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In *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), Willa Cather described Christmas Eve in "Haverford on the Platte," a little Nebraska town that much resembles Red Cloud:

The day before Christmas opened with a hard snowstorm. When the Gayhearts looked out of their windows, the ground was already well covered, the porches and the hedge fence were drifted white. At breakfast Mr. Gayheart said that, when he went down to make the furnace fire at six o'clock, the snow must have been falling for some time.

Lucy spent the morning tramping about in the storm on errands for Pauline. She took boxes of Christmas cakes to all their old friends, carried a pudding in its mould out to the Lutheran pastor's house at the north end of town, where there was no sidewalk and she had to wade through deep snowdrifts. The storm brought back the feeling children have about Christmas, that it is a time of miracles, when the angels are near the earth, and any wayside weed may suddenly become a rosebush or a Christmas tree.

(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938; 185)

*Happy Holidays*  
from  
Willa Cather's Red Cloud  
and the WCPM!



— Photo by Steve Ryan, January 1999, Burlington Depot, Red Cloud

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# "The Object of So Much Service and Desire": Reading Water in the Work of Willa Cather

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University of Maryland

EDITOR'S NOTE: An earlier version of this essay won the 1998 J. Golden Taylor Award for best graduate student paper presented at the Western Literature Association.  
— AR

Reading Willa Cather's novels chronologically and examining the narrative formed by the entire body of bathers, a narrative-within-an-oeuvre that reflects Cather's developing sense of story. In proposing new ways to read Cather, Richard Millington's recent essay, "Willa Cather and The Storyteller: Hostility to the Novel in *My Ántonia*," suggests ways in which her work is suffused with issues of storytelling, often beyond the boundaries of constricting novelistic conventions. The sequence of bathing scenes beginning with "Coming, Aphrodite!"'s Don Hedger and Eden Bowers' dispute over Caesar's use of the bathtub, and continuing through "Before Breakfast," with Henry Grenfell's observation of the nubile Miss Fairweather enjoying a morning swim in frigid North Atlantic waters. The shape of this narrative is both circular and linear, circular as it begins and ends with concealed or unobserved solitary men gazing at physically attractive young women, linear as it follows Cather's developing notions of the importance of sensuality in the life of the individual. An interrogation of the bathers narrative demonstrates that the layers of storytelling in all the Cather novels are enhanced and complicated by issues of gaze.

Since the innovation of indoor plumbing, the bath has been not only an instrument of hygiene but a place of relaxation and erotic and aesthetic pleasure. In positioning two of her best-known female protagonists, Thea Kronborg and Alexandra Bergson, so memorably in the bathtub, Willa Cather clearly had a momentous vision, if not multiple visions, of the power of the bath. Hygiene is an important cultural marker in Cather's novels, but, more than that, the female form, white (always), statuesque, magnificent, becomes in this set of images the repository for Cather's vision of the evolving America — its landscape, culture, and ideals. Yet Cather's interest in immersing her characters in water is not limited to her female characters and she resists a traditional possibility of confining the women to indoor scenes while the men are all outdoors. Thea, for example, bathes outdoors in Panther Canyon as well as in her hotel in New York, and both are important moments of renewal and celebration of the body; Alexandra's bath is conducted in a shed off the kitchen, at once within and separate from the domestic interior of her house; Jim Burden finds himself the object of the female gaze as he swims in the creek in *My Ántonia*; Claude Wheeler has an important moment

of revelation under the night sky, immersed in the horses' water trough; Godfrey St. Peter swims regularly; Henry Colbert finds temporary solace in the mill pond in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and Henry Grenfell returns Cather's narrative to a traditional form as he observes Miss Fairweather at her morning swim in "Before Breakfast."

Section eleven of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," the twenty-eight bathers passage, seems a natural link to Cather's interest in bathers and swimmers. Whitman and Cather shared an interest in the evolving nature of Americanness, and their work, with emphases on landscape, embodiment, and language itself; shares many more similarities than critics have addressed thus far. In section eleven of "Song of Myself," Whitman, as Cather would later in some of the scenes mentioned above, reverses the usual male spectator/female object scenario, while showing multiple possibilities of the pleasures inherent in the act of bathing. Tracing the evolution of the bathers from familiar biblical stories to Whitman to Cather opens up new ways to think about issues of storytelling in Cather's work.

In the twenty-eight bathers section of "Song of Myself" the watcher is a twenty-eight-year-old woman, located (arguably, at least, until the final lines of the section) at a safe remove from the bathers. The bathers are young men, "all so friendly,"<sup>2</sup> presumably, to one another, as they bathe by the shore in full view of "the fine house by the rise of the bank" (202).<sup>3</sup> Here, at least ostensibly, the gazer is female and the objects of her gaze are male. Yet the reason given for the woman's almost hungry preoccupation with these young men is an emptiness in her life, a void not met by the spectacular house or its rich appointments or any other trappings of material success: "Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome" (l. 201). This emptiness, in contrast to the desire to possess exhibited, in the biblical stories, by David and the Elders, who observe Susanna, leads the watcher to imaginatively join the bathers at play, to become one with the water as "Little streams pass'd all over their bodies / An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies" (l. 211-2). In Whitman's version, observation leads to a desire to share the experience rather than to possess the object of one's gaze.

David S. Reynolds suggests that the proliferation of sexual imagery in Whitman's work was an effort to recover sexuality from the prurient sensationalism of the time and render it more natural, and this reading provides a lens through which to regard Cather's bathing narrative as well:

Cleansing rhetoric is so rife in *Leaves of Grass* that one is tempted to read many erotic images in the

**Spring  
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Lora Black,  
Nebraska Public  
Radio broadcaster,  
reads selections  
from *My Antonia* at  
a candlelight even-  
ing gathering in St.  
Juliana Falconieri  
Church.

— Photo courtesy of  
The Red Cloud Chief



poem as intentional purifications of popular sexual images . . . Whitman seems to be borrowing from the popular sensationalists in the woman's fantasy scene: like them, he stresses that the woman is wealthy, that her sexual thoughts about the men are secretive, and that she fantasizes about not one but many lovers. But here the similarities stop. Whitman adopts the voyeuristic eroticism of the popular sensationalists but revises it in ways that make it natural and redemptive rather than selfish or destructive. (330)

While the notion of fusing cleansing language with the erotic is an important way to look at Whitman's work, it also provides an important link from Whitman to Cather. Cather's work, too, is "rife" with "cleansing rhetoric," not in an effort to rework popular sexual imagery but instead to rethink the role sexuality and sensuality play in the formation of character (both individual and cultural). In his examination of the twenty-eight bathers Michael Moon notes that "in merging without excluding either the (male) speaker and the woman into a composite 'twenty-ninth bather,' Whitman effectively destabilizes the genders of both the source and object(s) of the erotic gaze," a rhetorical move that not only deliberately inverts the biblical stories mentioned earlier, but also creates "a space in which both women and men are free not only to direct such a gaze at (other) men, but also to fulfill the desires that impel the gaze" (Moon 45). The work of the larger poem, concerned as it is with the fluidity and multiplicity of identity,<sup>4</sup> reflects issues at work in Cather's bathing narrative and provides a possible frame of reference for considering as a whole scenes taken from a sequence of short stories and novels.

In *O Pioneers!*, as the tragic romance of Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata draws to its inevitable conclusion, Cather's narrative detours through Alexandra's personal life, or lack thereof, describing it as "like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields" (203). Alexandra is unskilled at personal relationships, Cather argues, and lacks the skill to see "what was going on

in Emil's" mind or imagine "what was going on in Marie's mind" (203). Yet Alexandra has the capacity to preserve meaningful moments in her memory. The day she and Emil saw the wild duck is one of these resonant moments. Alexandra and Emil were on a long drive, "looking over the land" (204), when they stopped to eat their lunch in a shady spot by the river:

Under the overhanging willows of the opposite bank there was an inlet where the water was deeper and flowed so slowly that it seemed to sleep in the sun. In this little bay a single wild duck was swimming and diving and preening her feathers, disporting herself very happily in the flickering light and shade. They sat for a long time, watching the solitary bird take its pleasure. No living thing had ever seemed to Alexandra as beautiful as that duck. Emil must have felt about it as she did, for afterward, when they were at home, he used sometimes to say, 'Sister, you know our duck down there —' Alexandra remembered that day as one of the happiest in her life. Years afterward she thought of the duck as still there, swimming and diving all by herself in the sunlight, a kind of enchanted bird that did not know age or change. (204-5)

This moment, unlike Whitman's bathing scene or Cather's rendering of Don Hedger in the closet, allows Alexandra and Emil to watch the duck openly, and the duck herself to "take [her] pleasure" without fright. Alexandra and Emil find pleasure and a measure of ongoing solace in the scene, both in each other's company and in the gift of the duck's freedom of expression suggesting an exchange among the participants not present in Whitman's poem. While Alexandra preserves the duck in her memory as an "enchanted bird," Emil describes her as "our duck," showing that this moment, while important to both sister and brother, resonates quite differently for each. Emil speaks of the bird in the possessive,<sup>5</sup> just as he finds himself driven to speak of and to Marie Shabata. He cannot leave the duck "swimming and diving all by herself," just as he cannot leave Marie alone in the aspects of her life that give her pleasure. Cather's language here is telling: "Emil must have felt about it as she did," suggests, in fact, that Emil did *not* feel about it as Alexandra did, that his memory of a female creature taking her pleasure alone in a natural setting must be inflected by the language of ownership. It is not insignificant that the duck thus disporting itself is "solitary," linking her even more closely to Alexandra. This memory is termed "impersonal" (205), yet it is followed almost immediately in the narrative by Alexandra's dream/fantasy of being lifted and carried off by the yellow man, and her own bath, undertaken for a very different purpose than the duck's:

After such a reverie she would rise hastily, angry with herself, and go down to the bath-house that was partitioned off the kitchen shed. There she would stand in a tin tub and prosecute her bath with vigor, finishing it by pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body which no man on the Divide could have carried very far. (206)

(Continued on next page)

## READING WATER (Continued)

There's a very straightforward, obvious reading of this section of the narrative as a series of fantasies, culminating in an overtly sexual fantasy or daydream, followed by the proverbial cold shower, a suggestion that, for Alexandra, such fantasies are definitely taboo. Another possibility might be Cather's investigation into what is necessary for Alexandra's physical and psychic survival — the question of whether Alexandra can be permitted to dream about someone other (some male other) who will ease her burdens, who will take away "all her bodily weariness" (207), and relieve her of the draining work of being an independent woman, especially in contrast to the reality of the wild duck, who seems perfectly able to manage her life and her pleasure alone. Regardless of which gloss a reader prefers, both the corporeality of the duck and the fantasy of the yellow man, arranged in the narrative to lead into the cleansing scene, suggest that Alexandra's own bodily reality is more complex than the text has allowed up to this point. Her sexuality, nonexistent according to her brothers and most of her own community, is part of the "underground river," clearly surfacing here and making its presence known. This moment, significantly, occurs at a point in the narrative when Emil and Marie's thwarted, unsuitable romance is



**Spring Conference 2000**  
Janis Stout, Texas A & M University  
— Photo Courtesy of The Red Cloud Chief

about to come to its bloody and dramatic end. Alexandra and Emil share the experience of watching the wild duck, but her dream(s) of the yellow man and her bath are undertaken alone. When Emil and Marie are together, the result is tragedy and death. Solitude, then, may be read as integral to the experience of finding pleasure in the physical.

Thea Kronborg is more in touch with and aware of her body than other female protagonists in Cather's novels (save, perhaps, Eden Bowers in "Coming,

Aphrodite!"), and Cather's evocation of Thea's watery experiences is rendered more powerful, rather than less, by the absence of a partner. Thea has two important bathing scenes, the first in Panther Canyon and the second in her hotel in New York, after singing the role of Elsa. The scenes in Panther Canyon have figured prominently in criticism of *The Song of the Lark*.<sup>6</sup> Early in the sequence of the bathing scenes in her novels, Cather's own cleansing rhetoric makes it clear that, while hygiene for its own sake is not insignificant, the bathing experience also produces intense moments of revelation:

When Thea took her bath at the bottom of the canyon, in the sunny pool behind the cottonwoods, she sometimes felt as if the water must have sovereign qualities, from having been the object of so much service and desire. (304)

Describing the water thus provides an obvious link to the female form, but the water is already possessed of "sovereign qualities," leading Thea to make further connections among the water, herself, and the "Ancient People":

... Thea's bath came to have a ceremonial gravity. The atmosphere of the canyon was ritualistic. One morning, as she was standing upright in the pool, splashing water between her shoulder-blades with a big sponge, something flashed through her mind that made her draw herself up and stand still until the water had quite dried upon her flushed skin. The stream and the broken pottery: 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. . . . (304)

Other critics have read this scene through the "central image of running water [as] concerned with life as ceaseless change and motion which can only be 'arrested by art' . . . the only source of permanent value" (Thomas 41) and used the scene to further connections between Thea and the Rhine maidens and Thea and artistic identity. Without denying the potential validity of such readings, I want to suggest that the positioning of the subject in the water, occupied in a literal act of self-cleansing, to be sure, but an act of sensual pleasure as well, makes this a moment resonant with more than grand statements about Art. The language of ritual and ceremony combined with Thea's own "flushed skin" produces an intensity of sensation in this scene. Thea's body is important; this is not just a moment of abstraction. Janis Stout suggests that Alexandra's and Thea's triumphs have come at a price, the "redirection of sexuality to make its great energies serve a larger discipline," and that their sexual selves have been "driven into deep submersion" (Stout 103). Stout's use of the word "submersion," another watery image, leads to an additional interpretation. The bathing scenes speak clearly to the existence of Alexandra's and Thea's sexual, sensual selves, present and integral to their daily lives despite the perceived absence of a partner, and submerged only in bath water.

Cather's female characters express their sensual selves in other ways than through their own water play. As noted above, Alexandra and Thea's sensual selves are revealed in solitude, but not so the hired girls'. This is evident in one of the scenes in which Cather consciously reverses the direction of the appraising/approving gaze, Jim Burden's day in the country with the hired girls before his departure for university:

After my swim, while I was playing about indolently in the water, I heard the sound of hoofs and wheels on the bridge. I struck downstream and shouted, as the open spring wagon came into view on the middle span. They stopped the horse, and the two girls in the bottom of the cart stood up, steadying themselves by the shoulders of the two in front, so that they could see me better. They were charming up there, huddled together in the cart and peering down at me like curious deer when they come out of the thicket to drink. I found bottom near the bridge and stood up, waving to them. "How pretty you look!" I called.

"So do you!" they shouted altogether, and broke into peals of laughter. (MÁ 226)

While this scene is Jim's Edenic moment, it is also a moment of open sensuality, and enjoyment for Antonia, Anna, Tiny, and Lena. They find Jim attractive as he stands below them, naked in the stream, and they do not hesitate to share their appreciation. As in Whitman's poem, then, the key to the scene is participation rather than possession. This scene involves both a reversal of the traditional gaze and an exchange of seeing: while the girls are admiring him, Jim regards the girls from an unaccustomed vantage point and finds them "charming," natural and innocent, although he has been accustomed to view them as highly sexual, somehow suspect beings within the context of Black Hawk. This exchange ends with a moment that links Jim briefly with Alexandra's wild duck, taking pleasure in a solitary natural paradise:

Anna Hansen shook the reins and they drove on, while I zigzagged back to my inlet and clambered up behind an overhanging elm. I dried myself in the sun, and dressed slowly, reluctant to leave that green enclosure where the sunlight flickered so bright through the grapevine leaves and the woodpecker hammered away in the crooked elm that trailed out over the water. (MÁ 226-7)

Jim's moment of sensual pleasure is not disturbed and in fact may be enhanced by the arrival of the four young women. This moment of watery pleasure is different from the scenes involving female protagonists, however. While Cather still celebrates a particular kind of hygienic sensuality in this scene the narrative seems specifically interested in the role of landscape as it positions the bather as an emblem of culture or nationhood. Jim's body is submerged in the stream of narrative, unlike Thea's as she stands up in the stream, her body exposed, while the water dries on her. It is the hired girls' unabashed rejoinder that marks this scene and places them further outside Black Hawk society. This scene could not have taken

place with Jim bathing in a horse trough in the front yard: its location on the prairie that already holds so much meaning for Jim (as a place where he was able to be free in his dreams, activities, and associations) heightens the significance of his pleasure in the water as well as the girls' pleasure in seeing him disporting himself in the stream below them. They are all outside the hierarchical (deadening) social structure of the town at this moment, able to experience, see, and articulate pleasures that cannot exist within Black Hawk's boundaries.

Claude Wheeler finds as much pleasure in bathing unobserved as Jim Burden does basking in the gaze of Antonia and her friends. The long bathing scene in *One of Ours*, when Claude takes advantage of Enid's absence to relax in the sun-warmed water of the horse trough, begins with a carefully organized repetition of flower imagery:

The moon swam up over the bare wheat fields, big and magical, like a great flower. . . . He stretched himself out in [the water], and resting his head on the metal rim, lay on his back, looking up at the moon. The sky was a midnight-blue, like warm, deep, blue water, and the moon seemed to lie on it like a water-lily floating forward with an invisible current. One expected to see its great petals open. (OOO 169-70)

The moon lying on the sky mirrors Claude, emotionally and spiritually unopened, in the water. Unlike Jim, playing in the naturally flowing stream in the sunlight, expecting and eagerly anticipating the company of Antonia and her friends, this male bather is, like Thea and Alexandra, able to experience this moment only as a result of his solitude. As Claude is slowly able to relax and give his body over to the unfamiliar experience of sensual pleasure, his mind opens to the imaginative possibilities the moon suggests:

. . . the moon, somehow, came out of the historic past, and made him think of Egypt and the Pharaohs, Babylon and the hanging gardens. She seemed particularly to have looked down upon the follies and disappointments of men; into the slaves' quarters of old times, into prison windows, and into fortresses where captives languished. (OOO 170)

Reading the images of slavery and imprisonment is a fairly straightforward process given Claude's disastrous marriage to Enid Royce, his unrequited/unspoken/possibly unconscious feelings for Gladys Farmer, and his evolving sympathy for his mother and her own limited marriage. While Claude regards the sun in purely practical terms, the moon is linked to history, to a specifically biblical past, and to human limitation. This imaginative liberation occurs at a moment when Claude himself is least limited: when he is, temporarily, free of the imprisoning illusions that caused him to urge marriage on an unwilling Enid. The effects of her eventual acquiescence and their marriage ripple outward through Claude's life, forcing him to give up his friendship with his boyhood companion Ernest (and his relationship with kindred spirit Gladys), as well

(Continued on next page)

## READING WATER (Continued)

as condemning him to an enervating existence with his wife. His temporary freedom from illusion allows Claude a moment of unusual and, briefly, disturbing empathy: ". . . inside of people who walked and worked in the broad sun, there were captives dwelling in darkness" (170). His insight recalls Thea Kronborg's revelatory moment in the Panther Canyon stream, and Claude's bath is undertaken with the same desire for refreshment and rejuvenation as Thea's New York bath. The male bather, however, is so detached from enjoyment of anything physical that this spiritual moment takes on the resonance of a sexual encounter. Lacking Thea's ability to revel in the sensual pleasure of her bath, Claude's interaction with his own insight produces a powerful, almost frightening reaction:

He dismissed [the thought] with a quick movement of his hand through the water, which, disturbed, caught the light and played black and gold, like something alive, over his chest. . . . The people whose hearts were set high needed such intercourse — whose wish was so beautiful that there were no experiences in this world to satisfy it. And these children of the moon, with their unappeased longings and futile dreams, were a finer race than the children of the sun. This conception flooded the boy's heart like a second moonrise, flowed through him indefinite and strong, while he lay deathly still for fear of losing it. (OOO 170-171)

For Claude, then, this is not a moment of bodily freedom. It is, rather, an unexpected set of spiritual insights produced by an exchange between himself, the moon, and the water, which becomes a physical presence as it catches the light and plays on his body. Like the "Little streams" in "Song of Myself," the water is an active participant in this scene, yet Claude's solitude is unthreatened by its animation. The narrative presents this interchange as an experience of almost shattering intimacy, threatened by Enid's arrival in that controversial car:

At last the black cubical object . . . came rolling along the highroad. Claude snatched up his clothes and towels, and without waiting to make use of either, he ran, a white man across a bare white yard . . . he found his bathrobe, and fled to the upper porch, where he lay down in the hammock. Presently he heard his name called, pronounced as if it were spelled "Clod." His wife came up the stairs and looked out at him. He lay motionless, with his eyes closed. She went away. When all was quiet again he looked off at the still country, and the moon in the dark indigo sky. His revelation still possessed him, making his whole body sensitive, like a tightly strung bow. (OOO 171)

As "a white man in a bare white yard" Claude is unlikely to leave an impression, yet as a white man in a tank of dark water he becomes a participant in an intimate, revelatory, and physical exchange with the moon and the water. The "white man" displaces the dark water, allowing the light to become animate and

playful. Finally, Claude's spirit dares to imagine contact with others, though contact with a flesh-and-blood wife is to be avoided. Claude hides from Enid, preserving the secret pleasure of thinking thoughts and visualizing images so revealing and intimate she might as well have caught him in a sexual encounter with another person. The "black cubical box" of Enid's car stands in stark contrast to the fluidity and flower imagery of the water, sky, and moon and further separates her from the moment of revelation.

