

What Ever Happened to Mary Ingalls?
Megan A. Conway, Ph.D.
RDS Managing Editor

Since this issue features a forum on the family, I knew that I could easily write an editorial focused on my own family experiences. But then I realized that many of my editorials focus on my family! After all, my family is the most important thing in my life. Who wants to read another editorial about the exploits of my eight-year-old daughter? So instead I am going to focus on another family. They are the Ingalls family, and most interestingly, Mary Ingalls, the blind sister of the book and American TV show's main protagonist, Laura Ingalls.

For those of you unfamiliar with the American classic saga of the Ingalls family, their journey by covered wagon in the 1870's from the state of Wisconsin, through Kansas, Minnesota and finally into South Dakota, is told rather charmingly in the children's series, *The Little House Books*, by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Laura wrote the fictionalized story of her family's true journey when she was an older adult. I devoured these books as a child, and even lived their stories of pioneer hardship, family love and adventure in play with my friends. In the 1970's Michael Landon directed and starred in the TV series, *Little House on the Prairie*, which was a big hit for family television and ran for nine seasons. The TV series diverges from the books in countless ways, but the primary themes of family and hardship remain, with the appearance of familiar characters from the books including Laura, her "Pa" and "Ma", and her three sisters: Mary, Carrie and Grace.

In real-life, the book, and the TV series, Mary becomes blind as a teenager, due to a then-unidentified illness that for many years was said to be Scarlet Fever but that more recently is thought to have been Meningitis. In the book, and presumably in real life, blindness is for Mary the end of all expectations that she will realize her hopes of becoming a teacher or of having a family. Laura's descriptions of Mary in the *Little House* books are of someone who suffers her blindness without complaint, always "patient and brave", who at first spends days upon end in a rocking chair in the corner, but who gradually learns to contribute to household chores and childcare.

As told in the *Little House* books and according to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Ingalls) although Mary does have the opportunity to attend a school for the blind in Iowa where she is educated and learns vocational and housekeeping skills, she lives with her parents or sisters for her entire life and never has a family of her own. Her primary vocations include involvement in church life with her mother, and making fly masks for horses to help make ends meet after her father dies.

As a child I never noticed the sad plight of Mary, other than to sympathize with her blindness in a general way. I never connected her blindness to mine, or noticed any difference between her sheltered life and my life of "mainstream" schools, wandering the neighborhoods of San Francisco with friends, and dreaming of a career as a movie star (or lawyer if that didn't work out). As an adult, Mary's situation seems to me to be dreary and representative of the

constraints that disability has placed on people of the past, and unfortunately, on people of the present. Why could not Mary have had a family of her own and pursued a career as a teacher, even if “only” as a teacher of others who were blind?

Apparently the creators of the *Little House on the Prairie* TV series thought the same. In the concluding episode of Season Three, Mary is slowly going blind. In the book *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura writes, “All that long time, week after week, when she could still see a little, but less every day, [Mary] had never cried” (p. 2). In the TV episode, we counted no less than seven bouts of tears in the one-hour episode, from each of Mary, Pa, Ma, Laura, friends and neighbors. In any case, in this final episode, before she became blind Mary was being courted by a neighbor boy but her blindness puts an end to that (and not without a choice scene featuring Mary screaming at the hapless lad, “Get out of here, just get out!” and then, you guessed it, bursting into tears). So Mary is shipped off to a school for the blind, where she seemingly spends about a month (but actually spent eight years). There she meets her teacher “Adam”, who it turns out is very young and very handsome (of course she can’t see him but we sure can). Adam teaches Mary some important life skill lessons (“You will learn to eat with a fork!”) and apparently some other skills as well, as Mary and Adam fall in love and the Season ends with plans for their future together helping other blind people.

I definitely prefer the TV version of Mary’s prospects. According to a website devoted to the history of the Iowa Braille School (<http://www.iowa-braille.k12.ia.us/vnews/display.v/ART/4921ebc684123>): “All social interaction, in any event, was done under the close supervision of a dormitory officer or teacher. Many deep friendships developed through the planned social activities, some of which resulted in marriage after graduation. Mary, however, did not choose to marry.” The real Mary Ingalls left a much smaller mark on the world than her TV persona. Did she ever sneak away to kiss a sweetheart when the dorm mother wasn’t looking? Did she truly live a life of pious spinsterhood as the limited records about her would suggest? Did she have a choice? Mary’s place as a family member, both in the home and without, was seemingly dictated by her blindness rather than informed by it. I wish history indicated otherwise.