

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR “COUSINS” ...

PULITZER PRIZE- WINNING FRONTIER NOVELIST

Willa Cather
(1873 – 1947)

— *Bradley Rymph*

VISITS TO BACK CREEK VALLEY (GORE), VIRGINIA:

October 17, 2010

October 9, 2011 (*with Albert and Edna Mae
Rymph*)

Willa Sibert Cather was an early 20th century American writer, best known for her novels about life on the Great Plains as white settlers began their moves there in the late 1800s from the eastern United States and as immigrants from Europe. Three of her most widely read novels were her Prairie Trilogy — *O Pioneers!* (published in 1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918) — all written about families after they had settled in frontier Nebraska. Another Nebraska-based novel, *One of Ours* (1922) won Cather a Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

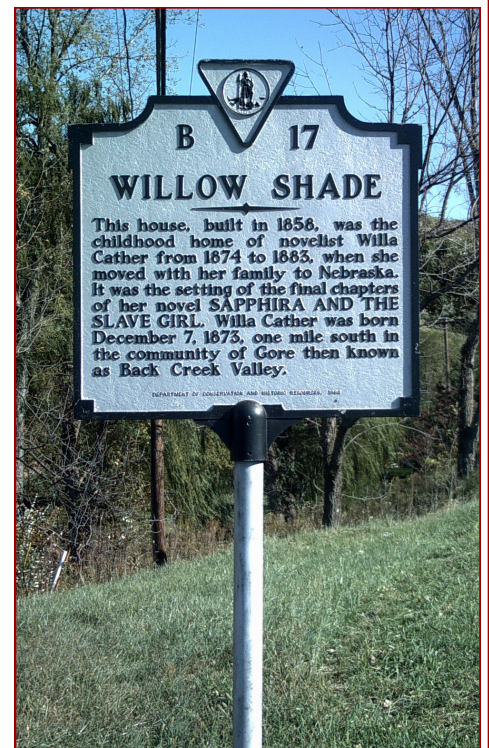
Cather’s writings, however, were not limited to the Great Plains. Another of her masterpieces, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), was set in New Mexico and France. She also wrote about life in New York City, where she worked as a writer and editor for most of her adult life. And her final novel, the controversial *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), took place in the Back Creek Valley of northwestern Virginia, the Appalachian area where she was born north of the city of Winchester. That novel’s final chapters were set at Willow Shade, the house in Back Creek Valley where she and her family lived from shortly after her birth until they moved west to Nebraska in 1883 (when she was age 9).

One of Willa Cather’s great-great-

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*"Willow Shade,"
Gore, Virginia*



grandfathers was Captain Jeremiah Smith (1711–1787; see separate profile in "Soldiers"), who had been one of the earliest settlers in Back Creek Valley.

Willa Cather was born December 7, 1873, with the name Willela Cather. Her parents had a sheep farm in Back Creek Valley. At the time of her birth, her parents lived in a house in the Valley that had been built in the early 1800s, then expanded and remodeled by Willa's maternal grandparents. A few

