

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXXIII, No. 2

Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

## Cather Day, 1989 By Herb Hyde, *Lincoln Journal Star*

The prairie wind was cold and razor sharp as I stepped from my car in front of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation bookstore and gallery, so I reached for the sweater I had brought along just in case. No one was stirring in the building, so I hurried over to the Corral Cafe next to the hotel. Sure enough, it was packed with visitors from near and far. All were either eating or ordering breakfast, but no one — least of all myself — failed to save room for kolaches and coffee later at the foundation building.

It was a busy day, one that scarcely departed from its schedule long enough for me to chat with old friends, though I did sneak a peek at Mildred Bennett's new office in the lumberyard building south of the post office and while there enjoyed a Nebraska ETV Network video of World War I poetry readings. Mass was at 8:30 at Grace Episcopal, the Rev. Louis Catching officiating, and of course no spring conference is complete without one or two, or three or four, of Father Frank Leiblinger's stories after Mass at St. Juliana Catholic (Annie Pavelka's church). Father Leiblinger, being in fine fettle this year, told two tales, both Catholic and both told in the utterly inimitable Leiblinger voice and style.

Then there was a memorable ribbon cutting at Mildred's new office (don't fail to see it when you next visit), at which Ron Hull presided and for which everyone had to evacuate said space so

that the ceremony could be conducted properly with protocol and high style. I was hoping Mildred would use a cavalry saber and slash the ribbon mightily, but no, she stuck with scissors and snipped it clean through without batting an eye, after which we hustled aboard seven school buses (of course they were yellow; what other color would a school bus be?) for a tour of "One of Ours" country.

My good friend Don Connors had made his annual pilgrimage from California and was tour guide on Bus 6. As he usually does, he told stories as he spoke of the various Cather-related sites along the way. We went first to Bladen Cemetery for a memorial service honoring veterans of all wars, the ceremony centered at the well-appointed grave of G. P. Cather, prototype of Claude Wheeler. There was a prayer, an address, a firing-squad salute (squad members fought in three wars: World War II, Korea, Vietnam) and Echo Taps. I almost lost it with Taps, for I remember all too well close friends who fell in each of the conflicts. A wreath of cedar, signifying in its fragrance and greenery eternal peace for the soul, was placed at G. P.'s headstone.

On to the G. P. Cather house, now occupied by Cather descendant Sayra Wagner, who is renovating it room by room. But it was Mahailey I saw, and Claude, Enid, Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler — one cannot escape the ghosts, and sometimes I

cannot tell which is the real person and which the Cather character. When you visit, be sure to walk around the house; it is quite deceptive, for it looks rather small from the front, but when you look at it from the rear, it becomes the Empire State Building.

Food is an integral part of every Cather work (and conference), so it was with anticipation that we arrived for lunch at Vets Hall. No disappointment as salad after salad disappeared from the serving table. For dessert, there were delicious brownies from many recipes, and of course what lunch would be complete without the ubiquitous iced tea and hot coffee? It was food for royalty, prepared and served with loving care by the P.E.O. ladies of Red Cloud (of course we all had seconds; need you ask?).

In "The Passing Show," moderated by Bruce Baker of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Cather scholars Baker, Susan Rosowski of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and John Murphy of Brigham Young University presented short papers on "One of Ours" before we split into groups for discussion of the novel. I was in Susan's group, which met in the basement of the old Garber bank building, now the Cather Museum. Boy, talk about well-read people! It was gratifying to see the depth of participants' knowledge of this outstanding work. The dissection touched every level you could expect to find in a semester's college course and then some. For me, it was by far

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## Cather Day, 1989

(Continued)

and away the best and most penetrating discussion of a Cather work I have witnessed at spring conference.

When we reassembled at Vets Hall, Marshall Christensen led us in song, World War I variety. And they brought back fond memories of the Great War's fighting men I have known.

World War I posters from UNL's collection lined the walls of the old Burlington depot, where cookies, iced tea, ice water and coffee were being served. Many of the posters were French, and of course the American variety spoke of the Horrible Huns and Liberty Bonds. Blood, gore and patriotism. And would you believe that many of today's high school students have not an inkling that there was a World War I and World War II, much less who fought and won them! Sad, very sad, but also very, very true. I know from experience.

