

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXVII, No. 3

Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

## 28TH ANNUAL CATHER SPRING CONFERENCE May 7, 1983



Come enjoy another beautiful spring day filled with exciting activities that will capture the interest of all. Saturday morning after church services at Grace Episcopal with Father L. Brent Bohlke serving (wasn't his article in the Winter Literary issue of the WCPM newsletter interesting?) and Catholic services at St. Juliana with Father Frank Leiblinger officiating, join a short but significant country tour.

We are honored to present Ching Tsien as our guest speaker for the banquet. She will also participate at the afternoon panel discussion.

Ching Tsien is working on her Ph.D. program at the University of Chicago. She is an associate professor of English at the Peking Foreign Languages Institute. Before coming to the United States she taught American Literature there and will continue this same work on the completion of her program at the University of Chicago.

Jean (as she is called at the University of Chicago) received the equivalent of a B.A. from Jiangsu Teachers' College and the equivalent of a M.A. from Peking Foreign

Language Institute. From 1959-1981 Jean taught English at the Beijing (Peking) Foreign Language Institute. After the Cultural Revolution when ranks were restored she was promoted to associate professor of English. The publications credited to her name are: *A Handbook of English Conversation* and readings in *Modern English Prose*, two volumes.

Zhend Yenz (American name, Grace), also from China, will provide the musical entertainment following the banquet dinner. Miss Yenz, a musician-scholar, currently teaches and studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Please send your registrations early!

### CATHER CARAVAN CENTENNIAL

One hundred years ago this spring, the Charles Cather family packed their household belongings and began the long train trip to Nebraska. The household consisted of Charles and Virginia Cather, their children: Willa, Roscoe, Douglas, and Jessica; Grandmother Boak (Mrs. Cather's mother), Bess Seymour and Will Andrews, two of Grandmother Boak's grandchildren, already grown and able to help with the work of the large household. Marjorie Anderson, at her mother's request, came also to live her life out as a member of the Cather family.

Neither Mrs. Cather nor Willa was much delighted about moving west. The last sad incident, told in Edith Lewis' book *Willa Cather Living*, relates how the beloved sheep

dog pulled loose from his new owners and came running after the Cather family. How they all grieved at leaving the old dog behind!

Willa Cather remembers something of the train ride in her fictionalized account in *My Ántonia*, but she gave her real feelings of the new country in an interview in New York, 1913 (quoted in Slotte's *The Kingdom of Art*, p. 446).

"I shall never forget my introduction to it [the Nebraska country]. We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather's homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself — the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything — it was a kind of erasure of personality.

"I would not know how much a child's life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron. I had heard my father say you had to show grit in a new country, and I would have got on pretty well during that ride if it had not been for the larks. Every now and then one flew up and sang a few splendid notes and dropped down into the grass again. That reminded me of something — I don't know what, but my one pur-

pose in life just then was not to cry, and every time they did it, I thought I should go under."

Now, here we could play the game of "What if?" But we need not. Fortunately for the heritage of the pioneers and Nebraska, Willa Cather came to this wild, untamed country from a lush civilized one, at the age of nine when impressions burn themselves forever on a brilliant young mind.

As your celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of that famous and fortunate journey of Willa Cather to Nebraska, read again *My Ántonia*, *O Pioneers!* and the others of her Nebraska novels. Search in any of her writings, and you will find the child's soul groping for order in a strange environment. The branding of that physical change from East to West influenced every word she wrote. Read and see.

---

**HOMILY DELIVERED AT  
SERVICES FOR  
BERNICE SLOTE  
February 25, 1983**

**Dr. Bernice D. Slote  
November 17, 1911-  
February 22, 1983**

When we are born, we begin to die. Some would call that a rather pessimistic view, but death is the companion of birth. It is inevitable. It is one common denominator among us, and it faces each of us at some time in the future. It is sure. The question is, "When?" For some death seems to come prematurely. For others it comes after a full and productive life. Some may find in dying a blessed relief from months or years of agonizing suffering. Other lives are snuffed out in an instant. Whenever it comes, or however it is accomplished, death is a process of life. It is unavoidable, severe, simple. It is always a shock to those who survive. It is an imponderable mystery, yet it awaits us all. No matter how alive we may feel, no

matter how many plans we may have for the future, no matter how much we may fear death, we are going to die — and we know it. But we prefer to avoid thinking about it. Willa Cather realized that tendency in us. She once wrote to a friend who had lost her husband after only eight months of marriage and said that she had found it a simple fact of life that after one's forty-fifth birthday death seemed to rain all around one. After the fiftieth year it becomes a veritable thunderstorm. She said that she never looked at a morning paper without reading of the death of someone she knew, somewhere. Death seemed to stare her in the face. In the days when they first met it seemed that nobody ever died. The obituaries had no connection whatever with her personal life. But now — death was becoming a dry, numbing, encroaching presence in her life.<sup>7</sup>

Bernice Slote and I talked often about that letter, especially during the last two years. She once told me that she was beginning to understand it more and more. Death is a problem not to those who die, but to those who live — to us. Its mystery makes some of us fearful as we move toward its portal. It often leaves behind broken ties, unfinished tasks, remorseful hearts, unfathomable questionings, and emptiness.

