

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

CATHERANA '84

By Herb Hyde

Snowflakes and Willa Cather spring conferences share at least one characteristic: No two are alike. The similarity goes no further because snowflakes are cold and impersonal, heartwarming and memorable to this participant were the greetings from hostess and program coordinator Vi Borton; banquet emcee Dr. Wilbur K. Bennett and his wife, Cather Scholar Mildred R. Bennett; and the super-busy staff at the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation and Museum. It was as close to going home as one can get.

A late start and fog forbade that I arrive in Red Cloud on May 5 before the Rev. Dr. Brent Bohike was halfway through his homily at Grace Episcopal Church. Appropriately, of course, it was Catheresque in theme, Christian in message. Fitting it was, too, that Dess Sherwood, Grace's oldest living member, knelt at the altar to receive Holy Communion. The Rev. Frank Leiblinger of St. Juliana Catholic Church was a whole 'nother story, but then of course he always is. The chuckle this day was about the priest and the rabbi who went duck hunting.

Neither Father Leiblinger, who appealed to Willa to do something about the weather, "since it's your day we're celebrating," nor Father Bohike, who perhaps had petitioned someone or other before I arrived, could stop the intermittent rain, which turned out to be more inter than mittent. Not even Vi Borton, keeper of the on-off switch, would take credit for the burst of sunshine that made midday brilliant for a while.

A journalist's quest for the truth is not easily thwarted, however, and the truth in this case lay with young Ryan Sherwood, great-great grandson of Carrie Miner Sherwood, Dess' late mother-in-law, who with Dess was a friend of Willa Cather. It seems that Ryan had asked his mom, Nancy, to pray with him from THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER. Open it, she said, so he did. To a prayer for fair weather.

Some 200 participants in the 29th annual spring conference toured Moonstone at 10:30. The first stop was Cather Prairie, where the meadowlarks lived up to their hospitality.

This year's theme for THE PASSING SHOW, which headlines the afternoon portion of each conference, was "Memories from Willa Cather's Nieces and Nephews." Only Helen Cather Southwick of Pittsburgh was able to attend but letters from several of the others were read, so listeners were treated to a wide range of material. Mrs. Southwick showed family pictures of herself and Cather relatives, including Willa, and expounded on the misinformation that has been disseminated by careless writers. It was not the day's only criticism of miserable performances by pseudo scholars.

Mrs. Southwick's talk was a delightful series of reminiscences that kept listeners enchanted. Her description of Miss Cather's visits from New York (Dess Sherwood said Willa acquired an Eastern accent and was difficult to understand at times) was especially interesting for its detail of daily routine: Aunt Willa always rested in the afternoon before tea and al-

ways dressed for dinner. From the trunk she brought with her came beautiful jewelry, one piece of which, a gem-set gold snake ring, Helen Cather admired greatly; Aunt Willa bequeathed it to her.

A valuable revelation during THE PASSING SHOW was that Willa Cather's voice resembled that of the late Cather Scholar Bernice Slote. Those of us who have heard Miss Slote now know approximately what Miss Cather sounded like; she must have been a delight to listen to. The similarity was strong enough that when Miss Cather's friends Yehudi and Hepzibah Meunin heard a tape of Miss Slote's voice they asked where the recording of Willa Cather had come from.

Also explained during the afternoon were the circumstances of Willa Cather's burial in New Hampshire and the reasons her will for-

As you read this newsletter and reread previous issues, you are aware of the continuing outreach and proliferation of Cather studies.

We enjoy keeping you informed of the many seminars, future studies and activities pertaining to Cather's Art.

As we approach the celebration of our 30th year we congratulate you for your generous support. We continue to need your financial assistance.

Thank you for your generous renewals.

Sincerely,
Viola S. Borton
President

bids publication of her letters. The latter are all perfectly logical. Her letters usually were written in haste, she explained, contained errors that she did not have time to correct and were personal words to the recipient that might be misunderstood by others. Besides, she was an artist and artists are wont to display only their most nearly perfect works.

Special treats at this year's conference were a slide show on Nebraska artist Terence Duren and David E. Scherman's Catherland photographs from the March 19, 1951, issue of LIFE. The former was at the museum, the latter at the depot.

Cather Scholar James L. Woodress of the University of California-Davis was the banquet speaker, his topic was "Recent Cather Scholarship: Trends and Events" and his talk was crammed with so much information that it was impossible to take adequate notes. There has been a tremendous surge in Cather scholarship during the past decade, he said, so much so that he will update his biography of Willa Cather and include much new material. Still, he said, he longs for the definitive biography, which he had hoped Bernice Slotte would write.

Woodress was generous in his praise of careful scholars — Bernice Slotte, Virginia Faulkner, Mildred Bennett, Susan Rosowski, Joan Crane, Brent Bohlike and others — and utterly scathing in his criticism of those who narrow their focus and ignore massive evidence to propound one or another of their illogical and sometimes prejudicial views and theories.

More treats. Guest poet Robert Schuler of the University of Wisconsin-Stout read for us from his own works and those of other poets; powerful word pictures spanning the literary landscape to the horizon. In particular I liked what he had to say about painters and the land.

The best treat I have saved for last: soprano Gerilyn Giebler, accompanied by pianist Sue Anschutz. Miss Giebler sang "Vilia" from THE MERRY WIDOW, "La Conzone di Doretta" from Puccini's LA RONDINE and "Italian Street Song" from NAUGHTY MARIETTA. Cather Museum Curator Ann Billesbach had the word I was searching for to describe Miss Giebler's voice: pure. The best word I can come up with to describe the way she sings is "effortless." It is as if all she has to do is open her mouth and beautiful music will pour forth. Clear. Soul-stirring. Pure. Like the meadowlarks at Cather Prairie. Thea, larks, move over.

1984 PRAIRIE WORKSHOP

"Prairie and the Nebraska Pioneer" was the topic for a five day multi-disciplinary course offered jointly by Kearney State College and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation in Red Cloud May 29 - June 2. Twenty-nine participants completed the course for three hours of undergraduate or graduate credit.

Dr. Helen Stauffer, professor of English at Kearney State College, was course coordinator and an instructor. Dr. Hal Nagel, Kearney State College professor of biology and manager of the Cather Memorial Prairie, gave tours of the prairie and presented biological instruction.

Other lecturers and tour leaders included Mildred R. Bennett, Cather biographer; Ann Billesbach, curator of the Cather Historical Center; Vi Borton, Red Cloud, president of the WCPM & EF; John Carter, curator of photographs; and Dave Murphy, architect with the Nebraska State Historical Society; Bill and Jan Whitney of Aurora, co-directors of the Prairie-Plains Resource Institute; Kay Young, from

the Encounter Center, and Robert Pabian, geologist with the University of Nebraska.

WILLA CATHER: THE NORTHEAST PERSPECTIVE

Though North Andover, Massachusetts, may seem an unlikely setting for a conference on Cather, it was the gathering place for Cather scholars from around the country for a week of lectures, discussions, films, and site visits to places on the East coast associated with Cather's life and work. Merrimack College was pleased to host its second national conference, WILLA CATHER: THE NORTHEAST PERSPECTIVE, from June 17 to 23. The program, developed by Kevin A. Synnott and John J. Murphy through the college's Division of Continuing Education, was designed to explore Cather's work in a context far different from her Nebraska world and to create a wider awareness of the cultural richness that the Eastern experience had provided in Cather's adult life, just as the Nebraska experience has so marked her childhood.

The major presentations began on Monday with Sue Rosowski's paper "The Discovered Self: Quest for Authenticity in *Alexander's Bridge* and *The Professor's House*," and John Murphy's "Catholicism in Cather's Mid-Career." On Tuesday, Elizabeth Ammons discussed "The Engineer in the Garden," offering new insights into the character of Bartley Alexander. That afternoon, close to Sarah Orne Jewett's home in South Berwick, Maine, Sharon O'Brien spoke on the Jewett-Cather friendship, the "gift from heart to heart." Marilyn Arnold described the significant Eastern influence found in Cather's short fiction, and Bruce Baker spoke, appropriately enough in this New

England setting, of Cather as an American Romantic. On Thursday evening, at the conference banquet, Mildred Bennett offered her views on marriage and romance in Cather, with her usual delight and insight. In addition, some 16 shorter papers read and discussed in roundtable sessions provided clear evidence of the exciting variety of Cather studies under way in all parts of the country.

