

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

*The Willa Cather Society*

VOLUME XXXVI, No. 1

Spring Conference News

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

## "A Sense of Place"

David E. Scherman

*In an informal talk at the 1991 Spring Conference, former Life editor and photographer David Scherman recalled the origins of the picture essay on Cather Country that he and Mildred Bennett did forty years ago ("Willa Cather Country," Life 30:112-23).*

It's great to return to a country where you drive by the compass instead of a roadmap. The Willa Cather pictures — I don't know how many of you have seen them — are at the Burlington Depot. They first appeared in *Life* magazine in 1951 and in some ways were the genesis of this entire organization (WCPM) and why we're all here today. Not in all ways, because an enormous number of people have done an enormous amount of work to build this foundation. But in some ways, because of the publicity they brought to Red Cloud, those pictures started the whole thing going. A lot of people have asked me how that story originated. Why did *Life* magazine get interested in Willa Cather? How did I first meet Mildred Bennett, etc. I'll try to tell you very briefly what it was all about.

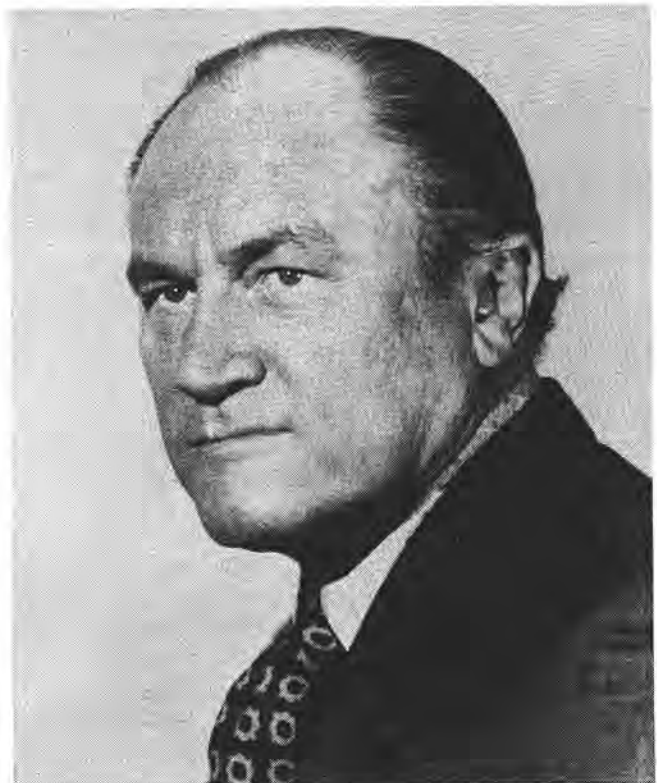
My wife and I had spent our courtship in France doing a story called *Literary France*, which was a set of pictures of the places made famous in French literature. When we came back to America, we decided to do the same thing about America, that is, to do a book called *Literary America*. At the same time, I was on leave of absence from *Life* magazine and was producing a television show. We got married in 1949 and began immediately to research *Literary America*. We got a munificent advance of \$2,000 from Dodd-Mead Publishing Company to do this year's long work. And we were able to talk the Book-of-the-Month Club into another \$2,000, but this was not enough. So I went back to my friends at *Life* and asked if they would be interested in doing a story on *Literary America*? The managing editor, Ed Thompson, said "This is much too big a subject for just one story, but our proprietor, Henry Luce, is interested in Willa Cather and if you'd like to just do that portion of *Literary America* we will assign you to do it."

(Continued Next Page)

## 1992 Spring Conference to Star E. G. Marshall

Cather's story "Two Friends," from this year's featured book, *Obscure Destinies*, will be "presented" at the Conference Banquet on 2 May by the distinguished stage, television, and film actor E. G. Marshall. Perhaps known most widely for his roles on television in "The Bold Ones" and "The Defenders," which earned him Emmy Awards, Marshall has starred in over a dozen stage plays, among them O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Miller's *The Crucible*. Among his equal number of motion pictures are *The Caine Mutiny*, *Twelve Angry Men*, *The Left Hand of God*, and *Interiors*.

