Cather Fans Gather in Red Cloud

By JACKIE PFEIFER
Reprinted by Courtesy of Hastings Daily Tribune

Dressed in a flowing prairie skirt, laced white boots and straw hat, red-headed Julie Harris looked as though she stepped out of a Willa Cather novel as she peeked into the Catholic church window.

The tiny St. Juliana Falconeri Church was too crowded as several of the 400 visiting Red Cloud Saturday for the 32nd Annual Willa Cather Memorial Foundation’s Spring Conference in Red Cloud packed into the church where Cather’s best friend, Annie Sadilek Pavelka, Antonia in My Antonia, was married.

Harris, a renowned Broadway and film actress whose love of the Nebraska author’s work brought her to Red Cloud as speaker, toured Cather historical sites along with others from across the state and nation for the biggest conference ever.

“1 am here, well, by the grace of God. And I am so happy that you invited me. I have loved Cather’s writing for most of my life,” she said.

Visiting the places Cather wrote about is like an imaginary homecoming for many, said Susan Rosowski, the Cather scholar at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln who has attended the conference the last 12 years.

“Many of the people come back every year... It’s like a second family for many because Cather did write so much about her family,” she said.

Don Connors, a California English teacher formerly from Omaha, has made an annual trek to Red

Reflections of the Third National Seminar

By DR. ELAINE SARGENT APHTORP
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Beyond all other concerns I came to the Seminar simply to enjoy myself — indulging in a teacher’s vacation, wearing at a relaxed angle my critical cap as I refreshed, rekindled — and shared — a rewarding literary enthusiasm. If any one impression of this year’s Seminar prevailed over others in my mind, it was that one didn’t need to be a professional critic to experience Cather’s achievement — that in fact there’s something intrinsic to Cather’s art which stimulates and validates the reader’s own intuition of value, which encourages the parishioner to trust her capacity to intwine creatively with the world, to make leaps of extension outward and introspection inward.

Accordingly, some of the most spirited and thoughtful conversations I had were with participants who came to Cather not as career students of literature but (to quote one Seminarian’s self-description) as purely personal “enthusiasts.” They felt Cather’s evocations of the Plains and Southwest, the weight and power of religious and literary traditions of which they had no conscious knowledge. All of us, as we listened to and discussed the implications of the papers presented, pondered and explored the sources of that art which so moved us. Like the polyglot of immigrant communities she so admired in her Nebraska heritage, Cather’s art emerged e pluribus unum, out of many, one. Like American pioneer culture she wove her unique work
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so particular about her descriptions... but she makes you think of your own childhood because she wrote so much about hers, and her brothers and sisters," Harris said.

Harris, a Michigan native who now calls Massachusetts home, was bombarded with autograph seekers after dramatic readings of three Cather stories at the evening banquet in which her voice took on the different characteristics of a husky, drunken Norwegian, heartbroken immigrant, feeble preacher, and a love-stricken river man, among others. She was given a standing ovation for her performance.

But while Harris was a drawing card for this year’s conference, Cather was still the star of the show as most said their main reason for coming was their interest in the author.

E. Laroea Moore, a former Nebraskan who now lives in San Diego, said she and her husband came to Red Cloud to visit the Cather sites.

"I am a retired teacher who has always liked Cather’s writing. We planned this trip around a visit to see relatives in York," Moore said. "You can tell who is not from Nebraska. We’re the ones smelling the lilacs. It’s really nostalgic."

Deborah Leonard attended the conference to see if the sites were as she remembered after teaching Cather to Chinese American literature students at Beijing University.

"I’ve been teaching in China for two years and I wanted to see if it (Red Cloud) was as I remembered," said Leonard, a Massachusetts native who was invited by the Chinese government to teach there. "It seems strange but completely familiar."

Leonard said Chinese students enjoy Cather’s concise writing and her relationship to the land and people. She wrote about many generations of families living in the same house, which is something Chinese people can identify with, she said.

"They loved Antonia. It inspired them and she became a hero for many," she said. "I hoped they’d like Cather because I do and I wasn’t disappointed."

