

Laura's Long Winter: Putting the Hard Winter of 1880-81 into Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Long Winter, by Laura Ingalls Wilder, chronicles the Ingalls family's survival of the brutal winter of 1880-81 in DeSmet, South Dakota. The book includes stories of multiple blizzards lasting multiple days, with little separation between events, and with blizzards occurring from October through April of that winter. The family resorted to measures such as burning hay for heat and grinding wheat in a hand coffee mill for food, with train service halted to the town and supplies short in the young settlement. The "Hard Winter," as it is known historically, had a significant impact on not only the Ingalls family and DeSmet, but on families and towns across the Plains. With train service newly extended into South Dakota, settlers arrived and towns became established just a year or two before the Hard Winter in most locations, with little or no time to grow an adequate crop or lay in an adequate supply of food and fuel for the winter.

Official weather information is scant across the Plains states in 1880-81, as most settlements were newly established and had not begun keeping official weather records. There were, however, a few official observations in the region, including those in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Omaha, Yankton, and several military fort locations in eastern South Dakota. Using these observations, as well as unofficial weather documentation from historical records, it is possible to not only characterize the severity of the Hard Winter but to determine more specifically the intensity of that winter relative to the period of record. The available weather records will be used to place the Hard Winter into perspective, looking at factors such as temperature, amount of precipitation, number of snow days, and wind information. By looking at the combination of factors, the severity of the Hard Winter can be compared to other winters that have weather records, with the potential to look for comparable winters as well as to determine if the winter of 1880-81 was indeed one of the "worst" on record in the region.

In looking at weather records, this study will be able to determine the extent of literary license in *The Long Winter*, and conversely, the weather facts of that winter.