie moderns in the 1920s, “the twenties marked the solidification of a new pattern of female roles characterized by a dynamic equilibrium between work, home, and consumer activities.”⁷ The image of the flapper emerged as young single women had more flexibility within society and did not follow the strict manners and etiquette practiced by their mothers, and larger numbers of women entered the workforce.⁸ Simultaneously, many women became dismayed by the seeming lack of interest in voting and other legal gains among their peers.⁹ Though this has recently been addressed, historian Estelle Freedman has pointed out that scholars long ignored the impact of the feminist movement in the 1920s.¹⁰ Assumptions such as historian Frederick Lewis Allen’s that “few of the younger women could rouse themselves to even a passing interest in politics: to them it was a sordid and futile business, without flavor and without hope,” persisted for decades; this enduring image has caused many to question the

⁶ Ibid, xv.

⁷ Mary P. Ryan, “The Projection of a New Womanhood: The Movie Moderns in the 1920s,” in *Decades of Discontent: The Women’s Movement, 1920-1940*, edited by Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 128.

⁸ Ibid, 113.

⁹ Estelle Freedman, “The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s,” *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 2 (1974), 372-373.

¹⁰ Ibid.

continuation of the feminist campaign in the 1920s even as women took advantage of the new opportunities and rights available to them.¹¹

During the 1930s and early 1940s, this new woman seemed on many fronts to vanish, though a dialogue about proper women's roles remained open. Individual women continued to achieve, and were held up as models of courage, bravery, and independence in popular culture. The 1930s saw such diverse women as Amelia Earhart, Georgia O'Keefe, Gertrude Stein, and Eleanor Roosevelt enter the public realm and captivate America, whether through politics, art, athletics, or other pursuits.¹² Eleanor Roosevelt in particular was key in inspiring women, encouraging them to work and enter the political realm. Over the course of her husband's term in office, she held 348 of her own press conferences, and was just as important as the president in implementing many of the social changes of the decade.¹³

Women responded to her call. More women politicians were active in the 1930s than any other decade until the 1960s.¹⁴ They also entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers, mainly out of economic necessity as the Depression grew worse and families became more desperate for money and food. Between 1920 and 1940, the percent of women aged fourteen or older in the labor force went from 23.3% to 25.4%, an increase despite the high unemployment rates during the Great Depression.¹⁵ Among this percentage, a greater number of married,

¹¹ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (New York: 1931), 95-96, in Freedman, 373.

¹² Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, introduction to *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940*, 3.

¹³ Eleanor Roosevelt, *Women in the Labor Force* (June 16, 1938), in Richard D. Polenberg, *The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt 1933-1945: A Brief History with Documents*, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 93-94.

¹⁴ Ware, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

middle-class women entered the workforce, especially in newly available and feminized white-collar positions such as clerical and sales occupations.¹⁶

However, these changes were met with resistance from a large percentage of the population. Many pushed for restrictive legislation that would discourage married women from working, arguing that married women took jobs away from unemployed men, that their proper place was in the home and domestic sphere, and that children were happier and healthier if they had a full-time mother.¹⁷ When in the public sphere, women's role could only be legitimized through language linking that role to their familial responsibilities and benefits.¹⁸ This mirrored a larger trend, where women's roles remained firmly rooted in their capability to make do and make a home no matter the economic circumstances. Their ability to purchase wisely became of utmost importance, and traditional views of women in many ways overshadowed the individual gains women made during this time period.¹⁹ Thus, women experienced both expanded opportunities and limiting boundaries on their identity.

The creation and story of *Little House* mirror this greater public inclusion and simultaneous entrenchment within traditional gender expectations and roles. Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane, and their writing process, exemplified these balancing acts of identity, acting as independent women while writing about and espousing the values of traditional society.²⁰ Lane, especially, was in many respects the very definition of the young

¹⁶ Scharf and Jensen, 6-7.

¹⁷ Ware, 27.

¹⁸ Scharf and Jensen, 9.

¹⁹ Ware, 2-3.

²⁰ It is important to note that the degree to which Rose Wilder Lane was involved in the writing process of *Little House* is still an active scholarly debate. Most scholars of the last decade do acknowledge that Lane played a hand in the shaping of the books, as evidenced by Wilder's and Lane's written correspondences. For the purposes of this thesis, I will work under the assumption

modern American woman of the 1920s. By 1928, the year most scholars mark as the beginning of Wilder's and Lane's collaboration, Lane had left home as a single woman at seventeen to be a telegraph operator, married and divorced, moved across the country to San Francisco, spent an extended amount of time abroad in Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, and made a modest reputation for herself as a journalist and author.²¹ From the diaries and letters Lane kept, we know she returned home to Mansfield in the late 1920s burned out, unsatisfied with her own writing, and depressed from her travels and personal relationships.²² Despite a love-hate relationship with her mother, whom she at times found overbearing and controlling, Lane resolved to return to a more traditional, slower-paced lifestyle back home in Mansfield.²³

Wilder, though farther towards the conservative end of the spectrum than her daughter, was also quite an independent woman for her age and time. After a lasting illness left Almanzo with a disability, Wilder took on some of the physical tasks of farming life, building up Rocky Ridge alongside her husband. She was a renowned chicken breeder in her own right; indeed, it was an article on chicken breeding that began her on the path to becoming a journalist at the *Missouri Ruralist*. She was also an active local community leader in Mansfield – she was a charter member of the Athenians' women's discussion club, the secretary-treasurer for the National Farm Loan Association until 1928, and even ran in a local election for the position of collector of Pleasant Valley Township in 1925.²⁴ Yet, she remained a dedicated lower-middle

that they collaborated and that both brought their own biases and personalities with them that come through in the books.

²¹ William Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane*, Missouri Biography Series, edited by William E. Foley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), ch. 3-7.

²² Anita Clair Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 39-40.

²³ Holtz, 194-199.

²⁴ John Miller, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman Behind the Legend*, Missouri Biography Series, edited by William E. Foley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 4.

class farmer's wife, limited her journalism to housewifery and other domestic activities, and was always careful to maintain proper womanly behavior and attitudes.

What brought Wilder and Lane together more than anything else was politics and a shared distrust of government. This interest in and free discussion of politics was in itself progressive, yet they bonded over an increasingly conservative rhetoric, embodying the dichotomy that would later appear in their writings. Lane began the 1920s as a self-defined Communist, yet by the end of the decade she had come to see anything beyond "minimal government" as "an unnecessary evil."²⁵ Lane had been attracted to Communism because she believed it would cause "the extension of human freedom by seizing economic control from the capitalist and ceding it to the state."²⁶ However, upon visiting Russia and talking with Russian families, she came to believe that in actuality Communism meant extreme control in the hands of a few people, and that what she truly desired was a focus on individual experience and freedom. Thus, she came to see minimal government, bordering on anarchy, as the better means to govern a society made up of individuals.²⁷ In later years, she became deeply entrenched within the Libertarian movement, writing political tracts rather than fiction, and becoming close friends with Roger Lea MacBride, a Libertarian politician, who would inherit the rights to *Little House* upon Lane's death.²⁸ Wilder, though long a member of the Democratic Party, became strongly opposed to Roosevelt's New Deal, and to governmental paternalism in general, especially in the arena of agriculture.²⁹ Both Wilder and Lane looked back upon their own hardships and how

²⁵ Ibid, 55.

²⁶ Holtz, 261.

²⁷ Ibid, 262.

²⁸ Fellman, 239.

²⁹ Ibid, 58.

they had managed to overcome them, and constructed from this reflection a set of political beliefs marked by a firm belief in independence, hard work, and self-reliance.

Their lifestyles as modern yet traditional women and their political beliefs came together in the creation of *Little House*. Wilder and Lane made the conscious decision to write about Wilder's childhood, framing it within the realm of the frontier. Wilder often commented that her favorite genre of pleasure reading was Westerns, especially those of Luke Short and Zane Grey, so she was familiar with the usual subjects and portrayals of the frontier at that time.³⁰ Wilder and Lane chose a very feminine way of entering into the world of frontier literature, writing from the perspective of Laura as a young girl, emphasizing the family and household as important and interesting in their own right. They wrote the books without the aid of men until the publishing stage, and used the money from writing to support their family. Wilder's emphasis on womanly behavior and middle-class values comes through, as do her and Lane's political, individualist values. In short, the women behind the *Little House* phenomenon, and their process of creation, were themselves attempting to ride through a time of transition in American social life, embracing new opportunities without wanting to give up the past. Perhaps it is this personal connection to and resonance with the push and pull of gender issues in the books that allows readers to so deeply identify with the character of Laura.

Wilder and Lane clearly aimed to include women and girls within a frontier narrative by directly marketing the books for the female child reader. Advertisements for books litter the pages of 1930s and 1940s era newspapers, particularly around the holidays. Among these, the

³⁰ Miller, 258.

Little House books regularly claim prime billing for books for girls.³¹ Local newspapers had weekly or monthly columns highlighting new purchases at the public library, and every time HarperCollins released a new *Little House* installment, that book quickly made many of these lists under new books of special interest to girls ranging in age from six to twelve.³² This is not uniformly true – some newspapers, especially for the earlier books in the series, claimed that truly good literature such as the *Little House* books appealed to all children and even adults. The fact that they felt compelled to widen the realms of readership, however, suggests that the prime audience was girls.³³

The dynamic between a girl-focused narrative, disrupting the traditional patterns of the frontier myth, and the maintenance of traditional gender roles is apparent not only in the authors' lives and in the construction of *Little House*, but also in the themes and plot of the texts themselves. Ann Romines, a Wilder scholar and English professor, has written extensively on the multiple levels of gender identification and analysis in the *Little House* series in her book *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder*.³⁴ In examining the following two plot elements, I will draw on her analysis in addition to my own.

While gender is a constant concern and source of ambiguity through the books, two plot elements will effectively serve to demonstrate the dichotomy between expanding roles for women and the emphasis on tradition. The first of these is the centrality of Laura and her voice,

³¹ “Books: Living Christmas Gifts,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, Dec. 7, 1941 [Factiva]; “Children’s Books Are Vacation Essentials,” *Indiana Evening Gazette*, Jul. 25, 1936 [Factiva]; “Moseley’s 83rd Christmas,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, Nov. 21, 1940 [Factiva].

³² “Want girls to do more reading,” *Evening Huronite*, Nov. 13, 1941 [Factiva]; “Spring book festival will find daily programs for students,” *The Daily Mail*, May 22, 1943 [Factiva].

³³ “Reading public’s choices swung to new publications,” *Muscatine Journal & News Tribune*, Dec. 30, 1943 [Factiva]; “Books for young enjoyable to both youth and adult,” *La Crosse Tribune and Leader-Press*, Nov. 22, 1935 [Factiva].

³⁴ Ann Romines, *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

and of women's place more generally, to the narrative throughout the books. The entire series is told from Laura's perspective, in opposition to the traditional western narrative where a lone adult male is the protagonist. In choosing to tell the story in this manner, the series becomes more inclusive for women than the western archetype: their stories and experiences are, in the majority of the books, privileged above the masculine experience, and a girl's voice is given weight and authority to tell a story when these voices have often been silenced.

First, women and girls are given priority in the narrative. Laura, and to a lesser extent her sister Mary, are the protagonists of the story. Ma's importance and influence grows over the course of the series, best epitomized in the weather-induced year of domestic confinement in *The Long Winter*.³⁵ Eventually, she replaces Pa as the key figure in Laura's life. Material culture and purchasing power are emphasized as areas where Laura can exert influence.³⁶ Thus, descriptions of dresses, cooking and cleaning techniques, and proper behavior fill the pages of the books. In so doing, aspects of daily life that were traditionally viewed as secondary topics of discussion are given primary importance in these stories.

In writing from Laura's perspective, and in allowing Laura to grow up, the reader is also allowed to see Laura's voice emerge and mature. In a world where adults, including Ma and Pa, tell girls that they should be seen and not heard, the story follows Laura's thoughts, her play, and her perspective on the changing world around her.³⁷ Additionally, after Mary goes blind at the beginning of *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Pa encourages Laura to use her talent for description to paint pictures of the world for Mary with her words.³⁸ This encourages Laura to develop not only her verbal skills, but also her critical thinking skills. She must form opinions about and

³⁵ Ibid, 163.

³⁶ Ibid, 99-101.

³⁷ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods* (New York: HarperCollins, 1932), 66.

³⁸ Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 22-23.

question the world around her as she describes it to her sister. This greatly differs from portrayals of silent, opinion-less women and girls in male-oriented Westerns.

Though women are the center of the story, they are not doing anything vastly out of the ordinary. Pa is still the one who completes most of the action outside of the domestic sphere – this is then related to the reader through Pa’s stories once he comes home for the evening.³⁹ This is especially true in *Little House in the Big Woods*, designed more as a tribute to Pa than to the development of Laura’s voice.⁴⁰ All of the activities they are describing are female, domestic activities. As the series progresses, Laura conforms more and more to traditional gender norms, to the point of getting married at the end of the series. For example, she helps Pa with farm chores less, and she defies Ma’s authority less – she has learned to keep her sunbonnet on, use a womanly voice rather than yell “like an Indian,” keep her temper, and remain content in the house rather than endlessly roaming the creek beds and prairies.⁴¹ Thus, she moves away from the plucky, rambunctious female character of the earlier novels, and away from any potential threat to gender norms.⁴² All of this serves to encase serious advances in women’s storytelling within an otherwise unobjectionable, traditional narrative.

Wilder and Lane also use a second plot element that expands discussions of gender: they highlight and question the various opportunities available to frontier women in the late 1800s.⁴³ Many of the smaller female actors within the narrative are fairly independent women who provide alternatives to Laura’s and the Ingalls family’s lifestyle choices. Aunt Docia and Lena (Laura’s cousin) appear in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. Though set within the boundaries of a

³⁹ Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, 35-38, 45-48, 72-79.

⁴⁰ Romines, ch. 1.

⁴¹ Ibid, 140-141.

⁴² Nancy Rost Goulden and Susan Stanfield, “Leaving Elsie Dinsmore Behind: ‘Plucky Girls’ as an Alternative Role Model in Classic Girls Literature,” *Women’s Studies* 32 (2003): 183-207.

⁴³ Romines, ch. 4-5.

traditional family and woman's work – feeding the railroad men, doing laundry, keeping up the household – they have much more independence than Laura had imagined possible. For example, Aunt Docia drives a buggy many miles by herself to tell Pa about a job opportunity on the railroad at the beginning of the book.⁴⁴ Romines points out that in addition to this act of independence, the delivery of her message spurs the key male figure, Pa, to uproot his family and continue the masculine journey westward.⁴⁵

Thus, a woman could take steps that would change the course of an entire family, though it had to be done by convincing the conventional head of the household to act. Lena, Docia's daughter, has many responsibilities in comparison to Laura, but also more freedoms. For example, she knows and sings the rough male working songs, swears, gallops bareback on her horse, and sleeps in her clothes in a tent behind the family shanty.⁴⁶ Laura finds her fascinating and wants to behave just like her, but Ma quickly cuts off their contact, worrying that Laura's gentle breeding will be ruined by Lena's influence. Thus, Docia and Lena both expand the world of social and behavioral possibilities for women within Laura's world, while Laura herself remains ensconced within traditional working roles and familial structure.

The third important woman that enters Laura's life is her eventual sister-in-law, Eliza Jane Wilder. She is a woman full of contradictions. She teaches school, yet abuses her power within the classroom. She remains an independent spinster, and has a reputation for being a bossy know-it-all. She apparently supports women's rights, and moves frequently to various cities and towns in the Midwest without a chaperone.⁴⁷ While the reader is not expected to like or

⁴⁴ Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 3-6.

⁴⁵ Romines, 145.

⁴⁶ Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, 45-55.

⁴⁷ Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*, 124-137.

sympathize with her, she provides a radical, freer alternative for how women could live their lives.

Later on in the series, Laura also learns of various economic opportunities for women. Laura herself works as a seamstress, a teacher, a claim-sitter, and a personal assistant, all before her marriage to Almanzo at the age of eighteen.⁴⁸ Romines points especially to Laura's realization that by earning a wage, regardless of how much she disliked the job, she could remain mobile and single.⁴⁹ She was not eager to get married, particularly after staying with a dysfunctional family, the Brewsters, during her first teaching stint. Additionally, her wages could help her family, allowing her to purchase her own clothing, keep Mary in a college for the blind, and even buy luxuries such as a parlor organ for the family. Thus, she could do what males of the family would often do, provide a second income to help Pa out of the rough patches and provide some extra comfort for the family. Additionally, she could fully participate in the key aspect of power for women in this time period – purchasing power. Romines makes a powerful case for this in her analysis of *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, where Ma begins to teach Laura and Mary of the importance of resourcefulness and taste in material and buying culture.⁵⁰

In the teaching realm, Laura also has an unheard-of level of authority and leadership. Alone and without guidance in a brand new settlement many miles from De Smet, she has to decide how to teach and engage the students, how to discipline them, how to handle inclement weather and dangerous situations, and countless other daily conundrums. Thus, while Laura remains firmly within the female realm, doing female jobs and remaining under Pa's authority

⁴⁸ Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*.

⁴⁹ Romines, 210-214.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 101-102.

until her marriage, she also learns what it means to have independence and agency by being employable.

In all of this, Laura (and the reader along with her) can examine different choices and economic opportunities women had within the framework of traditional gender rules and loving parental guidance. Most of the time, these lifestyle choices are neither presented in a positive nor a negative light – they are there for the reader to grapple with just as Laura grappled with them. Yet, the same gender roles that appear throughout the series continue to dominate Laura’s life even after she becomes economically independent, and that independence itself is short-lived. Thus, while some questioning can occur, the dominant theme continues to follow traditional gender lines.

It is this more conservative portrayal of women that, for the most part, remained and became a hallmark of *Little House* from the 1970s onward. Part of this is due to the shifting of creative control after both Wilder and Lane passed away. MacBride, the Libertarian Lane had befriended, became the heir to and copyright holder of *Little House*; he would later give the rights to Ed Friendly, the original producer and creative force behind the *Little House* television show.⁵¹ Friendly eventually left the project, but he retained the rights to *Little House*. His company, Friendly Family Productions, continues to hold the copyright today, going so far as to successfully sue the Little House on the Prairie historic site in Independence, Kansas for making profits from a trademarked name.⁵² For his part, Michael Landon, director and star of the show, earned a reputation from the cast and crew of *Little House* as a strong leader with a very precise

⁵¹ Valerie Nelson, “Ed Friendly, 85; helped bring ‘Laugh-In’ and ‘Little House’ to TV,” *LA Times*, June 20, 2007.

⁵² Melissa Block, “Little House on the Prairie Museum Sued,” *National Public Radio*, Oct. 23, 2008 [Lexis-Nexis Academic]; ThinkRisk Underwriting Agency, *Converging Risks in a Digital Economy: Museums* Ryan Specialty Group, LLC, 2012).

vision of how the television show should be run. Those with alternative ideas about a particular episode or character, most notably Karen Grassle, the actress who played Caroline Ingalls (Ma), would have to subordinate their ideas to his particular vision.⁵³

Thus, from its origins as a female-created narrative for a largely young female audience, *Little House* became a male-controlled story. It is not coincidental that at the same time that men began to control the narrative the story became more focused on the external happenings of the town surrounding the Ingalls family's house. Charles Ingalls became the key figure (surpassing Laura's centrality in the books), and much of the subtlety of women's agency is lost from the storyline. The television series, in particular, constantly created situations in which Charles Ingalls must come and save the day, while Caroline and the girls stayed home or in school. The emphasis thus shifted from Laura's perspectives of the world to an adventure-drama where the audience identifies primarily with Charles as a hero figure, perhaps because this was now designated as entertainment for the whole family to be broadcast in prime time. In order to move beyond the young girls' demographic, the creative team gave Charles Ingalls and the other key male characters of Walnut Grove a greater role. Women and girls were relegated to supporting roles where before they had enjoyed dominance within the narrative.

There are exceptions, especially in the later seasons, where women do exert agency. In one episode in the seventh season, "Oleson Versus Oleson," the town debates whether or not it should adopt equal property ownership rights for women. When Caroline Ingalls learns that three of the most respected men in the town, including her husband and son-in-law, are firmly against

⁵³ This sentiment is seen in many interviews and memoirs of the cast and crew, most notably in Alison Arnglim, *Confessions of a Prairie Bitch: How I Survived Nellie Oleson and Learned to Love Being Hated* (New York: itbooks, 2010); Melissa Sue Anderson, *The Way I See It: A Look Back at My Life on Little House* (Guilford: Globe Pequot Press, 2010); Melissa Gilbert, *Prairie Tale: A Memoir* (New York: Simon Spotlight Enterprises, 2009).

the idea, she rallies the women of the town to stand up and fight for their rights. The women leave the men to attempt to keep the households running, with predictably disastrous results. In the end, the men are forced to realize that the women were in the right.⁵⁴

In this episode, and a few others like it, women take center stage to actively fight for a cause they believe in or to engage in a money-earning opportunity on their own despite their husbands' pride. Multiple times, the audience learns along with the man of the house that the women are not always meek and mild. For example, Caroline Ingalls takes a job as a waitress and refuses to quit despite Charles' displeasure, and Laura makes clear that she would divorce Almanzo before being forced to give up teaching.⁵⁵ This directly contradicts the books' plot, where Caroline remains a contented housewife, Laura quits teaching after she gets married, and in general becomes gentler and more womanly as the series progresses.

In many ways, this could be viewed as responding to the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. This decade saw an outpouring of activism related to women's rights. In 1972, Congress proposed the Equal Rights Amendment with surprisingly little opposition; this stated "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." Congress stipulated that three-fourths of the states had to ratify the amendment within seven years. By the end of the first year, thirty states had ratified it, though it never received enough support to be officially added to the Constitution.⁵⁶ Though many different feminist groups had been active for years, in the 1970s the Women's Action Alliance

⁵⁴ *Little House on the Prairie*, "Oleson Versus Oleson," episode 149 (originally aired Jan. 5, 1981), Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSdEVPTeMdl> (accessed April 25, 2012).

⁵⁵ *Little House on the Prairie*, "Back to School," episode 114 (originally aired Sep. 17, 1979), Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8tp9oq52h4> (accessed April 25, 2012); "Divorce, Walnut Grove Style," episode 144 (originally aired Nov. 10, 1980), Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=870cwB57IYI> (accessed April 25, 2012).

⁵⁶ David Kyvig, "Historical Misunderstandings and the Defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment," *The Public Historian* 18, no. 1 (1996): 45.

began to push for a national, unified women's agenda; this came to a head in 1975, which the United Nations had declared National Woman's Year.⁵⁷

This agenda was comprehensive and wide-ranging. It called for more women in positions of authority, for better access to training and education programs, and for the expansion of labor laws and antidiscrimination policies in the workplace. It also encouraged greater women's participation and leadership in unions, equal pay for equal work, and various strategies to provide women with greater economic opportunities. On a separate front, it emphasized women's right to control their own bodies by calling for the recognition of rape as a violent crime, and for providing adequate information for a woman to give consent before undergoing medical procedures such as sterilization.⁵⁸

On some fronts, these demands translated into reality. Over the course of the 1970s, most states rewrote their rape statutes, and in 1973 the Supreme Court ruled in Roe v. Wade against prohibitions on abortions in the first trimester, a significant victory for reproductive rights activists.⁵⁹ More and more women began to have access to contraception, and sex outside of marriage also gradually became more socially acceptable. Divorces and cohabitation served to change the face of the traditional family, and correlated with a rise in the number of mothers re-entering the workforce.⁶⁰ In short, many of the results of the women's liberation movement also served to re-shape familial structures and patterns.

⁵⁷ Cynthia Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda: Coalition Building in the 1970s," *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, edited by Stephanie Gilmore, Women in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 19.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 21-23.

⁵⁹ John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1998), 314-315.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 331-333.

The gender interventions unique to the television show emphasized the early seeds of women's activism, which provided a new direction for the *Little House* narrative. The show emphasized women's rights to work when their husband was unable to provide for the family, essentially becoming working mothers. They stood up to their husbands and made their voices heard as strong women, though in a contained context. Though these are the key aspects where women's rights appear to be advanced in the narrative, the show did allow for a continuation of the balance surrounding discussions of gender as seen decades earlier in the books. There was still a balance between two poles where overall men are in control but women re-insert themselves into the dominant space in the story. Thus, while the television series shifted the overall narrative to be more male-dominated, it took small steps to align the women's storylines with the women's liberation language of the seventies. This flexibility once again allowed the audience to grapple with new issues within a non-threatening environment, but the emphasis had shifted to accommodate the needs of a seventies family audience.

Grappling with new opportunities and old frameworks for women has rung true to the audience of *Little House* from the 1930s onward. *Little House* resonated with younger audiences that were familiar with children's Western book series. However, as titles such as *The Frontier Boys*, *The Saddle Boys*, and *The Boy Ranchers* indicate, these usually centered around and appealed to boys.⁶¹ By providing girls with their own stories, full of feminine values such as love and contentment, *Little House* both drew on the existing popularity of the West and created its own niche that adults and girls alike loved. Librarians deemed it acceptable, edifying reading, while girls wrote to Wilder talking about the rag dolls they had made or the games they had

⁶¹ Kathleen Chamberlain, "The Bobbsey Twins Hit the Trail: Or, Out West with Children's Series Fiction," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1992): 9.

made up while reenacting the books' adventures.⁶² Many children loved her books for their ability to take them to a different time and place in history, and boys and girls alike related to Laura because she was independent.⁶³ The reader could both imagine herself within a traditional womanly framework, acting out women's and girls' games in a wonderful fantasy world, while also breaking out of those boundaries into the realms of history and independence. In short, while there is no way to definitively prove that gender portrayals led to *Little House's* popularity, there is a distinct link between *Little House's* appeal and its celebration of women and girls within a traditional framework. Without this nuanced portrayal, it could not have resonated so well with adults and children alike.

There is evidence to suggest that *Little House's* later, more conservative portrayals of women and girls have also resonated with its audience. The television series remained in the top twenty most-watched television shows for all but one season, indicating that it did expand its appeal to a wider, masculine as well as feminine primetime television audience.⁶⁴ Not only did it reaffirm traditional family values at a time when the nuclear family seemed to be unraveling, but it also incorporated elements of the women's liberation movement in its portrayal of the female characters. Thus, while it held enormous appeal for more conservative families, the fact that the show has managed to remain popular through a second wave of feminism, involving large gains for women in employment, public office, and political activity, could indicate that those with more progressive tendencies also relate to this narrative.

⁶² Fellman, 123-125, 155.

⁶³ *Dear Laura: Letters From Children to Laura Ingalls Wilder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

⁶⁴ Classic TV Hits, "TV Ratings: Top 30 Shows for each year, from 1950 to 2000," <http://www.classictvhits.com/tvratings/index.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).

One key lens through which to understand *Little House*'s legacy and popularity, then, is its ability to incorporate aspects of the woman's movement in the twentieth century within a conventionally gendered narrative. It embraced new possibilities for women, and marked their stories and voices as important in their own right. *Little House* expanded the frontier myth to not only include the roles of women and children, but also showed those roles to be significant and essential to the story of conquering the Turnerian wilderness. This provided a forum for people to think about the discussions of a new woman and the changing conceptions of what women could do and how they should behave. At the same time, it did so by celebrating traditional gender roles, thus placing the reader within a comfortable sphere. It also emphasized explicitly libertarian themes, and in so doing embedded these traditional gender roles within an overarching conservative narrative. In a time of transitions and uncertainty, *Little House* could engage with new dialogue of the 1920s and 1930s while creating a comfortable, accessible space for those unhappy with the political and social changes of the New Deal. Readers could feel like they were both advancing and resisting societal trends of the day. This could be one explanation for *Little House*'s appeal and immediate popularity for young girls as well as its inclusion in library programs and classrooms.

As *Little House* changed over time, the importance and place of gender discussions shifted in order to fit a changing audience's needs. In the seventies, *Little House* needed to appeal to a wide audience and was controlled by a group of men, yet also had to adapt to the rhetoric of a strong women's movement. In both times of transition, *Little House* included women and girls in ways that reflected the current needs of society while firmly placing the consumers within a sentimental, familiar, non-threatening space.

While gender is one case study for this inclusionary aspect of *Little House*, it is not the only one. Beginning with the original series, but particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, race is another way in which we can view similar dynamics. By expanding the frontier narrative to include more nuanced views of Native Americans and African Americans without compromising the overarching white framework of the narrative, *Little House* could engage with a post-Civil Rights audience in a way only hinted at with the episodes involving women's agency. The popularity of *Little House* in these decades is not only due to women's and children's places within the narrative, but also the role of people of color within a nostalgic framework of the past.

Changing Portrayals of Race in *Little House*

Over the course of the past thirty years, a popular tale surrounding the conception of the *Little House* television series has emerged.¹ It begins in the late 1960s, when a young girl named Brooke Friendly grew very ill, and spent much of her time reading the *Little House* series in order to pass the time. After she recovered, she continued to re-read them annually, even into her teenage years. Her mother noticed this, and suggested to her husband, television producer Ed Friendly, that these books should be adapted for the small screen. Though initially resistant, Friendly agreed to consider it, reading the books on a cross-country airplane flight. By the end of the flight, he had begun the process of discovering who owned the rights to the series. After multiple years of negotiations with Roger Lea MacBride, heir to the *Little House* legacy, Ed Friendly obtained the rights to produce a television version of *Little House*. He then approached Michael Landon about being a part of his vision. As one of the stars of the show *Bonanza*, with strong connections to NBC and a proven commitment to family entertainment, Friendly thought Landon would be the perfect person to aid in the process of finding a TV network to produce and finance *Little House*. Landon agreed and forged a contract with NBC.

The two-hour pilot aired on March 30, 1974, with Michael Landon as executive producer, director, and star, and Ed Friendly as co-producer. It was wildly successful, with the highest Nielsen ratings of any NBC television movie up to that time. The weekly series soon began in earnest, but Landon's and Friendly's relationship quickly grew strained. Friendly wanted to remain true to the books, while Landon wanted to take greater artistic license, using the Ingalls

¹ As there is currently a dearth of scholarly studies on the *Little House* television series, most information on the making of the show comes from popular and amateur television and *Little House* history, interviews, and brief news articles.

family as a base to tell stories relevant to his life and the audience. Unable to reconcile their differences, Friendly left the show in 1976, leaving Landon to complete the series.²

Throughout the course of its run, *Little House* remained exceedingly popular. When one looks at the other popular television series of the day, including such notable shows as *M*A*S*H*, *Happy Days*, *Three's Company*, and *All in the Family*, this fact seems surprising.³ Though some of these shows were also nostalgic and family-based, *Little House* was an historical pioneer show, centered around Christian values taught through the example of a loving, caring family, particularly through the figure of Pa. Drama, tears, and neighborliness replaced sarcasm, violence, and sex. When compared to the other popular shows of the day, *Little House* should have been an utter failure. Yet, it thrived.

This chapter will attempt to explain the re-emergence and popularity of the *Little House* narrative in the 1970s and early 1980s. At a moment of great anxiety, transition and questioning of American identity, socially and politically, *Little House* provided a safe, conservative context to grapple with the larger issues of the day. It also democratized the *Little House* narrative to include groups traditionally excluded from the frontier myth, and explicitly framed the American legacy of exceptionalism in a more inclusive way. This democratization, however, was framed in terms of the overall “moral tone” of the series. A problem that might stem from a charged contemporary context is developed in a contained manner on the prairie, and then given a clear solution by the end of the episode. This required a careful balancing act between embracing and

² Classic Television WebRing, “Little House on the Prairie History,” <http://littlehousescenery.homestead.com/files/history.html> (accessed April 25, 2012); Lennon Parker, “History of the NBC Little House on the Prairie Series,” Prairie Fans, www.prairiefans.com (accessed April 25, 2012); Valerie Nelson, “Ed Friendly, 85; helped bring ‘Laugh-In’ and ‘Little House’ to TV,” *LA Times*, June 20, 2007.

³ These shows were highlighted because they most often appeared in the top 25 shows alongside *Little House* in the years 1974-1982.

discussing relevant social issues and placing them within a comfortable, family-oriented historical moment. The show's ability to encompass both the progressive and the traditional encouraged the reappearance of *Little House*, and helped make it so popular in this time period.

Discussions of race both within the books and television show provide a perfect example of this balancing act. The books began to question stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans and African Americans by re-examining certain assumptions through the innocent questionings of a child, Laura. The television series built on this by explicitly addressing racism against both of these groups, allowing for more nuanced characters, and providing a forum for white people to alleviate their guilt. Multiple episodes foregrounded racial injustices and discriminatory attitudes, telling a morality tale about inclusion, tolerance, and overcoming personal prejudices. I will begin by giving an overview of the discussion of race in the original books. I will then provide a general context of the major racial issues of the mid-to-late 1970s before analyzing the portrayal of people of color in the television series and *Little House's* continuing popularity in light of this analysis.

Wilder's books provide a hint of the dual stories of democratization and stasis that mark the television series, particularly in Native Americans' and African-Americans' portrayals in *Little House on the Prairie* and *Little Town on the Prairie*. While many have rightly pointed to the racism that marks the language of key figures and certain events, by placing Laura as an innocent, questioning figure, the text is able to indirectly challenge the treatment of Native Americans and briefly include African Americans in unconventional ways.

Native Americans, though notably absent in Wilder's version of 1870s Wisconsin, feature prominently in *Little House on the Prairie*. Indeed, during the writing process Wilder and

Lane referred to this project as their “Indian book.”⁴ As Wilder would have been too young to remember any of her family’s time in Kansas, she and Lane spent much time thoroughly researching and carefully deciding which figures and incidents to include.⁵ Though the Ingalls family has many encounters with Native Americans, two examples will suffice to provide a glimpse into the ambiguities of the book.

In one instance, the local Indian tribes had come together for a buffalo-hunting party that degenerated into threats of war. For nights on end, the Ingalls family could not sleep as, “every night the Indian drums beat faster, faster, and the wild yipping rose higher and higher, faster, wilder,” and the ensuing “Indian war-cry” came more frequently.⁶ After this had been occurring for some nights, a lone Indian, Soldat du Chene, galloped by the Ingalls household; though his coming initially caused more intense noise, the war cries eventually ceased. The Ingalls later learn that this chief had single-handedly prevented the Indians from declaring war on the white people. This interlude ends with Pa’s declaration, “That’s one good Indian!” as well as Laura’s thought that, “no matter what Mr. Scott said, Pa did not believe that the only good Indian was a dead Indian.”⁷

Shortly after this incident, the Ingalls discover a long line of Indians riding away on the path that crosses in front of their cabin. Wilder describes this line for pages, reveling in the statuesque quality of the riders, the details of their clothes, and their sparkling black eyes. After watching the Indians for hours, Laura sees a papoose, and, “those black eyes looked deep into Laura’s eyes and she looked deep down into the blackness of that little baby’s eyes, and she

⁴ Ann Romines, *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 60.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: HarperCollins, 1935), 266-268.

⁷ Ibid, 276.

wanted that one little baby.”⁸ When Pa and Ma tell her to be quiet and that she cannot have the baby, she throws a tantrum, unable to express why she wanted the infant so badly.

Before analyzing these two events, it is important to note that these are two of the most ambiguous scenes from the books; the reader has earlier learned that Ma hates living close to an Indian tribe, and does not want her girls to be negatively influenced by them. Some of the other homesteaders around Independence remember previous massacres, and believe that all Indians should be killed; everyone takes for granted that the Indians will be forced to move on by the government simply because white settlers have now entered Indian Territory. Indians have come into the house, taken supplies and threatened Ma – overall, the book adheres fairly strictly to the traditional frontier view of Indians as exotic, dangerous others.

In a significant departure from a traditional Western tale, in none of the encounters with Indians do we see an overt attempt at or discussion of violence against Native Americans. Indeed, against the ominous-sounding Indians in the creek bottoms, there is the figure of Soldat du Chene, a French-speaking Indian negotiating on behalf of the white people. As English professor and Wilder scholar Donna Campbell suggests in her article “Wild Men and Dissenting Voices,” this indicates both that he speaks the language of diplomacy, and is portrayed as a mythic hero when the Ingalls family is unable to save themselves.⁹ Pa has also validated Soldat du Chene’s character, and in so doing explicitly refuted the blanket notion that all Indians were dangerous or inherently ‘bad.’

The second example, where Laura demands to keep the baby papoose, is marked by ambiguity. Some scholars view this scene through the lens of imperialism, noting her fascination

⁸ Ibid, 283.

⁹ Donna M. Campbell, “‘Wild Men’ and Dissenting Voices: Narrative Disruption in *Little House on the Prairie*,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (2000): 115.

with the Indians' exotic appearance and her desire to conquer the baby by taking it away from its mother and raise it as part of the Ingalls family.¹⁰ Others have viewed this as a moment of deep connection and empathy for Laura, as she is able to look into the soul of that baby Indian, feel its pain as it is forced to move away from its home, and does not know how to handle those emotions, hence her uncharacteristic request and subsequent temper tantrum.¹¹ In either case, these episodes indicate that, while there are many inaccuracies and assumptions in the portrayals of Native Americans, Wilder and Lane have presented an underlying uneasiness surrounding the systemic prejudice against Native Americans.

The first time that the reader encounters any non-white person other than Native Americans is in *Little House on the Prairie*, when the family has taken ill with malaria. With no one well enough to ride for help, a mysterious stranger appears with medicines for the Ingalls household. Introduced to the reader in short, disrupted sentences and jumping quickly from image to image, at first we know little more than the helpful stranger has a black face.¹² When Laura awakes, she learns from a fellow homesteader that an African-American doctor for the local Indian tribes, Dr. Tan, had come across the Ingalls household, and that without his care and medicine the whole family would have perished. She briefly interacts with Dr. Tan, the first African-American Laura has met, and learns that he is a kind, easy-going man. After this, he rides off and is never mentioned again.

¹⁰ Philip Heldrich, "Going to Indian Territory": Attitudes Toward Native Americans in *Little House on the Prairie*," *Great Plains Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (2000): 106; Sharon Smulders, "The Only Good Indian": History, Race, and Representation in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2003): 199.

¹¹ Romines, 77-78; Louise Mowder, "Domestication of Desire: Gender, Language, and Landscape in the Little House Books," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 17 (1992): 17.

¹² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 172-174.

