

# The Beautiful Snow

Newsletter

The Ingalls family, the railroads, and the Hard Winter of 1880-81

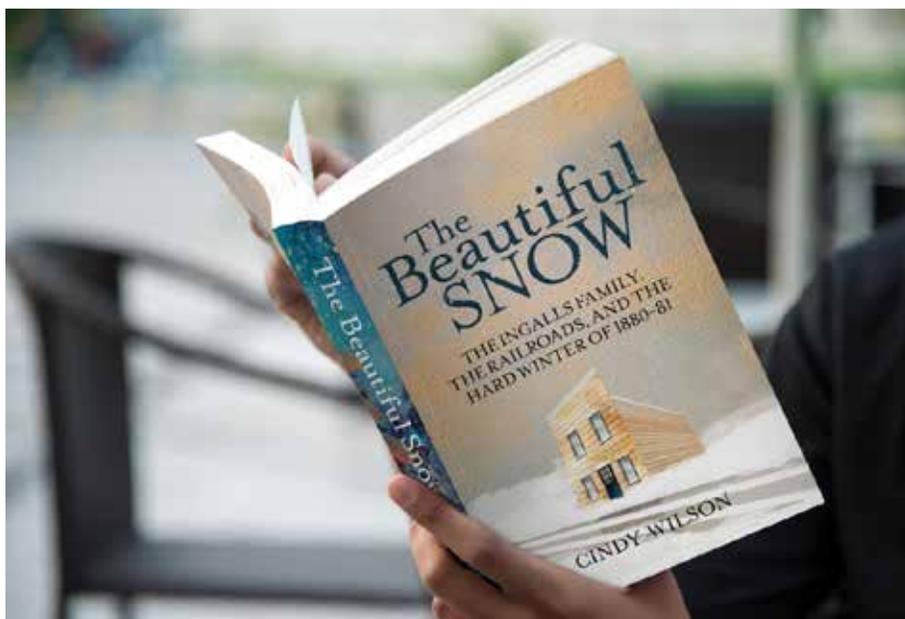
Oh the snow!  
The beautiful snow,  
Filling the cuts  
So the trains can't go

*Murray County Pioneer*  
Currie, Minnesota  
January 20, 1881

*The Long Winter* is one of the most memorable novels in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series. It beautifully details the dramatic events of a harrowing winter with months of never-ending blizzards leading to railroad blockades that all but cut off fledgling communities.

But what really happened during the Hard Winter of 1880-81?

Lively and rewarding, *The Beautiful Snow* is a new look at the Hard Winter. Pulling from nearly three thousand regional newspaper articles, *The Beautiful Snow* weaves the historical record around and through Wilder's fictionalized account of *The Long Winter*. From the tireless efforts to dig out the railroad blockades, to lavish oyster parties, to carefully spun boosterism, the Hard Winter comes to life with extraordinary tales of survival, resilience, and defiance that adds rich context to Wilder's beloved novel.



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Pre-order  
today!

at [TheBeautifulSnow.com](http://TheBeautifulSnow.com)

