

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

Dinner Kicks Off Fund Drive



Photo by Dave Mellinger — Courtesy of Hastings Tribune

Long white tables decorated with late fall flowers in slim vases filled the kitchen and parlor of Antonia's house. Fifty-six guests ate a Czech dinner catered by Mark Warner. The menu included boiled beef and dill gravy, sauerkraut and dumplings, parslid potatoes, rye bread, pickles, apple strudel, coffee and tea.

Among those present were Antonette Kort, Leo Pavelka and Elizabeth Boyd — three of the four surviving children of Anna Pavelka (*My Antonia*). Also present were Roxine Pavelka, widow of Emil; grandchildren Mildred Dvoracek Neff, daughter of Julia Skupa (deceased); Bernard Pavelka, son of Lucille Pavelka; and Marcie Vontz, daughter of Lucille; Phyllis Stabenow, daughter of Hugo Pavelka.

Other distinguished guests were Roger and Linda Welsch

and daughter Antonia, Wendell Frantz (Director of Museums, Nebraska State Historical Society) and wife, Wayne Ziebarth, former state senator and wife, John Lindahl (present Curator of the Cather Historical Center in Red Cloud) and wife, and Ann Billesbach, former curator of the Cather Center.

After dinner, the men moved the tables from the kitchen and the group gathered in that room to visit and tell stories. Leo Pavelka remembered his first glimpse of Willa Cather (ca. 1916). Hugo, Louis and Leo spotted an unfamiliar horse and buggy coming down the road. The boys knew all the neighboring rigs and wondered who this stranger might be, turning into their lane. They went out and greeted the lady who asked, "Does Anna Pavelka live here?"

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Enthusiasm in New Jersey . . .

Last summer Nancy Picchi and her sister took time off from their Amtrak trip across the United States to visit Red Cloud. On her return home to South Orange, New Jersey, she wrote:

"It's been difficult getting back to the mundane details of work after the excitement of the Amtrak Sisters' Western Tour. Again, I would like to ex-

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Time has rolled around again to membership dues. Since the 1986 tax revisions, I feel it misleading to suggest that your contribution will give you any tax advantage. Although we remain a non-profit organization, the tax breaks for donors have been sadly diminished. This statement is for the purpose of saying — if you're giving for tax benefit, consult your accountant first.

Now that I've been painfully truthful, let me assure you we appreciate your continued support and have no doubts about your loyalty and generosity. We could not function without your help, your comments and your kind thoughts. Thank you.

Mildred R. Bennett

Fund Drive (Continued)

The boys said, "Yes."

"When I take care of my horse, I'll be in to see her."

Hugo and Louis jumped to the buggy. "We'll take care of your horse."

The lady started for the door and Leo tagged along to see what might happen. Julia came to the door. The lady asked to see her mother. Julia invited the lady through the kitchen into the parlor. "Mother came through the bedroom door and looked at the stranger," Leo remembered.

"Don't you know me, Anna?"

At the sound of Willa Cather's voice, Anna embraced her. This was the first of three visits to the Pavelka home.

Elizabeth remembered the mink cape Willa Cather had sent her — a warm fur piece which in winter she used in her cold, unheated room to cover her feet. Antonette and Elizabeth recalled when they had to clean guineas — or was it pigeons — to send back with Willa. Roxine told how little Mildred Dvoracek asked to be cleaned up before she went home to Grandma's because Willa Cather would be there (1931).

Antonette Turner spoke of how much Willa liked the fact that Julia Pavelka Skupa, Antonette's mother, had named her daughter Antonette Willa.

As Roger Welsch said, "I never thought I'd eat a meal in Antonia's kitchen."

Although only fifty-six guests could attend, we had contributions from all over the United States: Connecticut, New Jersey, Oklahoma, California and others. The first activity will be to putty windows and replace broken ones and paint the exterior. Next spring architects from Kansas University at Lawrence will make detailed draw-

ings of the house and after approval by the State Preservation Committee, workmen will proceed with tearing out partitions and replacing the original 1916 walls. We plan to use as many volunteers as possible and stretch the funds as far as we can.

We are grateful to all who helped.

Enthusiasm (Continued)

press my appreciation to you for your hospitality and attention. When I should be writing a grant proposal, I find myself day-dreaming about Red Cloud. I am very impressed by the work that you and your dedicated band of Catherites have accomplished in Red Cloud. The restoration of the Cather Homestead is a gift to all of us; it preserves an important place in American literature and a special time in American history.

"The walking tour of Red Cloud and the tour by car of 'Catherland' are very well designed and presented. My sister Mary Ellen and I were most appreciative to have WCPMF docent Doreen Sanders as our guide. Her knowledge of the countryside and of local lore added such a special dimension to the drive out to the Catherton Cemetery and to the Pavelka Homestead. The opportunity to meet *My Antonia's* granddaughter, Toni Turner, was the perfect conclusion of our literary pilgrimage.

