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Willa Cather and the Gifts of a Great Plains Childhood

Mary Pipher

One of the highlights of the splendid 2003 Willa Cather Spring Festival was a Saturday morning talk by one of the best and most widely read American psychotherapists, Mary Pipher. Responding to the Festival's theme, "Willa Cather and Childhood," she spoke about the resources that a Nebraska childhood offered to young writers—like Willa Cather and herself. We are fortunate that Mary Pipher has allowed us to share the text of her talk with N&R readers.

One of the best things about speaking at this Willa Cather Spring Conference is that it has had me reading Cather. I just read *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and *Shadows on the Rock* for the first time, and I re-read my old favorites, the ones I'd read when I was fifteen. They are very different reads at fifty-five. How could Cather have been so wise when she was so young?

I read some of the Cather biographies as well. Cather's power as a role model for an artist is as amazing as her work. Her life was a piece of art.

I would never cast myself as Cather's peer. She was a genius, a person for the ages. Still I was struck by many similarities in our lives if not our talents. Hopefully, our common experience gives me some authority to speak on her early years.

Cather and I were both interested in strong young women and

fascinated by the immigrant experience. Almost all her books, including the two featured at this conference, *My Ántonia* and *Shadows on the Rock*, explore the question I find most compelling: How does culture affect the human spirit?

Both of us grew up in small towns, oldest sisters in large families with our younger brothers as main playmates. She directed plays and games in her attic, I in the room above our old car shed and in the old root cellar. Both of us worked for doctors as children—Cather for a variety of people and I for my mother. Both of us had rivers to explore—Cather the Republican and I, Beaver Creek. Later I lived on the Republican near Concordia, Kansas. We were lucky enough to live in relatively intact ecosystems, before Rachel Carson made us all aware of the fragility of the natural world. We had the now extinct luxury of believing that our natural world would last forever.

Finally, both of us are in love with the outdoors. Reading Cather's work, I was struck by the precision and abundance of detail about the natural world. Like myself, Cather had an absolute reliance on nature for her own grounding and she experienced total bliss looking at trees, sunsets and rivers.

Cather wrote that "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts." Clearly she felt a tremendous disconnect

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Pipher Talk

Mary Pipher with other participants in "The Passing Show" panel at the 2003 Spring Festival. Seated: (L to R) Pipher, Ardis Yost. Standing: (L to R) Ann Romines and John Murphy. Photo by Jay Yost.

In This Issue...

- Mark Robison on Alexander's Bridge
- An Interview with Bybee and Ford
- A new life at Cather's Second Home with Charlene Hoschouer
- Salad Recipes at the annual luncheon
- A report on the International Cather Seminar
- Pipher Talk
- Janis Stout on Cather, Race, and Music

"Friends of Billy" Organized at Bread Loaf

A new Cather interest group was formed by participants at the Bread Loaf International Seminar. The organization aims "to encourage and promote new work related to sexuality and gender" in the Cather scholarly community and to assure that that community is "fully inclusive," with an atmosphere of "safety and mutual respect for individuals of all sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions." The group's name, "Friends of Billy," was inspired by a letter from one of Cather's classmates in the college prep program at the University of Nebraska, who wrote: "Willa was just plain Billy to all of us."

For further information about the Friends of Billy and to add your name to the group's e-mail list (which posts messages of general interest, including research queries, new resources, and announcements of coming events), send a message to Professor Marilee Lindemann at the University of Maryland (mlindema@umd.edu).

Contributors to this Issue

We hope that this issue will introduce you to a wide variety of Cather enterprises. You'll read new scholarship by a senior Cather scholar and a new one; you'll enjoy a lively conversation with the producers of the production of *The Bohemian Girl* that delighted the audience at the opening of the Red Cloud Opera House. You'll read a much-admired psychologist's discussion of the childhood experiences she shared with Willa Cather, and you'll meet some of the Cather pilgrims who stay at the Cather Second Home when they visit Red Cloud. You'll learn about the latest WCPM activities and projects, and you'll even sample some of Red Cloud's best cooking! We hope that you enjoy every page--and that you will send us your comments and contributions. AR

- **Joshua Dolezal** is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, specializing in American literature to 1900 and literary ecology.
- **Charlene Hoschouer** is a journalist, a former antique dealer, and co-author of a book on quilt patterns. She and her husband, Doug Hoschouer, are former publishers of the *Red Cloud Chief* and currently operate a bed and breakfast in the Cather Second Home in Red Cloud.
- **Kyoko Matsunaga** is a Fulbright grantee and a second-year Ph.D. student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with an emphasis on ecocriticism and nuclear literature.
- **Mary Pipher** is one of the best-known and most-honored American psychologists, author of *Reviving Ophelia*, *Another Country*, *The Middle of Everywhere*, and most recently, *Letters to a Young Therapist*. She was a major speaker at the 2003 Willa Cather Spring Festival.
- **Mark Robison**, Associate Professor of English at Union College, is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. For his dissertation, he is investigating how the theory and practice of recreation intersects with Cather's life and writing.
- **Michael Schueth** is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, specializing in twentieth-century American literature, with an emphasis on celebrity culture and Cather. This is his second appearance in the N&R.
- **Janis Stout** is former Provost and Dean of Faculty at Texas A&M University. She is the author of many Cather-related texts, most recently *Willa Cather: The Writer and her World*, and editor of the enormously useful *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather* and of a forthcoming volume on *Willa Cather and Material Culture*.

Cather Calendar was moved to page 42.

Revisiting the Real Alexander's Bridge

Mark A. Robison

That Willa Cather based the climax of *Alexander's Bridge* on a 1907 bridge calamity in Quebec is all but incontrovertible. Biographer James Woodress states that "Cather must have used newspaper accounts of this event, for her bridge, like the real one, crumples and drops into the river while workmen are still out on the span" (217). The initial idea for this novel, however, may well have been planted nearly a decade and a half earlier. Indeed, a *New York Times* story that appeared in 1893 details a catastrophe that closely resembles the fictional collapse of Bartley Alexander's Moorlock Bridge:

There were fifty-one men on the bridge when the alarm was given by the engineer in charge of the work. Of this number, several succeeded in reaching the piers. . . . The crash attracted the attention of those on the shore, and many turned away as they saw the men struggling in midair in their mad efforts to climb out of danger. When the huge mass of material struck the water[,] all was concealed for an instant by the spray which was thrown into the air. As the water subsided and the mist was dispelled, here and there could be seen men struggling desperately to climb upon the timbers that thrust their ends above the water. ("Bad Disaster at Louisville")

Strikingly similar to the bridge collapses in Quebec and in Cather's first novel, this 1893 disaster took place in Louisville, Kentucky, fourteen years before the Quebec disaster and nearly two decades before Cather published *Alexander's Bridge* in 1912.

Appearing in the December 16, 1893, edition of the *Times*, the story details the financial difficulties that had been encountered by the doomed construction project, and a follow-up story the next day attributes the cause of the collapse to structural flaws exacerbated by the use of materials of insufficient strength: "One engineer, who refused to allow his name to be used, said: 'The bridge was never as strong as it should have been, and recently I have heard numerous engineers say that it was entirely too weak for trains to ever run over it'" ("Needs to Be Investigated"). With its strong parallels to plot elements of *Alexander's Bridge*, the Louisville bridge collapse indicates a stimulus for Cather's first novel from a significantly earlier source than has been previously recognized.¹

Cather would have seen the Louisville story on the front

page of the Lincoln newspaper for which she was employed as a columnist. The December 16, 1893, edition of *The Nebraska State Journal* carries an article on the bridge disaster entitled "A Dash to Death." Virtually identical to the *New York Times* article in length, structure, and wording, the *Nebraska State Journal* article was no doubt based upon the same wire service source as its New York counterpart.² Had she been only casually interested in reading that day's *Journal*, it is likely that the story of the bridge collapse would have attracted the eye of twenty-year-old Cather. The story is stirringly vivid and would have appealed to her active appreciation for human drama. Nevertheless, Cather had more personal reasons for looking closely at that day's edition.

Since the fifth of November Willa Cather had been contributing to *The Nebraska State Journal* a Sunday column called "One Way of Putting It." While it must have gratified the young author to see her work receive such prominent, if local, attention, she must have been even more delighted to see the *Journal* intermittently running advertisements in Saturday editions to promote her weekly column. A November 11 ad proclaims her column "A series of stories of more or less local character by a terse and vigorous writer" ("Read These in the Sunday Journal"). An advertisement in the December 2 edition promises "A few snappy and original discussions of miscellaneous topics . . ." ("In the Sunday Journal"). Cather, in

all likelihood, would have been scanning the Saturday, December 16 issue of the paper, looking for another of these promotions.

In identifying the 1907 Quebec collapse as source material for *Alexander's Bridge*, Woodress credits John Hinz, who in "The Real Alexander's Bridge" states that Cather brought to the writing task "a sharp and detailed recollection of the Quebec Bridge disaster" (473). According to Hinz,

"The details are so incredibly alike that they require scarcely any comment. To bring them into complete harmony with *Alexander's Bridge*, Willa Cather needed only to equate Cooper and Birks [Burke in the *Tribune*]; the engineer who planned the bridge and the engineer who died with it become, then, Bartley Alexander." Hinz goes on to dismiss *Alexander's Bridge* as "a poor novel" because "[i]t is, too much of it, reporting, not art" (476), but the existence of earlier source material undermines Hinz's dismissal. Cather's having tucked the 1893 Louisville incident into her memory

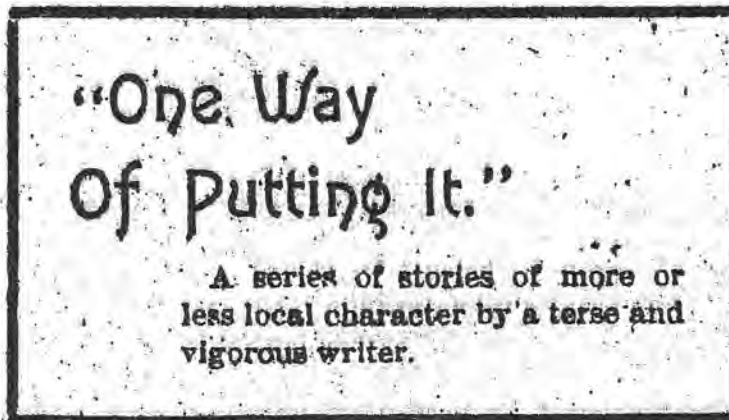


Illustration 1: *The Nebraska State Journal* advertised Cather's weekly column "One Way of Putting it" with several promotions such as this ad from November 11, 1893.

REVISITING

(Continued)

where it percolated for nearly two decades indicates a process more in tune with the author's known practice.

Scholars have shown that Cather's creative process was marked by varied reading and strong use of memory. About the author's early reading experience James Woodress writes, "She wanted to read about life, about characters who were in the midst of struggle. She did not pay any attention to style or form. She wanted color;

she wanted to be thrilled; she wanted excitement" (51). Bernice Slote notes that Cather "read enormously"; her consumption was "eclectic"; her omnivorous habit "to take in . . . whatever captured her imagination" (38). And Cather's memory was active: "Once the image was recorded on her brain, it never left her" (Woodress 39).

One can just see Cather poring over a vivid newspaper account, latching on to its details with her tenacious memory, only to reveal the event transfigured in her fiction years later. The effect of reading about the Quebec disaster would surely have been strengthened by its sympathetic resonance in

Cather's mind with the Louisville incident. While the 1907 incident in

Quebec provides the immediate source for *Alexander's Bridge*, another, perhaps ultimate, source for the novel's climax is headlined on the front page of the December 16, 1893 *Nebraska State Journal*.

Recognition of more than one source for the novel's plot restores a notable degree of complexity to a work that too many for too long have facetiously rejected as apprentice work. This complexity is reinforced when we shift our focus from plot to character. As Cather herself insisted, the characters in

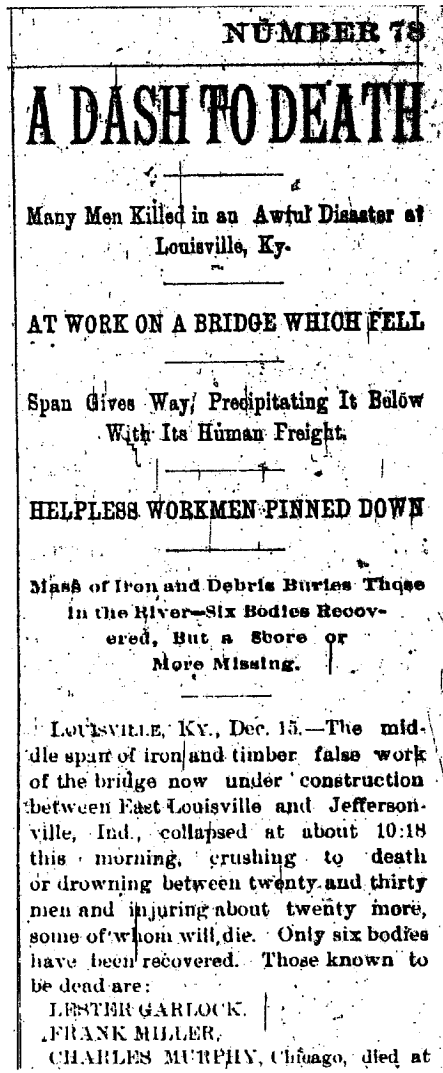


Illustration 2: The story of the Louisville bridge collapse was featured prominently in the upper right corner of *The Nebraska State Journal's* front page.

Alexander's Bridge also arise from a multiplicity of sources. In 1912 the author told *The New York Sun* that Bartley Alexander manifests an amalgamation "of the characteristics which I have noticed in a dozen architects, engineers and inventors"; she said that Alexander's lover, Hilda Burgoyne, is certainly not real-life actress Hilda Trevelyan, but a character given "certain qualities which I have found oftener in English actresses than in our own" (6). In addition to unearthing possibilities among contemporary stage actresses, scholars will find rich source material for this character within Cather's prolific drama criticism from the early 1890's, in which she intimately explores the lives of numerous actresses and soubrettes.

Furthermore, as we begin to discern how deeply *Alexander's Bridge* is rooted in Cather's Nebraska years, we will come to reconfigure our approaches to her early work. A purported breakthrough from Willa Cather's first novel to her later novels, for example, deserves reexamination. The quantum leap in Cather's writing craft that some assume to exist between *Alexander's Bridge* and *O Pioneers!* may turn out to be a rather small hop. By acknowledging the multiplicity of sources and the gestative depth that suffuse Cather's first novel, we begin to appreciate that an intricately rich creative process is at work from the outset of the novelist's career.

Notes

¹ It is likely that there were several sources for the novel. For instance, Elizabeth Ammons cites a story that appeared in *McClure's* in 1907 as a catalyst. Even though plot correlations are much stronger for the Quebec and Louisville events, Ammons claims that Viola Roseboro's "The Mistaken Man" may have sparked Cather's story because "the two are so close in basic outline" (753). Since Roseboro and Cather not only were on staff at *McClure's* at the time but also remained friends long after Cather left the magazine, Cather almost certainly was conversant with Roseboro's tale (It directly follows the fourth installment of Cather's exposé on Mary Baker Eddy in the April issue of *McClure's*). Even so, links through plot elements between "The Mistaken Man" and *Alexander's Bridge* are tenuous at best. Roseboro's story: ten years after the bridge over Tolleytown Creek is built, a train carrying a group of Sunday School children crashes in flames when the span fails. The only death by drowning involves the railroad president, instigator of the cheap construction practices that lead to the bridge failure, and he drowns in his own bathtub years after the accident (630, 634-35).

² The December 17, 1893, edition of *The Nebraska State Journal* includes a truncated version of the follow-up article that appeared the same day in *The New York Times*. Both versions state that there will be "a rigid investigation of the bridge disaster" ("The Louisville Disaster," "Needs to Be Investigated").

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“Poor Caliban”: Willa Cather and the Song of the Racial Other

Janis P. Stout

Among the thirty-seven poems in the original edition of Willa Cather's *April Twilights* (1903) is a sonnet called “Paradox,” which ponders the contrast between Ariel and Caliban in *The Tempest*. It is scarcely surprising that Cather would have written a poem paying implicit tribute to Shakespeare. Her veneration for The Bard (the term is justified by her customary tone toward him) is well evident throughout her work and has been abundantly noticed. Marginalia in books from her college years show that she studied his works with care.¹ Her familiarity with *The Tempest* was such that she was able to draw from it a fairly obscure line (“My library was dukedom large enough” I.ii) for use as an epigraph to an article in March 1897, when her college Shakespeare course was several years in the past (*W&P* 340). Her sonnet, then, is only one among many evidences of the familiarity with Shakespeare that demonstrated Cather's cultural polish and, at the same time, her cultural centrality.

In “Paradox,” however, she goes beyond aesthetic appreciation or use of his works as a source of wise statements—the two modes of engagement with Shakespeare that were most customary and would have been her likely conscious motivation—to engage the play, and specifically the figure of Caliban, as a vehicle for exploring matters of deep personal significance—sexuality, music (the art she most consistently associated with emotional intensity),² and, by implication, race. For as scholars of what has been called the School of Caliban have argued, Caliban has long—indeed, from the moment of Shakespeare's own conception—been an emblem of racial difference and racial subordination.³ Such scholars as Stephen Greenblatt and Ron Takaki have traced *The Tempest* to widely circulated documents of western hemispheric colonialism (Greenblatt, *Negotiations* 154-6) and the figure of Caliban to encounters with darker-skinned people in the Caribbean who were quickly enslaved. “Seen in this light,” Takaki writes, *The Tempest* “invites us to view English expansion not only as imperialism, but also as a defining moment in the making of an English-American identity based on race”(26). Cather's focus on Ariel and Caliban, then, is one having wide cultural ramifications. She creates a small parable touching on race and the intersection of race with art—indeed, her own art and its wellsprings.⁴

My purpose here is to use the poem as a lens through which to read a series of textual moments in her later writings in which this linkage recurs: particular moments in a group of letters written in 1912; in *The Song of the Lark* (1915); in *My Ántonia* (1918); in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927); in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940); and finally, in a letter written in 1944 in which Cather ponders her own southernness and its likely impact on her response to an upcoming encounter involving race.



Vintage Poster: This vintage poster, found in the Red Cloud Opera House and currently displayed there, advertised an early Opera House performance, one that might have been seen by young Willa Cather. Such stereotypical images of African Americans were a common feature of American popular culture during Cather's youth. Photo by Betty Kort.

First, though, let me provide the text of “Paradox” itself:

I knew them both upon Miranda's isle,
Which is of youth a sea-bound seigniory:
Misshapen Caliban, so seeming vile,
And Ariel, proud prince of minstrelsy,
Who did forsake the sunset for my tower
And like a star above my slumber burned.
The night was held in silver chains by power
Of melody, in which all longings yearned—
Star-grasping youth in one wild strain expressed,
Tender as dawn, insistent as the tide;
The heart of night and summer stood confessed.
I rose aglow and flung the lattice wide—
Ah, jest of art, what mockery and pang!
Alack, it was poor Caliban who sang.

POOR CALIBAN

(Continued)

The crux of Cather's response to *The Tempest* here is the binary of Ariel and Caliban, the favored spirit of mental subtlety and magic on the one hand and, on the other, the alienated, enslaved subhuman. Yet for all his "seeming vile[ness]," Cather's poem glamorizes and eroticizes Caliban. A powerful strain of submerged eroticism is traceable in the nighttime setting, the placement of the speaker in bed when the mysterious music begins, and the language of "longing," "yearn[ing]" "tide(s)" conveying her pleasurable but troubled response. She rises "aglow"—that is, in a blood-warmed flush—to go to the window and finds, not the "proud prince" she anticipated, Ariel, but the "seeming vile" Caliban, now transformed by the act of his expressive singing from an object of opprobrium into an object of sympathy or pity—"poor Caliban." Revealed as the maker of the song, Caliban is also, by way of the familiar association of song with poetry, revealed as a source of Cather's own art, or at any rate the art she is practicing here. This allegorical scenario would seem to imply that although Cather may at times have regarded people of color as "misshapen" and "vile," she nevertheless found that they sang to her (were emotionally appealing) in a special and spellbinding way.

Now to turn to the six later textual "moments" I have indicated:

(1) The series of letters Cather wrote to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant in 1912 from Arizona is, even in paraphrase, a remarkable and telling series.⁵ At their center is the powerfully attractive Mexican man named Julio who sang to her, along with two other Mexican musicians, and invited her to a dance where, she told Elsie, she was the only white person present. At first, when she was already feeling the attraction of his community on the other side of the tracks from her brother's house but had not yet fallen under Julio's spell, Cather labeled Mexicans living in the United States an inferior subset of their countrymen. Perhaps, that is, like Caliban, they were "seeming vile"? But even then she conceded that their language was beautiful (or musical). Later she could only gush over Julio's beautiful golden skin and acknowledge that he held her in a kind of bondage. In Edward Said's terms, Julio was being orientalized—literally so, with a sudden and uncontextualized reference to Egypt. Even the Mexican folk stories he told her reminded her, she said, of the Arabian Nights and of Cleopatra—a rampant enthusiasm at the time, as Said points out.

That the bondage she said Julio held over her, so that she doubted whether she could escape, was erotic in nature is

clear in a number of ways—in her imagining him as an artist's model (that is, posing in the nude), for one, and in her warning to Sergeant that she too would fall into bondage if she came west; she wouldn't be able to resist becoming involved with a Mexican lover. Sergeant reports, too, that Cather again invoked the idea of involuntary compulsion when asked, years later, why Mabel Dodge had married Tony Luhan: "How could she help it?" (Sergeant 216). The darker-complexioned male casts an irresistible spell.

The erotic is never far from the racial and aesthetic mixture in this sequence of letters. In the last in the series, on June 15, Cather enclosed a translation of a song he had sung to her, which he told her was not proper for an unmarried woman to sing, although a married one could sing it to either her husband or her lover (a line that recurs in *The Song of the Lark*). Speaking of the "rose of night" and inviting the beloved to "take" that rose, the song ends, "The heart of night is still—/ Beloved, sleep!" And so Caliban

sings his erotic song once again.

Unlike the Caliban of "Paradox," Julio seems never to have been even *seemingly* vile. Indeed, as Cather describes him, he possesses striking physical beauty and graciousness. Still, the combination of darker racial identity, music, and the "tide[s]" of erotic response evoked by his serenades must have struck her, as it does the reader of her letters, as a peculiar instance indeed of life's imitating art. Her poem had proven strikingly prescient. But in retrospect, as the career decision she was in the process of reaching when she met him was confirmed, her temporary infatuation must have come to seem a peril from which she had narrowly escaped. Later Caliban-figures based on Julio shade back toward vileness, and his beautiful golden skin reappears as a repellant yellow.

(2) In June 1912, the same month as Cather's last letter to Sergeant about the exciting and racially defined young man in Arizona, she published the poem "Spanish Johnny." The figure in the poem, clearly a version of Julio, is another Caliban figure strangely glamorized through association with music. Soon afterward he would be elaborated into the character of Juan Tellamantez in *The Song of the Lark*. Both are Latino men who behave vilely in some ways (Johnny commits murder, Juan goes off on binges) yet sing to the speakers of the poem and the novel in stirring ways. Darkly alluring figures, they appear to embody the duality of Cather's attraction to the life of art and, it is implied, a life of resistance to commonplace norms. Especially during the period when she had left her seemingly secure employment with *McClure's* and was gambling that she could make her living by writing, art itself must have seemed both alluring and dangerous. When, at the end of *The Song of the Lark*, we see Tellamantez's approval of Thea Kronborg's



"Blind Boone" (John William Boone): As a young man; image from concert ticket. Boone was a possible model for the character of Blind D'Arnault in *My Antonia*. Courtesy Boone County Historical Society, Columbia, Missouri.

performance at the Metropolitan Opera, we can read it as an indication that she (and perhaps Cather herself) has successfully negotiated the dangers.⁶

(3) In her next novel, *My Ántonia*, Cather again created a character reminiscent of the Caliban of “Paradox.” Blind D’Arnault, considerably more stigmatized than the characters based on the dazzling figure of Julio, is another “seeming vile” figure who makes music and also generates erotic excitement. He is vilely depicted indeed as, in childhood, a “hideous pickaninny” (a heavily derogatory racial term still common in the South in the 1940s and used again in *Sapphira*) who wore “an expression of idiotic rapture” when he heard his master’s daughter play the parlor piano (180). When he plays informally in the hotel parlor in Black Hawk, his appearance is further stigmatized. Jim, as narrative voice, labels him a “mulatto” with a “yellow face” (“yellow” a term commonly used to disparage mixed-race persons) and notes approvingly the “docile subservience” in his “amiable negro voice” (178). He adds, notoriously, “He had the negro head, too; almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool. He would have been repulsive”—would have seemed vile—“if his face had not been so kindly and happy.”⁷

Yet despite his affliction by an “infirmity” causing a persistent rocking motion (a behavior so common among neurologically impaired blind people that there is a name for it: a “blindism”) and despite his misshapen head and the “barbarous” or “abominable” quality of his piano playing as Jim characterizes it (183), his music is so spellbinding that Ántonia and the other hired girls spontaneously dance. As they walk home, Jim and Ántonia remain so stirred they can hardly bear to have the night end; they “dreaded”—a notably stronger term—“to go to bed” (187). Race, music, and sexuality are again linked. Indeed, Cather’s picture of Blind D’Arnault at the keyboard looking like “some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood” (185) implies that his playing is itself a sexualized act, a kind of coupling with the instrument, and thus invokes the common notion that people of darker skin are subject to strong animal lusts or are uncontrollable sexually.⁸ Once again the magic of art is mixed with threat or danger.

(4) People of color—primarily Mexicans but with slanting slurs at blackness—are again linked with music in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

In the home of Don Antonio Olivares, one of the “rich Mexican *rancheros*” of the diocese (183), there is an abundance of music, in part supplied by his wife, Doña Isabella, who sings. Certainly Sra. Olivares is not positioned as a Caliban figure; she is not herself Mexican, but rather an Anglo Kentuckian reared in Louisiana. Yet her racial identity is ambiguated by her marriage. The Olivareses’ daughter, Señorita Inez (a name that identifies her with her Mexican ancestry on her father’s side, just as Sra. Olivares’s designation in the text as Doña Isabella links her to the culture she joined in marriage), sings in a “beautiful contralto

voice” but only in church, without the slightest hint of eroticism. Neither, then, clearly perpetuates the pattern we are tracing. But Don Antonio’s two pleasure-loving nephews enjoy music so much that they have brought from San Antonio a “Mexican boy” who plays the banjo (186).

Race enters the novel at this point in peculiar ways. Though designated Mexican, the banjoist is described in color terminology more commonly applied to a mulatto: as a “strange yellow boy” (191), and the instrument he plays is usually associated with African Americans. To the Archbishop, it is “more than a little savage” (191). The music the boy plays on it apparently includes the “negro melodies of Stephen Foster” (185). But Señora Olivares also has been heard singing one of these “negro melodies,” “My Nelly Was a Lady.”⁹ One would not want to press the point very hard, but there seems to be a hint of disparagement entering the text here, perhaps directed at the “intermarriage” of the white Isabella (probably Isabelle, before her marriage) with the Mexican Olivares. In marrying a person of a darker race, has she moved herself nearer the status of “negro”? Certainly it was common, in the United States, to slur Mexicans on grounds of racial mongrelization—precisely the quality of *mestizaje* which was an officially sanctioned source of pride in the Republic of Mexico. It was well known that escaped slaves and former slaves had taken refuge in Mexico,

had been welcomed, and in many cases had intermarried with Mexican people. Is Cather, then, expressing racial anxiety about intermarriage? It is hard to say.

(5) Racial anxiety is unmistakable, however, in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in many ways a disturbing text and one in which Cather seems to have been working out private tensions, including her conflicted feelings toward her mother, Mary Virginia Cather. Set in Virginia in 1856, *Sapphira* both confronts and palliates the issue of black slavery.

Two of *Sapphira*’s house slaves, Lizzie, the cook, and her daughter Bluebell, are depicted with personal deficiencies including laziness, personal unattractiveness, slovenliness, and disposition to gossip. But they are

marvelous singers, highly valued at the Baptist church where Lizzie takes the de facto lead in hymn singing despite the church’s segregated seating. The two are “always being sent for to sing at funerals” (52) and in fact sing (anachronistically) a duet of “In the Sweet By-and By” at the funeral of Jezebel, the grandmother of Nancy, the “yellow” slave girl of the title—a funeral generally acknowledged to have been an especially splendid one for a deceased slave.¹⁰ But the combination of “seeming vile[ness]” and music in Lizzie and Bluebell is only one of the ways in which Cather’s racial attitudes in *Sapphira* are uncertain. African Americans are alternately stigmatized and remembered with affection—to be sure, not an unusual combination of attitudes for a southerner of Cather’s generation, from the slave-owning classes.

Racial ambivalence is further complicated by ambivalence toward Cather’s gracious and charming but



“Blind Tom” (Thomas Green Bethune): Another popular performer and possible model for Blind D’Arnault. Courtesy Boone County Historical Society, Columbia, Missouri.

POOR CALIBAN

(Continued)

indisputably domineering mother, identified in the last section of the novel as the gentle daughter of Rachel Blake but also, we know, a model for the harsh Sapphira. Apparently speaking in her own voice, Cather recalls that when she was a small child her mother had sung her to sleep with a song about Nancy:

*Down by de cane-brake, close by de mill,
Dar lived a yaller gal, her name was Nancy Till.*

Yet we cannot imagine Cather's mother speaking or singing in the heavily marked and racially stigmatized dialect in which the two lines of the song are represented. The rendition of the lines in heavy dialect is particularly puzzling since, as the actual "minstrel song of unknown origin said to be a favorite Ethiopian melody"—that is a song that pre-existed the novel—is quoted by March (218-19), it is in standard English.¹¹ Claiming to invoke the presence of her mother singing about Nancy Till while she herself again lies in bed, Cather instead invokes a female version of Caliban.

We recall that speech and music were linked in Cather's accounts of Julio in 1912—Spanish was a "beautiful" speech. The idea of beautiful—or at any rate elevated, hence literary—speech returns in *Sapphira*, but in a far more ambiguous form. Nancy's speech after her return from Canada has become correct and has taken on "charm" and "distinctness," but to the child's ear it lacks a "friendly" or "right and easy" quality (284). Stigmatized before her departure by her heavily racialized dialect, a "seeming vile" speech much like that in the two lines of the song, Nancy is stigmatized after her return by the opposite, a polished speech that in effect both de-regionalizes and de-racializes her. The female Caliban, it seems, has no options that will gain full acceptability among her white patrons—who in fact continue to assign her a second table at meals (286).

(6) Last, by means of a set of handwritten extracts made by E. K. Brown, a letter written by Cather to her niece Helen Cather Southwick, dated February 12, 1944, recounts an incident that had occurred in the early 1930s, shortly after Cather met Yehudi Menuhin and his family.¹² Cather had been invited to the Menuhins' apartment for an afternoon gathering at which, she knew, the celebrated African American actor and singer Paul Robeson would be present. Crossing Central Park on her way to the event, she found herself wondering if she was going to feel the effects of her southernness—that is, the effects of the racial divide—but found that once she came into Robeson's presence all she thought about was his greatness. His speech, she added, was beautiful to hear. Once again the "seeming vile" Caliban, whose presence threatened to make her feel "southern," or beset by race hostility, becomes instead the bearer of beauty, a man whose speech resembles music, a man who indeed was famous both for speech (his acting) and for making music.

The letter relating Cather's meeting with Paul Robeson was written several years after the publication of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, a book in which she felt "southern" indeed, but

the experience it recounts actually occurred *before* the writing of that southern, and profoundly racialized, novel. There, Nancy Till, is stigmatized by crudely distorted speech and a "foolish, dreamy, nigger side" to her otherwise industrious character. It is that side of her that gets her into trouble—trouble of a very sexual nature indeed. Yet after Nancy goes away to the North, she returns as a woman of dignity and grace and with proper speech—the attraction that Cather particularly noted in Robeson. At this late point in her life, then, both in *Sapphira* and in the remarkable letter written in 1944, Cather again associated the racial other with musical speech and with song. In the case of the song about Nancy Till, she was recalling an actual song from the racially divided South. One wonders whether the conflictedness of Cather's racial feelings was there from the start, from her early childhood, in the song about a racial other sung by her mother—the mother who was herself a center of deep emotional conflict throughout Cather's life.

Notes

¹These are available at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas.

²Giannone repeatedly alludes to Cather's regard for music as a bridge to the soul or spirituality and as a vehicle for the expression of profound emotion.

³The School of Caliban is usefully summarized in José David Saldívar's *The Dialectics of Our America* (1991), a title that carries considerable resonance for Cather scholars from its anticipation of the title of Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America* (1995). But if we move back in time from Saldívar's 1991 book to 1977, we find *Our America* used as the title of a posthumous compilation of the writings of José Martí about the struggle for freedom in Cuba, and thus return to the voice of the subaltern and to the Caribbean—the world of the *Tempest*. See also Greenblatt, Barker and Hulme, and Zabus.

⁴Cather herself seems to have perceived "Paradox" as being one of her more significant efforts in verse. It reappears in the second edition of *April Twilights*, twenty years later, from which she withdrew thirteen of the original poems, and reappeared again in the 1937 edition, from which she withdrew two others.

⁵The 1912 letters are at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, with copies also at the University of Virginia. For the most part I will be closely following the wording in *Calendar*, entries 224, 228, 229, and 236, but for some details I will move beyond these brief summaries to the original documents themselves.

⁶A great deal more could be said about race in *The Song of the Lark*, especially the privileging of whiteness at the Mexican dance.

⁷It is, of course, entirely in keeping with common usage—sanctioned, as a matter of fact, by law, in the so-called "one-drop" rule—that though a mulatto, D'Arnault would be labeled a negro.

⁸We should bear in mind that *My Antonia* was written at a time when lynchings of black men were rampant and that the "reason" for a lynching was commonly given as a sexual affront toward a white woman.

⁹She also sings "Listen to the Mocking-Bird" (1855), one of the most popular songs of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which may sound like a Stephen Foster song but was in fact composed by Philadelphian Septimus Winner under the pseudonym Alice Hawthorne. Winner was white. Even so, the song might, in a sense, be called a "negro song," as Cather refers to Foster's music, since it was apparently a tribute to the wondrous whistling of a black beggar called Whistling Dick, and the sheet music refers to it as a "sentimental Ethiopian ballad" (March 435; also web notes at <http://www.mi5th.org/Songs/Listen.htm>).

¹⁰The funeral occurs in 1856, but according to March (379) the hymn was not composed until 1868.

¹¹The song about Nancy Till was sufficiently well known to sustain parody by folklorist and poet Sterling A. Brown in "Real Mammy Song":

Down in the canebrake
Close by de mill
Dere lies a culluhd boy
Terrified and still—

a considerably more brutally realistic version of race relations in the South than Cather's idealized picture of Nancy's return and Till's devotion to the white family. Brown's expertise in folklore is evidenced in his having served from 1936 to 1939 as Editor of Negro Affairs for the Federal Writers' Project (Stuckey 13). The fact that the song Cather partly quotes

Continued on page 42.



A scene from *The Bohemian Girl*: Performed by UNL opera students at the grand opening of the Red Cloud Opera House, May 3, 2003.

The Bohemian Girl: An Interview with Ariel Bybee and James Ford

By Joshua Dolezal and Kyoko Matsunaga • Illustrations by Michael Schueth

Cather scholars and aficionados have enjoyed Jim Ford's and Ariel Bybee's collaborative performances for over four years, beginning with Ariel's vocal recital 'I Must Have Music' (including performances by Ariel and her students), which emphasized musical allusions in Cather's fiction. Their integration of Cather and music continued with Jim's narration of Ariel's performance at the 2000 International Cather Seminar in Nebraska City. Those present at this year's seminar in Bread Loaf also witnessed a stunning solo performance by Ariel, augmented by Jim's historical storyline.

Jim's and Ariel's largest production to date was *The Bohemian Girl*, Michael William Balfe's popular nineteenth-century opera. The production won four awards at the Waterford International Festival of Light Opera, including Best Male Vocalist, Best Female Vocalist, Best Chorus, and Best Operetta. As allusions to the opera surface throughout Cather's work, most conspicuously in the short story "The Bohemian Girl," Jim's and Ariel's production was of special interest to the Cather community. We were privileged to talk with them after their performance at the dedication of the restored Red Cloud Opera House last spring.

WCPM: How did you feel in reviving *The Bohemian Girl* with Willa Cather in mind?

JF: Cather was the genesis of the whole project. Ariel and I had done a program on music in Cather's fiction; when the Cather people asked us to do something, we

remembered that "I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls," which was one of the songs that we did in our program, came from this opera. I knew that Cather had seen it and that it had influenced her. So, this huge project that went to three states and two countries started with the idea that Cather was influenced by *The Bohemian Girl*. It was supposed to be played at the opera house in Red Cloud first, but the renovations were delayed, so it ended up being last. We felt a great satisfaction that we could finally take the production to where it was meant to be.

WCPM: Jim, how does opera and opera production compare with your experience as an English professor at the University of Nebraska?

JF: One of my fields of research is drama, and my dissertation was written on Greek tragedy. While I have studied drama all of my academic life, this production allowed me, for the first time, to apply in a practical way what I had learned theoretically and critically. I tended to defer to Ariel about the musical issues.

WCPM: Ariel, how do you imagine a Cather-oriented audience engaging *The Bohemian Girl* in comparison to the audiences you knew at the Metropolitan Opera in New York?

AB: The audiences that I'm used to playing for in New York are used to going to opera all the time; they are more sound-oriented. Here, [in Nebraska] they are more

BOHEMIAN GIRL

(Continued)

story-oriented [and] want to understand the words, [so] it's important to do more works in English. *The Bohemian Girl* was a wonderful kind of fun. It's a very dated piece; Jim had to rewrite part of the story [so] we, the audience, could enjoy it and not think it was as silly as it really is. Nevertheless, the singing does not change and we tried to keep the standard of the singing high. I was very pleased with the performance. The chorus was small, but they did a very good job. For me that's the most important thing: to try to keep the standard of singing high. The audience here appreciates good singing.

Cather's quote says something about "there was a good singer or two among them," and I think we outdid her on that score. I think we had more than a good singer or two.

WCPM: How was your production influenced by Willa Cather and her work?

AB: We tried to follow her description of what she saw. For example, we tried to present the orchestra the way she said she saw it, with the pianist doubling as a conductor. We faced the same limitations that the Andrews Company did when they were there. We had the pillar in the center, one very small dressing room, no entrance stage left, so we had to use the audience, and I suppose this was the way it was done when she was there. Also, we invested the majority of our budget in costumes.

JF: We reproduced what the Andrews Company did in that for us costumes were the major visual contribution, rather than sets. We know the traveling companies used flats, but they were skimpy. With so few props, they did everything they could to make the costumes count. Cather herself did not influence the score or the libretto, but she provided a context for what I knew about the historical period during which the opera was written (1840's) and the period during which Cather saw it (1880's). While making adjustments for modern audiences, I always tried to maintain what was dated, but still workable.

WCPM: For Ariel, how have you negotiated the transition from performing to teaching?

AB: I love performing, but I get more satisfaction from watching my students take a leap from being a student to

being a professional. It's the most gratifying thing to hear about their successes. Part of that has been their participation in *The Bohemian Girl*. When I was at the age of these students, I remember how much I wanted that career; while I don't feel that way anymore, I remember feeling that way. It's gratifying to move from being a singer to helping others.

WCPM: How did this production of *The Bohemian Girl* take on more significance in Red Cloud?

JF: The Red Cloud audience knew the historical significance of the work and the significance of its influence on Cather's work. Cather saw this when she was thirteen; then, in 1912, she wrote the short story "The Bohemian Girl," in which the story plot is a mirror image of the opera plot. Also, in her second-to-last novel, *Lucy Gayheart*, one of the most climactic plot transformations takes place as Lucy watches a performance of *The Bohemian Girl*. The opera was significant to Cather for its intrinsic artistic elements, but she knew that it was so well known that she could use it and expect her readers to catch what she was doing. In the short story, Nils calls Clara back to a gypsy life by going to her window and whistling "I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls"; Cather was confident that her original audience would know the significance of this allusion. Until about 1950, everybody knew the words to this song. The reports of the people in Red Cloud were that they felt they could imagine what it must have been like when Cather saw the opera originally, so through our production they made a connection between the past and the present.

WCPM: How has your collaboration as a husband/wife team changed the production of *The Bohemian Girl*?

AB: I don't know if it has changed the production, but it has changed us. We just love it. This is the six or seventh project we've done collaboratively. We've done several things where if I didn't have Jim, the performances would have just involved singing. But, with Jim, the things I'm asked to do have a theme and narration; we build the things I do around the narration and things that he writes. It has truly been a growing process for both of us. We have turned most everything we do into a collaboration so we can work on it together, which is really fun. I like dealing with the

motivation coming out of the music, and he's good at deciding how to move folks around on stage.

We're very happy we could perform our first major production in the opera house.

WCPM: What will be your next project?

JF: Our next collaborative project is a presentation for the International Cather Seminar at Bread Loaf, where we will perform a narrated musical program of music that we know Cather saw or could have seen at the opera house in Red Cloud. Ariel will sing seven numbers that were performed by the Andrews Opera Company, since we know what their repertoire was and we know what music Cather used in her writing.



Bohemian Girl: Nellie Andrews of the Andrews Opera Company, which performed for Cather in 1888.

Guests at the Second Cather Home: Who Are Cather's Admirers?

Charlene Ketler Hoschouer

The telephone rings.

"Cather Second Home," I answer.

"Do you have any openings for May 28?" the voice asks.

"Let me check my calendar," I reply. "Yes, we do.

What kind of room are you looking for and how many people?"

"I'm travelling alone," the voice says.



Starting the day off right: Laura Balament and Gay Ellen Stulp sit down for breakfast at the Cather Second Home. Photo courtesy Doug and Charlene Hoschouer.

"In that case, I have three rooms you may choose from. First, there's Willa Cather's room. It has a single iron bed. Second is Mrs. Cather's room. It has a double iron bed. Both of those rooms are upstairs. Then, on the ground floor is a room with a day bed and trundle. It's called Bev's room."

"You mean I could sleep in Willa Cather's room? Really?"

"Certainly."

As per usual, the booking is confirmed, followed by a brief conversation about the home.

My husband, Doug, and I purchased the nineteen-room Cather Second Home in August, 1998. It was the only property Willa Cather's family ever owned and remained theirs from 1903 until 1944. Following the sale, it became a boarding home for women whose husbands were fighting in World War II. After the war, it was remodeled into a hospital, nursing home and apartments.

Purchasing the home was a difficult decision. The restoration was a gargantuan task, but we felt strongly that the house had to be saved. We vowed to share the home with anyone who was interested. Tours began before the restoration and continued throughout the process. Today, the Cather Second Home is a bed and breakfast. Guests from forty-one states and eight foreign countries have signed the guest book in the four

years since the restoration.

People from almost every walk of life have walked through our doors. Each time a guest arrives, there is an excitement as I open the door, welcoming the traveller. When guests depart, they leave as friends, no longer strangers.

A woman from the Czech Republic comes to mind. She and her family escaped that country and are now living in California. Jarmilla knocked on the door four hours after her expected time of arrival. She had told me on the telephone she was unaccustomed to traveling alone and hoped she wouldn't get lost. Of course, she had. She traveled over 100 miles out of her way to reach Red Cloud.

Upon her arrival, she said she needed to go to the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie today. There seemed to be an urgency in the statement. Although her English is still broken, there was a look of desperation in her blue eyes.

"You've had a long drive today. Would you let me take you?" I asked.

She smiled with relief, and we headed south to the 610-acre prairie. All the way there, Jarmilla looked from one side of the road to the other. "This looks like my country," she said over and over. Upon arriving at the prairie, I told Jarmilla she was free to go for a walk in the grass if she wished. She quickly got out of the car and began her walk. After about an hour, she returned to the car. Her eyes were red with tears. "This is just like Willa said it was," she said.

Jarmilla, who translates Cather's work into Czech and is a writer in her own right, stayed with us several days. We continue to stay in touch.



A moment on the porch: Amy Ehrlich from Vermont, an author of children's books, on the Cather Second Home Porch. Photo courtesy of Doug and Charlene Hoschouer.

A couple from Hawaii came to visit Cather country. As the husband and I were visiting on their arrival, he said, "I bet we're your first Hawaiians." His chest puffed out.

"No, you're not. We had a couple from Honolulu a couple of weeks ago."

He shook his head. "Well, I bet I'm your first astronomer."

He was right.

Gay Ellen and Laura came to us from Lafayette, Indiana. Gay Ellen is a chemical engineer, and Laura had just



Having a good time: Mary from Chicago (left) enjoying her time in Red Cloud on the front porch of the Cather Second Home with Doug and Charlene Hoschouer. Photo courtesy of Doug and Charlene Hoschouer.

GUESTS (Continued)

finished her doctorate at Emory University and was employed at Purdue. She grew up in Germany and is an avid opera fan; she wrote her dissertation on Wagner and Cather. As a graduation gift to herself, she wanted to take a "Willa Pilgrimage" by traveling to Red Cloud on the train.

The women stayed nearly a week. Laura studied at the WCPM&EF archives, while Gay Ellen photographed the area. She is also a professional photographer.

Laura returned a couple of years later. She wanted to come "home."

They were followed by a couple from Japan, professors at a women's college in Tokoyo. Kazuko teaches English literature while Hitoshi teaches finance. While she studied, he, too, photographed Red Cloud and the surrounding area. The couple chose Bev's room, the only ground floor guest room. It was originally the kitchen, so is very large. During breakfast on the first morning, Kazuko said, "Our room here is bigger than our apartment in Tokoyo."

We learned a great deal from each other and remain in touch. When they e-mail us, they address us as their American mother and father.

Alain and Mary Louise, from Bowie, Maryland, were astounded by the enormous amount of work that had been done in Red Cloud to save the Cather history. Mary Louise is a distant cousin of Willa. She had heard of the writer and her fame all her life and felt a need to see Willa's country. They left Red Cloud with a completely different picture of this part of the world.

A former student of Willa's sister, Elsie, also came to see Catherland. Lucille is a remarkable woman who grew up in Red Cloud and now resides in Minnesota. Although well into her eighties, she has a remarkable memory. She admitted that Elsie Cather was not the best of teachers, but enjoyed the

celebrity of her sister.

I asked Lucille if she knew of Jessica Cather Auld, Willa's other sister. She told us that, as a youngster, she remembered seeing Mrs. Auld walking down the street. She was a tall, very well-dressed woman with the stature of a queen. Lucille is the only person to whom we have spoken who has any recollection of Jessica.

Willa's niece, Helen Cather Southwick, has visited us twice, with her family. She has complete and accurate recollection of the home of her grandparents and has told us many stories about the Cather family and the decades they lived in the Second Home. Without Mrs. Southwick's help, the restoration of the home would never have happened. Because of the joy she feels to have the home restored, Mrs. Southwick has given many things which were in the home during the Cather family's tenure here.¹

Over the past four years, Doug and I have been overwhelmed by the people who enjoy the writings of Willa Cather. People from all walks of life seem to form a huge fraternity. The common thread is a desire to feel the open space, to watch the sun set over the prairie, and to see the world that only Cather's words can describe.

* Editor's note: Charlene Hoschouer has written a fascinating booklet, *The House According to Helen*, based on Helen Cather Southwick's recollections of her grandparents' home. It is available for sale at the WCPM&EF bookstore.

Professions of Cather Admirers at the Cather Second Home

- Publishers, writers of books, magazines, newspapers, other periodicals
- Librarians
- Artists: painters and sculptors
- Medical professionals from every field
- Insurance agents
- Entertainers
- Social workers
- Real estate agents
- Bankers and investment brokers
- Educators with a plethora of degrees and fields
- Secretaries
- Engineers (chemical, electrical, environmental, mechanical and water)
- NASA scientists
- Retailers
- Interior designer
- Attorneys
- Photographers (1 Pulitzer Prize winner)
- TV directors, producers and personalities
- President, International Quilters' Guild, Germany

Willa Cather Holiday Gifts

Please add the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation to your holiday gift list. It will be a gift that will go on giving to the thousands of people who visit Red Cloud or use the Foundation's educational resources.

Your tax-deductible contribution to the Willa Cather Foundation will help support:

- Educational programming for the hundreds of K-12 students who come to Red Cloud to learn about Willa Cather as part of their school curriculum;
- Tours for the thousands of visitors from across the United States and other nations who come to Catherland each year;
- The program series that is offered in the newly restored Red Cloud Opera House;
- The Spring Festival that features nationally-recognized scholars on Willa Cather and annually attracts hundreds of Nebraskans as well as national and international participants;
- Restoration and maintenance of the thirteen historic buildings related to Willa Cather in Red Cloud that are owned or maintained by the Cather Foundation;
- Publications and research on Willa Cather.

You might want to use your gift to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation as an opportunity to honor someone who loves good literature, to remember a friend or relative who has died, to celebrate an occasion that is special to you, or as a very special holiday gift for someone who is dear to you. Please remember Willa Cather for the holidays!

We Thank You!

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation is very grateful to the following individuals and institutions who have contributed to its work this year to date, January 1 to October 15, 2003. We thank you for your generosity and for supporting the Foundation's work.

*[The following is a listing of those contributing to the Foundation January 1 to October 15, 2003. The listing does not reflect pledges—only monies received to date (excluding sales). We are also extremely grateful to those donations under \$50.00, as every donation is important to us. Some donations may include payment on a pledge or grant this year to date. Those gifts including such a payment are denoted by an *.]*

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Left: Discussions on the sidewalk between presentations.



Above: Sue Rosowski talks to Jim Ford and Ariel Bybee at the seminar held May 28-June 2, 2003.



Left: (L to R) Sue Rosowski, Robert Pinsky, Betty Kort and Lucia Woods Lindley, following Robert Pinsky's lecture.

Photos by Jim Rosowski.



International Cather Seminar at Bread Loaf

From May 28 - June 2, 2003, 150 people convened at Bread Loaf, Vermont, for the 9th International Cather Seminar on "Willa Cather as Cultural Icon." Bread Loaf, the oldest writers' conference site in America, is part of Middlebury College and is located at the edge of the Green Mountain Forest in central Vermont.

Cather, who taught at Bread Loaf in July of 1922, was among a group of writers who suggested that the campus be used for an annual writers' conference. Robert Pinsky, Poet Laureate of the United States (1997-2000) and contributor to the News Hour with Jim Lehrer, gave the keynote address. He presented thoughts reflecting on his book-length poem, *An Explanation of America* (1980), and its echoes of Cather's phrase, "obliterating strangeness."

During the five-day stay, seminarians presented papers, attended performances (including a program on late 19th century visiting opera companies by Ariel Bybee and James Ford), engaged in conversations, lived and worked, all the while being steeped in the history of Bread Loaf. In the end, a rich body of material was produced, which is a tribute to Cather and the group of scholars and students who continue to reveal the rich layers of her work and move Cather scholarship forward with consistently high quality.

The seminar was jointly sponsored by the WCPM and UNL's Cather Project, with Sue Rosowski serving as its director, Beth Burke as its program coordinator from UNL, and Betty Kort of the WCPM serving as director of sales.

CHILDHOOD

(Continued)

between the culture of her childhood and the culture of her late adulthood. As she aged, Cather felt alienated from much of the modern world. I also feel that and, in fact, I live now very much as I did as a girl. I read, walk, spend time outdoors and with my friends and family. I almost never use machines if I don't have to.

And, finally, we are similar in many small ways. Both of us attended the University of Nebraska. We planned to be doctors and switched to the humanities. Cather wrote her first novel at thirty-eight, which is when I wrote my first book. We both carry walking sticks and like naps. We're cross when our writing is interrupted and hate having our pictures taken. I feel great resonance with Cather, but I make this point not about me, but rather about her. Cather, as Walt Whitman said, "contained multitudes." That is the reason we are all here today. Part of her greatness is that we can all find ourselves in Cather.

Today the commonality I wish to address is our childhood in small town Nebraska that led us to be writers.

Cather was born in 1873. She was of my grandparents' generation. And she died in 1947, the year I was born. Of course, her childhood was different from mine in many ways, but I would argue that her childhood and mine were more similar than my own and my daughter's or granddaughter's.

Cather grew up in this little town we are all visiting today. I started school in Dorchester, also a town of Czech immigrants with names such as Hrdlchka, Marinsky, Walenchensky and Vrbka. In the fourth grade, I moved to Beaver City, a town of about 500 in Furnas County. It is built around a square and when I lived there had ten churches and no place adults could buy a beer.

We both grew up before cell phones, the Internet, shopping malls, interstate highways, factory farms, feed lots, Columbine, terrorists and television. We grew up before cradle-to-grave marketing in which children see 20,000-40,000 commercials a year. Our news and entertainment were local. Food was homegrown, an amazing concept in a time when we all eat kiwis, avocados and Chilean sea bass. Clothes were homemade or from Monkey Wards. Time was sun time and season time and life was organized around community, not money.

And there were elements in that life that encouraged Cather's and my own development as writers.



Republican River: Overlooking the river at Red Cloud, Nebraska. Photo courtesy of Ardys Miksch, Red Cloud, NE. This river was important to both Cather's and Pipher's childhoods.

1. We both had vivid contact with the natural world. Because there weren't many outside media (the word didn't even exist), experience was unmediated by images from machines. It was fresh, sensual and rich. Cather was able to explore nature directly and to find her own meaning in it. The natural world is both quiet and stimulating. Nature is both a place for epiphanies and for therapy.

On an April day, a friend and I visited Spring Creek Prairie near Lincoln. We lay down in the tall golden grasses. (Cather could describe all the different shades of gold.) We felt the dirt underneath us and watched the enormous blue sky above us. We lay silently listening to the wind sing in her many tones and voices. I knew Cather had experienced the same feelings we had when she wrote, "That is happiness; to be dissolved in something complete and great."

Cather grew up around both farm animals and wild ones. Animals are great teachers. From them we can learn patience, responsibility, commitment and calmness. For example, when I was ten, the man next door had collected a bushel of baby coyotes he would sell for bounty. He would receive two dollars for every pair of ears. I was most upset to know this and begged my mother to buy them all. She allowed me to save one. I remember looking into that bushel and

thinking I had the power of life and death, a power over another living creature I didn't want.

2. As Don Welch said in Joel Geyer's film on one-room schools, "*Children need silence and space to be educated.*" Cather and I had those elements in our childhood. In the first half of the twentieth century, children suffered a great deal of benign neglect. Childhood had less structure and was less hurried. There was time to sit by a fire and talk for hours, to stay up all night and look at the stars, or to go ice skating or berry picking all day.

My mother's childhood in eastern Colorado involved a great deal of time riding a horse to check on fencing—a very good time to think. My summer days were spent biking to the creek, swimming or reading. This time to think is critical for the development of artists. Children today are wired with computer toys that talk to them from birth on. I worry they do not experience the roominess of their own minds. From homemade games comes creativity. From quiet comes complexity and clarity of thought.

3. Children grew up in communities of real people. People knew each other's names and families. Adults could nurture and socialize children because of these names. They were not afraid of each other. Children spent time with all ages

of people. All ages shared common culture. Cather particularly took advantage of the wisdom of all ages in her town. She was friends of the heart with old and young.

Small towns are not perfect. I don't want to romanticize them. But they do provide people with a moral universe. Every small town contains within it the entire cast of Shakespeare. It is inhabited by all the people one needs to know to explore the human condition.

We both grew up in worlds built by stories told by people who knew each other. Extended family were often nearby and old relatives lived with younger ones. Children had their own relationships with the people in their towns. My mother told me stories when I accompanied her on house calls. Cather heard many of the immigrants' stories.

Children had more independence and autonomy. They often did useful work, alone or with family. Communities were small enough and safe enough to be navigable for children. Children learned to take care of themselves early as they rode horses, walked or biked around town. I remember lying in cool grass telling ghost stories or just watching the Northern Lights and Milky Way. Cather lived and worked in the heart of her moral universe.

Books were sacred texts, available, but not so available as to be taken for granted. Both Cather and I read all the time. Books gave us windows on life in all times and places. Not all books were high quality. I remember Uncle Arthur's bedtime stories, where all good children went to heaven and all bad children died and went to hell. Or the Cherry Ames student nurse series in which, with each new book, Cherry lived in a new town and met a new young doctor. But there were also

wonderful books—Beatrix Potter, Nancy Drew, the Dana Sisters, Dickens, Carroll, Austin and, of course, Cather. Stories in books required the development of the imagination. Images, scenes, stories, emotions and values must be built from words on a page. And the stories in books were much more complex than any movie or television show.

When I see children on television shows from the 1950s, I notice their faces are more innocent and less troubled. They look more trusting and respectful of adults. Their eyes are clear. Childhood was easier then, and more generative. Now only a very few children truly have a childhood.

Both Cather and I have experienced anti-Nebraska prejudice. One critic described Cather's work as "the triumph of art over Nebraska." Once when I told a host at the 92nd Street Y in New York City that I was from Nebraska, she looked at me unsmilingly and asked, "Have you considered moving?"

Cather and I have in common that when we were teenagers we couldn't wait to leave our small towns and to travel somewhere faraway and exotic. And from Red Cloud and Beaver City, every place looked faraway and exotic to us. We yearned for Paris, New York City and Chicago, important places with CULTURE. But later we both came to love our home state. Just as O'Keeffe made us look differently at flowers, Cather made Nebraska beautiful for the world.

Willa Cather was lucky to grow up in her time and place. From Nebraska Cather received her most important gifts—her deep understanding of people, her love of books and the natural world, and her creative imagination. Red Cloud may have been the perfect environment for a young writer. It produced Cather, after all.

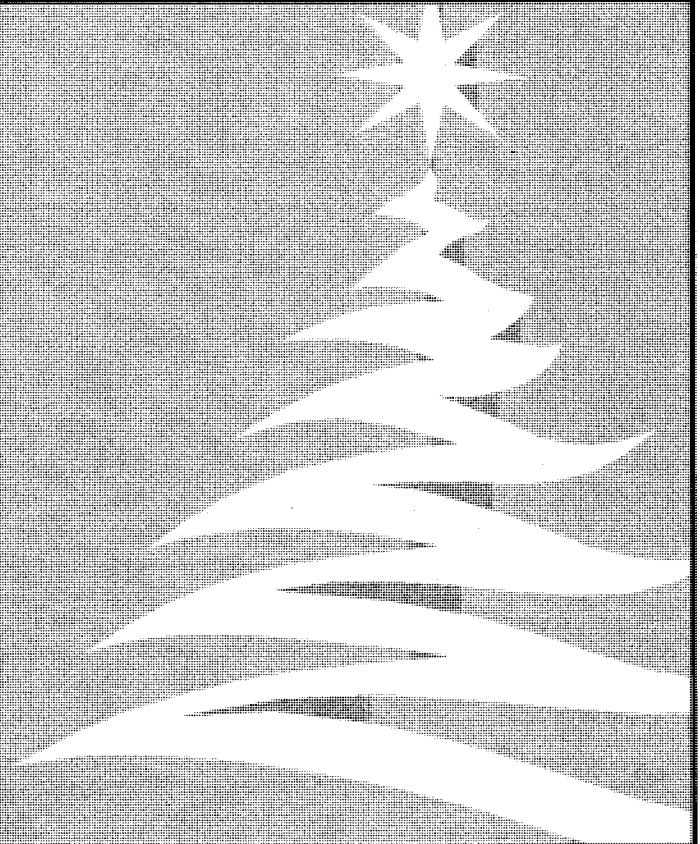
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POOR CALIBAN

(Continued)

did in fact exist adds to the reader's uncertainty about the story of Nancy's return narrated in the final section of the novel. Are we to believe that a real-world song was written about the fictional character in the novel? Or is Cather saying that her character (whose mother in the novel was, we know, based on an actual person, a slave of Cather's great-grandmother's) represents an original celebrated in the song? In this, as in many other ways, this closing section of the novel greatly unsettles the ontological status of the text.

Extracts at the Beinecke Library, Yale University; *Calendar* #1658. Shafer-Riha points out that the meeting at the Menuhins' also took place shortly after the close of Robeson's much-acclaimed run in the role of Othello in London. Extrapolating from that fact and from Cather's long interest in Shakespeare, she asserts that "Robeson's influence," specifically as Othello, was strong in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (33,35). The 1944 letter to Helen Cather Southwick goes on to comment on the production in which Robeson revived the role, in New York.

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Morhart History Enshrined in Opera House

Judy and Judson Morhart, children of Frank Morhart who donated the Red Cloud Opera House building to the WCPM in 1991, recently prepared a history of the Morhart family as it connects to the Opera House. The history was printed and framed. Pictures of the Morharts, Adam, Bert and Stace, and Frank, who owned the Opera House over a period of three generations, are included in the framed piece. This very attractive historical record will hang permanently in the lobby of the auditorium on the second floor of the Opera House. It is the wish of Judson and Judy, the fourth generation of Morharts, that "many generations enjoy countless opportunities to experience entertainment, art and culture at the Opera House."



Framed for viewing: Judy Morhart and Executive Director, Betty Kort, stand beside the newly framed Morhart History. Photo by Jim Fitzgibbon.

2003/2004
CATHER
CALENDAR

Willa Cather
Birthday Celebration

December 7th

Evening Prayer Service, Grace Episcopal Church
Birthday Cake Reception Following

49th Annual Spring Festival

April 30 - May 1, 2004

Obscure Destinies: Aging and Dying in Willa Cather's Fiction

News From The Executive Director



Some of the best news of this past summer in Red Cloud revolves around the WCPM. The number of guests visiting the Cather sites each month has doubled over that of last year. In part, this can be attributed to the newly restored Red Cloud Opera House. I also think that CSPAN's coverage of the WCPM site, the recent emphasis in Chicago on *My Ántonia*, the general media coverage of Cather that continues unabated, and, of course, the immense popularity of Cather's novels have contributed immensely to the increase in visitors. Whatever the reasons, Red Cloud and the WCPM are pleased to welcome so many guests. Yes, we have had to adjust, but we have been more than happy to do so.

• Thanks to the generosity of the Red Cloud Women's Chamber of Commerce, the Opera House has seven new round tables, each of which will seat six to eight people. The Women's Chamber members, many of whom are regular volunteers at the Opera House, donated \$1000 to buy the tables. The tables will work especially well for dinners in the Gallery before performances and for Christmas parties scheduled later in the year.

Speaking of volunteers, a picnic to honor Opera House Volunteers was held in the Red Cloud City Park on September 21st. The event was organized by the Red Cloud Opera House Volunteers Steering Committee headed by local resident Connie Bostock and our Programming Director Steph Thompson. The food was prepared by members of the committee. The Palace Restaurant donated delicious fried chicken.

At this point in time the WCPM could not operate the Opera House without the large number of volunteers who staff each and every Opera House production. The picnic was planned to extend a small thank you to volunteers for this large and gracious undertaking.

• In early September the Gallery was initiated as a dining area, which represented a new challenge for the staff of the WCPM, particularly Program Director Steph Thompson. The South Platte United Chamber of Commerce held its September meeting at the Opera House, and the event culminated in a dinner in the Gallery. Fortunately, the new tables, purchased by the Red Cloud Chamber of Commerce women, were in place. A photography exhibit accented the walls of the Gallery. The tables, covered with new tablecloths and highlighted by fresh flowers from a local Red Cloud garden, were bathed in soft light. It was an altogether charming atmosphere with delicious food and fine conversation. Former Nebraska legislator Ardyce Bohlke spoke at the afternoon session on the topic of the day, school finance. Red Cloud businessman Jim Farmer acted as host and master of ceremonies. As the banquet speaker, my role was to talk about the history of the Opera House, the process of restoration, and the fine response of the public to the new facility.

• For about fourteen years, the papers of WCPM founder Mildred Bennett have been moved from place to place in an effort to keep them dry and safe. For a long time they were located at the Baptist Church which is not a particularly dry or safe place. But thanks to the volunteer efforts of Beth Burke and Dr. Ann Tschetter, the papers have been moved from the Baptist Church to the basement of the Opera House. Eventually, the Bennett papers will be sorted and carefully filed for future reference.

• The Moon Block is getting a facelift, or perhaps I should say, *façadelift*. We are repairing and painting the exterior of the four business facades next to the Opera House thanks to a Red Cloud Economic Development Committee matching grant designed to upgrade North Webster Street. The State Office of Preservation has been helpful in choosing the colors of the buildings so that they are in a range that is historically accurate.

• In the last issue of the *Newsletter*, an appeal went out to help us secure a Steinway piano for the Opera House Auditorium. Although we have a fine piano in the Auditorium, which was donated to us by the Masonic Temple in Hastings, Nebraska, there is need for an original Steinway if the Opera House is to attract the finest concert musicians. About the time the *Newsletter* went to print, a Steinway piano appeared on a piano liquidation sale listing.

This Steinway just happened to have been built in 1873—you know, Cather's birthday. Even though the piano is over 100 years old, it is nevertheless in outstanding condition. It has a lovely carved case typical of that period. It has been beautifully renovated, just as the Opera House has been renovated. It is interesting to note that it only has 85 keys, which was standard until shortly before the turn of the century. Finally, the piano's tone is absolutely beautiful.

Readers may wonder how we could possibly be objective in dealing with this, but common sense did prevail. The problem was with the action of the keys, and this turned out to be a serious issue. We finally decided that the Steinway we select for the Opera House must be as perfect as possible. We did not buy the piano; therefore, we are still looking.

• My final news items are especially exciting. Pictures of Willa Cather abound at the office here in Red Cloud, but I have never particularly considered the clothing Cather wore in those pictures until this summer. Thanks to Helen Cather Southwick, we now have the famous green jacket Cather wore in several professional photographs. The jacket brings with it a personal dimension that helps one more completely sense who Cather was as a person. We look forward to the time when we can properly display it for public view. The WCPM is immensely pleased with this gift.

Richard S. Westfall from Greenfield, Maine, recently donated two original letters written by Willa Cather to his grandfather, Lewis Stoughton, a graduate of the University of Nebraska. The letters are short, one requesting a signed photograph on behalf of the University Union Society and the other declining an invitation. These precious artifacts will be tucked into the Archives along with over two hundred other letters written by Willa Cather.

Toward the end of the summer, Dr. Martin Zehr of Kansas City, Missouri, donated a rare and valuable first edition of *The Troll Garden*. The WCPM is so appreciative of those in the Cather community who make contributions of this nature.



Salad Lessons

In "Old Mrs. Harris," Vickie Templeton—a character modelled closely on the adolescent Willa Cather—wins a college scholarship, and she tells her good news first to her sympathetic, cosmopolitan neighbors, the Rosens. Both Rosens respond by giving her a lesson, something she will need to know as her life expands beyond the small town of Moonstone (closely based on Red Cloud). Mr. Rosen inscribes a wise maxim from Michelet for the girl, and Mrs. Rosen invites Vickie for lunch and serves up a lesson in cuisine:

"Luncheon is served," she said. . . . "And Miss Vickie, you are to eat your tomatoes with an oil dressing, as we do. If you are going off into the world, it is quite time you learn to like things that are everywhere accepted."

Vickie said: "Yes'm". . . . Today she didn't care what she ate, though ordinarily she thought a French dressing tasted a good deal like castor oil. (132-33)

Menus for elegant meals scattered through Cather's fiction suggest that she grew up to enjoy and appreciate the olive oil dressing that may have tasted "like castor oil" to her as a child. In fact, Willa Cather probably agreed with Mrs. Rosen that salad lessons are important for someone who is expanding her education and exploring new cultures. In her comments on *Shadows on the Rock*, she used salad as an emblem of the transplanting of European culture to the new world, suggesting that "really, a new society begins with the salad dressing" ("On *Shadows on the Rock*" 16).

Such lessons in salad are still being served up in Red Cloud, Nebraska, as visitors to the annual Spring Festival can attest. Every year, a different and delicious salad is on the menu at the Festival's evening banquet, served by the Red Cloud Women's Chamber. And at noon on Festival Saturday,

visitors are treated to a full menu of salads at the popular salad lunch served by the Red Cloud chapter of P.E.O. Now, these Red Cloud specialties are available to us all, for the Women's Chamber and P.E.O. chapters have recently published cookbooks, including (among others) the best of their salad recipes. Here is a sampling to whet your appetite. Both recipe books are available through the WCPM&EF bookstore. They make excellent holiday gifts. And we guarantee, none of these salad dressings will taste like castor oil!

Fresh Tomato with Oil Dressing

(This version of Mrs. Rosen's salad was served at the Cather Banquet in 1994.)

2 or more large tomatoes, diced or sliced

Oil Dressing:

1/4 c. chopped fresh parsley

1/4 c. salad or olive oil

1 clove garlic

2 T. cider or tarragon vinegar

1 t. salt

2 t. dry mustard

1/4 t. pepper

Mix all dressing ingredients well. Toss tomatoes in dressing or serve dressing individually. Present salad on lettuce leaves. Dressing may be mixed the day before. Serves 4.

Adapted from *Bounty of the Harvest*, Red Cloud Women's Chamber

Purple Plum Salad

(This recipe for an unusual and delicious fruit salad, which can also be served as a dessert, is typical of the molded salads that were specialties of many twentieth-century midwestern women.

It was contributed by Helen Obitz, one of the founders of the WCPM.)

2 envelopes Knox gelatin

1 6-oz. can frozen orange juice concentrate

2 c. boiling water

3 T. lemon juice

1/2 t. salt

2 c. sour cream

1/2 t. pumpkin pie spice

1 can (#502) plums, drained, seeded, and diced

Dissolve gelatin in melted orange juice concentrate. Add to boiling water. Add salt, spice, sugar, lemon juice, and liquid from plums. Chill until mixture mounds on spoon. Fold in sour cream and plums.



Salad Luncheon: Jay Yost (second from right), WCPM Board member, with guests at the annual salad luncheon Spring Festival 2003. Photo by G. Wade Leak.

From *Salad Luncheon Recipes*, P.E.O.

Taco Salad

(This salad, a current Red Cloud favorite, is a popular offering at the P.E.O. salad lunches. The recipe comes from Jan Offner, a member of the WCPM&EF staff.)

- 1 head lettuce, cut up
- 1 pkg. taco seasoning
- 1 lb. hamburger, browned and drained
- 1 can kidney beans, drained
- 1/4 c. chopped onion
- 4 tomatoes diced
- 1 13 oz. pkg. taco flavored Doritos, crushed
- 8 oz. shredded cheddar cheese

Sauce: 1 c. Thousand Island dressing

1 T. taco seasoning

1 T. taco sauce

1/3 c. sugar (or less, to taste)

To browned hamburger, add taco seasoning, reserving

1 T. from package for sauce. Stir in drained kidney beans.

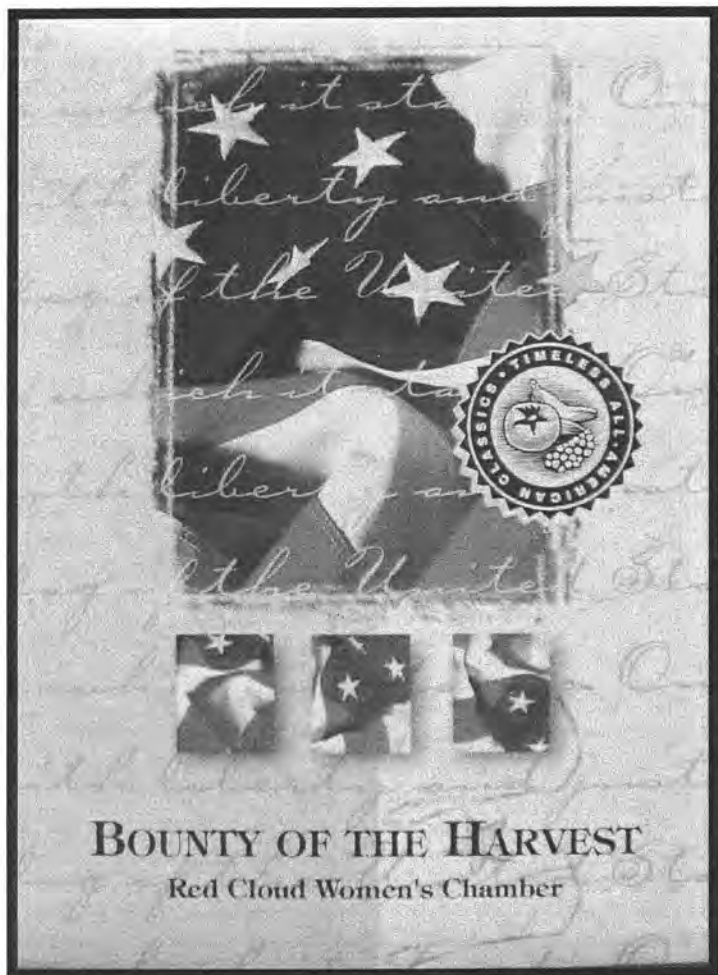
Layer lettuce, onion, tomatoes, cheese, and hamburger mixture three times in a large container. Seal tightly and refrigerate.

Just before serving, add crushed chips (as desired) and sauce and toss. OR for individual servings take out portions; add sauce and chips accordingly.

From *Salad Luncheon Recipes*, P.E.O.

Bounty of the Harvest, Red Cloud Women's Chamber, \$10.00.

Salad Luncheon Recipes, Chapter Y, P.E.O., Red Cloud; \$5.00.



Chamber Cookbook: Red Cloud Women's Chamber cookbook and PEO salad recipe insert feature recipes served at the Willa Cather Spring Festival luncheon and banquet. Photo by Betty Kort.



A Message from the President

Mellanee Kvasnicka, President, WCPM & EF Board of Governors

Some fifteen or twenty years ago, I had a conversation with Cather scholar Dr. Marilyn Arnold. Dr. Arnold and I were talking about *The Professor's House*, and I commented that of all Cather's works, this novel was the most perplexing to me. Dr. Arnold replied that she understood, but she encouraged me to let some time go by and try the novel again. When I did so, I was astonished at how much greater my appreciation was as an "older" woman. I thought about Dr. Arnold's comment that Cather was a writer who addressed her readers at various stages of their life's journeys.

I've been thinking about that conversation again lately as I've been re-reading *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. How is it that Cather can make me feel as if this book set in the American Southwest (a very different landscape than my own), whose main characters are Roman Catholics and priests (which I am not), can make me feel as if

she wrote this book for me? That, of course, is the question all of us ask of our best writers. For me, the answer lies in the writer's own humanity, the absolute awareness of his or her own gifts, possibilities, limitations, and responses to the vicissitudes of life. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is my book at the moment because it has given me solace in the loss of my mother and has shown me the value of lives lived not just doing the safe thing, but also of taking chances when great things were at stake.

I read once of a woman who had lost a child. She wrote of her struggle in dealing with this loss and said that during long and sleepless nights she turned to *My Ántonia*. That woman would also have understood Dr. Arnold's comment. Cather, I think, seems to know what we need and offers to us a precious gift, a balm which gives us peace and hope. What better gift is there?

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER AND REVIEW

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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 2500-3000 words; they should be submitted on disk in Microsoft Word and should follow *The MLA Style Manual*.

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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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Preserve the treasures

Please help to preserve the treasures in Red Cloud that honor Cather and her work. Make a special holiday gift to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.

A gift of \$ _____ is included. [] Check enclosed [] Visa [] Mastercard

Account # _____ Expiration Date _____

I/we also understand that all contributions are deductible for federal and state income-tax purposes.

Date

Signature

Thank you for helping to preserve for future generations the special work of Willa Cather.

Red Cloud Opera House Fall/Holiday Season 2003

Janna Harsch

“The Grace & Power of Equines”

Acrylic & Mixed Media
October 16 - November 30
Art Exhibit

John Blake Bergers

“The World of Willa Cather”

December 1 - January 14
Art Exhibit

Theater of the American West

“Honeymoon Flat”

November 9th at 2:30

Thalken, Tesdall & Thalken

“Holiday Concert”

December 14th at 7:00

Kerry Grombacher

“Western Songs”

November 17th at 7:30

“A Christmas Twist”

Theatre of the American West
December 18, 19, 20 at 7:30 & 21 at 2:30

For more information on the Red Cloud Opera House Schedule
call or e-mail the Foundation Office: 402-746-2641 or wcpm@gpcom.net

In recognition of the need for the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial & Educational Foundation (WCPM) to establish an Endowment Fund for the 1885 Opera House in Red Cloud, Nebraska, and to assist the WCPM in raising \$825,000 before July 31, 2005, so as to enable the WCPM to obtain \$275,000 in challenge-grant funds for such purpose from the National Endowment for the Humanities, I/we hereby state my/our intention to contribute to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial & Educational Foundation's Opera House Endowment Fund the sum of \$_____

I/We expect to make this gift payable over a period of one year, with the initial payment to be made as follows:

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2. \$_____ on or before July 1, 2005. 3. Other: _____

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