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Article Summary: Grace Church plays a role in the Willa Cather novel *A Lost Lady*. The heroine, Marion Forrester, is based upon Red Cloud’s Lyra Garber, wife of early Nebraska governor Silas Garber. The Garbers were founding members of Grace Church.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Willa Cather, Lyra Garber (Lyra Wheeler Garber Anderson), Silas Garber, the Rev John Mallory Bates, the Rev Timothy O’Connell, the Rev Stewart Crockett, the Rt Rev Robert Harper Clarkson, the Venerable R W Oliver, the Rev C L Fulforth, the Rev Dr George Worthington, the Rt Rev Anson Rogers Graves, Sister Hannah, the Rt Rev George Allen Beecher

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Grace Church, Red Cloud— A “True Story” of the Midwest

By L. Brent Bohlke

Of the many buildings of Red Cloud that make up the Nebraska State Historical Society's Willa Cather Historical Center, the “gem” of the collection is Grace Church, Episcopal, the tiny church so closely associated with Willa Cather. Cather once said that she wrote *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in response to the realization that the “true story” of the Southwest was told in the lives of the missionaries who civilized and ennobled the region.¹ The same case might be made for the Midwest.

Each Cather Day, in the spring, begins with a service at Grace Church, and Cather Day, 1982, was a particularly appropriate time to hold such an observance. Grace Church observed its centennial year in 1982, and celebrated the occasion. The Cather novel studied at Cather Day was *A Lost Lady* (1923). The prototype for Marion Forrester, the heroine of the novel, was Mrs. Silas (Lyra) Garber, a founding member of Grace Church and a long-time active communicant. Willa Cather loved Grace Church dearly. She and her parents were confirmed there in December of 1922; both of her parents were buried from that church; the Good Shepherd Window and the Nativity Window were both given by the Cather children in memory of their parents; Cather's regular and substantial contributions to the church made possible the window above the altar, a memorial to her old and dear friend, the Rev. John Mallory Bates, longtime missionary priest in the Diocese of Nebraska and the Missionary District of Western Nebraska, who was rector of Grace Church from 1903 until his retirement.² Her contributions also made possible the installation of new electric lighting in the church in 1942.³ The Christmas before her death, 1946, Miss Cather made a gift to the church that enabled the congregation to

install a new gas furnace.⁴ So Willa Cather, her family, Silas and Lyra Garber, and the novel, *A Lost Lady*, are tied very closely to the history of the Grace Church.

Cather had begun writing *A Lost Lady* in the spring of 1922. She was visiting friends in Toronto and had the Red Cloud newspaper forwarded to her there. In one issue she suddenly noticed an account of the death of Lyra Anderson, whom she had known as Mrs. Silas Garber, one time First Lady of Nebraska and for some time "first lady" of Red Cloud as well.⁵ Cather said that she was shocked by the news and retired to her room for awhile. During her rest, the story for the novel came to her all of one piece—as if she had read it somewhere. She suddenly remembered details about the Garbers and their home that she had not thought of in years.⁶

Silas Garber was the founder of Red Cloud, his stockade and dugout being the site of many firsts in Webster County: "In this primitive dwelling the first public meetings were held, the first election took place, the first liquor was sold, and the first organization of the county and the first school was held."⁷ The town was founded in 1870, and four years later, Silas Garber was elected governor of Nebraska; he was re-elected in 1876. "He lived in a 'dugout' during the winter of 1870 and 1871 and in the executive mansion in 1874."⁸ During his term as governor, he visited his brother Jacob in California, met Lyra Wheeler, his brother's wife's sister, married her, and returned to Lincoln with a new—and young—first lady. "When the governor and Mrs. Garber lived in Lincoln, she was considered one of the most beautiful and charming hostesses of the governor's mansion."⁹ Following his term as governor, Garber was thrown from a carriage in Lincoln, and his health was never completely regained after that. He and Mrs. Garber returned to live in a new house in Red Cloud, where he founded the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank. Governor Garber died in 1905, and Mrs. Garber stayed on in Red Cloud, becoming a part owner in an automobile dealership and publisher of the *Webster County Argus*. She moved to Idaho in 1914.¹⁰ The Garbers and the Cathers had become friends shortly after the Charles Cather family moved to Red Cloud, and Willa Cather frequently spoke of many childhood memories associated with the Garbers and their lovely home.¹¹

A *Lost Lady* is based closely in many respects on the personalities and lives of Governor and Mrs. Garber, but, in typical Cather fashion, other parts of the story are completely fictional and have no resemblance to the reality of these people at all. One connection to reality has to do with the religious persuasion of Marion Forrester, the fictional character based on Lyra Garber. The narrator of the novel, Niel Herbert, remembers

the very first time he ever saw Mrs. Forrester, when he was a little boy. He had been loitering in front of the Episcopal church one Sunday morning, when a low carriage drove up to the door. Ben Keezer was on the front seat, and on the back seat was a lady, alone, in a black silk dress all puffs and ruffles, and a black hat, carrying a parasol with a carved ivory handle. As the carriage stopped she lifted her dress to alight; out of a swirl of foamy white petticoats she thrust a black, shiny slipper. She stepped lightly to the ground and with a nod to the driver went into the church. The little boy followed her through the open door, saw her enter a pew and kneel. He was proud now that at the first moment he had recognized her as belonging to a different world from any he had ever known.¹²

The work of the Episcopal Church in Red Cloud had begun as early as 1879, and Silas Garber and his wife had long been active members of Grace Church. In fact, they were among the founding members of the congregation. The report of the Rev. Timothy O'Connell, the district presbyter at large for the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska to the Cathedral Chapter in August of 1881, told of his recent visits in the Republican Valley during July:

Saturday, the 16th, I reached Red Cloud, the principal town in the Republican Valley. Gov. Garber kindly met me at the train and drove me to his handsome residence, where I was treated with the greatest kindness and courtesy by himself and his accomplished lady during my stay in Red Cloud.¹³

O'Connell continues his report in *The Church Guardian* of August, 1881, and shows both an Episcopal and a midwestern prejudice:

The brethren secured the Congregational church for service on Sunday evening. The good people at Red Cloud were greatly cheered by the splendid congregation, composed of all denominations, which assembled to hear the service of our Church on Sunday night. William Smith, a zealous member of the Church, has raised about \$400 towards the building of a Church, and will gladly raise as much more as he possibly can when the Bishop is able to fulfill his promise to aid them. I learned also, that this generous gentleman,



A state historical marker has been erected near Grace Protestant Episcopal Church, built in Red Cloud in 1884. Willa Cather was a member of this church from 1922 until her death in 1947.

who is by no means very wealthy, contributed \$12 a month towards the support of his former Rector. Would that other churchmen of means imitated his example, and the hard-working Rectors and laborious Missions of our Diocese would be better supported than they are. It is really a disgrace to our Church, with its culture, wealth and superior privileges, that not a single Church Edifice of ours can be seen between Hastings and Indianola, a distance of about 200 miles. Two Churches, at least, ought to be built immediately in the Republican Valley—one at Red Cloud, and another at some central point in the Valley. Better that our brethren of the east left off for the present a turret or a spire from their proud Church Edifices, and sent us the amount thus saved to build a simple ecclesiastical fold for their friends and relatives who are wandering as sheep without a shepherd on these broad prairies.¹⁴

After making a trip down the entire Republican Valley as far as Indianola, Mr. O'Connell returned to Red Cloud on Friday, July 29, 1881. He writes:

I returned to Red Cloud and spent the evening at the elegant home of Mr. and Mrs. Smith. After partaking of a sumptuous supper Mr. Smith drove me around to call on the members of the Church at Red Cloud. There are about twelve communicants of the Church residing in this town; but there are several parties of influence in the town and its vicinity who are favorable to our Church and who would gladly unite with it if we had a resident minister there. . . .

During my trip this month I preached twenty times, baptized sixteen children and one adult, made 200 visits, administered the Holy Communion three times and took up the following collections for Diocesan Missions: Plum Creek—\$2.90; Palmyra—\$4.35; Red Cloud—\$4.27; Alma—\$3.45; Nebraska City—\$7.44.¹⁵ With those collections he had a long way to go before his grand plans would be realized.

In October, the Rev. Mr. O'Connell made a return trip to the valley, but this time he was accompanied by the first Bishop of Nebraska, the Rt. Rev. Robert Harper Clarkson. They arrived in Red Cloud on October 7, 1881, stayed with the Samuel Smiths, and then proceeded down the valley, stopping for services at Republican City, Orleans, Alma, and Arapahoe. Mr. O'Connell reported in the October issue of *The Church Guardian*:

On Tuesday evening, October 11th, returning to Red Cloud, service was held in the Methodist church, where the Bishop preached. A church will be built here next spring. At all these points in the valley, subscriptions were taken for the support of the clergyman, who is to reside at Red Cloud, holding service there on alternate Sundays, and spending the rest of his time at the towns in the valley farther west. A sufficient amount was realized for

the full support of the missionary. It is expected that a clergyman will be immediately sent to this field. It will be nearly one hundred miles in length, and it is supposed that there are near or quite one hundred communicants of the church who will be reached by his ministrations.¹⁶

The optimism about the church building was a bit hasty, but the following May, 1882, late in the month the first resident clergyman did arrive. A priest named the Rev. A. J. Yeater began his work there, and he, too, made a trip down the length of the Republican Valley. On July 2, 1882, he wrote to *The Church Guardian* to report on that trip and included some startling news:

I have just returned from my first trip up the Republican Valley. I have now held services at Red Cloud, Republican City, Alma, Orleans and Arapahoe. I failed at Bloomington in consequence of a storm. At some places I found the people all awake to the interests of the Church; at others, a great apathy [sic] existed. Promises made and unfulfilled on our part had created a kind of reaction in the minds of many, making it harder to renew their interest than if nothing had been done by my predecessor. A most important missionary field can be developed in the Valley, but it will take some time to put it in good working shape. The old subscriptions, gotten up by Rev. T. O'Connell, are good only just so far as the subscribers feel in humor to pay. That whole work will have to be done over at most places.

This field is too large for any one man to do it anything like justice, or give satisfaction to the people in the way of Sunday services. I find that, in entering upon it, I overrated my strength. My health is not good. To do justice to this work, an active, energetic young man should have it—just such a one as Mr. O'Connell. I most heartily nominate him for it, and he would receive a most cordial welcome on the ground.

I think four Churches could be built in here, this year, if the work could be pushed and some aid given. The best points now are Red Cloud, Alma, Orleans and Arapahoe. Republican City has lost by removals, and Bloomington is just now over supplied with preachers—a Presbyterian and Congregational minister having come in since we were there last. But all these places many solid people lean to the Church, and only want a chance to come into it.

