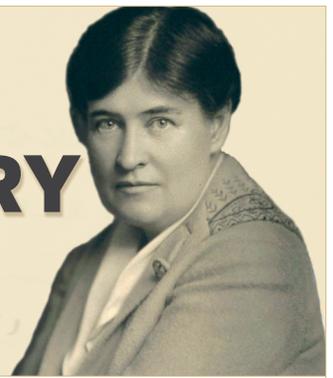


# NEWS FROM CATHER COUNTRY

VOLUME 12.2 | FALL 2023



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Visit us online at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org) to browse our bookstore or sign up for our e-Newsletter.

## Willa Cather Statue Unveiled in National Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol

It was an occasion five years in the making when a bronze statue of Willa Cather by artist Littleton Alston was unveiled in National Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol on June 7. An invited crowd of a few hundred were on hand to celebrate, including elected officials; dignitaries; arts enthusiasts; National Willa Cather Center leadership and supporters; members of the Cather family; and representatives from Cather's alma mater, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Cather is the first Pulitzer Prize winner and the twelfth woman represented in the National Statuary Hall Collection. She joins Ponca Chief Standing Bear, installed in 2019, as one of two new sculptures that represent Nebraska. The installation ceremony occurred exactly six months before her 150th birthday on December 7, and the occasion also comes in the centenary year of her Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*.

Littleton Alston, associate professor of sculpture at Creighton University in Omaha, was selected from over seventy artists to create the Willa Cather statue. Alston is the first African American artist to have a sculpture in the National Statuary Hall Collection. "It was an immense honor to create the Willa Cather sculpture for Statuary Hall, and I'm thrilled that Nebraska will finally have a literary heroine representing our state in the U.S. Capitol," said Alston.

Opening the ceremony, former House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy remarked "As one of America's greatest novelists, Willa Cather is a fitting addition to this gallery of great Americans."



Littleton Alston stands next to his statue of Willa Cather at the unveiling ceremony on June 7, 2023

Congressman Hakeem Jeffries noted that Cather's novels of nostalgia, of nineteenth century life, and of the nuances of adventure and uncertainty are key to understanding the depth of Americana, Nebraska life, and of the pioneer spirit. "Willa Cather's literary genius has been a key part of bringing the American journey to life," he said.

A special thanks to former State Senator Burke Harr and Senator Tom Brewer, who

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## Willa Cather Statue Unveiled in National Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol

*continued from front page*

co-sponsored the 2018 legislative bill that authorized the two new Nebraska statues. We are grateful to supporter Peg O'Dea Lippert for proposing Cather's inclusion in the collection, and to members of the Willa Cather National Statuary Hall Selection Committee for their tireless efforts to plan and carry out the project.

*Watch the full ceremony and browse images in our online gallery at [WillaCather.org/statue](http://WillaCather.org/statue).*



From L to R: Pulling the cord to unveil the sculpture are Littleton Alston (sculptor), Ashley Olson, (Cather Foundation Executive Director), Abby Camp (daughter of Willa Cather patron Laurie Smith Camp), John Cather Ickis (grandnephew of Willa Cather), Rep. Mike Flood, Rep. Adrian Smith, Sen. Pete Ricketts, Gov. Jim Pillen, Sen. Deb Fischer, and former U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. Photo courtesy Mike Theiler, *Lincoln Journal Star*.

## Hotel Garber Made Possible Through Rehabilitation of the Potter Block

Rehabilitation of the Potter Block to make way for a boutique hotel and event venue is steadily advancing. A third floor that was lost to fire in 1961 has been reconstructed, interior framing is nearly complete, façade work is ongoing, and window installation is underway. Completion is slated for the latter half of 2024.



Construction on the long-awaited third floor began in September.

When complete, the 22,500 square foot building will enable more visitors to spend an evening in Red Cloud for events, conferences, workshops, and retreats. The site will be connected to our Farmers and Merchants Bank next door, where a new permanent exhibit will enable guests to see objects related to Red Cloud's history and explore the intersections between the town and Cather's life and writing.

