

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

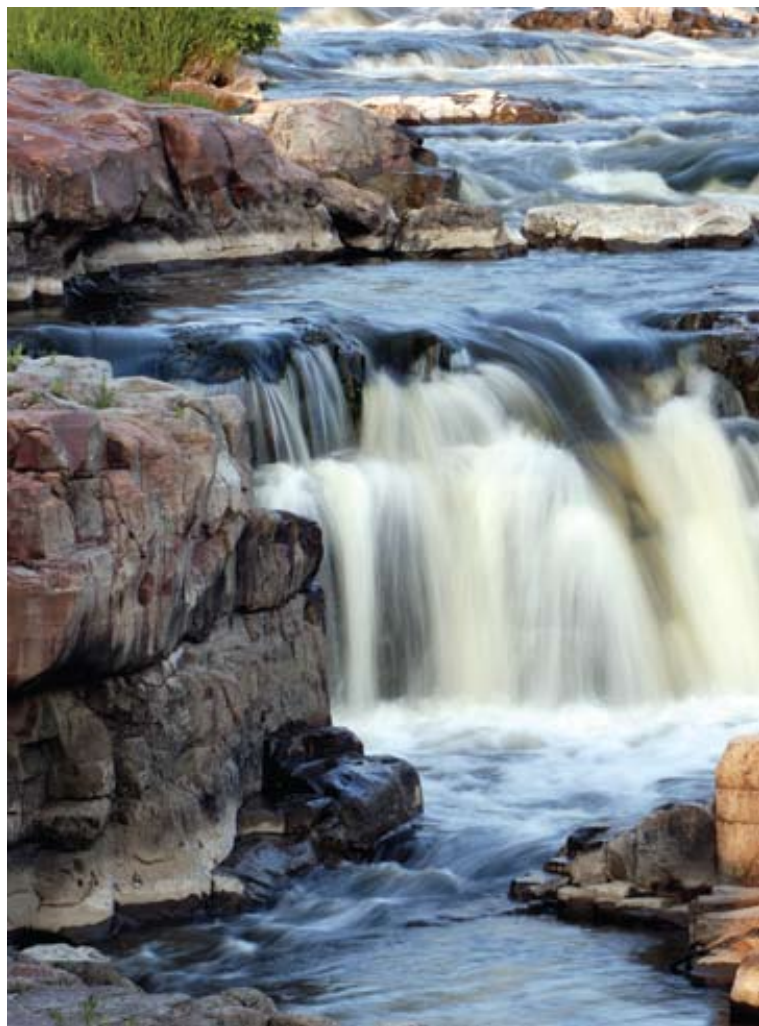
Amazing Days *on the Prairie*

by Anna Hobart

Sioux Falls, South Dakota ranks high on my list of comfortable American cities. It's one of those hometowns of the heartland where people smile at strangers, are unfailingly polite, and seemingly appreciate the good things they've got going.

Forbes magazine likes the little city on the Big Sioux River for its economic climate. (It regularly places tops in the publication's surveys of places to do business or find work.) Locals enjoy an enviable lifestyle. The charming downtown boasts a bonanza of public sculptures, quaint trolley cars and a bounty of cute shops and cozy restaurants. There are several art galleries and studios, museums and performing arts groups. The Sioux Falls Arena packs the calendar with sporting events, concerts and expositions. There's a year-round zoo, and a large park surrounds the namesake falls, a must-see for every tourist. Visitors find plenty of things to see and do right in town.

That said, anyone who grew up pining for a *Little House on the Prairie* experience should schedule a day trip from Sioux Falls to De Smet, South Dakota—about an hour-and-a-half away by car. If by some fluke your elementary school teacher failed to read Laura Ingalls Wilder's stories aloud to your class, you may be scratching your head. *The Little House on the Prairie*



The town's namesake falls on the Big Sioux River are a must-see

TV show plunked Laura, her ma and pa and sisters in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, where they lived out more than eight first-run seasons and have existed in syndication for a quarter-century. Hollywood's creative license took a toll there. In reality, the Ingalls were nomads hop-scotching from Wisconsin to Kansas, Minnesota, and Iowa before finally putting down roots in the Dakota Territory when Laura was a teenager. (They only spent two years in Walnut Grove.) In DeSmet you find the truth of their tale.

Tourists started poking around town almost as soon as Laura published the first of four books set in the community. That 1939 work, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, detailed how the family arrived on the heels of the first government survey team and, while waiting to file their homestead claim, lived in a lakeside house the surveyors left behind. The Ingalls hunkered down in that simple structure during a series of brutal blizzards documented in *The Long Winter*. When spring came, DeSmet began to grow up around them. Laura immortalized its development in *Lit-*



restored. Its period furnishings include a dresser built by Pa Ingalls. Across the street, the Discover Laura Center is a hands-on museum featuring a one-room schoolhouse and all its trappings, plus plenty of 19th-century gear and gizmos. Among its many activities, the young and young-at-heart can work a treadle sewing machine, or learn to spin wool.

