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Little House on the Prairie - Kane County Prairie, that is

By Jerry Turnquist | Daily Herald Columnist Contact writer



Gravestones of Laura Ingalls Wilder's ancestors are located on private property along Corron Road in an area west of Elgin.

LAURA STOECKER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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PRINT MAIL STORY

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As a lifelong fan of author Laura Ingalls Wilder, Barrington writer Patty Dowd Schmitz has long tried to learn everything she can about the famed author of the "Little House on the Prairie" series.

This has included studying maps, birth certificates, census information, and numerous publications about the famed author and her family.

While Schmitz, a freelance writer whose work sometimes takes her into the history arena, has amassed a wealth of information about the noteworthy family, she also uncovered one detail she wasn't expecting.

The Ingallses once lived right here in Kane County. This aspect of the family's life, all but overlooked by other researchers, is something she is studying further.

For those that might want a bit of a refresher, Laura Ingalls Wilder grew up in a Midwestern pioneer family during the 1870s and 1880s. In later life, she authored a six volume series based on her early family experiences which recalled the simple joys as well as the hardships of rural life. These books eventually found themselves into the hearts of readers of all ages and would inspire a television series starring Michael Landon.

The characters in her books include Charles "Pa" Ingalls; Caroline "Ma" Ingalls; Mary Ingalls, Laura's blind, older sister for whom Laura served as eyes to the world; younger sisters Carrie and Grace; and of course, Laura. The series follows the family through

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various Midwestern locations, chronicling the hardships as well as the simple joys of pioneer life.

Thousands of fans later wrote to Ingalls and traveled to sites mentioned in her book, visitations that still go on today, notes Schmitz.

These sites include DeSmet, S.D.; Pepin, Wis.; Mansfield, Mo.; and Burr Oak, Ia.

"But, a site just west of Elgin where 'Pa' Ingalls lived for 10 years as a teenager before moving to Wisconsin to marry Laura's mother, Caroline Quiner, is all but overlooked," Schmitz said.

Census records show Laura's uncles, James and Worthen Ingalls, moved to Illinois shortly after it was opened to settlement in the early 1830s inflation. About 10 years later - in 1844 and 1845 - the two men, along with James's son Jasper and another relative, Joseph Ingalls, purchased four quarter sections in sections 26 and 35.

These two adjacent sections were located along Corron Road in the southwest portion of Plato Township just north of the Campton Township line.

Several years later - probably about 1848 - Lansford Ingalls joined his two older brothers in Kane County. Lansford Ingalls first appeared in the 1850s census records as a laborer in the northern portion of adjacent Campton Township, Schmitz's research shows. Among his children was Laura's father, Charles, then 14 years old.

Lansford Ingalls and his family continued to live in Plato or Campton Township for the next decade until about 1860 when they moved to Concord, Wis., near Oconomowoc. It was in Concord that Charles met Caroline Quiner. A short time later, the pair relocated to Pepin, Wis., where Laura's sister Mary was born in 1865, followed by Laura in 1867.

But, more than written records remain of the Ingallses' life in Kane County, Schmitz explains. On Corron Road north of McDonald Road is a small family cemetery containing the grave of Eliza Ingalls, the daughter of one of Laura's great-uncles. Eliza died of "inflammation of the brain," according to mortality tables of the time.

Also buried in the small family plot are Malvina Geutcheus and Nancy Geutcheus, daughters of Morris and Betsy Ingalls Geutcheus. The sisters, who were ages 11 and 9 at the time of their deaths in the early 1850s, were reportedly struck by lightning, according to local historian John Russell Ghrist, who also researched the cemetery.

Also buried nearby are William Wright and his father Frankie Wright who died in the early 1870s. Others may have been buried nearby, Ghrist adds, but the evidence is inclusive.

"Many biographies have been written about Laura Ingalls Wilder, and while others have examined her mother's life, none have ventured to dig more deeply into her father's life and his teenage years," Schmitz said. "There is only one passing reference to 'Pa' living west of Elgin, near Otter Creek," she added.

"My research shows that Plato Township and Campton Township can lay claim to be a significant part of the Laura Ingalls lore."

Schmitz says she plans to continue her investigations and publish the results in some fashion.

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