Not so with Lynn Lu of Lincoln East High School, who at the banquet received the 1989 Norma Ross Walter Scholarship. She will use the four-year \$8,000 award to attend Harvard University.

I finally figured out who the banquet's master of ceremonies was after remarking to a fellow guest that he looked a lot like Doc Bennett. Of course it was Doc, but who of us would have thought that his World War II Navy uniform would fit so well after all these years. Well, all but the trousers, which Doc said gave up the ghost a long time ago, so he had to drum up a pair to replace them.

The food was prepared from "The Mess Sergeant's Handbook," World War I edition, and we had roast beef and gravy, corn, mashed potatoes, biscuits and honey, apple pie with cheddar cheese and you know what. Marshall Christensen sang my favorite WWI song, "Roses of

Picardy," plus "La Marseillaise" (the French national anthem) and, to close the evening, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," but not before Harold Schiffer of Hastings College recited poems written by American fighting men of the era, including Alan Seeger's prophetic "I Have a Rendezvous with Death."

The highlight of the evening was an address by Michel Gervaud, professor of English and teacher of Cather at the University of Aix en Provence in France. French is a beautiful language (I consider it the world's most beautiful tongue) in and of itself, but Gervaud made English sound perfectly gorgeous with his rich Gallic accent. He spoke of French culture, so much admired by Willa Cather through the senses of Claude Wheeler, and declared that had not Black-jack Pershing and his American Expeditionary Force arrived in France when they did, there would be no France today. It was reassuring to hear Gervaud confirm our finding in the afternoon's discussion that "One of Ours" is not — repeat — NOT a war novel, Willa's arrogant critics to the contrary notwithstanding. The war occupies but a small part of her story and serves only to express her views on the subject and to bring Claude to the point at which he can finally obtain the sense of accomplishment for which he has searched so desperately but which he finds only in death as he leads his men over the top.

## In Honor of All War Veterans

The following sermon was given by the Reverend Stephen Duaine Eldred at the Cather Conference, May 6, 1989 at the Bladen, Nebraska, cemetery.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face

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## Lynn Lu, 1989 Norma Ross Walter Scholarship Winner

Lynn D. Lu, 1989 winner of the Norma Ross Walter Scholarship, leaves this fall for Harvard Uni-



versity in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A 1989 graduate of Lincoln East High School, Miss Lu's academic achievements have been notable. Her class rank of first out of 335 students adds to her impressive list of honors. In her senior year, Lynn Lu, captain of the speech team, won the state championship in Informative Public Speaking, earned third place in the National Forensic League District Tournament and was the district winner of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Voice of Democracy Oratory Contest in 1987. Additionally, she placed as a finalist in the State Journalism Writing Contest, scored the highest possible score on the Advanced Placement English test and was invited to attend the Nebraska Scholars' Institute. This National Merit Scholar Semifinalist maintained her position on the honor roll for four years and received an invitation to become a member of the National Honor Society. Miss Lu also demonstrated her writing ability in her position as content editor of the school newspaper for two years.

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## Lynn Lu (Continued)

She participated in French Club, Junior Varsity tennis, and worked part-time her junior and senior years.

First runners-up in the competition were Patricia Cheng of Lincoln High School and Laura Rotunno, Kearney High School. Second runners-up were Jillyn Richards, Papillion-LaVista High School and Karin Gierke, Columbus High School.

It is not usual that the runners-up positions are shared. The caliber of the competition this year was exceptional and resulted in deadlock of the second and third place awards. We congratulate and thank those who participated in the Norma Ross Walter Scholarship competition.

The scholarship committee, jointly chaired by Dr. Virgil Albertini, Northwest Missouri State University, Maryville, Missouri and Josephine Frisbie, retired English teacher at Central High School, Omaha, Nebraska, must receive recognition for the formidable task which they encountered upon initial elimination of the 88 applications received. We are grateful to them for their fair, time-consuming, and critical evaluation.

## In Honor . . . (Continued)

of the deep, and the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

And God said: Let there be light.

And there was light.

And God saw that the light was good.