The project is a key priority of the National Willa Cather Center's *Campaign for the Future* and Red Cloud's Heritage Tourism Development Office, which was established in 2015 through a collaboration between the National Willa Cather Center, City of Red Cloud, Chamber of Commerce, and Red Cloud Community Fund

of the Nebraska Community Foundation.

*The project has reached 88% of a \$7.3 million goal with just under \$850,000 needed to bring it to completion. Please consider supporting the project with a charitable gift. All gifts of \$1,000 or more will be recognized on a donor wall, and pledges are payable over a five-year period.*

## Willa Cather Childhood Home Restoration Nearing Completion

A fourteen-month-long restoration project of the Willa Cather Childhood Home is nearing completion. The site now has an accessible entrance; updated electrical, heating, and cooling systems; and a reinforced foundation. Extensive repairs to the roof, windows, and doors sealed the building envelope to aid with collections care. The structure was recently repainted in the familiar historic palette, reconfirmed after a careful paint analysis. The porch trim is now being sanded and primed in order to complete

exterior painting. Conservation of the original wallpaper in Willa Cather's attic bedroom is planned for the spring of 2024. Cleaning, assessments, and testing were carried out in 2018 and 2022 by conservators from the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center.

The Willa Cather Childhood Home is a national treasure and the site most closely associated with the Pulitzer Prize-winning author. The restoration has been made possible through a Save America's Treasures Grant from the National Park Service, which has been

continued from previous page

matched dollar-for-dollar through a private fundraising effort as part of our *Campaign for the Future*.

The National Historic Landmark will reopen for tours on December 1 as part of Willa Cather's 150th birthday celebration. These special holiday guided tours will take place on December 7, and each Saturday in December. Tour reservations can be purchased in advance online.

*The project has reached 78% of its fundraising goal. If you would like to join the growing list of supporters, contributions may be mailed to the Willa Cather Foundation, 413 N. Webster St., Red Cloud, NE, 68970 or made online at WillaCather.org.*



The long-awaited reopening of the Willa Cather Childhood Home will occur in December following completion of electrical upgrades, porch refurbishing, and recreation of the wood picket fence that was present during the Cather family's residency.

## Cather Conference & Seminar Foster New Scholarship



Authors Margo Jefferson (right) and Elizabeth Kendall discuss Willa Cather's New York stories at the 18th International Seminar held at The New School in New York City.

This June, the 68th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference welcomed 176 attendees in a combination of online and onsite events in Red Cloud, while the 18th International Seminar came to New York for an immersive experience in the place where Cather lived and wrote for forty years.

The conference topic "Complex and Brilliant: Cather at 150" explored the author's life and legacy in Nebraska. Just as Cather wrote about the "certain qualities of feeling and imagination" possessed by Nebraska's early immigrants in her essay, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," we commemorated Cather's 150th birthday by examining the evolution of her own writerly imagination. The conference also examined Cather's novel *A Lost Lady*, which celebrates its publication centenary in 2023.

Dr. Molly Rozum, author of *Grasslands Grown: Creating Place on the U.S. Northern Plains and Canadian Plains*, discussed the aesthetic, social, and cultural experiences of the first generations of settler society to grow up on the grasslands. Dr. Shelley Stamp, the UC Santa Cruz Presidential Chair, presented a memorable talk titled "Willa Cather

and Company: Female Filmmakers, Female Screenwriters, and Female Authors in Early Hollywood."

Other highlights included a guided hike at the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie, an invitational art exhibit featuring the work of national and regional artists, and the premiere of a Cather-inspired song cycle by the Bel Canto Duo.

"Bright, Beautiful, and Alive: Willa Cather's New York Intersections" was the topic of the 18th International Seminar. Attended by 113 people, the three-day seminar was based at The New School in the heart of Greenwich Village, just blocks from where Cather resided between 1906 and 1932. Invited speakers included authors Margo Jefferson and Elizabeth Kendall, who discussed Cather's New York stories, and historian Hugh Ryan who spoke on Greenwich Village history and Cather's place in it. Various scholars presented their papers on diverse topics within the framework of the seminar. The three day event ended with a soiree at the Sony Music Building.