Nebraskans also came from all across the state. Roberta Hinz of Lincoln said she had a wonderful day in Red Cloud and was impressed with how well the event was organized. Marge Bush of Lincoln said she came to Red Cloud because "I’m a Cather fan here with all the other Cather fans."

Seven buses took visitors on a Catherland countryside tour during the afternoon, including the house where Annie Sadilek Pavelka raised her 13 children in My Antonia.

Two Pavelka children, Leo Pavelka, 84, of Hastings and Elizabeth Boyd, 76, of Bladen, greeted visitors at the now vacant house.

"If mother were here, she would be in her height of glory," Boyd said. "She always said she’d be in the movies some day. Professors and scholars were always visiting with her about Cather’s book."

As is often the case, a fat bull snake sitting on the steps to an underground cellar greeted tourists who peered down into the little cave.

"There were always snakes. When I was a kid I used to follow behind father in the furrow. One day father stopped and I stopped behind him and I was standing on two bull snakes. I jumped and ran so hard to the house I was out of breath. Mother asked what had happened, but I couldn’t talk," Pavelka said.

Harris said her experiences of the day, the opportunity to see Cather’s books come to life in visiting the historic sites, moved her to tears. She, and others, snapped photo album pictures throughout the day including a shot of a bunny rabbit at the nursing home and various buildings with new-found friends standing nearby. All her memories of the day, she said, would be cherished.

Letter Excerpt

"The seminar was the most exciting professional experience of my life — it exceeded expectations in all areas — intellectual, social, personal."

— Patricia Sell
High School Teacher
South Bend, Indiana

As of September 1, the Rev. Morris Cather becomes pastor of the Hebron Baptist Church of Gore, Virginia (the church of Sapphira and the Slave Girl). He has offered to give guided tours of that area for Cather enthusiasts. Requirements: call in advance, 1-703-662-2889.

Cather Seminar Staff
Standing from the left are David Stouck, Mildred Bennett, Jean Schwind, James Woodress, and Susan RosowskL Absent is John Murphy. Photo is courtesy of David Stouck.
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out of a plethora of cultural mate-
rials, and, as the Seminar presenta-
tions revealed, many voices in-
formed and resonated together in
her own voice — the voices of
great religious and cultural tradi-
tions, the voices of other great art-
ists of Classical, Russian, French,
German, English and American lit-
erature, and the lesser known
voices of folk and domestic art —
to each of which she listened with
reverence and engagement. Like
so many of her fictional exemplars
(I think offhand of Jim Burden,
Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kron-
borg), Cather perceived intuitively
the connection between personal
and racial memory, between par-
ish and world. Out of this vibrant
cultural diversity she created an
authentic and effective self, art,
and civilization. The suppression of
rigid segregation of those diverse
elements brought death. “Only
connect!” pleaded E. M. Forster,
but Cather’s forte was recognizing
and, with deceptive ease, portray-
ling connections. I think this is why
it seems so natural to us, as critics,
that we carry on and carry through
those connections — across cen-
turies, across continents, across
cultures, across consciousnesses
— which Cather now delicately
and subtly, now emphatically and
explicitly, established and invited
us to pursue.

As I kept murmuring to brother
and sister seminarians all week, I
felt myself a gleeful tourist in “a
scholar’s Disneyland.” But as Mil-
dred Bennett pointed out to a car
full of us, in her spirited way — as
we drove through the placid early
summer greenness of Hastings,
oohing and aahing over the quiet
beauty of the landscape and the re-
laxed kindliness of its people —
Nebraska is not Disneyland, any
more than America is; there is
something precious about the
Great Plains and the way of life
which has been nurtured here
which more favorably represents
American culture than the super-
market of commercial thrill rides
which our increasingly centralized
and depersonalizing media repre-
sents as “the American Way.”