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, water provides a different kind of escape for Henry Colbert, serving as moral respite from issues of power and sexual violence:

The miller got very little sleep that night. When the first blush of the early summer dawn showed above the mountain, he rose, put on his long white cotton milling coat, and went to bathe in the shallow pool that always lay under the big mill-wheel. This was his custom, after the hot, close nights which often made sleep unrefreshing in summer. The chill of the water, and the rays of gold which soon touched the distant hills before the sun appeared, restored his feeling of physical vigor. He came back to his room, leaving wet footprints on the floury floor behind him. (SSG 192)

Colbert's "physical vigor" is restored by the water, but his body is invisible in the narrative, concealed first by the "long white cotton milling coat" and then by the water. This invisibility has taken the male bather even further from Thea and Alexandra. While Jim's body was invisible in the narrative, it was quite obviously visible to Antonia and the other hired girls; Claude's body mirrors the moon; Godfrey St. Peter's head (although covered by a bathing cap) and shoulders remain visible as he swims; but Henry Colbert's physical presence is as nearly absent as is possible in a scene involving a human in water. His feet leave clear imprints on the "floury floor," but Colbert's overwhelming desire is to leave no physical imprint on this scene (or Nancy):

He did not know why, but he felt strongly disinclined to see Nancy this morning. . . . Now that he must see her as a woman, enticing to men, he shrank from seeing her at all. Something was lost out of that sweet companionship; for companionship it had been, though it was but a smile and a glance, a greeting in the fresh morning hours. (192-3)

And something else has been lost: Henry Colbert's physical being. By making himself invisible to Nancy that morning (and, more importantly, by absenting himself from Rachel's plan to help Nancy escape), Henry merely continues the process begun by his bath in the mill pond. Cather writes Henry's disappearing body as a process set off by the idea of a woman as sexual being, an almost complete inversion of the David and Bathsheba story.

The bathing scenes span nearly the breadth of Cather's work, but water imagery takes other memorable forms in her texts. There are no bathers in *A Lost Lady*, for example, save Marian Forrester's

description, designed to entrance Niel and his companions, of herself wading in the stream. And Marian Forrester herself is never embodied the way Thea and Alexandra are. Cather describes her adornments in great detail but treats the bodily in asides: "It was not until years afterward that she began to wear veils and sun hats, though her complexion was never one of her beauties" (LL 11). The Sweet Water, too, is far from Jim Burden's clear prairie stream, as Mrs. Forrester describes it: "mud and water snakes and blood-suckers — Ugh!" (LL 12). Marian Forrester would probably have been safer with the blood-suckers in the Sweet Water than those she would encounter on land. The bathing has moved into story in this novel, and the erstwhile curative, transforming water is itself in need of healing. Water plays quite a different role in *My Mortal Enemy* and *Lucy Gayheart* (and, for that matter, in *Alexander's Bridge*).

While the scenes I have focused on here suggest that, for Cather, bathing is an opportunity for solitary revelation, a wider investigation of the bathers narrative shows important communal and community experiences as well. Beginning with the exchange among Jim and the hired girls in the stream, continuing on to Anton Fosicky,<sup>7</sup> Claude Wheeler's wartime bathing experiences with his fellow soldiers, and Monseigneur Laval washing little Jacques' feet, sharing in the bathing experience does produce comradeship and benevolent exchange, if lacking a sense of play akin to that seen in Whitman's poem.

The work of the bathing scenes is multiple: like Whitman's "Song of Myself," and other narratives focused on the work of becoming American literature, Cather's metanarrative seeks both to celebrate solitary physical pleasure without recreating popular romances or sensational depictions of sexuality and to experiment with the boundaries of body, landscape, and culture. The bathers tell a story of Cather's developing and increasingly complex sense of narrative and the nature of story. Echoes of biblical stories, Whitman's poem, and Cather's own novels reverberate in these scenes: Claude's bath evokes Thea's; Henry Grenfell recalls Don Hedger (and, in some ways, David and the Elders); Jim Burden's play in the stream follows that of Alexandra's duck. The juxtaposition of sensuality and ceremony, ritual and play, works to complicate Cather's rendering of the body. As the narrative moves from the concealed male observer to the monumentally visible white female and back again, so does the landscape emerge and subside in Cather's work. This union of body and terrain suggests that the experience of forming and belonging to a new country (and a new literature) was an endeavor integrally linked to the physical. Extending this notion reveals that the efforts of people (like the inhabitants of Black Hawk) to remove bodily sensation from daily life were not only unnatural, in all senses of the word, but destructive. The nature of an evolving American identity, for Cather, seems inextricably linked to these naked bodies, surfacing and submerging in various bodies of water.



#### Spring Conference 2000

Norma Ross Walter Scholarship winner Tuesday Metcalf, Beatrice, flanked by her parents, Pat and Mark Metcalf.

— Photo courtesy of The Red Cloud Chief

#### NOTE OF THANK YOU

I would like to thank Nancy Chinn, Marilee Lindemann, Ann Romines and Robert Scott for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *American Literature* 66, no. 4, December 1994: 689-717.

<sup>2</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," 1. 200, in *Leaves of Grass*, edited by Harold Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, New York: W. W. Norton, 1973 (1891-92 edition), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> None of the criticism I have encountered takes up the notion that this fine house is clearly visible to the young men on the shore, and that this might well be a deliberate provocation of sorts for the twenty-eight to bathe in full view of a house known to be owned and occupied by a single woman.

<sup>4</sup> Some readers of Whitman suggest that while the poem in general and this passage specifically exhibits concern with issues of fluidity, the uncertainty this reveals about identity is not necessarily figured as positive. This reading regards Whitman creating the twenty-ninth bather as a form in which he can merge unseen with the bathers, subsuming otherness into himself, but without taking on the responsibility inherent in claiming more directly, "I contain multitudes." Whitman neutralizes gender in this passage out of anxiety both for his own identity and for the individual in general, as he worries about how it can be possible to be part of the crowd and yet remain separate. E-mail from Robert Scott to the author, July 16, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> A reading of Emil's "our duck" as referring to shared experience rather than possession, while eliminating the now pejorative connotation of ownership from his reminiscence, fails to recognize the link between Marie and the duck, and, therefore, a troubling aspect of Emil and Marie's relationship.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Janis Stout locates Panther Canyon as the location of several "intensely female images [that] dominate the text" (*Strategies of Reticence*, p. 102), and Susan A. Hallgarth says that "in the symbolic womb of Panther Canyon, where Thea births herself, she discovered that women have always been artists" ("The Woman Who Would Be Artist", p. 172).

(Continued on next page)

## READING WATER (Continued)

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Marvin Friedman for reminding me of this scene.

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### William T. Auld, M.D., R.I.P.

Dr. William Thomas "Tom" Auld, Red Cloud native and longtime member of the WCPM Board of Governors, died May 11, 2000, in a Stockton, California, hospital. He was 91.

Auld was born in Red Cloud to William and Jessica Cather Auld. A pediatrician for 48 years, Dr. Auld had lived in Stockton since 1938. During World War II, he served in the Army Air Force Medical Corps.

He was named after his uncle, William Thomas Auld, who gave Red Cloud the Auld Public Library.

Services were held at St. Catherine's Chapel in Stockton. He is survived by his wife, Corinne Auld, Stockton; stepmother, Gertrude Auld, Lincoln; siblings, James Auld, Lincoln, and Carolyn Goodman, Denver.

He was preceded in death by his parents and maternal grandparents, Charles and Virginia Cather, all early residents of Red Cloud.

## Pay No Attention to That Woman Behind the Curtain; or, Willa Cather as Postmodernist

Janis P. Stout  
Texas A&M University

EDITOR'S NOTE: Janis Stout presented a version of this essay as the major address of "The Passing Show" at the 2000 Spring Conference in Red Cloud.

— AR

When views of Willa Cather as a modernist first began to be advanced a decade or so ago (for example, by Jo Ann Middleton), they were far from the standard reading. Cather was more typically seen as a latter-day classicist or a romantic realist in the tradition of the late Victorians. Some readers still seemed intent on celebrating her for being old-fashioned, a kind of anomaly or beautiful survival of more wholesome or straightforward times, and surely as an "elegist of the pioneer period" (Acocella 3). All of these labels have elements of truth. Yet Cather is a notoriously difficult author to label. What I want to propose here is that we can also think of her as a postmodernist — or perhaps better, a "proto-postmodernist."<sup>1</sup>

This view of Cather makes her once again a writer slightly out of step with her contemporaries, but as a member of the avant garde, a forerunner, rather than a survival of the past. Postmodernism, as a *historical* designation, is not really operative until after World War II, when elements that had existed variously at many times and in many texts in literary history cohered into a generalized whole that has come to seem recognizably distinct from the generalized whole that preceded it. I am proposing, however, that in Cather's 1940 novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* — primarily in its closing episode, one of the most talked-about scenes in all of her work — we see a clustering of those elements generally linked to postmodernism. If we move backward and forward from that final scene, to consider both what precedes it and what comes *after* the end, we will see that these elements are also present in other parts of the novel. Nor are they limited to *Sapphira* alone. We can see instances of a more general unsettling of reality-states also carried on by Cather in some of her other books as well.

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At the end of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, her last published novel and one in which she drew on her family's past and her own memories of Virginia with a directness unparalleled in any of her preceding work, Cather cast aside the veil of novelistic illusion to become, quite insistently, her own child self. Having brought the novel seemingly to an end with Sapphira's death, in reliably fictional terms and in a third-person narrative voice, she skips over a period of twenty-five



years to an epilogue couched in sudden and insistent first-person perspective. The time frame of the novel's main action has been established quite clearly at the opening as 1856. The lapse of twenty-five years, then, makes it 1881, the Cathers' last full year in Virginia. What she shows us in this interpolated memoir that is, at the same time, a continuance of the novelistic plot is the slave girl Nancy's return from Canada, just as she claims to have witnessed it. Not that the child who is carried from her sickbed to the window of the upstairs bedroom to watch as Nancy alights from the coach, the childhood self of the narrating "I," is ever given a name. She is not labeled Willa or (as would have been more accurate) Wilella or Willie. But the tone of the book changes so drastically and its scene is so palpably Willow Shade that we are left in no doubt as to its altered character. Novel has become memoir. Minrose Gwin calls it one of the most "disconcerting" endings in American literature (134).

If we were in any doubt that Cather was consciously violating novelistic convention by compounding its reality status with that of the memoir, she dispelled it in her letters. When Langston Hughes wrote to congratulate her on the success of the novel, she replied that she had personally known all the "colored people" in the book and as a child had been very fond of some of them.<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Henry Seidel Canby she defended the shift from third-person to first-person at the end, despite indicating that she shared his discomfort with the device, by insisting that the events described in the final section had really happened. She could not leave them out, she said, because Nancy's reunion with her mother had provided the memory that enabled her to write the book at all.<sup>3</sup> It is as if the switch from fictional narrative to nonfictional first-person had been made in spite of herself. We might add that if so, it had swept her into a more nearly confessional mode than is at all characteristic of her.

As I have already indicated, one thing that this shift from third-person to first-person, this intrusion of the child self with which we are all familiar, means is that, like any self-respecting post-modernist, Cather was blurring distinctions of genre. As Ann Romines has written, "the mix [in *Sapphira*] is more complex than in any other Cather novel: autobiography, history, and fiction are inextricably interwoven" (174). Collapsing of genre distinctions, with an associated collapsing of distinctions among reality-claims — that is, between fact and fantasy, between realism and magic — is one of the hallmarks of the postmodern.

Yet despite the abruptness of this shift at the end of the book, when the child self steps forward, it is not by any means the only time Cather violates the distinction between fiction and fact in this novel. Merrill Skaggs identified this fact some years ago, writing in *After the World Broke in Two*, "The author intrudes directly into this novel as author, from the beginning" and "refused to maintain the distinctions between fact and fiction" (180). She in fact refused to make such

distinctions in other works as well. But to confine ourselves to *Sapphira* for the moment, in the opening scene with Sapphira and Henry at the breakfast table (the example given by Skaggs as a site of authorial intrusion), she pointedly undermines the fictive illusion by speaking of the fact that she is writing a story: "How these two came to be living at the Mill Farm is a long story — too long for a breakfast table story" (5). Compounding her act of telling with the scene being told, she implies that if she were to give us that "long story" she would be doing it at the breakfast table herself or at any rate within the time Sapphira and Henry spend breakfasting — as if they really were doing so or as if the act of narration occurred, not outside the story being narrated, but within its framework of time and space.

At other points in *Sapphira* as well Cather calls attention to her own act of fiction-writing with explanatory asides, shifts of tense or tone, and direct addresses out of the fictive space to the reader in factual space. "Even today, if you should be motoring through Winchester on the sixth of June . . ." she admonishes us. Pointing out that "motorists" find the beautiful "Double S" section of steep road "now denuded and ugly," in contrast to the way it was "in the old times" (171), she completely breaks the reader's illusion of having been transported back to those old times. These moments in the text are not signs of naive writing, as readers who are unaccustomed to thinking of Cather as a modern or an experimental writer may suppose; they are metafictional devices that cast "a shadow of hyper-self-awareness over the events depicted" and "stave off readings of the novel as a naive act of historical fiction" (Urgo 91). We might also want to note the various pointers to actual historic precedent that occur in the text; these blur the boundary between fact and fiction *precisely because* Cather does not maintain the fictive illusion, or verisimilitude, usually sought after in historical fiction.

Clearly, Cather is writing metafiction — fiction about the fact of being fictional.

Another of the hallmarks of the postmodern is the emptying of the concept of selfhood, or what is sometimes called the evacuation of the subject. Cather calls subjecthood into question in *Sapphira* in multiple ways. She assigns actual biographical models to different fictional representations in the novel, for example, with Sapphira being a recreation of both her great grandmother and her mother, Mary Virginia Cather, who is also represented in the mother in the epilogue who would be Sapphira's granddaughter. She also gives conflicting attributes to single characterizations, dispersing unitary identity. Sapphira is both sinister plotter and courageous Christian, both an abusive and a companionable mistress to her slaves; Jezebel is both a loving and loyal companion and a "gorilla" (93) who reverts to would-be cannibal (89). — or maybe she only pretends to? Nancy, of course, is utterly transformed, an embodiment of the instability of identity,

(Continued on next page)



**Spring Conference 2000**

Steve Ryan (left), WCPM executive director, and Rev. Dr. Charles Peek, University of Nebraska-Kearney, outside Grace Episcopal Church.

— Photo by Beverly Cooper

## PAY NO ATTENTION

(Continued)

and the nature of the connection between child self and the real-world adult self narrating the book is problematic. In all these ways Cather problematizes identity.

Still, the most blatant instance of such intermingling remains the scene with which we started, the abrupt arrival in the text of a real-world person from outside the text. At that moment Cather interrupts the flow of third-person narrative convention to address the reader in an insistent first-person, thereby suddenly redefining the entire story as a factual account. But that claim cannot be strictly true, since her child self had actually seen nothing of the story *except* the reconciliation and in a real world as opposed to an imagined world the family members from whom she heard the story of the escape would not have had access to various of the thoughts and incidents that make up the preceding text. The final words of text *per se* are Till's. In discourse whose punctuation marks it as direct, that is, quoted, Till says that Sapphira should not have migrated to Back Creek "where nobody was anybody much" (295) — an assertion contrary to, and thus invalidated by, what has gone

before. Not only Nancy and Mrs. Blake, but Mrs. Bywaters, Jezebel, and several others have patently been established as persons of consequence, at least in terms of courage and moral character.

Beneath these final quoted words of narrative, the words spoken by Till, appear the words THE END, centered on the page, and then, in italics, a kind of explanatory note. First comes a conventional disavowal which one can imagine to have been Alfred Knopf's idea for legal reasons, the kind of disavowal that usually appears in the front matter of novels: "In this story I have called several of the characters by Frederick County surnames, but in no case have I used the name of a person whom I ever knew or saw." Here, though, the formulaic statement is placed on the last page, rather than the first, the same page where several lines of novelistic text also appear, and in fact with very little white space separating it from the words THE END, only slightly more than between Till's comment and "THE END." The eye catches all three things together: the last lines of the novel, the words THE END, and the disavowal about real names and people. The disavowal is drawn into proximity with the novel itself, almost as if it were quasi-text.<sup>4</sup> But then after the formula of disavowal, Cather adds something else. In a chatty conversational tone, speaking in her own voice, she tells us:

*My father and mother, when they came home from Winchester or Capon Springs, often talked about acquaintances whom they had met. The names of those unknown persons sometimes had a lively fascination for me, merely as names: Mr. Haymaker, Mr. Bywaters, Mr. Householder, Mr. Tidball, Miss Snap. For some reason I found the name of Mr. Pertleball especially delightful, though I never saw the man who bore it, and to this day I don't know how to spell it.<sup>5</sup>*

Some of the people she mentions in this listing have appeared in the text; some have not. In any event, by introducing them "merely as names" she calls attention to the verbal signs themselves and drains them of *either* fictive or nonfictive reality. But then she makes another assertion contrary to fact. She claims not to be able to spell *Pertleball* even though she has just done so. She then appends, again in all capitals, her own name, WILLA CATHER, in the position of a signature to a letter. The appended note, if not the entire preceding text, becomes a letter to the reader, thus a text belonging to yet another genre, not fiction and not memoir or history but personal address.

Footnotes and similar documentation or asides are not conventional parts of novels, but of factual or analytic writing. They belong to the "real" world, the world of fact.<sup>6</sup> By appending her note to the text of the novel, Cather deconstructs the reality status of both, note and novel. Certainly she was not the only modernist to call attention to the textuality of text, but her confidential tone and her apology for her own inadequacy as orthographer (her inability to spell out the text she wishes to write) forego the more usual modernist gesture of claiming a superior reality-status for fiction.

Rather, she empties the text of its imaginative density even as she vacates the subjects whose names she calls attention to as names.

Such gestures of authorial intrusion, with all that they mean for the reality-status of the text, are not peculiar to *Sapphira* though in Cather's earlier novels they are rarely so blatant or startling as the shifts of reality-status here. On at least two other occasions she employed footnotes that act in much the same way as the epilogue and appended note to *Sapphira*. In *My Ántonia* she provides instructions as to how to pronounce the main character's name, as if we were going to need to speak to her or about her and Cather were serving as teacher or introducer rather than a creative imagination subsumed in the narrative voice and severed from us by the gulf between fact and fiction; or as if (and this is in fact true) she as author realized that as we read we will want to hear the name in our minds, and so she must step out from behind the fabric of narration to provide that helpful information. The assumption seems to be that Ántonia is a real person, with a real name that has a correct pronunciation, rather than an imagined subject whose name is arbitrary (though for verisimilitude, necessarily according with the assertion of Bohemian ethnicity).

An even more pronounced instance of the appended informational note shattering the fictive illusion occurs in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, where Cather acknowledges having misrepresented a historical fact. After reporting the rumor that the Indians of Pecos Pueblo, home of Bishop Lamy's guide Jacinto, "sacrificed young babies to the great snake, and thus diminished their numbers" (129), she undercuts this notion by reporting that the archbishop found it "much more likely that the contagious diseases brought by white men were the real cause of the shrinkage of the tribe" (130). Exploring this likelihood and its effects, she asserts in the voice of the controlling narrator that the "population of the living streets" of Jacinto's pueblo was "less than one hundred adults," but at once invalidates that assertion in an explanatory note keyed to the text by asterisk: "In actual fact, the dying pueblo of Pecos was abandoned some years before the American occupation of New Mexico" (130).<sup>7</sup>

It was useful to Cather to invoke Pecos Pueblo since it had in fact died or been abandoned within postcolonial times, and thus lent itself to use as demonstration of the vanishing of the Native American, a "fact" both desirable, if one were committed to the imperial conception of the United States, and readily lamentable. But even if she was determined to incorporate Pecos rather than, say, some fictional pueblo for which she could make up a name, there were other ways to do so. Jacinto could be identified as a member or a son of the group that left Pecos and took refuge at Jemez. Or Lamy could pass near Pecos on one of his journeys and be told about the abandonment of the pueblo. One can imagine any number of alternatives. Instead she chose to incorporate the historical fact, keep the actual name, revise the fact to

suit the time setting of her novel, and then tell her reader that that's what she was doing. Pointedly insisting on the fictive nature of the text, she deconstructs historic as well as fictional reality. She does much the same thing by including historic personages with their actual names (Kit Carson, Padre Martinez) as fictional characters to whom she gives invented words and actions. This is a far cry from mere allusion to actual people and events, which has always been found in fiction.

