

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXIX, No. 4

Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

RED CLOUD: A TOWN AND ITS HERITAGE

Excerpts from Herb Hyde's May 12, 1985 *Lincoln Journal-Star* account of the 1985 Willa Cather Spring Conference:

"Cather scholar Mildred R. Bennett's slide presentation 'The Restoration Years,' at 10:30 in Vets Hall was both educational and revealing, the former because she told us much about the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation and its eight charter members, the latter because we could see in her pictures the prodigious work required to make the various Cather historical sites what they are today. The names of many people who shared this labor of love or contributed in other ways are listed on plaques that were part of this year's exhibit at the old Burlington depot. On display there, too, were historic pictures and various certificates of honor the Foundation has acquired over the years.

"Complementing John Blake Bergers' Cather paintings at the bookstore-art gallery this year was an exhibit of Red Cloud native (she lives in Omaha now) Linda Stych's acrylic washes showing scenes and objects (mostly the latter) from Cather writings. Superb! Her work is detailed and authentic and has the same three-dimensional quality I find in Bergers' offerings.

"Saturday afternoon, 'The Passing Show' panel examined *The Professor's House*, a 1925 novel based on Willa Cather's visit to Mesa Verde in 1915. Cather scholars Bruce Baker (moderator), Susan J. Rosowski, John J. Murphy

and David Stouck provided individual views on the book before they fielded questions from the audience. It was one of the most thorough literary dissections the spring conference has had in several years. Religious symbolism is rampant in the book and was much discussed, but the points I found most interesting were those dealing with Cather's central thesis of man's relationship with the land, in which man desires not so much to possess the land as to be a part of it. Indeed, in many of her works, including *The Professor's House*, you will find man springing from the earth and returning to it in the ancient birth-life-death cycle. Precisely the same theme was expressed April 27 at the John G. Neihardt Spring Conference in Bancroft.

"Red Cloud's Chamber of Commerce women made the 30th anniversary banquet a memorable event, and soprano Gerilyn Glebler's three arias ensured that we would not soon forget the evening. She sang 'Lungi dal Caro Bene' by Giuseppe Sarti, 'O Mio Babbino Caro' from Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* and 'Let the Bright Seraphim' from Handel's *Sampson*. Her rendition of the last named all but lifted us from our seats with its power and beauty.

"Mildred Bennett's chronicle of events from the founding of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation to the present was an emotional telling that brought her a standing ovation at its conclusion. There is not space enough on this page or all the others in this week's 'Focus' to tell the whole story of this small-town miracle, but I think you can get some idea of what has been

accomplished when I tell you that her dream is to make Red Cloud a museum village of 1885. That she and many, many others have been so successful in making such a dream come true is a tribute to their love for the heritage of Nebraska and the Great Plains as that heritage is expressed in Willa Cather's writings. It ought to be the project of every citizen to preserve Red Cloud's legacy and those of every other Nebraska village and city, for once these things are gone, they cannot be recovered. All it takes to save them is the kind of love and dedication shown by Mildred Bennett and her colleagues. Would that every Nebraskan might adopt this attitude."

FOLLOWING CATHER IN EUROPE

Fourteen Cather enthusiasts left Kennedy Airport at 9:30 the evening of June 29 and landed at Heathrow Airport, London, June 30 at 7:00 a.m. We boarded a bus for

Please forgive us for reminding you that your annual memberships are due. We know you are bombarded from all sides for money.

Know that our books-salaries are always open to your inspection. We have no highly paid executives.

Your money goes for Cather education, preservation and international understanding. And right now we're able to hold the line with your help! Thank you!

Mildred R. Bennett

Chester, the first stop on Cather's tour of 1902. Eighty-three years ago Cather crossed by ship and probably went from Liverpool up to Chester by carriage.

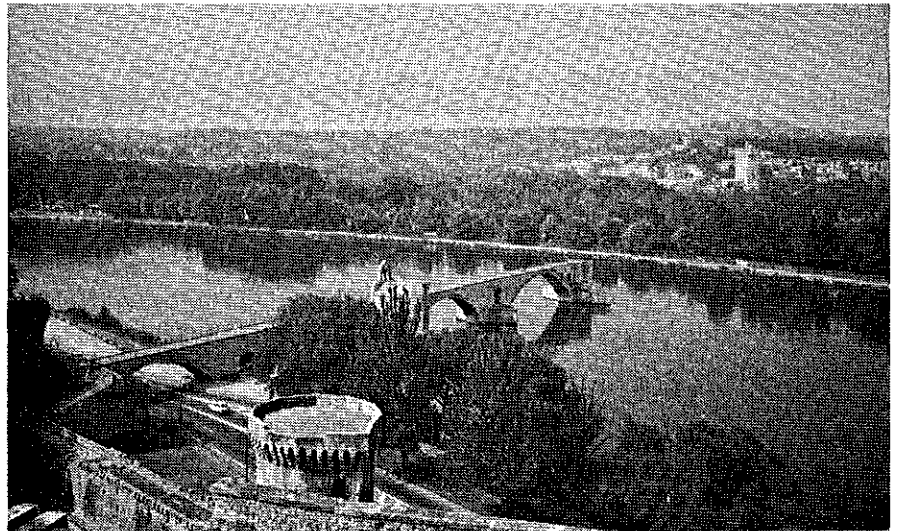
We explored Chester the next day. In Cather's time the canals carried freight, but today house boats ply the inland waterways. One of the boatmen invited a couple of us to ride with him and his wife and daughter to Oxford, and we would have liked to go, but we had to stay with our group. The locks are still hand-operated. We moved back in time at least a century when we saw a man brace himself against cleats to open the enormous wooden locks.

In the Chester Cathedral we tried to discover what Cather meant when she said part of the workmanship of the choir wall was much more exquisite than the rest, finished after England seized church revenues. The villain who left the south wall to be finished by indifferent workmen was Edward I, ancestor of Cather.

"The town is planted at the foot of the wildest of the Welsh hills, and is one of the oldest in England. In the business part of the town the streets are nearly all called 'rows,' that is, the second story of each building is built over the side walls and forms a sort of roof being supported by heavy posts. Many of these buildings have endured from Elizabeth's time, some are even older, and when new ones are built they are put up in exactly the same manner."

We found Cather's description holds true today, exactly as she had seen it long ago. We walked the old wall, built on ancient ruins and stood where Charles I witnessed the defeat of his troops and saw Cromwell enter the town.

We could not visit Hawarden (pronounced Hoardeen) Castle on account of advance notice must be given, and a permit granted. At Ludlow Castle we found poppies only in the courtyard at the entrance. We must have been a little



— Photograph Courtesy Michel Gervaud

"At the foot of the cliff, four great stone arches of the famous old Avignon bridge still reach out into the Rhone. . . . It was upon this bridge that the young men and maids of Avignon used to dance the farandole on Sundays. . . ."

— Willa Cather

too late for the flowers Cather wrote about in her poem. But we climbed all the circular stairs. The stairs to Arthur's room (Arthur was Henry VIII's older brother, first husband of Catherine of Aragon) had apparently been cemented shut when stones collapsed on it. In Mortimer Tower lived the little princes who later went to the Tower of London and supposedly were killed by Richard III.

Although we stayed at the Angel Hotel, we all went over to The Feathers where Cather stayed when in Ludlow. In this pre-Elizabethan hotel, we searched for a fireplace which Cather described: *"The entire ceiling of the dining room is carved with the arms of various lords of the western border, and about the great fireplace is a mass of intricate wood carving culminating in the work above the mantel where the star of the order of the garter and its creditable motto are cut the size of a tea-table top."*

The proprietor put us in a small room while we drank everything from coke to bitters. We talked and looked and finally John Campbell (the one who arranged this tour) exclaimed, "This is it." We all looked at the black fireplace and certainly it was carved in all sorts

of intricate designs. We also took pictures of everything including the ceiling. Then someone decided to talk with the manager. We wanted to see the records where Cather had signed her name, but all we found out was that the dining room in 1902 was upstairs.

We trooped upstairs and came into another room with a carved fireplace. This one fit Cather's description even better than the one downstairs, but we saw no oak beams. *"My sleeping room overhangs the street and I walk up an inclined plane from the dresser to my bed . . ."* We found the floor quite as uneven and one of our group nearly crashed, camera and all.

The British eat hearty breakfasts: scrambled eggs, poached eggs, English sausages, broiled tomatoes, toast, biscuits, ham, bacon, coffee and hot milk. We were always well fortified for the day.

After a visit to Oxford, Stratford-upon-Avon and, Shrewsbury, we checked into a fourth rate hotel in London. The place was overrun with young students who made the night and day hideous with noise. The lobby catered to con men and their victims. John Campbell called the travel agency and within two

days we moved to a much better place. We did not see much of Cather's London.

On July 6 we crossed into France from New Haven to Dieppe, the same way Cather had gone. But our passage was in daylight and the channel was smooth as a mirror. We watched the white cliffs of England fade, then wandered about the boat for the three hour crossing. We lost an hour coming into France. As soon as we could get away from the docks we climbed to the old castle. Cather says: "*The chateau d'Arques is the ruins of a Norman structure of gigantic proportions which stands upon the top of a chalk hill beside the river Arques. In this chalk cliff there are cut tunnels which give egress to various points along the coast and were invaluable in the long sieges the castle often sustained. Some of these underground passages are 25 miles long . . . They keep William's portrait at the castle still . . .*"

We found ruins, with no roofs intact where a portrait might have been kept. One of our group started to explore a tunnel but found himself in complete darkness and came back. The view from the old ruins was magnificent.

On to Rouen where we particularly wanted to see the tomb of the heart of Richard the Lionhearted, but that part of the church was locked up and we could not go behind the barriers. We also wanted to see Claude Wheeler's (*One of Ours*) rose-colored window in the Church of St. Ouen. "*Late in the morning Claude found himself alone before the Church of St. Ouen. He was hunting for the Cathedral, and this looked as if it might be the right place. He shook the water from his raincoat and entered, removing his hat at the door . . . When he reached the choir he turned, and saw, far behind him, the rose window, with its purple heart . . .*" *One of Ours*, pp. 341-2.

However this church was locked, but we could see from the

courtyard the circular window. As we drove toward Paris we saw fields red with poppies.

The one place in Paris which I wanted to see was the marble sculpture in the cemetery of Pere-Lachaise. Cather says: "*The great monument to the dead there is one of the noblest works of modern sculpture. It is a great wall of white marble, set against a green hillside, representing a wall in the middle of which is a door. The door is literally the door to the tomb. On either side of this door are emaciated figures, life-sized or larger, who are being driven all unwillingly toward the dread portal. These figures are in every attitude of despair and opposition; one woman is bowed with her head upon the ground, one is kissing her hand in a despairing adieu to her friends in the world; another, a strong young man, is trying to hold back. The male figures are equally unwilling; young men, bowed with chagrin at their own physical weakness, old men who clutch the very stones with their toes in their pitiful effort to remain yet a little while in the happy world of living things. The realistic treatment of the sculptor has been now and then bitterly criticized, and people have found the horror of these struggling figures too poignant. It would seem, however, that they in reality only heighten the enviable repose of the central and emphatic figure of the work. There are two figures, a man and a woman, who have actually passed the portal, who are erect in the doorway, passing into the mystery that awaits them. No shrinking, no horror, no distortion or contraction there. They stand upright and calm: fearless, indifferent, and weary. Once inside the portal there is no fear, no longing for the backward path . . . It is to all Adam's seed, this monument, to the human family and all its dead of the ages."*

Cather writes: "*The cemetery of Montmartre has one of the most beautiful situations in Paris. The hill of Montmartre towers above*

the city like one of those cloud-topped volcanoes in children's geography books. On the very summit of the hill rises the church of Sacre-Coeur, largest of all modern churches and a hill in itself. The church is all of white stone, with round Byzantine towers and dome. If one approaches Paris from the north the white gleam of Sacre-Coeur is the first thing that strikes the eye . . ."

The cemetery was most interesting, but the church in these 83 years of air pollution has lost its white color. Nevertheless we climbed up and went inside. A beautiful church, we wished the exterior might be washed and turned back to its former whiteness. In the courtyard of the church various merchants, appearing to be of Middle East origin, sold or tried to sell their souvenirs and trinkets.

"*From the terrace of St. Germain, Montmartre, with the purple city below, looks like the city of St. John's vision, or the Heavenly City that Bunyan saw across the river.*" We also saw this beautiful vision of Montmartre.

The day we visited Barbizon we had been delayed in Paris by motor trouble — someone had put paper in our gas tank, possibly because our bus flaunted an English license plate in an area where people are still upset over English behavior at the hockey game in which the Italians were so badly treated. But Barbizon seems to have been less disturbed by the decades than any other place. A large field of sunflowers (always facing east) bordered the town. We walked the streets where Millet, Rousseau and other artists worked. Millet's studio stood on the little main street. Shops had postcards or larger prints of his famous paintings. However, the roofs are no longer straw and we saw no sewage running in rivulets along the streets. The little village has done some modernization. Beautiful gardens with tables and chairs appeared behind open gates in walls.

We had too little time before we drove into Fontainebleau forest.

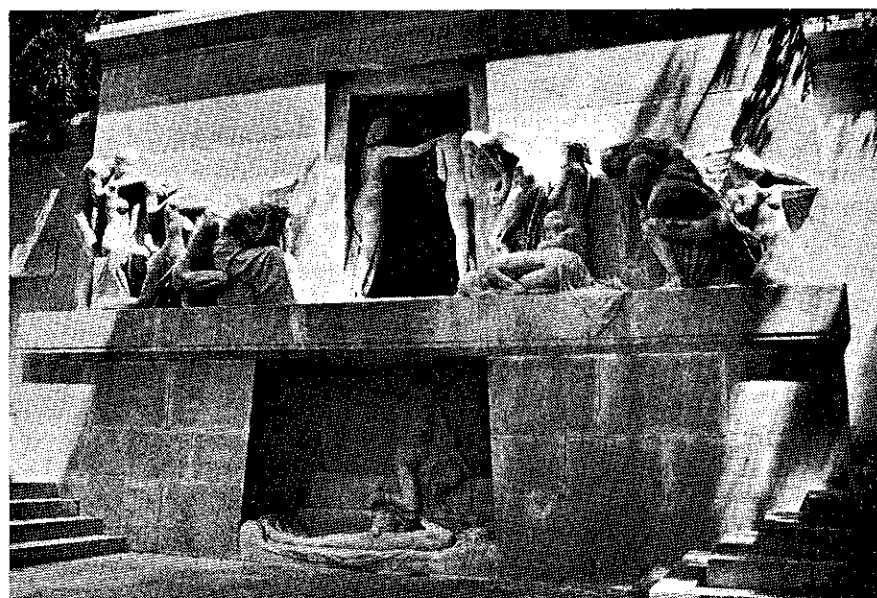
We found the immense forest of Fontainebleau in the middle of France delightful and surprising. The little town clusters around Napoleon's Palace.

The road to Aix-en-Provence from Fontainebleau led through the country which Cather describes:

"The long, even stretch of yellow stubble, broken here and there by a pile of Lombard poplars, recalled not a little the country about Campbell and Bladen, and is certainly more familiar than anything I have seen on this side the Atlantic. (Campbell and Bladen are little towns not far from Red Cloud.) To complete the resemblance, there stood a reaper of a well-known American make, very like the one on which I have acted as super-cargo many a time . . ." We too, saw an old reaper going through the fields. Our super combines would not work in a country where fields are so small.

"It was not until I saw the little white island of the Chateau d'If lying out in the sea before the old harbor at Marseilles that I awakened to the fact that we were at last in Monte Cristo's country, fairly into the country of the fabulous . . . the sunlight played on the white cliffs of the little island, and the first shock produced by the color of the Mediterranean, coupled with the name of the Chateau d'If, were enough to heat fancies that all day had been as wet as the dripping olive trees."

We spent a day in Marseilles and took a boat out to the Chateau d'If. The rock was covered with families swimming in the not-too-clean waters of the Mediterranean. But the color — looking across toward Marseilles — remains a marvelous blue. Some of our group climbed to the top of the ruins and examined the initials cut in the rock by prisoners of long ago. No one reported having seen E. D. for Edmond Dantes, the Count of Monte Cristo.



The marble sculpture in the cemetery of Pere-Lachaise.

— Photograph Courtesy of Beverly Parisot

Our headquarters were in Aix-en-Provence and we made daily excursions. At Avignon, I found things almost the same as when I visited there in 1981. But the passage from the Papal Chamber to the kitchen — a room like an enormous square inverted funnel, blackened by soot from centuries of cooking, had been blocked off and one entered the kitchen from an ordinary palace room. I thought some of the soot had been cleaned, and I regretted the loss of that black historic sediment. The gardens above the Palace bloomed as beautifully as when Cather saw them in 1902.

Cather reports, *"We came to Lavandou chiefly because we could not find anyone who had ever been here, and because in Paris people seemed never to have heard of the place . . . Lavandou is a fishing village of less than a hundred souls, that lies in a beautiful little bay of the Mediterranean . . ."*

We found that nothing of the original village seemed visible. The hillsides are covered with houses, the beaches crowded with people. Apparently a population explosion has covered whatever Cather saw here in 1902.

One day we drove to Arles. Cather says: *"We are not fortunate*

enough to see a bull fight at Arles, . . . The bulls for the ring are reared in a desolate fever-stricken marshy land called the Camargue. The only intruders on this reedy wilderness are the herdsmen, the duck hunters and the mistral . . . The amphitheatre is one of the most extensive Roman ruins in France, and is in a much better state of preservation than the coliseum at Rome . . . The ravages of the years are but little apparent; it is still as huge and white under its blue porcelain sky as it was in the days of Constantine, and even the loftiest gothic seems small beside its stubborn, arrogant, defiant hugeness."

The amphitheatre stands just as Cather describes it, but the stones are no longer white. One could sit on the seats above the ring and imagine gladiators, lions and Christians, as well as bullfights. Our bus driver insisted on taking us down to

IN MEMORIAM

Charlie Dugdale, whose magnificent voice talks us through the childhood home of Willa Cather, passed away in California in early June, 1985. Our sympathies to his wife Mickey.

the Camargue. We found, as Cather said, a desolate, swampy sweep of country. We saw the young bulls, the white horses famous for that area, and a few flamingoes, which did not allow us close enough for much admiration of their beauty. Water fowl covered the intermingled lakes and swamps. Roads had been built out into the area and we were able to see much that would have been inaccessible in Cather's time.

This account does not begin to cover what Cather saw and we also tried to see. My suggestion is that sometime each of you retrace her journey of 1902. You will find her descriptions bring to life the history and literature of each place.

NOTE: Quotations are from *Willa Cather in Europe*.

NEW SCHOLARSHIP FUND

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation was notified of a most generous bequest from the estate of Norma Ross Walter.

Miss Walter stipulated in her will that the money "be used as an endowment for a suitable scholarship program for girl graduates of Nebraska high schools, who desire to further their education at the college level and major in English."

We will update all information regarding the particulars of this scholarship in future newsletters.

David E. Scherman has sent us a copy of *The Midwest Review* Second Series, Volume VII, Spring 1985 which contains an article, "Peck, Turner, and Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*" by Richard C. Harris. The photos for the essay were given by David E. Scherman. Richard C. Harris is Associate Professor of Humanities at the State University of New York-Fort Schuyler. *The Midwest Review* is published annually by Wayne State College, Wayne, Nebraska 68787.

PRAIRIE WORKSHOP

Kearney College and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation will co-sponsor a "Prairie and the Nebraska Pioneer" workshop in June of 1986.

Dr. Helen Stauffer, English professor, and Dr. Hal Nagel, biology professor, from Kearney State College, will teach this workshop.

For more information please contact Dr. Helen Stauffer, Kearney State College, Kearney, Nebraska 68847 or Vi Borton, Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970.

PLEASE TAKE NOTE!

Revised date for the **Third National Seminar** on Willa Cather: June 14-20, 1987. Plan now to reserve this week for the seminar.

CHILDHOOD HOME FEATURED

The childhood home of Willa Cather has been featured in the November 1985 issue of "*Architectural Digest*."

This architect and builder's "Bible" features the house in a seven-page spread including two articles under their "Historic Houses" section.

Yehudi Menuhin is the guest author of the feature story. Photographer Tony Soluri did a superb job of catching the real beauty of this house.

TO ADVENTUROUS CATHER SCHOLARS

The undersigned wishes to engage with **no more than 10** like-minded persons to carry out a

spring expedition to Acoma Pueblo, certain deserted **Spanish mission churches**, the **stone quarry at Lamy**, the **Santa Fe Cathedral of St. Francis**, and the **bishop's retirement lodge** in the state of New Mexico.

Participants will travel during the last week of **May** or thereabout, and incur minimal expenses probably not in excess of **two hundred dollars** for food and lodging. The majority of the seven nights will be spent in tents at auto-accessible campgrounds.

Those interested in helping to plan and carry out this trek into the sites of Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are urged to contact the undersigned without delay.

Professor James Work
Department of English
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523
(303) 484-3389 or
491-5483

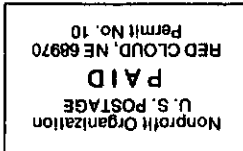
DEBORAH J. LEONARD IN CHINA

Deborah J. Leonard, who taught last year in the English department at Union College in Lincoln, was asked by the People's Republic of China to teach for a year in Beijing. She resides in the Beijing Friendship Hotel, in the same building where Virgil Albertini stayed when he taught there last year.

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial sent with Deborah 15 paperback copies of *My Antonia*, postcards of Willa Cather, and Cather Memorial bookmarks.

One of the problems that teachers overseas confront is lack of sufficient English texts. The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial aims to promote international understanding. Your membership helped send these Cather books to China.

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial
326 North Webster
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970



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- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
- By contributing your ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.

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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.

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**MILDRED BENNETT
RECEIVES
MARI SANDOZ AWARD**

Mildred R. Bennett of Red Cloud is the 1985 recipient of the Mari Sandoz Award. A plaque was presented to Mrs. Bennett September 17, 1985 at the Nebraska Library Association meeting at the Cornhusker Hotel in Lincoln. The inscription on the plaque reads as follows:

"The Mari Sandoz Award, 1985. The Nebraska Library Association honors Mildred R. Bennett for her

significant contribution to Nebraska Literary Heritage by exceptional dedication to the task of preserving and illuminating Willa Cather's World."

NEW OVERSEAS STAMP

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, pages 279-283 Cather tells of Father Junipero Serra. Now the Postal authorities have issued a 44 cent airmail stamp in honor of Father Junipero Serra, early Franciscan priest of the Southwest. The

issue is for overseas air mail, but those of you who like stamps might want to buy one to paste in your copy of Cather's book.

Upon his return from Europe, Don Connors visited Cather's Southwest and collected a series of maps, pamphlets and pictures which he gave to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial.