

The Rose Wilder Lane Papers

WILLIAM HOLTZ

IN 1980 the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa received the private papers of the American writer Rose Wilder Lane (1886–1968). Today Rose Wilder Lane is perhaps most easily identified as the daughter of the childrens' writer Laura Ingalls Wilder, but in the 1920s and 1930s she was well known in her own right. Her writing career began with newspaper work in San Francisco in 1915 and ended with a visit to Vietnam as a correspondent in 1965—at age 78.¹ In the 1920s she traveled extensively in Europe and the Middle East as a freelance writer; in 1928 she returned permanently to the United States and subsequently lived in Missouri, Connecticut, and Texas. In the 1930s she wrote primarily for the *Saturday Evening Post*, becoming increasingly identified with the anti-New Deal stance of that magazine. In the 1940s and 1950s she wrote primarily for *Women's Day*, authoring a definitive series of articles on American needlework; during this time she also devoted herself to an attempt to rethink and to propagate political theory sometimes termed neo-conservative or radical-right. Her influence can be seen in the establishment of the Libertarian party, which advocates an absolutely minimal role for government and a correspondingly enlarged area of personal freedom, and which has fielded a national candidate for the presidency in each election since 1972. The donation of her papers to the Hoover Library was by her heir, Roger Lea MacBride, who stood as the 1976 Libertarian candidate.

Rose Wilder Lane is connected with Herbert Hoover by way of her early biography *The Making of Herbert Hoover* (1920).

1. "August in Vietnam," *Woman's Day*, December 1965, 33–35, 89–90, 92–94.

First serialized in *Sunset* magazine, this work was in the mode of the popular journalism in which she had been trained. Hoover was then head of the American Relief Administration and typified in the popular imagination the successful American entrepreneur turning his talents to the rescue of Europe. The book led to a correspondence with Hoover and an acquaintance that continued intermittently throughout his life. The correspondence, sixty-eight letters dating between 1936 and 1960, is a part of the original Hoover papers; the added Lane papers bear occasionally on Hoover, but also hold information of substantial interest in other areas.²

The Hoover Library has arranged this material, occupying approximately ten feet of shelf space, by four series: Correspondence and Subject files; Laura Ingalls Wilder; Diaries and Notes; and Manuscripts. Of these categories, the manuscripts probably offer the least to the researcher; all but a few are simply typescripts of published material, ranging from the travel articles of Rose Wilder Lane's early career, through the short fiction of her middle years, to the needlework articles of her later years. Of the unpublished items, most are fiction or general interest articles that her agent was unable to place: notable exceptions, however, are a romantic thriller, "The Emerald" (1911), which is her first known effort at fiction, and a history of Missouri (1936), which seems to have failed to please the publisher who commissioned it. The diaries and notebooks, some ninety-six separate pocket-sized volumes, are almost continuous from 1918 to 1938 (although some must be dated by inference) and occasional until 1968. These are of primary interest to the biographer, but some, particularly the European journals, do have a broader interest as a contemporary account of a journalist's life in France, Italy, Albania, Serbia, Poland, Greece, Turkey, Syria, and Armenia from 1920 to 1927. Names later to be well-known—Dorothy Thompson, Lowell Thomas, Mary Margaret McBride, Isaac Don Levine, John Gunther, Sherwood Anderson, Edna St. Vincent Millay—appear casually in her pages along with many lesser figures.

2. The Rose Wilder Lane Collection relates peripherally to additional collections in other research libraries. Where these collections are listed in the *National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections* I have entered the reference in parentheses.

Broader research interests are served by the other two categories, the material relating specifically to the career of Laura Ingalls Wilder and the extensive correspondence of Rose Wilder Lane. The story of Laura Ingalls and her family is best known today through the television adaptation of *The Little House on the Prairie*, but the authentic and original account is contained in the series of autobiographical novels for juvenile readers that chronicles her family's pioneering trek from Wisconsin to Kansas to Minnesota to South Dakota. The published narrative moves around but never into Iowa, except by reference to Laura's blind sister Mary, who was sent to the Iowa School for the Blind at Vinton, Iowa. Nonetheless, the books afford fascinating reading for anyone interested in the early settlement of the Midwest. The items in this portion of the Lane papers are various but all connected to the writing career of Laura Ingalls Wilder. A series of letters reveals regular consultation and collaboration between mother and daughter; letters and memoirs from other family members and a diary by Laura's sister Grace Ingalls provide background material for the books; and an unpublished manuscript entitled "Pioneer Girl" offers an insight into Wilder's earliest conception of her material.³ Particularly notable in this manuscript is the account of the Ingalls' period in Burr Oak, Iowa, an episode that does not appear in the published books.⁴

The most varied research possibilities, however, are afforded by the correspondence and subject files. Rose Wilder Lane was

3. The first researcher to work with this material was Professor Rosa Ann Moore of the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, who reported her findings in "The 'Little House' Books: Rose Colored Classics," a paper presented at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association meeting in Washington, D.C., November 3, 1977. A later version was published as "Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: The Chemistry of Collaboration," *Children's Literature in Education* 11 (Autumn 1980), 101-109. At the time that Professor Moore studied this material, it was Mr. MacBride's intention to deposit it with the University of Virginia, which she reported at the professional meeting noted above. Mr. McBride's later decision to preserve the integrity of the collection in one donation to the Hoover Library should be noted. Roger Lea McBride has retained copyright properties in the writings of Rose Wilder Lane and Laura Ingalls Wilder.

