

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXIX, No. 3

Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

MEMORIES OF WILLA CATHER IN RED CLOUD

By Helen Cather Southwick

When I was christened at Grace Church in October, 1918, Aunt Willa was in Red Cloud and was one of my Godmothers. I have some snapshots that were taken the day of the ceremony. In one of them, Aunt Willa is holding me in her arms, and Miss Mollie Ferris, my other Godmother and a dear friend of the Cather family, is standing beside her. There are also pictures of each of my Cather grandparents standing beside my carriage and looking just as I remember them a few years later. I have fond memories of both of my grandparents and was dismayed by Mrs. Robinson's fictional description of them in her unfortunate book, *Willa*. She used the word "feckless" to describe my grandfather.¹ Nothing could be further from the truth. In a review of that book, Susan Rosowski pointed out that Mrs. Robinson seldom gives sources and often proceeds without sources.² Her description of my grandparents comes largely from the Templetons in "Old Mrs. Harris," a piece of fiction which Robinson apparently considered to be strictly autobiographical. Mildred Bennett wrote in *The World of Willa Cather* (listed in the Robinson bibliography) that "There is something of Willa's parents in the Mr. and Mrs. Templeton of that story," but she then cautioned that "before considering any of Miss Cather's characters as real portraits, one must remember what she said of her fictional people" and quoted a statement of Aunt Willa's describing her characters as composites of several people.³ I think she deliberately made the character of Mr. Templeton very different from my grandfather's so

that such an identification would not be assumed. My cousin, Jennie Reiher, was kind enough to search through family papers to find copies of newspaper clippings to show me what an enterprising and successful man my grandfather was. The *Argus* for February 28, 1884 said, "Mr. Charlie Cather is feeding 50 head of cattle for spring market. Charlie and his family settled with us last spring and is a very energetic man and we wish him success." The *Red Cloud Chief* of October 3, 1884 reported that "At the stock sale of Chas. F. Cather near Catherton the other day, the property sold high, returning something over \$9000. A little over 18 months ago Mr. Cather went into the ranch business with \$4000 cash, and in that time has made \$5000 over his investment."

My grandparents' home in Red Cloud was a pleasant place and their children and grandchildren liked to visit them. I spent many happy days there, especially when Aunt Willa was visiting. The house the grandchildren visited was the one at Sixth and Seward, with a two-story porch on the front. The upper porch had no roof but was shaded by several trees. When the trees died, an awning frame was built and dark green canvas awnings were put up each summer. Aunt Willa's bedroom was on the southeast corner of the house and had a door that opened directly onto the porch. She liked to have afternoon tea on the porch in the summer, and my cousin Mary Vir-

ginia and I were allowed to help take the tea service up the back stairs from the kitchen and through the long upper hall. I remember that Aunt Willa told us that the English always drank hot tea in the summer, even in the tropics. Though she liked her tea hot, Aunt Willa was not opposed to cold drinks. She sometimes took me to the soda fountain in the bakery for ice cream sodas and also a drink called cherry phosphate, which she and I both enjoyed.

Aunt Willa's visits to Red Cloud were not always just vacations. In the summer she usually went to her little studio in the back yard after breakfast and worked until lunch time. Elizabeth Sergeant has written that Aunt Willa told her in 1916 that her father wanted to build her a studio but that she didn't think she could work in Nebraska.⁴ If that be true, she must have changed her mind later. I don't know when the studio was built, but it is among my earliest Red Cloud memories. It was a small, nearly square one-room structure, perhaps 12 by 15 feet. It was behind the back wall of the barn, which Aunt Elsie replaced by a garage in the 1930s. My grandparents kept their car in the barn. Before my time they had a horse named Max, and Aunt Willa was sad when Max and the buggy had to go to make room for the first car. The barn is a place I still remember fondly. It smelled of sweet hay from the loft even after the hay was gone, and the loft kept the barn cool in hot weather — cooler than Aunt Willa's little studio, which had a rather low-pitched roof and unfinished walls. However, it had windows on all sides so that any breeze that blew would cool it. The little room was simply furnished. There was a plain wood table in the southwest corner which served as a desk. It usually had a small bowl

The Willa Cather Historical Center is seeking articles and papers on Willa Cather for its archives. Copies should be sent to the Willa Cather Historical Center, P.O. Box 326, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970.

of garden flowers on it. There were two or three wood chairs, a couch with brightly colored pillows, and a Navajo rug on the floor. On one wall there was a rather faded print of *The Song of the Lark*, the painting by Jules Breton.

