

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial

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Edited by Bernice Slote
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This literary issue of the Newsletter begins a series of copyrighted publications which twice a year will present new Willa Cather material: reprints of some of Cather's early, hard-to-find, and still uncollected journalistic writings; early reviews, interviews, and notes about Cather's work; bibliographical information; and—from Cather readers—original brief notes, observations, explications, or short critical articles. (Submit manuscripts to CATHER NEWSLETTER, 201 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508.) We hope that all views—past and present—will add to your delight and understanding in the study of Willa Cather's life and art.

. . . In This Issue . . .

☆ Willa Cather Reviews a Bad Western

This review of *THE LATIMERS* is printed exactly as it appeared in Willa Cather's "Books and Magazines" column in the *PITTSBURG LEADER*. A similar but very brief note appeared in her book column in the *HOME MONTHLY* for January, 1898. Especially significant are her comments on Cooper and the West.

☆ "Great Forking Trees"

After fifty years, Nebraska has heeded Willa Cather's argument for the cottonwood (quoted here from a 1921 interview) by making it the official state tree.

☆ *O PIONEERS!*: An Early Nebraska Review

As she told friends when *O PIONEERS!* was published in 1913, Willa Cather was especially happy when her home folks in the midwest liked the book. One of the most perceptive of all the reviews of *O PIONEERS!* was this one by Lincolnite Celia Harris.

Bernice Slote

WILLA CATHER REVIEWS A BAD WESTERN

From the *PITTSBURG LEADER*, November 26, 1897, p. 4. Unsigned.

"*THE LATIMERS*." Henry Christopher McCook. \$1.50. Philadelphia: Geo. W. Jacobs & Co. Pittsburg: J. R. Weldin & Co.

A tale of the whisky insurrection of 1794. The book has received most complimentary notices throughout the western part of the state, probably because of its strong local interest, most of the scenes being laid in and around Pittsburg. The historical data seem to have been carefully worked up and among the characters are many historical personages: Major McFarlan, of Washington, who fell in the attack upon General Ne-



"Cottonwoods . . . wind-loving trees of the desert, whose roots are always seeking water and whose leaves are always talking about it, making the sound of rain." *THE SONG OF THE LARK*. 46

ville's house; David Bradford, the chief plotter, who afterward fled and deserted the cause; General Neville, Hugh Brackenridge, General Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Justice Yates and numerous others.

But it is necessary to consider this book not merely as a collection of historical data, but as a novel, for such it purports to be. In the first place, the book is one of almost unpardonable length. Certainly few people in this generation have leisure to read a volume of 593 pages, and the surprising fact is that anyone should have had leisure or patience to write it. The man who writes a book of that length must either have a great deal to say, or he must have very little and be wonderfully inexpert at saying that little. This ponderous tome is as long as "*Les Miserables*" or the "*Count of Monte Christo*," and it is safe to state that the author had very much less to relate than either Hugo or Dumas. By omitting the interminable conversations which are written in a rather uncertain dialect and never happen to advance the story, and cutting out the irrelevant episodes, the story might have been written in almost half the number of pages it now fills.

The preface states that in the preparation of the book, "local histories have been read, papers, manuscripts, pamphlets, church and county records have been examined. The scenery described has been personally visited, photographed and sketched, and topographical plots and maps have been copied. The flora and fauna and weather conditions have been carefully noted."

That is just exactly what Mr. McCook has done: he has taken the flora and fauna and weather of Western Pennsylvania and a few vague historical personages and made a novel of them, carefully written all he knew or was able to find out about them, quite regardless of the story he professed to tell. He goes on and on from chapter to chapter with the prolixity and naive circumlocution of Herodotus, but there, unfortunately, the comparison ends.

