



*In this issue . . .*

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# *Willa Cather*

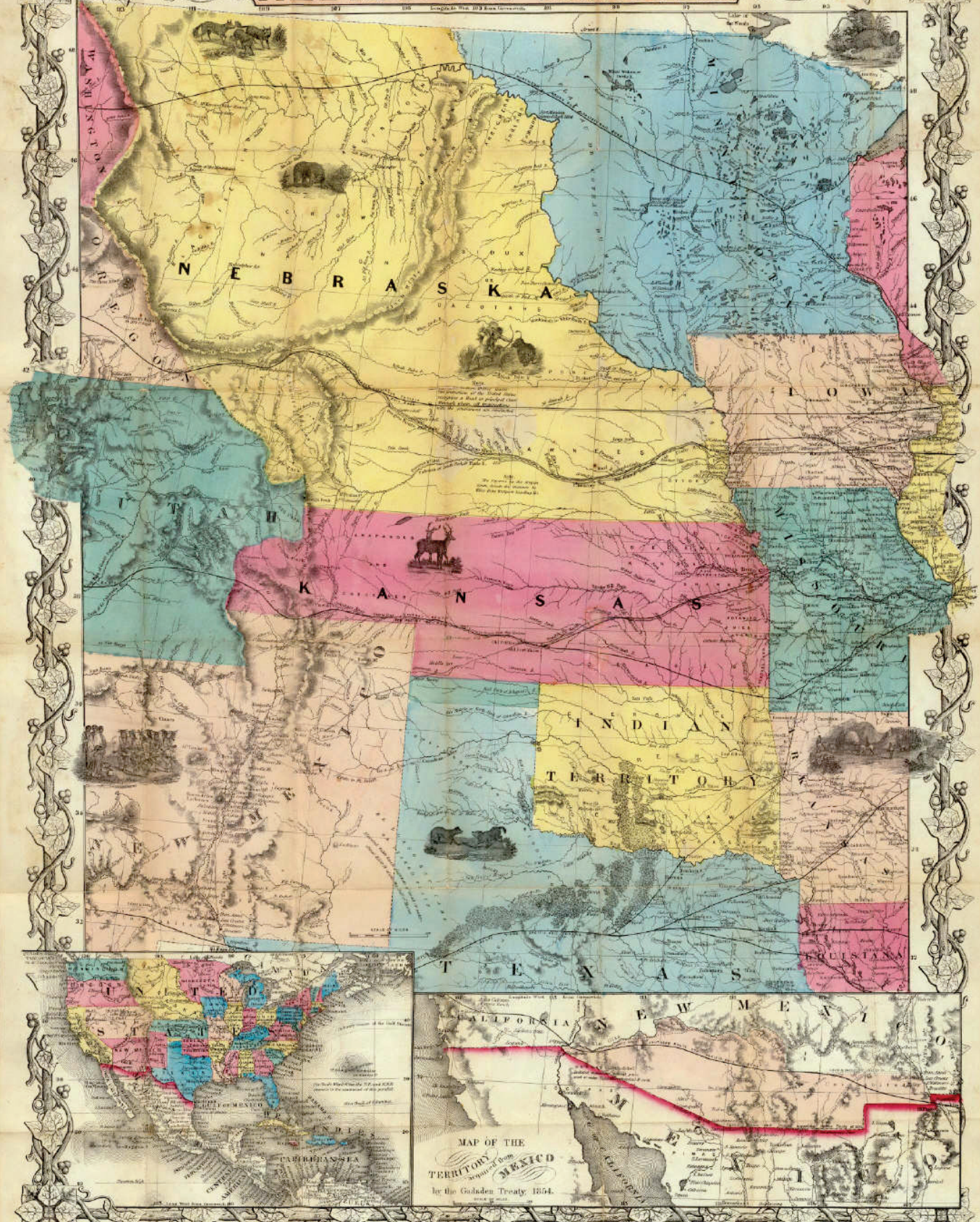
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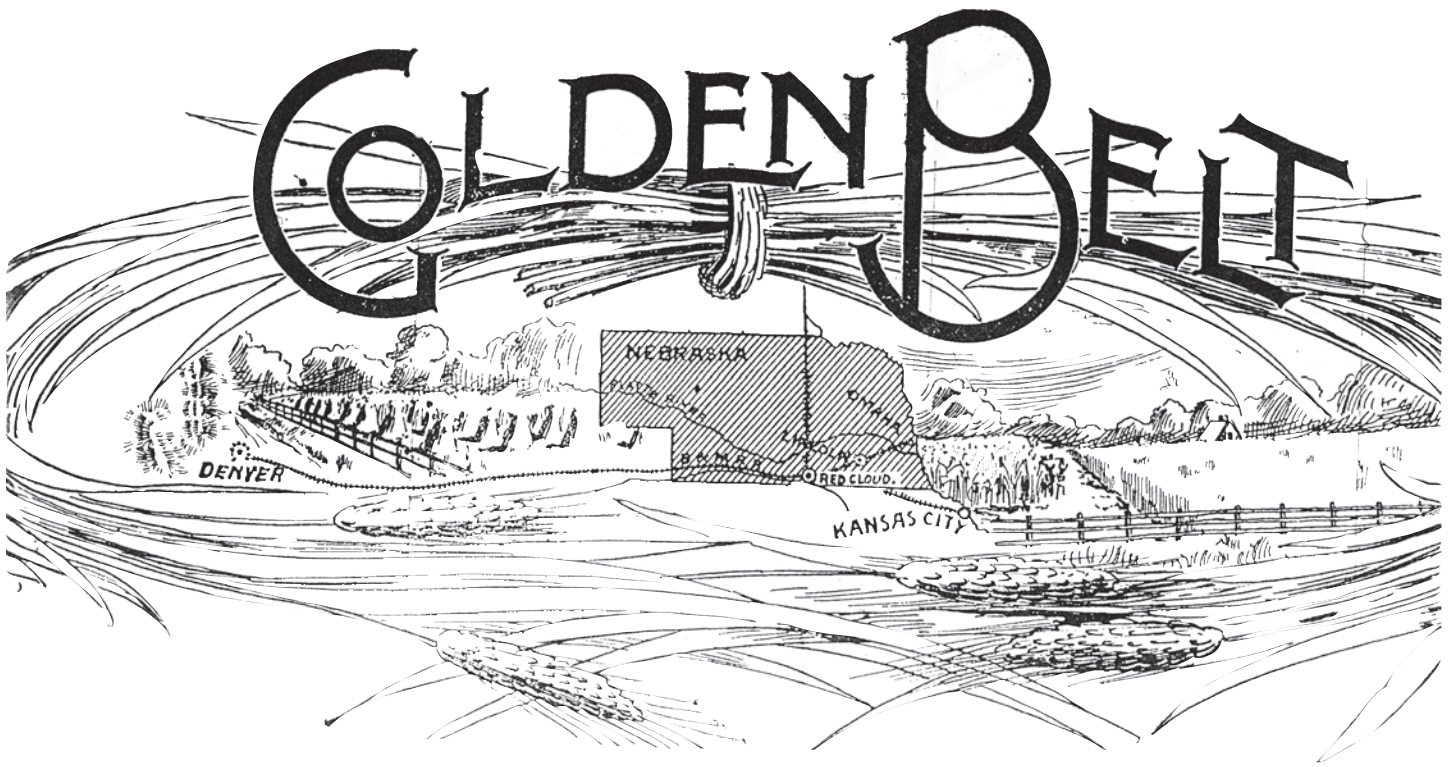
# NEBRASKA AND KANSAS



Revised according to Act of Congress, under date 22d of Feb. 1854, in the Constitution of the United States, and the various Acts of Congress, and the various Acts of the State of New York.

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## Kansas-Nebraska Acts: Territorial Imagination in “El Dorado,” *The Song of the Lark*, and *The Professor’s House*

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Nebraska, as a focus for fiction, did not come easily to Willa Cather (Woodress 42-43). Susan J. Rosowski puts it this way: “The challenge Cather perceived in the plains is correspondingly spiritual, not primarily to tame the land in the sense of breaking sod . . . but to humanize an alien world” (15-16). Because neither simple praise nor conventional appeals to Virgilian pastoral would answer this challenge, Cather turned to a kind of territorial imagination, an inventiveness rooted in the colorful vicissitudes of the recent territorial past, an approach to the plains that evolves through the pages of “El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional,” *The Song of the Lark*, and *The Professor’s House*.

Although a comprehensive history of this territorial imagination remains to be

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Illustration on page 30: Pocket map, 51 cm. x 70 cm. Published in *Nebraska and Kansas* by J. H. Colton, J. H. Colton & Co., New York, 1854. Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, CG4130 1854 .C6. Illustration above: Banner from *The Golden Belt*, published in Red Cloud from 1893 to 1896 by John R. Wilcox and William McMillan.

Front cover: Coreopsis, Nebraska Prairie Wildflower. Photograph by Betty Kort.

written, the story probably begins in 1787 when the Congress of the Confederation passed the Northwest Ordinance, which established a program of territorial self-government that would lead toward statehood. With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the land that Cather eventually embraced in her fiction became subject to these protocols. Stretching from Alberta in the north to portions of present-day Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas in the south,

***The dramatic passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 is usually discussed as a pivotal event in the battle over states’ rights and the question of slavery, but this act also deserves attention as an imaginative event, a political act that has much in common with the writer’s craft.***

these 828,000 square miles challenged the country’s imagination of itself. In the decades that followed, people of every stripe—frontier scouts, fur traders, ambitious investors, railroad magnates, visionary politicians—mapped and remapped the new territory.

Roy F. Nichols has described this territorial activity as a “process of constant experiment, adjustment, and rearrangement” (160). For instance, when Louisiana became a state in 1812, the region became the Missouri Territory—until 1819 when the southern portion was separated and dubbed the Arkansas Territory. An 1823 map simply identifies Cather’s future homeland as “Indian Territory,” with the added tag: “Deep

Sandy Alluvion.” David H. Burr’s 1838 map proposes a “National Boundary” line running north and south through present-day Kansas and Nebraska, creating a “here” and a “there.” The map of the United States used in *Mitchell’s School and Family Geography* (1852) identifies

## Kansas-Nebraska Acts

(Continued)

the region of western Kansas as “Great American Desert.” Taken together, these documents suggest a first principle of the territorial imagination: the land remains the same but boundaries and names can always be otherwise.

Discussions of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 usually center on the problems of slavery and popular sovereignty, but this act also deserves attention as an imaginative event. After decades of naming and renaming, marking and remarking, after the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850, the United States Congress inscribed bold territorial lines that created regions called “Kansas” and “Nebraska.” In so doing, these government officials impressed the power of re-inscription into the minds of grassland dwellers once and for all. The moral was clear. When a human agenda was important enough, the Great Plains could easily be re-drawn and renamed.<sup>1</sup>

In this case, the drawing created a lasting boundary between the future states of Kansas and Nebraska, a dividing line that—unlike the Rocky Mountains or the

### ***When a human agenda was important enough, the Great Plains could easily be re-drawn and renamed.***

Missouri River—was entirely fanciful. It was an imaginary border at 40° that sliced through a series of creeks and the Republican River. When, during the late 1850s, people in the Kansas Territory tried to expand their region by making the Platte River the dividing line between Kansas and Nebraska, advocates of this measure attacked the current division by arguing that the river constituted a “natural boundary” (qtd. in Gower 3). To anyone living through this period, it was clear that the rules governing this process of re-inscription were still being written.

Mapmakers captured some of this energy.<sup>2</sup> A. J. Johnson’s territorial map *Nebraska and Kansas* suggests the inventiveness (even the whimsy) of the Act by dressing Kansas in a gaudy pink that splashes west over Pikes Peak and South Park. Sporting a lighter, more roseate hue, Nebraska dominates the document.

By contrast, “Reynolds Political Map of the United States” from 1856 uses gray, red, and green to identify territories and their neighboring states according to their positions on slavery. In this map, Kansas,

### ***. . . the land remains the same but boundaries and names can always be otherwise.***

suddenly up for grabs on the slavery issue, occupies the center in undetermined white. Particularly adept at using colors to highlight territorial revisions, J. H. Colton also understood the power of pictures. In a stunning map for 1854 (see illustration), an Indian hunts a bison in the middle of the golden Nebraska territory, north of the Platte River. Two deer look out from a grassy ridge above the Smoky Hill Fork on the 103<sup>rd</sup> meridian in the pink Kansas territory. “Fremonts Route” runs just below their little island. Although they in no way represented innovations in mapmaking, such embellishments contributed to an implicit sense that all this redrawing and renaming had an aesthetic dimension.

Statehood finally settled this battle of competing hues, although territorial representatives needed four tries before they finally brought Kansas into the Union as a Free State in 1861 with its western boundary pulled back to 102° longitude. Some Kansas legislators called it “dismemberment” (qtd. in Gower 3). Other legislators were satisfied because they feared the creation of a state too large and too disparate to govern (Gower 7-9). Two years later, William Quantrill crossed the old border of the Missouri River to terrorize the citizens of Lawrence. Four years after that, with the Civil War finally over, Nebraska became the 37<sup>th</sup> state, but its northern border was re-inscribed at 43° North. Cather’s “Nebraska” encompassed a mere 20 percent of the territory it had once named.

It would, of course, be a gross simplification to argue that this territorial imagination informed Cather’s fiction the way the works of Henry James or Sarah Orne Jewett did. By the same token, it would be a mistake to assume that Cather, having moved to Nebraska in 1883, was not influenced by this recent activity, which stood as a precedent for any thinking about the region. In fact, when

Nichols describes the territorial experience as “experimental,” as a process of “self-renewal” and “creation,” he seems to be rehearsing Cather’s creed as a writer.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence of this synergy can be found in the pages of the Red Cloud newspapers that Cather and her family followed with great interest. A little article in *The Red Cloud Chief* from 17 April 1885 explained, “The latter part of last week the northern zephyr gave Kansas a generous baptism of dust from Nebraska’s virgin soil, while this week the Jayhawker cyclones have returned the compliment in grand shape” (5, 1). As they would do with a vengeance in the 1930s, the two states were exchanging some of the soil that defined them. Then, on 24 April, the paper reported that six men had been killed in an avalanche near South Park, Colorado. Known as “Kansas” in the 1850s, this region seemed now to possess its own species of catastrophe (2, 6). On 1 May, the paper announced “Another Kansas Flood” and the good news that “Catherton can now boast of a notary public, in the person G P Cather. He is well qualified to fill the office” (2,5; 4,1).

