

LOST

on the Prairie

MaryLou Driedger



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Author's Note

SORTING THROUGH SOME FAMILY PAPERS in 2014, I discovered a short autobiography written by my grandfather's youngest sister, Alma. It begins with a story about her family's 1907 migration from Newton, Kansas, to a new home in Drake, Saskatchewan.

According to Alma, three of her brothers, including my grandfather, made the journey in separate freight train boxcars, each filled with the family's livestock. Alma writes how worried her parents were when that freight train arrived at the station in Saskatchewan and the boxcar with my grandfather

was no longer attached to the train! No one seemed to know what had happened to the train car or to Grandpa.

Alma doesn't say more about my grandfather's disappearance, but we know he was eventually reunited with his family. This novel provides an imaginary explanation for the mystery surrounding Grandpa's failure to arrive in Saskatchewan with his brothers.

The 1907 railroad route Grandpa's train probably followed wound through the cities of Omaha, Nebraska, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, as well as the Lake Traverse Reservation in South Dakota. Those seemed like good places for my grandfather to have adventures.

Reading histories of Omaha and Minneapolis provided a picture of what those cities had been like in 1907. I visited Sisseton, South Dakota, and newspapers from 1907 in the public library gave a sense of what the town was like during the year my

grandfather might have stayed there briefly with his distant relatives.

Excursions to local sites, including Enemy Swim Lake, where Peter almost drowns, and the Sica Hollow State Park, where Peter and his friend Joe have a scary experience, made it so much easier to write about those places, as did going up a lookout tower on Sisseton-Wahpeton land to get a view of what Peter and Joe would have seen from the top of the hill they climbed together.

I visited the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Tribal Administration Building on the Lake Traverse Reservation and later conducted a lengthy interview with Naomi Parker, an Elder who grew up there.

I was so appreciative of the fact that Dr. Sherry Johnson, the Education Director for the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, arranged for Winona Starrlight Burley to read my manuscript when it was complete. Winona provided me with advice that helped make Peter's time with the Little Thunder family authentic and culturally appropriate. This novel is a work of

fiction but was inspired by actual people and events. Here are just a few examples.

My grandfather's name was Peter Schmidt and his older brother Herman died just before their family immigrated to Canada. Grandpa's youngest brother, Alvin, had epilepsy, and Grandpa married a woman named Annie, whose family had also immigrated to Saskatchewan.

My grandfather's family had two horses when he was growing up, Prince and Gypsy. Prince and



Peter M. Schmidt at
age 16.

Gypsy's hides were saved when they died of old age, and my mother and her siblings used those horsehair blankets to keep warm when they travelled by wagon to school or church during cold prairie winters.

Mark Twain, who Peter meets near the end of the story, made several visits to Minneapolis and always stayed at the West Hotel.

Omaha's Krug Park, where Peter rides the roller coaster, was a popular attraction in 1907 and featured hot-air balloon rides, a tunnel of love, and a roller coaster called the Big Dipper.

The Dominion Immigration Hall opened in Winnipeg in 1906, right by the Canadian Pacific Railway station, just the year before Peter almost missed his train there.

There are many other things in the book that are based in fact and I'd be happy to talk about them with curious readers.

My grandfather Peter Schmidt died as a result of injuries from a car accident when I was seven years old.

I have vivid memories of my own train trips from Winnipeg to Drake, Saskatchewan, to visit him and my grandmother Annie. I remember Grandpa teaching me how to ride a bicycle and how he would flip open his pocket watch and let me listen to it tick.

I hope he would like this story I've imagined for him. Writing and researching it was a way to make my Grandpa come alive again for me. I hope it will also be a way for the year 1907 to come alive for the those who read this novel, so they will have a better idea about what life was like in North America more than one hundred years ago.



Peter Schmidt and Annie Jantz Schmidt on their honeymoon train trip.