Even though we know it is coming, we are never quite ready for it. There is a very human epitaph that is reported to be on a gravestone in a small country cemetery somewhere near Nottingham, which says simply, "I expected this, but not just yet."

But death is a problem only to those who try to solve its mystery by human reasoning. The Christian does not try to rationalize death, nor to seek to avoid or sentimentalize the fact of death. We do not "pass away." We *die*. And we know that with our death we are faced with the fact of judgment, when all our pretenses and excuses and rationalizations will be

revealed for exactly what they are. For all those who place their trust in him who has overcome death in his own dying and rising again, the eternal God resolves this perennial problem. We have been assured today, in Paul's Letter to the Romans, that nothing — "nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Yet even that does not mean that we are not to feel sorrow. St. Paul says that we should mourn — "not as others which have no hope." But that hope does not make human grief unchristian. The very love we have for each other in Christ brings deep sorrow when we are parted by death. Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend, Lazarus.

It is such grief that brings us together today. It is such grief that has caused humans to huddle around open graves through the centuries. We come together today not only to pay our respects to Bernice Slote, but to add our prayers to those of the whole church, in heaven and on earth. This service from *The Book of Common Prayer* and the readings from Scripture give us words, at a time when they are not easily found, by which we may commend the departed to the everlasting mercy and love of God.

Finding appropriate remarks at a time such as this is an awesome task. I suppose I have discovered a number of temptations in trying to meet that task. One is tempted to simply deal with facts. I could give the dates of events in Bernice's life; I could list her many awards and achievements, outline her career, extol her accomplishments. But we all know those facts. They have been repeated for us in the past few days and, no doubt, will be repeated again.

Or one is tempted to take this time to philosophize, to become abstract and deal with death and the mysteries of the universe only in theory — to avoid the reality of

the event which has brought us here, and the reality of what each of us is feeling at this time.

Or one is tempted to become extremely personal, to take this opportunity to tell all of you what Bernice Slote meant to me, of how much she gave me, of what her friendship meant to me. But each of you has a similar story, and many of you have known her longer and more intimately than have I. That is another thing that brings us together today — bidding our farewells to a much-loved sister, cousin, Aunt Bernice, colleague, friend — and teacher.

Despite her many and varied accomplishments, it has been pointed out by others that she was proudest of her teaching. It was how she most often described herself — as “an English teacher.” When interviewed by a national magazine a few years ago about her fine teaching, she said, with characteristic modesty, “I can talk with students because I am still studying. You can’t teach well unless you are learning at the same time.”<sup>2</sup>

That may well have been the secret. Even had she tried, Bernice Slote could not have concealed the delight she always experienced when a student came to her with a new insight, a new fact, a new historical tidbit. And that delight was infectious. It caused her students to see that learning could be exciting, that knowledge could be broadening, that research could be fun, that education could make one more human and humane.

What Bernice once wrote about Willa Cather could apply in many ways to herself as well. She was, one American artist who made her way through the diversity and bewilderment of American life to interpretations and some reconciliations. Whatever she found of chaos is balanced by something achieved, something understood. The key, as [Cather] wrote in *My Antonia*,

is to “become part of something entire,” or, as in the lines on her tombstone: “That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.”<sup>3</sup>

Bernice Slote would seem to have been “dissolved” into many things complete and great — a poet, an artist, a critic, a teacher, an editor, a civic worker, an educator, an advisor, an ambassador for Nebraska, and a scholar of Keats, of Whitman, of Thomas, of the short story, and, of course, of Willa Cather. If Cather was the first to bring the muse into her country, Bernice Slote was among the first to give Cather to the world. I have great difficulty thinking of Cather scholarship without Bernice Slote. She had almost become synonymous with that study. Nebraska and the world are richer for her work in this area, and we are poorer for the work we had hoped she still might do. Her love of this state and her identification with the good earth were much like that of Cather’s. I think she may have expressed that best in the concluding paragraph of a study in which she was involved on a different subject — the Whitman tradition. In the last paragraph of *Start with the Sun* she wrote:

Start with the sun, said Lawrence. Perhaps one begins and ends with genesis: As [Dylan] Thomas said of his own art, the poet writes “for the lovers, their arms/Round the griefs of the ages.” . . . Writers in the Whitman tradition make the strongest affirmation possible: that we do not live by either illusion or disillusion; that no life is cheap or need be separate; that in the earth we may grow into possibilities; that we take nothing secondhand. To be absorbed directly out of the self and directly with the earth in the pulse of creation is no mean aim for a writer. Such an ideal, seriously practiced, might change the face

of poetry in any period. Start with the sun. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Bernice Slote started and lived with the sun. We can be truly grateful to have spent time in her brightness. May she and all the faithful departed rest in peace, and may light perpetual shine upon them. Amen.

