

WILLA CATHER THEMATIC GROUP:

WT07-10

81000376

1. NAME: Burlington Depot

2. LOCATION: South end of Seward street at the northwest corner of the intersection of Railway.

4. OWNER: State of Nebraska—Historical Society
ADDRESS: 1500 R Street, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508

7. DESCRIPTION: Red Cloud's Burlington Depot measures about 25 x 100 feet in plan and is a fairly standard combination station of wood frame construction. The two story section was built in 1897 and represents the essential combination station with agents living quarters above. The freight room, agents office and waiting room originally occupied the ground floor of this section. In 1913 the one story wing to the east was added, providing additional waiting room space and a covered platform-loading area. An 80 foot long wing to the west was constructed in 1916 which provided an enlarged freight room as well as lunch room. The majority of this wing was later removed, leaving only the coal storage room west of the main building and thus leaving the truncated appearance of the gabled west wing (photo #18).

The entire building except the truncated western wing is roofed with a hip roof, supported by brackets, and covered with metal shingles. A squared bay window on the south (track) side is original. Interior finishing of the entire ground floor is original while the second floor living quarters, once remodeled into enginemen's bunk rooms, was recently remodeled into comfortable living quarters for the Curator of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial.

The building was moved from its original site ca. 1965-67 as the result of the Burlington Northern's policies of removing redundant facilities from major lines. Its original site is less than 300 feet south-southwest of its present site, a location which still offers much of the ambience of the railroad setting and its originally remote location from Red Cloud's business district. Due to the Burlington Northern's policies, the building had to be moved in order to be preserved.

8. SIGNIFICANCE: Depots in general played a significant role in Cather's writings, thus justifying this building's significance to the primary theme. The original two story section of the depot is the building Miss Cather was familiar with during her last years in Red Cloud.

Red Cloud in 1887 was on the main line of the Burlington and Missouri between Kansas City and Denver. At one time eight passenger trains passed through town daily making the Red Cloud Depot a busy and exciting place. Mildred Bennet says:

"The Miner children had a pony, Billy, who could be trusted to start for home either at the first drop of rain or when he began to tire. The children particularly liked to drive him to the depot. . . If the troupe for some entertainment at the Opera House happened to arrive, the children were doubly delighted." (Bennett: 1961, pp. 43-44).

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"For Willa, growing up in Red Cloud, trains and the depot symbolized both escape to the world and the door through which the world came to Red Cloud. Trains later became a symbol of homecoming in her writings, and to her personality. Trains and Depots play an important part in much of Cather's fiction. In My Ántonia Jim Burden and the Sadilek family both travel to Nebraska by train.

"We stumbled down from the train to a wooden siding, where men were running about with lanterns. I couldn't see any town, or even distant lights; we were surrounded by utter darkness. The engine was panting heavily after its long run. In the red glow from the fire-box, a group of people stood huddled together on the platform, encumbered by bundles and boxes. I knew this must be the immigrant family the conductor had told us about." (My Ántonia pg. 5.)

The Union Pacific Depot in Cheyenne is the setting for "The Westbound Train" and a depot is described in "The Affair at Grover Station." The Red Cloud Depot is the setting for a happy departure in Lucy Gayheart.

"The train from the west was due to leave Haverford at seven-thirty, and by seven o'clock sleighs and wagons from all directions were driving toward the railway station at the south end of town.

"The station platform was soon full of restless young people, glancing up the track, looking at their watches, as if they could not endure their own town a moment longer." (Lucy Gayheart pg. 12-13).

and a unhappy homecoming in "The Sculptor's Funeral"

"There was but one of the company who looked as though he knew exactly why he was there; and he kept conspicuously apart; walking to the far end of the platform, returning to the station door, then pacing up the track again, his chin sunk in the high collar of his overcoat, his burly shoulders drooping forward, his gait heavy and dogged." ("The Sculptor's Funeral" - Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912. p. 173).

"A number of lanky boys of all ages appeared as suddenly and slimily as eels wakened by the crack of thunder; some came from the waiting-room, where they had been warming themselves by the red stove, or half asleep on the slat benches; others uncoiled themselves from baggage trucks or slid out of express wagons." ("The Sculptor's Funeral", Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912, p. 174).

Cather published two poems about the railroad: "The Night Express" and "Going Home (Burlington Route)".

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From out the mist-clad meadows, along the river shore,
The night express-train whistles with eye of fire before.
A trail of smoke behind her enclouds the rising moon
That gilds the sighing poplars and floods the wide lagoon.
Through yellow fields of harvest and waving fields of corn
The night express-train rumbles with whistle low and lorn.
The silent village harkens the sound it knows so well,
And boys wait on the siding to hear the engine-bell,
While lads who used to loiter with wistful steps and slow,
Await to-night a comrade who comes, but will not go.
The train that brings to mothers the news of sons who roam
Shoots red from out the marshes to bring a rover home.
(from "The Night Express", April Twilights, (1903) p. 38).

How smoothly the trains run beyond the Missouri;
Even in my sleep I know when I have crossed the river.
The wheels turn as if they were glad to go;
The sharp curves and windings left behind,
The road-way wide open,
(The crooked straight
And the rough places plain.)
(from "Going Home Burlington Route ", April Twilights, and Other Poems, p. 66).

The depot also carries significance to the architectural sub-theme. The depot is an excellent and well-preserved example of its type, that is, a wood-frame combination (freight and passenger) station with second story trainmen's bunkhouse. Living quarters were typically provided on the second level of many such stations on the Great Plains as a result of sparse settlement and the difficulty of finding suitable quarters in towns that grew up, sometimes slowly, following the completion of the railroad. The type has been seen as a notable example of architectural adaptation to this environment.¹⁴ While this depot is rather typical in design in its use of drop siding, lack of ornamentation, and overall form, depots along the Burlington system tended to be somewhat less standardized because of the latitude offered by the company to each operating division staff.¹⁵ The Red Cloud station is one of few which utilized a hip roof, giving the station a somewhat unique overall appearance.¹⁶

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreeage: Less than one acre

UTM Coordinate: 14/E540800/N4436240

Verbal Boundary Description; Lots 11-13, Block 19, Railroad addition to the City of Red Cloud, Webster County, Nebraska.

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