

Willa Cather



Photo by David Mobley

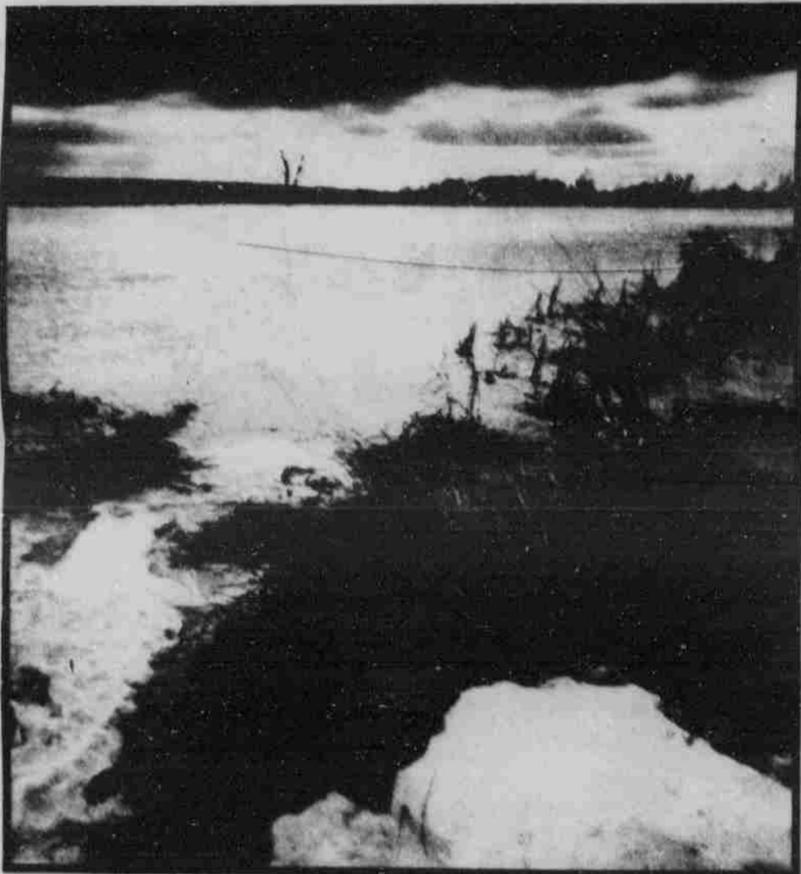


Photo by Ted Kirk

"Winter. . .the season in which nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep between the fruitfulness of Autumn and the passion of spring."

---Oh Pioneer!

"I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of these fields at nightfall."

---My Antonia

By Bill Roberts

"She had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself," wrote Willa Cather, "as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring."

Although Cather was describing Marian Forrester, main character in her 1923 novel, *A Lost Lady*, she might have been describing the rolling prairies of her childhood home in Red Cloud, Neb. For Cather, these grasslands suggested the pioneer spirit, the grand urge to bring order to the wilderness.

The prairies now are tamed. But her books about Nebraska—*O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*—her short stories and poems still call up the courage and spirit of those times.

Born in Virginia's Back Creek Valley in 1873, Cather moved to Nebraska when she was nine years old. But she never was cut off from civilization. Her father was an educated man, Willa an insatiable reader, and Red Cloud, situated on the railroad's main line, was not isolated.

In Nebraska she played on the bluffs and sandbars of the Republican River, collected seashells and performed scientific experiments. When she was graduated from Red Cloud High School in 1890, her commencement address was titled "Superstition vs. Investigation."

Cather's literary talents emerged during

her five years at the University of Nebraska. She wrote for the campus news and literary magazine, the *Hesperian*, and worked for the *Nebraska State Journal* newspaper.

After graduation she moved to Pittsburgh, then to New York in 1906. There S. S. McClure arranged for her collection of short stories, *The Troll Garden*, to be published. She worked for McClure's Magazine and eventually became managing editor.

She traveled extensively as an editor of one of America's finest magazines and her trips to the West became more frequent. Her rediscovery of Nebraska and the American Southwest inspired her to write the fiction which made her the greatest author this state has produced.

Cather had come to the West not as a trailblazer, but with the second generation of pioneers. She grew up among struggles that would shape the quality of life in the West, the changing of sodhouses into cities.

"This was the very end of the road-making West," a character in *A Lost Lady* reflects. "It was already gone, that age; nothing could ever bring it back. The taste and smell and song of it, the visions those men had seen in the air and followed,—these he had caught in a kind of afterglow in their own faces,—and this would always be his."



Daily Nebraskan Photo

"Trees were so rare in that country. . .they had to make such a hard fight to grow. It must have been the scarcity of detail in that tawny landscape that made detail so precious."

---My Antonia