

My name is Laura Elizabeth Ingalls Wilder. I have written many books about my childhood, about my family living in many different, interesting places, but my favorite place on earth was when we lived on the banks of Plum Creek near Walnut Grove, Minnesota. Now, since I'm all grown up and married, I live in Mansfield, Missouri, with my husband Almanzo, and my daughter, Rose, but my heart always goes back to the days of living in the little house on Plum Creek.

When I was cleaning out a storage room the other day, I ran across an old journal that I used to write in many years ago during those beautiful, fun-filled days on Plum Creek. I can remember our attic room, how cozy my older sister, Mary, my younger sister, Carrie, and I were, tucked in under comforters and quilts in our featherbed. I would write in my journal while Mary read her treasured books, and Carrie would play with her little family of ragdolls. We were the happiest of happy girls, all safe and warm in our little house on the banks of Plum Creek with our pa and ma.

One entry in this particular journal brought memories rushing back as I read the story written by myself as a young girl, the words forever stamped upon my mind as ones I would never forget. Along with this journal entry, with my memories included, this is the story of one of the worse days, but possibly one of the best days of my life, the day that Carrie went missing.

It started out as an ordinary day, a warm, sunny day in late April; the trees were beginning to sprout tiny green leaves; the birds were busy building new nest for their upcoming little families; everything was right with the world. The comings and goings of my family were routine and normal that day. Pa was out in the fields, tilling the rich earth, getting ready to plant our crops; Ma was busy washing sheets, blankets, and clothes in the two big cast iron pots that were set up in

the back yard. One pot hung over the fire pit filled with steaming hot water for washing; the other pot was filled with cool water ready for the final rinse to wash the soap away before hanging the clean linens and clothes on the clothesline to dry.

Mary and I were helping Ma with the wash while Carrie played with her dolls, sitting in the shade of the big oak tree in the yard close by. Jack, our dog was laying on the quilt with Carrie, her constant companion when we were all outside, watching over his small charge with much love and devotion, always keeping a wary eye out for possible dangers that might come along that he would need to take care of.

Ma, Mary, and I were chatting as we worked, laughing together, but still watching Carrie at the same time. Even though it was hard work, wash day was a pleasant time spent with my mother and sister, out in the sunshine on a glorious spring day. We often worked together doing the endless chores around the house, but the work was made lighter because of the closeness it brought to all of us. Ma always told us that a task done with three pairs of happy, laughing hands was much better than a chore done with one sad, lonely pair of hands; the hard work and time went by faster when you were having fun. Mary was telling some story, and Ma was chiming in, adding funny comments when in mid-laugh at something Ma had said, I happen to glance over where Carrie was playing. The laughter stuck in my throat; my heart leaped in my chest when I realized all I saw was the quilt spread under the oak tree where she had been sitting, playing with her dolls just a second before. No Jack was to be seen, either, just Carrie's dolls spread out on the quilt, just laying there, abandoned.

How did that happen so quickly, how did she just disappear in the blink of an eye, and Jack, too? She and Jack were just there. It took a moment to be able to speak, then I remember shouting at Ma that

Carrie was gone, that I couldn't see her anywhere. The look of alarm on my mother's face belied the calm way she took control of the situation. She told me to look around in the barn, and for Mary to search the house while she looked in the front yard. When none of us could find Carrie or Jack, Ma told me to run and get Pa, which I did as fast as I could. Pa came running, and we began a more extensive search farther out from the house.

Despite the strained looks on my father and mother's faces, they were amazingly calm, planning what to do as the four of us hurried along through the woods around the house and barn. Pa told us to spread out; he and Mary would go to an old barn across the field that was falling in, quite a dangerous place for a small child to go, but a very tempting place to play. They would search the barn and the surrounding woods while Ma and I went in the opposite direction. Pa looked so worried as he and Mary hurried off to begin their search. Ma and I went toward the creek; what if Carrie had fallen in? What if she had drowned? I couldn't bear the thoughts of finding her that way. Ma looked like she was thinking the same thing, her face strained, and worried.

We ran up and down the banks of Plum Creek, yelling for Carrie, and for Jack, hoping and praying that we wouldn't find Carrie lifeless in the water. If this happened we would never recover, we could never love Plum Creek the way we did now, nothing would be the same ever again. We searched and searched, no Carrie, no Jack. Where were they? Panic began to rise inside me; Ma began to look a little haggard, too. Time passed, Pa and Mary found us, but like us, they hadn't had any luck, either. There just didn't seem to be any clues as to Carrie and Jack's whereabouts. I remember very vividly the growing anxiety and helplessness that was building up in all of us.

The sun was getting lower in the west, if we didn't find Carrie soon, it would be dark, and the nights were still very chilly. Carrie only had on a little cotton dress, no coat, or blanket to keep her warm. Also, no shoes, she loved to go barefooted when the weather was warm. Pa finally made the decision that it was time to go into Walnut Grove to get some help from friends and neighbors, to ask them to join in the search before it got too dark and cold. With heavy hearts we all started back to the house so Pa could saddle up our horse, Pete, to make the trip into town.

As we made the turn around the barn, imagine our shock and surprise when we saw Carrie, happily sitting on her quilt under the oak tree, playing with her dolls with Jack lolling at her side! The overwhelming relief that followed the realization that she really was there sent a welcomed, calming wave through all of us. We went running toward her, all of us shouting different questions as we ran. Are you all right? What have you been doing? Where have you been? Are you hurt? Questions rained down on Carrie like acorns falling from that old oak tree. She looked up at us with a questioning look on her face, her little mouth quirked up in a small secretive smile. Beside her, Jack seemed to have the same secretive look on his face, as well.

Carrie's bright little eyes twinkled merrily up at us in the fading sunlight; you could tell she thought it all had been one big, happy lark, a grand adventure; why was everyone jumping around, yelling? Not a word did she speak, she just sat there, smiling as we all took turns hugging and squeezing her to make sure she was all right. Jack got some loving hugs, pats, and encouraging words, too. Happiness was as thick as honey, fresh from the honeycomb, flowing around all of us; our dear, sweet, little Carrie was home, again, unharmed. We could breathe again; we could laugh, dance, and listen to Pa play his fiddle in front of the fireplace that night, the terror of the day melting away in the warmth

of our family being together, warm and snug in our little house on the banks of Plum Creek.

We often wondered and talked about this day many, many times throughout the years. What did the two of them do that day? Where did they go? What did they see? What adventures did they have that they were never willing to share? Carrie soon forgot about that day while so many unanswered questions teased the rest of us. Throughout the following years, it remained Carrie and Jack's secret. One thing we had no doubts about was that Jack watched out for, and took care of his baby girl, bringing her safely home that day, our good ole Jack, our loyal and precious pup.

That's what I recall from my journal as being the worst of days, also, the best of days, along with the actual personal experience of living through "The Day Carrie Went Missing".

*The End*