Eight years later, when *The Golden Belt* attempted to make a place for itself in the hearts of Webster County readers, it did so by expanding this territorial conversation. The newspaper’s banner depicts a clearly demarcated Nebraska under a sheaf of wheat that stretches out to embrace the old Kansas-Nebraska territory. In a telling revision of the territorial maps, Denver and Kansas City anchor the west and the east, but Red Cloud centers the image. Under this proud proclamation, the paper reported that “David Wallace, one of our Kansas neighbors was in town Wednesday” and that “Mrs. Batten went to Denver Saturday evening to visit with her husband.” As the summer approached, *The Belt* (as it quickly came to be known) reported a symbolic union: “License was issued May 18, 1893, to Guy Varney of Kansas and Etta Savage of Cowles, Nebraska” (5, 2). Day after day, articles such as these helped to nurture a growing sense of regional identity. Red Cloud thrived at the center of things, a Nebraska town with its own weather and own cast of characters who studied the old territorial borders for news of their neighbors.

Rosowski illustrates Cather’s early dismissal of this world by quoting from the opening sentences of “El Dorado”:

“the flat plains rolled to the unbroken horizon vacant and void, forever reaching in empty yearning toward something they never attained” (qtd. in Rosowski, 15). The rejection of this frustrating landscape seems emphatic and complete, but Cather has a far more ambitious agenda in this story.

From the first words of “El Dorado,” the narrator emphasizes that the setting is Kansas: “People who have been so unfortunate as to have traveled in western Kansas will remember the Solomon Valley for its unique and peculiar desolation” (293). But was this country really “unique” and “peculiar”? Any objective observer would note many similarities between this topography and the country around Red Cloud.

Indeed, a rider on horseback, headed south out of Red Cloud, could easily cross the Nebraska-Kansas border and struggle to identify any topographical difference during the crossing. Underlying decades of imposed lines, colors, and names was the same undulating land that the youthful Cather considered ugly and void. Perhaps it is only a coincidence that, as Cather’s narrator continues to describe this alien landscape, she explains how “Beyond the river with its belt of amber woodland rose the bluffs . . .” (293). But the dry corn makes her think of “the golden apples of the Hesperides” (294) and letters imagine “the golden future of El Dorado” (297). In this way, the narrator subtly denies the story’s central premise. Like Webster County, Nebraska, this Solomon Valley of Kansas is part of “the Golden Belt.”<sup>4</sup>

No simple repudiation of either Kansas or the plains, “El Dorado” functions as an “act,” a peremptory division that attempts to set Kansas apart. As a result, the Sunflower State becomes, in a manner of speaking, *recessional*. It is the particular region of the plains where people yield to prairie hardships. Needless to say, some readers south of Red Cloud were angered by the portrayal, but it is precisely this fictional act that makes it possible for Cather to humanize her own portion of the plains, even as the colors of the old Kansas-Nebraska territory shine through (“Indignant Kansas” D2b).

It is in this context that we meet Josiah Bywaters, the poor Virginian who was conned into investing all of his money in Kansas. We are told that there was something respectable in the appearance of the man, and the narrator marks the distinction: “His appearance was not that of the average citizen of western Kansas” (“Eldorado” 294). Describing Bywaters’ fate, the narrator explains, “The tide of emigration had gone out and had left him high and dry, stranded on a Kansas bluff” (295). Bywaters has been cheated by the Gump family, particularly Apollo Gump, who introduced himself “as Mr. Apollo Gump of Kansas” (296). In a resounding interior meditation, Bywaters considers the West within this Kansas frame:

he wondered whether some day the whole grand delusion would not pass away, and this great West, with its cities built on borrowed capital, its business done on credit, its temporary homes, its drifting, restless populations, become panic-stricken and disappear, vanish utterly and completely, as a bubble that bursts, as a dream that is done. (303)

This rumination concludes with an emphatic statement: “He hated western Kansas” (303). In Cather’s Kansas, emotions (unlike the rivers) run deep. Loneliness. Hatred. Despondency.

This is how Cather divides the plains. What would appear largely homogenous

stuff there these three years” (305). In this anecdote, Kansas is a brown “there” where nothing will grow.

Water, as every Westerner knows, is always crucial to such stories. With this in mind, Cather turns experimental. In her Kansas, rivers become animate. The narrator explains that although “the Solomon is heartily disgusted with the country through which it flows, it makes no haste to quit it” (293). Eventually, it dries up “from weariness and ennui” (293). Along this grumbling river, “the dry little corn leaves whispered to each other” (294). And, at the end of the story, the old river is still contemplative and irritable, “wondering why a river should ever have been put there at all” (310). In Cather’s Kansas, water wanders and wonders. Corn whispers. Rivers and plants speculate and feel. They ask, “what if?” and “why this and not that?”

It should come as no surprise that Cather’s experiment in Kansas sentience echoes life in Red Cloud during the 1890’s. Back in the summer of 1893, as banks failed and the drought grew worse, Cather was smitten with Louise Pound and home from college. On 9 June, *The Golden Belt* reported the failure of The Kansas Grain Company (1, 4). Then, on 28 July, in addition to reviewing the recent Blind Boone concert, *The Golden Belt* included this report from nearby Cowles: “Give me water or I die says the corn in this locality” (4, 1). Whether Cather read these words or not is less important than the recognition that this Kansas-Nebraska “belt” was imbued with its own imaginative approach to storytelling. In Webster County, talkative vegetation really did define a locality.

And for the rest of that summer, as Cather ate banana ice cream and forced her brother Roscoe to read thirty lines of Caesar every day, *The Golden Belt* paid close attention to the dry weather and the gasping corn. On 18 August, the paper announced on its front page, “The last week has been most perfect corn weather” (1, 3). But the correspondent from Cowles declared, “Corn in this locality will make half a crop” (4, 1).<sup>5</sup> Sounding like one of Cather’s bitter residents of the Solomon Valley, the reporter from Guide Rock wondered at

***Cather’s formula seems clear. Using climate to grasp character, she re-inscribes lines drawn by the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. Nebraska becomes an absent “here” and Kansas becomes a palpable elsewhere. In this alien region, settlers yield and recess. In this fantastic territory, rivers meditate, corn whispers, and uncertainty looms like a funnel cloud. Perhaps a landscape becomes human when we can divide it on our own terms.***

to most observers, the writer separates into a here and an elsewhere. The valley becomes a vessel for negativity otherwise associated with the territory as a whole. She creates a perfect vignette to make the point. When a creaking wagon pulls up to the store, Bywaters listens to an ailing mother trying to get her family back to Missouri: ““We moved there ten years ago, when the country was lookin’ mighty green and purty. It’s all done burnt up long ago. It’s that dry we couldn’t raise any garden

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the fickleness of prairie rainfall: “Monday night it rained all around us, but left us in the dust” (4, 2). A year later, “Roads were crowded with long columns of people, as tens of thousands of Nebraskans hitched up their covered wagons and drove eastward” (Dick 333).

It seems obvious enough that Cather’s voices from Kansas are indebted to the people living and writing about corn and rain around Red Cloud in the 1890’s, but the story they tell is much older than territorial divisions. Many years ago, Waldo Wedel pointed to the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian as the key to this narrative:

Before the day of intensive agriculture, the eastern portion consisted of subhumid tall-grass prairies interspersed with numerous sparsely to heavily wooded watercourses, and with precipitation averaging from 25 to nearly 40 inches annually. Westward, the prairies give way to mixed grasses and then to short-grass steppe, where rainfall diminishes to 15 inches or less, evaporation increases, and surface water over large areas is scanty or absent for much of the year. (499-500)

For plains inhabitants, the real problem is that this abstract rainfall line “may shift as much as 200 miles to the east or west” (500). A person can try to point out the truly dry land in the Kansas-Nebraska territory; but, as people like to say, there is no *there* there. Wedel explains,

Climatic fluctuations are not recent phenomena in the Central Plains; they are a function of the geographic location of the area in the border zone between humid and arid regions. History bears testimony to the fact that these uncertainties troubled the Indian, as they have the white man, in the Central Plains. (501)

*The Golden Belt’s* correspondent from Guide Rock and Cather’s appropriately named Bywaters are simply rehearsing the

ancient narrative in their own distinctive idiom.

Cather certainly understood this ecological reality, but she was not trying to write environmental history. She was intent on redrawing the natural “border zone” in order to locate plains vicissitudes elsewhere, in this case, “Kansas.” As her finale shows, there is immense pleasure in such an act: “Next day, having got his money out of the place, the Colonel set fire to his old store and urged his horse eastward, never once casting back a look at

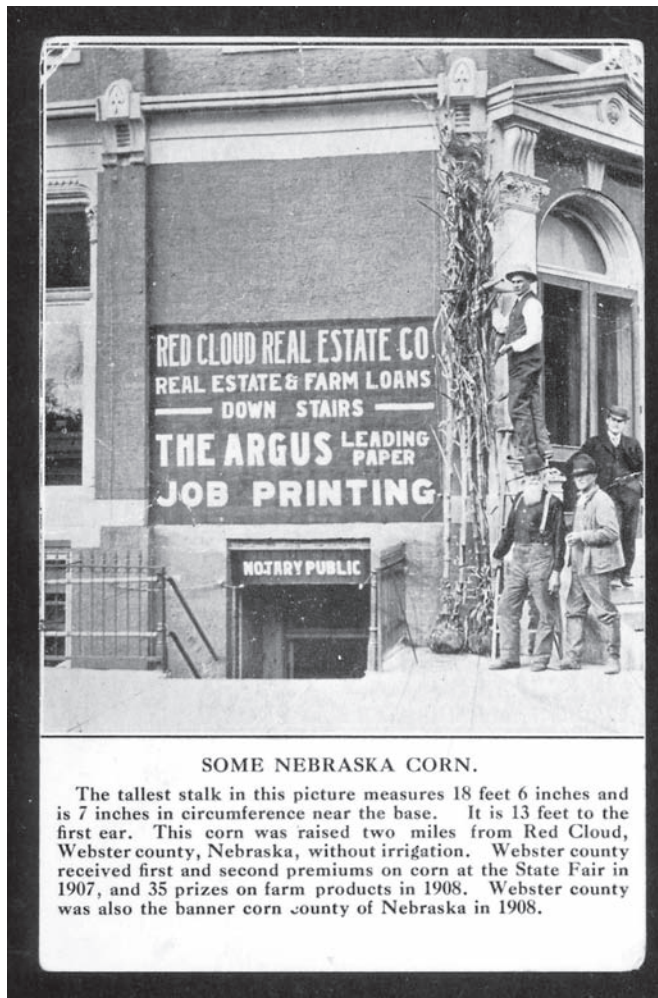
and Kansas becomes a palpable elsewhere. In this alien region, settlers yield and recess. In this fantastic territory, rivers meditate, corn whispers, and uncertainty looms like a funnel cloud. Perhaps a landscape becomes human when we can divide it on our own terms.

More than a decade later, having fully embraced Nebraska in *O Pioneers!* (1913), Cather set the first part of *The Song of the Lark* (1915) in a version of Red Cloud that she located at the far end of the old Kansas-Nebraska territory:

Colorado. In this novel, Kansas is where Wunsch disappears. Thea discovers this fact when she receives a birthday card marked with nothing but her old instructor’s signature. Ray examines the postmark: “Concord, Kansas. He has my sympathy!” Thea wants more of an explanation. Ray tells her, “He’s headed in the wrong direction. What does he want to get back into a grass country for?” (95). Ray’s colloquial speech is full of nuance. Kansas remains a kind of cul-de-sac, a place where an unfortunate person might “get back into.” As a backdrop for the artist’s story, recessionary Kansas is highly valuable because it underwrites the validation of *Moonstone*, the renamed Red Cloud that grounds Thea’s spirit.

Three years later, in the wake of *My Ántonia* (1918) and still very much fixed on childhood recollections, Cather wrote a prescient article for *The Red Cross Magazine* in which she fondly recalled her education in a prairie schoolhouse. She begins with a territorial gesture: “In Kansas and Nebraska almost

every community had a ‘frame’ schoolhouse, while the settlers themselves were still living in sod houses and dugouts” (54). On the next page of the article, she recalls hunting for exotic “wild flowers” unmentioned by the old *Gray’s Botany*, which “touched the flowers of western Nebraska and Kansas very lightly” (55). Then, in order to underscore how valuable such an education could be, she recalls “The case of Dr. Samuel Williston,” whose parents packed him up as a baby to settle on “a homestead near Manhattan,



Photograph courtesy of University of Nebraska Libraries, Archives and Special Collections.

the last smoking ruin of El Dorado” (310). Bywaters simply rides away from Kansas, but what he really rides away from is what Wedel calls “uncertainties.” On the back of Gump’s blooded horse, Bywaters turns his back on mutability. It is a marvelous fantasy that many people have entertained, including the young author who had left her “native” Nebraska for Pennsylvania.

Cather’s formula seems clear. Using climate to grasp character, she re-inscribes lines drawn by the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. Nebraska becomes an absent “here”

Kan.” (68). With no intention of becoming a farmer, he fled the prairie, eventually working his way into Yale and on to a

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remarkable career as a paleontologist. Cather cannot resist pointing out that “Williston wrote a great many scientific books of the highest importance” (69).

Another recessional tale, this professor’s life stands as a valuable prologue to *The Professor’s House* (1925), Cather’s story of Godfrey St. Peter, whose books have “brought him a certain international reputation and what were called rewards . . .” (34). Unimpressed by such things, the professor’s mind is elsewhere. In the opening pages of the novel, St. Peter recalls how he *got back into grass country*: “his parents sold the lakeside farm and dragged him and his brothers and sisters out to the wheat lands of central Kansas. St. Peter nearly died of it” (32). By this time in her career, Cather could take Kansas despondency for granted. It was there in her fiction. It was there in the fact of Professor Williston’s life. The pattern looks familiar and complete—until the novel’s end.

During long summer days, while his family travels in Europe, St. Peter fritters away time in reverie until a long lost figure returns, namely “the boy the Professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas, in the Solomon Valley—the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter” (263).<sup>6</sup> Out of his Bergsonian capacity for both recollection and emotion, “the Professor felt that life with this Kansas boy, little as there had been of it, was the realest of his lives, and that all the years between had been accidental and ordered from the outside” (264). This “Kansas boy” is “a primitive” and cares only for “earth and woods and water” (265). Returning from this dry region, the Kansas boy helps St. Peter face his life and impending death with wisdom worthy of Epictetus. He knows, simply, “That is true; it is time” (266). Set against Cather’s formulaic biography of Professor

Williston, the conclusion seems revelatory. The author has gone out of her way to redeem the old territory as something more than the sum of its divisions. It endures in reverie like a subterranean spring as a source of renewal and resolution.