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear fellow LIWLRA members,

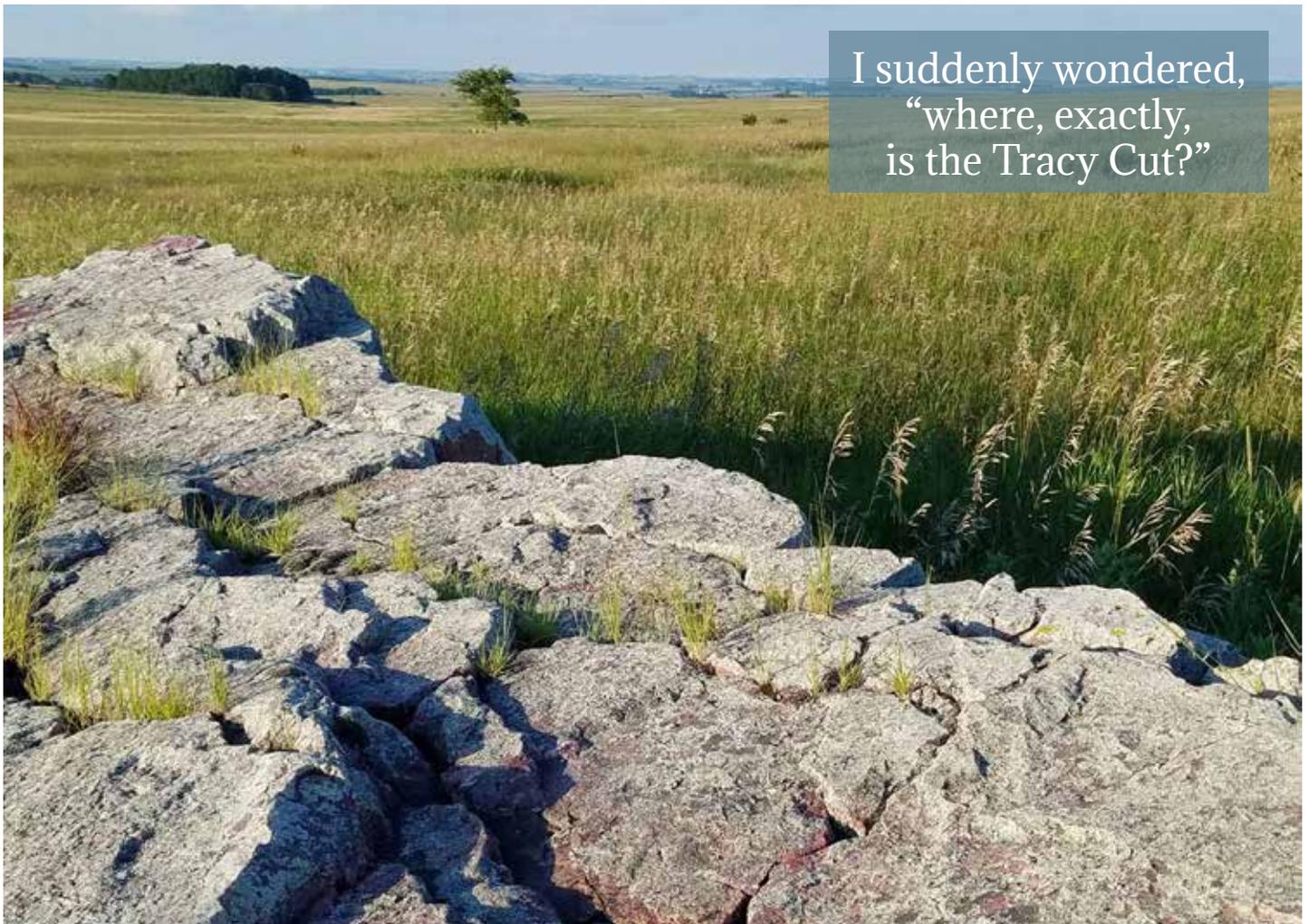
How did someone who dislikes cold and snow end up writing a book about one of the most historic of winters? That is an excellent question! An intense curiosity, love of research, and inspiration from previous LIWLRA conferences combined themselves into a wonderful quest.

Having lived in southern Minnesota my whole life, I've spent countless hours wandering the area between Walnut Grove and De Smet. In October 2016, I selected *The Long Winter* for my neighborhood book club. While preparing to immerse them in the world of the novel, I suddenly wondered, *Where, exactly, is the Tracy Cut?*—a pivotal setting in the plot.

That thought eventually led to nearly two years of my own immersion in that winter and the railroad development that preceded it. My initial goal was simply to find the Tracy Cut, where “the Superintendent from the East” admitted defeat and called off all further attempts to clear the tracks until the sunshine itself melted the snow.

Interestingly, Wilder struggled to find a plot while writing *The Long Winter*. Writing to her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, she confessed, “here is what is bothering me and holding me up. I can’t seem to find a plot, or pattern as you call it. There seems to be nothing to it only the struggle to live, through the winter, until spring comes again. This of course they all did. But is it strong enough, or can it be made strong enough to supply the necessary thread running all through the book.”

*continued on next page*



I suddenly wondered,  
“where, exactly,  
is the Tracy Cut?”