Study Guide



You can access this study guide with many added illustrations, suggestions, video links, resources, and curriculum outcomes on MaryLou Driedger's website at maryloudriedger.com.

Things To Do Before Reading *Lost on the Prairie*

1. Peter, the novel's hero, is going on an exciting trip! Can you recall memories of a trip using a sketch, a story, or a conversation? Do you have photographs or souvenirs to share?
2. Look at the cover of the book and the title. Write down three things you think might happen in the book. Save these predictions for when you finish *Lost on the Prairie*.
3. Learn more about the author of the book *Lost on the Prairie* on her website. Think of a question you would like to ask her.

Chapter 1

1. Peter takes the book *Captains Courageous* on his trip. What one book would you take on a trip? Explain your choice.
2. Peter's mother makes him a delicious lunch. What would a lunch with all your favourite things include? A still life is an artwork of carefully arranged objects. Can you create a still life of Peter's lunch or your favourite lunch? Check out the famous painting *Still Life with Fruit, Nuts and Cheese*, by Floris van Dyck for inspiration.
3. Peter's brother Alvin has epilepsy seizures. A seizure is when a sudden, uncontrollable surge of electrical activity in the brain temporarily affects a person's body or feelings for a period of time. Think about how you might feel if someone in your family had epilepsy.
4. Can you recreate the "fearsome racket" at the train station with a sound choir? Have friends imitate pigs squealing, chickens clucking, cows mooing, Prince and Gypsy neighing, the train whistle blowing, the conductor shouting "All Aboard," and people saying goodbye.
5. Words to think about: *ricochet, rucksack, nicker, dung, conjure*.

Chapter 2

1. List the seven things Peter liked to do with Herman. List seven things you like to do with friends. Act some out. Can your friends guess what you are doing?
2. Peter kills a copperhead snake. Make a KWL (Know-Wonder-Learn) chart for copperhead snakes. Watch a video or read a book to check the accuracy of your prior knowledge and find answers to your wondering questions.

3. How do Prince and Gypsy express their fear of the copperhead? Do people show fear differently than horses? Can you make your whole body look fearful?
4. The nail puzzle reminds Peter of his grandfather. What object reminds you of a grandparent or other older relative, and why?
5. The conductor says Peter hasn't been twiddling his thumbs on the trip. What does it mean to twiddle your thumbs?

Chapter 3

1. In Chapter 1, Peter talks about killing gophers, and in Chapter 2, he saves the lives of a gopher family. In Chapter 3, he just can't drown the gophers. What has changed Peter's attitude?
2. Watch TV news items about accidents. Write the script for a TV news report about the roller coaster accident. Remember the five W's: What happened? Where did it happen? When did it happen? Who was involved? Why did it happen? Can you perform your report like a TV reporter would?
3. What do you learn about Annie in this chapter? Can you sketch a portrait of Annie's face?
4. Phrases to talk about: *den of sin, shakes my hand like she means it, a crick in my neck, my heart foxtrots with excitement, wash my mouth out with soap, bats swoop out of the root cellar.*

Chapter 4

1. This chapter starts with a nightmare. Scary or stressful things that happen to us when we are awake can turn into nightmares when we are asleep. Experts think nightmares help us work

through difficult things that have happened to us. What are some challenging things Peter has already faced?

2. Peter realizes people and animals are counting on him. Which people or pets count on you?
3. Act out Peter's walk up the steep slope. In between each action take ten steps and rest: Using your hands, drag yourself over to an imaginary stick and use it to stand up. Get down on your bum and use your arms to move yourself a metre. Sink down and pick gooseberries to eat. Wipe the juice off your face with your sleeve. Sit down, take off your shoe, and fill it with nuts. You've reached the top, so shout "hurray"! Open the boxcar door and crawl inside.
4. Alliteration is when words that begin with the same sound are used more than once in a sentence. One example of alliteration in this chapter is *crippled crane*. Can you find at least six other examples of alliteration in Chapter 4?

Chapter 5

1. What are some hard choices Peter makes in this chapter? How does he decide what to do? Would you have made the same decisions he did?
2. A simile compares two different things, usually using the words *like* or *as*. One simile in this chapter is *He flips me up on the shore like a netted fish*. There are ten others. Can you find them?
3. Draw a picture of Peter surrounded by the things he sees underwater. Some are mentioned in the book, but can you add others? Colour your picture with crayons, then use thin blue watercolour paint to make a wash to cover the page.

4. Find images of boxcars online and try making one from a cardboard box.
5. *Lost on the Prairie* takes place over a century ago, when everyday language included words and phrases that aren't commonly used today. Here are examples from this chapter: *vex, ponder, fretful, plumb tuckered out, notion, wagon and plough horse, walk a spell*, and *land sakes*. Use context clues to figure out what they mean. Watch for other old-fashioned words and phrases as you continue reading.

Chapter 6

1. Long ago Sisseton-Wahpeton Elders used to sit with children on the shores of Enemy Swim Lake to tell the story of how the lake got its name. Find the story in this chapter. Can you research and write a paragraph about how a place in the area where you live got its name?
2. Can you find the questions Mr. Little Thunder asks to show he is concerned about Peter?
3. Peter recalls many memories of his home and family in this chapter. Can you find four of them?

Chapter 7

1. Gypsy and Peter have a special relationship. Can you think of other books you have read, movies you have seen, or stories you have heard about the friendship between an animal and a person?
2. The hill Joe and Peter climb is called Coteau des Prairies, or the Hill on the Prairie. Today it is the site of Nicollet Tower. From the tower's top, you get an amazing view of what Peter and Joe

will have seen from the hilltop. Use the description in the text to make a landscape drawing of the scene.

3. Today, Sica Hollow is a state park with a walking trail called The Trail of the Spirits. Write down five events that happen in the legend of Sica Hollow. Mix them up chronologically and see if a friend can number the events correctly.
4. Peter and Joe see a huge flock of monarch butterflies. Learn more about the annual migration of monarch butterflies by watching a video or reading a book. Look at some photos of them and try painting one.
5. Chapter 7 ends with a cliffhanger. What is a cliffhanger and why do authors use them?

Chapter 8

1. Joe is stuck in quicksand. Quicksand is a deep mass of loose sand mixed with lots of water to form a jelly-like substance. Can you make some quicksand? Try sinking objects of various weights in it.
2. Peter hears coyotes howling as he rides to get help. Coyotes howl to defend their territory, announce their presence, and call their pack together. Can you howl like a coyote?
3. Peter thinks about how his family likes to sing together. What are some of your family's favourite songs?
4. Problem-Action-Outcome are the elements of a good story. What is the problem in this chapter? What actions try to deal with the problem? What is the final outcome?

Chapter 9

1. Mr. Little Thunder learns about Peter's relatives from a Sisseton newspaper. Why might you say Mr. Little Thunder's discovery was *coincidental*?
2. What words might Peter use to describe Mr. Little Thunder and why?
3. You could say Peter has *mixed feelings* about leaving the Little Thunders. What does that mean?
4. Mrs. Schmidt owns a millinery where hats are made and sold. Three famous paintings of millinery shops created around the time *Lost on the Prairie* takes place are *The Millinery Shop*, by Edgar Degas; *The Milliner*, by Paul Signac; and *Hutladen*, by August Macke. Find them online. Which one do you like the best and why?

Chapter 10

1. Ellie, Eudora, and Ettie have preconceived and false ideas about Indigenous people. Peter's ideas differ because he has lived with a Sisseton-Wahpeton family. Can you think of a situation where you had certain ideas about people but once you got to know them your ideas changed?
2. A good paragraph has a topic sentence, relevant supporting sentences, and a closing sentence. Do some research and write a paragraph to answer one of these questions: What is quince fruit? What happens in a blacksmith shop? Can you explain how a mill grinds grain into flour? How does a rat trap work? How do you make peach cobbler? Can you explain the plot of the story about Joseph that Mr. Schmidt reads?

3. The mill has been in Mr. Schmidt's family for three generations. Can you think of some family businesses in your community? How old are they?

Chapter 11

1. Find a partner and pretend one of you is Ettie and the other one is Peter. Retell the events of this chapter from their perspective.
2. Peter has a special bond with his horses. In this chapter, Gypsy is a hero. How does she help Peter? How does Prince help him in previous chapters?
3. A metaphor is a comparison that doesn't use the words *like* or *as* the way a simile does. One metaphor for the fire in this chapter is "a stomping elephant." What other metaphors could be used to describe the fire?

Chapter 12

1. What are three questions you had while reading this chapter? How would you answer them? Ask your friends how they would have answered them.
2. Some words and phrases to talk about: *curling tongs, cinch, buckskin clothes, ledgers, toting, jabber, teetering, gingham, barn raising.*
3. Find places in this chapter where people are worried, surprised, scared, thoughtful, helpful, organized, and sympathetic.

Chapter 13

1. During the church service, Peter thinks about how many different kinds of parents there are, including the ones he has met so

far on his adventure. Some parents have problems in their lives that make it hard for them to look after their families. Have you read books or seen movies where children's parents are going through a difficult time? Has that happened in your family?

2. Peter considers what kind of grown up he might be. Can you write about what kind of grown up you will be? What kind of job might you have? What kind of family? Where would you like to live or travel? What kind of person do you want to be?
3. Mr. Schmidt and Peter take Ben's body to the undertaker. Do some research to find out what an undertaker does. Plans are made for Ben's funeral. Have you been to a funeral? What was it like?
4. Read newspaper reports about fires. Could you write one about the fire in the barn? You will need a headline. In the first paragraph give a quick summary of what happened. Add more details in the second paragraph. In the third paragraph, talk about what might have caused the fire. End with how the situation resolved.

Chapter 14

1. Listen to some of the songs Peter sings in his boxcar on the way to Minneapolis, like "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" and "Down By the Old Mill Stream," or the song "Take A Trip on An Airship," which he hears in the hotel. Try singing along with one.
2. In this chapter, Peter recalls six big adventures he has had so far. Get together with five friends and draw one frame each for a comic strip illustrating one adventure. Put your frames together to create a story about Peter's adventures.

3. Peter learns about the Eiffel Tower. There are instructions online for creating a miniature Eiffel Tower out of Lego, straws, cardboard, paper, toothpicks, popsicle sticks, or wooden skewers. Try building one.
4. Help other people learn about airships like Peter did. Do some research and create a four-slide presentation about airships.
5. Some words and phrases to talk about: *her voice can make your worries fly away, batting about, square those horses away, a heap more grown up, all at sixes and sevens.*

Chapter 15

1. Peter is fascinated by the people dressed in fancy clothes in the West Hotel lobby. Go online to see how fashionable people dressed in the early 1900s. Would you want to dress that way? Why or why not?
2. Danny is a bellhop. Can you find out how bellhops got their name?
3. Peter has never been on an elevator. Danny explains what it is. Elevators were quite new in 1907. Some things invented around the same time as the elevator were telephones, escalators, cars, radios, and movies. If you met someone who had never seen those things, how would you explain what they are and what they do?
4. Peter meets the famous writer Mark Twain in this chapter. Do some research to learn more about Mark Twain.
5. After Samson helps Peter find the West Hotel, he strides away. When Mr. Twain gets out of the elevator, he ambles down the hallway. Can you stride across a room and then turn around and amble back?

Chapter 16

1. Peter receives a letter from the railroad vice-president. Imagine Peter writes a letter back thanking him for the hotel room and telling him about the adventures he has had. Can you write the letter for Peter? Remember, a letter has a date, a greeting, several paragraphs of content, a closing, and a signature.
2. One of the books Mr. Twain has written is called *The Prince and the Pauper*. Just from the title what do you think it might be about?
3. Mark Twain's story, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, has been retold in graphic novels, picture books, cartoons, video games, manga comics, theatre productions, television series, ballets, operas, more than a dozen films, and in a song by Canadian rock band Rush. Which format do you think would be the best way to retell the story and why?
4. Mr. Twain writes an inscription in Peter's copy of *Tom Sawyer*. He says the last lines in the book aren't just about Tom, they are about Peter too. How do you think those lines might apply to Peter?
5. Words to think about: *carpetbag, flyleaf, steward, surmise, condolences, succumbed, spittoon, goodly, whittle.*

Chapter 17

1. Grain elevators were used to store grain until it could be shipped across the country by train. There aren't many grain elevators left on the prairies. You can draw a grain elevator using a few simple shapes. Check out the one on the cover of this book or find others online and try to sketch one.

2. Peter wonders if his family will treat him differently now. He thinks his adventures have changed him. Do you think they have? How?
3. Personification is when a writer gives something that isn't human the ability to do something a human could. In this chapter, the author uses personification to refer to Peter's heart. Find the passage. Write some of your own examples of personification.
4. Terms to think about: *sweet nothings, sashaying, valise, dungarees, full of beans, cotton to him, stow, chaperone.*

Chapter 18

1. Peter is worried his father may not let him return to school. In 1907 only about half the children in North America went to school, and those who did often stopped attending after Grade Six. Why do you think that happened?
2. Annie and Peter play *Toboggans and Stairs* which is another name for *Snakes and Ladders*. Can you try playing *Snakes and Ladders*?
3. The letters on Peter's toiletries kit are CPR. Can you find out what those letters stand for?
4. Peter visits the train station in Winnipeg. It was built in 1906. The building is still standing and is open to the public, but it is no longer a train station. Using photos you find online, compare and contrast how the building looked in 1906 with how it looks now.
5. Peter's family lives in a sod house. Look for photos and information to learn more about them.

Things to Do After Reading *Lost on the Prairie*

1. Peter often refers to the novel *Captains Courageous*. After reading a retelling of the Rudyard Kipling novel or watching a film

version, use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast Peter's story with that of Harvey, the hero of *Captains Courageous*.

2. Draw an outline map of North America showing the provinces and states. Locate and mark Newton, Kansas; Omaha, Nebraska; Enemy Swim Lake and Sisseton, South Dakota; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Winnipeg, Manitoba; and Humboldt and Drake, Saskatchewan. Try connecting those points by drawing railroad tracks that follow Peter's journey.
3. On the author's website, read about Jacqui Thomas, who designed the cover of *Lost on the Prairie*. Can you create your own cover for the book?
4. *Lost on the Prairie* tells the story of one family's immigration to a new country. Find out if your family has an immigration story. Peter is helped by an Indigenous family whose ancestors have been living in North America for thousands of years. Find out about Indigenous roots or connections your family might have.
5. Peter is separated from his family on his immigration journey. Read some news reports about children today who are separated from their families during immigration. How do their stories compare to Peter's?
6. Pick a favourite paragraph from the book. Practise reading it aloud using a steady pace, clear diction, an interesting voice, and an expressive face. Share your passage with your friends.
7. A hero is someone who, when faced with a difficult challenge, shows courage, strength, and intelligence. Is Peter a hero? Why or why not?



MARYLOU DRIEDGER'S curiosity and love of learning have taken her to some fifty destinations across the globe. As an educator, she has taught in three different countries and is the recipient of a Manitoba Teacher of the Year award. She is a columnist for the regional newspaper *The Carillon* as well as the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Her freelance work has been published in numerous periodicals, anthologies, travel guides, institutional histories, and curriculums. You can read about MaryLou's adventures and find out more about *Lost on the Prairie* on her website, maryloudriedger.com.