

## **WHAT LAURA SAW: MAKING A LITTLE HOME ON THE EXTREME GREAT PLAINS**

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Laura Ingalls Wilder's books *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *Little Town on the Prairie*, *The Long Winter*, and *Those Happy Golden Years* provide detailed descriptions of the experience of settlers who first farmed the prairies of Minnesota and South Dakota. We will show how these much-beloved works of literature can be used to explore the idea that western settlement was often a story of environmental misunderstanding. From the perspective of ecology, these books tell what happens when farmers with skills and assumptions attuned to the environment of the Northeastern United States confront the reality of the Great Plains. Wilder's books can help us understand the way in which settlers read, misread and mischaracterized the events which ensued from a catastrophe-driven ecosystem, one in which locust infestations, wildfires, floods, droughts, and severe temperature variations are normative rather than anomalous. This reading of the books does not take away from their real charm as coming-of-age stories in the late 19th century, or as often-heroic adventures of brave, hard-working people. Rather, from the vantage point of a scientific understanding of the prairie ecosystem we might discover a different interpretation of the settlement story. Looking at literature through an ecological lens may allow teachers in environmental science to use these narratives for exploring issues of prairie ecology, sustainable farming, and land settlement.