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IN *LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE*

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“GOING TO INDIAN TERRITORY” ATTITUDES TOWARD NATIVE AMERICANS IN *LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE*

PHILIP HELDRICH

Since its first printing in 1935, *Little House on the Prairie* has been a perennial favorite among countless readers. The Little House series itself ranks consistently as one of the most commercially popular of all times.¹ However, *Little House on the Prairie*, the second book in the series, has become the center of numerous controversies. Yellow Medicine East School District, in Granite, Minnesota, which serves a portion of the Upper Sioux Community of that region, stopped class reading of the book, citing disgust with the text's

portrayals of Native Americans. Such action follows a similar banning of the text in 1993 in Sturgis, South Dakota.² While the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union has sought to stop the ban in Yellow Medicine's classrooms, the controversy about the “racist” depictions of Native Americans in the text continues. While no critic denies that Indians³ in the book deeply affect the Ingalls family in a variety of ways, critical opinions vary concerning each character's feelings about the Indians encountered. This “Indian predicament,” as Charles Frey acknowledges, is “difficult to judge.”⁴ From Ann Romines, who sees the Ingalls women as a “colonial outpost of Anglo-American propriety on the Great Plains,” to Native American Michael Dorris, who feels personally offended by Ma's attitude toward the Indians, critical reception is at best mixed.⁵ As the book continues to be read by children across the world, and as awareness to the racial depictions of ethnic peoples in American literature necessarily continues to generate concern, a greater understanding of characters' attitudes toward the Indians in *Little House on the Prairie* should help educators in teaching this classic to future generations.

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While critics generally concur about Ma's racism toward the Indians, debate remains about the more complex attitudes of Pa and Laura. As the text shows, Pa's feelings toward the Indians initially manifest themselves from a frontier ideology espousing a firm belief in American individualism. However, over the course of the text, Pa moves from an inability to recognize the Native Americans as legitimate settlers of the Plains to an acceptance of their cultural difference and territorial claims. Pa's changing feelings help to explain why he decides to leave the family homestead at the end of the text. Laura, on the other hand, seemingly eschews her mother's racism but has yet to understand the full implications of racist behavior. Her beliefs reflect a middle ground between her mother's and father's positions. She grows over the course of the prairie journey, though she has yet to reach a fully mature, self-conscious understanding of her feelings toward the Indians.⁶

Of the three major characters, there is a general critical consensus that Ma is clearly the most racist. Author Ann Romines notes, "For Caroline Ingalls, Indians become a code for everything that seems to threaten the settled, white life she wants for her daughters." Louise Mowder agrees, explaining how the Indians challenge "the project of womanly domestication of the frontier." In addition, Virginia Wolf suggests how Ma "perceives them [the Indians] as inferior to white folks because they look different and they live differently."⁷ In teaching the text, a firm understanding of how Ma sees the Indians is critical to students reading the book at all levels in order to begin discussions about racism and the Anglo-American pioneer experience.

Ma's position toward the Indians is evident from the onset of the Ingalls's journey. When Laura announces her curiosity to "see a papoose," Ma quickly answers, "Mercy on us! . . . Whatever makes you want to see Indians? We will see enough of them. More than we want to."⁸ Ma's pejoratively toned remarks prompt Laura's follow-up, "Why don't you like Indians, Ma," which provokes Ma's "I just don't

like them" (46). The text firmly establishes Ma's racism before any actual encounters with Indians to show how Ma's beliefs reflect a more general cultural signification of Indian culture as inferior to Anglo-American culture.⁹ Ma's predetermined feelings, coloring her ability to see the Indians in any way other than inferior, shape her actual meetings with Indians throughout the text. Ma, with her hardened racism, is a foil to Pa and Laura. Ma's exchange with Laura, who has no predisposed racism toward the Indians, leaves the girl a bit bewildered, forcing yet another important question: "This is Indian country, isn't it? . . . What did we come to their country for, if you don't like them?" (47). Such a question confuses Ma, who

didn't know whether this was Indian country or not. She didn't know where the Kansas line was. But whether or no [sic], the Indians would not be here long. Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. It might already be open to settlement. They could not know, because Washington was so far away. (47)

While Ma may be confused about geographical boundaries, she is anything but confused about her attitude toward the Indians. Her racism shapes her inability to recognize territorial demarcations; to her, Indian Territory lacks any legitimate status.¹⁰ She is a colonizer who cares little about violating land agreements; the inferior Indians are a hindrance and a danger, a position she holds to firmly throughout the text.

