

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

Cather Fans Gather in Red Cloud

By JACKIE PFEIFER
Reprinted by Courtesy of
Hastings Daily *Tribune*

Dressed in a flowing prairie skirt, laced white boots and straw hat, red-headed Julie Harris looked as though she stepped out of a Willa Cather novel as she peered into the Catholic church window.

The tiny St. Juliana Falconeri Church was too crowded as several of the 400 visiting Red Cloud Saturday for the 32nd Annual Willa Cather Memorial Foundation's Spring Conference in Red Cloud packed into the church where Cather's best friend, Annie Sadilek Pavelka, Antonia in *My Antonia*, was married.

Harris, a renowned Broadway and film actress whose love of the Nebraska author's work brought her to Red Cloud as speaker, toured Cather historical sites along with others from across the state and nation for the biggest conference ever.

"I am here, well, by the grace of God. And I am so happy that you invited me. I have loved Cather's writing for most of my life," she said.

Visiting the places Cather wrote about is like an imaginary homecoming for many, said Susan Rosowski, the Cather scholar at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln who has attended the conference the last 12 years.

"Many of the people come back every year . . . It's like a second family for many because Cather did write so much about her family," she said.

Don Connors, a California English teacher formerly from Omaha, has made an annual trek to Red



Photo of Julie Harris at window of St. Juliana Church. Photo by Rick Monson. Courtesy of Hastings TRIBUNE.

Cloud since 1959, when he brought his high school juniors to tour the Cather countryside.

"Every year you see the sites, do varying types of research, see the same people and meet new ones," he said. "Once people come, they usually return. It's a very gratifying experience."

Harris said that her Red Cloud visit also took her back to her childhood. "Like any great writer, she is

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Reflections of the Third National Seminar

By DR. ELAINE SARGENT APTHORP
Department of English and Humanities
San Jose State University
San Jose, California

Beyond all other concerns I came to the Seminar simply to enjoy myself — indulging in a teacher's vacation, wearing at a relaxed angle my critical cap as I refreshed, rekindled — and shared — a rewarding literary enthusiasm. If any one impression of this year's Seminar prevailed over others in my mind, it was that one didn't need to be a professional critic to experience Cather's achievement — that in fact there's something intrinsic to Cather's art which stimulates and validates the reader's own intuition of value, which encourages the parishioner to trust her capacity to intertwine creatively with the world, to make leaps of extension outward and introspection inward.

Accordingly, some of the most spirited and thoughtful conversations I had were with participants who came to Cather not as career students of literature but (to quote one Seminarian's self-description) as purely personal "enthusiasts." They felt Cather's evocations of the Plains and Southwest, the weight and power of religious and literary traditions of which they had no conscious knowledge. All of us, as we listened to and discussed the implications of the papers presented, pondered and explored the sources of that art which so moved us. Like the polyglot of immigrant communities she so admired in her Nebraska heritage, Cather's art emerged *e pluribus unum*, out of many, one. Like American pioneer culture she wove her unique work

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Cather Fans Gather

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so particular about her descriptions . . . but she makes you think of your own childhood because she wrote so much about hers, and her brothers and sisters," Harris said.

Harris, a Michigan native who now calls Massachusetts home, was bombarded with autograph seekers after dramatic readings of three Cather stories at the evening banquet in which her voice took on the different characteristics of a husky, drunken Norwegian, heart-broken immigrant, feeble preacher, and a love-stricken river man, among others. She was given a standing ovation for her performance.

But while Harris was a drawing card for this year's conference, Cather was still the star of the show as most said their main reason for coming was their interest in the author.

E. Larocea Moore, a former Nebraskan who now lives in San Diego, said she and her husband came to Red Cloud to visit the Cather sites.

"I am a retired teacher who has always liked Cather's writing. We planned this trip around a visit to see relatives in York," Moore said. "You can tell who is not from Nebraska. We're the ones smelling the lilacs. It's really nostalgic."

Deborah Leonard attended the conference to see if the sites were as she remembered after teaching Cather to Chinese American literature students at Beijing University.

"I've been teaching in China for two years and I wanted to see if it (Red Cloud) was as I remembered," said Leonard, a Massachusetts native who was invited by the Chinese government to teach there. "It seems strange but completely familiar."

Leonard said Chinese students enjoy Cather's concise writing and her relationship to the land and people. She wrote about many generations of families living in the same house, which is something Chinese people can identify with, she said.

"They loved Antonia. It inspired them and she became a hero for many," she said. "I hoped they'd like Cather because I do and I wasn't disappointed."

Nebraskans also came from all across the state. Roberta Hinz of Lincoln said she had a wonderful day in Red Cloud and was impressed with how well the event was organized. Marge Bush of Lincoln said she came to Red Cloud because "I'm a Cather fan here with all the other Cather fans."

Seven buses took visitors on a Catherland countryside tour during the afternoon, including the house where Annie Sadilek Pavelka raised her 13 children in *My Antonia*.

Two Pavelka children, Leo Pavelka, 84, of Hastings and Elizabeth Boyd, 76, of Bladen, greeted visitors at the now vacant house.

"If mother were here, she would be in her height of glory," Boyd said. "She always said she'd be in the movies some day. Professors and scholars were always visiting with her about Cather's book."

As is often the case, a fat bull snake sitting on the steps to an underground cellar greeted tourists who peered down into the little cave.

"There were always snakes. When I was a kid I used to follow behind father in the furrow. One day father stopped and I stopped behind him and I was standing on

two bull snakes. I jumped and ran so hard to the house I was out of breath. Mother asked what had happened, but I couldn't talk," Pavelka said.

Harris said her experiences of the day, the opportunity to see Cather's books come to life in visiting the historic sites, moved her to tears. She, and others, snapped photo album pictures throughout the day including a shot of a bunny rabbit at the nursing home and various buildings with new-found friends standing nearby. All her memories of the day, she said, would be cherished.

Letter Excerpt

"The seminar was the most exciting professional experience of my life — it exceeded expectations in all areas — intellectual, social, personal."

— Patricia Sell
High School Teacher
South Bend, Indiana

As of September 1, the Rev. Morris Cather becomes pastor of the Hebron Baptist Church of Gore, Virginia (the church of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*). He has offered to give guided tours of that area for Cather enthusiasts. Requirements: call in advance, 1-703-662-2889.



Cather Seminar Staff

Standing from the left are David Stouck, Mildred Bennett, Jean Schwind, James Woodress, and Susan Rosowski. Absent is John Murphy. Photo is courtesy of David Stouck.

Reflections

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out of a plethora of cultural materials, and, as the Seminar presentations revealed, many voices informed and resonated together in her own voice — the voices of great religious and cultural traditions, the voices of other great artists of Classical, Russian, French, German, English and American literature, and the lesser known voices of folk and domestic art — to each of which she listened with reverence and engagement. Like so many of her fictional exemplars (I think offhand of Jim Burden, Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg), Cather perceived intuitively the connection between personal and racial memory, between parish and world. Out of this vibrant cultural diversity she created an authentic and effective self, art, and civilization. The suppression or rigid segregation of those diverse elements brought death. "Only connect!" pleaded E. M. Forster, but Cather's forte was recognizing and, with deceptive ease, portraying connections. I think this is why it seems so natural to us, as critics, that we carry on and carry through those connections — across centuries, across continents, across cultures, across consciousnesses — which Cather now delicately and subtly, now emphatically and explicitly, established and invited us to pursue.

As I kept murmuring to brother and sister seminarians all week, I felt myself a gleeful tourist in "a scholar's Disneyland." But as Mildred Bennett pointed out to a car full of us, in her spirited way — as we drove through the placid early summer greenness of Hastings, oohing and aahing over the quiet beauty of the landscape and the relaxed kindness of its people — Nebraska is *not* Disneyland, any more than America is; there is something precious about the Great Plains and the way of life which has been nurtured here which more favorably represents American culture than the supermarket of commercial thrill rides which our increasingly centralized and depersonalizing media represents as "the American Way."

