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WRITING THE *LITTLE HOUSE*

THE ARCHITECTURE OF A SERIES

ANN ROMINES

Laura Ingalls Wilder's perennially popular Little House series takes as its central motif the invention, abandonment, and perpetuation of a series of Great Plains houses. In large part Wilder tells the autobiographical story of her childhood and adolescence through a plot of housing, a risky competition and collaboration of male traditions of buying and building and female traditions of furnishing, arrangement, preservation, and housekeeping. With her series, Wilder made Great Plains

houses a central metaphor of U.S. culture, one that we continue to rethink and retell, as the Little House books proliferate, spawning everything from television reruns to porcelain dolls to architectural reconstructions and restorations.

These seven novels of Laura Ingalls Wilder's childhood were written during the Great Depression and published between 1932 and 1943 when the author was in her sixties and seventies.¹ Wilder was then living in the Missouri Ozarks, where she and her husband Almanzo had migrated in 1894, leaving the Great Plains behind them. Working together, they built, by stages, a ten-room farmhouse using materials from their own land: "We cut and planed and fitted every stick of it ourselves," Wilder boasted.² Such building, of course, would not have been possible in the treeless, stoneless South Dakota where the couple had met and married. In the Ozarks, with the encouragement, example, and collaboration of her writer-daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, Laura Wilder had established a career as a journalist, publishing brief essays from a "farm wife's" perspective in *The Missouri Ruralist*. As an organizer of farm women, Wilder had also cam-

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FIG. 1. *The Wilder farmhouse at Rocky Ridge near Mansfield, Missouri.* Reproduced from *A Little House Sampler*, by Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane, edited by William T. Anderson, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright © 1988 by the University of Nebraska Press.

paigned for public spaces for rural women, helping establish women's meeting rooms, rest-rooms, and clubs in small Missouri towns.

One of her early efforts to reach a larger audience, beyond the *Ruralist*, was a characteristic 1925 piece for *Country Gentleman*, "My Ozark Kitchen." She begins with the problem of building a dream kitchen on a real farm, where the kitchen

is the place where house and barn meet—often in pitched battle. . . . I meant, somehow, to bring my ideal kitchen to the farm. It had to be done by sheer brain power, for in the first place I could find no kitchen plans that provided for chicken's feed buckets, swill buckets, taking care of oil lamps . . . and all my other problems. And in the second place we had very little money.

The rest of the piece is an account of the feats of planning and cabinetry by which Wilder's "ideal" was accommodated, on a total budget of \$49.84. This kitchen on paper is an intensely organized and articulated space, with a cupboard for every bucket and every boot. Almanzo Wilder's skills as carpenter and painter are acknowledged, but the essential "sheer brain power" clearly came from Laura Wilder, and her success is signalled by the language of practical romance to which the essay returns at its end: "It is a kitchen to be happy in. The convenience and the neatness of it and the whiteness are a continual joy."³

By the time Laura Ingalls Wilder began to draft the Little House books, then, she had had considerable experience wrestling architectural fantasies into habitable realities, both in her house and on the page—in wood, stone,

and words. In the late twenties, as Wilder began to work at the autobiographical stories her daughter had long urged her to write, she may have been particularly spurred by the recent deaths of her mother and her blind sister Mary, by the breakup of the last Ingalls home in South Dakota, and by the economic uncertainties initiated by the 1929 stock market crash, which made the family farm seem a risky source of income and wiped out the investments of prosperous Rose Wilder Lane. Furthermore, Lane had returned from France, Greece, and Albania to live with her parents on Rocky Ridge Farm, bringing her own architectural fantasies.⁴ In 1928 she had insisted on building a modern “showplace” “English-style cottage of Ozark rock” as a retirement house for her parents and had remodeled their farmhouse as her own home.⁵ So, as the collaborative writing of the Little House books began, mother and daughter were living in adjacent houses on Rocky Ridge Farm—and not without rivalry and tensions, as Lane’s journals and the two women’s letters attest. In 1936, midway in the series, Lane left the farm residence permanently. As soon as she was gone, her parents closed the new stone house and moved back to their farmhouse, where they remained for the rest of their long lives.

