

# Willa Cather

## Newsletter & Review



Winter 2008

Volume LI, No. 3



"Wallpaper." "Willa Cather and Material Culture Exhibit." Photograph of wallpaper in Willa Cather's bedroom. Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society. Photograph by Betty Kort.

## Willa Cather and Material Culture

### *In This Issue. . . .*

This special issue of the *Newsletter and Review* celebrates the theme of the 2007 Spring Conference, "Willa Cather and Material Culture." For that event, we commissioned our Executive Director Betty Kort, a skilled photographer, to create a series of forty photographs of significant objects in the Cather Foundation's extraordinary collection. A selection of those striking photographs is reproduced here, and twenty-four scholars and readers have written brief comments, suggesting what each particular object can tell us about Willa Cather and her work. I think you will find their comments thought-provoking and revealing. You'll also find Janis Stout's fine keynote address from Spring Conference, discussing the current importance of material culture to Cather studies, and textile scholar Barbara Trout's comments on the aesthetic implications of Willa Cather's wardrobe.

This issue introduces a new feature, "My Favorite Cather Book," with filmmaker Joel Geyer's discussion of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and the visual choices he made about how to represent the novel in his much-admired film biography of Cather, "The Road Is All." You'll also find a recipe from the Cather Family Reunion, Eleanor Roosevelt's 1937 comments on Cather, and other news and features. We hope the issue brings you pleasure and reminds you of how much material culture contributes to our reading and appreciation of Willa Cather. —Ann Romines, Issue Editor



### **The Calling Card Holder**

The Calling Card Holder was originally in the home of Silas and Lyra Garber, close friends of Willa Cather, who were the prototypes for Captain and Mrs. Forrester, central characters in Willa Cather's novel *A Lost Lady*. Cather describes the figure in the hall of the Forrester house. Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society. Donor: Josephine Frisbie. Photograph by Betty Kort.

# Willa Cather and Material Culture: The Photography Exhibit

## Photographer's Comments

Betty Kort

The Cather Foundation and the Nebraska State Historical Society possess an extraordinary collection of artifacts connected to the life and times of Willa Cather. Some are too valuable to publicly display, others too fragile, and some fit so neatly into the historic buildings that they are obscured. This photography exhibit is intended to highlight a select few of these objects and denote their relevance to the life, times, and work of Willa Cather.

Like writers and other visual artists, a photographer is constantly making choices. In this exhibit, I had the choice to employ the simplicity and power of black and white photography. This would have made my task much easier. However, I have always been fascinated with Cather's use of color. She led a colorful life. She wore colorful clothing. She embodies objects, landscapes, even people in terms of color. In framing artifacts important in Cather's life, color, it seems to me, is both inviting and necessary.

Light by itself is an important factor. Willa Cather came to the world of writing at a critical time in the arts—a time when French Impressionist painters, in particular, were concentrating on the use of light to change dramatically the way we see objects. Claude Monet provides classic examples: among his subjects he chose haystacks, the Rouen Cathedral, the Houses of Parliament, and waterlilies, doing a series of paintings of each to reveal these subjects at various times of the day and in various weather conditions. The results are a stunning study of the nature of reflected light.

In seeking the power of light to capture an image in a given moment, the French Impressionists were magnifying the common, and, in so doing, transforming what is considered ordinary into the extraordinary in their paintings. In the same way, Cather used her power as a writer to suspend action within the narrative in order to transform images in a way that magnifies and sets them apart from the common. Examples abound—for instance, her “woodcuts” in *My Ántonia*: “Ántonia kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; Ántonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in the snowstorm; Ántonia coming in with her work-team along the evening sky-line. She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true.” In *O Pioneers!* we find Alexandra in the garden: “She was standing lost in thought, leaning upon her pitchfork, her sunbonnet lying beside her on the ground. The dry garden patch smelled of drying vines and was strewn with yellow seed-cucumbers and pumpkins and citrons.” Cather goes on to fix in the readers' minds the rhubarb, the asparagus, a row of gooseberry and currant bushes, the zinnias and marigolds—all arrested in a moment of time. Inanimate objects get the same attention:

Carl smiled. “Yes, I remember that time. Your uncle brought you some kind of a mechanical toy, a Turkish lady sitting on an ottoman and smoking a hookah, wasn't it? And she turned her head backwards and forwards.”

“Oh, yes! Wasn't she splendid!”

She explains this process best in *The Song of the Lark*, in what I consider a classic explanation of the nature of *art* itself: “. . . what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself,—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?”

I have been humbled by the task set before me and thankful that I possess an extraordinary camera that, in effect, often thinks for me. I own a computer that can transform images at the touch of a key. It is no common assignment to capture objects in the transforming power of light—light that isolates and magnifies an image into some degree of the extraordinary. I have the advantages of technology; how amazing it is that Cather was able in her descriptions to embody the essence of light, form, and color through simple, carefully chosen words that to this day astonish the world.

The “Willa Cather and Material Culture” Photography Exhibit was first displayed in the Gallery at the Cather Center in Red Cloud, Nebraska, during the 2007 Spring Conference. The exhibit features Betty Kort's photographs of artifacts connected to the life and times of Willa Cather. All of these precious artifacts are located at the Cather Historic Site and are the property of either the Cather Foundation or the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection, which the Cather Foundation turned over to the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1978.

The photographs are now on tour, having been exhibited in the fall of 2007 at the Niobrara County Library in Lusk, Wyoming, and the Sheridan County Fulmer Library in Sheridan, Wyoming, both as part of the National Endowment for the Arts BIG READ project. In December and January of

2008, the exhibit was featured at the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center. The photographs will be featured at the Goshen County Library in Torrington, Wyoming, during February and March, after which the exhibit will move to Weatherford College, Weatherford, Texas, in April and May. These last two exhibits are also part of the National Endowment for the Arts BIG READ project.

Individual prints of the photographs are available at the Cather Center (with profits going to the Cather Foundation) or online at [www.bettykort.com](http://www.bettykort.com). The numbered photographs, printed on archival quality watercolor paper, are signed by the artist. Houchin Photography, Hastings, Nebraska, prepares the professional prints. The complete exhibit may be viewed at [www.bettykort.com](http://www.bettykort.com).



## Detail: Rose-Patterned Wallpaper (Cover Photograph)

**Ann Billesbach, Nebraska State Historical Society:** Those of us who work with the physical remains of the past realize that it is often dumb luck that determines which artifacts survive through the years. In a house made up of rooms that were remodeled, lived in, and then finally restored to an approximation of the home that Willa Cather knew as a child, it is our extremely good fortune that her attic bedroom is the one space left to us virtually unchanged. The rose-covered wallpaper, preserved both in reality and on the pages of *The Song of the Lark*, defines this most personal room. That Willa herself selected this wallpaper to create a private space in which she could escape the household clamor that “drowned the voice within herself” makes it one of the most evocative and revealing of the Cather Center’s artifacts.

**Bruce Baker, Omaha, Nebraska:** Whenever I visit Cather’s attic bedroom, I experience the emotional and intellectual responses I felt from the first, nearly fifty years ago. How remarkable that in the midst of their small, crowded house on Webster Street, Cather’s mother saw to it that young Willa was given a private space where she could be alone with her own thoughts and dreams—a sanctuary where she could read, think, dream, and hear the whistle of the approaching trains which came from afar, connecting her own world in Red Cloud with the world outside. The yellow-flowered wallpaper, which she purchased from her earnings at the Miner store, helped transform the drab attic walls into a place of beauty where she could both retreat from the everyday world and, through those long windows, view the beckoning world outside. I can see her looking out, dreaming and imagining, thinking and feeling, seeing and recording—in short, preparing for the life and calling which were to be her own. A “room of her own”—and her Window to the World!



Willa Cather’s room in the Childhood Home—Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society. Photograph by Betty Kort.

**Ann Moseley, Texas A&M University-Commerce:** The “small red and brown roses on a yellowish ground” (*SOL 56*) of the still-beautiful wallpaper in Cather’s childhood bedroom recall for me “all the open, pastel colors of the desert”—not only of the area around Thea Kronborg’s Colorado home but also of the desert near Walnut Canyon, Arizona, which played such an important role in the artistic awakening of both Cather and Thea. The wallpaper border even includes blue flowers reminiscent of the Turquoise Hills Thea loves to visit. Furthermore, the wallpaper complements the extensive flower imagery that symbolizes Thea’s personal and artistic development in Part I of *The Song of the Lark* and foreshadows her symbolic but miraculous “bursting into bloom” at the climactic moment of her final *Sieglinde* performance.

**Susan N. Maher, University of Nebraska Omaha:** In gaining a small room of her own, young Willa Cather entered a transitional space preparatory for adulthood. With this bedroom came choice and voice, the ability to create intimate, personal, expressive space. Cather’s wallpaper selection is revealing in what it tells us about the young author and late-century American interior design. An abstracted floral pattern featuring a rose in the border, the paper is both romantic and modern. The roseate color of the bloom bespeaks passion, desire, love, even the blood of martyrs’ suffering.

