

Don't Doubt Your Horses and The Masters Store and Hall

by Dan Wahl

The Masters Store and Hall underwent a transformation in 2021, inside and out, after the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum Board greenlit the museum's first art exhibition. The decision to launch Don't Doubt Your Horses kickstarted the museum's restoration work that had begun a few years earlier but was forced to pause. Pandemic times delayed a project dear to the museum's mission: Preserving the only Walnut Grove building that held history of Charles "Pa" Ingalls and Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Significant progress was made in the ongoing restoration project. Outside, the porch was completed, the upstairs entrance rebuilt, and the main entrance completely restored to match the original welcoming face of this historic building.

On the inside, restoration was less physical but more in the spirit of the space. The second floor got cleaned out, lit up, and festooned with colorful horse drawings made by several thousand museum visitors. Don't Doubt Your Horses was designed to invite public interaction by drawing horses and adding them to a collection of the artist's work. People near and far sat at an antique table with crayon or pencil in hand, unconsciously creating an artistic community by interacting with the space. As a result, the social hall went back into public service for the first time since 1914.



Here is the original face of the building constructed by W.J. Masters in 1878. Masters ran the downstairs as a general store, while the upstairs served the community as a social hall. According to Laura Ingalls Wilder's writings, Charles "Pa" Ingalls helped with the construction, and young Laura worked there for a time as a nanny.

Thanks go to Daniel D. Peterson for his book, The Masters' Hotel: Walnut Grove, Minnesota, for historical reference.



This photo from 2017 shows the changes that had been made to the front of the Masters building during its later years as a boarding house and then a private residence. The home of Darlow and Amelia Foster was acquired by the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum of Walnut Grove.

Photo: Sarah Uthoff, from her blog "Trundlebed Tales: Bringing Laura Ingalls Wilder, Children's Literature, and History to Life." Used with permission. <https://trundlebedtales.wordpress.com/2018/10/16/news-on-the-masters-hotel-in-walnut-grove/>



By 2020 much progress in reconstruction had already been made by Andy Foster, a local contractor hired by the museum. The old porch was torn off to reveal the house entrance, and construction of a more historically accurate bi-level porch had begun. Roof work had been completed and the false front reconstructed.

Photo: Dan Wahl



Construction in the summer of 2021 included completion of the porch, as well as installation of the windows and door on the second floor. Here, progress is made on the considerable task of restoring the downstairs grand entrance.

Photo: Dan Wahl



The face of the W.J. Masters Store and Hall came back from the past in 2021. You can see the edges of the roof peeking out from behind the false front, a structural addition often seen on commercial buildings of the pioneer west.

Photo: Dan Wahl



The interior underwent a different sort of transformation. In Laura's time, the second floor was the social hall, a place where the community could gather for meetings, dances, or church events. In later years, as the hall faded away and a private home began taking shape, the space was divided into small boarding house rooms which were eventually removed.

Here is the social hall in 2021 before becoming a temporary art gallery space. Electric lights dangling from cables are in the process of being installed. Old mattresses and furniture left over from boarding house days wait to be removed. Dust covers everything.

Photo: Bill Richards



An Angel Horse, the art project's iconic symbol, watches over the proceedings.

Drawing: Dan Wahl



Here, Walnut Grove artist Dan Wahl, with the help of friends, family, and LIW Museum Board and staff members, works on turning the second floor into an art gallery. Shreds of dirty wallpaper were removed in order to create a cleaner gallery space and a better visitor experience, while extra care was taken to preserve the integrity of the wood underneath. Cleaning the walls of debris revealed hidden names and dates from when the building was constructed.

Most of the wallpaper had been pasted up after Laura's time, but in one place, above the nailed-in door, you can see some of the original wallcovering from when the Masters Store and Hall was built. This area was left untouched.

Photo: Dan Peterson



Sara Wahl helps install the 2021 Don't Doubt Your Horses exhibition, which initially consisted of 400 horse drawings strung from freestanding poles. Museum guests drew horses on 4"x6" postcards which would later be included in the exhibition, clipped to cords on the poles and walls. For the integrity of the social hall, care was taken when mounting cords on the walls, by putting nails only in existing nail holes or in gaps between boards.

Incidentally, the painted sign being used to cover a window was made by Darlow and Amelia Foster's grandson Dan Peterson when he was a boy.

Photo: Dan Wahl

Here's the ground floor gallery access, temporarily set up before the porch and second floor entrance were completed. Visitors could catch a glimpse of restoration in progress.

The museum counted 16,008 visitors in 2021. Many visitors paused to draw horses in the gallery or at a virtual exhibition kiosk set up in the gift shop for full public access. A conservative estimate of one in three museum visitors engaged with Don't Doubt Your Horses.



Photo: Dan Wahl



Laura Ingalls Wilder ascends dreamily to the old social hall as it becomes a new temporary art gallery. She spent a small portion of her growing up years in this space. The scene is from the virtual gallery walkthrough created by past director Bill Richards of Walnut Grove's *Fragments of a Dream* pageant. Actor Heidi Morgan played the part of Old Laura.

Photo: Bill Richards



Horse drawings fill the Masters Hall where Laura Ingalls attended community events such as church socials. Don't Doubt Your Horses was the first art exhibition presented by the museum, running from April 1 to October 31, 2021. The interactive event also marked the first public use of the social hall since W.J. Masters held a last dance there in 1914.

Photo: Dan Wahl. The person in the photo is Southwest Minnesota State University Professor Eric Doise.



Guest artist Neva Rose adds a horse to the exhibition. Many adults also participated, contributing to a grand total of 3,347 horse drawings by visitors of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum.

Photo: Dan Wahl



A horseshoe suspended in front of the original wallpaper from the Masters Store and Hall blesses gallery guests with luck. The transformation of the building, physically and in spirit, is a huge ongoing production, and the Don't Doubt Your Horses interactive art exhibition was only a small part of this process. The Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum of Walnut Grove, Minnesota, continues to work on bringing a real piece of Laura's history back to life.

Photo: Dan Wahl

Acknowledgments

Thank you for helping bring Don't Doubt Your Horses to life. If I missed your name please know that I am grateful to you. - Dan

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