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The Willa Cather Archive in the Classroom

Andrew Jewell

When writers, even well-informed ones, begin confidently predicting the future, I grow suspicious. As a seven-year-old, I eagerly read in my *Weekly Reader* that by the time I was old enough to have a driver's license cars would fly. Still earthbound in my Toyota, I have learned that most forecasts beyond the immediate future are suspect because they fail to fully appreciate the complexity and chaos of human life; despite the vision of sages in the 1950s, twenty-first century women in flared skirts are not hosing off their all-plastic couches. So, with that lesson in mind, I will not begin this essay with prognostications about digital technology taking over our lives and our classrooms in the future. In fact, the *future* is not what I'm concerned with at all. Digital scholarship on Willa Cather is an available classroom tool *right now*, and it can have, and is having, an important influence on how students interact with Cather's texts and how teachers present her life and work. The implications of this interaction, however, are complex: what does it mean when a writer is discovered not just through a printed page, but also through a computer screen?

I write from the perspective of a teacher who has used digital scholarship in the classroom, but also as the editor of the *Willa Cather Archive* (<http://cather.unl.edu>); I am both a user and a builder.¹ My comments, then, are influenced by my sincere belief that the web is and will continue to be an extremely valuable tool for readers, scholars, and teachers. I do not believe, however, that one should be overly jubilant; changes in the way we practice reading and teaching are neither inherently better nor inherently worse than the methods to which we are already accustomed. Instead, as our world and our teaching are transformed, we need to observe carefully and reflect upon the nature of the transformations.

This essay discusses many of the opportunities for teachers I believe are present in the *Willa Cather Archive*, particularly in the way the *Archive* makes new materials available or older materials available in a

new way. Additionally, this essay suggests some of the implications of the *Archive's* digital presentation of resources. However, the place of digital scholarship in academic life is still evolving, and students and teachers are just getting accustomed to using the form. Given this circumstance, many of my thoughts are inconclusive, observations based upon preliminary understandings into how this resource affects our classrooms. I avoid confident pronouncements on the nature of these effects and instead articulate what I see as the most likely changes the *Cather Archive* might bring to the teaching of Willa Cather's works.

I. Reading More of the Texts

Among the most profound transformations that digital scholarship brings to the classroom are increased access and a change in the nature of access. Specifically, the *Cather Archive* makes rare and unique texts and resources freely available to anyone with an Internet connection. Certainly, the most desirable texts are those written by Cather herself. At this writing, the *Cather Archive* presents nearly one hundred Cather works—including novels, stories, nonfiction, and journalism—in electronic form. Most of these works are presented as both text and image, so that one could read them as electronic text or from high-quality digital images of the original print publication.

The electronic texts open numerous possibilities to students and teachers, from the commonplace (the texts can be easily printed and read or just read from the screen) to the innovative (the texts can be searched, processed, and analyzed by computer software). Since they are electronic, these texts can be more easily transferred to a variety of programs and devices, giving creative classrooms the chance to play with and study the texts in ways unthinkable only a decade ago. For example, to help students consider the impact of design and visual context on works of literature or to help them make critical statements in nontraditional ways, a class could create its own distinctive presentation of Cather's texts, altering font, layout, illustrations, and other features.

The page images of original publications the *Cather Archive* provides will allow teachers to illustrate and incorporate elements of Cather's writing life that are obscured by the most common presentations of her work (print literary anthologies and paperback editions). With access to page images, teachers and their students can consider the original textual fields that existed in the first publication of many of Cather's works.² This is particularly important when the first publication offered an experience

that dramatically differs from most typical modern encounters of a Cather text. For example, the *Cather Archive* offers page images of the first publication of the well-known short story “The Enchanted Bluff.” Published initially in the April 1909 installment of *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, the story is presented with four original illustrations by Howard E. Smith (see fig. 1). These illustrations can dramatically affect the way the text is understood. When reading the story in its original physical context, one is constantly confronted with idyllic images of boyhood seemingly inspired, in content if not in style, by the True W. Williams illustrations for Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: boys in straw hats hunting, fishing, and loafing. A quick glance through the pages of the magazine might lead one to assume that Cather’s story is an adventure in the style of Twain, or at least a sentimental, idealized story of youth.³



Figure 1. An image from the original periodical publication of “The Enchanted Bluff” in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, April 1909. Available on the *Willa Cather Archive*.

