

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXV, No. 5

Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

ONLY ONE POINT OF THE COMPASS

Willa Cather in the Northeast

By Marion Marsh Brown and
Ruth Crone

Archer Editions Press 1980

Michel Gervaud teaches at Université de Provence in Aix en Provence. He has taught French in the United States, and McGill University of Canada requested him to join their faculty but he preferred to return to his beloved Provence. He has long admired Willa Cather and three times has visited Nebraska and Catherland.

Thanks to Willa Cather's major biographers we knew about her Red Cloud years, her life in Pittsburgh and New York but relatively little about her prolonged summer stays in the Northeast combining both relaxation and fruitful creative work. A few remarks here and there, some welcome snapshots in **Willa Cather, A Pictorial Memoir** only partly satisfied our curiosity concerning places which meant so much to her. There was therefore a real need for a book like this one. Of course, upon discovering that this study contains no notes at all and even — *horresco referens* — yields at times to the dangerous seductions of fictional treatment, strict scholars may be inclined to pooh-pooh such an unorthodox approach to biography. But as one goes with unflinching interest through the book, one soon realizes that it is based on honest, patient and thorough investigation. For obvious reasons, one easily guesses that the persons interviewed by the two authors did not all wish to have their names mentioned. Anonymity, in some cases, helped preserve the spontaneity — occasionally flippant — of their testimony.

It is by the way, most appropriate that this book should be "dedicated to the innkeepers and caretakers in the Northeast who helped provide a proper climate for the flowering of Willa Cather's art." Willa Cather, however fussy and impatient she may have been with these dispensers of the comforts of life, she appreciated most: cleanliness, quiet, good food, was perfectly aware of the precious role they played around her. Observing the skill displayed by Sebastian's Italian valet, Giuseppe, Lucy Gayheart remarks: "After all, it was people like these who counted with artists — more than their admirers." Willa Cather respected her cook Joséphine, in New York, and the Beals in Grand Manan who took care of her cottage and garden and together with Edith Lewis surrounded the writer with the peace that was essential to her work. Most caretakers around Willa Cather were efficient, attentive and patient but they were not unconditional admirers. Servants or employees (to use a word more acceptable to Americans) have always been particularly well placed to observe the manners and foibles of the people rich or famous they wait upon. A long literary tradition bears witness to this, in every country.

In Willa Cather's case, they did not really have any malignant reports to make but some of the lady-novelist's peculiarities gave them cause for mirth or irritation now and then. Their recollections of her are not, of course, of equal interest. Some tend to be rather gossipy and long-winded. Others are really amusing. Most of them confirm what we already knew of Willa Cather's personality. In a few

cases, they throw an unusual light on secret aspects of her psyche. Thus Willa Cather's phobia about fires was evidently a mere matter of joke for hotel employees but the Cather student will not fail to relate it to the curious 1912 short story "Behind the Singer Tower" an anticipation of the "catastrophe stories" which movie fans seem so much to relish today. The haunting horror caused by the burning of the huge and luxurious Mont Blanc Hotel looms over the table, conjuring up the vision of people either trapped in their plush suites or jumping to their death five hundred feet below like the unfortunate tenor Graziani whose snapped-off

(Continued on Page 20)

1982 MEMBERSHIP

The time has come to renew your membership with the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. In reading your newsletters you recognize the many successful projects that we have undertaken this past year. Your help provided eleven tuition scholarships awarded for the National Conference held in June.

We appreciate your generosity and dedication to us in the past and we count on your continuing membership donations to carry out our further plans in perpetuating worldwide interest in the work of Willa Cather.

Our thanks to those of you who have already renewed your membership for 1982.

Viola S. Borton
President

hand is found on the ledge of a window. Just as every normal person, Willa Cather suffered from phobias but to her, the artist, they could be a source of inspiration.

For art's sake she could also be rather unscrupulous. We learn, for instance, how she borrowed from Dr. Sweeney, almost against his will, the diary of his voyage to France on a troopship in WW I and made free use of it in **One of Ours** much to the dismay and anger of its author whose permission she never asked. *Felix culpa!* will, no doubt, Willa Cather admirers exclaim, as it helped give the novel a ring of truth it really needed but nevertheless it was a breach of good manners if not of trust. To be completely fair let us add that Dr. Sweeney and Willa Cather remained good friends and eventually the doctor's family were proud his diary had been thus used.

Only One Point of the Compass offers numerous and often diverting illustrations of Willa Cather's fierce determination to protect her privacy and shows how such an attitude baffled or hurt quite a few summer people and prompted sarcastic comments about the distinguished novelist so bent upon avoiding human contacts. Americans, in general, strike foreign visitors as being very friendly and sociable, in small communities at least, and extremely anxious to evince "good neighbor" feelings. It is no doubt a great American tradition. As a consequence, Willa Cather's behavior must have seemed all the more strange to those who ran across her. She was accused of being self-centered, haughty, temperamental, too much imbued with her literary fame. Actually the book also reveals or rather confirms the genuine warmth that was in her and the sympathy she could manifest towards the happy few she had elected as friends or more modestly as *personnes de confiance*.

As indicated by the title of this book, her exclusive center of inter-

est was her creative work and to accomplish it she absolutely needed seclusion in a natural environment both soothing and stimulating. Perhaps Willa Cather overdid her reserve but I personally think that she had good reasons to believe that the "nice little old ladies" overflowing with friendliness and good will she saw in hotels or at church would have soon turned into dreadful time-consuming bores, had she encouraged in the least their amicable dispositions. She also knew too well how prestige-seeking hostesses or various organizations were eager to catch hold of a celebrity to adorn their parties and serve their more or less disinterested purposes.

One of the rare merits of this book is that it succeeds in presenting so many sided aspects of Willa Cather's life in her various summer havens. It abounds in alert and evocative vignettes, true-to-life details. It is fair, sympathetic but never hagiographic. As befits a book written by women, it is filled — much to our delight — with remarks about clothes, furniture, flowers, food, details that are so essential to the enjoyment of everyday life and to the understanding of people's true personality, such as Willa Cather's attitude towards her attire (rather disconcerting sometimes) and the "little niceties" such as olive oil garlic and imported vintage wines she still needed in Grand Manan while refusing to have her cottage fitted with a bathroom. How typical of the Nebraska novelist!

Marion Brown's and Ruth Crone's study is deceitful: it is serious and informative and yet it reads like fiction. This is because the two authors are endowed with the gift of writing — a gift rare enough among scholars. Through their sensuous use of words we **see** the places they vividly describe. They evoke with a fine poetic sense the unspoilt beauty of Grand Manan, the splendor of fall over the wooded hills of Maine, the serenity of a land which enabled Willa Cather to give

herself absolutely to her material, to paraphrase one of her favorite sayings.

— Michel Gervaud
Professor of English
Université de Provence
Aix en Provence
France

Ronald W. Butler acts as chairman of the Division of Arts, Humanities, and Related Technologies at the University of Kentucky. Last summer he attended the week-long Cather seminar in Hastings and Red Cloud. He reports great satisfaction with the experience. He wrote this poem twenty years ago when he first read Cather's **Youth and the Bright Medusa**. His phrase comes from "A Death in the Desert."

"Ah, God! the swift feet of the runners!"

(On a phrase taken from
Willa Cather)

Where are all those beautiful
young poets
Who sang those few incomparable
poems?
Full of youth and the joy and the
living it
Racing through illusion
With nothing in their arms.

Ah, God! the first discord in the
music
The first quaver in the thin soprano
line
The first of the rainbow bubbles
bursting
On a spindly cocoon marked for
dying.

Staccato, then, the avalanche of
leveling
The frenzy of the butterfly's last
flight
Earth bound and footsore now the
runners
Like lemmings surging onward in
the night.

And why all those beautiful young
poets?
And where those incomparable
poems?

— Ronald Butler

Richard F. Fleck, professor of English at the University of Wyoming, Laramie, presently teaches at Osaka University, Japan.

Warpoem Upon Reading Willa Cather's ONE OF OURS

Dunkirk
Verdun
Dachau
Bastogne
Pleiku
Dien Bien Phu
Panmunjom
Wounded Knee
Syngman Rhee
Burst as shells
in human memory.

— Richard F. Fleck

GRANT REYNARD

The outstanding gift of the year must be the Grant Reynard paintings and memorabilia, given by his widow, to the Nebraska Art Collection. To be housed in Kearney at Kearney State College, the artist's work will not be displayed until a complete catalog can be finished, a task which may take one to two years. Fortunately, Grant Reynard saved all his sketches and preliminary drawings.

A native Nebraskan, Grant Reynard moved to the East and began his work with "arty" subjects "like ladies and goats, nude ladies romping with the goats through the woods." However at the MacDowell Colony in Peterboro, New Hampshire, he met Willa Cather. She came to him requesting to see his work, and then she talked about the importance and significance of everyday life, the beauty in our lives around us. Grant Reynard never forgot her visit nor did he ever lose the considerable influence she had on the sudden change in the subject matter for his work. In any lecture he gave, he remembered her help and influence.

In homage to her inspiration, he painted her home in Red Cloud. Those who directed him to the house sent him to the second Cather house, not the childhood home of which she so often wrote.

Not aware of this fact, Mr. Reynard completed the watercolor, painting it to depict the era of the 1900's when the streets wore carpets of dust, not asphalt. However, before he could present this gift to Miss Cather, she died. He kept it in his collection, but when I saw it, I knew that I must have it, and he let me keep it — it now hangs — as it has for years — in my living room, a tribute to both great artists.

About thirty years ago, my husband, Dr. Bennett, and I visited the Reynards in New Jersey, and viewed his studio. On the wall hung a magnificent portrait of a black man. My husband admired it, and then said, "This man died shortly after you painted this picture."

Grant Reynard opened his mouth in astonishment. "How do you know?"

"You have painted into his throat, his veins, his hands, the deterioration of a fatal heart disease."

The artist could scarcely believe that his eye and his hand had recorded what he, himself, did not recognize. Later, in his lectures, he often referred to the incident.

A new book about this great artist is now available: **Grant Reynard, N.A. An American Painter** by Harlan E. Knautz.

The hard-bound copies at \$13.50 include postage and handling. The soft-bound copies at \$10.00 must have also an added \$1.00 for postage and handling. Send orders to: Grant Reynard Book, Baldwin-Wallace College, Berea, Ohio 44017.

Grant Reynard gave the Cather Memorial two originals in oil: "The Blue Hill Blacksmith Shop," and "Crete Mills," and a lithograph of a Nebraska landscape with a dugout nestled in the deep cut draws.

— Mildred R. Bennett

The Nebraska Writers' Guild met in Red Cloud, October 10, for an all day meeting on Cather. Featured speakers were Marion Marsh Brown and Ruth Crone, authors of two books on Willa Cather: **Willa Cather: The Woman and Her**

Works and Only One Point of the Compass: Willa Cather in the Northeast.

Visitors toured the Cather buildings and viewed the John Blake Bergers' Cather paintings. Twenty-six members attended.

The brochures on John Blake Bergers' five available Cather prints have been sent out. If by some chance you did not receive yours, please write us for a copy. The prints are exquisite.

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

Bids have been received for restoration work on the exterior of the Garber Bank Building. The work will include reroofing, cleaning and tuckpointing the brick and stone on the building's west facade.

A landscaping project, which will encompass five Cather Center properties, is in the initial planning stages. Ed Dreier, a horticulturist with the State Historical Society, has completed an initial survey of the properties. Possible future projects include historic landscaping of the Cather House and a wild flower garden at the Grace Episcopal Church.

Lonnie Pierson of Lincoln has recently donated a number of articles, originally belonging to Lyra Garber, to the Cather Center. The articles, given to her by Maurice H. Green, nephew of Mrs. Garber, include several pieces of handwork done by Lyra, a pair of shoes, several beaded purses and three elegant fans.

Work on the Cather archives continues. We are attempting to expand our collection of scholarly articles written about Cather and her works. Copies of such articles or information on their publication may be sent to the Willa Cather Historical Center, 338 North Webster Street, Red Cloud, Nebraska.

— Ann Billesbach, Curator

Patricia Lee Yongue, Cather scholar and professor at the University of Houston, published a two-part article in **Southern Hu-**

manities Review, Volumes XIV, numbers 1 and 2, entitled: "Willa Cather's Aristocrats" which won for her the Hoepfner Prize of 1980. In her work she gives credit to the generous assistance of the Honorable Stephen Tennant, whose friendship with Cather started in 1926 and lasted until her death. Stephen Tennant wrote the Introduction to Cather's book, **On Writing**.

NOMINATION OF WILLA CATHER FOR WOMEN'S HALL OF FAME

Otis Rhea Schmidt of Cedar Falls, Iowa, has nominated Willa Cather for Women's Hall of Fame. This organization continues "to honor in perpetuity those women, citizens of the United States of America, whose contributions to the arts, athletics, business, education, government, the humanities, philanthropy and science have been of greatest value for the development of their country."

Here is Ms. Schmidt's nomination:

Nomination of Willa Cather for Women's Hall of Fame

Willa Cather created the first truly independent women in American literature. As historian of the prairie and the pioneer, she brought life to the frontier experience, illuminating it with the creative skills of the true artist.

Many of her novels portray women. Notable among them are **O Pioneers!**, **The Song of the Lark**, and **My Antonia**, which show women as strong people who struggle and prevail in a world of pettiness, a society of materialism. These novels depict the prairie and its particular appeal and challenge to the pioneer.

In the imaginative form of the novel, Willa Cather explored the pioneer in a distinctive way — as a woman. In these three early works, she created Alexandra Bergson, the builder, in **O Pioneers!**; Thea Kronborg, the artist, in **The Song of the Lark**; and Antonia Shimer-

da, the life-giver, in **My Antonia**. These portrayals vitalize the historical collection of facts about the American frontier experience.

The stories of these women who strive for perfection — whether taming the land, achieving excellence in art, or creating a rich family life — heighten appreciation of the pioneer in America. Although the pioneer was not a new subject in the history and literature of America, that pioneer was usually a man. Frederick Jackson Turner, historian of the prairie, wrote that "a valuable study might be made of the pioneer woman and her place in history." Cather did that in her fiction.

Cather's frontier constitutes an authentic and permanent record of the past; her characters constitute an early recognition of women as important, significant people.

Willa Cather deserves recognition among American women by being placed in the Women's Hall of Fame.

Yehudi Menuhin: "She had the strength of the American soil which she loved so much and understood so well."

— Submitted by Otis Rhea Schmidt
August 24, 1981

Those who wish to support Willa Cather for this honor, please write:

Women's Hall of Fame, Inc.

P.O. Box 335

Seneca Falls, New York 13148

Otis Rhea Schmidt writes: "You may also be interested in **Music for Chameleons**, a recently published book by Truman Capote in which he mentions meeting Cather in New York City when he was eighteen. He writes that she is the person 'who has most impressed me' and continues the description on pages 253-256."

Comment on Truman Capote's admiration for Willa Cather also comes from Japanese Cather scholar, Harue Tawarada, now in Singapore.

Liz Tilberis, fashion editor of **British Vogue** magazine, called

from London, England, to say the seventeen page section photographed in Cather Country last June will run in the January, 1982 edition.

CARNEGIE HALL IN PITTSBURGH?

A question from one of our Cather readers came in the recent mail. Why hasn't someone asked it before? Why, in "Paul's Case" did Cather put Carnegie Hall in Pittsburgh?

The facts are: Andrew Carnegie was the biggest influence in Pittsburgh, and in 1896 gave money for a number of cultural buildings and projects. Among these was a music hall, known in Cather's journalistic writings at the time as Carnegie Music Hall.

Carnegie also gave an art gallery, and doesn't Paul wander through that gallery before he gets into his usher's uniform?

Carnegie organized his Corporation for giving money to New York in 1911.

As Dorothy Canfield Fisher emphasized several times, Pittsburgh, then, loomed larger as a cultural center than New York.

A. K. Khare, Ph.D., head of the Department of English of C. M. D. Post-Graduate College, affiliated to R. S. University, Raipur, India, has sent the Cather Memorial a copy of his Ph.D. thesis, "A Study of the Themes in the Novels and Short Stories of Willa Cather." He wrote his thesis for Ravishankar University, Raipur (M. P.) India.

The Cather Memorial thanks all those scholars, world-wide, who have shared and will share their studies with us. Others visiting here will benefit from your work and your generosity. Dr. Khare's dissertation proves once more the universal appeal of Willa Cather.

At present Dr. Khare works with the American Studies Research Centre, Hyderabad 500 007, A.P. India.



"NEBRASKA"

TO MILDRED Z. BENNETT

Samuel Reynolds

Please Remember to Renew Your Membership.

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1982 SPRING CONFERENCE

Madame Lo-Chi Chang of Shanghai, The Peoples' Republic of China, has accepted our invitation to be our featured guest at the Cather Spring Conference, May 1, 1982. The topic for discussion will be "Cather and the Orient." Make plans now to attend.

Susan Weber, one of those who attended the Cather seminar last June, writes the Dorchester Library Column for the **Crete News**. Since her immersion in Cather's world, she has started introducing her readers to Cather information. Follow her example in letting your enthusiasm for Cather's work bubble over into your daily life. Not only you, but those you meet, will find their lives enriched.

Jim Davis, representative of the television show **Country Day** visited Webster County in October to prepare a five-minute show on Willa Cather to be broadcast from St. Paul, Minnesota.

YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AND GROWTH OF THE ORGANIZATION

- By being a Cather Memorial Member and financial contributor:

BENEFACTOR	\$1,000.00 and over
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIPS	
Patron	\$100.00
Sustaining	25.00
Family	15.00
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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 REQUESTS 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.

Newsletter Contribution Only \$5.00
(not a membership)

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