

NEWS FROM CATHER COUNTRY



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Visit us online at www.willacather.org to browse our bookstore or sign up for our e-Newsletter.

Newly Restored Willa Cather Childhood Home Reopens

After an extensive sixteen-month restoration, the Willa Cather Childhood Home reopened for tours in December, just in time for Willa Cather's 150th birthday. The site closed on August 15, 2022, to facilitate the first comprehensive restoration in more than fifty years.

Several noteworthy changes are visible as soon as guests arrive at the Childhood Home. Substantial work was undertaken to recreate the fence around the property. Only a handful of archival images exist to document the exterior appearance of the home during the Cathers' residence there, but the structure of the fence is readily apparent in several of them. A newly constructed painted cedar fence mimics the original structure, with a tall wooden plinth stretching across the bottom.

Our only archival image of the front of the house shows, at magnification, the original

brick foundation, much of which was lost during 20th century updates to the home. Pre-construction inspections revealed that the foundation needed structural reinforcement. This provided an opportunity to return the home's appearance to a more traditional one, using the original foundation bricks to face a reinforced concrete foundation.

Inside, we returned to founder Mildred Bennett's notes about the home's interior, based on her conversations with Cather's sisters, Elsie Cather and Jessica Cather Auld, in consultation with Carrie Miner Sherwood. In a long letter written the day after she took Auld through the house, Bennett recounted Auld's recollections about the way the house had been arranged before 1900:

"After the attic was sealed off, there were cubbyholes under the eaves where the kids kept their things, Christmas tree trimmings and such things. . . . In the west end of the attic, still in the narrow part, were trunks and barrels used for packing. She says that Willa's door locked from the inside, and Willa used to go up there, lock her door and smoke. Since none of the adults, besides Bess ever came upstairs, Willa was fairly safe."

During construction, one of the original panels for the cubbyholes under the eaves was discovered and retained. Thanks to Mildred's notes,

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A National Historic Landmark, the Willa Cather Childhood Home was Cather's residence between the ages of ten to sixteen. The house is described in Cather's novel, *The Song of the Lark*, and short stories, "Old Mrs. Harris" and "The Best Years."



Newly Restored Willa Cather Childhood Home Reopens

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a new door was constructed to represent Willa Cather's closed door. Also in the attic, the BVH Architecture team identified nailing patterns that strongly suggested the exposed rafters had once been enclosed with a ceiling built using planks and square nails. It was unclear when the ceiling had been removed—it may have followed Jessica Auld's recollection of snow sifting down through the roof onto their beds. The evidence that a ceiling had once been in place when the Cathers lived in the home allowed us an important opportunity. By rebuilding the ceiling in the attic, we would be able to install a vapor barrier to keep the attic and its precious artifacts in a clean and climate-controlled space, for the first time.

The extensive restoration project also provided an accessible walkway and entrance; electrical service and non-intrusive museum lighting for enhanced interpretation; a climate control system; and a new roof. The transformative project ensures the house is preserved as a cultural attraction for future generations to explore and enjoy.

This effort was supported by the State of Nebraska - Department of Economic Development, and a Save America's Treasures grant administered by the National Park Service that was matched through a private fundraising effort. In addition to our *Campaign for the Future* donors, we're grateful to the John K. & Lynne D. Boyer Family Foundation, Anne Thorne Weaver Foundation, Holland Foundation, Mammel Foundation, and an anonymous

supporter for their gifts to the restoration effort. A special thanks to BVH Architecture, Tru-Built Construction, Len Schamber of Schamber Historic Preservation, Brent D. Glass LLC, and all consultants and subcontractors who worked on the project.

Guided tours are available year-round. We invite you to see the changes and encounter family objects in an enhanced, accessible, and reinterpreted space. Please join us for a ribbon cutting, dedication, and tours on the afternoon of Saturday, June 8.



The parlor of the Willa Cather Childhood Home.

Hotel Garber Takes Shape in Rehabilitated Potter-Wright Building



Recent facade work included replacement of brick and installation of precast stone below second floor windows.

Rehabilitation of the 1902 Potter-Wright Building is breathing new life into an important downtown structure that has been vacant for more than twenty years. A third floor that was lost to fire in 1961 was reconstructed last year, and additional facade work is ongoing this spring. Interior framing and drywall work is now underway, along with rough-in for plumbing, electrical, and mechanical equipment.

In addition to aligning with our commitment to historic preservation, rehabilitation of the property will help achieve tourism development and downtown revitalization goals. When conjoined to our Farmers and Merchants Bank next door, the two buildings will share an elevator to provide visitors with full access to a new permanent exhibit about the history of Red Cloud and its intersections with Willa Cather's life and art.

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The Potter-Wright Building's rehabilitation will provide twenty-seven guest rooms to allow visitors from outside the community to secure lodging for conferences, performances, and events; a spacious lounge and dining area; meeting rooms; and catering facilities.

A new hotel in Red Cloud has been a priority for many years. An independent market feasibility study concluded that the Red Cloud market could support an additional 30-room lodging establishment. The hotel will allow us to better fulfill our mission—visitors, students, and families will be able to stay longer to enjoy the town, the museum and historic sites, the

Cather Prairie, and other scenic places.

The project has been a key component of our *Campaign for the Future* and Red Cloud's Heritage Tourism Development Office, which was established in 2015 through a collaboration between the National Willa Cather Center, City of Red Cloud, Chamber of Commerce, and Red Cloud Community Fund of the Nebraska Community Foundation.

A \$500,000 challenge grant to complete the fundraising has been offered and needs to be matched 2:1. Please consider supporting the project with a charitable gift. All gifts of \$1,000 or more will be recognized on a donor wall, and pledges are payable over a five-year period.

New Permanent Exhibit Opens

Our newest permanent exhibit, *Making a Place: A Long History of Red Cloud*, opened in the Farmers and Merchants Bank on March 1 in conjunction with Nebraska Statehood Day. This exhibit invites visitors to explore Willa Cather's 1923 novel *A Lost Lady* through topics that are both present and absent in her fiction. The exhibit includes explorations of Pawnee culture; town-making and homesteading; banking and the Panic of 1893; the lives and literary portrayals of Silas and Lyra Garber; and early preservation efforts led by our founder, Mildred Bennett.

One of Red Cloud's most arresting architectural specimens, the Farmers and Merchants Bank was built in the Romanesque Revival style by Red Cloud's founder, Silas Garber, who served two terms as Nebraska's governor between 1875-1879 before returning to Red Cloud. Cather became acquainted with Lyra and Silas Garber during her childhood and used them as prototypes for Captain and Mrs. Forrester in *A Lost Lady*. The bank is used in two of Cather's other writings: the short story "Two Friends," and the novel *Lucy Gayheart*.

The bank is also the first building owned and operated by the National Willa Cather Center, known then as the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. Dedicated in 1962 as the Willa Cather Museum, the site is a fitting place to explore the notions of place-making and the history of Red Cloud's founding, as well as the early days of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. For almost seventy years, the WCPM, which has grown and evolved into the National Willa Cather Center today, has worked to preserve the historic fabric of the town that Willa Cather immortalized in her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

This two-story interpretive space highlights the ideas of building and re-building as guests explore the original bank teller cages,



More than fifty guests were on hand to explore the new exhibit at a recent open house.

vaults, and offices—all a preserved rarity; view artifacts related to Red Cloud's founding and financing; and discover the origins of the WCPM's preservation mission, which began with the Farmers and Merchants Bank.

The exhibit was made possible with support from Pinnacle Bank and the Dinsdale Family, Cooperative Producers, Inc., B. Keith and Norma F. Heuermann Foundation, Rick and Kay Stahly in memory of Doris Hunter, Susan Parry, Jennifer J. Hein, Mark Howe, Tru-Built Construction, Heritage Bank, Mark and Linda Robison, and Michael Sirmons.

Visitors can view the new exhibit by booking a guided Town Tour. Schools and other groups are encouraged to include this exhibit as part of their field trip experience or as part of regional and state history curricula.

Cather 150 Programs Expand Outreach



Actors Matthew Reidy and Linda Biseti share selections from Cather's fiction and letters at the Boston Athenaeum.

Marking Willa Cather's sesquicentennial has provided a plethora of opportunities for Cather readers to gather and engage with

her literature. Last autumn, events were held in Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. In a memorable evening, actors Deanne Lorette and Steve Routman read curated selections from Willa Cather's fiction and letters to an enthusiastic audience at the New York Society Library in New York City. Executive Director Ashley Olson delivered a talk titled "Willa Cather: Life and Literature" at the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley in Winchester, Virginia. Among several programs he initiated, Board of Governors member Peter Ciplowski arranged for a captivating evening of readings and musical performances at Kaatsbaan Cultural Park in upstate New York; a lecture at Tufts Library in Weymouth, Massachusetts; and a presentation paired with brief excerpts from Cather's writing by actors Linda Biseti and Matthew Reidy at the Boston Athenaeum. Board of Governors member Bob Thacker gave a lecture at Harmony Library in Fort Collins, Colorado, while members Tim Bintrim and Kim Vanderlaan gathered academics and students from area universities to read selections for a program titled "A Pittsburgh Playlist" at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

Many events in additional locations are in development for this year. Please visit WillaCather.org/150 for a schedule. Interested in booking an event for your region? Email us at info@willacather.org.

Conservation of Willa's Wallpaper

The original wallpaper in Cather's attic bedroom is a beautiful late-nineteenth-century floral pattern. Applied directly to the acidic wooden boards beneath, decades of light infiltration and environmental instability have taken a toll on the wallpaper. As part of the 2019 collections and buildings transfer between History Nebraska and the Willa Cather Foundation, the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center provided expert technical assistance to plan for the wallpaper conservation.

In May of that year, conservator Hilary LeFevre and conservation technician Megan Griffiths were on-site for four days to clean and evaluate the original wallpaper. They removed surface debris and stabilized as many loose areas as possible. This tedious work was fascinating to watch as accumulated dust and oils were removed inch by inch, brightening the circa 1888 paper. While cleaning, the team was also able to locate the name of the wallpaper manufacturer.

The recent restoration and rehabilitation of the Willa Cather Childhood Home provided a stable environment for the next

phase of the conservation effort. A vapor barrier and climate control system in the attic system provides environmental conditions conducive to preservation of the wallpaper and allows for further conservation treatments to be carried out effectively.

Conservation work resumed last month with three intensive weeks of meticulous work. The wallpaper surface was thoroughly cleaned before the delicate and time-consuming conservation and treatment process could begin. As part of the project, conservators adhered detached pieces of wallpaper using Japanese paper fills and conservation-grade adhesives. Wallpaper losses that were at least one-quarter-inch in diameter were filled with an acrylic-toned paper fill.

Long after Cather left Red Cloud and became a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, she still fondly recalled the tiny attic bedroom she occupied as a young girl. Writing to her brother Roscoe from Maine in 1945, Cather mused: "I have a funny little room in the attic here, with a sloping ceiling, like my 'rose bower' in our old first house. Do you remember? I can always work best in a low room under the roof."



Hilary LaFevere and Vonnda Shaw of the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center at work on the wallpaper conservation.

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While the wallpaper can not be restored to its original appearance, the conservation and treatment will slow the deterioration, improve the overall appearance of the paper, and extend its lifespan. The discovery of the wallpaper's manufacturer makes it possible to explore options to recreate the paper, which would make viewing the original vibrant colors feasible.

If you would like to support the wallpaper conservation efforts, please contact development coordinator Jeniffer Beahm at jbeahm@willacather.org or (402) 746-2653. You can also support the project by shopping our exclusive line of Willa's wallpaper products at Shop.WillaCather.org.

Additions to the Archive

In recent months, two donations to the archival collection have arrived, providing new details about Willa Cather's life. Two postcards from the Nannie Andrews Matheny Collection, addressed to her cousin Nannie, help to date Cather's travels in the United States in 1907 and 1912. An autograph book belonging to another cousin, Bess Seymour, was signed by nine-year-old Willa Cather, as well as many of the Cather family's Virginia acquaintances before their move to Nebraska.

Another large collection of research materials was donated by Sue Hallgarth, a well-known



An autograph book owned by Willa Cather's cousin Bess Seymour.

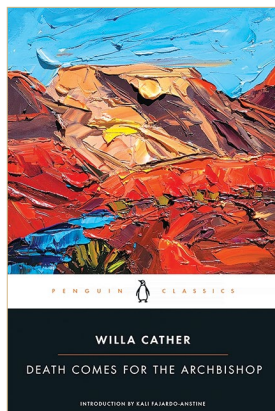
figure in Cather studies for many years. Her materials include dozens of folders of interviews and notes, historical information related to the important landscapes in Cather's biography and fictional universe, and several images of Edith Lewis that are new to our collection. We're always interested in evaluating materials that might be a good fit for our collections; strong ties to the Cather family or Red Cloud history are great candidates!

No matter the size of the collection, archivist Tracy Tucker would love to visit with you about preservation for the future. You can email her at ttucker@willacather.org.

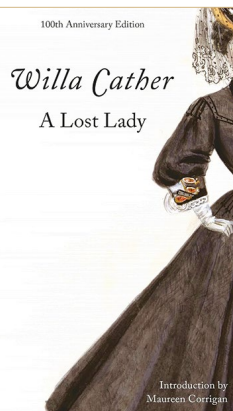
New to the Bookstore

Noteworthy paperback editions of two classic Willa Cather novels were recently published with new introductions.

Death Comes for the Archbishop was published by Penguin with an introduction by award-winning author Kali Fajardo-Anstine, who is a featured speaker at our 69th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference. *A Lost Lady*, with a preface by National Public Radio book critic and author Maureen Corrigan, was published by Vintage Anchor in



honor of the novel's 100th anniversary. Corrigan was an invited speaker at our Spring Conference in 2022, with a talk focused on the deliberations and decisions behind literary awards, informed by her time as a juror for the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction.



Members receive a discount on all purchases from our bookstore in Red Cloud, and online at Shop.WillaCather.org. Purchasing from our independent bookstore helps support the Willa Cather Foundation's mission and the advancement of Willa Cather's legacy.

Now Accepting Applications for the Willa Cather Residency

The Willa Cather Residency was launched in 2023 to commemorate the 150th year of Cather's birth and to provide a unique opportunity for writers to reside and create in Red Cloud. In a nod to the long road that Willa Cather traveled before she became free to focus on her own writing—a road that included freelancing, teaching, editing, and managing a national magazine—the Willa Cather Residency for Writers welcomes writers who are struggling to transition from a hectic career to a life in art. While open to all, our purpose is to assist



Joanna Biggs, a member of our inaugural cohort, at work while in residence last fall.

such artists. Our select cohort of writers will live and work in Red Cloud over a two-week period from October 13-27. Each resident will be provided a private furnished room in the Cather Second Home Guest House—with its comfortable communal kitchen, dining, and living spaces—and a separate place to work. Residents will also receive a stipend for provisions while in Red Cloud.

Applications are due April 15, and the cohort will be announced by mid-May. Visit WillaCather.org/residency for more information.

Prescribed Burn at the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie

Thanks to support from the Claire M. Hubbard Foundation, 185 acres of the 612-acre prairie were burned as part of our ongoing commitment to the restoration of this never-been-plowed native prairie to its 19th century conditions. Our gratitude to the Red Cloud Volunteer Fire Department Chief Dan Conway for his assistance, as well!



The recent prescribed burn at the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie, taken by Bob Harrold of Prescription Pyro LLC.

Prescribed patch burning helps reduce the spread of invasive plants, promotes a diversity of native plant species, creates diverse habitats for animal species, and increases nitrogen

availability in the soil. Restoration and conservation of the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie has been made possible by The Nature Conservancy, which transferred the property to the Willa Cather Foundation in 2006. Past support has also come from a generous multi-year grant from Nebraska Environmental Trust; the Gifford Foundation; and James and Marianne Fitzgibbon.

The Willa Cather Memorial Prairie is open to the public year-round, and guided tours are also available. Learn more at WillaCather.org/prairie.

Thank You to Departing Board Members

We bid farewell to three members from our Board of Governors who recently completed their terms and thank them for the many talents that they collectively contributed to our mission. **Marion Arneson**, a member since 2012 and a past board president, grew up near Red Cloud with a great knowledge of local history and perspectives from a successful business career in farm management and real estate. **Max Frazier**, a veteran and

a writer, gave valuable insight as a member of our education and marketing committees and the Willa Cather Residency task force. **Diane Prenatt**, a professor of English emerita at Marian University provided meaningful guidance as a member of our education and publication committees and co-directed our 2020 Willa Cather Spring Conference. Thank you Marian, Max, and Diane!

National Endowment for the Arts “Big Read” Features *My Ántonia*

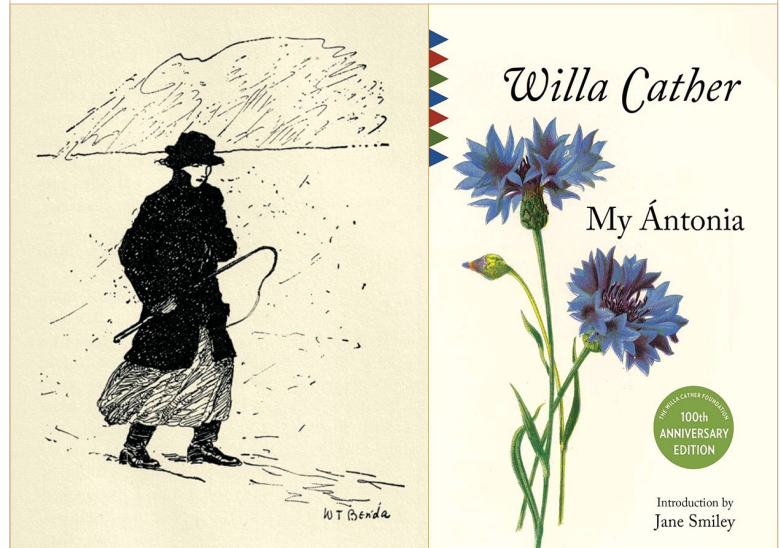
The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) announced in October that Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* was among the fifty titles selected for their 2024 NEA “Big Read” program. An initiative of the NEA in partnership with Arts Midwest, the program supports community reading programs designed around a single NEA “Big Read” book.

The aim of the program is to broaden our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. According to the NEA, a great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us.

The “Where We Live” theme of the 2024 grant program is to inspire meaningful conversations, celebrate local creativity, elevate a wide variety of voices and perspectives, and build stronger connections in each community.

We will be partnering with libraries and organizations across the country to offer programming, lectures, exhibits, and writing workshops. Numerous editions of the novel are available in our bookstore. Please contact Rachel Olsen at rolsen@willacather.org

to book a program or request book club resources. Programs will be available beginning September 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025.



At left, “Overcoat,” depicting Ántonia driving cattle in a blizzard, is among six of the eight original W.T. Benda drawings belonging to the National Willa Cather Center Collections & Archives that appeared in the original edition of the novel. At right, the 100th Anniversary Edition of the book, with an introduction by Jane Smiley, was published in 2018.

Student Field Trips Offered



Students peer into Willa Cather’s attic bedroom in the newly restored Willa Cather Childhood Home.

The school field trip experience is even better this year with the reopening of the restored Willa Cather Childhood Home and the unveiling of the brand new Farmers and Merchants Bank exhibit, *Making a Place: A Long History of Red Cloud*. Both sites are part of larger tours suited for students ranging from upper elementary through high school, who are learning more about

Nebraska and the Great Plains.

Educators planning a visit to Red Cloud can also work with education staff to create a customized experience for their students, ranging from a special tour itinerary tailored to a class syllabus to activities that incorporate primary sources and archival materials. Groups are invited to engage in historical inquiry during field trips, and they may find themselves puzzling over family farm documents, 19th century toys, or Willa Cather’s unique handwriting.

Can’t make it to Red Cloud in person? Schedule a virtual talk with a knowledgeable member of our education staff! Tailor an online discussion as an “Ask Us Anything” session about Willa Cather, or coordinate content and questions for specific novels and short stories. Download our free mobile app to take advantage of self-guided virtual experiences or to enhance a class assignment.

Visit willacather.org/field-trips for more information or to book a field trip. Questions about customized experiences or virtual classroom talks can be directed to Rachel Olsen, director of education and engagement at rolsen@willacather.org.

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Our Vision

People everywhere will find meaning and inspiration in Willa Cather's writing, life, times, and places.

Our Mission

To enrich lives by advancing Willa Cather's legacy locally and beyond through education, preservation, and the arts.

Cather Legacy Society

Membership in the Cather Legacy Society is open to all who desire to continue their support of the Willa Cather Foundation beyond their lifetimes. To learn more, visit willacather.org/legacy-society.



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

COMING UP!



69th Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference

Willa Cather and the Readerly Imagination
Thursday, June 6 to Saturday, June 8 | On-Site & Virtual

Missoula Children's Theatre presents *Peter and Wendy*

A new interpretation of the beloved J.M. Barrie classic performed by area youth
Friday August 2, at 5:30 p.m. | Saturday, August 3, at 12:00 p.m.

Marimba Sol de Chiapas

A musical tour of Mexico with four musicians—on just one marimba!
Friday, September 6, at 7:30 p.m.

Not Too Far Distant

A play by Becky Boesen on the life of a Nebraska World War II soldier
Friday, November 1, at 7:30 p.m.

Edem Soul Music

An eclectic performance and multicultural experience with twelve instruments
Saturday, December 7, at 7:30 p.m.

Visit us online at www.WillaCather.org for information on upcoming events.



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