"Curious Survivals": The Letters of Willa Cather

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Born in Willow Creek, Va., in 1873, Willa Sibert Cather moved with her family to a farm near Red Cloud, Neb., at the age of 9, and then to the town itself, where she grew up. Her 12 novels include O Pioneers (1913), The Song of the Lark (1915), My Antonia (1918), One of Ours (1922), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, and Death Comes to the Archbishop (1927). She died in 1947 in New York City.
“Curious Survivals”: The Letters of Willa Cather

ANDREW JEWELL

“Gaston Cleric introduced me to the world of ideas; when one first enters that world everything else fades for a time, and all that went before is as if it had not been. Yet I found curious survivals; some of the figures of my old life seemed to be waiting for me in the new.”
—Willa Cather, My Ántonia

Last winter, when hundreds of letters written by Willa Cather were donated to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the world got its first glimpse of a significant unread text of one of the United States’ most accomplished authors. These letters, written over four decades to Cather’s brother Roscoe and his family, are remarkable artifacts: meditations on the writing process, anxious descriptions of new ideas, celebrations of professional success, solicitations for financial advice, and gripes about family squabbles. They reveal details of complex and intense familial relationships that Cather’s biographers have not understood before, and they provide new details about the development and writing of Cather’s novels.

For all of the new information found in the letters of the Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection, the arrival of this correspondence raises an important question. For decades,
Cather's critics and biographers have casually referred to her decision, late in life, to destroy all of her letters. The story is typically told somewhat like this: In her last, misanthropic years, Willa Cather, helped by her companion Edith Lewis, systematically collected and destroyed all the letters she could find in order to prevent undignified exposure to the rotting world. Then, to make doubly sure that nothing untoward slipped before the public eye, Cather put a provision in her will to ban all publication of or direct quotation from her surviving correspondence. After Cather died, Edith Lewis, the executor of Cather's estate, continued the efforts and destroyed whatever other letters she could find or buy.

This basic story has been repeated many times, but is it true? We know with certainty that Cather banned publication of her letters in her will—there are legal documents to prove it. But what about the rest of the narrative? Did she seek to reclaim her letters in order to destroy them? If she did, why are so many still around? If she did not, why is that story so often repeated? Where does it come from?

I can only locate one source for the legend of the letter burning. In her 1953 memoir of her friendship with Willa Cather, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant describes a dinner she had with Cather and Edith Lewis in 1939:

As often among old friends who are getting older, there was a death to speak of. Isabelle Hambourg had died in Sorrento in 1938. Willa told us that Jan Hambourg, after his wife's death, had sent over her own letters to Isabelle, and that she was burning them up, as quickly as she could. Every Sunday Miss Lewis took a bundle of them to the apartment incinerator.

Sergeant, who, by her own admission, had grown distant from Cather in her later years, was disturbed by this destruction of letters written to one of the great friends of Cather's life. "There was a kind of finality in this cremation
that brought a chill of regret and dismay," she wrote.

Beyond this one story, which suggests Cather may have destroyed a portion of her letters (and, indeed, very few letters written to Isabelle McClung Hambourg are known to survive), I can find no evidence for the letter-burning legend. In one 1931 letter to DeWolfe Howe, Cather does suggest he destroy her correspondence to Boston hostess Annie Fields, as it was uncharacteristic, but then takes back that suggestion in the letter's postscript. The many, many published references to Cather's destruction of letters are, in all cases I have located, made without citation or reference to evidence. This suggests that the notion that Cather burned her letters is so universally accepted that no one making such a claim need back it up.

The arrival of the Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection provides physical evidence that, at the least, if Willa Cather and Edith Lewis did try to collect and burn up all the letters, they were very bad at it. Thousands of letters have survived and are available to be read not only in this collection but in repositories around the United States. There are currently around 2,500 pieces of correspondence written by Willa Cather, held in about seventy-five different repositories. The largest stores of letters are at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Harvard University, the Willa Cather Foundation in Red Cloud, Nebraska, and the University of Virginia. Like the new Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection, many of these large collections of letters came to institutions from the hands or families of people to whom Cather remained close until the end of her life, and many of these same people had affectionate relationships with Edith Lewis after Cather's death. If Cather's family and life-long friends would not cooperate in the supposed campaign to destroy the correspondence, who would?

