



In This Issue . . .

~The Cather Foundation celebrates the acquisition of a new collection of artifacts donated by Jim and Angela Southwick.

~Ann Romines and Andrew Jewell each tackle intimate letters written by or relating to Willa Cather.

~James E. Ford and Ariel Bybee discuss a recently discovered song manuscript with lyrics by Willa Cather.

~Betty Kort shares her favorite Cather short story, "Old Mrs. Harris."

~Marvin Friedman relates the spiritual connections between "Old Mrs. Harris" and *Shadows on the Rock*.

~Stephanie S. Gross discusses Willa Cather and her anti-consumerist aesthetic.

~Merrill Maguire Skaggs shares with *Newsletter* readers the 1925 meeting of Louise Guerber and Willa Cather in Denver.

~John N. Swift presents a listing of recent Cather presentations.

Willa Cather

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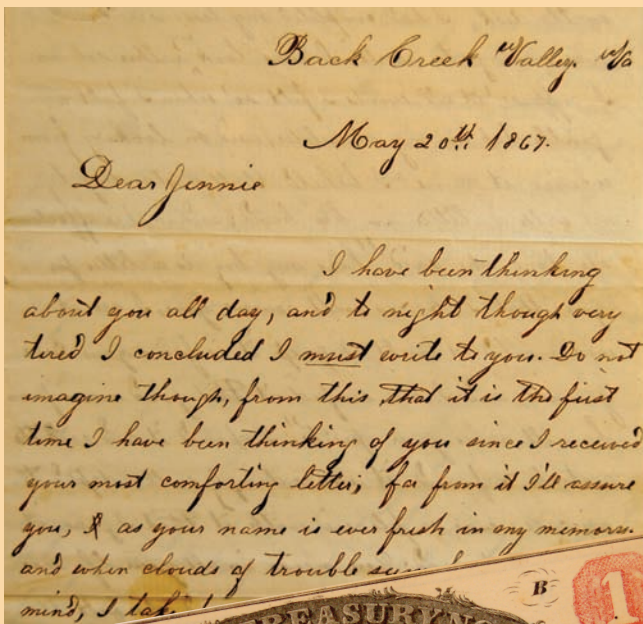


Collection Added to Cather Archives

Cynthia Bruneteau
Interim Executive Director

When Jim and Angela Southwick came to Red Cloud for June's Spring Conference and Cather Foundation Board of Governors meeting, they came bearing gifts—very generous gifts. As he announced this most recent donation to the Board, Jim asked that it be named in honor of Betty Kort's wonderful service. While that meeting would be Betty's last as executive director, the Betty Kort Collection will memorialize her tenure.

But the collection also memorializes the very reason for Betty's hard work: the life and works of Willa Cather.



Spanning 184 years, the Betty Kort Collection features items and artifacts dating from 1762 to October of 1946. Land records, wills, journals, letters, and personal items make clearer the path to understanding our common interest: Willa Cather.

Above: A letter to Jennie from Cather's father, Charles. Overlying the letter is a Confederate one dollar bill. The Cather's wrapped their dishes in this worthless currency when they traveled to Nebraska. The address book and ledger rest below. Far right: detail of the head of Cather's snake ring! [Newsletter cover photograph and photographs on this page are by Betty Kort.]

Perhaps one of the most exciting pieces in the collection is Cather's snake ring, which she gifted to her niece Helen Louise Southwick. The ring, mentioned



Open lipstick case with mirror reflecting the snake ring. Note the tinge of lipstick color.

in the 1984 winter issue of the *WCPMN*, is gold and beset with three gems. According to Jim Southwick, Cather used the ring to tease her nieces and nephews; she would jokingly chide that the snake would bite them if they were misbehaving. An interior engraving is no longer legible, evidence of much wear—clearly both Cather and Helen Louise adored the ring.

A favorite piece is the intricately etched silver lipstick case with side mirror. It is easy to imagine the case tucked away in one of the two delicate metal snap purses in the collection, kept at the ready for an easy touch up; it is not easy to imagine its color, described as fuchsia, hot pink, magenta, and even passion pink by those who have seen it. Whatever the proper descriptor, the lipstick color is not what one might envision Willa Cather donning. Trust that the artifact is housed safely at the Cather Foundation in Red Cloud—far away from those who might have a mind to breathe words like DNA, genetics, or even cloning.

Willa Cather's address book is another gem of the donation. Readers will see names such as Tomas Masaryk, Czechoslovakia's first president; Vilhjalmur Stefansson, explorer and ethnologist; and Stephen Tennant, writer and aristocrat.

Other pieces include a land deed signed by Henry Lee (father of Robert E. Lee), love letters between Cather's parents, an Edith Lewis watercolor painting, two Charles F. Cather journals, a letter from Douglass Cather to his father, Willa Cather's earnings ledger (dating from 1916 to 1938), a large amount of Confederate money, and much more. The Betty Kort Collection offers much for Cather scholars and fans. We thank Jim Southwick for his prescience and devotion to the preservation of Cather's life and work for our posterity. He has given Cather fans yet another reason to visit us in Red Cloud. (A full finding guide will be available on the new Cather Foundation website later this fall.)

I'll leave you with the last stanzas of a poem Cather wrote for her brother Roscoe. She gave this poem to him along with a copy of *Seats of the Mighty* by Gilbert Parker.

Ah, brother, let us then forget,
How sad a cheat this life can be.
The life that is shall be no more—
This is the life for you and me!

Lift high the cup of Old Romance,
And let us drink it to the lees,
For those are but the lies of life
And these are its realities!



Spring Conference Features Cather and Her Contemporaries

The three-day Willa Cather Spring Conference held in Red Cloud in June provided a spectacular array of events. Participants were treated to a scholar's symposium; a day in the world of *One of Ours* and WWI; a fascinating keynote address focusing on Cather, her contemporaries, and the arts; a world-class art exhibit; a cutting edge dance-theatre performance inspired by Cather's short story, "A Wagner Matinee"; and several presentations devoted to Cather and her contemporaries, delivered by Cather scholars from across the nation.

Traditional activities included the usual coffee and kolache on Saturday morning and the Passing Show Panel, which featured Charles Peek's riveting keynote address and slide presentation on the arts during the first half of the 20th century. Panelists Nancy Chinn, Guy Reynolds, and Ann Romines responded to the address by discussing their classroom syllabi used in the study of Cather and her contemporary writers and artists.

The Conference began with the Cather Symposium on Thursday. Scholars from across the nation gathered at Grace Episcopal Church to read papers and share comments. Robert Thacker served as chair with Richard Harris and Charles Peek also leading symposium sessions. This coming spring, *Newsletter and Review* readers can look forward to the publication of papers from the symposium in a special edition edited by Robert Thacker.

The St. Juliana Choir sang familiar hymns preceding the Vespers Service held Thursday evening in the Episcopal Church with the Reverend Charles Peek serving as Officiant. Reverend Peek commemorated past leaders of the Cather Foundation who are deceased, with special emphasis on the recent passing of Don Connors. Peek noted that it was particularly appropriate to remember Don, who made the Cather Community his family. After the service, participants gathered at Cutters Café where Don Connors's life was celebrated. Don's service to the Foundation was praised and many guests at the event shared stories of adventures with him.



Virgil Albertini presents a Scholarly Edition of *O Pioneers!* to Kirsten Block, winner of the 2008 Norma Ross Walter Scholarship. Photograph by Betty Kort.

Friday's focus was primarily on Cather's *One of Ours* and included World War I music played by Barb Sprague and rare WWI exhibits provided by Richard Harris. For many, the day began with a country tour of sites important in the novel. Harris and Becky Faber gave a joint presentation at the Bladen cemetery where World War I hero George P. Cather is buried. Following this event, participants were treated to a tour of the George P. Cather historic country home with owner Sayra Wagner serving as hostess. Friday afternoon, Richard Harris once again enthralled a capacity audience in the Opera House with his discussion of *One of Ours*.



Richard Harris delivers an address on WW I and *One of Ours*. Photograph by Barb Kudrna.

A new feature of the Spring Conference was the Board of Governors Dinner held Friday evening in the Opera House Auditorium. Guests enjoyed a sumptuous reception in the Gallery preceding the event. Dinner was served using the various china collections that have been donated to the Foundation, and each table was hosted by a member of the Foundation Board of Governors. Board President Chuck Peek began the occasion with a welcome, followed by Vice President Jay Yost's address in which he enumerated the many projects and accomplishments of the Foundation and encouraged support of the Cather Foundation mission. Entertainment provided by the Red Cloud Opera House Reader's Theatre featured selected readings from Cather's writings that relate to the four seasons. Excellent attendance and positive responses to the Board of Governors Dinner have encouraged the Cather Foundation Board of Governors to make this event a regular feature of future spring conferences.

Throughout the Spring Conference events, the paintings of Omaha-based British artist Steve Joy dominated the Cather Center Gallery. Monumental in size, the works invited admiration and discussion. Joy gave two presentations on his works, encouraging comments and questions. In July, Joy's works moved to the Joslyn in Omaha where his first full-career exhibition continued until late September.

Virgil Albertini graciously hosted the reading of winning essays and the presentation of the Norma Ross Walter Scholarship late Friday morning. The cherished 2008 Norma Ross Walter Scholarship was presented to Kirsten Block from

Spring Conference (Continued)

Gothenburg High School. Second place was presented to Alexandra Nelson, Minden High School, and third place went to Amy Durmaskin, Omaha Burke High School.

On both Friday and Saturday afternoons, participants alternately moved among various historic Cather sites where they were treated to presentations and discussions of Cather's contemporaries, including Faulkner, Aldrich, Jewett, Hemingway, and Wharton. These sessions were led by Cather scholars from colleges and universities across America. Special guest, Erika Koss from the National Endowment for the Arts, presided over the Edith Wharton discussion. Meanwhile, on Saturday afternoon Joel Geyer, one of the producers of the Cather biographical film *The Road is All*, served as host for a showing of the film in the Opera House.

The Spring Conference ended Saturday evening with *A Wagner Matinee* in the Opera House Auditorium. This mixed-media dance theatre performance by Laura Diffenderfer, inspired by Cather's short story of the same name, was sponsored by the Nebraska Arts Council and private donations. The performance, which provided a rare opportunity for participants to see a cutting-edge performance destined for New York City stages, elicited rave reviews from participants.

Thanks to the support of the Nebraska Arts Council, the Nebraska Humanities Council, and Spring Conference sponsors, participants coming to the annual Willa Cather Spring Conference can always look forward to a comprehensive art and literary experience. This has never been more evident than in June of 2008. The Cather Foundation returns to an April date for the 2009 Cather Spring Conference in Red Cloud, to be followed by the International Cather Seminar located in Chicago in June.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Willa Cather Foundation (Red Cloud, NE) present

The International Cather Seminar 2009 Cather, Chicago and Modernism

June 25-28, 2009

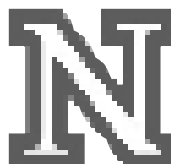
University Center, Chicago, IL

The 12th International Seminar will focus on Willa Cather's relationship to broader formations of cultural and literary modernism. How, and in what ways, is Cather a modernist (if at all)? Cather described *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as a 'narrative': does this kind of description point to a radical, experimental fiction-making? To what extent did she also resist and reject the 'modern'? The Seminar encourages papers that will address a wide range of intersections and connections between the full range of Cather's work and modernism/modernity.

The Seminar will take place in the downtown 'University Center', Chicago, IL, and will include events focused on specific literary/cultural sites within that area. We thus encourage papers that counterpoint Cather and Chicago within turn of the century culture. The Seminar solicits papers analyzing the musical, visual, architectural, and urban cultures of Chicago, and their representation in Cather's work (for instance, in *Lucy Gayheart*). The broader question of how Chicago has figured within the national literary imagination will naturally serve as another focus for the program.

Diverse critical and theoretical perspectives are encouraged. Interested contributors should submit abstracts of 500 words with a cover letter and brief résumé by January 26, 2009. Persons whose proposals are accepted will be expected to submit final papers by May 1, 2009. Papers should be 10-12 double-spaced pages for a 20 minute presentation time.

Submit proposals by January 26, 2009, to



Guy Reynolds, Cather Seminar Director
337D Andrews Hall
University of Nebraska-Lincoln



Scholars, Letters, and the Uses of Intimacy

Ann Romines, George Washington University and Andrew Jewell, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

[Editor's Note: As all Willa Cather scholars know well, Cather's will prohibits the publication of her personal letters. More than 2500 of these letters survive, scattered throughout the United States in libraries and archives. They are paraphrased in Janis Stout's 2002 Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather and in the ongoing digital expansion of that work under the supervision of Stout and Andrew Jewell at the University of Nebraska's Willa Cather Archive. Perhaps as a result of their writer's final prohibition (a gesture that appears vividly to confirm her famous privacy and self-concealment), the letters have fascinated critics, affording a privileged but only partly communicable perspective into an unguarded, intimate world. And often equally compelling have been the letters and informal reminiscences written about Cather by her closest friends and family, observers not of a literary icon but of a deeply human woman.

In this issue of the Newsletter and Review we present excerpts from two recent illuminating scholarly engagements through letters with the "unguarded" Willa Cather. In the first, adapted from a paper presented at the 2007 Western Literature Association conference, Ann Romines examines a paragraph and a single phrase from a newly collected 1917 letter to Mary Virginia Cather, evoking a private moment between daughter and mother that expands outward to inform our understanding of Cather in her historical and social context, as a "New Woman" of the early 20th Century. In the second, taken from an essay originally published in 2008 in the journal New Letters, Andrew Jewell concludes a careful critique of the well-known legend of Cather's having sought to destroy her letters, and a meditation on their vital importance to those who would understand her work, with a startling and unforgettable letter of late April, 1947, where Cather's niece Virginia describes for her mother the funeral of "Aunt Willie." (Jewell's entire essay can also be read online at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/librarianscience/132/>.) In different ways, these two scholars demonstrate strikingly the power of the personal and intimate in literary reading.]

From "Letters Home: Willa Cather Writes to Her Parents," Ann Romines, George Washington University

This four-page letter [of February 2, 1917] from Willa Cather to her mother, Mary Virginia Boak Cather, is chatty and apparently relaxed. Cather touches on a variety of personal and domestic subjects that are likely to elicit her mother's interest and approval: gifts that she's sending to family members, advice to a younger brother, housekeeping expenses, shopping, and the pretty tea table she will set for guests that afternoon, using Isabelle McClung's silver and the luncheon cloth her mother has given her. One passage is worthy of full quotation, Cather's direct description of her personal health and her doctor's recommendations. Here, however, I may only present it through the Jewell/Stout third-person paraphrase, in which Cather

is in bed for a few days with visiting "friend." Dr. Van Etten, to whom she was referred by Dr. Wiener, is helpful, and thinks he might be able to make her monthly bout less difficult over time and, by reducing loss of blood, improve her general health [and her "nerves"]. (Letter 1954, *A Calendar of Letters*)

Her "friend" obviously refers to a menstrual period—the first such reference I had seen in a Cather letter, and a relatively rare reference in letters written by nineteenth and early twentieth century women. Typically, Victorian mothers—like Mary Virginia Cather—discussed such matters as little as possible, even with their daughters, whom they taught, by example, that "genteel" women did not speak of menstruation. That Cather writes relatively openly to her mother about this subject (and also refers to "my friend" in at least two letters to sister Elsie) suggests a surprising openness about bodily matters among the Cather women, rather reminiscent of Thea Kronborg's mother, who openly examines her daughter's developing breasts and tells her that she's "filling out nice" (*The Song of the Lark* 489). Women (and men) have typically discussed menstruation in euphemisms; "a file on American menstruation folkspeech" at Berkeley lists and codifies 128 such expressions, many very negative, such as "the curse" or "the plague" (Golub 5-6). By contrast, "my friend," the expression used by the Cather women, is neutral or even positive.

The passage also tells us that Cather is experiencing debilitatingly heavy menstrual bleeding (dysmenorrhea) at

the age of 43, as she approaches the usual age (about 46) for menopause, and is being treated by a specialist for this condition. In 1921 she was again "bedridden" with her "friend," she wrote to Elsie. Was she suffering from endometriosis? Could one of her several surgeries (about which the letters sometimes seem quite secretive) have been related to this condition?

Cather's "specialist," Dr. Nathan B. Van Etten, was a well-known figure in New York medical circles between 1891 and 1953; he served as president of the American Medical Association in 1940. A general practitioner who later (in 1933) defined himself as a specialist in internal medicine, he was especially interested in public health issues; in 1927 he launched an effective five-year campaign to eradicate diphtheria in New York City. He had special expertise in tuberculosis; early in his career he spent a year in Germany, studying under Robert Koch, who discovered the tuberculosis bacillus. In 1922, he spoke in New York about "Tuberculosis, Its Prevalence, Signs and Care," and was billed as an "authority" with "many years experience in the subject" ("Health Aids") and in 1953 a Bronx hospital for tuberculosis patients was named for him (*National Cyclopaedia* 81-82). Given the Cather family history of tuberculosis, particularly among Willa's three young aunts who died of the disease, one wonders whether she (and her mother) might have feared that the symptoms she was suffering were somehow related to that disease. Several scholars are now researching Cather's health history and may want to pursue these possibilities.

This letter reminds me that menstruation is a part of Willa Cather's life history, as it is for every woman. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "medical texts and popular medical manuals as well as . . . everyday language" referred to menstruation "as a state of ill health. Women experienced 'symptoms' of menstruation and it was known as 'being unwell'" (Murray 136). According to Sharra L. Vostral, "since menstruation had been understood as a condition, ailment, disability, and altered emotional state, both men and women often treated menstruating women differently during their periods, ascribing poor performance, mental instability, and general irritability to a woman's period" (244). Such attitudes, along with the inefficiency of homemade sanitary napkins, which were constructed of rags, cotton, and gauze, often kept women

Scholars, Letters, and the Uses of Intimacy (Continued)

at home—and sometimes in bed—during their periods, as Willa Cather was in February, 1917.

Since her college years, Cather had been a physically active and peripatetic career woman, as a journalist, teacher, editor, and writer of fiction—not to mention a rider of bicycles, hand cars, and horses. How did she manage? Surely it would have been difficult for her to take off for several days of bed rest, monthly, during her hyperactive years as editor at *McClure's*. Between 1896 and 1912, Cather apparently defied (albeit quietly) many of the Victorian conventions about menstruation as an active career woman, and this quality marks her as a relatively early “New Woman,” one of those who were changing prevailing attitudes about women’s lives.

Just after World War I, improved bandage materials developed during the war made possible the first successfully marketed commercial sanitary napkins, at about the same time that the 19th Amendment was passed and women gained the vote (a subject which I’m still hoping to find Cather referring to in her letters). As Vostral writes, the vote “provided many women a sense of legitimacy as full citizens” and “more women attended college, lived away from their families, and identified as single women” (243-44)—as Willa Cather had begun doing more than two decades earlier. The new commercial menstrual hygiene products facilitated such lives; by using these products, “white middle-class women were encouraged to leave home, go to school, work at the office and travel in cars without discomfort getting in the way” (244).

Large-scale national advertising campaigns, aimed at women, played a key role in gaining wide acceptance of the new menstrual hygiene products in the 1920s and addressing women’s long-nurtured sense of privacy and secrecy about menstruation. One particularly successful campaign, for Modess sanitary napkins, actually included a “silent purchase coupon” that women could hand to the drugstore clerk to purchase the product without naming it aloud. One of the largest New York advertising agencies, J. Walter Thompson, handled the Modess account. The manufacturers, Johnson and Johnson, hired efficiency expert Lillian Gilbreth, whose firm specialized in the study of “women’s consumer behaviour . . . to design, produce, and market ‘a new type of sanitary napkin.’” Gilbreth conducted extensive research, concentrating on college and young working women, much like Willa Cather herself in her younger years (Vostral 253). Drawing on this research, J. Walter Thompson launched a long-running advertising campaign, “Modernizing Mother,” which featured enlightened young women introducing their hesitant mothers to Modess (“What Sadie Knew”). In 1919, Cather’s companion Edith Lewis had begun working for J. Walter Thompson; in the twenties and into the thirties, she wrote copy for several brands of toilet soap (Homestead). As a specialist in products aimed at women, Lewis, who had also been a college woman and young working woman, would almost certainly have been familiar with the Modess account and with Gilbreth’s ground-breaking research. Did she discuss her work with such products, and their implications for women’s lives, with her partner, Willa Cather—who must have experienced menopause sometime after 1923, when she wrote to her sister that her treatments at Aix Les Bains

would take longer if interrupted by her “friend” (27 August/4 September 1923)?

Although we often emphasize Willa Cather’s social conservatism in discussions of her career, there is significant evidence that she was in many ways an exemplary New Woman, with her university education, independent career, finances, and living arrangements, even her commitment to individual and practical clothing. In her 1917 letter to her mother, we can see her attempting to balance these qualities with her continuing desire for the approval of her Victorian mother. The difficulty of this effort is reflected in other letters, such as one written in the previous year to her brother Douglass, in which she acknowledges that she is “difficult” for her family to get along with, but (in the words of Jewell and Stout’s paraphrase), “any woman who has made good money in a business is [difficult] and she’s no different” (WC to Douglass Cather, 8 July 1916). In the novel Cather was writing in 1917, *My Ántonia*, such strains are reflected in the careers of the Hired Girls, particularly Tiny Soderball and Lena Lingard, and Cather continued to contemplate various versions of the New Woman in such characters of the 1920s as Eden Bower, Enid Royce Wheeler, and Nellie Birdseye.

You may think that I have strayed very far from those two words in a letter, “my friend.” But I hope you’ll take this paper as a demonstration of how much the newly available Cather family letters have to offer us all, whether our interests are biographical, historical, critical, or all of the above. These are extraordinary, invaluable letters, and my advice to you is to get to the Archives—or at least to the website—and to read them!

* * *

From “‘Curious Survivals’: The Letters of Willa Cather,”
Andrew Jewell, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Though I cannot transcribe and publish a letter written by Willa Cather, I can end with a letter from the new collection [the Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries] written by another member of her family. Virginia Cather Brockway, Roscoe’s daughter, wrote this letter to her mother Meta Cather the morning after returning from her Aunt Willa’s funeral in New York:

Wed. April 30, [1947]

Dearest Mother –

Just got home & I’m having some coffee before I clean up, bathe, etc. Later I’ll have to buy food & want to mail this when I go in.

I got to N. Y. early Monday morning & called Aunt Elsie and MV [Mary Virginia Auld Mellen, Virginia’s cousin and Cather’s niece] at their hotel, & then walked over & joined them for breakfast. Then MV went to the apartment to help with the flowers, but Miss Lewis preferred to have the rest of us wait until the funeral. Uncles Jack & Jim were to arrive during the morning & Charles was to meet them, but they missed each other so all ended up at the apartment. Aunt Elsie & I got there at 1:15.

The funeral was very small, about twenty four people I guess, all old friends. Mrs. Litchfield whom Aunt Willie had known from the days in Pittsburgh was there. Yehudi’s wife, a really beautiful girl, was also there. Beyond that I don’t know, & I somehow didn’t feel like asking. Uncle Jack can probably tell you.



Virginia Brockway. Photograph courtesy of University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, Archives and Special Collections, Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection.

The apartment was very little disarranged. Aunt Willie was in front of the windows and looked very lovely. There were masses of flowers. MV had busily torn bows off everything as Aunt Willie had always been allergic to bows on flowers & had always snatched them off. MV mentioned flowers from Maude Bradley, Zoe Akins, and Margery Sharp had cabled flowers from London.

Since Aunt Willie had known no minister in N.Y., Edith chose the only one she knew—a Unitarian minister who had conducted funeral services for Edith's mother. Edith & MV both thought Aunt Willie would be highly amused at having the Unitarian minister, but I'm afraid poor Aunt Elsie doubted that any but an Episcopalian minister could give one the right start toward heaven. However she felt better when she saw that he wore a very rich & elaborate vestment. She thought they were against such trappings. He just read from the Bible and offered a short prayer—nothing to conflict with our church. It was all very simple and dignified. He asked if he should read something Aunt Willie wrote, & evidently had an appropriate passage in mind, but Miss Lewis preferred just the Bible.

After the services Miss Lewis asked me to stay for a while and have a cup of tea with her. She told me all about Aunt Willie, and then her sister and Miss Bloom (Blum?) joined us for tea. It really did not seem at all inappropriate for Aunt Willie to be present, though it does sound odd.

She said it was very sudden. At 2PM Thursday Aunt Willie was well and cheerful, and was going to rest for a while.

She was troubled with rheumatism or lumbago and was to see the doctor the next day. At three she came out and said she was very ill and had such a terrible pain in her head. Before four it was all over. They were unable to get a doctor until too late—one arrived ten minutes after Aunt Willie died. However she was not unattended. Their maid was a registered nurse until she got too old for such a strenuous life so she was able to do just about all that could be done.

Miss Lewis said she sometimes wondered if Aunt Willie had felt it coming for so often of late she had said that she hoped she could die as quickly and easily as Roscoe and Douglass had. Of course it's a blessing that she did rather than having the helpless years grandmother had.

Aunt Willie had not been well since her trip to California. And since her operation she had been very weak and tired. But she wasn't an invalid. She rested a great deal and had to eliminate most social life, but she was up and around every day and would do things like walking to the hardware store and coming back with mops & kitchen equipment. And she was making hopeful plans for the future. She would ask Edith how she would feel about packing up and going to California right away. And they were planning to go to Maine as Aunt Willie was most anxious to get back to work and thought she could there. Of late Aunt Willie had been talking and thinking more and more of the family, particularly the nieces and nephews because they were young and Aunt Willie apparently found something hopeful in youth.

In all, I guess, it was all for the best. As with dad, a little less severe attack and there would have been a long period of invalidism, which seems the most tragic end for a life.

After I left Miss Lewis I went to the station to get a reservation & pick up my bag & then to Aunt Elsie's hotel. She had them bring in a cot for me so I shared the room with Aunt Elsie and M.V. Uncle Jack & Jim were there and all the family had a most pleasant dinner together. Whenever I looked quickly at Uncle Jack I was almost certain that he was dad. He said that you seemed well and cheerful and that they were so happy to have you near them.

Yesterday MV, Charles, Uncle Jack, Uncle Jim & Miss Lewis took Aunt Willie up to Jaffrey for burial. Since one of Jaffrey's main charms for Aunt Willie was the fact that it was almost inaccessible it seemed better not to have everyone go. So I stayed with Aunt Elsie. We spent the day at the Metropolitan Museum and saw the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. It is very beautiful. After dinner we just talked and I left for the station at 9:30. Got here at seven and John met me. I took him to work & then drove home.

Aunt Elsie says she feels much better. The doctors never learned just what had been wrong with her. She wasn't ill in bed but she had been definitely not well. She did no housework at all, but she got up every day and then just rested and got caught up on her "3 Rs"—reading, resting, and radio.

John just called to tell me that there was mail in a desk drawer—two letters from you. I didn't know Aunt Willie felt any bitterness toward Aunt Elsie but I did know that they hadn't been too close, and was sure that Miss Lewis & MV would know what Aunt Willie would think of having the Unitarian minister while Aunt Elsie's opinion was just her own prejudice. Understand she [Aunt Elsie] is very strictly religious, and she is really rather prim.

Scholars, Letters, and the Uses of Intimacy (Continued)

I wrote to Aunt Willie a short time ago—a dull letter I thought—just about the garden and my birds as I had nothing else to say. But I just somehow felt I should write & I'm so glad I did. Miss Lewis said the letter made Aunt Willie very happy and she read the letter to Miss Lewis.

Yes, the family seems to have disintegrated. To me, Uncle Jack is the only real Cather left. Perhaps it's his resemblance to dad, and the fact that they have always been so good to me. Uncle Jim seems kind of prim and opinionated, as Aunt Elsie is. And Aunt Jessie just doesn't seem to belong.

I am glad that Edith was the one to arrange everything for she knew all of Aunt Willie's little quirks, and I'm sure the dignity and simplicity would have pleased Aunt Willie. It has of course been most terribly hard for Edith. She will be really lost, I fear.

I will be very careful of everything of Aunt Willies[sic]—books, pictures, letters. M. wanted me to take charge of all the letters but now I think they should be divided up—just in case of a fire or something unexpected.

It's eleven, so I must buy food & straighten the house a bit—then write to E & M.

Love,
Virginia

There is much in this letter to evoke the pathos of the funeral day: the disagreement over the clergy, the intimacy of the service, the sense of the family's transformation, and the story of Cather's last day. But, for me, the sentences in the letter that most emotionally and poignantly evoke the day are the description of the tea shared by a few women. Willa Cather's niece, Virginia, her partner Edith Lewis and Lewis's sister, and her longtime personal secretary, Sarah Bloom, drank a little tea and talked about Cather's death right in the presence of the body and the funeral flowers, and that body was fit company for those gathered women. Those few, unadorned sentences in Virginia's letter bring to us a scene of remarkable intimacy, a scene that had been lost before.

And there is something else in that letter, something that directly challenges the legend of Cather the letter burner: Virginia tells her mother that all of her aunt's things—books, photographs, letters—are precious and need protection, “just in case of fire or something unexpected.” This woman who had just had tea with her aunt and poor, despondent Edith fears destruction and sees fire as “something unexpected.” If Willa Cather and Edith Lewis spent their last years collecting and destroying letters, would her niece, someone she well knew was in possession of many personal letters, understand destruction of those letters as something to fear and guard against?

Though Willa Cather's ban on publication certainly suggests at best an ambivalent attitude toward her own correspondence, there is little reason to believe that she, as the legend goes, sought to destroy all written artifacts of her personal life. I have long encountered Cather's letters as “curious survivals,” as pieces of her old life that had, through happy circumstance, managed to survive the fires. Now, with that legend revealed as little more than a melodramatic distortion of reality, I find these letters even more fascinating. There is more satisfaction in the realization that Willa Cather's letters have not

arrived in repositories in spite of her wishes, but because her family sought to keep them safe from unexpected destruction.

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The Archive

A new feature of the Newsletter & Review allows readers to peek into the Cather Foundation Archive. This issue features a photograph of Edith Lewis's camera from the “Betty Kort Collection,” recently donated by Angela and Jim Southwick. The camera, which folds into a case, is shown fully extended in this photograph. Labeled a Premoette Sr manufactured sometime between 1915 and 1923, advertisements for the camera highlighted its “distinct advance in amateur photography.” Equipped with an anastigmatic lens and a Kodak ball bearing shutter, the camera was said to be “easy to load and operate and simple in every detail and extremely low in price.” The original cable release is housed inside. One can almost see Lewis looking through the camera to capture an image of Cather. What might remain on the Verichrome film still stored inside?



Photograph by Betty Kort

Sat a Swed- ish Moth- er In her arms one
bab- y slept by her sat an- oth- er

“The Swedish Mother”

A Recently Discovered Song Manuscript with Music by Ethel Herr Litchfield and Lyrics by Willa Cather

James E. Ford and Ariel Bybee

[Editor’s Note: The song printed above and described in the following essay was performed by Ariel Bybee at the American Literature Association’s annual conference in May of 2008. It may be heard online at www.willacather.org starting in December.]

“I must have music!” (Brown 301) is a Cather declaration we have invoked in the titles of several of our Cather-related music-and-literature programs to emphasize the writer’s deep love of music. Cather was a devotee who wrote numerous music reviews, and, as Richard Giannone has ably demonstrated in *Music in Willa Cather’s Fiction*, may well have employed music in various ways in her writing about as often and as significantly as any great writer.

However, Cather was not herself a musician. As is the case with many of us, Cather’s talents were those of an appreciator, not a producer of music. She neither played nor composed. As Edith Lewis puts it,

... she knew, and of course knew that she knew, very little about musical composition. She wrote about voices, personalities, dramatic interpretation. . . . She recognized fully her own limitations where music was concerned—her lack of technical knowledge, which so far as I know, she made no effort to extend. (47-48)

This lack of technical vocabulary and expertise is evident in her reviews of musical performances, which were generally impressionistic in nature: “light as the mist on the hilltops,” was her description of Massenet’s oratorio *Eve* (qtd. in Woodress 129).

If any musical creation were to have come from Cather, it would have been one in which she provided the subject and

the words—that is, she would have been the librettist. And as librettist she has in fact been pressed into service by a growing number of composers. We think of three notable examples of compositions with librettos adapted from Cather’s works: Tyler White’s opera *O Pioneers!* and Libby Larsen’s opera *Eric Hermannson’s Soul*, as well as Larsen’s song cycle based on *My Ántonia*. But, of course, none of these composers knew Cather; and Cather is not known to have collaborated in the production of any piece of music—with one possible exception.

In February of 2001, the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation received a hand-written letter from Richard T. Gross, postmarked February 5, 2001, from Hastings, Michigan, and containing, as Gross describes it, an “Original of [a] song composed by Ethel Herr Litchfield with words by Willa Cather—(probably done in Pittsburgh).” Gross continues: “Ethel Litchfield was the Grandmother of my wife—Ethel Denton Gross (1932-1999) as well as her sister Alice Denton Fehr.” Gross also includes in his letter “Copies of excerpts from Edith Lewis’s *Willa Cather Living* (signed by the author) that probably explains the circumstances of composition.” (The copy of the book from which the extracts are drawn is dated “February 21, 1953,” and dedicated, in the author’s own hand, to “Ethel—dearest and truest of friend—with love from E.L.”)

“The Swedish Mother” song manuscript above, courtesy of the Cather Foundation Archives.

“The Swedish Mother”

(Continued)

The extract Gross has chosen contains the following pertinent background information:

In her later years in Pittsburgh, when she was teaching, Willa Cather never lost this vital association with music. She was living then with the McClung family on Murray Hill; and near by, in the same neighborhood, were Dr. Lawrence Litchfield and his wife. Ethel Litchfield had great beauty, and unusual gifts as a musician. . . . Willa Cather once told me how, before she knew her, she used to stop outside the Litchfield house on her way home from teaching, and stand listening to the music that streamed from it at all hours of the day and night. (Lewis 48-49)

At 20, Litchfield had traveled to Vienna to study with Leschetizsky. There the dashing Dr. Litchfield pursued and won Ethel, saving her from becoming a concert artist. Instead, she took her place as a Pittsburgh society maven whose home became one of the musical hubs of the city, where Ethel Litchfield accompanied famous visiting soloists and ensembles, as well as performing in more formal venues in the city (49). (James Woodress suggests there is something of Ethel in the character Caroline Noble in “The Golden Lodge,” who similarly traded a career as a concert pianist for marriage (113). It is possible to hear an echo of her pianistic talents in a recording on the *Kunst der Fuge* website of a piano roll of her playing Paderewski’s “Minuet in G major no. 1.” “In the gay, caressing, tempestuous atmosphere of that house, . . . Willa Cather found something intimate, congenial, and extremely enriching” (Lewis 49). Ethel Litchfield and Willa Cather were close friends for 50 years; when her husband died, Ethel moved to New York to be close to the writer.

Lewis remarks that Cather “was often a guest [at the Litchfield’s] when some celebrated musician arrived, or when some new composition was to be played” (49). Perhaps the song sent by Mr. Gross was one of those new compositions. The manuscript is hand written on standard 11-by-13-inch Carl Fischer Monarch Brand music manuscript paper, with a treble solo line and grand staff for piano accompaniment. The title page has in large printed letters “The Swedish Mother,” in quotation marks, and, in smaller cursive, “Song for contralto,” followed by the name of the composer, followed by “Words by Willa Siebert Cather.” The song itself begins on the next page.

Except for the size, the “Mother” in the title and the same smaller-sized word when it appears in the lyrics are nearly identical,

with characteristic left-leaning curves at the top of the vertical lines of the “t” and the “h.” Since there are similarities between the printing and the cursive on the title page, it is our non-expert opinion that the title page and the lyrics were written by the same person. Close examination also suggests that the very sloppily written dynamics and tempo markings may come from the same hand, written, perhaps by a player seated at the piano. And, still in our non-expert opinion, the handwriting in the song is very like that of a 1955 letter from Ethel Litchfield to Edith Lewis found in the Rosowski Cather Collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The lyrics to the song are substantively the same as those of a poem by the same name that was first published in *McClure’s Magazine* in 1911, and, later, collected into the 1923 edition of *April Twilights*. All differences involve accidentals, about 12 departures from the *McClure’s* version and a similar number of mostly different changes from *April Twilights*. Only two of the differences seem to hold any importance. The first may have an impact on how the sections may be assigned to various speakers, and even on the numbering of speakers. In both published versions there are quotation marks around the first and second lines—

You shall hear the tale again—

Hush, my red-haired daughter.

—either aligning them with the lines clearly spoken by the Swedish mother, also in quotation marks, or indicating someone, perhaps the grown-up self of the “li’l girl” to whom the mother tells her story, who relates the mother’s story to the “the red-haired daughter.” Another difference between the first two lines and the Swedish mother’s words is that the speaker of the first two lines is a native speaker of English, as is apparent from the educated “You shall,” whereas every single one of the mother’s lines either contains dialect or is non-grammatical, or both, as in

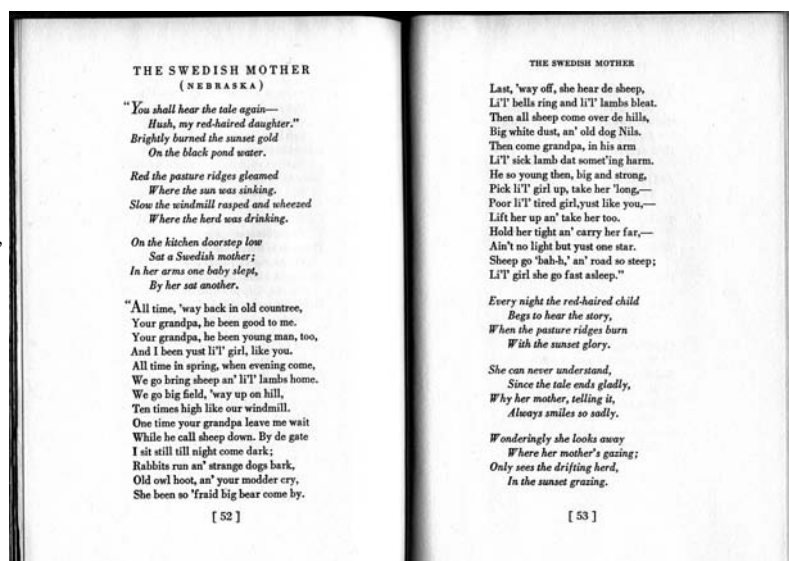
All time, ’way back in old country,

Your grandpa, he been good to me.

On the other hand, the attribution of the first two lines is clouded by the fact that the lines are awkwardly placed within the first stanza, followed as they are, with no break, by what appear to be lines spoken by a narrator. And both the first two quoted lines and the narratorial lines, here and at the poem’s end, are in

italics, which is not the case in the song manuscript. The quotation marks are also missing from the opening lines of the song.

Another divergence may tell us something about how to date the song. The *McClure’s* version has apostrophes after all its “li’l”s, whereas the song lyrics agree with the *April Twilights* version in having apostrophes between the “i” and the final “l.” Of course, if the song is the product of active collaboration, and if Gross is right that it was created in Pittsburgh, the work of creation might have



Text of “The Swedish Mother” by Willa Cather, from *April Twilights and Other Poems*, Knopf, 1923.

gone on anytime after writing the poem that Cather was living in Pittsburgh or visited with Ethel there or elsewhere.

The listener will be able to hear that nothing particularly subtle happens in the music; the accompaniment generally reflects what is going on in the lyrics in a quite literal fashion. Ethel introduces the song with rustic arpeggios in the left hand that evoke Scandinavian folk music. Other arpeggios occur throughout the song to similar effect, consistent with the mother's stereotypical Swedish manner of speaking English.

Longish solo piano passages mark changes in speakers. These passages coincide with corresponding stanza breaks in the poem. There are also shorter solo passages that indicate pauses or the passage of time. Changes in speakers are also signaled by key changes. Within any given key, accidentals and dissonance are used to color the mood. These accidentals, which effectively change these short passages to the dominant key, tend to convey the feel of minor keys and occur most often when the sentiment darkens, for instance, to communicate a little girl's night terrors or fear of being left alone.

As is widely known, the source poem is autobiographical. In the fall of 1874, the young Willa's parents, Charles and Jennie, were left in charge of the farm in Back Creek Valley when Willa's grandparents left Virginia to visit their son George, who was homesteading in Nebraska. During this period, when Willa was about two to nine years old, Charles raised a sizeable herd of sheep. "He ran the farm," Woodress writes, efficiently and, according to his nature, tender-heartedly. When his favorite sheep dog [perhaps the "old dog Nils" of the poem] cut his paws, he fashioned little leather shoes to protect his feet from the rocks, and, Willa Cather remembered, the dog would come begging for his shoes. Her most vivid memories of early childhood, however, were the times her father carried her with him at night when he went out to drive the sheep into the

fold. Her poem 'The Swedish Mother' recalls this early experience. (21-22)

The focus of this experience on Cather's father is reinforced by the dedication of the 1923 edition of *April Twilights*: "To my father for a Valentine." After he died, Cather commissioned in her father's memory a stained-glass window for Grace Episcopal Church in Red Cloud. The window depicts Christ as the Good Shepherd, holding a lamb.

Alas, we do not know what Cather the critic may have thought of this setting of her words to the music of her dear friend. But now, for the first time since the song was written and, presumably, debuted in Pittsburgh, we may judge its success for ourselves by going to the website of the Willa Cather Foundation for a performance by Ariel Bybee of "The Swedish Mother," music by Ethel Herr Litchfield, with lyrics by Willa Siebert Cather. (Performance available in December 2008.)

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The President's Message

Dear friends,

Previously, I addressed you many ways. In my last message to you as President of the Board, I hope I can also call you friends.

By now, many of you know that we have settled the issues of leadership that faced the Foundation, selecting Cindy Bruneteau to be our new Executive Director, while Betty Kort continues as a paid consultant for the *Newsletter & Review*, the Moon Block, and our transition. Jan, Stephany, Ashley, Jennifer, and Karin will be directing their many talents toward our future. Thanks to Joe Urgo, the Personnel Committee, and the Red Cloud board members for all their good work.

I leave this office with a bigger wish list than when I began. I wish you would have the chance to serve on the board. The board has steadfastly looked after the best interests of the Foundation, and I'm grateful you gave me the opportunity to serve with this capable and dedicated group. I wish you could spend time around the Opera House. The top notch staff there offers devotion and expertise that we as a board and our new Executive Director rely on for our continued success. I wish an angel would appear to solve our annual budget crunch or drop a million into the Moon Block . . . but then, we'd be robbed of the feeling of "ownership" we have because it is by our increased efforts and donations that we'll have what we have tomorrow. I wish you knew the new roster of officers [Jay Yost, President; Sue Maher, Vice President; David Porter, Treasurer; Glenda Pierce, Secretary] as I do. You would be very confident that the Foundation and the mission are in great hands.

Looking over the past three years, we have made a lot of progress; three years from now, we will have made even more. Cather was right, of course: happiness means to be dissolved into something complete and great.

Affectionately,
Charles A. Peek

Recent Cather Papers

The following is a listing (undoubtedly incomplete) of scholarly papers on Willa Cather and her work for the academic year 2007-08, with their authors' names and the sites of their presentation. We have not included papers from conferences sponsored by the Cather Foundation (Spring Conference in Red Cloud, the International Seminar), since these events are described more fully in the Newsletter and Review. We hope to publish this list regularly, both as a resource for scholars and as an indicator of the vigor and scope of scholarship in the Cather community, and we encourage readers to send information for 2008-09 to John Swift at swiftj@oxy.edu.

Ariel Bybee and James E. Ford, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, "'The Swedish Mother': A Newly Discovered Song Manuscript with Lyrics by Willa Cather" (American Literature Association, San Francisco, California, May 2008)

Nancy Chinn, Baylor University, "Shelley Fairchild in *Delta Wedding*: Eudora Welty's Tribute to Willa Cather" (Society for the Study of Southern Literature, Williamsburg, Virginia, April 2008)

Patrick K. Dooley, St. Bonaventure University, "Are All Religious Experiences on Par?: Religion and the Sacred in Willa Cather and William James" (Western Literature Association, Tacoma, Washington, October 2007)

Lisa Bouma Garvelink, Kuyper College, "The West as Willa Cather's Sacred Ground: *The Song of the Lark*" (WLA)

Cristina Giorcelli, University of Rome, "Intermedialità e Intertestualità in Willa Cather: *The Professor's House*" (Conference on Women's Writings, University of Pescara, Italy, October 2007)

Mike Gorman, Missouri State University, "San Francisco, the Celestial Empire, & Willa Cather's 'Song of the East'" (ALA)

Charmion Gustke, George Washington University, "Sex, Waste, and Empire in *A Lost Lady*" (WLA)

Evelyn Haller, Doane College, "What Most Delighted Her: Willa Cather and a Van Dyck Self-Portrait" (Cather Circles: Correspondence and Connections Symposium, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, June 2008)

Jacqueline Harris, Utah State University, "Les Filles du Roi and Female Destinations in *Shadows on the Rock*" (WLA)

Richard Harris, Webb Institute, "*The New York Times* Index as a Tool for Cather Research" (WLA)

Caroline M.C. Hellman, New York City College of Technology, City University of New York, "Madwomen in [Assorted] Attic(s): The Domestic Practices of Willa Cather and Her Protagonists" (ALA)

Stefanie Herron, Touro College South, "Cather, Jung, and the Desert Garden" (ALA)

Matt Hokom, Fairmont State University, "Pompeii, the House of the Tragic Poet, and *A Lost Lady*" (WLA)

Andrew Jewell, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, "'My Dear Boy': Roscoe Cather as Literary Confidant" (ALA)

Charles Johanningsmeier, University of Nebraska, Omaha, "The Readers Write Back: The Fan Mail of Willa Cather" (Cather Circles)

Anne Kaufman, Bridgewater State College, "'Affectionately from us both': Edith Lewis's Presence in Willa Cather's Letters" (WLA)

Celena Kusch, University of South Carolina, Upstate, "Phrenological Portraits in Willa Cather's *Death Comes to the Archbishop*" (ALA)

Sarah Mahurin, Yale University, "'*Mein Geliebtest Land*': Hostile Prairies and the Temptation of Nonhumanity in *O Pioneers!*" (ALA)

Vicki Martin, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, "Willa Cather's Community of Readers" (Cather Circles)

Maureen McKnight, Cardinal Stritch University, "Transferred Sexuality and Disabled Memory in Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*" (ALA)

Kathleen Simon McManmon, University of California, Berkeley, "Celebrity Bios as Self-Fashioning Gestures: The Case of Twain, Cather, and Mary Baker Eddy" (ALA)

Jacoba Mendelkow, Utah State University, "Re-Reading Willa Cather's Bastard Daughter: *My Ántonia*" (WLA)

Catherine Morley, Oxford Brookes University, "Crossing the Water: Willa Cather's Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary" (ALA)

Sharon O'Brien, Dickinson College, "'Having it Out with Melancholy': Willa Cather's Letters and the Creative Process" (Cather Circles)

Wendy Perriman, Independent Scholar, "Silver Mines: The Willa Cather - Ruth St. Dennis Correspondence" (Cather Circles)

Diane Prenatt, Marian College, "Enlarging the Circle: The Correspondence of Willa Cather, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, and Mabel Dodge Luhan" (Cather Circles)

Dynette Reynolds, University of Utah, "The Impossible Transmutation of Matter: Marie Curie, *Alexander's Bridge*, and Willa Cather's Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Literary Doom" (ALA)

Ann Romines, George Washington University, "Letters Home: Willa Cather Writes to her Parents" (WLA)

----, "Last Words, Last Things: Cather's and Welty's Final Southern Novels" (SSSL)

Kari A. Ronning, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, "Cather at the Hub: The Boston Connections" (Cather Circles)

Sabrina Sergeant, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, "'As We Are': Cather's Writerly Identities in the Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection" (Cather Circles)

Steven B. Shively, Utah State University, "Elsie Cather, Storyteller" (Cather Circles)

----, "'Faithfully yours': Cather, Religion, and Her Letters" (WLA)

Sarah Sisson, Utah State University, "The Fetes of Louis XIV: Community Celebrations and Imported Culture in Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock*" (WLA)

Sarah Stoeckl, University of Oregon, "An Authenticating Hand: Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and the Right to Write About War" (WLA)

Janis P. Stout, Texas A&M University, "Busy Emulating Wister and Remington: A Cather Letter of 1912 and the Question of Intentionality" (WLA)

----, "If Willa Cather Had Written a Memoir" (Cather Circles)

(Continued on Page 49)

The Spiritual Convergence of “Old Mrs. Harris” and *Shadows on the Rock*

Marvin Friedman

Although the times of Cather’s composition of *Shadows on the Rock* and “Old Mrs. Harris” overlapped to some extent, *Shadows* was published first. When “Old Mrs. Harris” was published in *Obscure Destinies* a year later, many reviewers expressed relief and pleasure that Cather had returned to the western geographic setting and time period of many of her most noteworthy earlier works (Ronning 227).

But geographic and temporal settings are merely formal elements of a story’s plot. In her 1925 Bowdoin College lecture, Cather is reported to have stated:

Great literature has no plot . . . Shakespeare made no plots as such. He took a tale from Plutarch or Boccaccio or Chaucer and he added another plot to it. He had two plots, in fact, but they are not invention. The second was the spiritual plot. It is inside the rough plot of the tale. (Bohlke 163)

I will now endeavor to show that, despite their differences in geographic and temporal setting, “Old Mrs. Harris” and *Shadows* share the same “spiritual plot,” that this was Cather’s intent, and that she embedded evidence of that intent in those works.

The youthful Cather firmly believed in the primacy of art as a redemptive force. At age twenty-three she stated that “Art itself is the highest moral purpose in the world” (*The World and the Parish* 292). But as she approached her sixtieth year, she found herself having to deal with the sickness and death of many of her loved ones,¹ a process that inevitably forced her to evaluate the impact of those lives upon her own and the world in general. In doing so, I believe she ultimately concluded that the everyday conduct of even “obscure” individuals can sometimes have at least as great moral purpose and redemptive force as art itself. That conclusion, I maintain, is at the heart of the spiritual plot of both “Old Mrs. Harris” and *Shadows*.

To uncover that plot, we must keep in mind that Cather was an allusive writer. Over forty years ago, Bernice Slote emphasized the “allusive texture” of Cather’s writing, her weaving of “some complex and subtle designs in her fiction, usually giving clues in names, places, details, quotations. No allusions were irrelevant” (*First Principles* 93). Slote found that Cather used allusion to create allegory, and that “like any allegorical structure, [her allegory’s] dimensions and degrees existed solely to make the spirit visible” (43). Moreover, Slote emphasized that “[f]rom the beginning, as if by inheritance, Willa Cather absorbed the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Their presence in her writing is constant, insistent, pervasive. Indeed, they made allegory familiar and natural to her, so that she *thought* allegorically” (35). Recognizing the centrality of these texts is particularly useful in uncovering the allusions that reveal the spiritual plot of both *Shadows* and “Old Mrs. Harris.”

With these principles in mind, let us turn to a biblical story that I believe provides a key to the spiritual plot for which we are here searching—*i.e.*, the Book of Ruth. That book opens with an Israelite family, consisting of Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, leaving its home in Bethlehem because of a drought. They settle in the neighboring land of Moab, where the sons eventually marry Moabite women, one of whom is

named Ruth. Elimelech and his sons die, leaving their wives childless. Naomi, hearing that the famine is over, informs her daughters-in-law of her intent to return to her homeland. They beg to accompany her, but she encourages them to return to their families, for she has little to offer them. Ruth, however, insists upon accompanying her mother-in-law to the foreign land. (Cather knew the Ruth story from very early; in an early 1895 newspaper article she revealed that knowledge by paraphrasing Ruth’s very words to Naomi [*The World and the Parish* 176].)

Upon their arrival in Bethlehem, Ruth provides food for herself and Naomi by taking advantage of the welfare system of that time, which allowed the poor to glean from the corners of the fields during harvest time. When Naomi realizes that Ruth has been gleaning in the field of Elimelech’s relative Boaz and has drawn his kind attention, she contrives a successful plan to arrange a marriage for Ruth with Boaz. Because Boaz is a relative, the marriage fulfills a variation of the important “leverite marriage” custom—it enables Elimelech’s land to remain within the family through Boaz and Ruth’s son, who will inherit the land in the name of Ruth’s deceased first husband. When that son is born, Naomi, in the words of the King James Bible, took it to her bosom and became its “nurse.” And, even though Naomi has no blood relationship to the child, her friends announce that “a son is born to Naomi,” a son who will restore her life and nourish her old age (Ruth 4:17). As for Naomi’s daughter-in-law Ruth in whose home Naomi is presumably now living as a result of the above marriage custom, the friends go on to say that she loves Naomi and is better to her than seven sons.

Cather directly alludes to the Ruth story in *Shadows*. Toward the end of the novel, Count Frontenac has a terrifying dream in which he is a little boy awakening at night in a house to which his nurse used to take him in summer. He is aware that he must bar the door to prevent the entry of a giant lurking outside in the darkness. When he succeeds in doing so and then awakens in a frightened sweat, he wonders why he had been dreaming of that particular house. He recalls that the house was his nurse’s property, but (and these are Cather’s very words) “on her son’s marriage, the daughter-in-law had become mistress, according to custom” (*Shadows* 245). The nurse had taken care of Frontenac from the time he was weaned until he went to school. As he lay behind his bed-curtains recovering from his dream, the Count reflected that “no woman, probably, had ever felt so much affection for him as his old nurse. . . . [She] had loved his fine strong little body, grieved when he was hurt, watched over him when he was sick, carried him in her arms when he was tired. Now, when he was truly sick, his mind in sleep had gone back to that woman and her farm-house on the Oise” (245-46). And the name of this nurse who lived in her daughter-in-law’s house according to custom was Noemi, French for Naomi. Interpreting the dream as a premonition of his impending death, the Count prepares his will and—echoing the Book of Ruth’s emphasis on following long-established tradition—leaves his property to his wife “as was customary,” even though “he had no desire to see her again” (246).

Spiritual Convergence (Continued)

Though subtle, Cather's allusion to the Book of Ruth is clear. But in order to understand the purpose of the allusion, we have to ask ourselves this question: what was the point of making the little four-chapter Ruth story part of the biblical canon in the first place? Much like *Shadows*, it's a simple domestic tale in which nothing historically noteworthy ever occurs. One key lies in the book's concluding genealogy (Ruth 4:18-22), showing that Ruth and Boaz are the great-grandparents of King David, who himself will be an ancestor of the messiah—in Christian theology, Jesus—whose own genealogy the *New Testament* expressly traces back to this same Boaz and Ruth (Matthew 1: 5). Both the Hebrew and Christian bibles here seem to be saying that certain types of even obscure human behavior can have intergenerational impact so significant that they have the power to redeem the world.

In *Shadows*, Cather takes pains to emphasize the intergenerational importance of personal conduct through her description of the high altar of the Notre Dame de la Victoire church to which Cécile takes Jacques to seek refuge from the rain (see photograph). The novel describes it as a representation of “a walled castle” with “three tall stone towers” (65). On a side tower stands Christ's grandmother, St. Anne, holding a little virgin Mary, while on the central, tallest tower “the Blessed mother and child stood high up among the shadows” (65). In a footnote, Cather states that the “charm of this old church was greatly spoiled by unfortunate alterations in the lighting, made in the autumn of 1929” (63). This footnote's specificity invites readers to examine directly the real historical church and draw their own conclusions. When I did so, I noted that on the base of the medieval tower were the words “*Turrus Davidicus*”—i.e., “David's Tower.” Thus, by choosing this altar, and by drawing attention to her choice, Cather alludes to the long intergenerational line leading forward in time and upward from David to St. Anne, to Mary and, ultimately, the messiah himself.

In actuality, St. Anne is not on either of the side towers in that Quebec church. To me, that means that Cather's fictional placement of her there, completing three generations of the Christian Holy Family, was important to her conception of the spiritual plot of *Shadows* and, as we shall later see, of the “Old Mrs. Harris” story as well. In fact throughout *Shadows* Cather repeatedly emphasizes the multi-generational nature of the Holy Family: St. Anne is included in the Auclairs' crèche and in Madame Pommier's private chapel, and Bishop Laval is reported to have said that “there is no other place in the world where the people are so devoted to the Holy Family” as in Canada (101), the country of which St. Anne is, of course, patron saint.

Cather's fictional description of the altar's tower with its ascending generations suggests that the individuals of every current generation have been affected by the conduct of the generations that preceded it. Moreover, while David may serve as the base of the towers on which the Christian holy family stands, Cather's express allusion to the Book of Ruth implies that the castle in turn rests on a generational foundation that leads us at least as far back as Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi.

Actually, I believe that she has left us with another exquisitely subtle allusion that takes us even further back in time. In *Shadows* she describes a freezing January night on which old

Bishop Laval finds little Jacques sitting in the snow and takes him back to his rooms. After warming, feeding, and washing Jacques, he sinks into meditation and concludes that the crying, half-clad child is “a reminder of his Infant Savior” (75). When he then learns that the child is the son of the prostitute 'Toinette, the Bishop says thoughtfully: “Ah! That, too, may have a meaning” (74). What meaning? What's the connection between the infant savior and a prostitute? There are arguably at least two such connections, each of which illuminates the intergenerational story on which I believe the novel's spiritual plot is based. That intergenerational story is intimately intertwined with the genealogy of Jesus set forth in the New Testament gospel of Matthew (1:1-16). That genealogy explicitly names three women (other than Mary): Ruth (whom we have already discussed), Rahab,² and Tamar. The designation of women in biblical genealogies is itself highly unusual, and the fact that these are the only women whose names are explicitly included in the fourteen-generation list of Jesus' forebears clearly shows that they are special.³ Why?

According to Matthew 1:5, Rahab was the mother of Ruth's husband Boaz. In the Old Testament Book of Joshua, the invading Israelites send two men as spies into the city of Jericho. They lodge in the house of a prostitute named Rahab who saves their lives by hiding them on her roof. Before they leave, she makes them promise that, in return for her kindness, they will save her and her entire family when the city falls (Joshua 2: 13). Thus, by making Rahab Christ's direct ancestor, Matthew's genealogy tells us that an obscure prostitute's action in saving lives can have cosmic intergenerational significance. Cather, I believe, has Bishop Laval find a similar meaning in the birth of a child resulting from the prostitute 'Toinette's potential life-saving action in taking in a homeless sailor who was too weak to work, marrying him, and attempting to reform herself. (Matthew's reference to Tamar takes us even further back to the Book of Genesis and another intergenerational story involving the appearance of ancestral prostitution, but space limitations prevent us from giving it further consideration here.)

That Cather actually intended the Jacques/Laval and Count Frontenac episodes to reflect the same biblical intergenerational stories is to me convincingly demonstrated by the dream framework in which she has bracketed them. The allusion to the Book of Ruth is revealed in the novel's last book as a result of a dream generated by Count Frontenac's real experiences as a little boy. Similarly, Cather introduces the Bishop Laval episode by having little Jacques recall it “in flashes, unrelated pictures, like a dream. Perhaps it was a dream” (70). The episode happened when Jacques was *four* years old. The Count, reflecting on his own dream, recalls that his nurse had taken him to her farmhouse for *four* summers. Loving, tender, nurturing care is central to the memories of both Jacques and the Count, as it is to the story of Ruth to which they allude.

Both the Old and New Testaments expressly urge such redemptive, caring acts. In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet describes God as desiring that mankind feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and let the oppressed go free (58:6-8). Jesus in the Book of Matthew echoes similar themes when he calls for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, taking in the stranger, and visiting the sick and those in prison; and, he tells his hearers, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). *Shadows* is

filled with individuals who exemplify these specific redemptive biblical behaviors. Count Frontenac is “charitable to the poor” (261), financing shoes for Jacques (58) and providing linens for Cécile’s future household (248). Bishop Laval lives in poverty, having given many of his possessions “to needy persons” (73). At the novel’s end, a reformed Bishop St. Vallier chooses to spend the rest of his life in two small rooms at a hospital he founded in order to help “the sick and the dying” and to be in “daily attendance upon the unfortunate” (274). He even insists that his visit to Auclair be interrupted so that the apothecary may tend to the needs of an anonymous countrywoman nursing her sick baby (275). Father Hector’s care for the sick is emphasized by his report that he must “lay in a supply of medicines” for his mission to the Indians (154). In addition to supporting his mother, Pierre Charron’s care for the sick and aged is illustrated by his effort to return to Quebec to be with Auclair, who he knows will be adversely affected by the death of Count Frontenac and who, in fact, lies at home “numb and broken” (263). In that strenuous return effort, Charron says that he “had only a half-man to help him—Antoine Frichette” (265), thereby revealing that he has been caring for a man who, because of his injury, had earlier mourned that he did not know how he would make a living (145). Even poor Blinker does what he can by going down Mountain Hill in terrible winter weather and, after facing down ’Toinette, bringing Jacques up the hill on his back to visit the Auclairs (159).

The Auclairs themselves illustrate their piety, like that of the Holy Family, in multi-generational fashion. Cécile’s grandparents fulfill the admonition to take in the stranger by allowing Bichette, the poor knife-grinder, to lodge in their basement (90). The grandfather fulfills the admonition to clothe the naked by giving Bichette his old shoes, and the grandmother fulfills the admonition to feed the hungry by often saving a cup of hot soup and a piece of bread for the old man and letting him eat them in the warm kitchen (91). Auclair himself would always give the old knife grinder a little of whatever money he made (91). The grandfather and Auclair respond to Jesus’ admonition to visit those in prison (and Isaiah’s urging to let the oppressed go free) by hurrying to the prison to speak for poor Bichette who has been tortured to make him falsely confess to a lifetime of crime (92). Auclair can only talk to Cécile in the evening because all day he is compounding remedies or visiting the sick (17). His late wife, Madame Auclair, looks out for poor Blinker by giving him soup (15). Cécile inherits that responsibility (14) and even extends it by allowing Blinker to participate in the Christmas fete (107). She fulfills the admonition to clothe the naked by procuring shoes for

Jacques and by herself knitting stockings for him (58). Finally, emphasizing themes resonant of the Naomi/Ruth story, Cather states that “[t]he individuality, the character of M. Auclair’s house, though it appeared to be made up of wood and cloth and glass and a little silver, was made of very fine moral qualities in two women, the mother’s unswerving fidelity to certain traditions, and the daughter’s loyalty to her mother’s wish” (25-6).

Paralleling *Shadows* and its biblical echoes, the contemporaneously written “Old Mrs. Harris” story focuses on a multi-generational family that includes three women. Whereas the youngest woman in the family is the central focus of *Shadows*, it is the oldest (a grandmother like Saint Anne) who is the focus of “Old Mrs. Harris.” Like the Auclairs who have no choice but to follow Count Frontenac in his exile westward to Canada, old Mrs. Harris believes she has no choice but to follow her family on their own journey westward from Tennessee to Colorado (97). Moreover, the redemptive biblical values embodied in the story parallel the ones with which we have become familiar in *Shadows*. Back in Tennessee, old Mrs.

Harris was a famous nurse who tended to the sickness of the poor mountain people (142). She dispensed charity, heard the troubles of the poor, and gave good food to old women (131), as well as aiding a woman (Sadie Crummer) who had been left with no home of her own (85). Even in the poverty of her Colorado home, she makes sure that the bound girl Mandy does not go hungry (99). Old Mrs. Harris’ daughter Victoria Templeton goes out of her way to invite the poor outcast Maude’s children to sit at her table at the Methodist Social (123). Later her children themselves lovingly care for their sick grandmother on what turns out to be her deathbed (182 ff.)—action that reminds us of Naomi’s friends, who prophesy that her new grandson (Ruth’s son) will “nourish her old age.” Victoria’s husband Hillary is described as “an honorable man” (133) who, despite his own straitened circumstances, never pushes his debtors in a hard year (179). And their neighbor Mrs. Rosen fulfills the admonition to clothe the naked by providing old Mrs. Harris with the sweater “comforter” she loves so much (94). Finally, the bound servant Mandy, who (like Blinker in *Shadows*) has nothing of her

own, performs what is described as “one of the oldest rites of compassion” by rubbing Mrs. Harris’ tired, cold feet (93)—an action that reminds us of Bishop Laval’s washing and warming the feet of little Jacques in *Shadows*.

In *Shadows* Cather expressly makes little Jacques a reminder of the “infant savior.” Is it too far fetched to suggest that, in our parallel spiritual plot, old Mrs. Harris is intended to remind us of the dying Christ? In my visit to the church of Notre Dames de la Victoire, I observed that one of the windows



The main altar of Notre Dame des Victoires, which Cecile Auclair imagines as a duplicate of the Kingdom of Heaven. Photo by J. Murphy.

Spiritual Convergence (Continued)

has an image of the *linen* cloth which one of the Jerusalem women (Saint Veronica) used to wipe the sweat off the face of Christ on his way to Calvary. In the dying-room scene in “Old Mrs. Harris,” Bert wipes the moisture from his grandmother’s face using the *linen* Sunday School handkerchief Mrs. Rosen had given him as a *Christmas* gift (182). In that scene, Cather describes the windows as having “had no blinds, but flimsy cretonne curtains tied back—not really tied, but caught back over *nails driven into the sill*” (183, emphasis added).

Additional allusive clues indicate the extent to which the two works are linked by the Ruth story and related biblical themes of redemptive actions. We have seen how, in *Shadows*, Cather alluded to the genealogical line which runs from Rahab the prostitute, to Ruth and Boaz, to King David, and ultimately to the Messiah. In “Old Mrs. Harris,” she alludes to David’s father Jesse in a song (“Old Jesse was a gem’men”) that Hillary Templeton sings to himself (180). She invokes King David himself through the medieval poem *Dies Irae* (in which David and the Sybil prophesy a coming day of judgment) (107) and by having Mrs. Harris repeatedly recite David’s twenty-third psalm (94, 188). This parallels what she does in *Shadows*, where Count Frontenac’s dream of his boyhood rescue of a household from a terrifying giant subtly alludes to David’s own boyhood rescue of his nation by defeating the Philistine giant Goliath. But the clearest clue that the stories dovetail can be found by closely examining the passage from the second part of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* that Mrs. Harris repeats to herself on her deathbed: the passage “which she had read aloud to the children so many times, the passage where Christiana and her band come to the arbour on the Hill of Difficulty: ‘*Then said Mercy, how sweet is rest to them that labour*’” (184).

Pilgrim’s Progress is itself an allegorical work, in which, as Bunyan put it in his Preface, he speaks in “shadows” (Bunyan 4). In its second part, a woman named Christiana and her neighbor Mercy leave their home in the “City of Destruction” to go on a pilgrimage to the Celestial City. Just a few pages before old Mrs. Harris’ favorite passage, Mercy has been called a “Ruth, who did for the love she bare to Naomi, and to the Lord her God, leave father and mother, and the land of her nativity, to come out and go with a people that she knew not heretofore” (201). On the journey, Bunyan describes Mercy as continuing her old work of making things for the poor; when asked what she will do with those things, she says “clothe the naked” (222). This is the same Ruth and Naomi to whom Cather has expressly alluded in *Shadows*, and here Mercy, Christiana, Ruth, Mrs. Harris, and Cécile Auclair all join in a kind of composite figure of humble, caring goodness. Like the biblical Ruth, Cécile in *Shadows* marries a much older man, Pierre Charron, for whom “the family was the first and final thing in the human lot” (*Shadows* 174); with Charron, Cécile bears four sons. Although one might argue that this detail simply demonstrates Cather’s failure to free herself from patriarchal paradigms, I find it more congenial to believe that, instead, she here once again subtly refers us back to the second part of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which Christiana also has four sons who accompany her on her pilgrimage. And these four-son families are, in turn, nicely framed by the “Old Mrs. Harris” household, which also has four sons.

In the Isaiah passage that I have quoted, God says that if humanity will do such things as feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and let the oppressed go free, “then shall your light rise in obscurity and your darkness be as noonday” (Isaiah 59:10). The surname of the obscure *Shadows* family which embodies those values is Auclair: “light.” In the parallel story involving another “obscure destiny,” the parlor wall of the home in which old Mrs. Harris lives bears an old oil chromo of “The Light of the World,” a pre-Raphaelite Holman Hunt painting of Christ carrying a lantern (115). The painting’s title is taken from the Book of Matthew, where Jesus tells his disciples: “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be moved. . . . Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (5:14-16).

I believe that Cather took these concepts seriously and, in the underlying common spiritual plot of both *Shadows* and “Old Mrs. Harris,” sought to shed a multi-millennial old light on how ordinary, obscure individuals can help achieve a redeemed world, not necessarily overnight but, hopefully, in the intergenerational fullness of time.

Notes

¹Cather’s father Charles died in March 1928 and, later that year, her mother suffered a stroke leading to a long debilitating illness which led to her death in 1931. Also, in September 1930, Cather’s friend Isabelle McClung Hambourg became gravely ill.

²All biblical quotations in this paper are from the King James Version, which undoubtedly would have been the version with which Cather would have been most conversant. However, different portions of the King James Version have variant spellings of names such as the one for Rahab (e.g., Rahab is spelled “Rachab” in Matt. 1:5 and as “Rahab” at Joshua 2:1). However, the Hebrew spelling for the name is the same in both biblical books, and this is reflected in the fact that modern bibles uniformly also use the “Rahab” spelling in both.

³Matthew’s genealogy does reference one other woman but, rather than expressly naming her, describes her as the one “that had been the wife of Urias” (Matt 1:6). However, the possible purpose of this indirect reference to Bathsheba is beyond the scope of this paper.

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The “Iron Cage” of Acquisition: Weber, Veblen, and Art in “Flavia and Her Artists”

Stephanie S. Gross, Husson University

Willa Cather’s anti-consumerist aesthetic is not fully articulated until her 1922 essay “The Novel *Démeublé*,” in which she speaks of unfurnishing the novel, ridding it of unnecessary clutter which will not stand the test of time. Her denunciation in this essay of a certain type of contemporary empiricist realism is significantly figured as a rejection of consumerist materialism; the necessary “material investiture of the story” is to be presented by the “reserved, fastidious hand of the artist, not by the gaudy fingers of a showman or the mechanical industry of a department-store window-dresser” (41). Similarly, in “The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett,” she shows her contempt for the acquisitive instinct: “If a writer’s attitude toward his characters and his scene is as vulgar as a showman’s, as mercenary as an auctioneer’s, vulgar and meretricious will his product for ever remain” (57). In her discussion of Tolstoy in “The Novel *Démeublé*,” Cather insists that in great art, literal material details are “fused” with the emotions of the characters, and “literalness ceases to be literalness—it is merely part of the experience” (39-40). Authenticity in art resides in emotions, not in material things themselves; this standard of authenticity becomes the basis for her rejection of the modern consumer culture’s consumption of art.

While these are self-reflective and self-conscious articulations of Cather’s later and more theoretically mature aesthetic, her 1905 collection *The Troll Garden*, and most especially her short story “Flavia and her Artists,” already show Cather’s ambivalence towards realism, towards modern and celebrity culture, and towards the place of the artist in that culture. Even before her turn away from Jamesian realism towards the writing Jewett encouraged her to pursue, Cather was already exploring ideas of authenticity in art, the demands of the market, the place of emotion and sensation within art; from the outset she wrestled with the contradictions within a culture which places various pressures on an artist who needs to market her work but also wants to remain authentic—and relevant. Cather’s depiction of Flavia as a sort of “vulgar . . . showman,” mercenary in her attitude towards the artists we are told she literally collects in her “asylum” (10), is one of her early statements about the dangers modern culture poses for art, demonstrating a dawning awareness of her own aesthetic and complex ideological need to turn away from an unqualified “overfurnished” realism that mirrors a culture now devoted to acquisition.

Many of Cather’s early stories, which deal with the urban, the modern, and the alienated individualism of the *fin de siècle*, have seemed old-fashioned, superficial, and limited to critics, who see in her later, epically “American” works like *The Professor’s House* or *Death Comes for the Archbishop* the flowering of her Modernist aesthetic. But I want to argue here, following the historian T. J. Jackson Lears, that Modernism is informed by a complex and highly ambivalent antimodern sentiment, which in Cather’s case develops consistently across her career, informing style and subject matter. From early on, she participates in a kind of radical cultural critique parallel to the contemporary analyses of Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen—

whose ideas were at the forefront of intellectual history in and around 1905.

In American culture at the turn into the twentieth century, Lears finds an aggressive rhetoric of progress and self-made success and yet, at the same moment, a “revulsion against the process of rationalization first described by Max Weber” (7). This rationalization is responsible for “the systematic organization of economic life for maximum productivity and of individual life for maximum personal achievement;” and it maximizes “the drive for efficient control of nature under the banner of improving human welfare [and] the reduction of the world to a disenchanting object to be manipulated by rational technique” (7). In describing the Protestant work ethic’s legacy, Weber points out that early in its development the care for external good was intended to “only lie on the shoulders of the saint . . . like a light cloak;” the impetus for (limited) acquisition initially was a spiritual one. But, he famously observes, by the end of the 19th century, this cloak has become “an iron cage” (Weber 181). The sense of spiritual bankruptcy which Weber observed at the turn of the century was based partly on the ascendancy of consumer culture which both encouraged and was driven by a radical individualism. Lawrence Scaff describes Weber’s analysis in this way:

Our lives, our choices, our opportunities, and cultural values are constrained by [what Weber termed] the “iron cage” of material goods and acquisitiveness. “Victorious capitalism” can dispense with its ascetic orientation or ethos and rely instead on opposite norms—hedonism, gratification, consumption, greed. (100)

For many antimodernists like Cather, this blatant hedonism elicits revulsion and even alarm. Flavia is only one of several early characters who represent the sort of *ur*-capitalist Weber describes at precisely the time Cather’s early stories appear.

For Weber, as the work ethic has lost its spiritual underpinnings, “the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs,” and this has implications for those who make acquisition their highest value:

Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport. (182)

Such spiritual sterility (what Lears calls a moral impotence) puts character at risk, since people have the feeling “that life [has] become not only over civilized but also curiously unreal” (Lears 5). Authentic experience of any sort seems more elusive, driving characters such as Flavia to ever more ridiculous extremes to compensate.

This is all especially relevant to Cather, since Weber posits the realm of art as an alternative to this spiritual emptiness,

The “Iron Cage” of Acquisition (Continued)

a lack which can no longer reliably be filled through the pursuit of an emptied-out religion—one which mainly serves the ends of consumer culture through equating material with moral progress. As her mid-career essays show, Cather’s identification of art with emotion suggests that art is the locus of the authentic, where, as she had put it in “The Novel *Démeublé*,” “literalness ceases to be literalness;” that is, it offers something beyond that which can be counted, marketed, or enumerated, but is rather felt and holds and transmits intrinsic value. Cather’s early work, then, dramatizes Weber’s idea that art must remain the alternative place of authenticity in a morally and spiritually bankrupt world. Her position superficially resembles the escapism of some *fin de siècle* Aestheticism, but in fact she is less an escapist than an involved observer and radical critic of modern American capitalism and its intrusion into the artistic sphere.

Cather makes her concerns and their inherent paradoxes clearest in “Flavia and her Artists.” Most critics have written the story off, as Loretta Wasserman does, as “too psychologically complex” with “too many crosscurrents so that the reader wearies of following them” (27); or because, as in Susan Rosowski’s judgment, Cather “is missing . . . conviction” even though her “technique in these stories [*The Troll Garden*] is often good” (29). On the contrary, I think Cather’s convictions, while plural indeed, are quite strong, and it is the “crosscurrents” that are the most interesting because they mirror the contradictory impulses inherent in antimodernist sentiment. Furthermore, Cather’s story offers us a clue, through its competing and seemingly contradictory currents, to her nascent and evolving aesthetic: her need to move away from her early realism towards something she saw as more authentic.

Cather’s contradictions reveal two strong commitments. The first is to the antimodern yet still “progressive” strain of American individualism and the work ethic, located in this story primarily in the “real artist” Jimmy, and through Flavia’s husband, the long suffering Arthur, whom Cather calls a “pillar of law” (32), and “a rather ascetic man” (11). His work ethic, in its self-denying way, is an anachronistic example of Weber’s ascetic rationalism (the self-denial required to lay up capital). Jimmy’s success is also attributable to her hard work, which has up until recently gone unacknowledged (because not glamorous enough) by Flavia. Cather’s second commitment, to the other side of antimodernism, the fear of and critique of hedonistic excess which success can bring, is manifest in the portrayal of Flavia herself and her collection of so-called artists, who aren’t really artists at all, but celebrities. Flavia doesn’t know the difference, but Cather is careful to distinguish between them. Flavia’s theft of other people’s passions and her collection of artists and celebrities themselves suggest a new level of American consumption; the exposure of this behavior by the real artist, Jimmy, suggests an alternative voice which can respond to the culture of consumption by maintaining, as Jimmy does, an alliance with the figure of ascetic rationalism, Arthur, and the bourgeois values of hard work, dedication to one’s art, and the rejection of celebrity status.

While Weber and Lears are crucial in understanding the context of Cather’s vicious satire of Flavia and help explain the countervailing forces in the story, Thorstein Veblen’s descriptions

of “conspicuous consumption” define another facet of Flavia’s actions. Veblen’s theory, outlined in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), holds that the “standard” for consumption relies upon something he terms “reputability.” Flavia’s *nouveau-riche* status is still relatively unfixed, and therefore to establish herself in the culture of the upper class she must engage in what Veblen termed “predatory behavior” to set herself off from others in her class. Cather writes that Flavia considers the artists “her lawful prey” (7). Veblen argues that since “possession of property becomes the basis of popular esteem,” therefore it is now “requisite to that complacency which we call self-respect,” or reputability (31). But, further, he observes that

as fast as a person makes new acquisitions, and becomes accustomed to the resulting new standard of wealth, the new standard forthwith ceases to afford appreciably greater satisfaction than the earlier standard did. The tendency in any case is constantly to make the present pecuniary standard the point of departure for a fresh increase of wealth . . . the end sought by accumulation is to rank high in comparison with the rest of the community in point of pecuniary strength. (31)

Both Veblen and Weber see this spiral of competitive accumulation as the critical high point (or low point) of American modernity and the point of departure for a new, hitherto unseen economic system. Cather, while adhering to ideas of the self-made individual/artist, nonetheless takes pains in the story to keep the genuine artist from being commodified, and to keep art as a safe, separate sphere apart from the rationalized, spiritually bankrupt, consumer culture in which art becomes public trophy. Here her antimodern ambivalence appears as an obvious reluctance to relinquish her reliance on the progressive rhetoric of the self-made individual (and true artist), while at the same time critiquing, even attempting to contain, the dangerous effects of such rhetoric for the separate artistic sphere.

Cather describes Flavia herself through images of voracious dissatisfaction, a hollowness born paradoxically from commercial and acquisitive excess: “The fact that her husband’s name was annually painted upon some ten thousand threshing machines, in reality contributed very little to her happiness” (7). Like many at the turn of the century, when, as Lears claims, republican moralism gave way to the pressures of industrial life and urbanity, Flavia desperately seeks real life—a type of “authentic experience” that offers a sense of structure, solidity, and meaning. But amid the sterility of nineteenth-century positivism, the crumbling Protestant culture Lears and Weber describe, Flavia’s attempt to acquire reputability, her successful acquisition of famous names and “interesting people” (7) in her household, cannot compensate for her emptiness or make her world more stable or real. Cather writes that “for all her sparkling assurance of manner, Flavia was certainly always ill at ease, and even more certainly anxious.”

She seemed not convinced of the established order of material things, seemed always to conceal her feelings that walls might crumble, chasms open, or the fabric of her life fly to the winds in irretrievable entanglement. (11)

In “Flavia and Her Artists” Cather shows her contempt for the conspicuous consumption outlined by Veblen, but focuses on one kind of consumption, that which disregards the sanctity

of the artistic sphere and even preys upon the individual artist. Veblen does allow for a possible standard that would compare, not simply material acquisition, but “moral, physical, intellectual, or aesthetic force.” However,

the comparison made in these respects is commonly so inextricably bound up with the pecuniary comparison as to be scarcely distinguishable from the latter.

This is especially true as regards the current rating of expressions of intellectual and aesthetic force or proficiency; so that we frequently interpret as aesthetic or intellectual a difference which in substance is pecuniary only. (97)

Flavia cannot discern the difference between aesthetic and exchange values (one cause of Roux’s critique) and yet she needs aesthetic culture, posited as an alternative sphere to the disenchanting modern world by Weber, to grant meaning to a rather meaningless existence. She also needs it to gain social capital, what Veblen terms reputability (and what Pierre Bourdieu will later term “distinction”). The pathos of her situation is that she desperately needs what she cannot or will not understand. Veblen is at his most viciously satirical when discussing figures such as Flavia, to whom it is “more necessary to be called clever than to breathe” (25). For such individuals, he claims, “this conspicuous leisure of which decorum is a ramification grows gradually into a laborious drill in deportment and an education in taste” as to “what articles of consumption are decorous and what are the decorous methods of consuming them” (50). This is, for Veblen, the “deliberate production of a cultured class” through the “process vulgarly known as snobbery” (50). In Flavia’s misuse of and misunderstanding of art Cather confronts the duality of her own antimodern response. Art represents something genuine, something apart from banal modern culture, and yet if consumed as Flavia consumes it, it cannot deliver on its promise. Art must remain pure and uncommodified to represent authentic experience; it cannot become the provenance of snobs.

Flavia is a type of character who will show up again and again in Cather’s early fiction as she wrestles with notions of aestheticism and individualism in nascent American bourgeois culture. Seeking access to that stratum of society which already holds the right to “culture,” Flavia will attempt to buy her way in, to literally consume art and, more specifically, and more threateningly, the artist: “she had now the few, the select, ‘the best’” (10). In “Flavia and her Artists,” Cather both demonstrates that the sphere of art is no longer entirely safe from marketing and consumer forces, and counters this polluted sphere of self-serving hedonism and greed with the anachronistic force of ascetic rationalism, figured here, as previously noted, as the hard-working, self-denying bourgeois, Arthur, as well as the authentic artist, Jimmy. These two characters represent the older form of progressive belief in success, acquired through self-denial, and in vocation or calling. While Jimmy is an artist and in residence in one of Flavia’s “cages” (10), she refuses even to be called an artist: “just remember I’m not one of them,” she cautions: “the artists, I mean” (14). Jimmy is, in fact, Cather’s figure of the *true* artist, and significantly serves as the legitimating voice of critique in the narration of the story.

Through her acquisition of the artists, Flavia’s social status is thus borrowed (or to be blunt, stolen, plagiarized). The Frenchman Roux is most aware of this and gives yet another voice to Cather’s alarm at the acquisitive impulse. As the most

sought after resident at her estate, partly because of his European cachet, Roux resents Flavia’s American acquisitiveness even more than Jimmy. Roux’s scathing editorial in which he satirizes Flavia is entitled, “Roux on Tuft Hunters: The Advanced American Woman As He Sees Her; Aggressive, Superficial and Insincere” (22). As Miss Broadwood notes, Roux

that merciless dissector of egoism . . . saw at a glance what some of them do not perceive at once . . . namely, that all Flavia’s artists have done or ever will do means exactly as much to her as a symphony means to an oyster; that there is no bridge by which the significance of any work of art could be conveyed to her. (25)

In Veblen’s terms, Roux recognizes that Flavia has no taste, merely an acquisitive instinct masking a deep insecurity.

Since Flavia has both wealth and leisure, she is driven to another level: that of competing in the arena of buying the prestige of others, hosting them, then showing them off as possessions, creating a new status marker for which others might then compete. As the line between celebrity, commodity culture, and art becomes more diffuse and illegible, the *nouveau-riche* asserts its superior pseudo-taste through its amplitude of acquisition. In her consumption, Flavia distracts herself but also betrays her need for cultural acceptance and for the cultural capital she hopes to acquire through her association with those “of one name . . . like kings” (16). But art as a commodity, and celebrity artists as producers or manufacturers, coexist in commodity culture as perpetrators of fraud as well. Neither Flavia nor her artists are shown as authentic. Neither is their art, with the notable exception of Jimmy’s.

Cather’s concern in this early story, then, is clearly not simply to mimic the realism of someone like Henry James. She attempts here to negotiate, in my view, the antimodern conflicting impulses which maintain the possibilities for advancement and progress, something she must hope for in her own career, and the revulsion she feels at the hedonism and greed that are the actual outcomes of modernity in its reliance upon victorious capitalism and market forces. Importantly, as she satirizes Flavia’s tasteless snobbery, she shows how far her own position is from elitism with regard to access to a rarefied art: art is endangered precisely by its elitist appropriation. Cather’s position is complex in insisting on art’s intrinsic value, its occupation of a sphere outside the consumer’s world (a position that goes back at least to Matthew Arnold and sounds dangerously close to elitism), but it is in fact a position of protest simultaneously radical and conservative, a protest against the modernity manifest in commodity culture, particularly as it attempts to commodify art and ideas and, as is dramatically shown here, the artist herself.

This position creates a fine line to walk for an artist who is, herself, seeking to become established in the literary world—which of course, means selling her material and perhaps creating some celebrity status for herself. These are issues which, I believe, will preoccupy Cather as she attempts to control her image, her work, and even the physical nature of her books, throughout her career. “Flavia and Her Artists” can be read as Cather’s early critique of the commodity culture which attempts to subsume and consume art for its own ends: the *nouveau-riche* individual’s need to participate in the cultural elitism that eludes her but seems necessary to legitimate a new social order based on invidious comparison. The story is also a critique of her class’s quest for authentic experience to replace religious conviction,

The “Iron Cage” of Acquisition (Continued)

which has become banal and filled with empty platitudes, and its sense that the conspicuous consumption of “culture” will provide a kind of redemption on both counts. In the early stories Cather attempts to answer cultural questions concerning the potential for art to offer a separate space from modern consumer culture, its potential to offer authentic experience, and, especially in this story, the relation of art to class, to conspicuous consumption, and to the American work ethic. “Flavia and Her Artists” is Cather’s most sardonic comment on the loss of the separate sphere of art postulated by Weber in his notion of an aesthetic culture and the corruption of that space by the emerging consumer capitalist as outlined by Veblen.

Just as Cather is careful in “On the Art of Fiction” in 1920 to delineate between stories produced, like breakfast food or soap, as a business, and “art” which she describes as a “search for something for which there is no market demand,” and “where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values” (103), so the theory of conspicuous consumption claims that the further we go in the search for reputability, the less discernment, the less taste we have. We cannot tell the difference between the breakfast food and the gourmet dinner, particularly if they cost the same or grant access to a higher class status merely through our acquisition of them. As Cather writes in “The Novel *Démeublé*,” the alternative aesthetic to novelty and enumerations in fiction, what she saw as modern realism, is the stripping down of life to its essentials, leaving room for what she feels is actually “real”: what she calls, in “Katherine Mansfield,” the “shades of sweetness and anguish” (136). These precious shades are lost in a cluttered, superficial accounting of material reality, a kind of acquisitiveness in itself, a meaningless collection, like Flavia’s artists; they are, as she says in “The Novel *Démeublé*,” “killed by tasteless amplitude” (42).

Flavia’s meaningless collection of artists finally represents the “tasteless amplitude” of a culture intent on consuming whatever it can to improve its status and to fill a void created by an economic system which has become an iron cage. How tempting it must have been (and of course, still is) for an emerging artist simply to write for the market forces at play. Cather tells us herself in “The Art of Fiction,” as if looking back on her early career, that “the courage to go on without compromise does not come to a writer all at once — nor, for that matter, does the ability” (103). Cather’s early stories are the beginning of that search for what is authentic, in ideas, in style, in aesthetic commitment, and, even there, her convictions are taking shape. Like so many other Modernist antimodernists, her convictions arise out of her actual engagement with art’s place in a world of “standardized values,” which are, of course, those of the market place.

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Cather Foundation to Host New Website

The Cather Foundation plans to launch a new, state-of-the-art website in December of 2008. The Cather Foundation has worked to become the formidable web presence required for success in the digital age. Our new website will promote tourism to Red Cloud and the surrounding areas by enhancing awareness of our organization through the use of the global community created by the Internet. Increased tourism brings much-needed economic activity; financial success means business growth; growth brings emerging businesses. This digital initiative project is critical to the Cather Foundation, and the community of Red Cloud.

This new website will ensure that visitors to the site will experience Red Cloud, the Cather Foundation, the Opera House, the bookstore, the gallery, and the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie in a comprehensive way, allowing them to make the decision to tour the facilities and/or become members and support our mission.

The major design elements are founded upon principles we’ve identified as priorities through our research: user-friendliness and interactivity. An online gallery will highlight pieces of art in our current exhibits and make purchasing art pieces quicker and easier; a guestbook will highlight visitor experiences and gain the trust of future travelers; a blog will ensure lively, conversational assurance to readers; a secure online bookstore will ease the process of online purchases, and increase sales to the Cather Foundation bookstore, which houses the largest collection of books by and about Willa Cather, along with supplemental items, including t-shirts, postcards, cards, and more; a showcase of the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie will enhance eco-tourism in the region; an education forum will help students and teachers alike in studying Cather.

Because the Cather Foundation is so multi-faceted, it can be difficult to market. Presently around 10,000 visitors find us without a state-of-the-art website; imagine how the face of our organization might change when global curiosity finds the new, improved willacather.org.

Merrill Skaggs died Monday, November 3, 2008, at the age of 71. Merrill was the Baldwin Professor of Humanities at Drew University until retiring in May of this year. A world-class Cather scholar and member of the Cather Foundation Board of Governors for many years, Merrill's contributions to Cather scholarship are legion. A memorial service was held on Sunday, November 23, 2008, at the S.W. Bowne Great Hall at Drew University. Donations in Merrill's memory may be sent to the Drew University Library Book Endowment in support of the American Literature Collection. A memorial fund will also be established at the Cather Foundation in her honor. Merrill's most recent submission to the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* is printed below.

Louise Guerber: Meeting Miss Cather, Denver 1925

Merrill Maguire Skaggs, Drew University

*The following transcription is from a journal account of an ardent admirer's first meeting with Willa Cather, in the summer of 1925. It was written by a young reference librarian named Louise Guerber, who was then working in the Denver Public Library. In it Guerber offers glimpses into Cather's lively thoughts on (among other things) literary technique, her friendship with D. H. Lawrence, the gestation of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, writing and golf—and into Willa Cather's memorable personality, freshly encountered by a young admirer. I offer it for use as scholars try to document "the real Willa Cather."*

The transcription and photograph that Willa Cather sent to Miss Guerber (later Burroughs) are from the Burroughs Collection, itself a part of the larger Drew University Cather collection, and they are published with the permission of Special Collections, Drew University Library.

Flyleaf signature: Louise Guerber

Front statement: The following notes were made by me for the sole purpose of keeping fresh in my mind my adventures with Willa Cather. If anything should happen to me it is my earnest wish that they be destroyed unread. There is nothing in them of interest to anyone but myself—my reason for wishing them destroyed is not that there is anything in them that should not be read but because I would not be guilty, even inadvertently, of "the vulgar treachery of public familiarity with my betters" as Mr. Beer so neatly put it.

1925

The excitement began on the 4th of August. A lady came into the Ref Room and asked Doris Wells for the Reference Librarian. Doris was very sorry but the Reference Librarian was on her vacation. Wasn't there something she could do. The lady then wanted to see the Librarian and Doris passed the buck to me. They were standing in front of the Reference Desk and as I went up to her I had the impression of mumbling she was saying something like this.

"I'd like to see the Librarian er perhaps y'd send in my card" all in a hesitating way. Then she tore off a piece of scrap paper and started writing.

"I'm a writer (pause) perhaps he'll know who I am, perhaps he wont"

Oh dear, thought I, another of these would-be, Colorado poets. I took the slip of paper and read

"Willa Cather."

I was stunned.

I rocked on my heels and beamed from ear to ear, or so my audience, the rest of the Ref. staff told me afterwards. Miss Cather was, fortunately looking the other way.

After what seemed to me aeons I recovered my voice and effervesced

"Of course Mr. Wyer will see you Miss Cather."

"Oh then you do know who I am"

"Know who you are!" There follows much burbling about how I wait for her books to come out, how I love them etc.

She seemed to be a bit embarrassed or rather not to know what to say except

"Well isn't that nice etc."

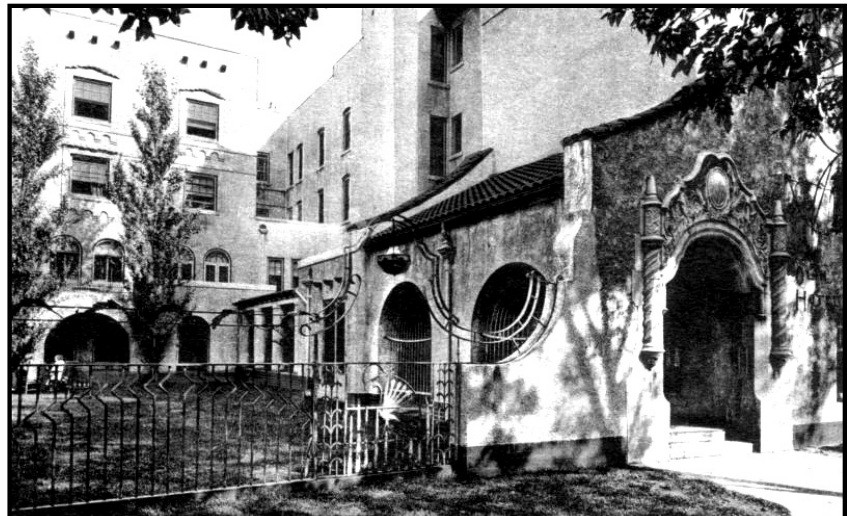
She said.

"The west is so wide I never know whether I will be known or not."

All this conversation went on during a triumphant march in front of the main desk from the Ref. Room. I saw Olive behind the desk and flashed a message that must have conveyed something unusual for she went to the Ref. Room which was seething with excitement and they all poured forth to spread the glad tidings. I left Miss Cather in the outer office and catapulted into Mr. Wyer. By this time I was wild and disheveled and my knees were trembling.

"Willa Cather wants to see you Mr. Wyer."

He didn't seem excited but he was sympathetic. He



Postcard of the Olin Hotel where Willa Cather stayed while in Denver in 1925. Postcard courtesy of John Swift.

Louise Guerber: Meeting Miss Cather (Continued)

afterwards said he didn't know whether I could get out or not. However I managed it.

While Miss Cather was talking to Mr. Wyer we collected in the outer office & excitement ran high. Olive had the bright idea of calling Mr. Wyer on the outside phone and asking him to ask her to tea.

Finally they came out. Miss Cather said

"Is this Miss Guerber?" and Mr. Wyer said "Yes." And I was into another paroxysm of excitement. She wanted some books looked up; some questions answered. I escorted her to the Ref Room, sat her down, gave her pencil and paper. I told her my slogan was "Conrad and Cather." She said she didn't belong in that class. She said, "When I was a little girl I used to wish and wish there were some one to do justice to this part of the country. They were doing fine things on the Atlantic seaboard but no one was doing anything out here."

I had to go in quest of her books and questions and when I came back she was surrounded by the Ref staff. She was very anxious to get some books from a second hand book store and asked if I would attend to it further. Then saying she would be back at 4 o'clock for tea she departed.

We planned an elegant tea. Mr. Wyer was very enthusiastic. It poured. Mr. Wyer came in to me at about 3.30. He said Mr. Stanly was going up for Miss Cather would I like to go with him. I felt as though nothing more wonderful could happen but things grew more wonderful steadily. Stanly and I went up to the Hotel and I went in for her. When she came down she said

"Why bless your heart, did you come for me yourself?"

She had her Mother and sister Elsie. As we drove down I told her how much we appreciated her coming and she said she had so much enjoyed her reception in the morning. She told me that she dreaded clubs. Last year, if she had talked at all the clubs that told her it was her duty to do so she would have had to talk to more than one a day.

The tea was a great success and Miss Cather was charming. She is very easy to talk to and talks very easily herself.

When it was over I took them home in our car. She was very much interested in Agnes Vaille [a climber tragically lost on Long's Peak, along with one of her rescuers, in January of 1925—ed.] and wanted to know all about the adventure and what I thought of it. I told her to the best of my ability and we sat in the car in front of the hotel for quite a while discussing it. I gave her the opinions of almost everyone, I think, when I said I thought she had a right to fling her own life away but when it came to involving a dozen other people who didn't want to climb the Peak it was a different story.

Miss Cather was interested and catechized me about it.

On the way up I had asked her if she had seen all of Denver and the surrounding country she wanted to. She said she hadn't and I offered to take her anywhere. She seemed gratified and said she would call me up if she wanted to go.

On Thursday, to my amazement—she called me.

"Miss Guerber?" "This is Miss Cather. It's a lovely day could you take me riding?"

I agreed to call for her at 2 o'clock and at 2 Til and I put in our appearance. Miss Cather sat in front with me and Til [,] Mrs. Cather and Elsie sat in back.

We drove to Golden up Lookout and down Bear Creek through Evergreen and Morrison.

She was charming. She acted as though we had been friends for years and talked about everything generously. I like her looks—strong, clear-eyed, and level-headed. She impressed me with her wide interest in people, her clear thinking and her absorption of detail. She didn't miss anything that was said however insignificant.

I asked her if writing were thrilling work? "Yes, very thrilling like riding horseback or playing golf. I only work 2 hours and a half and am completely exhausted." She said she



Copy of Willa Cather's 1920 passport photograph inscribed to Louise Guerber, along with a 1926 envelope addressed in Willa Cather's hand. A one-line note is enclosed with the photograph. Courtesy of the Burrough's Collection, Drew University.

liked to try new things and was at work on something totally different—from any thing she had ever done before. She said it was like a golfer playing on a new course. He knew his game, his clues, the feeling of his muscles and he had to fit all of his knowledge to the new course to win his game.

I told her the only trouble with her books was that I hated to have them end. Even “The Song of the Lark” was not long enough for me. She rather squirmed, saying that if she were writing it now it would be much shorter.

“I grow shorter and shorter” she said. She elaborated on that saying that art was a simplifying continually. At first the artist fumbles around and is very complicated; as he learns his art he becomes very simple. She observed that the Indian tongues were very complicated compared with the tongues of more civilized nations.

É propos of my hating to finish her books I asked her if she didn’t hate to finish books.

“No, I don’t. There aren’t very many thrills for me any more. Anatole France is dead, Proust is dead. She said she had been down to visit the D. H. Lawrences in New Mexico. I asked her if D. H. L. was as good-looking as his picture. She laughed and described him: red beard, red hair, or auburn rather. Very much like Thomas Carlyle. She said he is one of the finest writers of English today but that his art is spoiled by his reforming tendency. I understood this better after reading an article in the Nation by Edwin Muir. His revolt seems to be against conscious form. Miss Cather only likes “Sons & Lovers” and a “Sea in Sardinia.” She said “I am very fond of him and I think he is fond of me but we can’t talk about work. We mean entirely different things by it.”

Nov. 1 ‘25

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It hardly seems worth while going on with this after all that has happened in between and after all the time that has elapsed but I suppose some day I’ll want to recall the whole thing just as it happened and then I’ll be sorry if I have no record of it.

During that eventful ride Miss Cather was much interested in the wild flowers & trees, wanting to know all about them. Of course I knew nothing. Til stalled around a little but Miss Cather knew a great deal more than either of us.

We got back to Denver at about six o’clock. As we got in she almost made me hit a car in front of me by inquiring “Aren’t you tired, nice girl?”

When we got back to the hotel she said she would like to have us to dinner on Sunday but would call us later as she was more or less expecting her brother down from Casper.

On Saturday she called and said she was sorry but her brother was coming with his wife and three children. She insisted that she wanted us and would call us the early part of the next week.

Monday, Tuesday passed and Wednesday I was laid low with a running cold. Of course she called. Til answered and arranged that we should go to the hotel to dinner that night. I was drawn between being thrilled and dying to go, being scared to death to go and feeling rotten. However I struggled out of bed and dressed me up and at six o’clock we set forth to the Olin. We had to wait a few minutes down stairs and I grew more nervous by the minute. Finally, however, we were taken up to Miss Cather’s suite and once in her gracious presence I was at

ease again. Her sister was spending a few days in Evergreen so there were only the four of us. As for me if I had not already completely lost my mind, my heart & my soul to Willa S. Cather I made a thorough job of it that evening. I have no idea what I said. I know I hardly ate a thing. My own impression is that I just gazed with worshipful een. I felt decidedly woozy due to the cold and not very well able to cope with conversation but that is not necessary with Miss Cather around. She can keep it brilliant all by herself. All that is required of one is to listen and look both of which I did fervently. To me she was beautiful that evening. Til admitted that she was very good looking but wouldn’t concede beautiful. We hadn’t seen her with her hat off before and her hair is very soft and becoming. She had on a jade green blouse embroidered in gold and wore a jade green silk scarf. It was decidedly her color and I could not but admire.

I remember that we had trout; that Miss Cather very neatly dissected her mother’s for her; that she told us about her nieces. She has eight of them. There are three from Casper two of which are twins whom she called “Pep” & “Ginger.”

After dinner we went up to Willa’s room and smoked and she continued to entertain us. She was very tender with me, seating me out of a draught and what not which I tried to bear with good grace though I felt like a donkey. She was just full of her new book about fathers Macheboeuf and Lamy and she told us a great deal about the Southwest, the mission churches and about the old days. She read us a small bit from a Catholic book explaining the coming of the animals from the ark into No. America. It was very naïve. She showed us her ring—“a turquoise set in silver,” a square setting and a necklace of turquoises—very lovely.

I could have listened to that lovely deep voice until the crack of doom—all I ask now is to hear it once again—but at last we had to go home. Miss Cather decided she had to go to the drugstore so we walked down to the corner and back with her. And that was that.

* * *

This is the section of Louise’s journal written in Colorado. She picks up the effort again after she moves to New York, but the energetic prose is gone, as well as the sense of wonder and mysterious good luck. The accounts get sketchier and sketchier and soon peter out completely. For the continuing story, one must mostly rely hereafter on Cather’s point of view, established in Louise’s carefully saved letters and envelopes written and posted to her by her famous friend.

Joseph P. Lovering Dies in New York

Mark Madigan has sent word that Joseph P. Lovering passed away on July 3rd in Tonawanda, New York. Joe participated in the International Cather Seminars from 1987-1997. He had been a professor of English at Canisius College in Buffalo for thirty-six years before retiring in 1991. He wrote his dissertation on Dorothy Canfield Fisher at Ottawa University in 1956 and published a seminal article on her friendship with Cather. Joe possessed a keen intellect, a quick and gentle wit, and a passion for Cather’s writing. An online “guestbook” is available at <http://www.legacy.com/buffalonews/GB/GuestbookView.aspx?PersonId=112745544>

My Favorite Cather Short Story: “Old Mrs. Harris”

Betty Kort, *Newsletter and Review* Managing Editor

I am a grandmother. I don't know how the seasons went by so quickly, but four little ones now call me “Grandma.” This has a bearing on one of my favorite Cather short stories, “Old Mrs. Harris.” My wise friend Ann Romines says that we should read Willa Cather's works a second and third time, and I agree. Each time I reread one of Cather's novels or short stories, I respond differently. This most likely has something to do with my increasing age; and certainly it has a great deal to do with Cather's uncanny wisdom and, more particularly, her ability to get beneath the skins of people of all ages.

Some twenty years ago, I began the practice of assigning Cather's “Old Mrs. Harris” to my sixteen-and-seventeen-year-old high school students and making certain from the start they understood that the last paragraph of the text was critical to an understanding of the short story. When it came time to discuss this important ending, I knew that most of my students were accepting what I told them at face value (and in preparation for any possible test at a later date). Though they usually could identify at least with Vickie, they were not altogether internalizing what I said about this prophetic passage:

Thus Mrs. Harris slipped out of the Templetons' story; but Victoria and Vickie had still to go on, to follow the long road that leads through things unguessed at and unforeseeable. When they are old, they will come closer and closer to Grandma Harris. They will think a great deal about her, and remember things they never noticed; and their lot will be more or less like hers. They will regret that they heeded her so little; but they, too, will look into the eager, unseeing eyes of young people and feel themselves alone. They will say to themselves: “I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted things so much. But now I know.” (190)

Of course, twenty years ago I thought I myself knew what I was talking about when I discussed this portion of the text, but I have to admit that back then I saw myself escaping such confines as Grandma Harris came to experience. At least, I knew that I would never allow myself to be put into Mrs. Harris's position in a family setting. However, now as a grandmother, it is a bit unnerving to realize that I am gradually coming to identify with some to these exact situations—some comfortable and others not so comfortable. Even more surprising, I find myself accepting my lot in life, as did Grandma Harris.

I'd be the first to tell you that I lead a busy life and don't feel particularly lonely. Yet there are some exceptions. I was very close to my daughters as they grew up. They now live in Virginia and Texas and call often to tell me what is going on in their worlds. Both are now mothers of very young children and are totally immersed in their jobs and families. They ask what is going on in my world; but, in truth, they are not particularly interested. In fact, they might be surprised to know what actually occupies my time. I “look into the eager, unseeing eyes of young people and feel [myself] alone” sometimes (190)—just like old Mrs. Harris.

However, my relationship with my grandchildren can be very satisfying. Sometimes as a grandmother, I am surprised

at my reactions to situations. My oldest grandchild, Nicholas, is seven. This summer when I visited him in Texas, he and his two younger sisters once again became instant, non-stop playmates. I became as obsessed as Nick about skiing dangerously and carelessly down the slopes of a Nintendo Wii game. Though we each could ski down our own slopes, we preferred to start out together down the same slope. I would try to follow him, but inevitably, one of us crashed or took a crazy turn and lost the other. We seldom got to the bottom of the slope together, but oh, did we have fun. We broke all of the family rules about “time spent playing video games,” and played together for hours—we were deliriously enthralled. I know that my daughter Julie (Nick's mother) questioned our behavior and thought Nick's grandmother had lost her mind; indeed, that was probably close to the truth in some respects. As Cather said of Mrs. Harris, “Grandmother was perfectly happy. She and the twins were about the same age; they had in common all the realest and truest things. The years between them and her, it seemed to Mrs. Harris, were full of trouble and unimportant” (184). When I am with my grandchildren, I slip effortlessly into those “realest and truest things” that dominate their lives.

Yes, one can slip into childhood and escape the realities of aging, but for me this is something of an exception. My younger daughter and her husband both work full time in Washington, DC. Last summer I lived with them in their home in Arlington, Virginia, and took care of their first child for a considerable length of time. They were absolutely wonderful to me and appreciated my care of their toddler. Unlike Grandma Harris, I was not required to cook or clean. They imposed no rules, but I had rules anyway that I thought necessary to keep their nuclear family running smoothly. Cather says of Mrs. Harris, “her ‘things’ were almost required to be invisible” (98). And indeed, I too tried to keep both my things and my presence “invisible” as much as possible to allow them personal, family time. The word *invisible* is surely a synonymous term for *lonely* and certainly an adjective to describe old Mrs. Harris—the truth is that it fits me, sometimes. But don't misunderstand. I adore my daughter and her budding family and would have had the situation no other way. Grandma Harris obviously felt the same about her situation as caregiver of her grandchildren in Cather's short story.

There are, indeed, some advantages to the position in which I find myself. Cather writes, “To be sure, Mrs. Harris, and the other women of her age who managed their daughter's house, kept in the background; but it was their own background, and they ruled it jealously” (131). I too have a “jealously guarded background” of friends who are relatively close to me in age. Out of earshot of the younger generations, we talk about our children and grandchildren in knowing ways. We define for each other what we can and cannot do. We've all given up on Dr. Spock and learned the ins and outs of “time outs.” We vent our frustrations about our children and grandchildren, declare our joys, and display our photographs in our safe, secure world where we are in control—powerful, in fact. This reminds me that I admire Mrs. Harris for quietly engineering the funds for Vickie's college expenses. It is something I would feel confident to do if necessary

for any one of my grandchildren. In her own way, Mrs. Harris was powerful, perhaps the most powerful person in the short story, and I like to think the same of myself.

So, how does it end for me? Hard to say. "Mrs. Harris slipped out of the Templetons' story" (190) just as I will someday slip out of my family's story. And my daughters and grandchildren will, in time, "look into the eager, unseeing eyes of young people and feel themselves alone. They will say to themselves [as I have said to myself]: 'I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted things so much. But now I know'" (190). I suspect that my own mother and grandmother could have identified in the same ways I have with this short story. Nonetheless, I cannot imagine any of us condemning the younger generations for their lack of empathy. As Mrs. Harris said, "We are only young once" (130).

I could go on and on about the parallels between the character Mrs. Harris and my own life, but you get the point. The fact is I love this short story the way I love most good literature. The successful artist weaves an "old, old story" which, no matter the setting or situation, repeats itself so that time and again, the reader can identify with and slip into the story, becoming wiser because of the vicarious experience. Thank you, Willa Cather, for writing this particular story. "Old Mrs. Harris" is a narrative describing part of Willa Cather's early life in Red Cloud; over time it is becoming my story too.

(We know our Newsletter readers have favorite Cather novels and short stories. Please consider preparing a manuscript of 500 to 700 words formatted in Microsoft Word in which you name your favorite Cather work and explain why. E-mail to betty.kort@gmail.com or mail to the Willa Cather Newsletter and Review, Betty Kort, Managing Editor, Cather Foundation, 413 North Webster Street, Red Cloud, NE 68970. All manuscripts are welcome. You do not need to be a scholar or specialist. We want personal, inviting discussions. Perhaps your manuscript will be among those chosen for publication in a future issue of the Newsletter.)

Note

The quotations cited in the text are from my personal teaching copy of *Obscure Destinies*, published by Vintage Books, 1974. *Obscure Destinies* is out of print, except for the Scholarly Edition. The short stories included in the publication of *Obscure Destinies* can now be found in Cather's *Collected Stories*. New York: Random House. If you would enjoy having a copy of the Scholarly Edition of *Obscure Destinies* or *Collected Stories*, I encourage you to order your copy from the Cather Foundation Book Store or go to www.willacather.org.

Recent Cather Papers (Continued from Page 36)

Robert Thacker, St. Lawrence University, "As the Result of Many Solicitations": The Cather-Greenslet Correspondence at Harvard" (Cather Circles)

Dawn Trouard, University of Central Florida, "Seeing Cather and Welty Through Vermeer's Squared Windows: Preliminaries" (SSSL)

Sarah Cheney Watson, East Texas Baptist University, "Willa Cather's Classical View of Friendship in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*" (Baylor University Institute for Faith & Learning, Waco, Texas, October 2007)

Foundation Hosts Summer Programming

In keeping with the educational mission of the Cather Foundation, the Opera House was host to several educational programs in June in addition to the annual Spring Conference. The first program was a week-long learning immersion Elderhostel called Red Cloud: Willa Cather's Window to the World. Cather scholar and author Merrill Skaggs was the premier lecturer to 30 participants, who came from all over the country—from California to New Jersey. These lectures were enhanced by town and country tours, a visit to the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie, and educational events in the evenings. One of these evening events was a viewing of *The Road is All*, hosted by Joel Geyer, who introduced the film and later answered questions. Another evening brought the group to the Opera House to hear Betty Kort talk about her photography collection featuring three-dimensional Cather archives, which was on display in the auditorium. A farewell ceremony featured a video montage of highlights from the week made by Stephany Thompson. The Cather Foundation will host another Elderhostel, featuring Cather scholar and Board member Steve Shively, between June 15 and 19, 2009. Reviews of the program were outstanding, and we're still in touch with some of our superb participants.

Shortly after our Spring Conference and Elderhostel program, the Foundation hosted a Prairie Writers' Workshop, led by Lorraine Duggin—a Nebraska writer and author. This event hosted 12 participants from as far away as Colorado. Classes were held in the evening, which allowed writers to journey to the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie during the day and experience the rare warm season grasses and forbs. These trips to the Prairie were inspiration for a number of pieces written during the workshop, many of which drew connections to Cather and her craft. A reception for the public offered the writers a chance to share work they'd created throughout the week; writings included poetry, short fiction, and short non-fiction.

June ended with a visit from John Price, a professor of literature at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Price read from his latest book, *Man Killed by Pheasant and Other Kinships*. Price's writing explores ideas about place and identity, spirituality and nature. He has been compared to both Anne Lamott and Henry David Thoreau, writing with a unique combination of humor and sensitivity. As Cather seemed to have to leave Red Cloud in order to write about the community of the plains, Price's relationship with this place is the "unexpected, defining journey of [his] life: To come home without ever having left." While this might be a difference between Cather and Price, the common ground lies in their equal passion for the shaggy prairie and their genuine admiration for its people.

Calls for Papers

Willa Cather and Aestheticism volume: Sarah Watson and Ann Moseley are extending the deadline for 300 to 400 word proposals for a new essay collection on Cather and Aestheticism to January 1; contact Sarah at swatson@etbu.edu or Ann at Ann_Moseley@tamu-commerce.edu.

A call for papers for the May ALA in Boston has appeared at <http://www.calstatela.edu/academic/english/ala2/CALL%20SOCIETY.HTML>. Those interested should contact John Swift (swiftj@oxy.edu), ECLS Department, Occidental College, Los Angeles CA 90041, phone 323 259 2804.



**WILLA CATHER
NEWSLETTER & REVIEW**

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The *Newsletter & Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters to the Managing Editor. Scholarly essays should not exceed 3000 words; they should be submitted in Microsoft Word as an e-mail attachment and should follow MLA guidelines.

Send essays and inquiries to Issue Editors:

Ann Romines
Department of English
The George Washington University, Washington, DC
(annrom3@verizon.net)

-or-

Steven Trout
Department of English
Fort Hays State University, Hays, Kansas
(strout@fhsu.edu)

-or-

John N. Swift
Department of English
Occidental College, Los Angeles, California
(swiftj@oxy.edu)

Send letters and news items to

Betty Kort, Managing Editor
Willa Cather Foundation
413 North Webster
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68901
(bjkort@charter.net)

Essays and notes are listed in the annual *MLA Bibliography*.

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Telephone (402)746-2653/Toll Free (866)731-7304
Facsimile (402)746-2652
<www.willacather.org>
<wcpm@gpcom.net>

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Memorial & Educational Foundation
413 North Webster Street
Red Cloud, Nebraska, 68970

**WILLA CATHER
PIONEER MEMORIAL
& EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION
(The Willa Cather Society)**

Founded 1955 by Mildred Bennett

Mrs. Bennett and seven other founding members of the Board of Governors defined the Foundation's mission, which has evolved into these

AIMS OF THE WCPM

To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with The Nebraska State Historical Society.

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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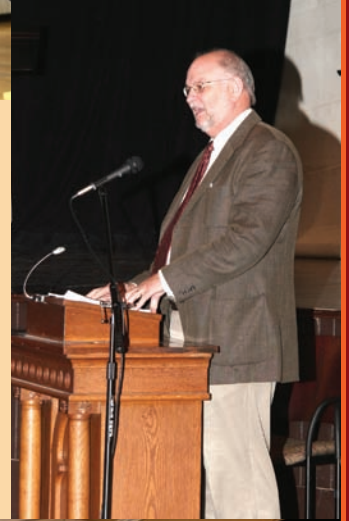
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Service: A Hallmark of the Cather Foundation



The Cather Community is familiar with the Cather Foundation's mission statement, which appears on page 50. Carrying out this mission is truly dependent on our donors and volunteers found locally in Red Cloud and throughout the country. At no time are the volunteer efforts more evident than during conferences and seminars sponsored by the Cather Foundation. Our hope is that by randomly recognizing a few volunteers on this page, we pay tribute to all volunteers who fulfill, without compensation, the many responsibilities of the Cather Foundation. Do you recognize these faces from the 2008 Spring Conference? Their identities are listed by row. Row 1: Joel Geyer-presenter/bd. member, Erika Koss-NEA presenter, Steve Shively-scholar/bd. member, and Bob Thacker-scholar/co-director of conference/bd. member. Row two: (standing) Merrill Skaggs-scholar/bd. member and Betty Kort-executive director. Seated, Bruce Baker-scholar/bd. member and Barb Sprague-pianist and volunteer extraordinaire. Dorothy Mattison-50 yr. employee, Betty Kort, Kim Johnson-2008 Volunteer Award recipient, and Betty Kort. Row 3: Jay Yost-vice president and Richard Harris-scholar (at the podium). Row 4: Ron Hull-annual Master of Ceremonies/bd. member, Chuck Peek-keynote speaker/president, and Merrill Skaggs-scholar/bd. member. Row 5: Left in first photograph, Ann Romines-scholar/bd. member, far right in photograph, Julie Olin-Ammentorp-scholar and Nancy Chinn-scholar, Bruce Baker-scholar/bd. member and Karen Baker, and Cather family members—Jim Southwick-bd. member, Angela Southwick, Margaret Fernbacher, Trish Schreiber, Jim Schreiber, and John Cather Ickis. Our thanks to these and ALL volunteers who so competently carry on the work of the Cather Foundation.

Photographs by Barb Kudrna.



The Cather Foundation

Preserving the Past . . . Informing the Future



The First Baptist Church, Red Cloud. Photograph by Betty Kort.

First Steps Taken to Restore Baptist Church

In recent months, the Cather Foundation Board of Governors has taken a serious look at restoring the First Baptist Church in Red Cloud. The church was dedicated July 13, 1884. Willa Cather's family joined the church and remained members until 1922. The First Baptist Church was a setting for Cather's short story, "The Joy of Nelly Deane," which can be found in *Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912*. In this story, Cather describes Nelly singing in the Baptist choir and her baptism by immersion in the cement pit directly under the pulpit rostrum. Both the choir loft and the baptismal fount, which can be mechanically lifted to the surface of the pit, still remain.

In order to gather interest in the building, the interior was thoroughly cleaned and the doors were opened during the 2008 Willa Cather Spring Conference. Several presentations were delivered in the sanctuary. Most people attending the conference had never seen the interior of the building, which boasts an intricate, distinctive architectural design.

Immediate needs of the building are being met. The foundation of the church was repaired last year, and this summer the bell was removed in order to expedite future renovations. Of immediate concern is the need to repair the roof, replace rotted wood siding on the exterior, and paint the building to forestall continued deterioration. Ultimately, basic structural renovations are necessary.

Old buildings require tender, loving care. This requires resources. If you are interested in furthering the restoration efforts, please contact the Cather Foundation. Your help will be appreciated.



CATHER FOUNDATION
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