



Nonfiction  
Feature

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# SWARM

## TINY MONSTERS

Grasshoppers might not look very scary. But you won't believe the trouble they can cause!

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# FILMS of Terror

In the late 1800s, grasshoppers destroyed the farms of pioneers across America's west. **BY LAUREN TARSHIS**

**T**he disaster began as a shadow in the distance, shimmering strangely in the sky. A young girl named Laura Ingalls spotted it on a hot July afternoon in 1875.

Laura had no idea what the shadow could be, but she sensed that something terrible was about to happen.

Laura and her family lived in a one-room house on a tiny farm in Minnesota. They were **settlers** in this new part of America. As far as they could see, there was prairie—flat land covered with tall, waving grass.

As **pioneers**, Laura and her family faced endless work and constant danger. Each day,

the Ingalls family rose at dawn to care for their cows, horses, and chickens. Laura's mother cooked and scrubbed and sewed. Her father worked in their wheat field until after dark. Laura's hands were sore from hauling buckets of water and raking hay.

The family faced many threats. There were blizzards, rattlesnakes, and deadly illnesses. There were lightning strikes and wildfires.

And now there was this enormous, terrifying cloud.



**PAUSE AND THINK:** What was life like for pioneers like the Ingallses?





**PIONEER FAMILY** The Ingalls family lived in western Minnesota. On their tiny farm, they cared for cows, horses, and chickens. Here Laura Ingalls (right) is shown with her sisters Mary (center) and Carrie (left).



## A Deafening Roar

The cloud seemed to stretch out forever. For miles around, people stared up at the sky. Farmers put down their pitchforks, and women turned away from their stoves. Children stopped doing their chores.

What was that cloud?

It wasn't gray like a thundercloud or funnel-shaped like a tornado.

The edges of the cloud sparkled. As it came

closer, the day turned dark. **Eerie** sounds echoed through the air. *Whir. Click, click, click. Buzz.* It sounded like thousands of enormous scissors snipping at the sky.

The cloud filled the sky over the Ingalls family farm. And then . . . *Thud.*

Something hit the ground. Laura stared in surprise. It was a grasshopper. It was greenish brown and an inch long, with spindly legs and bulging eyes.

*Thud, thud, thud, thud.*

More grasshoppers fell to the ground. Others hit Laura on the head. Had these grasshoppers somehow been swept into that dark cloud?

No. Grasshoppers weren't in the cloud. Grasshoppers *were* the cloud. It was made up of millions of bugs—and now the bugs were swooping down from the sky.

The sound became a **deafening** roar. Grasshoppers buzzed in Laura's ears and crawled across her eyes. She tried to swat them away, but there were too many. Laura pressed her lips

## VOCABULARY

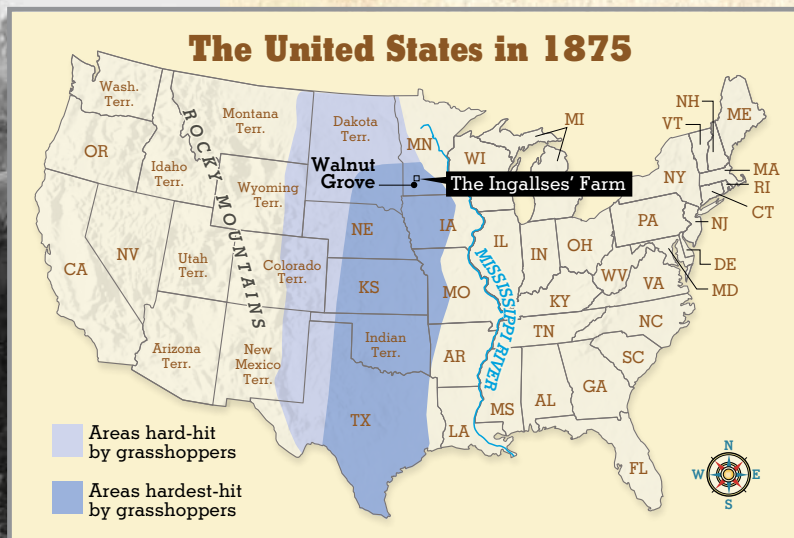
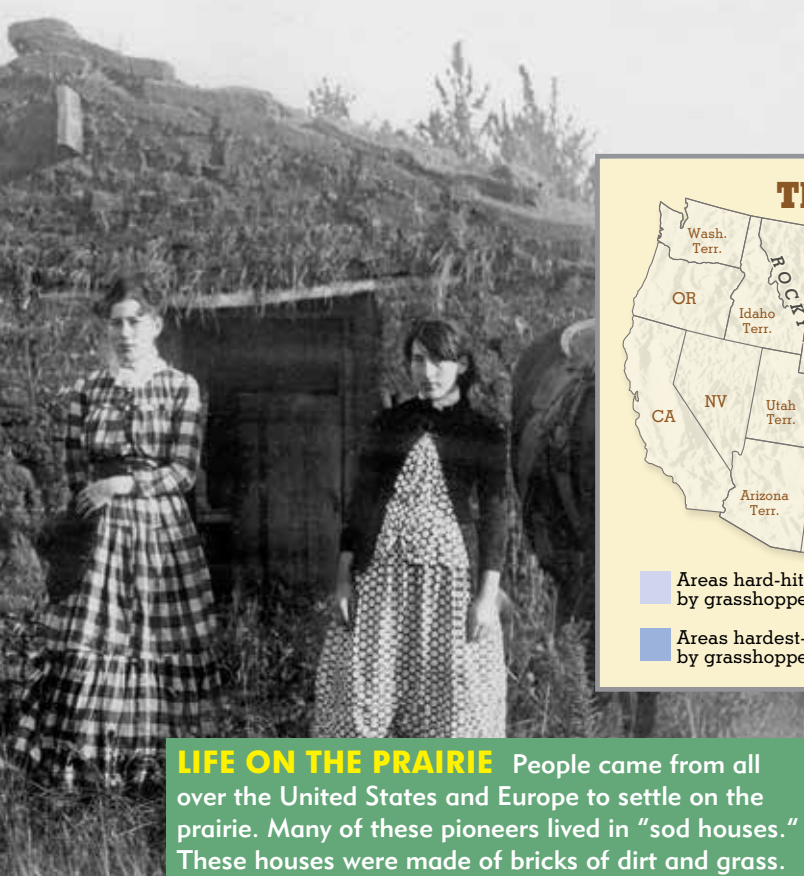
**settlers:** people who go to live in a new place where few other people live

