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# LITTLE SQUATTER ON THE OSAGE DIMINISHED RESERVE READING LAURA INGALLS WILDER'S KANSAS INDIANS

FRANCES W. KAYE

Laura Ingalls Wilder was a person of her time and place. She fictionalized her memories to give what she honestly believed was the truest possible account—true in deeply human ways as well as in accurate details—of one family's settlement history on the Great Plains frontier. I have never really liked her work. While my sister read all the Little House books, I read . . . Zane Grey. That I do not share Wilder's values and point of view is no argument against

the books—I do not share Zane Grey's values and point of view, either. But Zane Grey is not held up to contemporary parents, teachers, and children as a moral exemplar. We accurately recognize him as a prolific popular writer whose work is violent, sexist, racist, and almost self-parodically anti-Mormon and, after 1914, anti-German. Laura Ingalls Wilder, on the other hand, has spawned a minor industry in criticism. Her work, and particularly *Little House on the Prairie*, has been almost universally praised, especially by feminist critics, as a humane and feminist alternative to the myth of "regeneration through violence" of the masculine frontier of Zane Grey and the Wild West. What we think about the Little House books matters. It seems to me that Wilder's proponents are fundamentally mistaken. I honestly cannot read *Little House on the Prairie* as other than apology for the "ethnic cleansing" of the Great Plains. That her thought was unremarkable, perhaps even progressive, for the time in which she lived and wrote should not exempt her books from sending up red flags for contemporary critics who believe in diversity, multiculturalism, and human rights.

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What follows is a reading of *Little House on the Prairie* as a book that lulls us into believing that the dispossession of the Osage people from Kansas was sad but necessary and even “natural,” like all losses of the innocence of childhood and other primitive ways of being. I cannot claim to look at *Little House on the Prairie* from an Osage point of view, but what I endeavor to do below is to try to imagine what happens to the reading of this novel if one assumes that the Osage, rather than the Anglo settler, point of view is the normative one. I have tried, in my title, to suggest how jarring it can be to change our sense of what is normative. Implicit in my argument is my sense that contemporary criticism of *Little House on the Prairie* refuses to be jarred, and that this is a disservice to contemporary readers (and contemporary writers of children’s books who attempt to follow Wilder’s formula), who might well choose not to be complicit if they had the chance to perceive the book as a justification of continuing human rights violations. I have begun with a brief overview of the criticism, since it, rather than the book itself, is the main object of my discomfort with Wilder’s book. Then I have attempted to construct a context for the Osage point of view of the events that were the background for the novel, and finally I read the book against that Osage norm.

#### LOOKING AT THE CRITICISM

*Little House on the Prairie* (1935) is the third novel of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s eight-volume Little House series, but it is arguably the best known, if only because of the long-running television series of that name based loosely on the book. It has also attracted considerable attention from critics and is the only one of the series to have its own *Reader’s Companion*, published in 1996.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on the period of approximately a year and a half when the Ingalls family settled in Kansas, apparently covering the late summer of 1869 to the spring of 1871 and focusing on the summer and early fall of 1870. Since Laura was only three and a

half years old at that time—she had been born in February 1867<sup>2</sup>—the novel is based more on stories that she remembered having been told than on events she remembered, although it is probable that she anchored her memories on certain sensory recollections, sights and sounds that authenticated for her the narrative she had probably learned from her father.

Wilder’s eight novels have received a great deal of critical attention. Jane M. Subramanian’s 1997 annotated bibliography lists nearly 150 critical articles and another 100 dealing with Wilder’s biography and with teaching strategies for the books.<sup>3</sup> In general, writers have praised all of the Little House books as texts that not only give both young and older readers a taste for and an understanding of the past of the United States but also present feminist alternatives to the usual male-oriented myths of the frontier. Critics have generally given Wilder high marks for her treatment of Indians, pointing out that while she had imbibed a certain amount of the racism prevalent during both the period she described and the period when she wrote, she struck a balance between “good” Indians and “bad” Indians, showed both Indian haters and more tolerant settlers like Pa, and portrayed both Pa and Laura as finding much to admire in the Osage lifestyle. As John E. Miller points out, “if she was not always a model of advanced opinion on Indian-white relations, she went considerably beyond many of her friends and neighbors in her willingness to view Native Americans as a people worthy of respect and admiration.”<sup>4</sup> Because many of Wilder’s critics are also writing from a feminist point of view, they have particularly admired Wilder’s use of the Osages to represent a freedom that counters Ma’s racist—and sexist—gentility. Laura also questions her parents unquestioning belief in manifest destiny and desperately wants to acquire an Indian baby. Like the freedom symbolized by Wilder’s depiction of the “wild men,” her quest for a “papoose” seems to represent for the critics a search that, though patronizing, is not only humane but also heightens her sense of the possibilities of

being human.<sup>5</sup> Earlier critics have taken Wilder's portrayal of the Osages as simple ethnographic reporting and have glossed it only with photos of Osage men and attempts to pin down the identity of the "good" Indian, Soldat du Chêne, or Oak Soldier.<sup>6</sup> All of these critics, however, have portrayed Wilder's Indians within Wilder's frame of reference. Thus we see the heroic Ingalls family and the heroic but tragic Osage families, removed from their land, inevitably part of the story of the American West, though its tragic side. As Virginia L. Wolf says in her *Reader's Companion to Little House on the Prairie*, the *Little House* books "evoke what we were, what we had, and what many of us have lost—childhood; wilderness; a special period of our history; a native population and its cultures."<sup>7</sup> We are thus in the presence of the Vanishing American, whose "vanishing" is as natural, if touching, as the vanishing of childhood, the loss of unmediated Wordsworthian wonder. And the "we" of the critic certainly does not include any members of that "native population" that "we" have lost.

Not surprisingly, the critics who have been less kind to Wilder's portrayal of the Osages are themselves mixed-blood writers who identify with the Osages. Michael Dorris tells of trying to read the book to his own daughters and finding it simply impossible to stomach.<sup>8</sup> Dennis McAuliffe Jr., in a gripping book about the murder of his Osage grandmother in 1925, is far more scathing, noting that the Ingallses are squatting illegally on Osage land and that they are, in the words of the Osage agent, "trespassers, intruders, and violators of the nation's law." McAuliffe writes, "it bothers me that no one has ever noticed her portrayal of Indians, or objected to it." Curiously, Wolf cites McAuliffe in her notes, but she does not respond at all to what he is saying.<sup>9</sup>

McAuliffe is factually correct in his reaction to the novel, but most of Wilder's critics do not respond in the same way because they are still working from within the paradigm of the "Vanishing American." What they perceive is sad, even tragic, but it is not culpable.