Marshall's television credits reflect his interest in American writers: *Look Homeward, Angel*; *Our Town*, and *Middle of the Night*. While rehearsing for  
(Continued on Page 3)



## "A SENSE OF PLACE" Continued

Now, I always wondered why Mr. Luce, eclectic though he was in all of his thinking, would be interested in Cather. And it wasn't until yesterday, at the depot when I was talking to Harry Obitz (WCPM Board), that I got an inkling of why that was. It turns out that Harry was working as a golf professional for Fred Waring at the time. He had met, in the course of his golf games, a man called Jim Linen. Jim Linen was an executive of Time, Incorporated. He was also a nephew of Henry Luce, founder of *Time* and *Life*. I believe that Harry Obitz, with his Red Cloud connections, talked about Cather to Linen, who must surely have talked to Henry Luce about this remarkable prairie author. And I'm now sure that that was the genesis of Luce's interest in Cather. So when I turned up willing to go ahead with that, they said, "Sure, go ahead and do Willa Cather." I said, "Well it may mean my visiting Red Cloud, and Quebec, where *Shadows on the Rock* was set, and Santa Fe, where *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was set. It might mean my going there quite a lot." They said, "Go ahead. Shoot the works; do what you want." As a result, Rosemarie and I started off on *Literary America*. I came immediately to Red Cloud. While all this was going on, a former schoolteacher from Inavale (about seven miles west of here), the wife of Dr. Wilbur Bennett, had become very much interested in Willa Cather. I was told by Don Connors (WCPM Board) that a friend had brought *Shadows on the Rock* to her in 1932, which was the beginning of her interest. She became more and more interested in Cather and at one point wrote to *Life* and said she had discovered that a lot of the places that Cather wrote about were near Red Cloud and in Webster County. Would they be interested in sending a photographer to do a story? The answer was "No. We're not interested at all." Suddenly, she got a message that a photographer was coming from New York to do what she was dying to do anyhow. Bennett was, by this time, well aware of Cather's preoccupation with two very important things: the sense of place for Webster County, which Cather left long before she wrote *O Pioneers!*, and the existence on the prairie of a cultural clash between the white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture, if you like, and the immigrant cultures, the Bohemians, the Germans, the Swedes, who had come to this part of the country. Mildred was quite familiar with Cather's preoccupation with cultural clashes, and if there was ever such a clash, it was between Mildred Bennett, the recent Seventh Day Adventist from Inavale, and me, an irreverent New Yorker. When I got to Red Cloud, poor Mildred was very nervous. Who was this character who had come out from the slums of New York to the prairies of Nebraska to do such a sensitive story? But we hit it off very well. Wilbur gave us an old Packard and we set off on our first trip to do Willa Cather Country. Mildred had done her research

absolutely thoroughly. She knew all of the places that Cather wrote about, and she had a list of the quotations from the various Cather works which described these places. It was difficult from a meteorological and seasonal point of view so I decided that I would come here for the four seasons of the year. I did exactly that. Mildred and I drove around Webster County in all weathers in the elderly Packard. Webster County weather cooperated completely. In the wintertime we had below zero weather and had to bring the cameras inside the car and thaw the shutters against the car heater before we could photograph the winter scenes. Mildred would phone me in New York when the crops began to get ripe so that we could get the proper pictures of winter wheat coming up. She phoned me in the fall when the leaves began to turn. I came back to Red Cloud four times. I spent approximately four months on the story and the amount of money that it cost *Life* paid for the doing of *Literary America*, which came out the following year. While I was here I discovered that Mildred too had a book. She was familiar with Cather's sense of place, and familiar, of course, with Cather's remarkable literary style, the so-called "unfurnished novel." She said, "Do you suppose I could get this book published?", and I said, "Well, I'll ask our publisher if he would be interested." I phoned our publisher from Red Cloud. He said, "Yes, I'd be very much interested in seeing the book but I will only publish it if you will edit it." This put me in a rather difficult, blackmailing situation.

The only way that I could continue to get along with Mildred was to say I'd be glad to edit her book. I did indeed do that. Mildred came to New York in 1950 and we sat in a little flat on East 58th Street where Rosemarie and I were living before our children were born. And the picture, if you can bear it, of Mildred sitting in the back room of a tiny flat in Manhattan writing about the vast world of Willa Cather is really something to conjure with. In one week we finished *The World of Willa Cather*. It was published the following year under that name. The *Life* story was then about to come out. The managing editor said, "What shall we call it?" and I said, "Let's call it 'The World of Willa Cather,' that's what Mildred Bennett is calling her book." And he said "No. We're not going to give publicity to somebody else's book. We'll change the name of the story to 'Willa Cather Country'." And that, briefly, is the tale of how it all happened.

