

**WILLA CATHER THEMATIC GROUP:**

**SITES IN WEBSTER COUNTY NEBRASKA—INVENTORY . . . . . Page 1**

WTOO-12

82-200

1. NAME: Garber Grove

2. LOCATION: East of U.S. Highway 281 and south of U.S. 136, just east of the Corporate boundary of Red Cloud.

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY: Mrs. Henry Erickson

ADDRESS: Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

7. DESCRIPTION: The site is located on a slight rise just east and north of Crooked Creek (see site map, photocopy #1). The grove is a thick growth of cottonwood which demarks the original site of the Red Cloud Stockade, the Silas Garber dugout and the Silas Garber house. The house (photo #2) was destroyed by fire ca. 1925 and was replaced by a second house in about 1928. This second house was removed in 1959. Cultural features include remnants of the brick house foundation, a well and pump, a deteriorated shed, the lane leading to the house site, and a number of very old lilac bushes, yellow rose bushes and conifer trees.

8. SIGNIFICANCE: Garber Grove and the site of the Garber house were important both to Cather personally and to her writings, particularly as the setting for A Lost Lady. Mildred Bennett has recorded the importance of the place to Cather's personal life:

"A five acre grove of cottonwoods grew to the north and east, and blue grass sprinkled with white and red clover covered the slopes. The grove was a favorite place for picnics and in later years Willa said that in order to write well, she had to get up feeling thirteen years old and all set for a picnic in that grove. At one time she even considered buying and restoring the place" (Bennett: 1961, p. 73).

Willa Cather wrote A Lost Lady about Lyra Garber, wife of Silas Garber (former Nebraska Governor) and a friend of Willa's while she was growing up in Red Cloud. Cather talked about her friendship with Mrs. Garber in an interview published in the New York World. In it she said,

".. . A Lost Lady was a woman I loved very much in my childhood. Now the problem was to get her not like a standardized heroine in fiction, but as she really was, and not to care about anything else in the story except that one character. And there is nothing but that portrait."<sup>1</sup>

Cather describes the Garber place in A Lost Lady:

"The Forrester place, as everyone called it, was not at all remarkable; the people who lived there made it seem much larger and finer than it was. The house stood on a low round hill, nearly a mile east of town; a white house with a wing, and sharp-sloping roofs to shed the snow. It was encircled by porches, too narrow for modern notions of comfort, supported by the fussy, fragile pillars of that time, when every honest stick of timber was tortured by the turning-lathe into something hideous. Stripped of its vines and denuded of its shrubbery, the house would probably have

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been ugly enough. It stood close into a fine cottonwood grove that threw sheltering arms to left and right and grew all down the hillside behind it. Thus placed on the hill, against its bristling grove, it was the first thing one saw on coming into Sweet Water by rail, and the last thing one saw on departing.

"To approach Captain Forrester's property you had first to get over a wide, sandy creek which flowed along the eastern edge of the town. Crossing this by the foot-bridge or the ford, you entered the Captain's private lane, bordered by Lombardy poplars, with wide meadows lying on either side. Just at the foot of the hill on which the house sat, one crossed a second creek by the stout wooden road-bridge. This stream traced artless loops and curves through the broad meadows that were half pasture land, half marsh. Any one but Captain Forrester would have drained the bottom land and made it into highly productive fields. But he had selected this place long ago because it looked beautiful to him, and he happened to like the way the creek wound through his pasture, with mint and joint-grass and twinkling willows along its banks. He was well off for those times, and he had no children. He could afford to humour his fancies." (A Lost Lady, Pg. 10-11.)

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage: 14 acres (approx.)

- UTM Coordinates: A 14/E541220/N4437230
- B 14/E541450/N4437230
- C 14/E541220/N4436950
- D 14/E541450/N4436950

Verbal Boundary Description: This property is located in the W½ of NW¼, Section 1, T1N, R11W, beginning at a point 220 meters east of a center line of Highway 281 and 290 meters south of a center line of Highway 136; then heading east for 240 meters, then turning south 280 meters, heading back west 240 meters, finally turning north 280 meters back to the point of origin. 16 acres.

WTOO-13 82-4917

- 1. NAME: George Cather farmstead
- 2. LOCATION: Southwest of Bladen
- 4. OWNER: James and Virginia Kral
- ADDRESS: Bladen, Nebraska 68928

7. DESCRIPTION: This substantial farmstead developed over a period of years beginning ca. 1880 through the 1920's. The farmstead includes the main dwelling, outhouse, windmill, garage, shed, corrals and barn as well as a subsidiary dwelling with associated outhouse, smokehouse, summer-kitchen and windmill. Other subsidiary buildings include several grain bins, a frame granary and a larger frame shed. The buildings are identified and their arrangement indicated on the sketch site plan (photo copy # 3).

