

# WILLA CATHER

PIONEER MEMORIAL AND EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

## NEWSLETTER AND REVIEW

VOLUME XLIII, No. 3  
Winter-Spring 2000

Phone (402) 746-2653

326 N. Webster Street  
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

### Approaching the Mesa

A Short Story by Laura Winters

Willa Cather hated feeling trapped, yet she knew being trapped was sometimes the only way to get anything real done. That night in August 1915, Willa Cather had nowhere to go in the dark. That night she took on all the terrors. Her mind could find no rest from fruitless wandering along the paths of memory.



Colorado's Mesa Verde.

— Photo by Steve Ryan

Being lost in the mesa taught her the lesson of proportion, not the simple proportions of town life, the daily rituals of waking and bathing and breathing in air. Instead it taught her the good of monumental proportions, and of waiting. She had been conducted by an inexperienced guide into darkness. She'd pondered the reality of extinction, and then simply waited in the dark. She thought of people who were conversant with the practice of simplicity when, in awe, she saw the mule deer and a red-tailed hawk who seemed impossibly distant, yet still too close. At that moment she realized fully what she would never understand about others — what she would simply have to invent. "I've found the perch I've been looking for," she thought. In the complete darkness she did not know whether she were at the bottom of the canyon or on a rock ledge perilously near the rim, and for one moment, she didn't need to know — and that suddenly felt like wholeness.

Willa Cather needed the Anasazi to survive. They reminded her that even when we seem to vanish with no trace, there are traces

### *In This Issue . . .*

#### **Liminality and Passages**

"On the Mesa" by  
*LAURA WINTERS*

*MARY CHINERY* on Liminality  
in Two Cather Novels

*MELLANEE KVASNICKA's*  
Spring Conference Address

*ANN ROMINES* on the  
ALA Conference

*DON CONNORS* Remembers

Another Object Lessons  
by *KATY CARDINAL*

— cliff houses and novels that will endure. In the mesa that summer, Cather realized that the novel must not only be like the stage of a Greek theater as the spirit of Pentecost descends, but also like the cliff ruins seen from a distance. And she thought, they have no furniture to clutter the view — these houses are unfurnished.

Willa Cather hated change, yet she couldn't live without it. To be trapped in a canyon next to a city that hadn't changed in six hundred years was terrifying, like sleeping in a room with a dead ancestor, like sleeping next to a dead body. Lost in the mesa she had to stop because there was no place to go. It gave her the quiet urge to focus.

She wondered, What is taste after all? An integrity that lasts beyond the

(Continued on page 54)

## APPROACHING THE MESA

(Continued)

season. Think of the hats I've worn with brims or feathers. I like dress up — the freedom of it — the invisibility, like secretly trying on Roscoe's trousers as a child. He knew I'd done it. I watched him from behind a wooden pillar in the attic, pretending to be engaged with a rag doll. He looked toward me and I could only see him partly, but he knew I knew he knew, and he knew I knew he felt proud at that moment that I would try to be him. Nothing named in the encounter, it was felt and not said, but it was all there and I loved him for it and I would forever feel loved by him.



*Issue contributor Mary Chinery (left) and issue editor Merrill Skaggs enjoy their visit to Mesa Verde and conversation about Cather.*

— Photo by Steve Ryan

In the mesa, she remembered the smell of clover in Mancos in the week before her visit to the park. Richard Wetherill's brother, though now an old man, looked like a combination of a cowboy and a banker, but whatever he was, Willa Cather felt she'd met the real thing — someone who'd been there. After her stay in Mancos, the smell of a new novel would forever be the smell of clover. And it all got tied up with Roscoe somehow.

You don't have to die to have your whole life flash before you, Willa Cather had thought in the Wetherill house. In fact, she thought, this capacity of seeing the whole in an instant may be what separates the artist from the civil servant behind a desk looking to make the worthless task seem bigger, force it to take the whole day, that's what the Wetherill brothers always said about the government people. "They spend their lives trying not to get things done, and anyone who got in their way would damn well never get anything done either." But to have your whole future pass before your eyes, Willa Cather hadn't felt that before August of 1915. She had not yet needed to feel it.

Willa Cather had always been able to put herself in a place and unexpectedly find a shape, something of the whole. She first realized this as a child in Virginia when she heard slave stories, a truth and clarity to the telling, suffering and joy just beneath the

surface. Like the first river baptism she saw by chance — she knew something was moving around her, like the presence of a rattler — dangerous and intoxicating. A gun had the same power, but that was man made. The rattler could leap at any time — as unpredictable as the waves she had seen from the deck of the Noorland on her way to Europe with Isabelle for the first time. A rhythm, yes, but no real way to predict it — inevitability and surprise, the combination she loved best.

Willa Cather was not in the habit of carrying scripture with her on her journeys, but she had been so struck by old Wetherill's quoting from memory the end of Mark 4 about storms that she wrote out by hand and carried with her for months afterward the six verses that he had said in his soft voice: "And the same day, when the evening was come, he saith unto them, Let us pass over unto the other side. And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him even as he was in the boat. And there were also with him other little boats. And there rose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was now full. And he was in the stern of the boat, asleep on the pillow; and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith? And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, What manner of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?"

Old Wetherill had said the gospel of Mark seemed all about getting in and out of boats, and that felt so strange because he'd never seen the sea. They'd



*David Harrell (left), author of *From Mesa Verde to The Professor's House*, and John Swift at the Mesa Verde Symposium, October 1999.*

— Photo by Steve Ryan

been talking about the sight of the mesa and then the story of a blind musician and his tinny harmonica in town who'd never seen the canyon, yet he composed riffs. And someone had mentioned the blind being cured and the deaf hearing again and the lame suddenly jumping up and walking, then people got to laughing about the funniest falls they'd ever seen, broken arms and legs, then it got quiet and it wasn't a



long jump to storm-tossed seas and sleeping through the gale and then the short distance to talking simply about faith.

Wetherill had said of the cliff dwellers, "All their common actions were ceremonial." And at that moment it coalesced. That's what it's like with the people we love. The simplest task of touching lips to a spoon to taste the soup becomes a ritual.

When he first came to the door he reminded me of my brother, and that was the end of it, Willa Cather thought when she remembered old Wetherill. He could have told me any story and I would have been for the moment entranced, but that he had a real story to tell, each detail tantalizing, calling me to ford a dangerous river, made me more excited than I had ever been in the presence of men. I could discern the scent of something on these fellows in Mancos that I'd never known before.

Long after they had returned to New York, Edith Lewis had told Willa Cather that on the way back out of the mesa, she had a similar experience when the sole of her climbing boot had ripped away from the hardness of the walk. When Clint Scarf pulled the rawhide thong from his trouser pocket Edith understood what women feel about men — the absolute competence, the confidence that this small trick with the hands will hold everything together. The others had looked at them both with genuine longing, anyone would have.

What Edith Lewis never told Cather was what she's been thinking on the mesa, What I long for is nearness, this nearness in the dark, yet I can't stand it sometimes, like trying not to frighten a bird you're watching. Trying to get close enough to identify the colors and angles. Audubon had it right. You have to kill the birds to draw them and understand them — but then what do you have? I don't want a dead bird to study. Oh, the constant wail and fearfulness. It's the never knowing what will be the right time. She's like a doctor, always having to be ready for the next emergency — the call in the middle of the night. I want to give her stability, my steadiness. I want to give her the gift of my lack of imagination, my love of train time-tables and properly packed suitcases. It's her hands I love. There are none like them — a lifetime for those hands — it's not too much. We brush past each other — sometimes dangerously so. She comes near only when I'm angry and about to quit it all. Presence and absence are the only gifts we have to give, and the most exquisite suffering I've had comes from the reaction when one is called for and the other is given. When I know I've made the wrong choice. I've gotten in the habit, no more than that. I've fallen in love with my longing. I control it utterly.



*The Cliff Palace. Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado.*

— Photo by Steve Ryan

Constantly startled all over again by Edith's presence, Willa Cather had thought on the mesa, I'm afraid I'll disappear from all her caring — erased entirely by compassion until there's nothing left. Charity obliterating any trace of me. It was easy to be afraid of the rattler. Edith came with one, but we both knew it was dead when she found it. That was the worst of the day — something useless and embarrassing. I better begin to write her story so it gets told the right way.

Later, back at camp with the others where no intimacy was possible, Willa Cather realized that she'd felt beautifully mauled by the landscape. It was the first place my restless heart felt peace. For once I was not afraid to be alone with Edith because for the first time I felt she knew that no one could have me, that the canyon would have to be a lover. Yes, we'd laugh some day at the pure silliness of it. But at her most exhausted even Edith knew that only a force much larger than either of us would ever be could carry me out of myself and rock me.

The first time that night she tried to comfort me with touch, Willa Cather thought, I was stunned and reminded, not for the first time, of the dressmaking forms in the attic room at Murray Hill Avenue. I used to imagine holding them around the waist, and one night after too much brandy, I took two forms to my narrow bed. Almost without conscious thought, I placed one on each side of me and fell in between them. As I held them, I imagined cadavers with no heads then Ethelbert Nevin, then Isabelle, then my father, then I slept. I woke up at dawn with both forms on the floor around my bed, each as if collapsed from dancing, or suddenly overtaken by sleep.

The terrible moment on the mesa when Edith decided to touch my arm, I'd been thinking of the mummy Wetherill had told me about the week before. They'd found her in the mesa — preserved after all this time.

(Continued on page 56)

## APPROACHING THE MESA

(Continued)

Even later Willa Cather realized, Edith looked at every rock, the smallest stone when the cliff city was before her, she'd be checking her shoe because the heel has started to come off. As I see the last three-thousand years before me, she's distracting me by noticing the sediment in one small stone. On our way out, as she climbed down the tree limbs, I imagined that she'd broken both legs and had to hang there until I could rescue her. The thought sickened and excited me. To have Edith for one moment abjectly dependent upon me.



*John Murphy (left) and Manuel Broncano share Cather insights at the Mesa Verde Symposium. Dr. Broncano, of the Universidad de León in Spain, recently translated Death Comes for the Archbishop into Spanish.*

— Photo by Steve Ryan

A sudden spasm and Willa Cather remembered the first moment she met Isabelle, the split second she became conscious not of a face but a voice — there are voices that hush the restless clatter inside. She'd immediately recognized it from her past, not as if she'd known it all her life — something much longer than that, like the sound of the deepest rivers far beneath the earth. She'd spent a fair amount of time as a child

imagining the very center of the earth and the layers between herself and the center. As a child she'd spent time at the earth's core.

The night she met Isabelle backstage, it was as if she were hearing some natural wonder. The moment reminded her of those childhood reveries. She could never tire of hearing that voice. She'd given up a lot for the soft voice in her ear. She imagined it was all she could take in. The men she'd loved had firm and vulnerable voices — a whistling in the dark kind of strength that said, "maybe if I sound firm I will become firm." But Isabelle's voice was different. There was no hesitation, yet it was nothing but yielding — as if she allowed you to fill in what was missing — a voice that concealed as much as it revealed. It was a voice that wanted you to love it. Yet also conveyed utter confidence that it didn't matter a whit if you cared or not — it had everything.

On the mesa lost in the dark Willa Cather thought of one afternoon soon after she'd moved into the judge's house: As we lay holding each other loosely in the early autumn heat, Isabelle entertained me by speaking of the gentlemen who had professed their love to her. Ah, the variety of motives — pride and lust and fear of being alone. I listened eagerly because I naively thought (knew to my heart's core) that I'd be the last — all that had come before no more than dress rehearsal for the spectacular finale that would end the show, turn on its head the failures of the past, reveal all.

The common theme seemed to be that all were stunned by her charisma. One man rode her out to a lake near McKees Rocks. She knew what was coming and dreaded it, yet she wanted to hear the words — needed the reassurance of that. Half way around the lake — as they watched the ice skaters in the late afternoon light, he opened a box that contained a ring. He was honest enough to say he would never love her, didn't think he knew what love was, but that she was right for him, could take care of him, and there was so much he had to offer. That afternoon on Murray Avenue, everyone out of the house — no rush, no hurry, no excitement, no possible tap of the judge's cane on the ceiling, we were no more than twenty miles from that lake, yet I felt that place must exist in another world, a past that was changed forever, the world broken in two by our love.

Lost on the mesa with Edith, Willa Cather realized it'd been a very long walk around the lake for her and Isabelle.

In fact Willa Cather had not planned to go to Colorado that summer. Nor had she planned to travel with Edith, but again Dr. McKeeby's saying, "What gets in the way is the way" came true. Willa had planned to go with Isabelle to McClure's Germany as a journalist. But she'd been foiled again by the tapping of Judge McClung's cane on the floor in the middle of the night. The judge knew Germany was too dangerous for his daughter, and he knew that just like peace in



Europe, he would not last much longer. Apparently Isabelle could not leave her father

Lost in the mesa, Cather thought, Even tonight in the blessed dark in a place with no more concern for Europe than a prairie dog, I hear the war in the distance and I wonder about my cousins and the young men from Red Cloud who long for something to believe in — something shiny and old and foreign.

Willa Cather suddenly remembered when she had first been in Paris and had visited the Tuileries each morning near the place where men of different ages and means congregated. Yet those mornings she did not feel fear. One day she saw a pair of men begin to speak, but it took them a while, one being Austrian and the other French, to find a common language. When they quickly realized that English would do, they excitedly spoke of their love of opera and of their homes. Each morning at 6:30 she would pass their bench — their attention to each other allowed her to overhear freely. She envied the eye contact and single-minded attention these two new friends, so recently strangers, shared, but what riveted her attention was the request one asked of the other. The older man with dignified sideburns said quietly, "Please say something in your own tongue." The younger man spoke passionately in a language she did not understand. A brief statement. Maybe three lines. The older man was clearly moved when he said, "Yes, I suspected English would not be enough for us. This will be our phrase. Use it, please, when you don't know what else to say."

*Once again  
I had that glorious  
feeling that I've never  
had anywhere else,  
the feeling  
of being  
on the mesa,  
in a world above the  
world.*

— "Tom Outland's Story,"  
*The Professor's House*

## AN AFTERWARD AND EXPLANATION

If this were a postmodern story, I would begin with the thirty-two possible titles I considered for this manuscript. I would tell you minutely of my process and progress, for I am a pilgrim in a strange land, as Cather was in the mesa.

I would recount for you how I realized in bed one evening that I was virtually to the month the same age as Cather when she was lost in the mesa (forty-one years and eight months). For this is a story about resigning oneself, giving oneself over to something larger — to being trapped with a caretaker, to being at a moment in one's life when one imagines, in Cather's case so wrongly, that what had come before is greater than what will come after.

I would tell you how every day this narrative becomes deeper and closer to the core of my own demons and obsessions — my telltale heart, my green light, my beast in the jungle, my scarlet letter, my white whale, my Prufrock, my misfit, and my beloved. How every day I find another aspect of the drama. I would describe the cold chill that runs through me every time I think of the connections.

I would tell you that in the last year a woman I love has faced cancer with dignity and courage and has slowly come to real healing, but what I tell you must be something that will last. It must be a cliff dwelling, a tower house, a soda canyon. It must be the place we build then leave in the season of hunting and harvest. I must disappear entirely so that only the cliff city remains.

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## Ron Hull Spends Semester in Taiwan

Ron Hull, special advisor to the Nebraska Telecommunications Commission and member of the WCPM Board of Governors, spent the fall as a guest lecturer at Cechi University in Taipei, Taiwan. He was granted a Fulbright Lecture Scholarship in International Broadcasting Studies. Ron also expected to lecture in the theatre and journalism departments, as well as on Nebraska authors Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, and John Neihardt.

Ron's doctoral dissertation evolved from his experience serving as a programming advisor to the development of television in Vietnam in 1996-7. He had plans to re-visit the country to observe progress in the medium.

Friends and associates were relieved when he sent word that he was unharmed by the earthquake that rocked the island.



# Liminality in Willa Cather's *Alexander's Bridge* and *The Professor's House*

by Mary Chinery  
Georgian Court College

Although in her essay "My First Novel (There Were Two)" Willa Cather attempts to disavow *Alexander's Bridge* (1912) as conventional and shallow, the novel points to directions and structures in her later work. Many scholars rightly see such parallels between this first novel and *The Professor's House* (1925), with Bernice Slote in particular commenting that although *The Professor's House* is certainly more complex, "the two are so close as to suggest that the second book is something like a re-trial of the first" (xxiii).

Another way to view these novels together is through the use of liminal passages and symbols. Victor Turner calls liminality a state or moment "betwixt and between" (*From Ritual* 40), which occurs in religious and social rituals as well as initiation rites in clubs and fraternities. Life transitions of all kinds provide liminal experiences. Turner describes liminality as "an interval, however brief, of margin or limen, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance" (*From Ritual* 44). It is "full of potency and potentiality. It may also be full of experiment and play. There may be a play of words, a play of symbols, a play of metaphors" ("Frame" 33).

Turner explains that a margin or limen can be ". . . a very long threshold, a corridor, almost, or a tunnel which may, indeed become a pilgrim's road . . ." ("Variations" 37). In Cather's work, liminality takes many forms: dreams, rooms, bridges, transatlantic voyages, deserts, the Blue Mesa, the ringing of bells for Angelus, pilgrim journeys. Such experiences are by their nature temporary or transformative. Set apart from society, these moments include a before and after from which one will never be the same.

Although a few scholars have applied Turner's ideas on liminality to Cather's work, it has not been done so at length. John J. Murphy refers to liminal use of pilgrimage in religious culture in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and Ann Romines perceptively examines liminality in Thea's cave experience on the mesa in *The Song of the Lark* as well as incidents of shared cultural ritual in *My Ántonia*. However, in my view, Cather has played with this idea before and does so continually throughout her fiction. Both *Alexander's Bridge* and *The Professor's House* dramatize liminal moments. Bartley Alexander and Godfrey St. Peter both face middle age; they long for their boyhood selves when they were full of potential and had not yet made the cultural passage to marriage and careers. These crises are represented symbolically through Bartley Alexander's bridge and transatlantic journey; through Godfrey St. Peter's room and to a lesser extent his journey on the water; and Tom Outland's

desert experience on the Blue Mesa. These places are separated from normative society and provide a period of intense reflection which is transformational.

Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, brings this liminal structure to bear in the extended bridge metaphor. Bridges are modern archetypes of passages and connections as well as feats of engineering. Bartley Alexander is a master-builder in this relatively new field at the time of Cather's novel. His Moorlock Bridge in Canada is expected to be a masterpiece, a brilliant experiment that has lived only in theory: it was ". . . the most important piece of bridge-building going on in the world, — a test, indeed, of how far the latest practice in bridge structure could be carried. It was a spectacular undertaking . . ." (37). Laura Winters has examined this novel's conflict between the experimental cantilever bridge and the successful suspension bridge Alexander has already built in Allway Mills as a metaphor for his inability to live suspended with contradiction (20). Even the titles of the bridges underscore their difference: Allway is a passage Bartley has managed successfully, but he is paralyzed by this Moorlock Bridge.

Although readers only see the bridge at the end of the novel, it remains suspended in imagination. But once Cather has created this construct, we can see the shores of her character's life that must be bridged. He looks like a bridge, Susan Rosowski reminds us (36), as though he embodies its contractions and dualities. A dynamo of energy and a perpetual traveler, Alexander is stuck between oppositions: two cities, Boston and London; two women, Winifred and Hilda; two kinds of lives, successful society man or the young dreamer he loved. These extremities are brought together by the bridges in the novel.

From the bridge Cather suspends in our imagination, we see Alexander in London, where he wishes to see his old flame Hilda. To get to Bedford, the section where she lives. Alexander must cross Westminster Bridge. On one side exists dangerous possibility, not so much in an affair, but in the renewal of his relationship with the younger self for which he longs as he teeters on the bridge of midlife. On Westminster Bridge he considers his choices and reflects on his life as a young man when he was full of liminal possibility before his initiation into common cultural rituals: career and marriage. As Winters has written, "Bartley Alexander remains in bitter conflict with himself because he refuses to believe that the intense, bittersweet memory of youth (reawakened in his passion for Hilda), must coexist with the physical and emotional demands of middle age" (20).

Not yet ready to make the passage to see Hilda, Alexander crosses back to the other side of the bridge:

"When he reached the Abbey, he turned back and crossed Westminster Bridge and sat down to watch the trails of smoke behind the Houses of Parliament catch fire with the sunset" (35). Ironically, as he turns backward, he thinks about how fast his life has moved forward. Now, he most treasures the suspension of time as he sits on the bridge: "In all those busy, successful years there had been nothing as good as this hour of wild light-heartedness. This feeling was the only happiness that was real to him, and such hours were the only ones in which he could feel his own continuous identity —" (39). However, Alexander cannot remain on the bridge forever; one cannot remain in a perpetual liminal state. The next night his life changes as he renews his old relationship with Hilda.

Another kind of bridge experience which may also be considered liminal occurs on the transatlantic crossing. Alexander, now engaged in the affair with Hilda, struggles between his older self (a life of ease with his wife) and his younger self (the energy and possibility he feels with Hilda). Torn with guilt, he leaves Boston for London on New Year's Day, determined to begin anew and break with Hilda. On the ship he slips into what Cather calls a torpor, a near dreamlike state in which he allows himself to plunge into reflection:

He was submerged in the vast impersonal grayness about him, . . . He felt released from everything that troubled and perplexed him. It was as if he had tricked and outwitted torturing memories, had actually managed to get on board without them. He thought of nothing at all. (73)

Alexander retreats in and out of this internal liminal space, suspended from his cares, ". . . losing himself in the obliterating blackness . . ." (74); he even falls asleep on deck during a gale, momentarily free from the storm within him. On the waters of the Atlantic, he is neither here nor there: Boston recedes before London is visible, and Alexander can rest with some peace of mind that has been heretofore unattainable. For now on the water he is freed from the obligation to his wife and, for the most part, of his desire for Hilda: "Through one after another of those gray days Alexander drowsed and mused, drinking in the grateful moisture" (76). As Winters writes, "on deck, suspended between the demands of two places, he experiences contentment" (21).

He continues in this way until the weather slowly improves, and he, along with it, comes out of a fog. On the other side of the Atlantic, his life-spirit returns and he paces around with characteristic energy: "On the instant he felt that marvelous return of the impetuosity, the intense excitement, the increasing expectancy of youth" (77). Thereafter, he plunges into his other life with Hilda.

Back in America, Alexander has reluctantly decided to divorce Winifred and marry Hilda, but he is not happy with this decision, either. No matter which course he chooses, he remains in deep conflict. After being diverted to the Moorlock Bridge for a dire emer-

gency, he passes two bridges. On an old wooden bridge he sees boys around a fire, and he wishes for the boyhood years before his life choices were made. Then he crosses the suspension bridge he had designed earlier at Allway Mills. The original bridge seems longer and distasteful to him now, for he does not wish to recall himself as a young engineer: "And was he, indeed, the same man who used to walk that bridge at night, promising such things to himself and to the stars?" (117).

Out on the Moorlock Bridge, Alexander realizes that the bridge is "insupportable," a word Cather repeats in *The Professor's House*, and gives the order too late for the men to evacuate. As the structure begins to collapse, Alexander himself plunges into the water which had once given him relief from care, drowning as he moves to tell his wife everything.

Bartley Alexander could not make the passage from one era in his life to another and accept the inevitable changes in life. The Westminster Bridge and transatlantic journey both represent liminal moments, but his Moorlock Bridge represents his failure to move forward. Rather than a true transformation, Alexander merely experiences times which are free from care.

Cather's 1925 novel *The Professor's House* also uses liminal structures and symbols to represent a failure to move forward, but in this later work she is far more subtle and complex. In this novel, the middle section serves as a metaphoric rather than literal bridge. As Winters writes, the middle section is literally suspended between St. Peter's sections of the story (45). Like Alexander, St. Peter must find a way to link his younger self with his middle-aged self, or face extinction spiritually and physically.

Like Bartley Alexander, St. Peter also finds comfort on the water. In fact, the blue water of St. Peter's childhood provides him with a trope of creativity and loss: "You had only to look at the lake, and you knew you would soon be free" (20). When he moved from the blue water to arid Kansas, he "nearly died" of the loss (21), a comment that has been Cather's own childhood loss of Virginia: "No later anguish, and he had his share, went so deep or seemed so final" (21). Later, his need to see the water was so powerful that he chose his job to be close to it and chose his study to glimpse it while he worked. Downstairs, with his eyes closed as he day-dreams on the couch, he ". . . rest[s] his mind on the picture of the intense autumn-blue water" (46), as if that vision were a part of him.

St. Peter had also planned his award-winning work, *Spanish Adventurers in North America*, while travelling off the coast of Spain. "On the voyage everything seemed to feed the plan of the work that was forming in St. Peter's mind" (89). While off the rocky coast, he "lay looking up at them [the mountains] from a little boat riding low in the purple water, and the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves" (89).

(Continued on page 60)

## LIMINALITY . . . (Continued)

Thus his greatest creative work is borne on the liminal sea, apart from family and social obligations.

St. Peter's study is his second liminal space; here time is suspended as well as his place of intellectual experiment. There he could be away from "the engaging drama of domestic life" (16). When his eight-volume tome wins a lucrative prize, he builds the house he had long ago promised his wife. But he is stuck, and finds himself unable to make the passage forward. This passage, it seems, is much like the one that nearly killed him emotionally when he moved to Kansas as a child. Like one of Bartley Alexander's bridges, these houses suspend St. Peter's decision-making and paralyze his basic emotional functioning.

St. Peter shares this room with the family seamstress, Augusta, who stores her sewing things there. A devout Catholic, Augusta reminds the professor of spiritual holidays and seasons: All Souls Day, Maundy Thursday, and Lent (15). Although he no longer follows what he calls "the religion of my fathers" (15), he knows that when he moves to his new house he will miss Augusta's reminders of sacred time, of time set apart from the ordinary. Such time can be liminal in that it provides a space where one is taken out of daily life for reflection and transformation.

St. Peter may no longer follow these spiritual traditions, but he sees their inherent value. He lectures rather glibly to his students: "And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives. . . . Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had" (55). He searches for meaning, but can no longer find it even in the things — art and religion — that he professes to know give meaning.

Perhaps St. Peter best learns about the fusion of art and religion in Tom Outland's experience on the Mesa. Tom himself is at the liminal moment wherein he is moving from late adolescence to full manhood. In Tom, St. Peter sees the potential for a life before it is fitted into the frame required by the practical needs of family and profession.

Tom's story occurs in the middle section of the novel, a traditionally liminal position. Indeed, Tom is a more purely liminal figure than the other characters discussed so far. Even part of his name, Outland, suggests that he is outside normative society. Richard Dillman has called him "an American Adam," an original in the Emersonian sense (376). However, he can also be understood as a mysterious stranger, which Turner interprets as a liminal figure. An orphan, Tom lacks a formal education, and even his age, since uncertain, is suspended. He is the call boy for the travelling railroad men, themselves a band of outsiders with their own mores whose lives are run by the schedule of the train. Tom skillfully negotiates this world within a world, finding men where they should not be, and getting them back home or to work. Limi-

nal figures set the world upside-down — in this case, in the St. Peter household (*The Ritual Process* 110).

At their meeting, St. Peter invites Tom to lunch, and the young man gives his wife beautiful pottery and the children uncut turquoises. Lillian says, "We ask a poor perspiring tramp boy to lunch, to save his pennies, and he departs leaving princely gifts" (103), a phrase St. Peter himself reflectively echoes to her: ". . . you know them by . . . their sumptuous generosity — and when they are gone, all you can say of them is that they departed leaving princely gifts" (103).

In his story, Tom tells of being immediately drawn to the Blue Mesa and determined to climb it. The mesa has been called "felicitous space" by Judith Fryer, "pure, imaginative experience" by Susan Rosowski (132-33). Indeed, the desert landscape suggests the traditional symbol for spiritual exploration. Like the forest in works of early American literature, this desert space is liminal, suggesting exploration both of a spiritual and literal kind.

Although Tom works as a cattle rancher with his friends Roddy and Henry, he first travels to the mesa alone, which foreshadows his longer sojourn there. He begins on Christmas Eve, a holiday which marks the transition after the religious season of Advent, a traditional time of waiting. He follows the cattle route across the river, which serves to frame the space where he encounters Cliff City as sacred. David Harrell has explained the significance of the river through its name, *Cruzados*, a word suggesting both crucifixion as well as the crossing of passages (103-104). Cut off from the rest of his friends, and indeed the rest of society, the spot is a perfect liminal setting, ripe for an encounter with the ancient and timeless.

Laura Winters reflects, "Perhaps no geographical location in Cather's fiction contains more unalloyed pleasure than Tom Outland's cliff city" (46). When he arrives, he is struck by the pure air, as though it was of a different realm: "It made my mouth and nostrils smart like charged water, seemed to go to my head a little and produce a kind of exaltation" (179). In this exalted state, he discovers Cliff City, home of an ancient, cultured people: "Such silence and stillness and repose — immortal repose" (180). We later hear Cather's voice through Father Duchene, who says, "Whenever humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot" (199). Tom desires to uncover the story of this lost people and care for their ritual objects and dead. In short, he wishes to recover their sacred time and traditions, both of which are liminal aspects of religious culture.

After excavating the mesa over the summer, his journey to Washington, D.C., teaches him that no one cares much for his sacred spot. Indeed, he is sold out by his friend Roddy (whose last name, Blake, is suggestive of the Romantic poet's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*). Interestingly, in some rites of passage, monsters and other "masked figures"



invade the sacred space with the intent to frighten the subject about what has previously been taken for granted ("Variations" 38). And when Roddy's buyers clear out Cliff City, Tom indeed wrestles with the meaning of friendship and values.

Despite this betrayal and anger, his love of the mesa is not changed. He recalls what it felt like finally to return to that place,

Once again I had that glorious feeling that I've never had anywhere else, the feeling of being *on the mesa*, in a world above the world. And the air, my God, what air! — Soft, tingling, gold, hot — . . . it was like breathing the sun, breathing the colour of the sky. (217)

Now, with Roddy gone, Tom feels he has come into "possession" (226). He understands, in an intuitive explosion, the whole experience from the fragmented parts. Note, too, consistent with initiations, the use of the word "first":

I remember these things, because, in a sense, that was the *first* time I was ever really on the mesa at all — the *first* time that all of me was there. This was the *first* time I ever saw it as a whole. It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. (226, italics mine)

Cut off from the rest of the world, he becomes a new creature. No one except Father Duchene knows Tom is on the mesa. Turner writes that liminal figures "may be considered dead to the world, or at least invisible to it" ("Variations" 35) as they undergo a liminal transition. Further, "Transitional beings have nothing. They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows. Their condition is the very prototype of sacred poverty" ("Betwixt and Between" 8). Tom, with nothing material to his name except a text of Virgil, leaves behind the remnants of his former life and instead becomes a part of the society that once lived on the mesa. He already recognizes the deeper change that has occurred in him when he says, "For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion" (226). He spends the summer with the sense of time suspended, and is filled with the natural rhythm of the light and the sun.

Up there alone, a close neighbor to the sun, I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way. And at night, when I watched it drop down behind the edge of the plain below me, I used to feel that I couldn't have borne another hour of that consuming light, that I was full to the brim, and needed dark and sleep. (227)

We hear Cather's voice in her 1916 essay on the Mesa: "It is the human expression of that land of sharp contours, brutal contrasts, glorious color, and blinding light" (qtd. in Rosowski and Slote, 84). The wholeness and purpose with which the Cliff Dwellers live has been lost in this modern age. All Tom can do is live in its presence, as its student. During the summer, he no longer "excavates" the past,

but clears the debris created by the removal of the antiquities.

Tom has shifted twice in this experience on the mesa — he has matured into manhood and spiritual awareness on the Mesa. As David Harrell writes, "Instead, once he possesses the ideas, he can leave the physical mesa behind him, carrying always with him the meaning he has derived from it" (145). In summary of his experience, Tom tells St. Peter, "Happiness is something one can't explain. You must take my word for it. Troubles enough came afterward, but there was that summer, high and blue, a life in itself" (228).

After he leaves the mesa, Tom falls into normative time: he begins his education with St. Peter, falls in love with his daughter, invents an important engine and eventually goes to war. Though Tom later returns with St. Peter to the Mesa, his high and blue moment has passed, and his life could never be that simple again.

Passages over bridges, water or deserts are all symbolically suggestive of the deeper liminal passages Cather depicts in her characters. All of these characters, to some extent, wish to return to "the realist part" of their lives before the rites of the passage of time. But there are no returns. Alexander is killed by his bridge; St. Peter is nearly killed in his room with a view; and after his death, Tom's memory and inventions are killed by greed. But the liminal moments are memorable and transformative. Indeed, Cather's liminal moments touch the ancient and timeless.

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(Continued on page 62)

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CATHER SECOND HOME — RED CLOUD

A woolsey lindsey coverlet which was a possession of Charles and Virginia Cather. It hangs in an upstairs hallway in the Second Cather Home.

— Photo by Nancy H. Lang

## Education in the Parish: Preparation for the World

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In one of Willa Cather's finest stories, "Old Mrs. Harris," Vickie Templeton's neighbor and mentor Mr. Rosen gives her a slip of paper inscribed with a quotation from Michelet: "The end is nothing; the road is all." In that simple act, Cather encodes what was one of the guiding principles of her life. As a writer, Cather would define education as a kind of journey whose purpose was not reaching a destination, but navigating the obstacles along an uncertain course. Education would provide for Cather a window to a larger world, but it would also paradoxically focus Cather's attention on the smaller parish from which she had come. Education gave Cather the means by which to declare herself independent from her beginnings and at the same time enable her to understand the ties that bound her forever to the people and places from her past. Ideas of literature, culture, and art came to Cather as a direct result of her educational experiences. Her education provided the innately gifted Cather with the means of developing and channeling that art. Her education also taught her much about her own humanity. It was an education remarkable in many ways, and because of it, Cather's artistry developed with amazing insight and universal appeal. For Willa Cather, the journey began with the teachers in her own life, continued in her own teaching career, and ultimately manifested itself in her fiction. This quest became a focal point in Cather's life and career.

Cather's family is full of teachers, and familial support of education is a constant in family chronicles. Cather's early education took place largely at home, with her Grandmother Boak in Virginia and later with Cather's aunt Francis, called Aunt Franc, who taught a country school and organized local cultural events. Cather wrote of Aunt Franc that she surely did her share of distributing manna in the wilderness. Cather believed that education required a kind of spiritual calling, much like that experienced by a priest or a nun, and that idea is presented clearly in the 1919 article she wrote for *Red Cross Magazine*: "Teaching was not a profession then; it was a kind of missionary work" (54). This metaphor suggests a direct connection between education and religion. Much has been made of Cather's idea of art as religion. But it is also true that education provided the doorway to art and was for Cather an adjunct to art and religion as a guiding principle in living a life of integrity and truth. Education was both a process and a tool, and the ubiquitous presence of teachers and education in Cather's fiction is unequivocal proof of the role of education in her own philosophy.

Early on, Cather's teachers assumed a central role in her life. The first of several teacher-mentors in her life was Miss Evangeline King. Miss King attended college in Vermont, then later came to Red Cloud in 1880. She taught in Red Cloud and Blue Hill, then became superintendent of schools in Webster County. As Mrs. Case, after her marriage to a successful attorney, she became a teacher and preceptress at the normal school at Kearney. Today, at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Case Hall is named in honor of Cather's early teacher, and Miss King is remembered in Cather's short story "The Best Years" as Miss Knightly.

In a letter Cather wrote to the graduating class in Red Cloud in 1909, she speaks of Miss King and clarifies what it was that made her teacher so influential:

I am very sure that Miss King was the first person whom I ever cared a great deal for outside of my family. I had been in her class only a few weeks when I wanted more than anything else in the world to please her. During the rest of that year, when I succeeded in pleasing her I was quite happy; when I failed to please her there was only one thing I cared about and that was to try again and make her forget my mistakes. I have always looked back on that year as one of the happiest I have ever spent . . . As I went through the high school, she always helped me and advised me; she even tried very hard to teach me Algebra at night, but not even Miss King — who could do almost anything — could do that. (27 May 1909, 2)

So much of what Cather recognized as excellence in a teacher would become part of her own performance as an educator. In Miss King she discerned a sense of humor, expectations of behavior and performance, a concern for the individual student, recognition of talent, and generosity of spirit — all of which are excellent criteria for fine teaching. In that same letter to the graduating class, Cather wrote, summarizing all of those things the finest teachers aspire to:

I believe I am not the only graduate of the Red Cloud schools whose courage Mr. and Mrs. Case revived again and again. I believe that all the boys and girls whom they helped will agree with me that one of the things best worthwhile in life is to keep faith with those two friends of ours who gave us their confidence. In the long summer evenings Mr. Case and his wife used to sit on the front porch behind the vines and the little maple trees and plan out useful and honorable futures for the Red Cloud boys and girls. There is nothing for us to do now but to try to realize those generous dreams of theirs. (27 May 1909, 2)



CATHER SECOND HOME — RED CLOUD

*The Formal Living Room in the Second Cather Home is immediately on your right as you enter the house. The dark print on the wall (right) originally hung in the room.*

— Photo by Nancy H. Lang

Today's teachers may long wistfully for such days, but even though it's as difficult to find a front porch as it is to find students interested in sitting on one, Cather's notions regarding teachers remain resoundingly true, and today's finest teachers continue to illustrate Cather's definition of excellence.

If Miss King's momentum carried Cather beyond Red Cloud, her relationship with Mr. and Mrs. A. K. Goudy reminded her of home. As principal of the Red Cloud High School, Mrs. Goudy became particularly interested in the young Cather. Mr. Goudy, county superintendent and Latin teacher, opened the world of classical literature to Cather. When Mr. Goudy was appointed state superintendent, the Goudys moved to Lincoln — in the same year that Cather began her studies there (Ambrose 21). Cather corresponded with the Goudys for forty years. Their correspondence does not survive, but Edith Lewis describes those letters:

Those unguarded early letters, written in a large, immature hand, and filled with the new discoveries she was making about life and people, and about herself — the kind of letters that are only written in the confidence of being infallibly understood — show the crudeness, the extravagance, the occasional bravado of a young, undisciplined talent; and show too, flashes of rare insight and imagination; a depth of feeling and a capacity for suffering that are found only in exceptional natures. (20-21)

The idea of being "infallibly understood" suggests an intimacy in the relationship between Cather and her favorite teachers, an intellectual intimacy whose depth goes beyond many of Cather's other relationships.

(Continued on page 64)



## EDUCATION IN THE PARISH

(Continued)

In 1923 Cather would respond to an old school chum requesting biographical material. Cather referred Ned Abbott to Mrs. Goudy, suggesting that Mrs. Goudy would be able to reveal more about Cather than she could about herself (Letter, 25 Oct. 1923). The letter indicates the closeness of their relationship — even long after high school was over. When Mrs. Goudy died, the *Red Cloud Advertiser* carried a story describing the relationship between teacher and student:

She [Mrs. Goudy] had been Willa Cather's chief critic in the early days of the famous authoress' career. Miss Cather regarded her highly because "she is the only person who ever told the truth about me." The remarks followed Mrs. Goudy's refusal to coincide with views of others that Willa Cather was a remarkable and wonderful girl. "She is outstanding in her work," Mrs. Goudy said at the time. "But she needs to brush up with people who know a lot more than she does." ("Mrs. Alice Goudy" 2)

Being "infallibly understood" could also have its drawbacks! When you study Cather's commencement, you know what an extraordinary young woman, Mrs. Goudy's sentiments aside, Cather was and would be. Years later, when she wrote the graduating class, Cather's memory of that event designates and acknowledges her teachers:

I hope none of your graduates are as frightened as I was when I got up to deliver my important oration. When Mr. Goudy read my name and I rose and went to the front of the platform, the room looked as if it were full of smoke and the people seemed to have run together. I looked at this blur and made out three faces looking intently at me, Mr. Henry Cook in the front part of the house, and further back, Mr. William Ducker and Mrs. Case. These three friendly faces gave me courage and I am sure they always will. (4)

Cather's relationship with her teachers helps define her ideas of education. It was vital for Cather to be actively engaged with her teachers. Teachers had to do more than teach; they had to enable Cather to learn. There had to be more than a presentation of subject matter; there had to be an interpretation of and relationship to that subject matter. A teacher had to do more than assign compositions and correct examinations; a teacher had to listen and encourage. Teaching — good teaching — had to engage or perhaps even provoke the student to action, to active participation.

Cather's journey to the University of Nebraska was, without a doubt, the catalyst that led her to writing. When Cather arrived at the University in 1890, she was sixteen years old, and she was hungry. In many ways, when Cather entered the University, it was as if she had entered a world she had been dreaming of as long as she could read. It was a world in which people read books and discussed them with enthusi-

asm, a world in which the young Cather's ideas became valuable and her words important. It was a world of sophistication in which she could see plays and hear music and make friends with people who felt the same as she did about books and ideas. The experience was heady, like drinking too much wine too quickly. The same validation of her intellect Cather had received from her teachers in Red Cloud, she would find again in Lincoln. Two of those University professors had an enormous impact on Cather.

Cather's first professor in English was Ebenezer Hunt, a man known for his difficult classes. Hunt was a graduate of the University of Rochester, serving after his college graduation as journalist, lawyer, and clergyman. Despite Hunt's reputation as a "bear" (Manley, *Centennial History* 8), Cather changed her incipient plans for a medical career after Professor Hunt submitted her essay on Thomas Carlyle for publication. Hunt must have known how special this prep student was when he read her assignment. While Cather's prose was decidedly "purple," the writer was only seventeen years old. Her diction and syntax were complex; her allusions, sophisticated. Compared with the other essays Hunt must have received, it is no wonder he was impressed. Cather wrote later of that publication: "Up to that time I had planned to specialize in science; I thought I would like to study medicine. But what youthful vanity can be unaffected by the sight of itself in print. . . ." (qtd. in Bohlke 180-181). Hunt gave Cather room to be, as she herself said, "florid," "highblown," and "bitter," and after that it was clear that her aim was to write. Cather had found her voice. Her previous fascination with medicine was closely connected to the personalities of two powerful Red Cloud physicians, Drs. McKeeby and Damerell. But in Lincoln, with the publication of that first essay, and encouraged by Hunt, she found her own source of power. There's a bumper sticker that reads, "If you can read this, thank a teacher." It's only a slight exaggeration to alter that sentiment: "If you read Cather, thank Ebenezer Hunt."

Cather's excellent education in English continued with Professor Herbert Bates, himself an outstanding intellect. He was an 1890 Harvard graduate who took great interest in Cather's writing, encouraging her work. Annie Prey, a classmate of Cather's, wrote a character sketch of Bates for *The Hesperian*, the student newspaper and literary magazine, describing his methodology:

Those who have no themes with his scribbling on them cannot understand how sincerely and sharply he was accustomed to give his opinion. Yet his criticisms were hardly ever discouraging. I know of one theme that came back with a brief reference, "See there was a little girl that had a little curl, etc!" I knew the "and so forth." It was the last he meant: "And when she was bad she was horrid." This cut deeply til the owner of the theme remembered the part "when she was good." Then she was inspired to try again. (9)



**CATHER SECOND HOME — RED CLOUD**

*East view of Willa's room in the Cather Second Home. The door exits onto the second story porch. The iron bed with quilt is as the room was when Willa slept there.*

— Photo by Nancy H. Lang

There is no wonder Cather was close to Bates; she would later emulate much of his teaching with her own students. And he, too, would demonstrate great respect for his former pupil. When he resigned, he recommended that Cather take his place. In 1924, Bates wrote a letter to Cather about a lecture she had given:

What you said, and the way you said it, will do wonders in bringing home to those teachers . . . certain big truths about the teaching of writing as an art and the teaching of literature as the warm human appreciation of an art. . . . (19 March 1924)

Like Cather's Red Cloud instructors, her university professors recognized incipient talent and nurtured and encouraged the possessor of these gifts. It seems fitting that we see such nurturing of Jim Burden by Gaston Cleric, whose prototype was Herbert Bates.

Cather's course of study at the University further intensified her interest in language and composition. University archives contain Cather's transcript for her university years. She took at least eighteen semesters of English, including several course notations that she was allowed to substitute higher level classes for lower division work. Her other major field of study was in languages, as she accumulated seven semesters in Greek, four semesters of Latin, four semesters of French, and two semesters of German (Transcript of Willa Cather). These records indicate with startling clarity Cather's educational focus and career goals.

Cather's astonishing "prairie education," loaded heavily in the classics, would have a tremendous effect on her ideas not only about writing, but also about culture. This early work, centered so largely in language and literature, would shape her beliefs

about the humanities as an anchor. Cather would write later of the desire for education in those early days:

I think that the thirst for knowledge must have been partly a homesickness for other things and deeper associations natural to warm-blooded young people who grow up in a new community, where the fields are naked and the houses small and crowded, and the struggle for existence is very hard. The bleakness all about them made them eager for the beauty of the human story. In those days the country boys wanted to read the Aeneid and the Odyssey; they had no desire to do shop work or to study stock-farming all day . . . Some of them wanted to be scholars, and they were willing to pay everything that youth can pay. ("The Education You Have to Fight For" 70)

What Cather had learned about teachers and education in Lincoln would become valuable lessons when she herself became an English teacher in Pittsburgh. From the beginning, Cather made an impression that many of her students would not forget. Her entire approach to teaching was based on beliefs she had been shaping for years, heavily influenced by those who had taught her. Her interest in and emphasis upon literature and the classics supported her sense that education must do more than enable us to make money. Her own consuming love of the classics would doubtless place her at odds with some current educational trends which argue for more "relevant" curriculum. One of her students wrote of this concern: "She tried to impress her own high ideals upon us, and taught us to avoid the tawdry at all costs" (Byrne and Snyder 50). To Cather, the "tawdry" was everywhere; and it was threatening. Cather wrote in 1923 that

The classics, the humanities are having their dark hour. They are in eclipse. But the classics have a way of revenging themselves. One may . . . hope that the children, or the grandchildren . . . will go back to the old sources of culture and wisdom — not as a duty, but with burning desire. ("Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" 7)

In addition to her belief in the importance of the humanities as a cornerstone of her educational philosophy, Cather exhibited deep concern for her students. Former students report their affection for her. Frances Kelly suggests that "Everyone seemed to know she was really interested in him or her" (Byrne and Snyder 55). C. H. Klingensmith recalled Cather from Allegheny High School, saying, "She seemed to take an interest in my work. We got along real well" (Letter to Ruth Crone). Though Klingensmith

(Continued on page 66)

## EDUCATION IN THE PARISH

(Continued)

dropped out of high school, Byrne and Snyder report that he was a student of some ability, who cared "only for baseball and his English class" (Byrne and Snyder 61). Bruno Merker recalled her "no-nonsense" approach in the classroom and credited Cather with his success as an English student at the University of Pittsburgh (60). Even students who were not in her class wish they had been. Josephine Anderson regrets "that I was not in her class as I have been one of her great admirers, one who has bought, paid for, and read every one of her books" (Letter, 15 May 1967).

Cather's relationships with her students lasted for years, in much the same way she remained close to her own teachers. Fred Otte writes of remembering her birthday every year and her comic threat if he were ever to reveal the date of her birth (6). Another of her students, Norman Foerster, would become a writer and a critic himself. Cather and Foerster corresponded for years, he asking for and she giving advice. Remembering Edith Lewis' comments about her letters to the Goudys, we have a sense of Cather coming full circle and writing the same kind of letters to her students that her teachers had written to her. But these teaching years do more than illustrate her concern for students and cement her philosophy about the importance of education.

Her methodology suggests sound, modern educational practice. One of Cather's brightest students, Phyllis Hutchinson, describes the typical English class experience:

English in elementary school had been limited to grammar drills, parsing words and diagramming sentences. By the time a pupil reached ninth grade, he was supposed to know how to write grammatically, but the world of literature was mostly unknown. I think Miss Cather reveled in opening up the *Realms of Gold* to us and in stimulating our imaginations with her own enthusiasm . . . (Hutchinson 264)

Cather was the first teacher, Hutchinson goes on to say, "to give us a list of books for summer reading" (265). In 1929 Cather would explain why:

I think we should all, in our school days, be given a chance at Shakespeare, Milton, Fielding, Jane Austen — coming down as late as Thackeray, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy . . . I mean that students can be "exposed," so to speak, to the classics. If the germ "takes," in very few, it will develop and give them a great deal of pleasure in life. And those who do not catch the infection will certainly not be at all harmed. (qtd. in Bohlke 191)

Cather wanted her students to understand how language worked, so she taught them prosody. She also used her knowledge of Latin to help her students learn vocabulary words. Most compelling, however, are Cather's theories regarding the teaching of

composition. Cather believed in the effectiveness of frequent writing experiences. Phyllis Hutchinson recalls:

She knew the only way to learn was to write, and she set us to writing themes, one every class period, usually in the first ten to fifteen minutes of the class period. We did not know until we came to class what subjects she would assign. They were simple subjects like "My First Party," "An Italian Fruit Stand," "My Favorite Play . . ." (264)

This was a technique she had learned very well under Herbert Bates' instruction in his daily theme class (Letter, 10 September 1943).

Cather also advised her students to write out of their own experiences (Byrne and Snyder 56). Cather would remark in 1915 that "The young writer must learn to deal with subjects he really knows about. No matter how commonplace a subject may be, if it is one with which the author is thoroughly familiar it makes a much better story than the purely imaginal" (qtd. in Bohlke 15).

Cather expressed her own idea of what constituted excellence in teaching in 1939, some thirty-three



*CATHER SECOND HOME — RED CLOUD*  
On the dresser in Willa's room are hand-colored photographs of Charles and Virginia.

— Photo by Nancy H. Lang



years after she had herself exhibited these same characteristics and nearly fifty years after encountering these same traits in her own teachers:

While I do not believe that English literature can be "taught" in the sense that Latin can be taught, I know from experience that an instructor who is really steeped in his subject, who loves both literature and life, can, by merely expressing his own honest enthusiasm, or his honest objections, have a great influence on young people. (qtd. in Bohlke 139)

The faces of Miss King and the Goudys and Ebenezer Hunt and Herbert Bates are clear here. Cather wanted to be the sort of teacher who opened doors for her students as these teachers had done for her. We see how important teachers had been in Cather's life experience by the frequency with which they appear in her work.

Joan Crane's bibliography lists 62 works of short fiction in the canon. Teachers appear in or are referred to in 19 of those pieces. Seven of those short works contain important statements or definitions concerning teachers and/or education. In her twelve novels, nine of those deal with teachers and/or education in significant ways. Cather often uses teachers as spokespersons for her major ideas. They may be both participants and onlookers, and their professional responsibilities may be critical to Cather themes or mere coincidence. The frequency of their appearance demonstrates Cather's realization of the importance of teachers in shaping human beings, beginning first of all with herself. The power to influence is heavily laden with responsibility in Cather's beliefs, and effective teachers in Cather's fiction share the same strength as those in her life: knowledge of subject matter, the ability to recognize and nurture individual talent, respect for student dignity, and the desire to pass on something precious. Like Cather herself, her characters are often wide open to the possibilities education offers, no matter where that education may originate, and eventually, Cather's definition of education emerges through her teacher-portraits. The student-teacher relationship as seen in Cather's work changes, but ultimately it emerges as the most intimate relationship about which she writes. The student-teacher figures personify her own fears and aspirations. It is a relationship in which Cather invested herself deeply. We are often able to define a character's personality by examining his/her attitude toward education. It is not possible to discuss all of Cather's teachers today. But I would like to offer several representative examples to illustrate these ideas.

Aunt Georgiana from "A Wagner Matinee" is one of Cather's earliest teacher portraits. She not only teaches Clark music, but as he suggests, "It was to her, at her ironing or mending, that I read my first Shakespeare, and her old textbook on mythology was the first that ever came into my empty hands" (*Collected Short Fiction* 237). Aunt Georgiana opens doors for Clark, as Marilyn Arnold suggests, that were forever closed for her (*Short Fiction* 58).

In "The Sculptor's Funeral," Cather gives us a different perspective. Harvey Merrick is criticized when his student brings his teacher's body home for burial in Sand City. Here, in a brutal portrayal of small-town attitudes toward art and education, Merrick, a world famous sculptor, is criticized for his interest in art and education, branded unmanly, irresponsible, and even alcoholic. Clearly Cather recognizes what for some is a prevailing attitude toward art and the artist, toward education and the educated.

*O Pioneers!* was Cather's first novel which dealt with the material she knew so well, and also the first novel which introduced the theme of the importance of education to the pioneers. Cather will return to this idea in *My Ántonia*: education is that which gives immigrant peoples far greater opportunity than was possible in their own countries. As Alexandra says of Emil: "He's going to have a chance, a whole chance, that's what I've worked for" (117).

One of Cather's most deeply realized teachers is Andor Harsanyi from *The Song of the Lark*. He recognizes quickly that Thea is far from ordinary. Harsanyi sees in Thea something he hasn't seen often, and while he doesn't always know what to do about it, he knows it is a gift to be nurtured and cherished. For Harsanyi, as for many teachers, Thea is a stimulus to his teaching, bringing out the best in himself. By sharp contrast, Madison Bowers represents everything a teacher should not be: he is greedy, cold and bitter. As Harsanyi says, he has "the soul of a shrimp" (271), and because of that there will never be any real relationship between Bowers and Thea. For Thea and for Cather personally, the personal contact was an important element in their ability to learn. The need for that "infallible understanding" was clear.

One of Cather's most sympathetic teachers is Gaston Cleric. Most biographers believe that much of Cather's own experience is present in her description of Jim's university years. Cleric fulfills many of Cather's most cherished teacher functions: introducing the "world of ideas," believing in the importance of the humanities, bringing the long ago and far away very close, preserving the past through a classical education. Cather clearly identifies here with the student figure. Cleric is able to recognize Jim's weaknesses and his strengths, and cares deeply about his student, advising him to go away and begin his studies again, because, as he advises Jim, "You won't recover yourself while you are playing about with this handsome Norwegian . . ." (289). It is in this intimacy of infallible understanding that Cather invested so much of herself.

Another of Cather's important statements about education comes in *One of Ours*. Here Cather uses education to contrast the grasping materialism which so concerned her. Claude finds himself in sharp opposition to his father and brother, more interested in history than in business. When he transfers to the state university from the religious college he had

(Continued on page 68)

## EDUCATION IN THE PARISH

(Continued)

been attending, he, like Jim Burden, experiences a great awakening. When Claude turns in his final paper, the professor tells him, "You've got a good deal out of your course altogether, haven't you? I'll be interested to see what you do next year. Your work has been very satisfactory to me" (58). Much to Claude's delight the professor does not leave his paper on the table with the others, but takes it with him. So much of what happens in this scene is so right — in terms of Cather's own experiences, as well as in the timeless way that good teachers everywhere invest in their own students. The professor has validated for Claude (as Hunt and Bates had done for Cather) that he is worthy, that what he writes has value, and that what he thinks is important.

If Cather assumes the student's point of view in *My Antonia*, she trades places in *The Professor's House*. St. Peter has been a teacher all of his adult life and from the start, he has recognized and sustained the talents and efforts of gifted students, and in turn, is stirred by the possibilities such student-teacher encounters can provoke. He loves his subject matter, and as we often see in Cather's own life and work, teachers who understand the joy of learning because they are themselves active learners, make a tremendous difference in their students.

Personality, as we have often seen, is at the heart of student-teacher relationships, and St. Peter finds a student with whom he has an infallible understanding in Tom Outland. It is here that the depth of intimacy between student and teacher becomes clear. While St. Peter's relationships with his own family are vaguely troubling, it is with his finest student that St. Peter feels most at home. Outland brings out in St. Peter everything he has worked for, becoming St. Peter's touchstone, a living example of all that can be good in education and learning. It is because of this relationship with Outland that St. Peter is able to come to terms with the life he has lost. Through Tom's loss of the Cliff City, St. Peter has learned that one can lose the things most valued and still take hold of what remains. What is left may not be perfect, but it is all each has. Professor and student, intimately connected through subject matter, circumstance, but most significantly, personality, achieve a profoundly poignant relationship.

In "Old Mrs. Harris," education plays a central role. Young Vickie Templeton wants to go to college, partly because she's very bright, partly because she wants to escape, but also for reasons she can't quite verbalize. When her neighbor, Mr. Rosen, asks her why she wants to go to college, her only answer is "to learn."

"But why do you want to learn? What do you want to do with it?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess."

"Then what do you want it for?"

"I don't know. I just want it." (158)

Mr. Rosen understands: "Then if you want it without any purpose at all, you will not be disappointed" (158). He writes down for her the famous quote by Michelet: "The end is nothing, the road is all." Vickie's desire to go to college without knowing why suggests what was for Cather, an essential truth — to learn for the sake of learning, to know for the sake of knowing.

There are other teachers, of course. But these few examples illustrate Cather's typical uses of teachers. They exemplify the qualities Cather admired in her own good teachers as well as the qualities she demonstrated as a teacher in Pittsburgh. But perhaps even more significantly than providing a description of Cather's teachers, the fiction demonstrates the importance of education to Cather's philosophy

Education in Cather's fiction does not guarantee happiness nor even fulfillment. But what does happen is a kind of breakthrough to the self, a better understanding of one's position in the world and society. Sometimes such knowledge, such understanding is painful. Thea agonizes over what she doesn't know, even as she is in the process of gulping down what Harsanyi teaches. Often, for Cather's students, education is connected not just to learning a trade, but to allowing students to comprehend more clearly the relationship of past and present. Jim Burden becomes a lawyer, although that is not the aspect of his education which we see as most significant. Jim becomes educated as he understands the past (through his study of the classics) and its relationship to his present (through his memories of Antonia and Lena and Black Hawk). Niel Herbert studies architecture, but it is not as an architect that we see him. What we understand is that Niel, like Captain Forrester (and unlike Ivy Peters) longs to be a builder, one who, in modern America, will care more about preserving the past than destroying it. Tom Outland is an engineer, but even though his work leads to wealth and scientific advancement, it is not as an engineer that Tom Outland's value to us is most significant. When Tom first appears on St. Peter's doorstep, he carries ancient artifacts and pots from the Cliff City. He understands their importance, and it is in this context that we value Tom. His independent study of Latin on the mesa makes clear the role that education can play not just in earning a living or making money, but in defining the kind of people we choose to become. In the best of these relationships, both student and teacher galvanize each other into a fuller, more productive, and often more satisfying life.

Education also allowed Cather to develop an intimacy with texts, teachers, and audience. Cather read on her own, of course, and while at the University, Cather discovered how to use what she had learned, and she learned how to juxtapose unlikely people and events, independent of historical parameters. She could later, for example, place Thea in Panther Canyon and make clear the connection between bits of ancient pottery and Thea's striving for artistic fulfillment and success in the world of music.

Cather's study at the University enabled her to make such leaps, to cross such timelines. In learning the past, she achieved a kind of freedom from it. She learned that what one knows of the past can co-exist with the present, the former holding enormous power to enlighten and illuminate. This understanding provided an intimacy with her texts, an "infallible understanding," not only of what she read, but a recognition of where each text fit into the mosaic of her own experience.

Cather was also fortunate to achieve a kind of intimacy with her teachers. Those teachers supported her drive for independence and also helped build intensely personal relationships. Her attempts to please those who had faith in her lasted as long as her teachers lived. The idea of being "infallibly understood" was a singularly important description of Cather's idea of the student-teacher relationship: The intellectual intimacy which in the best scenarios students and teachers could achieve was an almost sacred bond in which feelings could be shared and ideas developed unobstructed by the subjective demands of family or friendship. Cather was, of course, fond of her teachers. Perhaps she even felt for them a kind of love. But this was not the same kind of relationship she had with family or her closest friends. Her teachers were her teachers — and that was enough. They gave to her without expectation of repayment or gratitude. This openness and honesty lends itself to a frankness which in other relationships is difficult to achieve.

It was as a writer that Cather could be both student and teacher. Clearly Cather felt very strongly the need for contact with her audience, for her books to reach out to her readers. Cather had established early in the canon her attitude toward students and teachers, and she counted on the allusive nature of the student-teacher relationship to express her most profound convictions. In establishing an intimacy with her readers, Cather could count on them to bring to a reading of her work a mindset which insured their understanding and loyalty, in the same way that a student understands a teacher's methodology and philosophy and comes to feel comfortable with the work they do together. In short, Cather trusted her readers to understand and recognize certain basic premises which permeated her work, one of which was her belief in education as an important aspect in the lives of human beings.

Cather was very modern in how she saw the value of education. We need education, she seems to suggest, in order to live as well as to make a living, in order to think as well as to know, in order to dream as



**CATHER SECOND HOME — RED CLOUD**

*Virginia Cather's bedroom is located on the second floor on the northeast side of the Second Home.*

— Photo by Nancy H. Lang

well as to hope. Education was a matter of bone-deep conviction in the issues that drove her artistic as well as her personal life: her compassion for human beings, her concern for integrity in the face of twentieth-century materialists, her obsession with time and youth. Education in Cather is not only a religion, it is an art, like writing itself, a journey whose destination is never reached. For Cather's students, teachers, and readers alike, education constantly evolves, always sustaining, always providing the means for grappling with the issues of life which astonish and confound us.

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(Continued on page 70)



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**CATHER SECOND HOME — RED CLOUD**

*Margie's room, high and under the eaves in the far west end of the house, holds a certain romance not felt in the other rooms. The headboard was made of what was left of the short fence at the back of the property. The tall fence which she requested Mr. Cather build has been rebuilt with much of the original material.*

— Photo by Nancy H. Lang

**Phillips Takes Position  
with  
University of Nebraska  
Foundation**

Harriett DeLay



*Pat Phillips*

After nearly two decades of serving as executive director of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Pat Phillips has resigned to accept a position as assistant director of development with the University of Nebraska Foundation. More specifically, Pat will be working for the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha.

Phillips began working part time at WCPM in 1978 as Mildred R. Bennett's assistant and began as director two years later following Mrs. Bennett's death.

"I feel that I've had the best of jobs," Pat shared in retrospect. "The position has truly been my 'window to the world' and in working with people on state and national levels, I've discovered the warmth, human concern and similarities that connect people."

Her work with WCPM exposed Phillips to the observations made by first-time visitors to Red Cloud.

**Annual  
Spring Conference**

**5-6 MAY 2000**  
Red Cloud

**THEME:**

Willa Cather:  
Writing for the 21st Century

**Banquet Speaker**  
**DICK CAVETT**

## **Music in Willa Cather's Fiction**

by Richard Giannone

Five mint-condition copies of Dr. Giannone's seminal work, first published in 1968 and now out of print, have been donated to the WCPM & EF by the author and are available for sale. Cost is \$60, plus a \$40 gift to the Opera House Restoration Fund. If you already have a copy, consider buying one to give to your favorite library. Interested parties contact Steve Ryan at the WCPM & EF.

Cloth. 254 pages.

## **PHILLIPS TAKES POSITION WITH UNIVERSITY**

(Continued)

"Remarks were typical in comments of how this town and area surpass peoples' expectations. It seems as though Red Cloud 'speaks' to people and they can appreciate Cather's words with a deeper understanding."

"I'm excited at the new challenge and a little sad to be leaving too," Pat said.

Pat will be working with deans and faculties in the development of programs within the medical communities. She began her new position October 18.

"I'll miss Red Cloud and certainly my associations with WCPM. I've been fortunate to have worked with such special employees and have made long-term friendships. Judy Graning, for example, has been with the organization for 20 years."

In praising her nucleus of employees, Pat noted that she was leaving the organization in capable hands. "I'm very happy to have Steve Ryan aboard WCPM too." Ryan, foundation archivist and education director, began his association at WCPM last January.

"Pat has worked so long at WCPM, it is hard to imagine the foundation without her. She will be missed. I have enjoyed working with her," offered Dr. Ryan in recognition of Pat's dedication.

Pat concluded with the thought that if she had a dream for Red Cloud it would be to develop its potential by embracing tourism. "This will make for a big, long future."

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from *The Red Cloud Chief*

## **Cather at ALA**

Ann Romines

The Willa Cather Society sponsored two sessions at the tenth annual American Literature Association conference, held in Baltimore, Maryland, on 27-30, May, 1999. "New Developments in Cather Studies," chaired by Michael Peterman of Trent University, featured two well-known Cather scholars, Marilee Lindemann of the University of Maryland and Robert Thacker of St. Lawrence University, and two graduate student scholars, Mark Heineke of George Washington University and Leona Sevick of the University of Maryland. Lindemann's "Queering Cather/Cather's Queerings" offered a fresh look at "The Old Beauty," while Thacker discussed "Making a Literary Career: Willa Cather and Reviewers." Heineke's paper, drawn from a recently completed M.A. thesis, was "Through the Eyes of Jim Burden: Masculinity and Class in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," and Sevick discussed the topic of her dissertation-in-process, concentrating on *Obscure Destinies* in "Antimodernism and the Conflicts of Culture: Willa Cather's Short and Long Fiction."

The second Cather session, chaired by Ann Romines of George Washington University, was a roundtable discussion with editors of Willa Cather Scholarly Editions and provided an opportunity for editors to assess what the five volumes of the Edition now published have achieved and the issues involved in producing forthcoming volumes. Participants included Susan Rosowski, General Editor of the Edition, and Charles Mignon, textual editor for several volumes, both from the University of Nebraska. Volume editors included Richard Harris of the Webb Institute (*One of Ours*), Ann Moseley of Texas A & M-Commerce (*The Song of the Lark*), Tom Quirk of the University of Missouri (*Alexander's Bridge*), and Romines (*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*). Both sessions were well attended and featured lively discussion. Later that afternoon, Cather scholars continued their talk at an informal social sponsored by the WCPM.

## **Acknowledgment**

Editorial oversight left several photographs unacknowledged in the Summer 1999 *Newsletter and Review* (Vol. XLIII, No. 1). The photographs of Sen. Bob Kerrey and others on pages 16, 18, 19 and 20 are courtesy of *The Red Cloud Chief*. The *N & R* thanks co-publishers Doug and Charlene Hoschouer and regrets the omission.

— SR

## Connors Celebrates 40th Anniversary of Visiting Red Cloud

Don E. Connors

April can bring both beauty and bounty to Nebraska. It did for us April 26, 1959.

A member of the English department staff at Central High School in Omaha, I taught a couple of classes of junior English. Those classes read Willa Cather's novel, *My Ántonia*. Universally, they seemed to enjoy the novel. I had said to my classes I thought it would be a fine experience to see the places in Webster County Miss Cather wrote about.

A colleague of mine on the English Department staff, Miss Josephine Frisbie, spent her youth in the Red Cloud area. I made inquiry of her about going to Red Cloud. She suggested I write Mrs. Mildred R. Bennett, asking her about the possibility of a visit by some of my students and me. Mrs. Bennett, the driving force behind the founding of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, replied immediately to my inquiry. I later learned that prompt replies and cooperation represented hallmarks of Mrs. Bennett.

Several car loads of us left Central High School very early that Sunday morning, headed, in pre-Interstate days, for Red Cloud, 200 miles away.

Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Miriam Mountford met us at a small cafe near the Red Cloud depot, the Beanery. Mrs. Mountford also served on the Board of Governors of the Cather Foundation.

These two ladies had invited Mary Miner Creighton and Carrie Miner Sherwood to have lunch with us. The Miner family served as the prototype of the Harling family in Miss Cather's novel. Mrs. Sherwood, the oldest daughter, served as the prototype for Frances Harling. (Mrs. Sherwood became one of the original eight people who founded the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial.)

Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Mountford had also arranged for an older, small bus for us to tour in. Bruce Bean drove us. It turns out that our group made the first bus tour of Catherland, something done commonly since that time. Because we had a warm day, Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Mountford had purchased a case of soda for us to drink on the bus tour.

We found it a delight to see the clay shelving draws of which Cather wrote. My mind's eye still records two of the students, Kay Showell and Tony Abbot, running hand in hand near a draw on the George Cather farm, the setting for *One of Ours*. We saw the location where Grandfather and Grandmother Burden of the novel homesteaded. The location of the suicide burial place of Mr. Shimerda made quite an impression.

After we had visited Ántonia's farm, we drove a mile north to the burial site of Ántonia and her husband, Anna and John Pavelka.

Still ringing in my ear lodges a comment by Tony Abbot at the little Cloverton cemetery. He said, "I wish we hadn't stopped here." When I asked him why he felt that way, he replied, "It makes it all seem so final."

When we returned to Red Cloud, we visited Mrs. Carrie Miner Sherwood in her home. She had all the first editions of Miss Cather's works and inscriptions in each one. The inscription in *My Ántonia* read, "In memory of old friends whose portraits are sketched in this book." Miss Cather had formally dedicated the novel "To Carrie and Irene Miner, in memory of affections old and true." She also had one of the original Benda illustrations which appeared in the novel.

With too much swiftness, the day flew by. We made the long trek back to Omaha, leaving Red Cloud much later than we had planned.

When we arrived at Central High School, we all felt a combination of exhaustion and exhilaration.

I've had contact with Tony Abbot in the recent years, and last year Larry Sampier came to Red Cloud during Spring Conference time.

The 26th of April in 1959 served as a beautiful and bountiful time for me. In Mildred Bennett I had the best friend anyone could ever have. And I have had a great time every year in Red Cloud since 1959, seeing the places, doing research, and enjoying the people of Red Cloud.

As did Miss Cather, I resist change. I miss all the people whom I've known and respected over the past 40 years.

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### The International Cather Seminar 2000 *Willa Cather's Environmental Imagination*

17-24 JUNE 2000

Lied Conference Center  
Arbor Day Farm  
Nebraska City

[www.unl.edu/cather\\_seminar](http://www.unl.edu/cather_seminar)



## From the Director



Steve Ryan

☐ We are saddened to have Pat Phillips leaving us to take a position with the University of Nebraska Foundation. We are disappointed to lose her, but are happy for her in the new opportunity she has found. We wish you all the best, Pat.

☐ It was good to see a number of you at the Nebraska Literature Festival at Chadron State College September 17-18. The conference was every bit as enjoyable as the late-summer trip to the Panhandle.

Sue Maher, Matt Hokom, and Steve Shively comprised a Cather panel which addressed the conference's theme of "Crossing Borders: Geographical, Ethnic, and Literary Frontiers in Plains Literature." Sue Maher, president-elect of the WLA and from the women's and environmental studies programs at UN-O, spoke of gender crossing in Cather, noting that Cather's heroines demonstrate Virginia Wolff's point that true genius is androgynous, involving a certain "porousness" between male and female. Cather protagonists Alexandra, Antonia and Thea, for example, are dynamic figures capable of embracing their destiny the way a man does. Cather likewise presents credible sensitive and sympathetic male characters.

Matt Hokom flashed his freshly minted UN-L doctoral degree in a discussion of geographical borders in Cather, focusing on *My Antonia*. Antonia is presented as paradigmatically Nebraskan, capturing "the country, the conditions, the whole adventure" of the pioneer Divide — and yet she has come from somewhere else. *My Antonia* is a gallery of immigrants. Cather understood the immigrant experience, Matt noted, for she was an immigrant herself.

Steve Shively, newly arrived at Northwest Missouri State, concentrated on characters who were formed in Nebraska (or neighboring Kansas) and go elsewhere, emigrating from the plains environment. Steve discussed a wide range of characters, from Harvey Merrick to Thea Kronborg to Claude Wheeler and Lucy Gayheart.

The panel's presentation was recorded and will be broadcast at some future date on Nebraska Public Radio's Sunday afternoon humanities program.

☐ On Monday, October 4, Jay Yost and Wade Leak hosted a fundraiser for the Opera House restoration project in New York City. The event was held in the social suites of the Citibank corporate headquarters in midtown Manhattan. We enjoyed a marvelous

evening, highlighted by readings from Cather by Dick Cavett and Broadway award-winning actress Kathleen Chalfant. It was gratifying to find so many devotees of Cather back East. The Foundation is very grateful to Jay and Wade for a truly special occasion.

I had visited F. Scott Fitzgerald's "slender riotous island" before, but had never really experienced the "racy, adventurous feel of it at night" until a madcap taxicab ride through Manhattan's rain-slicked streets with Pat Phillips and Betty Kort and the latter's oversized, uncooperative umbrella.

As we go to press we look forward to other fundraisers in Kearney, Grand Island and Lincoln.

☐ Preparations are well under way for the Eighth International Seminar next June in Nebraska City, and the Teachers' Institute preceding it.

☐ Bob Thacker of St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, paid an autumn visit to Red Cloud, spending several days in the archives researching Cather's days in Pittsburgh.

☐ The University of Nebraska at Kearney plans to host a Cather festival in the fall of 2000. Further information will be forthcoming.

☐ One of the delights of the fall has been the completion of the first major phase of the renovation of the Second Cather Home by its owners, Doug and Charlene Hoschouer. They consulted with Helen Cather Southwick, Willa's niece now living in Utah, throughout the project. The Cather family moved into the home in 1903.

The Hoschouers treated the WCPM staff to a delicious soup dinner and tour on November third. The home is beautiful; photographs can be found throughout this issue.

The Hoschouers are pleased to give tours to small groups for a small fee. It is best to make arrangements in advance by leaving a message at their home number, (402) 746-3183.

### **Song of the Lark to Air Later**

*Mobil Masterpiece Theatre's American Collection* production of *Song of the Lark*, originally scheduled for broadcast in January, will now be aired sometime in the fall. No date had been announced at press time.

# OBJECT LESSONS

Katy Cardinal  
WCPM Staff Member

## THE BISHOP'S APRICOT

Resting on the fireplace mantel at the Garber bank in Red Cloud is an original color woodblock print of a gnarled fruit tree in full bloom. It isn't very big — smaller than a standard sheet of typing paper — and is surrounded by a much larger frame. One cannot look at it without thinking of Spring. The colors are a mixture of grayed greens and blues, contrasted by thick peach-colored blossoms and black tree bark. Somehow, it invites the viewer to step into the picture.

The little woodblock is routinely ignored by most visitors to the bank. Based on its title, "The Bishop's Apricot," the staff assumed that the artist was inspired by Cather's novel *Death*

*Comes for the Archbishop*, where she describes in detail the Archbishop's discovery of a special tree outside Santa Fe while traveling to visit a mission:

"... he found a little Mexican house and a garden shaded by an apricot tree of such great size as he had never seen before. It had two trunks, each of them thicker than a man's body, and though evidently very old, it was full of fruit. . . . The old Mexican who lived there said the tree must be two hundred years old. . . ." (263-4)

Last June, something happened that raised questions about the history of the print. A visitor from Santa Fe recognized it immediately and stressed both the value and good fortune of having this particular example of "his" work, referring to the unfamiliar artist's signature.

The artist's name is Gustave Baumann. Why the print was considered valuable remained a mystery for several months. The search for more information led

back to Santa Fe and to an art gallery in California that owns a collection of his work from his estate.

Gustave Baumann came to the United States at age ten from Magdeburg, Germany. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and specialized in wood carving at the Kunstgewerbe Schule in Munich. In

1918 he moved to Santa Fe and worked there until his death in 1971.

His woodcuts are included in the permanent collections of several major museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe, the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, and The Annex Galleries in Santa Monica, California.



There have been traveling exhibits of his art across the country featuring the theme "Hands of a Craftsman, Heart of an Artist." This theme is based on a watermark design that he used, a stylized hand inside a heart, which he placed in the center of his signature at the bottom of his prints.



Gustave Baumann shunned the commercial art galleries and art groups in Santa Fe. He sold his work from his house and took no students. Visitors were not allowed in his studio. In 1925 he married Jane Devereux Henderson, an actress who had studied opera in Paris where she sang with the *Opera Comique*. The Baumanns collaborated on theater projects for the community, including puppet shows for children. Their hand-carved marionette

collection is on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe.

The "Bishop's Apricot" was printed in 1920, seven years *before* Cather's novel. We can only guess whether the Baumanns knew her in New Mexico while she was working on the research for the book. It is documented that Willa Cather was invited to stay at the Bishop's Lodge outside of Santa Fe to review the restoration work on Archbishop Lamy's Chapel in July of 1928. Present visitors to the site describe seeing a very old preserved tree. It would appear that somewhere along the way both artist and writer may have been inspired to immortalize the memory of the same tree in their work.

The woodcut on the mantel at the Garber bank was donated in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen D. Day by Louise Aldrich Nixon of Lincoln, Nebraska, in May of 1975. A letter from Louise Aldrich Nixon to Mildred Bennett states the value of the donation as \$75 plus shipping. Daniel Lieno of The Annex Galleries in Santa Rosa, California, notes that Gustave Baumann's pieces have increased significantly in value over the years.

Mr. Lieno also mentioned that "The Bishop's Apricot" had been used for the design of a poster for the Santa Fe Opera. The woodcut print is a favorite in the Santa Fe area. It is 79 years old. On your next visit to Red Cloud, look for it at the Garber bank.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

A special thanks to Sally Hyer, Historic Santa Fe Foundation board member, for her help in researching the life of Gustave Baumann, and also for her discerning eye in recognizing his work while visiting the WCPM.

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*When [Marie] went out into the dark kitchen to fix her plants for the night,  
she used to stand by the window and look out at the white fields,  
or watch the currents of snow whirling over the orchard.  
She seemed to feel the weight of all the snow that lay down there.*

*The branches had become so hard  
that they wounded your hand if you but tried to break a twig.*

*And yet, down under the frozen crusts,  
at the roots of the trees, the secret of life was still safe,*

*warm as the blood in one's heart; and  
the spring would come again!*

*Oh, it would come again!*

*"Winter Memories," O Pioneers!*



## WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

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*It seemed as if  
 there were a lark on every fence post,  
 singing for everything  
 that was dumb.*

ONE OF OURS

### 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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