Thank you to the board members and volunteers who assisted with the planning for these events: Carolyn Berman, James Jaap, Charmion Gustke, Andrew Jewell, Melissa Homestead, Wade Leak, Julie Napolin, Tracyann Williams, and Jay Yost. We are also grateful for support from the Nebraska Arts Council, Nebraska Cultural Endowment, Humanities Nebraska, the Philip L and Helen Cather Southwick Fund, and the University of Nebraska—Lincoln's Cather Project.



A new tradition at our annual Willa Cather Spring Conference is a guided walk with readings at the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie on National Prairie Day—the first Saturday in June.

## Abbie Loomis Joins Cather Legacy Society

Abbie Loomis was thirteen years old when she discovered Willa Cather. Her mother was a voracious reader, and *My Antonia* was among the Cather books on her shelf the day Loomis went searching for something to read—and it is still a book she continues to read every few years.

Loomis holds several degrees but it was while working on a PhD in Victorian Literature that she took a job in the library at the University of Wisconsin Madison.

Loomis believes that seeing history come to life past the pages of books is just as important for historical understanding, which is why she is committed to the long-term preservation and maintenance of the Pavelka Farmstead in Webster County. Anna Pavelka was the inspiration for *Antonia* Shimerda, arguably Willa Cather's most famous character and the namesake for her 1918 novel, *My Antonia*.

"You can see it now, the children flying out of the cellar, and that's just such a classic scene," Loomis said. "But when I first saw it, half the lumber was all shredded and the house was kind of sagging. It was a sadness because the house was one of the real evidences of what it must have been like to live out (on the prairie) at that time."

Restoration of the Pavelka Farmstead was one of key components of the *Campaign for the Future*, and while Loomis has not seen the



Abbie Loomis rereads her mother's copy of *My Antonia*.

updated site in person, she is grateful for all that was done to ensure that the stories of immigrants like Anna Pavelka are shared for generations to come.

Since 2020, the site has undergone significant historic and structural restoration. New interpretive exhibits are planned for the location, as well.

"I want visitors to be able to stand in their [the Pavelka family] shoes—to engage with exhibits that are real enough that they can empathize with the individuals," Loomis said, of future hopes for the property. "What would it be like to have your kitchen table overflowing with vegetables for canning, and know that means you'll have food all winter?... I think it's important to make history come alive for people."

This work of the Foundation is of vital importance to Loomis, who allocated a multi-year campaign pledge to the Pavelka Farmstead rehabilitation project, and then joined the Cather Legacy Society to support future maintenance at the site through a planned gift.

*If you would like additional information about the Cather Legacy Society, or if you have named the Willa Cather Foundation as a beneficiary in your estate plans, please contact Jeniffer Beahm, Development Associate, at [jbeahm@willacather.org](mailto:jbeahm@willacather.org).*

## The Cather Birthplace Acquired to Ensure Preservation

After an online campaign organized by Cather relatives in Virginia and bolstered by support from the National Willa Cather Center, the Willa Cather Birthplace now has a hopeful future. In May 2023, Virginia realtor Katherine Solenberger purchased the house to ensure its future stabilization and preservation, with the intention of donating the property to a nonprofit organization that is presently being formed to receive the house and elevate Cather's legacy in Virginia. We continue to work alongside stakeholders and volunteers in Virginia to assist in planning for the site's preservation.

Located in Gore, Virginia, on the eastern edges of the Appalachian mountains in the northernmost corner of the state, the simple two-story house has severely deteriorated. Although still intact with many original features and an adjacent residence and outbuildings, its restoration costs will be significant.

The Cather Birthplace, which was listed to the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, remains a testament to the humble, rural origins of a great writer who, toward the end of her life, struggled to write the story of her home state. The preservation of the Cather Birthplace could attract more visitors to explore the beauty and

complexity of her former Shenandoah Valley home. Cather described *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) as the most difficult book she ever wrote. Her family stories and memories of the region are entangled in the book, which was an attempt to confront the slaveholding realities in her family's past.

A special thanks to Board of Governors members Ann Romines and Jay Yost for their generous gifts and tireless efforts to encourage donations to the Willa Cather Birthplace Fund. We appreciate all of the supporters who have answered the call and contributed to this important effort.

*For more information, or to donate to the Cather Birthplace Fund, visit [WillaCather.org/birthplace](http://WillaCather.org/birthplace).*



After years of neglect, the Cather Birthplace has been acquired by preservationist Katherine Solenberger

## Five Writers Selected for Inaugural Willa Cather Residency Program

The Willa Cather Residency was established to commemorate the 150th year of Cather's birth and to provide a unique opportunity for a small cohort of writers to reside and create in Red Cloud. The inaugural year of the program brings five writers to Red Cloud this fall. Each resident is provided a private furnished room in the Cather Second Home Guest House and a separate place to work.

We were delighted by the enormous response and outstanding applications. The task of selecting five writers was difficult given the astonishing talent and unique voices of the applicants. The 2023 cohort includes: **Joanna Biggs**, a senior editor at *Harper's Magazine* author of a book of essays about women writers, *A Life of One's Own: Nine Women Writers Begin Again*;

**Monica Masiello**, a poet who explores the voices, desires, power imbalances, and identities of women and immigrant families in the United States; **Karen Rankin-Baransky**, a biologist who has researched whales and sea turtles, writes about the environment and is passionate about the issue of climate change and biodiversity loss; **Richard Scott Larson**, who writes about the lingering effects of the closet for queer people and has recently received fellowships from MacDowell and the New York Foundation for the Arts; and **Kirsten Sundberg Lunstrum**, a widely published author of three collections of short fiction and the recipient of a PEN/O. Henry Prize, with fellowships from MacDowell and the Jack Straw Writers Program.



Karen Rankin-Baransky



Joanna Biggs



Richard Scott Larson



Kirsten Sundberg Lunstrum



Monica Masiello

## Soprano Sarah Arneson Returns to the Red Cloud Opera House

With her rich coloratura soprano voice, opera singer Sarah Arneson sang to a large crowd at the Red Cloud Opera House on September 1. Arneson, who was born and raised in Inavale, near Red Cloud, has performed at the Red Cloud Opera House before and was a special request during our 20th anniversary year of performances. Accompanied by violinist Anne Hooper Webb, the evening was enlivened with music mentioned in Willa Cather's works.

Sarah grew up on her grandparents farm where her great-grandmother homesteaded in 1871. "My parents worked and saved so that I could go to college for which I shall be forever indebted," Sarah recalled. "I was cast in an opera at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and fell in love with it."

After college, Arneson won scholarships for her graduate studies at the University of Michigan. From there she went to Paris on a Fulbright and then to Vienna, performing in various opera productions, and where she first read Willa Cather's novel, *The Song of the Lark*.

"That is when I realized Cather's interest in opera and became intrigued by the numerous coincidences of Cather's character, 'Thea' with my own," Arneson said. "I was never a Wagnerian soprano, though!"

Arneson also taught voice at Boston University for many years. One of her former voice students, Kate Quinn, has a book coming out in February 2024 called *The Phoenix Crown*. Set around the time of the great San Francisco earthquake in 1906, with an opera singer as the heroine, the plot is loosely based on Arneson's life growing up on a Nebraska farm as a descendant of Norwegian immigrants. Admittedly, many aspects of Arneson's life paralleled Thea's in *The Song of the Lark*, which made her September performance so poignant.



Opera soprano Sarah Arneson (seated) with violinist Anne Hooper Webb (center), and Ruth Moore, accompanist, at the Red Cloud Opera House in September.

## Scholarships Assist With Pursuit of Humanities Degrees

On Friday, June 2, we awarded and celebrated our 2023 recipients of the Norma Ross Walter, Antonia, Antonette Willa Skupa Turner, and National Willa Cather Center scholarships. Four students presented their winning essays at the 68th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, followed by a Q&A session with conference participants.

The Norma Ross Walter Scholarship winners include **Ella Gaskill** (Lincoln Southeast High School), **Ava Hoffschneider** (Pius X High School), and **Trinity Houchin** (Minden High School). This year's Antonia Scholarship winner is **Campbell Collins** (Collins Homeschool). The Antonette Willa Skupa Turner Scholarship winner is **Autumn Wissenburg** (Milford High School). The National Willa Cather Center Scholarship winner is **Brooks Armstrong** (Red Cloud High School).

Norma Ross Walter was a frequent visitor to Red Cloud and lifelong Cather fan. The scholarship established by her ample bequest supports young women seeking higher education. Antonette Turner generously established both the eponymous



From L to R: Trinity Houchin, Ava Hoffschneider, Autumn Wissenburg, and Ella K. Gaskill

Antonette Willa Skupa Turner scholarship and the Antonia scholarship, named after the celebrated Willa Cather character inspired by Turner's grandmother, Anna Pavelka. Created by Jack Wilson in memory of his parents, the Leslie A. and Helen R. Wilson Scholarship assists Webster County students pursuing secondary education or agricultural degrees.

The National Willa Cather Center Scholarship was established in 2023 through voluntary contributions by our Board of Governors to support a graduate of the local high school. Cather herself was a graduate of Red Cloud High School. While she never returned to live in Red Cloud permanently after college, we hope recipients of this award will maintain a life-long interest and appreciation for their hometown, just as Cather did.

Scholarships awarded through the Willa Cather Foundation since 1987 total more than \$200,000 and have assisted almost one hundred students pursuing a higher education degree.

*Application information for 2024 is available at [willacather.org](http://willacather.org) and annual deadlines are January 31, February 28, and April 20.*

## Ken Burns Presents "Willa Cather's America" at Symphony Space

In the presence of a large and enthusiastic audience, documentarian Ken Burns hosted an evening of short fiction performance in a celebration of Willa Cather in New York City. "I'm actually here because I love Willa Cather," Burns said, to much applause. "I am the father of four daughters and I love Willa Cather so much that I named my fourth daughter after her."

The National Willa Cather Center collaborated with Symphony Space and Selected Shorts on this unforgettable evening. Actors brought Cather's writing to life in moving performances. Sonia Manzano opened the show with "The Way of the World"—an early story published in *The Home Monthly* in 1898. David Strathairn followed with the 1904 story, "A Wagner Matinée." Sarah Mezzanotte read an excerpt from *The Song of the Lark*, and Patricia Clarkson closed the evening with "The Burglar's Christmas." The event also included a musical performance by mezzo-soprano Linda Collazo, accompanied by Eric Sedgwick. Those who missed the livestream can look forward to the broadcast on the Symphony Shorts public radio show and podcast.

In his introduction, Burns said: "I've long admired Willa Cather's sense of place. She made permanent in words a landscape that has largely disappeared from the United States." He noted that Cather's ability to capture her own emotional and universal experiences in life allows us "to appreciate with gratitude that moment in time, and those moments that in her writing transcend time." The event was part of a year-long commemoration of Cather's 150th birthday and came to fruition through the vision of Board of Governors member Peter Cipkowski.



Documentarian and Willa Cather champion Ken Burns hosted the evening. From L to R: Ken Burns, Eric Sedgwick, Linda Collazo, Sonia Manzano, Patricia Clarkson, Sarah Mezzanotte, and David Strathairn.

## Summer Teacher Institute and NEH Institute Offer Place-Based Study of Cather



The 2023 Teacher Institute cohort enjoyed a country tour that concludes at the Pavelka Farmstead, where the group explored the root cellar. From L to R: Jane Bauman, Marisa Zornes, and Kristi Desaulniers.

The second Teacher Institute was held July 7-11, 2023, after an inaugural program in 2022 accomplished the objectives education staff hoped for: to build connections with educators who teach or want to teach the works of Willa Cather and to aid the development of new teaching resources. Perhaps the most important outcome of this new program is the opportunity to show teachers appreciation for the challenging work they do by providing networking opportunities with fellow educators as part of a curated Cather experience.

Also in July, Melissa J. Homestead, professor of English and director of the Cather Project at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln—and member of our Board of Governors—led a group of twenty-five scholars to Red Cloud through an NEH-funded

initiative. “Willa Cather: Place and Archive” explored place-based and archival approaches to Willa Cather’s life and works. In Red Cloud, participants took part in educational sessions, conducted archival research, and experienced the landscapes and buildings represented in Cather’s fiction.

*Teacher Institute Applications are available online, and the next deadline is March 31, 2024.*



NEH Institute scholars visited the recently restored Farmers and Merchants Bank, one of many stops in their four-day itinerary in Red Cloud. From L to R: Lauren Tucker, Ariel Silver, Natasha Whitton, Donal Harris, Caroline Straty Kraft, and Fallon Murphy.

## Coming Soon: A New Permanent Exhibit in the Farmers and Merchants Bank



The newly restored Farmers and Merchants Bank was dedicated as the Willa Cather Museum in 1962.

As we mark the publication centenary of Willa Cather’s *A Lost Lady*, installation of a new permanent exhibit in the Farmers and Merchants Bank is underway. *Making a Place: A Long History of Red Cloud* invites visitors to explore the novel’s connections to Red Cloud through subjects that are both present and absent in Cather’s fiction. The exhibit will explore topics that include Pawnee culture; the lives of Silas and Lyra Garber—in life and as portrayed as Captain and Mrs. Forrester in *A Lost Lady*; town-making and homesteading; banking and the Panic of 1893; and early preservation efforts led by the National Willa Cather Center’s founder, Mildred Bennett.

One of Red Cloud’s most arresting architectural specimens, the Farmers and Merchants Bank was built by Silas Garber, who went on to serve two terms as Nebraska’s governor. The bank is also the first building owned and operated as a museum by the National Willa Cather Center, known then as the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. The site is a fitting place to explore the notions of place-making, the history of Red Cloud’s founding, and the early days of our organization. For more than sixty years, the National Willa Cather Center has worked to preserve the historic fabric of the town that Willa Cather immortalized in her fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

This two-story interpretive space will highlight the ideas of building and re-building as guests explore the original bank teller cages, vaults, and offices; view artifacts related to the town’s founding and financing; and discover the origins of the WCPM’s preservation mission. Guests can view the new exhibit in 2024 by booking a guided tour.

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## Our Vision:

*People everywhere will find meaning and inspiration in Willa Cather's writing, life, times, and places.*

## Our Mission:

*To enrich lives by advancing Willa Cather's legacy locally and beyond through education, preservation, and the arts.*



The National Willa Cather Center  
413 North Webster Street  
Red Cloud, NE 68970

COMING UP!



### Rascal Martinez Band

Rockabilly, folk, country, and Latin sound fuse into covers and heartfelt originals  
Friday, November 3, at 7:30 p.m. | On Site

### Virtual Author Series: Alex Kava

Acclaimed mystery author discusses *The Mystery of Hunting's End*  
Thursday, November 9, at 7:00 p.m. CT | Livestream

### Holiday Dueling Pianos

A special request-driven dose of joyous holiday cheer  
Friday, December 1, at 7:30 p.m. | On Site

### Celebrating Cather at 150: A Guided Holiday Tour

Festive tours of four historic sites in their holiday splendor  
Thursday, December 7, & Saturdays in December | On Site

### Chasing Bright Medusas: A Life of Willa Cather with Benjamin Taylor

Celebrate Cather's 150th birthday with readings from this new biography  
Thursday, December 7, at 7:00 p.m. | Livestream

Visit us online at [www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org) for information on upcoming events.



Arts programming presented with the support of the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment.