

Laura Ingalls on the Declaration of Independence

by Ronald W. Kirk

Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.—2
Corinthians 3:17 KJV

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not
entangled again with the yoke of bondage.—Galatians 5:1

In the year 1882, Laura Ingalls, at age 15, walked into town with her Pa from their homestead farm in the Dakota Territory for an old-fashioned Fourth of July celebration. As was then typical, along with the ubiquitous fireworks, the rare treat of cold lemonade, and the speechifying of politicians, a man read the entire Declaration of Independence to an eager and attentive crowd. American's of the time uniformly loved their liberty and took it seriously and as a holy matter, even the often wilder folk of the western frontier.

This was a time of transition in American history. The solid foundation of an active Christian faith, that which had formed American in the first place began to erode. As my dear friend and pastor the late Christopher Rory Hoops noted regarding his large collection, 1879 was the watershed year that Christianity suddenly disappeared from American textbooks. It is that very year when the publishers abandoned the original readers edited by the profoundly Christian William McGuffey and replaced them with a completely secularized version, *McGuffey's Readers* in name only. As related by Laura Ingalls Wilder of the *Little House* series of books, the Ingalls family represented much of the old Christian morality and ethic, including such characteristics of tender love of family, excellence in endeavor, reliance on God, diligent investment by faith, love of liberty, and the practice of self-restrained conduct that makes general civil liberty possible. In this era of transitioning secularization, the Ingalls shone as lights of the old kind, though certain signs of the secularizing trend are apparent to the careful reader of Mrs. Wilder's great books.

The context of this secularizing era makes Laura's epiphany regarding America's liberty the more striking. So also is Laura's tender age. Nevertheless, here is her at once little and grand story:

A man had gathered a crowd around the flagpole. He protested he wasn't a public speaker, but the occasion demanded it. He briefly rehearsed the successful War for Independence and other trials involving Europe. He said, "Yessir, by Old Glory right here, waving over my head, any time

the despots of Europe, try to step on America's toes, we'll lick 'em again!" The crowd whooped and cheered. He went on, "Every man Jack of us a free and independent citizen of God's country, the only country on earth where a man is free and independent." He protested that they ought to have had bigger and better celebration on the Fourth of July. Maybe next year, they would be more prosperous and able to afford a more suitable celebration. Then the man read the Declaration...

"Laurie and Carrie (Laura's younger sister) knew the Declaration by heart, of course, but it gave them a solemn, glorious feeling to hear the words." When, the man finished the reading, a solemn hush came over the crowd. Pa began to sing the hymn "America." After that, as the crowd began to disperse, Laura pondered the moment. She realized, "God is America's king"!

She thought: Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn't anyone else who has a right to give me orders. I will have to make myself be good.

She says her mind filled with light:

This is what it means to be free. It means, you have to be good. "Our father's God, author of liberty—"The laws of Nature and of Nature's God endow you with a right to life and liberty. Then you have to keep the laws of God, for God's law is the only thing that gives you a right to be free.¹

If you are not shouting and weeping at this amazing and profound revelation to a teenaged pioneer girl, I am indeed saddened. America's future liberty—with what little is left of it today—depends upon each American earnestly and passionately embracing what Laura Ingalls understood at that moment.

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¹ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1941), 76-77.