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Article Summary: Cather biographies emphasize that she was often difficult and inaccessible. Her personal friends and many who knew her casually remembered her more positively.

Cataloging Information:

Cather Biographers: John H Randall III, Paul Horgan, E K Brown, James Woodress, Mildred R Bennett, L K Ingersoll, Marion Marsh Brown, Ruth Crone, Elizabeth Moorhead Vermorcken

Cather Acquaintances: Alfred A Knopf, Edith Lewis, Elizabeth Sergeant, George Seibel, Fanny Butcher, Elmer Alonzo Thomas, Phyllis Martin Hutchinson, Fannie Hurst, Lorna R F Birtwell, Frank Swinnerton, Marion King, Truman Capote, Mary Ellen Chase, Evaline Rolofson, Eleanor Shattuck Austermann, Myrtle Mason, Eleanor Hinman, Alice Booth, Grant Reynard, Josephine Frisbie, Rose C Feld, Flora Merrill, Walter Tittle, Burton Rascoe

Place Names: Red Cloud, Nebraska; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick; Jaffrey, New Hampshire; New York City, New York

Photographs / Images: Willa Cather at a picnic; young Willa Cather with Margaret Miner and Evelene Brodstone (later Lady Vestey); Dr Elmer Alonzo Thomas; George Seibel and his wife Helen (1899 photo); Truman Capote (1979 photo); Nebraska artist Grant Reynard; Lady Evelene Brodstone Vestey; inscription written by Cather in honor of Lady Vestey for the dedicatory tablet of the Brodstone Hospital, Superior; Cather on December 7, 1936

The Other Side of Willa Cather

By Marilyn Arnold

Students of Willa Cather are accustomed to biographical pronouncements about her cantankerous nature, her readily expressed prejudices, and her almost militant reclusiveness. While her detractors admit that she was fiercely loyal and warmly accessible to family and close friends, even her admirers have been compelled to concede that to the casual observer (or the celebrity monger), she may have seemed anything but gracious and kind. John H. Ran-

dall III is one who takes an extreme position, asserting that Cather's neurotic personality ruined her art.¹ Even the kindly Paul Horgan indirectly lends credence to the standard view of Cather's irascible nature. He good-naturedly describes her impatient reaction when as a young man he inadvertently interrupted her at work in a Santa Fe hotel.² Most commentators who express opinions on the subject of Cather's personality, however, take a neutral stance, acknowledging her

flintiness but granting that she had to be ruthlessly protective of her time and energy in order to write.

E.K. Brown indicates that more than any writer of her time, Cather managed to keep her "freedom and anonymity," probably at least partly because of Alfred A. Knopf's (Cather's publisher) sympathy with her "aversion to public encounters" and his endless efforts to ward off "demands for speechmaking and attendance at innumerable functions."³ James Woodress notes that Cather was "always highly selective in her friends. She chose the people she wanted and ignored the rest, but she never quite managed to be as independent as she liked to seem."⁴ According to Woodress, in the last fourteen years of her life "she became increasingly crotchety about invasions of her privacy and made very few public appearances." Mildred R. Bennett also notes that temperamentally Cather "enjoyed . . . isolation." As one observer said, she chose the persons she allowed "inside the battlements" of her affection, and her reclusiveness — which became pronounced in her maturity — was evident even in her youthful years in Pittsburgh.⁵

Among those commentators particularly interested in Cather's personality is L.K. Ingersoll. He indicates that the residents of Grand Manan Island — where Cather spent many summers and eventually built a cottage — were "at best, reserved in their

Willa Cather at picnic held on the old Red Cloud golf course. Courtesy of Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.



Marilyn Arnold, Professor of English and Dean of Graduate Studies at Brigham Young University, has lectured widely and published two books and numerous articles on Willa Cather.

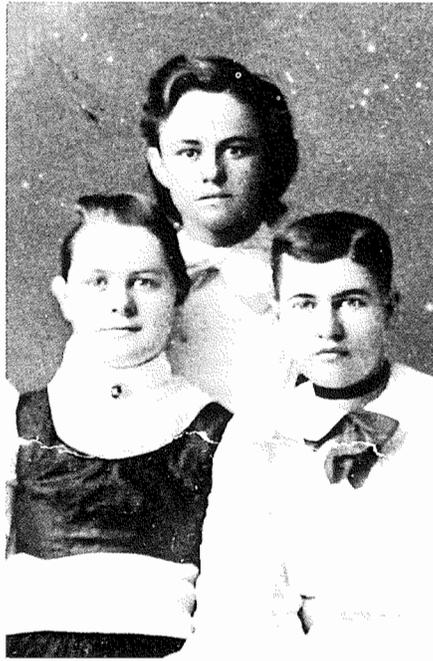
Willa Cather

opinion" of the "rather austere and little known 'summer visitor'" who seemed to want little to do with them. But Ingersoll also reports the views of one local citizen who taxied Cather about and did carpentry work for her. This fellow claimed that it was only the unscheduled disturbance that irritated her, and that her need for absolute concentration while at work created a false impression about her personality.⁶

Others interested in Cather's nature are Marion Marsh Brown and Ruth Crone. In their anecdotal biography, they portray Cather in Jaffrey, New Hampshire (Cather's earlier summer retreat) as even-tempered, though private. Their description of her in New York, however, characterizes her as aloof and likely to rebuff any advances by strangers. Brown and Crone conclude that "probably all of Willa's acquaintances in the 1920s — with the possible exception of Edith Lewis and a few old friends in Red Cloud, notably Annie Pavelka and Carrie Miner Sherwood — would have agreed that she was difficult at times."⁷

Such views enjoy a large degree of credibility, but they probably need to be adjusted to accommodate the impressions Cather made on casual observers — such as interviewers, lecture audiences, and passing acquaintances. Brown and Crone note that at least one interviewer, Burton Rascoe, found Cather approachable and intelligent. The fact is that during the 1920s, the decade Brown and Crone single out as a period when most people found Cather "difficult," she gave a number of public lectures and granted more than a few interviews. In addition, she apparently struck up several new acquaintances and interacted readily with strangers in a variety of public settings.

If one were to read only the reports of these interviewers and observers, one would conclude that here was a woman of impressive physical presence, of much good humor, and of abundant gracious charm. Obviously, these



Young Willa Cather (right) with Margaret Miner (center) and Evelene Brodstone (later Lady Vestey).

passing views do not tell the whole story, but they do tell a part of it that has been generally unknown or slighted. The present discussion deliberately omits the views of those who knew Cather well — the memoirs published by Edith Lewis, Elizabeth Sergeant, and Alfred A. Knopf, and the recollections of other close friends and family members. More than casual observers, but less than lifetime close friends are people like George Seibel, who first knew Cather at the turn of the century when she was editor of the *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh, and *Chicago Tribune* book columnist Fanny Butcher. Seibel remembers her as looking "about eighteen," a "plump and dimpled" young woman "with dreamy eyes and an eager mind, . . . avid of the world." Reflecting on Ellen Glasgow's comment about Cather's reticence, Seibel recalls that even as early as 1911, when she would go four nights in succession to see Sarah Bernhardt perform, "she was also

beginning to cultivate the reticence that later made her almost a recluse."⁸ Butcher's unabashed personal admiration for Cather, apparent in countless laudatory reviews, is confirmed in her autobiographical memoir. She notes that Cather was more absorbed in, and fulfilled by, her writing than anyone Butcher had ever known.⁹

Following is a sampling of descriptions of Cather by casual observers, some recalled after the passing of years, others recorded secondhand. The most valuable of them for us today, however, may be those published shortly after the encounter that produced them, uncolored by time and Cather's increasing fame. Cather's observers pay particular attention to her appearance — that is, to her physical build, facial features, and dress — and to her conversational manner.

One of the earliest, and one of the least flattering, of these published casual reminiscences is that of Dr. Elmer Alonzo Thomas, a hometown childhood contemporary of Cather and a descendant of one of Red Cloud, Nebraska's founding fathers. Article 73 of his 1953 *Compilation of Webster County Chronicles* is titled "Willa Cather as I Knew Her." Thomas rambles a good deal, talking about a variety of Webster County matters and naively revealing some unpleasant personal envy over Cather's rise to national prominence. He fixes on what he regards as her "masculine" characteristics and asserts that she was just an ordinary person and certainly no saint. In fact, he seems unable to forgive her, both for failing to endow Webster County with some sort of rich memorial and for choosing to be buried elsewhere. "To me," he writes, "she was never attractive and I remember her mostly for her boyish makeup and the serious stare with which she met you." He recalls that Dr. Damerell, who apparently favored Cather and Thomas among the town children, agreed with him that "she had as many male tendencies and characteristics as

female." Thomas says later, "I remember Willa Cather most for her masculine habits and dress . . . Willa seemed impervious to any criticism along this line and even boasted that she preferred the masculine garb."¹⁰

Phyllis Martin Hutchinson has more pleasant recollections. Hutchinson took high school English from Cather at Pittsburgh's Central High School in the fall of 1901. She remembers Cather as "good looking, with gray-blue eyes and dark hair worn pompadour fashion. She had intermittent dimples and beautiful, even white teeth that seemed to flash when she laughed." Hutchinson also notes that Cather "affected mannish dress," and that although she had "strong likes and dislikes and was generally outspoken, she understood the sensitivity of teen-agers and never held us up to ridicule as some of the other teachers did." Furthermore, Hutchinson says, Cather was a perfectionist who "had little patience with the stupid or careless pupil." According to Hutchinson, "personality was all important to her. She made it clear that even a child is not interesting *per se*, but only if he has an interesting personality. Her own personality could not be ignored. She was greatly admired by some of her students, and just as heartily disliked by others." Obviously one of those who admired Cather, Hutchinson indicates that even though she was young, "Willa Cather always seemed very sure of herself. Yet she did not seek the limelight, but always kept inconspicuously in the background." In New York, sometime in the late teens, Hutchinson called on her former teacher at one of Cather's Friday afternoon teas and was "surprised to see, instead of the tailored teacher I remembered, a very charming and delightfully feminine person who was most friendly and gracious as she introduced me to the other guests."¹¹

The latter Cather is the one who dominates accounts of interviewees in the 1920s, while earlier observations



Dr. Elmer Alonzo Thomas, from his book 80 Years in Webster County (Hastings, Nebraska: Hastings Daily Tribune, 1953)

echo Hutchinson's recollections of the younger woman and emphasize Cather's physical and mental sturdiness. For instance, Elizabeth Moorhead Vermorcken's first impressions of the young author of "Paul's Case" focus on Cather's physical traits:

She was young. Short, rather stocky in build, she had marked directness of aspect. You saw at once that here was a person who couldn't be easily diverted from her chosen course. "Pretty" would indeed be a trivial word to describe a face that showed so much strength of character as hers, yet she was distinctly good-looking, with a clear rosy skin, eyes of light grey and hair a dark brown brushed back from a low forehead — an odd and charming contrast in colour. They were observant eyes, nothing escaped them. Altogether a fine healthy specimen of young womanhood. She looked me straight in the face as she greeted me, and I felt her absolute frankness and honesty. She would never say anything she didn't mean; indeed, at times her speech would become a little hesitant, stumbling, in her search for the precise words to express her meaning. She was incapable of affectation or pretense, I saw that.¹²

It was the Cather of the 1920s, however, that seems to have especially

charmed and impressed those she encountered. Novelist Fannie Hurst recalls being quite overwhelmed when she first met Cather in the early 1920s. Doubting if Cather ever really was young, Hurst remembers feeling "vulgar" in her presence. Cather's mind, Hurst says, was "a porcelain cup that held its contents in perfect balance," while Hurst feared that her own "slopped over into the saucer." She describes Cather as a "gracious" and "aloof" woman "whose vast serenity . . . lay over the complicated mechanism of her mind and intellect like a blanket of snow."¹³ Perhaps even more sincerely impressed was Lorna R.F. Birtwell, who remembers Cather as a sensitive, thoughtful critic of the work of aspiring young writers at Breadloaf School of English in 1922. She recalls Cather's "kindly, chuckling criticism" of some amateur efforts. In spite of the novelist's "proverbial" reticence, Birtwell found that she became "a warm and hearty human being . . . among just people." She cherished the experience of knowing Cather "as a friendly neighbor in a small community of students."¹⁴

British writer Frank Swinnerton also recalls meeting Cather in the early 1920s on a late 1923 voyage of the *Berengaria* from England to the United States. His first comments describe her appearance, his subsequent comments her conversational abilities. She was, he remembers, "of middle height, fresh coloured, rather broad-cheeked, and decidedly self-possessed." Moreover, he says, she had a ready tongue, and the two of them "talked unstintedly" throughout the voyage. He found her to be intelligent, wise, interested in many things, graced by good humor, completely free from egotism, and unruffled by minor exasperating incidents.¹⁵

Marion King, who worked at the New York Society Library and met Cather after the novelist moved from Bank Street, remembers seeing "a new person in the neighborhood, a rather

Willa Cather

short, stocky lady in an apple green coat and matching green pork-pie felt hat, which she alternated with a similar habit in red." King says she treated Cather with an "incurious matter-of-factness" because she had "heard a good deal about her seclusion and reserve." Cather spoke, King recalls, with a "husky, rather boyish voice that came in little gusts. Her hair was brown, but her fresh pink and white skin and large blue eyes gave an effect of blondness. She was sturdy and wholesome looking."¹⁶

Certainly, one of the persons most charmed by his casual encounters with Cather was the young Truman Capote. His recollections of his initial meeting with Cather, probably in the early 1940s, outside the New York Society Library, describe the same woman that King and others met in the 1920s. As he tells it to Gloria Steinem, he did not know who Cather was, but the two of them began talking books, and he told her that Willa Cather was his favorite writer. She plied him for the titles of his favorite Cather books and then confessed to have written them. He remembers having noticed her prior to that day, an "absolutely marvelous-looking woman" with a "wonderful, open, extraordinary face, and hair combed back in a bun. Her suits," he continues, "were soft, but rather severe — very distinguished-looking — and her eyes. Well, her eyes were the most amazing pale, pale blue. Like pieces of sky floating in her face."¹⁷

Mary Ellen Chase, who knew Cather at Grand Manan in the summer of 1929, also remembers her as a "handsome woman, perhaps even beautiful."

Although Cather was of only average height and without doubt overweight, she had certain arresting features which one never forgot. Her complexion was clear and smooth, not like Dresden china, that tiresome comparison, but rather like the outside of any well-washed plate just off a white colour, perhaps like cream. Her face was startling in its absence of lines. Her mouth was generous and good-humoured. Her eyes were her most memorable feature, long rather than round eyes and of a clear blue, neither dark nor light. She always looked directly at one with a flatter-

ing expression of deepest interest, which, I am sure, was a mannerism rather than any sign of genuine concern.

According to Chase, Cather "was not a person who craved for or sought many human relations," for the most part preferring her own created characters to living people, but "she had great physical energy and vitality," and strong, broad hands that she used equally well in chopping undergrowth or punctuating conversation.¹⁸

Occasionally journalists interviewed people who knew Cather rather than Cather herself, and they recorded recollections of the artist secondhand. For example, Ella Fleischman reports this to be Evaline Rolofson's (Mrs. Harvey Newbranch) most vivid recollection of Cather in her university days: "A whack on the back, so startling I nearly fell out of the window through which I was looking, when 'Billy' Cather came up behind me . . ." Mrs. Newbranch also remembers that this "thoroughly unconventional, . . . out-of-doors girl" nevertheless "dressed up in the most formal fashion to attend the theater." She always

wore "long white kid gloves" and would not review the drama without them.¹⁹ Another secondhand reminiscence comes from Elizabeth Yates, who interviewed Eleanor Shattuck (Austermann), daughter of the proprietors of the Shattuck Inn, near Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire, where Cather was a regular summer guest in the 1920s. Mrs. Austermann remembered Cather as a "shy person, deeply kind and by nature considerate." If she seemed to withdraw, it was only because she was such "a demon for work" and had to have solitude in order to write. Mrs. Austermann also recalled, however, that when Cather came downstairs for meals she was extremely cordial and frequently joined a group in conversation by the fire. In Yates's words, "She preferred to be with the people she sought out — many of them elderly women who could not walk abroad as she did — rather than with those who sought her."²⁰

As was suggested earlier, some of the most interesting accounts of Cather's appearance and nature are contem-

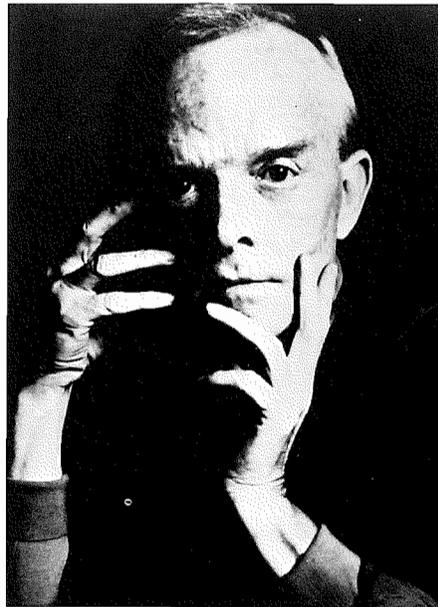
George Seibel and his wife Helen, photographed here in 1899, were two of Cather's closest Pittsburgh friends. From the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.



porary. Such accounts from the 1920s, mostly in newspapers, capture impressions of Cather when she was at the peak of her career and in great demand for lectures and interviews. The first is from a report of an address before the Omaha Society of Fine Arts, October 29, 1921. Myrtle Mason begins her account with an assessment of Cather's appearance, her articulation, and the impression she made on her audience: "She sounded all her 'r's' speaking in a rich, incisive voice. She was gowned with the good taste any woman in a small Nebraska town might show, but with no suggestion of Fifth Avenue shops. Utter absence of superficiality was there in Willa Cather. As a true perceiver of the true art, did she impress her audience."²¹ Mason's piece appeared in the Sunday and daily editions of the *Omaha Bee*, but a rival paper, the *Omaha Daily News*, printed an unsigned interview with Cather on the day of the address. Noting that Cather's creed was "to live intensely," the interviewer observes, "Superbly does Miss Cather live her creed. Splendid strength, well-controlled, shone from her clear blue eyes, as, with the help of her friend, Mrs. Irene Wise, she resurrected the little girl Willa Cather, the liveliest wire in Red Cloud."²²

A week later, Cather granted Eleanor Hinman an interview that was published in the *Lincoln Star*. This is an important interview, not only because Cather talks at length about her life and work, but also because Hinman records detailed impressions of Cather. The interview was actually a walking conversation, which Cather preferred over the formality of an indoor exchange. Hinman describes Cather as an "out-door person, not far different in type from the pioneers and prima donnas whom she exalts." Furthermore, says Hinman, "She walks with the gait of one who has been used to the saddle. Her complexion is firm with an outdoor wholesomeness. The red in her cheeks is the red that comes from the bite of the wind. Her

voice is deep, rich, and full of color; she speaks with her whole body, like a singer." Describing Cather as "down-right," without pretense or conventionality, Hinman finds her unafraid to express her ideas — a stimulating rather than a captivating conversationalist. "Her mind scintillates," Hinman says, sending "rays of light down many avenues of thought." This woman of "abundant vitality" likes walking, but she likes conversation even more. "She dresses well, yet she is



Truman Capote met Cather in the early 1940s. Copyright Irving Penn (1979) by The Conde Nast Publications, Inc.

clearly one of the women to whom the chief requirement of clothes is that they should be clean and comfortable."²³ Some of Hinman's observations are echoed a decade later by Alice Booth who, in preparing her series of articles on "America's Twelve Greatest Women," was impressed on her first meeting with Cather. She comments admiringly on the writer's strength of character, honesty, and keen eye.²⁴

Journalist-observer Burton Rascoe

met Cather early in 1924, when he joined her and a mutual acquaintance, Thomas Beer, for lunch. Indicating that she took him quite by surprise, being not at all "wistful" as he had expected, but being instead just the reverse — "alert, alive, quick-witted, vigorous-minded, and assertive, not at all dreamy, preoccupied, self-isolated, or diffident" — Rascoe claims to have noticed first "the forceful masculinity of her hands," which were "strong hands without the so-called artist taper." Clearly, Rascoe likes her, both as a writer and a person. He notes that "her features are bluntly decisive in line; her eyes are pale blue and set wide apart, with eyebrows high enough to give her ordinarily a look of challenge and appraisal; her mouth is ample, with full, flexible lips whose movements are as expressive an accompaniment of her speech as are the gestures of a Latin; and her nose is a nose, not a tracery." Rascoe admits that her mouth could be "capable of sternness, severity, stubbornness, perhaps, but not sullenness." He credits her with "extraordinary courage" in venturing to wear salmon and green together and doing so "with complete success." He also admires the way she sits, "relaxed without slumping, free, easy, assured, without tension." Commenting, too, on Cather's conversational manner, Rascoe calls it "staccato," with sentences chopped out "incisively, in short, neat links." Moreover, he says, she uses "such good sanguine words as 'muttonhead,' 'cub,' 'scamp,' and 'ninny' with delightful colloquial effectiveness." He sums up his first impressions of Cather this way: "She is fascinated by the spectacle of life; she is a capable businesswoman, or at least gives the impression of so being; and she is without sentimentality, prudery, or false values of any sort."²⁵

Later that same year, 1924, Cather granted an interview to Rose C. Feld that was published in the *New York Times Book Review* on December 21. This is how Feld's account opens:

Willa Cather

Tea with Willa Sibert Cather [as a young writer, Cather added a variation of a family name, "Sibert," to her own, then later dropped it] is a rank failure. The fault is entirely hers. You get so highly interested in what she has to say and how she says it that you ask for cream when you prefer lemon and let the butter on your hot toast grow cold and smeary. It is vastly more important to you to watch her eyes and lips which betray her when she seems to be giving voice to a serious concept, but is really poking fun at the world — or at your own foolish question. For Willa Sibert Cather has rare good sense, homespun sense, if you will — and that is rare enough — which she drives home with a well-wrought mallet of humor.²⁶

It is obvious that Feld is as interested in Cather, the person, as in what Cather has to say in this important interview.

A few months later, in April of 1925, Flora Merrill interviewed Cather for the *New York World*, and her report bears witness again to an encounter with an approachable, sane woman, not a testy recluse. Merrill even saw something of the actress's manner in Cather's initial greeting — "quick movements and rapidity of speech" almost reminiscent of Minnie Mad-dern Fiske. From the beginning, Merrill says, "one knows one is in her hands for good or bad." Cather conversed with "her chin resting on one hand, and analyzed her own methods and writing in general in a comprehensive, original manner. Her replies came in paragraphs rather than single sentences with a homely, informal quality." Merrill observes further that Cather does not insist that one agree with her. In person she presents the same "calm, intelligent and worldly outlook" that is found in her books; both she and her work give evidence of "a quiet courage, sanity and balance of mind." Merrill also describes Cather's attire and adds that "beauty lies in her eyes and her smile."²⁷

Like Rascoe before him, Walter Tittle, who met and interviewed Cather in the spring or summer of 1925, was completely taken with her appearance. He interviewed her at her home in New York and found her response to his ring "particularly hospitable because of its unmistakable flavor of my own Middle West." Paraphrase would not do jus-



Nebraska artist Grant Reynard met Cather in New Hampshire in 1926. Courtesy of Museum of Nebraska Art, Kearney.

tice to his opening description of the woman who greeted him:

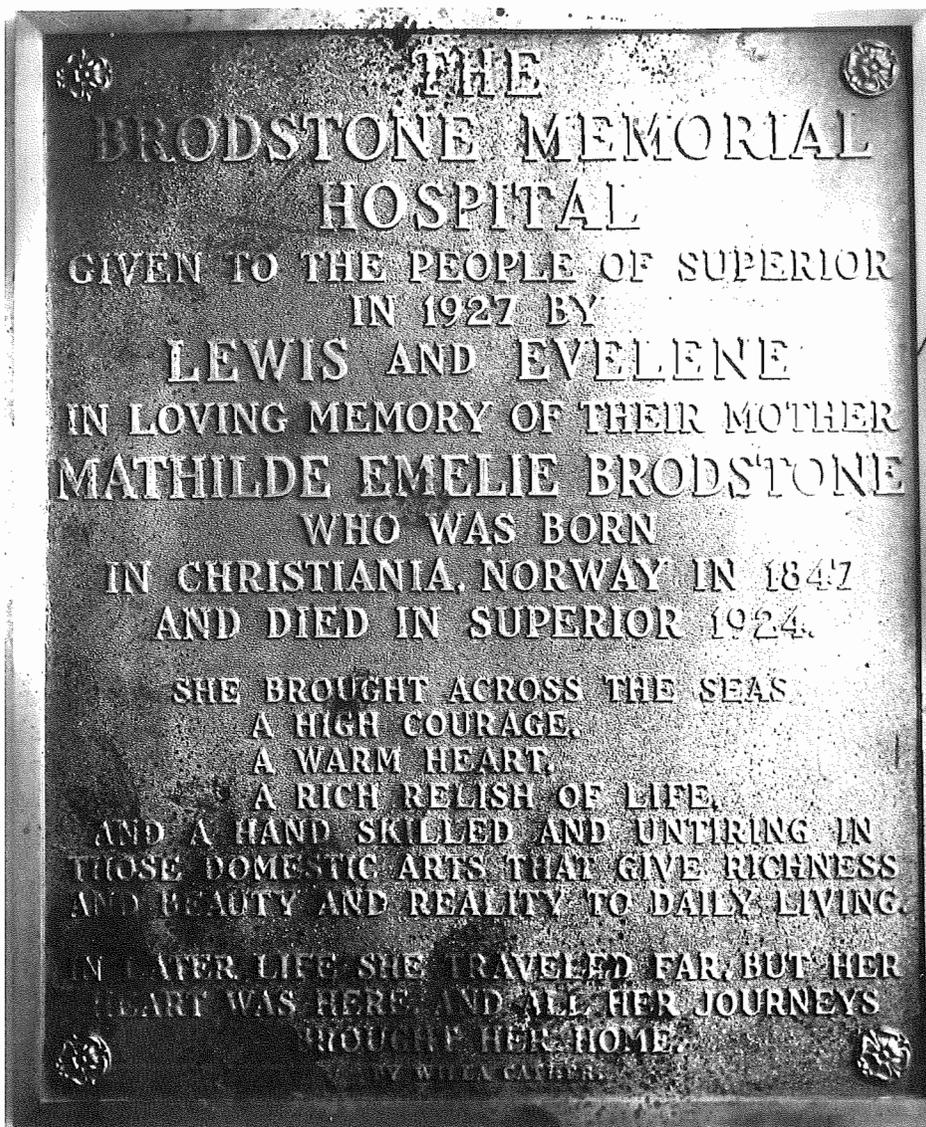
Her fine blue eyes revealed in their possessor the precious gift of humor, and contrasted pleasantly in their color with her dark lashes and strongly marked brows. Her straight, almost black, glistening hair, growing very low on her forehead, was caught back with effective simplicity from a parting off the middle, and the harmony of it with her slightly olive skin and a colorful shawl or scarf made a picture that cried for a full palette rather than black and white.

The balance of the interview focuses on the mutual interest of the interviewer and the interviewee on the culinary arts and on the way the American idiom functions for Cather, but it ends with a tribute to her amazingly "accurate memory" of painters and painting.²⁸

It should be remembered that all the time Cather was leading a rather

active public life, she was also producing novels at a faster clip than at any other time in her career. Between 1922 and 1927, she published five novels, averaging nearly one per year. In May of 1925, the seemingly indefatigable Cather lectured at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, at the Institute of Modern Literature, convened to commemorate the centennial of the Bowdoin class of 1825. Her lecture is represented objectively in the *Christian Science Monitor* of May 15, but the unknown writer who reported on it for the Institute's published proceedings praised her without restraint. This sort of bald adulation seems unsophisticated to the current reader and would never pass an editor's cold scrutiny today, but there is something quite heartening about its youthful sincerity. The writer, obviously a student, begins by noting that a large crowd had begun to gather long before the scheduled time for Cather's lecture, and "if Miss Cather were to come again and talk — even though it be on the most uninteresting of topics, 'The Freudian Backlash of the Binomial Theorem,' for instance, the old campus would be again filled with cars and the roads to her charming presence would be blocked."

Clearly, she was a welcome breath of fresh air among "big and little lions" (professional writers) who roared throughout the Institute, and she "left perhaps the most profound and enduring impression" on it. And she had the power to charm young men as well as older. To the easy conquests of Rascoe and Tittle can be added that of the author of the account currently under discussion, and he must be quoted at some length. He opens his description of Cather by vowing that "she has the gift of expression vocally, she has the poise of Womanliness, the modesty of self-negation and that indefinable thing called Charm." Her name makes her sound as though she "should be girlish, dreamful, passionate, and Edna Millayish. But instead," he continues,



Cather wrote the inscription for the dedicatory tablet of the Brodstone Hospital, Superior, in honor of her friend, the Lady Evelene Brodstone Vestey (above).

there is a woman of fifty, with a face of exquisite intellectuality and sensitiveness and a suggestion of capability, dignity, force, thought, culture, and all those things that one finds in faculties of SOME colleges. She looks as though she belonged in a home, head of a family and leading a 'movement' . . . And so natural and simple of method, and sweet of personality — well, one must be guarded in adjectives when one is rather carried off his feet.

Guarded is just what this adoring reporter is not, but perhaps his enthusiasm, and that of his classmates, helps balance the scales that

have sometimes tended to tip the other way. It is also satisfying to know that Cather's lasting regard for young people was reciprocated. Like his older predecessors, this young man also takes careful note of Cather's appearance.

Miss Cather wore (being a man, I do not know about these things), but mother would have called it a 'wrap' over a blouse of Persian orange silk or maybe it was not Persian orange at all, and the wrap was trimmed with the same color and occasionally slipped down over her

shoulders, and Miss Cather would pull it back. One person next in the settee along with me said it was a 'Doctor's gown'; but it was NOT. It was just what Miss Cather should have worn, and that shows how far gone we are in adoration.

Earlier the reporter had noted that Cather carried a large, practical silk bag, and that she began her remarks by taking out a watch and laying it in front of her, remarking as she did so that "a watch is the most essential part of a lecture." Apparently, however, neither she nor her audience paid much attention to it until after an hour and ten minutes she "looked at her watch and said, 'O-o-o-h,' and the audience broke into applause intended to encourage her to go on and on." She did, for another ten or fifteen minutes, "about the finest things." Obviously, Cather was at home with her audience, and they were extremely pleased with her.²⁹

There are still others on whom Cather left a highly favorable impression. Artist Grant Reynard, a fellow

Willa Cather

Nebraskan but nearly fourteen years Cather's junior, met her at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire during the summer of 1926, the only summer Cather spent there. He remembers being awed by the presence of the famous writer, and later being overwhelmed by the subtle advice she sensitively and indirectly gave the struggling painter—advice that turned his life around and set his career on the right course. He, too, was struck at first by her appearance and manner. Before he knew who she was, he was impressed by her “lusty laughter” and regarded her as a “woman who expressed herself with vigor and freedom.” He observed “a youthful animation about her” and noted that she was “outgoing in conversation.” He describes her hair and her clothing, asserting that her coat was “the sort cowboys might wear,” or “Annie Oakley in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.” Her features are described next — “eyebrows dark and straight, . . . an ample nose and a firm, full mouth, the valley between the nose and mouth,” deeply indented and her chin a good one, a “facial structure” that “recalled Russian women to me, the wives of workers on the Union Pacific railroad back home.” He concludes that she was, “all in all a forthright, gay, laughing person.”

Later, after numerous conversations, Cather asked if she might see Reynard's work. She arrived, he says, “with that pleasant way she had of forthrightly greeting people,” but she did not comment on his work (“my goats and unadorned ladies”) except to say that she liked “some small drawings of the woods and Mt. Manadnock.” Then she launched into a description of her own career, her attempt to produce what she thought was “fine writing,” until she discovered that a writer, like any other artist, worked best when she turned to her own experience and wrote from the heart. Reynard was disappointed that she seemed mainly to ignore his work; it was not until later that he realized

what she was telling him was about his art.³⁰

Another young person who was won over by Cather was Josephine Frisbie of Red Cloud, who writes of meeting Cather during the Christmas holidays in 1927. She was invited to tea one afternoon at the Cather home, but pictures she had seen of the writer had not prepared her for the woman she was to meet, “the nicely dressed, cordial hostess who greeted us.” As Cather's other casual observers had done, Frisbie details her host's appearance, noting that she was “about medium height with a slight tendency toward plumpness” and “dark and fluffy” hair done “very simply and becomingly.” Her

“two piece tan crepe dress,” her black pumps with one strap, and her sand colored hose “would have gone unnoticed” if Frisbie had not consciously examined them, for her attire was “far too becoming to be conspicuous. When you talk to her you notice her vigor and herself, not her clothes.” Frisbie also notices particularly Cather's “extreme alertness” and the “care with which she chose her words.” “At first,” Frisbie confesses, “her deliberate manner bothered me, but, as soon as I realized what she was doing, it became pure delight to listen. She talks as she writes, clearly and deliberately.” The young woman then describes Cather's actions and obser-

Willa Cather, December 7, 1936. From the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.



vations through the afternoon, and concludes with the realization that Cather's literary life and accomplishments were not mentioned once.³¹

One final account of a passing impression is appropriate here. It is a report of a visit Cather paid to the new Brodstone Hospital in Superior, Nebraska, apparently in January of 1928. She had written the inscription for the dedicatory tablet in honor of an old friend, the Lady Evelene (Brodstone) Vestey. The anonymous writer of the *Superior Express* article about the occasion has provided in one paragraph a good concluding example of the kind of spontaneous, admiring responses Cather drew from a wide variety of publics in the 1920s:

It is not difficult to understand, after meeting her, why Miss Cather is so popular and beloved by her friends and acquaintances. Despite her literary successes her personal charm is augmented by her democracy, and her easy gracious commonness. In her presence one realizes that the greatest source of charm in her delightful novels and sketches lies in her pleasant and versatile personality.³²

Surely, the Cather portrayed here is more human and tractable than the Cather of some other accounts. It is not surprising that someone rebuffed by Cather would respond negatively to her, nor should it be surprising that an artist who wanted to give most of her energy and concentration to her work would rebuff uninvited persons who sometimes thoughtlessly sought to intrude on her privacy. The invited guest, the friend, the modest stranger, the agreed upon occasion, found Cather to be a charming host and guest and an attractive, generous, and unegotistical companion.

NOTES

¹See especially Randall's *The Landscape and the Looking Glass* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

²See Horgan's account of the incident in "In Search of the Archbishop," *Catholic Historical Review* 46 (January 1961), 409-27.

³*Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 238, 327-28.

⁴*Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975; first publ. Pegasus, 1970), 62, 244.

⁵*The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961; first publ. 1951), 219, 221.

⁶"Shadows on the Rock," in *On This Rock: An Island Anthology* (Grand Manan, N.B.: Gerrish House Society, 1963), 56, 60.

⁷*Willa Cather: The Woman and Her Works* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 100-101.

⁸"Miss Willa Cather from Nebraska," *New Colophon* 2 (September 1949), 203.

⁹"Willa Cather," in *Many Lives — One Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 354-68.

¹⁰(Hastings, Neb.: Hastings Daily Tribune), 354-68.

¹¹"Reminiscences of Willa Cather as a Teacher," *Bulletin of The New York Public Library* 60 (June 1956), 263-66. A more recent article by Brown and Crone, "Cather as Teacher: Pittsburgh Students Remember Willa, Grade Her Work," *Lincoln Sunday Journal-Star*, February 23, 1986, 15, section h, describes the recalled responses of a few more of Cather's students in Pittsburgh. One remembers her as being very strict and thus not very popular. All of them recall that she wore rather tailored, plain clothes. One who regarded himself as one of her favorites called her "firm but not cranky." He remembered her as "rather masculine in her manner," with a "heavy though pleasing voice." Another student apparently felt that she was mistreated by Cather and had no pleasant memories of her at all. Apparently professional jealousies also colored the views of a few who worked with Cather at *McClure's* magazine. In his review of the three Cather biographies (two of them memoirs) published in 1953, Witter Bynner says that even when he first met Cather she was old-seeming, too authoritative, and lacking in humor. See "A Willa Cather Triptych," *New Mexico Quarterly* 23 (Autumn 1953), 330-38. And, according to biographer Robert V. Hudson, Will Irwin experienced many frustrations while working at *McClure's*, among them the fear that Cather was after his job and the suspicion that she was having an affair with S.S. McClure. See *The Writing Game: A Biography of Will Irwin* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 57-58. In all, the younger woman seems to have drawn more negative criticism from casual acquaintances than the mature artist.

¹²"The Novelist: Willa Cather," in *These Two*

Were Here: Louise Homer and Willa Cather (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Press, 1950), 47-48.

¹³*Anatomy of Me* (New York: Arno Press, 1980; first publ. 1958), 259-60.

¹⁴"Remembering Willa Cather," *Woman's Press* (November 1984), 8-10.

¹⁵*Swinnerton: An Autobiography* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doran & Company), 8-10.

¹⁶*Books and People* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 208.

¹⁷"Go right ahead and ask me anything," (and so she did)," *McCall's* 95 (November 1967), 148. Capote tells essentially the same story of his first meeting with Cather in *Music for Chameleons*.

¹⁸"Five Literary Portraits," *Massachusetts Review* 3 (Spring 1962), 511-12.

¹⁹"Willa Cather, Former Nebraska Girl, Puts Prairie in Literature," *Omaha World-Herald*, February 1, 1920. James Shively, in his collection, *Writings from Willa Cather's Campus Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1950), has published a number of recollections from Cather's college classmates, few of which paint a flattering picture of Cather during her Lincoln years.

²⁰"Required Reading . . .," *New Hampshire Profiles* 4 (December 1955), 17-19.

²¹"Nebraska Scored for Its Many Laws by Willa Cather," *Omaha Sunday Bee*, October 30, 1921, 5, section a; *Omaha Daily Bee*, October 31, 1921, 4.

²²"To Live Intensely Is Creed of Willa S. Cather, Authoress," *Omaha Daily News*, October 29, 1921.

²³"Willa Cather, Famous Nebraska Novelist, Says Pioneer Mother Held Greatest Appreciation for Art — Raps Women Who Devote Themselves to Culture Clubs," *Lincoln Sunday Star*, November 6, 1921, 1, 12.

²⁴"Willa Cather," *Good Housekeeping* 93 (September 1931), 34-35, 196-98.

²⁵"Contemporary Reminiscences: Willa Cather, Zoe Akins, Theodore Dreiser and Others," *Arts and Decoration* 20 (April 1924), 28. Reprinted in *We Were Interrupted* (Garden City, N.Y.: 1947), 316-19.

²⁶"Restlessness Such as Ours Does Not Make for Beauty": In an Interview Miss Willa S. Cather Discusses America and Its Literature," 11.

²⁷"Willa Cather Discusses Writing and Short Story Courses," reprinted in the *Lincoln State Journal*, April 19, 1925, 11.

²⁸"Glimpses of Interesting Americans," *Century* 110 (July 1925), 309-13.

²⁹"Willa Catha [sic] — Novelist," in *An Institute of Modern Literature* (Lewiston, Maine: Lewiston Journal Co., 1926), 88-96.

³⁰"Willa Cather's Advice to a Young Artist," *Prairie Schooner* 46 (Summer 1972), 117-20.

³¹"Willa Cather and Red Cloud," *Present-Day American Literature* 1 (July 1928), 30-31.

³²*Superior Express*, "Red Cloud Ladies Visit Hospital," January 12, 1928.