An impulse of play with the reality-status of fiction and fact was in various ways characteristic of Cather's writerly mind throughout her long career, gathering strength in her later work and culminating in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. It is an impulse that appears, for example, in her repeated pseudo-documentary explanations of how "she," or more precisely the narrator, came to know whatever story it is that she is telling. She takes up and uses as a structuring principle the device of the explanatory frame story. "Willa Cather" recalls a train ride on which she encountered Jim Burden, who recalls, in terms that approximate Cather's real life, his own train ride across half a continent when he first saw Ántonia. As he does so, this fictional narrator shows how fiction, a book about Jesse James, shaped his perception of "fact." Or again, the opening of "Two Friends" walks the reader from such real-world events as "the invention of the motor-car" and "the War. . . that happened a hundred years after Waterloo" (that is, World War I) to a fictional time "long ago, before" and two fictional characters who were men she actually knew in that long-ago time of her youth (*Obscure Destinies* 161-2). *My Mortal Enemy* begins with Nelly Birdseye's seemingly factual explanation of how she came to know what she is about to tell us. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* begins with an imagined scene in which fictional prelates discuss the appointment of the fictional Latour (based on the actual Lamy) as Vicar Apostolic in response to the very real circumstance of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the Mexican War. Fact enters fiction and becomes its occasion.

Play with the reality-status of fact and fiction also characterizes several of Cather's essays, particularly from the 1930s and after, such as "Escapism," "On 'Shadows on the Rock,'" and "Light on Adobe Walls," which bears the imprint of her preoccupation with aging and ending. The status of the essays with respect to her deconstruction of the boundary between fiction and nonfiction is particularly interesting. If her short stories and novels approach or even cross that boundary from one side, her essays often do so from the other. In the case of the essay "A Chance Meeting" and the overtly fictional treatment of the same material, the short story "The Old Beauty," they approach it in mirroring fashion. The short story could almost be considered a revision of the essay, which itself opens very much as a short story might: "It happened at Aix-les-Bains, one of the pleasantest

(Continued on next page)

## PAY NO ATTENTION

(Continued)

places in the world. I was staying . . . ." (*Not Under Forty* 815).

I have taken us far afield from that moment in *Sapphira* when the child Willa steps to the front of the stage, leaving us with one foot planted firmly in each of two dimensions, fantasy and reality — or perhaps in neither. My point has been to demonstrate that Cather's experimental play with the truth-claim of fiction (and, indeed, of nonfiction) can be seen in conjunction with the defining characteristics of postmodernist writing, and that in this regard the very odd *Sapphira* and *the Slave Girl* is not so odd after all, compared to much of Cather's other writing. Though it is the most conspicuous example, the ending of *Sapphira* is not the only moment in her work when she asks us to keep her story and the act of writing it under the eye at the same time and leads us to question where fiction starts and fact stops.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joan Acocella, in her recent survey of critical commentary on Cather, reads Joseph Urgo's and Guy Reynolds's historicist scholarship on Cather as having argued, in effect, that she was a "proto-postmodernist" (106). Urgo's actual statement is, "Cather was cognizant of the simultaneous enactment of cultural forces in widely divergent settings, a perspective available today under postmodernism" (17).

<sup>2</sup> WC to Langston Hughes, April 15, 1941, Beinecke Library, Yale University, Langston Hughes Correspondence.

<sup>3</sup> WC to Henry Seidel Canby, February 4, 1941, Beinecke Library, Yale University, AL MSS 64, Box 1, folder 38.

<sup>4</sup> My description of the last page refers to the First Edition, which is followed in the Vintage paperback. The placement of the explanatory note was a problem for Ferris Greenslet as *Sapphira* was being prepared for Houghton Mifflin's Autograph Edition. He wrote Cather on December 5, 1940, proposing that it be moved to the "customary" place at the front of the volume in order to avoid the "slight infelicity of having the two things [i.e., note and text of novel] under the eye together, at the same time"; Greenslet to Cather, December 5, 1940, Houghton Library, Harvard bMS Am 1925 (341), folder 41. What struck Greenslet as an "infelicity" is precisely what I read as a source of interest and energy. Cather responded on December 13 (Harvard bMS Am 1925 [341], folder 21) that the press could use its own judgment. This uncharacteristically passive attitude toward design questions reflected both her uncertainty about her breaking of the fictive illusion with the autobiographical statement at the end (expressed in her letter to Canby) and her general enervation at the time.

<sup>5</sup> Not only the name Bywaters but also the name Snapp — spelled with two p's — appears in Charles Cather's 1865 diary.

<sup>6</sup> A postmodern novel that utilizes extensive footnotes to produce a text calling attention to itself as text in a much more insistent way than *Sapphira* is David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996).

<sup>7</sup> Later in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* Cather again breaks the fictive illusion by inserting a parenthetical explanation that "Mexicans are very fond of sparkling wines"

and recounting an incident that occurred "only a few years before this" (193), that is, before the time being spoken of in the novelistic action. Again the reader is switched from one dimension to the other, from fiction to "fact" but a fact of a questionable nature.

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### 46th Annual WILLA CATHER SPRING FESTIVAL

(The erstwhile Spring Conference)

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(Please note change from the usual weekend)

Red Cloud, Nebraska

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Papers on *The Song of the Lark*, to be broadcast this season on Mobil Masterpiece Theatre's American Collection on PBS, and other aspects of Cather's writing are also welcome.

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# Letters to the WCPM...

I am the daughter of Frank Morhart who donated the Opera House to the Foundation in 1991. My mother and I started thoughts and plans for the restoration as far back as 1980. I am so pleased that the restoration is finally beginning. The fundraising has been phenomenal. I am enclosing a gift for the ongoing financial base to maintain the building and to help provide for the expansion of programs.

It is my intent to attend the dedication of the restored Opera House in 2001. I am hoping you will keep me informed of when this will happen. Growing up in the Opera House was very special and I know that my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents would be so proud of this happening. Our family owned the building for 106 years.

Sincerely,  
Judy Hudson  
Santa Rosa, California

★ ★ ★

Dear Dr. Ryan:

I wanted to take a moment to thank you for taking the time to meet me when I was visiting in Red Cloud the middle of August, and also to express my appreciation to your fine staff for all the kindness that was shown to me.

I particularly want to give my thanks to Dorothy Mattison, who made my visit to your archives particularly enjoyable for my reading of Ms. Cather's letters, in looking at scrapbooks and artifacts, and for Dorothy sharing first-hand knowledge she has of people involved with Willa Cather.

As well, Nancy Sherwood's tour was truly outstanding in letting me see and experience so much that I doubt I could ever have found on my own. Please give her my thanks as well.

In sum, I wasn't quite ready for the powerful impact that Red Cloud had upon me. Having been to virtually every other place associated with Willa Cather, and having made the rather ridiculous assumption that because of Cather's writing I "knew" Red Cloud and Nebraska well, it was a most remarkable experience to confront the concrete reality that she transformed into poetry.

But I also was rather astounded that sometimes it was not quite as hard to do that as I thought — the prairie and the breathtaking bowl of blue that is the Nebraska sky — with clouds performing as if on a stage — ARE poetry and gripped my spirit in a way and with a power that perfectly explained why Cather could never let go of Nebraska regardless of where she happened to live.

To this day, having returned to a far more circumscribed world, I need only think of standing at the Cather Memorial Prairie or the original Cather home-

stead and the most wonderful pictures reappear before my eyes. Almost immediately I begin to feel the prairie's ever-constant breeze that seems to literally embrace humans, thereby giving hard reality to its invisibility.

The images that fell upon my eyes, the sounds of the grass and birds, the feeling of being caressed by the wind had the effect of pulling me into nature as something so vast and of such significance that I became literally indifferent to the things I think and worry about everyday as "important."

Equally important was seeing the spirit of the people who live in Nebraska. There is a cleanness and a wholesomeness — in the most complimentary sense — that explains a great deal about the depth of Cather's feelings for Nebraskans. And — despite all her fears of harm from the changes in the world — the core being of the people appears to me to remain true to Cather's sense of a decent world.

The change in perspective I experienced was truly dramatic and will make all the difference when I begin the voyage another time across the world that Willa Cather created.

That would not have been possible without the very able — and very kind — help provided by the wonderful staff of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. My deepest appreciation for the courtesy that was shown to me by all.

I look forward to visiting with you again.

My best,  
Jim Messenger  
Marietta, Georgia

*Mr. Messenger, an accomplished writer, is a two-time Academy Award nominee and winner of an Emmy.* — SR

★ ★ ★

Dear Mr. Ryan,

I write in response to your letter seeking funds toward the comprehensive historic structural analysis of the Cather House . . . . I should like to make some contribution.

Having been deterred from the enjoyment of literature in school by an inept teacher, I have only come to enjoy literature in my mid-30s and arrived somewhat accidentally at Willa Cather! However, I am currently reading *The Song of the Lark* and, being the musical son of unmusical parents, can sympathise with Thea to some extent, at least (I am an organist). As I hope one day to visit Nebraska and find the Cather House in good shape, I should like to play a small part in helping to make this so and wish you every success in your endeavours.

Yours sincerely,  
Nicholas J. Page  
York, United Kingdom

# “She had only to touch an idea to make it live”: Willa Cather and Mary Baker Eddy

David H. Porter  
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*O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918), the first novels in which Willa Cather drew on her own Nebraska background, differ dramatically from the novel that immediately preceded them, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912). Cather herself was well aware of the breakthrough these novels represented and gave large credit for it to Sarah Orne Jewett, whom she had met in Boston in 1908. In her preface to the 1922 reissue of *Alexander's Bridge*, she distanced herself from this novel and suggested the impact of Jewett's advice in helping her find her own voice: “One of the few really helpful words I ever heard from an older writer, I had from Sarah Orne Jewett when she said to me: ‘Of course, one day you will write about your own country’ (vii).”<sup>1</sup>

That Cather was in Boston at this time, and hence met Jewett, was the serendipitous result of a *McClure's Magazine* assignment. In January 1907 *McClure's* published the first installment of Georgine Milmine's *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy*, a series that was to run through June 1908 and appear in book form in 1909 (references to the book version of the biography hereafter *MBE*).<sup>2</sup> S. S. McClure assigned Cather to this project after the first installments proved so flawed as to cast serious doubt on those yet to come (that the portrait of Eddy in the December announcement of the series was in fact not of her, as many readers pointed out, suggests how serious were the problems). Cather consequently spent more than a year in Boston meticulously checking Milmine's research and substantially revising her manuscript.<sup>3</sup>

A 1922 letter from Cather to Edwin H. Anderson, director of the New York Public Library, suggests that her role in the published versions of the Eddy biography was indeed substantial.<sup>4</sup> Cather stressed to Anderson, however, the confidential nature of her letter and its contents, and in public statements throughout her life she repeatedly minimized her contribution, treating the project as an assignment she had completed conscientiously but had neither wanted nor enjoyed. Not surprisingly, critics have, with a few exceptions, followed her lead, portraying her involvement with Eddy as a detour that left little mark on her subsequent career — aside from the fact that it facilitated the meeting with Jewett.<sup>5</sup> Such had always been my assumption — so much so that, though I have long owned the book, I had never read it closely. A new biography of Eddy, Caroline Fraser's *God's Perfect Child*, sent me back to it, and as I've read it — along with portions of the *McClure's* series, which are not always identical with the book<sup>6</sup> — I've become increasingly convinced that Cather's lengthy exposure to Eddy contributed to her subsequent fiction in ways that have not been fully appreciated.

I have been particularly intrigued by the final *McClure's* installment (hereafter *McC*), much of which did not find its way into the book, and which seems to be largely Cather's own (Crane 220). In tone as well as substance, this June 1908 section goes well beyond the book in both its criticism of Eddy and its recognition of her achievement. On the critical side, it attacks her theology, science, history, and economics — indeed, her whole approach — with a vigor and specificity not duplicated in the parallel passages of Milmine's final version — and has this to say about Eddy's writing: “[*Science and Health*] was a book of 564 pages, badly printed and poorly bound; a mass of inconsequential statements and ill-constructed, ambiguous sentences which wander about the page with their arms full, so to speak, heedlessly dropping unrelated clauses about as they go” (*McC* 180). Cather is even more troubled by Eddy's smallness of spirit, her inhumanity toward others, her abnegation of the physical world — again to a degree far beyond what appears in the final Milmine book: “Her foolish logic,” she writes, “her ignorance of the human body, the liberties which she takes with the Bible, and her burlesque exegesis, could easily be overlooked if there were any nobility of feeling to be found in ‘Science and Health’; any great-hearted pity for suffering, any humility or self-forgetfulness before the mysteries of life. Mrs. Eddy professes to believe that she has found the Truth, and that all the long centuries behind her have gone out in darkness and wasted effort, yet not one page of her book is tinged with compassion” (*McC* 185-186). And this on Eddy's view of the physical world: “It is ‘matter’ that is our great delusion and that stands between us and a full understanding of God; and matter exists, or seems to exist, only because we have invented it and invented laws to govern it. . . . The more we know about the physical universe, the heavier do we make our chains; our progress in the physical sciences does but increase the dose of the drug which enslaves us” (*McC* 185). That such a passage should appall Cather, given her attachment to the land, her reverence for nature, her respect for human inquiry, is scarcely surprising.

On the other hand, she concludes this same final *McClure's* essay by recognizing that Eddy, for all her flaws, was one of those people who make things happen, once more in a passage not included in the book: “New movements are usually launched and old ideas are revived, not through the efforts of a group of people, but through one person. These dynamic personalities have not always conformed to our highest ideals; their effectiveness has not always been associated with a large intelligence, or with nobility of character. Not infrequently it has been true of them —

as it seems to be true of Mrs. Eddy — that their power was generated in the ferment of an inharmonious and violent nature. But, for practical purposes, it is only fair to measure them by their actual accomplishment and by the machinery they have set in motion" (McC 189). Moreover, the concluding section of this essay also contains a fuller and more positive statement than does the book on those aspects of Christian Science that Cather found persuasive. While the focus is on Eddy's foolish — but characteristic — opposition to other practitioners of the same approach, both in this country and abroad, this section begins by recognizing that "Mrs. Eddy and her followers have given a demonstration too great to be overlooked, of the fact that many ills which the sufferer believes entirely physical can be reached and eradicated by 'ministering to a mind diseased'." It also acknowledges that Eddy's impact has been to oblige "the most hide-bound medical practitioners to take account of this old but newly applied force in therapeutics," and elsewhere in the same section Cather makes explicit what is implicit in this last clause — her acceptance of the basic tenet of Christian Science: "That the mind is able, in a large degree, to prevent or to cause sickness and even death, all thinking people admit" (McC 187-188, 183).

I mentioned earlier that there have been exceptions to the critical tendency to treat the Eddy biography as an interlude which, aside from giving Cather the experience of shaping a major book,<sup>7</sup> had but minimal impact on her subsequent novels. Not surprisingly, the most notable of these exceptions have been two scholars involved with reissues of the Eddy biography. Stewart Hudson, who wrote an extensive Introduction to the 1971 edition, clearly shows that Cather's reaction to Christian Science and to Eddy shaped many aspects of an early story, "The Profile," which Cather was writing at the very time when she was becoming involved in the Eddy project (xx-xxv).<sup>8</sup> He also persuasively suggests the impact of Eddy's personality — and of Cather's negative reaction to it — on Myra Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy*, Mrs. Cutter in *My Ántonia*, Mrs. Royce in *One of Ours*, and Mrs. Archie in *The Song of the Lark* (xxv-xxviii).

David Stouck's Introduction to his 1993 edition stresses that working on Eddy encouraged Cather to focus in depth on issues of human psychology and suggests that her "thinking and writing about Mary Baker Eddy probably left its strongest visible imprint on *My Mortal Enemy* and the portrait of Myra Henshawe" (xix). He also links Cather's "puzzlement" over Eddy's world-view to "the romantic idealism of such sympathetic but deluded figures as Claude Wheeler and Lucy Gayheart" and draws intriguing connections between Eddy's compelling presence and Cather's portrait of Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady* (xviii-xix, xxv-xxvi). Finally, he suggests that Eddy's very absurdities inspired Cather to hone a latent satirical bent and even proposes an association between Eddy's flawed religious yearnings and the elevated, communal

religious vision Cather projects in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (xxi, xxvi).<sup>9</sup>

While Stouck thus concentrates on traces the Eddy project left on Cather's post-1920 novels, my own musings have focused on the three great novels of the mid-teens, and their central themes and characters. The further I got into the Eddy biography, the more I found certain questions springing to mind: Can it be mere accident that soon after the Eddy project Cather moves from the male hero of *Alexander's Bridge* to three "dynamic" and "effective" female leads (to use Cather's own terms for Mary Baker Eddy) — Alexandra in *O Pioneers!*, Thea in *The Song of the Lark*, Ántonia in *My Ántonia*. Or, to bypass *O Pioneers!* for now, that Thea and Ántonia, different as they are, both recall Eddy in the sort of spiritual energy they embody and project? "She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl," says Jim Burden of Ántonia; "but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things" (*My Ántonia* 398). And of Thea, Cather writes: "She had only to touch an idea to make it live" (*Song of the Lark* 478). The animating force of these women seems of a piece with descriptions like the following of the impact that Eddy, for all her flaws, could exert on those around her: "To-day some of these who have long been accounted as enemies by Mrs. Eddy, and whom she has anathematised in print and discredited on the witness-stand, still declare that what they got from her was beyond equivalent in gold or silver. They speak of a certain spiritual or emotional exaltation which she was able to impart in her classroom; a feeling so strong that it was like the birth of a new understanding and seemed to open to them a new heaven and a new earth" (MBE 155-156).

When we turn to *O Pioneers!*, we find yet stronger connections.<sup>10</sup> To begin with, Alexandra, the central female figure Cather first creates after her work on Eddy, resembles the founder of Christian Science even more clearly than do Thea and Ántonia. Like Eddy, Alexandra begins in relative poverty but rises to great success. The Milmine/Cather biography constantly mentions Eddy's keen business instincts,<sup>11</sup> and Alexandra shares the same trait: "Before Alexandra was twelve years old she had begun to be a help to [her father], and as she grew older he had come to depend more and more upon her resourcefulness<sup>12</sup> and good judgment . . . It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors. It was Alexandra who could always tell about what it had cost to fatten each steer, and who could guess the weight of a hog before it went on the scales closer than John Bergson himself" (*O Pioneers!* 22-23 — hereafter *OP*).

Alexandra resembles Eddy also in her strong will, her ambition, and the pleasure she takes in the material success she achieves. Like Eddy, she is shrewd when it comes to acquiring land (*OP* 57ff., 64ff.,

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167ff.) — and not afraid to turn to the law when necessary. “Go to town and ask your lawyers what you can do to restrain me from disposing of my own property,” she tells her brothers. “And I advise you to do what they tell you; for the authority you can exert by law is the only influence you will ever have over me again” (OP 172).<sup>13</sup> Carl’s relationship to Alexandra, which occasions Alexandra’s quarrel with Oscar and Lou, reveals yet other ties to Eddy: “What a hopeless position you are in, Alexandra!” he says to her. “It is your fate to be always surrounded by little men. And I am no better than the rest” (OP 181). Compare Cather’s picture of the men who surrounded Eddy: “Her business assistants and practitioners were, most of them, young men whose years had need of direction. In the nature of the case, they were generally young men without a strong purpose and without very definite aims and ambitions” (MBE 305). In time, of course, Alexandra accepts Carl’s “littleness,” and the fact that he is several years younger than she, and marries him — just as Mary Baker Glover married (and took the name of) one of these “little” men who surrounded her — a man many years her junior:<sup>14</sup> “People who knew [Mr.] Eddy well in Lynn describe him as a quiet, dull little man . . .” (MBE 172).