While this might make the *Little House* series appear very forward thinking for its time, one must contrast Dr. Tan with a later minstrel scene in *Little Town on the Prairie*. Here, Wilder writes about a series of Friday night entertainments, called literaries, which have sprung up as a response to a feeling of restlessness among the townspeople. Generally, these appear wholesome enough, with such events as spelling bees and fiddle competitions. One night, however, the town decides to put on a minstrel show. Wilder describes

five black-faced men in raggedy-taggedy uniforms...The man in the middle was clog dancing...One played a jew's-harp, one played a mouth organ, one kept the time with rattling bones, and one man clapped with hands and feet...The whole crowd was carried away by the pounding music, the grinning white-eyed faces, the wild dancing. There was no time to think. When the dancing stopped, the jokes began. The white-circled eyes rolled, the big red mouths blabbed questions and answers that were the funniest ever heard.¹³

At the end of the evening, Laura and her sisters discover that some of the most respected members of the community, including Pa, were the men in blackface, and declare that “such an evening came once in a lifetime.”¹⁴

These two scenes are given equal weight in the books, presented as Laura remembered them with little explicit commentary. Wilder framed both situations by the wider context in which they were presented – Dr. Tan is portrayed in such a positive light because he has saved their lives, while the minstrel show is deemed acceptable because Pa is participating and it is presented in the fun, social context of the literaries. So, while racist activities are condoned by the town and presented to young readers as an acceptable form of entertainment, Dr. Tan is also accepted as an educated doctor and presented in an exceedingly positive, if somewhat exoticized, manner.

¹³ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* (New York: HarperCollins, 1941), 257-258.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 259-260.

Thus, younger readers in the 1930s and 1940s encountered somewhat more complex situations and portrayals of Native Americans and African Americans than in other contemporary western series literature designed for them. Rather than pass judgment, the book remained fairly neutral when describing the treatment of Native Americans, allowing readers to question whether certain adults' actions and beliefs were correct or fair. Thus, it set the stage perfectly for the 1970s television show to include not only strong individual Native American and African American characters, but to move beyond a questioning of unfair situations to a denunciation of prejudice and racism.

It is impossible to understand said advances in the narrative, however, without taking the larger context of the Civil Rights Movement and other social advancements in the 1970s into account. The 1970s was a decade marked by uncertainties, adjustments, and a wide-scale questioning of American identity. Nixon's Watergate scandal and subsequent resignation between 1972 and 1974, the withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975, and an economy marked by stagflation (inflation with simultaneous low or negative economic growth) all contributed to a "crisis of confidence." According to President Carter, this meant that Americans, "are losing faith...in the ability as citizens to serve as ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy."¹⁵ On the social front, this was a time for Americans to wrestle with the changes begun during the previous decade and how to incorporate them into daily life.

In many ways, the 1970s witnessed the solidification of rights for people of color on an unprecedented level. Affirmative action plans were widely implemented at institutions of higher learning, which led to an upswing in African American enrollment at universities. In the first half of the decade, America saw its first African American as an admiral in the US Navy, as secretary

¹⁵ Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the 70s*, Culture America (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2004), 2, 11.

of the army, as a bishop in the Episcopal church, and as a southern Congressmen since Reconstruction, to name a few. The black middle class grew by nearly 400 percent, and by 1972 each governmental department had an equal opportunity office.¹⁶ For American Indians, the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 guaranteed certain legal provisions to those living under tribal government. Similar legislation enacted in the late 1970s gave tribes greater control over their domestic affairs and guaranteed them religious freedom.¹⁷

Yet, things had not improved for all people of color; this was particularly true for low-income people living in urban areas. The end of the previous decade had seen race riots on an unheard of scale grip the nation from Detroit to Harlem; in one particularly horrific incident, the entire neighborhood of Watts, an almost entirely African-American area of Los Angeles, went up in flames.¹⁸ As Nikhil Pal Singh, author of *Black is a Country*, puts it, “with unequal access to basic city services, employment, and tax revenues, and subjected to concentrations of pollutants from highways and incinerators, segregated black urban populations, it seemed, had the least to gain from a civil rights movement.”¹⁹ Legislation that failed to effect significant change for the many groups it was supposedly designed to help left many feeling frustrated and disillusioned.

The Black Power and Red Power movements also gained momentum during the 1970s. The cry for Black Power emerged with the formation of the Black Panther Party in 1966 in Oakland. In the 1970s, this group’s focus included addressing police brutality, self-defense,

¹⁶ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 54-56.

¹⁷ Donald Parman, “Twentieth-Century Indian History: Achievements, Needs, and Problems,” *OAH Magazine of History*, 9 no. 1 (1994): 12.

¹⁸ Ramón A. Gutierrez, “Chicano Struggles for Justice: The Movement’s Contribution to Social Theory,” *Mexicans in California: Transformations and Challenges*, edited by Ramón A. Gutierrez and Patricia Zavella (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 96.

¹⁹ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 195.

celebrating a unique black identity and culture, and increasing black business ownership.²⁰ The Red Power initiative, led by the American Indian Movement, protested reservation conditions, corruption within the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and treaties that the United States had violated. Often using militant protest measures, they brought attention to their cause through such symbolic acts as occupying Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, or staging a centennial remembrance of The Battle of Little Big Horn in direct opposition to the national celebration of the Bicentennial.²¹

All of this led to a national questioning of racial identities and the status of different racial groups within society. As people saw these reforms and harsh realities juxtaposed, as groups like AIM and the Black Panthers provided radical alternatives to what a racial identity could be, and as integration began to occur on a larger scale, Americans of all races were forced to reexamine how conceptions of race should be constructed, to what ends, and how those constructs should then play out in society. As Eric Porter argues in his article on remaking race in the seventies, “people of color claimed race as a resource...even as race was generally dismissed as a meaningful biological category, it was embraced as an analytical, political, and cultural concept...and cherished as a marker of self and group worth.”²²

It was not only groups of color attempting to define new conceptions of race. White people also engaged in these discussions, with more people than ever before claiming a distinct ethnic background. Conversely, many felt that the push for equality had gone too far, to the point of discrimination against white people; indeed, politicians such as Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan structured portions of their campaign around decrying African-American “special

²⁰ Ibid, 196-197.

²¹ Jack D. Forbes, “Alcatraz: Symbol & Reality,” *California History* 62, no. 1 (1983): 24-25.

²² Eric Porter, “Affirming and Disaffirming Actions: Remaking Race in the 1970s,” *America in the 70s*, 54.

pleading” in the public arena.²³ Perhaps most interesting, though, was a renewed commitment to the color-blind theory that many had found appealing earlier in the Civil Rights movement. In this case, since basic equality before the law had already been reached, it could actually be rearticulated to protect the rights of white people.²⁴

These preoccupations also circulated within popular culture, particularly in television. According to *Newsweek* columnist Meg Greenfield, the 1975 cultural landscape as portrayed on television represented an, “ethnic bath, an affirmative-action plan gone mad.”²⁵ Celebrations of different racial identities appeared alongside narratives of white victimization, with apparently no thought to the inherent conflicts located within them.²⁶ The 1970s saw more appearances of African Americans in primetime television than at any other time in history. Black-oriented TV shows gained popularity, as did African American characters in supporting roles on white-oriented programs.²⁷ Yet, by the late 1970s, rather than have key African American characters or black-oriented viewing experiences, the new trend was crossover roles, so that African American characters were taken out of the African American community and placed in the midst of a white environment, “basically a nonethnic cultural setting which the vast white audience could readily identify with.”²⁸ This also led to the introduction of a “great white father figure” trope that played itself out over and over, in which a white figure provided advice, guidance, and often a sense of culture to the relocated black character.²⁹ Native Americans seem to have rarely appeared in any context other than a Western in this time period. A few producers attempted to

²³ Singh, 9.

²⁴ Porter, 67.

²⁵ Meg Greenfield, “Ethnic and Son,” *Newsweek*, Sep. 29, 1975 in Schulman, 75.

²⁶ Porter, 69.

²⁷ Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2001), 174.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 223.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 225, 228.

create alternative Westerns with more favorable portrayals of Indians in the early 1970s, with limited success.³⁰

Given the ubiquity of racial tensions in America in the seventies, and the inclusion of racial issues in popular media, it is not surprising that the *Little House* television show incorporated discussions of prejudice and characters of color. However, it did so to a greater extent than most other frontier narratives of the time. Five episodes directly address racism against Native Americans, while four directly address racism against African Americans. Discrimination against various ethnic and immigrant communities is highlighted in five episodes. With a total of one hundred and eighty one episodes filmed over the course of eight seasons, around two episodes each season specifically teach a lesson regarding prejudice. In this frontier show that focused on the adventures of a white family, fifteen percent of the episodes directly addressed racism. Additionally, African Americans Hester Sue Terhune, Joe Kagan, and various blind children become regular supporting characters on the show beginning in season five (1978-1979). Therefore, the number of shows whose plot lines include racial and ethnic minorities is quite a bit higher than this. This also means that the second half of the series has a much higher percentage of episodes portraying examples of integration and inclusion. Thus, *Little House* successfully included discussions of race into a traditional Western framework at a time when the genre of the Western was in decline and the alternative Western had faltered, and involved characters of color to a greater extent than all but the black-oriented television shows of the day.

Little House managed to include discussions of race within a frontier framework by creating four distinct storylines that viewers could emotionally and safely relate to. The first, most common, and most superficial of these is the white redemption tale. In this tale, a

³⁰ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 628-633.

prejudiced white person, or group, learns how to overcome their bigotry over the course of the episode. This usually occurs through a combination of decency from the marginalized person and common sense, disdain, guilt and the occasional punch from a respected white member of the community, most often Charles Ingalls.

This is related to a common theme of recent historical films, which Mark Golub describes as the “Hollywood redemption history” genre. There are four demarcating features: first, the narrative is told from the perspective of a person in the privileged group that the audience can easily relate to. Second, it provides closure, and thus catharsis, for the audience. Third, it connects the character’s fate to the audience’s, encouraging reconciliation; finally, the narrative serves as a “surrogate sufferer,” pushing the pains of racism onto the historical event portrayed in the movie.³¹ These features also weave through the first plot device of *Little House*, with a few distinct differences.³² The second plot device is similar, yet adds a layer of subtlety to the white redemption. In this case, a beloved character must face the fact that he is, in fact, prejudiced, and learn to reconcile how he views himself with what he actually believes. This leads to a happy resolution at the end of the episode.