In 1880, the family moved to a 157-acre farm. That Ingalls Homestead is now a commercial venture featuring a reproduction of the Ingalls' "little house" and a barn reconstructed in their exact locations. It also presents a sod dugout similar to the Ingalls' home on the banks of Minnesota's Plum Creek. Covered wagon rides, a petting zoo of farm animals and a re-creation of an 1880s-era school make this a fun adventure for Little House fans of all ages.

After seven years on the homestead, Pa gave up farming and built the family a modest, white, wood-frame house in town. The simple two-story structure still stands on its original Third Street location and contains many of the Ingalls' possessions. By the time her family moved to that final home, Laura was 20 years old, married to homesteader Almanzo Wilder and helping him tend a wheat crop near DeSmet. Its failure was the first in a series of setbacks that eventually prompted their move to Missouri's Ozarks where

Laura wrote the books detailing her childhood.

For three weeks each July one of those stories is dramatized during De Smet's Laura Ingalls Wilder Pageant. The theater is located outdoors between the Ingalls' original homestead and the marshland that has replaced some (but not all) of the Silver

Lake of Laura's day. The site itself is a part of the community's Little House legacy.

Maps provided by the Memorial Society direct visitors to other Little House landmarks. They include the land claim where newlyweds Laura and Almanzo Wilder welcomed their only surviving child, Rose, and their place of worship—The First Congregational Church (the stained glass windows are still held in place by frames Pa crafted). The hilltop cemetery, where Ma, Pa, Mary, Grace, Carrie and Laura's unnamed son are all laid to rest, is also noteworthy. As are the stories and their still-touching portrayal of this region.



Homes on the Prairie: Author Laura Ingalls Wilder and her family spent their first Dakota winter in the structure shown at left; Later Charles "Pa" Ingalls built the house shown at right

the Town on the Prairie and reflected on her stint as a 15-year-old South Dakota schoolmarm smitten with the young farmer Almanzo Wilder in *These Happy Golden Years*.

Writing secured Laura's place in history. Generation after generation falls in love with her work. Shortly after the author's 1957 death at the age of 90, De Smet's city fathers made it easier for fans to connect with her stories by establishing The Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society and turning much of their still-small town into a tribute to the author and her family. The original Surveyors' House has been moved from the shores of Silver Lake to downtown and is completely



Next summer, Sioux Falls' Washington Pavilion—the community's impressive all-purpose arts organization—will present the Guthrie Theater's highly acclaimed *Little House on the Prairie, the musical*, starring Melissa Gilbert as Ma. The original Minneapolis production debuted in the fall of 2008 and ran for 93 sold-out performances. Sioux Falls is among just 30 cities included in the national tour.

Audra Fullerton, director of artistic planning for the Pavilion's Husby Performing Arts Center said, "When it was brought to our attention that it was going on tour we just had to be part of it because of its profound relevance and historic importance to our region." The show will run June 1 through 6, 2010.

It's not necessary to wait until next summer to get a taste of rural South Dakota. Autumn in Sioux Falls holds other opportunities to feel close to the land. During the harvest season, anyone can get a tiny glimpse of the pioneer experience by heading south of town to pick apples or choose a fresh pumpkin at the Country Apple Orchard near Harrisburg. About five miles from there, the Heartland County Corn Maze is an opportunity to clamber through a dense field carved with paths that also form a work of art. This manner of fall fun is a far cry from cutting corn with a hand sickle or a team of horses. The tasks that meant survival for Laura and her family now provide pleasant pastimes for those who live much easier lives. Her tales of the faith, love and friendship that sustained the prairie pioneers still resonate in Sioux Falls. ■



Aerial view of Heartland Country Corn Maze's mountain lion design

APPLES: BECKY MACDONALD MAZE: HEARTLAND COUNTY CORN MAZE

**1000 AMAZING ANIMALS.
6 CONTINENTS.**

ONE PLACE.

GREAT PLAINS ZOO
& DELBRIDGE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

Delbridge Museum of Natural History in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, home to the collection of hunter Henry Brockhouse. Combined admission with the Great Plains Zoo. www.greatzoo.org

real mountains • real town • real vacation

Established in 1887.
866-710-5071
www.strater.com

get real **DURANGO** -COLORADO-

Durango & Silverton
Narrow Gauge Railroad
800-408-1639
www.durangotrains.com

Get your free travel planner today!
866-631-7010 • www.durango.org

Little House on the Prairie The Musical

with
Melissa Gilbert
as "Ma"

Melissa Gilbert & Steve Blanchard in The Guthrie Theater Production of
LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE The Musical

and Kara Lindsay as "Laura"

book Rachel Sheinkin music Rachel Portman lyrics Donna diNovelli

based on the 'Little House' books by Laura Ingalls Wilder

directed by Francesca Zambello

production initiated for the stage by Adrienne Lobel and Francesca Zambello

TICKETS START AT \$34.00!

ONE WEEK ONLY! • JUNE 1-6, 2010

For tickets call: **(605) 367-6000**

www.washingtonpavilion.org

Downtown Sioux Falls, SD



**WASHINGTON
PAVILION**
of Arts and Science