Cather portrays both Mary Baker Eddy’s and Alexandra’s minds as prevaillingly practical — and finds similar limitations in both: “What Mrs. Eddy has accomplished has been due solely to her own compelling personality. She has never been a dreamer of dreams or a seer of visions, and she has not the mind for deep and searching investigation into any problem. Her genius has been of the eminently practical kind, which can meet and overcome unfavourable conditions by sheer force of energy . . .” (MBE 482). As to Alexandra, “Her mind was slow, truthful, steadfast. She had not the least spark of cleverness” (OP 61). True, Alexandra has more capacity to dream than Cather/Milmine find in Eddy, but she too inclines toward the practical side of life. Sharon O’Brien (436) draws attention to the passage where Alexandra “dreamily” watches her brothers swimming in a “shimmering pool” but can’t keep her eyes from drifting “back to the sorghum patch south of the barn, where she was planning to make her new pig corral” (OP 46). And the flip-side of her genius in such practical matters is a curious lack of vision in others: “If Alexandra had had much imagination she might have guessed what was going on in Marie’s mind, and she would have seen long before what was going on in Emil’s. But that, as Emil himself had more than once reflected, was Alexandra’s blind side, and her life



*Spring Conference 2000*

*The St. Juliana Choir practices prior to Friday evening candlelight gathering.*

had not been of the kind to sharpen her vision” (OP 20-3).<sup>15</sup>

There are even specific similarities between the house Alexandra builds and Eddy’s home outside Concord, New Hampshire — indeed, from Cather’s description, Alexandra’s home might well have carried the same name as Eddy’s, “Pleasant View.” Both are located on hills and surrounded by fruitful gardens and fields, and both have extensive, unobstructed views. Alexandra’s farm displays “a most unusual trimness and care for detail,” and “[w]hen you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm” (OP 83, 84). At Eddy’s home “the trees are kept closely trimmed, the turf neatly shaven, and the flowerbeds are tidy and gay” (MBE 412). Each house stands as evidence that its builder is a woman who has made her mark in the world. Pleasant View is clearly the home of “a wealthy woman” (MBE 415), just as, in Alexandra’s case, “Any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide, and that the farmer was a woman” (OP 83). Despite its exterior elegance, the inside of Alexandra’s home is “curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort” (OP 83), and the kitchen remains the hub of activity. Similarly, Pleasant View is “comfortable but not luxurious,” and Eddy lives “as simply and methodically as before” (MBE 415, 412).<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the accomplishments of both Eddy and Alexandra inspire Cather to comment on the impact a single person can have — indeed, to suggest that important things happen *only* through such persons: “New movements are usually launched and old ideas are revived, not through the efforts of a group of people, but through one person,” Cather writes in the final paragraph of her *McClure’s* summation (McC 189). “Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a



woman," she writes as she describes Alexandra heading back to the Divide, certain now that her future — in which she will make such a mark — lies there and not in the river lands she has just visited with Emil (OP 65).

Interestingly, the "charismatic" side of Eddy, so strongly felt in Thea and Antonia — and later in Marian Forrester — appears in *O Pioneers!* less in Alexandra than in another unforgettable Cather figure, Marie Shabata. The correspondences between Eddy and Marie are very close — and are underscored by their virtually identical first names. Of Mary Baker Eddy we read, "[L]ife in the society of this woman was more intense and keen than it ever was afterward," of Marie (and women of her ilk), "People come to them as people go to a warm fire in winter" (MBE 65, OP 304). Cather constantly evokes Marie's presence through vivid colors, as in this first description of her: "She was a dark child, with brown curly hair, like a brunette doll's, a coaxing little red mouth, and round, yellow-brown eyes. Every one noticed her eyes: the brown iris had golden glints that made them look like goldstone, or, in softer lights, like that Colorado mineral called tiger-eye" (OP 11).<sup>17</sup> Here is Mary Baker Eddy: "She was like a patch of colour in those gray communities. She was never dull, her old hosts say, and never commonplace . . . There was something about her that continually excited and stimulated, and she gave people the feeling that a great deal was happening" (MBE 122-123). The effect of Eddy's words was "that of the wind stirring the wheat-field"; Marie exerted a similar natural force: "People couldn't help loving her" (MBE 314, OP 305).

These similarities between Mary Baker Eddy and the two central women of *O Pioneers!* seem especially striking in light of the severe reservations Cather had felt and expressed about Eddy just a few years earlier. But these very reservations, in turn, dictate the positive qualities with which she invests these two figures, thus rendering them as diametrically opposed to Eddy in some respects as they are similar to her in others. The Cather/Milmine Eddy repeatedly deserts her friends when it fits her personal agenda; Alexandra stands by hers through thick and thin, be it Ivar, so attacked by members of Alexandra's own family; Mrs. Hiller, who so angers Frank Shabata; or Frank himself after he has committed the murders. From the novel's very first scene Alexandra serves as surrogate mother to Emil, a role she maintains throughout the book — and a role that contrasts sharply with Eddy's callous abandonment of both her natural and her adopted sons.<sup>18</sup> And while there may be similarities between the women's marriages to younger, initially weaker men, there are also significant differences. Eddy's husband becomes ever more her pawn after their marriage, and even his premature death provides her with a readily-grasped lever by which to attack her enemies.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Carl grows into the role he assumes at the end of the book, and we are sure his marriage to Alexandra will only gain in strength and reciprocity as the years pass: "[Alexandra] took Carl's

arm and they walked toward the gate. 'How many times we have walked this path together, Carl. How many times we will walk it again! . . . I think we shall be very happy' " (OP 308).

The biography constantly shows Eddy living off those around her, draining their energies and resources, and often paying them inadequately or not at all. In contrast, Alexandra pays her help well (too well, her brothers feel), is unfailingly generous both to her neighbors and to less well-off members of her own family (as in the piano she gives to her niece), and makes her home a center of good will that flows freely to all around her. While Eddy constantly uses the law to attack others or to protect her own selfish interests, Alexandra turns to the law only when she is attacked by her brothers — and at the end when she promises to use every legal means possible to gain pardon for Frank Shabata, the man who has killed her beloved younger brother. There is a similar opposition in the ways Eddy and Alexandra use their savvy about land. On the shrewd maneuvers by which Eddy took over (at very favorable cost) the land on which the Mother Church was to be built, then gave it back — but only so as to guarantee her own control — the book comments, "The members of the Boston church were dazzled by Mrs. Eddy's lavish gift, and very few of them had followed the legerdemain by which the church had gone into Mrs. Eddy's hand a free body and had come out a close corporation" (MBE 404). In contrast to Eddy's grasping use of land to bolster her own power, Cather, in the closing pages of *O Pioneers!*, evokes Alexandra's generous recognition that any human ownership of land is but temporary: "The land belongs to the future, Carl . . . We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it — for a little while" (OP 307-8). To Eddy, land is something to hoard and manipulate for her own purposes; to Alexandra, something to love, understand, and gladly pass on to others.<sup>20</sup>

The sharp differences in their attitudes toward land reappear in the homes these two women create — so similar in appearance, so different in the roles they play. Eddy's house is a place to sequester herself, permitting guests the occasional audience, and constantly dispatching emissaries to work her will, but living in such a way as to create the "traditions of mystery and seclusion" which the biography explicitly contrasts with the "cheerful aspect" of the house itself (MBE 412). Alexandra's house, on the other hand, reaches out to the world, providing a home where her young Swedish girls come to begin new lives, where old Ivar feels protected despite his strange habits, where old Mrs. Lee can for a few days return to her old ways, where Carl Linstrum can stay longer than most neighbors think proper. And it is a place from which Alexandra herself constantly goes out to see and help others — to visit Marie Shabata, to comfort the ailing Mrs. Hiller, to call on the imprisoned Frank

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in Lincoln. The extensive grounds of Pleasant View insulate Eddy and her house from the intruding world, while Alexandra's energy radiates from her house into the surrounding fields: "You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best" (*OP* 84).<sup>21</sup> If the homes they create reflect in microcosm the differences between Eddy and Alexandra, the relationships of these two women to the world of nature expand these differences into the macrocosm. As Cather laments in her final *McClure's* installment, Eddy sees all of nature as but a barrier to our freedom: "The earth, the sun, the millions of stars, says Mrs. Eddy, exist only in erring 'mortal mind' . . . . All phenomena of nature are merely illusory expressions of this fundamental error" (*McC* 181). In contrast, this same world of nature, and the stars in particular, feed Alexandra's very being: "[She] drew her shawl closer about her and stood leaning against the frame of the mill, looking at the stars which glittered so keenly through the frosty autumn air. She always loved to watch them, to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security" (*OP* 70-71).

The counterpoint between Marie and Eddy, so alike in their powerful impact on others, so different in their personalities, is equally instructive. Throughout the book Eddy displays a dearth of warmth, compassion, or love, and we have seen how appalled Cather was by her lack of human feeling. It is no surprise, then, to find these very qualities richly embodied in Marie, be it in her powerful capacity for love — first for Frank, then for Emil; her continuing care for Frank, and her efforts to comfort him, even when he behaves horribly to her and to others; her anguish over the five ducks that Emil has shot for her; or the fire-like glow that draws everyone to her. Marie's sheer animal vitality, exemplified in the speed with which she moves (Carl asks at one point, "But can't she walk? Does she always run?" [*OP* 136]), contrasts with the sickliness of Eddy throughout her life, her frequent need to be carried from place to place. And while Cather endows Marie with a powerful and earthy sexuality, the Cather/Milmine Eddy is deeply ambivalent about marriage and procreation — a stand consonant, of course, with Eddy's distrust of the whole physical side of nature (cf. her query, cited by Cather with obvious concern: "Is marriage nearer right than celibacy?" [*McC* 187]).

Eddy deploys her charismatic powers in such a way as to line her own pockets, enhance her own power, and — frequently — destroy or weaken those around her. Marie's irresistible magnetism is an inevitable, tragic outgrowth of her vitality, warmth, and love of life, a mysterious power that dooms both

herself and others despite her best efforts: "It happens like that in the world sometimes," Carl tells Alexandra. "I've seen it before. There are women who spread ruin around them through no fault of theirs, just by being too beautiful, too full of life and love. They can't help it" (*OP* 304). Eddy too spread ruin in her wake, as the biography clearly shows, but scarcely "by being too beautiful, too full of life and love." Despite the comparison of her oratory to "the wind stirring the wheatfield" (*MBE* 314), Eddy's impact in the Cather/Milmine biography usually comes across as sinister, warped, at war with nature. In contrast, the tragic fate toward which Marie draws both Emil and herself partakes of the grandeur — and beauty — of nature at its most appealing, and most terrifying: "[I]t was something one felt in the air, as you feel the spring coming, or a storm in summer. . . . [W]hen I was with those two young things, I felt my blood go quicker, I felt — how shall I say it? — an acceleration of life" (*OP* 305).

The association of Marie with Eve — so inescapable, given the chapter where she and Emil meet in the orchard and together eat of the fruit (and where she specifically mentions the threat of snakes [*OP* 151]) — seems also to echo Cather's work on Mary Baker Eddy.<sup>22</sup> Cather was deeply troubled by Eddy's theory of evil, her idea that sickness and death do not actually exist but are just forms of "error," the result of faulty thinking of "mortal mind." The following is just one of many passages that question this basic tenet of Christian Science as Eddy presented it: "No philosophy which endeavors to reduce the universe to one element, and to find the world a unit, can admit the existence of evil unless it admits it as a legitimate and necessary part of the whole. But the very keystone of Mrs. Eddy's Science is that evil is not only unnecessary but unreal" (*MBE* 227-228).<sup>23</sup> Emil, as he moves toward his disastrous final meeting with Marie/Eve — again in the orchard — entertains similar imaginings: "He felt as if a clear light broke upon his mind, and with it a conviction that good was, after all, stronger than evil, and that good was possible to men. He seemed to discover that there was a kind of rapture in which he could love forever without faltering and without sin" (*OP* 255). This Edenic vision shatters as Ivar tells Alexandra of the deaths of Marie and Emil: "'Mistress, mistress,' he sobbed, 'it has fallen! Sin and death for the young ones! God have mercy upon us!'" (*OP* 271)<sup>24</sup> Could there be a stronger response to Eddy's faulty theology, to her belief that evil and sin can just be wished away, than the way Cather tells this story of her doomed Adam and Eve in their garden of delights?

Cather's contact with Sarah Orne Jewett, though clearly of critical importance, was occasional at best and largely through their frequent correspondence, while Mary Baker Eddy was for more than a year the constant focus of Cather's research and writing. Is it not likely that a strong and apparently growing distaste for Eddy on the one hand, a recognition of her astonishing success on the other, encouraged Cather to



### Spring Conference 2000

Dick Cavett, left, chats with Matt Van Boening in the WCPM bookstore — ever the crossroads of the illustrious and distinguished. Mr. Cavett was guest speaker at the banquet.

think long and hard about what were to become central themes in all three of the great novels of the teens: What makes a woman strong? successful? a leader? Does spiritual strength entail denial of the body and of the physical world? Does a person succeed only by trampling others down? Must a strong leader — or a strong woman — spring from “the ferment of a violent and inharmonious nature”? How and why is it that evil is so inextricably intertwined with good? It is in *O Pioneers!* that Cather begins to confront these issues, a quest that will continue in *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia*.

### NOTE OF THANK YOU

The author thanks Merrill Skaggs and Ann Romines for their helpful comments and suggestions on this article, and Amy Syrell of the Scribner Library at Skidmore College for assistance in obtaining needed library materials.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For Jewett’s impact on Cather, see O’Brien, esp. 334-378.

<sup>2</sup>The 1971 and 1993 reissues of *MBE* follow the original pagination exactly.

<sup>3</sup>On this episode, see Woodress 192-198; O’Brien 291-292; Downs 116-120.

<sup>4</sup>See Bohlke (1982) 291-293. Cf. Woodress 194: “Although Georgine Milmine’s name was on the title page both in serial and book form, Cather was the real author of all but the first installments.”

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., O’Brien 291-294 on ways in which this and other *McClure*’s assignments pulled against Cather’s growing ambitions as a writer of fiction.

<sup>6</sup>See Crane 218-222 for a useful summary of the differences between the two versions.

<sup>7</sup>Among Cather’s works only *The Song of the Lark* is longer than the Eddy biography (Stouck, *MBE* xvii). Work on Eddy also helped prepare Cather for her “autobiography” of S. S. McClure, published in 1914 under his name, but written entirely by Cather.

<sup>8</sup>Hudson also finds traces of Cather’s exposure to Christian Science in two other stories from the same period, “Eleanor’s House” and “On the Gulls’ Road” (xxix-xxx).

<sup>9</sup>Downs comments briefly but thoughtfully on the impact of the Eddy project on *Alexander’s Bridge*, *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, *A Lost Lady*, and *My Mortal Enemy* but suggests that the Cather character most like Eddy may be Sapphira in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (119-120).

<sup>10</sup>Although *O Pioneers!* was not published until several years after Willa Cather’s stay in Boston, she commented in a 1913 interview that she had dedicated it to Sara Orne Jewett “because I had talked over some of the characters in it with her one day at Manchester” (Bohlke [1986] 9). Since Jewett died in 1909, Cather must already have been thinking ahead to *O Pioneers!* during the time in which she was working on Eddy.

<sup>11</sup>Eddy’s flair for turning a profit is a ubiquitous theme. Cather comments, for instance, that Eddy “advertised the first edition of ‘Science and Health’ as a book that ‘affords an opportunity to acquire a profession by which you can accumulate a fortune’” (*McC* 186).

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Eddy’s “resourcefulness and energy in the prosecution of her plans” (*MBE* 460).

<sup>13</sup>On Eddy’s constant legal involvements, cf. *MBE* 245: “From 1877 to 1879 Mrs. Eddy was in the law-courts so frequently that the Boston newspapers began to feature her litigations and to refer to them and to her with disrespectful jocularity.”

<sup>14</sup>At their marriage, both bride and groom listed their age as 40, despite the fact that Mrs. Eddy was in fact 56: *MBE* 175.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *OP* 175: “. . . those clear, deliberate eyes, that saw so far in some directions and were so blind in others.”

<sup>16</sup>Specifically mentioned (*MBE* 412) also is the delight Eddy takes each day in looking from Pleasant View across the hills and fields to the place where she was born, just two miles away; in the same way, Alexandra retains in her new house “the old homely furniture that the Bergsons used in their first log house” (*OP* 84) and delights that her new home has grown naturally out of the land her parents first settled.

<sup>17</sup>Compare the description of Marie’s brilliant costume when she dresses as a fortune-teller for the church fair (*OP* 216) and Carl’s vivid recollection of her eyes (*OP* 135-136, 305).

<sup>18</sup>She showed “a curious aversion” to her natural son from the beginning and abandoned him early in his life (*MBE* 26ff.), and she determinedly prevented any sort of rapprochement with him at the end of her life (*MBE* 453ff.). As for her adopted son, Foster Eddy, the tale of how Mrs. Eddy dispatches flowers and a group of Christian Scientists to cheer him on his way as he sails for Philadelphia is one of the great set pieces of the biography (*MBE* 422).

<sup>19</sup>See *MBE* 291ff., including the following comment: “Explained as the work of animal magnetism, Mr. Eddy’s death, which might otherwise have been a blow to his wife professionally, was made to confirm one of her favourite doctrines.”

<sup>20</sup>Cf. O’Brien 435: “[Alexandra’s] relationship with the land dissolves boundaries between self and other, but with the soil she can both erase the self and create it.”

(Continued on next page)

## WC AND MARY BAKER EDDY

(Continued)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Carl's comment to her: "You belong to the land . . . as you have always said. Now more than ever" (OP 307). Mrs. Eddy's isolation at Pleasant View was dictated in part by her advancing age, but even this would not seem to necessitate her 1899 edict that "[n]either a Christian Scientist, his student or his patient, nor a member of the Mother Church shall daily and continuously haunt Mrs. Eddy's drive by meeting her once or more every day when she goes out — on penalty of being disciplined and dealt with justly by her church" (MBE 445).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Stouck 31: "The two stories woven together in *O Pioneers!* stretch back to Genesis. Alexandra's is the story of creation . . . Emil and Marie's is the story of lovers cast from the earth's garden through sin."

<sup>23</sup> See the extended comments on this issue in MBE 179-207, 227ff.

<sup>24</sup> The same issues seem at stake when Amédée insists on running his new header despite severe stomach pains — and ends up dying of a ruptured appendix (OP 241ff.). Cather's description of his young wife's assurance that all will be well seems close to Eddy's easy minimizing of disease and evil (OP 242): "Only good things could happen to a rich, energetic, handsome young man like Amédée, with a new baby in the cradle and a new header in the field." Her optimism is not only contradicted by his death but also set against the bleak picture of life on the Divide with which Cather opens the novel.

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Ann Tschetter

— Photo Courtesy of *The Red Cloud Chief*

## Omaha Scholar Studies Webster County

by Harriett DeLay

Ann Tschetter (pronounced "Chetter") says she loves to visit Red Cloud. "Its small-town atmosphere and friendliness remind me of the place in South Dakota where some of my family lived," the Omaha teacher says. Ann has made many trips here while pursuing a doctorate in history at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her dissertation examines the culture and history of Webster County.

Ann has spent long hours in the Cather Foundation archives, and looks forward to more at the Webster County Historical Museum. She has pored over newspapers of the 1870s and '80s on microfilm. "There were ads in the old circulars and papers inviting and enticing Easterners to come to Nebraska in those years. This was when it was planned that Red Cloud would be the main railroad stop between Omaha and Denver."

A boom followed. People streamed westward, seeking the American Dream. But "by 1890, this was over. I keep thinking, what happened to the dream?" Tschetter reflects.

There was a marked contrast between what was promised and what the homesteaders found. "This is a big country out here. It was semi-arid; people suffered losses in many ways. How would one adapt to no water, no trees?" Ann wonders.

Tschetter discovered in the initial stages of research that it is difficult not to include Cather in her study. In fact, Ann admits she has become "a real Cather geek" who has not only read all the author's books but also attended several Cather conferences, including those in Quebec and Mesa Verde, where *Shadows on the Rock* and "Tom Outland's Story" are set.

"I've been hooked for years on Willa Cather's stories and enjoy comparing her to the research about

the area and period." Her favorite Cather novel is *One of Ours*, the tale of a restless farm youth transported to the trenches of The Great War.

Ann credits one of her University of Nebraska-Omaha professors, Bruce Baker, member of the WCPM board of governors, with seminal influence on her current study. "At one point during my college years, he suggested that I do a paper on Red Cloud," she recalls. "Once I came to Red Cloud, I kept coming back!"

The historian/scholar already holds master of arts degrees in English and history. The doctoral candidate teaches at UNO.

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## John Murphy and Joe Uργο: A Conversation in Letters

[Editor's note: Those who attended the final session of the 1999 Cather Colloquium at Mesa Verde will remember an intense exchange between two noted Cather scholars, John J. Murphy (of Brigham Young University) and Joseph Uργο (then of Bryant College, now of the University of Mississippi). They disagreed emphatically about — among other things — the uses of textual scholarship, and their exchange sparked lively follow-up discussion. For our ongoing series of reflections on the state of Cather studies, I asked Uργο and Murphy to expand their views in an exchange of letters in spring 2000. Their freewheeling, exploratory correspondence follows. My only difficulty, as editor, was persuading them to stop! Thanks, John and Joe.

If you'd like to add your voice to this stimulating conversation, please let us hear from you. — AR]

Dear John,

I have attended a number of Cather conferences at specific locations chosen for their importance to Cather's life and work: Nebraska, Quebec, Shenandoah Valley/Washington D.C., New York, Mesa Verde. At each of these events, our attention is directed to source studies: exactly when was Cather on Mesa Verde, whom did she talk to, what did she know about the Anasazi, how long was she stranded in the cave, and so on. Each conference has been invaluable to me personally and professionally, as they have been to others, I know. Immersing oneself in the historical and geographical contexts out of which Cather's art emerged is invigorating, stimulating, and instructive. At the same time, the University of Nebraska Press has been issuing the Scholarly Editions of Cather's works, each with an Historical Essay and Explanatory Notes guiding the reader again and again, back to original context, original meaning, and historical significance. Lest your mind wander too far from the original signifi-

cance, those footnotes tell you what Cather probably had in mind when she wrote.