Understanding the original contexts of Cather's publications is crucial to assessing her relationship to her times. As Charles Johanningsmeier argues, "the projection of modern values and desires onto literary texts can very easily skew our understanding of the cultural work that literary texts performed, and . . . if one wishes to accurately gauge such cultural work, one must be sure to carefully document the specific circumstances of any text's publication and readership" (92). Certainly a key element of those circumstances is the design of the original publication. Until the advent of digital technology, reading the original periodical publications was impractical for classes. Original periodicals, even relatively mainstream titles like *Harper's*, are difficult to access in paper form. Students and teachers may be able to consult a single library copy (if the classroom is close to a major library with bound periodicals that circulate) or photocopies, but typically instructors use what is readily available to them: a modern reprinting of the story.

Though the readily available reprintings of Cather's works do accommodate many valuable classroom discussions and approaches to the material, those texts do not facilitate a cultural studies approach to the material, an approach that is becoming increasingly popular in classrooms, particularly college classrooms. The *Cather Archive*, though, can make such instruction more tenable, as it provides access to a good surrogate of the original that teachers and students can easily use independently or together in the classroom. Teachers can use the *Cather Archive's* presentation of materials as a way to broaden students' understanding of how texts are transmitted and received, which will complicate the common assumption of novice readers that texts are stable and consistent. In addition to illustrations that jar the reader, the original periodical publications also show the text's proximity to advertising; what, for example, happens to our interpretation of Cather's 1916 story "The Diamond Mine" when we read it next to advertisements for Reed and Barton's Rembrandt silverware, the Whitman's chocolate sampler, and Dr. Stall's books that claim to answer "Sex Questions"? (see fig. 2).

The *Cather Archive*, unfortunately, is not complete. At this writing, we have some first editions and several dozen periodical publications online (including short stories, nonfiction essays, and early journalism). We will undoubtedly be adding many more—a project is under way to edit all of Cather's early journalism, nearly 600 individual pieces, and more electronic editions of her fiction are currently being prepared—but my point is that the offerings are not, for the foreseeable future, going to



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The Diamond Mine

(Continued from page 11)

I sat down at the piano and handed myself the manuscript for some time, while Crossida dashed off necessary notes and wrote checks in a large square checkbook, six to a page. I supposed her immersed in summary preoccupations when she suddenly looked over her shoulder and said: "Yes, that legend, Sarba, is the most interesting. Run it through a few lines and I'll try it over with you."

"There was another," *"Dance les ombres des fleurs tristes,"* which I thought quite as beautiful. They were fine songs, very individual, and each had that spontaneity which makes a song seem inevitable and once for all done."

"I wish he'd indicated his tempo a little more clearly," I remarked as I finished Sarba for the third time. "It matters, because he really has something to say. An orchestral accompaniment would be better. I should think."

"Yes, he sent the orchestral arrangement. Poppo has it. It works out beautifully—so much color in the instrumentation. The English horn comes in so effectively there, the rose and indicated the passage, "just right with the voice. I've asked him to come next Sunday, so please be here if you can."

CROSSIDA was always at home to her friends on Sunday afternoons, unless she was called for the evening concert at the Opera House, in which case we were sufficiently advised by the daily press. Bombalaha had never been told to come early, for when I arrived on Sunday at four he and Crossida had the music-room quite to themselves and were standing by the piano in earnest conversation. In a few moments they were separated by other arrivals, and I let Bombalaha across the hall to the dining-room. The guests, as they came in, glanced at him curiously. He wore a dark blue suit, soft and rather baggy, with a short coat, and a high double-breasted vest with two rows of buttons coming up to the tops of his thick lips. He spoke in clipped English, and very good French. I found him a force, a transacting talker. His brilliant eyes, his gaunt hands, his white, sheep-lined forehead, all entered into his speech.

I asked him whether he had not recognized Madame Garnet at once when we entered the restaurant that evening, more than a week ago.

"Milk, coincidence!" I hear her twice when she sings in the afternoon, and sometimes at night for the last act. I have a friend who buys a ticket for the first part, and he comes out and gives to me his pass-back check, and I return for the last act. That is convenient if I am broke." He explained the trick with amusement but without embarrassment, as if it were a shift that we might any of us be put to.

He then told me that he admired his skill with the violin, but his songs much more.

"Oh, I have no instrument! The violin I play from memory; the flute, the piano, the harp, the organ. For three years now I've had the time, and it spoils the hand for nothing."

"When the maid brought him his tea, he took both muffin and cakes and told me he was very hungry. He had in lunch and dinner at the place where he played, and he got very tired in the food." "But since, his black eyebrows nearly met in an acute angle, "but since, before I cut at a bakery, with the slender leaven rank on the pie, I guess I better let alone well enough."

"He used to drink his tea, as he tasted one of the cakes his face lit with sudden animation and he gazed across the hall after the maid with the tray—she was now holding it before the spot and smiling like the Humptydangle Quartette. "Doe Gotsme!" he murmured fervently. "Do come go'de post fressez de die ginsone ne a New York!"

