

# NEWS FROM CATHER COUNTRY



VOLUME 9 ISSUE 1 | SPRING 2020

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Visit us online at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org) to browse our bookstore or sign up for our e-Newsletter.

## Willa Cather Persevered Through a Pandemic; Together We Will Too

As ever, we find inspiration with respect to our current times through the words of one of our nation's foremost writers. On October 18, 1919, Willa Cather wrote Ferris Greenslet, her longtime editor at Houghton Mifflin, "Influenza and moving have consumed a great deal of time, but I expect to begin work on *Claude* this Monday next." Signing herself, as she often did, "Faithfully, W. S. C."

Cather experienced influenza herself and lamented the suffering of those she knew, yet she very much looked forward to resuming work on the novel that became her Pulitzer Prize-winner, *One of Ours*.

Like Cather, we are adapting for the moment while looking optimistically to the future. What we enjoy most about our work is welcoming guests from across the country to the National Willa Cather Center. While the Center and our historic sites are temporarily closed, we remain focused on fulfilling our mission to promote Willa Cather's legacy through education, preservation, and the arts.

We miss seeing visitors explore Willa Cather's world, and we look forward to the day we can gather again. Until then, there are some wonderful things happening online—and more to look forward to—that we thought you would enjoy:

**Celebrating National Poetry Month:** During the month of April, we featured invited authors, poets, actors, artists, musicians, filmmakers, and other luminaries, who helped us to celebrate National Poetry Month by sharing their appreciative readings of Cather's verse. Visit our website for readings by documentary filmmaker Ken Burns; singer/songwriter Rosanne Cash; actress Marg Helgenberger; former United States Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky; and many more.

**Explore Cather's Red Cloud Virtually:** Our virtual tour gives students, teachers, and guests a content-rich, interactive way to experience Willa Cather's Red Cloud—from around the state or the world! Featuring historic photos, audio and video scenes from Cather's work, and interviews with noted Cather scholars, the Virtual Tour walks visitors through four of Red Cloud's most important Cather sites and places these sites in context with Cather's fiction. Begin exploring at [www.virtualcather.org](http://www.virtualcather.org).



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# Willa Cather Persevered Through a Pandemic; Together We Will Too

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**Guided Tours from Home:** Join Rachel Olsen, our education coordinator and tour guide, for “Tuesday Tours” of the Willa Cather Historic Sites. Part I and Part II of the Willa Cather Childhood Home tour are now posted on our YouTube channel. Share your experience using the hashtag #MuseumFromHome while visiting this National Historic Landmark.

**Browse the *Willa Cather Review*:** Over 180 issues of the *Review* are fully and freely accessible at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org). Our unique journal offers original work focused on Cather and

dedicated to the pleasures of her artistry: revealing essays exploring her influences and times, notice of new Cather discoveries and resources, as well as news of our activities in Red Cloud and beyond.

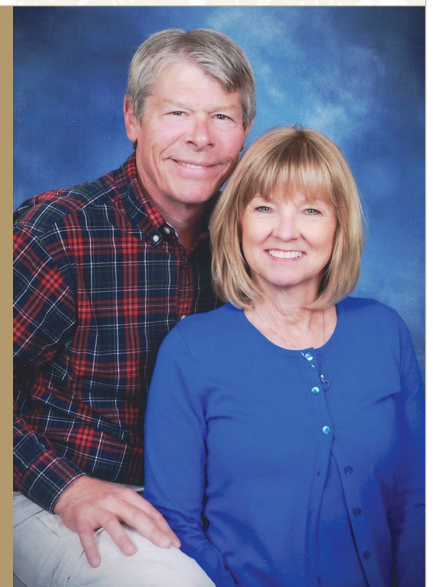
**Show Your Support:** As we work remotely, the National Willa Cather Center continues to deliver educational and inspirational content. You are invited to support the promotion of Cather’s legacy from afar. Making a donation and shopping our online bookstore are both excellent ways to support our mission while social distancing. Visit us at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org).

## Brad and Nancy Sherwood Honor Family Legacy With \$1 million Lead Gift to Current Campaign Initiative



“Great-grandmother Carrie Miner Sherwood was a visionary and a collector. A life-long friend of Willa Cather, she saved Cather’s letters and Cather family artifacts in her attic with the hope there would one day be a place for them. We believe in the mission of the Willa Cather Foundation and want to further this legacy. This campaign preserves the historic sites associated with Cather’s life and in Red Cloud and enables the Foundation to expand its outreach and programming across the country. We hope you’ll join us in supporting it.”