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR *continued*

Of course, Wilder did a wonderful job crafting a plot, and finding the necessary thread. That thread is part of a magnificent tapestry that links the novel to the history as reflected in the newspaper record. In *The Beautiful Snow*, I interweave Wilder's plot with the various voices and perspectives of the editors throughout the region to shine a light on that "struggle to live."

I am excited to guide you through what became known historically as the Hard Winter of 1880–81, along with tangent "sidetrack" subjects that further enrich the narrative. The more one learns about that particular winter, the more fascinating and impressive it becomes.

This monthly newsletter will take a peek into some of the research that led to *The Beautiful Snow*. The newspaper archives are a rich and wonderful resource. Specific patterns quickly emerged among the articles, and this informed the flow of the book. After briefly introducing the factors that led people to settle upon the

prairie, chapters for each winter month delve into the weather, railroad activities, food and fuel situations, the snow blockade's impact on the mail and newspapers, how people managed to get out and about, and the effect that boosterism had upon the messaging broadcast out of the region.

I went down many fun paths beyond the scope of the book simply because they were interesting. It does not take long to become familiar with names and personalities within a given town, and to become interested in the goings-on as they appeared within articles. I'll share some of those here as we go forward.

Thank you for the inspiration. It is my sincere hope that you will enjoy this journey!

*Cindy Wilson*



## A GLIMPSE INTO THE BEGINNING OF 1881

*Here is a sneak peek at the introduction to January.*

January was downright blizzardous, to borrow a beautiful word from the editors. It was cold, it was windy, and it was snowy. As a result, the railroads began their prolonged battle. Large crews, both paid and volunteer, donned shovels and braced themselves against the elements in the hope of getting a train into their towns, or to the towns "to the west" that were reported as destitute.

Already there were freight cars snowed in on sidetracks up and down the lines, and accidents involving snowplows and vulnerable shoveling crews became a sad and frequent reality.

Supplies of coal and wood were not yet critically low, but shortages were widespread enough that alternative fuels, such as hay, were employed.

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While trains became abruptly less commonplace, travel by wagon roads, sleighs, or even walking became popular. Community activities increased in number, though were sometimes cancelled due to snow, cold, or both.

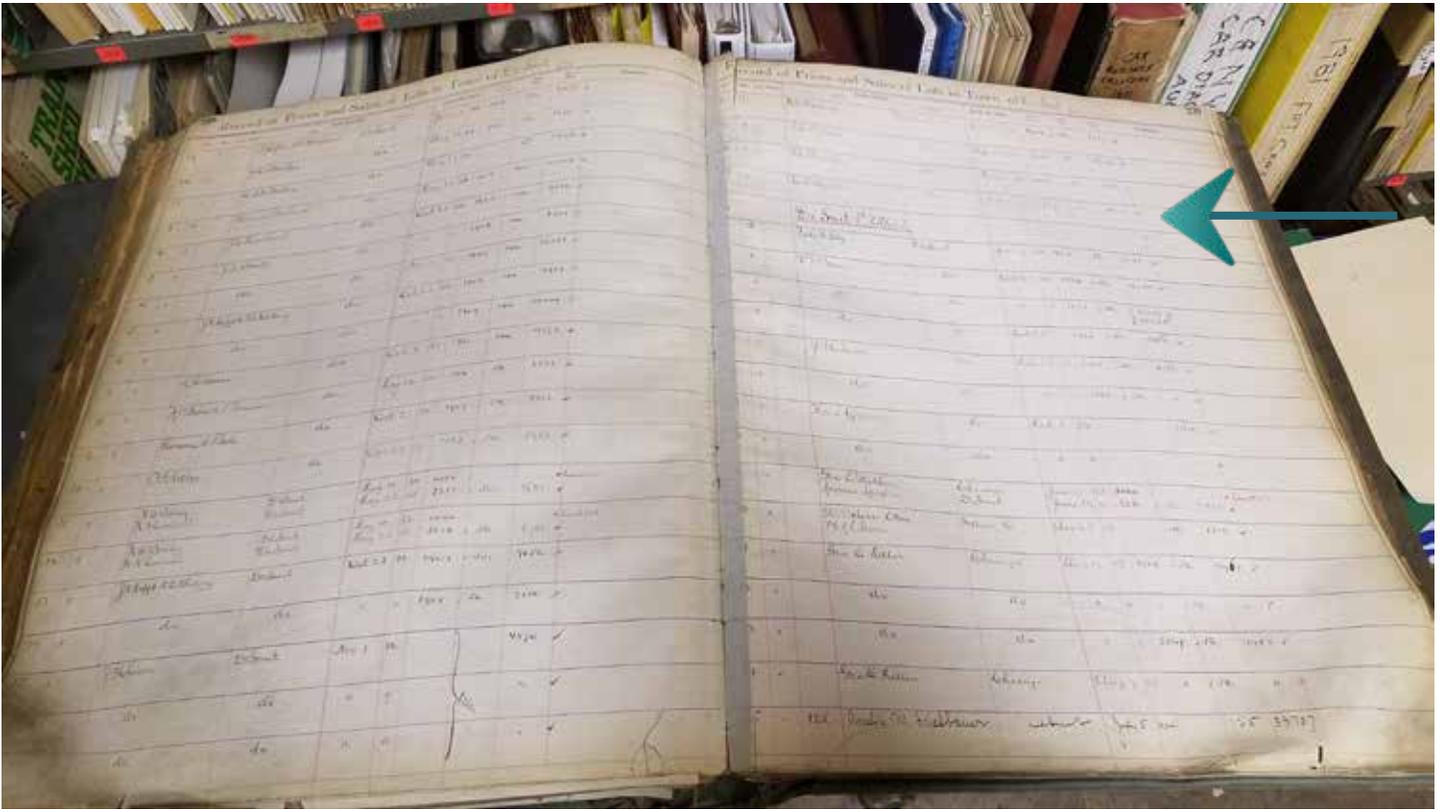
"Sunday was a terror.  
It snowed, and it  
blowed, and it drifted,  
until it seemed as  
though the whole  
country was to be  
inundated."

Brookings County Press  
Brookings, Dakota Territory  
December 30, 1880

Due to the increased unreliability of trains, alternate plans for mail delivery were established. Newspaper editors became more and more frustrated with the lack of supplies, whether that be paper or information, to share with their readers.

Prior to January, most instances of boosterism were general and positive. Now, however, examples of the "angry retort" became more prevalent, even humorous. The winter was just beginning.

## DIGGING IN THE ARCHIVES: Geeking out with the Archivist



*The Western Town Lot Company's land record book, open to the purchase by C.P. Ingalls of Lot 21 Block 4.*

Looking at the purchase records of the town lots within De Smet, and seeing so many familiar Little House names, was a definite highlight of the research phase. Talk about goosebumps! The book was huge, the paper thick, and it was fascinating to flip through. According to Chicago & North Western Historical Society Archivist Craig Pfannkuche, the recently rediscovered record book hadn't been seen in over seventy years. I was honored and excited to be among the first people to touch this wonderful, newly-found piece of history. Craig's interest in history aligns well with my own, and we spent a wonderful January day comparing notes about various topics, digging into different drawers, folders, boxes, rolled maps, and categorized photo bins.

*The original plat book drawing of De Smet. The green stars indicate location of the two lots discussed on next page.*



## DIGGING IN THE ARCHIVES: DE SMET LOT PURCHASES

In her autobiography, Wilder consistently wrote that her father had obtained two lots, diagonally across from each other at the intersection of Calumet and Second Street. The land records of the Western Town Lot Company were recently rediscovered within the archives of the Chicago & North Western Historical Society, and it confirmed that Charles P. Ingalls purchased Lot 21 of Block 4 (southeast corner of the intersection) for \$50. The purchase was recorded on July 17, 1880.

However, the record book shows that the second, Lot 8 of Block 1, had been purchased from the Western Town Lot Company by T. Maguire of Volga, also for \$50. That purchase was recorded on June 28, nearly three weeks before Charles' purchase was recorded.

Wilder noted that her father had built two store buildings in town during the spring of 1880, one on each lot. It is possible that Charles constructed buildings on each, hoping to purchase both lots from the railroad. Or, perhaps Maguire contracted Charles to construct a building upon the Block 1 lot.

