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Article Summary: Cather's essay on the role of the small town opera house in the cultural life of the children of the community appeared in the 1929 diamond jubilee edition of the *Omaha World-Herald*.

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Photographs / Images: Willa Cather, the main street of Red Cloud as it appeared during Cather's childhood (the Opera House was located in the center building with the single cupola)



Willa Cather



THE INCOMPARABLE OPERA HOUSE

By WILLA CATHER

Edited by MILDRED R. BENNETT

WILLA Cather was not given to writing lengthy letters and often ignored requests which constituted her giving a sample of her talent. Thus, the following discussion of early Nebraska opera houses which appeared over her name in the October 27, 1929, edition of the *Omaha World-Herald* is somewhat unusual. However, since the letter appeared among the numerous special features of the newspaper's diamond jubilee edition, it was perhaps a favorable reply to one such request for writing, this one probably from Harvey Newbranch, editor-in-chief of the *World-Herald* and an old school friend of Miss Cather's.

Mrs. Bennett, President of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation of Red Cloud, Nebraska, is an authority on the life and writings of Willa Cather.

The Red Cloud Opera House, built on the second floor of a hardware store on the main street of Red Cloud, opened October 26, 1885, with the first week's performance given by the Georgia Hamlin Dramatic Company. They remained a week and changed the program every night. The house seated about five hundred and was lighted with reflector kerosene lamps. Willa Cather was then eleven years old.

During the years, improvements in lighting, decorating, and scenery were made. By 1917 the house was abandoned in favor of a newer theater. The Opera House with some of its scenery still stands and is used as a storeroom. A hardware store still operates on the first floor.

DEAR MR. NEWBRANCH:¹

It's a newspaper's business, is it not, to insist that everything is much better than it used to be? All the same, we never gain anything without losing something—not even in Nebraska. When I go about among little Nebraska towns (and the little towns, not the big cities, are the people), the thing I miss most is the opera house. No number of filling stations or moving picture theaters can console me for the loss of the opera house. To be sure, the opera house was dark for most of the year, but that made its events only the more exciting. Half a dozen times during each winter—in the larger towns much oftener—a traveling stock company settled down at the local hotel and thrilled and entertained us for a week.

That was a wonderful week for the children. The excitement began when the advance man came to town and posted the bills on the side of a barn, on the lumber yard fence, in the "plate glass" windows of drug stores and grocery stores. My playmates and I used to stand for an hour after school, studying every word on those posters; the names of the plays and the nights on which each would be given. After we had decided which were the most necessary to us, then there was always the question of how far we could prevail upon our parents. Would they let us go every other night, or only on the opening and closing nights? None of us ever got to go every night, unless we had a father who owned stock in the opera house itself.

If the company arrived on the night train, when we were not at school, my chums and I always walked a good half mile to the depot (I

1. Harvey Ellsworth Newbranch, editor then editor-in-chief of the *Omaha World-Herald* from 1910 to 1949.

believe you call it "station" now) to see that train come in. Sometimes we pulled younger brothers or sisters along on a sled. We found it delightful to watch a theatrical company alight, pace the platform while their baggage was being sorted, and then drive off—the men in the hotel bus, the women the "hack." If by any chance one of the show ladies carried a little dog with a blanket on, that simply doubled our pleasure. Our next concern was to invent some plausible pretext, some errand that would take us to the hotel. Several of my dearest playmates had perpetual entry to the hotel because they were favorites of the very unusual and interesting woman who owned it. But I, alas, had no such useful connection; so I never saw the leading lady breakfasting languidly at 9. Indeed, I never dared go near the hotel while the theatrical people were there—I suppose because I wanted to go so much.

How good some of those old traveling companies were, and how honestly they did their work and tried to put on a creditable performance. There was the Andrews Opera company,² for example; they usually had a good voice or two among them, a small orchestra and a painstaking conductor, who was also the pianist. What good luck for a country child to hear those tuneful old operas sung by people who were doing their best: "The Bohemian Girl," "The Chimes of Normandy," "Martha," "The Mikado." Nothing takes hold of a child like living people. We got the old plays in the same [way], done by living people, and often by people who were quite in earnest. "My Partner," "The Corsican Brothers," "Ingomar," "Damon and Pythias," "The Count of Monte Cristo."

I know that today I would rather hear James O'Neill, or even Frank Lindon, play "The Count of Monte Cristo"³ than see any moving picture, except three or four in which Charlie Chaplin is the whole thing. My preference would have been the same, though even stronger, when I was a child. Moving pictures may be very entertaining and amusing, and they may be, as they often claim to be, instructive; but what child ever cried at the movies, as we used to at "East Lynne" or "The Two Orphans?"