Cather, in the final analysis, had nothing against Kansas. In “My First Novels” (1931), she explains, “Nebraska is distinctly déclassé as a literary background; its very name throws the delicately attuned critic into a clammy shiver of embarrassment. Kansas is almost as unpromising. Colorado, on the contrary, is considered quite promising” (94). Cather endorses Colorado, but candidly acknowledges a bond between Kansas and Nebraska. She knew, as her contemporaries did, that she had been remapping the old territory, story by story, novel by novel, for a very long time. And, from first to last, she understood that her creation of prairie protagonists depended on a prairie elsewhere.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this approach flourished on the Great Plains because the demand for adaptation was unavoidable? See Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1931), 7, and *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> For the definitive study of mapmaking rhetoric in the United States, see Susan Schulten, *The Geographical Imagination in America, 1880-1950* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Nichols 159. In *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature* (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1999), 11 and *passim*, Rosowski describes this mode of creativity as “birthing.”

<sup>4</sup> Golden corn and a kind of corn consciousness defined the Nebraska of Cather’s childhood. As Bradley H. Baltensperger (“Agricultural Adjustments to Great Plains Drought: The Republican Valley, 1870-1890,” *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture*, 44) has shown, sixty percent of the farmers in Webster County in 1880 came from corn country back east. It is worth noting here that Cather’s uncle George Cather invested in Kansas property during this decade.

<sup>5</sup> Precedents for this kind of complaint in Nebraska stretch all the way back to 1874. See Baltensperger, “Agricultural Adjustments to Great Plains Drought,” 47.

<sup>6</sup> The imaginative movement recalls “The Sculptor’s Funeral.” Once again, a thoughtful character discovers a forgotten boy in Kansas. Here, of course, the discoverer and the boy are the same person.

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# In Memory of Robert Henigan: A Cather Appreciation

Julie Henigan

My father, many of whose formative years were spent in Adams and Kearney Counties, was a man who had the Nebraska prairies in his blood: he breathed more freely and relaxed more fully when he stood on their soil than in any place I ever saw him. He complained to me that he felt hemmed in by the Ozarks hills, where I—who had grown up among them—felt at home. It is little wonder, then, that he should have possessed such a deep affinity for the works of Willa Cather, which he taught, wrote about, and loved for most of his adult life. He could easily identify with Jim Burden, walking the streets of a small town on summer nights—in his case, Heartwell—longing for something, he knew not what, beyond their narrow bounds. He, too, was an import, returned to his parents' home state when the Great Depression took its toll on commerce in southern California. Like Jim, my father put down deep roots in his adopted home and always hoped he would return to live there someday. Even after several decades, Cather's descriptions of both farming and small-town life on the prairies still rang true to him in both their physical and psychological details. So too did her depictions of the university life in *The Professor's House*, which he would later come to know, and of the southwest, where he used to take us on vacation, partly (I later realized) in order to visit the sites of *Death Come for the Archbishop*. Cather's

Bohemian heroines also stirred him—not only, I believe, because they were some of her most vividly drawn characters, but also because he had married a beautiful Czech violinist from northern Kansas.

My father, without being aware of his own gift, was an intrinsically musical man, and the music in Cather sounded a chord in him as deeply as anything in literature. He had grown up in the 1930s listening to Metropolitan opera broadcasts, and I had the impression that they were as much a part of his Nebraska experience as dust storms, baseball, his schooldays in Heartwell, or his brief time as a farmhand and railroad worker. Cather's intimate knowledge not only of opera and of the opera singers of her day but of the intricate workings of the musician's heart assured that my father would be enthralled by characters like Thea Kronberg, Lucy Gayheart, Kitty Ayrshire, and Professor Wunsch. It was a source of disappointment to him that he never got around to writing the book on Cather and opera which he had planned—although he did contribute an excellent article to the *Cather Newsletter* on *The Song of the Lark*.

However, a life is not to be measured solely by material accomplishments, but, usually and more importantly, by less tangible qualities—including its effect on others. I know that as a teacher, he joyously communicated his understanding, knowledge, and love of Cather's works;

and while all who knew him experienced the contagion of his enthusiasm, perhaps I, of all his "students," benefited the most. I first read Cather after he had given me a paperback edition of her complete works as a birthday gift, totally unaware of the impact they would have on me; perhaps he knew me better than I knew myself. At any rate, ever afterwards, I shared with my father a sense of the riches we both found in Cather's exquisite, transparent prose, in her unflinching sense of detail and description, in her clearness of vision, her acuteness to beauty, and in her spiritual intuition. Not long after a stroke in 2004 had left him aphasic, I read aloud to him a passage from *My Ántonia*—an act that elicited from him his first attempt since the stroke at complex formulation, as well as an enthusiastic engagement with something outside himself. He expressed his astonishment at the beauty and rightness of the description and shared his exultation with me. It was this generosity of spirit in the midst of his own pain that, along with other virtues, made me realize the extent to which my father's life was far more than the sum of its parts. It was certainly not, as he sometimes feared, either meager or undistinguished. It was, indeed, a life rich and complex, accomplished and dignified; and, at last, "complete and beautiful."



## Scholarly Contributors to This Issue

**Jeanne Collins** is a retired high school literature teacher with a longtime interest in Willa Cather; she now owns Wordsworth Writing, Editing, and Narration in Denver, Colorado. Her article in this issue is based on a paper she presented at the 2009 International Cather Seminar in Chicago.

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**Janis P. Stout** has published and edited several volumes of Willa Cather scholarship. She is editor of the print calendar of Cather's letters and is (with Andrew Jewell) a co-editor of the ongoing on-line catalog of the letters.

**Robert Thacker** is a dean and a professor of Canadian studies at St. Lawrence University. A well-known Cather scholar, he is beginning work as historical editor of the Nebraska Scholarly Edition of Willa Cather's poetry.



# Willa Cather's Field Guide to Wildflowers: The Object and What It Tells

Janis P. Stout  
Texas A&M University

Take our Nebraska wild flowers. There is no place in the world that has more beautiful ones. But they have no common names. In England, in any European country, they would all have beautiful names like eglantine, primrose, and celandine. As a child I gave them all names of my own.  
—Willa Cather, Interview, 1921 (Bohlke 47)

Among the *things*—the actual physical objects—that meant the most to Willa Cather and contributed most importantly to her experience of the natural world, and thus the meaning-making that went into her writing, was her copy of the 1902 edition of F. Schuyler Mathews's *Field Book of American Wild Flowers*. She carried this book for almost thirty years of walking in Nebraska, Virginia, Grand Manan, New Hampshire, and Maine. Her personal copy, now in the collection of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC) at the University of Texas, bears the evidence of extensive use in its abundant annotations, underscorings, and marginal comments. Speaking silently, as objects do, it has a lot to tell us about Cather's long devotion to botanizing and the keenness of her observation of the natural world.

The Mathews *Field Book* is one of some twenty-four titles included in the HRC's valuable but surprisingly little studied collection of books owned by Cather. Among them

***Speaking silently, as objects do, it [F. Schuyler Mathews's Field Book of American Wild Flowers] has a lot to tell us about Cather's long devotion to botanizing and the keenness of her observation of the natural world.***

are such notable volumes as her copy of Aristotle's *Poetics*, with heavy annotations probably made in a junior-year course at the University of Nebraska,<sup>1</sup> several well-worn volumes of Balzac (one



Willa Cather at Grand Manan. Photograph courtesy of University of Nebraska Libraries, Archives and Special Collections.

bearing incidental notes about her fellow passengers during a train trip in 1916), a heavily marked and curiously mutilated copy of Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea and Other Plays* dated in Cather's hand 1893, and a copy of Sarah Orne Jewett's *A White Heron and Other Stories* signed by Jewett with the inscription "For Willa Cather / Boston / 29th March 1908." All of these are treasures for bibliophiles. But the field guide stands out, both for its traces of long personal use and for its evidence of Cather's enthusiasm as an amateur botanist, paying close attention to the world around her as she walked or climbed.<sup>2</sup> As George Kates so felicitously puts it, commenting on one of Cather's early travel essays about rural England, "She [n]otices every growing thing, as she was to do throughout her life" (*Willa Cather in Europe* 13). My purpose here

is to give fuller consideration to the book itself, as a tangible object, and especially to Cather's annotations.

\* \* \*

F. Schuyler Mathews's *Field Book of American Wild Flowers* has gone through many revisions and reprintings. The edition Cather owned was the second, 1902. It is a small book, 6 7/8 inches tall, 4 inches wide, and an inch thick—small enough to fit in a handbag or a skirt pocket. Though still intact, with both the boards and the text block still attached to the spine, her copy shows heavy use. In the words of Molly Schwartzburg, HRC librarian, "The edges of the covers are well bumped, and the spine is broken from what appears to be frequent use of all parts of the volume."<sup>3</sup>

Curiously, the free end-paper in front has been neatly cut out, leaving a stub of a quarter-inch or so. That stub constitutes perhaps the greatest of the book's several mysteries. Why would Cather—or perhaps Edith Lewis,

after Cather's death—choose to mutilate a volume that had been such a treasured companion? The few dates noted in the margins beside Mathews's listings, indicating that Cather had identified a particular plant, may provide a hint. Most of these entries are merely marks (underscorings, lines in the margin, check marks). Sometimes a place is indicated, but the marginal notation rarely indicates a date. Of those that *do* give a date, the earliest year shown is 1917—to be more precise, August 1917. This note also indicates the place: Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

Cather made the first of many late-summer or early-fall visits to Jaffrey in 1917 at the suggestion of Isabelle McClung Hambourg. As she would for subsequent visits, she stayed at the

## Willa Cather's Field Guide (Continued)

Shattuck Inn. Isabelle, who had been and would remain one of the great loves of Cather's life, had married the violinist Jan Hambourg the previous year, 1916. The marriage had hurt Cather deeply, so deeply that her initial reaction was one of dismay and even of spite toward Isabelle's new husband. (See, for example, letters to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, March 15 [1916], and Roscoe Cather, July 8, 1916.) After a year, however, by 1917, she was beginning to relent. Perhaps the Mathews field guide was given to her by Isabelle as an emblem of the renewal of their friendship there in Jaffrey and the free end-paper bore an inscription that either Cather herself or Edith Lewis did not want others to read.

The listing that Cather marked as August 1917 in Jaffrey—her earliest dated annotation—was the Early Golden-rod (480).<sup>4</sup> During that first stay at the Shattuck Inn she also marked the Gray Golden-rod (482: "Jaffrey—Late September 1917"), the Rough-stemmed Golden-rod (478: "Jaffrey N.H. 1917 August"), and perhaps, though in this case the year is not indicated, the Late Golden-rod (480: "Jaffrey N.H. September").

The only other years indicated in the marginalia are 1919, for the Daisy Fleabane (498), with the added notation "August," place not indicated; 1937, for the Skunk Cabbage (14), indicating "Jaffrey, May 1937," and also the painted trillium (42), "Jaffrey, May 1937"; and 1938, for which there are three entries. I will return to these in a moment.

It is curious that there are no marked observations at all showing dates between 1919 and 1937. This does not mean, of course, that Cather stopped using her field guide after 1919 and took it up again eighteen years later. Numerous markings of plants seen and identified do not give the complete date. Sixteen marginal notes indicate either month or month and day without year, and another one hundred twenty-one give no date at all. Eighty-two of these 121 indicate *neither* date nor place, so that Cather's known travels at various times cannot be used as a basis for possible datings.<sup>5</sup> Given the large number of such markings, I can only suppose that she did carry her field guide during these eighteen years

but her habits in marking the plants that she saw—obviously subject to impulses of the moment—varied so much that in fact her practice of showing date and/or place lapsed altogether after 1919 until in 1937, while marking a plant that she had observed, she happened to note the date. Then the next year, 1938, she made the three dated notations that we have seen. That is the last year indicated in the marginalia. Nevertheless, we know that Cather's use of her Mathews guide did not end at that point, because two undated notations of plants indicate the *place* as Northeast Harbor (Maine). Her letters indicate that she vacationed in Northeast Harbor only in 1943 through 1946.

The three notations made in 1938 are of particular interest because of their connection with *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. All three indicate place: Virginia. Accompanied by Edith Lewis, Cather made a trip to Virginia in the spring of 1938 during the writing of her Virginia novel and took along her Mathews. In the left margin beside the listing for Calamus or Sweet Fig (16), she noted "Virginia 1938." In the margin beside Flowering Dogwood (318) she again wrote "Virginia 1938" but this time added "Cornus Stotonifera Dana." And when at some unspecified later time she saw a Pinxter Flower or Wild Honeysuckle (336), she indicated that she had seen it in 1938 on "Timber Ridge, Virginia"—an important

***Clearly, Cather's visit to Timber Ridge during her 1938 trip to Virginia, with recourse to Mathews while there, was made for the purpose of refreshing her impressions as she worked on the novel—not only her memory of "Virginia African American speech," . . .***

place name indeed in *Sapphira*. Book IV of the novel, "Sapphira's Daughter," opens: "One breezy afternoon Mrs. Blake was footing it round the last loop of the 'Double S,' on her way to Timber Ridge" (115). The following few pages are dotted with references to the Ridge, along with names of plants to be seen there. (See Explanatory Notes in the Scholarly Edition, 469-70.) Clearly, Cather's visit to Timber Ridge during her 1938 trip to Virginia, with recourse to Mathews while there, was made for the purpose of

refreshing her impressions as she worked on the novel—not only her memory of "Virginia African American speech," as Romines correctly indicates (Historical Essay, 349), but her awareness of the local plant life that, as Edith Lewis observes, provides "a great freshness of detail" (183).

The three notations made during the 1938 visit are the only identifications Cather made in her Mathews field book of plants seen in Virginia. Indeed, Virginia and Northeast Harbor, Maine, with three each, are cited the fewest of any places indicated in the marginalia. The full distribution of places mentioned, from fewest to most, is:

Virginia	3
Northeast Harbor, Maine	3
Vermont	5
Nebraska	6
Grand Manan	11
New Hampshire (Jaffrey and environs)	34

The absence of Central Park from the list is surprising, since Cather walked there frequently after 1932, when she moved into an apartment on Park Avenue just across from the park. It is also surprising that the number of entries for Jaffrey so far exceeds that for Grand Manan, where she and Lewis owned a house. Cather spent considerable time in both, often going from New York to Grand Manan at midsummer and directly from there to Jaffrey in the fall, before going back to New York for the winter and spring.

