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Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial in Red Cloud

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THE CHILDHOOD WORLDS OF WILLA CATHER

MILDRED R. BENNETT

She was a good artist, and all true art is provincial in the most realistic sense: of the very time and place of its making, out of human beings who are so particularly limited by their situation, whose faces and names are real and whose lives begin each one at one individual unique center.

Katherine Anne Porter

Willa Cather, as Katherine Anne Porter realized, was a provincial or regional writer who could derive the universal from the specific, as the best artists do. For Cather, the specifics to which she returned throughout her career were the people, places, and things of her childhood in Back Creek Valley, Virginia, and Red Cloud, Nebraska.¹ "The ideas for all my novels have come from things that happened around Red Cloud when I was a child," she once said. "I was all over the country then, on

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foot, on horseback and in our farm wagons."² To be familiar with Willa Cather's childhood, then, is to gain a special entry into her art.

Willa Cather was born on December 7, 1873, in her Grandmother Boak's house in Back Creek Valley, Virginia. Her grandfather, William Cather, a county sheriff and a strong Union man, had done much to unify the divided community after the Civil War, including using his Northern money to provide schooling for the young people of the valley. Virginia Boak, Willa's mother, was one of the young Confederates whom he helped, and there was little strife between her and her husband Charles. Virginia Cather combined the qualities of natural mother and Southern belle that would distinguish Willa's portrait of her as Victoria Templeton in "Old Mrs. Harris." During the Back Creek Valley years, she bore three more children, Roscoe, Douglass, and Jessica, but she always maintained her fine figure and aristocratic role, even while she enjoyed nursing her babies and never, as many Southern ladies did, turned them over to former slave wet nurses.

Charles Cather and his brother George served as deputy sheriffs to their father and ran the family sheep business, buying and raising lambs

to sell on the Washington and Baltimore markets. In June, 1873, when George left Back Creek Valley to pioneer in Nebraska with his wife, Frances Smith, his share of the work passed to Charles. A year later, grandfather William went to visit George, and Willa and her parents moved into Willow Shade, the homestead William had built on the side of a mountain. Through the basement kitchen of the house of Willa's childhood ran a spring that kept the dairy products cool.

Even before George moved to Nebraska, the Cather men had been interested in the West and had visited Colorado. William Cather wanted to move the whole family to Nebraska, because he believed that the humid atmosphere of Back Creek encouraged the tuberculosis that afflicted so many of the Cathers. When his father, James Cather, died, William became head of the family. He had just returned from his visit to George, with the four orphaned children of a brother who had lived in Missouri. After finding homes for three of the orphans among the Virginia Cathers, William and his wife moved to Nebraska with their widowed daughter, her little girl, and the fourth orphan. Two weeks after the group arrived, William's daughter died, leaving another orphan with her grandparents. Mobile families and orphaned children distributed among relatives provided the background for Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*.

William, a patriarchal man, wanted to keep his family around him, and his move to Nebraska increased the pressure on Charles and Virginia to follow, but Virginia did not want to leave her friends, her home, or the mountain countryside. (I doubt that Willa, who always hated change, did either.) However, Willow Shade's large sheep barn, containing a grinding mill for sheep provender, burned down, and William refused to rebuild, virtually forcing Charles to join him in Nebraska in 1883. Yet the uprooting did not come before Willa's imagination had stored up many experiences she later drew on in writing.