—Brad and Nancy Sherwood  
Lead Donors



Carrie Miner Sherwood, pictured with John G. Neihardt at the dedication of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial in 1962.

A few weeks into the quiet phase of a new campaign, Executive Director Ashley Olson received a phone call that would greatly impact the trajectory of the Willa Cather Foundation and our mission-driven work. On the other end of the line was Brad Sherwood, great-grandson of founding board member Carrie Miner Sherwood, a lifelong friend of Willa Cather. Brad had reviewed the materials he and wife Nancy were provided about our *Campaign for the Future*—an integrated fundraising initiative aimed at achieving the Foundation’s strategic goals of historic site restoration, program expansion, enhanced visitor experiences, and endowment growth. “I’d like to give you a million dollars,” Brad said. He continued, “See what you can do to leverage that.”

Brad and Nancy’s incredible generosity and willingness to make a leadership gift not only honored Carrie Miner Sherwood’s dedication to the Foundation and her long friendship with Willa Cather, but the gift also paved the way for the campaign success that would follow. [Note: the campaign has now raised over \$4.74 million and sits at 73% of goal; see accompanying article.] “The Sherwood gift was a defining moment,” said Executive Director Ashley Olson. “We transitioned from dreaming about what we wanted to do and where we wanted the Foundation to be in five years, to formulating and executing our plans.” She added, “I’m beyond grateful that the Sherwoods shared our vision and were willing and able to make a significant investment in shaping our future.”

## Mrs. Laura Bush and David McCullough Help to Announce Our Campaign for the Future

On January 28, just one year after assuming ownership of six Cather-related historic sites and nearly 8,000 artifacts from History Nebraska, we announced our *Campaign for the Future*. To date, we've raised \$4.74 million, or 73% of our \$6.5 million goal.

Former First Lady of the United States, Mrs. Laura Bush is graciously serving as the Honorary National Chair for the campaign, and she helped to announce the campaign's public phase. Mrs. Bush, who spoke at our dedication of the National Willa Cather Center in 2017, stated, "Through Willa Cather's writing, we have a better understanding of one of the most remarkable and compelling periods in American history." She continued, "The sites and collections that make up the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud are cultural treasures. Your generosity ensures that our children and grandchildren will be able to travel back in time to hear the 'nimble air' and learn from Willa Cather's example for many generations to come."

In addition to Mrs. Bush, writer and historian David McCullough noted, "The marvelous thing about going to Red Cloud, Nebraska, is you can walk right into Willa Cather's world. There's the house she lived in, the bank, the opera house, the railroad depot, and the landscape. It's one of my favorite places in all of America."

"Nebraskans have been very generous because they know we are fortunate to be home to such an iconic author," said Ashley Olson, executive director. "We have had strong support from longtime friends and foundations and now hope to include individuals from across the country who appreciate Cather's literature and value our work."



Mrs. Laura Bush visits the Willa Cather Childhood Home in 2017. Photo courtesy of Shane Booth.



The Pavelka Farmstead, pictured here with a new roof. The improvement was made possible through the support of Sydney Green, Evelyn Funda, Abigail Loomis, and Antonette Turner. We will soon begin work to restore the home to its period of significance (1905-1916).

Campaign funds will be used to restore eight historic properties, conserve newly acquired collection materials, expand educational programming, add exhibits, upgrade site interpretation, and invest in a downtown boutique hotel that will allow visitors to stay longer and explore more of Cather's Red Cloud. Olson said the highest historic site restoration priorities are the Willa Cather Childhood Home and the Pavelka Farmstead, which is a setting in Cather's most celebrated novel, *My Antonia*.

Adding to the success of the campaign is a Save America's Treasures grant of \$415,000 from the National Park Service for restoration of the Willa Cather Childhood Home—the jewel in the crown of the Foundation's historic sites and a National Historic Landmark. The grant requires a 1:1 match in nonfederal funds.

We invite you to join in this exciting endeavor by making a donation or pledge (payable over five years). Each year, the National Willa Cather Center and Red Cloud host visitors from an average of forty-eight states and five counties; your generosity will enable us to enhance programming and visitor experiences for every single one of them. No American author society boasts a larger collection of nationally designated historic sites than the National Willa Cather Center, making this campaign a unique and enduring investment opportunity. Pledge forms are available by contacting Ashley Olson at (402) 746-2653 or [aolson@willacather.org](mailto:aolson@willacather.org). To donate, send your contribution, clearly labeled *Campaign for the Future* to the Willa Cather Foundation, 413 N. Webster, Red Cloud, NE 68970.

