

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

PEOPLE AND GHOSTS IN CATHERLAND

By Herb Hyde

The rain beat hard against the windshield at the west edge of Beatrice and kept the wipers occupied as sizzling bolts of lightning mated to eardrum-rattling blasts of thunder, split the predawn darkness of either side of the road to Fairbury. Five, 10 miles later the rearview mirror reflected a lightening eastern sky; the western horizon was all but clear. Yup, I thought, Cather Day 1986 was going to be a winner all the way. What I was not counting on was a strong, steady south wind that blew and blew and blew. But of course that's what the Nebraska prairie is all about, isn't it?

Vi Borton, the wizard who pulls the levers that keep every Willa Cather Spring Conference huffing and puffing and roaring to success, was waiting with a warm greeting, a cup of coffee and my favorite kind of kolache: poppyseed (although I must admit that almond ran a very close second this year). It was she who broke the bad news: There would be no Mass at St. Juliana, hence no contribution to the Cather canon by Father Frank Leiblinger, because the little Catholic church was being repaired. Well, I told her, she might just as well cancel the other activities, but, being the wizard and all, she declared my suggestion out of order, or something like that, and the day proceeded as scheduled. It's probably just as well because more than 200 people showed up.

There was Mass at Grace Episcopal, with the Rev. Theron R. Hughes of Concordia, Kansas, officiating. He tried to fill in for his counterpart by telling us a good story, but there is after all only one Father Leiblinger and no mold. It was a fine service, and the St. Juliana choir, directed by John English, provided music, not only for the Mass, but for the banquet that evening as well.

This seems an appropriate place to comment on dedication and small-town life. To say Red Cloud is hurting economically is an absurd understatement, I know, but it is nonetheless quite true, although one would never know it because its people were as warm and friendly last Saturday as they have been on all the other Cather Days I've been there. These folks make

Membership Dues Reminder

1986 closes in a few days. Our projects for the year have been successful and rewarding. Our growth in membership reflects your interest and faith, for you have recommended our organization to others.

We are finishing plans for 1987 beginning with the 32nd Cather Spring Conference, May 2. From June 14-21 we will put on the Third National Seminar and in early fall you will see the publication of another special literary edition newsletter.

We reaffirm our pledge to promote Cather's art throughout the world. We ask for your continued generosity.

1987 Spring Conference

Julie Harris, five times a winner of the Tony Award and twice recipient of an Emmy, internationally known for *The Belle of Amherst* and currently appearing in *Knots Landing* will be the guest speaker at the 1987 Cather Spring Conference, May 2nd.

Check your calendar now to insure your participation in next year's activities.



you feel at home, no matter whether it's your first visit or your 20th, and they support the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation and its work in every way they can.

For example, the P.E.O. Chapter prepared one of the most delicious lunches you can imagine: salads of all kinds, scrumptious muffins and brownies, plenty of hot coffee and iced tea. Then there were the Catherland Federated Women's Club members at the Burlington Depot, who served calorie-laden homemade cookies, coffee and tea to visitors who dropped in to check out New Yorker Gabriel Seymour's photo exhibit of Cather sites (Gabriel was in high school when she snapped the pictures, but you couldn't prove it by me; they look like shots by Eisenstaedt or Steichen). The Red Cloud Women's Chamber of Commerce served a bounteous dinner of salad, rice, carrots, chicken, rolls and butter and a sugared fresh strawberry atop vanilla pudding in a delicate crust, plus the ubiquitous coffee and tea.

That takes care of meals and such. Now I pay tribute to the volunteers who staffed the various Cather sites; the tour guides; the bus drivers who took us through the heart of Catherland; kolache baker Lydia Jensen of Inavale (she is going into the bakery business, I'm told, and well she should); the young women who kept our beverage containers filled at dinner; the cleanup crews; the people who staffed the reception at the golf club; and no telling how many other folks I'm forgetting (for which I apologize) but without whom even the wizard could not have made Cather Day fly. Good times or bad, the people of Red Cloud always come through. Is it any wonder, then, that Willa Cather loved them so much? So do I.

