

2023 ANNUAL REPORT

THE NATIONAL
Willa Cather
CENTER

Dear Friends,

This year was one of remarkable milestones and meaningful celebration. In 2023, we honored the centenary of Willa Cather's Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*, a novel she described as "the story of a boy's life." While often identified as a war novel, it resonates more broadly as the journey of a young person in search of purpose. We also marked 100 years since the publication of *A Lost Lady*, a work drawn from Cather's keen observation and imagination, inspired by her early years in Red Cloud.

The 150th anniversary of Cather's birth was commemorated through readings, lectures, and celebrations nationwide, made possible through partnerships with libraries and cultural organizations. An unforgettable highlight of the year was the unveiling of Cather's statue in the U.S. Capitol's National Statuary Hall, a striking sculpture by Littleton Alston that now stands in the Capitol Visitors Center.

A vitally important restoration of the Willa Cather Childhood Home has refreshed the National Historic Landmark through improvements to aid care of collections and practical upgrades to enhance the visitor experience. A stable new foundation overlayed with original brick and a replica picket fence are evocative of the period the Cather family occupied the home. The attic, now climate controlled as a result of the restoration, provides a stable environment for the conservation of Cather's bedroom wallpaper.

Behind the scenes at the museum was the development of a new permanent exhibit, *Making a Place: A Long History of Red Cloud*, set to open in 2024 in our Farmers and Merchants Bank. This enhancement in our interpretation offers visitors a chance to explore the town's history and its intersections with Cather's life and literature. Also locally, our Red Cloud Opera House celebrated its twentieth anniversary with a season of sold-out concerts by artists identified as fan favorites.

Reducing all of this to numbers, we hosted eighty-three events that ranged from concerts and exhibits to readings and educational programs. More than 14,000 people visited the museum or attended these programs, and an additional 78,000 were served by our online resources and publications.

None of this would be possible without the commitment of our board, volunteers, supporters, and staff—people who believe, as we do, that engagement with literature and the arts truly enriches lives. Your support ensures that Willa Cather's voice endures, her stories inspire, and her world remains alive for generations to come. Thank you!



Ashley Olson

Executive Director



Bob Thacker

Board President

A MONUMENTAL OPPORTUNITY FOR NATIONAL OUTREACH

Willa Cather's sesquicentennial afforded us a tremendous opportunity to expand educational programs through collaborations with partner organizations across the country. Programs were staged in more than twenty cities and ranged from curated readings at the *Los Angeles Times* "Festival of Books" to *Selected Shorts: Ken Burns Presents Willa Cather's America* at Symphony Space in New York City. Dignitaries and Cather readers joined us in Washington, D.C. as Willa Cather's prolific writing career and contributions to American letters were honored with the placement of her statue in the U.S. Capitol as an addition to the National Statuary Hall Collection.

At the 68th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference in Red Cloud, Nebraska, we gathered under the theme "Complex and Brilliant: Cather at 150" to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Cather's Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*, as well as the publication centenaries for *A Lost Lady* and *April Twilights and Other Poems*. Summer also saw our 18th International Willa Cather Seminar "Bright and Beautiful and Alive," which was held in New York City. Highlights included Margo Jefferson and Elizabeth Kendall in conversation about Willa Cather's New York stories and Hugh Ryan, on Greenwich Village history, and Willa Cather's place in it. Perhaps one of our most important programs to help foster the teaching of Cather and inspire the next generation of enthusiasts is our Willa Cather Teacher Institute. This professional development opportunity gives K-12 educators five days of immersive literature and history study with special lectures, site tours, visits to the archive, conversation with Cather scholars, and time for curriculum development. The classroom units they produce are added to a growing collection of education resources made freely available.





Left: *Statue Dedication Ceremony in Honor of Willa Cather. Pictured left to right: Nebraska Sen. Pete Ricketts, Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen, Nebraska Sen. Deb Fischer, Rep. Kevin McCarthy, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Democratic Leader Rep. Hakeem Jeffries.* ***Right:*** *Ken Burns, Eric Sedgwick, Linda Collazo, Sonia Manzano, Patricia Clarkson, Sarah Mezzanotte, David Strathairn ahead of* Selected Shorts: Ken Burn's presents Willa Cather's America *at Symphony Space in New York City.*

RESTORATIONS AND REHABILITATION PROJECTS UNDERTAKEN

On December 7—Willa Cather's 150th birthday—the Willa Cather Childhood Home reopened to the public following a meticulous sixteen-month restoration. The project included long-overdue accessibility features, which will make it possible for all visitors to experience this National Historic Landmark. Additional restoration work included updates to the electrical service, non-intrusive museum lighting for enhanced interpretation, a climate control system, foundation repairs, and a new roof. Collections staff carefully removed, cleaned, and returned more than 550 objects. Support for the restoration of the Willa Cather Childhood Home was made possible in part by a Save America's Treasures grant from the National Park Service, with matching funds provided by nearly 700 donors to our *Campaign for the Future*.

While preservation of ten historic sites in Nebraska is a feat that requires consistent attention and resources , this year we were met with a new challenge when made aware that Cather's birthplace in Gore, Virginia was for sale and in danger of being demolished. Thanks to an online campaign co-organized by Cather relatives in Virginia and bolstered by advocacy from the National Willa Cather Center, the Willa Cather Birthplace now has a hopeful future. Virginia realtor Katherine Solenberger purchased the house to ensure its future stabilization and preservation and will donate the property to a new nonprofit organization that will work to elevate Cather's legacy in Virginia. We continue to work alongside stakeholders and volunteers in Virginia to assist in planning for the site's future.



Above: *A Red Cloud High School student peers into Willa Cather's attic bedroom as the space awaits future wallpaper conservation.*

Below: *Exterior of the Willa Cather Birthplace*



A RECORD-SETTING YEAR FOR PROGRAMMING

Performing arts took center stage this year with the Red Cloud Opera House twentieth anniversary season. From Joseph Hall's Elvis tribute to world-renowned opera soprano Sarah Arneson, the music drew more than 2,100 patrons for our twelve-show season, making 2023 a record-setting year. Arts and humanities programming at the opera house remains central to advancing our mission. Inspired by Willa Cather's own formative experiences with the arts, we have continued to expand the Opera House's role as a vibrant cultural hub. Since its reopening, the historic 1885 venue has grown into a thriving center for music, performance, and creative expression—bringing inspiration to our community and honoring Cather's enduring legacy.

New this year was an occasion to welcome five talented writers to Red Cloud—from a pool of more than one hundered applicants—for the inaugural Willa Cather Residency. The program offers a small cohort of writers the opportunity to live and create in Red Cloud. It honors Cather and reflects the life-long reverence she had for art, storytelling, and her hometown—an inspirational setting amidst the Great Plains of Nebraska—from which she created the communities in half of her novels. Now in its fourth year, the Willa Cather Author Series continues to grow. This year nine hundred readers attended thirteen author series events. The free program features contemporary authors who share their work and explore topics related to Willa Cather, Great Plains history, and art across a variety of styles and genres. Featured authors included Oscar Hokeah, David McKay Powell, Tracy Daugherty, and Alex Kava. Acclaimed writer and biographer Benjamin Taylor offered a four-part "Reading Cather at 150" virtual study series ahead of the publication of his new biography, *Chasing Bright Medusas: A Life of Willa Cather*, from which he read and discussed in a virtual event in observance of Cather's 150th birthday.



Above: O Pioneers! *opera returns to the Red Cloud Opera House for the 2023 season.*

Below: *Joanna Biggs works during the inaugural Willa Cather Residency for Writers.*





"I want to express so much gratitude for the dream residency this experience was. Staying in Cather's home, getting to know other writers well, and being so fully connected to a new place in which to make my work was such a gift. Thank you! I will not forget this experience, which was a lifetime professional highlight for me."

— Kirsten Sundberg Lunstrum, *Willa Cather Residency Cohort Member*

FINANCIAL SUMMARY

for the years ended December 31, 2023 and 2022

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

	2023	2022
Assets		
Cash and cash equivalents	281,897	128,947
Investments	3,255,923	2,201,867
Prepaid expenses	12,836	20,172
Pledges receivable, net	216,490	255,365
Grants and other receivables, net	601,300	378,958
Bookstore inventory	89,545	87,144
Land, property, and equipment, net	4,800,414	3,778,372
Investments in real estate	6,546,044	4,858,003
Art and historic structures	541,541	538,631
Restricted investments	6,151,631	7,798,043
Total assets	$ 22,497,621	$ 20,045,502
Liabilities		
Accounts payable	469,760	298,943
Accrued expenses and taxes withheld	35,132	83,402
Deferred revenue	84,219	0
Capital lease obligations	4,367	5,715
Total liabilities	$ 593,478	$ 388,060
Net Assets		
Without donor restrictions	17,882,512	13,989,399
With donor restrictions	4,021,631	5,668,043
Total net assets	21,904,143	19,657,442
Total liabilities and net assets	$ 22,497,621	$ 20,045,502

The financial statements of the Willa Cather Foundation are audited annually by an independent public accounting firm. A copy of the audited financial statements and the Foundation's tax filing (Form 990) may be obtained by contacting the Foundation's office.

STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

	2023	2022
Revenue and Support		
Contributions and grants	2,568,793	2,717,010
Noncash contributions	150,381	12,176
Conferences and seminars	59,701	19,335
Program and conference sponsors	38,325	38,225
Bookstore and concession sales	91,800	67,049
Tours, events, and admissions	40,907	29,259
Other programs and workshops	17,828	455
Membership fees	62,737	62,478
Rent income	112,029	102,145
Investment income	745,485	(886,956)
Gain or loss on assets	(154,908)	(145,956)
Total revenue and support	$ 3,733,078	$ 2,015,220
Expenses		
Program		
Cost of sales	54,561	35,463
Education and scholarships	335,590	287,223
Preservation of sites and collections	463,395	427,499
Historical center operations	164,675	139,624
Opera House and programming	83,319	199,552
Cather Prairie operations	18,213	17,752
Supporting		
Management and general	227,113	277,408
Development and fundraising	139,511	71,516
Total expenses	$ 1,486,377	$ 1,456,037
Increase in net assets	2,246,701	559,183
Net assets, beginning of year	$ 19,657,442	$ 19,098,259
Net assets, end of year	$ 21,904,143	$ 19,657,442

OUR SUPPORT

The following individuals and organizations were donors to the Willa Cather Foundation in 2023. Space does not permit us to list donations under $50.00, but we are grateful for these contributions. Every gift is important to us.

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Estate of James Sherwood, Big Pine Key, FL

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These generous individuals have made cumulative lifetime gifts of $1,000,000 or more to advance our mission.

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These generous individuals have made charitable gift plans to benefit the Willa Cather Foundation beyond their lifetime through a gift intention in their will or through a beneficiary designation.

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Melissa J. Homestead
Lincoln, NE
James Jaap
Pittsburgh, PA
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Omaha, NE
Ana McCracken
Ames, IA
Fritz Mountford
Hastings, NE
Diane Prenatt
Indianapolis, IN
Ann Romines
Alexandria, VA
Steve Skupa
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Luis F. Sotelo
Lincoln, NE
Mary June Talen
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John A (Jay) Yost
New York, NY

Leadership & Suppport Staff

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Rachel Olsen
Director of Education & Engagement
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Facilities & Preservation Specialist

Tour Guides
Sherri Billinger
Linda Hitchler
Pam Livingston
Janet Maruhn

Facilities Assistants
Alisa Chiplaski
Leah Meyer
Karin Prellwitz

Our Mission

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

Our Vision

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

"Willa Cather brought Red Cloud to life, and visiting enriches me. It slows everything down. You start to measure—by inch—everything. We're nothing if we don't understand our past; we're nothing if we don't have artists who understand that. Willa Cather understood that, and the work of the Willa Cather Foundation brings her writing and her life to the forefront for readers to appreciate her continued relevance."

— Littleton Alston, *Sculptor*



THE NATIONAL

Willa Cather

CENTER

The Willa Cather Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and an equal-opportunity provider and employer. The National Willa Cather Center is the registered trade name of the Willa Cather Foundation.

Cover Image: Willa Cather Childhood Home through the years.

Archival image: PHO-4-W689-196. Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection. Willa Cather Foundation Collections and Archives at the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

The National Willa Cather Center

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"This institute was made by teachers for teachers. I appreciated how much the archives and tours went hand in hand. I would see something in person and then read about it in Cather's letters. That was so powerful to experience, and I can't wait to arrange a similar experience for my students in Red Cloud!"

— Marisa Zornes, *Teacher Institute Partcipant*

