

Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography

John J. Fry
Trinity Christian College

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preciation of their dedication to justice (324). Readers can even imagine, he says, that “maybe there’s a hint of vigilante heritage in all of us” (324).

Even if Johnston does not pretend to be an academic, it is still inconceivable to me that he could so thoroughly romanticize the vengeance and terror in our past. We live in a world where the extralegal use of violence is making justice impossible to achieve in many places both close to home and far away. Indeed, Johnston can only create such a romantic story about vigilantism by leaving a major part of the story out. He “avoided stories of racism” and all examples of “racially motivated violence, especially leading to lynchings” (11). But why did he do so? And how are racially motivated lynchings different from those he describes and glorifies? In each case, people in power use extralegal violence to terrorize the community’s “others” or “outsiders” – some perfectly innocent of the charges, if there were any – and to maintain their power in society. But with stories of black bodies hanging from trees included in the narrative, Johnston’s entire premise would fall apart. With racially motivated lynchings included, Johnston could not reasonably conclude that Americans “love the democracy” of the vigilante story (323). Nor could he assert that “the overriding story of Missouri’s vigilantes is the story of good people in good families, yearning for happiness and peace” (11). The violence in our past needs not to be romanticized but interrogated and reconciled, now more than ever.

Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography, by Laura Ingalls Wilder; edited by Pamela Smith Hill. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2014. lxix, 400 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 hardcover.

Reviewer John J. Fry is professor of history at Trinity Christian College, Palos Heights, Illinois. An authority on the life and works of Laura Ingalls Wilder, he is also the editor of *Almost Pioneers: One Couple’s Homesteading Adventure in the West* (2013).

Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House novels have delighted young and old readers ever since they were first published during the 1930s and ‘40s. Based on Wilder’s own childhood, the books feature clear descriptions of pioneer life in multiple locations in Wisconsin, Kansas, Minnesota, and South Dakota from the point of view of a fictional girl who grows from a toddler into a young woman.

Before gaining fame for writing autobiographical children’s fiction, however, Wilder was a columnist for a Missouri farm newspaper from 1911 to 1925. She also had several articles published in national magazines. She then retired from journalism to compose a memoir titled “Pioneer

Girl." The memoir begins when she was just 7 years old and ends with her marriage at age 18. Wilder's daughter, novelist and biographer Rose Wilder Lane, typed the manuscript and attempted to get it published. "Pioneer Girl" eventually went through three revisions, but Lane was unable to secure a publisher for the work. However, a juvenile book of stories drawn from Laura's earliest childhood, especially those told to her by her father, did land a contract. *Little House in the Big Woods* was published in 1932, and the Little House series was born. Seven additional books were published over the next 11 years.

The popularity of the Little House books was staggering. Millions of copies were sold. The books were excerpted for elementary reading texts and translated into dozens of languages. Historic sites were established in five different states, and the stories inspired a television series during the 1970s. In the twenty-first century, the books continue to be loved by a devoted core of fans and enjoyed by a broader audience. However, while Laura's farm newspaper columns and other writings have been published, *Pioneer Girl* was never published until this edition.

In 2010 the South Dakota State Historical Society created the Pioneer Girl Project to "create a comprehensive edition of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Pioneer Girl*." By any standard, it has accomplished that goal. Pamela Smith Hill, author of a biography of Wilder published in 2007, edited the volume. The hardbound book is 9" x 10" — larger than a normal trade hardcover book but smaller than a coffee table book. It begins with Hill's excellent historical introduction to Wilder and Lane and to the history of the manuscript itself. The original manuscript is then presented and lavishly annotated. Maps created for the book give the locations of all the places the Ingalls family lived. The book also features all of the extant photographs of Laura and her family — and many of the other people and places mentioned in the memoir. A conclusion sets the memoir in the context of Wilder's life and Little House scholarship. Appendixes provide a facsimile of the juvenile book that first attracted publishers and several extended accounts from typed editions that did not appear in the handwritten manuscript. The bibliography gives a comprehensive list of works published by and about Wilder and Lane and their works. The book ends with an exhaustive index.

Notes begin at the side of each page of manuscript, but often cover multiple following pages. The notes are the product of careful research; it appears that Hill has consulted all of the appropriate sources. Some notes compare Wilder's accounts to extant public records that trace the Ingalls family's life. Others provide background information on the people, places, events, diseases, and other phenomena Wilder described. Still other notes compare the accounts given in *Pioneer Girl* to those in

the Little House books and other writings by Wilder. Hill makes cogent observations about Wilder's prose, noting the ways that it draws on her farm newspaper columns but lacks the polish of the finished children's books. A rough estimate suggests that notes, photographs, and maps take up almost as much space as the text of the manuscript itself. The exhaustiveness of the notes at times does make reading the book an exercise in turning pages back and forth. While it is possible to read the memoir through by itself, the notes draw readers in, and one often finds oneself relying on the notes to explain background and context.

In sum, *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography* is not just the publication of Wilder's memoir. The editor and publisher have successfully blended two types of books for two audiences. One book is the memoir itself, the entertaining story of Laura's youth, including many details that are not given in the Little House books. These include the birth and death of a younger brother, the family's year-long stay in a small town in Iowa, and descriptions of several neighbors' teenage pregnancies. This book will appeal to anyone with an interest in true stories about women and childhood in the nineteenth-century American Midwest. The other book is a compendium of what we know about Wilder's life, how she came to write the memoir, and how *Pioneer Girl* fits with her other works. This book is a work of scholarship that will set the standard for Wilder studies for years to come.

The Iowa Route: A History of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway, by Don L. Hofsommer. Railroads Past and Present. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. xii, 292 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$75.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Simon Cordery is chair of the Department of History at Western Illinois University. He is the author of *The Iron Road in the Prairie State: The Story of Illinois Railroad* (forthcoming, 2016).

Railroads opened Iowa to settlement and cultivation, integrated the state into a national economy, and challenged local power. By 1900, they were numerous and nearly omnipresent, but much of the state's railroad network has disappeared since then. Don Hofsommer, a veteran historian of the midwestern railroading scene, offers a useful, informative, and thorough history of one of those vanished corporations, the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway (BCR&N). He builds on his earlier histories of the Minneapolis & St. Louis and the Iowa Central railroads, both of which figure prominently in the book under review, to show how the BCR&N was "representative of innumerable enterprises that popped up around the United States during the age of railways" (ix).