I felt this as I wandered (ostensibly
in search of dinner) up Elm Street
along sun-drenched deep green
cornfields and oceans of bright
yellow wheat which, dancing and
straining towards the sun in their
disciplined rows and domesticated
thickets, seemed an idea made ac-
tual, a dream wrestled into reality
by the spirit and ingenuity of
human beings. What Alexandra
Bergson made, technocracy and
agribusiness are fast remaking and
repossessing, and the irony of a
depopulated heartland stole upon
me even as I drank in the slow
beauty of the prairie horizon and
began to “recover” a sense of
natural time and sensual aware-
ness which actually I had never
really experience before. Later, on
the Cather Memorial Prairie we
fanned out, many in hopes of so
separating themselves from the
group that they might for the first
time experience, if only for a few
moments, what it’s like to be the
only human element in the entire
landscape, to experience the
shape of the planet and the sounds
that the earth makes. Someone
said, “it was as if I’d had this ex-
perience before” — referring to a
look into Cather’s Red Cloud attic
bedroom — “and then I realized
that I had, of course: Cather had
described it so powerfully and
clearly in her novels that I had
been here before!” It was the
same on the prairie, for me, on an
evening when a few of us stayed
behind to photograph the prairie
sunset only to discover that the
project was somehow absurd, be-
cause the experience one wished
to capture involved more sensates
than the optic and finer shades of
light — unless it were Lucia Woods
behind the lens. I found, as I stood
there in near darkness, that Cather
stood beside and inside me, gently
guiding me into an experience and
insight which would not have been
available to me without her: recall-
ing some beautiful elements of My
Antonia and “Neighbour Rosicky,”
I understood suddenly, more fully
than I had ever done before, why
Cather’s Jim Burden recalls the
precious individuality of Antonia’s
face so urgently and with such
reverence. I could feel/see the
rareness of wagon wheels briefly
pressing these grasses, see/hear
the young vitality in Annie Saddleleik’s
face, amazingly personal. I had
always been confused by Cather’s
passion for the word “person-
ality,” but I felt perplexed no longer.
Out here on the prairie, natural
detail is so subtle (big bluestem
grasses; buffalo grasses) that it
can seem nonexistent, and human
detail is so very different, and so
scarce, that one would cherish the
single soul in all its individuality, for
as such it would always appear to
us, outlined against the vastness of
prairie grasses and environment.
Where the architecture of human
endeavors clutters the horizon
ironically, the value of any single
human being is obscured.

If Cather’s was the genius of
making connections, the genius of
this Seminar, it seemed to me, was
the way in which it encouraged the
sort of connection and recognition
I found myself experiencing out
there in the fields; by its deliberate
integration of intellectual and sen-
sual connections between the
words which were Cather’s tools
and the human experiences she
sought to make real and significant
for us. Lectures such as “Willa
Cather and the Russians” (David
Stouck), “The Dantean Journey in
Cather’s Catholic Trilogy” (John J.
Murphy), “Foodways of Willa Cather”
(Roger Welsch) and “Fine and Folk
Art in The Song of the Lark” (Jean
Schwind) — these only a sampling from the feast —
reminded us of the multiple tradi-
tions on which Cather drew and,
perhaps most importantly, to
which she referred in the confi-
dence that her readers would re-
ognize the references and give, in
their own reading, body and ex-
pression to the “thing not named.”
But we were exposed not only
to lectures but to slide presenta-
tions, films (Cather readers easily pass
over a brief reference to Camille
as the play which so moved Jim and
Lena in My Antonia but to see the
film, earnest, Garbo-resplendent
theater, in the context of a Cather
Seminar, is to see through a lens
very like the one Cather urged
upon us, to extend and expand
the novel beyond its words so that,
once again, it gestures effectively

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toward "the thing not named"), a
dancical, a vocalist (Marshall
Christensen, "the barnyard Pava-
rotti: solo, baritone-bass, solemnly
belted out "Bless This House" in a
Red Cloud gymnasium, with ac-
companist, so much as if right out
of The Song of the Lark and Lucy
Gayheart). And though the days
were filled with fibrous discus-
sion, we were often still and listen-
ing -- sometimes to one another,
and sometimes to the wind in the
grasses.

With the Scholars . . .
Marilyn Arnold, Brigham Young
University, Provo, Utah, currently
is editing John March's "Hand-
book to Willa Cather," preparatory
to publication.

