

'Beautiful Snow'

Book uncovers fresh views of epic winter

BY SETH SCHMIDT

WHEELS ACROSS THE PRAIRIE CORRESPONDENT

Will historians and authors ever exhaust the topic of Laura Ingalls Wilder?

Not as long as there are researchers

and writers like Cindy Wilson.

The Minnesota native's acclaimed new book, *The Beautiful Snow*, invites readers to board a westbound Dakota Central train and revisit the horrific winter of

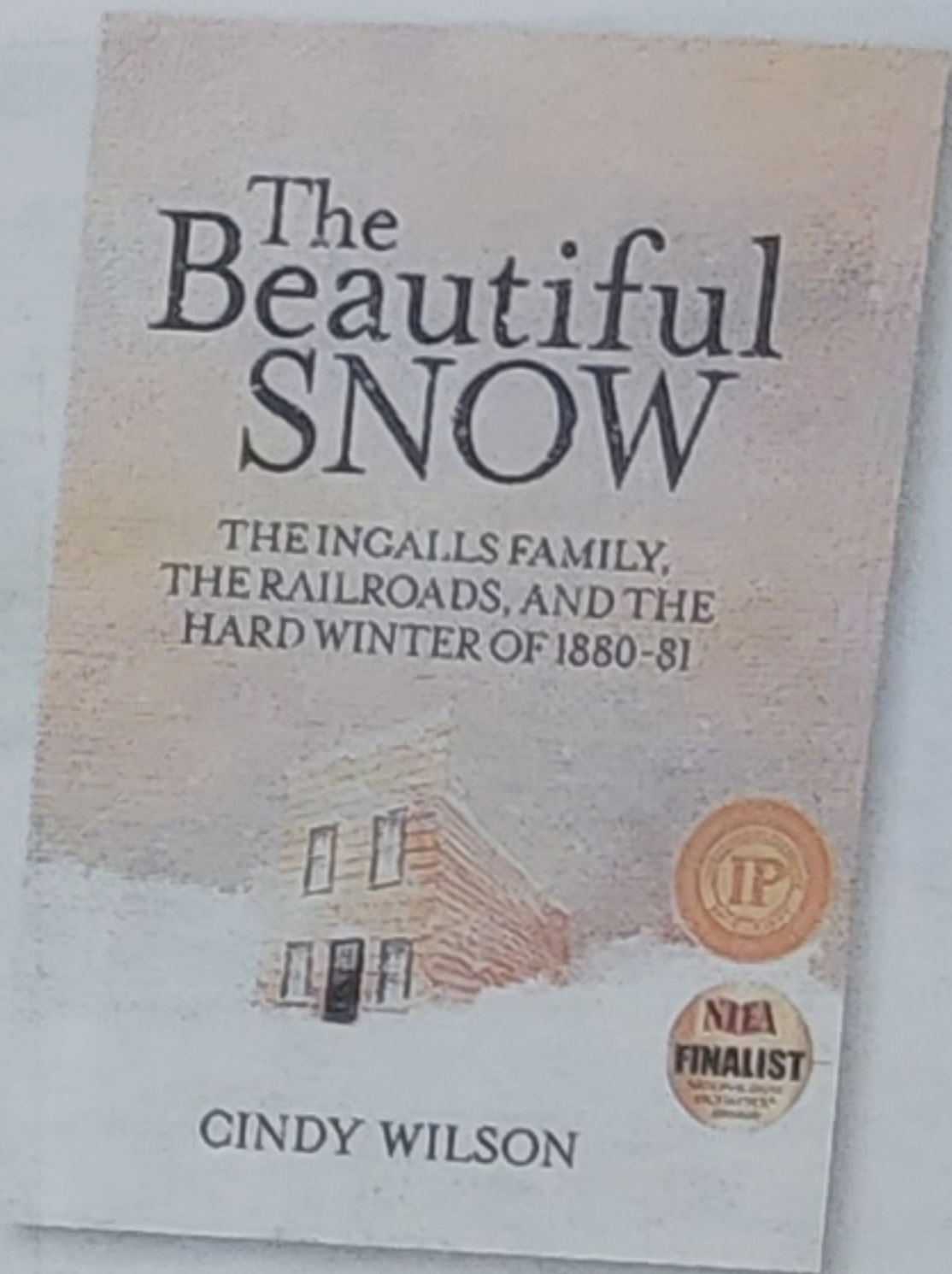
1880-81, immortalized by Wilder's autobiographical novel, *The Long Winter*.

Drawing on 140-year-old railroad records, weather data, and reams of small-town newspaper articles, Wilson recreates the Dakota and Minnesota frontier of the late 1800s. By interweaving the triple sources with Wilder's remembrances in *The Long Winter*, Wilson provides a fresh perspective of the hardships endured by the farmers, merchants, and tradesmen who settled in this vast territory.