I explained to him that Madame Garnet had an accomplished cook who made them, an Austrian, I thought.

He shook his head. "Austriehiner? He is gone gone."

Crossida was approaching with the Spanish cigarette, Miss Bombalaha, who was all black velvet and long black feathers, with a lace veil over her rich pulber and even a little black snuff on her chin. I beckoned them. "Tell me, Crossida, isn't Ruzenka an Austrian?"

She looked surprised. "No, a Bohemian, though I got her in Vienna." Bombalaha's expression, and the remnant of a smile in his long fingers, gave her the connection, he laughed. "You like them? Of course. They must seem of your own soil. You said have more of them." She nodded and went away to greet a guest who had just come in. A few moments later, Hence, then a beautiful lad in Flon clothes, brought another cup of tea and a plate of cakes for Bombalaha. We sat down in a corner, and talked about the songs. He was neither beautiful nor graceful. He knew exactly in what position they were excellent. I regarded, as I walked his face that he must be under thirty. His teeth were white, very irregular and interesting. The corrective methods of modern dentistry would have taken away all his good looks.

As we talked about his songs, his manner changed. Before that, he had seemed responsive and really pleased. Now he was abstracted, as if I had taken away his pleasant afternoon and wakened him to his loneliness. When I mentioned Poppo, he held his head in his hands. "Why is it to him that you are talking about? A little, oh, yes, very! But so much, always the same thing? Why?" He pressed me with the depressing sense which had followed as a sort of the restaurant.

I asked Bombalaha where he had sent any of his songs to the musical publisher, and named one or two, but he would be one who would never be heard of. He shrugged his shoulders. "They are not Bohemian songs. They are not my own." Most people came because they were whatever happens, they can right themselves a little. But one that I had heard of was the sort of person who might actually starve or blow his brains out. Something very serious, but he had been so long in the habit of his education, something that we are not accustomed to see people.

Gradually the parlor was filled with little groups of friends, and I took Bombalaha back to the music-room, which was surrounded by late comers: feathered women, with large sleeves and hats, young ones of an importance, in frock coats, with abiding hair and the smile which is intended to say as many flattering things but which really expresses little more than a desire to get on.

The older men were standing about waiting for a word of mine with the hostess. To the left of the door, where she kept her musical library. Two persons could be quite withdrawn there, and yet be a part of the general friendly scene. Crossida took a score from the shelf, and sat down with Bombalaha to read the windows, though the book open between them, though neither of them looked at it again. They fell to talking with great earnestness. At last the Bohemian pulled out a large, yellowing silver watch, held it up before the window, as if it were a moment as if it were an object of horror. He opened up, but Crossida's hand and murmured something, dashed into the hall and returned with a small box, without waiting for the maid to open it. He had some movement, apparently. It was then seven o'clock, he had just had a glass of port in the up-down restaurant.

"After supper, Crossida told me his story. His parents, both poor musicians, his mother a singer—died while he was yet a baby, and he was left to the care of an arbitrary uncle who resolved to make a poet of him. He was put into a monastery school and kept there. The organist and choir director, fortunately for Bombalaha, was an excellent musician, a man who had begun his career brilliantly, but who had not met with crushing sorrow and disappointment in the world. He devoted himself to his talented pupil, and was the only teacher the young man ever had. At twenty-one, when he was ready for the novice, Bombalaha told that the end of his was too strong for him, and he ran away out into a world of which he knew nothing, and he was taken to Vienna, begging and playing his lute from town to town. There he fell in with a gypsy band which he was invited to a Paris restaurant, and went with them to



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Figure 2. An image from the original publication of "The Diamond Mine" in McClure's Magazine, October 1916. Available on the Willa Cather Archive.

be comprehensive. The reasons for this are complex, but it essentially comes down to the restrictions of U.S. copyright law: we cannot digitally publish and freely distribute material that was originally published after 1922. Thus, the writings of Willa Cather presented on the site will be heavily weighted toward her early career, and the complete texts of her

major works of 1923 and after, which include such important books as *The Professor's House* (1925), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), *Obscure Destinies* (1932), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), will not be available.