Then God said: Let us make humans in our own image, after our likeness . . .

So God created humans in his own image; and in the image of God he created him;

Male and female — God created them.

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good.

— Genesis 1

Later on today we will sing songs from WWI which remind us of the romantic aspects of war.

- Patriotism — love of country
- Comradeship — esprit de corps
- Sacrifice for a cause larger than ourselves
- Adventure/Victory
- Love and Romance
- Heroism
- Idealism
- Participation in the making of history

— those things they used to make movies and write songs about.

We will get teary-eyed over memories of other times we sang those same songs, some of us in the same building erected by and for the war Veterans who fought in the wars that gave birth to those high-spirited ditties. We will recall the faces and names of those we have loved and lost in battle. In that same room we will have heard scholarly papers read about G. P. Cather's convictions of duty to country given to Claude Wheeler:

"That war could be made without rage," and "men could still die for an idea," and "ideals are the real source of power among men."

### One of Ours

But in reality, Claude Wheeler teaches us again the futility of war, both for those who die and those who live. The following is a description of Claude's heroic stand in May of 1918 while in battle in France:

Claude felt they were going soft under his eyes. He ran along the trench, pointing over the sand bags and shouting. "It's up to you, it's up to you!" Something instantaneous hap-

pened; he had his men in hand . . . . The men behind him saw Claude sway as if he had lost his balance and were trying to recover it. Then he plunged face down, outside the parapet . . . the look that was Claude's had faded.

Claude joined his comrade David Gerhardt in death. "He died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be." Miss Cather continues "One by one the heroes of that war, the men of dazzling soldier-ship, leave prematurely the world they have come back to — one by one they quietly die by their own hand . . . ."

In reality, war — any war — all war — is an attack upon God's beautiful, good Creation. War is not just an attack of one nation upon another, or one nation's army fighting another nation's army. War is a violent attack upon the Earth itself — the sky, the sea, the ground, the beauty, the life. War is an attack upon God, and every soldier, sailor, marine, airman who gives that last full measure (dies) is Christ-crucified again on the cross of futility.

In reality, War is not romantic. *War is Hell!* It is the reversal of God's act of creation, a denial of the love of our Creator, who breathes into us the breath of life.

From the movie *The Mission*, "If might makes right, then there is no place in the world for love, and I have not the strength to live in such a world."

For some it took the horror of the Vietnam conflict to convince us of the great corporate sin of sacrificing the blood of our strong young men and women on the altars of National parochialism. The "War to End All Wars" didn't. The War to make the "World Safe for Democracy" didn't. The War that was never declared is still being waged in the nightmares of

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## In Honor . . . (Continued)

modern day veterans who wake up screaming, in sweat-drenched beds, to cry like babies over "coming of age" in the jungles of a far off land of "The Gooks."

One of those "babies" is a friend of mine. He is a student in creative writing. He is a student of Willa Cather. He is an alcoholic. He is God's own child. His name is Robert Sasse, and he wrote:

### The Multiplegic

Thumbnail against gut-gray back,  
A centipede screams and drags  
thirty-two  
useless legs across the lip of a  
foxhole.  
Rising from ashes of scorched  
earth.  
I climb through naked bamboo of  
defoliated jungles  
to speak unspeakables about  
bastard war.  
Swaddlings of my guilt fall away at  
the feet  
of those who still believe in politik  
and I whistle a private national  
anthem.  
(the chorus is about freedom of my  
soul).  
I borrow words from poets and think  
in the language of jungle fighters, a  
voice  
of passion. Not noise of love-  
makers on clean sheets,  
but quiet passion of old ladies  
carrying rice  
to babies who cry in dusty corners.  
In a marble pagoda near the south-  
east corner  
of my soul, names are whispered  
of killed, wounded, missing,  
forgotten, lonely  
and hopeless heroes. In an empty  
room unborn children  
of long dead warriors remain,  
silently unnamed.  
My lament is wasted on those who  
don't hear.  
Not hearing, they don't care who  
sobs loudest.  
So I sing for the undrafted,  
untrained killers  
who must practice folly in  
tomorrow's fields.  
I cry for the centipede.

