

# the Homesteader

**Laura Ingalls Wilder  
and the 21st century**

## Walnut Grove Offers “The Ring” to Little House Fans

by Sandra Hume

*“... it would depend on the ring,” Laura answered and drew her hand away.*

Little House® readers recognize this from the engagement scene in *These Happy Golden Years*, after Almanzo asks her—theoretically—if Laura would like an engagement ring from him. The next time he picks her up in his buggy, he slides a ring on her first finger, telling her, “The set is a garnet, with a pearl on each side.” Laura accepts his proposal.

Little House® fans collect lots of Laura-related artifacts—bread plates, samples of her silver and china collection, Pa’s “big green book”—but one of the hardest to come by has been “the ring.”

“I’m not a big jewelry person, but I’ve been looking for *that* ring for a long time now,” says longtime Laura fan Laura Welser of Michigan. “I found one on eBay that was similar, but not quite the same. It is very small and worn quite thin, so I’ve never worn it.”

Meanwhile, in Minnesota, Nicole Elzenga was thinking about the ring, too.

As collections manager for the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum in Walnut Grove, it was her business to know what Laura fans cherished. She’d seen pictures of what the ring was believed to look like



*Minnesota jeweler Jim Skewes designed this reproduction of the engagement ring Almanzo gave Laura.*

photo courtesy of Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum, Walnut Grove

(no one knows what happened to Laura’s original), and she’d always had it in the back of her mind that Laura fans should have a way to own one. Pat Boever Skewes, a former Walnut Grove

resident, stopped by the museum for a visit, and Nicole had a lightbulb moment. Pat’s husband, Jim, was a jeweler in the neighboring town of Marshall. Might he consider recreating the ring?

In fact, he would. He developed a prototype based on a Montgomery Ward catalog ad for a ring that many Laura experts believe is the one Almanzo ordered. “We had to take a leap of faith that it was the right one,” Nicole says.

The result was extraordinary. The museum approved the prototype, which had been done with an amalgam metal. The final version of “the” ring would be offered in both silver (white gold) and gold versions through the Walnut Grove gift store. But at several hundred dollars per ring, the question remained: Would it sell?

It sure would. Details on the ring’s availability were released in summer 2011, and Laura fans pounced on the chance to own a piece of Laura’s history. The first batch of orders went to the jeweler at the end

*(continued on page 2)*

## PBS, Dean Butler, Pa’s Fiddle, and Nashville

by Sandra Hume

The short version of the story begins in the audience of the first LauraPalooza, on a Thursday in July 2010 in Mankato, Minnesota. Dean Butler was in listening to Vanderbilt University musicologist

Dale Cockrell’s presentation on the music in the Little House® books. And he got an idea.

Lunch followed. Dean placed himself strategically at Dale’s table, introduced himself, and sat down.

Since the late 90s, Dean’s company, Legacy Documentaries, had been involved in Little House® productions, the latest being a documentary of Laura’s life, *Little House on the Prairie: the Legacy of Laura Ingalls Wilder*. Dale’s LauraPalooza presentation sparked the idea, which he now shared with Dale: This music would make a perfect pledge drive special for PBS.

The long version of the story begins a decade earlier, recounted frequently since then. Dale was reading the Little House® books to his son and, as a musicologist, became intrigued by the songs in the books. He put his professional eye, ear, and skills to work and ultimately oversaw the recording of many of the songs. His son is now in college, and three CDs of Little House® songs, all recorded by professional musicians well-versed in Americana, have been released on the Pa’s Fiddle label.

The project between the two men was a melding of worlds. With Dean on the

*(continued on page 6)*

### Table of Contents

Pa’s Fiddle in Nashville .....	1
Laura’s Ring .....	1
Letter from the Editor.....	3
Kelly Ferguson Interview .....	4
Homesite Happenings .....	5
Storm Damages Blind School .....	6

## ... “The Ring,” continued

### LAURA'S ENGAGEMENT RING REPRODUCTION



23112 Garnet and Pearl, each, \$1.40; per dozen, \$15.00.

Illustration to the left from the 1884 Montgomery Ward & Co. Catalogue



Would you like to own a reproduction designed after Laura's engagement ring? This ring is available exclusively through the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum Gift Store in Walnut Grove, Minnesota.  
**10 Karat Yellow Gold or 10 Karat White Gold**

*The ad that the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum in Walnut Grove uses for the ring incorporates an 1884 ad from the Montgomery Ward catalog. The purchased ring comes in a white box with the museum's name on the inside front cover.*  
photos courtesy of Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum, Walnut Grove

of October. “We ended up with 19 orders in the first round,” says Nicole. “For the price point, that was way more than I expected.”

The timing of the ring's release no doubt contributed to its initial success. Both Laura Welser and Colorado fan (and founding board member of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Legacy and Research Association) Connie Neumann hint-hinted and received the ring as a combination birthday/Christmas/anniversary present. Connie's husband had previously gifted her with a similar gold ring found in an antique store; she was happy to add a silver one to her collection. “It arrived just before my January birthday, shiny and lovely in its silver setting.” She wears one or the other almost daily.

Omaha's Barb Boustead, whose Laura-related weather research made her one of the most popular presenters at LauraPalooza 2010 (she'll return again this year), was also among the first to order the ring. “It was a

present to myself—a milestone marker for successfully getting through my first year of my Ph.D. program and for getting other people excited about my Laura-weather research.” Her husband jokingly asked if wearing it meant she was married to “that Alfonso guy,” which she took good-naturedly. In truth, she says, the ring is a serious symbol that part of her is married to her work. Knowing that expression gets a bad rap, she's quick to clarify: “I love my work, and I want to nurture it to grow into something beautiful. What I do is an important part of who I am, and I can't separate the two. I am committed to it, and I sacrifice time, sleep, and occasionally sanity to make it work.”

To date the museum has sold almost 30 rings. Husbands are very often the buyers, Nicole has



noticed, often on the sly. “I have had at least four men call to order the ring for their significant others,” she says, one of whom used his work email and mailing address to keep the secret.

The ring can still be ordered through the Walnut Grove gift store, although rising gold costs have necessitated a substantial price increase on the gold version. Current prices stand at \$350 for gold, and \$210 for silver, plus shipping. The website is a little convoluted—I couldn't find it at first when I looked for it—but if you visit [www.walnutgrove.org/store](http://www.walnutgrove.org/store) and go to the bottom of the “Souvenirs” listing, you should find it.

“The ring is really beautiful,” Nicole says. “I love mine. It draws attention, and it has history behind it. And to me, history is all that matters.”

*Sandra Hume is editor and publisher of the Homesteader.*

### the Homesteader

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## Letter From the Editor

When I began work on the first *Homesteader*—10 years ago almost to the day—I was newly married and pregnant with my first child. The extent of my connection with Laurafans was a couple of email groups and a message board. But I wanted more. And I wanted to share. As a professional writer, I realized I had the skills to do it.

Thus, *the Homesteader* was born. It came from that desire to connect—to share the homesites with fans in a way that hadn't been done before, through color photos, commentary, interviews, and promotion of seasonal events. Most importantly, it was done in the spirit of supporting, promoting, and cherishing all of the homesites equally, in one place. This had been missing in the world of Laura, and I was proud to provide the first forum for it.

In the decade since then, I've lived in three states. I've developed a freelance writing and editing career. The baby I was days away from delivering as I mailed out the first issue is a first baseman on her softball team. She and her 7-year-old brother, Wilder (oh yes, I did) are both loving siblings to their new baby brother, born in December 2011. Life is pretty full.

In turn, the online world of Laura has exploded. Now we have not just email groups dedicated to Laura, but blogs and Facebook and Web sites and podcasts and Flickr and Pinterest and dozens and dozens of photos of all the homesites all

over the Interwebs. We're staring down the second LauraPalooza, the only Laura-focused academic conference of its kind. The Laura Ingalls Wilder Legacy and Research Association has been established, and Beyond Little House, the only group blog for all things Laura, has been up and running for several years.

For me personally, life, as it were, is not the same. Laura, understandably, occupies a much smaller portion of my life than she did back then. The past few issues of *the Homesteader* have taken a back seat to everything else. Subscribers have no doubt noticed that issues have been taking longer and longer to produce. (Case in point: it's now spring, and I'm still working on the winter issue.) I have very high standards for *the Homesteader*. If I give the work a lick and a promise, I won't be happy with the result—and if I'm not, you won't be.

In light of the new dawn in both my world and that of Laurafans, I've concluded that *the Homesteader* has outlived its useful life and should come to a natural end. Everything I had to offer that was unique to *the Homesteader*—color photos, exclusive interviews, over-arching home-site promotion—is now widely available to anyone who wants to seek it out. And that, my friends, is a good thing.

This change won't happen overnight; after this (late)

winter 2011-2012 issue, I intend to put out two more issues: Summer 2012 and a special edition for LauraPalooza 2012. I think 10 years, 20 regular issues, and 2 special editions are nice round numbers to rest on, don't you? (OK, I just realized I will actually have 21 issues. This is why I work with words.)

On an administrative note, I stopped accepting new subscriptions a while ago. With few exceptions, everyone will get the issues they have paid for. Those who won't I will contact directly to either issue refunds or, if desired, negotiate an alternate purchase. (Although *the Homesteader* will no longer continue in its current form, back issues will always be available, and I am nowhere near done with writing about Laura. Stay tuned!)

Thanks for taking this decade-long journey with me. The wagon ride has had its bumps and jolts, but it's gotten me where I am today. For that, and for all of you who have read and loved *the Homesteader*, I am grateful.



*These two photos encapsulate my Little House® life better than any words can. On the left is longtime Walnut Grove Museum Director Shirley Knakmuhs, now retired, on the steps of Rocky Ridge farmhouse in Mansfield, Missouri. It is 2002, and my daughter, Sky, is three months old. On the right is a photo from March 2012. That's Shirley again, in her home in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, and this time the baby in the car seat is my son, Timber—also three months old. Shirley will be presented with a Laura Ingalls Wilder Legacy Award at LauraPalooza 2012, along with Little House Cookbook author Barbara Walker.*

## Author Kelly Ferguson on the Good—and Bad—of Writing About Our Favorite Icon

Writer Kelly Ferguson's memoir, *My Life As Laura*, came out in fall of 2011 (Press 53). The Homesteader asked her to tell us what it was like to write about such an icon, and to address readers' reactions to the book. Here are some of the questions she has faced.

*There are perks in writing for an automatic audience of Laura Ingalls Wilder devotees. What has been some of the fallout?*

When I first starting to write about Laura, my motivations were simple—I wanted to write about Laura. The closer the book came to becoming a reality, the more I realized writing about an icon wouldn't be easy. There would be expectations. There would be criticisms. I was also aware of the political divide. My brother's family is Southern Baptist and the Little House® homesites are in the heart of red-state country. I would describe myself as liberal if not always Democrat. Fascinating to me, though, is how Laura love transcends politics. I wanted to respect that transcendence, and respect my family's views. My sister-in-law loved the book, so to me I succeeded, but she is admittedly biased. I wonder how other conservatives would or have reacted or will react.

I've also wondered if William Holtz, author of *Ghost in the Little House*, will read my book. I really tease him, calling him Dr. Crankypants, Dr. Feelbad, etc., for being such a downer about the relationship between Laura and Rose. I know that's a tetchy issue as well. But again, no one has reacted. Yet.

*Okay, so here's some fallout for you. What's with hatin' on the television show? I loved that show. Michael Landon! I had such a crush on him!*

If there's one part I (might) take back, it's my eight-page rant about the show. It's like that letter to the ex-boyfriend you need to write and not mail. I've had a few people tell me they stopped reading, looking at me as though I threw a puppy against a wall. I had a friend chase me around

her house while playing the theme song on her laptop, exploring "LISTEN TO THIS I LOVE THIS." She wouldn't calm down until I agreed to sit and watch. The point is that for me, television Laura has nothing to do with book Laura. So the show (especially as a kid) upset me. To repeat from my book, I'm not against nostalgia TV. Just last night I opened a \$6.99 bottle of wine and watched *Battlestar Galactica* reruns. From the seventies. Richard Hatch! I had such a crush on him!

*There are serious Laura Ingalls Wilder scholars out there, you know. How are they responding?*

I will say as content editing moved into copyediting, I began to worry about errors. I had decided to include a certain amount of history and biographical information to give the book some meat and context. I would wake up in the middle of the night freaking out about the date of the Homesteader Act.

*Every heard of fact checkers? They exist, you know. You can pay them.*

I was with a small press, and while I had multiple readers and an editor, there was no budget for a fact checker, never mind a Little House® expert. I did not receive a book advance and I'm a grad student. So I took on fact checking myself. I relied on published authors before me such as William Anderson, Pamela Smith Hill, and yes, William Holtz, for dates and facts. Even so, even in my final read I corrected horrifying mistakes,



*Busted! Kelly hangs with Laura in downtown Mansfield, Missouri.*

such as getting the year of Almanzo's death wrong.

*You really botched the milk-fed pumpkin in a few places, didn't you?*

The worst was a typo that I had caught but missed in the final proof. A chapter heading says "Mankato, South Dakota." I don't have to explain the extent of this travesty to readers of *the Homesteader*. I was giving a reading in Montana when I first saw the error in print. I opened my copy, gasped, and said a few choice words that would have severely disappointed Caroline Ingalls.

I have had some Laura researchers, such as Nancy Cleaveland, correct me in places. A few errors (such as Mankato) I've paid to re-typeset, while others I've had to swallow because rewrites would change the book layout too much. My plan is to address topics such as "what is a bison versus a buffalo?" in my blog. Then there are technicalities where I've given myself poetic license. For instance, I say that Silver Lake is now a sewage pool. While not geologically correct, that is what I saw in that moment, how I felt. I think Laura would be okay with that.

*What about the decision about what*

*(continued on page 5)*

(continued from page 4)

*factual information to leave in and leave out? What guided those decisions?*

It's weird knowing that people (such as my parents!) will be reading about themselves. I was also aware that when I wrote about the homesites, these are people's businesses at stake. My first draft was uncensored, but in revision I cut or changed my tone in many places.

This is weird to admit but my following drafts were Ouija Board-y in that I let Laura guide my hand, as in "WWLD?" For me this meant I had to be honest and fair, but part of being honest and fair is revealing some of the not-so-great parts and conflicts. I mean,

where would the series be without Nellie Oleson, Mrs. Brewster, or Eliza Jane? Or grasshoppers, blizzards, and wheels of fire? Laura trusted in her story. At some point I had to trust in mine.

Another problem I had to tussle with was the two big "Laura" elephants in the room, which I consider to be 1) what happened in the books versus what really happened and 2) the controversy over Rose's influence on Laura's writing. At first this information was all big news to me, but the more I wrote the more I found myself rewriting what other writers had already said. I also knew that Wendy McClure's *The Wilder Life* was coming out, so I focused on my trip and my Laura story.

*What's your favorite response to the*

*book?*

I love it when a dude says, "I'm not sure if I'm who this book was *for*," (and they say it exactly like that) "but I dug your book." Women Laurafans around my age (43) are the obvious audience, but I like to think anyone who ever had a childhood idol or wanted to take a road trip or change their life would relate. Of course, I also feel pleased when people say they are now inspired to go read the original books. Success!

*Kelly Ferguson's other work has appeared in mental\_floss magazine, Poets & Writers, the Gettysburg Review (for which she received a Pushcart nomination), McSweeney's Internet Tendency, and Brevity, among other publications. She is currently ironing her bonnets in preparation for LauraPalooza 2012.*

## Homesite Happenings ... What's Going On in the World of Laura

This past Christmas, we were happy to note that **Rocky Ridge Farm in Mansfield, Missouri** re-instituted its Christmas holiday. Visitors could have their photo taken *inside* the decorated **Rocky Ridge** farmhouse. We strongly hope that this will continue...In other Mansfield news, the Memorial Society there is currently seeking \$2 million in funding for an ambitious (but needed) overhaul to expand, preserve, and restore the grounds and all its priceless contents. Included in the planning will be the demolition of the current museum and construction of a brand-new facility ... The **Mansfield Pageant, Laura's Memories**, shown during Laura Ingalls Wilder Days in September, had its first organizational meeting of the year and is looking at having the pageant taped this year for sale... On January 6, a special was taped in Nashville for a **PBS pledge drive special** featuring music from the Little House® books (see related story beginning on page 1)...With new director, Michelle Martin, at the helm, the site in **Independence** has instituted many changes and updates; check out their Facebook feed for the most up-to-date details... After a winter of construction, the **Walnut Grove Museum** has a brand-new gift shop with twice the floorspace it had previously... The former **Burr Oak Mercantile** building next door to the Laura Ingalls Wilder Park and Museum in **Burr Oak, Iowa** has been purchased by a local person who has big plans for the building, but isn't quite ready to go public yet. Stay

tuned... Both Wendy McClure's *The Wilder Life* and Erin Blakemore's *The Heroine's Bookshelf* (panelists at 2010's **LauraPalooza**) came out recently in paperback. And speaking of Wendy, her publisher, Riverhead, also recently released an ebook of her Laura-related essays called *Don't Trade the Baby for a Horse: And Other Ways to Make Your Life a Little More Laura Ingalls Wilder*... Kelly Ferguson's book, *My Life As Laura* (which she read from as a presenter at 2010's **LauraPalooza**) came out last fall... The second **LauraPalooza** conference is happening this **July 12-14**. The next one won't be held until 2015. It's happening again in **Mankato, Minnesota**, featuring the theme "What Would Laura Do?"... **De Smet, South Dakota** is gaining a new visitor's center this year, which will no doubt come in very handy with the thousands of travelers who pass through each summer ... The July pageant at **De Smet** will now schedule its performances in order of the **De Smet**-based books, with one book per year; this year's is based on *The Long Winter*... Both the **Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society in De Smet** and the **Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum in Walnut Grove** participated in the recent auction for different versions of Garth Williams' illustrations from the book series; both ended up with a few, and both are continuing to raise money for future auctions from the Williams estate. No word on whether any of the other museums are planning on participating.... *Homesteader* Contributing Editor Sarah

Uthoff's podcast, **Trundlebed Tales**, about Laura and related topics, has surpassed 12,000 listens; see Issue 18 of *the Homesteader* for more details on the show. Find it on iTunes and the website [trundlebedtales.com](http://trundlebedtales.com)... **Old World Wisconsin** has returned to a two-day weekend instead of a one-day event for its Laura Ingalls Wilder Days in **Eagle, Wisconsin** on August 4-5, 2012...Genesee Country Village in **Mumford, New York** will hold their Laura Ingalls Wilder Days the following weekend on August 11-12, 2012 ... **Little House on the Prairie: The Musical** will see new life this fall at Cumberland County Playhouse in Crossville, TN. The hope, again, is for the musical to ultimately make it to Broadway... and speaking of the Little House musical, the Homesteader congratulates **Kara Lindsay and Kevin Massey**, who played Laura and Almanzo, respectively, in the musical and have been a couple ever since (written about in issues 14 and 16 of this newsletter), on their engagement. Now that's a swoon worthy of smelling salts... In June 2012 **South Dakota Historical Society Press** announced the planned publication of Laura's unpublished memoir **Pioneer Girl**. The project will be managed and the manuscript annotated by biographer Pamela Smith Hill. Release is scheduled for 2013. Check the next issue, Issue 21, of *the Homesteader* for an interview with Hill regarding the details and genesis of the project.

## PBS, Dean Butler, Pa's Fiddle, and Nashville

(continued from page 1)

production side and Dale the musical expert, both did everything they could to make this musical extravaganza a reality. Meeting after meeting was held, with musicians, with producers, with would-be financiers. And the dream changed. A couple of times. Budgets shrank as hoped-for financing didn't materialize. Some musicians declined; others wanted to accept but couldn't due to scheduling conflicts. The venue got smaller.

But where others might have quit in frustration, both men persevered, changing their course as the budget and other restrictions demanded. "What began as visions of an enormous production was scaled back to what the money would allow us to do," Dean recalls. And in the end, it all made sense; the entire event unfolded just the way it was meant to, almost because of, not in spite of, the roadblocks they faced along the way. "The no's you get are far more powerful than the yeses."

Eighteen months after that lunch in Mankato, an intimate audience of 120 in Nashville's Loveless Barn was treated to two and a half hours of music that Laura Ingalls Wilder had sprinkled all throughout the Little House® books. And in June 2012, audiences across America saw the result of that night in a pledge drive called, appropriately, "Pa's Fiddle."

By all accounts, the performance was perfect in every way. Artists like Randy Travis ("The Sweet By and By," "Rock of Ages"), Rodney Atkins ("Girls I Left Be-



Alabama-based a cappella group Committed performs at the Loveless Barn in Nashville. photo courtesy of Dean Butler

hind"), and Ronnie Milsap ("Dixie"/ "Battle Hymn of the Republic") took these down-home Americana and bluegrass songs straight out of the pages of the Little House® books—and owned them.

The most treasured gifts are ones you don't ask for. One of the artists who actually approached Dean and Dale to offer to play was Alabama-based African-American a cappella group Committed, who had won NBC's reality competition "The Sing-Off." Early in the Pa's Fiddle show they sang "Roll the Old Chariot Along"—and you could almost see Pa and his fellow workers pumping the handcar

just like it was during *The Long Winter*. But their later performance of "The Battle Cry of Freedom" was an unequivocal highlight. Says Dale, "We encouraged them to make it their own, and they did. It's the most powerful performance I have ever heard of that song. I swear the roof kind of levitated."

If you missed the pledge drive, a CD of songs from the show is scheduled for release on July 31, 2012. Dean and Dale will be presenting together at the second LauraPalooza in Mankato, MN, on July 12, 2012.



The registrar book containing Mary's registration and the ledgers with grades for some of the years she attended school. photo courtesy of Sarah S. Uthoff

## Iowa Blind School Suffers Storm Damage

In July 2011, the main building of the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School in Vinton, Iowa, which Mary Ingalls attended from 1881-1889, was hit with straight-line winds that removed a major part of the roof and destroyed the attic. Soaking rains later that week raised concerns over the fate of the contents of the third floor, under the attic. Some of the school's long-held artifacts were lost, but thanks to a cement barrier over the ceiling (originally put in place because the Vinton Fire Department didn't have equipment to access that tall a building at the time), most of the artifacts were protected, including Mary Ingalls' registration records. So far only a temporary roof remains in place; many third-floor contents have been relocated to a lower floor. Stakeholders in the building and its services to the blind are meeting this spring to discuss the building's future, while at the same time, a group of locals are determined to make it more of a tourist destination. We'll have to wait and see how this plays out.

-Sarah S. Uthoff