Cooper, too, habitually floundered his readers in a bewildering sea of verbiage, and demanded 500 pages to say what might have been told in 200, but when his 500 pages were finished, he had told you something worth while. He had given you living images and adventures that stirred your blood; he had not put you off with flora and fauna and the weather. It took him a long while to get worked up to his theme, but when he did, he was wholly master of it. He had to load his gun by piecemeal, as the old frontiersmen loaded their clumsy muskets, but when it went off it was with an explosion of heavy artillery. Whatever may be said of his faults, one thing he indisputably had—the epic genius. He placed his redskins and scouts in the glittering house of the immortals. Strange and uncouth figures they make among those splendid Hectors and Agamemnons and King Arthurs and superb Lucifers, but they are there by right of rugged masculine genius that created them.

"The Latimers" also is a tale which aspires to an epic character, a tale of Indian warfare which purports to represent the fierce, strenuous life in this valley a century ago. But alas! the author is so occupied with fauna and flora that his characters are secondary considerations, and those hearts that throbbed and ached then have no echoing pulse in his pages. His story is trite and his manner of telling it hopelessly amateurish. Novel writing is a craft after all, and one may write five, ay, ten hundred pages and yet not make a novel.

The dramatis personae of "The Latimers" are the stock characters of mediocre Indian tales of the "Wild Western Scenes" order. There is the girl who was stolen by Indians in her infancy and who returns to the bosom of her family and converses on the "Great Spirit" and says: "Me no 'fraid." There is the long-lost son who finally discovers his rightful father and this long-lost son, to his shame be it, even has the conventional birthmark. The credulous parent, upon seeing the strawberry mark, immediately cries after the manner of such parents, "It is, it is me long-lost son!"

The manner of expression throughout is hopelessly antiquated. When the brother embraces his sister he addresses her seriously as "fair maid" and it never occurs to her to call him a cad. The hero throughout is spoken of as "the youth." Dear me! how many revolutions in thought and manners and art lie between us and the time when novelists dared unblushingly to write of their heroes as "youths."

"GREAT FORKING TREES"

From "Miss Cather in Lincoln," an interview in the LINCOLN STATE JOURNAL, November 2, 1921, p. 7.

Miss Cather is particularly interested in saving the cottonwoods planted by the pioneers out in the

state. "The pioneers feel that the cottonwoods are bound up with their lives," said Miss Cather. "Yet everywhere the tall rugged trees are being cut down. Cottonwoods are out of date. The soft maple is the thing. I gave a talk at Hastings not long ago and made a plea for the preservation of the native trees. You should have seen the number of old people who stayed to talk to me and all spoke of how it hurt when one of the big trees they loved was felled.

"A flat country like Nebraska needs great forking trees like cottonwood or poplar. The poplar gets winter killed in Nebraska but it also does that in Lombardy. The cottonwood is the only tree of beautiful form that grows easily and naturally in the state without any care. Farmers say the cottonwood draws moisture from the fields. I am not asking them to plant more, but to let stand those great trees that are dear to the pioneers. Their faculty of drawing moisture makes the cottonwood needed in low places along the roads to take up water which would otherwise form a slough. On high barren pasture land, where nothing else will grow, the cottonwood will thrive. Just as great indifference is shown to the groves of ash and native elms. The farmers will not take the trouble to thin them. The soft maples which have been planted in many districts to replace the hardier trees, live at the most only about thirty-five years.

"The French people appreciate the beauty of the cottonwood. Great rows are seen along the Seine in Paris. They are of the cotton-bearing variety, too, and in the spring all Paris is a-flutter with cotton and no one seems to mind. The spreading roots of these trees draw up the too great moisture along the river banks."

O PIONEERS! . . .

. . . An Early Nebraska Review

From the Lincoln SUNDAY STATE JOURNAL, August 3, 1913, p. A-7.

Early last fall a story by Willa Cather in McClure's MAGAZINE startled a good many of us into remembering that there are other ways of looking at the west than the slangily humorous, the obviously picturesque or the drearily realistic ways of prevalent fiction. "The Bohemian Girl" was a story of the prosperous Scandinavians and Bohemians of our rich Nebraska farm country of today, now that the older generation has conquered the prairie and the younger generation has leisure to be temperamental. It was a rare, troubling, important story, for while it was warmly appreciative of its own middle-western soil, it was at the same time reflective of the intellectual and poetic influences of northern Europe. One saw Nebraska under a brilliantly quivering, modern light. Miss Cather's Swedes and Czechs, for all their Americanism, sent one across the sea to their melancholy or complacent or passionate brothers in European literature. Her style, like her Nebraskans, was both American and European.

The effect was beautiful but disturbing. One wondered just where "The Bohemian Girl" would lead Miss Cather. For after all, in interpreting America, even a European neighborhood in America, it would be a bad thing to let oneself be possessed by a European mood. It was evident that this was a transition story. She

had not only found a new vein of material but in developing it she was showing a surer sense of life than she had shown before. "The Bohemian Girl" had all of her old stylistic brilliancy, her old sympathy with intellectual rebels and appreciation of human exotics; but in addition it had a new sympathy with the simpler types of human character and a feeling for productive land that is more usual in older countries than in the United States where apple orchards are given away as subscription premiums. Miss Cather has sometimes seemed hampered by an inclination to write of people who have what we rather sweepingly call the artistic temperament. She has always had a directness of outlook and an intellectual vitality which would seem to demand a wider human field. Of the younger writers she has been one of the few who have allowed themselves to produce slowly and to keep their artistic seriousness. And in "The Bohemian Girl" there were unmistakable signs that she was casting off those shackles of temperament which have kept her from coming into her own high place.

O PIONEERS! Miss Cather's new novel of the Nebraska prairie, is an answer to most of the speculations which "The Bohemian Girl" aroused. She is in no danger of exoticism. The book is so deeply, unaffectedly American in style and inspiration that it may disappoint some of Miss Cather's readers by its very simplicity. It stirred me like a trumpet call.

It is a story of the taming of the prairie by the Nebraska pioneers. It tells of the courage and endurance and faith which struggled with a hostile waste, held to it, believed in it and changed it into the smiling, benignant mother land that it is today. In O PIONEERS! the prairie is given an energy of its own. At first it resists man savagely; then it tries his faith; then it yields to him; then it blesses him. Through all the circumstances of the story one is conscious of the prairie; of the frozen ridges of winters; of the fresh brown furrow of spring; the rabbits that bob across it; the forces that wait under it.

The book produces an extraordinary effect of reality. It is at once homely and beautiful and strange. Its characters seem in true relation not only with their own prairie soil and sky but with those older home soils from which they originally came. There are many people in the book, and they are all drawn with comprehending tenderness. Miss Cather has stripped her style of cleverness, and has found a new warm simplicity of phrase.

The story begins in the early eighties on the Nebraska divide near the West Blue. John Bergson, a Swedish pioneer, is about to die, just as he has paid off the last of the mortgages on his homestead after eleven years of mischance. He has a wife and two well-grown sons, but he places the family under the leadership of his daughter, Alexandra, a girl of twenty. They have six hundred and forty acres of land and a log house. Their neighbors are foreign Americans like themselves—Swedes, Germans, Bohemians—nearly all unused to farming. Everybody is living roughly and toiling harder than people should.

Through the next ten years of struggle with prairie cold and prairie drouth and the tough prairie sod—those years which are so recent and sharp a chapter

of the state's history that even now in the days of our prosperity there are a good many Nebraskans who do not like to look back and read it—through all that time of crop failure and bank panic, the tall, strong, steadfast girl, Alexandra Bergson, stands out as an embodiment of the pioneer faith that made Nebraska. When the disheartened are leaving the state by trainloads she mortgages the farm and buys more land. She could no more have run away from the prairie than her Viking ancestors could have run away from the sea. She sells the live stock and buys more land. She puts every dollar she can save or borrow into land. She does not work any harder than her neighbors—not half so hard, perhaps, as her plodding brother Oscar or her feverish, discontented brother Lou, but she has intelligence and faith. And so it is due to her that when the lean years are over the Bergson holdings are the richest in that part of the state and that the youngest brother, Emil, can go to the university at Lincoln and wear becoming tennis clothes and have leisure to taste the bitterest happiness and the most destructive pain.

Alexandra's youth is singularly unselfconscious. It is very sensible and cheerful and very lonely. Her one friend, Carl Linstrum, a sensitive, gentle German boy, moves away at the time when all the conquerable folks are fleeing. She is occupied most of the time with housework and stock reports and borrowing money from banks, but her nature grows steadily richer. She is like the prairie. She cannot be spoiled by the machinery of life. Prosperity only makes her golden.

When she is forty she lives in a big white house on the old homestead site. Her mother is dead. Oscar and Lou are married and on farms of their own. Emil is fresh from the university; he is having a full chance, Alexandra has seen to that. He can take his time and follow an unhampered career. She is glad to think that all of her work and Oscar's and Lou's have resulted in such a splendid well-mannered boy. Alexandra is a great farmer. She is also a beautiful woman. But she has no idea how wonderful she is. No one knows that but Carl Linstrum, who has come back from New York, sensitive and self-depreciatory as ever, to visit his old playmate. She has almost no consciousness of sex—or rather it lies so deep that it has never been stirred. It is never stirred in the book except in a strange, recurring dream which she does not understand.

She drives from one of her farms to another, managing them all. She sits at the head of her table with her farm hands and listens to their frank disapproval of her silo. She stands up for her rights against Oscar and Lou who are jealous of her superiority. Once a year she has for a visitor, Mrs. Lee, Lou's mother-in-law, a jolly old Swedish philosopher who likes to stay with Alexandra because she can have a toddy at bedtime, sleep with all her windows shut and run about the barns in Emil's boots. For friendship Alexandra has her neighbor, sulky Frank Shabata's gay-hearted young wife, Marie, whose brown eyes have dancing points of yellow light "like the yellow bubbles which rise in a glass of champagne."

So unconscious is Alexandra of human passion that she lets Emil and Marie Shabata walk into what in the yellow newspapers is the commonest and most

melodramatic of human tragedies. As Miss Cather tells it, it is the song of tragic youth.

Alexandra's own story moves quietly; it is merely part of the history of the evolving race. She marries Carl Linstrum without knowing that she does not love him and probably journeys with him to serene old age without once finding it out. She is a great relief in an age that is obsessed by the idea of sex. Her deepest, most personal experiences have been what others would call impersonal. Her struggle has been with the natural forces of a new, unbroken country. She has become part of the prairie. In comparison with pulsating Marie Shabata, sullen Frank, introspective Carl and all the other astonishingly vivid folk of this life-like book she seems like a great, calm, kindly, elemental fact. She could not possibly be dramatized. She creates her impression by triumph of actual existence, by character and that individual coloring which the inner life gives to a personality. She is infinitely restful, infinitely mysterious and infinitely lonely.

It is curious that in this almost passionately American book which takes its title from the most exaltantly American of poets, there are, as I remember it, just three characters whom one could even remotely suspect of being of native stock. One is Fuller, a real estate agent, who does not even have a speaking part; an-

other is a little drummer who once meets Alexandra on the street and exclaims, "My God, girl, what a head of hair!" The third is a pale young penitentiary convict named Bertie. In Miss Cather's melting pot there are Swedes, Norwegians, Germans and French but there is no sign that native Americans played any personal part in the lives of these pioneers from the old world. Now, Nebraska lands were first taken up in large part by union soldiers released from the civil war, and by enterprising young men from the eastern states; the foreign immigrants came later. And I can not help thinking that in a community where people of many nationalities were neighboring so naturally, where Swedes were going to French Catholic fairs, and Bohemians were telling Russian fortunes and being buried in Norwegian cemeteries—in such a neighborhood, which can be found only in a new, wonderful, forward moving country, I am sure there were a few friendly American farmers rubbing shoulders with the rest. I wish that Miss Cather had put one or two of these into O PIONEERS! For the book breathes of Nebraska. It is impossible to take it as an isolated story. And I am jealous of the fact that the native Americans have not a single significant representative.

Celia Harris

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AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To secure the bonding, insurance and housing of a permanent art, literary and historical collection relating to the life, time and work of Willa Cather.
- To identify and restore to their original condition, places made famous by the writings of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial in the form of art and literary scholarships.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.



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