In determining our scholarly goals for the *Cather Archive*, we have responded to this legal reality in several major ways, all of which have potential implications for the classroom. For example, we are working on ambitious editions of Cather's early work, much of which has never been completely or satisfactorily edited and is relatively inaccessible in complete form. The Willa Cather Early Journalism project, co-directed by Kari Ronning, assistant editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, and me, is an effort to collect, edit, and annotate all of Cather's early journalistic writings—nearly six hundred articles written roughly over the course of a decade. Though portions of these articles have been made available in Bernice Sloté's *The Kingdom of Art* (1967) and William Curtin's *The World and the Parish* (1970), scholars and teachers have never had good access to the full run of her articles. Furthermore, both volumes, though extremely valuable for many years, are heavily selective, often giving readers only excerpts of Cather's full articles, focusing closely on her comments about art and artists. Cather's other comments—on popular culture, local events, and other topics—are increasingly of value to teachers and scholars who seek to better understand Cather's cultural contexts.

In addition to publishing the complete texts and page images of the original publications, the *Cather Archive* will also feature annotations for each article, complete with images of many of the people and places Cather writes about. As Ronning's work has already demonstrated, these annotations will begin to make visible the complex culture that Cather was writing about, giving brief histories of hundreds of individual people, synopses of plays and books, explications of allusions and unfamiliar customs, and details of connections to Cather's writing and biography. Because space is not a restriction in the digital environment, we can afford to be generous with our annotations: for the first sixty articles, Ronning wrote nearly 1,500 annotations. Digitization and electronic publishing make such an ambitious project feasible. This project would be completely untenable to a press, both because the enormous length would require a multi-volume edition and because the cost of production would not be viable given the relatively small readership of scholarly editions.

In making Cather's early writing available, we hope to enable teachers to use this material in the classroom in a way that was impractical before. These vibrant writings are remarkably revealing of the talent, humor, and erudition of their author. Willa Cather the journalist has a voice that is at times consistent with and at other times at odds with her mature voice: attitudes, ambitions, perspectives, and interests are familiar, but the biting wit, unflinching criticism, and exuberance are sometimes surprising to readers. After all, superficial reading of Cather's best-known novels inspire many to use words like "serene" and "classical," while the journalism is full of sentences as pointed and funny as these: "The Dramatic Mirror announces that Maggie Mitchell will revive 'Jane Eyre' and 'Fanchon' next season. Yes, but who on earth or in the waters under the earth is to revive Maggie Mitchell?" ("With Plays"). And another: "She was quite pretty—when she had her veil on" ("Amusements"). Many instructors could make good use of these writings to provide a fuller picture of who Cather is as a writer, demonstrating that the confident opinions and occasional sharp humor of her mature work has deep roots. Teachers of more advanced students also could use Cather's early writings to give their students a connection to the author: Cather wrote many of the articles while herself a student at the University of Nebraska. In short, the *Cather Archive* hopes to give teachers the ability to include in their classes Cather texts that are not already available in affordable paperbacks. In doing this, I believe students will develop a broader understanding of Cather's long and complicated career.

II. Beyond Reading and Beyond Texts

In developing the content for the *Cather Archive*, I'm concerned that too many students may learn about Cather from a site that, largely for copyright reasons, highlights early work. In addition to the basic problem of a presentation that is an inaccurate representation of an author's body of work, the *Cather Archive's* focus on the early writings could present a "version" of Cather that is too centered on Nebraska. To put it another way: Cather lived most of her life in New York City; she wrote fiction about New York, Pittsburgh, Quebec, the American Southwest, and France in addition to Nebraska; and she was a frequent traveler. Her work, however, is so often characterized as being about "pioneers" on the Great Plains that many novice readers don't properly understand her range and complexity. Many of her most successful fictions of non-Nebraska locales were published in the last decades of her career, and

those are the very texts that the *Cather Archive* cannot legally present. Additionally, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is the major sponsor of the *Cather Archive* and home of the Cather Project, and even the web address of the *Archive* has “unl” in it. Nevertheless, the Nebraska focus is neither politically motivated nor the product of ignorant scholarship. Rather, it is the result of practical decision-making: Nebraska is the most common locale of Cather’s early writing, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has the most extensive collection of Cather material in the world, and the University provides a range of support for the development of the *Cather Archive*.

Even so, steps are being taken to somehow represent Cather’s later work. Though it is illegal to present works published after 1922 without explicit permission, it is permissible, within the Fair Use provisions of U.S. copyright law, to quote part of the texts. In the summer of 2007, a new and distinctive tool was published on the *Cather Archive* that, for the first time, provides some access to Cather’s later texts on the site. Working with Brian L. Pytlik Zillig, the *Cather Archive* developed a customized version of TokenX (<http://tokenx.unl.edu>), Pytlik Zillig’s text visualization, analysis, and play tool. TokenX allows students and teachers to perform complicated computational analysis over the *complete* corpus of Cather’s fiction, and the tool is designed to accommodate a range of questions. For example, one can search out revealing language patterns over the course of Cather’s writing career. Does her use of important terms alter significantly over the course of her career? Can tracking patterns of word usage within a specific novel reveal something about its formal structure? Does Cather abandon certain words at some point in her career or begin using new words that had not previously appeared in her fiction? Students and teachers can use the tool to track linguistic and compositional patterns, to make discoveries about Cather’s vocabulary shifts as the culture changed around her, to visualize her text in new and pedagogically useful ways, to alter methods of textual interaction in order to facilitate new ways of reading, and much more. Essentially, the project is experimental; we provide a novel tool for a new kind of research, a tool that is designed on the principle that we must facilitate a wide range of researcher-driven queries. As a new endeavor, the details and functionality of the tool are likely to grow and change considerably as we respond to users’ needs for their research and teaching.

In addition to textual material on the *Archive*, the site features a large and growing amount of non-textual material: photographs, sound record-

ings, and film. These materials are some of the most popular on the site, and classrooms can use the materials to greatly enhance understanding of who Cather was. The site not only has a range of photographs of Cather from infancy until late adulthood, it also has hundreds of photographs of Cather's family and friends, important locales in Cather's life, and images of people and places referenced in Cather's work (see fig. 3). Given the range of these images—from posed studio portraits to partly-out-of-focus family snapshots—students will be able to have multiple visual references for Cather. One should not underestimate the impact of such references, for an image of the author can communicate much to a new reader. Cather herself recognizes this when she remarks upon meeting Sarah Orne Jewett that she looks “very like the youthful picture of herself in the game of ‘Authors’ I had played as a child” (“148 Charles Street” 55). In recalling that “youthful picture” of Jewett, Cather acknowledges that her idea of “Sarah Orne Jewett” was intrinsically connected to the image of a face she encountered as a child.

The *Cather Archive* represents a distinctive confluence of circumstances that results in an unusual wealth of images of Cather. Inexpensive snapshot cameras such as the Kodak Brownie, which was introduced in 1900, became popular during Cather's lifetime. Many photographs taken with those snapshot cameras were preserved by Cather's family and friends including a series of poses in front of hollyhocks on Grand Manan; images of San Francisco Street in Santa Fe, New Mexico; and photos of Cather reclining in the grass. Large collections of photographs were donated to the Nebraska State Historical Society and to the Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, and now the *Cather Archive* allows public access to *all* the images in a free, searchable database. These images can be browsed, searched, and exported for use in the classroom or in educational presentations.

Easy access to the diverse images will allow for a visually complicated presentation of Cather, one that both fosters a better understanding of her complex identity and demystifies Cather as a “famous author.” The snapshot images in the collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln provide a particularly intimate view of Cather. Candid and unprofessional, these photographs show Cather on her travels, with her family, at her cottage on Grand Manan, and in a variety of poses. These are the photographs that populated Cather's and Edith Lewis's personal albums, and as such they lack the “Willa Cather as American Author” quality one finds in the publicity photographs taken during the same period, such as

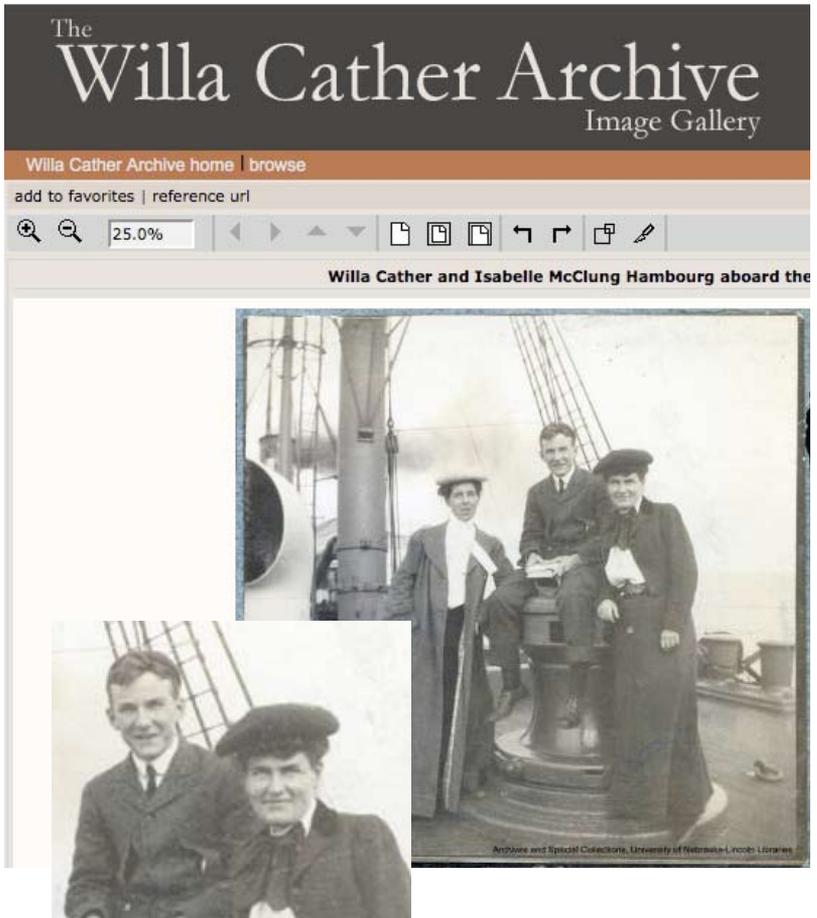


Figure 3. An image from the *Willa Cather Archive* Image Gallery (DOI #486). Willa Cather (right), Isabelle McClung (left), and an unidentified young man appear on the deck of the *S.S. Westernland* in September 1902. The inset image of Cather and the young man illustrates the Gallery's zooming feature, which allows users to examine photograph details. Image from Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, available on the *Willa Cather Archive*.

the portraits by Edward Steichen and Nicholas Muray. These images allow students to understand Cather as a real person living a recognizable life, rather than as a remote, dead artist. Additionally, the clothes, buildings, cars, and other artifacts that fill the margins of the photographs let students see Cather in the material contexts of her time. The other multimedia files—a sound recording of a 1933 speech originally broadcast on NBC radio and a ten-second silent film clip of Cather talking and

laughing in the 1920s—also help humanize and personalize Cather for students.

III. Critical Resources

As I've already suggested, contextualization of Cather's life and writings is a major goal of the *Cather Archive*, one we hope multimedia helps us reach. Over time, we plan to significantly build the contextualizing materials. For example, we would like to include sections providing information on and images of the regions of the world that influenced Cather and her writing: the Great Plains, the American Southwest, Quebec, New York City, Virginia, France, and other places. We also would like to present texts of Cather's writings about music with links to recordings of the pieces she references. But these examples are just small glimpses into the possibilities: the digital environment can accommodate a tremendous amount of material. The limits are determined almost solely by time, money, and energy. As the technology and our familiarity with it mature, the *Cather Archive* could potentially support a broad community of projects that provide incredible and unprecedented amounts of information on Cather and her world.

With the support of the University of Nebraska Press, the most prolific publisher of Cather scholarship in the past four decades, we are fortunate to be able to offer several highly-valuable critical works and editions originally published by the Press. These online versions are an easily accessible place for students at a variety of levels to begin their research on Cather-related topics. For example, we have two volumes of the *Willa Cather Scholarly Edition*, the complete text of James Woodress's 1987 biography, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, all of the interviews, speeches, and public letters collected in L. Brent Bohlke's *Willa Cather in Person*, and the complete run of *Cather Studies*. Additionally, thanks to a partnership with editors Steven Shively and Virgil Albertini we have all the back issues of *Teaching Cather* available.

In one case, the *Cather Archive* hosts an expanded, digital edition of a highly-valued Cather resource. Thanks to a partnership with the University of Nebraska Press and Janis Stout, the *Archive* published a new, digital edition of *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather* (see fig. 4). As many know, Cather's will prohibits the quotation of her letters, a prohibition that is still enforced by her executors, and no editions of her correspondence have been published. The letters themselves are scattered in approximately sixty-seven different repositories around the

The screenshot displays the 'A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather' interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text 'New Search:' and a 'Search Letters' button. Below this, it shows 'Calendar of Letters Advanced Search' and '369 letters found'. The search parameters are listed as 'Keyword: virginia'. There are links for 'previous' and 'next'. The results section is titled 'Results 1-20:' and includes a 'Sort by:' dropdown menu with 'Date' selected and 'Addressee' as an option. Two letter entries are visible:

- Letter ID:** 0002
Addressee: Stowell, Helen Louise Stevens
Date: 1889-05-31
Respository: Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation
To Mrs. Helen Stowell, May 31, 1889 from Red Cloud, Nebr.; WCPM
 Won Latin prize at end of school year. Grades of 90 in rhetoric, 95 in Latin, and 100s in physics, astronomy, and ancient history. Teacher wrote a message in report card praising her literary interests. Has fixed up a room at father's history, Homer, Milton, Swinburn yesterday. Mother, Mrs. Wiener, Silas Garber] had a picnic. Long Cather house is a gathering place
- Letter ID:** 0015
Addressee: Gere, Mariel
Date: 1893-08-01
Respository: Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation

A pop-up window for 'Cather, Charles Fectigue 1848-1928' is open, showing a portrait of Charles Fectigue and text: 'Father of Willa Cather. Other letters that mention this person'. The pop-up also lists related terms: 'hy, geology, musicale', 's F. Wiener, and', 'As usual, #2]'. The background text of the letter entry is partially obscured by the pop-up.

Figure 4: A detail of a screenshot from *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather: An Expanded Digital Edition* available on the Willa Cather Archive.

United States. In 2002 Janis Stout, Texas A&M University Professor of English Emerita and American literature scholar, published *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather*, a book that summarizes the contents of each letter while providing important information about addressee, date, and place. This volume is undoubtedly the best source of information on Cather's correspondence for most researchers. Even so, the print volume of the *Calendar* was quickly rendered insufficient: nearly seven hundred and fifty new letters that have emerged in the past few years are not included (a roughly forty-percent increase in the known letters); the index is selective; and new research has revised or confirmed several editorial suppositions. Observing the need for a new edition and, particularly, an edition that could continue to grow as knowledge of Cather's correspondence grows, the *Cather Archive* entered into a partnership that

produced an expanded edition in the summer of 2007. The digital edition is complete and updateable, searchable, and fully accessible to researchers at all levels.

Though we by no means have a thorough representation of the varied and extensive critical studies of Cather and her writings, these critical materials do offer students a solid and easy-to-use foundation for research projects. Hopefully, teachers who include Cather research in their courses, particularly in classes with students unfamiliar with scholarly research or in educational institutions with limited library facilities, can point to the *Cather Archive* as a useful research tool. If our goals are reached, the depth and breadth of the critical research materials offered will only continue to grow.

IV. The Computer as Reading Medium

Willa Cather wrote in the pre-digital world, and one might argue that a “true” experience of her writing requires that one read her materials on paper. Some scholars have even gone further. Noting that Cather believed “that a book’s physical form influenced its relationship with a reader” and “selected type, paper, and format that invited the reader response she sought,” Susan Rosowski and the editorial team of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition claim that “printing and publishing decisions that disregard her wishes represent their own form of corruption, and an authoritative edition of Cather must go beyond the sequence of words and punctuation to include other matters: page format, paper stock, typeface, and other features of design” (ix). Such ideals make intuitive sense—we do want to understand the authorial intention—but are ultimately impossible to achieve. Even the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition had to concede this reality as it surrounded Cather’s texts with elaborate critical apparatus (definitely not part of the original authorial intention), used different covers and bindings, and relied on a different typesetting technology altogether. Our world is decades displaced from Cather’s, and any attempt to recreate her cultural moment, even in publishing and bookmaking, will ultimately fail. We do not mind teaching Shakespeare as written text (rather than exclusively as performance) or watching a silent Chaplin film with pre-recorded sound on a television monitor (rather than projected on a big screen with a live orchestra) because such compromises help us accomplish a larger goal: bringing important works of art into the lives of students. We must acknowledge that compromises with our ideal of an “authentic” reading experience must also be made

with modern fiction.

But more profound than displacement from the original publication, which has been an eternal fact of life for classrooms, is the way the shift in medium affects the very way the students encounter the text. From a very young age, today's students grow accustomed to reading in ways completely foreign to previous generations. Though it would be an overstatement to claim students no longer know how to read printed text, it is true that the Internet and other media have accustomed many to reading texts full of hyperlinks, to words continually juxtaposed with graphics and animations, and to smaller self-contained divisions of text (the practice commonly known as "chunking"). Students' reading skills are greatly influenced by the digital culture most of them regularly navigate. This means that young students often have very limited experience reading sustained narratives over a sustained period of time. In other words, many young people have rarely, if ever, read a complete printed book.

This problem is neither new nor directly attributable to digital culture, but, according to some research, it is growing. The National Endowment for the Arts's rather alarming (or, according to some, unnecessarily alarmist) 2004 report, *Reading At Risk*, claims that the percentage of 18-44 year olds that engaged in literary reading during leisure time dropped from 60 percent to 43 percent between 1982 and 2002 (26). One problem with this assessment of reading, though, is its rather narrow definitions of "literary reading." The surveyed group was asked about the reading of "any novels or short stories, plays, or poetry" (1); though the report acknowledges that literature "can be found in sources other than books," the alternative forms mentioned only include "magazines," "literary journals," and "subway and bus placards" (2). In other words, the report is concerned with a very traditional and highly valuable form of reading, but it does not reflect the reading of Americans *in general*. It certainly seems that other kinds of textual interactions are far more common for young people today than they were in 1982. For example, with the advent of electronic mail and text messaging, today's students are almost certainly more accustomed to social communication in written form than the previous generation. Though sometimes this familiarity leads to an awkward absence of professional decorum expected by an even slightly older generation—a recent e-mail I received from a student I did not know was full of inattentiveness to punctuation and grammar—it at least provides students some sustained experience with thinking through reading and writing.

In general terms, I see this shift in reading culture to be good justification for both inclusion of assignments based on print-based, book-length texts *and* inclusion of digital scholarship. I reject the notion that students ought to be treated as a demographic that teachers need to sell their product to, as typified by the following sentiment I heard recently: “College students really like cell phones; how can we use cell phones in our classrooms?” After all, students ought to come to class to learn and grow, not to be indulged and pacified, and exposing students to the experience of book-reading is unquestionably appropriate. However, scholar-driven resources in media more comfortable for many young people—like digital media—do give teachers an opportunity to effectively communicate content to students while maintaining high standards in the classroom.

In some respects, the *Willa Cather Archive*, with its presentations of many electronic texts that were originally printed, is not going to produce a radically different reading experience for many people. After all, one way to use the site is as a way to access texts, print them out, and read them. But our goal is to create a site that allows for many different kinds of user experiences, from traditional linear reading of text to following hyperlinks within texts enhanced with multimedia to searching and computationally analyzing resources. Students will access material on the *Cather Archive* differently: they will enter the site at different points, they will travel around the site in different paths, and they will see different material. This quality is, admittedly, something that would make Cather, who “selected type, paper, and format that invited the reader response she sought,” quite uncomfortable. Still, experiencing a text in divergent ways is not something digital culture has introduced. The notion that any technology can inspire a consistent response from a variety of readers is faulty. Though a group of people can all read the same words in identical copies of the same physical book, no one reads the same book, for each reader brings unique circumstances, associations, conclusions, and prejudices to his or her reading.

Digital technology, however, intensifies and materializes differences that, though real, might be internal or theoretical in print culture. Through search engines and hyperlinks, the Internet takes the user to just what she or he seeks, virtually destroying any chance of a common textual experience in digital media. For the *Willa Cather Archive*, this means that one visitor to the site could spend hours carefully reading the short fiction as it was published in periodicals and read current scholarship on those stories; another visitor could look at some pictures, glance

at the brief chronology of Cather's life, and listen to the recording of her voice. The version of "Willa Cather" obtained by a student visiting the site might be informed by the design of the first edition of *April Twilights*, or it might be informed by the photograph of Cather wearing a fedora and riding a handcar in Wyoming.

The lack of control might be frustrating to a scholar or teacher who has an agenda to promote a predefined notion of who Willa Cather was, but it is the goal of the *Willa Cather Archive* to, as much as possible, present materials without such an agenda. We are an "archive" because we present a wealth of diverse resources, and we hope that we are useful and valuable to a range of scholars, teachers, and students with a variety of goals. Certainly, the *Archive* is not and, for the foreseeable future, cannot be absolutely comprehensive, and this lack of comprehensiveness could potentially skew a reader's understanding. Though it is on a different scale, the compromises inherent in the *Archive's* selection of materials is analogous to those an editor of an anthology must make. "Representative" choices must be made, and they must be made not only on theoretical grounds, but also on practical ones: What can we legally reproduce? What can we afford? What is best suited to the medium? Any selection, even the most thoughtful, provides limited access to the truth of an author's life and work.

The responsibility for the quality of the research, though, is finally with the researcher, not with the research tool. The *Willa Cather Archive*, though large in scope, is not one-stop shopping for Cather research. It is but one resource among many, and the good researcher will know that, will take what it has to offer, and will recognize what it does not have. A teacher using the site in the classroom will do the same: the *Cather Archive* is consciously undogmatic, preferring to present resources without heavy-handed suggestions as to how they may be used. At this stage in our development, we have prioritized making the basic resources available rather than guiding users on a specific path through them. We aim to make the materials as useful as possible, as we hope the *Cather Archive* fulfills practical needs in the Cather community. Yet we do not want to prescribe the specific ways the material will be useful. Instead, we hope the interactive methods possible in a digital environment will be exploited by individual people in ways that surprise us, that the students and teachers who visit the site will teach us about the different ways the materials can be used to better understand—and better teach—the life and writings of Willa Cather.

Notes

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²"Textual field" is a term which refers to the interplay of text with other bibliographic elements (fonts, layouts, paper quality, illustrations, etc.), coined by Jerome McGann (15).

³Also of note in the illustrations is the displacement of Cather's Great Plains landscape: the rich foliage and plentiful trees suggest the moister climate of the American South, subtly making another potential reference to Twain's boyhood adventure stories.

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