“When people ask me if it has been a hard or easy road, I always answer with the quotation, ‘The end is nothing, the road is all.’”

— Willa Cather

From an interview in the New York World, 1925

The Willa Cather Foundation

Promoting appreciation and understanding of the life and works of Willa Cather.

Preserving the historical settings and archives associated with her timeless writings.
To Our Friends and Supporters

Greetings from Red Cloud... (and New York)! As a native of Cather’s hometown and now a longtime New York City dweller, I am pleased to welcome you to the Willa Cather Foundation’s second annual report. Having my heart in the prairie and my head in the city, I get a unique perspective on the magnitude of the wonderful work that the Foundation does every day to help assure that Nebraska’s greatest literary light remains known as one of America’s greatest authors. In addition to the splendid offerings described in this report, the Foundation continues to do much more: 2008 marked our 53rd annual Spring Conference in Red Cloud, and in 2009 we’ll be hosting our 54th, as well as our 12th biennial International Cather Seminar — this time in Chicago. 2008 also saw us hosting our first Board of Governors’ Dinner during Spring Conference (a most enjoyable time was had by all), as well as moving forward on our current historic restoration project: the redevelopment of the Moon Block Building. This undertaking will allow us to expand our work and give us the proper archives we’ve dreamed of for so long. A revitalized Moon Block, along with the preservation and use of the nine historic properties we manage, is a vital part of our mission in promoting rural community development in one of America’s best-known hometowns. Despite the setback our endowment assets have taken, we will soldier on, doing the great work we have done for decades. We thank you for your continuing support and invite you to join us on this fun and edifying journey!

When Willa Cather borrowed a quote to remind us that “the end is nothing, the road is all,” she was, as usual, prescient. 2008 was proof that our efforts along the road to fulfill our mission are ever-growing, and successful.

Our mile-markers included a first Elderhostel with a second already in swing; the early phases of prairie restoration with a burn plan set for late April 2009; prestigious guest presenters such as the acclaimed artist Steve Joy and noted author John Price; resumption of a Prairie Writers’ Workshop to be held annually; a newly enhanced website drawing substantial numbers of worldwide visitors; increased programming including nationally renowned theatre and Smithsonian exhibits; up-to-date inventory management in the bookstore; and so much more that cannot fit within these pages.

As I look into our future — and commemorate past partners whom we have lost — I know that we’re doing what they’d have wanted most: we’re charging ahead on the road that is, as Cather tells us, all.

The deepest thanks to each and every friend who makes this possible.
Creative Life at the Red Cloud Opera House

It was at the Red Cloud Opera House that the young Willa Cather received her early exposure to the fine arts, which would one day figure powerfully in her work. In the Opera House’s first years, untold numbers of others — everyday folks who would not go on to become Pulitzer Prize-winning writers of timeless appeal — also had the great good fortune of experiencing the pleasures of Opera House attractions.

It was dark for decades, but today the Opera House facility is alive again, fulfilling the Foundation’s goal of bringing to new audiences the same stimulating artistic and cultural experiences that inspired Willa Cather.

As the centerpiece of our programming in 2008, the Willa Cather Foundation presented *A Kaleidoscope of Worlds*. This season-long series of theatrical productions, films, and musical performances examined the changing nature of rural and urban America from past to present. One memorable event was on Halloween, when the well-known Alloy Orchestra provided live musical accompaniment to a newly minted print of the classic silent film, *The Phantom of the Opera*. This event was made possible in part thanks to a first-time grant from the Mid-America Arts Alliance and the National Endowment for the Arts.

In the Art Gallery

The Opera House Gallery’s exhibit of British artist Steve Joy’s richly constructed abstract paintings provided a stunning visual complement to the events of the 53rd annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, and gave viewers an exclusive preview of *Uncreated Light*, Joy’s 2008 retrospective exhibit at Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha.

Joy’s work — brilliantly hued, vividly geometric — evokes the spirituality of places, both the exotic and close-to-home. It is highly compatible with the work of Willa Cather, who famously celebrated her home prairies while also nursing a lifelong wanderlust. The Foundation was honored by this association and proud to host this memorable exhibit.

Other memorable Gallery exhibits in 2008 included the premiere showing of “Adventures of Africa,” featuring the photographs of acclaimed Nebraska-born nature photographer Bruce Bohlen, and “The Rise of a Landmark: Lewis Hine and the Empire State Building,” showcasing the work of American photographer Lewis Hine and developed by George Eastman House.
User-friendly and Interactive

Global Outreach via the Web

Thanks to generous support from Nebraska Travel & Tourism, the United States Department of Agriculture, and private donations, the Foundation’s updated and expanded website launched in December 2008. In addition to enabling visitors to experience the life and works of Willa Cather in a fresh way, the dynamic site gives the Foundation a potent new tool for broadening our reach and fulfilling our multifaceted mission.

Online guests will be able to “visit” Red Cloud — and perhaps plan an actual visit to the famous town where Cather spent her formative years and began to develop her artistic voice. The site provides numerous glimpses of the Foundation’s historic buildings and sites, its collections, and seasonal exhibits. Purchases from the well-stocked bookstore and shop can be completed online, as can new memberships and renewals. A guestbook and user forums promote open conversation among site visitors, scholars, and worldwide Cather lovers.

“Worldwide” is the key word. The new site’s regular visitors hail from all 50 states and 102 countries and territories. Since the site launched, the Foundation’s web traffic has more than quintupled — and continues to grow.

Bookmark us and give us a visit: www.WillaCather.org.

“We Could Not Have Had a Better Instructor”

Under the able guidance of Professor Merrill Maguire Skaggs, 30 first-time visitors to Red Cloud had the opportunity last year to experience “Willa Cather’s Window to the World” — five June days of exploration and immersion learning in partnership with Elderhostel, the not-for-profit educational travel organization. Of the educator and guide who helped bring Cather’s world to life, one participant’s feedback was representative: We could not have had a better instructor.

A respected Cather scholar and long-time member of the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors, Merrill Maguire Skaggs passed away November 2008. She was a deeply valued colleague, tireless educator and mentor, and true friend.

That “word cloud” is composed of the textual contents found at www.WillaCather.org.

Merrill Maguire Skaggs.

2008 Elderhostel participants at the Burlington Depot in Red Cloud.
**Strong New Alliances**

Under the co-sponsorship of the Service-Learning Academy of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, 26 hard-working students from all over the world spent their fall break repainting the exterior of Willa Cather’s childhood home — and, because they were a very dedicated group, the interior of the Opera House Gallery as well. This was the Foundation’s first project with the Service-Learning Academy, an organization that fosters mutually beneficial partnerships among community organizations, students, and schools. Spearheaded by Susan Maher, Vice President of the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors and Chair of the Department of English at UNO, this collaboration with the Service-Learning Academy will lead to additional Foundation projects in 2009 and beyond.

**The Prairie Muse**

With the Prairie Writers’ Workshop held June 23-27, 2008, the Foundation revived an educational tradition originally established by Mildred Bennett, our founder. This year, 14 writers had the unique opportunity to develop and refine their work under the direction of poet and educator Lorraine Duggin. Drawing inspiration from the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie and working in a variety of genres, participants spent their days on the Prairie and convened for working sessions in the evening, under Duggin’s guidance. They read from their work at a well-attended public reception at the close of the weeklong course. The workshop will be held again July 13-17, 2009.

*A public reading at the Prairie Writers’ Workshop.*

*A writer at work on the Cather Prairie. 2008 was a busy year for prairie restoration, with the completion of new hiking trails, removal of more than 2,000 non-native trees, control measures against invasive species, and propagation of the rare wildflower, Fremont’s clematis, native to Webster County. These are just a few of the active steps being taken year-round under the direction of the Prairie Management Committee of the Willa Cather Foundation.*
Financial Summary 2008

Support and Revenue

- Contributions: $142,207
- Grants: $107,615
- Prairie Contributions, Grants, and Rent: $25,993
- Nebraska State Historical Society Contract: $68,430
- Membership Fees: $47,720
- Bookstore Sales: $33,236
- Tours: $8,423
- Conferences, Seminars, and Other: $40,169
- Opera House Admissions, Donations, and Grants: $55,643

Total Support and Revenue: $529,436

Use of Funds

- Program Services
  - Bookstore, Publications, Conferences, and Seminars: $37,716
  - Nebraska State Historical Society Operations and Maintenance: $106,031
  - Opera House Programming: $37,080
  - Operations and Maintenance: $86,504
  - Cather Prairie Operations and Maintenance: $16,429

- Supporting Services
  - Management and General Expenses: $160,255
  - Development: $21,031
  - Depreciation: $88,285

Total Expenditures: $553,331

For the Willa Cather Foundation, as with most nonprofit organizations, 2008 was a financially challenging year. As a result of market turmoil, net investment losses in our endowment and other interests amounted to $352,668 by year’s end — a 28% decrease that, proportionally, was better than the results of many nonprofit organizations nationwide.

While this setback did not prevent us from creating a rich program of activities, it does aggravate a perennial problem of structural deficits in our operating income. We earnestly look to our generous donors for help in closing the gap between income and expenditures.

The figures on this page are based on final year-end audited information compiled by an independent accounting firm.
The following individuals and organizations were donors to the Willa Cather Foundation in 2008. Some donations may include payment on a pledge or gift; gifts including such a payment are denoted by an asterisk. Space does not permit us to list donations under $50.00, but we are grateful for these contributions as every gift is important to us.

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— Willa Cather

*My Ántonia*
Photographs from the Heritage Highway Association Photo Exhibit

Three of the images used in this Annual Report were entrants in the photography contest organized by the Heritage Highway Association and exhibited in February 2009 at the Red Cloud Opera House Gallery.

Cover: Barbara Wiselogel
Back cover: Ruth Ann Behlmann
Inside covers: Jerri Haussler

The Willa Cather Foundation is grateful to the photographers and to the Heritage Highway Association for permission to use these beautiful images in this publication. The entire exhibit can be seen online at www.WillaCather.org.

For more information about the Heritage Highway Association, of which the Willa Cather Foundation is proud to be a member, visit www.HeritageHighway136.com.

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