

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXXIV, No. 2

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

Epitomes in New Mexico

N. Scott Momaday dined late-ly at Taos Inn with Willa Cather, the writer from Nebraska, and Father Martinez from New Mexico. While at table, each person told a wondrous Southwest story featuring, or as Momaday calls them, "epitomes of the Wild West."

Father Martínez was the first storyteller, remembering a familiar Momaday theme about an awestruck old Taoseño who saw a brilliantly starry sky in 1833, the night the Kiowas came to town. Next, Willa Cather took her turn and recalled how dangerous Billy the Kid, even while chained in a Santa Fé jail, had impressed Sister Blandina with his gentle manners. The Kid rides high in Momaday legends. The last storyteller was Momaday himself, relating a parable in which the Sioux Chief Crazy Horse meets General Custer in "Floral Valley." The two men exchange greetings, then each rides on his way.

All were stories of irony and imagination, telling of unex-

pected recognition and respect that come from "courtesy beneath oppression" — the result of "a deep drift of chivalry. And God knows how it came to be, but there it was." Momaday was the keynote speaker for the Fourth National Seminar, "Willa Cather: Multiple Traditions in American Culture," held June 16-23 in Santa Fé, New Mexico. One hundred seventy-five scholars, students, and "just plain fans" from thirty-four states and three foreign countries attended the seminar.

Following his storytelling, Momaday spoke informally with his audience, answering questions and exploring ideas in his — and Cather's — writing. What interested him in reading Cather most recently were her ideas of imagination and sympathy. "Imagination is not simply the ability to weave pretty stories out of the air," he observed, and writing with sympathy "is to approach something very close, to take possession of it." The



*Hermione Lee of
York University in Heslington, England*
— Photo by Polly Duryea

1969 Pulitzer-Prize winner (for *House Made of Dawn*) was joined by other distinguished lecturers at the seminar.

In "Entering Jacinto's Cave: The Politics of Culture," Sharon O'Brien (author of *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, 1987) drew upon theories of culture, politics, and aesthetics to ask "what are the principles of exclusion



Left to right: Charles Mignon, Susan Rosowski, N. Scott Momaday
— Photo by Polly Duryea



Left to right: Blanche Gelfant, Bruce Baker, Robert Knoll, Sharon O'Brien, John Anders, Tony Mares.
— Photo by Polly Duryea



Left to right: Lucia Woods Lindley, Robert Knoll, Charles Mignon.
— Photo by Polly Duryea



Left to right: Canadians - Janet Giltrow, David Stouck, Mary-Ann Stouck.
— Photo by Polly Duryea

and inclusion?" that govern discourse generally and Cather's narratives specifically. O'Brien used the Jacinto's cave episode, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, to point out that Cather's narrative is "far from unified." In "Willa Cather and the Last Hurrah for the White Man's Burden: History as Seen in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," E. A. "Tony" Mares, Southwest historian, writer, and descendant of the real Father Martínez, placed Cather's sense of history within her own intellectual context. By accepting premises of the Golden Age of Europe, including that of Anglo-colonization, Cather was a child of her time; yet "Willa Cather's stance toward the 'White Man's Burden' was not uncritical," Mares concluded. "She was disturbed by the logic of her own

conclusions," and had the integrity to follow up on those implications.

British scholar Hermione Lee (author of *Willa Cather: Double Lives* 1990; in the British Virago Edition, *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up*, 1989) in "Cather's Bridge: Anglo-American Crossings in Willa Cather" focused on Cather's "sense of marginality," seen in her negotiation between the late 19th-century stance of a passionate pilgrim and the early 20th-century one of a lost generation. There were two aspects of England that appealed to Cather, Lee maintained: one was a democratic Hogarthian sense of reality and the other, a gilded frame of Edwardian stage art.

Discussion groups took up the multiple aspects of culture

in Cather's fiction as presented in over fifty papers and lectures. University of Nebraska-Lincoln Professor Susan J. Rosowski noted that "sometimes contradictory arguments led to general questions about a writer's responsibility to history, and fiction's role in shaping it." The multiple perspectives were evident, for example, in a panel titled "Church Responses to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," with Jerome J. Martínez y Alire (Archdiocese of Santa Fé) telling of the oppression of growing up within a history shaped by Cather, with Thomas Casey, OSA (Merrimack College) arguing that Cather was adept at imagining the religious mentality of view of Lamy/Latour and the native peoples "because she had a sacramental sensibility;" and John J. Murphy (Brig-



Victor Grant, guide at Martínez Hacienda in Taos, provides the group with some historical background.
© 1990 — Photo by Lucia Woods



In the cathedral. Left to right: Phyllis Greene, George Greene, Bruce Baker (with camera bag) and Shirley Showalter.
© 1990 — Photo by Lucia Woods



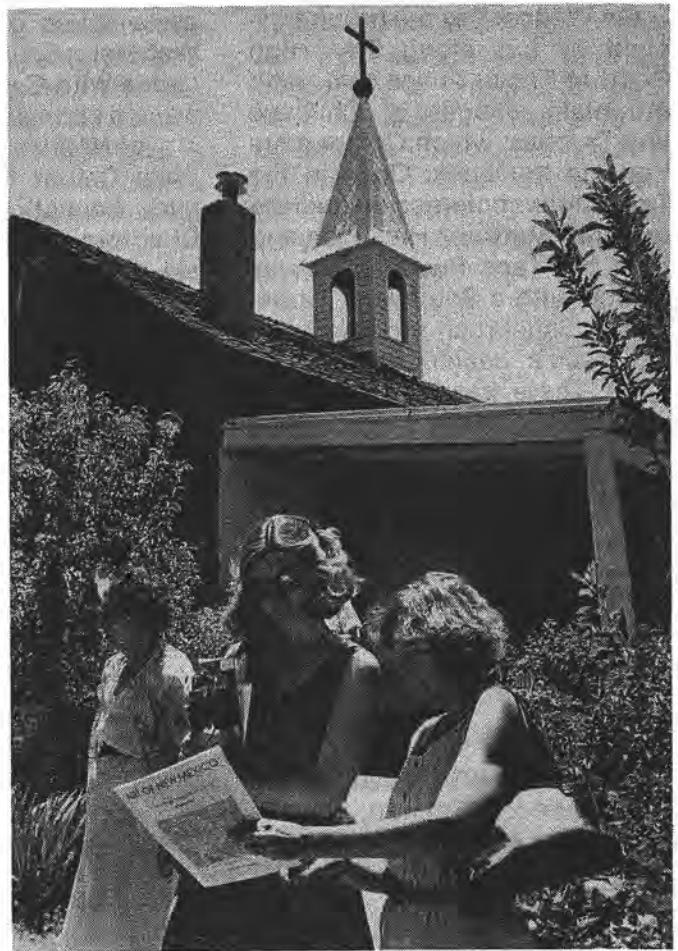
Left to right: Robert Gish, James Woodress, Kris Aithal from India. — Photo by Polly Duryea

ham Young University) interpreting *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as “prophetic of the break that began the world stage of Christianity” announced by Vatican II.

Extending the idea of culture beyond the Southwest, in “France in the Life and Work of Willa Cather,” James Woodress demonstrated the importance of Daudet to Cather; and in “Strains of Blood: Myra Driscoll and the Romance of the Celts,” Robert K. Miller introduced a new interpretation of Cather’s idea of race. Gender analysis lay behind Jill Jones’s concept of class in “Betraying Antonia,” and in “‘The Earth Speaks Louder’: Describing a Style for Reading the Land,” a tandem presentation, David Stouck and Janet Giltrow (Simon Fraser Uni-

versity, Canada). Giltrow and Stouck combined literature and linguistics to reveal through grammatical analysis Cather’s design for “the thing not named” on her page.

To enable participants to experience the “sense of place” found in Cather’s Southwest writing, Pat Phillips (WCPM) organized side-trips related to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Monday included a walking tour to Bishop Lamy’s Cathedral in historic Old Town



Left to right: Virginia Rock, Mary Jo Lehman, Ann Fisher-Worth. — Photo by Lucia Woods, © 1990

Santa Fé. Later in the day everyone lunched at the elegant Bishop’s Lodge Complex — a site northeast of the City of Holy Faith where Lamy spent his days in retirement.



On Wednesday the group travelled by bus along the "High Road to Taos" to see the rustic mountain villages of Chimayó and Truchas, which Cather mentions in her book. Once in the Taos area, conferees visited the restored Martínez Hacienda and then the Taos Pueblo. The day closed with a Southwest barbecue at Sagebrush Inn, overlooking Taos's Sacred Blue Mountains. There was just time for a visit to the hotel room where Georgia O'Keeffe painted in the late 1920's. The last stop was a photographer's delight at the most-photographed church in America, the Church of St. Francis of Assisi at Ranchos de Taos, before the desert-sunset ride back to the College of Santa Fé.

The Fourth National Cather Seminar was dedicated to the late Mildred R. Bennett, pioneer in Cather studies and in the

preservation of Red Cloud and Webster County sites associated with Cather. The seminar was co-sponsored by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. Directors were Susan J. Rosowski, and Patricia K. Phillips, assisted by David Harrell (University of New Mexico). They and their staff deserve bouquets for high quality papers and "epitomes in New Mexico." Major funding was made possible by grants from the Nebraska Humanities Council and the New Mexico Endowment for the Humanities.

As for the Fifth National Seminar in 1993, plans are underway — Quebec? Pittsburgh? Nebraska?

Aho!

Polly Duryea
University of Nebraska-
Lincoln

duction's compelling, unifying force. Her transformation from young woman burdened with her father's legacy, to successful farmer, to emblem of the land is this adaptation's true focus, and the strength of the performance prevented sentimentality about the Pioneer Age from overcoming the harsh reality of taming and loving the land. All the great qualities which form Alexandra's character came to life and gave the drama its shape.

One would like to have seen such depth in other characters as well, but only Crazy Ivar (John Carpenter), who intuitively "knows" the land as Alexandra does, in any way shared center stage with her. Insofar as their understanding of each other comes through mutual love for the land, their friendship and kinship in Ms. Cloud's adaptation served as counterpoint to other relationships in the play less satisfying. Carl Linstrum (Randle Mell) seemed, perhaps, too unsettled and uneasy with himself, too much a mismatch for the clear-headed Alexandra. Oscar (Douglas Krizner) and Lou (Christopher Council), her brothers, were too weighted down by their heavy boots as young, untried farmers, and too obviously constricted by their new clothes as successful landowners. Annie Lee (Kate Phelan), Alexandra's sister-in-law, devolved to an unconvincing parody of the Mid-western middle class, lacking any real sense of value, and shrill in displaying her shallowness. Perhaps most disappointing, however, was the lack of dramatic integration of the critical sub-plot of Emil (Neil Maffin) and Marie's (Jennifer Rohn) passionate, illicit love. The pain and horror of it was there, but that story never fully meshed with the story of Alexandra's passion for the land.

Yet, curiously, a great sense of the spirit of *O Pioneers!* and of Cather prevailed. Many scenes were thoughtfully composed to suggest the richness

O Pioneers! on Stage

Last January, at the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* came to the stage. The production, adapted by Darrah Cloud and directed by Kevin Kuhlke, met with luke-warm reviews, such as that of the *New York Times* (1/28/90), which noted that "Ms. Cloud has been unable to find a substantial dramatic equivalent for Miss Cather's prose." Fair enough as drama criticism, and a perceptive assessment of a central fear for Cather, who sought even through her will to prohibit such transformations of her works. With Cather's work coming into the public domain, however, the question of how it will be handled on the stage or in film becomes an increasingly interesting one. Fortunately, Ms. Cloud's work is more interpretation than transformation, and while it does not match Cather's eloquence, nor ironically for theater — fully captures the

vitality of the novel, it successfully dramatizes the strength and vision of Alexandra Bergson and her compelling identification with the land.

Importantly, the production in Boston took few liberties with Cather's text, encompassing the full scope of the novel with a literalness which might in some ways please Cather herself. Faithfulness, however, seemed initially to impede the dramatic action. The early scenes unfolded in somewhat episodic fashion across a simple, uncluttered set (a true Cather "scene"), and heavy Scandinavian accents kept some of the players teetering on the brink of caricature. It was not until Alexandra took her place as the production's central concern that theatrical tricks to identify time and place became less bothersome. Mary McDonnell's extremely sensitive interpretation of Alexandra became the pro-

of Cather's vision and to capture the abiding sense of drama inherent in her work. For example, Amedee Chevalier's funeral and the country confirmation were staged simultaneously against a backdrop of simple Gothic arches and surrounded by the swelling sound of liturgical music. Such a visually striking juxtaposition captured the novel's essentially Whitmanesque view of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, even as it eloquently depicted the hard realities and simple celebrations important to the early frontier community. It seemed no small accomplishment to create a scene so moving as this through the arrangement and revisualizing of Cather's prose. One had to be reminded of Cather's awareness in her own writing of such a "voyage perilous."

Those who read and study Cather's work will probably approach such adaptations with expectations different from those of the drama critic, and in the case of *O Pioneers!*, at least,

Cather admirers should be somewhat reassured by the production's faithfulness to the spirit of the land and its people. Watching the play, we are apt to remember Cather's own enthusiasm for the theatre, her often cutting, early drama criticism, and that basic tenet of her craft, "to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls." In some ways, the Huntington Theatre's *O Pioneers!* met the requirements of the imagination and calmed the nervous anticipation we have when such a project is announced. We may not yet be comfortable with the notion of Cather's work as "fair game" for the dramatist or the filmmaker, especially in light of her own attempts to guard and protect it. Yet with interest in Cather so high, other attempts are inevitable. We will surely hope for better adaptations, and we will surely worry about less satisfying ones.

Kevin A. Synnott
Russell Sage College

purposes of this organization are well established and the challenges to continue the good work lie ahead. I welcome all persons to join in this effort to promote the Willa Cather Foundation and bring to Red Cloud persons who will help our community prosper."

Members of the Staff at the WCPM are Judy Graning and Lisa Beezley. Doreen Sanders and Louise Eldred conduct group and private tours. Kerry Anderson, Jennifer Phillips and Marlene Nikodym, students at Red Cloud High School, work weekends and holidays.

Report on the 35th Annual Spring Conference

The 35th Cather Spring Conference weekend, 4-6 May, was a cold one, with frost covering the autos outside the Green Acres Motel on the morning of the 5th. Rain threatened all that morning, and, depending on location, there were raindrops.

Activities began for many on Friday evening with the opening of a photo exhibit at the Red Cloud Depot followed by a no-host dinner at the Palace attended by Academy Award-winning actress Eva Marie Saint and her husband, Jeffrey Hayden, a distinguished director. The Haydens proved gracious and friendly guests (and patient — dinner took a long, long time to arrive), conscientious in their attendance and involvement in conference events.

The exhibit, "Midwestern Farm Women: A Century on the Land," gathered by Terry Kuhn of Northern Illinois University, depicts family life during hard times and in moments of joy (sometimes these overlap). The women's faces in the photos are haunting and tell stories silently in black and white. The exhibit will remain at the Foundation's

New Director Appointed

Keith Albers, President of the Board of Governors, announces the appointment in January of Patricia Phillips as Director of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.



Patricia Phillips

Pat began work at the WCPM in 1978 and was appointed Administrative Assistant to Mildred Bennett and the Board of Governors in 1988. She is a native of Red Cloud, pursued a degree in sociology at the University of Nebraska, and has additional degree course work in management skills from Creighton University. Pat and her husband, John, have three daughters.

"We are pleased to make this appointment," stated President Albers. "The Board feels fortunate to have a person with Pat's experience, dedication and enthusiasm, and we believe she will direct the WCPM activities in a positive manner."

"I am pleased to serve as Director of the WCPM," Mrs. Phillips said. "The goals and

Bookstore and at the Burlington Depot through October.

Subsequent to the usual coffee and church services on Saturday morning, the tour this year focused on *O Pioneers!* country, since that novel was the featured Cather work for the conference. The bottomland farms along the Republican River (which Alexandra Bergson surveys), the road (taken by Alexandra) rising from the town of Inavale to meet the Divide, the Divide itself (where Alexandra experiences her ecstasy), the French settlement (Campbell, Nebraska), St. Ann's Church (Sainte-Agnes in the novel) were tour highlights, as were the Crazy Ivar country and pond in Franklin County, the Bergson homestead site on Norway Creek, and the Norwegian cemetery. Back in Red Cloud, visitors enjoyed a quaint horse-drawn trolley, which added a touch of history while picking up and depositing the weary and adventurous at the popular in-town Cather sites.

After a tasteful salad luncheon was cleared away at the Vets Hall, Julie Cochran opened "The Passing Show" with a delivery of Willa Cather's 1890 Graduation Speech, "Superstition vs. Investigation." Moderated by Bruce Baker (University of Nebraska-Omaha), and featuring brief statements by Helen Stauffer (Kearney State College), Robert Knoll (University of Nebraska-Lincoln) and John Murphy (Brigham Young University), the discussion of *O Pioneers!* generated unusually lively response from the audience, reviewing again Alexandra's love life (and Marie and Emil's), her experience of the Genius of the Divide, the identity of her dream lover, her intimacy with the earth, etc. Jeffrey Hayden contributed insights on the dramatic possibilities of this novel, which reminded participants that art is still a very discussible issue.

Saint and Hayden demonstrated the dramatic potential

of *O Pioneers!* in a fifty minute reading after the banquet Saturday night at Red Cloud High School. On a stage of green plants and two handsome wooden podiums they made Alexandra's and Carl's characters live, made their love credible, and Carl Linstrum a far stronger character than many feel he is.

A Memorial Mass for the late Mildred R. Bennett was attended by a capacity crowd at Grace Episcopal Church on sunny Sunday morning. Fr. Theron Hughes from Illinois did a credible job with a dated version of the Book of Common Prayer in this presently inactive church with its beautiful memorial windows Willa Cather had installed for her parents. As the priest eulogized her life of accomplishments, Mildred seemed present at this first Spring Conference we had presumed she had missed.

Kara Choquette Wins \$8,000 Scholarship

Kara Choquette, Upland, Nebraska, won the 1990 Norma Ross Walter Scholarship competition. Miss Choquette, valedictorian, Minden High School,



Kara Choquette

will attend Briar Cliff College, Sioux City, Iowa. She will pursue a degree in English.

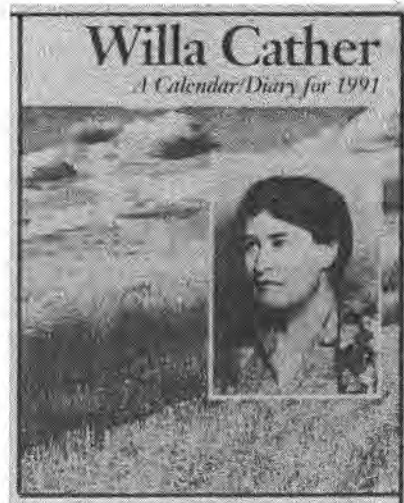
She maintained a four year 4.0 G.P.A., worked on the family farm, and during her senior year served her Nebraska district Unicameral Congressman. Kara competed at the district and regional levels in speech and debate contests and at science fairs. She played a lead roll in the all-school drama her senior year and was also active in band and music. Kara earned numerous honors and participated in gifted programs. Chosen a Rotary International Exchange Student, she spent her junior year studying in Niort, France where she was involved in fencing and the school's French Revolution bicentennial production. This National Honor Society student (named a National Merit Commended Scholar her senior year) has been the co-chair of her community's beautification program and food drive for the needy. She has been active in the Fellowship for Christian Athletes and the Catholic Youth Group.

Being a fifth generation Nebraskan and raised on the same farm her great-grandfather homesteaded has been significant in Kara's life. She wrote in her essay, "As I look back, I can see how playing, working, and learning on the farm helped develop my character in ways I never thought possible. While playing we were developing our creativity and demonstrating our independence. While working we came to understand the value of hard work, the importance of being determined, and the necessity of having the will to succeed. While learning on the farm we were also learning those things that would become important in school and in life later on. I think that all of this becomes more apparent after being away from home for a year. I realize that because of the values and experiences I had as a child, I was able to have the maturity, wisdom, and courage to go abroad. And now, after

(Continued on Page 14)

NEW! NEW! NEW! Introducing . . .
WILLA CATHER Calendar/Diary for 1991

A thought-provoking collection of excerpts from Willa Cather's writings accompanied by photographs of Cather's life settings from Back Creek, Virginia, to Red Cloud, Nebraska, Pittsburgh, Greenwich Village, Cos Cob, Santa Fe, Grand Manan, Northeast Harbor, and Jaffrey, New Hampshire. This brand new calendar has weekly 2-page spreads as well as month-at-a-glance pages. Sized, for today's lifestyle, to go from desk to handbag and back again!

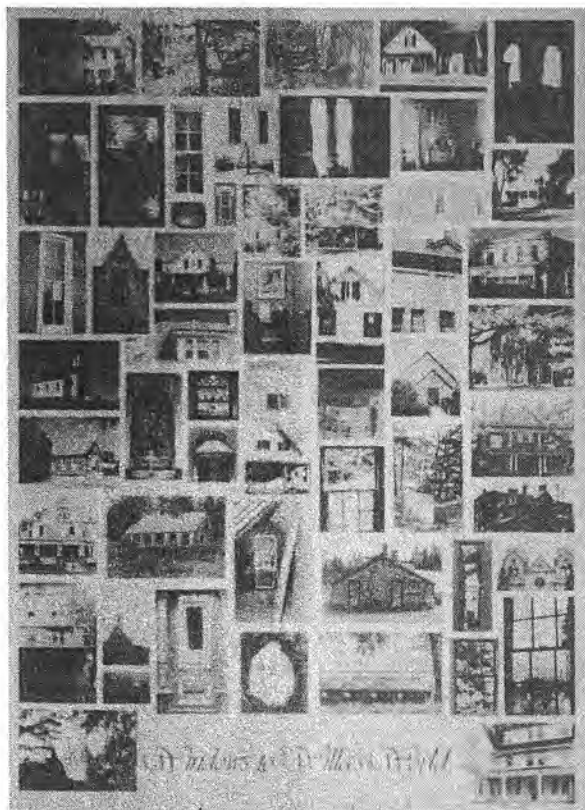


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Kara Choquette

(Continued)

coming home, I realize how much I love Nebraska, the place of my birth. I appreciate the open sky filled with the sounds of migrating cranes. I appreciate the land, from the great expanses of prairie to the uniformly tilled fields. I appreciate the rivers and the family fun canoeing down the Republican. But most of all, I appreciate my Nebraska roots, because no matter where I go, I know I can always come back to this place called home."

First runner-up in the Norma Ross Walter Scholarship competition was Shauna Boyd from Kearney High School; second runner-up was Sharon Burke, Elwood High School. The Foundation is pleased with the high-caliber applicants for this award and wishes the scholars well on their roads of life.

Dale McDole, an educator from Omaha and a member of the WCPM Board of Governors, and Dan Studer, junior high teacher from Lincoln, spent hours reading and re-reading the 95 applications received before

determining the six finalists for the scholarship. A committee of five then scrutinized the resumes and essays submitted by the students and determined the winner. We are grateful to all of these people, but especially grateful to Mr. McDole and Mr. Studer for the care and diligence given the long initial screening process.

This fall, the scholarship endowed by Norma Ross Walter will help four Nebraska girls, all majoring in English at different institutions, attend college.

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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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