The group visited the Jewett house (currently undergoing extensive restoration) and had the chance to experience the beautiful "country of the pointed firs," while picnicking along the Maine seacoast. A trip to Boston brought us into contact with sights found in Cather short stories and in *Alexander's Bridge*, and brought to life the culture and style Cather would have encountered in her early visits to Boston. Fittingly, our final journey was to Jaffrey, New Hampshire, where Cather spent many summers, where she wrote parts of *My Antonia*, and where she is buried. In the shadow of Mount Monadnock, in a quintessentially New England landscape, the group came together for a final assessment of the significance of the "Eastern perspective" in Cather's work. For some, it was a new experience of another "place" in Cather's world, and for others, it was confirmation of the importance of Cather as a writer of Nebraska and far beyond. We had seen in the works we talked about and in the first-hand experiences we shared the significance of Sarah Orne Jewett's admonition to the young writer to "know the world" in order to write about "the parish." Though far removed from the prairies of Nebraska, New England and its culture are every bit as important in Willa Cather's world.

Kevin A. Synnott
Division of Continuing Education
Merrimack College
North Andover, Massachusetts

WESTERN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

Viola Borton and Mildred R. Bennett attended the WLA annual meet-

ing in Reno, Nevada, October 3-6. Mildred Bennett presented two papers. Although Willa Cather was not listed among the authors for which papers might be given, so many articles came in that the director, Ann Howard, arranged four sessions on Cather, more than on any other author.

WINTER LANDSCAPE

for Jacob Van Ruisdael

"that troubled music, ever-darkening, ever-brightening . . ."

Willa Cather, THE SONG OF THE LARK

now/then there is little sense to
cities
cluttered huddled under clouds
twisting down—
bursts of winds scream our skins
streetlights out we walk slowly
across snow
stained a strange sand-tan grains
of pollen silver-tipped
branches of trees whipped
into that deeper singing darkness
what is so distant from us

later there will be a room for art
fire-lit dim
crowded with books and shadows
no one can enter

when we come back

Robert Schuler
University of Wisconsin-Stout

HELEN OBITZ

Helen Obitz, charter member of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, born September 11, 1920, died November 18, 1984.



Helen's interest in history immensely benefited her home town of Red Cloud. In 1955 she was a founding member of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation and was a 30

year member of the Board of Governors. She was an officer for many of those years.

She served as a trustee and as an officer of the Webster County Historical Society beginning with its reorganization in the early 1960s, holding the office of vice-president at her death. Helen led the search for period furnishings and artifacts for both the Webster County Museum and for the Cather properties. She planned, designed, financed and executed many of the first displays for both museums.

She was the spark plug behind celebrations commemorating historical events. Most memorable perhaps are the celebrations surrounding the centennials of Nebraska (1967) and Red Cloud (1971). These events in turn generated a new sense of community pride and sparked enthusiasm for preserving our heritage.

Her collection of old clothes spans 100 years of styles and in the last 20 years has costumed hundreds of people.

In 1960 Helen's Little Red School House was restored to its original turn-of-the-century style, and since then she has made it available for all kinds of community groups from Cub Scouts to senior citizens to visiting dignitaries, Cather guests and convention attendees.

She was involved in historical activities on the State and National level, as well as locally, served as an officer in most of the associations of which she was a member, and was appointed by President Eisenhower to be an advisor to the Smithsonian Institute.

At the WCPM spring meeting May 1, 1976, Helen received a picture of Willa Cather's room with an inscribed tribute to her more than 20 years of devotion and service to the Foundation. The award cited Helen's "contributions as collector, curator, historian and benefactor for the WCPM."

Without her energy, knowledge and generosity the Cather Memorial could not have prospered.

THE SOWER AWARD

The Nebraska Committee for the Humanities' prestigious SOWER AWARD was presented to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation on September 14, 1984.

The Cather Foundation was honored for "a record of growth, volunteerism and accomplishment over the past 30 years in encouraging and assisting scholars to interpret the life and writings of Miss Cather and at the same time offering local and national audiences exemplary literary and cultural programs."

Speaker at the Banquet Awards Dinner was Wallace Stegner, long-time admirer of the work of Willa Cather.

The award is an eight inch bronze replica of the sower atop the Capitol building.

WCPM 1985 SUMMER TOUR TO WILLA CATHER'S FRANCE AND ENGLAND John Campbell, Tour Coordinator

Plans for the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial's 1985 summer trip to Europe are nearing completion. Our exciting itinerary will follow that of Willa Cather's first trip to Europe. Updated, it will also include things of interest for the 1985 traveler. Plan to join the WCPM as it makes this fun filled discovery tour of England and France.