**pioneers:** the first people to do something, such as settling in a new area

**eerie:** strange and frightening

**deafening:** extremely loud

**drought:** a long period of dry weather with little or no rain



**LIFE ON THE PRAIRIE** People came from all over the United States and Europe to settle on the prairie. Many of these pioneers lived in “sod houses.” These houses were made of bricks of dirt and grass.

**▲ LOCUSTS ATTACK** In the late 1800s, giant swarms of locusts invaded several states west of the Mississippi River. These insects destroyed farmers’ crops and caused many people to starve.

together to keep bugs from flying into her mouth.

The entire family was caught in a swarm of bugs—and so were thousands of other people across the prairie.



**PAUSE AND THINK:** What did Laura find out the cloud was made of?

## Millions of Chomping Jaws

The kind of grasshopper that attacked the Ingalls family was called a Rocky Mountain locust. These locusts thrived in dry weather.

The prairie had been going through a long **drought**, which created ideal conditions for the locusts to multiply—and to form gigantic swarms.

In the late 1800s, locust swarms destroyed farms in Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas. One swarm in 1875 was reported to be 110 miles wide and 1,800 miles long—as long as the entire east coast of the United States.

The insects didn’t sting like bees or spread

diseases like mosquitoes. They weren’t poisonous like black widow spiders. But the locusts ate the crops and food that people needed to survive. They mowed down fields of wheat, and they devoured vegetables and fruit.



**PAUSE AND THINK:** Why were there so many locusts in the late 1800s?

## Chewed to Nothing

The Ingalls family watched, horrified, as the locusts covered their wheat fields. Laura’s parents lit fires in the fields to drive the insects away. They banged on pots and smacked the wheat stalks with sticks.

Nothing worked. The locusts stuck like glue. By the next morning, the field had been chewed down to nothing. The locusts had even eaten the vegetables in the family’s garden.

The Ingalls family earned a living by selling their crops. But with their farm destroyed by locusts, they had no way to earn money—and no



SL\_PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (BACKGROUND), STEVE\_ADAMSON/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (PRAIRIE), JIM\_MCMAHAN/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (MAP)

vegetables to eat.

How would the family survive?



**PAUSE AND THINK:** How did locusts ruin the Ingalls family farm?

## Rotting Bugs

The horror continued even after the insects died. Dead locusts filled up wells and ponds, making the water too foul to drink. The bugs' dead bodies covered the ground and gave off a disgusting odor that hung in the air for weeks.

Newspapers across America reported stories of starving families and ruined towns, and people donated supplies for "grasshopper victims."

State governments distributed money to families like the Ingallses, but it wasn't enough. After losing their wheat crop two summers in a row, Laura and her family abandoned their Minnesota farm and relocated to Iowa.



**PAUSE AND THINK:** Why did the Ingalls family move to Iowa?

## Fading From Memory

In the late 1890s, the grasshopper attacks finally stopped. The Rocky Mountain locust began to die out. But why?

As more settlers came to the prairie, they tore up grass to plant crops. The settlers also brought in cattle, which ate plants. Without the grass and other plants, the locusts couldn't survive.

The swarms of the 1800s have faded from memory. But one author wrote about them in a book called *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. The book is part of the famous Little House series. It's fiction, but it's based on the author's true experiences growing up as a pioneer on America's prairie.

That author is Laura Ingalls Wilder—the little girl who watched the locust cloud arrive in 1875.

She lived to be 90 years old, and she never forgot the terror of the day the grasshoppers attacked her family's farm. •



**PAUSE AND THINK:** What did Laura Ingalls Wilder write about as an adult?

## GRASSHOPPERS AND LOCUSTS: What's the Difference?

All locusts are grasshoppers, but not all grasshoppers are locusts.



### GRASSHOPPERS

Grasshoppers are insects that live mostly on the ground. There are more than 10,000 types!



### LOCUSTS

Locusts are a type of grasshopper. When they are crowded together, the way they act changes. They eat more and form huge, destructive swarms.