John Murphy, Brigham Young
University, Provo, Utah, is revising
his Dante and Cather paper for
publication, doing a paper on Ca-
ther and Elizabeth Madox Roberts
for the Kentucky panel of WLA,
writing a paper involving Cather for
the Rocky Mountain MLA in Octo-
ber, and preparing a Professor of
the Year lecture at BYU in Septem-
ber. His big projects are a book-
length study of My Antonia for
Twayne Masterwork Studies ser-
ies, and editing Death Comes for
the Archbishop for the Cather
Scholarly Edition. He is also rev-
iewing Cather and other criticism
for American Literary Scholarship
1986, as well as gathering gems
for the Cather number of Literature
and Belief (the BYU magazine) and
the WCPM newsletter Literary
Issue.

Susan J. Rosowski published
The Voyage Perilous: Willa Ca-
ther's Romanticism, November,
1986, University of Nebraska
Press; "Willa Cather and the Fatal-
ity of Place: O Pioneers!, My An-
tonia, and A Lost Lady in Geog-
raphy and Literature in Meeting of
the Disciplines, edited by William
Mallory and Paul Pimpson-Housley,
She also had an essay on Willa Ca-
ther, Jules Breton and the French
Rural Tradition in The Rural Vision:
France and America in the Late
Nineteenth Century, University of
Nebraska Press, 1987. Work in
progress includes editing the Mod-
ern Language Association volume,
Approaches to Teaching My An-
tonia and with James Woodress
serves as general Editor of the Ne-
braska Scholarly Edition of Willa
Cather. During the past academic
year she taught a Cather seminar
at the University of Nebraska-
Lincoln, served as Academic Di-
rector of the National Seminar on
Willa Cather, also presides over
the Western Literature Association
as President and will host the WLA
at Lincoln, Nebraska, October 15-

James Woodress' Willa Cather:
A Literary Life will be out in Oc-
tober. All Cather scholars will want
this exhaustive and definitive study
which reads like a novel, but shows
excellent basic scholarship.

Will other Cather scholars
please report what they are doing
in this field?

Board Members at the
Third National Seminar . . .
Bruce Baker read a paper,
"From Region to the World: Two
Allusions in A Lost Lady."

As moderator, Robert Knoll
opened the first session with an in-
troduction and discussion among
Cather scholars.

Lucia Woods Lindley gave a
slide show "Still and Still Moving
in the Cather World."

Marcella Van Meter served, in
her own terms, as "Go-fer" girl.
She met planes and buses, and re-
turned participants to their des-
tined places of departure. She also
ran many errands for the staff and
scholars.

Mildred R. Bennett gave a slide
show about the growth of the Willa
Cather Pioneer Memorial and Edu-
cational Foundation.

With WCPM . . .

Harry Obitz gave us an ex-
cellent showcase wherein we dis-
play the Acoma pottery that Aneta
Murray presented to us and an
autographed photo of Julie Harris,
a memento of her visit at Spring
Conference, for which she refused
any compensation, returning our
check as her membership gift to
the WCPM.

Helen Cather Southwick
brought us a middy blouse and the
suit that Willa Cather wore when
she received the Gold Medal for
Fiction of the National Institute
of Arts and Letters, New York, 1944.

News from Abroad . . .

Harue Tawarada who teaches
English at a University in Tokyo
wrote that she would like to help in
our campaign to raise a million
dollars to continue making Red
Cloud and Cather Country an in-
ternational culture center. She cannot
visit us at this time but she sent a
check which would be equal to a
trip to Red Cloud, the first gift
toward our goal. Her check for
$2,203.10 has been deposited in
the endowment fund. She writes:
"Feeling happy and honored I am
sending you the check (enclosed)
to be used as a very modest starter
for your future projects at Willa
Cather Pioneer Memorial. This is to
mark my first trip to Red Cloud, though vicarious this time."

From The China Daily, Beijing,
Friday, May 8, 1987:
"Cather grew up in America
when the country was predomi-
nantly agrarian. She saw it turned
into an industrial nation with a
modern society based on mass
production. The pioneering spirit of
Americans of that period and their
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News from Abroad . . .
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values as reflected in her novels, therefore, may inspire us to carry out our modernization programme.”

