What Happened at Drum Creek

Caroline Fraser says that what Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote down about Kansas, long ago, says a great deal about her, even though the Kansas prairie was home to her very first memories. She wrote those memories down on "Big Chief" tablets and never intended them for publication, unlike so much else she put to writing. Just for the record, Caroline Fraser's *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder*, just won the Pulitzer. It's a great read.

Laura remembered her father's quiet assurances to her family. He'd remind them there was nothing to worry about, even though, late into the night, the dancing and singing of the Osage people not far away created sounds she claimed seemed to her childish imagination worse than howling wolves. Neither did she forget that on some noisy nights, Charles, her father, would be awake, his gun at his side.

The Osage weren't homeless, but they were refugees; and, in 1860s, when the Ingalls family arrived, the Osage were very much strangers in a strange land. Their homeland was Missouri and Arkansas, but when white folks swarmed in, Arkansas and Missouri looked prime. So, like so many other first nation peoples, the Osage were moved farther west. In 1825, some to eastern Kansas, where, some years later, Charles Ingalls determined to live.

The Osage were--and still are--a proud people, tall and fierce and formidable. But dislocation and disease wore them down. Already in the 1850s, when Kansas went to war with itself in the opening rounds of the Civil War, the Osage, time and again, were victims of violence. As people say, the Osage had no dog in that hunt, the hunt to determine whether Kansas would be "slave or free."
Nor did anyone ask their opinion about the attack on Ft. Sumter. The bloody Civil War subjected them to swarming armies of Yankees and Rebs looking for recruits, mercenaries. For the record, the broad plains of eastern Kansas, in the middle decades of the 19th century, were not the Elysian Fields. But that's where Charles Ingalls, the dreamer, took his family. And he wasn't alone.

You have to look hard to find the Drum Creek historical marker set up just outside of Independence, Kansas. It's off the road a bit, north. If you stop to find it, you won't fight off a crowd, because the story itself, mean and bloody, is itself a vagrant. You don't know who exactly to celebrate or how. In a way, it's a story without a real home.

It goes like this. Once upon a time a bunch of Rebs were stealthily working their way north when a band of Osage found them in the neighborhood. The Osage were going to meet Father Schoonmaker at the Indian Mission School--I'm not making this up. The Rebs were trespassing, so the Osage simply asked them who they were. "We're from the Fort," they said, an answer that failed miserably. The Osage knew by name the Union soldiers, and these galoots weren't them.

Up went the suspicion. Words were exchanged, then a little gunfire, and a death--one of the Osage went down.

What started peaceably ended nowhere near. The rebs--we may just as well call them spies--took refuge where they shouldn't have, in some horrible place where they were killed, slaughtered, every last one of them. The Osage then punctuated their victory by doing things to their bodies that I'd rather not mention. Think the worst.
That historical marker outside Independence tells that story, the story of the Drum Creek battle, which, believe me, the Osage won, going away. It was a slaughter that somehow wasn't evil but most certainly wasn't good.

It may well be a blessing that historical marker is hard to find. Even a yankee like me doesn't quite know how to cheer what went down at Drum Creek.

Just a few years later, the Ingalls' family moved in, squatters. Charles Ingalls never once questioned whether the government would let him stay on what some worthless treaty claimed was Osage land. He simply assumed that if he built a log cabin on the Verdigris River, Washington would find a way to get those blame Indians the heck out.

And, of course, he was right. The government did just that.

Laura Ingalls Wilder, as a child, remembers wandering through an abandoned Osage camp, picking up beads, multi-colored beads, "a great many red ones," from the ground, things the Osage people left behind when they were pushed on.

That very day, she says, when she came back home to the log house her father had built, she and her sister Mary discovered their mom holding a brand new little baby, another sister, Caroline Celestia. All of that happened close by.

You have to get off Highway 160, and you got to look good to find the marker. But it's there. Just like the story, even if, like me, you don't know quite what to make of it.