Every now and then I experience a tiny voice in my head rebelling against all this. The voice is made larger by Emerson's preference for books as sources of inspiration, not information. The voice booms as I recognize a desire to be taken up by Cather's aesthetics, away from the material, historical and geographical world. Like Jim Burden, I want to drift, I want to ride, to project myself out over the edge of the world. Or like Alexandra Bergson, I want to be carried by something stronger than my consciousness. And for that I don't want to be tethered to facts like the date of Cather's trip to Quebec or when exactly it was that Isabelle married Jan. I want to go out over the edge of these facts, past Nebraska and Virginia and Mesa Verde to what it was that the fact of physical, landed existence did to Cather, how it drove her to imagine alternative dimensions and convinced her finally that art, not journalism, was her calling.

For this I'd envision a "Cather and No Place" conference, held on a ship maybe, a floating opera or a ship of fools, where no one would be allowed to mention a biographical, historical, social (race, sex, gender, any), geographical, or political matter, but where scholars and readers generally would be compelled to articulate the transcendent experience of Cather. If everything is political, well then — we'd center on nothing.

I am thinking of a passage from Emerson's essay, "The Poet":

An imaginative book renders us so much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward, when we arrive at the precise sense of the author. I think nothing is of any value in books, excepting the transcendental and extraordinary. If a man is inflamed and carried away by his thought, to that degree that he forgets the authors and the public, and heeds only this one dream, which holds him like an insanity, let me read his paper, and you may have all the arguments and histories and criticism.

Of course I value historical scholarship — I've done a fair amount myself. I wonder, though, if we critics mislead the public by failing to attend to what moves us in the writing to which we have devoted our lives and our careers. That movement is away from fact and place and physical bounds, for me.

Yours, Joe Uργο

Dear Joe,

About conferences, I too would welcome a topic-less one on Cather, maybe not "Cather and No Place," but an opportunity to examine the art without a prescribed handle, an invitation to participants to use whatever handles they like. As far as information goes, there are worthless kinds not relevant to a writer's art (and much of this kind clutters confer-

(Continued on next page)



— Photo Courtesy of The Red Cloud Chief

## Kearney Photographer Gives 1947 Front Page to Archives

Russ Hanson, a Kearney photographer, was renovating an old home when he discovered the front page of the Friday, 25 April 1947, Omaha *World-Herald* morning edition lying in a drawer. Featured prominently is news of Willa Cather's death the previous day.

Hanson contacted Dr. Steve Ryan of the WCPM, offering his find to the Foundation. Dr. Ryan drove to Kearney to accept the piece, which Hanson had enclosed in plastic for protection. It will be placed in the Foundation archives.

The article discusses Cather's years in Nebraska; her teaching, journalism and writing careers; and notes she is survived by two sisters, Miss Elsie Cather, Lincoln; and Mrs. Jessica C. Auld, Palo Alto, California; and two brothers, John E. Cather, Whittier, California; and James D. Cather, Long Beach, California. It closes with "Miss Elsie Cather planned to leave Lincoln Thursday night for New York."

"We're grateful to Mr. Hanson for thinking of us and donating the item," Ryan said. "It's a fine artifact, quite interesting, in good condition, and we are pleased to have it in our archives."

Other articles on the page include "Toast by Stalin to Truman Highlights Kremlin Banquet," describing a state dinner attended by the foreign ministers of France, Great Britain, Russia, and the United States following weeks of difficult diplomatic discussions in the Russian capital; and "Holdrege's Soured Milkman Found; Rejoined the Army," resolving the mystery of a milk truck en route from Holdrege to North Platte discovered abandoned at Elm Creek. The milk had soured and the missing driver was found to have suddenly re-joined the armed forces.

The masthead notes the edition has 34 pages and sells for five cents.

## MURPHY AND URGO (Continued)

ences), but there are other kinds that illuminate that art and expand it beyond the writer and into realms we used to refer to as "universal."

It is interesting that you quote Emerson because it reveals a preference for the kinds of art that expand the reader's horizons without having to be much informed beforehand. But there are other kinds of art, and sometimes individual writers produce both kinds. Let's take Emily Dickinson as an example, since she is close in spirit to Emerson's "The Poet." In poems like "The poets light but lamps" (J883) and "As if the sea should part" (J695), circumference (the transcendental and extraordinary experience you call for) comes easily. Both poems expand the reader outward, into increasing concepts of space and mystery. But to experience circumference in a poem like "I should have been too glad, I see" (J313), it is not only necessary to clarify the role of suffering in the expansion process (and in Christian life) but also to identify aspects of the passion of Christ, references to Palm Sunday, the meaning of "Sabachthani," etc. The poem generates a greater experience if the reader is informed.

There are some works of Cather fiction — perhaps *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* — that are immediately stimulating and through seamless language expand the circumference of the reader with ease, enabling us to take flight like Cather's larks. (Of course, there are informed ways of reading these texts as well.) But other books depend on information to be effective. I've just spent about three years of "free time" on *Shadows on the Rock*. Not much in Cather moves me, stimulates me toward expansion as does the description of Quebec that opens the fourth book ("Pierre Charron"). I've always appreciated the beauty of the prose in this passage, but it never excited me until I found out the implications of the description.

*Shadows* depicts a Counter-Reformation society, which explains its religious hysteria, frantic missionary activity, and mysticism. One of the Catholic teachings reformers were perceived to be challenging was the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist (and the

priestly power of Transubstantiation that went with it). Note the many affirmations of the Real Presence in the novel, such as Jeanne LeBer's desire to live as a sanctuary lamp and to sleep with her head a few inches from the Sacrament. Now connect these to the novel's early comparison of Quebec to a Nativity scene (a setting for the Incarnation) and, later, to Cécile's setting up the creche. Now reread the description of Quebec that opens Book Four. An analysis of the text (helped by Cather's earlier version) reveals Quebec as a new Jerusalem more than a new Bethlehem (although they are related), "gleaming above the river like an altar with many candles, or like a holy city in an old legend, shriven, sinless, washed in gold" (137). The comparison to an altar combines the Second Coming and the doctrine of Transubstantiation, the changing of Eucharistic bread and wine into the physical presence of Jesus on the altar; the description also compresses several biblical passages and makes rock-set Quebec the transfigured church. In the earlier typescript Cather borrowed from Psalm 195 to describe the sun as "the bridegroom issuing from his chamber" and used Matthew 13.43 (depicting the children of heaven shining at judgment like the sun) to compare the colonial community to "the righteous in their Heavenly father's house." The entire passage owes to the description of the transfigured city in Revelation 21, that of the bride as the tabernacle of the Lord generating its own light and descending to the righteous as their dwelling. Now the fusion of all this makes me breathless, but only after I had enough information to figure out what was happening.

Information for its own sake is worthless to me, but when it reveals the way a text is executed (which Henry James claimed is what criticism is all about), it is stimulating. In *My Antonia: The Road Home* (1989), I concluded a summary of all the sexual stuff that had cluttered Cather criticism for several years with the idea that even if Jim's journey and "all such journeys [probably] arise from psychic pressures and maladjustment, somehow they also explode beyond sex, beyond time, beyond the claustrophobic lives of authors." And it's because of this explosion that we keep reading them.

Yours, John

Dear John,

I want to begin where you end, with that explosion "beyond sex, beyond time, beyond the claustrophobic lives of authors." Two contexts are important to me when I read literature. One is the context within which the author worked. For that, scholarship such as yours on *Shadows on the Rock* is indispensable. The reader misses much in literature if he knows little about the past, about the sources the author had in mind when she wrote, or about the more general references that the author assumed her audience would know — assumptions that do not hold up over time, as we in education know very well.

My concern lately, however, is for another context, the one created by the text and the capacity of books as powerful as Cather's to shape our lives even if we don't know a sod house from a smokehouse. I teach Cather in Rhode Island, where most of my students have not seen a sky bigger than one that fits in the windshield and for whom the term "flat land" is an oxymoron. I don't want to tell them they can't be moved and shaped by Cather's art because of geography any more than I want them to be concerned, when they read *Shadows on the Rock*, that they can't read the French. My hope, of course, is that those who come to love Cather and reach that point where they must read her on occasion in order to stay sane, will be the kind of people who want to know enough French to know the passage or at least know how to find out, and who will have Nebraska on their list of vacation destinations, leaving the cruise ships and the casinos for another life.

My favorite Cather essay is not "The Novel Dèmeublé" (which I think is overrated and in which I think Cather was kidding around a bit. For example, it seems to me that you have found a lot of furniture in the novels you've annotated.) but "Escapism," published in *The Commonwealth* in 1936. It is Cather's response to charges that literature must be relevant to the real world of politics and commerce. "What has art ever been but escape?", she asks. The artist, she says, is "useful, if you like that word, only as true poets are, because they refresh and recharge the spirit of those who can read their language." My argument is not with you, John, nor with the work of textual scholarship. My quarrel is with our laxity as educators in instructing students how to read the language of escape in order to refresh and recharge the spirit. Instead of exploring the value of literary experience, we seem to want to become sociologists, or psychologists, or historians. Or worse, we want to protect sensibilities from being offended and so we look to fiction for self-validation. Great and powerful writers, Cather says in "Escapism," are "valuable, like powerful stimulants, only when they are left out of the social and industrial routine which goes on every day all over the world. Industrial life has to work out its own problems."

I am drawn to the ambiguity and uncertainty of Cather as an escape from the overload of social and industrial confidence that surrounds me. Life today seems to buzz with certainty — this will make me healthy, that will kill me, I should buy this, should not say that. Was Cather a southerner or a westerner or a New Yorker? Was she a lesbian? Who is that on the train with Burden? Is Sapphira a good guy or a bad guy? All arguments can be ordered to prove any of these alternatives and, as we know, have been. But, to invoke Henry Adams, "Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man." Adams got to this aphorism in thinking about the kinetic theory of gas, like Tom Outland. But, unlike Tom, he knew better than to fight the idea.

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## MURPHY AND URGO (Continued)

To return to the matter of evocative context. Who among Cather readers can look at a cathedral — any cathedral — and not think about Archbishop Latour and speculate about the human being responsible for its construction? Who among us can pack up and move without St. Peter's doubts about it? How many Lena Lingards are held responsible for some Ole in the field? Who among those of us who are teachers can talk to a student whose dream it is to become a writer or a doctor or anything that requires sacrifice, and then listen to her tell us about her mother who needs help or her boyfriend who wants her to move in with him, and not think about Thea Kronborg? But even more, my mind has been shaped by the rhythms of Cather's prose, and by how she has taught me to watch, watch carefully for moments that rise out of the mundane and the trivial to capture so much meaning, to write it all on the setting sun, so to speak. "One of those nights stands out in my memory as embracing them all," says the narrator of *My Mortal Enemy*, "as being the burden and telling the tale of them all." I am less concerned with remembering what follows in that text than I am with aspiring to a quality of mind that embraces such chaos, where meaning solidifies and disperses — insight glimpsed momentarily and then lost to our venturesome memory.

When I have the desire for Cather it's not usually a desire for Nebraska or Mesa Verde but for a mode of thought, a sensibility. My fear is that we critics have not done well in making that into something real enough to describe and annotate. We have spent so much time responding to the charge of escapism, and making a case for this or that interpretation of the text, that we have let slide what moves us to even give a damn in the first place. And I do think this is something to be informed about, something readers need to know as much as the hierarchy of contexts you



### *Spring Conference 2000*

*Enjoying a morning cup of coffee and freshly baked kolaches at the WCPM Bookstore are Steve Ryan, Betty Jean Steinshouer, and Bruce Baker.*

— Photo by Beverly Cooper

articulate so convincingly, and with which I have no real quarrel.

Yours, Joe

Dear Joe,

I enjoy our exchange. It concerns matters we unfortunately seldom discuss at meetings, and I think we agree on more than we don't. I taught Cather for some twenty years north of Boston, and most of my students could only construct imaginative prairies far superior to anything "real" and closer to Cather's constructed prairie. However, once college English majors and graduate students have that necessary creative experience, they should explore the materials the artist used to enable them to have it. This includes words and other art works as well as houses, barns, and prairie dogs. Such students should try to become experts. Our trouble is we've educated lots of "experts" who lack or are incapable of the imaginative, creative experience and can't help their own students to have it. Too many of these kinds of experts wind up dominating literary scholarship and designing sessions on topics that divert literature from what it is supposed to be.

I too think Cather kids around in her essays — they are a kind of fiction. However, they are fabrications with a purpose, and the point about all the furniture is that it shouldn't be a dead heap of stuff but function to enhance atmosphere, character, and theme.

My first literary passion was Hawthorne because in stories like "Ethan Brand," "Roger Malvin's Burial," and "Rappacini's Daughter," he exploded me into a highly charged world I've come to define through Flannery O'Connor as one of mystery. (And as a New Yorker I had been fortunate in being protected for years from the real House of Seven Gables.) I think that's why I favor religious and morality-driven texts. They go way beyond most sociologists, psychologists, and historians. Besides, as literary scholars we're only amateurs in these other fields. Cather was not kidding when she said that if we're less interested in stories "than in the Preservation of the Indian or Sex or Tuberculosis, then [we] ought to be working in a laboratory or a bureau." Those questions you list about Cather and her characters are only worth asking if they help us explore the imaginative process of the art.

I'd like to discuss the chaos and order topic you mention, but Ann Romines told me to be brief — and I've already disobeyed her.

Be in touch, John

Dear John,

I wasn't an English major in college, even though I got my highest grades in that subject, because I found English classes rather stultifying. It was an era of high structuralism. I remember key-punching Walt Whitman's "Calamus" and running a program to study comparative usage of the nonspecific articles "a" or



“an” and the more specific article “the” preceding nouns. I forget the findings but I got an A, and I can still see those keypunched cards. I have never forgotten what I learned, which is an antipathy for placing the reader in thrall to such exactitude.

My first literary passion was Faulkner. I read *Absalom, Absalom!* on an overnight bus from Eugene, Oregon, to San Francisco, the year I graduated college. A girl I'd had a crush on in my senior year was doing her thesis on it. She read it over and over, and was a lot more interested in it than in me, that was certain. It must have been some kind of self-flagellatory move, but I bought the novel and read my first Faulkner in an all-night stint. When I arrived in San Francisco, my friend there saw what I was reading and asked, “What is it about?” I told him I had no idea but it was surely the best book I had ever read. I have long forgotten the girl, but I have read that book dozens of times. This is a long way to go to agree with you about mystery: the essential value of literary experience is confrontation with the ineffable, the mysterious, the point beyond understanding which nonetheless beckons us toward it. Of course O'Connor comes to mind. So does Melville. And Jewett. And Willa Cather, to return to our subject, for whom mystery was, and remains, the thing that does not need to be named.

Thank you for this exchange. I have admired your work for a long time and since coming to know you, admire you as well as someone who cares very much for the nature of literary experience and for the place of the imaginative in the lives of students and society generally. The realities pressed hard on my generation and I fear they press even harder today, with their conspiracy to convince us we have little time for such seeming trivialities as reverie and destinationless searching. More than once I have had fantasies of firebombing the career center on campus, or at least posting a warning on its front door.

Maybe we can co-sponsor an ALA session on Cather: Chaos and Order, and each of us can accuse the other of taking the other side, without quite admitting that to choose either is to abandon the mystery of their cohabitation, a surrender to the facts.

Yours, Joe

Dear Joe,

I was a history major for the first half of my college life but switched to English (with a minor in history) because literature made more sense to me than it had in high school classes that were hodgepodes of



*Lori Unick, left, and Matt Hansen of Bahr Vermeer Haecker architectural firm, Omaha, take measurements at the Childhood Home. Various teams of experts have visited the site in preparation for a comprehensive preservation needs analysis. The assessment is made possible by a grant from the Save America's Treasures fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, established by the J. Paul Getty Trust.*

spelling quizzes and composition exercises with an occasional novel, play, or poem tossed in outside any cultural framework. When I did decide on literature and then to teach it, it was to share what seemed beautiful to me — much like taking a friend to a favorite painting, to see it deeply in its combination of parts.

I went to a rather undistinguished commuter university in Brooklyn in the early 50s with other first-generation ethnic kids whose parents (many of them immigrants) had never finished or even started high school. So it was a great luxury, I thought, to be able to read poetry and fiction at an age when an earlier generation was working at jobs to pay family bills. In order not to feel too guilty I had to believe that a life in literature was a noble pursuit, that the literature I would teach could benefit others, could bestow vision and insight, make life better, more tolerable, difficulty more meaningful, and so on. What I believed had been summed up well by Kentucky novelist Elizabeth Madox Roberts (a contemporary of Cather): “it is the function of art to enlarge one's experience, to add to man more tolerance, more forgiveness, to increase one's hold on all the out-lying spaces which are little realized in the come and go of every day.”

I still believe something like this, which is why I am intolerant (literature didn't refine me here!) of some things going on in the profession, like convoluting rather than illuminating texts, serving personal proclivities in the name of literary scholarship, dedicating oneself to demolishing hated texts, skimming or

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## MURPHY AND URGO

(Continued)

intentionally distorting texts to serve some political agenda. What has happened to interest in aesthetics, or to the kind of expanding vision those parents of yesteryear could have enjoyed if they had the opportunity? I thought Cather was a good route for the many, and for the fewer who would graduate to James or Faulkner, or to another level of Cather.

I'd love to cooperate on a session on Cather: Chaos and Order. Not that I have answers, but the exploration might be exciting — and we could convolute with the best if we reached an impasse!

By the way, tell those Rhode Island students to go to the sea to imagine the prairie — or better still, take them there yourself, and read Cather on the beach.

Cheers, John

## Spring Conference 2000: Pennsylvania Scholars Savor Catherland

By Harriett DeLay

Three scholars who attended the 45th Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference were 11th grade advanced English students from State College, Pennsylvania. The young women were Kate Dreibelbis, Rebecca Falkenstern and Colleen Flickinger. Their teacher, Mary York, accompanied them to Red Cloud.

State College is a city of about 75,000. There are 2,000 students at State College Area High School. Their class has 600 students.

The trip was funded by their school and various projects after the trio selected *My Ántonia* for in-depth study during a unit on novels. "We could have chosen other books, and almost did," the young women commented. "We're glad we chose Willa Cather's book. Researching this writer and then actually getting to visit Nebraska and Red Cloud have been wonderful experiences — some we will remember a lifetime."

Once the project was underway, the students contacted Dr. Steve Ryan, WCPM executive director, for further information. Dr. Ryan, in turn, put them in touch with Antonette Turner, Bladen, granddaughter of Annie Pavelka, Cather's prototype for the book.

The project included journals, poems, sketches, videos and characterizations, all drawn from *My Ántonia*. Kate, the artist of the group, based portraits on excerpts from the book. "I scanned the book again after reading it, looking for descriptions," the scholar said. The students presented their work at Saturday

morning's "The Passing Show" at First United Methodist Church.

Rebecca read some of the poetry she had composed about Ms. Cather's writings. "After being in Nebraska for the first time, visiting sites here and being so involved in Willa Cather's work, I saw that her thoughts all lead a reader to where she (Cather) was headed all along — back home to Red Cloud," Rebecca said.

The young women compiled a 90-page book, paralleling *My Ántonia* with writings, poetry, and sketches. They presented the book to Dr. Ryan as a gift to the WCPM. Ryan said the gift will be placed in the Willa Cather archives.

None of the three young women had ever visited Nebraska prior to their time here last week. "It's so flat . . . there's so much blue sky . . . the straight roads . . . we love the sounds of the wind. These things are just like Willa Cather described about



Left to right: Antonette Turner, Jeanne Margritz, Colleen Flickinger, Kate Dreibelbis, Rebecca Falkenstern and Mary York.

— Photo courtesy of The Red Cloud Chief

Nebraska in the book! We can understand now what she means," all three of the students enthused.

Rebecca's father had researched Nebraska and Red Cloud on the internet. "We visited some of the sites he found, like the Homestead Monument at Beatrice, Princess Blue Cloud's burial place [on the bluffs above the Republican River, south of Red Cloud], and we went to find the Guide Rock [in southeastern Webster County]," she explained. "He told us to be sure to eat plenty of Nebraska beef while here!"

The students, Mrs. York, and Jeanne Margritz, their hostess for the two days they were in Red Cloud indeed enjoyed eating beef at The Palace. They were joined there by Mrs. Turner, who accompanied them as they toured. Jeanne also provided helpful information while touring Red Cloud and the prairie sites.

"We are so impressed with the friendliness of the people here," Colleen smiled. "Our city and school are

so large; life in Red Cloud is so different and we love this small town. We are fascinated to walk down the street and see the sites that Willa Cather saw and wrote about."

During the country tour, Mrs. Turner showed Mrs. York and her students the barn at the Annie Pavelka farmstead. "She could tell us so many things we found so interesting," all agreed. Since Kate collects old license plates, Mrs. Turner presented her with one she had. She also made kolaches for the Pennsylvania visitors. "Hers were so good; the ones we made for our class when we studied about Czech traditions weren't so good," all admitted.