The images of the Indians in the "Indians in the House" chapter clearly demonstrate how Ma's racism has shaped her and her daughters' ideas of Indians. The chapter, because of its depiction of the Indians, also provokes much of the outrage surrounding the text today. After having entered the house, the Indians appear animalesque, even representing a sexualized threat: "Around their waists each of the Indians wore a leather thong, and the

furry skin of a small animal hung down in front. . . . The skins were fresh skunk skins" (138). Their "bold and fierce" faces and "black eyes" heighten their animal-like appearance (139). Their speech is also animalistic with its "harsh sounds" (140). The unworthy Indians have no legitimate voice; all they can vocalize to Ma and the girls are incoherent noises. For Ma, the moment confirms, literally and symbolically, all her predisposed feelings; after the encounter, Ma "trembled" and "looked sick" (141). The scene even suggests, as Romines notes, a "hysteria about the possibility of interracial rape."¹¹ Few critics would argue about Ma's attitude toward the Indians, an attitude clearly shaped by her predisposed racism that has signified the Indians as inhuman and threatening; Ma's feelings remain consistent throughout the book. However, Pa's and Laura's attitudes differ markedly from Ma's, an important point to note when studying the text in the classroom.

With regard to his feelings about the Indians he encounters, Pa is one of the least understood characters in the book. Unlike Ma's hardened racism, Pa's behavior toward the Indians seems to be reflective of his espoused frontier ideology. Ann Romines suggests that Pa at times resembles a nineteenth-century ethnologist who finds the Native American culture "worthy of respect and attentive reading," especially in the "Indian Camp" chapter, where Pa judges the Indians by the racial hierarchy of his "Euro-American" ideology.¹² However, Anita Fellman suggests, perhaps more accurately, that Pa perpetuates, as do Wilder's books, a "frontier myth,"¹³ a myth that I feel shapes his feeling significantly. According to Fellman, the prairie represents to pioneer men a "place of conquest, escape to freedom, lawlessness, individualism, and concern for autonomy."¹⁴ These ideals significantly shape Pa's character and his attitudes toward the Indians, and they reflect more generally the ideology of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier myth, which both Fellman and Jan Susina see heavily influencing the book.¹⁵ According to Turner, the frontier rep-

resents a "meeting point between savagery and civilization." It is peopled by "stalwart and rugged," "anti-social" frontiersman, espousing a radical individualism. Such men are firm believers in manifest destiny as a divine right for westward expansion.¹⁶ Pa's songs, too, espouse such an ideology; the text uses Pa's music "to emphasize and reinforce that action that is occurring in the narrative."¹⁷ Pa's songs are also emblematic of his romanticized feelings about the Indians; he sings from the perspective of a lovelorn Indian, "Strong and true my arrows are," "Bold is my warrior good," and "Proud wave his sunny plumes" (235). Such words as "strong," "bold," "good," "proud," and "sunny" do much to represent the noble savage to his family. However, over the course of the text, Pa develops a greater understanding of Indians beyond their simple depictions in his songs. Pa's growth, his revision of his frontier ideology, and his acquired understanding of the Indians play a significant role in influencing his decision to abandon his homestead at the end of the text.

Pa's ideology shapes his actions. Espousing an almost radical belief in frontier individualism, Pa decides the family is "going to the Indian Country" because "there were too many people in the Big Woods now" (1). He and little Laura sense an ever-growing encroachment in Wisconsin. Laura can hear "the ringing thud of an ax which was not Pa's ax, or the echo of a shot that did not come from his gun" (1-2). Outside of their home, the "path . . . had become a road" (2). Even "wild animals would not stay in a country where there were so many people" (2). Such feelings of encroachment stir Pa's belief in the American frontier myth:

In the long winter evenings he talked to Ma about the Western country. In the West the land was level, and there were no trees. The grass grew thick and high. There the wild animals wandered and fed as though they were in a pasture that stretched much farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. Only Indians lived there. (2)

Pa imagines a vacant, limitless, and bountiful West with "level land" more than hospitable to farming, a land so plentiful and fertile the grass can grow "thick and high." This imagined landscape or "pasture" is an Eden for the Adamic Pa over which to exert his dominion.¹⁸ Such a myth colors Pa's thinking so much that he fails to recognize, at this time, the Indians as legitimate settlers of the land he desires to possess: "Only Indians lived there," he reflects.

To Pa, frontier individualism can flourish in the big West, where there seems enough vacant land for everyone. He can also effectively play the role of patriarch, as he rules over his family and the fertile, feminized land. His covered wagon becomes a one-man, self-sufficient prairie schooner: "Everything in the little house was in the wagon, except the beds and tables and chairs. They did not need to take these, because Pa could always make new ones" (3). Pa's espoused do-it-yourself individualism is in sharp contrast to the extended kinship and communal structure of Native American tribal culture.¹⁹ In fact, much of the text demonstrates the shortsightedness of Pa's self-centered ideology, which, as examples accrete, exerts a significant influence on his change of heart.²⁰ With his gun within handling reach, Pa drives away with his family safe in the wagon, promising that "when they came to the West, Laura should see a papoose" (6). At this point in the text, Pa's custodial and patronizing attitude toward the Indians, and even toward his family, seems consistent with his frontier ideology, which fails to legitimate the West's Indian inhabitants as human equals.