### Special Exhibit at the Depot

*"The Magical Essence of  
Willa Cather's Childhood"*

Original Acrylics by Linda Lambrecht Stych  
Owned by Anne Wagner and Gary Gruenemeier

**E.G. MARSHALL** Continued

*Iceman* he developed a lasting friendship with Eugene O'Neill, who personally directed the actor in this and five other of his plays.

Marshall's career would have interested Cather. He was prairie born, in Owatonna, Minnesota, to Norwegian parents and was educated at Carleton College and the University of Minnesota. He left Minnesota in 1933 for Chicago and the Federal Theater. After four years he headed for New York and eventually triumphed in O'Neill's play. E. G., his wife Judith, and their three children live on a seven-acre farm in Bedford, New York.

**Building Hours  
of  
Operation, May 2**

■ WCPM Art Gallery/  
Bookstore  
8:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.  
4:30-6:00 p.m.

■ Cather Historical Center  
Museum  
8:00 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

■ Cather Childhood Home  
9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.  
4:30-5:30 p.m.

■ Grace Episcopal Church  
1:00-2:00 p.m.

■ St. Juliana Catholic  
Church  
1:00-2:00 p.m.

■ Burlington Depot  
9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.  
4:30-6:00 p.m.  
*Exhibit and Book Signing*

**Authors of Books and  
Essays Will Be  
at the Burlington Depot  
from 4:30-5:30 p.m.  
for Autograph Session.**

**37th Annual Cather Spring Conference**

**SATURDAY, MAY 2, 1992**

**8:00-10:00 a.m.**

Registration, coffee and kolache  
*WCPM Art Gallery and Bookstore, 326 North Webster*

**8:30 a.m.**

Mass — Father Charles Peek, officiating  
*Grace Episcopal Church, 6th and Cedar*

**9:45 a.m.**

Mass — Father Stanley Schieffer, officiating  
*St. Juliana Catholic Church, 3rd Avenue and South Walnut*

**10:45 a.m.**

Tour — Tour departs from Bennett Building  
*3rd Avenue and Webster Street*

**1:00 p.m.**

Lunch  
*Lincoln Elementary School, South Entrance, 3rd and Cherry*

**2:30-4:30 p.m.**

"The Passing Show" — A roundtable discussion of  
*"Reading Obscure Destinies"*  
Susan Rosowski, Moderator  
*Lincoln Elementary School, South Entrance, 3rd and Cherry*

**9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.**

Exhibit "The Magical Essence of Willa Cather's Childhood"

**4:30-6:00 p.m.**

Exhibit Continues  
Book and Journal Signing  
*at Burlington Depot*  
Refreshments, 4:30-5:30 p.m.  
Courtesy of Catherland Federated Women's Club

**7:00 p.m.**

Banquet — E. G. Marshall, Guest Performer  
John Kunz, Original Musical Entertainment  
Ron Hull, Master of Ceremonies  
*High School Gymnasium, 7th and Webster*



**WINE AND CHEESE PARTY**

Immediately following the banquet  
Red Cloud Country Club  
2 miles east of Red Cloud, Hwy. 136, and ½ mile north



*Cather Buildings are opened courtesy of  
The Cather Historical Center, Nebraska State Historical Society  
John Lindahl, curator*

(More Conference News on Page 5)

## Garrison Keillor in Red Cloud

Polly Duryea

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The Troll Garden rumbled again when Minnesota humorist Garrison Keillor and his gifted troupe of



artists came to Willa Cather's 118th Birthday Party on December 7, 1991. Keillor broadcast his variety show directly from Red Cloud, Nebraska — a town not unlike his own Lake Wobegon — to call attention to the prairie author. He stated that Cather "knew about the spirit of the land and its power over people. . . . We want to do a live two hour broadcast that will give our radio audience a sense of Cather, of the town, and of the Great Plains, that will send some of them to look up her work and read some of it."

On December 6th, the day before the broadcast, Keillor arrived in town at dusk. Down at the high school gym Production Manager Janis Kaiser and a crew of local kids had packed the stage with music stands, microphones, an antique pump organ, choir risers, and a grand piano. At one side stood a curious collection of doors, locks, latches, gongs, and Venetian blinds to be used for radio sound effects. Spotlights glared from the metal rafters. On stage the Coffee Club String Quartet fiddled spasmodically, while down on the gym floor a Brooklyn stagehand queried the coach about the Warriors' basketball team. Technical Director Scott Rivard tinkered with a state of the art soundmixing board wired to the huge Bose speakers inside the gym, and outside to Minnesota Public Radio's satellite uplink that would beam the show 22,000 miles to carriage stations with only a quarter of a second delay. Everyone was waiting for Keillor.

Suddenly amidst the chatter and the rattle of unfolding chairs and moving lights, Garrison Keillor appeared on stage like a giant. He was dressed in a long, olive-green trenchcoat covering a coral sweater with matching coral socks that stuck out below his pants. With a song sheet in hand Keillor peered myopically from under those familiar Viking eyebrows, out through his tortoise rimmed specs.

Silently he autographed my offered copy of *WLT: A Radio Romance* (which he has dubbed "With Lettuce and Tomato"). Without a word he returned an imaginary basketball into an imaginary hoop, in an exchanged greeting with a fan as she stepped into the gym. The pace quickened and he turned away to rehearse quietly with his music director, Rob Fisher. Friends said the humorist would finish the script alone well into the night. The rest of us packed the Palace Lounge until midnight.

On the morning of December 7, both Willa Cather's Birthday and the 50th Anniversary after Pearl Harbor, Red Cloud was celebrating! Pat Phillips and John Lindahl had a huge, white "Welcome Garrison Keillor" banner hung that flapped in the wind above Webster Street. Fans flocked to the Historical Center at the bank and to the WCPM bookstore to meet artist John Blake Bergers. Up on Cedar Street Saint Juliana's choir sang glorious Alleluias at the Episcopal Church, where the winter sun streamed through the colored windows on this eve of the Virgin's holyday. Over at Vets Hall decorated Veterans posted the Colors before the auxiliary served soup and sandwiches to the hundreds of visitors while the band played. Later, at the elementary school Nebraska speakers warmed up the crowd for the Keillor show. Native American Matt Jones spun Kiowa tales; Dr. Harold Shiffler read "A Wagner Matinee"; and folklorist Roger Welsch told jokes and gave tribute to prairie pioneers by "celebrating the ordinary."

Around four o'clock everyone strolled northward under a sunny blue sky to form a queue around the high school block. Just before five o'clock eight hundred lucky people showed their (\$24.50) tickets before entering the gym. Once inside the angry droves nestled down onto their bleachers and folding chairs. Already on stage Keillor amused them with small talk and loosened his long red tie hanging over his blue shirt and gray suit; this time matching red socks showed below. Skillfully working his sometimes handsome face and his long Danish arms, he embraced the crowd through gesture and honey-droned voice.

Then electric-red letters — ON THE AIR — switched on and the magic began. With skits, songs and hymns ("Lonesome Valley" and "In the Sweet By and By" with St. Juliana's choir) Keillor paid homage to Willa Cather. Actress Lois Smith read from *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, passages relating to the Divide and its people. The troupe presented three lusty skits: "Café Burf in Clu Rouge"; "The Road to Red Cloud," about a down and out L.A. scriptwriter's attempt to make a cable movie from *The Song of the Lark*, [WC, reincarnated, yells: "You do and I'll pound the pudding out of you, Buster!"]; and another called — "Chicklet" — an all-chicken production of *Hamlet*, featuring an irritating white fowl (from a small Nebraska town) who types with the Hunt and Peck Method and dies trying.

Recasting the mood Keillor and Kate Mackenzie crooned a musical setting of Cather's love poem, "Spanish Johnny." Gifted NYC soprano Lisa Saffer sang "No Place Like Home" and a Mozart aria, recalling Willa Cather's passion for opera.

For two hours Keillor charmed the audience in the goblin-dark gym. Eerily the camera flashes illuminated his bittersweet story of his midnight skate as a boy onto a black, frozen Minnesota lake under billions of stars. Wearing speed skates inherited from a drowned cousin, he glides farther out to the lake center with terrible sounds of cracking ice underfoot. The terrified boy wonders, "what will become of me?" before circling back to the safety of the lighted shores of Lake Wobegon, "cross-stepping — right foot over; left foot, slide behind — right foot over; left foot, slide behind." The ghost of *Lucy Gayheart* filled the darkness.

While Keillor believes that Willa Cather's best stories came from Red Cloud he grants that perhaps "the town suffered in having a great writer come from its ranks. . . . It ain't all a privilege, as I'm sure people up in the cemetery can tell you." Finally the magician bid his audience farewell, praising both Willa Cather's books and the prairie ancestors who peopled them. Eight hundred spellbound fans broke into one voice singing, "Blest Be the Tie That Binds," Willa Cather's birthday song, and the fabulous party in the Troll Garden was over for another year.

#### NOTES

Opening quote, NPR Network Press Release, Nov. 14, 1991.

Final quote from L. Kent Wolgamott, *Lincoln Journal-Star*, Dec. 8, 1991, p. 1A.

### **Obscure Destinies Roundtable to Be Led by NEJ Authors**

This year's Conference Roundtable ("The Passing Show"), "Reading *Obscure Destinies*," will be chaired by Susan Rosowski of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and feature as discussants the authors of essays in the special "Cather in the Classroom" issue introducing the *Nebraska English Journal* in its new format. Besides Rosowski, the issue's authors include Cather specialists Merrill M. Skaggs, John J. Murphy, and Bruce P. Baker; prize-winning teachers Mellanee Kvasnicka, Betty Kort, and Steven Shively; and new Cather voices Matthias Schubnell, Evelyn Funda, and Anthea E. Amos-Bankster.

Copies of the special Cather issue of the *Nebraska English Journal* can be preordered on the conference form at a special \$8.00 price. After the conference the issue will be \$10.00 and available from WCPM, 326 N. Webster, Red Cloud, NE 68970 (Please add \$2.50 postage and 5% Nebraska sales tax.) or from the NEJ Editors, Creighton University.

### **John Kunz to Sing Cather at Banquet**

Before the Marshall reading, another prairie native, John Kunz, originally from Springfield, Illinois, will perform songs inspired by Cather's fiction. An accomplished singer-songwriter and guitarist now making his home in Omaha, Kunz has been featured at various Omaha events, including the 1991 Nebraska Literature Festival and, this winter, a celebration of Nebraska's 125th at the Joslyn Art Museum.



The performance at the Spring Banquet will include words and music Kunz calls lyrical adaptations of the *Obscure Destinies* stories. He has worked closely with Bruce P. Baker of the University of Nebraska at Omaha in selecting stories and themes from the fiction. He will briefly introduce some of his songs to enable listeners to journey back to homestead and prairie schooner days.

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### **Board News**

Two new members were appointed to the WCPM Board of Governors in September 1991: Merrill Maguire Skaggs and Robert Harwick.

Skaggs, a leading Cather critic, is presently Dean of the Graduate School at Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. She has authored *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather* (Virginia 1990) and many articles on Cather's fiction. She has generated much interest in Cather at Drew and several of her students have added distinction to Cather scholarship.

Harwick recently retired from Hastings College, where he chaired the English Department; he has also taught at UNL and Doane College. He received his Ph.D. from UNL in 1965 and served on the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities.

The Board was saddened by the death in December of Marian Schultz, a long-time and generous member of the WCPM Board of Governors.

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### **News Bit**

Willa Cather is among the authors whose original manuscripts have been donated by Houghton Mifflin to Harvard University's rare book collection at Houghton Library. Cather changed publishers from Houghton Mifflin to Alfred Knopf after *My Ántonia*.

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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**Willa Cather Newsletter  
 Spring Conference News Issue**

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*Willa Cather Newsletter* welcomes articles and notes for its Literary Annual and other issues. Address submissions to WCPM, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970. Essays and notes are currently listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.

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- Free guided tour to restored buildings
- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
- By contributing your ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.

**ALL MEMBERSHIPS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND BEQUESTS ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE**

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**AIMS OF THE WCPM**

- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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