Lunch was always served in the back dining room, and after lunch Aunt Willa went to her room to rest before getting dressed for tea. Afterward there was a drive in the country if the weather was pleasant. Sometimes Aunt Willa went back to her room to write letters until dinner time. If we had gone for a drive, or perhaps gone shopping or calling on friends in the afternoon, Aunt Willa went to her room after dinner to write letters. We usually listened to Victrola records after dinner while we sat on a screened side porch in the summer or in the back living room in the winter. There were operatic arias on Victor Red Seal records that Aunt Willa had sent from New York, my grandparents' favorite songs of the South, spirituals, and popular 19th century ballads.

Aunt Willa always traveled by train, and when she came for a long stay she brought a trunk. I used to be allowed to help her unpack the trunk and hand her things to be hung in the closet. In addition to the cotton skirts and middy blouses that she wore in the morning, she brought beautiful clothes to wear in the afternoon and evening — heavy silk crepe skirts and chiffon and crepe de Chine blouses and dresses. In the winter there were fine wool crepes and velvets. There was always a box of interesting pieces of jewelry which I liked to look at. The piece that fascinated me the most, though, was the snake ring that Aunt Willa always wore on the little finger of her right hand. A few years ago, when William A. Curtin's book, *The World and The Parish*, was published, I was much interested to read that the ring had been given to her when she was in college by a man named Charles Moore, who was said to be the son of R. E. Moore, the man who founded the Security Investment Company of Lincoln⁵, with which my grandfather became associated in 1895. Actually R. E. Moore's two children

had died in infancy; Charles was a nephew who had come from Illinois to work in his uncle's various financial enterprises.⁶ For a few years following 1882, R. E. Moore was president of The First National Bank of Red Cloud.⁷ Some time ago I read in the WCPM Newsletter that a niece of Charles Moore, Mrs. Lois Daily, had given to the Memorial some things that Aunt Willa had given to her uncle. There is a graduation picture of Aunt Willa showing the ring on the ring finger of her right hand, some pictures of places in Europe and a copy of *April Twilights* with the inscription: "To Charles H. Moore in remembrance of Auld Lang Syne and of our many good days together. Willa Sibert Cather, 1903." Mrs. Daily sent a letter to the Memorial in which she said she had seen (but not read) a pack of letters about 10 inches thick that Charles Moore had received from Aunt Willa. The letters were not found after his death, so apparently he had destroyed them in accordance with Aunt Willa's wishes.

After Grandfather's death in 1928, Aunt Willa stayed on in Red Cloud when Grandmother went to California with Uncle Douglass for a visit. Aunt Willa had the house cleaned and refurbished and the yard put in good order for Grandmother's return. She also made arrangements for Elizabeth Hufmann, who had helped Grandmother in the past, to be there as housekeeper in the spring, when Grandmother was expecting to return. But Grandmother was in an apartment near the ocean and decided to stay through the summer and then through the winter. In December (1928) she had a stroke and was unable to return to the house that Aunt Willa had prepared with so much care and love. After that, Aunt Willa made long, sad visits to Grandmother in California instead of the long and happy visits to spend time with her in Red Cloud, as she had hoped and expected to do.

Grandmother left the house and its contents to Aunt Elsie, who was living in Lincoln and used it only in the summer. Aunt Willa sent her money regularly to help with its maintenance. When the time came

for Aunt Elsie to retire from the English Department at Lincoln High School, she had to decide whether she wanted to live in the house in Red Cloud or stay in Lincoln. It was not an easy decision, but she decided in favor of Lincoln, which really had been her home for most of her adult life and where she had many friends she did not want to leave. She also felt that the house in Red Cloud was too large for one person and too difficult to keep up, even with Aunt Willa's help. Aunt Willa was disappointed and distressed by this decision. She truly believed that Aunt Elsie would have a better life in Red Cloud, just as she had believed that Grandmother would be happier in the house in Red Cloud than in California. Aunt Willa loved the house. She wrote in letters that it made her happy just to know that it was there and being cared for, and that she looked forward to staying there again. She told Aunt Elsie at the time the house was sold, about 1941, as I recall, that if she were ten years younger, she would buy it herself. The house was bought by W. A. Maynard, who gave it to the town for a hospital. Aunt Willa was pleased that it was serving a useful purpose, and she contributed to the hospital fund. A contribution was made in September, 1946, seven months before her death.

At the end of my recollections at the 1984 Spring Conference, I was asked why Aunt Willa is not buried in Red Cloud, and I replied that I feel sure that it is simply because in 1947 it would have been a more difficult problem to get a casket to Red Cloud than to Jaffrey. Southern New Hampshire is much nearer New York, and Aunt Willa loved that area, too, though it is not true that she had bought a plot in the Jaffrey Center cemetery and made arrangements for her burial there. Eleanor Shattuck Austermann, who was one of the managers of the Shattuck Inn and was the daughter of the original owners, told me that after Aunt Willa's death, Edith Lewis telephoned them to ask if a burial plot was available for Aunt Willa's grave. Because Mr. Austermann was on the cemetery board, he was able to create such a plot by having a

small piece of ground at the very edge of the cemetery filled and leveled and edged by a stone wall. Mrs. Austermann herself supervises the care of the grave, and last fall (1982) had myrtle planted on it.

At the time of her death I don't think anyone would have put so much significance on Aunt Willa's burial place. Uncle Douglass, the first in his generation to die, was buried in California because it was less difficult to arrange than a Red Cloud burial. Uncle Roscoe and Aunt Meta were buried in Red Cloud, but they were cremated, as was Aunt Elsie, so there were no caskets to be transported. Both of my parents were cremated, too, but my mother chose to have my father's ashes interred in California and bought a space beside them for her own. Uncle Jack and Aunt Irma, as well as Aunt Jessica, are buried in California, where they were living at the time of their deaths. Thus, as it happens, only two of the seven children of Charles and Virginia Cather were buried with their parents in the plot in Red Cloud, which, indeed, was too small to serve as a plot for the whole family.

About the Author

Helen Cather Southwick, daughter of James Cather and Ethel Garber Cather and niece of Willa Cather, has shared her memories with us.

Footnotes

¹Phyllis C. Robinson, *Willa: The Life of Willa Cather*. Doubleday, 1983, p. 22.

²Susan J. Rosowski, "Cather Biography Undiscriminating, Trivial." Lincoln (Nebraska) *Sunday Journal and Star*, October 9, 1983, p. 15TV.

³Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather*. University of Nebraska Press, Bison Edition, 1961, p. 22.

⁴Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir*. Lippincott, 1953, p. 141.

⁵William M. Curtin, ed., *The World and The Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1895-1902*. University of Nebraska Press, 1970, Volume 1, pp. 98-99.

⁶Information furnished to me by Henry E. Goebel of Lincoln, taken from the obituary of R. E. Moore, Lincoln (Nebraska) *Star*, December 7, 1921. Also, obituary of Charles H. Moore, Lincoln *Star*, March 1, 1933.

⁷Mabel R. Cooper-Skjeiver, *Webster County: Visions of the Past*, p. 289.

THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE: AN EARLY SOURCE

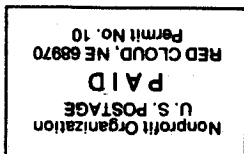
By Bruce P. Baker, II
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Cather's well-known 1938 letter "On *The Professor's House*," reprinted in *Willa Cather on Writing*, revealed long ago her debt to the real-life story of Dick Wetherill's discovery of Mesa Verde; and, until very recently, scholars have relied on Edith Lewis's account of Cather's own 1915 visit to Mesa Verde as an additional source for the Tom Outland section of the novel. Within the last few months, however, two additional articles have contributed significantly to our understanding of the origins of Cather's story of Professor St. Peter and the Blue Mesa. Paul Comeau, in an article written especially for John Murphy's *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), argues that Antole France's *La Mannequin d'Osier* (1897) is the "major literary source" for the novel and Susan Rosowski and the late Bernice Slote have made available Cather's own lengthy and fascinating account of her visit to Mesa Verde, an account "charged with the emotional force of her personal discovery" of the famed ruins and hence what Lewis called "the real genesis" of the novel. (See "Willa Cather's 1916 Mesa Verde Essay: The Genesis of *The Professor's House*," in *Prairie Schooner*, Volume 58, Winter 1984, pp. 81-92.)

The Outland story is, however, only one-third of the novel, well-integrated (as critics have finally been able to accept) but nonetheless only the second of the novel's three "Books." The other two sections, the professor's own story, have their "genesis." I would suggest, in a relatively unknown story by Cather herself: "The Professor's Commencement," which first appeared in the *New England Magazine* for June, 1902, some 13 years before Cather's trip to Mesa Verde and 22 years before she wrote *The Professor's House*. (Mildred Bennett reprinted the story for the first time in *Willa Cather's Collected*

Short Fiction, Lincoln, 1965, pp. 283-291. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be included in the text.) The Professor of the short story is clearly a preliminary study of the central character in Cather's later novel; although his last name is "Graves," he is affectionately called "Emerson" by Miss Agatha, the professor's older sister and housekeeper. The title of the story refers first to the Professor's commencement exercises in college some 30 years ago, an occasion when he had felt humiliated upon being unable to complete his recitation of "Horatius at the Bridge." The title also refers, ironically, to the banquet in honor of the Professor's retirement, an event which is described in the last scene of the story.

The Professor has spent his life teaching in a "city high school" amongst colleagues who Agatha insists are "failures in every trade who drift there to teach the business they cannot make a living by" (p. 285). Agatha, who is a great deal better educated and sophisticated than is the later Augusta, feels the Professor's motives for teaching there have been "quixotic to an absurdity" but he retorts, "As I have often told you, this city is a disputed strategic point. It controls a vast manufacturing region given over to sordid and materialistic ideals. Any work that has been done here for aesthetics cannot be lost. I suppose we shall win in the end, but the reign of Mammon has been long and oppressive" (pp. 285-286). The point is clear: the Professor's life has been spent fighting the forces of materialism by means of his attempt to propagate the true and the beautiful. In fact, the Professor himself interprets his quest in terms of specific symbols: "As he slowly climbed the hill to the high school that morning, he indulged in his favorite fancy, that the old grey stone building was a fortress set upon the dominant acclivity of that great manufacturing city, a stronghold of knowledge in the heart of Mammon's kingdom, a Pharos to all those drifting, storm-driven lives in the valley below, where mills and factories thronged, blackening the



winding shores of the river" (p. 286). The conflict between materialism and the good life, certainly one of the major themes of *The Professor's House*, is thus interpreted in this early story as the conflict between factory and school; and, indeed, the factory seems to be winning. Even the beauty of nature has been perverted to ugliness; in the tradition of Romantic Primitivism, Cather comments: "The beautiful valley, where long ago two limpid rivers met at the foot of wooded heights, had become a scorched and blackened waste" (p. 286). Her sympathies are clearly with this man who "had cried out against the image set up there as the Hebrew prophets cried out against the pride and blind prosperity of Tyre" (p. 287). The image of the Hebrew prophet is more appropriate than it might at first seem, for by the end of the story Cather has suggested that the Professor's outcries, important and necessary as they have been, have not been heeded. "His students were boys and girls from the factories and offices, destined to return thither, and hypnotized by the glitter of yellow metal. They were practical, provident, unimaginative, and mercenary at 16" (p. 287). His attempts "to cry the name of beauty so loud that the roar of the mills could not drown it" have gone largely unheeded, and now he finds himself at age 55 (St. Peter is 52) wondering what he had done with "the youth, the strength, the enthusi-

asm" of his youth (p. 289). Moreover, as with Professor St. Peter, this professor has had only one utterly splendid, creative student. The parallels with Tom Outland are startling: "the reward of his first labors had come in the person of his one and only genius: his restless, incorrigible pupil with the gentle eyes and manner of a girl, at once timid and utterly reckless, who had seen even as Graves saw; who had suffered a little, sung a little, struck the true lyric note, and died wretchedly at three-and-twenty in his master's arms, the victim of a tragedy as old as the world and as grim as Samson, the Israelite's" (p. 290).

In the final scene the Professor rises to recite those lines he had been unable to complete 30 years ago at his commencement — and falters again at exactly the same point. The situation is, I believe, a symbolic one in which Cather suggests futility and defeat and indicates that the quest on which the Professor is embarked, the overthrow of materialism by beauty and truth — the very quest of the later St. Peter — cannot be completed. Both must simply muster the courage to live on in a materialistic and utilitarian world. In "The Professor's Commencement" Cather is, for the most part, content to explicate the story's symbols, or at least to have the Professor himself do so for us. Nevertheless, this story of 1902 anticipates not only some of the major characters but

also a major theme of *The Professor's House*, a novel published some 20 years later when Cather would explore her theme by allowing image and symbol to suggest and, in the phrase she used to describe Sarah Orne Jewett's work, "communicate vastly more than she actually wrote." In short, "The Professor's Commencement" must surely have "teased" her mind for years, only to be transformed from the explicit moralizing of the early story to the transcendent art of one of Cather's finest novels.

About the Author

Dr. Bruce Baker, instructor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, has long been a Cather scholar, W.C.P.M. Board member, lecturer on Cather, has taught special seminars and published Cather studies.

PLANS UNDERWAY FOR 1986 NATIONAL SEMINAR

The Third National Cather Seminar entitled "The World and The Parish," co-sponsored by the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is being planned for Hastings and Red Cloud, Nebraska, the week of June 29 and 30, July 1 through 5, 1986.

Expect brochures and additional information by January, 1986.