I felt this as I wandered (ostensibly in search of dinner) up Elm Street along sun-drenched deep green cornfields and oceans of bright yellow wheat which, dancing and straining towards the sun in their disciplined rows and domesticated thickets, seemed an idea made actual, a dream wrestled into reality by the spirit and ingenuity of human beings. What Alexandra Bergson made, technocracy and agribusiness are fast remaking and repossessing, and the irony of a depopulated heartland stole upon me even as I drank in the slow beauty of the prairie horizon and began to "recover" a sense of natural time and sensual awareness which actually I had never really experience before. Later, on the Cather Memorial Prairie we fanned out, many in hopes of so separating themselves from the group that they might for the first time experience, if only for a few moments, what it's like to be the only human element in the entire landscape, to experience the shape of the planet and the sounds that the earth makes. Someone said, "it was as if I'd had this experience before" — referring to a look into Cather's Red Cloud attic bedroom — "and then I realized that I *had*, of course: Cather had described it so powerfully and clearly in her novels that I *had* been here before!" It was the same on the prairie, for me, on an evening when a few of us stayed behind to photograph the prairie sunset only to discover that the project was somehow absurd, because the experience one wished to capture involved more senses than the optic and finer shades of light — unless it were Lucia Woods behind the lens. I found, as I stood there in near darkness, that Cather stood beside and inside me, gently guiding me into an experience and insight which would not have been available to me without her: recalling *some beautiful elements of My Antonia* and "Neighbour Rosicky," I understood suddenly, more fully than I had ever done before, why Cather's Jim Burden recalls the precious individuality of Antonia's face so urgently and with such reverence. I could feel/see the rareness of wagon wheels briefly

pressing these grasses, see/hear the young vitality in Annie Sadilek's face, amazingly personal. I had always been confused by Cather's passion for the word "personality," but I felt perplexed no longer. Out here on the prairie, natural detail is so subtle (big bluestem grasses; buffalo grasses) that it can seem nonexistent, and human detail is so very *different*, and so scarce, that one would cherish the single soul in all its individuality, for as such it would always appear to us, outlined against the vastness of prairie grasses and environment. Where the architecture of human endeavors clutters the horizon ironically, the value of any single human being is obscured.

If Cather's was the genius of making connections, the genius of this Seminar, it seemed to me, was the way in which it encouraged the sort of connection and recognition I found myself experiencing out there in the fields; by its deliberate integration of intellectual and sensual connections between the words which were Cather's tools and the human experiences she sought to make real and significant for us. Lectures such as "Willa Cather and the Russians" (David Stouck), "The Dantean Journey in Cather's Catholic Trilogy" (John J. Murphy), "Foodways of Willa Cather" (Roger Welsch) and "Fine and Folk Art in *The Song of the Lark*" (Jean Schwind) — these only a sampling from the feast — reminded us of the multiple traditions on which Cather drew and, perhaps most importantly, to which she referred in the confidence that her readers would recognize the references and give, in their own reading, body and expression to "the thing not named." But we were exposed not only to lectures but to slide presentations, films (Cather readers easily pass over a brief reference to *Camille* as the play which so moved Jim and Lena in *My Antonia* but to see the film, earnest, Garbo-resplendent theater, in the context of a Cather Seminar, is to see through a lens very like the one Cather urged upon us, and to extend and expand the novel beyond its words so that, once again, it gestures effectively

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Reflections

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toward "the thing not named"), a dancical, a vocalist (Marshall Christensen, "the barnyard Pavarotti: solo, baritone-bass, solemnly belting out "Bless This House" in a Red Cloud gymnasium, with accompanist, so much as if right out of *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart*). And though the days were filled with fiberous discussion, we were often still and listening — sometimes to one another, and sometimes to the wind in the grasses.

With the Scholars . . .

Marilyn Arnold, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, currently is editing John March's "Handbook to Willa Cather," preparatory to publication.

★ ★ ★

John Murphy, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, is revising his Dante and Cather paper for publication, doing a paper on Cather and Elizabeth Madox Roberts for the Kentucky panel of WLA, writing a paper involving Cather for the Rocky Mountain MLA in October, and preparing a Professor of the Year lecture at BYU in September. His big projects are a book-length study of *My Antonia* for Twayne Masterwork Studies series, and editing *Death Comes for the Archbishop* for the Cather Scholarly Edition. He is also reviewing Cather and other criticism for *American Literary Scholarship* 1986, as well as gathering gems for the Cather number of *Literature and Belief* (the BYU magazine) and the WCPM newsletter Literary Issue.

★ ★ ★

Susan J. Rosowski published *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*, November, 1986, University of Nebraska Press; "Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: O Pioneers!, *My Antonia*, and *A Lost Lady* in *Geography and Literature in Meeting of the Disciplines*, edited by William

Mallory and Paul Pimpson-Housley, Syracuse University Press, 1987. She also had an essay on Willa Cather, Jules Breton and the French Rural Tradition in *The Rural Vision: France and America in the Late Nineteenth Century*, University of Nebraska Press, 1987. Work in progress includes editing the *Modern Language Association volume, Approaches to Teaching My Antonia* and with James Woodress serves as general Editor of the Nebraska Scholarly Edition of Willa Cather. During the past academic year she taught a Cather seminar at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, served as Academic Director of the National Seminar on Willa Cather, also presides over the Western Literature Association as President and will host the WLA at Lincoln, Nebraska, October 15-17, 1987.

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James Woodress' *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* will be out in October. All Cather scholars will want this exhaustive and definitive study which reads like a novel, but shows excellent basic scholarship.

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Will other Cather scholars please report what they are doing in this field?

Board Members at the Third National Seminar . . .

Bruce Baker read a paper, "From Region to the World: Two Allusions in *A Lost Lady*."

As moderator, Robert Knoll opened the first session with an introduction and discussion among Cather scholars.

Lucia Woods Lindley gave a slide show "Still and Still Moving in the Cather World."

Marcella Van Meter served, in her own terms, as "Go-fer" girl. She met planes and buses, and returned participants to their destined places of departure. She also ran many errands for the staff and scholars.

Mildred R. Bennett gave a slide show about the growth of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.

With WCPM . . .

Harry Obitz gave us an excellent showcase wherein we display the Acoma pottery that Aneta Murray presented to us and an autographed photo of Julie Harris, a memento of her visit at Spring Conference, for which she refused any compensation, returning our check as her membership gift to the WCPM.

Helen Cather Southwick brought us a middy blouse and the suit that Willa Cather wore when she received the Gold Medal for Fiction of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, 1944.

News from Abroad . . .

Harue Tawarada who teaches English at a University in Tokyo wrote that she would like to help in our campaign to raise a million dollars to continue making Red Cloud and Cather Country an international culture center. She cannot visit us at this time but she sent a check which would be equal to a trip to Red Cloud, the first gift toward our goal. Her check for \$2,203.10 has been deposited in the endowment fund. She writes: "Feeling happy and honored I am sending you the check (enclosed) to be used as a very modest starter for your future projects at Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. This is to mark my first trip to Red Cloud, though vicarious this time."

From *The China Daily*, Beijing, Friday, May 8, 1987:

"Cather grew up in America when the country was predominantly agrarian. She saw it turned into an industrial nation with a modern society based on mass production. The pioneering spirit of Americans of that period and their

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News from Abroad . . .

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values as reflected in her novels, therefore, may inspire us to carry out our modernization programme."

Jean Tsien of the Foreign Language Institute at Beijing who organized the symposium to remember the 40th anniversary of Willa Cather's death took her doctoral work with James Miller of the University of Chicago. She spoke at the 1983 Spring Conference and attended the 1983 National Cather Seminar. She will edit the 1988 special literary issue of our newsletter. The WCPM sent Cather souvenirs for Dr. Tsien to distribute to scholars.

Coming Attractions . . .

On August 15, the Red Cloud post office will issue a first day 10-cent stamp of Chief Red Cloud. The WCPM, in connection with the other museums of Red Cloud, will have a first day issue envelope with a picture of Red Cloud, a peace pipe and a drawing of Willa Cather's home, a plow against the sun, and the words "Home of Willa Cather."

Anyone who collects first day issues and stamps may have this envelope mailed from Red Cloud on August 15 for a cost of \$1.25. Please order at once.

★ ★ ★

The Western Literature Association meets in Lincoln October 15-17. They will visit Red Cloud on the 17th. If possible, plan to join us at WLA.

★ ★ ★

On December 7, the 114th anniversary of Willa Cather's birth, the Rev. Dean Bartholomew of the Hastings Pro-Cathedral will hold a high requiem mass at the Red Cloud Episcopal Church at twelve noon. We invite all of you.

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We have photographs of four seasons in Cather Country by James Goble and Beverly Cooper

available for purchase. You may rent or purchase the slide presentation of *My Antonia* Country from the WCPM. You will also receive a cassette tape with audible or inaudible slide progression.

From O Pioneers!

A woman stooping low over
ground cherries
Did not notice
As a cold black hand
Snuffed out the sun setting.

An icy breeze kicked up under
Her long loose skirt
Winding up between her legs
Chilling her — distracting her from
her rhythmic picking.

She knew the wind
But ignored it
And took small strength
By licking the salt on her lips.

Picked cherries dropped
Into the fold of her skirt
As she held it up
Letting her naked legs glow.

In the last orange light before dusk
Her black eyes fixed on the
distance
Scanning the deserted prairie.
Not even a tree kept her company.

She should have gone home
To escape the cold dark.
But she continued to harvest.
The field grew black, angry and the
moon laughed.

— Greg John
Monrovia, California
June, 1987

1990 National Seminar

Dr. Susan Rosowski announces tentative plans for the Fourth National Seminar to be held in the Southwest in 1990. Those of you who have requested that we visit the Southwest will want to keep 1990 in mind and watch for future announcements.

Cather Interest in Russia

The following letter from Donald Paneth is quoted in its entirety:

Dear Mrs. Bennett,

Alexander Taukatch, of the Soviet Union, and I, United States, share an office as editors of the *Yearbook of the United Nations*. Recently, Alex brought in an article by A. S. Mulyarchik, a leading Soviet expert on American literature. The article, entitled, 'Across the Literary America,' appeared in the March 1987 issue of the monthly magazine, *USA: Economy, Politics, Ideology*, published by the Institute of the United States and Canada, USSR Academy of Sciences. In the following passage, which Alex translated and which I thought would be of interest to readers of the *Newsletter*, Mulyarchik writes of Willa Cather:

"The state of Nebraska is the 'literary homeland' of Willa Cather, a wonderful writer, regrettably too little known in the Soviet Union. Her best works, beginning with the novel *O Pioneers!* (1913), are a tribute to the enterprise and courage of a host of trailblazers from far away, who braved great risks to discover the virgin lands of the American Midwest. For the characters populating her books, the energetic people — white as well as Indian — and the boundless expanses that surrounded Cather from her early childhood, remained the symbols of a free and happy life, a kind of life that harried penny-wise city-dwellers could only dream of. All these impressions came to the young Cather during her student years in Lincoln, and even earlier, in the dusty town of Red Cloud, which now boasts a Memorial Center devoted to her works. It consists not only of a house turned museum but also of some 610 acres of prairie. Close by, at a village cemetery, one can find the grave of Annie Pavelka, the prototype of the protagonist in Cather's novel *My Antonia* (1918),

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Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial
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- 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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Cather Interest . . .

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which was recently translated into Russian."

Sincerely yours,

Donald Paneth

Yearbook of the United Nations

United Nations

New York, New York

Baptist Church

The four church members who owned and have been meeting in the 1884 Baptist church are giving it to the Willa Cather Pioneer

Memorial and Educational Foundation. Leslie Doyle of Red Cloud sent a 1910 photograph of the



The Baptist Church as it now stands without the steeple. Photo courtesy of Kenneth M. Kent.

church before it lost its steeple in a wind and electric storm. The photo will enable complete restoration.

Dr. and Mrs. C. Bertrand Schultz have given \$5,000 to begin work on this church where Willa Cather attended when she was a child and where she gave her recitations.

The Webster County *Argus* for May 14, 1885 says: "The Sunday School concert at the Baptist Church Sunday evening was of the usual high standard. The house was filled to overflowing and all were pleased. Miss Willie Cather electrified the audience with her elocutionary powers . . ."