

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXIV, No. 4

Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

**Author's Note:**

Please forgive the ungrammatical construction, lack of punctuation, verbs, etc. in my paragraph introducing Willa Cather's Virginia. The errors are all mine. All English teachers' blood will be curdled, as is mine. Do not go back and read it. It grows worse with rereading.

— Mildred R. Bennett

## CATHER FOR INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

### FIRST CONTACT WITH THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The Memorial has received a most interesting letter from Mrs. E. H. Lohr of Columbus, Nebraska. On a recent visit to the People's Republic of China, she met a lady who had written her English thesis on Willa Cather. She is a retired English teacher, Miss L. C. Chang of Shanghai.

Upon her return home, Mrs. Lohr visited the Cather Memorial in Red Cloud and sent Miss Chang books and pictures. Miss Chang replied: "I do enjoy the books you sent me, especially **The World of Willa Cather** on the back cover of which I found the signature of the author, Mrs. Mildred Bennett. I was much excited. Please thank her for her friendliness and good will. If possible, please share two of the book marks I'm sending you. Please send my greetings of love and respect to her."

Mrs. Lohr sent us the lovely circular bookmarks with Miss Chang's explanation: "The birds on the bookmarks bring good tidings. The ones with sparrows mean 'happiness.' We Chinese call the sparrows 'happy sparrows.' The one with cranes means 'longevity and

## JAPANESE TEACHER VISITS RED CLOUD, HER DREAM FULFILLED

Emiko Yoshioka, 30, of Nara, Japan, has dreamed for years of visiting Cather Country. Jeff Jordan, in his **Omaha World Herald** column (June 15, 1980) said: "As a child she had lived near the temples of Tenri, the birthplace of humanity according to some Japanese writings. It could well have been her death place. She was terribly burdened with illness as a schoolgirl. There were 20 years of pain, paralysis, depression, surgery again and again.

"Her parents were gone and a strong-willed grandmother guided her, told endless stories of her own time in Seattle early in the century, of her troubles with those tall, hard Americans, of the struggles of her sister who had stayed, who had endured in that hostile country. The schoolgirl listened, wide-eyed.

"Later, English was put before her, as it is required of all Japanese students. She became increasingly adept with its mystery."  
(Continued on Page 2)

health.' So I wish you and Mrs. Bennett happy and healthy!"

Miss Chang is sending us a copy of her thesis.

All Cather readers, who may be traveling, please note Mrs. Lohr's constructive promotion of international understanding through culture. If you find someone interested in Cather, please send us the name and address so that we may put that individual on our mailing list. One of our aims is: To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather. Thank you, Mrs. Lohr.

## THE PRAIRIE WORKSHOP

June 16-19, 1980, the Nature Conservancy, Kearney State College, The Cather Historical Center (Branch of the Nebraska State Historical Society) and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation combined with major funding from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities, a state-based program of the National Endowment for the Humanities, to give a selected group of 24 students training in Botany, Soil Conservation, and Literature as it reveals the land, for a credit of three hours.

Important to this study is the Willa Cather Pioneer Prairie, which, as we learned at the 1979 Workshop, has all but five of the flowers and plants mentioned by Willa Cather. This year, however, Dr. Hal Nagel of Kearney State College, assures us that a spring has broken out in the corner of the 610-acre tract and the plants that must have water are coming back. Soon all of Cather's flowers (over which she wept as she held them in her lap when a child, because they had no names, and therefore gave them names of her own) will be growing and also identified by their right botanical names. Cather's interest in plants was not a mere whim. She said once she had rather written Clements **Botany** than any of her books.

The four evening programs of the Prairie Workshop were open to the public.

Harry G. Lewis, husband of Ella Cather Lewis, died in California, October 11, 1980. We extend our sympathy to all the family.

## Japanese Teacher (Cont.)

ies. She began to read the American classics and among them she found Willa Cather. It was an electric moment . . .

"The strength, the tenacity to battle her failing body came from those pages. The will to live, not die, flowed up through her fingers. . . . Her doctors were unbelieving of the evidence she put before them. The paralysis was gone, the scars were healing. She was tall, strong.

"But then, they couldn't know that, in spirit, Emiko Yoshioka had become a Nebraskan.

"That her 'citizenship' had been conferred by Willa Sibert Cather of Red Cloud. That she was coming 'home.' "

A few weeks ago Jane and Julie Takechi of Omaha brought Emiko to Red Cloud. I had the privilege of taking her on the Cather Country tour. I wish all of you might have been with us. The roadsides bloomed with trees and plants that Cather talks about. Sweet yellow clover lined our path. Remember that Captain Forrester likes the yellow clover around his place (**A Lost Lady**) and will not let it be cut until autumn?

Among the clover shone patches of bright pink and red wild roses, most beautiful in June. They also appear in **A Lost Lady** when Niel goes in the early morning to cut a bouquet for Mrs. Forrester to draw her heart away from the grossness of Frank Ellinger. But, it is Niel who is disillusioned.

We found a wild mulberry tree in fruit. Emiko had read about the White Mulberry Tree in **O Pioneers!** This roadside tree did not have white fruit but the more common purple clusters. I am not sure Emiko liked the bland taste, but at least, now, she knows what a mulberry tastes like.

Emiko told me she had been having trouble with her hearing for twenty years, but she has an amazing understanding of English and reads lips remarkably well. We

came to a cluster of cottonwoods and I wrote in her notebook the words from **The Song of the Lark**, "whose roots are always seeking water, and whose leaves are always talking about it, making the sound of rain." She stepped out of the car, cupped her ear close to the tree, listened and then smiled and nodded her head.

At this season rose mallow abound. They are mentioned in **My Antonia** and are common as weeds. As we trampled through them, Emiko exclaimed over and over. "I am dreaming. This can not be true, that I am here. It is too wonderful."

In the churchyard of the New Virginia Church we found a ground cherry plant. I reminded her of how Mrs. Bergson (**O Pioneers!**) made, as Cather said, "an insipid jam" out of them, but I also told her that the jam was by no means insipid. My mother made it, and it was delicious, especially the year it fermented and had a special tang.

June is too early for sunflowers and red grass, but we saw purple clover, and fields of alfalfa, "Like a bright green-and-purple handkerchief thrown down on the hillside," as Claude sees it in **One of Ours**.

Emiko had with her a book in Japanese written by several Japanese ladies who visited here several years ago. In it is our map of the country tour, and she tried to trace just where we were. She looked for church landmarks and the grave in the center of the crossroads (now long since moved to the Red Cloud cemetery.)

The elderberry bloomed white and we took a sprig so that Emiko could sniff its odor. In **My Antonia** the girls are picking bloom for elderberry wine. Others use the berries with some tart fruit for jelly. However, the most exciting flower was the milkweed (wild cotton as Cather calls it in **O Pioneers!** Cather had her own names for flowers and sometimes it takes research to identify which she meant.) Its ash-rose balls of flower exude a spicy odor, almost cloying,

and its broken stem oozes sticky white fluid which gives it the name Milk Weed. But in the fall, the seeds form cotton wisps which float the seeds over the countryside. This "wild cotton" is most useful for small girls to make doll mattresses and pillows. (Not that I think Willa Cather ever spent much time with dolls.)

Eventually, we came to the Divide where "the furrows lie a mile in length," and the George Cather home, so like a southern mansion, but deserted now. Here Cather places the Wheeler family in **One of Ours**. Then we went down to the Catherton cemetery where Willa's grandparents (the Burdens of **My Antonia**) are buried.

When we came to the grave of Annie Pavelka (**My Antonia**) in Cloverton Cemetery, Emiko knelt down and caressed it lovingly. She had come on a pilgrimage and could not believe she was really here, seeing the places she had dreamed of for years.

The tender affection which the Japanese scholars show toward Willa Cather gives me an uplifting experience. I wish all you native-born Americans who may wonder what the world sees in Willa Cather, could go with me on one of these precious tours to show scholars of other lands our country which Willa Cather memorializes — our fields, our flowers, our pastures, and our precious heritage for which Cather speaks to all people.

We have more visitors from Japan than from any other foreign country. But we do not lack appreciation from our own high school students, one of whom stood by Annie's grave and said, "It makes it all so real and final."

— Mildred R. Bennett

## AN OXFORD DON IN RED CLOUD

will air on Nebraska ETV Network December 10, 1980, at 9 p.m. This program was taped in Red Cloud and Cather Country last spring during our Annual Cather Spring Conference. This program will be carried as part of the weekly Cultural Affairs series, WEDNESDAY SHOWCASE.

Review:

## SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL

The Cather State Historical Center generously furnished from its archives the following review of **Sapphira and the Slave Girl**, written by lifelong friend of Willa Cather, Dorothy Canfield Fisher. Mrs. Fisher was for years a member of the selection board for The Book of the Month Club. **Sapphira and the Slave Girl** was a 1940 selection.

"The people of our times are turned towards embittered skepticism by calamity almost beyond human imagining. Helpless spectators of the horrifying spread of human slavery, readers of 1940 are forced into a suspicion that a happy ending to any story can be no more than a cheap and sleazy veil thrown over but not hiding the ugly figure of truth. To such saddened readers, aching with shame for humanity, Willa Cather presents a lovely story of escape from human slavery, which is not only literally and factually true, but deeply and symbolically the truth.