## Remembrances of Mildred Bennett Sought

In collaboration with the National Willa Cather Center, author Will Fellows is working to bring forth a publication on the vision, passion, and persistence of our founder, Mildred Rhoads Bennett (1909-1989). Bennett's work to preserve key elements of Willa Cather's early years in Nebraska began in the 1940s, and she had many dedicated collaborators over the decades. One of them, Ron Hull, states in his memoir that Mildred Bennett "could have literally stepped out of a Willa Cather novel. Like some of Cather's heroines, Mildred was a strong, fiercely independent, intelligent woman who loved the land and planted her roots deeply in the soil of Webster County, Nebraska."



Mildred Bennett, charismatic founder of the Willa Cather Foundation.

With a longstanding interest in the world of Willa Cather and in the organization that preserves and interprets that world for those of us living today, Fellows considers Bennett to be a fascinating

figure who deserves greater attention. To do so, Fellows hopes to call on those who knew her, and her work, best.

"I intend to make use of materials in the National Willa Cather Center archives, and to glean information and insight from the published and unpublished texts of Bennett's autobiography. But my first priority in this project is to interview individuals who knew Mildred Bennett," Fellows said.

"Even if you think you have nothing extraordinary to share with me regarding your memories of Mildred Bennett," Fellows continued, "I hope you will tell me what you can.

Everything, however seemingly unremarkable,

contributes to a richer composite portrait." If you have information or are interested in being interviewed, you can reach Will Fellows at [willfellows@hotmail.com](mailto:willfellows@hotmail.com) or at (414) 208-9730.

## Educator Scholarships Available

To advance our educational mission, the National Willa Cather Center created the Educators Scholarship in 2016. With support of the Thistlewood Foundation, this scholarship allows educators to experience the Cather historic sites, the cultural opportunities, the growing body Cather scholarship, and the camaraderie that our Cather community offers. These awards aim to facilitate a dynamic exchange of ideas between Cather researchers and educators, upon whom we rely for our next generation of Cather readers.

This year, we will award three teachers or administrators

complementary registrations to the virtual Willa Cather Spring Conference. Due to COVID-19-related changes in our program delivery, we will also arrange a free two-day stay at a Cather historic property, town and country tours, and tickets to an upcoming Red Cloud Opera House program, as well as a grant to help offset the cost of travel, at a future date.

To apply, please submit your application by May 15. Application forms are available at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org) and questions may be directed to education specialist Rachel Olsen, at (402) 746-2653 or [rolsen@willacather.org](mailto:rolsen@willacather.org).

## Documentary on Willa Cather Sculptor Littleton Alston

Nebraska Educational Television recently aired a documentary on sculptor Littleton Alston, who was selected, through a national competition, to create a statue of Willa Cather for the National Statuary Hall Collection. *A Sculpted Life*, traces Alston's journey from his childhood in Washington, D.C., to his remarkable career as an artist and Associate Professor of

sculpture at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.

To gather footage for the documentary, the film crew—led by producer Christine Lesiak—made an appearance at our 64th annual Spring Conference last year in Red Cloud. There Alston unveiled the competition-winning maquette

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of Willa Cather to the appreciative crowd. Also featured in the documentary is a visit to Alston's Omaha studio, where members of the Willa Cather National Statuary Hall Committee and statue benefactor Laurie Smith Camp joined leadership of the Willa Cather Foundation to review the second, and final, maquette before Alston began work on the full size sculpture.

This compelling film also reveals how Alston, an African-American boy growing up in a disadvantaged section of Washington, D.C., was influenced by this "city of statues." From his neighborhood, he could see the U.S. Capitol dome, with its sculpture atop called "Freedom." He often went with his brother to hear the tours of the Capitol and was amazed by the sculptures of the "Olympian Gods that didn't look at all like me." These experiences helped to shape his interests in art, history, and sculptural form.

For his Cather commission, Alston studied the author's life and works extensively. "She came to me through her words—that's when I felt like I was sculpting her," Alston said. "Knowing *of* her is one thing, knowing her is another"—something the sculptor admitted would take a lifetime. "I look at the maquette as a poem, and then I see the four-foot version as a short story," Alston said at last year's maquette reveal at Spring Conference. "Then the seven-foot bronze version will be the novel," he added.

When Willa Cather's statue is installed as part of the National Statuary Hall Collection, she will become one of less than a dozen women represented. Alston will become the first African-American sculptor to have his work in the



Littleton Alston, pictured in his studio beside the four-foot Willa Cather maquette.

collection. He hopes that his Cather sculpture will one day inspire another young African-American to be the second. You can view the documentary on the NET Nebraska website at [www.NETNebraska.org](http://www.NETNebraska.org).

## Board of Governors Transitions



Melissa J. Homestead

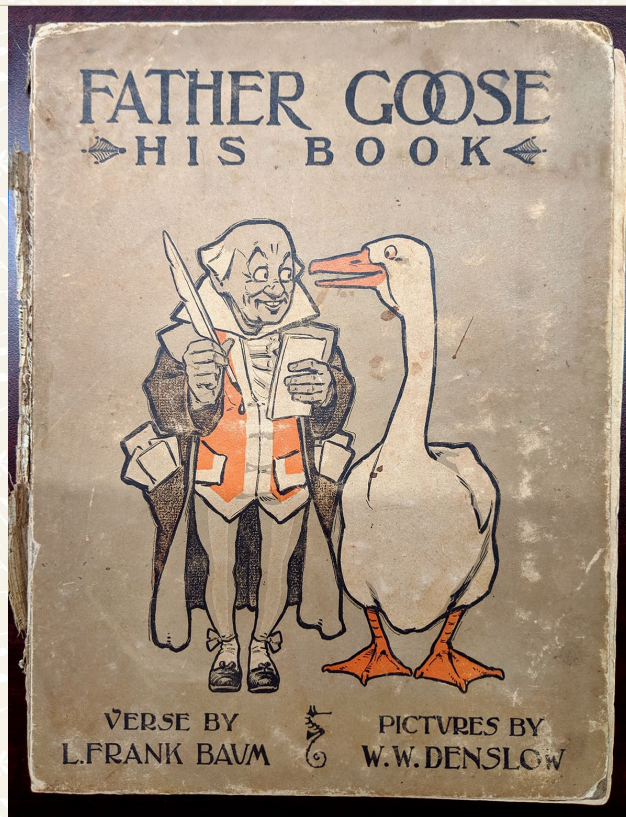
Please join us in welcoming Melissa J. Homestead to our Board of Governors as an ex-officio member representing the Cather Project. Homestead is Professor of English and Program Faculty in Women's & Gender Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where she serves as Director of the Cather Project and Associate Editor of *The Complete Letters of Willa Cather: A Digital Edition*. She has published widely on American women's writing from the late 1700s to the early 1900s, and her forthcoming book *The Only Wonderful Things: The Creative Partnership of Willa Cather and Edith Lewis* will be published by Oxford University Press on February 1, 2021. Homestead is also president of the Catharine Maria Sedgwick Society.

The Willa Cather Foundation would also like to thank retiring board members Ramón Guerra and Guy Reynolds for their time and service on our Board of Governors. Guerra is an associate professor of English at the University of Nebraska Omaha, and Reynolds is the former director of the Cather Project at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he is professor and chair of the Undergraduate Program and Curriculum Committee for the Department of English.

## Jack Cather Materials Now Available for Research

An exciting gift made in honor of the John E. (Jack) and Irma Cather Family has reached Red Cloud and is now available to researchers. A collection of eleven inscribed books, many with the addition of manuscript verse, were given by Willa Cather to her youngest brother Jack. These books, along with dozens of photographs of the family and the early days of the WCPM, and copies of poem drafts, provide new insights into Cather's relationship with her brother as well as revealing new information about Cather's poetry. When combined with our recent poetry manuscript acquisitions and original poems and hand edits in our legacy WCPM collections, the National Willa Cather Center now offers researchers a significant body of primary resources for the study of Cather's poetry.

Jack Cather, sometimes referred to in these materials as "Jack-a-boy," was Willa Cather's youngest sibling. Willa Cather used "Jack-a-Boy" as the title of a short story appearing in



Hard cover illustrated children's book of verse, with inscription "To Jack from Willa at Christmastime 1899."

*The Saturday Evening Post* in 1901. Cather's poem "Are You Sleeping, Little Brother?" was dedicated to him, and it's clear from this collection that the two shared a love of drama, of verse, and many fond memories.

Jack and Irma Cather's daughters, Catherine Cather Lowell and Ella Cather Lewis, were members of our Board of Governors and made the family's first donations of collection items during their lifetimes. In more recent years, the estate's executor has worked to make additional materials available. Many thanks are due to Beverly O'Neill for her safekeeping of these precious materials.

The National Willa Cather Center houses the earliest Cather collections and continues to add to its growing collection of letters, photographs, artwork, and personal items, which we make available to scholars and researchers. Research requests can be made via email. Please contact our archivist, Tracy Tucker, at [ttucker@willacather.org](mailto:ttucker@willacather.org) or call (402) 746-2653 to make arrangements.

To Jack from Willa  
at Christmastime 1899

No, I never saw a rabbit climb a tree,  
and I never saw a lobster ride a flea,  
But I used to know a goat  
who wore a reefer coat,  
and he always got his lessons after tea!

A playful poem or portion thereof written by Cather that reads:

No, I never saw a rabbit climb a tree,  
and I never saw a lobster ride a flea,  
but I used to know a goat  
who wore a reefer coat,  
And he always got his lessons after tea!

## An Immersive Cather Weekend in Taos

We're excited to share a brand-new opportunity to experience Cather in context—join us in Taos, New Mexico, for a 3-day, 3-night excursion, November 12–15, 2020! We'll explore the beautiful mountain town and the best of its historic and arts offerings, while learning about Cather's time in New Mexico. We'll discuss and share from Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *The Professor's House*, as well as a host of selected outside readings, in addition to touring the Father

Martinez Hacienda and Taos Pueblo, the Fechin House and the Millicent Rogers museum and more; our time together will be hosted by the Mabel Dodge Luhan House, where Cather herself was a guest.

Taos has long been considered a nexus of countercultural thought, even before the term was coined in the 1960s. When Mabel Dodge settled in Taos and began to invite her friends and artists from the East in 1918, she did so with the idea of establishing not just an artists' colony but a completely different lifestyle. Later, her house would be purchased by Dennis Hopper, who had his own vision of the counterculture lifestyle. "Willa Cather and the Counterculture" explores Cather's relationship with Taos and its resident artists—both good and bad—alongside the artists' relationship to the Taos area itself.

This event will be limited to thirty guests based on house capacity, so plan to register early! A preliminary schedule of the event and registration details are available on our website; for questions about the program, please contact Education Director Tracy Tucker at [ttucker@willacather.org](mailto:ttucker@willacather.org).



The Mabel Dodge Luhan House.

## Intern Makes Important Archival Discovery

Donna Devlin, 2018 National Willa Cather Center intern and current Ph.D. student in History at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, recently published new and ground-breaking information about Anna Sadilek Pavelka, the prototype for Antonia Shimerda in Cather's *My Antonia*. Writing for the *Willa Cather Review*, Devlin reveals the methods of her research into the life of Cather's lifelong friend.

The clues were held in Mildred Bennett's original research files in our archives; in those files, Bennett has typed a note that suggested Anna Sadilek gave birth to a child out of wedlock—but details of the birth didn't correspond with what Cather biographers had long ago established about Anna's life. The card also suggested legal proceedings and settlements, which were, Devlin believed, the logical place to try to verify the card's information. Devlin, who studies

History but specializes in Great Plains and legal history, was the perfect candidate for the job.

The rediscovery of Anna's story—a story of sexual assault and of legal confrontation—is a rediscovery of a larger historical pattern of abuse perpetuated against young immigrant women across the Great Plains. While we believe this opens new doors for Cather scholars to re-interpret *My Antonia* and Cather's authorial choices in telling Anna's story in fiction, we also look forward to Donna's continued research into the legal history of this darker side of our Great Plains story.

You can read Donna's story online in the *Willa Cather Review*, volume 61.3. To receive a print copy of the *Review*, please become a member by joining online at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org) or calling (402) 746-2653. Single issues of the *Review* are also available for purchase through our bookstore.

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The National Willa Cather Center  
413 North Webster Street  
Red Cloud, NE 68970

COMING UP!



### The Virtual 65th Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference

Un/Tethered: Cather on the Cusp of the 1920s  
June 4-6, 2020

### Nebraska Chamber Players

Christian Ellenwood's competition-winning new work inspired by Cather's *One of Ours*.  
Currently postponed, new date TBA

### Missoula Children's Theatre

*The Snow Queen*  
July 31, at 5:30 p.m. and August 1, at 2:00 p.m.

Visit us online at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org) for the latest information on upcoming events.



Arts programming presented with the support of the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment.