

An Unauthorized Junket to Dr. Will's House

or

“The Meat-Axe”

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“Let your fiction grow out of the land beneath your feet”

Willa Cather

I robbed the cradle, so now I'm retired, and my wife is not. Since I like to travel and Liz is still working, sometimes I travel alone. My wife has labeled these trips "fully authorized," "semi-authorized," and "unauthorized. Thus far, "fully authorized" trips have only occurred when I volunteer for our church's Appalachian Service Project in Kentucky, because, after all, I was "doing God's work."

In late spring 2014 I traveled to Red Cloud, Nebraska. I would have named this a "semi-authorized" trip, but since I wanted to take a "short-cut" home through South Dakota's Black Hills, it became "unauthorized."

This trip was precipitated by talking to my old high school buddy, Tom, at our 50<sup>th</sup> reunion. Tom's Ph.D. thesis was on the use of the male narrator by author Willa Cather. I hadn't read any of Cather's twelve novels in adolescence, probably because my male hormones were raging and all I read were the heavily masculine writings of Steinbeck, Hemingway, and London. Then college, medical school, and a busy career as an academic psychiatrist intervened, so at age 68 I still had not read Cather. After our conversation, I picked Cather's most famous work, *My Ántonia*, to read.

Much of Cather's work is autobiographical. For instance Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* is Cather herself. *My Ántonia*, Cather's fourth novel, is intensely autobiographical. Its main character, Ántonia Shimerda Cuzak, is modeled after Annie Sadílek Pavelka, a Bohemian immigrant farm-girl from Red Cloud, four years older than Cather. In at least three other novels, Cather chose to use a male narrator. In *My Ántonia* the narrator is Jim Burden, who, like Cather, was born in Virginia and moved to Webster County, Nebraska when he was age nine. The novel follows the lifelong friendship of Annie and Jim until Jim returns to the Cuzak farmstead and meets her husband and ten children. In one famous passage, symbolic of the populating of our vast Western plains, Jim recounts seeing the children emerge from a fruit cellar:

"We turned to leave the cave; Ántonia and I went up the stairs first, and the children waited. We were standing outside talking, when they all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight. It made me dizzy for a moment." (p. 382, Cather, *My Ántonia*)

Like Ántonia and Jim, Willa Cather and Annie Pavelka remained life-long friends. Cather maintained a correspondence with Annie and some of her sons. During the Great Depression Cather sent Annie money to buy a washing machine and pay taxes on the family farm. Cather sent money to other struggling residents of Webster County as well.

I am captivated by Cather's imaginative use of the male narrator, her exquisite evocative prose, and her ability to paint a picture so vivid that you can see it, feel it, hear it, and smell it. The images of her characters and of the landscape remain fixed in one's mind long after finishing her novels. They touch the soul. A few examples will suffice.

This passage from *My Ántonia* describes what Jim and Ántonia saw at twilight:

“Presently we saw a curious thing: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disc rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.” (p. 279, Cather, *My Ántonia*)

This scene, perhaps one of the most famous scenes in American literature, symbolizes the settlement of our western prairie.

In an August 1893 letter to her friend Mariel Gere, Cather wrote of her experience with her friend Ross when they climbed a windmill:

“One of our favorite amusements out there was sitting on top of the fifty foot windmill tower at night. It was great on calm evenings. We could see for miles and miles... The red harvest moon, swollen with plenty, rose over the lagoons and wheat fields... As soon as she was up, the little ponds all over the country began to glimmer in the corn tassels and all these forests of corn looked white as silver. We could see the windmills and groves of cottonwoods all over the country as plainly as in daylight. Moonlight has the peculiar effect on the country; it obliterates what is ugly, softens what is harsh, and what is beautiful it raises almost to the divine supernatural.

But the greatest thing we saw from that mill tower was the coming of a storm. The moon did not show herself at all, there was a long black bank of clouds in the west, and the lightning kept playing along it as steady as the fire of a battery. The world seemed to get ready for a storm; the cattle all huddled together in one end of the [corral], the corn leaves got restless and began to toss their long blades up as if to reach for rain. In a moment the big wind struck us... and we fifty feet up in the air on a four-foot platform! [My brother] Roscoe howled [below us], “Off with your skirts Willie or you will never get down.” You bet I peeled them off, all but a little light one. The descent was something awful, the tower shook and we shook, the wind hummed and sang and whirled all around us. If it not been for [Ross's] grip on me I believe I should have fallen. My hands are still blistered from the way I hung on the rounds of the ladder.” (pp.20-21, Jewell and Stout)

Jim Cantore and Mike Bettes, eat your hearts out!