"*The Beautiful Snow* is a thoroughly engrossing read," comments historian and author William Anderson. "Cindy Wilson's impeccable research resulted in an exciting panoramic account of the infamous winter of 1880-81, and its effect on Minnesota and the Dakota Territory."

Marcy Schramm, a Wheels board member and a meticulous Ingalls Wilder researcher in her own right, calls *The Beautiful Snow* a splendid addition to the pantheon of Ingalls Wilder literature.

"Cindy is a master at weaving the railroad history, community newspaper



articles, and the 1880-81 meteorological facts, with the events described in *The Long Winter*."

Five railroads

Wilson sets the scene for *The Beautiful Snow* by detailing the westward expansion of five southern Minnesota railroads in the 1870s through 1880. The construction of the Dakota Central—which extended rail service 240 miles west from Tracy to Fort Pierre, SD. in 1879-80—directly impacted the Charles and Caroline Ingalls family. In her novel *On the Shores of Silver Lake*, Wilder described the thrill of her first train ride as a young girl in traveling from Walnut Grove to Tracy in 1879 with her mother and sisters. After waiting at the Tracy depot to be picked up by "Pa" in a horse-drawn wagon, the Ingalls family continued west to make their new home in the fledgling Dakota territory town of De Smet.

But the family's first full winter in De Smet was brutal, with a relentless string of howling blizzards enveloping the surrounding prairie landscape with deep snow and bitter cold.

The winter's first storm, a three-day blizzard that paralyzed travel from the Dakota Plains to the Great Lakes, occurred in mid-October. The last heavy snow hit in mid-April, and didn't melt away until May. In between, an extraordinary parade of winter fury whipped up snowdrifts that stopped railroad shipments for weeks and months. Severe shortages of coal, firewood, kerosene, and food staples

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CREWS OF SHOVEL-WIELDING MEN were often overmatched by Mother Nature, in trying to keep tracks clear of snow during the arduous winter of 1880-81. This Chicago & Northwestern Historical Society photo, which is displayed at the Wheels Across the Prairie Museum, shows men attempting to clear passage for a train near Sleepy Eye in April of 1881. Similar epic snow-clearing efforts were also often needed in a snow-clogged cut west of Tracy.



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were the result in isolated towns and farms dependent upon the railroads. Mail stopped. Diets became ever more spartan. Twisted strands of hay became the heating fuel of last resort.

The Beautiful Snow explains that railroad "cuts" dug through hills during the Dakota Central's 1879-80 construction were vulnerable to snowdrift blockages. A choke-point west of Tracy was especially notorious, rating numerous mentions in *The Long Winter*, newspaper articles, and railroad records.

Armies of men were hired to shovel out mountains of snow from "the Tracy cut" and other blockages, often to little avail, as snow from new storms quickly drifted back in.

In *The Long Winter*, Pa Ingalls tells a dramatic story about the railroad attempting to open up the "Tracy cut," by ramming three locomotives full-speed into the drift. The operation described in the book fails grandly, by burying the locomotives so deeply it took men two days to dig the behemoth engines out. Pa Ingalls grimly tells his family that the railroad had given up on efforts to keep the rails running between Tracy and De Smet, and that the family shouldn't expect to see supplies from another train arrive until spring. Wilson's research doesn't turn up evidence to corroborate Pa's tale. But De Smet was in fact cut off from rail shipments for months that winter, with its first train in the spring of 1881 not arriving until May 4.

Wilson identifies the probable location of troublesome Tracy railroad as being



AUTHOR CINDY WILSON

4.5 miles west of Tracy, on the western edge of Section 30 in Monroe Township. Wilson writes that her quest to pinpoint the Tracy cut provided the inspiration for writing *The Beautiful Snow*.

Beautiful snow? Wilson explains that the phrase was often used by newspaper editors during the winter of 1880-81.

The 3,000 some newspaper articles that Wilson included in her research included the *Murray County Pioneer* of Currie, the *Pipestone Star*, the *Lyon County News* of Marshall, and the *Marshall Messenger*. However, except for an excerpt reprinted in another newspaper, nothing is included from the *Tracy Gazette*. No copies of Tracy's first newspaper, which went defunct in 1881, are known to exist.



THE "TRACY CUT" is still visible today, 4.5 miles west of Tracy, although wider and less steep than it was during the winter of 1880-81. Photo / Marcy Schramm.

In *Beautiful Snow*, Wilson acknowledges that reconstructing past events is often messy work. Evidence is sometimes contradictory and incomplete. Human memory can be misleading and absolute truths elusive.

But she concludes that the challenges

make historical research about the winter of 1880-81 all the more worthwhile.

Wilson writes:

"The more one learns about that particular winter, the more impressive it becomes."