The Virginia years are portrayed in most detail in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, but they

were also Willa's introduction to nature, school, American history, and the Old World. As soon as she could walk, she roamed hills and fields rich in wildlife and varieties of trees and flowers. Although she was too young to attend regularly, Willa often went with her father to the neighborhood school, where she sat and listened—and I dare say asked questions. Charles Cather's love of history impelled him to make his oldest child aware of the local heritage and to impart it to any interested listener.³ He undoubtedly took her to the home of Lord Fairfax, Greenway Court, which inspired her early story, "A Night at Greenway Court." The hired women who worked at Willow Shade no doubt contributed another kind of history—family stories, superstitions, and folklore. Willa Cather's interest in France began in the house of her friend, Mary Love, whose mother was the daughter of a former United States minister to France. Willa questioned Mrs. Love about her years abroad and admired her many treasures from France.⁴ Another comrade was Marjorie Anderson, the prototype of Mahailey in *One of Ours* and of Mandy in "Old Mrs. Harris." Marjorie's mother, who figured as Mrs. Ringer in *Sapphira*, worked in the kitchen at Willow Shade. Although Marjorie was retarded and could not profit from Willa's attempts to teach her how to read, she was a companion on Willa's trips into the hills.

Willa Cather's nine years in Virginia were her preparation for Nebraska. The contrast between the two environments could not have been more startling. Climate and surroundings were radically different, and friends, doctors, and education had, it seemed, been left behind. In Nebraska, chickens let out of their coops were lost for good in the never-ending red grass that stood as high as the young trees planted by hopeful settlers. Willa Cather later emphasized the break that she felt with the past in Jim Burden's arrival in Nebraska in *My Ántonia*, but she was not quite as lost as he. Her household that first year in Nebraska included her parents and brothers and sisters, her grandmother Rachel Boak, Mrs. Boak's granddaughter Bess Seymour, Bess's half brother, Will Andrews,

and Willa's friend Marjorie Anderson, whose mother had entrusted her to Mrs. Cather's personal care. This extended family settled on William Cather's homestead, about fifteen miles northwest of Red Cloud. It was April, not autumn as it was for Jim Burden, and the spring promised much. During the intense summer, Virginia Cather, pregnant for the fifth time, was bed-ridden and eventually lost the baby. Willa was left free to explore the new country and to meet the neighbors. She had her own pony and sometimes fetched the mail from the farmer who served as postmaster. She also loved to visit the immigrant women—Swedish, Danish, Czech, Russian, German, and French—even though she could not speak their languages. Nothing, she later said, excited her more than spending a day with one of them, watching her churn, make bread, or perform similar tasks. She felt then as if she had got inside another's skin, the kind of empathy she aimed for in her finest fiction.⁵

Willa later romanticized that first year in Nebraska. She claimed that she picked wild flowers and sat with them in her lap, crying over them because they had no names and no one seemed to care for them. Legend also has it that she did not attend school in the country, but roamed the land "like a wild thing." However, country life was neither uncivilized nor without graces. Willa said her Aunt Franc (George's wife), who was a graduate of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, scattered more manna in the wilderness than anyone else. Frances Cather, whom Willa eventually transmuted into Claude Wheeler's mother in *One of Ours*, organized a literary society at which members discussed transcendentalism and other topics. She was also a botanist who had pressed the prairie flowers and classified them by both technical and common names. No doubt this reality was less interesting to Willa Cather the writer than the image of a child weeping over a heap of flowers. However much Willa may have wandered in the summer, records show her enrolled in New Virginia school in the winter of 1883–84, although the term may have lasted only three months. On the other hand, accounts

that Willa learned Latin from her two grandmothers are probably what Elsie Cather termed "Willie's little stories."⁶ Neither grandmother seems to have been a Latin scholar, and Willa liked to fictionalize about herself, inventing three birthdates, December 7, 1874, 1875, and 1876—the last a biological impossibility, since her brother Roscoe was born in June, 1877. Even if they did not teach her Latin, Willa's grandmothers served her well. Rachel Boak became the title character in "Old Mrs. Harris," and Caroline Cather served as the basis for Grandmother Burden in *My Ántonia*.