Pa's adamant and uncontested individualism, the driving force behind his actions, can have detrimental effects. Early in the book the family crosses a swollen creek, which serves to remind readers of Pa's recklessness and the harm that can result from radical frontierism. After a near disastrous crossing, Pa boldly declares, "We're all safe . . . I never saw a creek rise so fast in my life" (23). However, while Providence perhaps more than Pa saved the family

from drowning, the pet dog, Jack, disappears. Though Jack manages miraculously to appear in the subsequent chapter, his disappearance serves as a subtle reminder of Pa's negligence. A second episode depicting Pa's reckless individualism occurs when Ma injures her foot while helping Pa build the family home. Pa begins construction with few problems; "All by himself, he built the house three logs high" (58). However, when he enlists the help of Catherine, a log carelessly topples onto her foot. "I blame myself," said Pa, "I should have used skids" (61). The scene suggests Ma's futility to a frontiersman like Pa, and his problem is not so easily resolved until he works out a commodified exchange of male labor with the neighboring Mr. Edwards. The two men finish framing the house in "one day" (63), which ends with Pa's singing about the "Gypsy King" who can, as a mythic individual, "come and go as [he] please[s]" (66). Such playing prompts Mr. Edwards to declare, "You're the fiddlin'est fool that ever I see [sic]!" (67), a supposed compliment that acts as an implicit comment on Pa's character.

Pa's well-constructed walls initially seem to be an adequate bulwark against the prairie's dangers, including Indians. The walls serve as an apt metaphor for Pa's radical frontierism, which colors his attitude toward the land and its Native inhabitants: "This is a great country. This is a country I'll be contented to stay in the rest of my life. . . . this country'll never feel crowded" (74-75). However, homesteaders "settling along both sides of the creek," Indians, and even wolves crowd in upon the Ingalls's home from all directions (87). Each incident forces Pa to further secure his dwelling until he has erected a stout door that he believes will serve "best to lock up your horses at night" from the threat of incoming neighbors (106). However, even after Pa has placed a roof and a floor on his home, after he sings the prejudicial "One little Indian, two little Indians, three little Indians" song (122), Indians break into his secured dwelling while he is away. No matter what Pa does to stave off settlers or Indians, continual encounters chal-

lenge his frontier dream of solitude and self-reliance.

The more Pa tries to be self-reliant, the more the text subverts such individualism. The text itself even establishes a link between radical individualism and ethnocentric, racist behavior. The well-digging scene with Mr. Scott is one such example. To dig a well, Pa must enlist the assistance of Mr. Scott. To test the well for poisonous gases, Pa sends and retrieves a lighted candle. However, Mr. Scott, perhaps an even more hardened individual than Pa and an avowed racist, eschews such a practice: "That's all foolishness, Ingalls" (153). Mr. Scott's carelessness and Pa's inability to stop it result in Mr. Scott's brush with death when he is overcome by the well's gases. In another episode where the text subverts individualism, Pa and the family sicken with fever and ague and must call upon the African-American Dr. Tan to nurse them to health. While the text portrays Dr. Tan in a stereotypical fashion with "white teeth" and a "rolling, jolly laugh" (191), he is able to cure the family, challenging any claims of black inferiority. As Romines notes, "In Kansas it is possible for her [Laura] to believe that an educated, compassionate man can move safely among white settlers, African Americans, and Native Americans."²¹ On the open prairie where the physical, and even metaphorical, borders are uncertain, the black Dr. Tan, who serves the Ingalls as well as "the Indians," can move successfully between races with little hindrance (192). Susan Maher suggests that such border crossing portrayed in *Little House* "opens one up to new expressions."²² While to the reader Dr. Tan may represent a challenge to hardened racism and segregation, for the Ingalls the lesson goes largely unheeded at this time. After Dr. Tan cures Pa's sickness, Charles feels indebted to his neighbors: "I wish I hadn't borrowed those nails from Edwards" (206). Pa has yet to recognize how his radical individualism colors his ability to interact and rely on others until he meets the "tall Indian."

Pa's individualism is further compromised when he discovers that he has built his home

on a well-used Indian trail: "I wouldn't have built the house so close to it if I'd known it's a highroad" (227). Such a discovery, again, challenges his dream of solitude. The very placement of the home along the Indian trail creates the setting for an extended exploration of pioneer and Indian relations, which significantly changes Pa. While Ma feels they should "[l]et Indians keep to themselves . . . and we will do the same" (229), such an idea seems an impossibility with a home alongside an Indian thoroughway. Pa, however, has a different response to the well-worn trail. "It's his [the tall Indian's] path," Pa says, "[a]n Indian trail, long before we came" (230). Actually seeing the path confirms in Pa a sense of propriety and right. In Pa's eyes, the Indians have established a legitimate land claim with their path on what had initially seemed to be vacant land. In other words, to a frontiersman like Pa, a claim is akin to a right to the land. Recognizing the legitimacy of the Indians' land claim, Pa also begins to recognize the Indians as legitimate settlers. Pa's new awareness contradicts his earlier failure to recognize the Indian Territory as belonging to the Indians, due to his believing the land to be vacant. Pa's encounter with the tall Indian represents a significant turning point in the text, as Pa's feeling about the Indians and his frontier ideology begin to undergo radical revision.

