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of 1878. She earned fifty cents a week washing dishes, sweeping floors, dusting, making beds, setting tables, and baby-sitting the Masters's grandchild. In the hotel she only had to keep her ears and eyes open to learn about things that she not only would not have heard about at home but also sometimes did not entirely understand. Although she was still a schoolgirl, she bore a sturdy sense of responsibility. Her work contributed to the welfare of the family, and it was needed. Laura realized that her family was poor, but, looking around her, she could see that few of the other families in town were much better off. From William Masters her father bought a lot in the pasture behind the hotel and built another little house for the family in the spring of 1878. Afterward he rented a room downtown and began operating a butcher shop in it. Most families ran out of home-butchered meat by the end of winter. Business was brisk for a time, but Charles sold the business at summer's end since people would be doing their own butchering again as soon as cold weather set in. With winter approaching, he hired out his carpentry skills to Mr. Masters, who was erecting a new store building next to his hotel, with a meeting hall on the second floor. Although he still lacked a steady source of income, Charles Ingalls was not without respect in the community. He was elected as a trustee of the Union Congregational church. In the winter of 1879, when a Good Templars unit formed in Walnut Grove, he and Caroline joined. The following March he was elected justice of the peace in the first election ever held in the town, capturing twenty-three out of the twenty-nine votes that were cast. He used the front room of their house for an office, listening to the cases that were brought in to him. When this happened, Caroline would shoo the girls into the kitchen, but they eagerly listened through the door to hear what was going on in the next room. Laura learned something more about greed and treachery in some of these proceedings. There was, for example, the case of a woman who obtained revenge on her sister for having married the man she loved by tricking her out of property back in New York State. Even church took on a different color in the mind of the eleven year old. Religious revivals enlivened Walnut Grove as they did in towns all over America, but Laura felt uncomfortable listening to people publicly testify about their personal beliefs. It violated her sense of privacy. If she was more reticent than some people, however, she did not resist going to church and Sunday school every week at the Congregational church. When the opportunity arose, she topped that by attending Methodist services and Sunday school in the afternoon. The church was conducting a contest to see who could memorize the most Bible verses (called Golden Texts and Central Truths), and Laura tied for the top prize, winning a reference Bible for her efforts. How long the family would have stayed in Walnut Grove had not a new opportunity arisen is hard to say. People continued to move into the area, economic activity began to pick up, and the frontier pushed ever farther west. During the five years after 1875 the population of Redwood County jumped from 2,982 to 5,375. Charles Ingalls probably would have obtained another plot of land and tried his hand at farming again soon, but a new possibility emerged when his sister Ladocia unexpectedly came through town one day and made him a tempting offer. (C) 1998 The Curators of the University of Missouri All rights reserved. ISBN: 0-8262-1167-4





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