4. A version of this episode has been prepared by Irene V. Lichty, director of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home and Museum in Mansfield, Missouri, from the holograph manuscript in that collection. It is available by mail order.

an energetic and always interesting letter writer throughout her life. She frequently made copies of her own letters and kept many sent to her. Roger Lea MacBride collected many of her letters from correspondents after her death to add to the collection. The largest bulk in this collection (over one-third of the correspondence) has to do wholly or in substantial part with the political and economic interests of her later years. Two of her published works, *Give Me Liberty* (1936) and *The Discovery of Freedom* (1943) develop the basic positions that her correspondence elaborates. A significant portion of this correspondence, her exchange with executive Jasper Crane, has been published in an edited volume.⁵ Other correspondents with whom she shared her views include Gareth Garrett, Merwin Hart, Roger Lea MacBride, Frank S. Meyer, Leonard Read, Hans Sennholz, and Orval Watts.

Other series of letters testify to other major interests in her life, largely literary and personal, and the two are often intertwined. Her correspondence with Fremont Older, Dorothy Thompson, Floyd Dell, Clarence Day, Jr., Mary Margaret McBride, Talbot Mundy, and her agents Carl Brandt and George Bye are the most significant here. Her career had begun as a feature writer for the *San Francisco Bulletin* in 1915, where she quickly drew the attention of the *Bulletin's* crusading editor, Fremont Older.⁶ He was among the few people she revered; their friendship and correspondence continued until Older's death in 1935. Older is an important figure in the history of San Francisco journalism; his letters and his wife's diaries are a part of the manuscript collection of the Bancroft Library of the University of California-Berkeley (MS 71-773). Apparently Lane contemplated a biography of Older after his death and asked his widow to return the letters she had written to him. Some fourteen letters were returned; these, with twenty-six of his letters to her (plus a letter to Older from Clarence Darrow), comprise a correspondence dating between 1926 and 1934 that forms an important adjunct to the California collection.

Another important correspondent was Dorothy Thompson,

5. *The Lady and the Tycoon: Letters of Rose Wilder Lane and Jasper Crane*, ed. Roger Lea McBride (Caldwell, Idaho, 1973).

6. Fremont Older, *My Own Story* (New York, 1926).

the political columnist and radio commentator and second wife of Sinclair Lewis. She was an aspiring writer fresh from college when she and Rose Wilder Lane met in Paris in 1920. Their friendship was immediate and became intimate: Rose, older and already established, was mentor and confidante in the early years of Dorothy's career; later she cared for Dorothy's child in New Jersey while Dorothy and Sinclair Lewis went to Stockholm for the Nobel Prize ceremony.⁷ Their relationship cooled as political differences emerged in later years, but their correspondence remained mutually respectful as late as December 1960, a month before Thompson's death. The Arendts Research Library of Syracuse University received Dorothy Thompson's private papers (MS 69-521), including portions of her correspondence with Rose Wilder Lane from 1921 to 1960. Lane's papers complete a significant part of that correspondence, containing ten Dorothy Thompson letters not in the Syracuse collection.

Among the forgotten writers of the 1920s and 1930s is Floyd Dell, the Illinois socialist who lived for a while with the Iowa writer George Cram Cook on Cook's farm near Davenport. Later both moved east, Cook to become director of the Provincetown players and the early promoter of Eugene O'Neill, Dell to become with Max Eastman an editor of the socialist journal *The Masses*—and, for writing against American involvement in World War I, to be tried (and acquitted) for treason. Dell's novels were popular in his day, and he claimed to have vetted the manuscripts of Theodore Dreiser's *The Genius* and Sherwood Anderson's *Windy McPherson's Son*. Dell and Rose Wilder Lane became acquainted in 1918 in an artists' colony at Cronton-on-Hudson, New York, and their friendship continued despite political differences that came between them in the 1930s.⁸ Her papers contain nine letters from him covering the years 1926 to 1934 as well as a fragment of a fiction manuscript. This material supplements the larger collections of Floyd Dell's papers at the Newberry Library in Chicago (MS 59-198) and at the Lilly Library of Indiana University.

7. Marion K. Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time* (Boston, 1973), 61, 75-77, 159.

8. Floyd Dell, *Homecoming: An Autobiography* (1933; reprint, Port Washington, New York, 1969), 155, 252-270, 334-335.

Better known today than Floyd Dell is Clarence Day, Jr., author of the still popular *Life With Father*. Lane apparently came to know him in New York in 1918 or 1919. Her papers contain twelve whimsical letters from him, including some drawings, written from 1926 to 1928. This material supplements the large collection of Day's papers in the Sumner-Keller Collection in the Beineke Library of Yale University (MS 64-1314). Another interesting series of letters is from Mary Margaret McBride, the radio talk-show hostess whose network program made her name a household word for over twenty years from 1932 on. She was a reporter and free-lance journalist in the 1920s, when she and Rose Wilder Lane were closest; she was among many writers whom Rose helped professionally.⁹ Nine letters from 1929 and 1930 express her gratitude and reveal the difficult times magazine writers faced in the early years of the depression. A less specific debt is acknowledged by Talbot Mundy, the writer of historical romances, whose dedication of his *Tros* (1934) to Rose Wilder Lane marks his appreciation of their correspondence. Twelve of his letters from 1934 and 1935 survive among Lane's papers.

Rose Wilder Lane's first literary agent was Carl Brandt, a major figure in the literary world whose agency still exists under his wife's direction. An interesting portrait of Brandt emerges from the 1979 biography of J. P. Marquand by Millicent Bell.¹⁰ An additional glimpse into his character and the relations between author and agent is provided by ten surviving letters from Brandt to Lane and the copies she kept of hers to him. This exchange supplements the major collection of Brandt's papers in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. In 1931, however, Lane chose as her new literary agent George Bye, whose more than three hundred letters to her from that year until 1937 read at times like the script of a musical comedy. Taken in conjunction with her diaries for the same years, and occasional letters from magazine editors, these letters offer a fascinating documentation of the problems of writing for mass circulation magazines during the depression.

9. Mary Margaret McBride, *A Long Way From Missouri* (New York, 1959), 176-177.

10. Millicent Bell, *Marquand: An American Life* (Boston, 1979).

Other large collections of Bye's letters are in the James Oliver Brown Collection of the Columbia University Library (MS 71-928) and in the Donald Culross Peattie Collection at the library of the University of California—Santa Barbara (MS 68-188).

The two remaining major series of letters have a significance more nearly personal than literary or political. The largest collection of letters from Rose Wilder Lane to any one person (226 letters, 1921-1928) contains those to journalist and sometime playwright Guy Moyston. Her relationship with Moyston was a romantic one for several years, and her letters to him are often purely personal; occasional asides turn to the broader subjects of writing, writers and publishers, her travels in Europe, or her life in Albania. And this Albanian connection, finally, is perhaps the most improbable episode in her varied career. Albania has always been something of an enigma to Western observers, but in the 1920s Rose Wilder Lane found it to be a place of special fascination. She recorded her first visit in *The Peaks of Shala* (1923); and in 1926 she returned with the intention of living there more or less permanently. Personal and professional concerns forced her return to the United States, but she retained a permanent interest in Albania by way of a young man who, as a boy of twelve, had been her guide during a mountain trip in 1921. Rexh [Redge] Mehta went to Cambridge University at her urging and with her financial support. Nominally he was sponsored by the shaky regime of Ahmet Zogu; but the stipend seldom came and she repeatedly sent him drafts for money she could ill afford. Later, when he was a minor government official, she paid for construction of a house for Mehta and his wife, whose first child became her namesake. Apparently she planned eventually to live with them. She saved his letters and kept copies of hers to him; their correspondence constitutes 102 letters dating from 1918 until just after the fall of Albania to Italy in 1939. Quite apart from its personal and domestic concerns, it offers a fascinating glimpse into Albanian culture and politics. Taken with her published writings on Albania and the relevant years from her journals, this substantial sheaf of letters should be of significant interest to those whose study of Albania must be from documents alone.

The Rose Wilder Lane Collection not only has integrity as a substantial body of family papers but also significant intersections with other collections and other possible lines of research. Another significant collection centrally related to Rose Wilder Lane is the Hader Collection in the library of the University of Oregon. Elmer and Berta Hader, well known as illustrators of children's books, were among Rose Wilder Lane's closest friends for many years. The friendship began in 1915 when she and Berta Hader worked together in San Francisco; later the Haders settled in Myack, New York, where their home became a frequent gathering place for a circle of writers and artists.¹¹ Their papers contain many letters from these people, including thirteen by Rose Wilder Lane. She refers to the Haders many times in her diaries and letters, but her papers contain only one unique item from them: a comic, annotated watercolor sketch of Rose and one of her friends in Paris in 1920. It is apparently based on her letters to them and illustrates the Haders' habits of correspondence with close friends. Other letters by Rose Wilder Lane are held by the Library of Congress (three to William Allen White), the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (one to George H. Lorimer, eleven to Adelaide Neall), the Newberry Library (four to Floyd Dell), the Lilly Library of Indiana University (one to Talbot Mundy, two each to Max Eastman and Upton Sinclair), and the University of Iowa (one to Ruth Suckow).

Finally, collections that are primarily for display rather than research also offer information related to Lane's papers. The Laura Ingalls Wilder Home and Museum in Mansfield, Missouri contains holograph manuscripts of all the Wilder books save *The Little Town on the Prairie* (at the Pomona, California Public Library) and *The Long Winter* and *These Happy Golden Years* (at the Detroit Public Library, and available for research on microfilm). This museum also holds family memorabilia, as does the museum of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society of DeSmet, South Dakota.

11. See the account by Mary Margaret McBride in *Long Way From Missouri*, chapter 11.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.