— L. Brent Bohlke

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Willa Cather, Autograph letter signed, to Zoe Aikens, 31 December 1932, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>2</sup>“Teacher: A Gallery of Great Professors Agree that an Interested Student is What Their Job is About,” *People Weekly*, 13 October 1975, p. 60, col. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Bernice Slote, “Introduction,” in *Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir*. Text by Bernice Slote. Pictures by Lucia Woods and others. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. x.

<sup>4</sup>Bernice Slote, “Start with the Sun,” in James E. Miller Jr., Karl Shapiro, and Bernice Slote, *Start with the Sun: Studies in the Whitman Tradition*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960, originally subtitled “Studies in Cosmic Poetry,” Bison Book edition, 1963), p. 238.

## MILDRED R. BENNETT RECEIVES STATE HONOR

Mildred R. Bennett, who was instrumental in founding the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, has won the prestigious Henry Fonda Nebraskan Award.

Mrs. Bennett was foundation president for twenty years. She currently is the chairman of the board of directors, a post she’s had for seven years. The award was given to Mrs. Bennett in recognition of her making a significant contribution to the state’s tourism growth. It is awarded by the Department of Economic Development and the Nebraska Diplomats and was presented at the governor’s Travel Industry Conference and Awards Luncheon in Omaha February 4, 1983.

## THE PASSING SHOW

Dr. Virgil Albertini of Northwest Missouri State at Maryville, Missouri, will chair the "Passing Show" panel discussion on the afternoon of May 7. Dr. Albertini has been a professor of English for eighteen years at Northwest Missouri State. His growing interest in and scholarly approach to Willa Cather's work has kept him busy the last decade.

Sharon Browning, Chairman of Marketing and International Business at Northwest Missouri State University, Maryville, received her Ph.D. in Business Administration in 1973 from the University of Missouri, Columbia. During the summer of 1981 she studied the agribusiness needs of China and upon returning to Missouri began work on the Missouri-China Agri-Business Trade Development Project. This project resulted in eleven key Chinese officials coming to Northwest Missouri State University where they studied and worked for three weeks in May and June, 1982 with fifteen sponsors in agribusiness related fields both at the University in seminars as well as in the field with the sponsoring firms.

Tzu-An Hsu (pronounced shoe) comes from Taiwan. A junior majoring in American History and minoring in English, he has studied our Cather course.

Mildred R. Bennett, Cather biographer, will again be a most valuable member of the panel. Mrs. Bennett will read Lo-Chi Chang's

article "Willa Cather and China" prepared especially for our Spring Conference.

---

## CONFERENCE SCHEDULE — SATURDAY, MAY 7

**8:00 a.m.-12:00 noon**

Registration, coffee and kolache, Cather Center Museum, 338 North Webster.

**8:30 a.m.**

MASS — Grace Episcopal Church, 6th and Cedar, Father L. Brent Bohlke, officiating.

**9:45 a.m.**

MASS — St. Juliana Catholic, 3rd Avenue and South Walnut, Father Frank Leiblinger, officiating.

**10:30 a.m.**

CATHER MINI-COUNTRY TOUR — Depart from Cather Center Museum, 338 North Webster.

**12:30 p.m.**

BOX LUNCH — Vet's Hall, 3rd and Cedar.

**2:00-3:30 p.m.**

"THE PASSING SHOW" — Vet's Hall, 3rd and Cedar; panel discussion — CATHER AND CHINA.

**3:45-4:45 p.m.**

MEMORIES: An exhibit of WCPM scrapbooks compiled by Helen Obitz; Foundation Building, 326 North Webster.

**7:00 p.m.**

BANQUET, Guest Speaker, Jean Tsien — High School Gymnasium, 7th and Webster.

**8:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. and 3:30-5:00 p.m.**

GIFT SHOP/GALLERY, OPEN. Foundation Building.

**10:30 a.m.-2:00 p.m. and 3:30-5:00 p.m.**

OPEN HOUSE — all Cather Center Buildings, "NEBRASKA LANDSCAPES" — photographic exhibit by Roger Bruhn at Burlington Depot, 1st Avenue and South Seward; refreshments at Depot from 3:30-5:00 p.m.

*Cather Center Buildings are opened courtesy of the Cather Center, Nebraska State Historical Society, Ann E. Billesbach, Curator.*

Page 16



**Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial**

326 North Webster Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

Nonprofit Organization  
U. S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
RED CLOUD, NE 68970  
Permit No. 10

**Register early for May 7th!!!**