We will explore the charming English countryside, described by Cather, visiting the villages of west central England and then the timeless Costwalds. We will visit Shakespeare's country, Oxford, and Windsor. Exciting London will be next with time to visit historic sites, shop, or take in a London show.



Mrs. Mildred Bennett receives the Sower Award from Lt. Governor Don McGinley at the Banquet Awards Dinner sponsored by the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities.

Crossing the English Channel, we will begin our memorable journey across France. For it is France that so affected Cather as to have a place in her works. Arriving in France we will tour the city of Rouen, home of Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant. Then on to enchanting Paris. While in Paris we will enjoy a day trip to Fontainebleau Forrest and the Barbizon visiting the artists' studios that so attracted Cather.

Leaving Paris we will travel to Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. Included in our stay will be a visit to Avignon, its Papal Palace and gardens. In Provence, we will visit the country of Cezanne and Picasso to experience that part of France which influenced the works of these artists. Completing our travel, as did Willa Cather, we will visit the French Riviera coastal towns including Nice and Monte Carlo.

The WCPM tour plans to follow Willa Cather's journey on her first trip abroad and in addition includes sites of interest to today's traveler to England and France. Whether you are a first time traveler, or a veteran, the WCPM tour has been expertly designed. Complete details will be available soon after the New Year. Watch your mail box. Plan to join us for this memorable vacation experience.

30TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE

The book for Spring Conference, May 4, 1985, will be THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE. The year 1985 marks the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. For that celebration we anticipate the participation of Dr. A. L. Rowse who has visited Red Cloud twice and has seen the beginning and the accomplishments of the WCPM. Plan now on attending.

Tsien Ching, who now teaches in the Department of English, Foreign Languages Institute, at Beijing, China, writes that she finished her Ph.D. thesis on Cather in August, and returned home to the People's Republic of China. She is now translating into Chinese THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE. She also reports that she talked with Antonia Byatt, sister of novelist Margaret Drabble of Britain, and Ms. Byatt will write the preface to a British edition of THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE. Ms. Ching writes: "We are going to correspond about Cather. Interesting how Cather can draw people together even outside the States, isn't it?" Ms. Ching also discussed Cather with the American Indian writer, Leslie Silko.

Michel Gervaud, our Cather friend in Aix-en-Provence, France, will give a lecture on Willa Cather and Europe. If any of you have recent material on this subject, please send it to us and we will forward it to Dr. Gervaud.

DEATHS

Maxine Jacks, widow of the late Dr. L. V. Jacks, charter member of the WCPM. Burial in Omaha, August 13, 1984.

Alfred A. Knopf, publisher of Cather's work since 1920, at his home in Purchase, New York, August 11, 1984.

Virginia Cather Brockway, daughter of Roscoe Cather and niece of Willa Cather, born February 2, 1912, died September 29, 1984. She has been a faithful and generous friend to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial.

THE VIRGINIA FAULKNER COLLECTION

The Virginia Faulkner Collection, containing over 2,000 titles, is housed in the Special Collections Department of Love Library at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Although the content of the collection is eclectic — ranging from Renaissance plays to geological surveys and cookbooks — it is especially strong in twentieth-century writers and in University of Nebraska Press publications. Some of Ms. Faulkner's favorite writers included Edward Albee, Eric Ambler, E. F. Benson, Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, Noel Coward, Geogge McDonald Frazer, Lillian Hellman, Henry James, Bernard Shaw, Rex Stout, Tennessee Williams, and Edmund Wilson. Of especial value to scholars are her extensive holdings of Willa Cather, Wright Morris, and John Neihardt.

In addition to her monographic collection, Ms. Faulkner had nearly complete runs of the University of

Nebraska Press Series. As a writer and editor, she needed access to biographical and factual documents, and this is evidenced by the large number of specialized encyclopedias, dictionaries, and almanacs within the collection. Although her library contains several periodical titles, her holdings indicate selective interests.

As a result of her position with the University of Nebraska Press, and because of her own literary stature, Ms. Faulkner was able to leave a number of letters to the University that are themselves primary research materials. Her correspondence with S. N. Behrman, E. E. White, Edward Wagenknecht, Donald Sutherland, Wright Morris, Louise Pound, Mari Sandoz, Hazel Barnes, Alfred A. Knopf, and others provide insight into the literary development of these figures, as well as chronicle the intellectual thought of the period. Amassed in a separate file, these letters are available to interested scholars.