Both places held great importance for her, Grand Manan more as an alternative home and a place of total relaxation (though she also worked there sometimes) and Jaffrey as a place of withdrawal both for intensive work and for rest from the rigors of New York life. There she enjoyed autumn mountain scenery and outdoor exercise.

It might seem that Cather would not have had much time for botanizing in Jaffrey, since she did accomplish a great deal of work there. She wrote much of *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in a favorite room of the Shattuck Inn at the attic level where the ceiling sloped down much as it had in her childhood bedroom in Red Cloud or in a tent set up in a meadow. Yet we know from her letters that her usual working pattern was rigidly confined to mornings, presumably leaving her afternoons free.



**Pinxter Flower.** *Rhododendron nudiflorum*

The Pinxter Flower. Page 337 in F. Schuyler Mathews's *Field Book of American Wild Flowers*. Illustration photographed by Loren Lutes for this article.

She was a devoted, energetic walker, and she kept her *Field Book of American Wild Flowers* with her. And perhaps another reason she made so many more annotations in Jaffrey and its environs than in Grand Manan was that she associated her copy of Mathews with Jaffrey and thereby with Isabelle.

In a sense, the small number of entries labeled as being made in Nebraska can be accounted for by the fact that she did *not* work there. When she visited in Red Cloud, her days were much less structured than elsewhere, but they were also less free. Returning for visits with her parents meant surrendering most of her time to them, rather than going on solitary walks, *Field Book* in hand. This is conjectural, of course, but can be inferred from many of her letters written at Red Cloud. She may, of course, have marked many more plants than six during walks in Nebraska but simply not noted the place; we recall that

well over a hundred marginal notations do not show place. At any rate, of the six she did mark as sightings in Nebraska, two—the Great Solomon's Seal (36) and the Tradescant's Aster (492)—bear the more specific note "Republican River / Neb." and one places the Hard-leaved Golden-rod (482) on "River Bluffs Red Cloud" [sic].

Of the five entries showing Vermont, two bear the added indication "Bread Loaf" or "Bread Loaf Vermont." These were presumably made in the summer of 1922, the one year Cather lectured at the Bread Loaf School. A third, the Red-berried Elder (446) was seen at or in "Woods, Vermont."

Of the eleven Grand Manan entries, only one bears any further specification: "Robinson's garden." It would be nice to know the identity of Robinson, or the Robinsons, but I do not. Another, entered beside listings of several members of the Borage family of plants, bears the note "Mertensia Maritruca (Grand Manan)/Mertensia Siberica High Mountain N.M."—an interesting entry for at least two reasons.

First, Cather must have known these names (the second more usually spelled *Mertensia sibirica*) from another source, since the only *Mertensia* listed by Mathews is the *Mertensia virginica*, the Virginia Cowslip (378), a plant that closely resembles the Siberian Cowslip, as the *Mertensia sibirica* is commonly called. Second, this is the only time New Mexico appears anywhere in the book. Nowhere is a plant marked as having been seen in New Mexico. Yet the implication of this reference to the "Mertensia Siberica High Mountain N.M." is that she did observe the flora of New Mexico during her several visits with the care and precision we see evidenced elsewhere and that she remembered what she saw well enough to draw on it—whether correctly or incorrectly—when noting a similar plant in Grand Manan. Why she did not carry, or at any rate did not annotate, her field guide while in New Mexico is another mystery.

A similar notation—two places separated or linked by a slash mark—locates the Sheep-laurel or Lambkill (334) as "Jaffrey July 1 / Northeast Harbor July 12." Since there was no single year in which she went to both places, she must have made the slash mark and added the second part of the marginal note when she saw the same plant, or what she considered to be the same plant, in another year and at a very different location.

Consistent with what seems to have been her usual practice, Cather's numerous Jaffrey entries are rarely more specific than that, simply "Jaffrey." But in one instance, when making note of a member of the Crowfoot family, probably the Long-fruited Anemone (130), she not only specified place and date (though not year)—"Mt. Monadnock, October 6"—but went on to comment beautifully on the plant itself: "in fruit—entire plant a deep plum color from frost." She spotted the Long-leaved Aster (494) at the "Swamp foot of Mt. Monadnock" and the Purple-stemmed Aster (496) at "Swamp near Jaffrey N.H." Was it the same swamp? I do not know. The Many-flowered Aster (490) was apparently quite common in those environs, meriting merely the note, "Roadsides Jaffrey."

It is not clear whether asters in general or a particular one, the Large-leaved Aster (486), prompted one of the most interesting and apparently associative of the lengthier marginal notes in the book. On the back of a color picture toed in at page 486 (where she had written "Jaffrey N.H." beside the Large-leaved Aster) she made this extended comment:

RedCloud  
Blue aster on river bluffs: low; olive green foliage, tough gray stalks, almost creeping in habit, yellow centres, Aster Genderi

The tiny dull white or pale lavender which resembles Multiflorus is really Exignous

To this point the note is written in pencil, including the *first* underscoring of Exignous. But there is then a second underscoring in the ink of what follows:

Intense purple blue, flowers large as a nickle [sic] or larger, the intensely blue strap [?]  
—flowers about yellow centers. Seem tough and woody.

## Willa Cather's Field Guide (Continued)

Leaves alternate, small, sessile, oblong, very rough, sawtooth edge. Grows along river bluffs and clay pasture banks all the way up to the divide. Oblongifolius.

The specificity of Cather's description of the Aster is characteristic. As I have written elsewhere, when she extends her annotations in her field guide into descriptive notes like this, she demonstrates the precision of her visual observation.<sup>6</sup> Her attentiveness to the small details of what she observed during her walks implies, as well, a respect for the real things of earth. Her novels might at times reach toward the ineffable, but her feet remained firmly planted—and her eyes intently fixed—on the ground.

This was the attentiveness from which grew such descriptive specificity as her marginal note on the Canada Hawkweed (526). In response to Mathews' report of its "generally smooth stem" she inserted a counter, or at least supplemental, descriptor, "zigzag." But even that wasn't sufficiently exact. At the end of the printed description she added an insistent, "Branches and stem forming zigzag angles." She wanted to get things right. For the Small White Aster (492) she supplemented Mathews's entry with "Flowers form garland on upper side of wand-like branches." Of the Bristly Sarsaparilla or Wild Elder (302) she observed, "The sharp stiff bristles are at the base of the plant; at first glance it resembles water-parsnip." Many underscorings and other markings of details provided by Mathews seem to have been made as confirmations of what he reports. In her note for the Arrow-leaved Tearthumb (108) she both underscores his statement that the flowers are in "small dense clusters" and adds a further refinement, inserting after the word "dense" her more specific "clublike." And to the printed description of the leaves of the White Woodland Aster as "smooth" (484) she adds two levels of specificity: "Hairy on the underside, on the vein."

If we see Cather's respectful attention to the natural world in her detailed comments, we also see her delight in it in the surprising presence of an actual specimen, still intact, inserted between the pages: a tiny clover, threadlike stem, tiny root ball, and all. Delight is evident,

as well, in her notation for the Clintonia (26), where she wrote in the margin, "saw fruit first in 1917 / saw flowers first May 1937." She must have seen it in New Hampshire, since we know that she was there in September 1917 and that she paid an untypical spring visit to Jaffrey in May 1937. "Delight" is indicated by Lewis as Cather's response to the "leafless woods" of her Virginia home place in 1938, when "every bud and leaf and flower seemed to speak to her" (182-3).

\* \* \*

For at least twenty-six years the Mathews field guide was Cather's faithful companion in her walks and her resource for identifying what she saw. And on at least one occasion it also served her as an all-purpose notebook. Written on the free end-paper at the back of the book we find, in pencil and without title, the following:

The old volcanic mountains  
That slope up from the sea  
They drowse and dream a thousand years  
And watch what-is-to-be.

What gladness shines upon them,  
When, white as white sea-foam,  
To the old, old ports of Beauty  
A new sail comes home!

Underneath, not in pencil but in ink, is written, "Margie died October 7, 1924." It would seem clear merely from the difference of writing materials that the two were written on different days. And that proves to have been the case.

The penciled poem is a draft version of "Recognition," first published in the 1923 edition of *April Twilights*, one of twelve poems added in that edition while thirteen from the original 1903 edition were withdrawn. I would guess (and "guess" is the operative word here) that as she was out walking one day, some time before the 1923 publication of the poem, she was running it over in her head—this little poem that she had already drafted—and wrote it down with the pencil in her pocket in order to take another look at it on the spot. We cannot suppose that what we see here was her first attempt, spontaneously dashed off in the back of her field guide, because there are no strikeouts. Cather was a compulsive reviser, even in letters. So it must have been a fairly advanced draft. And in fact only one line (line 3) differs in the published version, which has "They *dream* and dream a thousand years" rather than "*drowse* and dream" (emphasis added). And in *April Twilights*

it is set without the indentations of the pencil version, and there are two changes in punctuation: a dash added at the end of line 2, and the comma at the end of line 5 eliminated.

But why the inked notation below the penciled draft of the poem, a year after it was published? The note that Margie had died refers to Marjorie Anderson (1854-1924), a household worker who migrated from Virginia to Nebraska with Cather's family in 1882 (see Ronning 214, Harris 679, and Romines 318). Somewhat limited mentally, Margie, as she was regularly called, worked faithfully in the household the rest of her life. She is depicted in the character Mandy in "Old Mrs. Harris," in the similarly devoted domestic helper Mahailey in *One of Ours*, and in the poem "Poor Marty," which brought Cather considerable praise.

What, specifically, moved her to record Marjorie Anderson's death on the same page where she had earlier written out her poem is hard to say. Perhaps, in pondering Margie's importance in her life, she thought of her spirit, momentarily, in the exalted terms of the last two lines: "To the old, old ports of Beauty / A new sail comes home!" My reading of these lines is that it is the newly sailing artist, or Cather herself as that artist, who "comes home," or arrives at the vaguely classical, welcoming port (Stout, "Willa Cather's Poetry" 172). Yet a web of associated patterns in Cather's thinking may justify extending that identification to Margie Anderson. The linkage of common people of integrity and authenticity with the underpinnings of the Classical world is recurrent with Cather; it is a linkage that supports Classical parallels and celebration of the common people in a number of her works stretching from *My Ántonia* to "Old Mrs. Harris," the culminating work in which a character modeled after Margie appears. Too, Cather may have been thinking of Margie's importance as an inspiring figure to her own emergence as that bright "new sail." If so, the addition of the notation about Margie's death becomes an expression of tribute and thanks. And, last, we may see in the juxtaposition of the note about Margie's death against the draft of the poem a hint that the web of association extended back to Cather's insistence, in an interview of 1921, that the ordinary farm woman who cooked and ran a household well and with joy

was, in a sense, an artist herself (Bohlke 47).

\* \* \*

All this and, I believe, a great deal more is said to us in the silent language of the object by Cather's copy of the Mathews guide. A botanist could doubtless find far more here, perhaps even a pattern in the classes of plants Cather did and did not single out from Mathews' long list. Even without that level of botanical expertise, however, we can see that it speaks to us of her vigorousness (fully supporting the observation of an early interviewer that she was "very fond of walking"; Bohlke 43); it speaks to us of the precision of her eye; and it speaks to us of the connection, in at least two instances, between her love of the people in her life and the places she also, and perhaps equally, loved.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Kari Ronning for confirming that Cather took Greek 3 and 4 during her junior year; per personal communication by e-mail, November 25, 2008. It may be possible to determine, from archives of university catalogs, when in the curriculum the *Poetics* was taught, but I have not attempted to do so.

<sup>2</sup> Cather's close botanical observation can be seen as an extension of the turn of the century "amateur field" of "nature work" closely "associated with women" and emphasizing "scientific accuracy of observation." See Raine, "Science, Nature Work, and the Kinaesthetic Body," 801-3. Raine adds that Cather's earlier novels "mak[e] intimacy with the natural landscape central to the heroines' identities and vocations."

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Molly Schwartzburg of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center for her assistance with this project.

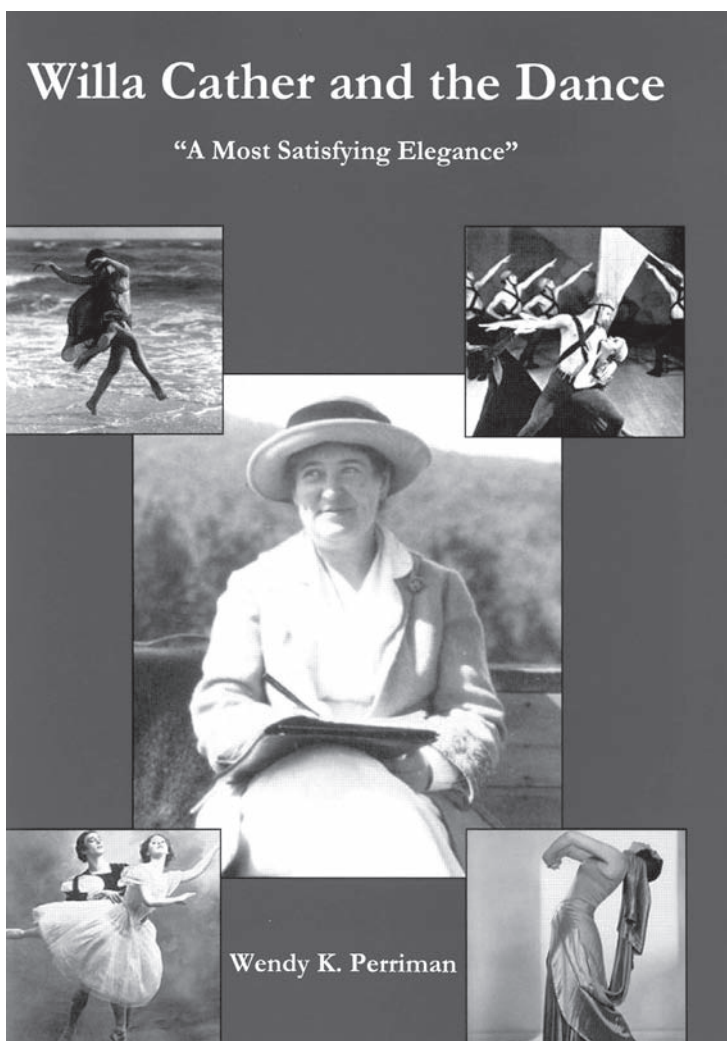
<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, such parenthetical numbers refer to the page number in Mathews.