2. The Andrews Opera Company appeared in *Red Cloud* in December of 1888 and January, 1889, then again in July of 1893. The company gave such shows as *The Bohemian Girl*, *Chimes of Normandy*, and *Martha*. Cather uses this background in *Lucy Gayheart* when Lucy hears *The Bohemian Girl* and in the music finds a new reason for living.

3. An account of the *The Count of Monte Cristo* with Frank Lindon appears in the *Red Cloud Chief* for December 7, 1888.

That is the heart of the matter; only living people can make us feel. Pictures of them, no matter how dazzling, do not make us feel anything more than interest or curiosity or astonishment. The "pity and terror" which the drama, even in its crudest form, can awaken in young people, is not to be found in the movies. Only a living human being, in some sort of rapport with us, speaking the lines, can make us forget who we are and where we are, can make us (especially children) actually live in the story that is going on before us, can make the dangers of that heroine and the desperation of that hero much more important to us, for the time much dearer to us, than our own lives.

That, after all, was the old glory of the drama in its great days; that is why its power was more searching than that of printed books or paintings because a story of human experience was given to us alive, given to us, not only by voice and attitude, but by all those unnamed ways in which an animal of any species makes known its terror or misery to other animals of its kind. And all the old-fashioned actors, even the poor ones, did "enter into the spirit" of their parts; it was the pleasure they got from this illusion that made them wish to be actors, despite the hardships of that profession. The extent to which they could enter into this illusion, much more than any physical attributes, measured their goodness or badness as actors. We hear the drama termed a thing in three dimensions; but it is really a thing in four dimensions, since it has two imaginative fires behind it, the playwright's and the actor's.

I am not lamenting the advent of the "screen drama" (there is a great deal to be said in its favor), but I do regret that it has put an end to the old-fashioned road companies which used to tour about in country towns and "cities of the second class." The "movie" and the play are two very different things; one is a play, and the other is a picture of a play. A movie, well done, may be very good indeed, may even appeal to what is called the artistic sense; but to the emotions, the deep feelings, never!

Never, that is, excepting Charlie Chaplin at his best—and his best—I have noticed, really gets through to very few people. Not to his enormous audience, but to actors and to people of great experience in the real drama. They admire and marvel.

I go to the picture shows in the little towns I know, and I watch the audience, especially the children. I see easy, careless attention, amusement, occasionally a curiosity that amounts to mild excitement; but never that breathless, rapt attention and deep feeling that the old barnstorming companies were able to command. It was not only the "sob stuff" that we took hard; it was everything. When old Frank



The main street of Red Cloud as it appeared during Willa Cather's childhood. The Opera House was located in the center building with the single cupola – COURTESY WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL AND EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION.

Lindon in a frilled shirt and a velvet coat blazing with diamonds, stood in the drawing room of Mme. Danglars' and revealed his identity to Mme. De Morcery, his faithless Mercedes, when she cowered and made excuses, and he took out a jeweled snuff box with a much powdered hand, raised his eyebrows, permitted his lip to curl, and said softly and bitterly, "a fidelity of six months!" then we children were not in the opera house in Red Cloud we were in Mme. Danglars' salon in Paris, in the middle of lives so very different from our own. Living people were making us feel things, and it is through the feelings, not at all through the eye, that one's imagination is fired.

Pictures of plots, unattended by the voice from the machine (which seems to me much worse than no voice), a rapid flow of scene and pageant, make a fine kind of "entertainment" and are an ideal diversion

for the tired business man. But I am sorry that the old opera houses in the prairie towns are dark, because they really did give a deeper thrill, at least to children. It did us good to weep at "East Lynne," even if the actress was fairly bad and the play absurd. Children have about a hundred years of unlived life wound up in them, and they want to be living some of it. Only real people speaking the lines can give us that feeling of living along with them, of participating in their existence. The poorest of the old road companies were at least made up of people who wanted to be actors and tried to be—that alone goes a long way. The very poorest of all were the "Uncle Tom's Cabin" companies,⁴ but even they had living bloodhounds. How the barking of these dogs behind the scenes used to make us catch our breath! That alone was worth the price of admission, as the star used to say when he came before the curtain.

Very cordially yours,
WILLA CATHER.

4. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was produced at the Opera House November 5 and 6 by McFadden's of Boston Troupe. The account is given in the *Red Cloud Argus* for November 11, 1886.