A subsequent home invasion by the Indians while Pa is out hunting contests Pa's new feelings toward them. After the Indians take cornbread and Pa's tobacco-pouch and furs, Pa's passive response is that "all was well that ended well" (234). Using a song to explore his feelings further, he sings of Bright Alfarata, a romanticized ballad celebrating Indian lovers, which prompts Laura's question: "Where did the voice of Alfarata go, Ma?" (235). The various answers reflect the family's various attitudes toward the Indians. The unconcerned Ma says, "I supposed she went west" (236). The answer, however, does not satisfy Laura, who asks, "Why do they go west?" (236), prompting Pa to point out that "the government makes them [go west]" (236). "Will the

government make these Indians go west?" she returns, to which Pa responds:

"Yes . . . When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now. That's why we're here, Laura. White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick. Now do you understand?"

"Yes, Pa," Laura said. "But, Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to—"

"No more questions, Laura," Pa said firmly. "Go to sleep." (236-37)

The fiery exchange creates a moral dilemma for Pa, who has only recently begun to recognize the Indians as legitimate settlers. From this point throughout the remainder of the text, Pa will grapple with his feelings toward the Indians, ultimately realizing the flawed nature of his frontier ideology.

Shortly thereafter, following his relief that an Indian has killed a renegade panther—a moment in which Pa discovers a mutual understanding with the Indian in protecting children—Pa receives confirmation that "the government would not do anything to the white settlers" (273). While the news might seemingly have been received with joy, it evokes no response from Pa, suggesting his continued moral dilemma. As encounters with "friendly" as well as "surly and cross" Indians become more frequent for the Ingallses, Pa's affection for the Indians grows (276). After Mr. Edwards and Mr. Scott accuse the Indians of starting a prairie fire, Pa notes that "the Indians had always burned the prairie to make green grass grow more quickly, and traveling easier. . . . Now the ground was clear. And he was glad of it, because plowing would be easier" (283-84). Pa's positive characterization of the Indians does not satisfy Mr. Edwards and Mr. Scott. Mr. Edwards senses a growing Indian presence, and "he didn't like it" (284). Mr. Scott finds the "coming together" akin to "dev-

ilment"; to Mr. Scott, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" (284). But Pa disagrees:

Pa said he didn't know about that. He figured that Indians would be as peaceable as anybody else if they were let alone. On the other hand, they had been moved west so many times that naturally they hated white folks. But an Indian ought to have sense enough to know when he was licked. With soldiers at Fort Gibson and Fort Dodge, Pa didn't believe these Indians would make any trouble. (284-85)

Pa's response again reflects his moral uncertainty about the Indians. On the one hand, he defends them, while on the other hand, his answer seems colored by his initial frontier ideology of manifest destiny.

The Indian jamboree and invasive war cries of the subsequent "Indian War-Cry" chapter represent symbolically the outward manifestation of Pa's moral dilemma. Pa's conflict renders him incapable of continuing his work; "the plow was in the field where he had left it" (295). The Indians debate among themselves whether to fight the settlers, "to kill the white people who had come into the Indian country" (300), only to disband at the urging of the Osage leader, Soldat du Chêne. The bravery and example of Soldat du Chêne ends Pa's moral consternation: "That's one good Indian! . . . No matter what Mr. Scott said, Pa did not believe the only good Indian was a dead Indian" (301). Pa finds in du Chêne the legitimation of a culture. Clearly, Pa's attitude toward the Indians has changed significantly from the beginning of the text when he failed to recognize the Indians as legitimate settlers of the western prairie lands. Pa's change of heart may also be the reason for his "long night of sleep" after many previous sleepless nights of moral confusion (302).

