

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

Author's Note: In writing this narrative, I have used actual letters and documents and numerous newspapers, and for the most part actual incidents. If, at times, I have entered a character's mind, I have tried not to violate the spirit nor personality of the characters involved. For special help in remaining true to facts, I spent many hours with Elsie Margaret Cather, sister of Willa Cather; Blanche Cather Ray, daughter of George Cather; George Ray, grandson of George Cather; Jennie Miner Reiher, great granddaughter of William Cather; Bessie Love Massie, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Love and corresponded with William Hudgins, son of Mary Love Hudgins; Mrs. T. Russell Cather for help in finding historic Winchester places; to Mr. Eddy of the Handley Library staff and to Mr. Grubb of the George Washington Headquarters Office of Winchester, Virginia. The story of the dog breaking his chain and running after the Cather family comes from *Willa Cather Living* by Edith Lewis.

The purpose of this sketch is to give an idea of the rich background of Cather's first nine years. Elsie Cather told me that the stories of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* were family stories told to all the children, but to Willa they meant something more.

Mildred R. Bennett

WILLA CATHER'S VIRGINIA 1873-1883

The first authentic information we have about the world into which Willa Cather was born appears in a letter from her father, Charles Cather, to his brother, George, in Nebraska:

January 22, 1874

Dear Brother and Sister:

Yours of December 24 and 25th was received by due mail. As nothing of particular importance has happened since that time we have delayed writing. We have just been treated to a slice of cold weather; the first of the season — last week we had three of our coldest days so far. The thermometer stood at 10 above zero, which is not near so cold as last winter. It is now quite pleasant again; the ground is not frozen at all.

We filled our ice house during the freeze; so we will be contented if we have no more cold weather. Jennie and I were at town today. Jennie went to have a tooth drawn, the first time she has been out. We left the baby at home with its grandma. [Grandmother Boak] She said it did not cry once while we were gone. She grows very fast, and is just as good as she is pretty. She is not old enough yet to have that picture taken.

We call her Willie after our little sister . . .

The Virginia into which Willa Cather was born still rankled with resentment and hatreds of the War Between the States. Grandfather William was the only one of the Cather family who had (with his children) supported the Union cause. William's father, James, supported the South. He had



Willow Shade, Back Creek, Virginia

— Photo Courtesy of Nebr. State Historical Society

said, after the war, that he would never vote again. "Voting has become too promiscuous."

When George Cather told his grandfather, James, that he was moving to Nebraska (a black Republican state) James muttered that it was not quite far enough away. After the war William was named deputy sheriff of Frederick County and his two sons served with him. Everyone liked easy-going, amiable Charles, but others resented George's blunt decisions. The southern sympathizers of the family rejoiced to see him go west.

Charles and Jennie had weathered the fact that they were on opposing sides during the war. Jennie had four brothers in the Southern Army, and the youngest, Clarence, a boy of fourteen had been caught taking messages to his brothers, and had been sent north to prison. He had come home old, broken in health, had gone to the deep South and was living with some of Jennie's cousins — the beautiful French Severina Seibert who was a Catholic and who sent Jennie crocks of molasses and sugar. (See "The Dance at Chevalier's" for Cather's use of the French Severine.) Brother Willie had died of wounds at Manassas, and was buried in a common grave somewhere under the scarred pine trees.

The break-up in society and economics led many Virginians to seek new land in the West. John Cather (William's brother) went to Missouri, William planned to visit Nebraska. John Smith also left for Nebraska.

John Smith was to marry Alfretta (Charles' sister). Her twin sister, Alverna, already widowed, had brought her son, Kyd Clutter, home to Willow Shade. Alfretta, invalided during the war by tuberculosis of the leg, had gone through an amputation by a Union doctor — without anesthetic. That the girl still lived was a miracle. She sat by the upstairs window and

waited for John. In Nebraska, the air would make her well. He was staying with George and Franc until he could stake out a claim for himself and Retta.

Lung trouble ran rampant during and after the Civil War. William's brother, Perry, had died of it at twenty-two. Brother Clark had lived a little longer. Brother John went to Missouri to seek recovery and Brother Howard spit blood. William believed that the dry air and long days of sunshine and great blue sky of the middle west could effect a cure. William thought the damp climate of the valley dangerous. He regretted he had built Willow Shade at the foot of the hills, where the dew lay heavy in the thick grass until past noon, and where the running spring water in the cave back of the basement kitchen became not a symbol of life, but of death.

That spring with its brick wall and the center where a pot might be placed to keep foods cool, was a great boon and William had planned it so. But he had not foreseen the dampness that clung like a gray fleece over the brick walls, a dampness that even the brightest flames in the many fireplaces failed to dispel.