Ghosts walked the Catherland I saw, and some of them spoke through Don Connors of Huntington Beach, California, who was tour guide on the bus I rode and who quoted the appropriate Cather

passages from memory at each site. He told us so much more than was in the printed material we were given that under his tutelage I, at least, was carried for brief moments into the past, into that vast countryside Willa Cather saw and wrote about. We visited Annie Pavelka's grave in Cloverton Cemetery, where many of the stones have weathered so much they are barely legible. We stopped at her home, where I fully expected to see children exploding out of the fruit cellar; instead it was a bunch of York College students who had found a couple of non-poisonous snakes down there.

There were other sites — the New Virginia schoolhouse; the Dane church; the prairie dog town; the George Cather home, now rapidly falling to ruin; the fields where mile-long furrows once were plowed; the Divide; and more, ever so many more — and at each of them Don provided spellbinding information, sometimes reciting Cather passages, other times relating his own experiences. He is a veritable fount of knowledge that will not soon run dry.

Cather scholars Mildred Bennett, Bruce Baker and John Murphy conducted a literary autopsy of *My Mortal Enemy* during "The Passing Show" and failed to agree on the cause of death (David McCullough supplied his own assessment after dinner).

The slide show of the 1985 European trip that retraced Cather's 1902 tour route was something else again. John Campbell and Beverly Parisot narrated and read from Cather's account of the journey and supplied much relevant material.

Ron Hull, who does his TV wheeling and dealing in Washington, D.C., these days at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, was master of ceremonies at the banquet. Before introducing David McCullough, he spoke of other things and made a comment that I found particularly interesting: He re-

ferred to his jaunts to Red Cloud for Cather Days as inner trips.

Not half an hour earlier I had remarked to the Rev. Dwight Ganzel of Fairbury (yes, he is the father of Bill Ganzel, who put together the beautiful *Of Dust Bowl Descent*) that coming to Red Cloud was a spiritual journey of sorts. It was another instance of *deja vu*, and it also brought recollection of John Janovy's Keith County of the mind (for which see Lonnie Dinkle in *Return to Keith County*), a place I equated with the Osage at the time and since have correlated with the John G. Neihardt Center in Bancroft and Bobby Bridger's and Roland Hulstein's spiritual quests. Ever go back to your hometown? Same thing.

McCullough, author of *The Johnstown Flood*, *The Great Bridge*, *The Path Between the Seas* and *Mornings on Horseback*, says a whole lot in a few words. He furnished a brilliant analysis of Willa Cather and her work, with which he became familiar through "Paul's Case" as a high school student in Pittsburgh (she taught there).

He had much else to say, of course, but the statement I admired most concerned his occupational role and status. After noting that he has been described by many people as a social historian even though he took his last history course in high school, he said simply, "I'm a writer." Amen!

What's that you say? I haven't mentioned Cather Prairie? No, I haven't. Did I go there? Of course I did; I told you a couple of weeks ago that it was required. Did the larks sing? Certainly, about a dozen of them; that's their job. Their sweet, pure notes were borne far and wide by the strong south wind that rippled the prairie grass. My senses drank their fill. My cluttered mind cleared, the day's weariness faded and inner peace descended upon me. What more could one ask?

— Reprinted Courtesy of
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1986 PRAIRIE WORKSHOP

June 9 through 13, 1986 the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation and Kearney College co-sponsored the seventh multidisciplinary English and Biology workshop for three hours graduate or undergraduate credit.

Dr. Helen Stauffer and Dr. Hal Nagel of Kearney State College staffed the workshop for 30 students. With cooperation from Curator Ann Billesbach and the Cather Historical Center students visited Cather sites in Red Cloud.

As a continuance of the Cather Foundation's emphasis on education we assume the responsibility of the salary for one of the professors. This course has proven to be most valuable to elementary and high school teachers seeking

credit hours for endorsements or professional enrichment.

This year three evening programs were funded through the Speakers' Bureau of the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities. Karen Dyer from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln presented "The Role of Music in the Life of 19th Century Settlers in Nebraska." John Carter, curator of photographs for the Nebraska State Historical Society presented his slide and talk program, "Photographing the American Dream: The Life and Times of Solomon D. Butcher." Michael Fowler from the Art Department of York College presented "Exploring the Heritage: Images of the Prairie Landscape."

This course will be offered again the summer of 1988.

Any Cather enthusiast will need this book to keep Cather's work in perspective.

