

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXXIV, No. 4      Editor: John J. Murphy      Editorial Associate: Patricia K. Phillips      RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

## WCPM Receives Copy of *One of Ours* War Diary

Tom Allan

(Edited from *Omaha World Herald*, 12 December 1990)

A copy of a World War I doctor's diary that provided inspiration and source material for author Willa Cather's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *One of Ours* has found a home in Red Cloud. The copy was presented on December 10 to Pat Phillips, WCPM Director, by Frank and Charlotte White of Hastings, Nebraska, on behalf of the family and a friend of the late Dr. Frederick C. Sweeney of Jaffrey.

"This is a significant gift and will be important to the reading and understanding of Willa Cather. It gives insight into

Cather's use of a primary source for something which she could not experience herself," Mrs. Phillips said. The Whites and Phillips said that in addition to providing important source material, the diary refutes implications by some critics that Cather may have plagiarized parts of the diary for use in her novel.

For White and his wife, the presentation of the copy consummated a long friendship with its keeper, Margaret Bean of Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Mrs. Bean knew and had "so many warm memories" of Dr. Sweeney, White said, but did not

know Cather, who wrote many of her novels at Jaffrey and is buried there. It wasn't until Dr. Sweeney died in 1967 that his daughter Dorothy, a friend of Cather's, talked to Bean about Cather's use of the diary.

The diary was placed on permanent loan to the Jaffrey-Gilmore Foundation by the Sweeney family. Since it was in a fragile state, Bean prepared copyrighted typewritten copies for the family as well as one that scholars could read only at the foundation. It was specified that no other copies could be made. But at the suggestion of the Whites, who met Mrs. Bean on their pilgrimage to Cather's grave in the mid-1970's, and with the approval of Dr. Sweeney's family, Bean decided to make and donate bound copies of the diary to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; the Jaffrey library; the University of California at Davis; Helen Cather Southwick, Cather's niece; and the WCPM.

Phillips said the story behind the diary "is intriguing." In 1919, when she began writing *One of Ours* in a tent near her favorite lodging, Jaffrey's Shattuck Inn, Cather became ill with the flu. When Dr. Sweeney was called to treat her, Cather learned that he had been a medical doctor on a troop ship during a flu epidemic and had kept a daily diary of events.

Cather biographer Woodress said Sweeney "obligingly loaned" the diary to Cather, "and she mined it for the detail that went into Book 4 of her novel *One of Ours*." The Whites and Bean say



Pictured left to right: Charlotte White, Frank White, Pat Phillips.  
— Photo by Tom Allan/World-Herald

the diary proves that Cather did not use Dr. Sweeney's words in her description of the troop ship crossing to France. "You can place the diary and the book side by side and see the difference," Mrs. White said.

On display alongside the original tattered diary at the Jaffrey Foundation is a copy of the first

limited edition of *One of Ours* that Cather had presented to Dr. Sweeney as a gesture of gratitude. She wrote on its flyleaf: "For Frederick Sweeney, who gave me so much inspiration and information for the fourth book of this story. From its grateful author, Willa Cather."

Indeed, soon after entering the University of Nebraska in Lincoln in 1890, Cather evidently began work on what was to become her first published story, "Peter," derived from the account of Mr. Sadilek's suicide. As James Woodress has pointed out, her effort so impressed her English teacher, Herbert Bates, that he sent it off to the editors of *The Mahogany Tree* (*Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, p. 77. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987). The Boston magazine published "Peter" in its May 31, 1882, issue and the story was reprinted in the university's own literary magazine, *Hesperian*, on November 24 of the same year.

## Willa Cather's "Peter": From Anecdote to Narrative

Bruce P. Baker, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Soon after Willa Cather moved to Webster County, Nebraska, at the age of nine, she heard an oft-repeated story of one Frank Sadilek who had committed suicide some years before and had been buried, according to old world custom, in an unhallowed grave at a crossroads in the country. One can almost see young Willa's eyes grow wide as she heard the story repeated; it had within it a romantic, mysterious quality so appealing to children and also something of the tragic despair that she herself felt upon coming from the wooded hills of Virginia to the barren levelness of the Nebraska plains. No doubt the story as she originally heard it was very similar to the following account recorded by Sadilek's daughter, Annie Pavelka (the prototype for *Antonia Shimerda* in *My Antonia*) in a moving and significant letter written to Frances Samland, a high school student in Omaha, just two months before Annie's death in 1955:

[T]hat was a bad winter [of 1880?] lots of snow not much to cook nothing to burn no place to go nothing to read people had to burn corn stalk sun flowers and cow chips it was lucky mother brought feather beds as we had to sleep on the dirt floor with hay for mattres, that was hard on father in the old country he had weaver when it was cold and in the evenings he would

sit and make linens and any kind of wearing material allways and was allways joking and happy he was a man in a million allways had lots of friends . . . he never swore or used dirty words like other men no he never drank or play cards he was a clean man in everyway.

[T]hen one nice afternoon it was 15 of feb he told mother he was going to hunt rabbits he brought a shot gun from the old country he never used it there nobody dared to shoot there was all rich peoples property when he didnt return by five oclock mother older brother and the man we lived with went to look for him it was dark when they found him half siting in that old house back of the bed shot in the head and allready cold nearly frozen the sherif said it was a suiside there no cemetery or nothing one of the near neighbors had to make a wooden box and they had to make his grave in the corner of our farm but my brothers him moved and him and my mother also are sleeping in Red Cloud cemetery and they have a tumbstone I hope they are restting sweetly.

The story clearly impressed Cather; Mildred Bennett has reported that young Willa felt that "if she ever wrote anything, she would be bound to write some time about that" (*Early Stories of Willa Cather*, p. 7. Ed. Mildred Bennett. New York: Dodd, 1957).

In "Peter" Cather treated for the first time the artistic soul in a world that neither recognizes nor respects creativity. Old Peter Sadelack of the story's title is just such a soul. Committed to the "dreariest part of . . . southwestern Nebraska," he finds himself unable to endure his new life on the plains. The style of "Peter" is, of course, rather heavy-handed by Cather's later standards, but in this first story Cather not only anticipates the suicide of Mr. Shimerda in *My Antonia* but also a motif which appears in many of her other stories: the plight of the sensitive immigrant in an environment which does not yet value beauty and art. Thus, when old Peter finds that he can no longer make music — the only thing he has valued in his new life on the plains — and when his son Antone is insistent upon selling the symbol of what seems to Antone to be both frivolous and useless, Peter takes his own life. Suicide in his case seems almost inevitable.

Whatever the historical accuracy of Cather's account of the details of the suicide, however, it is clear that she changed the story somewhat in order to clarify the conflicts and enhance her themes. "Peter" is not merely a retelling of the

Sadilek suicide but a transforming of it into a work of art. For example, although little if any hint is given of the actual Mr. Sadilek's motivation for suicide in his daughter's literal account, Cather makes the motivation poignantly clear. The conflict with Antone, the son, is superimposed on the original material, as is Antone's role as a rather typical — and altogether too real — representative of American materialism and "practicality." Moreover, their conflict is given added intensity by its being defined as a son versus his father conflict, a turnabout of the actual relationship of the real Sadilek with his family. The loving, gentle man praised by Annie Pavelka in her letter is in the short story called a "lazy old man" by a son who is ironically considered by many of the townspeople and farmers to be "a much better man than his father." Indeed, the son's desire to get rid of the fiddle is symbolically akin to his attitude toward Peter: neither is of any real use or value. Cather suggests this theme and forebodes Peter's death in the very first sentences: "No, Antone," insists Peter, "I have told thee many, many times, no, thou shalt not sell it until I am gone." "But I need money; what good is that old fiddle to thee?" Antone retorts.

Although Cather does, of course, succeed in eliciting the reader's sympathy for Peter, she attempts to balance the portrait somewhat. Whereas Annie Pavelka's letter characterizes Frank Sadilek as one who "never drank," Cather writes in her narrative, "There were but two things [Peter] would not pawn [in order to get whiskey], his pipe and his violin." Then, too, it is clear that Peter is of very little help in meeting the difficulties of making a living by farming the western plains. The overriding impression of him is of an inept but artistic man whose love of music is central to his life but

demeaned by Antone and those like him. Cather has dramatically altered her source by introducing the significant role of music in Peter's life; Annie Pavelka's only indication of her father's artistic bent is her observation about his skill as a weaver. It is when music is no longer possible that Peter resolves to commit suicide; life without art is simply not worth living.

Poignant as Annie's account of her father's suicide is, Cather's narrative enhances its plight and underlines the tragedies and ironies involved. Peter takes his own life, and those who represent "success" on the Divide would appear to have triumphed. The final irony of the story is thus succinctly conveyed in the very last paragraph:

In the morning Antone found him stiff, frozen fast in a pool of blood. They could not straighten him out enough to fit a coffin, so they buried him in a pine box. Before the funeral Antone carried to town the fiddlebow which Peter had forgotten to break. Antone was very thrifty, and a better man than his father had been.

Antone and the forces of American insensitivity and materialism would seem to have won the day.

But what about that fiddlebow which remains? Antone will, no doubt, be able to sell it and thus exchange the instrument of music and art for money. And yet, if the bow is sold, it will no doubt "live on" to help some violinist create music once again. Art, Cather seems to me to be suggesting, will in fact endure and transcend the narrow materialism so rampant on the Divide. Cather's narrative has transformed the original anecdote into a commentary on the persistence of art in spite of those who seek to ignore or destroy it.

NOTE: "Peter" is available in *Early Stories of Willa Cather* and *Collected Short Fiction* (ed.

Virginia Faulkner: University of Nebraska, 1970); both the letter and the story are included in *My Antonia: The Road Home* by John J. Murphy (Boston: Twayne, 1989).

## One Woman's Heels

(For Mildred R. Bennett)

A sound tumbled over the street,  
one woman's heels clicking on  
the concrete.

Breeze carried the sound around  
corners  
where others seldom walked,  
past where they boarded up  
most of the fine old houses  
along the highway.

Years before, other people  
walked over the same concrete,  
drifting through the town like  
dry leaves.

Only ones that got caught in  
corners  
or against trees or behind walls  
stayed.

When these people left  
few remarked.  
But her sound was different.  
It rolled along the highway and  
off of the earth,  
just over the hill, really,  
and the cold sun  
burned under a flat palm of  
clouds.

Since she left  
she didn't have to see  
the sky go dark  
for one more fall.

Greg John  
September 28, 1990

Remember  
SPRING  
CONFERENCE  
Saturday, May 4!

DESK CALENDAR  
REDUCED PRICE

**NEW BOARD MEMBERS**

Newly-appointed members of the WCPM Board of Governors include: Jim Fitzgibbon, a science teacher in the Red Cloud Schools recognized for developing an enrichment program in paleontology and for publications in science education; Betty Kort, who teaches English and art at Hastings, Nebraska, Senior High and received an NEH-supported sabbatical for 1989-90 to study the culture of the Great Plains; Mellanee Kvasnicka, a veteran, prize-winning teacher and department chair in English at South High in Omaha, and the author of articles on Cather in the *WCPM Newsletter* and *Willa Cather and the Family*; and William E. Mountford, a retired Red Cloud businessman and civic leader who served as treasurer of WCPM from 1975-1977.

**LINDLEY NEW WOODS  
PRESIDENT**

Lucia Woods Lindley, a longtime member of WCPM Board of Governors, has been elected the first woman president of the Woods Charitable Fund. Lindley is cofounder of the Chicago Foundation for Women and, in 1983, established the Sophia Fund to support programs aimed at economic, social, political, and cultural equity for women.

**CATHER'S "GREAT BOOK"**

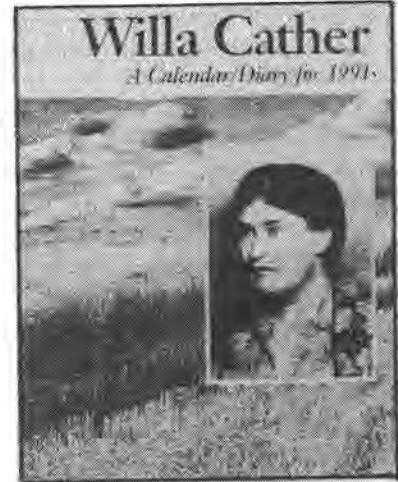
Willa Cather is one of four female authors recently added to the list of "Great Books of the Western World," determined by editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The Cather book chosen is *A Lost Lady*, respected for its near perfect artistry but not as well known as either *My Ántonia* or *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. In response to the selection, Susan J. Rosowski described the novel as "like a poem with extremely concentrated meaning."

**WILLOW SHADE  
RESTORED**

Since August 1985, David and Susan Parry of Washington, D.C. have been the owners of Willow Shade, the Virginia childhood home of Willa Cather, which is located on U.S. 50 between Winchester and Romney, West Virginia. The house has undergone extensive restoration, most of which was completed in spring 1990. The Parrys are greatly interested in Cather's work and, by pre-arrangement, would be pleased to open to scholars and WCPM members the rooms described in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The Parrys can be contacted at: 5526 Broad Branch Road N.W., Washington, D.C. 20015, Phone (202) 363-5987 or Willow Shade, Route 1, Box 47, Gore, Virginia 22637, Phone (703) 877-1546.

**CATHER BIRTHDAY  
ACTIVITIES**

Nebraska Public Radio joined the WCPM in the celebration of Willa Cather's 117th birthday on December 7. Featured on the nearly five hours of programming were NPR's 1983 three part production of "Willa Cather: A Look of Remembrance," based on Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's memoir, with Colleen Dewhurst and Dianne Wiest; Susan Rosowski's 45-minute cutting of *O Pioneers!*; a recorded performance of Betty Jean Steinshouer's "Willa Cather Speaks"; and Dr. Harrold Shiffler's reading of "A Wagner Matinee." In Red Cloud, the Very Reverend Dean John P. Bartholomew conducted a noon celebratory mass in Willa Cather's honor. Lunch with birthday cake followed at Meadowlark Manor. On Sunday, December 9, the Willa Cather Historical Center hosted its first Victorian Christmas Tea, and thirty children from Webster County listened to Cather stories at the WCPM and made Christmas gifts for their parents.



**Willa Cather  
Calendar / Diary  
for 1991**

<del>\$10.95</del>	\$6.57
Tax	.33
Postage	2.25
	<b>\$9.15</b>

If ordering more than one calendar, add 33¢ tax and 75¢ postage for each additional calendar. *Hurry . . . supply limited!*

**A Post-Santa Fe  
Connection**

Sister J. Adele Edwards  
Mount St. Mary's College,  
California

Those of us who have read Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* know about the Sisters of Loretto and their relationship with Bishop Latour (Lamy), who brought them to Santa Fe to staff his Academy of Our Lady of Light. Those of us who attended the Cather Seminar in Santa Fe in June, 1990, probably visited their miraculous staircase in the Loretto Chapel. I am not a Sister of Loretto; I am a Sister of St. Joseph — another congregation with pioneer women who mi-

grated to the Southwest in the 1800s — but, as I reread *Archbishop* prior to the Cather seminar and learned some more history during it my curiosity was aroused about the possible connections between the Sisters of St. Joseph, Bishop Jean Lamy, and his friend Father Joseph Machebeuf. My research produced for me some new and exciting information.

Cather wrote about Father Valliant (her fictionalized Machebeuf) and his missionary service in Colorado's "comfortless mining camps, looking after lost sheep in Creede, Durango, Silver City, and Central City" (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Vintage, 1971, p. 257). It was to this last mining camp that the historical Father Machebeuf, in 1873, requested the Sisters of St. Joseph to come from St. Louis and operate an academy. They responded to this need "for forty years until the decline of the mines forced them to close. The sisters often had to stand at the top of the mine shafts to beg alms from the miners in order to buy food" (Dougherty, 114). By 1876, the then Bishop Machebeuf, as Vicar Apostolic of Colorado and Utah, recognized the need for hospitals. So once again he asked for the Sisters of St. Joseph. As a result, St. Joseph's Hospital was opened in Georgetown, Colorado, in 1880, and staffed (until 1914) by the sisters who cared for "victims of mining accidents, train wrecks, avalanches, or gunshot wounds" (Dougherty, 128) in Clear Creek County.

Bishop Lamy had not been so fortunate as his friend. When in 1868 he requested Sisters of St. Joseph for the newly appointed Bishop Salpointe of Tucson, no sisters were available. It was not until April 1870, and because of the persistence of Salpointe, that seven sisters left their motherhouse in St. Louis on the newly completed Transcontinental Railroad. They arrived in Tucson on May 26, after some

harrowing experiences during a covered wagon trip across the desert. By 1873, negotiations were underway for opening a school at the old Indian mission of San Xavier del Bac, which Cather's Valliant had restored and "declared to be the most beautiful church on the continent, . . ." (223). In 1874, Bishop Salpointe again went to St. Louis to ask for more sisters to staff the mission school at San Xavier. On his return to Arizona, he and three sisters stopped in the frontier town of Denver. Here the sisters once more connected with "Bishop Machebeuf, who as a former missionary in Arizona, gave the sisters the benefit of his experiences among the Papagos in the vicinity of Tucson" (Savage, 255). These same sisters later received hospitality on their journey from Bishop Lamy's Sisters of Loretto in Santa Fe (Savage, 256).

For many years I have read or listened to stories about our early sisters and their missionary endeavors in the Southwest. However, it was not until I reread *Death Comes for the*

*Archbishop* that I realized the importance of Bishop Jean Lamy and Father Joseph Machebeuf, the models for Cather's Bishop Latour and Father Valliant, in the missionary work of my congregation. I discovered that many of our sisters may never have come to the Southwest had it not been for these two priests. My reading of Cather's historical novel has become more meaningful to me personally, for I am proud to have shared in the fruits of these men and women missionaries in the American Southwest.

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#### WORKS CITED

Dougherty, Sister Dolorita Marie, C.S.J., et al. *Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet*. St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1966.

Savage, Sister Mary Lucida. *The Congregation of Saint Joseph of Carondelet*. 2nd ed. St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1927.

### BYU's Willa Cather, A Major Collection of Essays



## WILLA CATHER

Family, Community, and History

(The BYU Symposium)

John J. Murphy, Editor

Brigham Young University's Humanities Publications Center has just published the largest collection of original essays on American novelist Willa Cather. The volume, *Willa Cather: Family, Community, and History*, contains 32 essays by literature and history professors from 25 universities, including California, Nebraska, Wisconsin, South Dakota, New Mexico, Houston, San Francisco, and BYU.

This is a gathering of the best presentations from the Cather Symposium held at BYU in September 1988 and selected by the Utah Endowment for the Humanities as a "Merit Award Project," an "outstanding example of how the humanities disciplines can be used in public programming."



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BYU Professor John J. Murphy, editor of the volume, has arranged the essays according to theme, prefacing each section with a short introduction: "Cather's Family and Home Place" explores the Cather biography directly through the fiction; "The Family Idealized and Explored" discusses Cather's handling of parent-child and sibling relationships; "Issues of History and Fictional Communities" places Cather among historians who viewed our culture in decline and surveys her use of communities in Nebraska, New Mexico, and Quebec to trace the decline of Western civilization.

The seven essays in "Feminist Perspectives on Family and Community" present war, slavery, art, and family history as women's issues. The shortest section, "Communities of Art, Families of Faith," explores the community of readers and observers created through art and also the transcendence of earthly communities through religion.

Among the unique features of the collection are 17 vintage photographs depicting the Cather family and the family of Annie Pavelka, the Bohemian immigrant who inspired *My Ántonia*, Cather's most popular novel. Historian Robert Cherny of San Francisco State University enhances his essay on Nebraska backgrounds with a photographic survey of cultural evolution on the prairie from the dugout to the building of Lincoln as prairie capital and seat of the University of Nebraska.

The work of historians like Cherny, University of California's Wilbur Jacobs, and BYU's Ted Warner develops recently neglected areas in Cather studies, like her creative handling of historical fact and the influence of historians on her fiction. BYU faculty contributions to the volume include, besides Warner's and Murphy's, essays by Marilyn Arnold, Stephen Tanner, and Eugene England, all of the English Department. Other contributors include James Woodress, Susan Rosowski, David Stouck, Bruce Baker, Blanche Gelfant, Patricia Yongue, Loretta Wasserman, Merrill Skaggs, and others.

Murphy feels that the production of this book represents a family and community story in itself. Working within the restrictions of a modest grant, most of the work was performed by student editors under the direction of Linda Adams of the

Humanities Publications Center. Student editorial teams prepared camera-ready copy, checked all sources, and read proof. The volume was a year and a half in preparation, and is available for \$7.95 from the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970. Please add \$3.00 for shipping and handling.

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

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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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