

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

## Have You Read *The Professor's House*?

Cather's *The Professor's House*, published in 1925 received these comments from a *New York Times* critic:

"Here in one volume — and one novel — are three books. Book the first is ingeniously invented and admirably carried along as far as it goes. It stops in mid-channel. Book the second is an amateurish essay in archeological adventure. It is flat, stale and unprofitable. Book the third finds Miss Cather far beyond her philosophic depth without adequate equipment of waterwings for keeping afloat what is left of the story so inconsiderately abandoned at the end of book one.

"... It is really not possible to take this work seriously as a whole. As you look back over the first book you have a recurring sense of gaps and vacancies, incompletenesses in the story — as if parts had been hastily cut out of the manuscript and the ends not joined up. Then there is that long parenthesis inserted in the middle of a story of psychological analysis of character. The discovery of the cliff-dwellers' city on the Blue Mesa a thing of magic in itself. And here is no magic.

"... What is worse, perhaps, the author's quality as a writer, which is so refreshingly present in the first part of the novel, escapes her as she struggles with the mere narrative material of the

western adventure. The adventure is not adventurous, the discoveries are not exciting. Perhaps the writer is not naive enough for that sort of thing."

A critic from *The Kansas City Star* says:

"Professor St. Peter, with his vigorous masculine color and enthusiasm, is deftly centered within a revolving system of feminine selfishness. In this book Miss Cather is very hard on her own sex . . . The novel is marred somewhat by its tendency to wither at the conclusion . . . Tom Outland's story . . . concords finely with the rest of the book, revealing as it does the helplessness of the detached, scientific spirit before the entrenched and practical workaday world . . . That her creations are always individuals and never types is the epitome of Willa Cather's distinction."

Another critic, Helen E. Haines (publication unidentified) says:

"That Willa Cather's artistry should fail seems impossible. That a structure, sound and balanced, rising apparently to proportioned completeness, should suddenly mushroom into three separate parts and collapse in disunity is the last thing to be expected of the work of a skilled architect. But that is what happens to *The Professor's House*, and the calamity leaves this reviewer sadly embarrassed. . . . The main structure of the book has broken down and in its disintegration this fragment [Tom Outland's story]

has arisen . . . Tom Outland's story seeks to re-create the magic that Miss Cather herself has found on the New Mexico mesas, the magic of turquoise sky and electric air, and the age-old brooding of primitive forces undisturbed by a modern age. But that magic, to me at least, is not conveyed in these pages; they give description of things seen, not immediacy of experience . . . We find him [the professor] no longer a living man, but a psychological simulacrum engaged in a struggle with his own consciousness which we follow with a growing sense of vague inconclusiveness until we turn the page and suddenly encounter 'A note on the Type . . .' What conclusions Miss Cather indicates for the professor's problem, I will not tell. And if you should remark that I will not tell because I don't know — let us change the subject."

The reviews from the English Press are more perceptive:

"Miss Cather is a novelist of whom America may well be proud." (London Daily Mail)

"It is a novel stamped all over with distinction, and, in speaking of Miss Cather's work generally, it is difficult to keep superlatives from breaking in. She is a very fine artist, indeed — a good case could be made out for her claims to be America's best novelist — sensitive and subtle, but never finicking, feminine in her outlook, but never trivial." (Observer)

"Miss Cather is much too little known in England. In America her position is assured, she is the heir-apparent to the place now occupied in American fiction by Edith Wharton." (London Guardian)

"'A Lost Lady' must have made many readers alert for another novel by Miss Cather, and they will find here, too, her exquisite sensibility, her imaginative invention." (Manchester Guardian)

"Let it be said at once that the Professor's House is not in Main Street. This is as far as possible from being the conventional American novel; it is both American and English — English of the best." (Scotsman)

"If one has to confess to a little disappointment over Miss Willa Cather's latest story, it is mainly because Miss Cather herself has set such a very high standard with earlier books." (London Queen)

The Cather Scholar is interested to read what scholars have since said of this controversial book. David Daiches, 1951 said: "The full meaning of the professor's crisis and its resolution is never overtly examined, and a note of deliberate mystery remains to the end. . . . *The Professor's House* shows Miss Cather moving toward a more delicate kind of art."

Leo Gurko says in *The Angry Decade*, 1947, "Willa Cather . . . Ellen Glasgow . . . Neither belongs to the front rank of her age. . . ."

E. K. Brown (and Leon Edel) 1953 say: "It is by a scrutiny of the approach to houses that the deepest meaning in the novel will disclose itself, and by the same token clarify the beautiful relation among the three parts in which it is arranged. . . . The obviously surprising element in the structure of *The Professor's House* is its second part, a long story inserted. . . . as Willa Cather has said, an effect

similar to those Dutch pictures of an interior where a square window offers a contrasting vista of a gray sea or the masts of ships. *The Professor's House* is a religious novel."

James Schroeter, 1967, interprets *The Professor's House* thus: ". . . The Jew is a money-maker rather than a creator, a traditionless aggressor who invades from the outside; he threatens and destroys the past; and he symbolizes what is wrong with the present. . . . If the Professor can be taken as a symbol of America, then Willa's 'message' is simply that America is falling into the hands of the Jews."

Edward Wagenknecht says (1952) "*The Professor's House* is Willa Cather's subtlest and richest — though not her greatest — book, a book full of nourishing food for the mind and spirit of a disillusioned, if not despairing maturity."

Dorothy Tuck McFarland tells us (1972) "On the flyleaf of Robert Frost's copy of *The Professor's House*, Miss Cather wrote that the novel was about 'letting go with the heart' — a reference to Frost's poem *Wild Grapes* . . . It seems to me that the emergence of St. Peter's boyhood self is indicative, not of his regression to a more primitive level of consciousness, but of his incipient rebirth. . . . According to C. G. Jung", says McFarland, "'The archetype of the child has a redemptive significance. . . .'"

Margaret Doane, 1984, writes in *Western American Literature*, "One of St. Peter's prejudices is against women: women are representative of a mundane world which destroys artistic capabilities. . . . A further examination of the Professor, however, shows him to be remarkably obtuse and unfair to his wife. . . ."

"Cather has in *The Professor's House* established an anti-female bias as a dominant aspect of the book: she herself is not against women, but she establishes num-

erous male characters who make almost innumerable remarks against women. . . . a close examination of his [St. Peter's]. . . thoughts about women shows a perspective which is both prejudiced and insensitive."

Now you have observed how different viewpoints emerge throughout the past 60 years. Come to hear our distinguished panel discuss *The Professor's House* and bring your own questions.

I do not have room for a bibliography but if any of you want publisher, book and page, write me.

Mildred R. Bennett

## LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSE DONATED TO THE WILLA CATHER FOUNDATION

The century-old Little Red Schoolhouse and the acre of land it stands on will become a part of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.

The schoolhouse, similar to one Miss Cather often mentioned in her stories, was donated to the foundation by Red Cloud sportsman Harry Obitz as a memorial to his wife, Helen, who died last November. Obitz and his wife were charter members of the foundation.

"It is a magnificent and priceless gift," said Mildred Bennett, a Cather authority and founder of the 30-year-old foundation, which promotes and preserves the art, literature and history of the late Miss Cather, a Nebraska Pulitzer Prize-winning author.

"There is none other in the state so complete with artifacts — including a 1,000-book and textbook library — that represents so completely what a little one-room schoolhouse was like at the turn of the century," Mrs. Bennett said.

"It is similar to the New Virginia schoolhouse Miss Cather attended

in 1883-84. Its furnishings even include 29 antique lunch pails like those flashing in the sun in Cather's 'Best Years'."

Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Borton said the school, located southwest of Red Cloud, would be used by the foundation for meetings and picnics and would be available for visits by schoolchildren.

The schoolhouse was purchased at an auction by Mrs. Obitz in 1960 for use as a family memorial to her father, the late W. B. Frame, who had attended school in there as a boy. It was built in 1885 and was last used for classes in 1959.

Mr. and Mrs. Obitz, operators of a Red Cloud antique store, added to its original furnishings and equipment and made it a treasure trove of turn-of-the-century history. Additions included a wood-vane windmill, outhouses, a cob house for the pot-bellied stove, period playground equipment and a collection of books and maps.

— Excerpt from article  
by Tom Allen  
*Omaha World Herald*

## With Regret

Dr. A. L. Rowse has advised us by letter a few weeks ago that because of recurring trouble with his alway present enemy, duodenal ulcer, his physician has advised him not to exert himself in the effort of a trip to Nebraska. Dr. Rowse, in his 82nd year, has to guard his strength. He expressed great regret at not being able to celebrate our 30th anniversary with us and we, with you, share that same regret and sense of loss. Dr. Rowse visited Red Cloud first in 1957 and again in 1980 when he rejoiced and commented on what had been accomplished here to commemorate Willa Cather. His book, *Memories*, in which he tells of his visits here will be available at our gift shop during conference, and any time you wish to order.

## An Interesting Find

Some weeks ago, my nephew Dr. Gayle Rhoads in Lodi, California called to say he had seen, in a used book store, a Cather book. It was, he said, a copy of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* with the inscription: "For Willa S. Cather with deep gratitude — Christmas 1927." It had fourteen photographs, illustrating the scenes Cather had described, tipped into the pages throughout the book.

"How much are they asking for it?" I said.

"Fifteen dollars."

"It's a steal. Get it, by all means."

When the book arrived here, we all exclaimed over it. Although it is not a first edition, we feel that it was once in Willa Cather's library and we would like to know, if possible, how it ended up in a used book store in Lodi, California. Can you suggest any theories?

## May 4th Panel

The panel for the discussion of *The Professor's House* will be chaired by Bruce Baker, teacher of English and Cather specialist at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He has chosen as his distinguished participants: Sue Rosowski, of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, John Murphy of Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, (John Murphy is on loan to Brigham Young from Merrimack College in North Andover, Mass.) and David Stouck, of Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada.

Each of these professors of English has published articles on Willa Cather, edited others' articles, taught those seeking to specialize in Cather. David Stouck published in 1975 *Willa Cather's Imagination*. John Murphy recently edited a book, *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*. Both books are available for you in our gift shop. Sue Rosowski has a special gift for us, an essay which she and her

husband discovered in Denver when she was researching Cather.

Prof. Baker has chosen wisely in this panel selection. All of them are equal to lecturing, answering questions, solving problems. Bring your own questions written out for them to read and answer.

## Special Exhibit

Linda Lambrecht Stych is a south central Nebraska artist originally of Red Cloud, who is currently working out of Omaha. She is a gifted artist whose colors and brush, mixed with her love of Nebraska landscape, captures these landscapes in a nostalgic way few artists can achieve.

Linda's art has received numerous awards and has been hung in juried shows and exhibits throughout the state. She has paintings and batiks in many private and public collections throughout Nebraska.

Because of the increasing demand for her work and the many commissions Linda receives, she is able to pursue her art career at home. She is now devoting her time to being a wife, mother, and full-time artist. Quite a task.

Linda has been commissioned to do a series of Cather-related paintings by a private couple. She has offered to bring these works to Red Cloud on May 4 for an exhibit during Spring Conference.

No cost of living rise in our prices! You can afford to celebrate our 30th with us. You *can't* afford to miss this event. At the evening banquet we will tell you about 30 years of building the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.

Register early for  
Spring Conference!

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- 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.
- For Newsletter Donation Only ..... \$5.00  
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**Out of the Past**

*Fall 1957, Vol. I, No. 2*

Dr A. L. Rowse, All Souls College, Oxford, England took time from his lecture engagement at Hastings College to visit the Memorial

*Spring 1958, Vol. II, No. 1*

The Board of Governors is now negotiating to buy the Red Cloud City Hall (built originally as a bank in 1889 by Silas Garber) as headquarters for the Memorial and for permanent housing of the Willa Cather collection.

*Fall 1959, Vol. III, No. 2*

All Nebraska members of the Board of Governors were on hand when the Memorial was host to the Nebraska Writers' Guild at its annual fall convention in Red Cloud. Featured speaker was author of *The Horsecatcher*, *Old Jules*, and *The Cattlemen*, Mari Sandoz, who paid tribute to the fine work being done by the Memorial.

*Spring 1960, Vol. IV, No. 1*

The Garber bank building was purchased.

*Fall 1960, Vol. IV, No. 2*

Willa Cather's Childhood Home has been purchased for the Memorial.

*Fall 1961, Vol. V, No. 2*

First Spring Conference (a banquet only) held in May of 1961. Honored a \$5,000.00 gift from the J. M. McDonald Foundation.

*Fall 1962, Vol. VI, No. 2*

Spring Conference of May 26, 1962 John Neihardt dedicated the Garber Bank Building as the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial.