



## Homeward Bound

“ONCE UPON A TIME, 60 years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs.” So begins Laura Ingalls Wilder’s 1932 novel, *Little House in the Big Woods*, the first in the famed *Little House on the Prairie* series of children’s books. The classic tales of young Laura traveling with her family across the Midwest harken back to the pioneer era, when idealistic would-be homesteaders like Charles “Pa” Ingalls put their faith in the promises of America’s unknown frontier. Today, Laura’s legacy lives on in two recreated log cabins on the sites of her family’s first two homes, near Pepin, Wisconsin, and Independence, Kansas.

Laura was born in 1867 in a small log cabin just outside of Pepin. It was here that her family developed the memories later recounted in her first book. She describes this home as a place of unadulterated happiness, a comforting refuge from the frightening animals and other dangers that lurked beyond its walls. “All alone in the wild Big Woods, and the snow, and the cold,” she writes, “the little log house was warm and snug and cozy.”

In 1869, Pa Ingalls moved his young family from the Big Woods of western Wisconsin to Indian Territory near Independence, Kansas, in search of greener pastures. During the journey, after crossing the frozen Mississippi River, the family camped in a log house built to shelter travelers: “At last the wagon was pulling up a slope of earth again, and again there were trees. There was a little log house, too, among the trees. So Laura felt better.”

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The Ingalls family stayed with Laura’s aunt and uncle in Rothville, Missouri, for a few months, and evidence suggests the two families shared a log cabin before continuing on their separate ways. Upon reaching Kansas, Pa and a neighbor built a new log home on the prairie. Laura describes its construction in great detail in her third book. But within a year, Pa pulled up stakes again and moved the family back to Wisconsin’s Big Woods, leaving behind the prairie log home and the beginnings of the farm he established.

That wasn’t the last of the Ingalls family’s travels, however. In 1876, during a short stop in South Troy, Minnesota, the Ingalls family stayed with other family members in what was probably a rented log cabin. Their later homes included dugouts, claim shanties and fine homes made of board lumber, but they never again lived in another log cabin like the ones Laura so loved from her childhood.

Fortunately, modern fans of the series can visit replica cabins where the family’s most significant ones once stood. Both the Little House Wayside in Wisconsin (*above right*) and the Little House on the Prairie in Kansas (*above left*) were built according to their descriptions in the books. Each offers insight into how young Laura and other pioneers of the time lived on the land. They provide a temporary trip into yesteryear, when self-sufficiency and determination were more valuable than monetary wealth, and a simple log cabin with a light in the window calling you home offered unbound happiness, pure and simple.

— Danielle Taylor