<sup>5</sup> These numbers reflect a hand count, and all hand counts are prone to error, but I believe they are at least very nearly accurate, if not precisely so.

<sup>6</sup> See Stout, "The Observant Eye, The Art of Illustration, and Willa Cather's *My Antonia*," which includes brief comments about the importance of the Mathews field guide; also, "Seeing and Believing: Willa Cather's Realism."

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## *President's Message*

Whew!—When I began my term as President of the Cather Foundation in January, I didn't know it was going to be quite as wild a ride as it's been. But if change means growth, then I say—bring it on!

The Foundation has gone through an amazing number of transformations this year. Whether you visit us on the web or at the beautiful Red Cloud Opera House, you'll start to see why these changes are making us into a stronger and more effective advocate for all things Cather. Our new website, our new organizational structure, our new Executive Director are all positioning us to transform our beloved Cather Foundation into the dynamic entity it's always had the potential to become. So let me give you a quick re-cap of what's been doin' in 2009.

In January, we had our Board meeting at the downtown law offices of Kutak Rock, in the lovingly restored Omaha Building. This was followed by a gracious cocktail reception for our Omaha-area donors, and then an all-day strategic planning session to help us define where we want to go from here.

With January also came the news of the pending departure of our then-Executive Director, Cindy Bruneteau. Although at that time Cindy had only been with us for 18 months, she had brought a wealth of talent and ideas to her positions, as well as building new bridges to the local Red Cloud community and beyond. One of the projects during her tenure was funding and developing our wonderful new website, [www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org). Take a look. The website is truly becoming a town center for the Cather community.

April brought us our 54th(!) annual Spring Conference in Red Cloud, with inspirational and enlightening speakers, including Bishop Frank Griswold, the former head of The Episcopal Church in the United States. There were also fantastic musical programs, our second successful Board of Governors' Dinner and, as usual, a whole lot of fun. At the Board meeting in Red Cloud that Sunday, we were fortunate enough to hire Michael Avery as our Interim Executive Director.

Now Michael is a take-charge kind of guy, and during the four months he was with us, he reorganized the staff structure to make it more efficient and flexible, worked on various initiatives to move us forward, oversaw our second Elderhostel and a reinvigorated Prairie Writers' Workshop, and represented the Cather Foundation at the 12th International Cather Seminar in Chicago. With much help from our loyal and talented staff, all of this came off without a hitch. He soon endeared himself to many in Red Cloud, and when he left us, both the town and he were a little surprised at how fond they had grown of each other.

Michael also helped us conduct our search for a new Executive Director who, I'm very happy to say, is Dennis Norris. Now if Michael was a take-charge kind of guy, Dennis is someone who will transform the kingdom.

Dennis joins us with a rich background in non-profit management, consulting, and fundraising, and is determined to make the Cather Foundation both high-tech and high-touch. Go to the website and watch Dennis's video commentary about how it feels to be transported into the middle of the Cather world, and find out what things he's working on and how you can help. We're also posting short videos of Board members discussing why the Cather Foundation means so much to them, which is a wonderful way to inspire all of us and to encourage others to join our journey.

We ask for your help in making the Cather Foundation all that it can be, by being as generous as YOU can be before year end. Together we can and we are making our organization into one that shares Cather's life and works with the world in new and exciting ways. And with your help, we can continue to embrace change to move the Cather Foundation forward.

Change? Bring it on!

—Jay Yost

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# New Developments with the Cather Scholarly Edition

## Introduction

Guy Reynolds

General Editor, Willa Cather Scholarly Edition

The purpose of a “Scholarly Edition” might seem simple enough, but its development can prove to be a very complex business indeed. That might be the summary of more than twenty years of work by the team of scholars behind the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition (the CSE). The CSE has always been housed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, but has drawn on the talents of a wide, deep pool of scholars from many other institutions. Many well-known Cather scholars have worked on the CSE at some point: John Murphy, David Stouck, Mark Madigan, Ann Romines, Tom Quirk, Richard Harris. The series was begun under the general editorship of our old friend Susan J. Rosowski, and her leadership, which continued until 2004, established a warmly collaborative ethos of excellence.

Where is the Edition today? The simple answer: in a more complex and detailed place. The CSE has paralleled and helped to support one recent trend in Cather criticism, toward a contextual, cultural studies response to her work. A Scholarly Edition is in the first place a work of textual criticism, and textual editors have aimed to create the closest possible version of what Cather intended to be in place for the first edition of a work, as it set off for the printers. Alongside this textual work, the editorial team also collates historical material relating to the text’s production. This might mean delving into the research that Cather herself undertook when beginning work on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, say. Such materials can be drawn from an extraordinary range of historical sources. We always knew that Cather drew on “prototypes” for her characters: real-life figures who inspired her fictional creations. But the Edition has enabled us to trace even more deeply connections between fiction and “reality.” The military history underpinning *One of Ours*; the social history of colonial Quebec in *Shadows on the Rock*; the meticulous local history and family genealogy woven into *Sapphira*; all these volumes demonstrate the work Cather put in, even before she started to write.

What a reader might now do with this information is a matter for her to decide. The Edition is a textual and historical resource, and the interpretative aspects of literary criticism are held in check by each volume editor (tempting as it must be to use hard-won information to advance new theses about Cather’s creativity!). The Modern Language Association, which vets and approves each volume, is scrupulous in permitting scholarly editions to include only information that is utterly proven and supported empirically. Nonetheless, it does seem to me that the Edition is likely to spur another wave of Cather criticism that will draw on the CSE’s value for historical researchers.

The most recent volumes, in particular, make great use of visual materials: photographs, maps, postcards, letters in their original format. We now have a deeper understanding of the rich material culture surrounding Cather. The formatting of the Edition has changed over the years, and *Sapphira*—the tenth and most recent publication—carries a wider range of visual materials than the early volumes. Might this “visualization” of Cather’s imaginative world suggest new forms of criticism? Future Cather criticism might become hybridized, composed as much from images as from text-based sources. And, since forthcoming volumes include *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart*, Cather’s two most musical novels, a further prospect now arises: a future Cather scholarship turned decisively not only to the visual but also to the spoken, the sung, and the performed.

In the three brief essays that follow, you will meet editors of the two most recent volumes, both published this year, as each discusses an apparently small discovery made in their research and how that discovery might expand our readings of Cather. Then you will hear from an editor of an Edition still in its early stages—a collection of Cather’s poetry—as he begins his exploratory research. We hope that these essays will remind you of the fresh and surprising discoveries and possibilities that the CSE continues to offer to scholars and readers.

## Discovering the Prototype for Charley Edwards in “Paul’s Case”

Mark Madigan

Nazareth College

One of the many pleasures of editing *Youth and the Bright Medusa* was unexpectedly discovering the prototype for a character in Cather’s most famous story. In early 2001, as I read the manuscript of Sharon Hoover’s *Willa Cather Remembered*, I was focused on assessing her indispensable collection of interviews and reminiscences for a review. Yet when I came upon a previously unpublished remembrance in Hoover’s book, I knew I was on the trail of the prototype for Charley Edwards, the young actor who is Paul’s hero in “Paul’s Case.”

Hoover’s collection includes an essay by one of Cather’s high school English pupils in Pittsburgh, Fred Otte, Jr. In “The Willa Cather I Knew,” Otte fondly recalls the intellectual and artistic advice his former teacher offered him. Among other activities, she suggested that he attend the Sunday dress rehearsals of the Harry Davis Stock Company. He writes,

It was there I met such well known professionals as Lizzie Hudson Collier, Henriette Crossman [sic], Marian Ballou, the ingénue and Tommy Meighan,

then painting scenery, shifting canvas, playing juveniles, but later to become a star of the silent films. There was never any idea that I had any special talent for show business. It was just part of my education. When you studied with Willa Cather, you studied. (45)

Otte’s mention of the acting company caught my attention, for in Cather’s story, Paul tells his schoolmates “the most incredible stories of his familiarity” with the actors of a similar Pittsburgh stock

## The Scholarly Editions

(Continued)

company, of whom he has a complete set of autographed pictures (218). Of the company, Paul is particularly devoted to Charley Edwards, who is, as Cather describes:

The leading juvenile of the permanent stock company which played at one of the downtown theatres was an acquaintance of Paul's, and the boy had been invited to drop in at the Sunday-night rehearsals whenever he could. For more than a year Paul had spent every available moment loitering about Charley Edwards's dressing-room. He had won a place among Edwards's following, not only because the young actor, who could not afford to employ a dresser, often found the boy very useful, but because he recognized in Paul something akin to what Churchmen term 'vocation.' (215)

Paul's visits to the stock company do not last for long: when his insufferable classroom behavior leads to his expulsion from school, he is put to work as an office boy, and Edwards "remorsefully" promises not to see him again (219).

After reading Otte's memoir, it was clear to me that if Tommy Meighan had indeed been the leading juvenile of a Pittsburgh stock company which had

Sunday dress rehearsals, then he was the prototype for Edwards. I was soon delighted to find that Meighan's obituary in *the New York Times* confirmed Otte's account. According to the *Times*, Thomas "Tommy" Meighan was born into an affluent Pittsburgh family on April 9, 1879. The obituary continues, "when young Tom refused to go to college, he was set to work shoveling coal. One week of this convinced the 15-year-old of the wisdom of higher education and he consented to study medicine. After three years of this schooling, he decided he had enough of medicine and too good a memory to waste on pharmacology" (21). As droll as these lines may be, it was the next sentence that contained the vital information: "He became a \$35-a-week juvenile in a Pittsburgh stock company headed by Henrietta Crosman" (21).

As Otte remembered, during the teens and twenties Meighan was one of Hollywood's most popular actors. Appearing in more than seventy silent films, he acted alongside Lon Chaney, Myrna Loy, Mary Pickford, Norma Talmadge, and William Powell among other stars. Cecil B. DeMille cast him as the leading man in several of his films,<sup>1</sup> including the acclaimed *Male and Female* (1919) with Gloria Swanson. Following a brief retirement, Meighan resurfaced during the sound era with a comeback that included a lead role with Jackie Cooper in *Peck's Bad Boy* (1934). It would be his final appearance on the screen

(Brumburgh). Meighan died of cancer at 57 on July 8, 1936. The *Times* reported that his salary during his best years was \$5,000 a week. He had come a long way from when Fred Otte, Jr.—and presumably Willa Cather—watched him act in Pittsburgh at the beginning of his career.

There is no record of Meighan and Cather ever meeting, nor mention of him in Cather's correspondence. Nonetheless, she inscribed a trace of the actor in the character of Charley Edwards. Owing to Otte's reminiscence and Hoover's astute editing of *Willa Cather Remembered*, the prototype for Paul's stage idol is identified for the first time in the scholarly edition of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>Clips of Thomas Meighan in *The Mating Call* (1928) may be found by searching "Thomas Meighan Mating Call" on YouTube.

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Thomas Meighan and Gloria Swanson in *Male and Female* (1919), a silent film directed by Cecil B. DeMille. Credit: <[goldensilents.com](http://goldensilents.com)>



# A Picture of Marjorie Ann Romines George Washington University

When *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was published in 1940, many readers were surprised to learn that Willa Cather was a fifth-generation Virginian and had spent her first nine years there. *Sapphira* is grounded in Virginia family and local history and, as historical editor, one of my tasks was to trace the Southern threads in Cather's life and work that culminated in this final novel.

Like the Templetons of "Old Mrs. Harris," Willa Cather's family retained much of their Southernness in Nebraska, as reflected in their customs, their cooking, and the Virginia stories that Willa and her siblings continued to hear in their Red Cloud home. Such stories were central to *Sapphira*, Cather said. One of several women storytellers who influenced Cather from early childhood, and were written into her novel, was Mary

Ann Marple Anderson. Mrs. Anderson, a white mountain woman who worked in the Cather household and was a renowned storyteller and repository of local history, entranced young Willa. She appears in *Sapphira* as the keen, voluble mountain woman who was "born interested," Mandy Ringer (Lewis 11). Mrs. Ringer's daughter Marge, seduced and impregnated by a local boy, is briefly mentioned; she hides away, perhaps in shame, when a visitor comes (124). The real Marjorie, one of fifteen Anderson children, worked at Willow Shade as Willa's beloved



Marjorie Anderson and Elsie Cather. Photo by Wegmann, Red Cloud, 1894-96. Courtesy of Special Collections. University of Virginia.

childhood nurse and companion; and when the Cathers moved to Nebraska in 1883, she went with them, remaining a servant in their household until her death in 1924.

Marjorie was an enigmatic figure. Timid and reclusive (perhaps partly because of a frightening early marriage to a Virginia mountaineer [Bennett 58]), she was sometimes the subject of speculation and gossip in Red Cloud. "She was considered 'simple' by some of the neighbours; but she had a faithful, loving nature, and . . . she served the family with perfect self-forgetfulness and devotion"

(Lewis 11), performing simple tasks: "she dusted, peeled potatoes, and washed dishes" (Bennett 57) and was an important presence in the children's lives. Willa Cather loved "Margie" dearly, she said, "with the special love one reserves for children or those whose minds never grow up." On visits home, Cather spent happy hours working with Marjorie in the kitchen; "they understood each other" (# 754; WC to Carrie Miner Sherwood in Stout, 113).<sup>1</sup> After Marjorie's death, Cather memorialized her in a 1931 poem, "Poor Marty," mourning a devoted "poor white" Virginia servant who scours and scrubs and washes dishes "three times every day. . . . Sixty years she never missed" (807). Marjorie was also the prototype for the faithful "bound girl" Mandy in "Old Mrs. Harris," and for Mahailey, the Virginia servant woman in *One of Ours*, who regales her employers with with Civil War tales (several

of Anderson's brothers were Confederate soldiers). One of Mahailey's war stories is repeated in the epilogue of *Sapphira* (268).

Marjorie Anderson was one of the storytellers who kept Virginia tales alive and fresh for the Cather children after their move—even for the younger siblings, who were born in Red Cloud. For example, the youngest Cather daughter, Elsie (1890-1964), wrote a fanciful Red Cloud high school theme in which a heroic umbrella, wielded by a black "mammy," vanquishes a "drunken Yankee" and thus

## The Scholarly Editions (Continued)

strikes a “mighty blow . . . in behalf of the Confederacy.” Obviously, this girl was well-schooled in southern storytelling (the theme received an A+). Even near the end of her life, in 1961, Elsie Cather was still telling family stories of Virginia and passing them on for her brother Roscoe’s grandchildren to enjoy (“Christmas Memories”: also see back cover).

In my *Sapphira* research, I stumbled upon a piece of this Southern family history in the University of Virginia Library’s Special Collections. A professional photograph of a child and woman, taken in Red Cloud by Wegmann,<sup>2</sup> was labeled “Aunt Marjorie and Cather child.” I could identify the child immediately as Elsie Cather, whom I’d seen in other family pictures. But “Aunt Marjorie”? I hadn’t encountered a Cather relative by that name. When I asked about the photograph’s provenance, I learned that it came from Rose Ackroyd, granddaughter of Mary Ann and niece of Marjorie Anderson. After the publication of *Sapphira*, Ackroyd and Willa Cather exchanged letters and memories, and Ackroyd asked what had become of her dear “Aunt Marjorie.” With mounting excitement, I realized that this photograph, which must have been taken in the mid-1890s, is the only known image of Marjorie Anderson.<sup>3</sup>

She gazes out at us without defenses, a guilelessly clear-eyed young woman apparently dressed in her best—a stiff jacket of coarse wool; well-worn, polished shoes. At her side, Elsie Cather is a doll-like child, poised and assertive in an elaborate, luxurious costume. The very fact of the photograph suggests how integral and intimate a place Marjorie Anderson held in the Cather family—and it also implies the class distinctions that were preserved in their relationship. In this photograph, the mysterious, elusive “Margie” comes to dignified life. She embodies another of Willa Cather’s lifelong connections to the Virginia of her birth—one which she wrote into *Sapphira* through Mrs. Ringer and her Timber Ridge mountain family.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For additional discussion of Willa Cather’s enduring fondness for Anderson, see Janis Stout’s essay in this issue.

<sup>2</sup>Photographer J.H. Wegmann worked from a Moon Block gallery in Red Cloud between 1893 and 1901. He was in partnership with Frank Bradbook except for the years 1894-96, when he worked alone; the solo signature on this photograph suggests a date during this two-year period. Thanks to Kari A. Ronning for this information.

<sup>3</sup>The University of Virginia Library has corrected the labeling of this photograph.

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## Cather as “Singing Novelist”: Looking Toward a Scholarly *Collected Poems*

Robert Thacker

St. Lawrence University

Early in 1931 a brief essay appeared in *The Commonweal* by Joseph J. Reilly entitled “A Singing Novelist.” In it, Reilly begins by recounting his discovery of “a slender brown volume” of some “thirty-five poems, all brief,” for sale for ten cents in a Boston bookstall about 1914. The book “bore the copywright [sic] date, 1903, beneath the legend: ‘Boston, Richard C. Badger, The Gorham Press.’” Reilly, who was then librarian and professor of English at Hunter College in New York, continued: “I had already made the acquaintance of the author in a collection of little-known short stories which were distinguished by so rare a touch and so keen a flavor of life that I at

once predicted great things of her future. To meet her thus in the guise of a poet, came with a shock of surprise. I had not dreamed that she had that gift of song.” Identifying this “little treasure trove” as a copy of *April Twilights* (1903) “by Willa Sibert Cather,” Reilly offers some 1931 context—writing as he was between *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and just before *Shadows on the Rock*—that seems germane: “To chance upon this stranger volume was a joy, but to discover it on a bargain shelf, its fortunes so sadly fallen, brought a sigh. Today however I sigh no more, for its fortunes have risen mightily. Cinderella has shaken the dust of the chimney-corner from her feet and is numbered among the

elect. That slender volume now occupies a place in special catalogues which are devoted to rare items and first editions” (464).

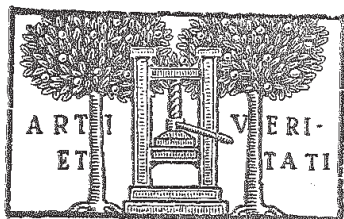
Reilly then continues to offer an appreciative reading of the 1903 *April Twilights*, saying at one point that Cather “has the true poet’s eye for the concrete and the true novelist’s interest in men and women. It is the heart which lures her, love, tears, dreams of dear but unforgotten yesterdays, revolt against blindness to beauty, a sense of the essential loneliness of life.” Acknowledging the existence of the revised *April Twilights and Other Poems* (1923), Reilly notes that it “omits, alas! a round dozen from the original



# APRIL TWILIGHTS

POEMS BY

*Willa Sibert Cather*



Boston: Richard G. Badger

The Gorham Press: 1903



Title page for *April Twilights*, 1903, Willa Cather's first collection of poems and first book.

edition of 1903" and further notes that he has himself just quoted "six of these 'outcasts'" and asserts that "poets are often uncertain appraisers of their own verse" (466).

This essay offers further evidence of Cather's willingness to participate in her own presentation—presumably, she had to give permission allowing Reilly to quote as much as he did from her excised poems—but more than that it points toward towards a key irony in Cather's career: That *April*

*Twilights*, her first book, is in some ways among her least-discussed volumes. More than this, it is the last book of hers to be included in the Cather Scholarly Edition.

Work on Cather the poet for the edition has begun, however. Charles W. Mignon—as textual editor—and I—as historical editor—have begun working on a volume that, although we have not made any categorical decision yet, will probably be called *Collected Poems*. As Reilly notes, thirteen poems from the 1903

edition were omitted in the 1923 Knopf edition but, what is more, there are other poems to consider, written and published before the 1903 *April Twilights*, between its appearance and the 1923 revision, and afterwards. "Poor Marty," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1930, was included in the Knopf volume after 1933. And when the poems were included in the 1937 Houghton Mifflin collected edition—*April Twilights* paired with *Alexander's Bridge*—Cather made further changes.

As is known, Cather wrote to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant in June 1912 expressing regret that Sergeant had discovered *April Twilights*, calling its contents bum verse and deprecating her younger self, saying that she had never been anywhere when she composed its poems. And in late 1916 she wrote to Ferris Greenslet thanking him for his willingness to publish an expurgated and revised edition of the book. Clearly, the 1923 *April Twilights* was in some sense just that: expurgated. What this suggests—most especially in view of the work of such scholars as David Porter on Cather's explicit shaping of her own self-presentation throughout her career—is that *April Twilights* and the poetry generally played a role in that shaping. "A Singing Novelist" in fact, Cather wrote poems that both presaged her struggles as an artist and suggested much about the directions she would ultimately take and, equally compellingly, chose not to take.

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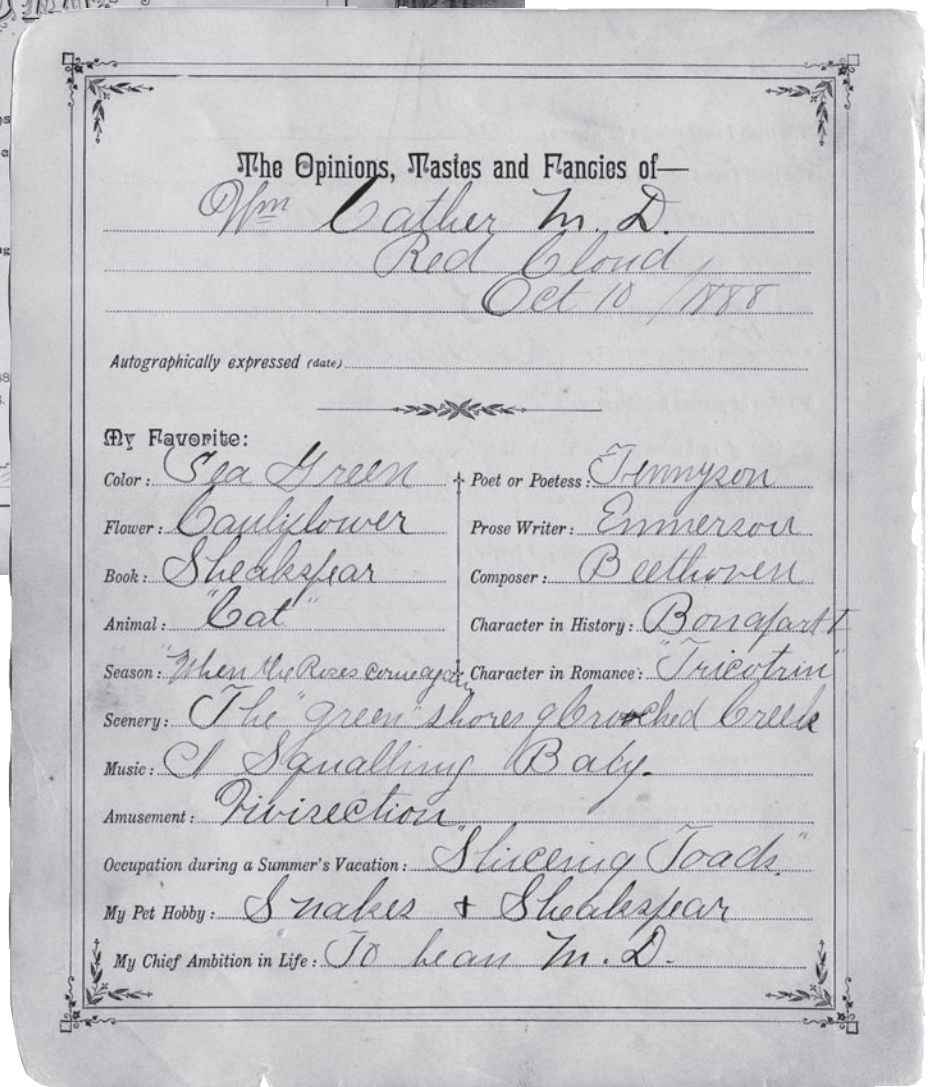
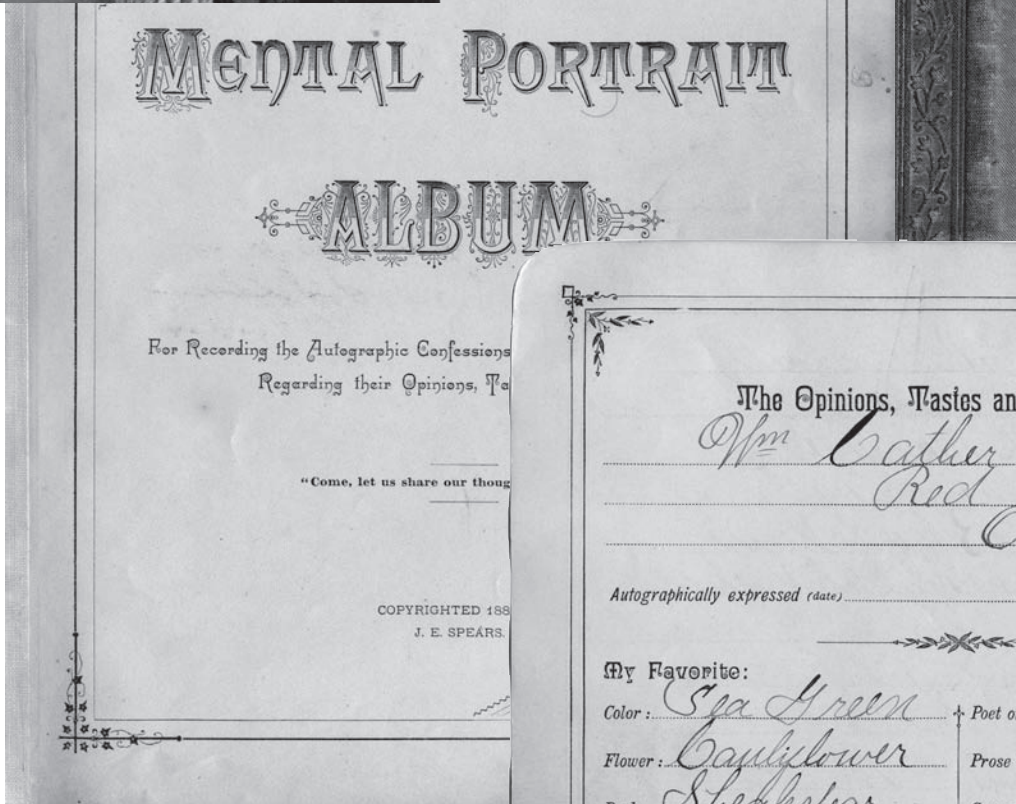
*Youth and the Bright Medusa* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*  
and all other Scholarly Editions are available at the  
**CATHER BOOKSTORE ~ [www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org) ~ 402-746-2653**



## Serena's Album: A New Web Resource for Cather Scholars and Readers

Ann Romines, George Washington University with  
Kari A. Ronning, University of Nebraska

Autograph and friendship albums were among the most enduring fads of the nineteenth century, particularly among girls and women. By the 1880s, various printed versions of these books were being marketed, even in the small towns of the Midwest. In the fall of 1888, seventeen-year-old Serena White, a student at Red Cloud High School, owned a particularly interesting album. *Mental Portraits*, bound in green leather, included ample space for friends to answer questions about their "Opinions, Tastes and Fancies." Serena circulated her album, collecting entries from her circle of friends, most of whom



Photograph above: Serena White, owner of album.

Above: Title page of Serena's album. A portion of the cover of the album is revealed behind the title page.

Immediate right and illustration on page 49: Willa Cather's entries in Serena's album, 1888.

Images courtesy of Jane Dressler; album scanned by Virginia Dressler.

seem to have been fellow students. One of those friends was Willa Cather, fourteen years old when she signed Serena's book as "Wm Cather M.D."

Such albums gave young girls and women opportunities to define themselves as individuals and to try out various versions of themselves—romantic? witty? learned? feminist? committed to a future profession—or to marriage? Willa Cather's amusing and revealing entry, reproduced here, is a portrait of a complex, playful, and ambitious adolescent girl. She is curious, experimental, and anticipates a medical career—"Vivisection" is her favorite amusement, and "Sliceing [sic] Toads" her favorite vacation pastime. Her idea of "Misery" is a conventional female pastime, "Doing Fancy Work." Conventional female attire, "Dresses and Skirts," she considers the nineteenth century's "greatest folly"; if shipwrecked, she would most desire "Pants and Coat." Some of Cather's entries reflect adolescent humor (her favorite flower? Cauliflower), while others express tastes

that we recognize from the adult Willa Cather: books, walking, "Sheepspear" and "Emmerson" [sic]. She has little tolerance for "Lack of 'Nerve;'" the "fault" for which she has *most* tolerance is "Passion." And the person she thinks has done most toward "the world's progress" is Cadmus, a Phoenician prince who introduced writing to the Greeks.

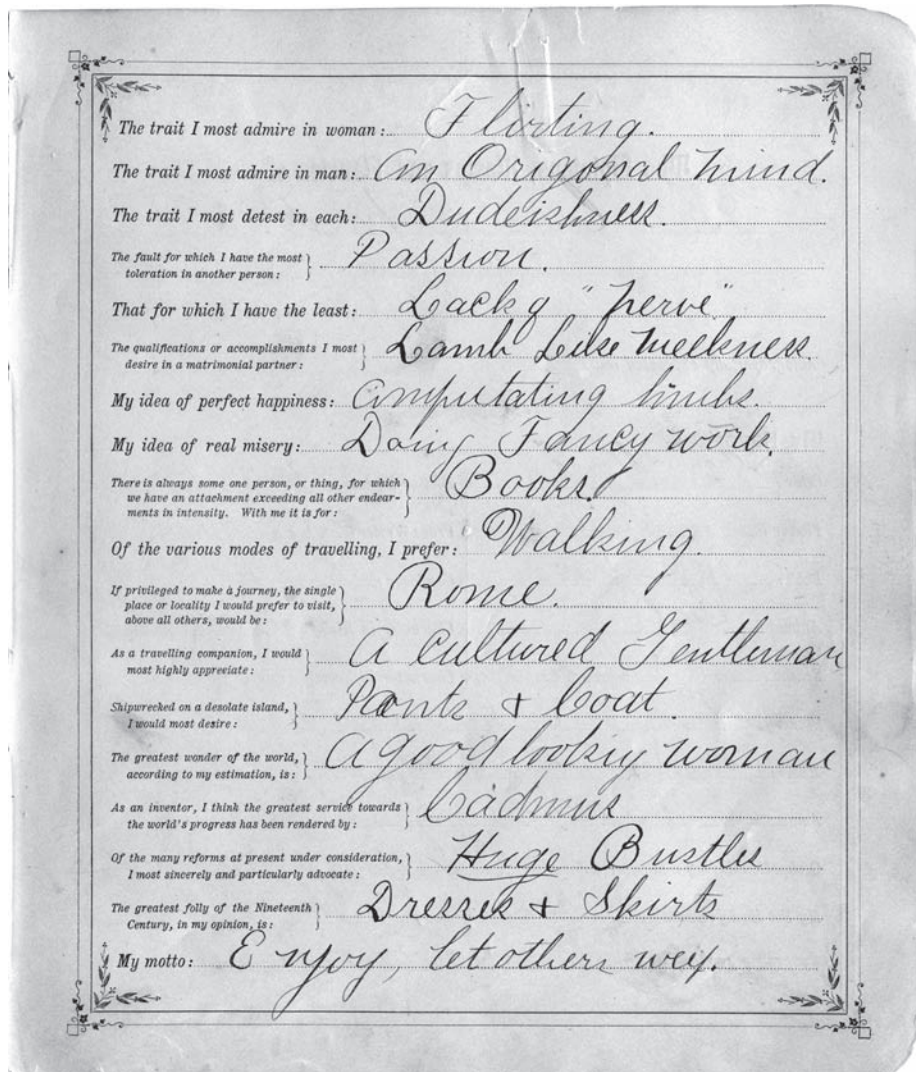
Obviously, young Willa's entries are a portrait of an extraordinary woman in the making. Other girls' entries in Serena's album, including such Cather friends as Mary Miner and Evalina Brodstone, give us an invaluable picture of the female circle of adolescents of which fourteen-year-old "Wm. Cather M.D." was a part. Cather scholar Kari A. Ronning has provided identifications of other signers in the album.

One of the girls, Mary Miner (Creighton), born in 1873 and daughter of a Red Cloud merchant, became Willa Cather's first Red Cloud friend, and the entire Miner family (portrayed in *My Antonia*) became important to Cather.

Mabel Martin (Jones), born in 1871, was also the daughter of a Red Cloud merchant, as was Lavilla Marsh, born about 1873. Loua Bellows (Holden), born in 1871, was an orphan who lived with her grandmother in Red Cloud and was active in the social life of Red Cloud's young people in the 1880s. Maud Goble (Fulton) was another young friend of Cather's. Two other signers were among Serena's Red Cloud teachers; Adella Hurlbut was assistant principal and Jennie Thomas taught the "grammar room."

Serena White's family lived near Superior while she attended Red Cloud High School during the 1888-89 term, and several other signers of the book, including Shirley Foster (b. 1870), lived in Superior and often visited back and forth with Red Cloud girls. Another Superior girl was Evelina Brodstone (b. 1875), who was to have a career as unusual as Willa Cather's; after a secretarial course, she took a job with a British-owned meat-packing company and became one of the world's highest-paid women executives, earning more than \$250,000 a year. She married one of the company's owners, William, Lord Vestey, in 1924 and, like Cather, kept up her connections with Nebraska friends. When Brodstone funded a hospital in Superior in honor of her mother, Cather wrote the dedicatory inscription.

When Cather Foundation founder Mildred Bennett was researching her groundbreaking book, *The World of Willa Cather* (1951), she interviewed Serena White's younger sister, Florence White Grosvenor, about the album, and Cather's entries were published in Bennett's book. The album has been preserved by Grosvenor's family, which includes Jane Dressler, a musician and music professor at Kent State University who has performed and presented papers at Cather seminars. Now, for the first time, we have full access to this carefully preserved treasure, through the generosity of Jane Dressler and her daughter Virginia, Digital Library Programs Librarian at Case Western University, who has scanned the book. The entire album, from cover to cover, along with contextualizing materials, is now accessible at the Cather Foundation website: [www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org). It is an invaluable resource for scholars and for anyone interested in the 1888 Red Cloud world of young Willa Cather. Thank you, Serena White!



## New Cather Acquisition at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Archives & Special Collections has recently acquired two manuscripts of Willa Cather's short story titled "Two Friends." The two 25-page typescripts, with many careful interlinear revisions in Willa Cather's hand, are accompanied by a short autograph note from Cather to her typist, Miss Bloom. Based on Cather's deeply personal recollection of two neighbors from her childhood in Red Cloud, Nebraska, "Two Friends" was written in Fall 1931, and became one of the three stories to appear in *Obscure Destinies*.

The UNL Libraries now hold nineteen Cather manuscripts, including ones of *The Professor's House*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Shadows on the Rock*, and manuscript works of short fiction. Katherine Walter, Chair of Digital Initiatives & Special Collections, describes the recent find as "remarkable, and an exciting find for researchers." For additional information on Cather holdings at UNL, see <http://www.unl.edu/libr/libspec/>.

## Important New Cather Acquisitions at University of Virginia Library

Special Collections of the University of Virginia Library recently added two Willa Cather manuscripts to their important Cather collection, thanks to the generosity of an alumnus, Murray F. Nimmo. The first of the two manuscripts, both acquired through Christie's, is a "newly discovered working typescript" of a story often considered Cather's best, "Old Mrs. Harris." The 72-page manuscript includes numerous deletions, re-writings and emendations, as well as many additional sheets bearing new text cut out and pasted in, and it reveals Cather's complex and careful process of revision. For example, the story's resonant final sentence, "But now I know," is not included in this manuscript, suggesting that it was a very late addition to the story. The second manuscript is a typescript of Cather's lead essay in *Not Under Forty*, "A Chance Meeting," which describes her meeting with the elderly niece of Gustave Flaubert. It consists of 23 pages, with revisions, plus additional text on attached sheets and clippings from Flaubert's published letters.

Edward Gaynor, Head of Collection Development for Special Collections, describes these manuscripts as "the best Cather items we've been able to acquire in years" and they are sure to become an important resource for scholars. Information about UVa's Special Collections is available at: <http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/small/>.

## CALL FOR PAPERS:

### Willa Cather Spring Conference 2010 *Food, Drink, and Willa Cather's Writing*

A Scholars' Symposium scheduled for June 3 will kick off the annual Spring Conference in 2010 with an exploration of the importance of food and drink in Cather's writing. This day of scholarly papers and discussion will be followed by two days of events related to the conference theme, including kitchen tours at Cather-related sites, food and wine tastings, talks, panels, and lively discussions of food-and-drink related issues in Cather's work and life, and a variety of celebratory events in Cather's Nebraska hometown and the surrounding countryside.

For possible presentation at the Scholars' Symposium, please submit abstracts of approximately 300 words for papers related to the conference theme. Presentation time for papers will be 15-20 minutes. The featured texts for this conference will be *O Pioneers!* and "The Bohemian Girl," but papers addressing food and/or drink issues in any aspect of Cather's career will be welcome. A partial list of possible topics can be found in the Spring/Summer 2009 issue of the *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* or at the Cather Foundation website, [www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org).

Paper presenters at the Scholars' Symposium will be invited to submit their papers for possible publication in a special expanded edition of the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review*.

Please send your proposals, as well as questions about this event, to Professor Ann Romines, conference co-director, at [annrom3@verizon.net](mailto:annrom3@verizon.net). Proposals are due by 1 Feb. 2010.

## New Books on Willa Cather from Fairleigh Dickinson University Press

*Seeking Life Whole: Willa Cather  
and the Brewsters*

By Lucy Marks and David Porter

*Willa Cather and the Dance  
"A Most Satisfying Elegance"*

By Wendy K. Perriman

*Willa Cather: New Facts, New Glimpses, Revisions*  
Edited by John J. Murphy and Merrill M. Skaggs

*Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather*  
Edited by Joseph R. Urgo and Merrill M. Skaggs

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Margaret and Elizabeth, twin daughters of Roscoe and Meta Cather, with their mother (left) and Aunt Willa, 1916. Photograph courtesy of University of Nebraska Libraries, Archives and Special Collections.

## Cather Cookbook in The Works: A Delicious Preview Recipe

In connection with the next Willa Cather Spring Conference on “Food, Drink, and Willa Cather’s Writing,” the Cather Foundation is assembling a Cather cookbook that will be for sale at the conference, and thereafter. It will include Cather family recipes, recipes connected with Willa Cather’s writing and with places and people that were important to her, and recipes from Cather Foundation supporters and events. If you have contributions or ideas for the cookbook, please be in touch with Ann Romines at [annrom3@verizon.net](mailto:annrom3@verizon.net).

To whet your appetite, here is a Cather family recipe that will appear in the cookbook. As we know, Willa Cather was deeply fond of her nieces and nephews, and this recipe comes from Margaret Cather, one of the twin nieces who were daughters of Willa’s oldest brother Roscoe (see illustration). Margaret married Richard Stoll Shannon, Jr., and became the mother of five children, to whom she served this chocolate dessert. The recipe was contributed by Margaret’s daughter Trish Shannon Schreiber, who says, “My mom called this dessert ‘ice cream pie,’ because it was always served with vanilla ice cream. . . . it was a favorite of our Shannon family. The ‘pie’ was always served in thin slices, because it was so rich. We savored each delicious bite.” You will too!

### Ice Cream Pie

1 c. white sugar	1/2 c. butter (1 cube)
2 eggs (separated)	2 squares Baker’s chocolate (1 oz. each)
1/3 c. flour	1 t. vanilla (optional)
1/8 t. salt	

Cream well the butter and sugar. Beat the 2 egg yolks and add to sugar and butter. Melt chocolate in a double boiler [or microwave]. Add to previous mixture. Stir in flour and vanilla. Beat the 2 egg whites with salt until stiff [an electric mixer is helpful]. Gently fold egg whites into chocolate mixture, stirring as little as possible. Bake in a well-greased 9” pie pan, in a preheated 325-degree oven. Cool the pie, then cut in wedges and serve with vanilla ice cream. [P.S. Coffee ice cream is also very good with this.]

## Elderhostel

### Red Cloud: Willa Cather’s Window to the World June 7-11, 2010

Hosting the nation’s largest living memorial to an American author, the Willa Cather Foundation invites you to Red Cloud, Nebraska, and into the exciting world of Willa Cather. Our five-day program will offer you a true immersion into Pulitzer Prize-winning author Willa Cather’s life, times, history, and writings. A premier Cather scholar will provide lectures and host discussions.

## Prairie Writers’ Workshop Red Cloud, Nebraska July 2010

- 5 day, 20-hour writing workshop in Red Cloud, home of author Willa Cather
- For everyone, beginner to professional
- Experience the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie, a 608-acre ecological gem of virgin mixed loess grassland
- Concludes with a public writers’ reception hosted by the Willa Cather Foundation

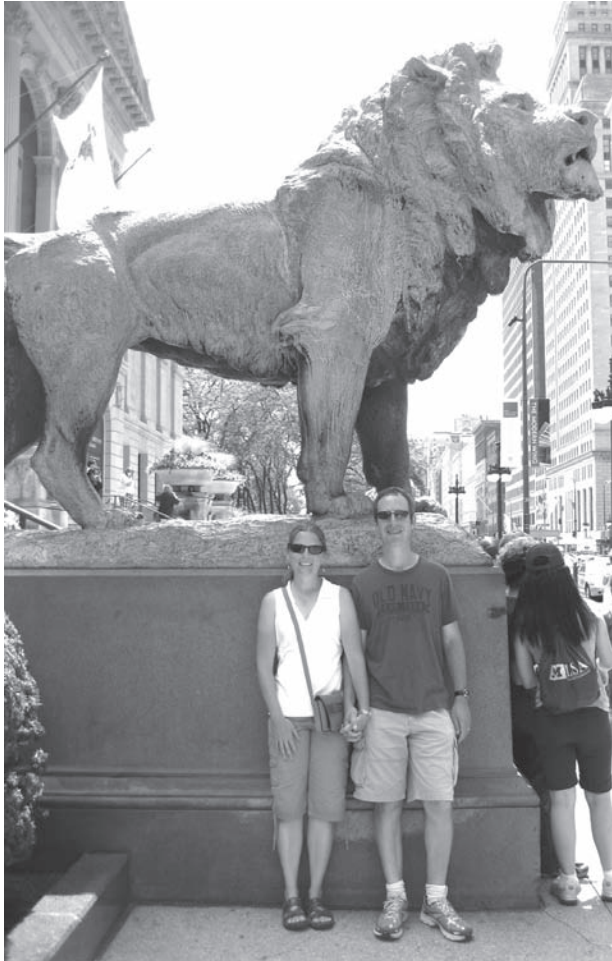
*For more information on Elderhostel or Prairie Writers’ Workshop call 1-866-731-7304 or e-mail [info@willacather.org](mailto:info@willacather.org).*

# The 2009 International Cather Seminar in Chicago

Andrew Jewell

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

In March 1895, Willa Cather, with her chaperone Mary Jones, took a long-anticipated trip to Chicago. Her trip coincided with the touring company of the New York Metropolitan Opera, and while



Cather enthusiasts Vicki and Chris Sommerich of Lincoln, Nebraska, standing in front of the Art Institute of Chicago. Photograph by Andrew Jewell.

in Chicago she saw, for the first time in her life, grand opera. She was present at the fourth American performance of Verdi's *Falstaff*, something she claimed was "more than a pleasure; it was a privilege and a great opportunity." She honored the trip by having her photograph taken at least three times: one in her graduation cap and gown, a second in an elaborate buffalo cape, and a third in profile, her cape on the shoulder away from the camera, her face alert and buoyant beneath the ornate feathers of her hat.

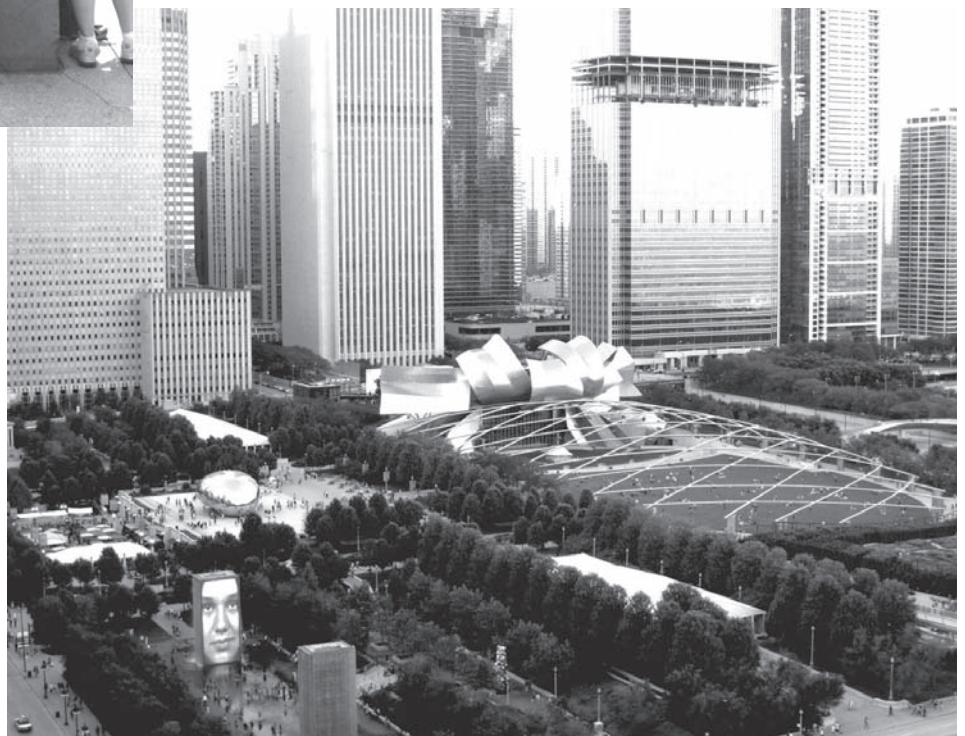
It is this third photograph of the twenty-one year old Cather, full of bright expectancy and modern panache, that

graces the poster for the 2009 International Cather Seminar. The conference, held June 25-28, 2009, declared its theme "Cather, Chicago, and Modernism," and the 120 scholars who gathered at the University Center in downtown Chicago pursued the theme from many different angles. As is traditional for International Cather Seminars (this was the twelfth such event), participants learned extensively about both the complex worlds Cather inhabited and those she created. Of particular interest, of course, were her connections to the city of Chicago itself: its buildings; its institutions; its iconic power in American culture; and, perhaps most importantly, its people.

The seminar, co-sponsored by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Willa Cather Foundation and directed by UNL English Professor and Board of Governors member Guy Reynolds, included several

events that gave participants a chance to not only learn from one another's research, but also encounter the city. This opportunity is something of great value in all the International Cather Seminars: by selecting locations that figure prominently in Cather's life and works, participants can experience concretely the atmospheres evoked in Cather's fiction. In Chicago, we were able to listen to essays about Thea Kronborg and the Art Institute of Chicago in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, and then walk over to the museum and see, for ourselves, the Jules Breton painting that inspired the title of the novel. The pleasure of seeing Breton's "The Song of the Lark" was increased by the way one got to it: after snaking through the cavernous Art Institute, past hundreds of important works of art, one found the Breton painting surrounded by other Cather scholars, engaged in a discussion about the piece.

Cather's connections with history and place—combined with her tremendous artistic achievements—were the foundation of the keynote lecture by the celebrated novelist Bradford Morrow at the Chicago Public Library. Morrow, in his lecture entitled "My Willa Cather," detailed the way Cather's fiction inspired his own, but also the way his family



A view of Millennium Park from the Cliff Dwellers Club, Chicago. Photograph by Becca Jewell.



history intertwines interestingly with hers. Morrow's descendants are from Webster County, Nebraska, and members of his family were even employed by members of Cather's family. Morrow, like so many Cather readers, reflected on a relationship with Cather that seems more personal than is typical between reader and author. This relationship is, of course, inspired by her deeply-felt fiction, but it was cemented, as Morrow described it, by his own vicinity to Catherian places: New York, the Southwest, and, especially, Red Cloud. It was in Red Cloud on a rainy night last spring, Morrow said at the end of his talk,

when, while sitting in his room at Cather's Retreat Bed and Breakfast, he felt the deepest communion with Cather and her world.

In addition to Morrow's keynote and the many excellent presentations by scholars from around the world, other highlights of the seminar were a luncheon sponsored by DePaul University, a bus tour of Cather's North Chicago (featuring Chicago's Swedish neighborhoods), and a roof-top reception co-sponsored by *Teaching Cather* at the Cliff Dwellers Club. The Cliff Dwellers Club, which overlooks the Art Institute and Millennium

Park, was a vantage point from which to take in much of the city and its energy; one could imagine Cather—or Thea Kronborg or Lucy Gayheart—as they were swept up in the activity and dynamism of the city. Our days in Chicago were so packed, that, in memory, they are a bit like Lucy Gayheart's "individual map of Chicago": "a blur of smoke and wind and noise, with flashes of blue water, and certain clear outlines rising from the confusion." Thankfully, the seminar provided far more "clear outlines" than noise, and most of the smoke in my memory comes from the barbeque pits at the Taste of Chicago.

***Become a member of the Cather Foundation! Your membership will help support the world-wide promotion and preservation of the life, times, sites, and works of Willa Cather.***

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To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.

To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.

To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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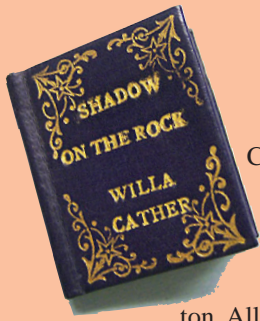
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# The One-Sentence Wonder: Willa Cather's Shortest Book

Jeanne C. Collins

Denver, Colorado



Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry houses two treasures of interest to Cather readers, Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle and Willa Cather's shortest book.

The Fairy Castle, originally called simply "doll house," was conceived by Colleen Moore, silent film star of the 1920s and 30s. She employed hundreds of movie studio craftsmen and artists to create the cast aluminum castle, which measures approximately nine feet square by eight feet tall and weighs one ton. All the castle's rooms and the Magic Garden feature fables, fairy and folk tales, myths and legends, nursery rhymes, and children's stories well-known prior to the castle's completion in 1935, and it is filled with priceless objects from around the world.

Central to Cather's connection is the library, Moore's favorite room, which the fairy folk enter from the Magic Garden instead of the grand entrance hall. Verdigris copper bookshelves hold a collection of sixty-five miniature eighteenth century books. "These English and French volumes, exquisitely bound in leather, vellum, and gilt, are clearly legible" (Moore 232). Captivated by the idea of these tiny books, Moore had many blank miniatures manufactured and always carried several with her on the chance she met a prominent person who would "write" another book.

Willa Cather's book is one of these. Cather's book does not rest on one of the copper shelves, however, because the books cited above filled them. Instead, it is "kept in the vault, along with other precious things" (O'Connor).

On Wednesday, June 24, 2009, I was privileged to see Cather's tiny book, thanks to the generosity of MSI curator Margaret Schlesinger. Originally described as having a dark blue leather cover, the color is now closer to a medium purple; the spine is ridged, in the style of antique hard-cover books. It measures one inch wide and one and a quarter inches tall. Each corner of the front cover bears an elaborate scrolled design much like a fancy corner bracket adorning the doorway of a Victorian house. The title, *Shadow on the Rock*, and Cather's name are stamped in gold within this golden framework. Oddly, Cather wrote sideways on the page, starting at the gutter and extending to the side edge. Covering only three of the several pages, the text is in ink in Cather's hand and reads as follows: "Quebec is to me the most interesting city in the New World, and San Francisco is next.— Willa Cather" (Within the Fairy Castle 122). One sentence—the ultimate novel démeublé!

Unfortunately, the MSI has no provenance explaining how or when Moore was able to get Cather to write this wee book, because it and the many others she gathered over the years were part of the "package deal" when the Fairy Castle went on permanent museum display in 1947. So far, I have determined three possibilities, and two hinge on Moore's practice of asking friends who knew authors to ask the favor for her. The first theory is that Colleen Moore and Cather's long-time friend Irene Miner Weisz might have known each other, because both husbands were prominent Chicago businessmen. Moore's husband, Homer Hargrave, Sr., was a stockbroker and brokerage partner and Charles Weisz was an insurance company president; their offices were about three blocks apart on West Jackson. The second is Moore's continued contact with Hollywood friends and professional associates. Alfred Knopf's younger brother, Edwin, became a film writer, director, and producer, and was active from the 20s through the 50s. Although they worked for different studios, because both Edwin and Colleen knew King Vidor and Scott Fitzgerald, they might have known each other, so that Edwin might have been the connection via either Colleen Moore or his brother Alfred, Cather's publisher. The final and simplest possibility is that Moore wrote to Cather as reader to author and asked her directly.

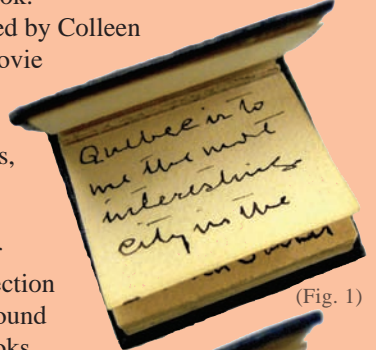
However Cather came to write this tiny treasure for the Fairy Castle, her one-sentence wonder rests safely in its archival box in the Museum vault.

## Note

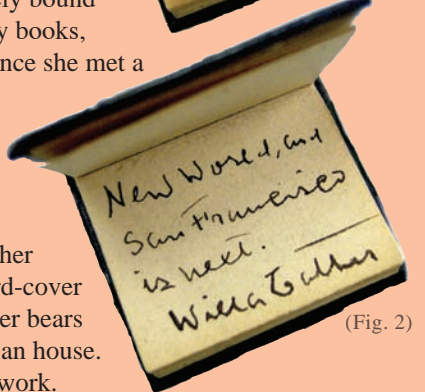
The author extends special thanks to Margaret Schlesinger, curator, MSI, for showing me Cather's tiny book, and to Cynthia Morgan, associate curator, MSI, for arranging for the images accompanying this article.

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(Fig. 1)



(Fig. 2)



Photographs (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) record pages 1 and 2 of *Shadow on the Rock*. Lower two photographs are of the interior of Colleen Moore's Fairy Castle where many of the miniature books are housed. Note cover photograph located left of article. Photographs are courtesy of Collections, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago.

## Christmas Memories

{The Cather family's long tradition of celebrating Christmas was carried on in their homes in Virginia and Nebraska, and then in Willa Cather's novels and stories, many of which feature Christmas celebrations. In 1961 Willa's younger sister Elsie Cather wrote this account of family festivities for her brother Roscoe Cather's children.}

My dear children, when your great grandfather [Charles Cather] was a little boy back in the state of Virginia, just a little over a hundred years ago, there were no Christmas trees in that part of the country. . . . at that time the people of the Old Dominion, as Father loved to call it, still clung loyally to the ways and customs of their English ancestors. In place of the Christmas tree, they had the Yule log. They would hunt for days for the largest and most slow-burning log that would fit into the big fireplace in the living room, and it was lighted on Christmas eve with great ceremony. As long as the Yule log burned, the high holidays lasted; and no one in the whole household, white or black, did any more work than was absolutely necessary. . . . There were parties and dances and gay times of every sort. . . .

When my father was a child, they burned candles all over the house every night as well as at Christmas. He could clearly remember the first coal-oil [kerosene] lamp he ever saw. He was a big boy, eight or nine years old. His mother [Caroline Cather] made the candles herself in the old candle mould. And she cooked over an open fire-place in the kitchen. When my mother [Jennie Boak Cather] came to Willow Shade to live, Father bought her a cook stove. It was considered new and very grand.

By this time, Christmas trees had arrived in Virginia, so that as far back as your own grandfather [Roscoe Cather] could remember, they always had a gay tree with plenty of decorations.

By the time I can remember, the family had moved to Red Cloud and Christmas trees were sold at the grocery stores much as they are now. But we had to make our own trimmings. Every year we would string yards and yards of popcorn to make white decorations, and yards and yards of cranberries to make red. We lit the tree with real candles. They were much more beautiful than electric lights—and much more dangerous. But we never had a fire. I do not remember ever seeing a Christmas card before I went to college.

Later, about 1920, when Christmas cards were "all the style," and every one was sending Christmas cards to everybody, Mother took it into her head that she wanted Father to give a Christmas card to her. The dear man was mildly surprised, as he thought that Christmas cards were for friends whom you did not see every day. Nevertheless, he went down town and picked out the prettiest card he could find and brought it home for Mother. She would have none of it. He must write a Christmas message and send it through to mail! Then Father was really confused. "Why Mother, we have been living in the same house for nearly fifty years. Why do you want a card sent by mail?" But nothing else would do. So Father gave in, as he always did, and from that time on he sent Mother a Christmas greeting by way of the post office. . . .

Happy Christmas!

E. M. C.

*In anticipation of the holidays,  
The Cather Foundation also wishes our readers a Happy Holiday Season!*



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