1989. /s/ Robert Sasse

Mahailey: "Now Mudder, you  
go upstairs an' lay down an' rest

yourself . . . . Never you mind,  
Mudder, you'll see your boy up  
yonder."

## The Last Hour and Death of Lieut. G. P. Cather

Following is a letter received  
by Mrs. [G. P.] Cather from one  
of the nurses on duty at one of  
the base hospitals in France.

55 rue de Verneuil  
Paris

October 10, 1918

Dear Mrs. Cather:

While doing my work for the  
Home Communication Service  
of the Red Cross, I found a man,  
wounded, in a hospital, who was  
able to tell me about the last  
hour, and death of your hus-  
band, Lieut. Grosvenor Cather.  
As is always done, I made a com-  
plete report of all the informa-  
tion I had gathered, and this has  
already probably been sent to  
you. To make doubly sure of  
your receiving it, I am going to  
write it all again to you directly.

Sgt. Prettyman, of A Co. 26th  
Infantry, when I asked him if he  
could tell me anything about  
Lieut. Cather, reached under his  
pillow and pulled out some bits  
of paper scribbled in pencil.  
These were the last orders your  
husband had given him — he  
had been saving them for  
months, meaning to send them  
to you if he could ever find your  
address. He thought you might  
like to have them. He was sec-  
ond in command, under your  
husband, and it is evident that  
he loved him as few men love  
their officers. He was very much  
moved when he told me about  
what had happened, and more  
than once there were tears in his  
eyes. He is a very intelligent,  
sensitive [sic] boy.

This is what he told me — per-  
haps you have already had the  
same news.

"It was on the Somme, at the  
right of Cantigny, but not as far  
up as that — about 1500 yards to

the rear that Lieut. Cather was  
killed. It was May 28 the night  
after we took Cantigny. We were  
in the trenches in a wood, and  
the shelling was awful. It was  
raining shells. We were losing  
many men. The Lieutenant  
wouldn't keep off the top of the  
trenches, but kept out there to  
look after the men. He worried  
more about them than about  
himself. I begged him not to go  
out. He kept running up and  
down the trench to see if the  
men were all right, and to get the  
wounded taken care of. He never  
thought of himself.

"He was down at the post — it  
was in the afternoon, but in the  
excitement I couldn't tell just  
what time — and he was talking  
to some men there, trying to  
cheer them up. There were no  
dugouts and the trenches were  
about four feet deep. We lost 19  
men out of 42. He turned around  
to walk away from the trench —  
going forward — when a shell  
bust in front of him. He was  
thrown way back into the trench,  
on his back. A piece of shell had  
gone in just above his heart, kill-  
ing him instantly. I didn't see  
him fall, but he had spoken to  
me just before. One of the men  
came running up to tell me, and I  
went down to see him. He was  
dead, with a hole above his  
heart. That was his only injury.  
He hadn't suffered an instant,  
and was not disfigured.

On the morning of the 29th, I  
sent three men out to dig a grave  
in the rear of our trench. There  
was so much shelling, there was  
nothing else to do. No way of  
getting back to any town. I  
wrapped him in his blanket and  
buried him there, with two other  
men of the platoon beside him. I  
tore up an ammunition box and  
made a cross and nailed it to his  
identity tag. Then we made a  
map of the place so that the  
grave could be found. The map  
is in the care of the Company."

The boy cried when he told me  
— more than three months later  
how the men loved Lieut. Ca-

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## Last Hour . . . (Continued)

ther. "There was no officer like him — he was good to his men — he treated them like a father. We were good friends — he thought the world of me too — he often talked to me about his wife," he said. Everything he said was a tribute of feeling and admiration for your husband — it was the picture of a man who was brave and kind and generous. It must have been something to you to know how wonderful he was at the moment when he died, and that he didn't suffer. The story of his sergeant is something I shall never forget.

I am enclosing the papers Sgt. Prettyman gave me. This boy was in the hospital for weeks and weeks and weeks, very sick and weak, badly wounded, and now has been sent home to America.

Perhaps you would like to write to him — I think he would be glad to hear that you received the papers he saved for you. His address is: Sgt. E. G. Prettyman, Indiana County, Penn., HUFF P.O.