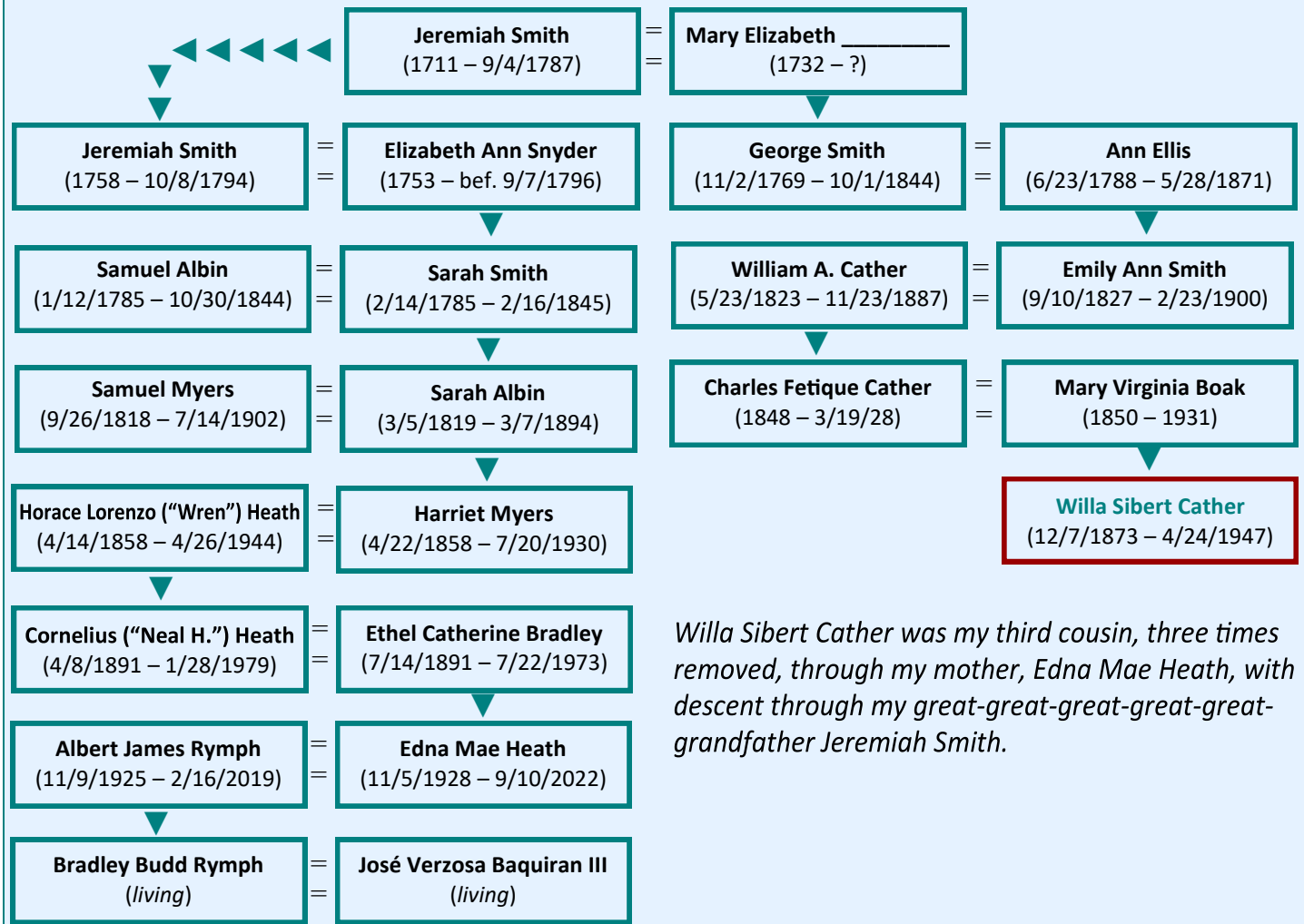
months later, Willa's paternal grandparents — William A. and Emily Ann (Smith) Cather — moved west from Back Creek Valley to the Nebraska frontier, and Willa's parents moved their family into the Cather grandparents' home, known as Willow Shade. Both houses still stand and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1883, Willa's parents decided to move west to join her maternal



*Cather home,
Red Cloud, Nebraska*

HOW WE'RE RELATED



Willa Sibert Cather was my third cousin, three times removed, through my mother, Edna Mae Heath, with descent through my great-great-great-great-grandfather Jeremiah Smith.

grandparents on the Nebraska frontier. They eventually settled in railroad community of Red Cloud, in the south-central portion of the state, and Willa's father opened a farm mortgage business there. Most of the family's neighbors were European immigrants.

Many years later, she recalled the family's arrival in Red Cloud:

We drove out to Red Cloud to my grandfather's homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon,

holding onto the side of the wagon to steady myself — the roads were mostly faint rails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out in the country I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything.... It was kind of an erasure of personality.... I had heard my father say you had to show grit in a new country, and I would have bot on pretty well doing that ride if it had not been for the larks. Every

WILLA CATHER AND MARK TWAIN

In late 1905, Willa Cather attended a 70th birthday celebration for Mark Twain. A decade earlier in May 1895, about the time she would have graduated from the University of Nebraska, Cather had written a scathing critique of Twain in the *Nebraska State Journal*:

... like all men of his class, and limited mentality, he cannot criticize without becoming personal and insulting. He cannot be scathing without being a blackguard.... Mark Twain is a humorist of a kind. His humor is always rather broad, so broad that the polite world can justly call it coarse. He is not a reader nor a thinker nor a man who loves art of any kind. He is a clever Yankee who has made a "good thing" out of writing. ... but he is not and never will be a part of literature. The association and companionship of cultured men has given Mark Twain a sort of professional veneer, but it could not give him fine instincts or nice discriminations or elevated tastes. His works are pure and suitable for children, just as the work of most shallow and mediocre fellows.... Thoroughly likeable as a

good fellow, but impossible as a man of letters.