Jean Tsien of the Foreign Language Institute at Beijing who organized the symposium to remember the 40th anniversary of Willa Cather’s death took her doctoral work with James Miller of the University of Chicago. She spoke at the 1983 Spring Conference and attended the 1983 National Cather Seminar. She will edit the 1988 special literary issue of our newsletter. The WCPM sent Cather souvenirs for Dr. Tsien to distribute to scholars.

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Coming Attractions . . .

On August 15, the Red Cloud post office will issue a first day 10-cent stamp of Chief Red Cloud. The WCPM, in connection with the other museums of Red Cloud, will have a first day issue envelope with a picture of Red Cloud, a peace pipe and a drawing of Willa Cather’s home, a plow against the sun, and the words “Home of Willa Cather.”

Anyone who collects first day issues and stamps may have this envelope mailed from Red Cloud on August 15 for a cost of $1.25. Please order at once.

★ ★ ★

The Western Literature Association meets in Lincoln October 15-17. They will visit Red Cloud on the 17th. If possible, plan to join us at WLA.

★ ★ ★

On December 7, the 114th anniversary of Willa Cather’s birth, the Rev. Dean Bartholomew of the Hastings Pro-Cathedral will hold a high requiem mass at the Red Cloud Episcopal Church at twelve noon. We invite all of you.

★ ★ ★

We have photographs of four seasons in Cather Country by James Goble and Beverly Cooper available for purchase. You may rent or purchase the slide presentation of My Ántonia Country from the WCPM. You will also receive a cassette tape with audible or inaudible slide progression.

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Cather Interest in Russia

The following letter from Donald Paneth is quoted in its entirety:

Dear Mrs. Bennett,

Alexander Taukatch, of the Soviet Union, and I, United States, share an office as editors of the Yearbook of the United Nations. Recently, Alex brought in an article by A. S. Mulyarchik, a leading Soviet expert on American literature. The article, entitled, ‘Across the Literary America,’ appeared in the March 1987 issue of the monthly magazine, USA: Economy, Politics, Ideology, published by the Institute of the United States and Canada, USSR Academy of Sciences. In the following passage, which Alex translated and which I thought would be of interest to readers of the Newsletter, Mulyarchik writes of Willa Cather:

“The state of Nebraska is the ‘literary homeland’ of Willa Cather, a wonderful writer, regrettably too little known in the Soviet Union. Her best works, beginning with the novel O Pioneers! (1913), are a tribute to the enterprise and courage of a host of trailblazers from far away, who braved great risks to discover the virgin lands of the American Midwest. For the characters populating her books, the energetic people — white as well as Indian — and the boundless expanses that surrounded Cather from her early childhood, remained the symbols of a free and happy life, a kind of life that harried penny-wise city-dwellers could only dream of. All these impressions came to the young Cather during her student years in Lincoln, and even earlier, in the dusty town of Red Cloud, which now boasts a Memorial Center devoted to her works. It consists not only of a house turned museum but also of some 610 acres of prairie. Close by, at a village cemetery, one can find the grave of Annie Pavelka, the prototype of the protagonist in Cather’s novel My Ántonia (1918),

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Cather Interest . . .
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which was recently translated into Russian."

Sincerely yours,
Donald Paneth
Yearbook of the United Nations
United Nations
New York, New York

Baptist Church

The four church members who owned and have been meeting in the 1884 Baptist church are giving it to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. Leslie Doyle of Red Cloud sent a 1910 photograph of the church before it lost its steeple in a wind and electric storm. The photo will enable complete restoration.

Dr. and Mrs. C. Bertrand Schultz have given $5,000 to begin work on this church where Willa Cather attended when she was a child and where she gave her recitations.

The Webster County Argus for May 14, 1885 says: "The Sunday School concert at the Baptist Church Sunday evening was of the usual high standard. The house was filled to overflowing and all were pleased. Miss Willie Cather electrified the audience with her elocutionary powers . . ."