There is only the one story of letter destruction, and it is told by someone who was not a witness to the actual burning. If the burning of letters to Isabelle did indeed
happen, that one act of burning, which probably consumed hundreds or even thousands of letters written over a nearly forty-year period, could be interpreted as a distinctive act of mourning, a ceremony to mark the darkness that came with Isabelle’s death. But given the thousands letters not destroyed, it seems that only one conclusion can be drawn: Cather and Lewis did not try to systematically burn all of Cather’s letters. The story that has been repeated dozens—if not hundreds—of times in print is a fiction.

Why, then, has such a fiction survived decades of Cather scholarship? There is no simple answer; the truth is bound up in the specific relationships, prejudices, concerns, and practices of the scholars themselves. Certainly Cather’s legal action forbidding the publication of or quotation from her letters, an act that has been a significant burden to Cather scholars who learn much from the correspondence, has had something to do with it. For reasons that are not clear, Willa Cather did not want the world at large to read her letters. Some have speculated that she was trying to suppress something dramatic that was revealed in the letters, that she collected and destroyed only the letters that revealed the secret. Probably not. In the surviving letters, particularly in the Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection, there are plenty of details to satiate anyone looking for sensitive information, including disparaging analyses of friends, acquaintances, and siblings; detailed financial and health information; and several claims of deep personal affection. I do not think suppression of secrets was Cather’s motivation, though I do believe she banned publication of the letters in an effort to control the public’s perception of her. The thing that motivated her ban on letter publication is likely the same thing that led her to minimize or conceal her voluminous journalistic writings and early short fiction: She didn’t think they were very good, and she wanted people to know Willa Cather as the creator of works of art. Cather was probably motivated by her desire to be
known to the world through the texts she struggled over, the carefully revised and considered novels, stories, and essays that she saw to publication in her maturity. The letters were written quickly, hurriedly, sometimes out of deep engagement, sometimes begrudgingly out of a sense of duty or politeness: They were not the words, she must have thought, that should represent an artist's work.

However, easy conclusions about Cather's motivations are difficult if not impossible, for the evidence contradicts itself. She sometimes claimed that an author ought to have only her books to speak for her. Nevertheless, she read several authors' collections of letters, memoirs, and biographies, and she cooperated with her first biographer, E.K. Brown, shortly before her death. Though she did not always approve of her letters as fit representations of herself, she acknowledged in a letter written to Polly Damrosch Howard in 1942 that letters have the distinctive power to reveal the complicated personality of their author. In the end, the specific motivation for Cather's prohibition against the publication of her correspondence is, and probably will always remain, a mystery.

Cather's ban on publication has not stopped readers from being interested in the letters. In fact, the opposite is true. The letters have about them an intrigue and a symbolic power that grows from their inaccessibility. Though many researchers have consulted letters in their work, they are forced to discuss them in a way that is tortuously indirect. At least in print, critics and biographers cannot use the words Cather did when discussing information, opinions, or revelations in her correspondence; they are forced to paraphrase, to talk about the letters rather than cite the words contained in them. Even when provocative claims are made, any letter used as evidence is just beyond the light of scrutiny. This off-the-page quality gives the letters an aura
of protection and sanctity not usually given to documentary evidence. In order to read them, one must actually travel to one of the repositories, carve out hours or days of time, and decipher difficult handwriting. They are documents that can only be read in specific rooms with enhanced security, by people who have proffered their credentials or identification for the right to read.

This air of exceptionality deeply annoys most scholars, for the reason that it makes scholarly work more difficult. A scholar writing about the letters is put into the awkward position of forcing the reader to trust that scholar's representation of the letter when evaluating the evidence. The reader, too, has reason to be sensitive if not suspicious. Because critics use the letters to make argumentative claims about Cather's life and work, the representations of the letters are, usually unconsciously, biased toward the argumentative stance of the scholar. That is, paraphrases are influenced by the need of the scholar to convey an interpretation of the letter's content. A "neutral" paraphrase of a letter is impossible. Though scholars' paraphrases are typically not dramatic alterations of a letter's original content, in subtle ways, through selection and omission, through choice of words and emphasis, the voice and meaning of the original letter changes.

