

Blouse by Chanel,
£4,410; skirt by
Emilia Wickstead,
£3,990; bow
brooch by Abbie
Walsh, £49; belt
by Margaret
Howell, £195



Wild At Heart

How the spirit of the pioneer woman lives on...

The sky is indigo blue, the light white, the air desert-dry. Beyond the high prairie grass lie the mountains, whose narrow passes are dotted with the bones of settlers, and whose rivers still flow with the sweat and tears of long-forgotten miners. This is America's West – once upon a time pioneer country and the location of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. A century and a half later, great tracts of land remain untamed, life out here is still ruled by drought and flood, yet set in a landscape so beautiful, it is impossible not to lose your soul to it.

In 1869, little Laura Ingalls embarked on an epic journey across this unmapped wilderness. Guided by the restless spirit of her father, moving west from Wisconsin to Kansas to Minnesota, the family finally settled in Dakota. It was their struggle for survival which was to inspire the *Little House* books, adapted into the 1970s TV series *Little House on the Prairie*.

Little Laura in her patched cotton dress, trimming her sister's coat with the feathers of a wild swan, will forever stand as America's frontier sweetheart. The publication of her autobiography, *Pioneer Girl*, 80 years after she began writing it proves that her brand of self-determined heroism has never lost its resonance. Ingalls Wilder romanticized her hardships for good, old-fashioned commercial reasons, but *Pioneer Girl* comes out at the same time as the film *The Homesman*, in which another strong-willed pioneer, Mary Bee Cuddy (played by Hilary Swank, see page 162), undertakes a treacherous journey across unchartered Nebraska Territory. *The Homesman* tells a very different story to Ingalls Wilder's – one of unstinting hardship and loneliness. Possibly it is a truer picture of how life was, yet both stories return us to the idea of romance and freedom in the adversity of the wild.

In their different ways, Cuddy and Ingalls Wilder both embody feminism in its grittiest form. Pioneer women had to be the equal of men or families died. Ingalls Wilder, with her husband semi-paralyzed, grew the crops, sewed the clothes, molded the bullets, baked the bread, yet she wanted more – a career, recognition. Things have not changed so much then. If tenacity, independence and self-reliance are foundations on which America was built, they also remain qualities we aspire to today.

The comforts of modernization have left an empty space in our hearts. We are the spoilt yearning for the unspoilt. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that we can still build a life out of courage and grit, that we are prepared to take on a fight whether for ourselves or as ambassadors for others. Women are still pioneers, we have always been survivors, and we will continue to be heroines. And, like Ingalls Wilder and Cuddy, whatever hardships we face, we will be damn sure to come out with our spirit intact, dancing to the fiddle in the high prairie grass. *By Bella Pollen*