The collection was presented privately on November 4, 1984 and is now available to everyone.

ALBERTINI TO CHINA

Northwest Missouri State University Professor of English Virgil Albertini was selected to teach for eight weeks during the fall semester at the Beijing Institute of Foreign Trade in the People's Republic of China.

He was the first Northwest faculty member selected to teach at Beijing through an agreement reached last spring between Northwest and the Beijing Institute. Other schools involved in the agreement were Seton Hall University, the American Graduate School of International Management and UCLA.

Dr. Albertini taught a course on Willa Cather and the American Short Story, as well as a writing class based on these two areas. He was also available for lectures and conference.

Dr. Albertini left Maryville in late August and returned in mid-October.

He stayed at the Friendship Hotel in Beijing, which was constructed in the 1950s when the Russians were there.

A Cather authority, he has completed numerous publications and presentations on the author, in addition to criticisms on other American writers. He is the bibliographical editor for the scholarly journal, "Western American Literature."

BRENT BOHLKE AT BARD COLLEGE

Father Brent Bohlke has accepted a call to be chaplain of Bard College. A distinguished Episcopal liberal arts college, Bard is at Annandale-on-the-Hudson, New York. Father Bohlke will also serve as rector of nearby Saint John the Evangelist, Barrytown. For the past few years he has been an instructor in the English Department of the University of Nebraska and vicar of Trinity Memorial Church in Crete. He has also led many of the special Masses at the Grace Episcopal Church on Spring Conference Day.

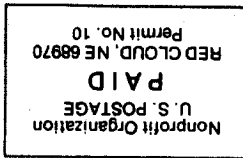
HISTORIC CATHER SITES FUNDED FOR REHABILITATION

Matching grants totaling \$26,000 were approved by the National Parks Service for rehabilitation sites at Red Cloud.

The projects, made possible through the Emergency Job Act passed by Congress in 1983, included five buildings that had a connection with the late Willa Cather, internationally known author who grew up at Red Cloud.

Ann Billesbach, curator of the Cather Historical Center said the funds were distributed by the Nebraska State Historical Society.

The rehabilitation designations were the Grace Episcopal Church where the original-type wood shin-



YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AND GROWTH OF THE ORGANIZATION

- By being a Cather Memorial Member and financial contributor:
 - BENEFACTOR \$1,000.00 and over
- ANNUAL MEMBERSHIPS**
 - Patron \$100.00
 - Sustaining 25.00
 - Family 15.00
 - Individual 10.00
- WCPM members receive:
 - Newsletter subscription
 - Free guided tour to restored buildings
- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
- By contributing your ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.

ALL MEMBERSHIPS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND REQUESTS ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE

Under Section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1965

Special group memberships (such as clubs or businesses) are available. Write to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial for details.

AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
 - To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
 - To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
 - To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.
- For Newsletter Donation Only \$5.00
Foreign Mailing 6.00

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gles were replaced, including re-pointing and cleaning the bricks, soffit repair and roof repair.

The Cather Childhood home was air-conditioned with the use of these funds.

Three of the five store fronts of the Moon block, which Cather called the Duke block in SONG OF THE LARK, were restored to their original 1885 look.

DEATH UPON THE WEARY

Father Latour: "I shall not die of a cold, my son. I shall die of having lived."

DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

A long and tedious pilgrimage we take,
Walking miles upon the rock-hewn path,
We see before us graven images,
Simmering in the wasteland fantasy,
Hovering always before us,
As a mirage taunts the eye of thirsty pilgrims.
Weary travelers, we,
Who once set upon the course clear-eyed,
Provision-full, clothing whole,
Fast of foot, eager.

Along the way we've seen great vistas,
Each hill reveals a view indigenous,
A plant or tree upon horizons,
Each unique in its hue.

When finally we arrive,
We see the graven images as they are,
Look Medusa in the face,
And are not turned to stone;
Then ready we must be,
To cast aside our now-worn sandals,
To disrobe ourselves from garments frayed,
To lie down in a bed clean and warm about the skin,
To end the journey weary,
And ready for the final vision.

Dr. Nancy Owen Nelson
English Division
Henry Ford Community College
Dearborn, Michigan 48128