Yet the pattern’s abstraction reflects late-19<sup>th</sup>-century reform movement design, which eschewed ornate patterns, flocking and gilding, and heavy colors that oppress rather than illuminate space. Significantly, the paper’s creams and yellows would have captured light entering the north-side window, usually a darker side to a home, giving play to brightness and shadow. The modern elements contain the disruptive emotions of roseate passion, an early signal, perhaps, of Cather’s later aesthetic.

## The Calling Card Holder (Inside Front Cover)

**Kari A. Ronning, The Cather Project, University of Nebraska-Lincoln:**

*“There . . . was a scantily draped figure, an Arab or Egyptian slave girl, holding in her hands a large flat shell” (LL 110)*

*“[T]hey must put on their best dress and carry a card-case when they went to the Forresters” (LL 131)*

This decorative bronze object signifies the Garbers’ and Forresters’ upper class existence, displaying their refined tastes, their connection to natural beauty, and their broad acquaintance with the world. Its overt function—receiving visiting cards—subtly marks the household as one where the upper-class rituals of formal visits and calling cards are customary. Cather’s identification of the exotic figure as Arab or Egyptian serves to justify the semi-nudity—showing the bodies of women of other races was permissible—and tries to mute the suggestion of African American slavery, made blatant by the red lips painted, perhaps later.

**Nancy Chinn, Baylor University:** The Forresters’ calling card holder provides a subtle reminder of Cather’s southern roots. The statue’s “scantily clad” attire suggests her nationality—“Arab or Egyptian,” not African American. Describing her as a “slave girl,” however, prefigures Cather’s final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, seventeen years later. In 1900, Cather reviewed *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, whose Creole New Orleans includes calling cards and obligatory visiting days. While the Victorian world of the Forresters is not so strictly structured as Chopin’s, Cather clearly sees their world as attuned with nineteenth century values and laments their loss, even though both worlds contain black servants. Finally, the statue recalls other African American characters scattered throughout Cather’s work. While not an egregious example of the stereotyping in mass-produced material culture, the girl’s bright lips and curly hair hint at those exaggerations. Clearly, Cather was so haunted by the memory of the slaves she knew in Virginia that she had to write *Sapphira*.



**Matthew Hokom, Fairmont State**

**University:** *A Lost Lady* describes this mail-holder from Cather's childhood as "a scantly draped figure, an Arab or Egyptian slave girl, holding in her hands a large flat shell from the California coast." Within the context of the engraving in the Forrester home depicting Pompeii's House of the Tragic Poet, these details suggest erotic power and

point to Euripides' *Helen*, in which the real Helen is stranded in Egypt while Paris has abducted a phantom. The "shell from the California coast" links Helen to Mrs. Forrester, indicating both are stranded in alien lands. Cather's description shows her power to transform a simple, remembered object into a nexus of literary references and themes, in this case connecting the letter holder to Euripides and Helen, eros and exile.

**Joe Urgo, Hamilton College:** Captain Forrester and Niel Herbert talk momentarily before "a scantly draped figure, an Arab or Egyptian slave girl," which serves as Mrs. Forrester's outbox. Captain Forrester comments on his wife's penmanship as he holds in his hand her letter to her lover. Niel's instinct is to hide the evidence of Mrs. Forrester's indiscretion, but while he tries to slip the letter into his pocket, the Captain seizes it and engages Niel about his wife's qualities. Niel suppresses, the Captain veils. Later in the novel, Niel cuts a phone cord mid-call. Niel remembers seeing the "scantly draped figure" when he first entered the house. That's too bad—it is one more naked truth

Niel must repress if the world around him is going to conform to his standards.

**Lisa Marcus, Pacific Lutheran University:** In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, an abolitionist patriarch keeps a figurine on his shelf, "a black boy's mouth full of money. . . . two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth [which] . . . wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some small service. . . . Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words 'At Yo Service.'" Morrison injects this racist icon into the scene without external commentary, but astute readers recognize that this man is compromised by the racism of everyday household objects.

Cather's shell-bearing slave girl is a similar icon. In 1992, Morrison pushed Cather scholars to attend to the Africanist presence shadowing her texts (particularly *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*) and to consider what these black surrogates teach us about their white employers. In *A Lost Lady*, the "scantly draped" slave girl figurine is a reminder of Marian Forrester's illicit sexuality and a conduit for her final love letter to Frank Ellinger. Here, as in many American texts (notably, *Sapphira*), race is conflated with subversive sexuality. Morrison's figurine, with its mouth full of money, reminds us of the economy of racism; Cather's slave girl participates in that same economy with a sexual twist. It stands in the hallway on the threshold of conventional domesticity but always "at [Marian's] service" to figure sexual freedom and escape.

**Pocket Watch**  
(Back Cover)



**Steven Trout, Fort Hays State University:** Willa Cather's 17-jewel women's pocket watch was manufactured by the Elgin National Watch Company (of Elgin, Illinois) in 1923. It is an exceptionally beautiful artifact. The Elgin Company produced just 9000 copies of this particular model, whose most distinctive feature—the thing, I would like to think, that caught Cather's eye—is the circular, quasi-Chinese design in the center of the face. In 1923, Cather received the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* (1922), her first major commercial success, and won new admirers with *A Lost Lady* (1923), one of her finest novels. This is the elegant timepiece of a writer whose time had come.

**Acknowledgement:** Our thanks to Jan Offner of the Cather Foundation, who located the watch's serial number and looked it up on the Elgin Watch Collectors' Site.

**Ron Hull, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications:** It is important that people, drawn to the inspiration of this great artist, have tangible, actual artifacts of her material culture to remind us that, like ourselves, this was a real flesh and blood person. A timepiece is personal because the owner is daily dependent on it. It helps her through the day, meeting her deadlines, staying alert and responsive. To hold Willa Cather's pocket watch, which inexorably ticked away her life, or to run one's fingers along the windowsill where Willa Cather once looked upon the night sky, reminds us that, though the minutes and hours of her life have been spent, time itself cannot destroy what she created within the span of those ticks and tocks . . . .

**David Porter, Williams College:** I like to imagine that, as Willa Cather traveled between New York and Red Cloud, she would pull out this watch and muse over its intimations of a tension written deep into *My Ántonia*. The larger hands, set off by the strength of the case and the beauty of the face, appear to stand still, to defy time, just as the plough seen large against the sun seems to evoke its own timeless world. But the swift, visible rotations of the single hand on the watch's smaller dial tell a different story: "*Optima dies . . . prima fugit*," Those larger hands do move after all, and Cather reminds us that the sun soon sets and "that forgotten plough" sinks "back into its own littleness somewhere on the prairie."

**Charles Peek, University of Nebraska Kearney:** Watch: (1) artifact with numbers ranged in a circle (what was called the "face") and slivers ("hands") that pointed to them as if they were times, whose personification obscured its impersonal role in the cause of efficiency; (2) popular accessory, cherished and handed down during the pioneer era—after accelerating transportation and communication made measuring only days obsolete and before physics made counting seconds, minutes, and hours seem quaint; (3) machine, useless for registering the time Marie refers to when she wants to live "a hundred years, forever!" but adequate for reporting that "Amédée died at three o'clock this morning"; (4) reminder, carried about the person like an amulet, forcing the question of whether time is our friend or our enemy (no longer considered fashionable).

## Turkish Lady (Opposite Page)

**Stephany Thompson, Red Cloud Opera House:** The “Turkish Lady” was the star of the show! This dormant artifact came to life through Betty’s lens, and her haughty attitude spilled into the Cather Center Gallery and the Bookstore.

Her travels have taken her from Sandy Creek, New York, to Dr. Cook’s home in Red Cloud, Nebraska, to the pages of Cather’s *O Pioneers!*, to the Nebraska State Historical Society’s Garber Bank building. And now, as all divas eventually do, “Turkish Lady” is touring the country in the photography exhibit “Willa Cather and Material Culture.” She has done well for herself.

To quote Marie, “Oh yes! Wasn’t she splendid!” And she still is.

**Merrill Maguire Skaggs, Drew University:** Cather’s literary power is underscored by the fact that nobody noticed one glaring discrepancy between the written description and the real thing: the real object, that little Turkish lady sitting on an ottoman, smokes no hookah. Whether she moves her head was not possible to say at the 2007 Spring Conference, since she was under protective cover and untouchable. But I think Cather added at least the hookah deliberately, in order to imply the titillatingly forbidden sins a Turkish lady might memorably suggest, even in a pioneer’s Nebraska. Cather’s first “master” Gustave Flaubert, for example, once wondered, according to Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk in *Istanbul*, whether the source of his syphilis was “a Maronite or ‘perhaps it was a little Turkish lady.’ The Turk or the Christian?” Nebraskans could wonder more, too, if she smoked a hookah and moved her head, instead of merely holding a silly jump rope.