Here Cather describes what Webster County, Nebraska looked like when she arrived at age nine:

"This country was mostly wild pasture and as naked as the back of your hand. I was little and homesick and lonely and my mother was homesick and nobody paid any attention to us. So the country and I had it out together and by the end of the first autumn, that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and the curse of my life." (p. 32, Bohlke)

So, after reading *My Ántonia*, I knew I had to visit Red Cloud (known as Black Hawk in *My Ántonia*) where Cather lived from age nine until she went off to Nebraska State University in Lincoln. Arriving in mid-afternoon in late May, I settled myself in at the Kaley House, a local B&B. My next two days were taken up with tours of Willa Cather sites in Red Cloud and surrounding Webster County.

I was hooked, not only by the beauty of the landscape and the history of the region, but also by Willa Cather's fascinating personality. I learned that in adolescence she had dubbed herself William Cather, M.D., and had dissected animals on the walk in front of her house until her embarrassed and prim Virginia-bred mother persuaded her to bring her gory endeavors inside.

Back home, I decided to order a biography on Willa Cather. Seventeen biographies later, I'm still looking for the definitive biography. *Willa Cather, A Literary Life* by James Woodress comes closest, but it was published nearly twenty years ago, long before *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* was published in 2013. Why is this important? It's because until just recently, Cather's estate forbade quoting directly from her letters. The other important Cather biographical source is *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*, by Edith Lewis, Cather's household partner of nearly forty years. Although written with a biased eye, this biography is the single most important account of Cather's adult life.

Usually I love reading biographies by English literature academics because they are well written and richly annotated. Not so with most Willa Cather biographers. It seems that they cannot resist analyzing each of the Cather novels and many of her short stories in ultimate boring detail. Like Joe Friday of *Dragnet* fame, I'm a bit overwhelmed by all of the excess verbiage, and am left feeling like, "All we want are the facts, ma'am." What's more, many of the Cather biographers apply an outdated Freudian analysis to their critiques. My sincerest apologies to any English literature academics among you.

Willella Seibert Cather was born on December 7, 1873 in Back Creek, Virginia. She was the eldest of seven children born to Charles Fetique Cather and Mary Virginia Boak. The family lived on a sheep farm until the barn burned and they moved to Webster County, Nebraska to make a new beginning in 1883. Initially the Cather family lived on a farm situated on the high ground between the Republican River and the Blue River, an area known as "the Divide." During the one and a half year period of living on the Divide, Willa was said to have ridden her pony amongst the numerous Swedish, Norwegian, Bohemian, French, Czech, German, and Russian immigrant settlements and listened to older women tell stories about the old country. Tiring of farming, Charles moved the family to nearby Red Cloud where he became involved real estate and insurance.

Willa's mother, Mary Virginia, has been described as tyrannical and a strict disciplinarian who punished her children with a rawhide whip. She never left her bedroom in the morning until she was clean, well-quaffed, and elaborately dressed. Her father Charles, on the other hand, was amiable and gentle, a real teddy-bear. Willa was closest to her two eldest brothers, Roscoe and Douglas, with whom she shared an attic bedroom in Red Cloud while the rest of the brood slept downstairs.

Grandmother Boak taught Willa how to read. In addition to her formal schooling in Red Cloud Willa visited various folks around town who taught her Latin and Greek, spoke with her in French and German, and interested her in the performing arts. When she graduated from high school in 1890 she gave a commencement speech entitled, "Superstition versus Investigation," which shocked some of her critics regarding her interest in biology, dissection, and medicine. Her speech seemed to presage a deviation from her conservative Baptist background.

In 1888, while still in high school, Willa filled out a questionnaire for a friend. It was entitled "The opinions, tastes, and fancies of..." and could be considered a forerunner of our modern sentence completion test. In it Willa wrote that she desired "lamb-like meekness" in a marital partner, considered real misery "doing fancy work" or needle-work, thought of "vivisection" as an amusement, liked "slicing toads" during summer vacation, and felt that "dresses and skirts" were the greatest folly of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (pp. 112-113, Bennett) In my opinion this reveals much about Cather's developing personality and rejection of the typical female role of the period.

Willa did not want to be like her mother or other conventional women of the time. During her early adolescence she began to dress like a young man. She went to the barber shop and had her hair cut short. She wore a derby cap and carried a cane. While in high school she participated in a number of plays and often played a male part. She became interested in medicine and began to sign her name William Cather, M.D. Willa often accompanied two local physicians on their house calls and once helped administer anesthesia during a leg amputation. This masculine behavior continued at university and well into her early career in Pittsburg. She told a professor at the University of Nebraska that she always wanted to be a boy. While working at the *Pittsburg Leader* she wore mannish-looking shirtwaists and preferred to be called Bill. As a high school teacher in Pittsburg, her dress was mannish, she wore ties, had a low voice, and carried herself with a mannish stride. Even when she lived in New York during her later career Marion King, librarian at the New York Society Library, described her voice as rather husky and boyish.

Over her lifetime Cather changed her name several times. Her parents had named her Wilella after her paternal aunt who died of diphtheria during childhood. In childhood Willa answered to the nicknames Willa or Willie. She also called herself Willa Love Cather, after Dr. Love who attended her birth. In College she Latinized her name to Willa Lova Cather. Later she changed her name to Willa Seibert Cather, after William Seibert Boak, an uncle who died at Manassas during the Civil War.

From 1890 to 1895 she attended the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Her first year at university she took college preparatory courses. Intending to become a physician, she began courses in the sciences, but after her article on Thomas Carlyle was published in the *Nebraska State Journal*, she changed her major to English literature and composition. While in college Cather was a very busy young woman as she was the managing editor of the *Hesperian*, a University of Nebraska literary magazine, and was editor of the *Sombrero*, the university's yearbook. In addition she attended the theater in Lincoln regularly and, in order to pay her way through college, wrote scores of reviews for the *Nebraska State Journal*, the local newspaper. Her course work and job were exhausting and it was late on one evening that she met author

Stephen Crane who “was fascinated at the sight of a young girl...standing fast asleep” at her writing desk (p. 98, Woodress).

Willa’s theatrical review column in the *Nebraska State Journal* was called “The Passing Show.” The *Journal’s* managing editor, Will Owen Jones remarked, “The awful Miss Cather threw a scare into actors from coast to coast. Players in Lincoln slept badly never knowing what new assault to expect from that meatax (sic) young girl.” (p 33, Gerber)

While in college Cather developed an infatuation with Louise Pound who later became a world-class golfer and tennis player as well as an English professor at the University of Nebraska. This relationship ended abruptly, however, when Willa wrote a scathing attack on Louise’s older brother Roscoe, who was then a young professor at the University of Nebraska. Why this occurred has never been satisfactorily explained. Both Miss Pound and Miss Cather eventually became “New Women,” the forerunners of mid-twentieth century feminists.

After graduation from the University of Nebraska, Willa returned Red Cloud for a year where she continued to write for the *Nebraska State Journal*. She also began writing for the *Lincoln Courier*. She continued her theater reviews which were often lively and sometimes “meat-axe” scathing, if Cather was not impressed with the performance.

In 1896, one year after finishing college, Cather moved to Pittsburg where she first worked as an editor for a new magazine, the *Home Monthly*. At first she lived the family of James Axtell, one of the publishers. In a letter to her friend, Mariel Gere, she described the family home:

“...When we entered the parlor my heart sank. It is one of the hair cloth furniture kind and its only ornament was a huge crayon portrait of Grandpa!! Now for the sad news, the Puritan maid [daughter Clara] is not at home. She is over in Wainsburg [Waynesburg, Pennsylvania] visiting “aunt somebody” and being coached in Greek preparatory to going to Vassar this fall - not Wellesley - so they say, but I secretly believe they sent her away to save her from my contaminating influence. I am rather glad she is not here...The room I have must be hers, I think, as it contains three Bibles. Of course she took three with her, so that makes six. Alas! It also contains many a worn copy of the trashy religious novels of E.P. Poe...” (p. 114, Woodress)

Obviously, this living arrangement did not last long. Cather remained with the *Home Monthly* for one year until her contract expired and then was offered a job at the *Pittsburg Daily Leader* where she worked for four years editing and rewriting headlines and telegraph news. She also continued writing for the *Nebraska State Journal* and the *Lincoln Courier* as well as publishing short stories in *McClure’s Magazine*, the *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Cosmopolitan*. From 1901-1902 she taught Latin, English, and algebra at Central High School and from 1903-1906 she taught English at Allegheny High School, both in Pittsburg.

While in Pittsburg, Cather met the second love of her life, Isabelle McClung, the daughter of a conservative Pittsburg judge. They met in 1901, and soon after, Cather moved into the McClung family mansion. Cather had her own room plus a third floor sewing room which

served as a study where she did her writing. Cather returned to the McClung home to write in this study even after she moved to New York. Willa and Isabelle took a number of trips together, but in 1916 Isabelle married Russian concert violinist Jan Hambourg. In 1922 the Hambourgs moved to Europe. Cather was devastated, but the relationship continued from afar and Willa even nursed Isabelle during her final illness in 1938.

Cather did have a number of dates with men, both while in college and in Pittsburg. One of Cather's contemporaries indicated that in college "the boys who dated her were scared off after one date." (p.70, Woodress) She dated two men in Pittsburg, one a doctor and the other a teacher, but neither relationship resulted in marriage. Interestingly, a happy marriage in Cather's fiction is rare.

In mid-1906 Cather received an offer she could not refuse; she moved to New York City to eventually become managing editor of *McClure's Magazine*, where she remained until 1911 when she finally struck out on her own as a successful published author. *McClure's Magazine* was an extremely popular publication which had published the fiction works of Hardy, Kipling, Crane, O'Henry, London, Twain, Hart, Stephenson, Conan-Doyle, Conrad, and others. *McClure's* was also known for its muckraking and had published articles on Standard Oil and Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science fame.

Willa continued to live in New York for the remainder of her life. She lived in a variety of places including Greenwich Village, the Grosvenor Hotel, and finally on Park Avenue. From 1909 until her death in 1947 she lived with her partner Edith Labaree Lewis (1881-1972). They had previously met in 1903 at a mutual friend's home in Lincoln, Nebraska. A graduate of Smith College, Lewis had authored a number of poems and short stories, taught school, and had worked on the editorial staff at *McClure's Magazine*. For the remainder of her writing career, Cather and Lewis spent many happy hours together copy editing Cather's writing. They took extensive trips together to Europe, Canada, and the American southwest. They owned a cottage on Grand Manon Island in New Brunswick, Canada where they spent summers, allowing Willa to do her writing in seclusion away from the hustle and bustle of New York City. Lewis, however, never did visit Red Cloud on Willa's nearly yearly trips to visit her parents. Cather and Lewis kept separate bedrooms, both at home and when they traveled. When Willa died in 1947 Lewis became the executor of her estate. Lewis was willed one third of the estate and the remainder went to Cather's nieces and nephews. Cather's will also directed that much of her correspondence be destroyed and that remaining letters could not be directly quoted. Sadly only two postcards from Isabelle McClung and one letter to Edith Lewis are known to exist.

This one remaining letter written from the Shattuck Inn, Jaffrey, New Hampshire speaks to the depths of their relationship:

"My darling Edith;

I am sitting in your room, looking out on the woods you know so well...I wake up now and then, saturated with the pleasure of breathing clear mountain air...of being up high with all the woods below me sleeping, too, in still white moonlight. It's a grand feeling.

One hour from now, out of your window, I shall see a sight unparalleled - Jupiter and Venus both shining in the golden-rosy-sky and both in the West; she not very far above the horizon, and he about midway between the zenith and the silvery lady planet. From 5:30 to 6:30 they are of a superb splendor - deepening in color every second, in a still-daylight-sky guiltless of other stars, the moon not up and the sun gone down behind Gap Mountain; those two alone in the whole vault of heaven. It lasts so about an hour... Then the lady, so silvery still, slips down into the clear rose colored glow to be near the departed sun, and imperial Jupiter hangs there alone. He goes down about 8:30. Surely it reminds one of Dante's "eternal wheels." I can't but believe that all the majesty in all that beauty, those fated and unfailing appearances and exits, are something more than mathematics and horrible temperatures. If they are not, then we are the only wonderful things - because we can wonder...

And now I must dress to receive the Planets, dear... I won't wish to take the time after they appear - and they will not wait for anybody

Lovingly  
W." (pp. 519-521, Jewell and Stout)

In her novels, how did Cather write in such a beautiful evocative manner? She gave a few hints when she discussed her writing:

"When I sit down to write, turns of phrase I've forgotten for years come back like black ink before a fire." (pp. 39-40, Woodress)

Cather also penned:

"The ideas for all my novels come from things that happened around Red Cloud when I was a child. I was all over the country then... poking into nearly everything. It happened that my mind was constructed for the particular purpose of absorbing impressions... I always intended to write and there were certain persons I studied. I seldom had much idea of the plot or the other characters, but I used my eyes and ears." (p. 77, Bennett)

Cather was raised Baptist, but like many young adults became disenchanted with the church and never attended regularly. However, in 1922 at age 49, both she and her parents were confirmed by Rev. George Allen Beecher in the Grace Episcopal Church in Red Cloud. Subsequently Willa gave a number of large gifts to the church including several stained glass windows, new electric lighting, and a new gas furnace. Many of her novels contain strong religious themes and she maintained a warm correspondence with Rev. Beecher for the rest of her life.

Over the course of her career Cather received many honors including honorary degrees from the University of Michigan, Columbia, Yale, and Princeton. For her novel, *One of Ours*, she received the Pulitzer Prize in 1922.

Although her public persona was described as “reclusive” by some biographers, in her later years she was primarily seeking seclusion so that she could do her writing. She was very discriminating about accepting interviews and teaching workshops. She carefully controlled her public persona by writing her own brief biographies, designing her book dust jackets, and doing publicity. She was psychologically-minded and was very curious about the traits and behavior of others.

Cather was heavily criticized by some reviewers for writing in too romantic a fashion and ignoring current events. But did she? In *My Ántonia* she wrote of immigration, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, rape, suicide, poverty, and fraud. In *O Pioneers!* She wrote about death and dying, bankruptcy, soil conservation, vegetarianism, mental illness, and the responsible use of guns. Perhaps she was too far ahead of her time.

During her career she met or corresponded with a number of other authors including D.H. Lawrence, Thornton Wilder, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. She attended Robert Frost’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday dinner. She even had an encounter with a young Truman Capote at a New York library. In this chance meeting, Willa did not immediately reveal her identity and asked Capote who his favorite author was. It was Cather herself and it was only upon parting that she revealed who she was.

Cather’s later years were filled with numerous losses: the deaths of her father (1928), mother (1931), Isabelle Hambourg, brother Douglas (1938), and brother Roscoe (1945). In 1942 she had a cholecystectomy and from 1934 onward she had an intermittent tendonitis of her wrist which caused her great pain in writing. In a letter to her to her sister-in-law Meta in April 1946 Willa described having a depression and “nervous collapse” after her brother Roscoe’s death in September 1945. Her symptoms included sadness, fatigue, crying spells, and social isolation. (p. 660, Jewell and Stout)

Willa Cather died of a stroke in her New York apartment on April 24, 1947. A private funeral was held there and her partner Edith arranged for her burial in the Old Burying Ground next to the Jaffrey Meeting House, in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Her tombstone gives an erroneous birth year of 1876 because many years before, Willa had shaved three years off her age. Edith Lewis remained single the rest of her life and, when she died in 1972, she was buried beside Willa.

In summary, Willa Cather became one of America’s greatest late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s female novelists. Equipped with a brilliant mind and a sharp quill, she became a well-known commentator on both the theater and contemporary culture. Her evocative prose is unequalled in twentieth century fiction. Moreover, she was a fascinating persona who stimulated generations of academicians to research both her writing and psyche. Here’s to you, Dr. Will!

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\*Highly recommended