Mrs. Cather, I can't tell you how this story has moved me — the pity of it! — but I shall be happier if I think that what I have been able to write to you has made some difference to you.

Sincerely yours,  
Anne Taylor.

From *The Bladen Enterprise*, May 6, 1921, courtesy of the Webster County Historical Museum.

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For a collection of the novelist Dorothy Canfield Fisher's correspondence, I would appreciate hearing from anyone who has letters written by Fisher or addressed to her.

Mark Madigan  
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452 Bartlett  
University of MA-Amherst  
Amherst, MA 01003

## Cather Country

That morning the sky owned the prairie.

A wind, so gentle that the grass bowed and rippled, offered secrets.

We might have asked a wilder wind,  
but this was a soft day.

The green horizon circled us,  
and we were safe in a benign presence.

We heard a lark song,  
saw a grave where deep grass  
whispered the deep dream.

Caryl Porter  
Duarte, CA

## The Tide Has Turned

Polly Duryea, July 1989

Ninety-five years ago this past July, Willa Cather wrote a crisp article — "An Old River Metropolis" — after visiting Brownville's HOT fortieth anniversary celebration. She probably was wearing her famous middy and beribboned straw sailor-hat. She "was a Junior at Nebraska State University at the time and was doing some work for the *State Journal* . . ." (772). Cather lamented over Brownville's incredibly short history, "It is as though there had once been a high tide of prosperity there, and when it went out it had left for its watermark rows of ruined houses and stranded homes" (104). Recognizing that the collapse of the steamboat trade caused the bustling town to fold, Cather sketched ghostly immigrants, miners, outfitters from then-closed shops. She photographed the Opera House that no longer echoed the music and drama of the new civilization; grieved bygone balls and receptions in the proud hilltop homes.

Willa Cather described the benign ruins of Brownville's two Churches: one "on the little hill

to the east stands the Episcopal church where the elite of ancient Brownville [met] to worship" (107), and another "white frame church [with the] sweet and silvery tone of its little bell" (108). Ironically it is the two Churches that tie us today with Cather's elegy, since they continue to house the muses of drama and music that inhabit the village.

As we know Henry and Phyllis Blanke's Brownville Village Theater has just completed its twenty-third continuous season in an old Church, bringing live drama to the surrounding area. The steamboat Meriwether Lewis is back, and The Spirit of Brownville carries young and old alike on nostalgic journeys up and down the Missouri River; the proud fine houses have renewed the cultural tradition long gone. But what of the other Church — the little Episcopal church that Willa Cather described, with its gold motto, "Peace Be Within Thy Walls" (108) painted over its door? Well, if Cather's church mice could have lived for ninety-five years, they would see the gold motto is again painted above a spanking white Church door in the identical location — a gold anchor against the outgoing tide.

Jim and Ruth Keene, from Omaha, have restored and equipped an historic Peru First Christian Church — complete with gold motto and silvery bell — for renewing the fine arts tradition in Brownville. The church bell, originally from Bethany E. U. B. church, was donated by the Ogle family from Dawson. In total cooperation with the Brownville Fine Arts Association the extended community shall again enjoy the rich treasure of music, drama, art to be held in the old frame Church, now called the Brownville Concert Hall. Under the competent project direction of Calista Cooper Hughes, Humboldt, and Carie Allen, Auburn, the Grand

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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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**The Tide Has Turned**  
(Continued)

Opening is initialed for Fall 1989. After a hundred years the arts will again flourish in two of the churches of Nebraska's first village. That notion would please Willa Cather who believed that, "religion and art spring from the same root and are close kin." (From a letter to *The Commonwealth*, April 17, 1936. Other information taken from Cather, Willa. *The World and the Parish: Articles and Reviews 1893-1902*. Ed. by William Curtin. Two volumes. Lincoln: UNP, NE.

The above article was written by Polly Duryea for the Brownville *Bulletin*.

**Request**

The WCPM Newsletter has received a request from Laurel Brake, editor of the Year's Work in English Studies, Centre for Extra-Mural Studies, Birkbeck College, 26 Russell Sq., London, WC1B 5DQ, England, to send review copies of the newsletter to her.

**4th National Seminar**

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