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## The Long Way Home: The Little House Books, Born in the Albanian Mountains

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## The *Little House* Books, Born in the Albanian Mountains

WE WHO BLITHELY DRIVE TO THE MOUNTAINS FOR A WEEKEND forget that mountain ranges for thousands of years barred peoples from each other. The ridges were truly remote.

I've been working for a while on a book about Laura Ingalls Wilder, who, in the 1930s and 1940s, wrote the *Little House* book series based on her nineteenth-century pioneer childhood. An experience in a remote mountain range inspired Wilder's secret collaborator—her daughter, Rose. Rose Wilder Lane was a famous fiction writer who believed that hard times made America.

People who explore wilderness often tell me that Laura Ingalls Wilder inspired them. If they knew more about Rose Wilder Lane, they'd say the same of her. The two women together wrote the books about Laura's hardscrabble childhood, which shaped Laura and her family (with a little editorial tweaking) into heroes and heroines. Rose herself wrote two adult novels about pioneers. Readers eagerly jumped into these stories published during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, the worst economic and environmental disasters in a hundred years. Readers sent letters to Wilder telling her that they had found courage in the pioneers.

Only recently have I realized that this courage made its way into writing because Rose Wilder Lane went to the mountains of Albania ten years before they started writing the books. The trip inspired her to live in Albania for a few years during a time the tiny nation was a destination for Bohemian Europeans and Americans. There, she pondered her own past and that of her mother and father. She wrote to them, asking them for details of their covered-wagon trips and early farms on land buffalo had recently trampled.

Rose's trip through the northern Albanian mountains was on horseback in 1920. The beauty of the country, the sweet tenacity of her boy guide, and the harshness of its tribal ways struck her. Many of the people she met had never seen women from the West.

"I had the vaguest notion of Albania," Rose wrote in her book, *Peaks of Shala* (Harper & Brothers, 1923). "I knew it was the smallest and newest member of the League of Nations; I knew it was in the Balkan wars. . . . If some one, testing my intelligence or psycho-analyzing, had said to me, 'Albanians,' I should have replied, 'Bandits.'"

But she had joined a small group with two other Red Cross women who were considering opening a school in the mountains, an interpreter who was secretary to the Albanian minister to the interior, and guides who included a 12-year-old Albanian named Rexh Meta.

At times, if you believe Rose literally, their ponies navigated the steep incline by standing on their hind legs and pawing the rocks with their front legs. One of the women lay "almost perpendicular" on her pony's back. The guides each carried 20 pounds and walked next to the ponies. The guides sang. "The sun swung to its highest and sank again while we climbed," Rose wrote. "It was low in the sky—it seemed on a level with us—when we made the last interminable hundred yards up into the Chafa Bishkasit [the Road of the Mountaineers]. We were in the sky; there is no other way to say it, and no way in which to describe that sensation of infinite airiness. Forty miles behind and below us, Lake Scutari lay flat, like a pool of mercury on a gray-brown floor."

Rose went back to the United States for a period, then returned for another visit. On a day when she stood on a high, lonely meadow there, looking down on simple villages and farms, she resolved to live in Albania. By fall 1926, after another stay on the Missouri farm, Rose was back in the Balkans with a friend (nurse Helen Boylston, who wrote books for girls). They spent nearly two years living in Tirana, in a big house with a walled garden. Here, Rose wrote stories and a novel, but not about her lowland garden; the mountains had done their work. Away from the American heartland, she saw its rough striving spirit clearly. She wrote serial fiction about the American Midwest. In a notebook of ideas, she planned ideas for books about pioneers.

Rose (and Boylston) finally left Albania in 1928. Rose missed America, although she would not have put it that way. By 1928, Rose was back living at her parents' farm, urging her mother to write down all of her memories about pioneer days. And so they began the work on *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and six other books.

—Christine Woodside  
Editor-in-Chief

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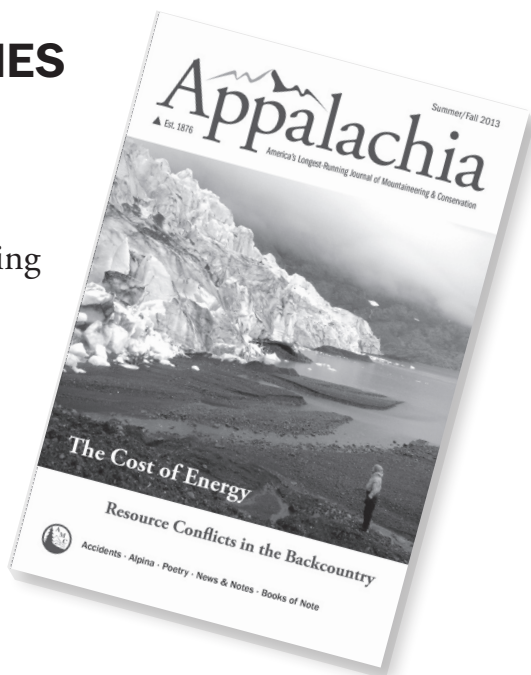
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