Mrs. York and the three scholars also visited Red Cloud High School; principal Roger Hammond provided them a tour. They were impressed with the distance learning center and other features of the local institution.

Among the Nebraska souvenirs the students will take back to their school will be many photographs, more journaling and videos. "When we stopped near Beatrice, you could actually hear the wind blowing. We thought this was so neat and hope we've captured it on tape so that our classmates can experience it," they mentioned. "This (the wind) was like poetic voices!" The group returned to Lincoln Saturday afternoon, hoping to have enough time to visit a Czech festival underway in that city.

Upon return, they will share their experiences with their faculty and classmates.

Mrs. York concluded the visit by saying, "To be here and to be experiencing the sights, sounds, smells and the culture that stimulated [Cather's] writing, touches the imagination. We came here because Willa Cather touched the imaginations of three wonderful students in State College High School . . . Willa 'spoke' to these students . . . Willa now lives in the spirit of State College."

— Edited and reprinted with permission  
of *The Red Cloud Chief*

### Cather Clearinghouse

**FOR SALE:** *My Antonia*, 1954 Riverside Literature Series edition (Houghton Mifflin). Inscribed by Carrie Miner Sherwood. To highest bid. Minimum bid: \$200. Contact the WCPM&EF.

**SOUGHT:** A seven-foot grand piano for the renovated Opera House. The WCPM&EF is willing to pay shipping of the gift of a concert-quality piano in good condition.

## The Eighth International Cather Seminar: Willa Cather's Environmental Imagination

From June 17-24 the Lied Conference Center at Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska City, Nebraska, was the site for the Eighth International Cather Seminar, "Willa Cather's Environmental Imagination." As the Lied Center guidebook notes, Arbor Day Farm was once the agricultural estate of J. Sterling Morton, the founder of Arbor Day, and visitors to this historic landmark are greeted by arboretums, apple orchards, a hazelnut research field, and hiking trails graced with wooden footbridges, all of which reflect the National Arbor Day Foundation's commitment to tree planting and care.

With its cathedral ceiling, exposed timbers, floor-to-ceiling fireplaces, and earthy color scheme, the lobby of the conference center is reminiscent of a ski resort; although mountains are absent, of course, the building seems native to this wooded portion of southeast Nebraska. Lied Center's publicity emphasizes that it is an "environmentally friendly building." The site was selected, in part, because of Polly Duryea's recommendation that this would be an ideal location in which to consider the intersection of the seminar's topics: environmentalism and Cather. Everywhere the ecological ethics we discussed were put into practice; in our guest rooms, for example, placards tutored us tips on reusing linens and recycling waste.

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Registration began on Saturday afternoon for the approximately 180 seminarians, but as seminar director Susan J. Rosowski noted, numerous people attended individual events that were open to the public. One highlight of the pre-seminar presentations was University of Nebraska-Lincoln biology professor James Estes' slide-illustrated tour of "The Grasslands." Using vivid photographic and word images, Estes introduced the major flora of the prairie, explaining the conditions — spare rainfall, tight soils, and frequent wildfires — that discourage tree growth but allow grasses to thrive. Professor Estes noted the irony of promoting grasslands conservation at a facility named after National Arbor Day.

The evening started with a reception co-hosted by the University of Nebraska Press, where numerous reunions were enjoyed and seminarians met seminar coordinator Margie Rine, who had tirelessly answered our e-mails and smoothed the way for our arrival. Following dinner and opening remarks, seminarians strolled to the Nebraska City High School auditorium, where University of Nebraska-Lincoln artist-in-residence, mezzo-soprano Ariel Bybee, and seven of her students performed "I Must Have Music: Songs and Arias from Willa Cather's Fiction." The narrative,

(Continued on next page)



Seminar participants were delighted to tour rural Catherland with Antonette Willa Skupa Turner, granddaughter of Anna Pavelka, who inspired *My Ántonia*. Here Antonette visits the grave of her grandparents.

— Photo by Mary Chinery

## EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR (Continued)

written by UNL English Professor James E. Ford, argued that Cather used music allusively, trusting her readers to know the mood and context of popular operas, although Ford also noted that Cather's musical references often contain within themselves all that is needed for a full understanding of a passage. Accompanied by pianist Michael Cotton, Bybee and her students momentarily became Cather's impassioned singers in semi-staged vignettes while slides flashing on a backdrop illustrated great actors of her day in the very roles before us.

— II —

Sunday morning began with an abundant breakfast buffet, one of the many hearty meals served throughout the week. In fact, seminarians joked about the endless choices and supply of food, including a fully-stocked snack bar, breakfast pizzas, nachos and dips, hard candies, and so much more. Following breakfast Joseph Meeker, a core faculty member at the Graduate School of the Union Institute and author of one of the foundational texts of ecocriticism, *The Comedy of Survival*, presented his address, "The Pen and the Plough," which asserted that Cather lacked an ecological ethic and, furthermore, "had an ambiguous relationship with the prairie she said she loved." In Cather's ethical system, he added, land is "defined and given value by human associations"; it is raw material to be converted to profit through railroad building and agriculture. In sum, "She liked things that made wealth." While not all of us fully agreed with Professor Meeker's analysis, we admired his honesty and his willingness to inject controversy; his insights fueled discussions for the rest of the day.

During the subsequent presenter session, introduced by Merrill Maguire Skaggs, Cheryl Glotfelty,

pioneering theorist and editor of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, gave us "A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism, with Excursions to Catherland." Ecocriticism, she explained, takes as its subject the connections between the human and nonhuman. When ecocritical theory began taking shape in the late 1980s, scholars found much writing in this vein had already been done, but there were "no institutions, no journals, no jargon, no jobs." The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment, or ASLE (pronounced AS-LE), was founded by Professor Glotfelty and others in October 1992 to fill this void and now claims more than a thousand members. Taking her cue from a recent article by Lawrence Buell, Glotfelty identified five areas of emerging ecocritical writing: engaging science, resisting theory, expressing particular landscapes, critiquing anthropocentrism, and forging an environmental rhetoric. She predicted that ecocriticism would bear much fruit in the next decade. Following Glotfelty, Robert Thacker of St. Lawrence University spoke on "Placing Cather, Cather's Places." Surveying the critical reception of Cather's early works, Thacker mentioned his recent discovery of Ferris Greenslet's reader's reports on Cather's early novels among Harvard University's uncataloged papers.

After lunch, paper sessions focused primarily on Cather's early fiction. Tom Quirk moderated "Ecological Criticism and Cather"; the presentations included Ann Fisher-Wirth's "'Clean as a Cow that Calves': The Environmental Imagination and the Semiotic of Birth," Julia Helm Hoskins' "Vast Landscape as Metaphor for the Psyche: A Reading of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* with Comparisons to Modern Authors Cormac McCarthy and Louise Erdrich," Li Zhu's "Willa Cather's American Idiom and the Ecology of Language," and J. F. Buckley's "Cather's Dialogic Environmentalism: The Voice of Ecological Eroticism." Concurrently, Sherrill Harbison facilitated the *O Pioneers!* session in which papers were delivered by Ann Lundberg on "'The Tall Grass Whispers': The Voice of the Land in *O Pioneers!*," Joanna Lloyd on "Poetics, Ecology, and *O Pioneers!*," Ellen Fangman on "The Flaming Rose and the Golden Light: Contemplation and Sensuality in *O Pioneers!*" and Kathryn Mapes on "Cather Reimagines Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* in *O Pioneers!*" The third session, "Ways of Storytelling," was chaired by John P. Anders, and Sarah Fedirka presented "'Writing [A]n Empty Country': The Coronado Legend as Metaphor in 'The Enchanted Bluff,' *My Ántonia*, and 'Tom Outland's Story.'" Mary K. Stillwell delivered "'Old Mrs. Harris': Ecologos and Cather's Revision of the Allegory." Lynn Wake discussed "The Shell of a Turtle: Family Storytelling in 'Neighbour Rosicky,'" and Marvin Friedman read "The Samson and Delilah Story: One of Cather's Lifelong Paradigms." Mark Madigan moderated the fourth session, "Gardens," which included presentations from Isabel Maria Fernandes Alves on "From the Old to the New World: In the Trail of Cather's Gardens," Manuel Broncano Rodriguez on "The Poetics of Gardening: Cather's 'Ecological Realism' in *Death*

*Comes for the Archbishop,* Phyllis and Seymour Pustilnik on "Entrapment in the Creation Garden of Willa Cather's *The Troll Garden*," and Mark Facknitz on "a tidy half-acre: Nature, Compromise, and Idealism in Willa Cather's Gardens."

The afternoon presenter session was introduced by Marilyn Arnold and featured Janis Stout's "Seeing and Showing: The Observant Eye, the Art of Illustration, and *My Ántonia*." Stout explained the process Cather completed in order to illustrate her 1918 text; Cather wanted each of the illustrations by Bohemian émigré, W. T. Benda, to depict a bareness, specificity, and focus. Yet these same etchings were to be visual representations of what Cather was illustrating with language. To Cather, Stout emphasized, "Truth is linked with seeing." Stout believes that Cather was pleased with Benda's work because it captured the author's bare style.

After Stout's presentation Arnold introduced Cather studies' "international voice," Guy Reynolds from the University of Kent at Canterbury. His topic was "Organic Modernism: Architectural Aesthetics and Ecology in Willa Cather and Frank Lloyd Wright." Much of Reynolds' talk focused on the similarities between the father of "prairie style" architecture who believed that "natural space is shaped by the imagination," and Cather who, espousing the modernist traditions of William James and Gertrude Stein, believed that the "human being was in connection with the environment."

"Cather and the Classroom" was the topic of the evening meeting, which was facilitated by Steve Shively with refreshments provided by Northwestern Missouri State University. A "Demonstration and Discussion of the Electronic Cather Archive" was delivered by Doug Colglazier, Polly Duryea, Joy Margheim, Michael Schueth, and Susan Rosowski. The electronic Cather archive was conceived as a complement to the Scholarly Editions; with "strong visuals that pop," the website is geared for students, according to Schueth. Presenters described issues of copyrights and agreed on the value of keeping archival materials safe while allowing many people to have access to them. Colglazier noted that the collected stories are already on line and that Cather's student writings are currently being catalogued with full texts and illustrations eventually to be made available. Omaha South High School faculty members Mellanee Kvasnicka, Marjorie Waterman, Granville Welch, and Antoinette Turnquist discussed the "Teacher Institute," a new program that is developing an interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of place using *My Ántonia*. Later Steve Shively and Virgil Albertini distributed subscription forms for a new periodical, *Teaching Cather: A Newsletter*, which will be for teachers at all levels, and they invited us to submit relevant articles and notes. The session concluded with comments from experienced Cather teachers: Virgil Albertini, Bruce Baker, Mellanee Kvasnicka, and Steve Shively. In addition to registered seminarians, more than twenty

local high school teachers attended this session, adding new voices to our discussion.

— III —

Graduate students met early on Monday morning for an informative session moderated by Tim Bintrim and Jennifer Danes. After an icebreaking exercise in which we learned something unique about each person, silk cottonwood leaf pins were distributed as marks of solidarity and to pique the curiosity of non-student seminarians. Ann Romines, Merrill Maguire Skaggs, and Elizabeth Turner spoke about new and established publishing venues, conferences directed by graduate students, and other ways students could boost their vitas while contributing to scholarship. Sound advice was offered, and afterward some time was left for students to share their concerns.



*Charlene and Doug Hoschouer of Red Cloud opened the doors of the Second Cather Home to visitors from the 8th International Seminar.*

— Photo by Elizabeth Turner

As Monday morning's presenter session began, Michael Peterman introduced Joe Urgo, who discussed "What Jim Burden Gave Willa Cather on That Stormy Winter Afternoon." Beginning with a survey of the national parks movement, Urgo argued that Jim Burden's divided self is "emblematic" of the debate between the "wise use" and "preservationist" philosophies of park management. In his return to the Divide and *Ántonia*, he added, Jim acted "like an urbanite at Yellowstone"; he "set apart enough time for an aesthetic experience." Marilyn Arnold's presentation, entitled "Eco-Candor (to put it mildly) in Willa Cather's Letters," followed. Referring to the letters, Arnold observed that "'wild' is a stamp of approval" in Cather's correspondence and that she "relished environmental extremes and storms." Two statements about place and locality in the letters (here paraphrased) prompted catcalls and jocularity from Arnold's audience: "God passed by California" and "New York City — bah!" While we debated custody of our

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## EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

(Continued)

favorite author, Cather seemed to reprove us in a letter written to biographer E. K. Brown (again paraphrased): I read an author to visit his state of mind, not the state where he lived.

The afternoon concurrent paper sessions covered a range of topics. Joseph Meeker chaired the session on "Place as Agency" during which papers were presented by Stephen Longmire on "Cather's Fictional Landscape," Jacqueline Zeff on "Nature as Artist in the Work of Willa Cather," Beth Jensen on "*A Lost Lady: The Role of Nature and its Reflection of Character*," and Gul Ozyazicioglu on "The Functions of Place in Self-actualization in Some of Cather's Novels." Guy Reynolds facilitated the concurrent session on *The Song of the Lark*. Ann Moseley opened this session with "From the Ancient Sinagua to Thea Kronborg: The Creative Ecology of Walnut Canyon." Rafeeq O. McGivern's paper was "To Train [the] Vision upon Distant Objects: The Gaze across Vistas in Cather's *The Song of the Lark*," and ". . . three light footprints, running away': Memory and Nature in *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart*" was read by Frances Zauhar. The third session, "Cather and Ecological Narratives," lead by Cheryl Glotfelty, included Doug Colglazier's "Cather and the Ecologists' Field Guides," Deborah Osteen's "Rosicky in the 1920s: The Importance of History in Willa Cather's 'Neighbour Rosicky'," Christine Edward Allred's "Constructing Environments, Constructing Cultures: Lewis Mumford, the Civilization Group, and Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*," and Suzanne Shepard's "Caring for What the Land Calls Forth: Cather as Heir of Literary Regionalism's Writers of the Garden."

After the paper sessions Ann Billesbach introduced David Murphy, senior research architect with the Nebraska State Historical Society, who spoke on "The Construction of Culture in Place: *My Ántonia* and the Pavelka Homestead." Using slides of the Pavelka farm, Murphy taught seminarians the distinguishing features of Czech homesteads on the Plains: houses built with a living room and storage room on the first floor and a single door facing the farmyard instead of the road. The Pavelka orchard, with "layers upon layers" of plantings, we learned, was also classic Czech design.

Before dinner, *Washington Post* classical music critic Philip Kinnecott enthralled us with a comic yet scholarly treatise on how Cather may have understood Wagner. Although Cather honored Gertrude Hall's "layman's guide to Wagner" by writing its introduction, he argued, Cather's real primer to the *Ring* Cycle was George Bernard Shaw's *Perfect Wagnerite*. When Kinnecott had finished, the audience demanded an encore; he complied the next day by featuring the seminar in the *Post's* "In Style" section. Kinnecott's positive review was faxed to us by Constance Kibler of the English Department at George Washington University.

That evening we piled onto coach buses for the trip to Brownville. There Mr. and Mrs. James Keene opened their home, the Muir House, considered one of Nebraska's most elegant homes. Formerly owned by Robert Valentine Muir, an early Brownville resident, it was built by Muir shortly after the Civil War. While the tour was taking place, Mrs. Harris' coconut cake (baked by Polly Duryea) and lemonade were served in the Brownville Concert Hall. At 8 p.m. the feature program, "Willa Cather — Her World of Music," began. Jane K. Dressler, soprano, and Linda Jones, pianist, performed selections from Balfe, Liszt, Grieg, and Schubert. After intermission came the premiere of composer Libby Larsen's original work, *My Ántonia*. After great applause, Dressler and Jones graciously entertained listeners' questions.

### — IV —

Tuesday morning greeted us with a discussion of the "Willa Cather Scholarly Edition" led by Susan Rosowski, who asked the panel of editors — Richard Harris, Mark Madigan, Charles Mignon, Ann Moseley, John J. Murphy, Tom Quirk, Ann Romines, and Kari Ronning — to describe an epiphany they had experienced while working on their volumes. Richard Harris, volume editor for *One of Ours*, for example, was struck by Cather's allusions to both popular culture and song, and Mark Madigan, volume editor for *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, mentioned numerous similarities between Cather's fiction and her journalism, noting that Cather knew much about recycling her own material.

John J. Murphy moderated Tuesday morning's presenter session featuring Michael Peterman and Ann Romines. Peterman's paper, "From Parthia to Parnasis?: Placing *My Mortal Enemy*," amplified Merrill Skagg's analysis of "Parthian shots" in the novella. (The ancient Parthians feigned retreat in battle so they could fire back at their enemies, who had left their defensive positions.) Peterman observed that the *OED* also defines "a Parthian flight" as "having the last word" in an argument, a strategy that is made "a Driscoll trait" in *My Mortal Enemy*. Peterman examined the three settings in the novel — southern Illinois, New York City, and a San Francisco-like place — noting the symmetrical nature of the novel; he said that the first part is about material investiture, and the second half is about "disinvestiture." Ann Romines followed with "Admiring and Remembering: The Problem of Virginia in Willa Cather's Fiction." "Life began for Willa Cather when she ceased to admire and began to remember," said Romines, who explained the dangers of admiration and of becoming a passive object of admiration. At the end of "The Sentimentality of William Tavener," Romines asserts, when Hester removes the mosquito netting from the basket of waxed fruit her sister made in Virginia and places it over William's head, she chooses remembering over admiring. Romines continued by questioning Edith



A lofty Ann Sprague entertained seminarians on their visit to the Bladen Opera House.

— Photo by Elizabeth Turner

Lewis' description of her friend's Virginia childhood as "serene." As a child Cather was aware of "violence, as well as gender and class tensions" in Back Creek. Cather's own family, Romines noted, was split by the Civil War, and Frederick County was taken and retaken several times by each side, so union lines were difficult to draw. In many of her works Cather was asking herself how she should remember and write about the South. For Cather, ultimately, the challenge was not how to solve the problem of memory but how to render it.

Tuesday afternoon included a one o'clock concurrent paper session. Marilyn Arnold chaired *The Professor's House* session with the following papers: Frank Edler's "Language and Being in Cather's *The Professor's House*: A Look Back and Forth From Thoreau to Nietzsche and Heidegger," Carol Steinhagen's "All the Strange Professors: The Interior Landscapes of Loren Eiseley and Godfrey St. Peter," Margot Soven's "The Professor on the Psychiatrist's Couch: Is Godfrey St. Peter Really Depressed?," and Yoshiko Kayano's "Uprooted Southern Children: A Comparative Study of Childhood and Environment in the Fiction of Peter Taylor and Willa Cather." Sharon Hoover was in charge of the *My Ántonia* session, which included presentations from Genevieve Pfaff on "A Shared Experience of Place: The Authorizing and Distancing

Narrative of *My Ántonia*," Margaret Doane on "The Fear of the Tongue, That Terror of Little Towns': Overcoming the Oppression of Gossip in Cather's Nebraska Novels," Darcie Rives on "We Possessed Together the *Communicable* Past: Articulating the Connections Among Cather, Omaha, Rural Nebraska, and My Family History," and Jan Goggans on "Social (Re)Visioning in the Fields of *My Ántonia*." The third section of the early afternoon session, "Celebrity, Manners, and the Art of Business," was chaired by Robert Thacker. Michael Schueth discussed "Cather, Celebrity, and the Environmental Imagination." Amy Fuqua read "*McClure's Magazine* and the Ideal of American Progress in Cather's Early Novels." Jennifer Danes examined "Willa Cather's Participation in the Discourse on Manners in *The Song of the Lark*," and Rebecca Roorda's topic was "The Other Side of the Kingdom: Willa Cather and the Business of Art."

After a refreshment break, the 2:45 p.m. concurrent sessions began. Glen Love led "Ecopoetics," which included presentations from Nancy Wurzel on "Creating, Preserving, or Destroying the Landscape: Blurring the Boundaries with Willa Cather's Farmers, Pioneers, and Visionaries," Virginia Wright-Peterson on "Willa Cather's Desert Landscapes: A Sense of Place 'She Had Been Refining and Perfecting So Long,'" Leslie Butler on "The Lavishness of Cather's 'Back Rooms,'" and Emily Scheuer on "The Implied Author: Third Person Singular in Willa Cather." Richard Harris hosted the second section, which was on *One of Ours*. Michael Cadwallader presented "The Quest for Death in *One of Ours* and *Moby Dick*." Mary Ryder delivered "'Better Than Any Country Can Ever Be': The Shared Environmental Vision of Willa Cather and Dorothy Canfield Fisher," and Tony Millspaugh read "The Diva and the Doughboy: The Role of Wilhelmina Schroeder-Schatz in *One of Ours*." "Intersections of Biology, Environment, and Culture," the third section, was moderated by Michael Peterman and included the following papers: Jessica Rabin's "'Born Like That': Nature, Nurture, and Normalcy in *My Ántonia*," Susan Meyer's "Phrenology, Race and the Artist: *The Song of the Lark*," Mako Yoshikawa's "The Punishment of Passionate 'Primitive' Women: Mother Eve, Jezebel, and Cather's Construction of Race," and Mark Madigan's "The Sculptor's 'Mulatto' Mourner."

A lavish reception underwritten by the Abel Family, major supporters of Arbor Day Farm, awaited us as we left the session rooms. Conversation, exchanges of papers and sources, and delayed reunions flourished around the shrimp, hors d'oeuvres, and well-stocked bar, and neo-pagans had time to escape onto the verandah to tip a glass to the summer solstice.

The evening's meeting began with Steve Ryan, executive director of the WCPM, talking about "The WCPM in Red Cloud and Webster County" in preparation for Wednesday's excursion to Red Cloud. David T. Parry delivered an illustrated paper, "Willa Cather and the Burlington Railroad," complete with hard-

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copies for audience members. Concluding the session was Kari Ronning's "The Environmental Landscape of Red Cloud, 1885-1895," which gave "all the dirt" on small town water, dust, odors, and sanitation.

— V —

Wednesday was a highlight for many seminarians as we headed out from Nebraska City at 7 a.m. for a day-long visit to Cather sites. Our first stop was the Cather Prairie outside of Red Cloud, where Steve Ryan presided over the unveiling of a plaque from the Friends of Libraries USA marking the prairie as a Literary Landmark. From here we went into Red Cloud for a picnic lunch in the park followed by more touring. Stops in town included Cather's childhood home, the Garber bank building, the depot, St. Juliana Falconieri Catholic Church, Grace Episcopal Church, and the WCPM.



Mr. and Mrs. James Keene, center, welcome Kari Ronning, left, and Polly Duryea, right, to the Muir House in Brownville.

— Photo by Elizabeth Turner

Douglas and Charlene Hoschouer, owners of the second Cather Red Cloud home and editors of *The Red Cloud Chief*, opened their doors for tours conducted by WCPM staff. The Hoschouers purchased the house in August 1998 and moved in during October of 1999 after considerable restoration. The speed with which they are restoring the second home is remarkable, for it had been much altered through the years. After Elsie Cather sold the house in 1944, it had served as a hospital (where our WCPM tour guides, identical twins Ilene Wulf and Irene Hansen, gave birth to their children), a nursing home, and an apartment building. Bev Cooper presided over a display of cherished Cather artifacts, including a watercolor of Grand Manan painted by Edith Lewis on Cather's stationery, Cather's reading glasses, photographs of Cather's parents, family dishes and more. The Hoschouers noted that Helen Cather Southwick has shared many items that belonged to the Cather

family, and she has been invaluable in helping them to restore the house. To assist us in envisioning the original structure, the Hoschouers included a sketch of the floor plan in the packet of information provided to each of us by the WCPM.

The country tour included highlights of similar interest. With Antonette Willa Skupa Turner, "Ántonia's granddaughter," as our guide, we visited the Pavelka homestead. Antonette kept us entertained with stories of childhood visits to her grandmother's farm; she also pointed out various spots of interest, including the Cloverton and East Lawn cemeteries. We headed into Bladen to the Opera House, which was opened for refreshments, and our host was Geneva Lewis. The entertainment was provided by Ann Sprague, who performed a part of her interpretive dance based on selections from *April Twilights*. As we walked into the darkened theater, we were stunned to see Sprague standing twelve feet off the floor in a David Copperfield-like effect. Draped to the floor in a silk parachute that twisted and spun with her body, Sprague danced to Cather's poem, "The Tavern," read by University of Nebraska at Kearney theater major, Jillian Schlake. Afterward, when Sprague revealed the tall, narrow pedestal that supported her above the stage, our curiosity was abated, but not our amazement. Upon our return to town, we stopped at the Zion Lutheran Church for a spread of homemade dishes prepared by the Lutheran Ladies Club. On the way out of Red Cloud we persuaded our amiable bus drivers to pass Wick Cutter's house so that we could share a satisfying hiss before settling into a quiet sunset-filled ride back to Nebraska City.

— VI —

Thursday morning came early for those who had spent the day touring, but we were rewarded with a most memorable presentation from keynote speaker Thomas J. Lyon, Utah State University, whose publications include *A Literary History of the American West* and *This Incomparable Land: A Book of American Nature Writing*. Delivered in a soft-spoken but compelling voice, "Willa Cather, Learner" touched seminarians with its argument that the "real Willa Cather" was above all a "learner," whose "deepest-going books are about learning — that is, about sensitivity and vulnerability, and the extraordinary beauty of human consciousness when it is young and free." The basis of this sensitivity, he continued, is the ecological or environmental imagination. As Professor Lyon offered us a thoughtful way in which to interpret Cather, he was, as many listeners recognized, offering us a way of life, suggesting that we ask ourselves if the freshness has been kept, if we have taken the lid off



discovery, if we allow ourselves the sacredness of the empathic, to free consciousness to what it sees and to see with love. We leaned forward as Professor Lyon spoke to us, taking in the significance of his insights and acknowledging the beauty of his words; many of us were moved to tears, and the applause after he completed his reading was sustained, for we wanted him to know that we understood what he was saying. A talk such as this is a rare experience, and it became our touchstone for the rest of the seminar.

Thursday morning's presenters' session began with John Anders' "Landmarks in Fiction: Willa Cather and Ingliss Fletcher." Anders explained that both writers endorsed historical fiction as a form of environmental preservation. For Fletcher, the milieu is colonial Edenton, North Carolina; for Cather, the origin of her historical sense is colonial Virginia as is apparent in her early story, "The Night at Greenway Court." Cather's full fruition as an historic preservationist is seen in her various descriptions of Nebraska and Nebraskans. Merrill Maguire Skaggs concluded the session with "Cather's Mixed Quartet: The Uses of Environment." Using allusions to the transcendental writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Skaggs explored Cather's environmental evolution in four later novels and explained how each contributed to her *tour de force*: "Old Mrs. Harris." In Godfrey St. Peter, Cather explores the patriarchal views of the environment as depicted by Emerson in "The American Scholar." In Myra Henshawe, Cather catapults from abstract thought to narcissism. In Father Latour, Skaggs sees Emerson's "The Poet," a hero in the midst of a feminine landscape. By the time Cather published her next novel, Emerson's "All things are shadows in Him" contributes to her title, *Shadows on the Rock*. The novel has a matrifocus with each successful character as a mother or would-be mother, yet it is not until "Old Mrs. Harris," published the following year, that she completely embraces and celebrates the feminine landscape.

We returned for a set of three concurrent sessions after lunch. Diane Quantic facilitated the "Great Plains" session, which included papers from Lonnie Pierson Dunbier on "Lyra and Silas Garber: The Place That Held Them to Willa Cather," Angela Nepodal on "Captivation and Captivity on the American Frontier: A Study of the Abject Conditions of Immigrant Settlers in the Great Plains Fiction of Willa Cather and O. E. Rolvaag," Patrick Dooley on "Biocentric, Homocentric and Theocentric Environmentalism in Willa Cather," and Ann Kaufman on "Reflecting on the Prairie: Contested Waters in Willa Cather and Margaret Laurence." *A Lost Lady* was the topic for the second concurrent section of the one o'clock papers; Charles Mignon presided. Matt Hokom read "A *Lost Lady*, Emerson and Montaigne." Mark Robison presented "Finding an Erotics of Place in *A Lost Lady*," James Gremmels discussed "Misconceptions of *A Lost Lady*," and Joanna Tardoni discussed "The Colors of Nature in Cather's *A Lost Lady*." The third section, "Legacy of

Place," was chaired by Tom Lyon, and it included the following papers: Richard Chilton's "The Divide as Allegory: The Kiraruta as Place in Cather's Fiction," John Jacobs' "From the World to the Wilderness: Renewal in Thoreau and Cather," Kathleen Butterly Nigro's "Willa to William: The Aesthetic Alliance Between Cather and Wordsworth," and William Barillas' "Jim Harrison, Willa Cather, and the Revision of Midwestern Pastoral."

After a brief break, we reconvened for a virtual tour of the "Cather Archives in Nebraska." First, Ann Billesbach of the Nebraska State Historical Society described the variety of materials the NSHS offers scholars, including state newspapers on microfilm, public records, census data, maps, letters and photographs. Next, Steve Ryan discussed the excitement surrounding the Opera House renovation. The project, expected to be completed in 2001, will offer a climate-controlled archives and research center for scholars. The session concluded with Katherine Walter, head librarian of Special Collections at the University of Nebraska's Love Library, who encouraged all to use the comprehensive Cather holdings at Love Library.

In the evening we met at the Steinhart Lodge for a barbecue of burgers and grilled portabellas, complete with salad, corn on the cob, baked beans and apple crisp. "On Defining a Plains Fiddle Style" was the entertainment provided by Dave Fowler and Peter Blakeslee, made possible in part by the support of the Nebraska Humanities Council. The program included musical examples from many of the ethnic groups who settled in Nebraska as well as music of Cajun, ragtime, and bluegrass origins.

## — VII —

Friday, our last full day together, began with the last keynote speaker, Glen Love, a University of Oregon professor whose publications include *New Americans: The Westerner and the Modern in the American Novel* and *Ecological Crisis: Readings for Survival*. Professor Love stressed the importance of interdisciplinarity to bridge the cultural divide between "fuzzy" arts and "hard" sciences. This may be achieved through a common focus on place — embracing geography — or through new approaches like ecocriticism, "which hold together what other disciplines take apart." While part of the problem is our "fear of biology" and its racist and determinist potential, we must recognize that human universals — archetypes — do exist. Cather was in touch with these archetypes, especially in *The Professor's House* and *My Ántonia*. The quickest way to achieve interdisciplinarity, Love joked, was to marry a scientist, the route he took; but if barred from that, we could at least take one to lunch.

Following Professor Love's session was a presenter session facilitated by Michael Peterman and featuring John J. Murphy and Susan J. Rosowski.

(Continued on next page)

## EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

(Continued)

Murphy's address, "'And I Saw a New Heaven and a New Earth': Avignon, Quebec, and Santa Fe" focused on Cather's annotations of the book she consulted while writing her unfinished Avignon piece, the 1926 edition of Thomas Okey's *Story of Avignon*. Murphy argued that one does not see the significance of what Cather selected from Okey unless one sees her notations in sum, a textual study made more intriguing by the fact that the story exists only as an incomplete manuscript. Murphy illustrated his talk with slides of architectural details of the papal palace at Avignon. Following Murphy, Susan Rosowski asserted in her presentation, "Cather's Comedies and Ecology," that "ecology and comedy belong together" in Cather's fiction. Cather resembled a biologist in her study of nature, reading "drama in the vegetation around her," and comedy, Rosowski explained, is a more open form than tragedy, for it celebrates an on-going sense of life. For Rosowski, then, the links between these topics felt inherent. She told us that Cather derived her knowledge of nature from a variety of sources, including her Aunt Franc, the Clements' *Botany*, Professor Charles Bessey, and her own close study. Cather's command of nature's operations is born out in her early stories: "On the Divide" dramatizes the destruction of vegetation by "yellow scorch" while "the real story" of "The Treasure of Far Island" is "the ongoing life of an oval sandbar." However, Rosowski warned us to resist isolating a single work from the entire body of work; consequently, she briefly took us through Cather's *oeuvre* to exam the intersection between ecology and comedy, noting that *The Professor's House*, *My Mortal Enemy*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* belong together, for they are, in effect, Cather's divine comedy.

The final concurrent paper session was held on Friday afternoon. Ann Moseley hosted "Desert Places," with contributions from Richard Harris on "Willa Cather, D. H. Lawrence, and the American Southwest," Elaine Limbaugh on "Spirit and Self in Western Landscapes: Willa Cather and Leslie Marmon Silko," and Marybeth McMahan on "'Matters of Art' and Spirit in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*." The second section was facilitated by Janis Stout and included the following papers: Jim Hartman's "The Hierarchy of Place," Robert Miller's "Present or Poison: Princely Gifts in *The Professor's House*," Elizabeth Turner's "The Chivalric Code of Silence in *The Professor's House*," and Rosanna Walker's "Torn Outland in Neverland." Kari Ronning chaired "The Voices of Place," the third section. Tim Bintrim presented "'The Place was Vocal to Him': 'Uncle Valentine' and the Lost Communities of the Sewickley Valley," and Sherrill Harbison read "Still Warm, Through Savory Adjectives and Carnal Figures of Speech: Sigrid Undset, Willa Cather and Nature Writing." The last two papers in this section were Linda Ross' "Places and Spaces:

Cather, Students, and Me," and Sharon Hoover's "Buffalo Peas as Sign: Willa Cather and Community."

Sue Rosowski facilitated the wrap-up panel of seminar staff members, who were asked to describe one of the more meaningful insights/experiences of the week. Ann Romines, for example, noted with pleasure that Virginia is being brought more fully "into the vocabulary of Cather Studies." Bob Thacker said that he appreciated the performance of "*Connais-tu le pays*" from *Mignon*, and he thanked Tom Lyon for the extraordinary nature of his presentation. Speaking with what she acknowledged was nostalgia, Marilyn Arnold talked about her first meeting with Mildred Bennett while wondering, "What would Mildred think of Cather studies now?" Sue Rosowski aptly noted that the seminar adds to the maturation, the breadth, of Cather scholarship. After the session Joel Geyer, of Nebraska Educational Television, said that ecology is a part of the reason why Cather was seen as a whole during this seminar instead of in parts; "she survived intact," he laughed. He was impressed that we are willing to see Cather in her complexities, contradictions, conflicts, for it is in these complexities that we see her humanness.

During the afternoon recess a terrific thunderstorm blew into the area, sending off tornado warnings that forced seminarians to retreat to the basement of the Lied Center. The rain did not, however, delay the farewell banquet held in the Steinhart Lodge. Tyler White, director of orchestral activities at the University of Nebraska School of Music, showed us video excerpts from his original opera based on *O Pioneers!* after which we enjoyed live performances of some of the opera's highlights. Around 10 p.m. the evening turned playful as Bob Thacker hosted "Bound for Cather Glory," an original Cather game show co-produced by Linda Ross and Thacker. The show was complete with a singing emcee (Marvin Friedman), judges (John Murphy and Merrill Skaggs), scorekeepers (Bruce Baker and Elizabeth Turner), technician (Tim Bintrim), and Power Point wizard (Michael Cadwallader). Contestants were drawn at random from a pool of volunteers. The game consisted of three rounds with ten questions in each round; the questions presented the name of one Cather character with three possible song titles, and competitors had to buzz in and identify the song title that most accurately reflected that particular character. For example, for Lucy Gayheart the choices were "Chicago," "Satisfaction," and "I'm Just Wild About Harry," and for Mrs. Archie contestants could choose from "I Only Have Eyes for You," "Burning Down the House," and "Light My Fire." The winners of the three rounds were Susan Parry, Janis Stout, and Mark Facknitz, and the winner of the final round and the entire game would then possess Cather Glory. When the final points were tallied, Willa Cather, looking a bit like Linda Ross, arrived to upbraid and congratulate the winner, Janis Stout.

The next morning seminarians gathered in the dining room to enjoy one last breakfast together and

to reflect on the events of the week. While the WCPM board members stayed in Nebraska City to conduct business, the rest of us departed in anticipation of the next International Seminar.

— Composed by Tim Bintrim and Elizabeth Turner with Tony Millspaugh

## From the Director



Steve Ryan

We were saddened to learn of the death of Dr. Thomas Auld, Willa Cather's nephew and longtime member of the WCPM&EF board of governors, in May. The board of governors and staff extend their sympathy to Mrs. Auld and the family. We will always remember his contribution and generosity to the Foundation.

Mellanee Kvasnicka and the WCPM staff put together another excellent Spring Conference May 5-6. Katie Cardinal merits special mention for organizing one of the best country tours in years. I cannot praise our staff enough: *You were magnificent!* Dick Cavett's humor tickled all at the banquet. Enjoy the photos of the event appearing in this issue.

Please note that our annual spring event will become the Cather Spring Festival in 2001 and will move to May 18-19. Over the years we found that academic calendars have shifted, making the first weekend in May a favorite for proms and, especially, graduations. These conflicts prevented many who wanted to be here from coming. After trying the new date, we will re-evaluate future times for the Festival.

Attending the American Literature Association conference in Long Beach in late May gave me the opportunity to meet with John Swift, WCPM board of governors vice president, and hear several fine papers on Cather. I was also glad to meet Willa's nieces, Catherine Cather Lowell and Ella Cather Lewis, and to have lunch with Charles Cather, Willa's nephew. On my way back to Nebraska I stopped in Midway, Utah, to visit Helen Cather Southwick, another of Willa's nieces. The family remains very interested in the work of the Foundation, and we are grateful for their support.

On June 16 I visited the *American Women!* exhibit at the Herbert Hoover Library in West Branch, Iowa, with displays on numerous notable women, including Willa Cather, with items on loan from the WCPM/Nebraska State Historical Society collec-

tion. It was an eclectic and fascinating display, ranging from Martha Washington to Annie Oakley to Rosa Parks. The program runs April 22 through October 29.

June was a very busy month, beginning with Melanee Kvasnicka's Teaching Institute at the Lied Center in Nebraska City, prior to the international seminar. We hope to expand and enlarge Mellanee's fine seminal effort in years to come.

Margie Rine of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln deserves the congratulations and thanks of all who attended the Eighth International Cather Seminar, co-sponsored by the WCPM and UNL, and a wonderful success owing to her excellent organizational skills and Herculean efforts. Well done, Margie! I hope you spent the rest of the summer catching up on sleep.

The C-Span cable television network telephoned to schedule a live broadcast from Red Cloud as part of its American writers series. As we go to press, the broadcast is scheduled for July 2, 2000, although it is subject to change.

It was good seeing a number of you at the Sheldon Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln August 15, for the reception honoring Helen Cather Southwick for her gift of the Nicolai Fechin portrait of her aunt. It was a grand occasion and a fine turn-out of Catherphiles. We enjoyed the subsequent visit by her, her son and granddaughter to Red Cloud, even though it had to be cut short. They were guests of Doug and Charlene Hoschouer in the Cather Second Home.

The Save America's Treasures preservation needs analysis on the Cather Childhood Home has begun. A special concern is saving the wallpaper Willa hung in her upstairs bedroom. We need to raise \$5,000 in matching funds toward the grant, and will be sending an appeal later in the fall. Please watch for it.

## Prep Scholars Awarded Cather Text

For the third year in a row, the San Diego chapter of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Alumni Association has honored one junior who has excelled in English classes at each of 15 San Diego area high schools. The chapter presents each student with the scholarly edition of *My Ántonia*, by Willa Cather, NU class of 1895. A special section bound into the back of the book deals with Cather's years in Nebraska and attendance at NU. The text, edited by Charles Mignon with Kari Ronning of UNL, is published by the University of Nebraska Press.

— Edited and reprinted with permission from the UNL Alumni Association *Nebraska Magazine*

## Ron Hull of NETV Receives 2000 Sower Award

Ron Hull, associate general manager of the Nebraska ETV Network and the manager of KUON-TV in Lincoln, is the winner of the 2000 Sower Award in the Humanities, given by the Nebraska Humanities Council. Hull is a longtime member of the WCPM&EF board of governors.

Hull was honored September 7 during ceremonies surrounding the 5th Annual Governor's Lecture in the Humanities in Lincoln.

From 1982 to 1988, he was director of the Program Fund for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in Washington, D.C., administering some \$40 million in funding support annually to public television stations, independent producers and minority producers for nationally distributed programs.

In that position, he fostered support of quality programming in areas ranging from drama, performance and science to cultural affairs, documentaries and biography, including the landmark series "The American Experience" and "Eyes on the Prize."

Hull has been especially active in supporting Nebraska's native sons and daughters. In creating an archive for hundreds of the best programs produced by NET, he helped to preserve historic interviews with Nebraska writers John G. Neihardt, Mari Sandoz and Wright Morris, actress Sandy Dennis, talk show host Dick Cavett and UNL professors Bernice Slote, Robert Knoll and Virginia Faulkner.

In accepting the award, Hull noted the value of the humanities by quoting two of the state's historical figures.

"Willa Cather said, 'The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.' She also said, 'Where there is great love, there are always miracles.'" Hull said Sandoz often quoted Crazy Horse's observation that "a people without a history is like wind on the buffalo grass."

"We're talking about relationships when we talk about the humanities," Hull continued. "To me, relationships are the essence of our lives, the relationship that we have with each other . . . The predominant thought that I have at this moment is simply how fortunate I am, how thankful I am to have the privilege of being a part of you, in this city, in this state."

— Edited and reprinted with permission from Nebraska Humanities Council *Newsletter*



*The Cather Second Home  
Seward Street at Sixth Avenue, Red Cloud.*

## Cable TV Broadcast to Feature Cather Second Home

Home and Garden cable television network has visited Red Cloud to film the Cather Second Home for a segment of its *If Walls Could Talk* series.

The Cather family owned the home from 1903 to 1944. The home, at the southwest corner of Seward Street at Sixth Avenue, is three blocks north and one block west of the Willa Cather Childhood Home at Cedar Street and Third Avenue.

The home is owned by Doug and Charlene Hoschouer of Red Cloud.

Jennifer Darrow, the show's producer, confirmed in a telephone interview that the installment would air sometime in April 2001, although an exact date has not yet been determined. Ms. Darrow further explained that the most interesting homes are saved for the first and last programs of the season. The Cather Second Home will both open and close the final broadcast, which will also feature homes in Massachusetts and Alaska.

After the Cather family sold the home in the 1940s, it was converted into a hospital and nursing home. The Hoschouers purchased the home in 1998 and began extensive renovations. They consulted extensively with Helen Cather Southwick, a niece of Willa Cather who had visited the home frequently in her youth, for guidance.

Tours of the home are available by prior arrangement by calling (402) 746-3700 or (402) 746-3183.

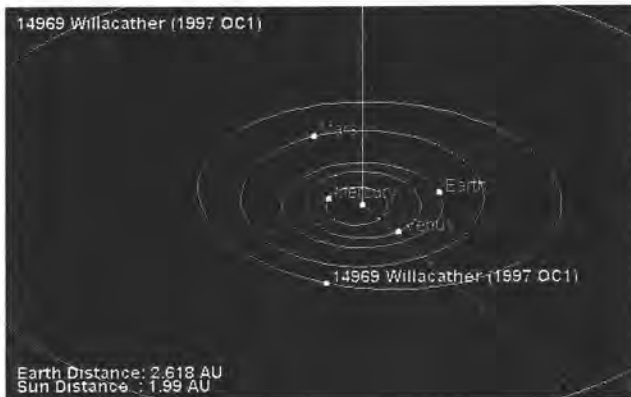
— Reprinted and edited with permission from *The Red Cloud Chief*

## Heavenly Body Named for Cather

by Steve Ryan

*Alexandra drew her shawl closer about her and stood leaning against the frame of the mill, looking at the stars which glittered so keenly through the frosty autumn air. She always loved to watch them, to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security.*

— "The Wild Land," *O Pioneers!*



*Projected position of asteroid Willacather on the author's natal anniversary, December 7, 2000. You may log on to this orbit simulation at <http://neo.jpl.nasa.gov/cgi-bin/db?name=Willacather&group=ast&search=Search>.*

— Simulation courtesy of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, National Aeronautics and Space Administration

A rural Nebraska amateur astronomer has named an asteroid he discovered for Willa Cather.

The International Astronomical Union (IAU) officially recognized planet 1997QCI (14969) as Willacather this fall. Agency guidelines dictate the spacing and capitalization of the name.

Robert Linderholm, peering into the heavens from his private Lime Creek Observatory near Cambridge, found the rock August 28, 1997, during a routine search for comets and asteroids. It is part of an asteroid belt orbiting the sun between Mars and Jupiter, 200 million miles from Earth.

Willacather travels at about eight miles per second in its orbit around the sun. The exact size is unknown, but it is likely less than ten miles in diameter. The asteroid is not designated a PHA, that is, Potentially Hazardous Asteroid, and poses no threat to Earth.

The retired Linderholm and his wife are avid readers, and Cather is one of their favorite writers. When he decided on Cather as a name, Linderholm contacted the WCPM which, in turn, contacted the Cather family, which gave its approval. Linderholm then presented a proposal to the international agency governing such designations.

The naming of the heavenly bodies follows certain protocols. Suspected discoveries are given a provisional designation of a combination of numbers and letters. Once the orbit is confirmed and charted, the body receives a permanent number. Discoverers may then name their finds, but the names of political and military figures may not be used unless one has long been deceased. The process can take a number of years.

Willacather was Linderholm's third asteroid discovery. In 1996 he became the first Nebraskan to discover a celestial body, which he named Nebraska. The second he named Brace, after Dewitt Bristol Brace, founder of the physics and astronomy department at the University of Nebraska in the 1880s. He has yet to name two other asteroids he has discovered.

For those making long-range travel plans, Mr. Linderholm expects the asteroid to keep its orbit "for a few hundred million years."

*Rosicky shook out his pipe and walked home across the fields. Ahead of him the lamplight shone from his kitchen windows. . . .*

*He stopped by the windmill to look up at the frosty winter stars and draw a long breath before he went inside.*

*That kitchen with the shining windows was dear to him; but the sleeping fields and bright stars and the noble darkness were dearer still.*

— "Neighbour Rosicky"

**Mobil Masterpiece Theatre's  
American Collection Production  
of**

**WILLA CATHER'S  
*The Song of the Lark***

will be broadcast  
on PBS

**Wednesday, May 2, 2001**

and

**Sunday, May 6, 2001**

Evening Prime Time

PLEASE CONSULT YOUR LOCAL LISTINGS.

Right: A large number of participants in the 8th International Cather Seminar attended the unveiling of the plaque marking the Cather Prairie a Literary Landmark.

— Photo by Mary Chinery

Below: WCPM executive director Steve Ryan at unveiling of plaque designating the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie.

— Photo by Mary Chinery



## Willa Cather Memorial Prairie Receives Literary Landmark Award

The Nature Conservancy's 610-acre Willa Cather Memorial Prairie has received the high distinction of Literary Landmark from the Friends of the Library USA. This is the first site in Nebraska to be designated such. It is also unique in that all the other literary landmarks are buildings.

The plaque was presented to Betty Kort, Hastings, then-President of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation last November. The mounted plaque was unveiled in a public ceremony at the prairie June 21.

Steven P. Ryan, executive director of the Foundation, said, "The designation recognizes the importance of the Great Plains in Cather's writings and in American letters. Readers have long noted that the land is as significant as any character in her fiction. The Nature Conservancy has preserved a treasure. Visitors today can experience the pull the land had on Cather — its beauty, power, and breadth."

In *My Ántonia*, young Jim Burden, recently orphaned, is sent to live with his grandparents in Nebraska. This is how the prairie felt to him: "As I looked

about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running."

The Willa Cather Memorial Prairie is five miles south of Red Cloud on U.S. Highway 281. It is open to the public for nature hikes and viewing.

— Edited and reprinted with permission from *The Plains Messenger*, newsletter of the Nebraska chapter of The Nature Conservancy

## Bound for Cather Glory: A Game Show Review

Linda H. Ross

As the participants in the Eighth International Cather Seminar huddled in the concrete-lined utility basement in the Lied Conference Center waiting out a tornado warning, all I could think was "Will tonight's festivities occur, or will we be swept up and transported to some fantastic land?"

(Having spent the better part of two months working on *Bound for Cather Glory* and thinking of the great fun Bob Thacker had experienced collecting song titles for Cather characters for seven or more years, I thought what a shame it would be if this part of the final evening of the June 2000 seminar would not happen.)

My fears were not realized as *Bound for Cather Glory: A Game Show* started almost on schedule. In the process, we were transported to another world.

(As the strains of *There Is No Place Like Nebraska* wafted up the stairs, the audience and potential contestants walked in and took their chairs. The power point presentation and the contestant's buzzers worked perfectly, and, suddenly, we were in that other world.)

*Co-producers  
Bob Thacker and  
Linda Ross.*

— Photo by Linda Ross



We had no yellow brick road, no magical silver shoes, no wicked witches, no Emerald City, but we had an abundance of brains, heart, and courage. We also had munchkins, invaluable assistants who helped put the entire show together because no show ever occurs without the help of many people, and the munchkins for *Bound for Cather Glory* were indispensable. Behind the scenes munchkins were Pam See, a Sheridan College techie who was vital in helping put together the power point presentation, and Anne Kaufman, a seminarian, without whose



*Scorekeepers Bruce Baker and Elizabeth Turner and judges Merrill Skaggs and John Murphy and buzzer-clearer Tim Bintrim with 1st round contestants.*

— Photo by Linda Ross

valuable assistance during the seminar week, the show would not have been as effective as it was. (She helped identify and organize the questions and created the score sheet.) Both these people were active participants, albeit absent ones. In addition, we had the invaluable assistance of Margie Rine, seminar assistant director, and the Lied Center personnel.

Those more obvious munchkins were equally invaluable. John Murphy and Merrill Skaggs, the judges, waited expectantly for a contestant to protest an answer so they could judge the protestor who had to sing the song the contestant thought was right. No such protest occurred!

Bruce Baker and Elizabeth Turner kept score and identified the winners at the end of each round; Michael Peterman kept time, making sure that contestants answered promptly after ringing in; Michael Cadwallader ably ran the power point presentation so that the contestants and audience could see the questions; and Tim Bintrim conscientiously cleared the contestant's buzzers after each question.

Not only did the game show have great assistance from the munchkins, it also had not one but two wizards. The first was the announcer Marvin Friedman, our own Rod Roddy. He came running in to introduce *Bound for Cather Glory*. Exhibiting great heart by singing "new" lyrics to "Mr. Gridiron U.S.A.," he welcomed all to an hour of trivia and fun. (He showed great *élan*.)

(The show was a combination of — with variations on — *The Price Is Right*, *Jeopardy*, and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*) Shouting "come on down!" Marvin introduced the contestants for Round 1: Janis Stout, Sherrill Harbison, and Polly Duryea. He then grandly introduced the game show host Bob "Barker Trebec Philbin" Thacker, who read the rules, welcomed the contestants, and began the game.

Bob was superb in reading the Cather characters and song titles for each question, joking with the contestants and audience during the rounds, acknowledging the contestant who rang in first, conferring with the score keepers and judges, then announcing the winner at the end of each round. He may just have found a new career! He was equally effective in distributing "valuable" prizes, which were generously donated by the University of Nebraska Press and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.

The contestants were enthusiastic and competitive, trying to ring in first and answer correctly. The audience was both restrained and exuberant, restrained in not shouting out the song title answers and exuberant in response to the contestants — applauding, booing, supporting. All were active participants.



*Game show host Bob Thacker presenting champion Janis Stout with the grand prize.*

— Photo by Linda Ross

A quick thumb on the buzzer and an acute brain made Janis Stout the *Bound for Cather Glory* champion.

(Continued on next page)

## BOUND FOR CATHER GLORY

(Continued)

Little of the last hour of the International Willa Cather Seminar 2000 was serious, but contestants, audience, munchkins, and wizards made the last hour great fun. Even Willa Cather, who made a brief appearance, seemed to enjoy it, remarking that "the world is a stage, the stage is a world of entertainment."

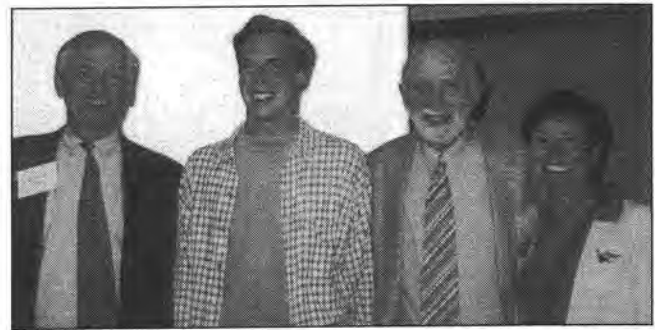


*Tim Bintrim (seated left) and first round contestants Janis Stout, Sherrill Harbison, and Polly Duryea.*

— Photo by Linda Ross

*Below: Susan Parry, left, Charles Mignon (intensity personified?), and Mark Robison, 2nd round contestants.*

— Photo by Linda Ross



*Bob Thacker, left, game show host; Michael Cadwallader, technical assistant; Marvin Friedman, game show announcer; and Linda Ross, co-producer and writer.*

— Photo by Linda Ross



*There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country. It gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the season, holding nothing back.*

*Like the plains of Lombardy, it seems to rise a little to meet the sun.*

*The air and the earth are curiously mated and intermingled, as if the one were the breath of the other. You feel in the atmosphere the same tonic, puissant quality that is in the tilth, the same strength, and resoluteness.*

— "Neighboring Fields,"

*O Pioneers!*



*At left: Michael Peterman, time keeper; Michael Cadwallader, technical assistant; Michael Friedman, announcer; and Bob "Barker" Thacker.*

— Photo by Linda Ross





*Richard Harris, Mark Facknitz, and Rebecca Roorda, 3rd round contestants.*

— Photo by Linda Ross



*Bob Thacker with the finalists, Mark Facknitz, Susan Parry, and Janis Stout—and the ubiquitous Willa Cather overseeing.*

— Photo by Linda Ross

**“Collected Sketches  
from  
Willa Cather’s Childhood”  
Red Cloud, Nebraska  
1884-1890**

*We request the pleasure  
of your company  
at a preview and sales reception  
for the  
exhibition of*

**A Two-Person Show**

**John Bergers**  
oils

**Wes Holbrook**  
watercolors, acrylics

To Benefit the

**Endowment for the  
Red Cloud Opera House,  
Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial  
and Educational Foundation**

**THURSDAY, MAY 17, 2001**

6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial  
326 North Webster Street  
Red Cloud, Nebraska

Show continues through June 30, 2001

*On the first or second day of August I got a horse and cart and set out for the high country . . . . The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing . . . . The windy springs and the blazing summers, one after another, had enriched and mellowed that flat tableland; all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea. I recognized every tree and sand-bank and rugged draw. I found that I remembered the conformation of the land as one remembers the modelling of human faces.*

— “The Pioneer Woman’s Story,”  
*My Antonia*



# OBJECT LESSONS

by Ann Romines

*This Object Lessons departs from the usual focus by examining an item outside the WCPM&EF/NSHS Collection.*

## THE ROBINSON-CATHER QUILT

When Willa Cather was born in Back Creek Valley, Virginia, in 1873, she joined a community of women and girls with a tradition of fine quilting. Two surviving quilts made by her great-aunt, Sidney Cather Gore, in 1849 and 1854 show the meticulous needlework and elegant design that Cather's kinswomen could produce; the Gore quilts are the work of "an accomplished artist, even by the high standards of Southern needlework" (*Oklahoma Heritage Quilts* 17-18).

An even more striking example of the varied work and skills of local quilters is the Robinson-Cather quilt, made by a community of Back Creek Valley needlewomen in the 1850s. This quilt, which has never before been photographed, was brought to the 1997 Seventh International Willa Cather Seminar in Winchester by Kit Robinson, whose late husband James Kenneth Robinson (a former U.S. Congressman) was a Cather descendant. It is an album quilt, each block inscribed or stamped with the name of its maker or a member of her family. All thirty-six blocks are different, five in classic pieced patterns and the rest meticulously appliqued, some showing a high degree of skill and invention. Naive, fantastic, or realistic flowers and leaves alternate with stars, pinwheels, and intricate lacy cutouts. The prevailing colors are bright reds, greens, and yellows, showing the influence of the new aniline dyes that became widely available in the 1850s.

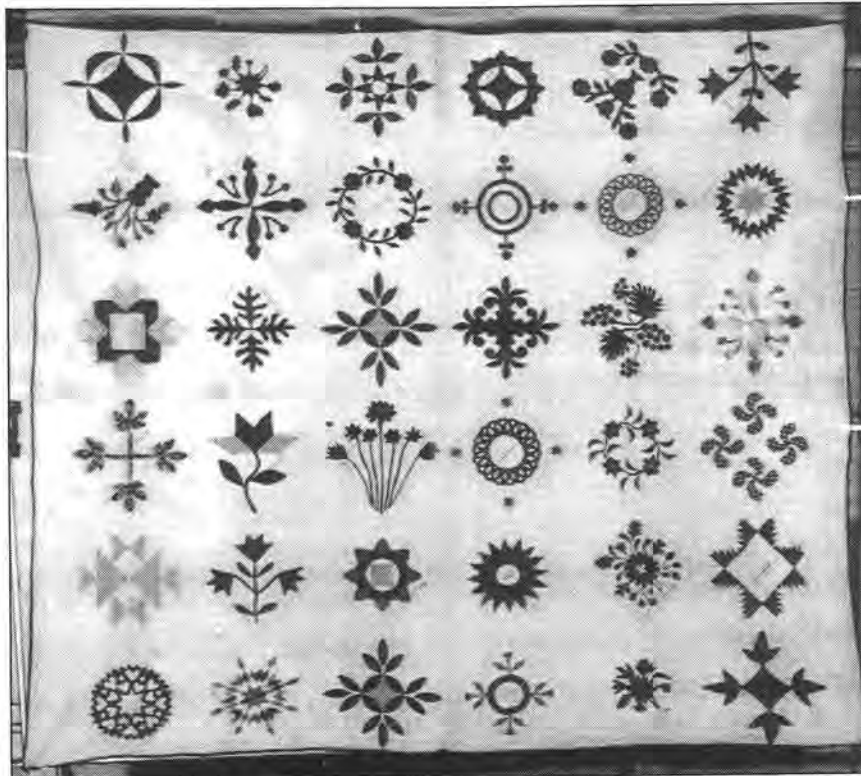
The quilt resembles another well-known Frederick County quilt from the 1850s, the Hollingsworth quilt, which has the same number of blocks in the same formation, a similar quilting pattern, and some similar pattern blocks, especially the distinctive lacy cutouts. (Another similar cutout block serves as a centerpiece for one of Sidney Cather Gore's quilts.) Robinson

names appear on both quilts, suggesting that the same women may have worked on — or at least seen — both quilts (Description of Property).

The names that remain legible on the Robinson-Cather quilt sketch a portrait of a tightly woven local community. Several are Cathers: Elizabeth and her daughter, Susan G., and two others with indecipherable first names. Another is Hannah Eleanor Robinson, who was born a Cather

and whose marriage linked the two families. At least five names are Robinsons. Others are Jacksons, Fentons, Rogerses, Joneses. According to the 1850 census, all these families lived in adjacent dwellings in Back Creek Valley. In the Gainsboro cemetery, where Willa Cather's Cather great-great-grandfather, great-grandparents and other relatives are buried, the same names recur again, forming intricate figures of kinship, friendship, and affiliation.

Willa Cather inherited the quilting tradition of the women who collaborated on the Robinson-Cather quilt. Like many nineteenth-century American girls, she was set to piecing quilts at an early age; in the epilogue to *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, she recalled that, at the age of five, she was "allowed to sit" with her grandmother and the former slave "Aunt Till" in the kitchen, sewing her patchwork and listening while they talked (287). The stories she heard, remembered for a lifetime, became the stuff of Cather's last novel, and



quilting and storytelling were intertwined in the child's memory. Cather's companion Edith Lewis wrote that Cather remembered selecting the calico for her childhood quilt patches with great care and that "Willa Cather took great pride in making these quilts. She did the piecing, and the old women quilted them with lamb's-wool from the lambs on the place [Cather's father raised sheep]" (*Willa Cather Living* 11-12).

The "old women" who quilted Willa Cather's childhood efforts at patchwork may well have been some of the same local women who made the Robinson-Cather quilt some twenty-five years earlier. In 1940, Cather returned again to their Southern community in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which is set in 1856, the same period in which the quilt was made. This quilt, newly visible to Cather's readers, is another text that testifies to the intricacy and pervasiveness of Willa Cather's Southern connections.

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This note will appear in *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, forthcoming in fall 2000 from the University Press of Virginia.

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The 2002 Spring Festival in Red Cloud will be co-sponsored by the WCPM and the Nebraska Quilters Guild.

## Niece Gives Cather Portrait to Sheldon Art Gallery



Guests assemble at an August 15, 2000, reception honoring Helen Cather Southwick for the gift of a portrait of her aunt, Willa Cather, to the Sheldon Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Pictured left to right are Dr. Susan Rosowski, UNL Department of English and WCPM board of governors; Mary Southwick, Mrs. Southwick's granddaughter; Helen Cather Southwick; Harvey Perlman, interim university chancellor; Dr. James Southwick, Mrs. Southwick's son; and Steve Ryan, WCPM executive director.

The portrait, by Russian *émigré* Nicolai Fechin (1881-1955), was painted in the early 1920s. Fechin and Cather became acquainted during one of her visits to Taos, New Mexico, where he was part of a thriving artists' colony. For many years, the 20 by 24-inch oil on canvas hung in Willa Cather's New York City apartment.

The painting was to be on view for the fall semester before being temporarily removed for cleaning and restoration.

Like Cather, Mrs. Southwick and her late husband are graduates of UNL. Before returning home to Utah, Mrs. Southwick, her son and granddaughter visited Red Cloud.

*All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn. The new country lay open before me; there were no fences in those days, and I could choose my own way over the grass uplands, trusting the pony to get me home again. . . . All those fall afternoons were the same, but I never got used to them. As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at any other time of the day. The blond cornfields were red gold, the haystacks turned rosy and threw long shadows. The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed. That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death—heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day.*

— "The Shimerdas," *My Ántonia*

**WILLA CATHER  
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- 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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