I have written the Bishop declining the field, simply because I feel physically unable to fill it, not because it is not a most promising work.¹⁷

So, within two months of having their first resident priest, the people at Red Cloud were back under the supervision of the district presbyter.

Very soon, however, a young, energetic, newly-ordained priest was found. In the spring of 1883, the church was assigned to the Rev. Stewart Crockett, a recent graduate of Nashotah House. He entered upon the work in this new field

with great zeal, and by the late summer of 1883, he said he hoped to build a "couple of churches in the first year."¹⁸ In September he reported as follows:

I have just returned from another missionary tour through the valley, as far west as McCook. I am glad to say that the good people are beginning to take a very deep interest in the welfare of our beloved Zion, and are realizing the sublime dignity of her venerable liturgy and historic character.

It is impossible for us to have the service of the sanctuary as orderly as we would desire, on account of having no church building of our own, but we hope this will not be long so as preparations are being made to lay the cornerstone of a church in Red Cloud about the 2nd of October. We expect to build a church which will cost about \$1,500, and when completed the whole property will be worth at least \$2,000. We hope to have all this accomplished on Christmas-day. . . .

I feel greatly encouraged in my work in the valley, but some of the people are disheartened on account of some of the best members leaving in order to settle in different parts of the country where they think they can do better in their business pursuits, and we have every reason to believe they will never forget the church, the bride of Christ.¹⁹

The cornerstone was laid in October of 1883, and the service was attended by over 300 people. The event was reported in great detail by the *Webster County Argus*:

For some months past the Episcopalians of Red Cloud have worshipped in the Congregational Church, at stated intervals. Last July the Rev. Stuart [sic] Crockett came here from Wisconsin and took charge of the Mission and has since been preaching for them. Being a gentleman of unusual energy, he could not sit idle and see his people without a house of worship. He, therefore, determined that with the funds on hand, and by subscriptions he could build a church. The paper was started around and the requisite amount was secured, and on last Tuesday saw the beginning of the result of his previous labors. The ceremony of laying the cornerstone took place under the direction of the Masonic fraternity of Red Cloud and the rector of the church.²⁰

The ceremony was preceded by a large procession which formed downtown and went to the site of the new church. From the newspaper account, the service would appear to have been quite lengthy and elaborate. It concluded with a rather pompous declaration by Mr. Crockett, and the stone was finally laid. The *Argus* goes on to describe the articles which were deposited in it:

Copy of the proceedings of grand lodge in Nebraska; copy of by-laws of Charity Lodge No. 53, with a list of all members from its institution until the

present time; list of present grand officers of Nebraska, with names of officers performing ceremony.

Bible, prayer book and hymnal, constitution and canons of the Church in the United States, constitution and canons of the Diocese of Nebraska, proceedings of the last Diocesan council of Nebraska, *Spirit of Missions*, *Church Guardian*, Omaha, Catalogue of Brownell Hall, Omaha, and Nebraska College, Nebraska City, photograph of Bishop Clarkson, Webster County *Argus*, one cent and one dime, a list of the Bishops of the Church in the United States, from St. Paul traced through the sees of Arles in France, and Canterbury in England to the present presiding Bishop in the Church in the United States.²¹

It was obviously a rather large cornerstone!

The church was completed by Christmas, and at the beginning of 1884, the year the Cather family moved into Red Cloud, things looked very promising—but not for long. In early February, the Rev. Stewart Crockett preached his farewell sermon to the congregation of Grace Church, having taken a position as rector of Zion Church in Menden, Illinois, and as one of the canons of St. John's Cathedral in Quincy. Naturally, the people of the church—indeed, Webster County in general—were greatly saddened and disappointed. The *Webster County Argus* reported, "It is to be regretted that Mr. Crockett don't find it to his best interests to remain here and enjoy the fruits of his labors so far, and to continue the work he has so well begun, which would without doubt result in the upbuilding of a strong church in this city."²²

Bishop Clarkson was concerned also. He had been trying for three years to establish a local and continuing ministry in the Republican Valley. He scheduled a visitation to Red Cloud on Septuagesima Sunday, February 17, 1884. The Venerable R. W. Oliver, archdeacon and general missionary of the diocese, accompanied the bishop on his visit, and reported, "The parish needed much attention, owing to the unexpected departure of their late missionary, the Rev. Mr. Crockett. The sympathizing words of their Bishop quickened their energies, and the Bishop arranged for the Rev. Mr. Shaw to take the charge of them upon the first Sunday in April."²³ The bishop celebrated the Holy Eucharist and preached to the congregation. It was the last time he performed either act on this earth. The Rt. Rev. Robert Harper Clarkson, first Episcopal bishop of Nebraska, celebrated his last Eucharist, preached his last sermon, and performed his last official act at Grace Church,

Red Cloud. He had a cold when he left Omaha, and while returning, he fell ill with pneumonia. After a three-week illness, he died. His death was mourned throughout the state, and all the businesses and schools in Omaha closed for the day of his funeral,²⁴ Bishop Hare, the first bishop of South Dakota, preaching the sermon at the requiem, told of Bishop Clarkson's touching concern for the diocese during his dying days: "It was pathetic as he lay dying to find that the Child's Hospital [now Bishop Clarkson Hospital] and the feeble stations of his diocese were upon his anxious heart, and hear him ask, 'Will this (his approaching death) affect the Hospital? Will the contributions fall off?' and to catch the names of his missions, amid incoherent sentences half uttered, 'Red Cloud,' 'Tecumseh.'"²⁵

The Rev. Mr. Shaw, whom the bishop had appointed in that last official act of his in February, was gone from Red Cloud by June.²⁶ It becomes more and more obvious that Grace Church's mere presence in Red Cloud for a century is something of a miracle.

Bishop Clarkson's death left the Diocese of Nebraska in a difficult circumstance. It was over a year before new episcopal leadership was to be obtained. During that year Archdeacon Oliver again visited Red Cloud and reported that he had found a concerned and earnest congregation there:

My last visit to this place was in company with the late Right Reverend Bishop Clarkson whose last services in the Church on earth were rendered here. The parish is composed of ten communicants, who by very great and persistent exertions managed to erect a neat, comfortable and substantial church. But there is held against it by the builder an acknowledged claim of \$330. The holder of the claim, although in needy circumstances, is very unwilling to foreclose his lien. It is hoped that some help may be afforded them in their extremity. When Bishop Clarkson was last there he promised to help them with the removal of the debt, if the ladies by holding "*Festivals & c.*," would seat and furnish the church. They are renewing their efforts for that end.²⁷

Further action was taken in early 1885 by the Cathedral Chapter, and funds were apparently found, for the building of the church continued.

After three elections, the Diocese of Nebraska finally chose the Rev. Dr. George Worthington to be its second bishop. He was consecrated in February of 1885 and was anxious to get to know his new diocese.²⁸ He had scheduled a visitation to Red Cloud on June 1, but decided to postpone it:

The Church at this mission station is not yet finished, and it was decided to defer my visitation for confirmation until the autumn. There are only a small number of Church people in this place, and for a long time they must have the aid which they now receive.

I have promised the carpet for the chancel and matting for the middle aisle, and the Church will be very comfortable and decent when the work which now occupies the attention of the few devoted people at this station is finished.²⁹

In July, a new priest was assigned to the Republican Valley. "The Rev. C. L. Fulforth has resigned the rectorship of Christ Church, Beatrice, and accepted the position of missionary along the B. & M. R. R. from Red Cloud to McCook."³⁰ Bishop Worthington made his visitation on Sunday, September 6, and reported later that month:

The day was rainy. A.M.—Assisted the Missionary, the Rev. C. L. Fulforth, in the service; preached and celebrated the Holy Communion. P.M.—Preached a special sermon by request. The Missionary has been recently appointed to this station and the class for confirmation was not fully prepared. After the evening service, conferred with communicants and others interested in the work of the Church at this point. With their consent, the parochial organization was dissolved, and the Mission established in its place. Warden, Robt. B. Eaton; Treasurer, C. B. Hosford; Secretary, G. N. Barker. This place will ever have sacred associations connected with it. It was here that Bishop Clarkson last officiated in the great work which he accomplished in this Diocese. I desire that some memorial be placed in this church, which will bring this act to mind. The unwearied Missionary has with his own hands painted the interior of the building. This does very much to make the barren place attractive. I wish that I might find every House of God in the Diocese as neatly kept in every particular as Grace Church, Red Cloud. There is here a Sunday-school and a well ordered guild for Church work. The services were well attended, notwithstanding the weather was so very inclement. The music pleased me, for it was simple and churchly. The responses were hearty. One man came sixty miles to be present at the service and to meet his Bishop, and another more than forty miles to be fed with "the Bread of Life." The diligent Missionary has a long itinerary of more than one hundred miles, and is able to be at this point only two Sundays in each month. The offertory for Diocesan Missions at this visitation was \$11.50.³¹

The Rev. Mr. Fulforth was indeed a tireless worker, and the first in Red Cloud without itchy feet. He stayed at Grace Church for over three years before moving on to Pennsylvania in 1888.³² During his tenure the church grew, the debt on the building was paid off, and Bishop Worthington's "Journal" of September, 1886, reported the following:

Monday, September 13th. 4:45 p.m.—Left by train for Red Cloud with the Rev. Dr. Oliver; was met on our arrival at the station by the Missionary

Priest, the Rev. C. L. Fulforth. Reception in the evening at the residence of Mr. A. J. Kenney.

Red Cloud, Tuesday, September 14th—10:30 a.m.—The day appointed for the consecration of Grace Church. The Rev. Dr. Oliver preacher and gospeler. The Bishop Celebrant. I confirmed and addressed one person who came a long distance to receive this apostolic ordinance. The occasion was one of deep interest to us all. Here the first Bishop of Nebraska celebrated the Lord's supper and delivered his Master's message for the last time. The sermon full of instruction and suitable for the pious act of consecration made touching allusion to our venerated Clarkson. The Church has been made very attractive by the taste, the skill, the unwearied toil of the Rev. Mr. Fulforth who with his own hands has done very much to beautify and adorn the holy place. The handsome black walnut lectern is a beautiful memorial to Bishop Clarkson, from Dr. Oliver, and the handsome chandelier is a gift of Mrs. Clarkson, whose deep and active interest in the work of the Church in this Diocese where her lamented husband laid foundations deep and broad, is a great comfort and support to me. I rejoice in it, and thank God for it. A high wind and thunderstorm occurring at the time of evening service compelled us to abandon the intention. 10:45 p.m.—Left Red Cloud for Omaha.³³

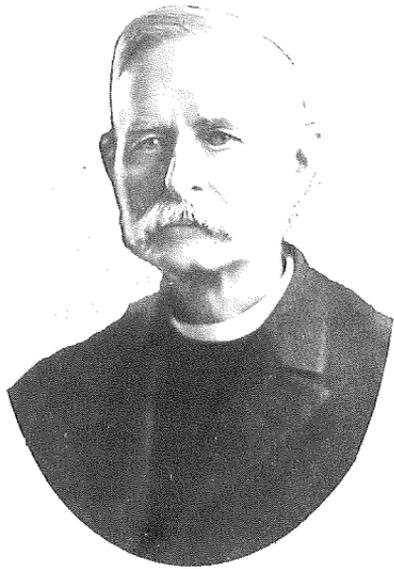
After so many false starts, several disappointments, and much travail, the work of the Church in Red Cloud was "off the ground," so to speak. Fulforth was followed by a priest named Landers, and in 1889, Grace Church became part of another ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The General Convention of that year created the Missionary Jurisdiction of the Platte and elected the Reverend Anson Rogers Graves as its first bishop.³⁴ He appointed the Rev. Samuel F. Myers of Holdrege to be in charge of Grace Church, but in August of 1891, that priest was deposed by Bishop Graves.³⁵ A deaconess named Sister Hannah was then placed in charge of the work in Red Cloud and is listed in the *Journal* of the Second Convocation as the licensed lay reader in charge. She appears to have been an untiring worker. Bishop Graves' address to the Convocation of 1892 reports:

The little Church at Red Cloud, where Bishop Clarkson preached his last sermon, stood by an open field on the extreme edge of the village. The wind had racked it and broken the plastering, and it was so far to one side that many refused to go so far to the services. Under the energetic lead of Sister Hannah, funds were secured to brace the church with iron rods, move it on to two central lots, and replaster the building. All is paid for except \$100 due on the lots.³⁶

A later report gives what may be a more objective narrative in saying that "a tornado wrecked the building and the



The Right Reverend Robert Harper Clarkson, first Episcopal bishop of Nebraska. . . . (Below) The Right Reverend George Allen Beecher, second bishop of Western Nebraska.



The Reverend John Mallory Bates served as rector of Grace Church from 1903 until his retirement in 1920.



location seemed ill-chosen so that in 1890 it was considered advisable to move it to its present excellent quarters. . . . The plastering was rejected and the walls ceiled under the direction of Geo. W. Warren. After Bishop Graves took charge of Western Nebraska in 1890 he had had sad experience with falling plaster in several towns and would have no more of it."³⁷

By 1890 a guild had been organized, which boasted seven members and a year's earnings from "entertainments" of \$29.25, which was donated to the missionary's support. The report for that year listed 22 baptized persons.³⁸

The bishop's address at the Convocation of 1893, and the reports filed that year showed the results of the deaconess' work. The bishop said:

Sister Hannah has been faithfully at work throughout the year; at Red Cloud during the first part of the year made calls on the people and arranged for a superintendent of the Sunday School; raised the last \$100 in debt on Church lots; secured a new bell in Denver for a Church there by obtaining one hundred new subscribers for The Living Church and received the old bell for the Platte Institute; left Red Cloud March 1.³⁹

The annual report for that year listed 40 baptized persons at Grace Church, almost double the previous year's report.

After Sister Hannah's departure, the Rev. William Gill was appointed to the Republican Valley on August 22, 1892, to serve under the direction of the Rev. S. A. Potter. Potter was in charge of the missions in Bloomington, Blue Hill, Callaway, Eddyville, Elwood, Farnam, Franklin, Holdrege, Juniata, Minden, Oconto, Orleans, Red Cloud, Riverdale, and Riverton! Mr. Gill moved to Tennessee in February of 1895, and in July, the Rev. Edward D. Irvine was appointed to the field, living in Hastings.⁴⁰ The *Journal* of the Convocation of the Platte for the next few years reflects the decline of the once-promising work. The Rev. E. J. Hall served as priest-in-charge from September, 1896, to March 1, 1897, leaving before he was even canonically transferred into the district. The *Journal* of the Convocation of 1898 does not even list Grace Church among the missions of the district. In 1899, five communicants were reported and an assessment of \$2.50 was levied. The Rev. E. A. Osborne had become the missionary of the vast area previously served by S. A. Potter in June of 1898. His tenure was also understandably short. The guild was reorganized in November of 1899, and in May of 1900, the Rev. W. H.

Xanders was appointed to the field. There were eight confirmations in 1900, and a like number in 1901. In June of 1902, the Rev. E. U. Brun became the resident priest in Red Cloud and presented three for confirmation that fall. Prospects for Grace Church were again looking up.⁴¹

Finally, in 1903, Grace Church entered upon its "Golden Age." In that year the senior priest in Nebraska, the Rev. John Mallory Bates, arrived in Red Cloud to become the rector of Grace Church and the missionary of the Republican Valley. Bates had been born in Wallingford, Connecticut, in 1846. He received both a B.A. and M.A. from Trinity College, Hartford, and then graduated from Berkely Divinity School in Middletown, Connecticut, being ordained to the priesthood in 1877. After serving a number of parishes in Connecticut and Maine, he came to the Midwest in response to a strong sense of vocation to serve as a missionary. He was headmaster of Bethany College and rector of Emmanuel Church in Topeka, Kansas, from 1883 to 1886; rector of the Church of Our Savior, North Platte, Nebraska, 1886-1887; then founded and served as headmaster of a school for boys in Omaha. In this latter venture he was assisted by his wife, Sarah Marvina Glazier, M.A. from Vassar and the first professor of mathematics and astronomy at Wellesley.⁴² The school opened in September of 1887, in the choir room of St. Barnabas Church at 19th and Cass, and lasted but one year.⁴³ In 1888 Bates became the rector at Valentine, Nebraska, and was in charge of 20 mission stations.⁴⁴ He served there until he moved to Callaway in 1901, then Red Cloud in 1903, where he was also rector of Holy Trinity Church in St. Paul, Nebraska, and was in charge of ten missions. A truly remarkable man, Bates was internationally recognized as a botanist. His botanical authority in the state of Nebraska was said to be second only to that of Dr. Bessey of the University.⁴⁵ He contributed numerous articles to church, scientific, and scholarly journals. He was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a member of the American Ornithological Union, the Nebraska Ornithological Union (of which he was president in 1902), the Nebraska Academy, the American Forestry Association, and the Fern Society.⁴⁶ Following his death, his herbarium was purchased by the University of Nebraska for \$1,000.⁴⁷

Bates was 58 years of age when he arrived in Red Cloud. He served actively as rector until his retirement in 1920, at the age of 75; then he continued serving as priest-in-charge during his retirement, during which time two men served under him while studying for the priesthood in the field. The Rev. Samuel Hardman was ordained to the diaconate in 1922 and moved on to Arapahoe. The Rev. Basil Daugherty was ordained to the priesthood in 1925 and was then assigned to St. Elizabeth's in Holdrege.⁴⁸ After that, with occasional assistance from the dean of the Pro-Cathedral in Hastings, Bates continued as priest-in-charge of Grace Church until his death on May 25, 1930, at the age of 85.⁴⁹

Bates was the last resident priest in Red Cloud, and the window above the altar at Grace Church was given in his honor, primarily by Carrie Miner Sherwood and Willa Cather.⁵⁰ The priest had become a friend of the Cather family almost upon his arrival in Red Cloud, and he baptized Elsie Cather in 1906, and presented her for confirmation the following year. That event marked the beginning of a continuous trek of the Cather family into the Episcopal Church. As early as 1915, Bates wrote in his report in the *Western Nebraska Churchman*:

Miss Willa Cather, the noted writer, has been visiting her parents the past month and preparing material for a new book, and her sister, Miss Elsie Cather, who has been absent for six years past at college and teaching, is spending at least a few months with us. It is an age of "absenteeism" on the part of young people, doubtless all for the best in its broadening influences, but hard on church work temporarily.⁵¹

Willa Cather and her parents were, of course, finally confirmed at Grace Church on December 27, 1922, by the Rt. Rev. George Allen Beecher. Beecher always had a special interest in the work at Red Cloud, and he, too, became a close friend of the Cather family soon after his consecration as the second Bishop of Western Nebraska in 1910. In 1920, Bishop Beecher made two visitations to Grace Church to confirm 15 people.⁵²

He corresponded with Willa Cather frequently until her death in 1947, and Cather never wrote to him without mentioning Grace Church and her love for it and the communicants there. She attended the guild meetings, whenever she was in Red Cloud,⁵³ and at Christmas, 1924, the *Western*

Nebraska Churchman reported, "Miss Willa Cather, who is home for the Holidays, furnished flowers . . . for the altar, and we are very grateful to her for this act of kindness."⁵⁴ Bishop Beecher was fond of discussing his friendship with Miss Cather also, and he reported in the *Western Nebraska Churchman*:

January 25—The Bishop's house was made a very happy place on the occasion of a visit from Miss Willa Cather of Red Cloud, accompanied by Mrs. Creighton and Mrs. Sherwood. A few friends gathered for a social visit; and we enjoyed ourselves to the utmost limit. As Miss Cather was pleased to compliment me on the appealing environment of what I call my den, which is my office, with its modest collection of historical relics and curios, I confess I felt quite flattered.⁵⁵

Besides the Cathers, the Sherwoods, and the Creightons, the communicant lists during the 1920s include many well-known Webster County names: Blackledge, Foe, Damerell, Roby, Storey, McFarland, Crabill, Grimes, Boles, Turnure, Powell, Robinson, Auld, Holten, Ferris, Van Camp, and others.

In 1925, it was decided that the entire structure needed to be remodeled. A contract was let on August 6, 1925, to move the church back about 10 feet as well as "raising the church twenty inches, installing a full basement, partitioning it off into a furnace room, kitchen, and main room, plastering the basement walls, laying a wood floor in the basement, enlarging the vestibule, brick veneering the whole building and constructing brick and cement steps and approaches."⁵⁶ The community and the diocese were pleased with the remodeling, and at the 39th Convocation of the Missionary District of Western Nebraska Bishop Beecher reported:

Those of us who remember the old frame church which has stood upon the corner since the days of Bishop Clarkson, can appreciate what his transformation means to our faithful group of Church people in Red Cloud. The old building was practically re-built with solid brick walls, new roof, and cement basement; furnished with modern equipment for Church School and social gatherings. The property value is listed at \$6,600.00. There is no debt.⁵⁷

The Cather family was deeply involved in the renovation, and after the death of Charles Cather, Bates wrote:

Although he found his home in the Episcopal Church late in life, he had become deeply attached to our services and the system of the Christian Year; and only ill health kept him from the precincts of the Sanctuary. . . . The

renovation of our dear Church building filled him with satisfaction; and he seldom left it without calling the attention of his companions to the wonderful improvements we have made with his assistance, which, of course, he never mentioned.⁵⁸

When Charles Cather died, his daughter, Willa, "paced frantically back and forth between the house and the little Episcopal church where his body lay."⁵⁹ Shortly thereafter, she made arrangements for the installation of the "Good Shepherd" window in Grace Church in memory of her father.⁶⁰ After her mother's death, Cather arranged for another window to be placed in the church, in memory of Virginia Cather. Bishop Beecher's account of the dedication of that window and others is worth the space required in reprinting:

Service of Dedication of Two Memorial Stained Glass Windows in Grace Church, Red Cloud, Second Sunday in Advent, December 5, 1937:

Grace Church, Red Cloud, during the past fifty or more years, has become a shrine of blessed memories. From time to time this group of church people and friends have gathered about the earth mounds in the Silent City of the Dead to lay to rest the bodies of loved ones who have shared the interesting experiences of pioneer days. Red Cloud, named from the famous Chief among the Ogallala tribes, is one of the historical centers in this section of Nebraska. There are those still living who were personally acquainted with this famous chief. The Cross and the plow have followed the pioneer in his earliest treks through this great West, where the first anchors of civilization were made along flowing streams before the days of the steam locomotive.

The descendants of these pioneers are those to whom the Church is ministering today, together with those who have come in recent years to share alike the fortunes as well as the vicissitudes of the home builders and Christian communities which are now forming their own traditions.

Those who have read Willa Cather's story of *My Antonia* must have been impressed with some of the primitive conditions of pioneering. One of the windows dedicated on this occasion was in memory of Mary Virginia Cather, given in loving memory by her children. The subject of this beautiful memorial was *The Nativity*. This subject was chosen by the donors as a most fitting tribute expressing the motherhood of her life. There were four sons and three daughters. This is the central window in the north wall of Grace Church.

The west window on the north wall was given by the members of Grace Church guild, to whom a donation of \$100.00 was made by Mrs. Charles Platt, to be used by the members as they thought best. They unanimously decided upon the memorial window as a lasting tribute. The subject of this window is *The Garden of Gethsemane*. The records show that this window was given in memory of all those associated in former years with Grace Church Parish, with the wording: *For All Thy Saints Who From Their Labors Rest*. There are not windows enough to memorialize the long train

of faithful members of Grace Church and friends intimately associated with its history during the past fifty-one years since its dedication who have helped to further the work in this historical center. Among them may be mentioned Mrs. George Van Camp, Mrs. Clark (niece of the late Bishop Anson R. Graves), Mother Grice, Mr. and Mrs. Stanser, Mrs. Margaret Blackledge, Mrs. Lee Mable Hadell, Mrs. Charles Platt, Bishop Robert Harper Clarkson who preached his last sermon in this church, and the late Bishop Graves.

In this window are pictured the kneeling Christ; above Him an angel bearing a chalice, and in the background a sleeping disciple.

The circular window in the west gable was a gift from the Emil Frei Stained Glass Company of St. Louis.⁶¹

Following Bates' death in 1930, Grace Church has been ministered to by the deans of the Pro-Cathedral in Hastings, including Dean Francis R. Lee, 1926-1940, Dean George L. Whitmeyer, 1940-1942, Dean Nelson L. Chowenhill, 1942-1945, Dean Winfield E. Post, 1945-1955, Dean Willis H. Steinberg, 1955-1966, Dean George H. Peek, 1967-1973, and is currently under the spiritual supervision of the Very Rev. John P. Bartholomew.

Early in the 1970s, owing to the declining communicant membership and the high cost of maintenance, the Diocese of Nebraska deeded the property to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation with the stipulation that the services of the church could be held there whenever necessary and/or desirable. Since that time the Grace Church and the other Cather buildings have become a part of the Nebraska State Historical Society. The restoration and maintenance of the church has been admirable, and Bishop Worthington's observations of 1885 are still true today—would that many of the small churches in Nebraska were as finely kept and as lovely as Grace Church, Red Cloud.

One brief addendum to this already lengthy history will bring us back to Cather Day, 1982. During those early years of struggle, Governor and Mrs. Silas Garber were active members of Grace Church. Mrs. Garber frequently entertained the ladies of the church at the Garber residence on the east side of town. Many church picnics were held on their grounds. Mrs. Garber was Elsie Cather's godmother,⁶² and from Grace Church Silas Garber was buried in 1905.⁶³ Some of these events are fictionalized or hinted at in Cather's novel, *A Lost Lady*. The story of a godly bishop, struggling to bring

the Cross to the plow, a permanent ministry to the frontier, dealing with fickle clergy and troubled times, trying to raise funds for the church, and bringing the Gospel to a scattered people was one that appealed to Willa Cather. She immortalized just such a man as Bishop Clarkson in her novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, in 1927. She loved Grace Church, was a close friend of its longtime rector, John Mallory Bates, and one of its bishops, George Allen Beecher, and she immortalized one of its communicants, Mrs. Lyra Wheeler Garber. Bishop Beecher was fond of referring to Grace Church as "that Sacred Shrine of Christianity."⁶⁴ It certainly has been that, but it is a shrine sacred to the realms of literature, the history of the diocese, and the history of the state of Nebraska, as well. It has been a continuing, although mercurial fortress for the witness of the Church of God in its Episcopal expression for over a century. It is a "true story" of the Midwest—and its people.

NOTES

Reprinted with minor editing from the *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* (1983), Volume XXVII, Nos. 1 and 2.

1. Willa Cather, Copy of TLS to E. K. Brown, October 7, 1946, Cather Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

2. Willa Cather, ALS to Carrie Miner Sherwood, n.d., 1928, and January 21, 1929, Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Red Cloud.

