

Reader Questions

The Long Winter and *The Beautiful Snow*

Some readers like to read the novel first, then look into the history behind it. Others have enjoyed reading the corresponding chapters in the novel first, then stop to read the month's history, then return to the novel. There is no right or wrong! This table will help readers correlate chapters in *The Long Winter* to the months as historically detailed in *The Beautiful Snow*.

September and October

Make Hay While the Sun Shines
An Errand to Town
Fall of the Year
October Blizzard
After the Storm
Indian Summer
Indian Warning
Settled in Town

November

Cap Garland
Three Days Blizzard
Pa Goes to Volga
Alone
We'll Weather the Blast
One Bright Day
No Trains
Fair Weather

December

Seed Wheat
Merry Christmas
Where There's A Will

January

Antelope!
The Hard Winter
Cold and Dark

February

The Wheat in the Wall
Not Really Hungry
Free and Independent
Breathing Spell
For Daily Bread
Four Days' Blizzard
The Last Mile

March

It Can't Beat Us

April - May

It Can't Beat Us
Waiting For the Train
The Christmas Barrel
Christmas in May

The Beautiful Snow documents the Hard Winter of 1880-81 as seen through the weekly newspapers. Each monthly topic is organized by date then railroad line. Check out the extended Table of Contents at TheBeautifulSnow.com/Resources to get a glance of the book's structure.

- 1). Was this your first time reading a Little House book? If so, are you interested in reading others in the series?
- 2). What were some of the similarities between the winter as portrayed by Wilder and what was found in the newspaper record?
- 3). What were some of the more surprising differences?
- 4). The towns were brand new. How do you think this impacted daily life during the winter (both in the novel and real life)?
- 5). The railroad companies needed the settlers, and the settlers needed the railroads. What pros and cons can you think of about this relationship?
- 6). In *The Long Winter*, there is a chapter when a blizzard hits the town as the children are in school. The teacher and a man from town lead the children out into the storm, struggling for two blocks until they reach main street and safety. Would you have left the building? What things would you consider before deciding whether to stay put or to try to make it home?
- 7). Snow fell on the beds of the Ingalls family several times in the novel, yet Laura expressed appreciation for the well-built store building compared to the homestead shanty. Name some things about home construction now that provide comforts that we take for granted.
- 8). In the novel, it feels like a big adventure when Pa goes to Volga to help shovel, taking a hand-car on the tracks as transportation. As found in the newspaper record, several men were killed because work trains surprised them, either out in the open or insulated in the cuts. How did learning about that danger change your view of the adventure Pa experienced?
- 9). We tend to think of pioneers as having cellars and/or attics full of food preserved from the previous season. That wasn't the case for the residents of De Smet. What factors led to there being insufficient food among the residents as winter wore on?
- 10). Same question, but about fuel for heat.
- 11). *The Long Winter* has a different "mood" than other Little House books. Usually, Pa and Ma are sure, confident, and in control. Pa is jolly, Ma is steady and stoic. These traits made the girls feel safe and comfortable. In this novel, Pa is nervous about the impending winter, and at one point loses his temper and yells at a storm. Ma likewise shows her anger several times. Each instance shocks the girls. From a literary point of view, how do these altered portrayals help the plot while also maintaining the characterizations of each family member?

- 12). The story about the Superintendent from the East is a pivotal moment in the novel. The railroad company declared that it would not work to keep the tracks clear, leaving the residents to the west abandoned to the blizzards until spring. When reading the novel, how did you feel about this scene?

After reading *The Beautiful Snow*, what new insights do you have about the situation? (keeping in mind that the near-perfect story arc of the novel brilliantly used the railroads as the culprit of isolation to support the plot line).

- 13). Stepping back from the novel, Wilder's autobiography and letters indicate that she believed the Superintendent Story to be true, and that efforts had stopped. Do you think that is how Wilder experienced it? Or that her memory changed over time? Do you think Charles (Pa) was aware of the continued efforts to clear the tracks? Did he share those stories with his family or do you think he changed the stories to create adventure and bravery? (These are things we cannot know; they are simply fun to speculate about in terms of human nature, the science of memory, etc).

- 14). The Seed Wheat Run is an important part of *The Long Winter*. From a literary point of view, it is a near-perfect plot element. But there are some inconsistencies.

A). In the novel, Almanzo convinced homesteader Anderson to sell 60 bushels of seed wheat. Almanzo had the same quantity hidden within the walls of the feed store. Almanzo used the same arguments to persuade Anderson to sell that Royal had used in his discussions with Almanzo. Anderson used the same arguments in refusing to sell that Almanzo had used against Royal. Almanzo was able to persuade Anderson, where Royal had been unable to persuade Almanzo. Almanzo and Cap were absolutely heroes in going to get the seed wheat to save De Smet. Does thinking about the parallels between the two amounts of available seed wheat lessen his heroism?

B). The historic record shows that there were large amounts of wheat piled up in elevators all across the region, the result of productive harvests and the lack of available railroad cars to haul the wheat away. We do not know what the situation was in De Smet, but there were other towns within a day's travel, which likely had wheat piled up and available. If this was true, why were the residents of De Smet so desperate for wheat to grind into flour?

- 15). The business lesson around Mr. Loftus and the seed wheat is interesting. He paid \$1.25 per bushel for the seed wheat. Then he tried to sell it for \$3.00, claiming it as his right as a businessman. The town was understandably angry at his price gouging, and Almanzo and Cap were offended, as they had charged nothing for having risked their lives. The town (via Charles/Pa) argued that Loftus had his right to charge \$3.00 a bushel, but that they, as his customers, also had the right to not shop with him in the future. His business decisions would have consequences.

Loftus then says he will charge only \$1.25 for the wheat. Pa reassures him that the town would not begrudge him a profit (just not gouging). After thinking about it for a moment, Loftus sticks to the \$1.25 price. Do you think he was embarrassed? Remorseful? Or merely simply trying to save his business? Loftus remained a respected businessman in town, so this incident did not tarnish his reputation. What do you think about this interaction?

- 16). The newspaper editors had to get creative to produce their product once paper became scarce. What did you learn about how frontier newspapers were put together? List some of the important roles the editors and their newspapers played?
- 17). According to the newspaper record, towns put on dances, literary societies, concerts, oyster parties, and similar activities throughout the winter, despite the weather. Some events ended up canceled, but many were held. What roles did these events play for the residents?
- 18). Oyster parties seem an odd fad, but were wildly popular during the Victorian era. This was partly due to canning processes that allowed oysters to be preserved for longer-term storage, and partly due to the expansion of railroads that allowed rapid transit inland. What other changes in technologies were mentioned in *The Long Winter* and *The Beautiful Snow*?
- 19). Laura Ingalls Wilder is noted for her beautiful descriptions of the landscape, sunrises and sunsets, and other natural phenomena. Did any catch your attention? Share them with the group.
- 20). At the end of the novel, the residents of De Smet break into an emigrant car and steal the food that was within it. When Ma was shocked at the source of the food, Pa defended it as a way to feed his starving family. How did you feel about the theft of the unknown family's food? Justified under the circumstances? How about the stories throughout the winter about people pulling up railroad ties, bridges, trestles, and snow fence to burn for heat? Same situation? Or different?