

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

By the Shores of Silver Lake

by

Laura Ingalls Wilder

Book Information

Laura Ingalls Wilder, By the Shores of Silver Lake
Quiz Number: 212
HarperTrophy, 1967
ISBN 0-06-440005-0; LCCN
290 Pages
Book Level: 5.3
Interest Level: MG

The Ingalls family leaves Minnesota, travels to the Dakota Territory, and lives at a railroad camp until Pa can file their claim to a homestead near Silver Lake.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Newbery Honor; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee
Topics: Family Life, Growing Up; Series, Little House; U.S. States/Regions, South Dakota

Main Characters

Aunt Docia and Uncle Hi the Ingalls girls' aunt who brings Pa a job offer and her husband who is a contractor for a railroad

Big Jerry a rough but kind-hearted half Indian, half French man; people suspect him of horse stealing

Carrie Ingalls a younger sister to Laura and Mary

Grace Ingalls the baby sister

Laura Ingalls the twelve-year-old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ingalls

Ma and Pa Ingalls the parents of the Ingalls girls

Mary Ingalls Laura's blind older sister

Mr. and Mrs. Boast folks who stay with the Ingalls for a short time, then move to a shanty nearby

Vocabulary

conductor the person in charge of a train

depot a railroad station

homestead a tract of land given by the government to a person who has agreed to occupy it for a specified period of time

shanty a small and simple dwelling which is usually only lived in for a brief period of time

surveyors people who measure and inspect tracts of land

trundle bed a small bed that fits underneath another bed

Synopsis

The Ingalls family is in debt in Plum Creek, Minnesota. While they are wondering what they will do, Aunt Docia arrives with news that her husband, Hi, is a contractor and would like to offer Pa a job as a storekeeper, bookkeeper, and timekeeper at the railroad camp in the Dakota Territory. Pa accepts and heads out West during the spring, and several months later his wife and four daughters follow by train.

Shortly after, the family heads farther west for Silver Lake. Along their journey, the Ingalls stay with various relatives. Life at Silver Lake is quite different, and the family members adjust to it in their individual ways. Meanwhile, Laura, the second oldest girl in the family, is fascinated with the railroad work, so she and her father go to the work site, and he explains how railroads are built.

The men who work on the railroad are paid every two weeks, but one pay day they are upset because they feel they should be paid all the money due them up to that day. That evening when Pa is in the office doing bookwork, a crowd of angry workers arrive and demand more money from Pa. Before a riot can break out, however, Big Jerry, Pa's kind-hearted but rough friend, arrives and calms the crowd.

Soon, the weather grows colder and birds begin migrating. Laura wants to move westward, but Pa tells her she must stay where she is because their new town will have a school which she must attend. Ma had been a schoolteacher, and Laura is expected to become a teacher as well.

Winter is coming and Pa decides that, because he had not had time to stake a claim on a piece of land and build a home that summer, the family will have to move East for the winter. The shanty they had lived in during the summer would not be warm enough for winter. Fortunately for the Ingallses, they are allowed to stay the winter rent-free at the

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surveyors' house instead. The house is large and has a little store that is stocked with goods and supplies. The Ingallses settle into their new home and later, when Pa is out tracking wolves, he spots the perfect section of land to claim for their homestead. He is not able to file the claim immediately, though, because the land-office is closed until the first of the year.

At the end of the season, Mr. Boast, one of the railroad workers, had gone to Iowa to get married. Now he and his wife arrive at the house of the Ingalls on Christmas Eve. Mr. Boast warns Pa that many people from the East are heading west. He tells Pa he should have filed on a homestead during the fall. The Boasts stay for Christmas and then move into a shanty nearby.

When spring arrives, many strangers come through Silver Lake on their way to make a claim to a homestead. The Ingallses board and feed them for free at first, but later, as their numbers increase, they charge them. Meanwhile, the little town of De Smet is taking shape with buildings rapidly being erected. Pa finally decides he can wait no longer and sets out to secure his claim at the land office. There are many men there, and Pa almost fails to get his claim, but he succeeds with the help of a friend.

Pa builds a storefront in town so he can sell it for profit later. The family must live there for a while after the surveyors return to their home. The town is becoming populated and busy, and Laura feels scared and alone; she misses the quiet life on the prairie. Soon the family hears of a claim jumper committing murder near town. Pa decides to build a shanty quickly before someone tries to steal his claim. The Ingallses move into their newly built shanty. They plant trees and finally feel settled in their new home.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

As the town is being built, the narrator states that Laura "did not feel all alone and happy on the prairie now; she felt lonely and scared. The town's being there made the difference." What does this mean?

Before the town is built, Laura feels alone, but she is happy to be alone because it means that things are peaceful and familiar to her. Now that she has moved into town things are changing. She feels lonely because the people are strangers and she is afraid of them.

Literary Analysis

How is the setting important to this novel?

The setting is an important element in this novel since it influences the actions of the characters. One example occurs when Pa plans to go to Brookings to secure his homestead. His attempt to travel is thwarted by a storm. As a result, Pa must wait until the spring to go to Brookings, and he nearly fails to secure his claim. If the storm had not happened, Pa might have secured the claim earlier with no problems. Also, the cold weather causes difficulties for the Ingalls family because it forces the many strangers to seek shelter and food with them. If the weather had been milder, the men could have slept outside.

Inferential Comprehension

Laura does not want to become a school teacher. Why do you think she objects to becoming a teacher?

One probable reason is that the career choice is essentially forced on her. Her parents expect her to do it because her mother and her mother's mother were teachers. She probably resents having the choice of career taken away from her. Laura is an independent girl, and there are many things that interest her. She wants to be able to decide what she wants to be when she grows up.

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Constructing Meaning

What can the reader learn about Laura's personality and values from this book?

The reader can gain an understanding of the importance of nature, freedom, and independence to Laura. For example, she loves the peacefulness of the open land away from the towns and the adventure of traveling and exploring new lands. She also enjoys the idea of being self-sufficient by living off the land.

Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events There are a few instances in this book that deal with the effect of human encroachment on the environment. For example, at Silver Lake there used to be many wolves, but the railroads and settlements have driven them farther west. Also, as the town of De Smet progresses, Pa notices there are fewer and fewer animals to hunt. This is an even bigger problem today than it was then. As humans take up more land, the animals have less space in which to live. Have students research the effects of human encroachment on animal habitats. The Internet would be a good place to look for information, as well as television documentaries and resource materials from groups such as World Wildlife Fund and other environmental or animal groups. Ask students to write a two-page summary of their findings.

Recognizing Details The Ingallses loves singing songs together. There are many song lyrics listed in this book. Have students share their favorite campfire or old songs with the rest of the class. Students can also try to locate the lyrics and melodies of other songs that were popular during the 1880's. Students can then sing them together in class.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The Ingallses learn that their new town is going to be called De Smet, after a pioneering French priest. It is interesting to learn the origin of the names of towns and states. Have students research their state and town. When were they named? How

did they get their names? What do the names mean?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In this story, families are moving out West to establish homesteading claims, and railroads are being built. Have students choose another book about the lives of the pioneers and compare them with this novel. A good book to read might be *Dear Levi: Letters from the Overland Trail*. How are the books alike? How are they different? What are possible explanations for apparent contradictions? Have students discuss their opinions in class.