It is not "genocide" or "ethnic cleansing." It evokes the same spirit of melancholy evoked by Shelley's *Ozymandias* and the whole romantic tradition, but it does not evoke either in Laura or in Wilder's readers any sense that, as receivers of stolen property, the story entails for them a sense of responsibility. This is not to imply that the destruction of the indigenous worlds of the western hemisphere was not inevitable. It happened, so in retrospect, it was inevitable. As mixed-blood, Oxford-educated Osage historian John Joseph Mathews wrote, "The Amer-European . . . had the power now to do just as he wished with the Little Ones [Osages]. If he had taken the reserve in the same manner in which he did take it, but without the mealy-mouthed hypocrisy, the end would have been the same."<sup>10</sup> To assuage his conscience, in Mathews' terms, and to make it fit with the requirements of bureaucracy, the "Amer-European," wanting to settle southern Kansas, made new treaties—for the good of the Osages, according to the treaty texts. A series of treaties and agreements from 1865 to 1870 moved the Osages from the land their 1825 treaty had promised them in perpetuity off to Oklahoma, where the government promised to protect them from persistent settlers like the Ingallses. According to Elizabeth Segel, *Little House on the Prairie* questions "the pernicious doctrines of repressive gentility and racial superiority"<sup>11</sup> and makes the reader aware of the painful loss that went along with settlement, but Wilder and her readers accept that loss as virtually inevitable in the clash of two cultures, of two peoples equally determined to find homes and sustenance for their children. Like the treaty makers, Wilder and her readers see the story of the Ingalls family in Kansas in a light that valorizes the settlers and makes the removal of the Osages emotionally quite bearable. The sadness readers feel is ennobling, not wrenching. Like the treaty makers, readers can feel that the best has been made of a sad situation. Wilder's narrative of 1869-1871 on the Osage Diminished Reserve varies from the narrative presented by Osage and non-Osage historians in order to create that mild

frisson of sadness mediated by the images of the Noble Savage and the Vanishing American. John Miller writes,

what is notable about Laura's attitudes toward Indians is not so much that they contained a considerable degree of narrow-mindedness and prejudice but that they, to some degree at least, transcended generally accepted notions that were held about racial inferiority and the Indians' alleged backwardness.<sup>12</sup>

It is, in fact, this benign image of Indians "as fellow human beings who had been created in the image of God"<sup>13</sup> that makes Wilder's portrayal of the Osages so insidious. It is not for nothing that "Uncle Tom" is a term of opprobrium nor that the Lone Ranger's sidekick Tonto ("Fool" in Spanish), though played by the "real Indian" Jay Silverheels, is perceived with more pain than pride in Indian Country. The ability of the secure and rhetorically powerful white author or reader to turn the person of color into a perpetual victim or sidekick undermines the agency of the reader or character of color more subtly and thus more effectively than does overt racist rhetoric, which presents a cruelty that jars the well-intentioned white reader. The reader of *Little House on the Prairie* does not identify with the unthinking dislike of Indians demonstrated by Caroline Ingalls or the family bulldog, Jack, nor with the "only good Indian is a dead Indian" philosophy that Pa explicitly rejects. A friendly and respectful expulsion from one's homeland, however, is still expulsion, and by definition neither friendly nor respectful. The good feelings of Laura and Pa soothe the reader's conscience as well, apparently, as Wilder's, but the "collateral damage" of that soothing is making the reader complicit in "ethnic cleansing," in arguing for it in terms of national destiny, fairness, or self-determination rather than in terms of greed, violence, and racism. Owning up, without shame or apology, to denying the rights and destroying the way of life of thousands of other people is

sociopathic, and Laura Ingalls Wilder and her readers are certainly not sociopaths. Yet unless we, as readers and critics with the advantage of hindsight back down the bloody twentieth century, ask different questions of her stories than could have occurred to Wilder, we are adding a coat of whitewash to an American past that still prevents all of us from getting along in a fairer way.

*Little House on the Prairie* is a complex family narrative negotiated over three generations—from Charles and Caroline Ingalls's stories to Laura Ingalls Wilder's writing to Rose Wilder Lane's editing<sup>14</sup>—that firmly establishes the myth of the necessary tragedy, the fortunate fall, that arises when the determined farmer meets the nomadic wanderer, the tragedy played out in Judeo-Christian myth from the time of Jacob and Esau. Yet this high-sounding fantasy of Noble Savage versus Yeoman Farmer has almost nothing to do with the events that unfolded in southern Kansas from the summer of 1870 to the spring of 1871 or with the events that led up to and followed them. Wilder, writing as honestly as she knew how, spun a tale that, because of her very decency, makes "ethnic cleansing" appear palatable.

#### THE OSAGES AND THEIR WORLDS

The Osages were a Dhegiha Siouan people who, like their cultural and linguistic relatives who became known as the Omahas, Otoes, Poncas, Konzas, and Quapaws, moved from somewhere around the Ohio valley westward before 1600. By the seventeenth century, when the French met with the people who would eventually be called in English the Osages, they lived in villages in what is now called Missouri and Arkansas and carried out well-organized buffalo-hunting expeditions every year onto the plains of Kansas and Oklahoma.<sup>15</sup> Despite Euro-Americans casual descriptions of them as "wanderers," the Osages were firmly attached to life in particular villages with particular sacred sites and with consistent patterns of seasonal land use involving

hundreds of miles of territory. Because they were strategically located on the Missouri, the Osages were able to dominate much of the French fur trade carried on from St. Louis. Soon after the Louisiana Purchase transferred European title to their land to the United States, the US government began to treat with them for land cessions and to move eastern peoples, including the Cherokees, onto their accustomed lands, leading to conflict between Osages and Cherokees. The treaties of 1808 and 1818, however, were only preliminaries to the treaty of 1825, in which the Osages ceded all of their land to the United States save for what they reserved for themselves in southern Kansas. The reserve began fifty miles west of the Missouri border, ran west for about 125 miles approximately along what is now the southern border of Kansas to the 100th meridian, and extended about fifty miles south to north. The Osages were to hold this reserve for "so long as they may choose to occupy the same" while the rest of the eastern part of what is now called Kansas, then called Indian Territory, was to be filled with eastern tribes, including the Ottawa, Delaware, New York, Wyandot, Shawnee, Miami, Pottawatomis, Kickapoo, and others whom Euro-American settlers wanted displaced from their homes.<sup>16</sup> The Kansas reservation was not perfect for the Osages, but it was more or less workable, despite tension with the Cherokees, who became the Osages' eastern and southern neighbors, and various depredations by Euro-American borderers.

In 1854 Kansas Territory was organized by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which opened Kansas to Euro-American settlement and provided for "squatter sovereignty." The Kansas-Nebraska Act was a response to the growing crisis of slavery and expansion in the older states of the nation. As Craig Miner and William Unrau show, opening Kansas to settlers and allowing them to decide whether the territory would be slave or free was a temporary solution, but it overlooked one fact crucial to Indian Kansas—"not one acre of land was legally available to sell to settlers" and there was no

Homestead Act in 1854 to provide them free land. All those squatter sovereigns would be on Indian land. As Miner and Unrau remind us, Paul Wallace Gates pointed out more than forty years ago that "Indian removal from Kansas" was not "a battlefield encounter between befeathered warriors on the one hand and hardy pioneers on the other,"<sup>17</sup> as one might guess from reading *Little House on the Prairie*. Rather it was a complex and venal struggle that featured railroad companies, timber pirates, state and federal politicians and civil servants, Indian agents occupying every inch of the spectrum from honest to corrupt, mixed-blood intermediaries, full-blood and mixed-blood traditionalists and accommodationists, illegal Euro-American squatters of all stripes, including army officers, and lawyers for every side. All the negotiations were both blocked and speeded up by acts and threats of illegal violence, charges and countercharges of corruption, and great confusion and hardship.<sup>18</sup> By 1861 Kansas was a state. In 1862 the Homestead Act was passed. By 1865 a new wave of settlement inundated Kansas as the nation surged west after the Civil War, led by railroads and homesteaders. By 1870 more than 10,000 people of Native heritage had been removed from eastern Kansas and the lands they had been promised in perpetuity. Only a few particularly determined Pottawatomis, Kickapoos, Sacs and Foxes, and scattered other individuals were left.<sup>19</sup>

The large Osage tract was the last reservation in eastern Kansas. During the war years the eastern immigrant tribes had been bought out and almost all moved south. In all cases, there was pressure from the squatters, settlers who had moved in hoping to buy preemptions or, after 1862, to homestead. A preemption claim allowed a settler to buy government land at \$1.25 an acre, or \$200.00 for the standard quarter-section, 160-acre farm. Before the passage of the Homestead Act, preemption was the most popular route for the public domain to become the property of a settler. Homesteaders continued to be allowed to preempt a quarter section in addition to their

quarter-section homestead, but most of the land in Kansas was not sold to settlers when Indian title was extinguished. Instead the railroads took the land feverishly, hoping to beat each other out and become the main lines cutting south and west. They expected the same kinds of alternate-section grants that the Illinois Central, the first transcontinental, and other railroads were receiving, and in addition they expected to retail the land they bought from the Indians to settlers. Some land was tied up in other swindles, such as the Ottawa Indian University scheme,<sup>20</sup> while other land fell to town-site promoters. Some of the purported railroad builders were apparently hoping to take the land and resell it without bothering to go to all the trouble and expense of actually laying tracks. Others vied to become the railroad magnates of the West, building trunk lines from the Missouri valley to the Gulf.<sup>21</sup> The Kansas tribes, some of whom were still waiting for annuities or other promised payments for the eastern lands they had ceded to the government before coming to Kansas, were offered better deals by the railroads than by Washington, and the railroads at first did not suggest taking all the land of any tribe or the further removal of the people.<sup>22</sup>

The tribes' willingness to make deals with the railroads was also enhanced by the fact that they were suffering continuous unchecked depredations at the hands of would-be Euro-American settlers.

For example, the Delaware decision to sell to the railroad is explainable in the light of a report by their agent that whites in the area between 1854 and 1861 had stolen \$48,750 worth of timber and \$32,227 in other property from the tribe. The Indian office had been able to get only two convictions of the thieves and no monetary settlement at all.<sup>23</sup>

The railroad company, however, defaulted on its payments after stealing most of what was left of the Delawares' timber through a subsidiary company it had developed. The railroad

depleted the lumber company's profits so that it went bankrupt and could not pay the Delawares, but the railroad insisted that it had no legal responsibility and did not pay the Delawares, either,

[T]he most frightening aspects of the story are not what was done illegally but what was done legally. In 1856 future Kansas senator Samuel Pomeroy stated that Indian lands and railroads were all the rage, and that as long as the system could be made to fit that spirit "we don't think or care now whether the laws are 'bogus' or not."<sup>24</sup>

The Delawares left their Kansas lands to competing railroad companies who ended up defaulting on much of their debt to the Indians but who then turned around and sold the land to settlers.<sup>25</sup>

By the time the Osage land came up for discussion, all sides were poised to take advantage of it. The Osages were concerned to sell the land for as much as they could, in order to buy a new reservation in Oklahoma and to provide investments to protect themselves into the future when the buffalo were no more. Several different railroad groups wanted to buy the land. Land reformers in Congress wanted to stop the sale of land to railroads and to make sure that it was offered to homesteaders in the form of free homesteads.<sup>26</sup> Settler groups wanted homesteads or at least preemption rights. In 1863 negotiations began in earnest for the Osage lands, and a treaty was concluded in September 1865 and ratified the following year. It chopped a block thirty miles wide off the east end of the reserve, to a point one mile east of the intersection between the Verdigris River and the southern Kansas boundary, to be sold for the Osages' benefit. "No pre-emption claim or homestead shall be recognized," but the State of Kansas was allowed to grant lands to "a railroad" that might be constructed. The treaty also peeled a strip twenty miles wide off the northern part of the reservation, which was to be held in trust for the Osages and sold for not



less than \$1.25 per acre. Squatters already in residence were guaranteed the right to purchase their land on both ceded tracts, as had happened on most other Indian lands in Kansas, and Osage "half-breeds" were allowed to patent their lands if they wished. The treaty concluded that if the Osages were to leave their remaining lands in Kansas, "then the diminished reservation shall be disposed of by the United States in the same manner"—that is, by purchase at the government minimum price of \$1.25 per acre. A separate treaty with the Cherokees, also ratified in 1866, provided land in Oklahoma (ironically, part of the land ceded by the Osages to the US in 1825), which would be purchased by the government from the Cherokees for other tribes including, eventually, the Osages, who would purchase their Oklahoma land with some of the proceeds of the sale of their Kansas land.<sup>27</sup>

In 1868 the Osages agreed to a treaty in which they would sell the entire diminished reservation, plus the northern trust lands, to the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston (LL&G) railroad for a total sum of \$1,600,000, payable in installments and contingent upon the railroad's actually laying track. The clause in the 1865 treaty regarding preemption and homestead was amended to read, "Said lands shall be surveyed and sold . . . for cash. . . . But no homestead settlement shall be recognized. . . . nothing in this amendment shall be so construed as to diminish in any way the funds derivable to the Indians under said treaty, or construed so as to interfere with vested rights under said treaty." The LL&G was given the right to use timber and stone for railroad construction, but only after they had paid for it. No provisions existed for squatters to take land, timber, or other resources. Nor was a date fixed for the Osages to leave their land, which was still theirs, according to the terms of the 1825 treaty. The 1868 treaty did oblige the federal government to pay the Osages "a just and fair compensation for stock stolen from them by whites," but made no mention of land, timber, or other resources taken by settlers. Although the treaty was signed by

109 Osage leaders and 8 white commissioners and other agents in May 1868, it was never ratified.<sup>28</sup>

The Osages signed the 1868 treaty for a number of reasons and it failed ratification for an even greater number of complex and entangled reasons. In 1865 the Osages had accepted as inevitable their removal from Kansas. By 1867 settlers were encroaching onto the diminished reservation, and according to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs at Atchison, Kansas, "the Adjutant General of Kansas had sent arms and ammunition to the settlers in order that they might sustain themselves on Osage land."<sup>29</sup> The Osages had watched white settlers and would-be town-site and railroad promoters usurping and speculating in Indian lands since before the Kansas-Nebraska Act had been officially proclaimed, and they knew what was going to happen next. They knew firsthand what had happened to the Delawares. Two Delawares had written to President James Buchanan in 1858, complaining that settlers were setting themselves up on unceded Delaware lands, cutting and selling timber, and threatening to kill any Delawares who interfered. Neither Indian agents in Kansas nor officials in Washington had offered the Delawares any protection.<sup>30</sup> So it had gone with the other tribes as well, and the individual squatters and their settler associations were setting up on Osage lands. The constant harassment and uncertainty predisposed the Osages to sell, and selling to the railroad seemed a reasonably efficient way to handle the problems of encroachment and removal. Furthermore, the Osages were hard up in 1867 and 1868. Their crops were plagued by grasshoppers and drought, and the western tribes, the Arapahoes and Cheyennes, were guarding the already diminishing buffalo herds from Osage hunters.<sup>31</sup> The annuities owed the Osages from their 1865 sale of lands were withheld from them in order to force their attendance at the 1868 treaty negotiations. Interested settlers and the Seventh Cavalry also came to the negotiation site, and the Osages finally agreed to the treaty.<sup>32</sup>

The 1868 treaty never came into effect. Settler groups immediately opposed it, crying "The white man first; the Indian next; monopolies never."<sup>33</sup> Not only were there to be no homesteads, there was not even any provision for school lands, another standard of American land laws since before the Constitution, or for preemptions. Settlers would have to buy their lands for whatever the railroad demanded. A rival railroad offered to buy the diminished reserve for \$2 million, \$400,000 more than the LL&G, setting up claims and counterclaims of fraud and corruption between the backers of the two railroads and encouraging Osage lawyers to work against the treaty in the hope of getting a better settlement for their clients. Kansas politicians, vying for kickbacks from the railroads but trying to keep voter support, added to the confusion. Land reformers in Congress were furious that such a vast and fertile land was to be sold to the railroads for only 20¢ per acre. The government of Kansas and the Kansas Republican State Convention asked the Senate to reject the treaty, and the Kansas Democrats demanded that the reservation lands be opened up for homesteads as well as preemption sales. Finally, in March 1871, the House of Representatives not only killed the Osage treaty but forever ended the treaty-making power of the Indian Office with the ratification of the Senate.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, back on the Osage reserve, all was turmoil. In 1868 settler groups estimated that there were already 12,000 to 15,000 squatters on Osage land, and some towns, including Wichita, were applying to the state for incorporation, "despite the absolute illegality of such an action." Frontier journalists in 1869 advised settlers to occupy the lands so that they could claim them when the treaty fell through. Settlers established what they called counties as well as towns and individual homesites. When the Osages came back to their townsites and gardens after each buffalo hunt, they found more and more trespassers on the land. Osages who fought off settlers were threatened with hanging, but by 1870

the Osages had begun to burn crops and even cabins or to demand rent from trespassers who wanted to stay and harvest their crops. The settlers organized against the Osages and threatened the Osages' Quaker agent, Isaac T. Gibson, who eventually called in troops to preserve the peace and protect the Osages—but not to remove the settlers. On 15 July 1870, when the Osages were out west on their summer buffalo hunt, Congress passed legislation ordering the removal of the Osages from Kansas and authorizing the sale of land to actual settlers at the familiar \$1.25 per acre figure.<sup>35</sup>

All that remained was for the Osages to agree. This was not an entirely foregone conclusion, especially as some of the leaders who had been most upset by the trespassers had seriously considered one last fight to the death against the invaders, either by themselves or in alliance with some of the western tribes. Agent Gibson waited nervously for the Osages to return from their summer buffalo hunt. Finally, after two weeks of discussions and ceremonies, in September 1870 the Osages agreed to accept the government conditions with a few amendments, the most important being that they would hold their new reservation in common rather than by individual allotments. As had been the case in 1868, the entire negotiations had been watched solicitously by the settlers, who wished to do nothing to anger the Osages at the last minute. "After the signing of the paper, the women sobbed their mourning songs every morning for days." A week later, they left Kansas for good.<sup>36</sup>

The issue of the land, however, was not entirely finished. While the diminished reservation was clearly open for sale at \$1.25 an acre, the eastern portion that had been ceded in the 1865 treaty was still covered with railroad claims, and railroads and settlers continued to fight both in the courts and on the ground over legitimacy of title. Matters were not finally settled until an 1875 Supreme Court ruling. Final approval for preemption on the diminished reserve came in October 1870, granting existing settlers one year to pay up

their \$200 for a quarter section. Although Congress would end up granting several extensions to settlers unable to pay off what was certainly a hefty sum for farmers who also had to build houses and fences and to buy stock and farm implements, especially as the 1870s were dry and plagued with grasshoppers, many of the early settlers never did pay up or lost their claims to mortgage companies. In the 1880s better weather and new settlers came. By 1888 most of the Osage lands had been settled by Euro-Americans.<sup>37</sup>

The Osages did not vanish from the face of the earth when they left Kansas in 1870. By a combination of good luck and tenacity, Osages maintained themselves through booms and busts and today remain an influential people of Oklahoma. Because the 1870 act of Congress honored the 1865 treaty and paid the Osages \$1.25 per acre for the diminished reserve, they were able to buy a new reservation from the Cherokees on land the Osages themselves had occupied before the 1825 treaty and put a sizable chunk of cash in government bonds as well. Because they purchased the land, they acquired the mineral rights as well. Because they had insisted upon holding the land in common, they were able to apportion all the land when individual allotments were forced upon them and not give up any "surplus" land to white would-be settlers. Because they had insisted on keeping mineral rights in common even after surface rights were apportioned, when oil was discovered on the Osages' Oklahoma lands in huge quantities, it made all the original allottees and their heirs wealthy. The Osages were the most famous and visible Indians of the 1920s, famous for their oil wealth and the fast cars that it bought—and for the "Osage Reign of Terror" of the early 1920s, in which whites married into the tribe and systematically murdered their Osage relatives to inherit their "head-rights" to oil wealth. Because the Osages were independently wealthy, they could not be coerced by the withholding of rations into sending their children to the brainwashing Indian boarding schools, and despite the inroads of

Christianity and the weakened position of the Osage language, they have managed better than many Native North American peoples to preserve their culture and religion, even after their oil and money ran out.<sup>38</sup> Although the Osages were heading west on another buffalo hunt when they left Kansas for good, their eventual destination was not toward the setting sun and their death as a people, as the iconography of the "dying race" in American popular culture, including *Little House on the Prairie*, might have suggested. They were moving to the south, land of rebirth and perpetual summer, the same direction that Laura Ingalls Wilder would choose as an adult.

#### READING *LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE*

This, then, is the complex background against which *Little House on the Prairie* is set. How might it affect our understanding of the novel? *Little House on the Prairie* is an autobiographical novel, but it is fiction, not history. Some things we know Wilder deliberately changed—Carrie Ingalls was born in Kansas in 1870, but in the novel she is already a baby when the family leaves Wisconsin; the Ingalls family stopped over in Missouri between Wisconsin and Kansas, but in the novel it is one uninterrupted trip. Laura was only three and a half years old during the summer of 1870 when most of the action takes place, but her actions, her speeches, and especially her recollections seem to be those of a much older child. Some other differences are introduced into the text either through Wilder's misrecollections or through exaggerations on the part of Charles Ingalls when he subsequently told his daughters about their adventures in Kansas. Wilder evidently believed that the cabin had been forty miles south of Independence (that is, in Oklahoma, not on the Osage Reserve in Kansas), and she may even have driven down to Oklahoma looking for evidence that the family had been there, though both the family Bible and the 1870 census place them in Kansas. Subsequent scholars have placed the Little House near Wayside, Kansas, about three miles

west and ten miles south of Independence.<sup>39</sup> In the novel Wilder uses the forty-mile figure. The accuracy of these details is not important, but they do show that Wilder was shaping her narrative to meet her idea of poetic truth, and they raise the possibility that other details may have been added or changed to support the myth or paradigm that Wilder (or Wilder and Lane) uses to establish the meaning of the story.

In streamlined form, the myth basically goes as follows: A loving family of white settlers bravely sets out to establish a home for themselves. After many difficulties, much ingenuity, and with the cooperation of helpful neighbors, they establish an idyllic and isolated small farm. They survive the threat of unfriendly Indians, are saved from frontier warfare by the sage counsel of the friendly Indian Soldat du Chêne, and witness the departure of the Indians from the district. Then, just as all seems well and their crops are beginning to grow the following spring, they have to leave because some inexplicable government mix-up has voided their right to settle and soldiers will remove anyone who tries to stay. In this telling, Indians can be both noble and fearsome. Some settlers may hate them and some admire them. Their going is sad but necessary if settlers are to make homes and change the prairie from lonely grassland to grain that will feed multitudes. The federal government acts appropriately in removing the Indians—although the why of this remains unaccounted for—but acts atrociously in removing the settlers. We have two land-use systems in conflict, but the settlers' system of using the land to support many people is humanly superior to the Osages' system of neglecting the land during the growing season to go on buffalo hunts. This seems to be the frame of reference implicitly or even explicitly accepted by all the critics who have written in any detail on *Little House on the Prairie*, except for McAuliffe and Dorris. If this is indeed the framework of any reader's understanding, then that reader has no choice but to sympathize with the fictionalized Laura and her family

and their fellow settlers and, as Wolf suggests, to regret the passing of the Osages only with the inevitable sadness that one regrets the passing of childhood. If, however, we mediate the shape of our understanding not just through Wilder's narrative (and the critics' acceptance of its validity) but through the narratives of both Osage and Euro-American historians, we may feel rather differently about where our sympathies lie.

According to Donald Zochert's meticulous but undocumented biography *Laura*, the Ingalls family arrived at their cabin site in the fall of 1869 and, as described in the novel, Charles Ingalls cut logs and constructed a little house. Although Zochert, as well as other historians, points out that white settlers were rapidly filling up the land around Independence, Wilder emphasizes the isolation of the family and the fact that although they are in "Indian country," they do not see any Indians (who are still on the buffalo hunt). When the first Osages do appear, Wilder gives them entirely negative attributes. They are "naked, wild men" whose "eyes were black and still and glittering, like snake's eyes."<sup>40</sup> They enter the house and apparently ask for food. "Their faces were bold and fierce and terrible" (139). Wilder reports that "The Indians' ribs made little ridges up their bare sides" (138-39) and that they "ate every morsel" of the cornbread "and even picked up crumbs from the hearth" (140). The family's next encounter with an Osage is with "the tall Indian," whom Wilder later tells us is named Soldat du Chêne, Oak Soldier. Pa admires him and smokes quietly with him but does not understand him when he begins to speak a language Pa identifies as French. The next day the tall Indian threatens the Ingalls's dog, Jack, who hates Indians, but gives Pa a chance to get Jack out of the way and tie him up. He does not harm Laura's pet. Some months later another pair of Indians come into the house. "Those Indians were dirty and scowling and mean. They acted as if the house belonged to them" (232-33). These two take cornbread and tobacco and pick up the furs Pa has trapped

but then return them. These events lead Pa to tell Laura:

“When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now. That’s why we’re here, Laura. White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick. Now do you understand?” (236-37)

Pa refuses to answer Laura’s logical question, “Won’t it make the Indians mad to have to . . .” (237).

These passages, as most critics have noticed, portray both the “dirty” thieving savages and the Noble Savage. Ma, the dog, Jack, and many of the other settlers have nothing but hatred for the Indians, while Pa is more tolerant and Laura both fearful and fascinated. Pa states quite bluntly not only his belief but the belief of all the squatters in the Osage Diminished Reserve. The land belongs to the white man, and those “sooners” who jump the gun, settle before they are legally entitled to enter the tract, and risk the hostility of the Indians deserve the best land. That strategy had already worked for settlers, railroads, and politicians in the rest of eastern Kansas. Laura’s questions, according to Wolf and Elizabeth Segel, are a courageous resistance to Pa’s manifest destiny beliefs, but they are not really a challenge to the idea that the whites deserve the land because of the overall myth of the Vanishing American through which the Osages are presented. The innocent child questioning the harsh necessities of reality is a familiar literary device, and there seems to be no alternative to Pa’s edict that the Indians will have to leave. The first two Osages we see are portrayed with a string of adjectives that render them barely human—“fierce,” “terrible,” “naked,” “wild,” with “black and still and glittering . . . snake’s eyes.” This is melodrama, not description. The prominent ribs and hungry demeanor of the two may be more accurate, especially as the 1869 buffalo hunt,

from which they would just have returned, had been somewhat unsuccessful because of the hostility of the Arapahoes and Cheyennes. If so, it is not surprising that they considered themselves completely within their rights in commandeering food from the squatters who have established themselves on Osage land during their absence. In Montgomery County, where the Ingallses had settled, the Osages customarily charged a very nominal rent of five dollars for settlers on the prairie and ten dollars for those on timber claims.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps these men like the two later visitors have come to collect the rent—in food, if need be. The same may be true of the two men who come later and act “as if the house belonged to them”—well, it did. It had been constructed without their permission on their land with their lumber. The furs that the Osages finger and contemplate taking are also theirs, and the Osages, with a long history as fur-trade middlemen, would quite naturally see Pa’s trapping as another economic raid on their way of life as well as an affront to the ceremonial relationship between the Osages and their animal kin. Laura is not the only tenant who has ever perceived a landlord come to collect arrears as “dirty and scowling and mean.” The framework of the novel, however, prevents the reader, like Laura, from grasping the landlord-tenant aspect of the relationship. The narrative leads the reader to feel that the Ingallses are in the right, but legally and by right of occupancy it is the Osages who are the owners and the settlers who are the unwelcome and threatening intruders.

The tall Indian of Noble Savage mien returns to play an important role in the novel, one that is carefully established by a series of images intended to intensify the reader’s fear of the other Indians. The Ingalls family and the other settlers were, with good reason, worried during the summer of 1870. Neither the government nor the Osages were guaranteed to produce the results the settlers wanted: homestead, or at least preemption, rights to their land claims and improvements. Pa reports unhappily that “folks in Independence

said that the government was going to put the white settlers out of the Indian Territory” because “the Indians had been complaining,” but he claims that the government “always have let settlers keep the land” and proves it by reading a “newspaper from Kansas” (272-73). Nonetheless, the settlers continue to be disturbed by sounds that they perceive as hostile coming from the Indian camps. Because of the vagueness of Wilder’s recollections and her complete lack of knowledge of Osage ceremonial life, it is impossible to say what the settlers were hearing, but given that the season is early summer, it is likely that the Osages were carrying out traditional ceremonies asking for success on their buffalo hunt, with their corn crop, and throughout the coming year. In the imagination of white settlers, all traditional Native American song and oratory registered as “war whoops,” as if Native peoples spent all their time thinking about the intruders and spared nothing for their own culture. The rumors about the removal of the settlers were much more concrete, however, as the attempts to gain ratification of the 1868 treaty entered their final phase. The settlers might be removed—but in favor of the railroads, not the Osages, who would definitely be going south to Oklahoma, not west as Charles Ingalls (and manifest destiny ideology) predicted.

At the end of the summer, however, the entire family is terrified by the sounds from the Indian camps, especially by what Pa identifies as “the Indian war-cry” (291), which is the title of the chapter. Pa promises that the troops from Fort Gibson and Fort Dodge will protect the settlers, but the nightly drumming and “war-cries” continue to frighten the family. One evening they see “the tall Indian” gallop past. Finally the nights are quiet again and “an Osage” tells Pa that “all the tribes except the Osages had made up their minds to kill the white people who had come into Indian country. And they were getting ready to do it when the lone Indian came riding into their big pow-wow” (300). The lone Indian is Soldat du Chêne, “a name that meant he was a great soldier.” Soldat du Chêne rallied the

Osages to promise the defense of the settlers and “the other tribes . . . went away” (300-301). “That’s one good Indian!” Pa said. No matter what Mr. Scott said, Pa did not believe that the only good Indian was a dead Indian.” (301)

Wilder has received considerable praise for her handling of this chapter, particularly for her portrait of Soldat du Chêne as the “good” Indian. Critics assume that this man actually existed and did argue successfully against war. The “dignified and friendly Soldat du Chêne,” according to Segel, prevents the reader from easy stereotyping and “pat answers.” Ann Romines notes that “The powerful figure of this much-admired warrior, who can bring nonviolent concord out of a multicultural cacophony of assembled tribes that are eager to wage war against whites, expresses a version of male heroism articulated nowhere else in the *Little House* series.” Wolf calls him a “Noble Savage,” and Romines points out that not only is he stereotypically “noble,” but that perhaps arguing the rights of whites against Native peoples ought not to be the sole criterion for defining “good.”<sup>42</sup> Wilder herself attached great significance to Soldat du Chêne, writing, “I could not remember the name of the Indian chief who saved the whites from massacre. It took weeks of research before I found it.” According to Wolf, in answer to one of the letters Wilder had sent off asking for information, a correspondent in Muskogee, Oklahoma, confirmed that “the Chief of the Osages at that time was named *Le-Soldat-du-Chene*.” Zochert also liked the portrayal of Soldat du Chêne, whose name meant “he was a strong-hearted leader of his people,” but admits that no record of such a name exists among the Osages in 1870, only much earlier.<sup>43</sup>

If we compare *Little House on the Prairie* with Osage historian John Joseph Mathews’s magisterial history of the Osages and with contemporary documents, it becomes clear that the whole “Indian War-Cry” episode, like the settlement forty miles from Independence, is an exaggeration, built on the frontier myth of the Noble Savage and probably developed by

Charles Ingalls because it made a much more gripping story than a meeting between Osages and bureaucrats to ratify an agreement passed by Congress. As Zochert points out, there is no record of a *Soldat du Chêne* in 1870. None of the many leaders listed by Mathews bears such a name. He certainly was not an important leader, let alone the chief of the Osages. Muskogee is the home of the Creeks and Seminoles and not particularly likely to produce accurate information about the Osages, who were headquartered in Pawhuska, Oklahoma. None of the 109 signatures on the 1868 treaty is listed in French, and none is listed as Oak Soldier—in French, English, or Osage. The French had had no official role in the Missouri valley since 1803, and since 1808 the Osages had been making treaties with the Americans in English. Since the tall Indian is a man in his prime, under fifty if not under forty, the chances that such a man, speaking French but not English, existed in Kansas in 1870 are remote. Furthermore, there was no large meeting of non-Osages anywhere near the Ingallses' cabin in 1870. The diminished reserve stretched well to the west of Wichita, and when the Osages returned from their summer hunt, they came alone. The threat of a war had been real, but the conclave that Wilder describes and the heroic action of *Soldat du Chêne* never happened. It may well be that Charles Ingalls in his readings had come across the mention of the Osage *Soldat du Chêne* who had entertained some of Zebulon Pike's explorers with a splendid dinner in 1806<sup>44</sup> and had brought him into the story to make it more dramatic and to supply the Noble Savage, or he may have had him confused with one or more important later leaders called *Soldat du Chien*, Dog Soldier, an easy mistake for an English speaker to make.

The winter and spring of 1870 were not restful ones on the Osage Diminished Reserve as the Osages tried to remove trespassers or at least collect rents, and Agent Gibson worried that some of the more antisettler leaders would return from their summer hunt with reinforcements from the western tribes to wage war on the settlers. Zochert records both Agent

Gibson's and settlers' diaries' fears that the Osages would attack the settlers.<sup>45</sup> It was not unusual for frontier journalists and boomers to exaggerate the danger of Indian attacks and to call for the cavalry to protect the settlers. The US government paid good money for wild hay and grain for cavalry mounts, creating a market for farmers who were far from any other buyers and providing much-needed cash to a frontier economy inconveniently dependent upon barter. Some of the Ingallses' neighbors refer to the 1862 "Minnesota massacre" and darkly hint that it was the norm for all situations in which settlers and Indians were in close proximity. Rumor and fear must have been present in other settler cabins as well as that of the Ingallses that summer, providing vivid stories for the older members of the family to retell in later years. Wilder would undoubtedly have been able to remember some of the fear the three-and-a-half-year-old Laura had felt, but she would not have had any coherent recollection of the order of events. Certainly the stereotype of Indians war-whooping around fires would have made a better story for Charles Ingalls to tell than a meeting of the Indian agent and a committee of the President's Board of Indian Commissioners with the Osage bands as they returned from the summer hunt, the only conclave that occurred anywhere near the Ingalls cabin. A French name would probably have sounded more noble to Ingalls and Wilder than the names of actual Osage leaders such as Not-Afraid-of-Longhairs or Black Dog or Arrow-Going-Home or Antler-Maker or Forked Horn or even Dog Soldier.

The Osages were both angry and depressed at being forced off the land they had been guaranteed in perpetuity and on which they had lived well. They talked and deliberated and conducted religious ceremonies and at least sometimes wore paints that had a particular sacred meaning. Eventually they signed the agreement. But there was no actual plan to kill settlers, there were no other tribes, and there was no heroic and peaceful *Soldat du Chêne*. Laura had heard some kind of sound—

she would recall it for the rest of her life. Her father told her it was a war cry, and this fit with her stereotype of Indians as well as that of generations of Euro-American readers who have accepted the war-cry story. Laura may have been wrong. Mathews describes a pre-dawn sound, "a long drawn-out chant broken by weeping. . . . It was like the song of the wolf and yet like the highest pitch of the bull wapiti's moonlight challenge." Perhaps this is what Laura heard, for after agreeing to removal "the women sobbed their mourning songs every morning for days. They must leave the graves of their fathers and their children for the third time."<sup>46</sup> To admit that the sound was of women mourning rather than of men preparing for a final bloody defense of their homelands would challenge the conventional image of "befeathered warriors" confronting innocent white women and children that is at the heart of the Indian iconography of *Little House on the Prairie*.

Our final view of the Osages in *Little House on the Prairie* is of their leaving Kansas. In the novel they are led, of course, by Soldat du Chêne, with his "proud still face. No matter what happened, it would always be like that. . . . Only the eyes were alive . . . and they gazed steadily west" (305). The family watches the procession, and Laura, who has throughout the book been on her own quest to obtain a "papoose," sobs to her father to get her one particular child, carried in a cradle basket. The Osages pass by in a long procession until the last has gone. The description of the tall Indian's "proud still face" ought to alert us that we are watching a pageant of stereotypical stoicism, and Laura's propensities for kidnaping seem at best bizarre and at worst reminiscent of General William Colby's abduction of the baby later called Lost Bird from the killing fields of the Wounded Knee massacre. Critics have praised Wilder for this romantic "Vanishing American" scenario. As Wolf says, "Many have interpreted this chapter . . . as an elegy for the Native American way of life and have seen Laura as identifying with and sympathetic to

the Native Americans." According to Segel, despite Laura's patronizing desire to own the baby, readers should recognize that

she is asserting a kinship with these people, that she is grieving for their exile, and that the tragedy unfolding around her is not lost on her. In the Indians, even as they yield their ancestral lands to the superior force of the United States government, the little girl sees freedom from deforming constraints, and she envies them that freedom.<sup>47</sup>

While this sympathy may be real, it is sentimental catharsis that requires no identification with the continuing lives of the Osages, indeed no recognition that their lives do continue. Wilder's lack of knowledge of what she had witnessed showed in her uncertainty about where she had lived and whom she had seen leave that day, though she, like other literate Americans, must have read about the oil-rich Osages during the 1920s, the decade before she wrote *Little House on the Prairie*. The stoical depthlessness of the eyes of both Soldat du Chêne and the baby Laura wants show we are looking at stereotypes, not real people. Laura savors their tragedy; she does not feel their pain. Even Ma, who has never liked Indians, is imbued by this false sentimentalism and nostalgia for something that never was. Mathews adds one curious detail to the account of the Osages leaving Kansas. Fifty men, he says, went to Independence, which they called Hay-House-Town on account of its thatched roofs, changed into their dance regalia, and danced.

Possibly one of the social dances, apparently as a gesture of farewell. As the people of the town watched, they must have begun already to have a feeling of nostalgia which couldn't possibly have a logical basis. Possibly in their great relief in the knowledge that they would never see the Little Ones again, they might have been filled with well-being and generosity.<sup>48</sup>



So might Ma. And so might several generations of readers and critics of the Little House books.

After the Osages leave, the winter of 1870-71 passes between chapters. The Ingalls family gets its first sod planting done. All is well, and it looks as if the family will live happily ever after. Then suddenly, much to the reader's—and to Laura's—surprise, two neighbors tell Pa “the government is sending soldiers to take all us settlers out of Indian Territory” (316). He blasts politicians for misinforming him so that he settled “three miles over the line into Indian Territory” (316) and vows to leave before the soldiers can push him out. Some of the other settlers decide to leave also, others to stay. Pa gives the cow and calf to the neighbors, loads up the covered wagon, and leaves the house, the fields, and the plow behind forever, predicting that “there will be wild Indians and wolves here for many a long day” (325). Almost all the critics have taken the Ingallses' departure at face value, though Wolf wonders why Charles Ingalls did not file a preemption as the other settlers did. She cites Zochert's claim that the purchaser of the Ingallses' Wisconsin land had defaulted to move west and that they had returned north to take back the Little House in the Big Woods, puzzles over that, and then asks rhetorically, “Why do we care?” Later in the book she suggests that leaving the Little House on the Prairie is just Pa's wanderlust kicking up again: “Like the Native American, he is by nature a wanderer.”<sup>49</sup>

This casual assumption that the Osages are “wanderers” and that their removal is no more important than a whim of Pa's wandering nature undercuts even the sentimental tragedy of the Osages leaving, especially as Laura's point of view on the move is mostly a sort of joy that the family is once again enjoying the wild, free life of the wagon and the open road. The connection between the Osages and the settlers is reinforced by the impression Wilder leaves at the end of the novel that the settlers' are to be moved out in favor of the Indians and that the land is still largely unsettled. Yet

as we know, the 1870 agreement had provided that all the land in the diminished reserve was to be sold to settlers for \$1.25 per acre, or \$200 per quarter section. There were many eager takers. By the spring of 1871 the railroad interests were still agitating for the 1868 treaty and the right to sell land to the squatters at considerably higher prices. Charles Ingalls may have heard something that made him believe that the railroads were going to win. More likely, he did receive the letter from Wisconsin and realized that he was not going to sell his farm there and thus had no realistic prospect of raising the \$200 he would need to patent the quarter section of Kansas land he had chosen. Or he may have realized that, despite his hope and those of the other squatters, the land was never going to become available for free homesteads. At any rate, he probably made an economic decision to leave Kansas. Given that he never succeeded at homesteading even without a \$200 debt and that most of the other “sooners” who filed on Osage land were hard put to pay their debts, it was probably a wise decision.

Despite Pa's bluster and settler confusion and unrest, there was no danger soldiers were going to evict the Ingallses or any of their neighbors. Although settler knowledge of the exact southern border of Kansas was unclear enough that Pa could have believed he was accidentally “three miles over the line” into Osage country when he thought he was on the Cherokee Strip, the strip was not open to homesteaders or preemption buyers, either. Charles Ingalls undoubtedly believed, as Laura reports that he told her, that the Indians would be moved out in favor of the settlers, but he can scarcely have believed in good faith that any land near him had been officially open to settlement. He was eleven miles into the Osage Diminished Reserve and more than sixty miles east of the boundary of the ceded but still unavailable chunk of the reservation.<sup>50</sup> Despite the predictions of the settlers associations and their allies, it had been perfectly clear that in 1869 not one acre of the land in the whole vast Osage tract was available for

either homestead or preemption. Charles Ingalls, like thousands of other hopeful settlers, had gambled that the rules would change and they did—but apparently not enough to suit him. So the Ingalls family left. Whether or not Pa actually blamed soldiers and the “politicians” for doing them out of their cabin site, the story sounds good and fit into Wilder’s—and particularly Lane’s—antigovernment philosophy. Critics have not so far questioned it because it sounds so good and fits so nicely with the clash-of-cultures stereotype where stupid government policy pits nice Indians against nice settlers and then pulls out, having ruined the lives of both heroic parties.

Although *Little House on the Prairie* paints the Ingalls family as quite isolated, they were only thirteen miles from Independence, a lively center of information, as well as of the optimistic misinformation of the settlers’ associations and other boosters who were trying to make sure that both the Osages and the railroads were driven out in favor of the settlers. In choosing the story that soldiers were coming to evict the family as the reason for leaving the little house on the prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder adopted the role of “innocent victim” that Patricia Limerick has identified as retaining an extraordinary power in the story of the American West. As Limerick shows, disappointed settlers like the Ingallses could “slide smoothly from blaming Indians to blaming the federal government.”<sup>51</sup> Certainly there were lots of sources for Charles Ingalls as storyteller to have picked up the soldiers idea as he later retailed reasons for their leaving Kansas to his family. Earlier in Kansas, squatters on Indian land to which Indians still held title had been threatened with eviction by soldiers, but it had usually been stayed for “humanitarian reasons”—especially when the settlers were themselves soldiers.<sup>52</sup> The soldiers who had come to southern Kansas in 1870 and stayed through the fall had not been allowed to evict squatters, but they might have suggested the idea. During 1871 squatters and railroads in the eastern section of the Osage lands that had

been ceded by the 1865 treaty were still fighting over title, but if soldiers had evicted any squatters there, it would have been in favor of the railroads, not the Indians. Later in Oklahoma, soldiers did occasionally evict squatters from Indian lands,<sup>53</sup> and Ingalls may have gotten his story—if that was his story—from there. The only people evicted from Osage Diminished Reserve lands after 1870 were mixed-blood and a few full-blood Osages who had attempted to assert their right, guaranteed by the 1865 treaty, to locate on Kansas land and receive individual title to it. Settlers burned their property, killed their livestock, and physically threatened them. When Agent Gibson appealed for help to a group of settlers who had earlier promised to look out for the Indians, they told him “The Osages have signed the Bill [of removal] and we have got the land, let the half breeds go to hell.” Nor did the soldiers respond to Gibson’s plea for help for the mixed bloods, who soon fled for Oklahoma.<sup>54</sup> Later, Osage hunters, legally hunting in an as-yet unclaimed part of the Kansas reserve, were attacked and murdered by squatters.<sup>55</sup> Whoever may have been betrayed by the politicians, it was not the Ingallses.

Readers’ easy acceptance of the Noble Savage-Indian uprising subplot of *Little House on the Prairie*, along with Wilder’s self-serving interpretation of her family’s right to build their little house in the first place and the “innocent victim” explanation for their leaving Kansas, are not as astounding as they might be if readers and critics were not themselves mostly of European descent, hoping deeply to discover that the dispossession of Indian America was a wonderful epic. It had its tragic side, of course, but readers could be ennobled by Laura’s recognition of that tragedy, with no need to look any further and discover that this story of individual heroism and Noble Savagery was a cover for unsuccessful land speculation set against a background of railroads, lawyers, and economic gain. Current critical readings of *Little House on the Prairie* as the feminist story of the moral growth of the pioneer girl who uses the [projected] chaos and

blackness of the Indians to challenge and overcome the Victorian gentility of her time are even more upsetting, substantiating as they do the longstanding charges by women of color that white feminists totally misrepresent non-European cultures. Charles Ingalls told stories for the entertainment of his family and friends. Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane wrote in and for their time, and their political philosophy, particularly Lane's growing libertarianism, made stereotyping Native peoples and refusing to see the communitarian virtues of tribal societies a valid strategy for expressing their version of truth. That we should continue to accept their stereotyping without question, and even to profess to find it liberating, is our shame and not theirs.

#### REFERENCES

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  7. Wolf, *Companion* (note 1 above), p. 125.
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  20. This complex swindle resulted in the taking of large amounts of Ottawa land and money, supposedly to fund education for Ottawa children but mostly to line the pockets of an astonishing collection of Kansas politicians and speculators. See William Unrau and H. Craig Miner, *Tribal Dispossession and the Ottawa Indian University Fraud* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).
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  23. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

25. Paul Wallace Gates, *Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts over Kansas Land Policy, 1854-1890* (1954; reprint, New York: Atherton Press, 1966), p. 190.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-229; Miner and Unrau, *Indian Kansas* (note 17 above), pp. 122-29.
27. *Treaty between the United States of America and the Great and Little Osage Indians, concluded, September 29th, 1865 . . .*, pp. 20-26; *Article Sixteen of a treaty between the United States of America and the Cherokee Nation of Indians, concluded July 19th, 1866, p. 27; Articles of a Treaty made . . . on the 27th day of May, A. D. 1868, by and between the United States . . . and the Great and Little Osage tribe of Indians . . .*, pp. 28-44, all in *Treaties and Laws of the Osage Nation* (note 16 above).
28. 1868 *Treaty*, *ibid.*, pp. 40-43; Gates, *Fifty Million Acres* (note 25 above), p. 209-10.
29. Quoted in Mathews, *Osages* (note 10 above), pp. 659-60.
30. Miner and Unrau, *Indian Kansas* (note 17 above), pp. 114-15.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 138; Mathews, *Osages* (note 10 above), p. 663.
32. Mathews, *ibid.*, pp. 667-76.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 673.
34. Miner and Unrau, *Indian Kansas* (note 17 above), pp. 123-24; Gates, *Fifty Million Acres* (note 25 above), pp. 198, 208, 201-2, 204-5, 210. For a longer discussion of the 1871 resolution abolishing the treaty-making power that does not treat the Osage treaty of 1868 as a major cause, see John R. Wunder, "No More Treaties: The Resolution of 1871 and the Alteration of Indian Rights to Their Homeland," in *Working the Range: Essays on the History of Western Land Management and the Environment*, ed. John R. Wunder (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 39-56.
35. Miner and Unrau, *ibid.*, pp. 122-23 (quoted), Mathews, *Osages* (note 10 above), pp. 685-89.
36. Mathews, *ibid.*, pp. 689-92.
37. Gates, *Fifty Million Acres* (note 25 above), pp. 218-25.
38. For information about the Osages up to the present, see Mathews, *Osages* (note 10 above), pp. 693-786; Wilson, *Underground Reservation* (note 15 above), and McAuliffe, *Sybil Bolton* (note 9 above), both dealing with the oil years and the Reign of Terror; and Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), a study of Mathews and others, esp. pp. 14-26.
39. For discussions of these anomalies, see Zochert, *Laura* (note 6 above), pp. 33-37; Wolf, *Companion* (note 1 above), pp. 11-15, Anderson, *Country* (note 2 above), pp. 24-31.
40. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (1935; reprint, New York: Harper, 1971), p. 134. Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text.
41. Gates, *Fifty Million Acres* (note 25 above), p. 222. Gates cites here an 1883 history of Kansas (A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas* [Chicago: 1883], pp. 1564, 1588), which may have been somewhat self-serving on the part of the settlers, but the report that such rental agreements were widespread, written only thirteen years after the events, strongly suggests that at least some settlers paid rents to at least some Osages.
42. Segel, "Unflinching" (note 5 above), p. 68; Romines, *Constructing the Little House* (note 5 above), pp. 71-72; Wolf, *Companion* (note 5 above), p. 105.
43. Laura Ingalls Wilder *Sampler*, quoted in Romines, *Constructing the Little House* (note 5 above), p. 71; R. B. Selridge to Wilder, quoted in Wolf, *Companion* (note 5 above), p. 13; Zochert, *Laura* (note 6 above), p. 48.
44. Mathews, *Osages* (note 10 above), p. 363; Grant Foreman, *Indians and Pioneers: The Story of the American Southwest before 1830*, rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1936), p. 24. Charles Ingalls could well have encountered this story in Pike's journals or possibly in the writings of James Wilkinson, the infamous conspirator with Aaron Burr, who had ordered the expedition, as American governor of the upper Louisiana country, and whose son was actually entertained by Soldat du Chêne. Soldat du Chêne may also have been the name of one of six Osage leaders who met with the Spanish governor of Louisiana in 1794. At any rate, this was the name supplied to the governor by French trader Auguste Chouteau, though it may actually have been Soldat du Chien, or Dog Soldier, a more common name. See Rollings, *Osage* (note 16 above), pp. 173-76. Wherever Charles Ingalls may have encountered the name Soldat du Chêne, it would certainly have seemed like a good name for storytelling purposes.
45. Zochert, *Laura* (note 6 above), pp. 41-42.
46. Mathews, *Osages* (note 10 above), pp. xi, 692.
47. Wolf, *Companion* (note 1 above), p. 47; Segel, "Unflinching" (note 5 above), p. 69.
48. Mathews, *Osages* (note 10 above), p. 694.
49. Wolf, *Companion* (note 1 above), pp. 15, 51.
50. Gates, *Fifty Million Acres* (note 25 above), pp. 225-26.
51. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), p. 46.
52. Miner and Unrau, *Indian Kansas* (note 17 above), pp. 112-13, 120.
53. Mathews, *Osages*, (note 10 above), p. 696.
54. Wilson, *Underground Reservation* (note 15 above), pp. 17-18.
55. Miner and Unrau, *Indian Kansas* (note 17 above), pp. 138-39; Mathews, *Osages* (note 10 above), pp. 711-12.