**Jean C. Griffith, Wichita State University:** Like many characters in Cather’s works, this figure is liminal: a Turk who does not appear Turkish, she has the idealized characteristics (alabaster skin, blue eyes) of white femininity, yet her unconventional clothes and sitting position, in addition to her hookah, suggest that she is not a “lady” by American standards. While *O Pioneers!* Marie boasts that the Bohemians saved Europe from Turkish invasion, she too masquerades as a Turkish Lady when, for the church fair, she wears a costume similar to that of her music box woman. And it is in this costume, one that associates Bohemians with racial others, that Marie is kissed by Emil, an act that leads to violence and thus complicates Cather’s otherwise positive portrayal of diversity in the novel.

**Evelyn Funda, Utah State University:** The Turkish lady’s hookah reminds me of how, in 1913, women’s smoking was deemed improper. Although men’s smoking indicated intelligence and composure (they even did it on a sinking Titanic), among women, public smoking was a forbidden act, for which women a decade earlier had been arrested and occasionally even jailed. Alice Roosevelt sparked controversy with her smoking, defying her father’s demand that she never smoke “under my roof” by simply going upstairs and smoking on the roof of the White House. Even Cather’s biographers have been reluctant to admit that she smoked, as if trying to protect her reputation within the standards of her own time. The Turkish lady, then, serves as an icon of women’s growing rebelliousness and self-determination, suggesting how that taboo was being transformed by women into an emblem of freedom and autonomy, of the brand that helps Alexandra succeed in agriculture (another predominantly male purview).

### CALL FOR PAPERS & INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

#### WILLA CATHER SPRING CONFERENCE & SYMPOSIUM

Red Cloud, Nebraska

June 5-6-7, 2008

#### *Cather and Her Contemporaries*

The 2008 Cather Spring Conference at the Willa Cather Historic site in Red Cloud on June 5-6-7, 2008, will feature a Symposium. Paper proposals related to the works of Willa Cather are invited for presentation on Thursday, June 5, with special consideration given to papers dealing with Cather and Her Contemporaries or the focus novel, *One of Ours*. Send proposals no later than April 1st to

Robert Thacker  
Canadian Studies Program  
St. Lawrence University  
Canton, NY 13617  
rthacker@stlawu.edu

The two-day conference following the Symposium will feature *One of Ours*, with Charles Peek, Professor of English at the University of Nebraska Kearney, serving as keynote speaker for the Passing Show Panel. The Conference will include a tour of Red Cloud and the surrounding countryside, with special emphasis on sites related to *One of Ours*.

Carl smiled. "Yes, I remember that time. Your uncle brought you some kind of a mechanical toy, a Turkish lady sitting on an ottoman and smoking a hookah, wasn't it? And she turned her head backwards and forwards."

"Oh, yes! Wasn't she splendid!"

~~ O Pioneers!



### Turkish Lady

This photograph depicts the Turkish doll music box, circa 1860-70, that is described in Willa Cather's 1913 novel, *O Pioneers!*. The doll is from the home of Willa Cather's friend, Dr. Henry Cook. A wedding gift to Henry and Arabelle Meacham Cook, the Turkish lady traveled to Red Cloud with the Cook family from Sandy Creek, New York, in 1879. The music box played a tune while the doll turned its head and raised the pipe to its mouth. Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society. Location: Garber Bank Building in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Donor: Josephine Frisbie. Photograph by Betty Kort.

## Willa's Silver Baby Cup

**John J. Murphy, Santa Fe, New Mexico.** In *Shadows on the Rock*, Cécile's baby cup, given to her by Aunt Clothilde, resembles the one Willa Cather was given by her paternal grandfather, William Cather. In the original, the given name is surrounded by a heart-shaped cluster of leaves and lilies of the valley, but in the fictional, Cécile's name is wreathed by roses. It's a stretch, perhaps, but roses are appropriate here, as the novel advances toward Christmas, for they are mentioned in the King James Version of Isaiah 35 and have messianic overtones. More particularly in this scene, where Cécile reads to Jacques from the *Lives of the Saints* and serves him hot chocolate, the cup reflects her own as well as Cather's privileged status, recollects the birthplaces of both (France, Virginia), and suggests that such material treasures may outlast those who cherish them.

**Ann Romines, George Washington University.** A silver (plated) cup, a survival of indulged Virginia childhood. Letters cut into enduring metal celebrate the birth of a first child, whose name (Wilella>Willie>Willa) recalls an aunt who died at four. The cup also celebrates the modest affluence and the endurance of a family that could buy and then keep such a gift, transporting it from Virginia to Nebraska, from generation to generation. . . . Little Jacques, with no such family, understood that Cécile's silver cup "fixed" his friend "as born to security and privileges."

This object tells us about an invaluable gift Willa Cather received from her family: the sense that her life and her name mattered, were worth celebrating and polishing and cherishing. The audacity and persistence of her triumphant life as an artist must have been grounded in that gift.

**Andrew Jewell, The Cather Project, University of Nebraska-Lincoln:** In the last days of my grandfather's life, my uncle came to his house after visiting the site where my great-grandparents' dilapidated house was being bulldozed. He came with an artifact just unearthed: a small tin cup, with "Baby" etched into its side. Holding it in his weak hands, my grandfather squinted at the cup and murmured, "I guess that was mine."

The first cup is one of the earliest possessions that mark the child as independent of her mother, as mature enough to be sustained away from the breast. This cup was Cather's entrance into the sustenance, culture, and power of having her own place at the table.

The simple cups endure beyond those named on their sides. They remind us that, though we know people in their dying days, their small fingers once delighted in the glimmer of the new cup.

**Elsie Cather, quoted in Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather*:** [On 22 January 1874, Charles Cather wrote of his baby daughter:] "We call her Willie after our little sister." (The little sister was Wilella, who died of diphtheria in her childhood.) Willa Cather's birth certificate signed by Mrs. Charles Cather . . .

gives the name as Wilella Cather, and it was originally written thus in the Cather family Bible. But in the Bible it was altered from Wilella to Willa by Willa Cather herself. The date that she did so is not known.

Referring to Charles Cather's letter . . . Elsie Cather wrote that her parents must have changed their minds about her sister's name soon after: "Father must have written that letter before Mother had her last word on the matter. I am sure that my sister was never again referred to as anything but *Willa* or *Willie*. I have the silver baby mug that Grandfather Cather gave her when she was still a baby and it has *Willa* engraved on the front. In those days when so few records were kept, people felt at liberty to change names if they wished to do so."



Willa's Silver Baby Cup. Cather Foundation Collection. Donor: Elsie Cather. Photograph by Betty Kort.

**"to have a little cup, with your name on it . . . even if you died, it would still be there, with your name."**

~~Shadows on the Rock~~



## My Favorite Cather Book

Joel Geyer, Senior Producer, NET Television

Cather is, of course, a writer for many ages. When I was young, quixotic, and an easy mark, I was smitten with *Alexandra*, *Thea*, and *Antonia*. I would not, at the time, have found much interest in old Mrs. Harris, Godfrey St. Peter, and Father Latour. Cather had not yet taken on the weight of my literary heroes—Hawthorne, Hesse, Twain, Kerouac, and Vonnegut (yes, I went to Woodstock).

But my sea change regarding Cather surprised me a decade later when I least expected it. In the early 1980s, I was producing one of a series of musical travelogues for German National Television (ZDF) and PBS. The series was called “Melody of a City.” My lucky assignment was the city of Santa Fe. My challenge as a producer and director was to establish a cultural ambience for performances of a wide range of music—opera, mariachi, classical, flamenco, and cowboy country. Not easy. Clearly (in my mind) the project needed extensive location scouting. I convinced the German producers that I should spend ten days of serious research in Santa Fe. Serious research, mind you—ten long, hard days of eating, drinking, and listening to music.

The first day actually was hard work. I drove the high road to Taos, making many stops along the way to hike up hillsides for potential panoramic shots. When I finally returned to my hotel—the legendary La Fonda—I was in no mood for a long evening on the town. So I headed down to the hotel news stand to see what local literature might be easily available. The selection was slim but surprisingly well chosen. Within minutes I had purchased Tony Hillerman and Willa Cather. Little did I realize at the time that I would eventually read all things Cather (and Hillerman).

Sitting in my La Fonda hotel room with its faux adobe walls and beamed ceiling, I began reading *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. At the time, I really didn’t know much about Cather. My simple view was that she was an elegist of the prairie, not a historian of Southwestern metaphysics. I thought the book would be something I would “surf” for a week or so before finishing (if it was good enough to finish). But I unexpectedly found myself reading page after page until I was going deep into the night, unable to stop exploring Cather’s intriguingly oblique narrative. Finally, around 4 a.m., I came to the remarkable passage—“into the morning, into the morning!” (288).

It was one of those moments when words seem to transcend the page and flow into both your conscious and subconscious. Her weaving simple story after simple story into one story was literary alchemy. My heightened sense in that moment was that Cather was spinning story into legend and in the process capturing enticing glimpses of the diverse spirituality of the Southwest. “Death” was both mythic and magical.