"I have begun my Willa Cather Society proselytizing and have a core of believers ready to sign on the dotted line. I am always surprised by how many well-educated Americans

have never read a novel by Willa Cather. I have now taken to carrying copies of *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* with me and distributing them to these poor souls. I feel as if I am distributing manna in the wilderness. Your East Coast chapter of the WCS awaits your instructions.

"Mary Ellen and I have fallen under the spell of the Pavelka Homestead; as we looked into the fruit cellar, I could almost see the children tumbling out of it into the sunlight. Seeing the house stripped bare of furniture, and in need of wallpaper and paint, gave us an inkling of the feat that you accomplished in restoring the Cather Homestead. The Cather Homestead restoration provides the inspiration, encouragement, and rationale for bringing the Pavelka Homestead back to life.

"The restored Pavelka Homestead and farm would provide Americans with a living memory of the triumph of the immigrants' dreams. In fact, that's what Red Cloud is all about — it was conceived and built by women and men in search of freedom and opportunity, peace and prosperity. In her Nebraska novels Willa Cather sought to preserve the spirit of this search; by preserving these sites the WCPMF is serving both a literary and historical purpose. As the granddaughter of Italian immigrants and as a Willa Cather devotee, I am enclosing a donation of \$250 to help with the restoration of the Pavelka Homestead. I also look forward to participating in fund-raising efforts for this restoration.

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Enthusiasm (Continued)

"Yesterday my husband, Bern, and I received a letter from the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation describing the work that has been done to restore Ellis Island as a monument to the immigrants that helped to build this country. As I read this letter, I kept thinking of Red Cloud and Catherland; while Ellis Island symbolizes the beginning of the American dream for these immigrants, Red Cloud and Nebraska represent the actual realization of that dream. Thanks to your vision and the work of the WCPMF, the materialization of that dream has been preserved. Your dream of a Willa Cather Conference Center would provide a place for the study of Willa Cather's writings and of the immigrants' life and spirit that she so beautifully captured in her Nebraska novels.

"You have managed to draw me into your project; I am having a difficult time thinking of much else. Please let me know how I can be of assistance to you."

International Cultural Center

This summer Dr. Bennett and I bought the old lumberyard — a full city block south of the Red Cloud post office and across from the city park — to hold the site for the future International Cather Center we foresee for Red Cloud.

Since Cather appeals to readers all over the world, we feel those people will want to walk the streets where she walked, breathe the clear dry air she

breathed, see the hills, trees, flowers she loved. We need, therefore, a fitting place to assemble, to hear lectures, to discuss.

Harris Stone of the Kansas University Department of Architecture at Lawrence, Kansas, came last summer with three colleagues: Rene Diaz, Barry Newton and Dennis Domer — all of the American division of the School of Architecture. They discussed building plans and will have their students design what each thinks would be best.

At the same time Clark-Ener-son, Lincoln architects, have volunteered to make preliminary sketches to give prospective donors an idea of what we need. We are making fund-raising plans. We will keep you informed.

— M. R. B.

Of Interest . . .

From Loretta Wasserman at Grand Valley State College in Allendale, Michigan, we received this piece which appeared in the Summer 1988 edition of "The Key Reporter," the Phi Beta Kappa newsletter, and is reprinted, courtesy of "The Key Reporter":

[The article reviews *Early Novels and Stories: The Troll Garden. O Pioneers!. The Song of the Lark. My Antonia. One of Ours.* Willa Cather. Selected and with notes by Sharon O'Brien. Library of America, 1987.

Willa Cather In Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters. Ed. by L. Brent Bohike. University of Nebraska Press, 1987.

Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice. Sharon O'Brien. Oxford University Press, 1987.

Willa Cather's Short Fiction. Marilyn Arnold. Ohio University Press, 1986.]

The establishment of Willa Cather as one of America's classic writers is attested to by the publication in a single volume of the Library of America of her first collection of short stories (including such memorable tales as "The Sculptor's Funeral," "The Wagner Matinee," and "Paul's Case") in 1905 and four of her novels, all from the texts as originally printed, and by the collection of published interviews with her, dating from her arrival in Pittsburgh as editor of the *Home Monthly* in 1897, to 1940; her speeches, beginning with the oration she delivered at her graduation from Red Cloud High School in 1890; and a smattering of her letters that for one reason or another escaped her testamentary interdiction against the printing of her correspondence. Because Cather's telling of her own story is distinguished by falsifications and reticences that, however understandable, distort the truth, Sharon O'Brien's account of Cather's early years (up to the writing of *O Pioneers!* in 1913) is all the more valuable, even though one pauses nervously over its description as "a close study of gender and creativity." In trying to cover the tracks to her past, Cather naturally invited the biographer (whose intrusion she feared and deplored) to write such chapters as "Divine Fertility and Unnatural Love."

Arnold's discussion of Cather's short fiction is straightforward and unpretentious.

Cather Inducted into National Women's Hall of Fame

On November 15 Willa Cather was one of four women inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New

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Cather Inducted (Continued)

York. Other inductees included Ida Wells Burnett, Sally Ride and Gwendolyn Brooks.

The Women's Hall of Fame began as an idea in 1968 and became a reality in 1979. With the inclusion of these four women, 48 women from the fields of the Arts, Humanities, Business, Education, Government, Science and Athletics have been honored. Nominations for this award are made by the general public. These names are turned over to a research committee which compiles a list of the nominees and information about them. This material is sent to 25 selectors for final consideration.

We are pleased with this recognition of Willa Cather and her art.

Facts About Mr. and Mrs. Bentley's Death

Reprinted from the *Commercial Advertiser*, Monday, April 15, 1912. [The Bentleys were prototypes for the Wick Cutters in *My Ántonia*.] (Reprinted courtesy of Webster County Historical Museum.)

In our lost (sic) issue we spoke of M. R. Bentley and wife's death. Since then news has been received from Arkansas that Mr. Bentley shot and killed his wife and afterwards shot himself. He was about 71 years of age and his wife was about four years his junior. For many years they had been quarreling over the disposition of Mr. Bentley's wealth, which was very considerable, and from time to time the money question was the cause of unpleasant quarels (sic) until it is thought that M. R. became mentally unbal-



Help!

The sheriff of Great Bend, Kansas, reports his men found the above plaque dumped on a country road three miles north of Great Bend.

If anyone knows the location from which this artifact was stolen, please let us know at (402) 746-2653.

Thank you.

anced over that and the loss of several thousand dollars, and while in one of those spells committed the awful deed. They had lived in this city many years coming here in the early seventies, and it was here that he laid the foundation of his fortune. However, he disposed of most of his property here and went south for the purpose of restoring his health and had lived in Siloam Springs for some eight or ten years. Their tragic ending caused much comment in this city by those who knew them best. — What the Siloam Daily says of the tragedey (sic):

M. R. Bentley, who shot his wife yesterday a little after noon at their home on Wright Street, died at 10 o'clock last night. This ended the most notable tragedy in the history of the town. Bentley, who was 71 years of age, quarreled with his wife over the division of their hoarded wealth and laid deliberate plans to murder her.

He went to the Bates hardware store yesterday an hour or

so before the tragedy and asked for a gun to kill a dog. Mr. Bates went with him to his residence and loaned him a 38 caliber revolver, which contained (sic) five cartridges and give (sic) him five additional ones. Bentley went on home and seemed in a happy and contented mood. The family sat down to the noon meal, and evidence shows that it was interrupted with a resume of the quarrel. Mrs. Bentley went up stairs to the back bed room and was followed by her husband. He fired a shot immediately on entering the room, the bullet entering the chin and passing on through the neck. She fell on her knees with her head on the bed fatally shot, when the second shot entered the ear.

When sure of his wife's death, Bentley entered the front bed room and holding a hand mirror in front of him, sent a bullet crashing through his brain.

The housekeeper rushed to the room at the first sound of the pistol but was ordered away under penalty of death. She gave the alarm and soon the horrible crime spread over the community. Drs. Sexton and Webster were the first to enter the rooms and make the examination. The murderer was sitting on the floor braced against the bed, his victim cold in death. Bentley was rashional (sic), but brain substance was oozing from his wound. He asked to be put out of misery. When told of his serious condition and being asked if he had a statement to make he replied that he had none.

He was left in charge of his brother John, who lives on Flint Creek who remained with him until his death.

Coroner Baldwin assembled a jury in the afternoon which took testimony over the body of the woman and adjourned to await the result of Bentley's wounds,

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Bentley Facts (Continued)

and it will continue the investigation this afternoon.

The jury is as follows:

I. L. Rice, J. S. Alexander, W. T. Harmon, J. M. Cardin, L. E. Collins, D. Smith, Frank Hogan, J. T. McKinnon, E. J. Lee, Edd Curtis, N. B. Wilson, John Elrod, W. N. Young, Dr. Webster, Dr. Sexton.

The direct cause of the tragedy was domestic trouble, growing out of the distribution of the estate valued at \$100,000.

The body of Mrs. Bentley will be held pending the arrival of relatives or orders from them.

The arrangements for the funeral of Mr. Bentley have not been made but he will be buried here at his own request.

He had previously outlined his plans for burial to undertaker McCulloch and they will be carried out to the letter.