Thus the Little House series was written in an anxious period for Wilder and Lane, when the construction of houses and of books was conjoined. During this period, too, Lane continued to write fiction and launched a career as a political theorist; she and her mother, who took an active interest in politics, were united in their opposition to the New Deal. Wilder’s longtime advocacy of women’s partnership in family farming and her and Lane’s interest in traditional forms of women’s material culture linked them to prevailing concerns of the Depression years. As Barbara Melosh has argued, the New Deal years, which almost exactly coincide with the publication of the Little House books, were “not accompanied by a resurgence of feminism. Instead, the strains of economic depression reinforced the containment of feminism that had begun af-

ter the winning of suffrage.”⁶ So it seems inevitable that the series they jointly produced probed questions of gender—and especially of female independence and agency—in the framing context of a series of houses.

This is how the first Little House book begins:

Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs.

The great, dark trees of the Big Woods stood all around the house. . . . As far as a man could go to the north in a day, or a week, or a whole month, there was nothing but woods. . . . no houses. . . . no roads. . . . no people.⁷

Here, a little house is the one mark of culture in an overpowering natural world. A little girl in a house seems consigned to stay there, for according to this passage and the book that follows, it is only “a man” who can traverse the Big Woods. Wilder’s first book evokes a static *now* in which there is no possible mobility for a girl. The Ingalls house in the Big Woods epitomizes the “detached dwellings in the countryside” which, as Gwendolyn Wright has written, signified “certain key national virtues” in the nineteenth century: “personal independence. . . . democratic freedom of choice. . . . and private enterprise.” These “virtues” are all essential to the fictional Laura’s father, Charles Ingalls, whose “free-standing single-family dwelling” is to him, in terms that Marilyn R. Chandler says still prevail in U.S. culture, “the most significant measure of the cultural enfranchisement that comes with being an independent, self-sufficient (traditionally male) individual in full possession and control of home and family. The seldom-realized ideal is for the householder to have designed and built this house with his own hands,”⁸ as Charles Ingalls *did* build the Little Houses.

Much of Wilder’s narrative is determined by the fact of her father’s restlessness. Despite his wife Caroline’s lack of enthusiasm,

he decides to move west. The family's subsequent migrations are the vehicle by which Wilder's story could become a *serial* narrative of Great Plains houses. At their first stop, in Kansas Indian territory, Pa constructs another house, following the precedents of settlers of English descent who, Wright says, "brought with them the knowledge of how to construct a simple foursquare . . . dwelling, its facade unadorned, save for symmetrically placed windows and doors."⁹ Working in wood, Pa perpetuates northern European building traditions, and *Little House on the Prairie* chronicles, in amazing detail, the processes of his carpentry, using no manufactured materials but a few nails. Even today, it would seem possible to construct a wooden door latch, for example, from Wilder's precise instructions. Although young Laura watches her father intently, clearly this building is men's work. Pa hauls logs and raises walls alone. When he once enlists his wife to help in lifting, disaster strikes: a log falls on her and nearly crushes her foot, frightening the whole family. Pa says, "I blame myself. . . . I should have used skids."¹⁰ Obviously, a woman who participates in building courts disaster; Ma never helps Pa again in raising a house. Instead, he eventually finds other men with whom to trade work.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, the narrative of building vies with another narrative: the story of the competition between "white settlers" and Native Americans for lands that are still, according to U.S. law and tribal tradition, "Indian territory." After a year of building and planting on land they do not own, the Ingalls are forced by the exigencies of this struggle to abandon their house on the prairie, which Pa has just proudly completed. Next they locate beside Plum Creek, in Minnesota, moving into an already built, non-wood dwelling that Ma considers degrading—a dugout. Here young Laura observes that the white-washed house and sod barn of their Norwegian neighbor, Mr. Nelson, "did not look like Pa's house and Pa's stable. They cuddled to the ground, under a slope of the prairie, and

they looked as if they spoke Norwegian."¹¹ Laura is beginning to see houses as *languages* evoking the multiple cultural heritages and priorities of the Great Plains.

Obviously she has also learned another important principle of her culture: houses are property and property belongs to men. These are Pa's and Mr. Nelson's buildings, even though both men have hardworking wives and daughters. For Laura, as Daphne Spain argues, "houses are the spatial context within which the social order is reproduced."¹² Clearly, it is by building that her father constructs himself as a citizen. Thus, although the Norwegian-built dugout is a snug and practical shelter, Pa takes economic risks and borrows money for an English-style two-room dwelling that the dazzled Laura calls "the wonderful house." Never again will Charles Ingalls construct a log dwelling. Instead, in this relatively settled community, he delights in all the manufactured building materials he can buy on credit: machine-sawed boards, tar paper and "boughten" shingles, windows, doors, latches, locks, and "white china door knobs"—no more hand-made latchstrings! As Pa hauls his new supplies, "his face was one big shining of joy." He has promised his wife and daughters that, when the wheat crop is harvested and sold, they will live "like kings."¹³ In the west, Pa seems to say, self-made men crown themselves kings by building castles. But the unspoken question for Laura is—how can a *girl* participate in that process? Apparently *not* by building. The series offers not a single example of a female builder.

The Ingalls, of course, never actually live "like kings." Crops fail, debts loom, and an epidemic blinds the oldest daughter, Mary. When her parents decide—Pa eagerly, Ma reluctantly—to make yet another start in Dakota, Laura, now adolescent, is delighted to leave the "wonderful house" behind. The rest of the series has a single Great Plains setting, De Smet, South Dakota.

The little town is the last stop on a newly built railroad. In this booming environment,

it is increasingly apparent that the serial process of building matters far more than any single permanent edifice. Pa erects a claim shanty in a day and the family moves in the next day; while Pa is cutting a window in the shanty wall, Ma and Laura are placing the furniture under that very window. Pa expounds, "That's what it takes to build up a country. . . . Building over your head and under your feet, but building."¹⁴ He almost exactly echoes an 1859 *Pocket Manual of Rural Architecture*, which declares, "We are proud of the flimsy, insubstantial structures . . . which dot the whole face of the country. They are the homes of the people, who will by-and-by build and own better ones."¹⁵ In her South Dakota books (*By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *The Long Winter*, *Little Town on the Prairie*, *These Happy Golden Years*) Wilder elaborates the major buildings of such homestead towns, most of which Charles Ingalls helped to erect: claim shanties, stores with apartments above, barns, schools, churches, and railroad stations. Required by the Homestead Act to live on their claim for at least six months a year, but unable to survive on farming income alone or, at first, to improve the shanties so that they were habitable in winter, the Ingalls, like other families, spend summers on their claim and winters in the store building Pa has erected in town. Thus "home" for them is no one dwelling, but a stable *idea* of a house that (unlike any actual structure) is portable and imperishable. The *signifier*, the word "house," becomes more and more distant from any literal, physical *signified*. Laura learns to think of the structures her father builds in reference to this conceptual house. Thus the Ingalls women see the new claim shanty as *half* a house; the other half exists in their minds. When Pa adds more rooms, years later, Laura says, "Pa built the missing half of the claim shanty."¹⁶

As the family shuttles between store and claim, the gender balance of the series seems to shift. While *Little House on the Prairie* foregrounded Pa's work as a builder, in later books the processes of building are only very slightly

indicated. Instead, the emphasis falls more heavily on Ma's sphere. Inside the amorphous spaces Pa constructs, she intensely, rigorously articulates space, and she teaches her daughters to do the same. They are accustomed to moving and rearranging their possessions at least twice a year. The continuities of *home* are created by these arrangements and their combinations of variables and constants, so that even the blind daughter has the security of a stable shelter. After one such move, Mary says, "The cupboard is in a different place, but Ma put all the dishes in the same places in the cupboard, so I find them just as easily as ever."¹⁷

In the earlier books, Ma sometimes seemed cowed by her husband's egocentric feats of building and buying. When her husband surprised her with a new stove, she was almost afraid to cook on it. But now her confidence and her powers of invention become more apparent. When faced with the problem of fitting six people and all their things into a tiny shanty, Pa is perplexed; he says, "Can't you get it all in?" Ma replies confidently, "Where there's a will there's a way." Laura, by now a moving veteran herself, comes to her mother's aid by proposing a furniture arrangement of perpendicular beds. "Then we'll hang a curtain around our beds . . . and another curtain beside yours, and that leaves room for the rocking chair against your curtain." Ma's response is the most explicit praise she ever gives Laura: "That's my smart girl!" said Ma."¹⁸

Laura is praised because she is following her mother's example, controlling space in ways she has seen Ma do, and using textiles such as quilts, curtains, and sheets—traditional appurtenances of women's culture—as her medium. Thus women "build" rooms in the frame Pa has provided, expressing the preoccupation with differentiated space that was so important to the domestic literature of the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Ma, a former schoolteacher reared in the eastern U.S., reads domestic literature whenever it is available on the frontier: a sentimental novel by Mary Jane Holmes,²⁰ *Godey's Ladies' Book*

(which published monthly house plans), and Protestant women's "church papers." Through such reading, she would have been at least indirectly touched by the most influential housekeeping manual of the times, Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *American Woman's Home*, published in 1869.

This book begins its discussion of houses with these words: "In the Divine Word it is written, 'The wise woman buildeth her house.'"²¹ Pivotaly, this text claims "Divine" approval for women's appropriation of the prerogatives of *building*, and especially as Ma does so, by the articulation of interior space. Beecher and Stowe continue with instructions for "the close packing of conveniences" in "small and economical houses" and they advocate the use of home-constructed movable storage screens to define space. With their quilts, curtains, and recycled packing boxes, Laura and her mother accomplish these same ends. The Ingalls family's practice demonstrates what Angel Kwolek-Folland has argued: in the late nineteenth-century U.S., "the home environment essentially was a woman's creation even though the physical shell was designed or built by males."²²

Another of the means by which Ma takes on the authority of a house-builder is through her control of language. Her dearest possession is a porcelain figurine shepherdess—a portable signifier by which she indicates that a particular structure is worthy of being called a *house* (and thus, an Ingalls home). The shepherdess, older than Laura can remember, alludes to an elaborate literary tradition of pastoral agriculture and, with its glaze, gilding, and delicate modelling, to a tradition of consumer art and culture that may seem very distant from the Great Plains. Unchanging and unchipped, the little figure, which Ma displays prominently, also indicates a tradition of female survival. When the family squeezes into the first shanty, Pa asks, "where's the china shepherdess?" and Ma replies, "I haven't unpacked the shepherdess, Charles. . . . We aren't living here, we're only staying till you

get our homestead."²³ Pa loves moving, transience, and rebuilding; any roof over his family is house and home to him. As a former teacher and the family letter-writer and reader, Ma is far more tied to formal language than he. With the shepherdess and other such ploys, she controls the family vocabulary as well as the family space, impressing on her daughters what house and home must mean.²⁴ Later, when Almanzo Wilder proposes to Laura, he says apologetically that their first residence will "have to be a little house." Laura replies ardently, "I have always lived in little houses. I like them."²⁵ In fact, she has grown up in amazingly varied dwellings, from covered wagon to dugout to shanty, as well as more conventional residences. It is a testimony to her mother's success in enforcing the abstract but habitable ideal of the Little House that Laura can conclude that she has *always* lived in Little Houses.

The late seventies and eighties, the period in which the De Smet books are set, was a period of rapid change in domestic ideology. The high point of the "separate spheres" of men's and women's lives that was so influential in U.S. culture at midcentury had passed, and the emphasis on "order and hierarchy in domestic life" was giving way to "new stress on individual talents, the display of material possessions and the equality of household members."²⁶ As we have seen, this shift also occurs in the Ingalls household, as Ma's influence becomes more apparent and Laura takes increased responsibilities for family housekeeping and finances.

A new neighbor emerges as catalyst of such changes. Mrs. Boast is a newlywed recently arrived from "the East" (Iowa). Although her shanty is excruciatingly small, the determined bride invents a furniture arrangement that allows her to give a dinner party, even if the door *won't* close. To Laura, Mrs. Boast's novel housekeeping is entrancingly "fashionable . . . odd and new," enhanced by "pretty dishes and brand-new tablecloth." Mrs. Boast also instructs the Ingalls in constructing an Iowa (and

national) fad, a whatnot. With this task, architecture becomes a *female* project. Pa does the carpenter work to Mrs. Boast's commands, and the girls and women do the fine work. When the shelves are in place,

"So that's a whatnot," Pa said.

"Yes," said Ma. "Isn't it pretty?"

"It's a neat job," said Pa.

"Mrs. Boast says they're all the rage in Iowa," she told him.

"Well, she ought to know," Pa agreed.

"And there's nothing in Iowa too good for you, Caroline."²⁷

Pa's responses are equivocal; he accedes to the authority of his wife and Mrs. Boast.

The whatnot, a homemade adaptation of a Gothic Revival furniture style, becomes a little temple within the Little House, a tableau as telling as any altar.²⁸ When Pa builds "two tiny bedrooms" onto the shanty, his labors are summarized in two paragraphs. But eight paragraphs are devoted to the women's arranging of the "front room," newly spacious with the bedsteads gone. The crucial separation of public and private spaces is finally accomplished. The chapter culminates in a minutely detailed description of the whatnot:

The afternoon light made plain the gilded titles of the books on the whatnot's lower shelf, and glittered in the three glass boxes on the shelf above. . . . [A]bove them, on the next shelf, the gilt flowers shone on the glass face of the clock and its brass pendulum glinted, swinging to and fro. Higher still, on the very top shelf, was Laura's white china jewel box with the wee gold cup and saucer on its lid, and beside it, watching over it, was Carrie's brown and white china dog. . . . It was a beautiful room.²⁹

The whatnot orders and summarizes the values Ma would impress on her daughters: literacy, socialized time, amenities, and preservation. It also functions as a narrative de-

vice, for each of the objects it holds evokes an earlier episode in the series. Like the shepherdess, it provides coherence for a series of Little Houses and of Little House books. The whatnot speaks for women's capacities to invent, to build, to survive, and to perpetuate culture, even in a community where houses are built and owned by men. Thus it is not surprising that in the last book, when Laura is preparing to marry, she is concerned about her departure's disordering the whatnot. She wonders if she should disturb the arrangement by removing her treasured glass box:

Laura held the box in her hands, undecided. "I hate to take this box away from Mary's. They shouldn't be separated," she mused.

"See, I've moved my box closer to Mary's," Carrie showed her. "It doesn't look lonesome." So Laura put her box carefully in the trunk.³⁰

When she marries, at the end of the last book, Laura moves into a small house that Almanzo has built for them. The series' final image is of the newlywed Wilders on their wedding night, sitting outside the door of their new house. Then, in the original 1943 edition, a final page reprises that image with a drawing of the couple and a foursquare, prototypical Little House, crucially captioned, "The End of the Little House Books."³¹ The message is double: the series is definitively ended (Wilder, at seventy-six, was eager to complete the project) but, with Laura's marriage and coming of age, another cycle of Little Houses is launched.

Visiting the homes of U.S. writers is a popular pastime for tourists and pilgrims. The houses of Samuel Clemens, Washington Irving, Louisa May Alcott, and others—including Wilder's Great Plains contemporary, Willa Cather—are open for business. But, despite the enormous popularity of the Little House story, it is impossible to visit any of the dwellings which Charles Ingalls built and where his

family kept house, as portrayed in the series. At site after site, only a historical marker or a reconstructed cabin marks the spot. The flimsy, transient prairie shelters are gone without traces.

But Wilder's novels, more durable, still stand. Probably no writer of her generation has provided such a complete evocation in words of Great Plains houses, outside and (especially) in. Writing the *Little House* books with her daughter, Laura Ingalls Wilder perpetuated the building traditions of both her parents. In a *serial* context established by Pa and the patriarchal vagaries of manifest destiny, Ma Ingalls taught that enduring houses could be built of order and of words. Thus, even in the most constraining of gender paradigms, a girl could grow up to be a builder. Wilder's long, productive career as journalist, farmer, housekeeper, and novelist is a rich and complex testimony to that fact.

NOTES

1. When I refer to the *Little House* books, I mean the seven novels about the Ingalls family, all of which feature the fictionalized Laura Ingalls as protagonist: *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *The Long Winter*, *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* (1932, 1935, 1937, 1930, 1941, 1943; rpt. New York: Harper, 1953).

Wilder's second novel, *Farmer Boy* (1934; rpt., New York: Harper, 1953), is often considered an eighth volume in the series. It is a narrative based on a year in the New York State childhood of Laura Ingalls Wilder's husband, Almanzo Wilder. Almanzo's family is depicted as stably located in a settled, thriving agricultural region, and they are much more prosperous than the fictional (or actual) Ingalls family ever was. Their house and barns are large, commodious, and built to endure. Thus I do not consider this volume a *Little House* book, although some other Wilder scholars (notably Fred Erisman) disagree; see Fred Erisman, "Farmer Boy: The Forgotten 'Little House' Book," *Western American Literature* 28 (Summer 1993): 123-30.

2. Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane, *A Little House Sampler*, ed. William T. Anderson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 106.

3. Wilder, "My Ozark Kitchen," *Little House Sampler*, *ibid.*, pp. 138-42.

4. House-building and domestic arrangements were lifelong preoccupations for Lane, as reflected in her public and private writing and in the intense, serial housekeeping she practiced all her adult life. These interests probably contributed significantly to the domestic focus of the *Little House* series. On Lane's interests in architecture and domestic culture, the most thorough source to date is William Holtz's recent biography: *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

5. *A Little House Sampler* (note 2 above), pp. 174-75. According to William Holtz, this "cottage" closely resembles one of the mail-order houses marketed by Sears and Roebuck, "The Mitchell," although the local stone exterior of the Wilder/Lane house is an alteration of the shingle siding of the Sears model. The catalog description of this house, with its mixture of domestic romance and European/Californian allusions, recalls Lane's tastes and interests: "The Mitchell follows the latest idea in English architecture with a touch of the popular California studio type," featuring "French doors . . . [and] colonial bench. Strap iron hinges on the sturdy arched front door and a quaint English lamp hanging above bespeak the hospitality and happiness that dwell within." Katherine C. Stevenson and H. Ward Jandl, *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck & Company* (Washington: Preservation Press, 1986), p. 212. My thanks to William Holtz for bringing this suggestive description to my attention.

6. Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), p. 1.

7. Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods* (note 1 above), p. 1.

8. Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p. 89; Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 1-2. Two other books have also helped to shape my argument about frontier housing in this essay: Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and C. A. Weslager, *The Log Cabin in America: From Pioneer Days to the Present* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969).

9. Wright, *Building the Dream*, *ibid.*, p. 88.

10. Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (note 1 above), p. 61.

11. Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (note 1 above), p. 215.

12. Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 140.
13. Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (note 1 above), pp. 111-14, 109, 315.
14. Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (note 1 above), p. 253.
15. Daniel Harrison Jacques, quoted in Wright, *Building the Dream* (note 8 above), p. 86.
16. Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* (note 1 above), p. 16.
17. Wilder, *The Long Winter* (note 1 above), p. 73.
18. Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (note 1 above), p. 268.
19. According to Clifford Edward Clark, "by the middle of the nineteenth century such divisions [especially between 'public and private spaces'] had become an obsession." *The American Family Home, 1900-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 42.
20. Holmes' *Millbank* (1871) is mentioned in the earlier Little House books as the only novel the family owns; Ma reads it aloud to Pa so often that Laura memorizes the first paragraphs of the text (*On the Banks of Plum Creek* [note 1 above], pp. 33-34).
21. Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (1869; rpt., Hartford: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1975), p. 23.

22. Angel Kwolek-Folland, "The Useful What-Not and the Ideal of Domestic Decoration," *Helicon Nine* 8 (Spring 1983): 72.
23. Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (note 1 above), p. 74.
24. Angel Kwolek-Folland argues that icons of "movable culture," such as Ma's shepherdess, had special import for women who settled the Great Plains between 1870 and 1900. "The Elegant Dug-out: Domesticity and Movable Culture in the United States, 1870-1900," *American Studies* 25 (Fall 1984): 21-37.
25. Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (note 1 above), p. 220.
26. Clark, *American Family Home* (note 21 above), p. 108.
27. Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (note 1 above), pp. 204, 211.
28. According to Kwolek-Folland, the whatnot "presented a small replica of the rooms themselves. . . . The what-not cabinet or its equivalent appeared in all homes with any pretension to culture." "The Useful What-Not" (note 22 above), p. 73.
29. Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* (note 1 above), p. 18.
30. Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (note 1 above), p. 284.
31. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (New York: Harper, 1943), n.p.