In the autobiographies, the family moved from the Surveyor's House into the partially completed store building on Lot 8 of Block 1 (Maguire's lot), where an April snow sifted into the structure and covered them in their beds. She then wrote that this store building was sold and that Charles began building again on the second plot, which was Lot 21 of Block 4.

In the novel, these moves were compressed into moving from the Surveyor's House into the Lot 21, Block 4 building, where the snow fell upon the sleeping family. This is also the building where they spend the winter of 1880-81.

In all versions, fear of claim jumpers led the family to move to the homestead south of town while the shanty was still under construction, their third move into uncompleted structures within a relatively short amount of time. It is interesting that all three buildings were described as allowing snow to fall upon them as they slept.

Lot	Blk.	List Price	PURCHASERS.		DATE OF SALE.	No. of Contract.	Price Paid	No. of Deed.
			NAME	ADDRESS				
8	4		H. Whiting	De Smet	Oct 21 82	1903	50.	8327 ✓
9	7		L. E. Williams	do	Apr 28 82	1068	50.	5738 ✓
10	7		G. W. Bradley	do	May 1 82	1066	50.	5188 ✓
21	4		C. P. Ingalls	do	July 17 80	127	50.	4212 ✓

Entry showing the purchase, by C.P. Ingalls, of Lot 21 Block 4.

Lot	Blk.	List Price	PURCHASERS.		DATE OF SALE.	No. of Contract.	Price Paid	No. of Deed.
			NAME	ADDRESS				
1	1		J. Smith & J. E. Koorland	De Smet	Oct 23 82	1912	100.	11708 ✓
2	1	125.	T. Maguire City of De Smet	do	June 28 80	115	50.	2129 ✓
3	1		E. L. House	De Smet	Dec 30 86	7528		15815 ✓
4	1		E. L. House	do	" "	7529		15815 ✓
5	1		J. H. Carroll	do	Apr 9 83			5514 ✓
6	1		do	do	Oct 23 82	1915		6701 ✓
7	1		do	do	Apr 12 82	988	100.	5134 ✓
8	1		T. Maguire	Volga St	June 28 80	115	50.	2129 ✓
9	1		do	do	" "	116	50.	" ✓

Entry showing the purchase, by T. Maguire, of Lot 8 Block 1.

Photos by author, courtesy Chicago & North Western Historical Society

### How Were Wrecks Cleaned Up?

During the research phase, many newspaper articles about train derailments and wrecks were encountered. *How, in 1880, did they right a locomotive and/or cars?* Some additional research, a few emails, and a couple of new friendships later, fascinating answers are ready to be shared! August's *The Beautiful Snow* newsletter will feature photos and explanations about how wrecks like the one shown here were cleaned up.



*Wreck in Menomonie, Wisconsin, 1881*

Photo courtesy Chicago & North Western Historical Society

### Editor Clarence Graham

*Janesville Argus*, Janesville, Minnesota

Each newspaper had its own voice and personality, reflecting the editor who ran it. Some exuded significantly more style than others. Among the voices that called out from the faded ink (ok, microfilm...) was that of Clarence Graham, the editor of the *Janesville Argus*. Grounded and solid, he had a creative and expansive vocabulary, was not afraid to take on his critics, and was responsible for some of the more humorous quips of the winter. Next month, we'll learn more about this interesting figure.

“

*The Superintendent of the Chicago & North Western should send up a special agent and a special pot of oil to grease the wind mill at the water tank. Howls and grumbles like a flock of wild geese mourning for their first born. Excruciating and horrible.*”

*Janesville Argus, December 14, 1880*

### SIDETRACK - The Process

While preparing to present about the Tracy Cut at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Legacy & Research Association's July 2019 conference, I found workspace at my friend Dawn's deli. The dining room is an old one-room schoolhouse, which provided wonderful atmosphere for the work.



## ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER

Subscribe at [TheBeautifulSnow.com](http://TheBeautifulSnow.com)

While writing *The Beautiful Snow*, nearly 3,000 articles were harvested from the newspaper archives of South Dakota and Minnesota, covering March 1879 to May 1881.

In the months to come, via the emailed newsletters, we'll explore deeper corners of that history, and uncover additional fascinating stories that didn't fit into the book.



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