Mrs. Bentley was a member of the Eastern Star at Red Cloud, Nebraska, and she will be buried by that order. She was 65 years of age.

Mr. Bentley was a member of the Masonic order in Red Cloud, Nebraska, and in good standing up to the time of the tragedy. He came here several years ago, after a successful career in Nebraska, where he located in an early day.

The tragedy has cast a gloom over the city, as very few of their friends and acquaintances knew of their trouble.

Bentley was the heaviest loser in the Bank of Siloam. — Thursday's *Daily Register*, Siloam Springs, Arkansas.

Winters Hours for Cather Museum

The Willa Cather Historical Center changed to its winter schedule on October 1. The museum will be open Tuesday to Friday, 8:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. and 1:00-5:00 p.m.; weekends, 1:00-5:00 p.m.; closed Mondays until May 1, 1989.

The Foundation's Art Gallery and Book Store hours remain unchanged. Please call ahead if you want to verify hours of operation or tour times.

Call for Papers

Rhoda Orme-Johnson of Maharishi International University, Fairfield, Iowa 52556, announces a call for papers for a seminar in the fall of 1989 of the Midwest Modern Language Association on Willa Cather's use of myth and the classics in her work. Those interested should send Mrs. Orme-Johnson a 300 word abstract by April 15, 1989.

Cather Monologue

Betty Steinshouer of Black Mountain, North Carolina, will speak to Webster County elementary children December 4 at 2:00 p.m. at the Cather Foundation building. Watch for further announcements in the local Webster County papers. She will also speak at the Red Cloud Schools the first week in December.

Ms. Steinshouer has given her monologue impersonating Willa Cather to groups all over the East Coast from elementary to college, to men's clubs and women's societies. She will make this pilgrimage to Webster County to honor Willa Cather and her home country.

115th Birthday!

On December 7 at noon the Right Reverend Dean John Bartholomew will give a requiem Mass for Willa Cather's 115th birthday.

Guests will please make reservations with the Cather Foundation, (402) 746-2653, if you wish to join us in a light repast after mass. Cost will be \$3.00 and will include the special birthday cake.

The Cather Question

By May Hutchinson

Can we hope to know exactly
"Who" and "What" she was,
And how the artist came to be,
When what she seemed to wish
for was
Successful anonymity?

Who is the writer/artist
When master of her craft
But THAT —

Creator of a world
Between two covers spent —
And then two covers more,
Two covers more, and on,
Until "THE SELF" is sacrificed,
Abandoned, re-created, meta-
morphosed,
Multiplied to many, many selves.
Whom could she ask to love all
these?

Or would, perhaps, a hint suffice
From paraphrase of her own
words —

The artist's admonition:
For everything accomplished
We have to pay a price;
And, in that I was willing
To pay so much to write,
I felt myself full-justified —
TO DO SO.

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Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial

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Cather Fans Rejoice!!!

This November Sayra Wagner (granddaughter of George Cather and daughter of Oscar Cather) purchased and moved into the George Cather home southwest of Bladen. She plans to restore this historic structure room by room.

A ten-year-old Sayra visited here and remembers well Grandpa George and the old homestead. When she arrived in Webster County earlier in the summer, she realized the importance of this site, not only to her but to all Cather scholars.

Listed in the National Register of Historic Places, this farmstead deserves historic and literary importance. These notes come from the Nebraska State Inventory of Historic Places:

Major features of the site include the main George Cather house, built initially in the early 1880's, and expanded and remodeled through the turn of the century. A substantial dwelling, the 22-room house is two stories over a brick basement banked into the hillside with a sub-basement below.

The George Cather farmstead was the home of Willa Cather's aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. George P. Cather. Her Aunt Frances (Aunt "Franc") was the prototype for Aunt Georgiana in "A Wagner Matinee" from Cather's *The Troll Garden*. The house was also the setting for Miss Cather's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *One of Ours*.

The George P. Cather house is also significant to the architectural heritage of Nebraska. The house is an excellent, well-developed, if somewhat late example of the Virginian Tidewater I-type house, which is a relatively rare house type in Nebraska in spite of its strong Anglo associations. One room deep and two stories high over the basement, the house features external end

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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brick stove flues and a wide central stair hall common to the later, Georgian-influenced I houses of the Tidewater. Stylistically, the house proclaims its late date relative to the type with vernacular Neo-Georgian or Neo-Classical Revival detailing including its projecting entrance pavilion with rounded vestibule, the full-fronted porch, return cornices, and its shingled front gable with elliptical attic light.

We suggest that Sayra Wagner can use any kind of help Cather devotees can give: blue-collar labor to clean up, skilled labor for repair and maintenance, money to pay for materials and labor. Sayra does not ask for anything, but we know many of you will find a way to show her how delighted we are with her project. Scores of you have said this house should be restored. So . . . let's help!