Just two years later, Cather's opinion of Twain seems to have moderated. In May 1897, she wrote in *The Home Monthly*:

I got a letter last week from a little boy just half-past seven who had just read "huckleberry Finn" and "Tom Sawyer." He said: "If there are any more books like them in the world, send them to me quick." I had to humbly confess to him that if there were any others I had not the good fortune to know of them. What a red-letter day it is to a boy, the day he first opens "Tom Sawyer." I would rather sail on the raft down the Missouri again with "Huck" Finn and Jim than go down the Nile in December of see Venice from a gondola in May. Certainly Mark Twain is much better when he writes of his Missouri boys than when he makes sickley romances about Joan of Arc. And certainly he never did a better piece of work than "Prince and Pauper." One seems to get at the very heart of old England in that dearest of children's books, and in its pages the frail boy king, and his gloomy sister Mary who in her day wrought so much woe for unhappy England, and the dashing Princess Elizabeth who lived to rule so well, seem to live again.



Willa Cather's table at a party for Mark Twain's 70th birthday in 1905. Cather is third from right.

*The young Willa Cather,
dressed as a boy*

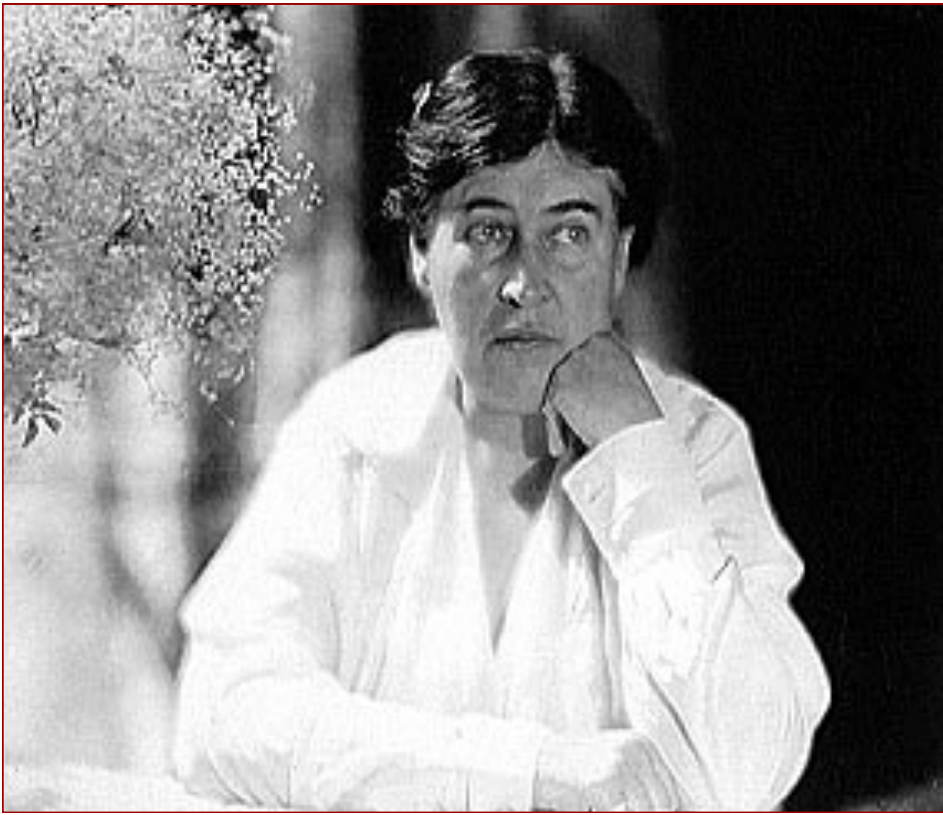


now and then one flew up and sang a few splendid notes and dropped down into the grass again. That reminded me of something — I don't know what, but my one purpose in life just then was not to cry, and every time they did it, I thought I would go under.

Both in Virginia and in her first two years in Nebraska, Willa was not sent to school. Instead her education in Virginia consisted of her being read to by her maternal grandmother. In Nebraska, "she read many of the English Classics aloud to her two grandmothers and learned to read Latin at the same time," according to Edith Lewis (with whom Cather lived for the last several decades of her life).

The writer Joan Acocella wrote of Willa's childhood: "No money, no privacy, no great things around her, but just a dusty prairie town ... a mother usually sick or pregnant, and a pack of noisy little brothers and sisters."

As a child, Willa was known as an unconventional girl. Acocella calls her "a show-off, an explosion, a pest." Willa intentionally sought out the eccentric older people around Red Cloud, hoping to learn from them less conventional ways of thinking and acting. Hoping to one day become a doctor, she had a hobby of dissecting animals to learn their anatomies. Willa also preferred the company and activities of boys to those of girls. According to profiler Chris Kraus, "At fourteen, she went to



the town barber, got a crew cut, and started dressing like a man.”

When Willa first arrived at the University of Nebraska in 1890, she continued to dress as a man — a practice she continued until friends persuaded her to stop during her second year in Lincoln. She also called herself William Cather, Jr. At first, she was determined to study to become a doctor. However, as she began writing themes for her English classes, her interests changed. By 1893, her primary studies were English Composition and English Literature. To help her family back in Red Cloud, she began writing play reviews, features, and a column for the *Nebraska State Journal*.

Also while in college, Willa is said to have fallen passionately in love with a fellow student and athlete, Louise Pound. One profiler notes, “In her letters to Pound, Cather regrets the fact that society considers intimate friendship between women to be unnatural.”

The independent Willa was, simultaneously, proudly certain of her own ambitions and harshly critical of what she perceived as the generally limited literary talents of her fellow females:

- “The fact that I was a girl never damaged my ambitions to be a pope or emperor.”
- “Sometimes I wonder why God ever trusts [literary] talent in the hands of

women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it.”

- Female poets were “emotional in the extreme, self-centered, absorbed.”
- Female novelists had “a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable” and were only able to write about love.

Once she graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1895, she went back home to Red Cloud. The Agricultural Depression of that era had caused her father’s mortgage and insurance business to founder. She minded that business while her father went to Lincoln to pursue other business opportunities.

Travel and writing never ceased to be the focus of Cather’s dreams and aspirations. A year after returning to Red Cloud, she was offered a job with

the *Home Monthly* of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She accepted the offer and eagerly moved East. After a brief period with that publication, she left to work instead with the more prestigious Pittsburgh *Daily Leader*, where she rewrote wire stories and published various reviews. But, by the time she was 28, she despaired that she would never have the time to write the fiction that was calling to her. She quit journalism, and for four years taught high school in Pittsburgh.

In the years that followed, she wrote “Paul’s Case,” the short story of which she was proudest, then published a book of poems (*April Twilights*, 1903) and another of short stories (*The Troll Garden*, 1905), including “Paul’s Case.” S. S. McClure, the publisher of *The Troll Garden*, also published a magazine



Grave of Willa Cather,
Old Burying Grounds, Jaffrey,
New Hampshire. Grave of
her partner in life, Edith
Lewis, is immediately to
the right of Cather’s grave.

named for him. Not long after publishing her book, McClure persuaded Cather to join the staff of *McClure's Magazine*. In 1906, Willa left Pittsburgh, moved to New York City, and for six years worked for that magazine, eventually becoming managing editor of what was at the time one of the most influential political and literary magazines in the United States.

In 1908, Cather met the essayist and fiction writer Sarah Orne Jewett, who became a mentor to Cather. Not long after their meeting, Jewett wrote Cather a letter, "I cannot help saying what I think about your writing and its being hindered by such incessant, important, responsible work as you ... have now. You must find your own quiet center of life and write from that ... to write and work from this level we must life it."

Cather took Jewett's advice. In 1909, she wrote her first Nebraska-based story, "The Enchanted Bluff," and began writing down notes for another (unpublished) story, "Alexandra." In 1911, Cather took a long leave of absence from *McClure's* to write her first novel, the Boston-based *Alexander's Bridge* (published in 1912), and then immediately began work on another Nebraska-based short story, "The Bohemian Girl." She also went back to Red Cloud, and wrote "The

White Mulberry Tree." On her way back to New York City from Red Cloud, she stopped in Pittsburgh. While there, she put the manuscripts for "Alexandra" and "The White Mulberry Tree" next to each other and realized that she had already written half a novel. The merger of the two stories eventually became her great novel, *O Pioneers!*

Also in 1908, Cather met a fellow Nebraskan, Edith Lewis, while Cather was on a visit back to the state where she became an adult. Like Cather, Lewis was employed in New York City in publishing and advertising. Lewis began serving as the copyeditor, proofreader, and editor of Cather's work. The two moved into an apartment together in New York City. They continued to live together at various Manhattan addresses until Cather's death in 1947.

In 1912, while on her long leave of absence from *McClure's Magazine*, Cather officially resigned, so she could devote herself to writing full-time.

In the years that followed, Cather became one of the most prolific and highly respected novelists (male or female) of her time, releasing one highly regarded novel after another:

- *Alexander's Bridge* (1912)
- *O Pioneers!* (1913)
- *The Story of the Lark* (1915)

- *My Antonia* (1918)
- *One of Ours* (1921)
- *A Lost Lady* (1922)
- *The Professor's House* (1925)
- *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)
- *Shadows on the Rock* (1931)
- *Lucy Gayheart* (1935)
- *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940)

On April 24, 1947, Cather died of a cerebral hemorrhage in the New York City apartment she shared at the time with Edith Lewis. She was buried in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, and left Lewis as executor of her literary estate. Lewis later wrote that Cather “was never more herself than on the last morning of her life; her spirit was high, her grasp of reality as firm as always.”

When Lewis later died 25 years later in 1972, she was buried in a grave next to Cather's.

TO LEARN MORE

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