

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXXI, No. 4

Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

## The Scholarship of L. Brent Bohlke

By SUSAN ROSOWSKI

Brent Bohlke, Episcopal priest and Cather scholar, died March 7, 1987. On September 20 friends of Brent Bohlke gathered in Lincoln to honor and remember. Dr. Susan Rosowski gave the following tribute:

In one of his prefaces Brent Bohlke quoted Willa Cather's reflection that "the play of blind chance" and "fortunate accidents determine our way" (WCIP, viii). Fortunate accidents resulted in Brent's scholarship on Willa Cather. He was a Nebraskan (Cather's childhood state) who was ordained as an Episcopalian priest (Cather's religion); and he was a literary scholar trained by Bernice Slote (the pioneer Cather critic) at the University of Nebraska (Cather's school). Most important, he met Beverly, who long ago suggested that he might enjoy reading Willa Cather. Such accidents result in great enrichment of our understanding of Willa Cather.

Brent Bohlke possessed the essential curiosity of a scholar-critic, which means that he didn't stop — or even start — with the standard opinion about a subject. He went to primary sources and looked at his subject fresh. As a graduate student, Brent travelled with Beverly throughout the United States, reading Cather letters and miscellaneous materials that, because of restrictions in Cather's will, can not be published or duplicated, and thus can be studied only within the libraries that house them. The archival habit remained with Brent, and by it he made those discoveries that make scholarship

exciting. I remember when we were colleagues at UN-L and Brent had been in New York, attending a conference over a weekend. Early Monday morning he came into my office and, to my surprise, said nothing about the conference. Instead he asked, "Do you remember Cather's interview on *Alexander's Bridge*?" Of course I did. Brent was referring to one of those puzzles in the Cather archives — a newspaper account of an interview Cather gave about her first novel, closely clipped, only about 3" long, and without heading, date, or other identifying information. It was an especially frustrating item because it was so important, the single known explanation Cather gave of her intended meaning for her first novel. "Well, I found its source," Brent said. Armed with a theory based on the corner of an advertisement on the reverse side of the clipping, Brent had taken a break from his conference to visit archives, where he had gone through New York papers contemporary to the appearance of *Alexander's Bridge*. Readers will see the interview in Brent's book, *Willa Cather in Person*, but I doubt they will guess the story behind it. With characteristic modesty and grace, Brent simply follows his reprinting of it with the attribution, *New York Sun*, 25 May 1912.

The time-consuming work behind such discoveries is essential to the finest scholarship, for it provides the pieces that help make up our picture of a subject. Brent contributed the pieces, and he also profoundly changed the way in which we interpret the picture they form. Convention had it, for exam-

(Continued on Page 44)

## Thank You for Your Support

With this issue of the Newsletter we are enclosing a flyer about December giving. We do not want to twist any arms. If you are like me, you receive four to six requests for money in almost every mail. And we do not want you to look forward with dread to the arrival of our Newsletter.

You have been generous and faithful in giving. Thank you.

Our plans for 1988 look like this:

1. Since 1988 marks the 70th anniversary of the publication of *My Antonia*, we are calling it "The Year of *My Antonia*." All our events will celebrate that book.

2. We plan a slide program, possibly a video cassette, on that book. Beverly Cooper and James Goble have personally spent more than \$3,000 on the project already.

3. We are restoring the Baptist Church where Willa Cather attended in her childhood. Bertrand and Marian Schultz gave \$5,000 for that project and the owners of the Church gave us the church and their insurance money from last year's hail — more than \$2,500.

4. We want to put out the special literary Newsletter in quarterly format. If we can afford it, we will begin putting out two special literary numbers a year, and two "down-home" types.

5. We have started a fund-raising campaign to add to our Endowment so that by 1991 we can invite people from other countries to spend two weeks with us here in Cather country. We need to make more preparations for their housing. Red Cloud should be a center for international cultural understanding.

(Continued on Page 44)

## The Scholarship

(Continued from Page 43)

ple, that Cather was not a particularly religious person, or that at best she made a religion of her art. As always, Brent went beyond the obvious sources (her religious novels) to all her early fiction and all her extant correspondence. The result was his dissertation, "Seeking Is Finding: Willa Cather and Religion" (1982). In it Brent demonstrated how "very important a part religion played in her life — and her art . . . . She was a solid Christian" in her personal life, and she wrote far more subtly and consistently of religion than had been recognized (SIF, viii).

One thing leads to another, and Brent noticed while exploring her ideas of religion that Cather had given more interviews than anyone had supposed. Again, the discovery contradicted convention, which had it that Cather was always rather grimly private and, as she grew older, increasingly reclusive. This convention had been especially influential in interpreting Cather's fiction, for it served as a starting point by which readers saw the middle novels as bitter, the later ones as escapist. So when Brent set out to collect and edit the interviews, he was investigating an exceptionally significant aspect of her life.

The result was *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, published in 1986 by University of Nebraska Press. In this volume Brent presents the clearest example we have of Willa Cather speaking for herself, about herself, her writing, and the innumerable other topics that attracted her attention. The writer who emerges is not at all a brooding recluse, for the items Brent collected, in his words, "allow us to see the spontaneous wit, the gregarious warmth, the bluff side of the ebullient woman behind the canon" (WCIP, xiv). Like his work on Cather's religion, that on her interviews, speeches, and letters will make a difference to all who follow Brent in reading Cather.

So far I have talked about Brent's going to primary sources

with the discipline and patience that made his scholarship impeccable. I greatly admire these qualities, yet what I admire most about Brent's scholarship is another matter altogether. Brent never forgot that the real source of literature is a human one. Like Cather, he remembered literature is written from one person to another about the important questions of the soul. One of the clearest statements of this human dimension is, appropriately, in a speech by Cather that Brent discovered: the novel "is just self protected into the aesthetic and artistic spectrum of human life" (WCIP, 165). Like Cather Brent remembered that literature is "self" projected into human life, and he cautioned against divorcing it from its creator. Perhaps it *is* possible to read Cather's fiction as presenting the church "only as a purveyor of aesthetic values," Brent wrote, and then demonstrated the shallowness of such a reading. "When one examines her early writings — all of them — and her extant life-long correspondence, a different kind of human being emerges than that often described. A different kind of author emerges also (SIF, viii). Brent always remembered and knew that it was the human "signature . . . on every page" that mattered. It is in keeping, then, with the rest of his scholarship that Brent titled his recent book *Willa Cather in Person*, and that through it he introduces another and very human side of Cather — a "wise, witty, and warm" human being, with "more openness" than anyone would have expected (WCIP, xii-xiv).

One of the joys in reading Brent's scholarship lies in recognizing the human voice of Willa Cather; another lies in recognizing Brent Bohlke's own voice. Like a novelist's, a scholar's "attitude . . . is the most important thing," and (here again I am quoting Cather by way of Brent Bohlke), "this appertains also to spiritual and intellectual and moral viewpoints" (WCIP, 164). Brent never succumbed to the academic fashion of the moment; he told his scholarly tales directly and honestly, in a manner that will be understood as clearly

by future generations as by today's reader.

When in mid-June of this year over a hundred people gathered in Hastings for the third national seminar on Cather, Brent was very much on our minds. There was, of course, a sense of immediate loss, heightened by the fact that the setting itself reminded us of him, for he had been a major lecturer in the previous national seminar held at the same place. Yet Brent's book was there, so newly off the press that most participants saw it for the first time upon arriving. By the second day of the seminar, people were talking about *Willa Cather in Person*, quoting from it in formal talks and referring to it in informal conversations. By the end of the week, participants were planning their future work based on ideas from it. The legacy of the book is that in it Brent gives us Willa Cather, and also himself.

---

## Thank You

(Continued from Page 43)

6. In regard to housing, we have requests from scholars and writers who would like to spend a week to a year living in Red Cloud. We need to plan for them.

7. We want more WCPM members. You could help by giving us names of interested persons to whom we could send sample newsletters so that they might know what we do.

And thank you for reading this far. We appreciate your help in any way you can send it.

Cordially,



Mildred R. Bennett

Joanna Lathrop, curator of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial from 1975-1977, died August 7, 1987 at her home in Ordway, Colorado.

## Folk Song for the 1988 Year of *My Antonia*

Stanza 1:



*I won't have none of your weevily wheat, I won't have none of your bar... ley--*



*I want some wheat that's fit to eat to make a cake for Char... ley.*

Stanza 2:

O, Charley he's a nice young man, O, Charley he's a dandy;  
O, Charley loves to kiss the girls and feed them sugar candy.

**NOTE:**

The above folk song, one stanza of which is given (in somewhat variant text) in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (Book II, Chapter 4), was sung by my mother, Sarah Armitstead Crown (1883-1969), who I assume learned it from her mother, Alice McClellan Ford Armitstead (1849-1927). Grandmother Alice worked as a cook in a Red Cloud hotel in the latter '70s or around 1880. She had moved to Red Cloud after the loss of her first husband, and it was there that my grandfather, James Arthur Armit-

stead, met her. The coincidence in the time of my grandmother's residence in the town named "Black Hawk" in the novel and the setting in which the novelist uses the rhyme supports — whatever the rhyme's origin — its currency there in the 1880's.

The different phrasing in my mother's version (stanza one) hints that it is an older version: compare "I want some wheat that's fit to eat" with "But I'll take a measure of fine white flour" in Miss Cather's version. The term "sugar candy" suggests that candy made

from refined sugar was a special treat to pioneer families, accustomed to the use of natural sweeteners such as sorghum and molasses.

Willa Cather's inclusion of part of a common rhyme (one perhaps set to an Irish tune, as my mother's song suggests) in her regional "memory piece" again reminds one of her art in preserving the glow of common pleasures girding the daily life of the settlers.

— Rachel Crown

### Order Now for Christmas!

Remember! . . . If you are a member, you will receive a 10 percent discount on all purchases. Please state that you are a member when you order.

These items are *NEW* in our bookstore:

- James Woodress' *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (\$2.50 postage) . . . . . \$35.00
- Cather house note cards, artwork by Barbara Avery,  
buff color, brown ink (\$1.00 postage) . . . . . 10/\$4.50
- Cards (color) by John Blake Bergers
  - Painted Windows (has a verse) . . . . . 25/\$12.50
  - On Lovely Creek (blank inside) . . . . . 25/\$12.50  
(\$1.50 postage, each package of 25)

## Received

A priceless gift of four Cather letters arrived from Mrs. Alice Woodbridge of Morristown, New Jersey. Her mother, Alice Stowell Elder, born in Red Cloud in 1882, played with Jessica Cather. Her grandmother, Mrs. Eugene Alexander Stowell, received these letters from Willa Cather in 1888, 1889 and 1928. Mrs. Woodbridge heard of the WCPM from Mrs. Harriet Miner of Crete, Nebraska.

Virago Press of England has given us nine of their paperback Cather volumes. Introductions come from A. S. Byatt and Hermione Lee.

## Needs Quotations

James Work, who teaches English at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, would like quotations from *Death Comes for the Archbishop* for which you teachers would like to have slides.

He has already taken pictures of much of the beauty of Cather's southwest and now needs your help in selecting about one hundred suitable slides.

Please send your suggestions to WCPM, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970.

## Note of Appreciation

Western Literature Association met in Lincoln October 14-17. On Saturday, seventy of the group toured Cather Country here in Red Cloud.

Typical of the comments we have received, Blanche Gelfant of Darmouth, New Hampshire writes:

"This is to thank you for . . . the glorious day at Red Cloud. I shall remember forever the prairies as I have seen them at last — more beautiful and spacious than in the dreams I had of them after reading Cather's novels."

Page 46

### YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AND GROWTH OF THE ORGANIZATION

- By being a Cather Memorial Member and financial contributor:  
BENEFACTOR . . . . . \$1,000.00 and over

#### ANNUAL MEMBERSHIPS

Patron . . . . .	\$100.00
Sustaining . . . . .	25.00
Family . . . . .	15.00
Individual . . . . .	10.00

WCPM members receive:

Newsletter subscription

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

Under Section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1965

Special group memberships (such as clubs or businesses) are available. Write to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial for details.

### 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.

### BOARD OF GOVERNORS

Keith Albers  
William Thomas Auld, M.D.  
Bruce P. Baker, II  
Mildred R. Bennett  
W. K. Bennett, M.D.  
Don E. Connors  
Josephine Frisbie  
David Garwood  
Ron Hull

Robert E. Knoll  
Ella Cather Lewis  
Lucia Woods Lindley  
Catherine Cather Lowell  
John March  
Dale McDole  
Miriam Mountford  
John J. Murphy  
Harry Obitz  
Jennie Reiber

Ronald W. Roskens  
Susan J. Rosowski  
David E. Scherman  
C. Bertrand Schultz  
Marian Schultz  
Margaret Cather Shannon  
Betty Sherwood  
Helen Cather Southwick  
Marcella Van Meter



## Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial

326 North Webster Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

Nonprofit Organ.  
U. S. POSTAGE

**PAID**

Red Cloud, NE 68970  
Permit No. 10

1988 Memberships Now Due!