The third element is integration of African-American characters in minor recurring roles in the second half of the series, favoring presentations of equality over white redemption. In these episodes, African-American characters are fully placed within the narrative, respected and treated as any other in the community. Racial oppression and tensions are not given prominence

³¹ Mark Golub, “History Died for Our Sins: Guilt and Responsibility in Hollywood Redemption Histories,” *Journal of American Culture* 21, no. 3 (1998): 26-27.

³² Specifically, Golub locates the redemption narrative within an historical event of oppression, and the white person to be changed is placed within this context. In *Little House*, the emphasis is not on one actual historical event, and the marginalized person is placed within a white context. Additionally, said person generally has more agency than Golub anticipated in his definition of the redemption history.

– rather, the emphasis is on portraying day-to-day life in the town, and recurring African-American roles play an equal part with the rest of the cast.

Finally, there is a fourth element that only fully appears in one episode, which examines racial tensions while ultimately leaving the main problem of the episode unresolved. In this narrative, the person in the minority acts with agency, becoming the true protagonist of the story and leaving their mark on the rest of the community; most importantly, this person raises more questions than he leaves answers. We can begin to paint a picture of how *Little House* democratized a traditional frontier narrative to include previously marginalized groups by comparing a few key themes that run throughout the various types of episodes. These include character development, setting and background, the level of empathy expected of the audience, as well as the wider implications of each narrative.

The most superficial handling of racial issues is that of the white redemption narrative that directly echoes Golub's categorizations. One of the best examples occurs in season three's "Injun Kid."³³ In this episode, the daughter of a local man 'escapes' from an Indian tribe with a half-Indian son. We learn from the woman's father that she had married a man of the tribe and happily lived on a reservation until her husband is killed; unable to support herself and her son, she takes them back to live with her father in Walnut Grove.

However, her father is prejudiced, and refuses to accept his grandson, making him change his name to Joseph Stokes and requiring that he go to church, among other things. There are two key moments of drama in this episode; the first occurs when Joseph conducts his own worship service after attending church. His grandfather finds and punishes him, despite an intervention by Charles Ingalls. Charles attempts to explain that Native

³³ *Little House on the Prairie*, "Injun Kid," episode 61 (originally aired Jan. 31, 1977), Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RewAQPSvtqY> (accessed April 25, 2012).

Americans worship the same God as they do in church, just in different ways, thus placing the discussion of tolerance within a seventies framework of cultural relativism. Mr. Stokes, however, refuses to listen. In the second instance, one of the schoolboys fails to tame a horse that he has been given. Joseph tames the horse using traditional techniques, then rides off. According to Indian law as portrayed in this episode, the horse now belongs to him. The boys eventually catch Joseph and beat him. All ends well as Doc Baker and Charles Ingalls save him, and Mr. Stokes realizes the error of his ways and reconciles with Joseph.

Here, the Ingalls family is portrayed as the accepting, tolerant family, while the schoolboys and their fathers are clearly prejudiced and of generally bad character. Mr. Stokes, though obviously caring, has a bad temperament and is undeniably in the wrong from the start of the episode. Joseph has some agency – he rebels against the system, runs off to maintain his traditional practices, and defends himself, forcing his grandfather to change to accept him. However, the emphasis of the story lies mainly with Mr. Stokes and his transformation over the course of the episode. Additionally, it is really Charles Ingalls who forces Mr. Stokes to change his mind, with his heart-to-heart discussions and impassioned outburst. The episode focuses on healing and acceptance, with the reconciliation between Mr. Stokes and his grandson serving as the emotional climax of the episode. By making the action mostly revolve around the character to be redeemed (Mr. Stokes), and the white person redeeming him (Charles) rather than the character overcoming prejudice (Joseph), this fits into a traditional white redemption narrative. The storyline is also cleanly resolved by the end of the episode, encouraging the catharsis that Golub outlines as his second feature of redemption histories. In this narrative, the viewer is also placed in a comfortable, superior position – the audience will most likely align themselves with the Ingalls family, and can freely judge Mr. Stokes and the schoolboys for their racist behavior

and beliefs. This judgment, however, occurs without an overt push for self-reflection – the viewer is sufficiently removed from the situation, similar to Golub’s third and fourth features. The audience can relate to the key characters of the narrative, applying the redemption in the stories to their own lives, while also relegating the pain of racism onto the characters in the story and distancing themselves in the process.

This is the only story arc in which Native Americans appear – they are relegated to the role of merely aiding white people in the process of alleviating guilt. This mirrors a larger trend in the series, in which Native American characters are considerably less complex and three-dimensional than other minorities, and their roles within the story diminish over the course of the second half of the series until they are virtually non-existent. Perhaps in a time when African-Americans were more often portrayed on screen, and when their fights for equality were given more space in the news than those of Native Americans, the writers of *Little House* decided to integrate African Americans to a greater extent. Or perhaps it was assumed that the ‘Native American problem’ could be solved more easily than issues of racism against African-Americans, and thus are only included in the first type of narrative. A third reason could be that Native Americans were still viewed in a more paternal manner than African-Americans were in the 1970s, and thus are given less agency within the narrative. Whatever the reason, these trends of a more simplified redemption narrative for Native American characters and a decreasing emphasis on their stories indicate that *Little House* emphasized and questioned racial tensions only to the extent that its audience would remain engaged, entertained, and not feel threatened or uncomfortable.

The second story arc replaces a mean, rather unlovable character with an upstanding, respected member of the community as the key character in the white redemption narrative. The

best example of this is season eight's "Dark Sage," when Dr. Baker hires a new doctor to help with the practice, Caleb Ledoux, without realizing that he is African-American. Though Dr. Baker refuses to admit that he has a problem with Dr. Ledoux's race, he will only give Dr. Ledoux some minor animal cases, and fails to introduce him in church. When Dr. Ledoux confronts Dr. Baker with these facts, he denies that it has anything to do with his race. Ledoux presses him further, at which point, Dr. Baker responds with, "I have practiced medicine in this town over twenty years. I have treated Orientals, Indians, and Negroes without any thought to the color of their skin, and I won't allow you to accuse me of prejudice."³⁴

The viewer is simultaneously introduced to Jenny Sherman, a pregnant young woman experiencing complications with her pregnancy and saddled with an uninterested husband. When Dr. Baker is called away, Dr. Ledoux goes over to the Shermans with Charles and Caroline Ingalls to see if he can help Jenny with her delivery. Mr. Sherman refuses to allow Dr. Ledoux to touch his wife until Charles punches him; he proceeds to deliver the baby with a state-of-the-art surgical technique, saving both Jenny's and the baby's lives. Frustrated by his continuing isolation within the community despite his heroic actions, Dr. Ledoux decides to leave, and is only convinced to stay after Dr. Baker gives an impassioned apology speech. Baker publicly states,

I had no reason to doubt the ability of a man who'd studied seventeen years of his life to become a doctor, and a surgeon. No reason except one – prejudice. It was very difficult for me to admit that to myself... But the truth of the matter was I didn't believe that a black man could become a good doctor. A good man, yes, a good farmer, blacksmith. But a doctor? No. That territory belonged to the white man... I want to publicly apologize to Dr. Ledoux, to his wife Mattie, and to all of you.³⁵

³⁴ All of the quotations from the television series are my transcriptions from listening to the episodes. Where there are dialects, I attempt to capture them in writing. *Little House on the Prairie*, "Dark Sage," episode 163, (originally aired Oct. 26, 1983), Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nm6nmenC4CY> (accessed April 25, 2012).

³⁵ "Dark Sage."

The camera then pans out as the entire congregation embraces and welcomes the Ledoux family into their community.

In this case, Dr. Ledoux takes center stage. The Ingalls family remains the open, welcoming family, but apart from one punch to Mr. Sherman, Charles stays out of the spotlight. He provides moral support but little direct intervention to get the community, and ultimately Dr. Baker, to accept Dr. Ledoux. Rather, Ledoux, through his heroic actions and obvious expertise, forces Walnut Grove to accept him. Once again, the narrative is placed within a high-stakes situation – Mr. Sherman’s and Dr. Baker’s racism could have cost two lives. In the end, however, reconciliation and acceptance are the take-home themes. This reconciliation also takes place within the church, intermingling tolerance and acceptance with traditional Christian values. In some ways, by making Dr. Baker the key figure, it fits Golub’s model better by placing the protagonist outside of the archetypal oppressive figure. The viewer is not quite so comfortably removed in this situation – Dr. Baker has proved to the audience over eight seasons that he is an honest, good man, a person to emulate generally. If he has prejudice, the viewer is asked to wonder, who else does, and how does it make them act? Yet, by providing closure at the end of the episode, it follows Golub’s model by safely encasing the racism within late-1800s Minnesota.

In the third story arc, normally marginalized characters are integrated as fully accepted members of the community. Where the other three story arcs included multiple different racial groups, this story arc applies only to African-American characters. Here, racial issues are not explicitly highlighted, but rather viewers are provided with examples of people living together in harmony. The perfect example of this is the character Hester Sue Terhune. Introduced in the fifth season, the audience learns that she has been running her own school for blind African-American

children. Her school is in trouble just as Mary Ingalls' (and her husband Adam Kendall's) school for blind children also falls into financial difficulties. They decide to merge the schools, and relocate back to Walnut Grove. Hester Sue is introduced as a strong, independent character that knows her own mind and has a good sense of humor. She quickly integrates into the community, and becomes a regular character, appearing throughout the second half of *Little House's* run. Eventually, as Mary and Adam move on, she takes over the school, running it independently.

Here, there is little emphasis on a marginalized character and how white people are changed because of him or her. Rather, there is the same level of interaction between Hester Sue and any white character as between two white people. Rather than an emphasis on healing and empathy, the underlying theme is that of coexistence and living peacefully together without constantly thinking about race. The level of empathy inspired in the viewer depends on the plot of the episode, and is based on whatever external problem is fueling that week's drama.³⁶

With the final, and most unusual, plot device, the redemption narrative is not tied up so neatly. White prejudice is not solved, and while greater levels of understanding are reached, the world's problems remain, and the audience is left questioning what will happen to the characters introduced. This is not a common narrative – indeed, the following episode is the only good example of its type. Even today, it is remembered as one of *Little House's* most controversial episodes.³⁷ Though it is an exception, it more deeply probes questions of overcoming a history of prejudice, examining institutional as well as personal ramifications of racism, and is therefore worth examining. “The Wisdom of Solomon,” first aired in season three, embodies this type of questioning, uncomfortable narrative. In this episode, a young African-American boy named

³⁶ This could also apply to Joe Kagan, an African-American ex-boxer turned farmer.

³⁷ Comments on *Little House on the Prairie*, “The Wisdom of Solomon,” episode 64 (originally aired Mar. 1, 1977), Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weu-CSD6e7o> (accessed April 25, 2012).

Solomon runs away from his family, frustrated at his lack of ability to attend school and learn how to read.³⁸ Charles agrees to let Solomon stay with them and go to school in exchange for helping out with some chores around the farm.

As the Ingalls family learns more about Solomon, he quickly turns their ideas of equality and fairness upside down, forcing them to question things they had comfortably accepted long ago. From his first day at school, Solomon proves unsettling – when Miss Beadle asks the class to think of something they dislike, he answers with, “Bein’ a nigger.” He explains his meaning later that evening to Charles, saying that he disliked being African-American because it forced him into an inferior place in society. When Charles vaguely responds, Solomon continues with, “Ain’t nothin’ over. Laws don’t change nothin’...Wouldn’t you like to live to be a hundred?...Would you rather be black and live to be a hundred, or white and live to be fifty?” Charles, usually the fount of wisdom in uncomfortable situations, has no answer.

The next evening, Solomon’s older brother Jackson comes to rescue him. Jackson begs him to come home and questions why he would stay with this white family in the first place. When Solomon says that he can get schooling, Jackson responds with, “What good’s it gonna do you, huh? Bustin’ a field, sowin’, harvestin’, ain’t none of that any easier with book learnin’.” When Solomon questions this assumption, Jackson provides no comfort, saying, “You think things are gonna get any better cuz you can read? You think anything’s gonna change? It ain’t. White folks ain’t gonna let it change.” The next morning, Solomon is introduced to Dr. Tan, the African-American doctor who works on the reservations. This is intended to be the same Dr. Tan from the book *The Little House on the Prairie*, but is here used to highlight the limited opportunities available to African-American people. Even though Dr. Tan is literate and has

³⁸ “The Wisdom of Solomon.”

studied many years to become a doctor, he is only able to get occasional work on the reservations. The fact that Dr. Ledoux from the previous episode was able to participate in a largely white practice, while Dr. Tan cannot, is never examined or questioned.

With this, Solomon decides to return to his family. He leaves Charles with this thought concerning people's ability to change: "And if they don't? We go to the same school, and learn the same, but it don't make no difference. When we done, nothin's changed. All I'm still good for is to walk behind the plow... Don't make no difference to learn or somethin' if you can't use it." The town's thoughts and emotions are encapsulated in Laura's closing question, "What's wrong with people Solomon? Why can't they change?" With that Solomon leaves, and is never heard from again.

On a few levels, the framing of this episode itself has some problematic racial issues. For example, Laura is initially unduly excited to see her first "real, live Negro person", and both Solomon and Jackson state their desire for a better life in terms of wishing they were white. On the other hand, it deeply questions the status quo. Solomon is the protagonist, and as a child has more agency than many other adult guest characters. He forces the inhabitants of Walnut Grove to examine the privilege they inherently have as white people. The injustice of this level of inequality seems to physically permeate the episode. The entire town of Walnut Grove, as well as the audience, is left upset by the realization that this little boy will probably never finish his education, and that the system within which they are living is responsible. Furthermore, it leaves even the usually spotless Ingalls family with some exposed flaws – why are they just letting him leave? Why are they trying to apologize for the town? This episode encourages the viewer to empathize with Solomon rather than empathizing with a white character. While such a tumultuous episode would usually demand a neat, wholesome answer, this episode is

purposefully left open-ended. The town has come to a deeper understanding, but not a resolution. The viewer is purposefully left frustrated – perhaps in order to spur action in the real world by those watching the episode.

Among all four story arcs, there are a few common themes. Most significantly, it must be the white people in the episodes who change or whose eyes are opened, and most of the time they are opened by Charles Ingalls, the very definition of an archetypal white father figure. This is most often accomplished by placing the character of color within a white environment, echoing a common theme in mainstream television.³⁹ At the same time, *Little House* forged new ground in the characters of Hester Sue and Joe Kagan, who remained permanent characters for the final four seasons of the show. This highlights the balancing act of pushing for greater racial inclusion and more nuanced portrayals of African American and Native American characters while maintaining an overarching white framework. This provided a niche for *Little House*'s popularity; it democratized the narrative without compromising the overall structure of society, introducing left-leaning ideas within a traditional story.

All of these story arcs also place situations addressing seventies concerns within an explicitly historical narrative. Therefore, the racism or prejudice could be examined in a less charged environment than shows set in the seventies, taking advantage of nostalgia to alleviate the messiest and most controversial aspects of the given problem for the episode. It also allowed the writers of *Little House* to craft episodes and problems that could easily be solved by the end of the episode, leaving viewers satisfied and morally uplifted. Additionally, it placed these problems within a frontier narrative, one that celebrated American exceptionalism and tapped into a foundational myth of white America. In so doing, the television series could

³⁹ Bogle, 225, 228.

simultaneously provide a safe forum to discuss these issues while also advancing a white heritage narrative. The Ingalls family had been a part of American culture since the 1930s, and was a perfect family for white Americans to attach themselves to in their quest for a unique heritage. In combining these two themes, then, *Little House* allowed viewers to remain within their comfort levels and tap into a beloved white historical narrative while providing a forum for discussing prejudice. It also provided a clear solution, leading viewers through a cathartic process. Thus, viewers could redeem themselves by watching other white people admit their prejudice and change their ways.

The writers of *Little House* also used multiple tools to create an emotional connection between the characters and the viewers. For example, most of these episodes place the main characters in dangerous situations. By raising the stakes, and putting peoples' physical safety at stake, these episodes encourage people to engage more deeply than they might otherwise. Additionally, many of these episodes are crafted as a kind of parable. Michael Landon, who affirmed that his goal was to, "teach America's families and children", has verified this.⁴⁰ As appropriate for a parable, overtly Christian morals are used to guide the character needing redemption to the appropriate solution. The manner in which the African American or Native American character is presented encourages viewer empathy – the characters are often Christian, smart, and stand up for themselves without being pushy; in short, they are beacons of good moral behavior. Both thus encourage the viewer to become invested in the healing and acceptance at the end of the episode. As a parable, we can then assume that the hope of Landon and the writers was to have that investment move from the television screen to the real world.

⁴⁰ Joel Swerdlow, "A Question of Impact," *The Wilson Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1981): 92.

This balance between addressing social concerns and remaining in a comfortable, traditional narrative could only have aided in *Little House*'s popularity. At a time when many were questioning classic conceptions of American identity, *Little House* provided a reassuring yet inclusive answer: America could retain its exceptional heritage while including and recognizing the value of people of color. Thus, *Little House* provided one model for how America could view itself, a model that played on political and social currents, outpourings of emotion and empathy, and nostalgia for simpler times. A possible explanation for *Little House*'s popularity, then, could be that America latched onto this model of American identity.

Unfortunately, there is little documented reaction to specific racial themes or episodes from the 1970s and 1980s. *Little House* was listed in *Ebony* magazine's children pages in their top five favorite television series, thus indicating that *Little House* appealed to African American audiences as well as white audiences, but beyond this, the trail fades.⁴¹ In current online discussion boards, the episodes addressing racism are still widely debated and loved; indeed, *The Wisdom of Solomon* is many people's favorite episode. From racist comments to affirmations of how far America has come since the late 1800s, it is apparent that at the very least, the democratization of the narrative did not hinder *Little House*'s popularity. The fact that many people still discuss these episodes indicates that they continue to resonate with viewers today.⁴²

Additionally, there has been much scholarly debate recently surrounding the portrayal of Native Americans in Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. Most agree that there is enough redeeming value to continue to teach the book and have it available in libraries, but the racial themes are now viewed as detractions. In other words, the *Little House* books can retain their

⁴¹ Jane S. Mackay, "Daze-A-Head: Your Favorite Show," *Ebony Jr.*, May 1985.

⁴² Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071007/>; (Parker, www.prairiefans.com; comments on *Little House on the Prairie*, www.youtube.com).

popularity and influence today in spite of certain racist tendencies.⁴³ At the same time, more recent incarnations of *Little House* either align themselves very closely to the book's portrayal of Native Americans or avoid the topic of race altogether, indicating a current divide between the popular and scholarly interpretations of racial themes in *Little House*. This lends further credence to the argument that the democratization of the narrative through the television show of the 1970s and 80s allowed for the re-emergence of *Little House* in the specific moment of the seventies. In a time of great social change, the narrative expanded in order to remain relevant; once racial debates died down, they also faded into the background within the *Little House* narrative.

Little House on the Prairie re-emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the sweeping political and social changes of the day. By incorporating discussions of race and pleas for tolerance into a white narrative, *Little House* could simultaneously challenge and comfort. It provided clear solutions in the form of teachable moments that Americans could latch on to in an era filled with complexities and consequences from generations of racism. Yet, it also celebrated America's ability to democratize and expand while retaining its most essential qualities. Rather than focus on the negative parts of American history, it placed current discussions of tolerance and bigotry within one of America's most celebrated myths, that of the frontier. It could therefore avoid the most controversial aspects of those discussions while creating a place for Native Americans and African Americans within a beloved narrative. In short, *Little House*

⁴³ Marilyn Cochran-Smith, "Color Blindness and Basket Making Are Not the Answers: Confronting the Dilemmas of Race, Culture, and Language Diversity in Teacher Education," *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (1995): 493-522; Nora Murphy, "Starting Children on the Path to the Past: American Indians in Children's Historical Fiction," *Minnesota History* 57, no. 6 (2001): 284-295.

encompassed the middle ground of integration and acceptance of people of color without undoing an overarching white framework of the world.

Conclusion

Between the 1990s and early 2000s, the market for new *Little House* books and commodities exploded. HarperCollins, the publishing company for *Little House* since its inception, appears to have realized the market potential of the series, and commissioned various children's authors to create stories loosely based on the original novels. In recent years, the children's section of bookstores has become overrun not only with Laura's stories, but also the tales of her daughter's, mother's, grandmother's, and even great-grandmother's childhoods in serial format.¹ If even these books did not satiate the appetite for all things prairie-related, HarperCollins also commissioned other authors' imaginings of the Ingalls family adventures not laid forth in the original books.² Moreover, in order to reach a wider childhood demographic, HarperCollins also introduced *My First Little House Books* and beginning chapter books, distilled versions of the original series for beginning readers and early chapter book readers, respectively.³

If it was merely HarperCollins attempting to sell as many adaptations of *Little House* as humanly possible, it would be easy to overlook this proliferation of new children's books as a shallow, temporary trend spawned by a company's greed. However, interest in *Little House* re-emerged in many different arenas during this time frame. Ed Friendly, in conjunction with Disney, introduced a miniseries more closely aligned with the books, also entitled *Little House*

¹ Roger Lea MacBride, *The Rose Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993-1999); Maria D. Wilkes and Celia Wilkins, *The Caroline Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996-2005); Melissa Wiley, *The Charlotte Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999-2004); Melissa Wiley, *The Martha Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999-2003).

² Cynthia Rylant, *Old Town in the Green Groves* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002); Elizabeth Cody Kimmel, *Mary Ingalls On Her Own* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

³ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *My First Little House Books Series* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994-1998); Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House Chapter Books* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994-1998).

on the Prairie.⁴ The historic sites have risen in popularity, with an average of over 200,000 visitors each year at the most visited sites.⁵ A widely publicized stage musical of *Little House on the Prairie*, with Melissa Gilbert (who played Laura in the 1970s television show) as Ma, has appeared in Minneapolis and toured the Midwest.⁶ With the invention of the Internet, fan websites, online sales of *Little House* collectibles, and fan fiction now abound.⁷ Memoirs that document celebrities' and the average reader's interactions with both the books and the television series have also been published.⁸

For the most part, these new stories adhere fairly closely to the traditional values espoused in the original book series. Most of the ambiguity and nuance that marked the earlier discussions of gender in the books and race in the television series is now absent. The stories have been cleaned up and homogenized, with explicitly conservative values as the focus. For example, the 2005 miniseries returns to very stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans when they appear, and while girls are still the center of the narrative in the newer series, they lose much of the depth that characterized Laura and other female characters in the books.⁹

However, the current iteration of *Little House* still seems to be adapting to fit the changing needs of society. In this case, it appears to reflect the rise and prominence of the

⁴ *Little House on the Prairie* (originally aired 2005), Youtube.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP9jnbrpG4Y/> (accessed April 25, 2012).

⁵ William Anderson, *The Little House Guidebook* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

⁶ Little House Productions, LP, *Little House on the Prairie, the Musical*

<http://littlehousethemusical.com/> (accessed April 25, 2012).

⁷ Wikia, *Little House on the Prairie Wiki*

http://www.littlehouse.wikia.com/wiki/Little_House_Wiki_Little_House_on_the_Prairie/ (accessed April 25, 2012); Lennon Parker, *Prairie Fans* www.prairiefans.com/ (accessed April 25, 2012).

⁸ Alison Arngim, *Confessions of a Prairie Bitch: How I Survived Nellie Oleson and Learned to Love Being Hated* (New York: itbooks, 2010); Melissa Gilbert, *Prairie Tale: A Memoir* (Simon Spotlight Enterprises, 2010); Wendy McClure, *The Wilder Life: My Adventures in the Lost World of Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011).

⁹ *Little House on the Prairie* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP9jnbrpG4Y/>.

American Right in recent years. Though the roots of this rise can be traced to the 1940s, it was not until the 1980s that conservatism gained a strong foothold.¹⁰ According to Lee Edwards in *The Conservative Revolution*, the Right successfully incorporated “traditionalists, libertarians, and neoconservatives; the South, Midwest, and West; and blue-collar Catholics and Protestant evangelicals into a winning electoral force.”¹¹ This began to be evident with Ronald Reagan’s landslide election in 1980, and came to fruition with the 1994 election in which Republicans regained control of the United States Senate for the first time in forty years.¹² The conservative movement brought together these otherwise disparate groups through a dual emphasis on opposition to increasing governmental control in social and economic life, and concern over a decline in morality and a healthy family life.¹³ Perhaps *Little House*, in focusing on the themes of traditional family values and individualism, now plays the role of reaffirming the newly created conservative majority, celebrating both elements that have brought many together over the course of the last thirty years.

After all, the ability to integrate topics important to the audience of the day within a nostalgic, traditional frontier narrative has been central to *Little House*’s ability to survive and thrive through the many tumultuous social and political phases of the twentieth century. By drawing on a frontier myth that had its origins in the very founding of the country, *Little House* placed itself within a uniquely American framework centered on independence and self-reliance that has continued to resonate with audiences.

¹⁰ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 15-17.

¹¹ Lee Edwards, *The Conservative Revolution: The Movement That Remade America* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 3.

¹² *Ibid*, 1.

¹³ McGirr, 10-11.

At the same time, *Little House* consistently expanded and democratized this romantic version of the West while remaining within acceptable social boundaries. In the 1930s, *Little House* challenged some traditional gender definitions with the creation of the original book series. The lives and working priorities of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane in many ways mirrored the ambiguities facing women in the 1930s. Empowered, with their voices given authority in the realm of history, and earning their own income with them, they created a story for and about girls. Yet, they remained within a feminine realm, describing domestic life, and not questioning the roles given to them within the narrative. In this way, a thirties female audience could both have access to and exert their right to be featured in a frontier story without leaving the realm of what was acceptably female.

Likewise, in the 1970s, when the country was adjusting to life after the Civil Rights movement, the television version of *Little House on the Prairie* addressed issues of racism and expanded the narrative to include characters of color to an unprecedented extent. Yet, they did so without compromising the overarching white framework of the story. With multiple redemption storylines and the inclusion of recurring minor African American characters through the second half of the series, viewers were introduced to teachable moments preaching tolerance and acceptance, but were never forced out of their comfort zones. The series never questioned the dominance of whites, but nevertheless nuanced, three-dimensional characters of other races and ethnicities were given credence in a way not before seen in the realm of frontier literature and cinema.

In short, *Little House's* ability to both adapt to new circumstances and societal expectations yet remain within a conservative, nostalgic narrative of westward expansion has allowed it to resonate and remain popular with multiple generations of Americans. On a broader

scale, then, *Little House* can be viewed as one key example of how cultural and historical sources are flexible, dynamic, constructed narratives. In this case, the creators of *Little House* reconstructed the frontier myth to incorporate 1930s and 1970s anxiety surrounding major changes in gender and race relations.

Little House also makes clear that, despite or perhaps because of the adaptations made to the traditional narrative, the frontier myth remains an integral part of American identity. More than any other aspect of this thesis, there is ample evidence to suggest that people have gravitated to *Little House* specifically because of its nostalgic re-telling of pioneer life. Yet, the enduring appeal of *Little House* also suggests that certain aspects of this myth are not essential to the narrative – namely, that it must be male-dominated, involve large levels of violence against other human beings, and only incorporate people of color as foils for the white protagonists.

What about the frontier myth, then, does *Little House* embody that Americans continue to find so appealing? While this question deserves much more scholarly attention and research, there are a few recurring themes that could provide potential explanations. One of these is the belief that times were simpler back then, that people had better morals, and led more wholesome, less complicated lives than in modern times. While nostalgia is a common element of most historical memory, this simplicity is linked directly to the wild, open, unconquered territory of the West, and hence carries with it an underlying critique of urbanization and a modern, industrialized lifestyle. Though this probably carried more weight with a 1930s audience still grappling with the close of the frontier and the ramifications of a recently industrialized society, the belief that life is more complicated because of technological and industrial advancements continues to permeate American thought.

A second trend, and one more uniquely tied to the frontier myth, is the celebration of individualism, self-reliance, and independence. This is a central theme of *Little House*, and appears in most traditional conceptions of the frontier myth. As Fellman demonstrates in her study on the link between *Little House* and the rise of conservatism in America, this self-reliance and individualism has translated in *Little House* to an espousal of Libertarian values and beliefs, including a strong distrust of government.¹⁴ At moments when more Americans become uncomfortable with the size and scope of government, whether with the New Deal or in our current political climate, the belief that the heart and core of America centers not around government, but on individuals and their actions, also becomes deeply appealing to many. The frontier myth affirms that belief. Perhaps the legacy of *Little House* lies not only in the democratization of a narrative to include new groups of people, but in its ongoing testament to America's self-identification as a nation of individuals at their best when overcoming difficult situations.

¹⁴ Anita Clair Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008).

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