March, 1955 with five of the founding Governors of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. Pictured, left to right, are Harry Obitz, Mildred Bennett, Frank O’Rourke, Carrie Miner Sherwood, Helen Obitz and Jennie Miner Reiher. (Not pictured are Josephine Frisbie and Dr. L. V. Jacks.)

Mildred R. Bennett...
"passed from the School of Time into the Academy of Eternity" on Tuesday, November 7, 1989 at Red Cloud. This newsletter is lovingly dedicated to Mildred, whose open arms have welcomed everyone to Red Cloud and the study and enjoyment of "the world of Willa Cather."

A special memorial service is planned at the Grace Episcopal Church in Red Cloud at 8:00 a.m., Sunday, May 6, following the annual Spring Conference Day.

Mildred’s "graduation" ceremony (her outlook on her own death) was given from the Congregational Christian Church in Red Cloud on Friday, November 10, by the Reverends Steve Eldred and Kenneth Doughman.

1 From the obituary written by Dorothy Minchin-Comm, Red Cloud Chief, November 16, 1989.
... September 23, 1989 at the special birthday luncheon given Mildred by the Board of Governors. The plaque, for both the Bennetts, reads: "For Mildred and Wilbur Bennett, founders of the WCPM in grateful appreciation from the Board of Governors and the people of Nebraska. 'Where there is great love, there are always miracles.'"

The Faces of Mildred...

... October 10, 1989, loving the gift of letters from many friends, worldwide. This was the Board's surprise gift which was to have been presented at the Western Literature Association meeting in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in celebration of her 80th birthday and the WLA Distinguished Scholarly Achievement Award.

Photographs courtesy of Dr. W. K. Bennett, Beverly Cooper, Antonette Turner (photo by Larry Lindgren), Nancy Picchi, Sue Rosowski, Pat Phillips and WCPM.

... October 12, daughter Alicia Bennett Engstrom receives Mildred's award at the WLA annual meeting in Coeur d'Alene. The award was presented by Ron Butler, Owensboro Community College, Owensboro, Kentucky.
... March, 1989 with Harriet Katz, director of fundraising for Ellis Island, at Ellis Island.

... 1983 at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan where they conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. Pictured with Mildred are Prof. Merlene Ogden and Andrews University President, Dr. Smoot.

"You should never take someone’s song away from them. You should sing it with them. We should all sing together."

— 1989, Mildred Bennett to Joel Geyer, Nebraska Public Television interview

... 1985 with friends on the European trip which retraced Willa Cather's trip of 1902.

... Spring Conference 1988. Conference theme was My Ántonia. Mildred stands with the granddaughter, Antonette Turner, and the great granddaughter, Anna Marie Hoyt, of Annie Sadilek Pavelka (Ántonia).
Dr. Bennett and Mildred, married for 55 years . . .

... the Bennets as grandparents. Scott, Kristin and Jamie Engstrom.
... as the parents of Dr. William G. Bennett (daughter Alicia shown elsewhere)

... May, 1987 with Julie Harris, Spring Conference Speaker.

... 1981 with Maya Angelou, Spring Conference Speaker.


... 1980 as panel participant at the Spring Conference. Pictured are Margaret Goodman-Malamuth, Mildred and Dr. A. L. Rowse from Oxford University, England, who was the Conference Guest Speaker.
The Woman in Black

The following story by Willa Cather was discovered by Mildred Bennett more than twenty years ago in The Home Monthly, November, 1896. Cather edited The Home Monthly from June, 1896 to September, 1897. From Mrs. Bennett, "It purports to be written by Hamilton Ormsbee but Willa Cather admitted she had written much of that magazine under pen names . . . . Hamilton was the name she chose in The Professor’s House and Marian Ormsby was the maiden name of Mrs. Forrester in A Lost Lady. Cather did that with names.

“In addition George and Helen Selbel both thought Willa Cather had written it and so did her sister Elsie Cather.” (from a letter to the Editor of Prairie Schooner, June 9, 1989.)

It was a gala night in Newark. The Marasquin English Opera Company was to open its season there in Faust. Marasquin never had sung and never could sing in any language but Italian, but his Mephistopheles was a great impersonation and his company was more nearly English than are most of those which sing under that appellation. Mitchell, the tenor, was a Nantucket Yankee; Neumann, the baritone, was born in Oshkosh, where his father owned a brewery; the contralto’s English had a Gallic twist to it; Alice Titus, Mitchell’s wife, who had sung Marguerite to his Faust for fifteen years, was a Vermont girl, and Miss Evans, the girl who was to succeed the old favorite, came from Texarkana, and had courage, beauty and a voice. Hers was the only new face. The others were established favorites and Newark had turned out to do them honor.

There were women without bonnets and wearing diamonds in two of the boxes. Half a dozen Newark men were in evening dress, and in the body of the house there were knots of New Yorkers who had run over to give the house were knots of New Yorkers who had run over to give their friends an auspicious start on their new season.

Near the front sat a woman in a black gown with a little black hat, plain as a pikestaff but jaunty as a cock partridge in the spring. Her black hair was freely touched with gray and she was well past forty, but she was not old. Her face bore the unmistakable stamp of achievement, and she looked a mature woman of fine health in the full ripeness and keenness of intellectual power. She bore herself easily and indifferently, as one accustomed to crowds. A little quickening of interest and a long and sweeping use of her glass as the curtain rose showed that she had come for the opera rather than for any social purpose.

The performance went quietly until the vision of Marguerite was shown. Scores of glasses were leveled at this picture, a sigh of admiration swept over the house and then a hearty round of applause, in recognition of the beauty of the new singer. The woman in black turned to the younger woman who accompanied her: “She has good points, but she doesn’t make up well; her mouth — ”

Just behind them a young girl attending her first opera exclaimed to her escort: “She is perfectly lovely! How can a girl look so much like an angel?”