While Pa's feelings seem clarified at this point in the book, the final chapters, "Indians Ride Away" and "Going Out," represent some of the most critically contested in the entire book, especially with consideration to Laura's

attitude toward the Indians. Her feelings are less complex than her father's, though not as blatantly racist as her mother's. Her position rests between her parents'. As Claudia Mills explains, a central motif of the book is Laura's growing maturation from parental obedience to autonomy, including moments of "moral uncertainty."²³ (130). Such uncertainty helps to explain Laura's reactions to the Indians. At times, Laura makes stereotypical racist remarks about the Indians reflective of her mother's racism, but she also asks sincere questions about the plight of Native Americans learned from her father. Wolf feels Laura's views represent a "balance" between her father and mother²⁴ and that "her response goes beyond what she has learned about the Native Americans from either parent."²⁵ While Wolf's points help to establish Laura's position in between those of her parents, the balance seems to shift in the text toward Laura's father. And, perhaps more importantly, Laura's remarks in the concluding scenes must be read with regard to her age and her lack of a mature self-consciousness and understanding, which prevent the transcendent growth Wolf claims for her.

Laura's notions about the Indians come from her parents, typical of how most children learn about others and how most acquire racist behavior. At the onset of the Ingalls's journey, Pa promises Laura she will "see a papoose" even though she doesn't know what one is: "what is a papoose?" she asked him" (6). Pa signifies the papoose as a "little, brown, Indian baby" (6), marking the child's cultural difference from Laura. Throughout the text, Laura tries to understand this difference. She learns early about her mother's racist feelings toward the Indians, even though she herself has yet to understand her questions regarding Indians and the family's journey to their territory.²⁶ With her questions about borders, boundaries, behaviors, and attitudes that have no easy answers, Laura speaks the consciences of Ma and Pa. Although she asks the questions, she has yet, because of her age, to fully realize their significance. Still having been unable to see a papoose, she remarks: "This

was Indian country and she didn't know why she didn't see Indians" (123).

When first glimpsing the Indians in the "Indians in the House" chapter, Laura feels fearful of her meeting with the Other, a fear predicated on her mother's prejudice. Wolf notes that Laura is both afraid and curious.²⁷ As she hides behind a piece of board leaning against the wall, "she couldn't help moving her head just a little, so that one eye peeped out and she could see the wild men" (138). Laura's observations seem to confirm her mother's racism as the Indians have "snake's eyes" (134) and "smell" (138); but to Laura the visit seems more of a time for games, as she plays hide-and-seek with the Indians: she "peeked, and hid, and peeked again" (140). Upon arriving home, Pa, too, treats the visitation as a game: "Indians? So you've seen Indians at last, have you, Laura?" (143). While Ma confirms her fears, Pa seeks to placate them: "You did the right thing . . . We don't want to make enemies of any Indians" (143) and "the main thing is to be on good terms with the Indians" (144). Laura finds herself torn between her mother's racist fears and her father's newly developing attitude toward the Indians. Louise Mowder suggests that there exists a connection between Laura, with her tan skin, and the Indians. Maher, too, finds a link with the Indians and Laura's loud yelling, but Maher feels that ultimately Laura "feels no connection" during the visit.²⁸ I argue such links between Laura and the Indians act to strengthen an *unself-conscious* leaning toward her father's feelings, though the text avoids any clear distinctions for Laura.

The later "Indian Camp" chapter again focuses on Laura's feelings, and again the Indians seem to be largely a curiosity for her, as Laura has yet to attain a greater self-conscious understanding of the Native "Others." From her field trip over the prairie to the campground, she importantly learns that she and her family do not represent the center of the world: "They went farther and farther into the vast prairie. Laura felt smaller and smaller" (174). The prairie itself serves as a metaphor

for difference to accentuate Laura's growing awareness of the "vast" world: "The prairie seemed to be level, but it was not level" (175). As the prairie metaphor suggests, the flat, homogenized prairie is actually more heterogeneous or varied, an apt discovery to make in a chapter exploring the signs of an alternative culture. Pa guides his girls to the Other's world. While the Indian lifestyle revealed by the Indian camp exploration is a stark contrast to the Ingalls's, Pa treats the Native culture, as Ann Romines contends, with respect.²⁹ For Laura, the trip is even rewarding, as she finds a number of "beautiful" Indian beads (177), a symbolic cultural exchange that later teaches Laura a lesson about selfishness. The more she learns about the Indians and finds herself caught in the middle of her parents' differing feelings, the more she asks questions such as, "Why do they [the Indians] go west?" (236). Neither parent seems able to provide her with an adequate answer, forcing Pa to stop any more of her inquiries, "No more questions, Laura . . . Go to sleep" (237). Without any clear answers, Laura, like Pa, suffers from confusion in the "Indian War-Cry" chapter. Like Pa, "Laura ached all over and there was a terrible ache in her very middle" (297). This ache, a symbolic manifestation of her confusion, will not be easily resolved for Laura.

