

**The Iowa Braille**  
AND SIGHT SAVING SCHOOL

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## **Mary Ingalls Era**

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1982

**The Mary Ingalls Era**

Mary Amelia Ingalls was born in Pepin County, Wisconsin, on January 10, 1865. Her father, Charles Ingalls, a pioneer farmer, later homesteaded near DeSmet, Kingsberry County, South Dakota Territory. She had become totally blind at the age of 14 due to what was then classified as brain fever, a general term used to encompass a span of diseases. Some speculate that it was actually scarlet fever that caused Mary's blindness. On November 23, 1881, at the age of 16, Mary Ingalls was enrolled at the Iowa College for the Blind.

After Mary became blind, her younger sister, Laura, spent many hours reading aloud to Mary and helping her memorize what was regarded as pertinent material. Since there was no school for the blind in South Dakota, the decision was made to send Mary to college in Iowa, a school referred to them by a traveling missionary. Making a living was a constant struggle for the Ingalls family; money was scarce due to crop failures and illnesses. Laura helped to provide the necessary tuition for Mary by basting shirts for a total of 25¢ for a 12-hour day. An indication of the prevalent adaptability of the family can be noted in that Mary and her parents ate blackbird pie during the long train ride to Vinton, although blackbirds had helped devastate family crops. They were determined to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to provide Mary with the best type of education available.

Typically, students then arrived in Vinton by train and were met at the depot by a horsedrawn bus. New students entered the main building through a back door which was near a comfortable, well-lighted sitting room used by Superintendent Robert Carothers. Although steam heat had been installed, its frequent ineffectiveness made the wood stove in that room a welcomed source of heat for the new arrivals. After a conference with Robert Carothers, new students were frequently presented to Lorana Mattice, a highly competent blind teacher whose warm, friendly manner soon put them at ease. Parents were encouraged to stay with their newly enrolled child the first few days, until the child became acquainted with the new surroundings.

The school curriculum at the time Mary enrolled encompassed nine years. The school population during her first year consisted of 94 students – 42 males and 52 females. Ages in the regular grades ranged from six to 29, while those enrolled for only the industrial classes ranged between 22 and 67.

Course offerings were extensive and included the following:

spelling, arithmetic, grammar, history, geography, physiology, natural and mental philosophy, algebra, rhetoric, chemistry, zoology, raised print, New York Point, literature, civil government, political economics, plane and solid geometry, and botany.

Music courses offered:

vocal, harmony, piano, pipe organ, violin, guitar, flute, clarinet, and cornet

The Industrial Department offered construction of the following:

brooms, mattresses, hammocks, fly nets (for horses), cane seating, piano tuning, carpet weaving, sewing, knitting, and beadwork

Mary's academic achievements were high, especially in mathematics. Her performance in music, mainly on the organ and piano, was excellent. Students were graded on deportment (conduct), and Mary received 100%, the highest of anyone in her class. School came easily for her due to her innate ability and hunger for learning as well as the positive attitude for education that was part of her family heritage.

The high school subjects Mary studied were on a college level, a plan rigidly enforced by Thomas McCune, who became superintendent in 1882. Essay, poetry, and music contests were given considerable emphasis, with students vying with one another on a competitive level. A prize of \$10.00 or \$15.00 was frequently awarded to contest winners. Many students worked hard to be among the prize winning group. High scholastic standards were accepted as matter-of-fact.

There was no gymnasium during the 1880's. The daily schedule included assembling the students in the chapel for exercises after 4:00 p.m. The chapel was located on the third floor of the north wing, excluding the narrow "T" section that juts out from east to west. Under the guidance of the head lady teacher, students did a variety of exercises accompanied by music. Exercises were planned according to age, ranging from "free gymnastics" to working with dumbbells, rings, and wands as well as marching.

A favorite pastime was walking with a close friend or in a group. Countless hours were spent walking up and down the halls, strolling on the expansive verandas, ambling along the gravel front walk and around the cinder oval

back of the main building. Only a minimal amount of outdoor play equipment was available, mainly swings. Younger students spent many happy hours on a long boat-shaped structure called a Rock-A-Way, located on the back (west side) veranda. Boys and girls had limited or no association depending on their age and grade level. Play areas were either scheduled at different times or designated entirely apart from each other.

