

WILLA CATHER THEMATIC GROUP:

WT00-175, Continued

The chalk cliffs, a highly visible manifestation of a local geological condition (see WT00-176) are a local landmark which was also noted in Cather's writings.

" . . . Our own house looked down over the town, and from our upstairs windows we could see the winding line of the river bluffs, two miles south of us." (My Ántonia, pg. 145)

" . . . 'Ha,' he murmured under his breath, 'there's the white chalk cliff where the Indians used to run the buffalo over Bison Leap--we kids called it--the remote sea wall of the boy world. I'm getting home sure enough'". ("The Treasure of Far Island" Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912, pg. 266).

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA:

Acreege: 50 acres (approx.)

- UTM CoordinateS: A 14/E540420/N4434745
B 14/E540930/N4434740
C 14/E540930/N4434340
D 14/E540420/N4434335

Verbal Boundary Description: This property is located in the SE¼, Section 11, T1N, R11W beginning at point 630 meters west of a center line of Highway 281, and 410 meters north of the south section line, then heading east for 510 meters, turning south 405 meters then returning west for 510 meters again heading north for 410 meters to point of origin. 52 acres.

WTOO-176

82003207

1. NAME: Willa Cather Memorial Prairie--Natural feature
2. LOCATION: 5 miles south of Red Cloud, west of U.S. Highway 281 including all of Section 35 west of the highway.
4. OWNER/ADDRESS: The Nature Conservancy
Rex Boner
328 East Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55414
cc: Hal Nagel, Depart of Biology
Kearney State College, Kearney, Nebraska 68847

7. DESCRIPTION: The Cather Prairie is a large tract of unbroken prairie nearly 600 acres in area. Dr. Harold Nagel, Professor of Biology at Kearney State College has kindly provided the following description of the Cather Prairie from a soon to be published manuscript.

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"Cather Prairie combines characteristics of both the tallgrass prairie of the east and shortgrass prairie of the west and adds unique characteristics of its own for a blend of prairie plants known as mixed grass prairie. Chalk lilies, butterfly milkweed and other plants thrive on Cather Prairie's chalky outcroppings along the limestone ridges. The vegetation of Cather Prairie is probably similar to what it was when Willa was gathering wildflowers in Webster County. As Cather described the bluestem vegetation in My Antonia -- "As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at any other time of the day." However, where cattle grazed heavily in past years, the redgrass (big and little bluestem) has been largely replaced by tall dropseed, side-oats grama, and weedy species such as Kentucky Bluegrass. Wildflowers make up about 25% of the vegetation and are very abundant, both in number of individuals and number of species. Kearney State College scientists have documented 250 species of plants on the prairie.

"Animal life on Cather Prairie, though inconspicuous, is abundant. As many as 250 insects and spiders (from 40 species), most of which require careful observation to be noticed, can be found in a square yard. While insects and spiders are abundant, conspicuously missing are bison, prairie dogs and antelope which were the dominant animals before the settlers arrived bringing with them guns and barbed wire. Today this niche is partially filled by cattle and white-tail deer. Visitors to the prairie will see over 30 bird species in a days' outing. Meadowlarks, Grasshopper Sparrows, Upland Sandpipers and recently Greater Prairie Chickens are among those to be seen. Prairie Chickens were not on Cather Prairie in 1975, but are now nesting there in fairly large numbers."

The long-range goal of The Nature Conservancy and the Kearney State College biologists who work with the prairie is its restoration to pre-settlement conditions.

8. SIGNIFICANCE: The prairie which characterized this land when the Cathers first arrived in Nebraska had a profound, lasting influence on the young Willa Cather. She later wrote about her first impressions of the new homeland.

"This country was mostly wild pasture and as naked as the back of your hand. I was little and homesick and lonely and my mother was homesick and nobody paid any attention to us. So the country and I had it out together and by the end of the first autumn, that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and the curse of my life."

Cather's interest in the prairie was scientific as well as aesthetic. Hal Nagel writes -- "Cather apparently developed a good knowledge of the local flora. She became interested in wildflowers early, possibly being influenced by her Aunt Frank (Mrs. George Cather, whose plant collection from the 1890's is housed at the Willa Cather Museum in Red Cloud). Willa Cather and her brother Roscoe collected botanical specimens and mounted them".¹⁰

Mildred Bennett has noted the Cather felt there was no place with more beautiful wildflowers in the world than Nebraska. She continues, quoting Cather -- "In England, in any European country, they would all have beautiful names. . . As a child I gave them all names of my own. I used to gather great armfuls of them and sit and cry over them. . . There is one book that I would rather have produced than all my novels. That is the Clemens sic botany dealing with the wildflowers of the West."¹¹

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Characteristically, the prairie is a recurring theme in Cather's writings.

"As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running." (My Ántonia, p. 15)

". . .But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness." (O Pioneers!, p. 15)

10. GEOGRAPHIC DATA

Acreage: Approx. 599 acres

UTM CoordinateS: A 14/E539460/N4429520

B 14/E541080/N4429540

C 14/E541090/ N4427920

D 14/E539480/N4427920

Verbal Boundary Description: The property includes all of Section 35, T1N, R11W except for a southeast portion (see map) beginning at the northwest point of section 35, following the section line east, then south at the section line, for 1,000 meters, then making a jog west following the highway to the south line of the section, following remainder of section line. 605 acres.

WTOO-177

82 - 4970

1. NAME: "Crossroads Grave Site"

2. LOCATION: Corner of Sections 25 and 36, T3N, R12W and Sections 30 and 31, T3N, R11 W

4. OWNER: Webster County Commissioners

ADDRESS: Webster County Courthouse, Red Cloud, Nebraska

7. DESCRIPTION: This site is known locally as the "suicide corner", the site of the original burial place of Francis Sadilek, one of the first Bohemian settlers in Webster County and father of "Ántonia". Buried by his wife in 1881 in what was thought to be the corner of the Sadilek's homestead, later surveys found it to be along the section lines and in the county's right-of-way. The roads ran around the gravesite for some time but the grave was removed prior to 1914. The road was straightened in the late 1950's or early 1960's. Presently the north-south road is vacated, its alignment still visible between the hedgerows (photo #15).

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8. SIGNIFICANCE: This unusual site is important to the major theme as well as the ethnic heritage sub-theme. The idea of burying suicides and other undesirable human phenomena at a cross roads or other crossings, with its connotations of Satan's cross, etc., relates strongly to Central European traditional belief systems — a part of necromantic magic.

Significance relative to the major theme is indicated in a letter Cather wrote to Carrie Miner Sherwood (January 27, 1934), where Cather indicated ". . .that if she were to write anything at all, it would have had to be My Ántonia because of the many times she had heard the story of the Sadilek suicide when she first came out to Nebraska." (Bennett: 1961, p. 241 notes). Because of this, the site has retained considerable importance locally.

Cather describes the grave in My Ántonia

"It developed that Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch wanted the old man buried on the southwest corner of their own land; indeed, under the very stake that marked the corner. Grandfather had explained to Ambrosch that some day, when the country was put under fence and the roads were confined to section lines, two roads would cross exactly on that corner. But Ambrosch only said, 'It makes no matter.'

"Grandfather asked Jelinek whether in the old country there was some superstition to the effect that a suicide must be buried at the cross-roads.

"Jelinek said he didn't know; he seemed to remember hearing there had one been such a custom in Bohemia." (My Ántonia, pg. 113).

"Years afterwards, when the open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines, Mr. Shimerda's grave was still there, with a sagging wire fence around it, and an unpainted wooden cross. As grandfather had predicted, Mrs. Shimerda never saw the roads going over his head. The road from the north curved a little to the east just there, and the road from the west swung out a little to the south; so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me. I loved the dim superstition, the propitiatory intent, that had put the grave there; and still more I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence—the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the home-coming wagons rattled after sunset. Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper." (My Ántonia, p. 118-119).

10. GEOGRAPHIC DATA

Acreage: less than one acre

UTM Coordinate: 14/E532905/N4448790

Verbal Boundary Description: This property is located at the center point of the intersection of sections 25 and 36, T3N, R12W, and sections 30 and 31, T3N, R11W.

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