3. George Allen Beecher, ALS to Willa Cather, January 12, 1942, original in Bernice Slote papers.

4. The Very Rev. Winfield Post, TLS to E. K. Brown, January, 1948, E. K. Brown Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale.

5. The notice appeared in the June 23, 1921, edition of the *Webster County Argus*. Ironically, in column 3 of the same page is a brief item taken from the *State Journal* which reads, "Miss Willa Cather is visiting in Canada and will pass some time at several points there before returning to New York."

6. Willa Cather, ALS to Irene Miner Weisz, January 6, 1945, Cather Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

7. Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 71.

8. "Ex-Governor Passes Away," *Webster County Argus*, January 13, 1905.

9. Bennett, 73.

10. "Writes of Last Years of Former R. C. Lady," *Webster County Argus*, July 14, 1921.

11. Bennett, 69-76.

12. Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady*, Vintage Books Edition (New York: Random House, 1972), 42.

13. "Diocesan News," *Church Guardian*, 4 (August 15, 1881), 164.

14. *Ibid.*, 164.

15. *Ibid.*, 166.

16. "Cathedral Chapter," *Church Guardian*, 5 (October 15, 1881), 11.

17. "Letters," *The Church Guardian*, 5 (July 15, 1882), 155.
18. "Correspondence," *The Church Guardian*, 6 (August 15, 1883), 164.
19. *Ibid.*, 6 (September 15, 1883), 181-182.
20. "Laying the Corner Stone of Grace Church," *Webster County Argus*, October 8, 1883.
21. *Ibid.*
22. "Farewell Sermon," *Webster County Argus*, February 7, 1884.
23. "Dr. Oliver's Report to the Cathedral Chapter," *The Church Guardian*, 7 (June 15, 1884), 134.
24. *In Memoriam: Bishop Clarkson* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg and Company, 1884), 17.
25. *Ibid.*, 33.
26. "Dr. Oliver's Report," 134.
27. "Cathedral Chapter," *The Church Guardian*, 8 (November 15, 1884), 27.
28. William Joseph Barnds, *The Episcopal Church in Nebraska: A Centennial History* (Omaha: Omaha Printing Company, 1969), 72.
29. "The Bishop's Journal," *The Church Guardian*, 8 (June 15, 1885), 139.
30. "Changes Among the Clergy," *The Church Guardian*, 8 (July 15, 1885), 152.
31. "The Bishop's Journal," *The Church Guardian*, 8 (September 15, 1885), 180.
32. "Clergy List," *Bishop's Record: Diocese of Nebraska*, 1, Protestant Episcopal Church: Diocese of Nebraska Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
33. "The Bishop's Journal," *The Church Guardian*, 9 (September 15, 1886), 180.
34. Barnds, 26.
35. *Journal of the Second Annual Convocation of the Missionary Jurisdiction of the Platte* (1892), 6.
36. *Ibid.*, 7.
37. "Grace Church, Red Cloud," *Western Nebraska Churchman*, 20 (January, 1926), 22.
38. *Journal*, Report, n.p.
39. *Journal of the Third Annual Convocation* (1893), 16.
40. *Journal* (1894 and 1895).
41. *Journal of the Eleventh Annual Convocation of the Missionary Jurisdiction of Laramie* (1901), 6.
42. "Deaths and Funerals," *Lincoln Evening State Journal*, October 14, 1919.
43. "Diocesan School for Boys," *The Church Guardian*, 10 (September 15, 1887), 171.
44. Lewis H. Blackledge, "In Memory of Rev. John Mallory Bates," delivered to the Southwest Nebraska Historical Society, McCook, Nebraska, October 23, 1930. TS, p. 3. Located in Beecher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.
45. Blackledge, p. 5.
46. TS, copy of "John Mallory Bates: Class of 1872," from *Trinity College Bulletin*, n.d. cited, p. 1. In Beecher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.
47. Bennett, 142.
48. *Webster County Argus*, April 14, 1921; April 26, 1923; September 13, 1923.
49. "Rev. J. M. Bates is Called Home," *Webster County Argus*, May 29, 1930.
50. Willa Cather, ALS to Carrie Miner Sherwood, n.d., 1928, and January 21, 1929. Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Red Cloud.
51. "Mr. Bates' Field," *Western Nebraska Churchman*, 7 (October, 1915), 15.
52. "Confirmations," *Ledger: Missionary District of Western Nebraska*, 1. Protestant Episcopal Church: Diocese of Nebraska Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.
53. "Red Cloud," *Western Nebraska Churchman*, 18 (July, 1924), 17.
54. *Ibid.*, 18 (January, 1925), 10.
55. "Bishop's Journal," *Western Nebraska Churchman*, 22 (February, 1928), 4.

56. "Episcopalians Let Contract Today," *Webster County Argus*, August 6, 1925.
57. "New Buildings and Church Property," *Western Nebraska Churchman*, 24 (June, 1929), 23.
58. John M. Bates, "Charles F. Cather," *Western Nebraska Churchman*, 23 (May, 1928), 20.
59. Bennett, 28.
60. Willa Cather, ALS to Carrie Miner Sherwood, n.d. 1928, and June 13, 1928. Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Red Cloud.
61. "Bishop's Notes," *Western Nebraska Churchman*, 34 (January, 1938), 4-5.
62. John Mallory Bates, *Church and Clergyman's Record Book*, "Baptisms," 55, Beecher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.
63. Bates, "Burials," 147.
64. George Allen Beecher, ALS to Willa Cather, January 12, 1942, 1. Original in Bernice Slote papers.