While the people, plants, and animals of the new country charmed Willa, her mother disliked the isolated homestead and urged Charles to move into Red Cloud, where the schools were supposed to be better. Because he was not a farmer at heart, he complied, and in the fall of 1884 he sold his farm equipment and stock and moved to a house at Third and Cedar streets in Red Cloud. He had arranged to buy, but the deal fell through, and he had to rent the only house available, the "Newhouse" property, where the Cathers lived for twenty years. Cather described this small, overcrowded house in *The Song of the Lark*, "Old Mrs. Harris," "The Best Years," and other stories. At one time twelve people lived there, under the management of Virginia Cather; the warm and comfortable atmosphere of the home was created in part by Grandmother Boak and Bess Seymour. On winter nights Charles would pull down the ornate kerosene lamp and read to the children. These sessions introduced Willa to most of the literature, especially the poetry, that she loved.

The geography of Red Cloud is reflected in the layout of Moonstone in *The Song of the Lark*. The town's strange configuration resulted from the rivalry between J. L. Miner and his brother-in-law Will Jackson, who had married Julia Miner. Jackson owned the land around the depot, and in about 1882 he donated land for the St. Juliana Falconieri Church, named in honor of his wife. The large Burlington and Missouri Hotel and Eating House and several other establishments were built on this south

side of town. But then Miner, who owned land farther up the hill, "nailed down" what eventually became the main part of town by building a fully equipped brick department store at the corner of Third and Webster, where it still stands. Willa liked to sit on the plank sidewalk south of the high-windowed brick wall and watch the white dust roll upward from slow wagon wheels, or listen to Mr. Miner and Mr. Richardson talk politics and business, conversations she would recreate in "Two Friends."

The major resource of the town for Willa Cather was its people, transients and long-term residents alike. The alcoholic music teacher Shindelmeisser she transmuted into Thea Kronborg's beloved Herr Wunsch in *The Song of the Lark*. The town had considered him unfit to teach respectable girls until Mrs. Miner recognized his skill and engaged him to teach her daughters. Willa also took lessons from him, but she was more interested in listening to him play or telling her about the great composers than in practicing herself. When the exasperated teacher complained to Mrs. Cather, Willa's mother assured him that the girl was learning the things she needed. Like Mrs. Kronborg, Mrs. Cather understood her gifted daughter.

Mrs. Miner, who first appreciated Shindelmeisser, was the daughter of an oboist in Ole Bull's Royal Norwegian Orchestra, owned the first harpsichord and the first piano in town, and played arias from the popular operas of the day. Her daughters practiced diligently, especially Mary, who could play Willa's favorites by the hour. Willa frequently accompanied the Miners to St. Juliana's, where she heard the fine ecumenical choir sing the Gloria and Ave Maria. Mrs. Miner could also tell stories of her childhood in Norway, such as the time she met the dowager queen on the grounds of the summer palace and talked about flowers with her. Mr. Miner, equally interesting, had been born in Ireland and had lived for a while in Galena, Illinois, where he knew Ulysses S. Grant. Mary Miner's calm disposition and interest in music quieted Willa, while Carrie Miner, four years her elder, satisfied her curiosity. Carrie helped manage her father's store and was full of

interesting information about everybody in the county. On weekday mornings, Willa would loiter about the Miner's house until Carrie left for work, then follow her to the store, asking questions about the people in the community. She hesitated to follow Carrie inside, however, because she sensed that Mr. Miner considered her a nuisance.

One of the people Carrie told her about was Fannie Fernleigh. Fannie had taught music in Lincoln before she secured the backing of certain local businessmen and opened a lavish house of prostitution on the west edge of Red Cloud, just outside city limits. Painted bright red to be seen from miles away, the establishment was given various names: Magenta Bagnio, House of the Soiled Doves, The Red Rooster. When Fannie came into the store, the young salesmen, who were not always so distant, refused to wait on her, and Carrie herself had to cut the yards of satin and quantities of lace that were needed for the girls' dresses. Sometimes the girls themselves came to buy babies' things and children's clothes for little brothers and sisters back home. The girls were neither local nor immigrants—no one seemed to know where they came from. In *A Lost Lady*, Cather used Fannie as Nell Emerald, the Denver madam who tells Frank Ellinger that no decent man would take a prostitute out driving in broad daylight.

On the other end of the social spectrum, Carrie introduced Willa to Silas and Lyra Garber, who became Captain and Mrs. Forrester in *A Lost Lady*. Governor Garber, a Civil War officer who had served as governor of Nebraska, had married as his second wife Lyra, a startling beauty from California. About the age of her stepson (a fact that interested gossips), the young Mrs. Garber continued to love parties and excitement while her husband grew older and more settled in his ways. At first Willa merely heard of the parties from Carrie, but later she, like the young Niel Herbert, was included, and came to love and admire Mrs. Garber. Carrie herself was a character to fire Willa's imagination. She was the one person Willa Cather could not dominate, and neither

could anyone else. Her father treated her like a son and put her in charge of the store when he went home for meals, even on Saturday nights when the railroad crews came in to cash their pay vouchers. Miner would put a loaded revolver on the counter and tell Carrie to use it if necessary, but she never needed to—everyone respected her. Throughout her life she retained her power over people, managing even the vagrants who sometimes hid in the sunflower-filled dry creek bed at Third and Cedar streets. Cather used the Miners as the Harlings in *My Ántonia*, and Carrie became the somewhat awe-inspiring Frances Harling.

Mr. and Mrs. Wiener, whom Cather called the Rosens in "Old Mrs. Harris," were other neighbors who influenced Willa. Jews from New York with a deep understanding of French and German culture, they moved into an elegant apartment above their newly built clothing store. Willa loved to visit them, attracted by their library and the breadth of knowledge they made available to her. Mr. Wiener loaned Charles Cather the money to pay for Willa's first year at the University of Nebraska, and she felt forever indebted to him and his wife. Another helper was Will Ducker, a student of Greek and Latin. She studied gratefully with him, although she was more interested in Latin as a gateway to the classical world than as a study in itself. Her formal schooling provided at least one bona fide mentor, Eva J. King, the teacher who later appeared as Miss Knightly in "The Best Years." Not even from her idolized Miss King could Willa learn mathematics, and it was not until just before graduation from the University of Nebraska that she was able to pass an examination qualifying her in that subject. She later said that when something difficult loomed ahead she had nightmares about not passing math.

Not all the people Willa knew in Red Cloud were benevolent, however. M. R. Bentley, once mayor of the town, was a notorious womanizer and money grabber whose hired girls, always in danger of seduction, occasionally had to be sent away. Bentley's unsavory activities gave Cather the material for the villainous Wick

Cutter in *My Ántonia*. Like his fictional counterpart, Bentley quarreled constantly with his wife and threatened to cut down the cedars in front of their house to deprive her of her precious privacy. He never did, however, and they stand by that house today. The couple eventually moved to Hot Springs, Arkansas, where Bentley shot his wife while she was embroidering a tablecloth. After she fell forward dead, he went downstairs and shot himself.

Willa Cather said that those who live by the imagination find that it is that part of their lives that endures in the memory. Certainly Willa lived so. She wrote original plays and dramatized fairy tales, then directed the children's performances of them, usually in the Miners' front parlor. Mrs. Miner and her hired girl, Annie Sadilek, frequently helped with the costumes. Annie, the prototype of *Ántonia*, was herself an important character in Willa's imagination. The best known of Willa's theatricals, "Beauty and the Beast," was staged in the Opera House for the benefit of the victims of the Blizzard of '88. Mary Miner played Beauty, and Willa was so convincing as the father that the audience did not recognize her.⁷ The program netted more than forty dollars, a considerable sum in those days. Willa also led the other children in the construction of Sandy Point, a play town framed by plum bushes, just south of the Cather home. The town consisted of wooden packing boxes the Miner girls had coaxed from their father, two boxes on top of each other representing a two-story building. Willa was mayor, banker, and newspaper editor. Mary Miner made candy, and her sister Irene and a friend ran a millinery shop where customers could try on hats on the upper floor. The boys floated bonds to build a bridge across a ditch. The children also staged circuses in the hayloft of the Miners' large barn. River creatures—frogs, lizards, and turtles—made up the sideshow.

Some of Willa's make-believe was more serious. Intending to become a doctor, she signed herself "Wm. Cather, M.D.," and constructed a laboratory in the back of her father's real estate and loan office. There she chloroformed frogs,

stray cats, and even a family dog, and dissected them scientifically. In her high school graduation address in 1890 she criticized the town ladies' disdain of her medical hobbies, proclaiming the importance of scientific experimentation over superstition.⁸ Her interests brought her the friendship of all of the three Red Cloud doctors. She admired the well-educated and politically active Dr. Damerell, and worked summers for Dr. Cook, the pharmacist, earning money for books, a magic lantern, and wallpaper for her attic room. Her favorite was Dr. McKeeby, whom she later immortalized as Dr. Archie in *The Song of the Lark*. McKeeby's wife supposedly resembled the frigid Mrs. Archie, and when the newspapers linked McKeeby with the girls from Fannie Fernleigh's, his friends felt that if ever a man were justified in patronizing Fannie's place, he was. His notoriety, however, seems to stem from the fact that he had cared for one of Fannie's girls, who had broken her leg in a carriage accident. McKeeby often took Willa on country calls, and once she helped him give chloroform to a boy whose leg he amputated.

A wide-open town for saloons, gambling, and prostitution, Red Cloud let the world pass through it on eight trains a day, four in each direction. Traveling salesmen spent weekends there, and many other travelers stopped to eat. The trainmen would signal ahead to the Burlington and Missouri Hotel and Eating House the number of diners, and by the time the train arrived, the meals would be ready. Willa and the Miner girls often waited at the depot for dignitaries to alight or for the arrival of opera or theatrical companies on their way to a performance at the Opera House.

The upstairs hall at the Opera House had become a community center as well as a home for traveling performers. Local youngsters produced Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and other light fare. Willa's high school graduation exercises were held in the Opera House in 1890. Here she saw "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and other popular shows, and here she heard Blind Boone, the black pianist who suggested Blind d'Arnault in *My Ántonia*. A road performance

at such an opera house convinces the heroine of *Lucy Gayheart* that life is to live.

Willa Cather's childhood provided her with much of the material out of which she produced her fiction. Red Cloud in particular presented a blend of unspoiled nature with the achievements of cultured people like the Garbers, the Wieners, and the Miners. She could explore the river bluffs south of town, or civilize them by reading, with her friends, *Idylls of the King* and *Sohrab and Rustum*. Willa led the children as they became pirates on the river island, explorers, or anything else they chose. In her fiction she was often fondly to remember boys camping on a river. Her years of roaming through nature and drinking in the particular achievements of the people of Red Cloud kindled Willa Cather's imagination and left an indelible mark upon her writing.

NOTES

1. Katherine Anne Porter, "Critical Reflections on Willa Cather," afterword to Cather's *The Troll Garden* (New York: New American Library, 1961), pp. 149-50.

2. From an interview by Eleanor Hinman, *Lincoln Sunday Star*, November 6, 1921.

3. Carrie Miner Sherwood heard it from Willa in 1883, soon after the family arrived in Nebraska.

4. According to interviews with her sister and correspondence with her son, Mary treasured her childhood letters from Willa, which were lost after Mary's death in the 1940s.

5. H. W. Boynton, "Chapters in 'The Great American Novel,'" *New York Evening Post*, November 13, 1915.

6. While I was working on *The World of Willa Cather*, Elsie often questioned certain "facts." "Is that really true," she would ask, "or is it one of Willie's little stories?"

7. The *Red Cloud Evening Chief*, February 6, 1888, singled Willa out for her ability to play a man, commenting that she "carried it through with . . . grace and ease."

8. Cather argued that novices cannot become experts without experimentation. For a full discussion of her "medical" period, see my *The World of Willa Cather*, rev. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 109-18.