

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXXIII, No. 4

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA



. . . March, 1955 with five of the founding  
Governors of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial.  
Pictured, left to right, are Harry Obitz, Mildred  
Bennett, Frank O'Rourke, Carrie Miner Sher-  
wood, Helen Obitz and Jennie Miner Reiher. (Not  
pictured are Josephine Frisbie and Dr. L. V.  
Jacks.)

IN MEMORIAM  
**MILDRED  
R. BENNETT**

FOUNDER  
CATHER BIOGRAPHER  
SCHOLAR  
FRIEND

SEPTEMBER 8, 1909  
NOVEMBER 7, 1989

## Mildred R. Bennett . . .

"passed from the School of Time into  
the Academy of Eternity"<sup>1</sup> on Tues-  
day, November 7, 1989 at Red Cloud. This newsletter is lovingly dedicated to  
Mildred, whose open arms have welcomed everyone to Red Cloud and the study  
and enjoyment of "the world of Willa Cather."

A special memorial service is planned at the Grace Episcopal Church in Red  
Cloud at 8:00 a.m., Sunday, May 6, following the annual Spring Conference Day.

Mildred's "graduation" ceremony (her outlook on her own death) was given  
from the Congregational Christian Church in Red Cloud on Friday, November 10,  
by the Reverends Steve Eldred and Kenneth Doughman.

<sup>1</sup> From the obituary written by Dorothy Minchin-Comm, *Red Cloud Chief*, November 16, 1989.



... September 23, 1989 at the special birthday luncheon given Mildred by the Board of Governors. The plaque, for

both the Bennetts, reads: "For Mildred and Wilbur Bennett, founders of the WCPM in grateful appreciation from the Board of Governors and the people of Nebraska. 'Where there is great love, there are always miracles.'"

## The Faces of Mildred . . .

... October 10, 1989, loving the gift of letters from many friends, worldwide. This was the Board's surprise gift which was to have been presented at the Western Literature Association meeting in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in celebration of her 80th birthday and the WLA Distinguished Scholarly Achievement Award.



Photographs courtesy of Dr. W. K. Bennett, Beverly Cooper, Antonette Turner (photo by Larry Lindgren), Nancy Picchi, Sue Rosowski, Pat Phillips and WCPM.

... October 12, daughter Alicia Bennett Engstrom receives Mildred's award at the WLA annual meeting in Coeur d'Alene. The award was presented by Ron Butler, Owensboro Community College, Owensboro, Kentucky.



... March, 1989 with Harriet Katz, director of fundraising for Ellis Island, at Ellis Island.



... 1983 at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan where they conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. Pictured with Mildred are Prof. Merlene Ogden and Andrews University President, Dr. Smoot.

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*“You should never take someone’s song away from them. You should sing it with them. We should all sing together.”*

– 1989, Mildred Bennett to Joel Geyer, Nebraska Public Television interview

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... 1985 with friends on the European trip which retraced Willa Cather’s trip of 1902.



... Spring Conference 1988. Conference theme was My Antonia. Mildred stands with the granddaughter, Antonette Turner, and the great granddaughter, Anna Marie Hoyt, of Annie Sadilek Pavelka (Antonía).





... the Bennetts as grandparents.  
Scott, Kristin and Jamie Engstrom.

*Dr. Bennett and Mildred,  
married for 55 years . . . .*



... as the parents of  
Dr. William G. Bennett  
(daughter Alicia shown elsewhere)



... 1981 with Maya  
Angelou, Spring Conference  
Speaker.

... May, 1987 with Julie Harris, Spring  
Conference Speaker.



... June 1987 with her first  
book, *The World of Willa  
Cather*, published in 1951.

... 1980 as panel participant at the Spring Conference. Pictured are  
Margaret Goodman-Malamuth, Mildred and Dr. A. L. Rowse from  
Oxford University, England, who was the Conference Guest Speaker.



## The Woman in Black

The following story by Willa Cather was discovered by Mildred Bennett more than twenty years ago in *The Home Monthly*, November, 1896. Cather edited *The Home Monthly* from June, 1896 to September, 1897. From Mrs. Bennett, "It purports to be written by Hamilton Ormsbee but Willa Cather admitted she had written much of that magazine under pen names . . . Hamilton was the name she chose in *The Professor's House* and Marian Ormsby was the maiden name of Mrs. Forrester in *A Lost Lady*. Cather did that with names.

"In addition George and Helen Seibel both thought Willa Cather had written it and so did her sister Elsie Cather." (from a letter to the Editor of *Prairie Schooner*, June 9, 1989.)

It was a gala night in Newark. The Marasquin English Opera Company was to open its season there in Faust. Marasquin never had sung and never could sing in any language but Italian, but his Mephistopheles was a great impersonation and his company was more nearly English than are most of those which sing under that appellation. Mitchell, the tenor, was a Nantucket Yankee; Neumann, the baritone, was born in Oshkosh, where his father owned a brewery; the contralto's English had a Gallic twist to it; Alice Titus, Mitchell's wife, who had sung Marguerite to his Faust for fifteen years, was a Vermont girl, and Miss Evans, the girl who was to succeed the old favorite, came from Texarkana, and had courage, beauty and a voice. Hers was the only new face. The others were established favorites and Newark had turned out to do them honor.

There were women without bonnets and wearing diamonds in two of the boxes. Half a dozen Newark men were in evening dress, and in the body of the house were knots of New Yorkers who had run over to give their friends an auspicious start on their new season.

Near the front sat a woman in a black gown with a little black hat, plain as a pikestaff but jaunty as a cock partridge in the spring. Her black hair was freely touched with gray and she was well past forty, but she was not old. Her face bore the unmistakable stamp of achievement, and she looked a mature woman of

fine health in the full ripeness and keenness of intellectual power. She bore herself easily and indifferently, as one accustomed to crowds. A little quickening of interest and a long and sweeping use of her glass as the curtain rose showed that she had come for the opera rather than for any social purpose.

The performance went quietly until the vision of Marguerite was shown. Scores of glasses were leveled at this picture, a sigh of admiration swept over the house and then a hearty round of applause, in recognition of the beauty of the new singer. The woman in black turned to the younger woman who accompanied her: "She has good points, but she doesn't make up well; her mouth —"

Just behind them a young girl attending her first opera exclaimed to her escort: "She is perfectly lovely! How can a girl look so much like an angel!"

The escort looked down with admiration into the flushed face and sparkling eyes. He was thirty and in evening dress.

"It's a fine chance for me to pay a compliment, Nellie," he murmured, "but I don't think I will. She is certainly pretty, but I'm afraid she will not make good the loss of Alice Titus. Alice is an old stager from farther back than I can remember and she positively had to stop singing last winter. Three or four women have tried to fill her place and have failed. Perhaps this girl may do better. Old Alice could sing, though."

The nostrils of the woman in black quivered, but the young man was too pleasantly absorbed to observe it. It was Nellie's first opera and he felt obliged to dispel her illusions as far as possible. That is one of the ways in which we take our revenge on youth. When Faust threw aside his student's cloak, appearing as a tall, dashing, handsome youth the escort leaned over Nellie and whispered: "He doesn't look as if he was the husband of a woman of fifty, does he?"

The woman in black did not hear that.

The Garden scene came and the new Marguerite trembled as she drew her spinning wheel in front of her to begin, "There was a King of Thule." Her voice was a little uncertain and she hesitated occasionally. Indeed, her singing was more like that of the real Marguerite than of an operatic prima donna. But the voice was fresh and true and

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## Thank You . . .

To those of you who have known already of Mildred's death, we thank you for your outpouring of love and concern.

One needn't know Mildred for long to develop a deep attachment, love, for her. Probably the most repeated comments have been, "she was always so nice to me" and "she always encouraged me."

Adjectives such as energetic, courageous, tenacious, warm, enthusiastic, thoughtful, encouraging, visionary, leader easily come to mind when thinking of Mildred.

We have lost a friend and supporter. Her inspiration, though, remains. And that to which she devoted half her life also remains. Each of us, in our own way, will work to continue what she began.

— Pat Phillips

there was in it a touch of that something which we call charm and which won her audience. The applause was so hearty that the girl blushed through her "make up" with pleasure. The woman in black sank back and sighed: "She is so young, so blessedly gloriously young."

The woman had recovered her critical attitude by the time the Jewel song was reached. Her glass followed every movement and her acute ear judged every intonation. While the house was applauding enthusiastically she whispered to her companion: "She is a nice girl and she tries, but she can't sing that and I don't believe she ever will. Did you hear her trill wobble? She missed two notes in one of her runs. It should have gone like this," and in brilliant, pearly little tones almost under her breath the speaker ran through one of the passages in which Marguerite vents her delight.

Soft as it was, the young man behind her heard the run. He looked at the singer's face and started. He glanced from the face to the gray hair and back again. He tried to remember all the things he had been saying and blushed deeply.

Presently Faust was singing his love. The woman in black leaned forward, her lips parted, her fingers unconsciously marking the time, then, as the tenor's fervor increased and his tone grew clearer and more vibrant, a flush overspread her face. As he ceased she beat her gloved hands together as loudly as she could.

A sympathetic look stole into the young man's eyes, and while the woman in black was wholly occupied with the stage he whispered softly to Nellie: "That woman in front of you is Alice Titus. She is Mitchell's wife and she has been blushing with pleasure at his singing. They sang lovers together for years and the company called them the turtle doves."

Nellie awoke from her dream. She glanced from the woman to the tenor and exclaimed incredulously, and louder than she knew: "She can't be Faust's wife. Why she is gray!"

The lips of the woman in black tightened, and the young man regretted his indiscretion. He tried to atone for it in the Church scene by praising the dramatic way Alice Titus had played that, but he knew that the singer understood the situation and the words stuck in his throat.

Meanwhile the success of the performance and of the new singer grew. Before the end was reached the members of the company had congratulated Miss Evans heartily upon her triumph. The last traces of the girl's nervousness disappeared. She walked as on clouds and in the final trio she poured forth such a flood of voice as she had never known that she possessed. The audience was stirred quite out of the Newark habit of putting on wraps during the last scene. It sat delighted and called out the singers after the final curtain had fallen. The New York men cried "Bravo!" loudly and the recall became an ovation. Alice Titus' companion leaned forward, waved her handkerchief, cried "Bravo!" and did what she could to stimulate the excitement. Somebody cried "Evans, Evans!" and Marasquin led forward the trembling but happy Marguerite.

Then the audience began to go out, but the woman in black sat still. Her lips were white, and when her companion rose she did not move. The other woman averted her face and busied herself with her wrap. At last the passage to the stage door was cleared and the woman in black rose heavily and walked slowly toward it.

She found Faust still in his stage clothes outside his dressing-room. The woman in black passed in without a word. Faust dismissed his dresser, entered and closed the door. His wife

was leaning on the back of a chair, sobbing. He raised her to his arms, saying softly: "There, darling, don't take it so desperately. Think of all the drudgery you escape by being out of the harness."

She still cried, nestling on his shoulder. Presently she raised her face, kissed him and said: "You're wonderfully good to me, Fred, but even your tenderness cannot disguise the fact that I'm gray. I was told of it to-night by a chit of a girl with pink cheeks."

The man's face flushed with anger and his wife hastened to add: "She did not mean any harm, dear, and she did not think I could hear. She was surprised into speaking too loudly when I was pointed out to her as your wife. She could not believe it, and I must say," with a rueful glance into the large dressing mirror, "that I can't blame her."

"Nonsense, dear. Of course it was only the make-up."

"O, I know all about that, and I know I could look twenty on the stage tomorrow. But for all that I would do every bit of my hard work over again for the youth of that little chit behind me. Time is more cruel to women than eternity can ever be."

## Call for Papers on Cather

★ ★ ★

First Annual  
American Literature  
Association  
Meeting

May 31-June 3,  
1990

San Diego, California

★ ★ ★

Address papers to  
Willa Cather Foundation  
by January 15, 1990

# MILDRED

By Heather V. Butler, November 11, 1989

Senior at Western Kentucky University at Bowling Green, Kentucky

Four days now — and  
the sensations of undisturbed sleep  
are alien, in some ways unwelcome.  
On the train I finally close my eyes  
to a sunrise so beautiful that  
it can be only Armageddon . . .  
or Nebraska, where the sky  
does its best to help you forget  
there are no trees. I do not forget.  
You loved to take me to the prairie  
because I would leap out of the car  
and run through half a mile  
of four-foot grasses — gathering  
ticks on my long skirt, scaring  
into flight the sleeping birds — then  
suddenly drop face down with awe,  
my arms and hair full of weeds;

you could not see me lying there  
listening to the absence of human contact,  
hearing only grass brushing against grass.  
(It sounds like clouds, engulfing you  
so completely that the sound seems to come  
from within)  
You stood with arms akimbo, chuckling  
to yourself for my enjoyment as my head  
popped up grinning from the void.  
You never called me back, but patiently  
hunted wildflowers to show me later  
(and always found my favorite);  
Now I am learning the names of those flowers  
because you can't remind me.  
You taught me to love more than a flat land  
with no trees.

## The Fourth National Seminar on Willa Cather *Willa Cather:*

### *Multiple Traditions of American Culture*

JUNE 16-23, 1990

Santa Fe, New Mexico

#### Keynote Speakers:

**N. SCOTT MOMADAY** — Pulitzer-prize winning American Indian (Kiowa) novelist, poet, and critic. Professor of English, University of Arizona. *House Made of Dawn, The Way to Rainy Mountain, The Names, Angle of Geese and Other Poems, The Ancient Child*

**SHARON O'BRIEN** — Professor of English, Dickinson College. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*; editor of Library of America volumes on Cather.

**HERMIONE LEE** — Senior Lecturer in English at the University of York, author of *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* plus books on Woolf, Roth, and Bowen.

**E. A. MARES** — Historian and playwright, Albuquerque. Author of *I Returned and Saw Under the Sun*, based on Padre Martinez of Taos; editor of *Padre Martinez: New Perspectives from Taos; Hispanic Writers of New Mexico*.

**EVENTS** will include lectures, seminar discussions, readings, films, and guided tours to sites Cather wrote about in Santa Fe, Taos, and elsewhere.

**CALL FOR PAPERS** on any aspect of the seminar theme, to include (but not be limited to) Cather's southwestern writing. Of special interest are papers addressing questions of class, race, gender, religion, place, and historical consciousness. Interdisciplinary studies are encouraged. Send two copies of manuscripts (10-12 pages) plus a 125-word abstract to Susan Rosowski, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0333. Phone: (402) 472-6645; (402) 472-3191. Deadline: April 15, 1990.

**ACADEMIC CREDIT** is available.

#### For Additional Information:

Contact Pat Phillips  
WCPM, 326 North Webster Avenue, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970  
Phone (402) 746-2653

**35th  
Annual Spring  
Conference**

★   ★   ★

**SATURDAY,  
MAY 5, 1990**

★   ★   ★

**Theme: O Pioneers!**

**Midwestern Farm Women:  
A Century  
on the Land**

A Photographic Essay  
by Terry Kuhn  
Northern Illinois University,  
Regional History Center

**Saturday, May 5, 1990**  
at the  
Burlington Depot  
Red Cloud, Nebraska



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WCPM members receive:  
Newsletter subscription  
Free guided tour to restored buildings

- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
- By contributing your ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.

**ALL MEMBERSHIPS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND  
BEQUESTS ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE**

Under Section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1965

**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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