"The book is very quiet in tone, slight and short — about half the length of the usual novel, with a good deal of space given to minute, affectionate and enchantingly detailed descriptions of the background of life in a rural district of Virginia, near Winchester, in 1856. Hardly a page in it is without a thumb-nail vignette, clearly drawn, of the exact aspect of place or person, as they were on the date of the story: — 'A short, stalwart woman in a sunbonnet, wearing a heavy shawl over her freshly ironed calico dress' — there is a plain, pre-Civil War country woman, every item chosen to make her different from a modern country woman visually vivid.

"The home of the miller, where the action takes place, is like an old, finely-executed, pen-and-ink drawing with every tree, every walk, every plant set precisely in its place. Nor are all these details visual ones. The story of how the



— Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society and Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Collection

miller's wife happened to own the land in Back Creek, is told from 1747 to 1759, long before the birth of any of the characters of the book. The annual mowing of the meadows by eight scythe-swinging Negro field-hands is as brilliant with carefully selected detail as the best Breughel painting of peasant life. The talk of the Negro slaves is almost startlingly real, every shading preserved, the difference carefully marked between the language used by house servants when speaking to their white masters and when talking together in their own cabins.

"But, although all this is utterly charming, Miss Cather's book is no period piece. Vivid as it is, the background is, outdoors and indoors, in its proper place back of the characters, back of the action. It is not in the book for its own sake, in spite of the loving care lavished on it. The reader's attention is wholly fixed on the story, one of the many variations on one of the oldest of human themes, a prison, a human being in it, the effort to escape, the uncertainty as to whether escape is possible. The use of the wonderfully described background is the sound legitimate use of setting a real world around real human beings.

"And yet, although the story is on the always exciting theme of attempted escape from prison, although the men and women, black and white, are profoundly human and living, one feels a relaxed, mellow lack of intensity which, although it is agreeable in the extreme, seems at first rather odd in a story made up of the crudest and most violent elements. The tale is of the cruelly ruthless attempt made by a jealous elderly wife to use the unrighteous power over other human beings given slave owners, to wreck and blight a blooming, dewily innocent, and virtuous young girl, hardly more than a child.

"Mrs. Colbert, the wife of the miller, complacent with the stupid self-esteem of the provincial overvaluation of material possessions, cold, calculating, relentless, is an appalling old woman of exuberant Elizabethan wickedness. Portrayed by Faulkner, in livid purples and bloody reds, she would have had the reader, his hair standing on end, shouting for help. But in Miss Cather's book we accept her as those around her accepted her, without heroics.

"The same sort of almost dreamy quality is found in the portrayal of Nancy's tragic situation. Her danger, her trapped struggles

### 1981 MEMBERSHIP

Our reminder to you for renewing your membership and newsletter support is as fervent this year as in the past.

We are expanding our scholarship program with additional credit and non-credit workshops and seminars.

It is only with your continued financial support that we are able to make more and more teachers and students aware of Cather's art.

Our thanks to those of you who have already renewed your memberships for 1981.

Viola S. Borton

to escape from the doorless, windowless prison in which slavery kept her, make an exciting story. But we are not excited by it. We believe fully in the stealthy, threatening footsteps which so terribly frighten Nancy; but Miss Cather does not try, as Hemingway does, to make us, too, hear them with a physical shudder. We follow the plot with the closest, most sympathetic attention, but — we realize at the end of the book — almost as though we knew all along, that Nancy was sure to be saved from the villainous plot to destroy her, that the nobility, integrity, sense of the sacredness of human dignity,

felt by the miller and his magnificent daughter, cannot but conquer the forces of evil, as right cannot but in the end be stronger than wrong.

“As soon as we begin the exquisitely written Epilogue, we see why the book has, for all its savage story, a lovely mellow bloom, why, as we read, we half knew that it is all going to come out all right. We see that it is not just a story, it is poetry, poetry in the sense of emotion remembered in tranquility. We see that it is, and has been all along, a tale told to a little girl, held in her memory for a lifetime, recurring to her mature mind with the

special moonlit, seen-in-a-mirror quality of stories remembered from childhood. And as we realize this, we see how it frees us from turbid, immediate, imitation-emotion of literally realistic stories, and permits us calmly to see in perspective the golden human values of the tale.

“Those values are infinitely consoling and comforting to us, shocked as we are by the recurring, ever-nearer dangers to our own freedom. The book bids us have faith.”

— Dorothy Canfield

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Special group memberships (such as clubs or businesses) are available. Write to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial for details.

**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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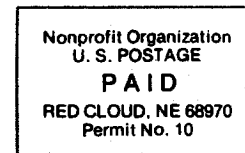
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