Meanwhile Caroline (Willa's grandmother) went about the neighborhood caring for the delivery of babies and the otherwise ailing. Grandmother Boak performed the same mercies for those farther along the road to Romney. But in April Grandmother Cather went to Langollen, the country estate where Caroline's youngest daughter lived. She later wrote to Franc (George's wife) of the trip:

Willow Shade, May the 5th

Dear Daughter:

I hope you will pardon me for not answering your letter sooner. I assure you it is not want of love or interest for either you or George that has kept me from writing. I had Will _____'s family to wait on about three weeks and George knows what they are. Then I was over with Jennie over two weeks. She has a daughter, was born the tenth of April. [This child grew up to be the mother of Jennie Miner Reiher, Charter Board Member.] She was quite poorly most of the time I was with her, was mending when I left.

I was sorry I was not at home when John Smith left. Hope you will not feel insulted at the spread and blanket I sent you, only sent them to save you a letter. Once I told the girls if you named anything in your letters to get your Father to get it and send it by John if I did not get home before he started. They say you did not name anything. Think it strange you did not have some want. I didn't wish to send you anything you don't need. Know you have a great many things now that you have no use for until you get more house room.

Think George ought to build a small house this summer, one large enough for a kitchen. I fear your dugout will be damp in rainy weather. Want George to write me what it will cost to build a small house in a plain manner just so it is comfortable. I will see if his Father can help him to do it. I was very anxious for him to help to buy more land but it has not been

Noted Author, Editor Virginia Faulkner Dies

Virginia Faulkner, noted author and former English professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, died September 15, 1980, at age 67.

Ms. Faulkner, who died of natural causes at her Lincoln home, was editor-in-chief of the University of Nebraska Press from 1959 to 1979. She also was professor of English until her retirement last June.

Recognized as a noted Willa Cather scholar and co-editor of "The Art of Willa Cather," she was given an award for outstanding research and scholarship during the 24th Annual Cather Spring Conference in May 1979.

Ms. Faulkner was an active member of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation's Board of Governors for more than twenty years.

Services were held September 17 in Lincoln.

convenient for him to do it yet. But I have come to the conclusion it will be better for you to make yourselves comfortable on what land you have got than to buy more and kill yourselves trying to pay for it or run the risk of losing all.

I will show this to your Father and see what he thinks of it. I know he will do all he can for his children if he sees they are trying to do for themselves and we are both encouraged with your and George's efforts. Hope you will succeed in every good undertaking and not undertake anything wrong or that you can't ask the blessing of the Lord upon. Hope the day is not far distant when we will both see you both in your new home comfortably fixed.

I showed what I had written to your Father and he said it was all right. Do hope John got out and I know you were more than glad to see him. Tell him to write to me and tell the whole truth about your state — not just the good side leaving the bad out. I was real glad A_____ and J_____ did not call on you. You can afford to lose the gloves and suit. It is better than being bothered with them. Hope George and you will not be too free to invite everybody that's going west to come and stay with you. It will wear your life out waiting on them and be neither credit nor profit to you.

I am real glad John went out. Hope he will settle near you but you had better run the risk of strangers than have acquaintances that are not the right stripe settle around you. Never be too quick to take up with strangers.

Hope George will hire his well dug as he is not acquainted with such work. Tell him not to be too hard on himself. He can't stand everything. How are your chickens getting along? I have but twenty and it rains every day and I have to keep them up nearly all the time.

Antonia's Son Dies

Emil Pavelka, Jan of Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia*, passed away October 4, 1980. The Cather Foundation will sorely miss his enthusiastic support.

Emil gave graciously of his time to those interested in Cather. Visiting students and scholars interviewed him about his mother, Annie Pavelka, and Miss Cather.

Rettie is about as well as when John left. The rest of us are well. All join me in love to you both and John too. Tell John I am sorry I did not get to put him up a lunch.

God bless you!

By the light of Grandmother Smith's lamp, Caroline could read the Winchester news. The family joke was that a neighbor had brought the lovely white porcelain lamp with pink roses all the way from Baltimore for Grandmother Smith, who was totally blind.

The Winchester news told of cholera among the hogs and chickens. Too much rain. Many who had gone west to settle were returning, disillusioned with the West. Winchester had industries for employment, even five glove factories. When George's bride, Frances (Franc) Smith, had finished teaching at the Female Seminary in Winchester the spring before, the board members hadn't enough money to pay her wages, and they had given her gloves as part payment, dozens of white gloves which she took to the prairie. (The neighbors thought she was most strange to have those gloves.)

William Cather, for all that he was a Union man, was the only one capable and willing to see to the education of the young people of his community. He gathered them all in his house and found a teacher for them, and he sent some of the older ones to Baltimore for advanced work. Mary Virginia Boak, Charles' wife, had been one of them.

Jennie Cather (Charles' sister) had been too young to send away, but she had attended the Female Seminary in Winchester and had brought home Frances Smith (now George's wife). Jennie had insisted on going down to the Seminary to register when she was seventeen, the day before her eighteenth birthday, and so Jennie had stayed seventeen on the school records. (One is reminded of Willa's own many changes of birth date.)

George no doubt sent newspapers from Nebraska. His mother read that a little girl was recovering from her lung disease in Webster County and that there was no danger from Indians. The same page said that General Sheridan had been ordered west to take measures against the Sioux. However, the paper reassured "There are no hostile Indians in Nebraska. All this talk is just a scare to have the war department continue a large force in Omaha. Confusion arises over the two names **Red Cloud Agency** and **Red Cloud**."

The Webster County paper also said there were 2500 people in the county and every day wagon trains went through. The west lured the Cather grandparents.

That autumn Caroline had to write to John Smith that Retta would never live to go west. John arrived home in time to spend one day with Retta before her death. He lingered a day after the funeral to talk with Retta's parents.

They wanted to know about the new land. John told them George had settled on the **divide**, the high plain between the Little Blue and the Republican Rivers. He had chosen that site on the advice of Caroline's brother, Dr. Joe Smith, who had settled in Iowa. George and Franc had fine level land, but taming it wasn't easy. Sudden prairie fires flared. Tornadoes struck. Water was lacking. They had sometimes carried water sixteen miles in an old lard barrel, and then in a coal oil barrel. But this year (1874) in July, when the crops were at their best, with corn seven feet high and early potatoes as big as a man's fist, the grasshoppers had come. They had eaten everything — the fruit of wild plums, the wild green grapes along the river, the onions out of the earth. Wherever any harvested grain had been left uncovered, that too had been devoured. Fortunately, George had his wheat well protected.

The Governor of Nebraska, a man named Silas Garber, whose home was in Red Cloud, the county seat of Webster County, had written letters authorizing men to collect funds to help the hungry and disaster-struck people.

The fall of 1874 brought William and Caroline Cather by train to Nebraska. From the railway station they journeyed by wagon across the Little Blue and west to the divide where George and Franc had built an extra dugout to make room for them.

All day long the wind blew. At night the coyotes howled and the cries echoed through the low dwelling. The first week in November turned cold. The thermometer read ten above zero. But the cold was dry, not humid.

Franc had started teaching in a little sod schoolhouse six and a half miles east. The term lasted only three months, but the scant wages would help them through that dark grasshopper autumn.

During that winter William Cather packed a small black suitcase and walked all over Kansas checking out the prairie and deciding where might be the best place to settle. During his absence Caroline kept the dugout and helped wherever she could. One day the two women were buttering fresh loaves of bread when the door opened and in walked a tall Indian, followed by another brave. The Indian took a loaf of bread, stooped to go through the dugout door, and disappeared. After that so long as they were in the neighborhood, the Pawnees dropped in without warning and helped themselves. The tall Indian was a Chief and he liked to sit down in the homemade chair and wait for the women to make him coffee. He would put the full cup on the floor and his arm was so long he could reach the cup and bring it up to his lips without any movement of his straight back.

Christmas and New Year came. William wrote from Kansas that he didn't know when he would be back. Charles wrote from Virginia that William had been elected judge of elections at Pughtown. (Mentioned in Cather's "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" but spelled "Pewtown.")

The last of August, 1875, William received a letter from his father, James Cather, telling him that his brother, John, in Missouri, a widower, had died leaving four small orphans. He asked William to come home by way of Missouri and bring the children so that he (James) could make a home for them.

On the first day of September, 1875, William and Caroline with four tired and lonely children, arrived in Winchester, Virginia. William's brother, Howard, met them. James Cather had died that morning. William and Howard must arrange for the children.

Caring for orphans was no new experience for the Cather brothers. After the war the childless Howard and his wife, Millicent, had brought up eleven orphans. They now took two of John's children. William took one, Clark, and the other went to Aunt Sidney Gore, William's sister.

Ann Howard Cather, William's mother and the widow of James, had lost much — her first born, Perry, baby Amanda, then Clark and John and now her husband. At the funeral old

enmities over the war showed in the way some of the kinfolk shunned William and Caroline, refusing to come back to the Flint Ridge home where Ann Howard Cather now lived alone. William and Caroline stayed on with his mother during the warm autumn days. Caroline kept a little basket of maple sugar by the kitchen door for the grandchildren — Kyd Clutter and sometimes two-year old Willa and her parents.

Ann Howard Cather had a deep sense of the long past. She could not remember Ireland, but she had heard that her parents had fled during civil strife — a strange pair, her parents. Father had been a Catholic and mother a Presbyterian. They had landed in the United States the day of George Washington's funeral. Her brother, Anthony, had pirated with LaFitte at New Orleans. This land where she now lived, had once belong to Lord Fairfax — dead more than fifteen years before she had been born. She had been fourteen when the war of 1812 swept the valley.

(To Be Continued)

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- 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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