

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

## CATHERLAND REVISITED: PRAIRIE MAY DAY

By Herb Hyde

May Day was a Don "Bring on the Wind" Welch day in Red Cloud. Although wind velocity probably was not quite up to the Kearney poet's standards, it more than met mine because there was a chill edge to the south breeze, enough to make one uncomfortable in the shade. Even so, the weather was beautiful, just as I'm told it always is on Willa Cather Spring Conference day in Red Cloud. That's because Vi Borton, the hostess with absolutely the mostest when it comes to Cather conferences, arranges it that way. Every year.

I knew it was going to be a great day when I sampled the coffee and kolaches at the Cather museum. Anytime you start a day with food like that, you know you're going to be a winner at the end of it. You have to be careful, though, because the museum folks make you feel so much at home that you want to kick off your shoes and stay.

Old Home Week began with celebration of the Eucharist at Grace Episcopal Church with the Rev. Brent Bohlke, for whom No. 1 Daughter was secretary at St. Mark's on the Campus for a couple of years before she graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1976. Not only is he a Cather scholar, he also knows how to spell the name of that county William Faulkner was always writing about. Anyone who can do **that** has got to have plenty on the ball. By the way, Bohlke has another talent: He teaches English at UNL.

This day he treated us to a history of Grace Episcopal. It was ob-

vious that he had done his homework, so the story he told was both informative and fun. The church had fat years and lean, but a great many of the latter; thank God it weathered them because if it had not, you and I wouldn't be able to enjoy some of the most beautiful stained glass to be found anywhere in the world. Nor would Grace's oldest living communicant, Mrs. C. Miner Sherwood (nee Dess Taylor), who worshiped with the Cather family, have been able to commune there on May 1, 1982.

I've mentioned Old Home Week and you probably wonder why. Well, going to Cather conferences at Red Cloud is like staying home in Lincoln as far as seeing familiar faces is concerned. On hand that Saturday were, among others, Ron Hull of the Nebraska ETV Network and Professors Bertrand Schultz and Bernice Slote of UNL. There were other acquaintances, too, including writers Marion Marsh Brown, Ruth Crone and Barbara Tupper. A busload of students came down from York College, and there were folks from all sections of Nebraska, plus Utah, California, Colorado, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Minnesota, Florida, Illinois, Missouri and Kansas. Some of these visitors were in Red Cloud for the first time, others for the umpteenth.

I did not meet Doreen Garrick of Hastings, England, but I'm sure she enjoyed the day's festivities as much as I did. She had been visiting friends in Hastings, Nebraska. On the other hand, I had a marvelous visit with Masaichi Hashiba of Tokyo, who graduated from UCLA in 1940 and teaches English in the College of Humanities and Sciences at Nihon University. He spe-

cializes in Cather and other American writers, including John Steinbeck. Since I'm an Okie by birth, I was able to tell him of Dust Bowl days at first hand; when I mentioned Henry Fonda and the opening of the film version of Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," he noted immediately that Hank is a Nebraska native and was cast perfectly in the role of Tom Joad.

We were joined in our discussion of the film and the Dirty Thirties by Wendy Roberts and Karen Borek of the University of Kansas, both of whom know the film and the Great Plains well. The strongest bond between our nation and the peoples of the Orient, we agreed, is a love of the land as expressed in the works of Cather, Steinbeck "et al." Speaking for myself, I hope that we Americans may yet come to realize that we're all children of Mother Earth and that we are killing our mother day by day. The peoples of the East have recognized her frailty and have been trying to protect her for centuries. On our side of the Pacific, the American Indian always has referred to her as "our mother." Need more be said?

Here I am rambling on and I haven't told you I was late for Mass at St. Juliana Church. That tiny sanctuary was packed when I got there, but a very tall gentleman with white hair opened the door a bit, reshuffled the crowd at the back to make room for one more and invited me in. I was in time to hear the Rev. Frank Leiblinger note in Willa Cather some of the same virtues to be found in St. Joseph, whose feast was being celebrated. One of the things I like about Father Leiblinger is his unpredictability, and he did not disappoint this

day, either. After Mass he introduces his assistant, the Rev. John Hagemann, O.S.B., of Mount Michael Abbey at Elkhorn in roughly this manner: "You may have noticed that this is not Jesus Christ who has been helping me today. He's Father Hagemann, a Benedictine, but he's all right. He's also a follower of Willa." Now there's "my" kind of priest.

One cannot read Cather without encountering prairie flora. That was Kearney State College biology professor Harold Nagel's topic at the 10:30 session. He showed magnificent color slides and shared a bit of his vast knowledge of Great Plains ecology with us. Since he is manager of Willa Cather Memorial Prairie (on the Kansas border south of Red Cloud), he used the occasion to explain some of the problems he is trying to solve with various management techniques. I for one had not realized just how much more there is to taking care of native prairie than merely letting it lie there, but the husbandry is terrifically complex. On display at the Burlington depot was a selection of Nagel's wildflower photographs, with attendant calligraphy by Arthur Pierce, a Nebraskan whose work you may have seen at Sheldon Gallery. If you have not, you have missed beauty in a form of which there is all too little nowadays.