The escort looked down with revenge on youth. When Faust threw aside his student’s cloak, appearing as a tall, dashing, handsome youth the escort leaned over Nellie and whispered: “He doesn’t look as if he was the husband of a woman of fifty, does he?”

The woman in black did not hear that.

The Garden scene came and the new Marguerite trembled as she drew her spinning wheel in front of her to begin, “There was a King of Thule.” Her voice was a little uncertain and she hesitated occasionally. Indeed, her singing was more like that of the real Marguerite than of an operatic prima donna. But the voice was fresh and true and

The nostrils of the woman in black quivered, but the young man was too pleasantly absorbed to observe it. It was Nellie’s first opera and he felt obliged to dispel her illusions as far as possible. That is one of the ways in which we take our revenge on youth. When Faust threw aside his student’s cloak, appearing as a tall, dashing, handsome youth the escort leaned over Nellie and whispered: “He doesn’t look as if he was the husband of a woman of fifty, does he?”

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Thank You...

To those of you who have known already of Mildred’s death, we thank you for your outpouring of love and concern.

One needn’t know Mildred for long to develop a deep attachment, love, for her. Probably the most repeated comments have been, “she was always so nice to me” and “she always encouraged me.”

Adjectives such as energetic, courageous, tenacious, warm, enthusiastic, thoughtful, encouraging, visionary, leader easily come to mind when thinking of Mildred.

We have lost a friend and supporter. Her inspiration, though, remains. And that to which she devoted half her life also remains. Each of us, in our own way, will work to continue what she began.

— Pat Phillips
there was in it a touch of that something which we call charm and which won her audience. The applause was so hearty that the girl blushed through her "make up" with pleasure. The woman in black sank back and sighed: "She is so young, so blessedly gloriously young."

The woman had recovered her critical attitude by the time the Jewel song was reached. Her glass followed every movement and her acute ear judged every intonation. While the house was applauding enthusiastically she whispered to her companion: "She is a nice girl and she tries, but she can't sing that and I don't believe she ever will. Did you hear her trill wobble? She missed two notes in one of her runs. It should have gone like this," and in brilliant, pearly runs. It should have gone like this, and closed the door. His wife dismissed his dresser, entered the dressing-room. The woman in black passed in without a word. Faust rose heavily and walked slowly toward it. He glanced from the woman to the gray hair and back. He tried to remember all the things he had been saying and blushed deeply.

Presently Faust was singing his love. The woman in black leaned forward, her lips parted, her fingers unconsciously marking the time, then, as the tenor's fervor increased and his tone grew clearer and more vibrant, a flush overspread her face. As he ceased she beat her gloved hands together as loudly as she could.

A sympathetic look stole into the young man's eyes, and while the woman in black was wholly occupied with the stage he whispered softly to Nellie: "That woman in front of you is Alice Titus. She is Mitchell's wife and she has been blushing with pleasure at his singing. They sang lovers together for years and the company called them the turtle doves."

Nellie awoke from her dream. She glanced from the woman to the tenor and exclaimed incredulously, and louder than she knew: "She can't be Faust's wife. Why she is gray!"

The lips of the woman in black tightened, and the young man regretted his indiscretion. He tried to atone for it in the Church scene by praising the dramatic way Alice Titus had played that, but he knew that the singer understood the situation and the words stuck in his throat.

Meanwhile the success of the performance and of the new singer grew. Before the end was reached the members of the company had congratulated the tenor and exclaimed incredulously, and louder than she knew: "She can't be Faust's wife. Why she is gray!"

The lips of the woman in black tightened, and the young man regretted his indiscretion. He tried to atone for it in the Church scene by praising the dramatic way Alice Titus had played that, but he knew that the singer understood the situation and the words stuck in his throat.

The man's face flushed with anger and his wife hastened to add: "She did not mean any harm, dear, and she did not think I could hear. She was surprised into speaking too loudly when I was pointed out to her as your wife. She could not believe it, and I must say," with a rueful glance into the large dressing mirror, "that I can't blame her."

"Nonsense, dear. Of course it was only the make-up."

"O, I know all about that, and I know I could look twenty on the stage tomorrow. But for all that I would do every bit of my hard work over again for the youth of that little chit behind me. Time is more cruel to women than eternity can ever be."
MILDRED
By Heather V. Butler, November 11, 1989
Senior at Western Kentucky University at Bowling Green, Kentucky

Four days now — and
the sensations of undisturbed sleep
are alien, in some ways unwelcome.
On the train I finally close my eyes
to a sunrise so beautiful that
it can be only Armageddon . . .
or Nebraska, where the sky
does its best to help you forget
there are no trees. I do not forget.
You loved to take me to the prairie
because I would leap out of the car
and run through half a mile
of four-foot grasses — gathering
ticks on my long skirt, scaring
into flight the sleeping birds — then
suddenly drop face down with awe,
my arms and hair full of weeds;
you could not see me lying there
listening to the absence of human contact,
hearing only grass brushing against grass.
(It sounds like clouds, engulfing you
so completely that the sound seems to come
from within)
You stood with arms akimbo, chuckling
to yourself for my enjoyment as my head
popped up grinning from the void.
You never called me back, but patiently
hunted wildflowers to show me later
(and always found my favorite);
Now I am learning the names of those flowers
because you can't remind me.
You taught me to love more than a flat land
with no trees.

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Dickinson College. Willa Cather: The Emerging
Voice; editor of Library of America volumes on
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HERMIONE LEE — Senior Lecturer in English
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For Additional Information:
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- 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.

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