



Scope & Significance

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FOR THE DEDICATION OF THE WILLA CATHER CHILDHOOD HOME
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“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?” Cather wrote these words to her brother Roscoe from an inn in Maine less than two years before her death. She was at work on “The Best Years,” a short story about their childhood. The day Cather was set to mail Roscoe a typescript of the story, she received telegram notification of his death. The brother who she referred to as her best critic was gone without having read one of her final stories, a story that returned to Nebraska and drew upon their childhood memories.

“The Best Years” vividly describes an attic with features that unmistakably match the one in this home; a space that is the private world of the children, a space where, as Cather wrote, “there were no older people poking about to spoil things.” When we acquired this house in 1960, the attic had been sealed off and the main floor had been divided into two rental units. Our founder Mildred Bennett must have been elated when she climbed a ladder to enter the attic for the first time and found Cather’s bedroom disused; the room and the rose-strewn wallpaper that was hung decades earlier remained largely undisturbed. The first restoration of this house began in 1966 by removing earlier alterations on the main floor using structural evidence and guidance of Cather’s sisters Jessica and Elsie and her childhood friend Carrie Miner Sherwood.

Like the earlier project, much thought and care went into the recent restoration and rehabilitation. A new foundation clad in original brick; recreation of the fence seen in archival photos that date to the period the Cather family occupied the house; an accessible walkway and entrance; electrical service and non-intrusive museum lighting for enhanced interpretation; a climate control system for the attic; and a new sawn cedar shake roof. Enclosure of the attic space and extensive repairs to the windows and doors sealed the building envelope to limit exposure to the elements, ensuring an improved environment for collections and enabling us to move ahead with the meticulous conservation of the original wallpaper in Cather’s attic room, which is now more than 130 years old.

These were all much-needed and important enhancements. But returning to Cather’s question to her brother—“Do you remember?”—I’m fairly certain these enhancements won’t be what guests remember when visiting this house. They might remember the nickel-plated parlor stove that matches Cather’s description in *The Song of the Lark*. Or perhaps they’ll remember the small passageway that was occupied by Grandmother Boak, a space that is unquestionably similar to the depiction of Grandmother Harris’ living quarters in “Old Mrs. Harris.” And I hope they’ll remember peering into the delicately papered room that was home to Willa or William Cather, M.D. between the ages of ten to sixteen. What makes this site so special is that it brings us closer to an author whose prose has been meaningful to our lives, meaningful for a variety of uniquely personal reasons. Today we invite you to be a guest in the Cather family home, and we hope it will be an experience you remember.