I learned from the book’s introduction that Cather had imagined the story based on the true stories of Father Machebeuf,

which gave it both the randomness and reality of factual truth. I also knew that Cather had imagined the narrative while reading Machebeuf’s letters in that very hotel in 1931. Could I be in the same room? A person of a more supernatural sensibility might describe the moment as a “visitation.” As Cather said of her experience: “Before morning, the story was in my mind. . . . on the white wall of that hotel room in Santa Fe, as if it were all in order and color there, projected by a sort of magic lantern” (Qtd. in Small 109).

The “white wall” for me was not in the hotel room. It was and is the magic lantern of television. Once I “see” something in the eye of my imagination, it becomes a challenge and an adventure to see if it can be brought to life on television.

After many years of keeping the images in the back of my mind, finally, in 2001, I began conspiring with my talented friend and frequent collaborator, Christine Lesiak, to do a new television biography of Willa Cather. This is a more formidable challenge than most people realize—a 90-minute documentary is less than 30 pages, less than 10,000 words. What in the name of Willela do you decide to use? What do you painfully leave out?

Chris and I soon realized that we would not only have to pass over some of Cather’s stories, but also actually have

to leave out major novels. In fact, we would only be able to afford—in both time and money—the creation of eight to ten major scenes. For good reason, we decided that three of those would be from *Archbishop*.

Why? One reason is that *Archbishop* comes in Cather’s career as she is discovering a remarkable new level of creativity. If you have made lifetime study of story development, it is easy to see when something is “worked up,” to use Cather’s phrase. As much as Cather would tell us to “pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,” if you study Cather’s style you come to see



Latour lost in the desert. Story board illustration for film biography, *The Road is All*. Tom Floyd, artist. Permission of NET Television.



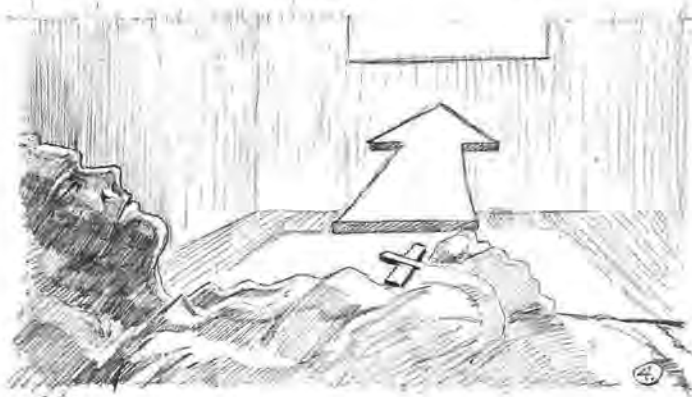
Jacinto and Latour discuss the stars. Story board illustration for film biography, *The Road is All*. Tom Floyd, artist. Permission of NET Television.

## My Favorite Cather Book

(Continued)

the great Oz at work in *O Pioneers!* and *Song of the Lark*. But Cather-as-Oz disappears in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. She allows aesthetics to transcend structure, narrative to transcend novel. It is as if her prose itself begins to flow “into the morning, into the morning!”

Another reason for the emphasis on *Archbishop* is that it captures a stunning diversity. Today’s presentism demands that we chastise Cather for some of the prejudices of her time, but



The Archbishop’s death scene. Story board illustration for film biography, *The Road is All*. Tom Floyd, artist. Permission of NET Television.

*Archbishop* is, at any time, a remarkable reflection on a complex confluence of cultures—Native American, Spanish, Mexican, Euro-American, and French. Despite America’s tragic flaws, if you study world cultural history, you know that an essential part of America’s genius is diversity. Now, pause for a moment. Put yourself in the shoes of a television producer. You know you are going to feature three scenes from *Archbishop*. But which ones? Not easy to decide, is it? After many false starts, we finally picked scenes that suggest the beginning, middle, and end of the narrative. We begin with Cather’s perfectly chosen spiritual metaphor—Latour lost in the desert. It sets the scene for all that is to follow.

We further pursue the spiritual quest with Jacinto and Latour discussing the stars while sitting around a campfire. Latour says, “We think they are worlds like ours, Jacinto.” Jacinto replies, “We think they are great leaders.” Latour closes the scene with a sublime acquiescence, “Whatever they are, they are great.”

Inescapably we needed to re-create the Archbishop’s death scene. Speaking as someone who had to “work up” the moment for television, it is a very dangerous scene. As Woody Allen might say, metaphysics is tricky.

While I can’t imagine Cather approving of any television or movie treatment of her work, she at least might approve of the aesthetic philosophy behind our final re-creation—simple understatement. A key element in our “work up,” however, is the use of light—pure, bright, white light. Most people don’t consciously “see” lighting; but subliminally it has powerful effects. In this scene it serves almost as a character sharing the moment with the dying Latour. But perhaps better said, it is the “verb” in the scene. The scene has no action besides Latour’s barely discernible rubbing of his Rosary Beads. But the action comes from the light. Latour’s face is shrouded in shadows, but the light moves across the bed, piercing the darkness, and beckons to Latour, drawing him, welcoming him.

But, of course, from a director’s perspective, the most essential element in the scene is Cather’s description—done beautifully by Marsha Gay Hardin. To emphasize Cather’s “voice” we decided to create a spare, simple visual canvas where Cather’s words could carry the scene. As we all know, Cather’s special genius is not in her narratives, although they may be charged with dramatic action. It is not in her characters, although they may burn with passion. Cather’s special magic is in her use of language.

Something whispered to the ear on the pillow,  
lightened the heart, softly, softly picked the lock, slid  
the bolts and released the imprisoned spirit of man into  
the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into  
the morning!

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## CALL FOR PAPERS AND INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

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Present

The 12<sup>th</sup> International Cather Seminar  
Cather, Chicago, and Modernism

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## Relics and Things: The Material Professor's House

Janis P. Stout, Texas A & M University, Professor Emerita



Janis Stout speaks at the 2007 Spring Conference. Photograph by Barb Kudrna.

Willa Cather made few public comments on her own work, but there does exist a small set of frequently quoted statements in which she defined her principles and standards as a writer. These statements about her art have become bywords in Cather studies. They include, for example, the following handful of statements that almost all students of Cather's work have come across at one time or another:

—how “The world broke in two in 1922, or thereabouts,” from the preface to *Not Under Forty* (SPOW 812).<sup>1</sup>

—“This [*O Pioneers!*] was like taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that knew the way,” from “My First Novels [There Were Two]” (SPOW 963).

And probably most familiar of all,

—“How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window” and “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named,” both from her essay “The Novel D meubl ,” (SPOW 837).

When we think about Catherian phrases relating to *The Professor's House* in particular, we turn to the concise statement reprinted in that wonderful little collection *On Writing* in which she compares the form of that novel to a Dutch painting in which a “warmly furnished” interior was made spacious by the inclusion of a “square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of gray sea.” In much that same way, she said, she sought to create an “overcrowded and stuffy” atmosphere in Book One of that novel, then “open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa” (SPOW 974).

All of these phrases of Cather's—and a few others that might be listed—are true, surely sincere, and insightful reflections about her own art and aesthetic principles. But there is another, less familiar and certainly less public phrase that I want to call attention to, one quite different in tone and apparent seriousness. Having been written in a personal letter, this phrase has not been often quoted and cannot be quoted here. The statement, in paraphrase from a letter to Irene Miner Weisz dated January 11, 1926, is this: Thanks to Professor St. Peter, she had just acquired a very nice mink coat.

Cather's own phrasing in the original is much more lively and enthusiastic, even playful, than my wording can possibly indicate. Written as a happy bit of news to a longtime friend, it may lack the profundity, let alone the polished grace of some of those other examples of Cather's phrase-making, and it may not be so obviously related to her art, yet it seems to me to be a quite significant statement. It tells us, I believe, a great deal about Cather as a professional writer practicing her craft at a very high level of artistry, in the midst of an American culture that molded and shaped her as much as it molds and shapes you and me—if only by shaping her sometimes to resist. Moreover, its significance is connected with what has been, I believe, the single most important thrust in Cather studies in the past two decades:

the reconnection of Cather with the things of the real world, the physical objects that she proclaimed a desire to throw out the window.

At one time Cather's critics tended to see her as being rather otherworldly, both in a moral sense (because she did indeed strongly disapprove of some of the trends she saw in her society) and in an aesthetic sense. We spoke of her disinterestedness, as if she lived and worked on another plane altogether from that of ordinary human motivations. We spoke of her refusal to think of her writing in terms of business. She didn't write for money or for vulgar fame, we said, but solely for the sake of Art, with a capital A—out of a desire to produce fine literature for the ages. All that was true. But it was not the whole truth. When we elevated Cather to the status of the ideal and idealizing artist, as if she had no interest in the realities of the world around her, we over-stated the case. And when critics over-reach in one direction, there will almost always be a correction in another direction. Hence the change in Cather studies that I am referring to: a reconsideration of Cather from the perspective of material culture studies.

Really, there have been two major shifts in Cather studies in the past couple of decades. One is the serious textual study we see embodied in the Scholarly Edition being published by University of Nebraska Press. That Scholarly Edition is an effort of inestimable importance. The existence of a fine and reliable edition with variant readings and other scholarly apparatus makes it possible to pursue serious study of a writer at a whole new level. But it is the second shift that I am talking about today—the effort to view her as a part of her culture, rather than *apart from* her culture.

The historicized or cultural studies approach to Cather has prominently been associated with the work of Josephargo and Guy Reynolds. Their books, published in 1995 and 1996, really launched this redirection of Cather studies. When I published my own *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* in 2000, I intended its title as an indication of where I meant to position myself in this newer way of reading Cather, as well as an indication of its central argument. The interest in material culture evident in many of the explanatory notes and illustrations in the Scholarly Edition volumes and in the volume of essays edited by me called *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World*, published in 2005, is one form taken by this historical or cultural studies approach to Cather. By way of that volume, this interest in Cather and material culture is now associated with the whole group of scholars whose fine work appears there. And it is also associated with Steven Trout, through his book *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War* (2002) and his edited volume *Cather Studies 6: History, Memory, and War* (2006).

In his introduction to *History, Memory, and War*, Trout summarizes the turn to a cultural studies approach to Cather this way:

Over the past two decades, scholars equipped with the methodologies of New Historicism and cultural studies have turned this conception [of Cather as a

## Relics and Things

(Continued)

writer who separated herself from the historical present] on its head, replacing the solitary, politically indifferent artist with a cultural *participant* whose works embrace, reject, or redefine, by turns, the dominant values and beliefs located in her contemporary milieu. . . . No longer sealed away from politics, ideology, and material culture, Cather's texts now *say* much more than they once did (xi-xii).

It seems to me that that statement is both very accurate and very important. Her books do say much more than they did when they were put up on our mental shelves to be admired as beautiful and wholesome stories whose significance was primarily or perhaps solely an aesthetic one, above and apart from the gritty context provided by history and culture. But Cather doesn't need the protection that such a veneration implies. We don't need to put her books up on a shelf like beautiful and precious but fragile treasures. They are fully adequate to anything we can throw at them. And they "say much more" when we do. Certainly that is true of *The Professor's House*, when we read it through the lens of material culture.

Let's return, then, to Cather's words in her letter to her friend Irene. What does it tell us that she said her professor had purchased a fur coat for her?

It tells us, first, that Cather was very human. Certainly she was serious about the art of writing and very serious indeed about her place in the tradition of texts that she saw as being really fine, not just scribbles of the moment. But such a level of high seriousness does not require being immune to the attractions and pleasures of the material world. We can hear her delight in her phrasing when she reports her new mink coat to Irene—there is practically (not literally) an exclamation point. What her attribution of the coat to her professor meant was that the fee *Collier's Magazine* had paid for the serialization of the new novel had been a fat one—\$10,000—and the strong early sales of the Knopf first edition (45,000 copies printed in 1925, the year of issue) had been quite lucrative (Link 392-94). As we can see, she was not indifferent to that. Just how far from indifferent is evident, too, in a slightly earlier letter to Irene Miner Weisz, probably written on March 16, 1925, in which she says, following my own paraphrase in *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather*, that she has "sold the serial rights to *The Professor's House* for \$10,000" but does not want Irene to tell members of the Cather family "because they will expect things." Instead of socking all that money away in c.d.s, or the equivalent of the day, as a person primarily interested in money for its own sake might have done, or instead of giving it all away to Relief for Starving But Serious Artists, as a person indifferent to the possession of money might have done, or, as we see from her letter, instead of opening her pocketbook to her relatives, she bought something that gave her

pleasure.<sup>2</sup> And not the ethereal kind of pleasure that ownership of a Picasso, say, or a John Singer Sargent might have given her, but a luxury item to put on her back. James Woodress points out in his historical essay in the Scholarly Edition of *The Professor's House* that at the time the novel was published Cather had not been really prosperous for very long (291). When this bonanza came in she went for pleasure in a real, immediate, bodily sense. There are other moments in Cather's letters as well as other writings when we see her expressing this kind of pleasure in the world around her. I list some of these in my introduction to *Willa Cather and Material Culture* (6-8). She refers to being



Kari Ronning, speaking to an audience during a session at the 2007 Spring Conference, points out a detail in an artifact from her 19th century clothing collection. Photograph by Barb Kudrna.

pleased that her maid Josephine Bourda had organized the napkins, oyster forks, and ice cream freezer when she came back to work for Cather and Lewis in 1921. She records her pleasure in the aprons and dish towels her mother sent her for Christmas that same year and the steamed pudding Carrie Miner Sherwood mailed to her. She exults over a satin "quilt" (as she calls it; we would probably say down comforter) given to her by Blanche Knopf and a quilt (the word is used right this time) made for her by Nebraska friends. She remembered a music box in the form of a Turkish lady smoking a hookah, which belonged to friends in Red Cloud, well enough to recreate it in *O Pioneers!*. She literally wrote home about a marionette that was brought to tea by one of her guests in 1920, and how it was made to beg for a cigarette—one of the cigarettes she kept, by the way, in a tortoiseshell box. Objects crowd into her letters.

Christmas trees, for instance—it was not just the abstract idea and meaning of Christmas that was important to her, but the festive physical object; we know that from *My Ántonia* as well. And food—she mentions especially good dinners as well as especially poor ones, such as during war time. She was delighted when Zoë Akins sent a turkey for Christmas in 1943, but when Zoë repeated the gift the next year it got lost in the mail. (We may wonder how some post office smelled after that!) Cather in turn took pleasure in sending gifts of food to old friends in Nebraska, especially during the Depression years, commissioning Carrie Miner Sherwood to buy specific lists of food items as gifts. And her letters, as well as photographs, show too that she took enormous pleasure in clothes. Some of her unusual outfits can now be seen at Red Cloud. Her niece Mary Virginia would check out sales and let her know if she needed to rush over to the department store to try something on.

All of these objects referred to in Cather's letters show her natural human enjoyment of material possessions and experiences. We see the traces of that rich sensuous experience in her novels and stories—for all their minimalist, or "démouillé," style and structure.

Besides her pleasure in a luxury item, however, Cather's reference to her new fur coat, when combined with other textual moments, also tells us that there was a good deal

more ambivalence in her attitudes toward materiality than has sometimes been reflected in critical commentary. The conception of Cather as a pure aesthete, detached from the vulgar common world of things and politics and human entanglements, has gone hand in hand with an emphasis on her disapproval of materialism, especially in the nineteen-twenties—the decade, we



Bruce Baker speaks to an audience in the Gallery during the 2007 Spring Conference. Behind Bruce is the “Turkish Lady” from the “Willa Cather and Material Culture” photography exhibit by Betty Kort. Photograph by Barb Kudrna.

should note, of the book that provided her her mink coat, *The Professor's House*. That distortion in our understanding was far more prevalent, of course, twenty years ago than it is now. And certainly it is true that she was severely critical of material excess and a society gone mad over getting and spending. She made that point more than once in her novels. In *One of Ours*, for instance, there's all that junk piling up in the Wheelers' basement; it isn't there just by some kind of narrative happenstance, but to make a point about consumer excess. At the same time, as we have seen already, her own delight in material objects was equally evident. Mary Ann O'Farrell speaks of this ambivalence of Cather's toward things, objects, in her afterword to *Willa Cather and Material Culture*: “If things must be dismissed from the novel, removed from its considerations, it can only be because they are so alluring, distracting, seductive, demanding.” In “Cather's imaginary unfurnished room,” O'Farrell continues, “renunciation and desire work” together, and “the good riddance of things” that Cather announced in “The Novel Demeublé” is “what makes space for them” (209-10).

In *The Professor's House* Cather's aversion to a preoccupation with possessions is evident in Professor St. Peter's distress over the hostility between his daughters springing from Rosamond's flaunting of the signs of her wealth and Kathleen's envy of that wealth and of the fine clothes and furs it provides (TPH 83-85)—and in his more general distaste for his family's obsessive shopping. Cather touched on these traces of material excess in her published comment on the novel that I referred to earlier. Leading up to the phrase about opening the window and letting in the fresh air, she gave examples of the kinds of things that made the professor's house “overcrowded and stuffy” to the point that “one got rather stifled.” The examples she offers are “American proprieties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies—until one got rather stifled” (SPOW 974). But even in this list conveying her objection to materialism gone mad we

see the evidence of her very real, human ambivalence about the world she lived in, because the list includes the very object that she so enjoyed having her professor “buy” for her: furs.

My point is very simple: that like so many of us, Cather could pronounce judgment on a practice or an object at one moment, yet feel her own yearning for it at another. This is not true of her attitude toward material objects alone. The same kind of ambivalence was evident in her attitudes toward her Nebraska home. After she moved away to Pittsburgh and New York, she often expressed an insistent yearning to get back to the prairie country, but at other moments she also expressed her eagerness to escape to the centers of high culture and confessed that she was flatly unable to write in Red Cloud—a very conflicted attitude indeed. A similar ambivalence is evident in that most familiar of all her novels, *My Ántonia*; she idealizes Ántonia as a “rich mine of life” but at the same time makes it clear that serving as a mine is not a sufficient basis for a life when Ántonia herself shows that she wants more for her daughters. She holds up to them, for emulation, the example of Frances Harling, a successful businesswoman and community leader. It is, again, a simple and humanizing point—that like so many of us, Cather could entertain conflicting feelings, both disapproving and desiring.



Standing in the Gallery before the “Willa Cather and Material Culture Exhibit,” Polly Duryea makes a point as she speaks with Guy Reynolds. Polly stands in front of a display case containing Willa Cather's turquoise dress. Guy stands in front of a photograph by Betty Kort which shows a detail of the fabric found in the gown. Photograph by Barb Kudrna.

If simple, though, it is perhaps not a point without significance. It invites us to read her writings in a less absolutist, less one-dimensional way than we sometimes have.

Last, we might note how Cather's statement about the fur coat, in her letter to Irene, takes its place in a whole complex of values related to material objects. In her “demeublé” art, Cather was selective in the objects she mentioned, using them as markers of emotional or moral significance. In her brief commentary on *The Professor's House*, for instance, she associates the figurative breath of fresh air that she lets into the “overcrowded and stuffy” room of the novel with a quality she calls a “fine disregard of trivialities.” She then goes on to imply that such a disregard is what constitutes the fineness of Tom Outland's character.

Yet if we examine the text carefully we see that Tom does not disregard things, objects; he just disregards *some* objects. Indeed, he chooses with some discernment which ones to regard. He brings the St. Peter family turquoises, for instance, and Native pottery (the latter removed from the archaeological site, we might note, in total disregard for what is now considered

## Relics and Things (Continued)

ethical). These are very material gifts that are by no means scorned by the novelistic center of judgment. More surprisingly, he pursues, as a graduate student, not philosophy or aesthetics but the most material of all possible fields of study, chemistry. His research develops a vacuum or a gas—an odd uncertainty on the novelist's part—that becomes the basis for the Outland engine, and so contributes to the fighting of the Great War. One could scarcely be more embedded in materiality than that.

Moreover, Steven Trout has recently established in his essay "Rebuilding the Outland Engine" that Tom's curiously material career as chemist before he goes off to fight in the war demonstrates with a stunning conclusiveness how very involved Cather really was in her contemporary culture. The Outland engine in *The Professor's House* replicates the all too real Liberty Engine, on which the U.S. government wasted a lot of money during World War I, and which was widely discussed in newspapers. When Cather wrote her novel, she wasn't just devising an aesthetic pattern in her mind, as she said in her published comment on the novel; she wasn't just pronouncing judgment on the foolish materialism of the twenties; she was drawing on that very culture of material waste for one of the central and most meaning-full objects in her novel.

Balancing the Outland engine and its puzzling vacuum or gas is another meaning-full object. There is no uncertainty at all about this one. It is quite clear, firm, fully material—and very beautiful. What I mean, of course, is the "turquoise set in dull silver" that is the central emblem of the novel. It is a very different kind of thing from the bedroom suites and clothes and furs (yes, furs) with which the Professor's unfortunate daughters occupy their minds. The turquoise is not literally a relic of the culture whose artifacts Tom excavated, since working with silver die did not come into the Southwest's Native cultures until well after the advent of the Spanish. The Navajo, for instance, probably did not work with silver until the 1850s and did not begin to set turquoise in silver until about 1880 (Gilpin 136, 143). The Zuni did not set turquoise in silver until about 1900 (Parezo et al. 152). But we have no evidence that Cather realized that, and in any event, by its regional origin the "turquoise set in dull silver" evokes an association with the predecessor Native cultures of the Southwest with which she concerns herself in the novel. Like most great writers of fiction or poetry, when Cather wished to define for us the essence of a culture, she didn't do it with abstractions; she did it with objects that epitomize that culture: jewelry and new furniture and clothes and furs to represent white middle-class America in the nineteen-twenties, relics like pottery and stone walls in the side of a cliff and, correctly or not, turquoise and silver to represent the solidity and integrity of a lost Native culture.

The turquoise and the pottery are objects of beauty, objects associated with a real place. They are, moreover, objects associated with a place, the Southwest, that in the wake of World War I became a kind of cultural preoccupation of Americans. I have argued elsewhere (*Picturing* 139) that in turning to the Southwest Cather was, for once in her life, being trendy. But in her use of both these material objects in *The Professor's House*—the engine, with all its vagaries and conflicts, and the simple turquoise set in silver, with its beauty, its regional authenticity, its

integrity of design, and, at the same time, its lack of practical utility—Cather was showing us her involvement in culture, her understanding of the importance of the Real, and the discernment with which she made choices in her use of real things in her fiction. She was showing us what it meant to strip away the clutter in order to focus on a few selected objects that convey emotion and meaning. What she was not showing was her own personal luxuriance in material objects such as mink coats. But that, too, through the curious connection of royalty checks and letters to friends, is part of the materiality of *The Professor's House*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Willa Cather's critical statements about her aesthetic principles are quoted from the Library of America volume *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings* (1992) and will be cited in the text as *WPOW* with page number.

<sup>2</sup>I beg the reader's indulgence of my facetiousness here; the language is traceable to the oral delivery of the original version of this essay, but I retain it for its value as conveying, in informal terms, the possibilities that might have crossed such a possessor's mind.

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## Cather's Hand Brace



Cather's Hand Brace. Helen Cather Southwick Collection, Cather Foundation. Donated by Jim and Angela Southwick. Photograph by Betty Kort.

**Betty Jean Steinshouer, Lake Alfred, Florida.** 1923: neuritis in right arm, Aix-les-Bains. Hot sulfur baths, underwater massage pleasant enough, after French doctor's diagnosis: intercostal rheumatism. Delayed *Lucy Gayheart* for months, 1933-34. Sometimes a splint. Through mid-1935, electric therapy, massage, hot-water soaking. Quoted Shakespeare to make peace with limitations: "My very chains and I grow friends." May of 1938, right hand smashed in drugstore door. Another sprain, October 1940. Early 1941, slow improvement. By 1944, inflamed tendon in right thumb brought the brace. Early 1945, right hand collapsed again; back into Dr. Ober's wood-and-metal. Writing by dictation allows no flow of words. Typewriting even worse. Never free of brace again. 1947 difficult—months of immobilization. Finally able to write a few notes to friends, family—a week before the end.

**John N. Swift, Occidental College.** Strangely medieval-looking, with its sweat-stained leather straps and bright metal, the brace would have been Cather's companion as she worked at her *Avignon* novel. It suggests her career's full circle, reminding me of her childhood fondness for another story of the Middle Ages: Howard Pyle's *Otto of the Silver Hand*, whose child protagonist cruelly loses a fleshly hand but gains one of silver—the emblem of his hard-won mature wisdom. Cather called Pyle's fable an embodiment of "the precious message of Romance," a gift of beauty for children "in a desert place," and I like to think that her own silver hand helped sustain her across her last decade's desert places. The image speaks eloquently of sacrifice, of painful discipline, and of hoped-for triumph.

**Tom Gallagher, New York City.** As strong as the picture is on first sight—this is a beautiful thing—it gathers power over time. But its moods and meanings shift. The brace's design is evident enough, but any feel for the therapeutic function of the object is overpowered by the formal and sensory pull of the image. The cool metallic gleam and reflected light, the soft curls of the straps . . . beautiful, yes, but also severe and forbidding and equivocal. Call it *Portrait of the Artist as Ambiguous Reflective Object*. Writing in these pages, John Swift spoke of the brace evoking "the strength of Myra Henshawe or Sapphira Colbert." And so it does, but I think also of Nellie Birdseye and her amethysts; ponder this thing too much, you risk getting a chill over your heart.

### The Brace Guy Reynolds, The Cather Project University of Nebraska-Lincoln

A simple object but fangled too; a contraption; a prosthesis; a work tool.

Cather was a writer and obsessive. She was a writer and obsessive: writing, writing, writing: this is what happens when you start early and finish late.

The body can't take the strain; muscles and ligatures wear out.

Her body fell apart in fitting ways. First, the hand strain, then the brace. But the brain raced on, conjuring fictions.

Until she fell down, a nice Spring day: the brain hemorrhaged.

I bet she had her brace on.

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**Your gifts to the Cather Foundation guarantee that you are**

- supporting the preservation of important national treasures—papers, photographs, and physical artifacts relating to the life, times, and writings of Willa Cather;
- helping to maintain the Cather Foundation's nationally designated historic sites;
- encouraging important educational initiatives, seminars, and conferences;
- underwriting the publication of the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review*, insuring that important scholarly work continues to find an audience and insuring that news of events surrounding the work of the Foundation is made available to members and friends of the Foundation; and
- sustaining the Cather Foundation website, [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org), so that it continues to be an important source of information to interested individuals throughout the world.

In effect, you are providing for the preservation of the life, times, sites and works of Willa Cather now and long into the future.

***Your contributions make a difference. Thank you!***

Mark your Calendars!

## 2008 Spring Conference and Symposium

### *"Cather and Her Contemporaries"*

Red Cloud, Nebraska—June 5-6-7

Focus Book: *One of Ours*

**Retrospective of the Plains**—Paintings by Steve Joy—Conference Gallery Exhibit

Throughout the Spring Conference, enjoy paintings by British artist Steve Joy, whose work has been shown in galleries throughout Europe and America. Following the conference, Joy's work will be featured at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha. During the Spring Conference, take in Steve Joy's presentation on the contemporary art of Cather's time.

**World War I Exhibit**—the Richard Harris Collection; **World War I Music** during conference, courtesy of Richard Harris

**Thursday, June 5**—Daylong **Cather Symposium**: papers and discussion with Cather scholars

Evening—Traditional **Service at Grace Episcopal Church** with the Right Reverend Charles Peek serving as Officiant

**Friday, June 6**—Morning Country Tour highlighting the novel *One of Ours*—special tour of the George P. Cather home; tour of the Bladen Cemetery led by Richard Harris

Late morning—Reading of Norma Ross Walter Scholarship winning essays

Friday afternoon presentation—*One of Ours*, featuring Richard Harris

Late afternoon—Join Merrill Skaggs in a discussion of "**Cather and William Faulkner**"—Harling House Porch

—Join Melissa Homestead in a discussion of "**Cather and Bess Streeter Aldrich**"—Baptist Church

Evening—Join supporters of the Cather Foundation for a special donor dinner at the Opera House

**Saturday, June 7**—Spend your morning at the traditional **Passing Show Panel: "Cather and her Contemporaries"**

—Keynote Address: by Charles Peek with Panelists Nancy Chinn, David Porter, Guy Reynolds, and Ann Romines

Choose your own afternoon activities or attend all:

—"**Cather and Sarah Orne Jewett**"—a discussion led by Ann Romines—backyard of the Cather Childhood Home

—"**Cather and Ernest Hemingway**"—a discussion led by Steve Shively—Baptist Church

—"**Cather and Edith Wharton**"—a discussion led by Erika Koss, NEA BIG READ—Harling House Porch

—*The Road is All*—film biography of Willa Cather in the Opera House Auditorium with co-producer and host, Joel Geyer

Following the traditional Spring Conference Banquet, plan to adjourn to the Red Cloud Opera House Auditorium for a mixed-media performance inspired by Cather's "A Wagner Matinee." "**Afternoon with Marina**" is a dance theatre work by Laura Diffenderfer, which includes video, photography, and dance. (Sponsored by the Nebraska Arts Council.) Reception following the performance.

\*The 2008 Spring Conference is sponsored by the Nebraska Humanities Council and support from Cather Foundation members and friends.

## Eleanor Roosevelt on Willa Cather, 1937

For several years, we have known that our current First Lady is an enthusiastic reader of Willa Cather. In a *Washington Post* interview of Sept. 28, 2007, Laura Bush mentioned *My Ántonia* among four favorite novels. Recently, we were happy to learn that an earlier First Lady was also a vocal Cather fan. While reading Cather in an American literature class, Jessica Vormwald, a student intern for the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at George Washington University, was excited to discover Roosevelt's comments on Cather in a draft for her nationally distributed "My Day" column of April 19, 1937. Roosevelt had just read Cather's most recent book, *Not Under Forty* (1936), which includes essays on Sarah Orne Jewett and Katherine Mansfield, among others. With the permission of The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, My Day Project, and thanks to Jessica Vormwald, we are happy to share Roosevelt's perceptive comments with you.

For several days I have been meaning to write you about a book which I have just finished. Willa Cather's latest book of literary essays. I suppose a literary essay should make you want to read, and if that is a criterion of the value of this book, she has certainly been most successful. I wanted at once to go and search for Sarah Orne Jewett's books which I have not read in years and I must get at once every story that Catherine [sic] Mansfield ever wrote. To me the chapter on Miss Mansfield is the gem of this book. Quite aside from awakening a desire to read I enjoyed as I always do, every page in this small volume for the quality of the writing. To my mind no one in this country quite equals today the special gift which seems to belong to Willa Cather. She says herself in one of these essays that it is impossible to describe the certain something which makes the individuality of a real writer. I feel that way about Willa Cather herself and am grateful for a kind of thrill which her writing never fails to give me. —Eleanor Roosevelt.

Ten years later, a few months after Cather's death, Roosevelt referred to her again in her published "My Day" column for July 19, 1947. While summering at Campobello Island, near Cather's summer home, she noted that "Willa Cather, who was one of my favorite authors, used to have a house on Grand Manan and I always wanted to go and see her. I still wonder which books she wrote there. My favorite has always been 'Death Comes for the Archbishop'" ([www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/](http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/)).

*Editor's Note:* Cather's fine essay on Katherine Mansfield, which Roosevelt considers the "gem" of *Not Under Forty*, includes her famous description of the tensions of life in a large family. It is interesting to speculate about whether Roosevelt was thinking of the large and complex Roosevelt family when she read this essay. For more information about the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, directed by Professor Allida Black, go to [www.gwu.edu/~erpapers](http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers).

## Peach Cobbler from the Cather Family Reunion

Ann Romines

Although Willa Cather's immediate family moved to Nebraska in 1883, following her Cather grandparents and other relatives who had made the move a decade earlier, many other Cathers remained in Virginia, where the family had been established by Jasper Cather about 1766. The transplanted Nebraska Cathers kept in touch with their Virginia kinfolk through letters and visits, and Willa Cather returned to visit her Virginia homeplace at least three times before she published her Virginia novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in 1940.

The Cather family has continued to grow and flourish in Frederick County, Virginia, and for the past half-century they have held an annual family reunion. The 50<sup>th</sup> reunion was a very special celebration, held on August 19, 2007, at the firehouse in the village of Round Hill, not far from Willow Shade, Willa Cather's childhood home. Everyone enjoyed reminiscences, games and prizes, and costumed Cather children portrayed some of their ancestors, including Jasper Cather and Sidney Cather Gore (prototype for Mrs. Bywaters in *Sapphira*). The highlight of the day was the bountiful potluck dinner. Three long tables groaned with Virginia delicacies that would probably have tasted very familiar to Willa Cather: fried chicken, Virginia ham, potato salad, succotash, fresh green beans, ripe tomatoes, all kinds of slaws and salads, hot rolls, and an extra-long table devoted entirely to delectable desserts, everything from red velvet and coconut cakes to pies and cobblers in multiple flavors. Betty Kort, John Jacobs, and Ann Romines, representing the Cather Foundation at the reunion, did their duty, sampling as much of this Virginia family feast as possible! And as if the feast weren't enough, everyone carried home a jar of Cather applebutter, made at the family's annual applebutter-making. (Frederick County is famous for its apple and peach orchards.)

One of the most picturesque desserts was an enormous peach cobbler (see illustration), made by Kim Walls from freshly picked peaches. Kim kindly shared the recipe, which calls for a peck of peaches and serves dozens of Cathers. I have adapted Kim's recipe for a smaller group.



One of three tables "groaning" with the weight of delicious food. Cather Reunion. Photograph by Betty Kort.

### Kim's Reunion Peach Cobbler

Mix together:

About 6 1/2 cups peeled and thinly sliced peaches (Kim recommends Red Hale peaches, but any fresh peaches from Virginia or even elsewhere will do. If peaches are out of season, you may use thawed frozen peaches.)

1 1/2 cups white sugar  
pinch salt  
2 T. flour  
1 t. cinnamon  
1/2 t. ground nutmeg  
1 T. lemon juice

Line a rectangular glass baking pan, about 11" x 8", with pastry;\* trim to leave an overhang of about 1/2 inch all around. Pour peach mixture into pastry-lined pan. Top with another layer of pastry, also trimmed. Fold top layer of pastry over bottom layer and crimp edges firmly. Cut vents in top crust. (I cut Willa Cather's initials into the top of my cobbler.) Place cobbler pan on a cookie sheet to catch possible drips and bake at 400 F. for about one hour, or until pastry is lightly browned and peaches are tender. Serve warm and top with vanilla ice cream, if desired. 8 generous servings.



Kim's Reunion Peach Cobbler. Cather Reunion. Photograph by Betty Kort.



Ann Romines visits with Louise Cather. John Jacobs stands in the background. Photograph by Betty Kort.

### \*Pastry for Cobbler

Mix together 3 c. all-purpose flour and 1 t. salt. Cut in 1 c. plus 2 T. shortening, using a pastry blender or food processor, until mixture resembles coarse cornmeal. Mix in about 1/3 cup ice water to make dough. Divide dough into two portions, 60% and 40%. Wrap each portion in waxed paper and chill well. Roll out as thinly as possible, and use the larger portion to line and the smaller portion to top baking dish. (I like to roll pastry between sheets of waxed paper, for more ease and less mess.) You may have some leftover rolled pastry; if so, do as my mother did and cut into short strips. Sprinkle the strips with cinnamon sugar and bake on a cookie sheet at 400 F. for an extra treat.



## Executive Director's Report

I am curious to know how many *Newsletter* readers visit the [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org) website. Cather Center staff members are making major changes in both content and design to encourage more interest. As part of the development of the site, our Education Director Cindy Bruneteau suggested that I begin a blog for the site.

According to Cindy's research, blogs attract visitors. Thus, I have begun the *Middle Ground*, a journey into the heart of the Cather Foundation. In my first blog I attempted to explain the *Middle Ground*—something similar to the important space between the foreground and the background in a landscape where, in my opinion, the action occurs.

It is a space, however, that is often glanced over. In somewhat the same fashion, I think many people fail to see the full scope of Cather Foundation activities, but instead see a narrow view of the organization. In the blog I attempt to emphasize what is happening within the boundaries of the organization. Since the Cather community reaches around the globe, the *Middle Ground* of the Cather Foundation is sizeable. My intent is to weave back and forth between the Red Cloud site and the far-flung activities of the Foundation.

The road pictured with this Director's Report is found in Virginia, and, in fact, leads to two important Cather-related sites. If this piques your interest, find my "Travels with Ann" blog entry to learn more. See you at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org) soon, I hope!

## The President's Message

Dear Catherland,

What a great year 2007 was! For you who put on conferences and seminars, made presentations, edited newsletters, and otherwise supported our enterprise, many thanks. And a special thanks for the concerted efforts of the Board of Governors and Advisory Board, the work of Betty Kort as our Executive Director, and the able support of the staff in Red Cloud.

In 2008, besides our Spring Festival on Cather and Her Contemporaries, we will be moving ahead on the development of the Moon Block.

**Announcing  
Elderhostel Program  
Cather Foundation Hosts First Elderhostel at  
Willa Cather Historic Site  
Red Cloud, Nebraska  
June 9-13, 2008**

The Cather Foundation will initiate an Elderhostel Program to better acquaint Elderhostel participants with Cather, her writings, and the local settings that influenced Cather's works. Merrill Skaggs will serve as primary lecturer. Participants will enjoy town and country tours, special programming, and have some free time to investigate surrounding historical sites and museums on their own. For more information, contact Cindy Bruneteau, Education Director, at the Cather Foundation or visit [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org).

Congress has recognized the importance of this project for regional economic development, as well as for advancing one of America's cultural treasures. The latest appropriations bill includes \$588,000 for the Moon Block project!

Together with the previous Congressional appropriation for architectural planning and environmental impact studies, this brings from the American people nearly a fourth of the funding for the project.

We owe a great debt of thanks to Senators Chuck Hagel and Ben Nelson, who have steered these funds our way and, in so doing, served well their constituents. This is an example of visionary leadership.

Your own support can be seen in the Donors' List (included in this issue). For all this, I am very grateful and extend to all our workers, supporters, and benefactors a heartfelt thank you.

Sincerely,  
Chuck Peek





**WILLA CATHER  
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The *Newsletter and 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.

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

**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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Betty Kort

*Willa Cather  
Newsletter & Review  
The Willa Cather Society*

Winter 2008  
Volume LI, No. 3  
ISSN 0197-663X

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## Object Lessons from Cather's Wardrobe

Barbara Trout, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

This past spring a group of students from the University of Nebraska traveled to New York City and stood in awe at the Metropolitan Museum of Art peering at a group of exotic, silk garments designed by couturier Paul Poiret (1879-1944). Poiret, known for freeing women from the corset, was a creative artist who designed vibrant colored robes and tubular dresses inspired by a classical Greek and oriental aesthetic. Most of the students participating in the spring study tour were unaware that on display in their home state in Red Cloud, Nebraska, were equally sumptuous garments of silk velvets, laces, and brocades owned by another creative artist, Willa Cather. The extant Cather garments in this collection provide a striking contrast to those worn in the 1910 photograph of her in an Edwardian inspired dark frock and feathered hat. They are quite different from the "tweedy" capes, middy blouses and basic skirts often associated with her no-nonsense dressing. Considering that Cather was a woman who subscribed to minimalism and often dressed in "familiar" clothes not to be noticed, the Cather Foundation's collection, dating from 1915 to 1935, is intriguing. The colors are vibrant; the fabrics—consisting of silks, brocades and velvets—are luxurious; and the lines of several of the garments represent the most cutting edge fashion of the time, with at least some items originating from the very center of fashion in the teens and twenties: Paris, France.

Fashion of the nineteen hundreds through the twenties was intertwined with other art forms and was constantly in a state of flux, based on a need to break from the past and the pursuit of a modern form of dress. In Paris, a strong link existed between fashion and theatre, in particular the Ballets Russes. Poiret, among the most influential fashion designers of the time, took inspiration from works such as "Scheherazade." From these fantasies emerged notable but highly criticized fashion items such as harem pants and the hobble skirt. The major costume designer for the ballet was Leon Bakst, a contemporary and friend of Willa Cather, whom she chose to paint her portrait. Like Cather, he understood the expressive value of color. His ballets seemed to ignite on the stage with images and motifs shaped from Turkish, mid-eastern, and Egyptian influences. Bakst also borrowed from the ancient Greeks. He used riveting color combinations for his sets and costumes with intense hues that often played on analogous color combinations. He used strong blues and greens with lemon yellow, and tied shades of maroon to vivid pinks, reds, and oranges. Bakst ventured into fashion when he was commissioned to create contemporary designs for the House of Paquin during the teens. His masterful color work certainly influenced Paul Poiret, whose classically and oriental inspired garments, rendered in brave color schemes, shaped fashion in the teens and twenties. Although we cannot attribute any of the garments in this collection to Poiret, his influence can be seen in the collection.

Willa Cather was well aware of clothing's value as a statement of status, yet she would not have been labeled as a person driven by fashion. The high fashion garments that appeared in her wardrobe were there partly due to her fondness for rich textiles, her appreciation of color, and her admiration of fine craft. Tucked carefully in the trunk that was delivered to the Cather Foundation by Jim and Angela Southwick was a teal clutch coat of silk velvet. The coat was accented with a shimmering, lemon

yellow lining and a yellow-green celluloid button, forming the type of analogous color scheme that Bakst so favored. This coat has a high, ruched collar, tall enough to be dramatic when the garment was pulled tightly around the body. Curiously, it is a "coat without sleeves" and has two pleated panels that drop from a low shoulder line to cover the arms. The label of the coat reads "House of Jane, Rue de la Paix." Another velvet clutch coat of deep fuchsia is cut in the slightly pegged silhouette that was popularized by Poiret. The oversized fur collar and cuffs demonstrate Cather's fondness for fur.

Dresses in the collection are equally interesting. One has a strong medieval influence and features a dropped waistline. The draped collar, which rides high in the back, is the kind that would have been approved by the dress reformers of the early twentieth century. This garment has a maroon velvet skirt and a rich brocaded bodice in bright pink, maroon and bronze, although the bronze could be the result of a gold lame yarn that discolored over time. The pattern, influenced by Sassanian textiles, is based on a swirling wave motif interspersed with large circular medallions. Another significant garment is a 1920s silk velvet dress in a soft shade of aqua, accented with white pearls and grey and fuchsia glass beads. Intricate beading borders the edge of the garment and decorates the front panel. The motifs consist of lotus blossoms and fan shapes, suggesting Egyptian influence and perhaps confirming Cather's interest in international perspectives. Finally, a very distinctive garment in the collection, perhaps the one associated most with Cather, is the soft, blue green wool jacket with couched surface decoration (see illustration). It is only briefly referenced because it deserves extensive research. The design is an enduring style that possesses an originality and individuality associated with Willa Cather.

It is significant that the dates of these garments coincide with Cather's most productive decades and overlap a period when she traveled to France. This was a time of rebellious transition in women's dress, with designs developed to avoid restrictions and to reflect the freeing up of women's roles in society. Rich collaboration existed between fashion and the arts. Thus, a fashion culture developed based on a merging of comfort and aesthetics. The garments in the Cather Foundation's collection reflect these very qualities.

### Long-Time Board Member Dies

As the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* goes to press, the Cather Foundation Board of Governors has learned of the passing of Don Connors of Huntington Beach, California. Don, one of the longest serving members of the Board of Governors, was totally dedicated to the Cather Foundation, donating both his time and resources. He was at Mildred Bennett's side as she did her important restoration work in Red Cloud, and he continued to support the vital work of the Foundation for the remainder of his life. Don's dedication is a fine example of the kind of commitment so many have made to the Cather Foundation. He will be missed.



**Detail: Cather's Green Jacket**

Willa Cather wears this jacket in a photograph which she signed and dated "1922." Helen Cather Southwick Collection, Cather Foundation. Location: Cather Center. Donated by Jim and Angela Southwick. Photograph by Betty Kort.

*“Optima dies . . . prima fugit.”*



**Cather's Pocket Watch**

Helen Cather Southwick Collection, Cather Foundation. Location: Cather Center. Donated by Jim and Angela Southwick. Photograph by Betty Kort.



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