

Laura Ingalls Wilder's beloved "Little House" books may be set in the Plains and Midwest states, but they have a little-known connection to western Washington County.

It turns out that Nellie Oleson — Wilder's nemesis in the books and TV series — is buried in Forest View Cemetery in Forest Grove, along with her brother and father. This small trivia item about a supporting character draws a surprising amount of attention from Wilder-philes across the country.

Almost every year, people call the Friends of Historic Forest Grove, wanting to visit the grave of Nellie Owens Kirry, said past FHFG President Mary Jo Morelli.

"It goes in cycles. Some years there will be quite a bit of interest," she said. "Other years less."

The real Nellie Oleson was born Nellie Owens on Aug. 2, 1869, two years after Laura Ingalls.

It appears Ingalls slightly altered Nellie's last name when she wrote the "Little House" series.

In the books, Nellie shows up first in Walnut Grove, Minn., where the Ingalls family had moved after a year in Indian territory, preceded by the family's early years at a pioneer home in Pepin, Wisc. The Ingalls children were newcomers, rural and poor. Nellie was the daughter of the store owner, and seemed to delight in making fun of Laura and her sister, Mary.

A number of sources, including Mormon Family Search, confirm that Nellie Owens was born in 1869 in Walnut Grove, Minn., that her father was the owner of the general store and that she had a brother named Willie — just as in the books. But Nellie shows up again in later books, when the Ingalls lived in De Smet, S.D. Since Owens never lived in South Dakota, many believe Ingalls turned her into a composite of different girls.

In the mid-1970s, Nellie (the person) was made into Nellie (the character) on a popular television series starring Michael Landon as Pa Ingalls and Melissa Gilbert as his daughter, Laura. Nellie — witty but sharp-tongued — was played by Alison Arngrim, and even Arngrim wondered what had become of Nellie, according to an article by Laura Waskin in *Lore*, a publication of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society.

The real Nellie's family moved to California, probably via the Oregon Trail, in about 1883. From California, the family moved to Tillamook in about 1891.

Nellie taught school before she married Henry Kirry on July 24, 1893, in Tillamook. The couple moved to Bay City, just north of Tillamook, where Henry became the blacksmith. Their three children — Zola, Lloyd and Leslie — were born in the years between 1893 and 1900. They moved to Rainier around 1899, where Henry worked as a diesel engineer for a local boat company. In later census records, he is listed as a marine engineer.

Nellie's mother, Margaret, died in 1908 and is buried in Tillamook's Fairview Cemetery. It was after the death of her mother that Nellie and her husband, Henry, moved to Forest Grove because it was midway between her family in Tillamook and Henry's work on the Columbia River. According to the *Lore* newsletter, "Here [Forest Grove] was a more stable environment for the children to grow up in, where the schools were excellent. Pacific University, founded in the 1850s, was in fact known as one of the top colleges in Oregon and located on 30 acres almost in the middle of town."

Several years after Nellie's mother died in 1908, Nellie's father moved to Forest Grove and lived with Nellie and her family. While the account in *Lore* has them living on Union Street (now 22nd Place), a city directory places them on Greenville Road between Banks and Forest Grove in 1920. Nellie's father, William, died in 1920 and was also buried at Forest View Cemetery.

In the early 1920s, Nellie and Henry separated, and she moved to Portland so she could be close to her

daughter, Zola, and Zola's children.

In the 1940s, she moved to Patton Home, a retirement home at 4619 N. Michigan Ave. in Portland. The building remains, but is now a drug- and alcohol-free home for recovering addicts.

Nellie died on Nov. 2, 1949. She was buried Nov. 5 that year in Forest View Cemetery, next to her father and her brother. In an interesting coincidence, Willie, like Laura's sister Mary, lost his eyesight.

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