Contrary to what had apparently been the practice previously, Thomas McCune permitted and encouraged students in Mary's era to mix with one another socially. Many parties were planned, and, for the first time, dancing became a part of these get-togethers. Those who showed no interest in dancing spent their time visiting with one another.

The Literary Society met on Saturday evenings, and, during the half-hour intermission, the well-supervised students were permitted to mix on a boy-girl basis. In the classrooms, boys and girls sat on opposite sides of the room and were not permitted to engage in conversation with each other. However, through the planned social activities, many deep friendships developed, some of which resulted in marriage after graduation. Mary, however, did not choose to marry.

Fire drills were held periodically while Mary was in school. If everyone managed to clear the building within three minutes after the fire alarm sounded, Thomas McCune rewarded the group by cancelling classes for the remainder of the day and gave permission to seek whatever reasonable amusement they preferred.

Without indoor plumbing, bathing facilities were limited and of a makeshift nature. All students were required to change their clothes once a week and take a bath each Saturday. A half-hour period was assigned to each individual for bathing. Teachers supervised and assisted with the bathing of younger children or even with any older students who were careless in carrying out the bathing requirements.

Most students' rooms were furnished with two double beds with two students assigned to each bed. Older students were allowed to choose their bed partners. The beds had "wire bottoms, with mattresses stuffed with either wood or husks." Bed linen was usually changed weekly. The boys' living quarters were in the south wing while girls occupied much of

the north wing. Students were required to care for their living quarters with matrons assisting whenever help and guidance were needed.

Meals during the time Mary attended the Iowa College for the Blind were plain, yet adequate. A planned weekly menu was repeated quite consistently, which meant the students could predict fairly accurately what would be served at a given meal. The girls sat on one side of the dining room, the boys on the other, with 16 students at each table. Preceding each meal, a blessing was said.

Records show that Thomas McCune placed strong emphasis on the development of acceptable table manners. Each table group was responsible for keeping their table neat and clean. Any student who stained the tablecloth was immediately removed from the table, and those remaining had to eat from oilcloth, due to their irresponsibility in preventing the untidy accident. Greasy fingers were not tolerated. Each student was expected to use an oblong-shaped slice of bread to assist in non-spillage from the plates. Older students were expected to furnish their own table napkins, but the school supplied napkins for the younger children.

Records show that Mary Ingalls was never a behavior problem. Disciplinary measures were frequently needed, however, for many students. Corporal punishment was not permitted. One of the common disciplinary measures was to have the misbehaving student sit apart from the rest of the group, either in the hall or in the library, although one teenage boy was sent home for using profanity.

Mary Ingalls graduated at the age of 24, in June 1889. Records suggest that she was absent during the 1887-1888 School Year due to illness or lack of funds, although this is not definitely known. She was one of eight in her graduating class which consisted of five females and three males. At the commencement exercises, she recited a Robert Burns essay entitled "Bide A Wee and Dinna Weary."

After graduation, Mary spent most of her remaining life living in the family home in DeSmet, South Dakota. Mary and her mother were highly active in the church as well as in the community. Both of them played the organ in the church, and Mary taught Sunday School classes. After her father's death, she made fly nets which helped supplement the family income. When her mother died in 1924, Mary lived for a brief time with her sister, Grace, whose home was near DeSmet. Later, she went to live with her

sister, Carrie, at Keystone, South Dakota. On October 20, 1928, at the age of 63, Mary died of pneumonia and was buried in the family plot near DeSmet. She did not live long enough to know that her sister, Laura Ingalls Wilder, would immortalize the family through her writing of the Little House books.

## **A Rural Choir**

By

Mary A. Ingalls

Every evening in the spring

All the froggies meet and sing  
Sitting on a mossy log  
By the brookside in the fog

Mister bullfrog leads the choir  
And they tune up higher and higher  
Learning how to swell their throats  
Reaching high peculiar notes

'Till their song goes up so high  
That it reaches to the sky  
Then the twinkling stars look down  
And the moon man tries to frown

So the frog choir sweetly sings  
As the world's great cradle swings  
'Till the darkness like a pall  
Covers earth and sky and all

When they've sung the world to sleep  
Home the tired froggies creep  
To their seats upon the log  
By the brookside in the fog