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Article Title: Willa Cather and the Prairie

Full Citation: Mildred R Bennett, "Willa Cather and the Prairie," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 231-236.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1975WCather.pdf>

Date: 7/13/2011

Summary: In August, 1974, The Nature Conservancy purchased 610 acres of native grassland in Webster County, Nebraska. The prairie has been set aside as a memorial to Willa Cather, one of the nation's most distinguished writers of life on the American grasslands. Miss Cather was a journalist, a teacher, a published poet, and managing editor of McClure's, the New York muckraking publication, before retiring at the age of 39 to write novels. She won a Pulitzer Prize in 1923 with her book *One of Ours*. Her last novel was published in 1940, seven years before her death. In this article, Mrs Mildred Bennett, President of the Pioneer Memorial Educational Foundation, describes the Nebraska prairie's influence on the life and writings of Willa Cather.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Willa Cather, Silas Garber, Paul L Riley, C Bertrand Schultz

Place Names: Webster County, Nebraska; Red Cloud, Nebraska; Lincoln, Nebraska; Republican River Valley;

Keywords: The Nature Conservancy; National Historic Landmark; Episcopal Church [Red Cloud]; *The Nature Conservancy News*; *Omaha Daily Bee*; *O Pioneers!*; *One of Ours*; The Woods Charitable Fund, Inc.; Farmers and Merchants Bank Building [Red Cloud]; Willa Cather Memorial Prairie; Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation; *The Lost Lady*

Photographs / Images: Willa Cather Memorial Prairie in Webster County, Lucia Woods, copyright, 1975; Paul L Riley, unveiling Cather Memorial Prairie Marker in Webster County, May 3, 1975. C Bertrand Schultz; Willa Cather bust in the Nebraska Hall of Fame, State Capitol, Lincoln, Nebraska



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Willa Cather Memorial Prairie in Webster County. (Courtesy of Lucia Woods, photographer, copyright, 1975)

WILLA CATHER AND THE PRAIRIE

By MILDRED R. BENNETT

In August, 1974, The Nature Conservancy purchased 610 acres of native grassland in Webster County, Nebraska. The prairie has been set aside as a memorial to Willa Cather, one of the nation's most distinguished writers and a chronicler of life on the American grasslands. Miss Cather was a journalist, a teacher, a published poet, and managing editor of *McClure's*, the New York muckraking publication, before retiring at age 39 to write novels. She won a Pulitzer Prize in 1923 with her book, *One of Ours*, and gained wide acclaim the same year with *A Lost Lady*, a book which mourned the passing of the pioneer spirit in America. Her last novel was published in 1940, seven years before her death. In the following article, Mrs. Mildred Bennett, President of the Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, describes the Nebraska prairie's influence on the life and writings of Willa Cather.

Willa Cather first came to Webster County in 1883 at the age of nine from the civilized, lush hills of Virginia. The contrast between that land and Nebraska made a lasting impression on her. In her own words, she said, "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."¹

Although Willa Cather left Nebraska to pursue a journalism career in the east, her early impression of the midwestern prairies colored all her work. As she said, "I knew every farm, every tree, every field in the region around my home and they all called out to me. My deepest feelings were rooted in this country because one's strongest emotions and one's most vivid mental pictures are acquired before one is fifteen."² She added, "I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the

country I love, its romance, the heroism and the strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil and I did not find them. And so I wrote *O Pioneers!*”.

O Pioneers! is the story of Alexandra Bergson and her labor to subdue the wild land. When Alexandra is hard pressed for money and wonders if she should sell out like the neighbors and buy land close to the river, she goes with her brother, Emil, to the flatlands by the river and looks at the farms. She decides that the future lies with the upland prairie, and on her return to her own farm on the Divide she decides to buy more land. Cather expresses her own feeling for the prairie in these words: “For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. . . . The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.”³

But not all the characters in Willa Cather’s novels loved the prairie landscape. Cather said of the prairie when Jim Burden (*My Antonia*) first saw it, “There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.” And Cather had no illusions about the hard life on the prairie; she saw that it could crush as well as nourish. In *My Antonia*, Antonia’s father cannot stand the life in the raw dugout and the loneliness and monotony of the prairie, and one January day he wanders out with his gun, presumably rabbit hunting, goes down to the barn and shoots himself. The episode is based on the suicide of a Webster County settler, a story often retold by the pioneers as they gathered around the stoves on cold winter nights.

Willa Cather witnessed the effects of civilization upon the Nebraska prairie, and in *O Pioneers!*, she describes the country after the wild land was tamed: “From the Norwegian graveyard one looks out over a vast checkerboard, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light. Telephone wires hum along the white roads, which always run at right angles. From the graveyard gate, one can count a dozen gayly painted farmhouses. . . . The light steel windmills tremble throughout their frames and tug at their moorings as they



Paul L. Riley, Research Associate of the Nebraska State Historical Society (right), addresses Cather Memorial Prairie Marker unveiling ceremony in Webster County on May 3, 1975. At left is C. Bertrand Schultz, former head of the Nebraska State Museum.



Willa Cather bust in the Nebraska Hall of Fame, State Capitol, Lincoln.

vibrate in the wind that often flows from one week's end to another across that high, active, resolute stretch of country. The Divide is now thickly populated."

At first Cather loved the big white painted farmhouses and admired the modern ways of the telephone and the well-tilled fields, but by the time she came to write *One of Ours*, she was lamenting the old times and the old prairie as she remembered it. When she came home from the east on visits, her chief joy was to hire a horse and rig and, with a couple of her old friends, drive out to see the country. She would find a still untilled place, leave her friends in the buggy, and climb to the top of the ridge and let the wind play in her hair and think long thoughts of the old land, of the prairie as it used to be when it was not yet a country, but the stuff of which countries are made.

Cather's longing for the prairie land and her desire to see her old friends brought her frequently back west to Nebraska. Of that she said, "There I was on the Atlantic coast among dear and helpful friends and surrounded by the great masters and teachers with all their tradition of learning and culture and yet I was always being pulled back into Nebraska. Whenever I crossed the Missouri River coming into Nebraska the very smell of the soil tore me to pieces. I could not decide which was the real and which the fake 'me.' I almost decided to settle down on a quarter section of land and let my writing go. My deepest affection was not for the other people and the other places I had been writing about. I loved the country where I had been a kid, where they still called me 'Willie' Cather."

Willa Cather would have loved the high hills and the sweep of wind from Kansas that comes up over the site selected for the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie. Stretching north toward the Republican River Valley and Cather's home town of Red Cloud is a carpet of grasses – mostly little bluestem and prairie sand reed, but also big bluestem, Indian grass, tall dropseed, and others typical of tallgrass prairies. Interspersed among the grasses is an excellent assortment of native forbs and prairie flowers. Though years of overgrazing have gradually reduced the vigor of the native grasses and allowed some non-native species to invade, the 610-acre tract contains the finest remaining tallgrass prairie in Webster County. The Conservancy's Midwestern Regional Office is developing a plan for proper rest and manage-

ment of the area which should restore the prairie's natural composition and productivity.

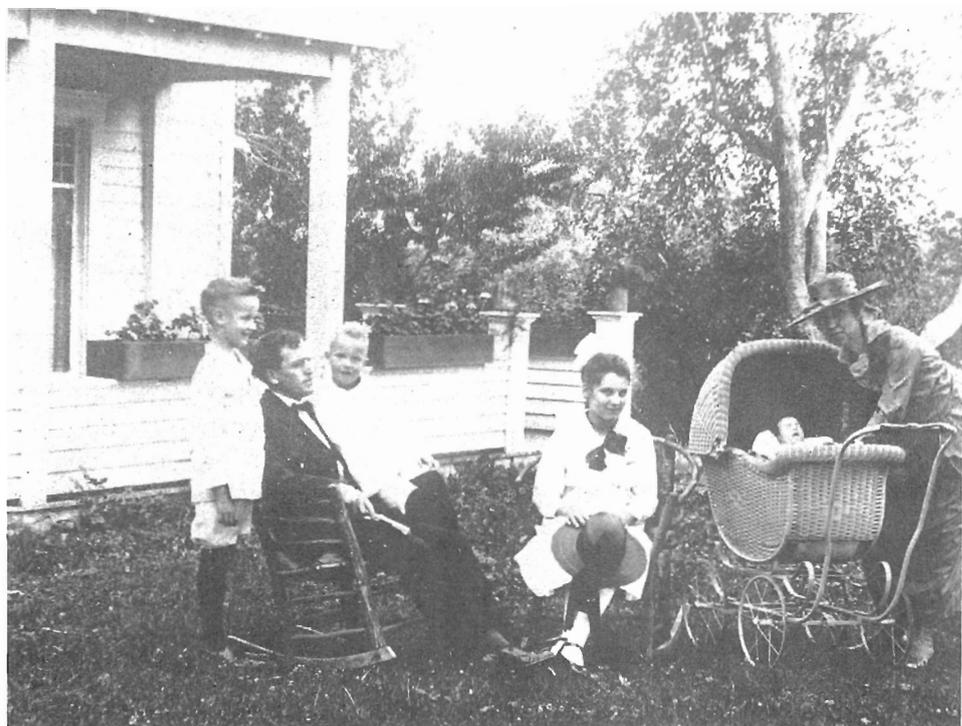
Funds for the purchase of the prairie by The Nature Conservancy were provided by the Woods Charitable Fund, Inc. The grant also created a permanent endowment fund for continuing management and maintenance of the area. The Woods Charitable Fund has long been an active supporter of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation in Red Cloud, which for twenty years has been endeavoring to preserve the landmarks and the places of which Miss Cather wrote. With the help of the Fund, the Memorial now has restored the original Cather home, which is a National Historic Landmark, the Episcopal church which Willa Cather joined in 1922, and other buildings prominent in Cather's life and novels. The headquarters of the Memorial are lodged in the old Farmers and Merchants Bank Building built in 1889 by Silas Garber, the Captain Forrester of *A Lost Lady*, the book which tells of the passing of the frontier and the men who made it great.

The Nature Conservancy has paid a most appropriate tribute to Willa Cather by preserving some of that original prairie that she first saw in 1883, and that she regarded with love and longing all her life.

(Reprinted from THE NATURE CONSERVANCY NEWS, Winter 1975.)

NOTES

1. *Omaha Daily Bee*, October 29, 1921.
2. Eva Mahoney, Magazine Section, *Sunday Omaha World-Herald*, November 6, 1921.
3. *O Pioneers!* (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913), 65.



Aldrich family group, Elmwood, Nebraska, about 1910. From left, James, father Charles (Cap) Aldrich, Charles, Mary, Robert, mother Bess Streeter Aldrich. . . Bust of Mrs. Aldrich, Nebraska Hall of Fame, State Capitol, Lincoln