By the end of the text, Laura, limited by her maturity, will not develop any conclusive position with regard to the Indians. When the Indians ride away, she becomes caught again between her parents' differing feelings, especially with regard to her desire to possess a papoose. Critical assessment of the scene is largely varied. Maher asserts that in the papoose incident "Laura penetrates the Indians' otherness."³⁰ Dolores Rosenblum feels that Laura's desire for the papoose signifies "the qualities of 'freedom' and 'innocence' the baby stands for which Laura must 'internalize.'"³¹ Frey suggests Laura's papoose represents the "deep and mysterious affinity she [Laura] has with the Indian spirit and way of life"; Romines also sees the moment as representing the "possibilities of a shared lifestyle and a shared life

between the Euro-American and the Native American children." Additionally, Susina contends the papoose is a symbol for the "transitory nature of the prairie and its inhabitants" and Wolf finds Laura's "response goes beyond what she has learned about Native Americans from either parent."³² The papoose incident is certainly a resonant moment. However, I feel given Laura's middle position between her parents and her lack of mature self-consciousness, her desire to possess the papoose exemplifies her curiosity about the Indians previously encountered. The Indians exist largely in her imagination and in the conflicting attitudes of her parents; she never fully realizes the Indians as human equals. If any clear connection is made between the Ingallses and the Indians during this scene, it is between Pa and Soldat du Chêne: "'Du Chêne himself,' Pa said, under his breath, and he lifted his hand in salute" (305). The salute signifies a respectable exchange of admiration, confirming Pa's change of attitude about the Indians. While Pa admires du Chêne, the migration sickens and depresses him: "I don't feel hungry," he tells Ma (311).

If the papoose incident seems shrouded in mystery, then the decision Pa makes to abandon his homestead might seem even more unclear. After all of the family's hard work during the spring planting season, Pa still decides to leave. His decision seems abrupt and the circumstances for it confusing: "If some blasted politicians in Washington hadn't sent out word it would be all right to settle here, I'd never have been three miles over the line into Indian Territory. But I'll not wait for the soldiers to take us out. We're going now!" (316). Without any clear confirmation that the government would remove settlers, Pa seems to have made a hasty decision. Critics such as Fellman and Romines blame the government for the failure of the homestead experiment. For Fellman, government "blundering and unreliability" keep the Ingalls from "prosper[ing]," while Romines suggests an unfounded parallel between government expulsion of the Indians and government restriction on the

Ingalls. Frey, on the other hand, suggests that the ending represents an "ethos of nomadism triumphant against agrarian rootedness."³³ Considering Pa's new respect for Indian culture which developed over the course of events, his decision to leave seems to have less to do with the government or nomadism and more to do with the recognition of the legitimacy of Indian Territory and his place within it as an intruder. Loading the family into the wagon, Pa heads back east, a symbolic acquiescing of both his false land claim and his initial notions about the mythic West. Along the trail, Pa even finds himself confronting a stranded couple who espouse the same notions of radical frontier individualism that once shaped Pa's beliefs. The couple refuse the Ingalls's help, opting instead to face the West's impending dangers on their own: "They wouldn't leave the wagon; everything they owned in the world was in it. So at last Pa drove on, leaving them sitting on the wagon tongue, all alone on the prairie" (330). Leaving the couple behind, Pa leaves behind his former self, represented by the westward-headed pair. "All alone on the prairie," the rugged individualists seem small and ineffectual, swallowed by the vastness and their false dreams.

With the Ingallses headed back east, the text takes the reader full circle in order to create a before-and-after contrast. At the end, Pa has changed significantly from the beginning. He no longer seems to believe the frontier myth in the same way he did initially. He recognizes the dangers of radical individualism and how the reality of the West differs from the West of his imagination. He finds in the Indians an admirable culture with a legitimate right to the land. Pa's new beliefs seriously contest American ethnocentricity and challenge the claims of the American frontier myth. In the end, Pa finally begins to understand the plight of tribes forcibly removed from their lands: "We're taking more out of Indian Territory than we took in," he tells his family (333). While Pa has altered his beliefs significantly, Ma seems silenced at the end.

Her silence suggests her intransigent ideology of superiority, which is given no voice. Laura, while still a child who lacks full self-consciousness and understanding of the significance of the family journey, seems under the influence of her father as she attentively listens to his songs, which lull her to a peaceful sleep of "endless waves of prairie grasses" (335). Her experience has entered her subconscious, as perhaps it has for countless generations of readers, too.

To ban *Little House on the Prairie* might seem a knee-jerk reaction to a complex text. The text's portrayals of both the Ingallses and the Indians belie any easy assessment of the book and its various characterizations. As Fred Erisman points out, the *Little House* books "reflect the disparate and often conflicting attitudes present in a nation undergoing radical change."³⁴ To silence the text would be to silence an understanding of how writers like Wilder in the 1930s represented our past and responded to relations between white and Native Americans. To the undiscerning reader, the book can seem guilty of portraying racial prejudices and stereotypes; however, such portrayals have specific roots and manifest themselves within the complex characterizations of this enduring children's classic.

REFERENCES

1. For a thorough overview of the book's historical contexts, reception, and biographical details, see Virginia L. Wolf, *Little House on the Prairie: A Reader's Companion* (New York: Twayne, 1996), pp. 3-32, and Ann Romines, *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), pp. 55-94.
2. Chuck Haga, "Big Hullabaloo over *Little House on the Prairie*," *Kansas City Star*, 20 December 1998, L5.
3. As much confusion currently surrounds the usage of the terms "Native American(s)" and "Indian(s)" within both Native and Anglo-American cultures and within the critical discourse on the text, I will seek to use the term "Indian(s)" when specifically referring to Wilder's text in order to remain consistent with Wilder's usage.
4. Charles Frey, "Laura and Pa: Family and Landscape in *Little House on the Prairie*," *Children's*

Literature Association Quarterly 12 (1987): 125-28, p. 128.

5. Romines, *Constructing* (note 1 above), p. 58; Michael Dorris, "Trusting the Words," *Booklist* 1-15 June 1993, 1820-22.

6. The critical body of work on Laura Ingalls Wilder that might help convincingly substantiate her feelings toward the Indians is currently inconclusive. With this in mind, I will focus exclusively on the textual representations as a system of interpretable signs rather than use a critical approach based on biography and authorial intention. For a good starting point on historical attitudes toward and (mis)representations of Native Americans, particularly the "noble savage" dichotomy, see Jon C. Stott, *Native Americans in Children's Literature* (Phoenix: Oryx, 1995), and Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

7. Romines, *Constructing* (note 1 above), p. 67; Louise Mowder, "Domestication of Desire: Gender, Language, and Landscape in the Little House Books," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 17 (1992): 15-19. As Glenda Riley explains, women settlers "preserved family, religion, and ethnic traditions" (*The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* [Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988], p. 2). "[W]omen's chief responsibilities," according to Robert L. Griswold, "were homemaking and child rearing"; they "represented the moral foundation of the family and society" ("Anglo Women and Domestic Ideology in the American West in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century," in *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* ed. Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988] p. 15-37. The implications of such a domestic ideology are important in understanding Ma's racism and its potential influence on her daughters, especially Laura. Wolf, *Reader's Companion* (note 1 above), p. 46. Recent critical work on the text has generated a number of powerful feminist readings, which often focus on Ma and Laura's mother-daughter relationship. See Romines, Mowder, Wolf, Susan Naramore Maher "Laura Ingalls and Caddie Woodlawn: Daughters of a Border Space," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 18 (1994): 130-42, and Anita Clair Fellman, "Don't Expect to Depend on Anybody Else": The Frontier as Portrayed in the Little House Books," *Children's Literature* 24 (1996): 101-16.

8. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper, 1971), p. 46. Further citations to *Little House* appear in parentheses in the text.

9. A number of studies have noted the uneasy relationship between Anglo women settlers and Indians on the prairie and plains. As Elizabeth Hampsten suggests, among Anglo women settlers, few made attempts to "understand" or empathize with Indians or others of varying backgrounds (*Settlers' Children: Growing Up on the Plains* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991], p. 8). Hampsten further explains how "hysteria" and prejudice were not "uncommon among [Anglo] women" (p. 231). Elliott West adds that "parents actually cultivated this anxiety [about Indians] as a tool of discipline" for their children, when in fact "there was little to worry about" as "more Indians were killed by whites than vice versa" (*Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier, Histories of the American Frontier* [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989], p. 35-36. West further describes how "Native Americans might be allowed some fuzzy, abstract nobility, but face-to-face, as potential neighbors, they were considered somewhere between marginally tolerable and barely human" (*Contested Plains* [note 6 above], p. 187). Riley explains how fears about Indians held by women developed largely from "popular and often fictionalized" stories of "rape, captivity, and child stealing" in captivity narratives of the day; "[r]umors and alarmism were rife across the prairie" (*Female Frontier* [note 7 above], p. 44).

10. For an explanation of territorial borders of the time, see Wolf, *Reader's Companion* (note 1 above), pp. 11-13. She clarifies, that after Kansas statehood in 1861, the Cherokee Strip and the Diminished Reserve of the Osage represented the state's southern border. The land did not begin to become available to settlers until 1871.

11. Romines, *Constructing* (note 1 above), p. 65.

12. Romines, *Constructing* (note 1 above), p. 62.

13. Fellman, "Don't Expect" (note 7 above), p. 104.

14. Fellman, "Don't Expect" (note 7 above), p. 105.

15. Ibid., Jan Susina, "The Voices of the Prairie: The Use of Music in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 16 (1992): 158-66.

16. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1920), pp. 3, 15, 30, 32. Wolf (*Reader's Companion* [note 1 above], pp. 141-42) discusses a number of well-known works, now classics, on the American frontier by such authors as D. H. Lawrence, Charles Feidelson Jr., R. W. B. Lewis, Richard Chase, Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, and Leo Marx. In various ways, these critics support and comment upon the

general myth of the American frontier identified by Turner. However, recently a number of historians have sought to revise Turner's thesis and his idea of the "frontier." More specifically, Patricia Limerick finds Turner's ideas "ethnocentric and nationalistic" (*The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* [New York: Norton, 1987], p. 21) and the term "frontier" suggestive of racial and cultural exclusion as well as white hegemony ("The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," in *The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library*, by Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick, ed. James R. Grossman [Chicago: Newberry Library; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], pp. 73-75). For Limerick, "the American West was an important meeting ground, the point where Indian America, Latin America, Anglo-America, Afro-America, and Asia intersected" (*Legacy*, p. 27). Similarly, Donald Worster and Michael Malone also criticize Turner's omissions and flawed vision of the West (Donald Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner Jr., and Charles E. Rankin [Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991], pp. 3-25; and Michael P. Malone, "Beyond the Last Frontier: Toward a New Approach to Western American History," in *Trails*, pp. 139-60). For *Little House*, Pa's ideology initially seems closest to that of Turner; however, Pa does come to a recognition of the prairie as a place of intersecting cultures, an awareness that plays a large role in his decision to leave his homestead at the end of the text.

17. Susina, "Voices" (note 15 above), p. 164.

18. For an extended discussion of the Adamic impulse in American literature, see R. W. B. Lewis's hallmark study, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

19. For a general, informative discussion of the communal structure of Indian families, see Elliott West's *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains*, Calvin P. Horn Lectures in Western History and Culture [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995], pp. 107-25. Pa's individualism is also atypical of frontier family units. West suggests that in contrast to "examples of hell-bent individualism and the frontier's fierce, atomizing competitive spirit," families often settled together for mutual support, though they preserved the nuclear family structure and single-family dwelling (pp. 95-96). Lillian Schlissel adds how the nuclear family was "not sufficient" for frontier life; "[e]xtended family was vital" ("Family on the Western Frontier," in Schlissel, *Western Women* [note 7

above], pp. 81-91). The *Little House* text makes many implicit comparisons between Pa's individualism and Native American communal society at various points in the book. The "Indian Camp" chapter suggests a close-knit tribal group by descriptions of the proximity of tents near an assumed central campfire; the "Indian Jamboree" chapter suggests group cohesiveness by the Indians' unified singing; and the tribe's group travel in the "Indians Ride Away" can be seen as yet another example of how a communal society sticks together for mutual support and protection.

20. Both Wolf in *Reader's Companion* (note 1 above), p. 16, and Fellman in "Don't Expect" (note 7 above), p. 107, draw attention to Wilder's anti-New Deal, libertarian politics. They see Pa's frontier ideology as reflective of Wilder's libertarianism and distrust of intrusive governmental policy. However, Wolf's and Fellman's ideas seem compromised by the text, which acts to subvert Pa's individualism and contest such libertarianism.

21. Romines, *Constructing* (note 1 above), p. 70.

22. Maher, "Daughters" (note 7 above), p. 130.

23. Claudia Mills, "From Obedience to Autonomy: Moral Growth in the Little House Books," *Children's Literature* 24 (1996): 127-40.

24. Wolf, *Reader's Companion* [note 7 above], p. 49.

25. Wolf, *Reader's Companion* [note 7 above], p. 48.

26. West notes how children's fears often came directly from parents and their exaggerated stories (*Growing Up* [note 9 above], pp. 35-36).

27. Wolf, *Reader's Companion* (note 1 above), p. 47.

28. Mowder, "Domestication" (note 7 above), p. 16; Maher, "Daughters" (note 7 above), pp. 133, 136.

29. Romines, *Constructing* (note 1 above), p. 62.

30. Maher, "Daughters" (note 7 above), p. 37.

31. Dolores Rosenblum, "Intimate Immensity: Mythic Space in the Works of Laura Ingalls Wilder," in *Where the West Begins: Essays on Middle Border and Siouland Writing, in Honor of Herbert Krause*, ed. Arthur Huseboe and William Geyer (Sioux Falls, S.D.: Center for Western Studies, 1978), pp. 72-79.

32. Frey, "Laura and Pa" (note 4 above), p. 128; Romines, *Constructing* (note 1 above), p. 78; Susina, "Voices" (note 15 above), p. 163; Wolf, *Reader's Companion* (note 1 above), p. 48.

33. Fellman, "Don't Expect" (note 7 above), p. 109; Romines, *ibid.*, p. 79; Frey, *ibid.*, p. 129.

34. Fred Erisman, "The Regional Vision of Laura Ingalls Wilder," in *Studies in Medieval, Renaissance, (and) American Literature: A Festschrift (Honoring Troy C. Crenshaw, Lorraine Sherley, and Ruth Speer Angell)*, ed. Betsy Colquitt (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1971), pp. 165-71.