

NEWS FROM CATHER COUNTRY

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Hotel Garber Ribbon-Cutting

The long-awaited soft opening of Hotel Garber took place on Friday, April 4. More than one hundred people gathered for celebratory remarks, a ribbon-cutting, open house, and self-guided tours. The occasion bookended more than eight years of planning, fundraising, and construction that helped rehabilitate a vacant historic commercial building into a boutique hotel and event center.

“When you step into the restored Potter-Wright building today, I hope you’ll be awestruck with its transformation,” Executive Director Ashley Olson said in her opening remarks at the Red Cloud Opera House. She shared that the local newspaper astutely reported in 1902 that the building would be a credit to a town

four to five times larger than Red Cloud, and noted “that sentiment still rings true.”

Board of Governors member Jay Yost spoke about the history of the building, while Tourism Development Director Jarrod McCartney emphasized the project’s importance to growing tourism. Representing the Red Cloud Community Fund, Dennis Hansen spoke about the collaboration with the Fund and early investors.

“Rural America, the critics say, is slowly dying,” McCartney remarked. “Imagine the audacity then, of not only deciding to build a new hotel in a town of about one thousand people sixty miles from the closest interstate, but also declining the

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The ribbon-cutting and tours were attended by more than 100 people undeterred by the spring rain.

L-R: K.C. Belitz, Director, Nebraska Department of Economic Development; Kevin Daehling, Red Cloud City Council; Mark Bostock, President, Willa Cather Foundation; Liz Rasser, Past Member, Heritage Tourism Advisory Committee; Gene Horne, Mayor of Red Cloud; Ashley Olson, Executive Director, Willa Cather Foundation; Ben Hobbs, Red Cloud City Council; Jarrod McCartney, Director, Heritage Tourism Development; Kina Elliott, Red Cloud City Council; Jay Yost, Secretary, Willa Cather Foundation; Dennis Hansen, Treasurer, Red Cloud Community Fund.

Photo: Nebraska Community Foundation



opportunity to build a cheap chain hotel on the edge of town in favor of rehabilitating a dilapidated historic building to the tune of almost \$9 million.”



Above: The Hotel Garber is now a key fixture in downtown Red Cloud, and its emergence has inspired other historic streetfront restorations and new businesses in recent years.

Below: The Potter-Wright building prior to rehabilitation.



In his remarks, K.C. Belitz, director of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, observed that Red Cloud had the audacity to think that a small town could build a childcare center, a world-class museum, and a hotel. He encouraged the community to continue to be enterprising, stating “there are great opportunities right now for small towns, but not all will benefit equally. The growth and forward progress will go to the audacious.”

Hotel Garber provides twenty-seven rooms for guests, including a two-bedroom loft, a lobby with a small reading nook and library, and a spacious dining and lounge area. More than seventy historic photos of Red Cloud’s early citizens and businesses are on display. A street-level stairwell has been restored for lower-level entry into the Red Cloud Creative Hub, which consists of two spacious multi-purpose rooms for readings, workshops, art classes, meetings and residencies.

The hotel is now accepting reservations and will hold a quieter grand opening next month when Forrester’s, the hotel restaurant and lounge, will open to the public. Like Hotel Garber, the name of the hotel restaurant is a nod to Silas and Lyra Garber, who served as models for Captain and Marian Forrester in Willa Cather’s 1923 novel *A Lost Lady*.

As an important keystone of the collective mission to grow heritage tourism in Red Cloud around the life and literary legacy of Willa Cather, the Hotel Garber project raised more than \$7 million in charitable gifts and grants. Paired with an estimated \$1 million in Nebraska Historic Tax Credits, total funds secured from all sources is more than \$8 million. The campaign is now within \$230,000 of reaching its goal, and gifts of \$1,000 or more will be permanently recognized on a donor wall in the hotel lobby.

To make a gift or pledge, please contact Development Coordinator Jeniffer Beahm at jbeahm@willacather.org.

An Evening with Willa Cather

Library Foundation of Los Angeles’ Leadership Circle Members and Bibliophiles recently gathered with members of the National Willa Cather Center at the Richard J. Riordan Central Library prior to an ALOUD program that celebrated Willa Cather’s resurging voice.

Guests enjoyed light bites, wine, and remarks by Stacy Lieberman, president and CEO of the Library Foundation of Los Angeles; Peter Cipkowski, vice president of National Willa Cather Center’s Board of Governors; and Ashley Olson, executive director of the National Willa Cather Center..

Following a lively reception, guests experienced a 150-year anniversary celebration of Willa Cather. Featuring readings from actors Linda Bisesti and Matthew Reidy and performances by Christine Li, Sean Stanton, and Timothy Wong, this memorable evening brought to life the uniquely American prose of this Pulitzer Prize-winning author.

You can view the entire program on the “ALOUdla” channel on YouTube.

L-R: Peter Cipkowski; Matthew Reidy; Linda Bisesti; Timothy Wong; Sean Stanton; and Christine Li.
Photo: Library Foundation of Los Angeles



Retired Teacher Leaves Unexpected Gift to the Willa Cather Foundation

Ask Loren Johnson's former students what he was like as a teacher and they won't mince words—he was tough. But they also describe in the same breath Johnson's kindness and compassion. In fact, Johnson cared so deeply about others that he rarely shared much about his own life and passions. It wasn't until Johnson's death in September 2023 at the age of seventy-nine that former students Bryan Harman and Greg Pedroza learned their best friend had quietly bequeathed his entire estate to three non-profit organizations, one of them being the Willa Cather Foundation.

"Loren spent life not calling attention to his own life. It wasn't important to him that others knew what he was doing. He lived his life like this always. Self emptying; pouring himself onto everyone," said Harman, a retired IT specialist with the University of Utah.

Johnson's selfless final act didn't surprise Harman and Pedroza, but what did come as a shock was the amount of money that was distributed on behalf of a retired school teacher. Johnson received a bachelor's degree from Eastern Washington University and a master's degree from Westminster College. He spent his entire 35-year career at Kearns High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he taught English and Advanced Placement courses.

"Every word I write, Loren is in my head," said Pedroza, a retired theology professor. "He made all of us perform and develop at our best. There were at least a dozen former students at his memorial."

Johnson's impact on these two former students was so great that in their adulthood each developed a deep friendship with their toughest teacher. Literature may have been his first love, but travel came in a close second, and following the death of his spouse, Paul Larsen, Johnson took his friends with him across the United States and to Europe.

"People loved Loren because Loren loved people. He knew how to maintain a connection with people around him. Always going to visit folks. Great listener and willing to give advice . . . if you asked for it," Harman said.

In his final days, Johnson, who battled Parkinson's disease, was greeted by what Harman could only describe as a parade of love from friends, family, and former students.

"When they left, he told me how lovely it had been." Pedroza said, "I didn't know people cared that much for him. I'm not sure he experienced that himself. By the absence of it in his life, he knew it was important and worked hard to make sure others understood they were valued."

Neither Pedroza nor Harman had heard of the Willa Cather Foundation prior to Johnson's estate gift. While his obituary described the written word as his first love and that Willa Cather

held a special place in his devotion, his former students did not remember reading a Cather novel in his classes. During the pandemic, Johnson recommended that Pedroza read *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but that was the entirety of their Cather conversations.

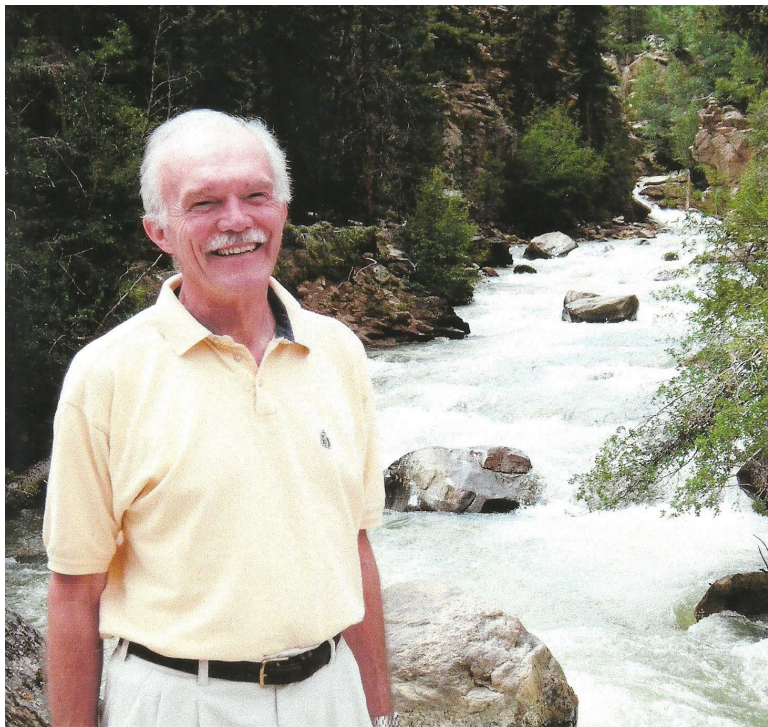
Johnson's membership with the Willa Cather Foundation began in 2004, following a trip to Red Cloud, Nebraska, for the Willa Cather Spring Conference. And while he maintained a rather private affection for Cather—at least with these two dear friends—they agree that Johnson's legacy gift to the

Willa Cather Foundation aligns with his lifelong commitment to the arts and education.

"Something must have happened on that trip to Nebraska," Harman said. "Something about the Foundation's work resonated with him."

Johnson's celebration of life was held on what would have been his 80th birthday, which also happened to be the 150th anniversary of Willa Cather's birth.

If you would like additional information about planned giving and the Cather Legacy Society, or if you have named the Willa Cather Foundation as a beneficiary in your estate plans, please contact Development Coordinator Jeniffer Beahm at jbeahm@willacather.org.



Courtesy Image of Loren Johnson

Glass Negatives Discovered

In February, the National Willa Cather Center staff made an amazing discovery: in a small, water-damaged cardboard box, stored out of sight behind historic building materials, were eighty-seven glass negatives. The fragile glass pieces capture historic images within their delicate gelatin emulsions, but they were jumbled together and encased in dirt, dead spiders, and wasps' nests. It's unclear how or when they were placed in that out-of-the-way corner.

For now, the glass negatives have undergone an initial cleaning and evaluation. A very few were simply unsalvageable, with no silver remaining on the glass at all. Director of Collections and Curation Tracy Sanford Tucker has made some careful experiments on more intensive cleaning, but no further work will be undertaken until a preliminary scan can be done. These baseline images will serve as insurance, should further cleaning and conservation work result in damage to these extremely fragile pieces. Staff will also be able to begin identifying the subjects, which we know will include Julia Miner; prize-winning cattle, chickens,

and pigs; Douglass and Roscoe Cather; Retta Ayre Miner and her daughter Jennie; and more.

These plates allow our organization to learn new things about the Miner House itself—its wallpaper and furnishings, for example—as well as the daily activities of the family. As we've learned over decades

of historic preservation and interpretation, sometimes the smallest details in a photograph give us the clues we need to bring a story or a building to life. We're excited to see what we learn from this small treasure trove.

Do you have a collection of photographs or negatives—whether glass or acetate? Tucker would be happy to talk with you about how best to preserve your photos for the future and share them with others who love Willa Cather or Red Cloud. In the past, we have arranged digitization projects to allow images to be preserved and shared,

even if the original owner retains the physical copies.

If you're interested in visiting the archive or donating to our collection, please contact Tracy Tucker at ttucker@willacather.org.



Julia Miner negative, undergoing cleaning

19th International Cather Seminar Headed to Milwaukee

About forty scholars and students will present papers at the 19th International Cather Seminar, held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, from June 25–27 this year. “All Together Different: Reading Willa Cather Across Regions” will focus on the 2025 centennial of the publication of Willa Cather’s novel, *The Professor’s House*, a novel that traverses regions in action and in memory: a Midwestern town in an unnamed state on Lake Michigan, cattle and mesa country in northern New Mexico, and the grasslands of Kansas.

We take our title and the conference’s location from the titular professor’s recollection of the difficulty of explaining Lake Michigan to his friends in France: “It is altogether different. It is a sea, and yet it is not salt. It is blue, but quite another blue. Yes, there are clouds and mists and sea-gulls, but—I don’t know, il est toujours plus naïf.” Paper presentations will explore Cather’s relationship to region, broadly construed, and Cather’s relationship to earlier literary regionalism and to regional traditions of the twentieth century.

Featured speakers are **Jeffrey Insko**, professor of English and coordinator of American Studies at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, where he teaches courses on nineteenth-century American literature and culture and the Environmental and Energy Humanities. He is the author of *History, Abolition, and the Ever-Present Now in Antebellum American Writing* (Oxford, 2018) and the editor of the Norton Library Edition of *Moby-Dick* (2024). **Noreen Masud** is a lecturer in Twentieth Century Literature at the University of Bristol and an AHRC/BBC New Generation Thinker. While Masud works mostly on twentieth-century literature, she also makes forays into Victorian and Romantic literature. Her upcoming book, *Flat Landscapes in Twentieth-Century Literature*, focuses on D. H. Lawrence, Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein.

Registration is now open on our website. Please contact Rachel Olsen, director of education and engagement, at rolsen@willacather.org with questions about the seminar.



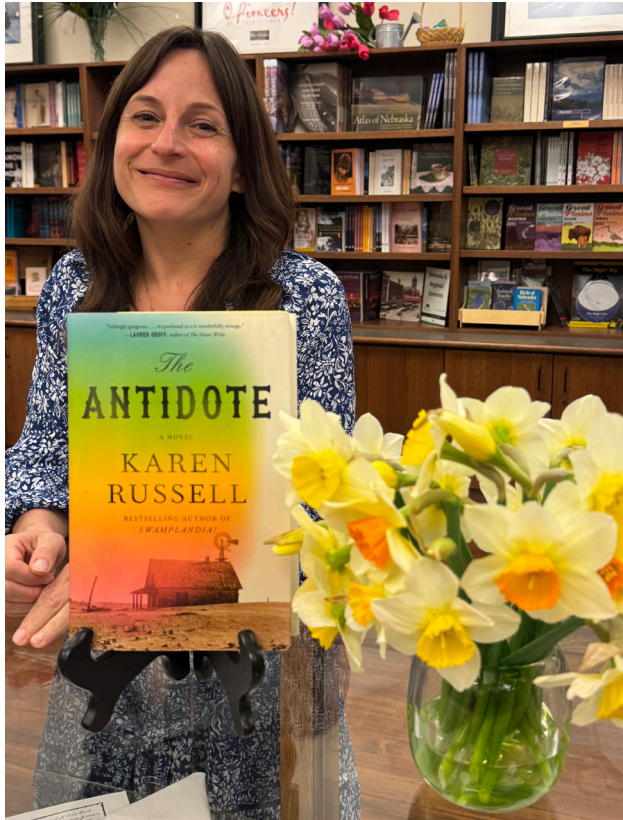
Above: Jeffrey Insko

Below: Noreen Masud



Karen Russell Reading & Book Signing

We are grateful to author Karen Russell—Pulitzer Prize finalist and MacArthur Fellowship recipient—for taking time to be with us in Red Cloud on April 4 as part of the book tour for her recent novel, *The Antidote*. Russell is also the author of six books of fiction, including the *New York Times* bestsellers *Swamplandia!* and *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*. The event was attended by more than one hundred people, many of whom came from rural areas of Kansas and Nebraska.



Infused with historical events and elements of magical realism, *The Antidote* is set in Nebraska during the Dust Bowl and begins ninety years ago on April 14, 1935, Black Sunday, when ferocious winds stirred up an estimated three hundred thousand tons of topsoil that advanced across the prairie in an ominous dark front. The storm hits the fictional town of Uz, Nebraska,—“south east of the Sandhills and west of the Platte river”—and its aftermath unfolds in the town in unusual ways. Works Progress Administration photographs from the era are featured throughout

the book and add a stark and thrilling layer to the narrative. A strong sense of landscape, weather, and environment provide a backdrop for the culture of Russell’s characters—both fantastic and earthbound.

In the decade spent writing the novel, Russell did extensive research and visited many people and places in Nebraska. While in conversation with Director of Education Rachel Olsen, Russell was asked, “What has Nebraska taught you?” She answered, “Above all, generosity . . . the really generous sharing of knowledge, expertise, food, time . . . In talking to real people here in Nebraska I realize how much people love this place—like Cather did with the people and the landscape. And strangers that I approached became friends.” The day after her talk, Russell visited the Pavelka Farmstead and descended into its iconic fruit cave, a connection that will resonate with readers of her novel. *The Antidote* is available in our bookstore and online at shop.WillaCather.org.

Funding for this event was provided by Humanities Nebraska and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment.

FROM OUR BOOKSTORE



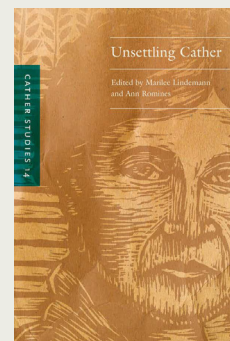
National Willa Cather Center Tote Bag | \$16.99



Willa Cather Signature T-Shirt | \$22.50



Willa Cather Childhood Home Card | \$5.99

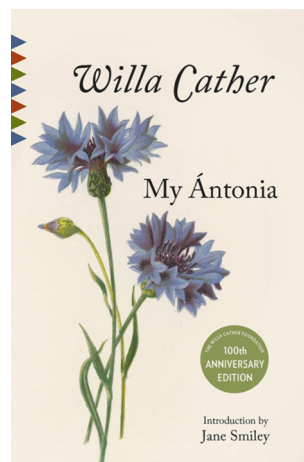


Cather Studies 14 | \$40.00

Shop.WillaCather.org
Members of the Willa Cather Foundation receive
10% off purchases, in-store and online.

Big Read of My Ántonia

Last fall, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) included Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* among the fifty titles selected for their 2024 Big Read program. An initiative of the NEA in partnership



Vintage Classics 100th anniversary edition of the novel with an introduction by Jane Smiley.

with Arts Midwest, the Big Read supports community reading programs designed around a single "Big Read" book. The National Willa Cather Center received a grant of \$20,000 to bring communities together around the shared activities of reading and discussing the novel.

Numerous programs and initiatives organized by education and curatorial staff have been offered, and more than seven hundred copies of *My Ántonia* have been distributed to reading groups and classrooms. Discussions and traveling exhibits have been hosted

by Joslyn Art Museum, T. G. Masaryk Czech School, Hastings College, and public libraries in Hastings, Lexington, and Papillion, Nebraska, as well as Port Townsend, Washington.

Perhaps the most impactful resonance of this program has been experienced in high school classrooms across the country. Christopher Kite, an English teacher at Classical High School in Providence, Rhode Island, requested seventy copies for his students last fall. He recently sent a moving letter thanking staff for their outreach and included several dozen individual handwritten thank you notes from his students. He wrote "As you can see from their heartfelt thank you notes, they did experience and absorb much of the magic that is Willa Cather and *My Ántonia* . . . It changed them, and it changed me. I know it might sound trite and hackneyed, but I had a first hand experience to witness the power of great literature and its effect on young people. What greater experience is there?"



A basket of thank you notes sent by students from Rhode Island.

Learn more, or request books, a program, or traveling exhibit at www.WillaCather.org/BigRead.

Plan Your Visit to Coincide with Fall Concert Series



Clockwise from upper left: Fall performers include Opus 76, AMFM, Joseph Hall, and Lauren Andersen.

With the addition of Hotel Garber and available lodging at the historic Cather Second Home, we encourage you to book a weekend escape to Red Cloud. Concerts at our Red Cloud Opera House take place on the first weekend of each month during the spring and autumn seasons. A weekend visit is also an opportunity to experience our new "Cather Immersion Package," which includes two days of excursions and a one night's stay in Red Cloud.

The package includes a tour of seven Cather-related historic sites, a guided hike of the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie led by our own on-staff Master Naturalist, the Country Tour of rural sites and landscapes, including a visit to the restored Pavelka Farmstead. Guests will also enjoy a personal tour of the archive, along with the opportunity to browse exhibits and see our new film, *Willa Cather: Breaking the Mold*.

This fall, Opus 76, Kansas City's classical string quartet, will perform on September 5; we'll enjoy hits from the 80s with AMFM on October 3; the bluesy rock sound of Lauren Anderson on November 7; and the return of Joseph Hall in two nights of *Elvis' Blue Christmas* on December 5 and 6.

We request that tour packages be booked at least two weeks in advance. For questions, please contact Visitor Services Coordinator Nick Powers at npowers@willacather.org.

Introducing the Red Cloud Creative District



Pictured here prior to the addition of furnishings, the Creative Hub will utilize two spacious rooms in the lower level, including this former barbershop with its preserved original tile flooring.

In 2023, Red Cloud was designated as an official Creative District by the Nebraska Arts Council. The Nebraska Creative District Program utilizes the arts as an economic driver to support communities in Nebraska by telling their stories and elevating the value of the arts. As a certified Creative District, the Red Cloud Creative District was eligible to pursue a Development Grant from the Nebraska Arts Council, which was awarded in 2024.

The grant supported the creation of the Red Cloud Creative Hub

and the development and promotion of arts events. The goal for the newly established Creative Hub is to foster artistic and cultural creativity and advance economic vitality as part of Red Cloud Creative District's vision to foster a vibrant destination where residents and visitors alike can experience the arts. Jarrod McCartney, in addition to his role as tourism development director, serves as the director of the Creative District and will work with a committee of volunteers to establish Creative Hub programs.

"The Creative Hub will take the Hotel Garber's cultural and economic impact on the community to the next level," McCartney said. While the hub will serve as headquarters for the Creative District's activities and provide area residents with opportunities to engage with the arts, McCartney also described its potential to attract smaller and mid-size conferences and workshops through modernized meeting spaces and food service.



We invite you to host a workshop or a corporate retreat in our Creative Hub! Contact Tourism Development Director Jarrod McCartney at jmccartney@redcloudnebraska.com

Welcome New Board Members

This spring, three new members joined the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors, each with an appreciation for Willa Cather. **Nancy Bierman**, a native of Jackson, Mississippi, grew up with a love of Southern literature and served on the National Advisory Board of the Eudora Welty Home. She has lived in Dallas, Texas, for about forty years where she serves on several community boards, including the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. **Donna K. Gower**, from Andover, Kansas, is director of development for FosterAdopt Connect. With over twenty years of experience in nonprofit development, she has a strong track record in fundraising and community engagement. **Jack F. Preis** is a professor of law at University of Richmond in Virginia where he specializes in constitutional litigation. Growing up, he spent his summers working on grain and cattle farms in Illinois and then, after college, worked in the grain business for Archer Daniels Midland.

To get to know our board, visit WillaCather.org/About/Board-Governors



Clockwise from upper left: Nancy Bierman, Jack Preis, Donna Gower

Thank You to Departing Board Members

We recently bid farewell to three members from our Board of Governors who completed their terms and thank them for the many talents that they collectively contributed to our mission. **Melissa Homestead** is the director of the Cather Project and professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In addition to her contributions to the Cather community through research and publishing, Melissa was involved with seminar planning and served on the governance committee. **Glenda Pierce** has served on the board for eighteen years and is a past president and secretary who most recently served on the development and governance committees. She is a zealous promoter of Cather and a committed ambassador for the Foundation. **Steve Skupa** is a business owner and community leader whose insights were valued as a member of our finance committee.

Board Officers

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Secretary: John A (Jay) Yost, New York, NY

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Alisa Chiplaski, *Facilities Associate*

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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.

Cather Legacy Society

Membership in the Cather Legacy Society is open to all who desire to continue their support of the Willa Cather Foundation beyond their lifetimes. To learn more, visit www.WillaCather.org/legacy-society.



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

COMING UP!

70th Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference

"Cather's House: Examining Built and Natural Environments in Her Work"

June 5-7 | National Willa Cather Center

American Voice: An Evening With Willa Cather

With the Newberry Library and the National Willa Cather Center

June 17, at 6:00 p.m. | The Newberry | Chicago, IL

19th International Willa Cather Seminar

"All Together Different: Reading Willa Cather Across Regions"

June 25-27 | Milwaukee, WI

The Opus 76 Quartet

An evening of classical music from a Kansas City ensemble

September 5, at 7:30 p.m. | Red Cloud Opera House

Lauren Anderson

Bluesy rock music with soulful, earthy vocals

November 7, at 7:30 p.m. | Red Cloud Opera House



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