Before lunch (it was not too windy to eat in the park this year), some of us paused to purchase bright-painted weathered shingles from artist Eunice Fritz, who doubles as Webster County superintendent of schools. I wanted them all but settled for a church (long since torn down) and a farm scene set against one of Nebraska's brilliant prairie sunsets; I figured No. 4 Daughter and her mother would like them, and they did. The painter-school administrator dispenses wit, history, philosophy and wisdom with her art; it works wonders for the mind. However, I regret to inform you that the Eunice Fritz mold has been bro-

ken, so don't look for a print. Check out her work when you visit Red Cloud, though, and purchase at least one shingle for each room in the house. If you have a dark closet, put one there, too.

Speaking of paintings, Cather artist John Blake Bergers has a couple of new ones in the bookstore-gift shop-gallery at Red Cloud, both illustrating Cather texts so well that they seem alive when you look at them. One shows the Burlington depot in a night platform scene, the other a section of rolling prairie undulating with native grasses and wildflowers. The latter work reminded me of something I had seen somewhere, and I finally pinned it down in my column of July 12, 1981: "During a recent trip to the Osage, I was amazed by the tremendous variety of wildflowers along the roads, among the blackjacks and on the prairie. There were throw rugs and fence-to-fence carpets of them, for it was early June and high time for them to be about the business of preparing future generation." Except for the blackjacks, Berger's painting shows precisely that.

"The Passing Show" is the title Willa Cather gave her column in the Lincoln papers from 1895 to 1900, and it serves in a titular capacity as well for the conference's annual afternoon panel discussion of a Cather work. This year's novel was "A Lost Lady" and panel members were Bruce Baker, moderator, who teaches English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha; Frederick Manfred, novelist, poet, writer in residence at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion (and unofficial doorkeeper at St. Juliana Catholic Church); Mildred R. Bennett, Cather biographer and chairman of the board of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation; and Helen Stauffer, Mari Sandoz biographer and professor of English at Kearney State College. Their lively and interesting discussion was followed by a lively

and interesting question-and-answer session.

For me, a trip to Red Cloud is not complete without a visit to Cather Prairie, no matter what the season. Sure enough, the first thing I heard when I got out of the car was the song of a meadowlark. That helped considerably to cheer me up, for I was lonesome for No. 2 Daughter, No. 1 Granddaughter and No. 2 Granddaughter, who had flown back to Seattle a few days earlier after a month's visit. The doves were missing this year, but oh what an understudy! As I looked west across the prairie, a bald eagle rode the wind low along a ridge-line, quartering the prairie below, ready to snatch any creature foolish enough to move. About a quarter-mile away it gave up the search, turned heavenward and climbed straight up in tight circles until it disappeared into the blue beyond a cumulus. I learned later in town that two pairs of eagles are nesting along the Republican near Red Cloud.

Wildflowers were blooming on Cather Prairie, among them purple poppy mallows and a tiny white flower which I could not identify but which resembled baby's breath. Quite easy to recognize were the bottles, cans, paper cups and other trash tossed aside by transient bipeds from a species many members of which seem bent on careless destruction of anything and everything, including the human race.

I missed Frederick Manfred's autograph session at the bookstore but was in plenty of time to check out the Hastings Amateur Radio Club's all-day special-events broadcast setup next to the post office. While I was there, hams from Illinois, Minnesota, Colorado and Wisconsin acknowledged the Hastings signal, many of them saying they had read one or another of Willa Cather's works. No doubt there was contact with places even farther away than those I mentioned. Incidentally, don't overlook the post office when you

visit Red Cloud. Inside are murals painted in 1941 by Archie Musick.

Old Home Week continued during the banquet at Red Cloud's elementary school, for the master of ceremonies was none other than President Philip Heckman of Doane College, the campus of which No. 3. Daughter and Big Nose the Doberperson are known to frequent (she is a student and they live across the street from the school). He promised to be brief and was. (My guess is that the aroma of an indescribably delicious meal was getting to him.) Father Bohlke delivered the invocation, Mrs. Bennett officially welcomed us and we enjoyed a leisurely dinner.

No Cather banquet is complete without music. Supplying it this year was soprano Gerilyn Giebler, accompanied by Byrnell Figler, professor of music at Fort Hayes (Kansas) State University. In head-to-head competition, the meadowlark from Cather Prairie would not have had a ghost of a chance against Miss Giebler. She thrilled me clear down to my toes with arias in a voice that was pure tonal sweetness itself. Unfortunately, she finished singing long before I was ready to quit listening.

Frederick Manfred's address was not an address per se but a recital of passages from "A Lost Lady" in which he pointed out the descriptive power of words and phrases. The analysis was highly instructive, adding yet another facet to the day's Cather studies. His choices were powerful examples of the writer's art in evoking a gamut of responses by using carefully chosen words, either singly or in groups. He is no slouch at that himself.

In private conversation I learned that Manfred and former Lincolnite Alan McIntosh, a Minnesota journalist and editorial writer (remember "I Am a Tired American"?) whose column "More or Less Personal" once appeared in the Lincoln Journal, were good friends (?) who disagreed violently on politics

but shared a love of good writing and other things. As you might have guessed, Manfred tried his hand at journalism (Minneapolis Journal), among other things, before settling into a full-time writing career. Americans are the richer because he made that choice.

That's all I have to say about the 1982 Cather gathering. Are you surprised? Well, I'll bet you aren't nearly as surprised as No. 3 Daughter was when I dropped in for a midnight snack on my way back to Lincoln!

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from Gil Savory, Editor  
Lincoln Journal and Star

### **WILLA CATHER: MORE DAWNS THAN SUNSETS**

Willa Cather is perhaps the most deceptive of American writers. Her characters, all flat surfaces and smooth edges at first glance, contain hidden recesses of personality that catch us unawares. Her prose, unadorned and disarmingly direct, conceals a great deal of conscious and complex artistry. Of her Leon Edel has said: "The time will come when she'll be ranked above Hemingway." That time may be almost upon us.

Like the robust folk she wrote about, Willa Cather was herself a pioneer. For, more than any other writer, Cather pushed the geographical center of American literature to the heart of the continent; she stocked American fiction with representatives of the immigrant hordes up to then largely ignored in literature — Norwegians, Swedes, Hungarians, Czechs, Germans, and Mexicans.

Cather's protagonists are simple, generous, rugged, with a vein of flinty hardness. They are people whose slow, dogged struggle with stubborn soil, whose hesitant reaching out for beauty, whose fierce determination to educate their children in the values of an old prairie aristocracy lead from suffering to triumph. Cather's most

memorable characters are survivors. They possess not only the imagination but also the strength necessary to survive.

For Cather, the wilderness — the lush and yet bleak Nebraska prairielands, the huge purplish mass of the Blue Mesa, the carnelian hills and arid yellow deserts of New Mexico and Arizona — is a symbol of the challenge offered to heroic individuals by the uncertainty of human life. The landscape, friendly and hostile, terrible and beautiful, imparts, moreover, a sense of space, an epic grandeur, to Cather's novels. But, however harsh or brutal, it never betrays the hero. The landscape is an eternal and unchanging presence against which he tests his mettle and measures himself.

It is not surprising, then, that one detects Homeric echoes and epic resonances in Willa Cather. Indeed, she may be America's only authentic singer of tales, the one narrative voice devoted to the heroic past of the American continent and its perished beauty. For horse-pasturing Argos and wind-swept Troy, simply substitute "Santo Domingo, breeder of horses; Isleta, whitened with gypsum; Laguna, of wide pastures; and finally, cloud-set Acoma."

Cather's women, on the other hand, are decidedly non-Homeric. For, unlike Andromache, Penelope, and Helen of Troy, Antonia Shimerda and Alexandra Bergson are not the wives or sweethearts of heroes; they are heroes themselves — noble, brave, and resourceful.

Though she may borrow her title **O Pioneers!** from Walt Whitman, Cather avoids his unwieldy dithyrambs and dense metrics. An avowed enemy of the "overfurnished" of the obesely vulgar, of the murky, busy, and brash, she draws passion with clean, quiet strokes, with an economy of words and rhythm of phrase. Her novels have been variously described as refined, fastidious, sly, penetrating, lyrical, and heroic. But what is

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- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
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**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.

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it, finally, that makes Willa Cather so special, that makes us return again and again? Perhaps Carl Van Doren expressed it best when he said that Cather writes "as if human life had more dawns than sunsets in it."

— Robert J. White, Hunter College CUNY (Reprinted with permission from A FEAST OF FAVORITE AUTHORS, 1982, literary catalog published by Cahill & Company)

**GOOD NEWS!!!**

The Second National Willa Cather Seminar will be held June 19-26, 1983 in Hastings, Nebraska. Plan now to attend!

How lyrical and beautiful the Bergers' paintings of Catherland are! Thank you very much for the copy of **Nebraskaland**. I enjoyed and admired it thoroughly. The paintings make me long for the dear land more and more. They make me feel that, since there is so much the paintings can impart to us, there should be more in Catherland which would fascinate us if we ever stand there. I have been tempted to buy some of the Berger prints, but somehow I feel it isn't fair for me to get them without visiting the place myself.

— Harue Tawarada  
 Teacher of English, Singapore

**WILLA CATHER FEATURED IN NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC**

A twenty-three page article in the July issue of **National Geographic** should be of interest to all Cather fans. If you do not subscribe to this publication try your city or school library or inquire at the Foundation office concerning the availability of extra copies of this issue.

Congratulations to Professor William Howarth, Princeton University and Farrell Grehan, photographer, for this fine article.