Scholars are aware of the trouble paraphrases introduce, and most everyone writing and publishing about Cather's letters struggles through re-articulation, mourning the loss of Cather's graceful language in the process. Yet scholars insist on writing about her letters because they contain information and language that is revealing of her fiction and thinking. However, in choosing to write about the letters, scholars are forced to substitute their words for Cather's. Worse than keeping the public eye out of her private writings, Cather's ban on the publication of her letters has engendered hundreds of little adaptations and has prevented her from speaking for herself.
Willa Cather's letters lack the control and finesse of her published works, but the freedom with which they were written is one of their most delightful qualities. It is not that Cather was unselfconscious as a letter writer, but that her consciousness was directed in different places than it was for the published works. For the novels, she had to consider the amorphous reading public, but for the letters she had to think only about specific readers. Depending upon the recipient, the tone and content of the letter could dramatically alter, revealing in its omissions as much as it does in its inclusions. Consider, for example, the letter Willa Cather wrote to her mother on December 6, 1919, a document that is part of the new collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Like most letters to her mother, Cather fills this one with details of home economics: the cost of butter, the arrangements with hired help, the bathroom remodeling. And, like many other letters to her mother, it provides a lively catalogue of reasons a mother can be proud of her daughter.

After a page and a half apologizing for taking so long to write, describing her busyness keeping house, and conveying other pleasantries and bits of news, Cather tells her mother about her recently earned prominence in literary circles. She has been covered grandly in New York newspapers, and some have called her the greatest living American writer. She claims, though, that she and her publishers have not orchestrated the surprising publicity that emerged from the popularity of her 1918 novel *My Ántonia*, and that the demands fame makes on her time are highly inconvenient. She tells her mother one funny story about lying to a newspaperman when he mistook her for someone else, telling him when he surprised her at the door that "Miss Cather" had left for Atlantic City.

A significant part of the letter explains the new international attention that has been afforded to Cather's
work: a Swedish translation of *O Pioneers!* (the look of which reminds Cather of old newspapers her immigrant neighbors would read in Nebraska), French and Bohemian translations of *My Ántonia*, and the efforts to secure a good contract in England for the next book. After cataloguing her reach around the world, Cather brings the focus home again, and says that her greatest pleasure of her life was being at home when her parents read and enjoyed *My Ántonia* soon after it was published. Cather goes on to express deep concern over her mother’s illness and insists that when she says she is coming home to Nebraska soon, she means it, though she clearly suspects that no matter what she says, her mother will not believe she is sincere. She ends the letter with a claim that, as she grows older, she understands and appreciates her beautiful mother even better, that her youthful restlessness is behind her, and that she will come to Nebraska soon.

This long letter from 1919 reveals a trove of information on newspaper articles, translations, and publishers, but its value rests more squarely in its revelation of the woman writing the letter, the human being who, at age forty-five, is both an internationally celebrated author and a daughter trying to please her mother. It is that subtle revelation of frailty that makes letters so compelling, the way they can scrape off the veneer of an author’s icon status and bring her back into the realm of the recognizably human. The letters force us to remember that Willa Cather is not just a profoundly gifted artist and creator of masterpieces, but also somebody’s daughter, somebody’s friend, somebody’s sister.

It is because she was somebody’s sister that the newest collection of Cather letters has come to light. The Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln contains hundreds of letters written mostly to Roscoe Cather, his wife, Meta, and their daughters Virginia, Margaret, and Elizabeth. Cather trusted Roscoe intensely
and shared a bond with him, and the letters in this collection reflect that feeling. Her letters to him are amiable, emotional, and reflective, and often she suggests a playfulness to her personality not always apparent in her public writings. For example, Cather sends a postcard to her niece with a picture of the Notre Dame de Paris cathedral and indicates with a little arrow where Quasimodo threw the bad priest off the parapet in Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Later in her life, she confesses to her brother that she makes her days more enjoyable by pretending to have tea with Winston Churchill.

Of chief interest to many readers are the letters to her brother revealing the concerns and ambitions she has for her novels. Among these is one letter about her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, a novel of antebellum Virginia based on Cather family lore and history. The letter was written in August 1940, just after the novel had been completed. Writing the novel was, in a way, a departure for her, the only book in which she wrote explicitly about the American South and had complex African-American characters. In another way, it was a return home to her earliest memories as a girl growing up in Virginia, listening to old stories under a quilting frame.

After an appreciative compliment of the beauty of Roscoe's new granddaughter, whom she has seen in a photograph, Cather's letter provides the rare and great pleasure of an authoritative guide to pronouncing the name of the novel, which has always been a minor matter of confusion: *Sapphira* with a short i, not the biblical *Sapph-\-eye-ra*. She tells Roscoe that she has written the novel out by hand twice—three and four times for some parts—and that it has been technically very difficult for her. The Epilogue of the novel where she recounts a childhood memory is the key to it all, she says, and the basis of her authority. She was motivated by a need to portray the real South, something apart from all the mansion-filled, pretentious displays
that seem to be so common in fiction. In particular, she tells Roscoe, she wants to present the speaking patterns of African-American Virginians accurately and does not want them to sound like Uncle Remus. A trip she made to Virginia while writing the novel was specifically to check her memory of that speech. She goes on to implore Roscoe to save the letter she is writing to him, as it is the first commentary she's written about the novel, and she wrote it to him because he is the only one in her family who gives a damn. She hasn't always minded her family's apathy, she says, but as she grows older she longs for their attention and interest.

Willa Cather was sixty-seven years old when she wrote this letter, the winner of virtually every major literary award offered, a best-selling and critically acclaimed novelist, and she is still longing for something more. Even after all that, she needed to feel that her own blood kin gave a damn about her.

* * *

In light of the legend of Cather's letter burning, it is interesting to note that in this letter to her brother, Cather argues for the value of her own correspondence, asking Roscoe to save the letter and declaring it her first written commentary on the novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. There is nothing to suggest that she thought such writings disposable, or even that the harsh comments about her family made the letter worthy of destruction. Certainly, one might argue that the value of this letter had something to do with Roscoe Cather's possession of it; after all, it was not a commentary given to a newspaper or published for all to see. Yet Cather understood that her own articulation of her ambitions and technique in writing *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was important, even if it was only in a letter to her brother.

Some readers feel that we ought to respect Cather's wish
to keep her letters away from the public and to be known by her published writing alone. To them, it remains important that her privacy be protected and her wishes granted. I believe, however, that when the writer is dead, when the people written to and mentioned in the letters are dead, and when the life and works of the writer have a significant impact on cultural history, that the artifacts and manuscripts of that writer ought to be available to study, particularly the revealing and distinctive personal correspondence. Reading the unpolished words of the letters allows the reader to witness the multidimensional humanity of the author. The letters help move the author out of myth and into history, out of ethereal fame and into the solid world around us. To put it simply: Letters are a way to understand someone a little more accurately; and accuracy is central to the work of biographers, critics, and literary historians.

Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that what Cather wanted was her privacy protected. Her ban on publication of the letters in her will is combined with the other prohibitions in the will (no dramatization, no film versions, no adaptations of her fiction in any medium) into a single part, the Seventh. This combination of prohibitions suggests that she was not protecting herself and the details of her biography, but her works. She cared deeply about her books, even the paper stock they were printed on, and did what she could to prevent the material forms of her books from being compromised, resisting even the publication of paperback versions. Furthermore, she explicitly states in her will that she does not charge her executors with legally enforcing her preferred restrictions, but “leave[s] it to the sole and uncontrolled discretion of my Executors and Trustee in each instance.” Though this language may well be boilerplate legalese, its presence indicates that, rather than a woman bent on strenuously protecting her privacy at all costs, Cather was an author interested in controlling the way her words materially came before readers’ eyes.
However, she was fully aware that her power to do so from beyond the grave was limited.

Cather's works have inspired hundreds if not thousands of books, articles, films, radio programs, and Web sites about her; many of her works have fallen out of copyright; and her ability to control the way her works are encountered is lost. I can see no benefit in continuing to enforce the prohibition on publishing letters, not for Cather's legacy, her executors, or anyone else. On the other hand, allowing the letters to be read and quoted would have enormous benefits for Cather scholars and, perhaps even more important, for the millions of Cather readers. The letters, if made available to all through a widely distributed edition, would give readers another body of texts written by an extraordinary author. Willa Cather's letters are remarkable documents from the cultural life of the United States, and each day they continue to be difficult for the public to read is a day the public is less rich than it ought to be.

* * *

Though I cannot transcribe and publish a letter written by Willa Cather, I can end with a letter from the new collection written by another member of her family. Virginia Cather Brockway, Roscoe's daughter, wrote this letter to her mother, Meta Cather, the morning after returning from her Aunt Willa's funeral in New York:

_Wed. April 30, [1947]_

_Dearest Mother—_

_Just got home & I'm having some coffee before I clean up, bathe, etc. Later I'll have to buy food & want to mail this when I go in._

_I got to N. Y. early Monday morning & called Aunt Elsie and MV [Mary Virginia Auld Mellen, Virginia's cousin and Cather's niece] at their hotel, & then walked over & joined them for breakfast. Then_
MV went to the apartment to help with the flowers, but Miss Lewis preferred to have the rest of us wait until the funeral. Uncles Jack & Jim were to arrive during the morning & Charles was to meet them, but they missed each other so all ended up at the apartment. Aunt Elsie & I got there at 1:15.

The funeral was very small, about twenty four people I guess, all old friends. Mrs. Litchfield whom Aunt Willie had known from the days in Pittsburgh was there. Yehudi's wife, a really beautiful girl, was also there. Beyond that I don't know, & I somehow didn't feel like asking. Uncle Jack can probably tell you.

The apartment was very little disarranged. Aunt Willie was in front of the windows and looked very lovely. There were masses of flowers. MV had busily torn bows off everything as Aunt Willie had always been allergic to bows on powers & had always snatched them off. MV mentioned flowers from Maude Bradley, Zoe Akins, and Margery Sharp had cabled flowers from London.

Since Aunt Willie had known no minister in N.Y, Edith chose the only one she knew—a Unitarian minister who had conducted funeral services for Edith's mother. Edith & MV both thought Aunt Willie would be highly amused at having the Unitarian minister, but I'm afraid poor Aunt Elsie doubted that any but an Episcopalian minister could give one the right start toward heaven. However she felt better when she saw that he wore a very rich & elaborate vestment. She thought they were against such trappings. He just read from the Bible and offered a short prayer—nothing to conflict with our church. It was all very simple and dignified. He asked if he should read something Aunt Willie wrote, & evidently had an appropriate passage in mind, but Miss Lewis preferred just the Bible.

After the services Miss Lewis asked me to stay for a while and have a cup of tea with her. She told me all about Aunt Willie, and then her sister and Miss Bloom (Blum?) joined us for tea. It really did not seem at all inappropriate for Aunt Willie to be present, though it does sound odd.

She said it was very sudden. At 2PM Thursday Aunt Willie
was well and cheerful, and was going to rest for a while. She was troubled with rheumatism or lumbago and was to see the doctor the next day. At three she came out and said she was very ill and had such a terrible pain in her head. Before four it was all over. They were unable to get a doctor until too late—one arrived ten minutes after Aunt Willie died. However she was not unattended. Their maid was a registered nurse until she got too old for such a strenuous life so she was able to do just about all that could be done.

Miss Lewis said she sometimes wondered if Aunt Willie had felt it coming for so often of late she had said that she hoped she could die as quickly and easily as Roscoe and Douglass had. Of course it's a blessing that she did rather than having the helpless years grandmother had.

Aunt Willie had not been well since her trip to California. And since her operation she had been very weak and tired. But she wasn't an invalid. She rested a great deal and had to eliminate most social life, but she was up and around every day and would do things like walking to the hardware store and coming back with mops & kitchen equipment. And she was making hopeful plans for the future. She would ask Edith how she would feel about packing up and going to California right away. And they were planning to go to Maine as Aunt Willie was most anxious to get back to work and thought she could there. Of late Aunt Willie had been talking and thinking more and more of the family, particularly the nieces and nephews because they were young and Aunt Willie apparently found something hopeful in youth.

In all, I guess, it was all for the best. As with dad, a little less severe attack and there would have been a long period of invalidism, which seems the most tragic end for a life.

After I left Miss Lewis I went to the station to get a reservation & pick up my bag & then to Aunt Elsie's hotel. She had them bring in a cot for me so I shared the room with Aunt Elsie and M.V. Uncle Jack & Jim were there and all the family had a most pleasant dinner together. Whenever I looked quickly at Uncle Jack I was
almost certain that he was dad. He said that you seemed well and cheerful and that they were so happy to have you near them.

Yesterday MV, Charles, Uncle Jack, Uncle Jim & Miss Lewis took Aunt Willie up to Jaffrey for burial. Since one of Jaffrey’s main charms for Aunt Willie was the fact that it was almost inaccessible it seemed better not to have everyone go. So I stayed with Aunt Elsie. We spent the day at the Metropolitan Museum and saw the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. It is very beautiful. After dinner we just talked and I left for the station at 9:30. Got here at seven and John met me. I took him to work & then drove home.

Aunt Elsie says she feels much better. The doctors never learned just what had been wrong with her. She wasn’t ill in bed but she had been definitely not well. She did no housework at all, but she got up every day and then just rested and got caught up on her “3 Rs”—reading, resting, and radio.

John just called to tell me that there was mail in a desk drawer—two letters from you. I didn’t know Aunt Willie felt any bitterness toward Aunt Elsie but I did know that they hadn’t been too close, and was sure that Miss Lewis & MV would know what Aunt Willie would think of having the Unitarian minister while Aunt Elsie’s opinion was just her own prejudice. Understand she *(Aunt Elsie)* is very strictly religious, and she is really rather prim.

I wrote to Aunt Willie a short time ago—a dull letter I thought—just about the garden and my birds as I had nothing else to say. But I just somehow felt I should write & I’m so glad I did. Miss Lewis said the letter made Aunt Willie very happy and she read the letter to Miss Lewis.

Yes, the family seems to have disintegrated. To me, Uncle Jack is the only real Cather left. Perhaps it’s his resemblance to dad, and the fact that they have always been so good to me. Uncle Jim seems kind of prim and opinionated, as Aunt Elsie is. And Aunt Jessie just doesn’t seem to belong.

I am glad that Edith was the one to arrange everything for she knew all of Aunt Willie’s little quirks, and I’m sure the dignity and simplicity would have pleased Aunt Willie. It has of course
been most terribly hard for Edith. She will be really lost, I fear.

I will be very careful of everything of Aunt Willies[sic]—books, pictures, letters. M. wanted me to take charge of all the letters but now I think they should be divided up—just in case of a fire or something unexpected.

It's eleven, so I must buy food & straighten the house a bit—then write to E & M.

Love,

Virginia

There is much in this letter to evoke the pathos of the funeral day: the disagreement over the clergy, the intimacy of the service, the sense of the family’s transformation, and the story of Cather's last day. But, for me, the sentences in the letter that most emotionally and poignantly evoke the day are the description of the tea shared by a few women. Willa Cather's niece, Virginia, her partner Edith Lewis and Lewis' sister, and her longtime personal secretary, Sarah Bloom, drank a little tea and talked about Cather's death right in the presence of the body and the funeral flowers, and that body was fit company for those gathered women. Those few, unadorned sentences in Virginia’s letter bring to us a scene of remarkable intimacy, a scene that had been lost before.

And there is something else in that letter, something that directly challenges the legend of Cather the letter burner: Virginia tells her mother that all of her aunt's things—books, photographs, letters—are precious and need protection, "just in case of fire or something unexpected." This woman who had just had tea with her aunt and poor, despondent Edith fears destruction and sees fire as "something unexpected." If Willa Cather and Edith Lewis spent their last years collecting and destroying letters, would her
niece, someone she well knew was in possession of many personal letters, understand destruction of those letters as something to fear and guard against?

Though Willa Cather’s ban on publication certainly suggests at best an ambivalent attitude toward her own correspondence, there is little reason to believe that she, as the legend goes, sought to destroy all written artifacts of her personal life. I have long encountered Cather’s letters as “curious survivals,” as pieces of her old life that had, through happy circumstance, managed to survive the fires. Now, with that legend revealed as little more than a melodramatic distortion of reality, I find these letters even more fascinating. There is more satisfaction in the realization that Willa Cather’s letters have not arrived in repositories in spite of her wishes, but because her family sought to keep them safe from unexpected destruction.

WILLA, JACK, AND ELsie CATHER. RED CLOUD, NEB., ABOUT 1900.
Willa Cather with her brother Jack Cather and sister Elsie Cather.
PHILIP L. AND HELEN CATHER SOUTHWICK COLLECTION,
ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN LIBRARIES.
Willa Cather with her brother Roscoe Cather's daughters: Virginia [her letter page 166] and the twins Margaret and Elizabeth.

ROSCOE AND META CATHER COLLECTION, ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN LIBRARIES.
PICNIC AT CATHER HOMESTEAD. WEBSTER COUNTY, NEBRASKA, 1910S.
Picnic at tree stand on the Cather homestead.
GEORGE CATHER RAY COLLECTION, ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS,
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WILLA CATHER PICNICKING IN RED CLOUD, RED CLOUD, NEB., 1929.
PHILIP L. AND HELEN CATHER SOUTHWICK COLLECTION,
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Oscar Cather (?) kneels and holds a chain, on which the coyote he caught is leashed. A few feet away, the coyote leans and pulls against the chain. Standing behind are, left to right, Jack Cather, Roscoe Cather, Isabelle McClung, Elsie Cather, and Willa Cather.

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