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The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism by Susan J. Rosowski, University of Nebraska Press, 1986, \$22.95 plus tax (Nebraska only) and postage, \$2.50. This full length criticism of all the novels and major short stories explores subjects not previously recognized in earlier criticism. For example, Dr. Rosowski discusses Willa Cather's use of Gothic ideas and techniques with Wick Cutter interpreted as a classic form of an American grotesque and Lucy Gayheart discussed as a female of the Dracula story.

Dr. Rosowski argues that Willa Cather early took up the romantic challenge to vindicate imaginative thought in a world threatened by materialism, then pursued it with remarkable consistency throughout her career.

The book, organized chronologically, devotes a chapter to each novel. The chapters can be read independently or as part of a unified argument providing a larger picture.

Cather Honored

The National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center of Hereford, Texas, posthumously inducted Willa Sibert Cather as a Western Heritage Honoree on July 21, 1986.

This fine organization praises the strength, spirit, stamina and courage of the Western Woman. It believes the woman's role in the West must be recognized: the pioneer woman conquering an untamed land, the cowgirl loving and promoting her sport, the missionaries caring for the needy, the educators, artists, public servants, authors, pace setters and business women contributing their talents while preserving our Western Heritage.

The selection committee spent much time and research to prepare an excellent, permanent Cather exhibit for the museum. Helen Cather Southwick, niece of Willa Cather, provided appropriate mementos for this exhibit.

New Books

Order Now from WCPM

Willa Cather: A Reference Guide, by Marilyn Arnold, G. K. Hall, 1986, \$35.00 plus tax (Nebraska only) and postage, \$2.50. Dr. Arnold's book represents 90 years of Cather criticism and comment. The scholar can trace the critic's reception of each of Miss Cather's works, the changing opinions over the years, and the dominant conviction that Cather stands foremost in writing.

This complete volume chronologically lists and describes nearly 2,000 secondary sources on Cather's work. It includes documentation of the vast holdings at the Willa Cather Historical Center in Red Cloud, Nebraska, which include books, articles, critical assessments, dissertations and interviews, as well as lesser-known book reviews, periodical clippings and personal letters. The guide also contains an extensive author/subject index, and English summaries of foreign sources.

Attention Railroad Buffs

Richard C. Kistler, Superior, Nebraska, has two publications about railroads of southern Nebraska.

The Wymore Story is a history of the Wymore Division from the Missouri River west to Red Cloud of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. Cost, \$9.00 plus Nebraska tax and \$1.75 postage and insurance.

The High Plains Route is a history of the McCook Division of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. Cost, \$20.00 plus tax and \$1.75 postage and insurance.

Both books have an abundance of old photographs of steam engines, depots and roundhouses.

The Third National Seminar on Willa Cather

"The World and the Parish"

JUNE 14-20, 1987

in Hastings and Red Cloud, Nebraska

The seminar will bring together distinguished Cather scholars, critics, and students from various parts of North America. Lectures, discussions, panels, films, tours, slide presentations, and exhibits will be used to explore the theme, "The World and the Parish."

SEMINAR STAFF WILL INCLUDE:

- JAMES WOODRESS, University of California, Davis. *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (1970) and the definitive biography, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (in press).
- MILDRED R. BENNETT. Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. *The World of Willa Cather*, *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction* (ed), etc.
- SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*, and numerous articles.
- DAVID STOUCK. Simon Fraser University. *Willa Cather's Imagination* (1975) and numerous articles.
- JOHN J. MURPHY. Brigham Young University. *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* (ed) and numerous articles.
- SHARON O'BRIEN. Dickinson College. *Willa Cather's The Emerging Voice*.
- JEAN SCHWIND. Earlham College. *Pictorial Art in Willa Cather's Fiction* and numerous articles.

CALL FOR PAPERS:

Papers on any aspect of the seminar theme are invited for possible presentation in special sessions. Two copies of manuscripts (2500-5000 words) must be submitted by April 15, 1987.

ACADEMIC CREDIT AVAILABLE

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WRITE TO:

Susan Rosowski
Department of English
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0333
(402) 472-6645; (402) 472-3191

OR

Viola S. Borton, President
Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial
326 North Webster
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970
(402) 746-2653

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