



Visit us online  
www.headlightherald.com



TMB SPRING  
SPORTS  
PREVIEWS  
PAGE 1B



# TRACY AREA HEADLIGHT HERALD

GENERAL EXCELLENCE  
& GENERAL REPORTING  
STATE AWARD-WINNER

BRINGING YOU YOUR NEWS WEEKLY SINCE 1879

OUR 145TH YEAR - NO. 13

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2024

S2

## Lost piece of history brought to life

*New book explores railroad surveyor's two-year expedition in Minnesota and Dakota territory*

**BY PER PETERSON**

EDITOR

Inspired by Laura Ingalls Wilder's book, *The Long Winter*, Cindy Wilson has released her new book, *We Suffered Much*, unearthing a long-forgotten piece of Minnesota and South Dakota history.

In the book, Wilson chronicles the little known but true story of surveyor



WILSON

**HISTORY**

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3A



# History

Continued from page 1A

Charles Wood Irish and the creation of the railroad from Tracy to Pierre, SD, as well as the survey west of the Missouri River. Wilson pieced together details of Irish's odyssey by scouring through diaries, personal letters and contemporary newspapers.

"Tracy was the eastern terminus of the new line that Chicago & Northwestern built to go west — they wanted to reach the Missouri River, and they are also hoping to get to Deadwood (SD)," Wilson said. "When the surveyor initially started in January of 1879... he could ride the rails to Tracy because the rails at that point went up to Marshall and what now is Watertown (SD). But he went south to Currie and west from Currie to Pipestone and onto Flandreau (SD)."

Irish, however, was later directed to explore across Lincoln and Lyon counties, Wilson said. That is how the railroad line that shoots west out of Tracy was established.

Through her research, Wilson discovered that this is a tale of ordinary work and extraordinary adventures, sickness and hardiness, as well as unimaginable conditions. It's also a tale of Irish's devotion to his family. A man ahead of his time, Irish strove to stay connected to his wife and daughters, who proved to be just as adventurous and capable as he was.

Wilson, who grew up in Bloomington and now lives in Elysian said her pursuit of information didn't originate because of a book she originally didn't even plan to write, but from Laura Ingalls Wilder and her works.

"In 2016 I had my bookclub read Wilder's novel 'The Long Winter,'" she said. "I knew the women would want to know about how the history of that winter compared to what was in the novel. I started digging around and really couldn't find anything; I ended up in the newspaper archives and was discovering such amazing information about what was published week by week as people actually experience that winter."

Just before the pandemic hit in 2020, Wilson's first book "The Beautiful Snow: The Ingalls Family, the Railroads, and the Hard Winter of 1880-81" came out; the book documents the winter month-by-month across five different railroad lines in the region, going out into South Dakota.

"From that, I became very interested in the railroad history," she said. "The railroad part became very fascinating to me. It all started with curiosity about the hard winter."

"We Suffered Much" also includes Wilson's own adventures as she retraced Irish's footsteps — digging into mysterious camp locations, gaining access to rare maps and exploring sites with modern landowners.

Wilson is a sought-after speaker, has been published in South Dakota History and has worked with PBS American Masters.