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WT00-13, Continued

Major features of the site include the main, George Cather house, built initially in the early 1880's, and expanded and remodelled through the turn of the century. A substantial dwelling, the 22 room house is two stories over a brick basement banked into the hillside with a sub-basement below — a Tidewater I house in type with vernacular Neo-Classical detailing highlighting the exterior (photos #4, 5).

A second major feature of the site is the horse barn, a substantial frame structure with central feed aisle terminated on the south with a granary and with manure aisles along each (east and west) side. Along the west is an attached implement shed, while a large open loft is situated above the ground floor of the main part of the building. Both the exterior walls and the roof are covered with cedar shingles, a feature of several of the non-domestic outbuildings (photo #6).

A third major feature is the one-and-one-half story, frame, gable-fronted bungalow which was built after the turn of the century for use by George Cather's son, Frank (photo #7). Other subsidiary outbuildings associated with this house as well as the farmstead in general are noted on the site plan and have been listed above.

8. SIGNIFICANCE: The George Cather farmstead is significant to the major theme as well as to the architectural sub-theme. The site was the home of Willa's aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. George P. Cather. Her Aunt Francis (Aunt "Franc"), was the prototype for Aunt Georgiana in "A Wagner Matinee" from Cather's The Troll Garden.

" . . . and I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress; the black pond where I had learned to swim, its margin pitted with sun-dried cattle tracks; the rain-gullied clay banks about the naked house, the four dwarf ash seedlings where the dishcloths were always hung to dry before the kitchen door. The world there was the flat world of the ancients; to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak; to the west, a corral that reached to sunset; between, the conquests of peace, dearer bought than those of war." ("A Wagner Matinee", p. 112)

"For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curved boards; naked as a tower, the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dishcloths hung to dry; the gaunt, molting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door." ("A Wagner Matinee", p. 115)

The house was also the setting for Cather's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, One of Ours.

"When he came up the hill like this, toward the tall house with its lighted windows, something always clutched at his heart. He both loved and hated to come home. . . .The table was set for supper, and Mahailey was at the stove, stirring something in a big iron pot; cornmeal mush, probably,—she often made it for herself now that her teeth had begun to fail." (One of Ours, p. 42)

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"The attic was reached by a ladder, which, because of her weak back, Mrs. Wheeler very seldom climbed. Up there Mahailey had things her own way, and thither she often retired to air the bedding stored away there, or to look at the pictures in the piles of old magazines." (One of Ours, p. 65)

"Before him were the bluffs of the pasture, and the little trees, almost bare, huddled in violet shadow along the creek, and the Wheeler farm-house on the hill, its windows all aflame with the last red fire of the sun." (One of Ours, p. 71).

"He (Claude) crept down two flights of stairs, feeling his way in the dusk . . . He went through the kitchen into the adjoining washroom, which held two porcelain stands with running water. Everybody had washed before going to bed, apparently, and the bowls were ringed with a dark sediment which the hard, alkaline water had not dissolved." (One of Ours, p. 3)

The George P. Cather house is also significant to the architectural heritage of Nebraska. The house is an excellent, well-developed if somewhat late example of the Virginia Tidewater I-type house which is a relatively rare house type in Nebraska in spite of its strong Anglo associations. One room deep and two stories high over the basement, the house features external end brick stove flues and a wide central stair hall common to the later, Georgian-influenced I houses of the Tidewater.<sup>2</sup> Stylistically, the house proclaims its late date relative to the type with vernacular Neo-Georgian or Neo-Classical Revival detailing including its projecting entrance pavilion with rounded vestibule, the full-frontal porch, return cornices, and its shingled front gable with elliptical attic light.

The features extant in the farm group well-represent a prosperous turn-of-the-century farm on the Great Plains. The Frank Cather dwelling, with its summer kitchen, though later, serves well to enhance, along with the existence of the I house, the prosperous Anglo culture which built the farmstead.

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA:

Acreage: Less than ten acres

UTM Coordinate: 14/E530555/N4455260

Verbal Boundary Description: This property is located in the central S½, S½ of Section 2, T3N, R12W. The center point of the property is located 75 meters north of a center point of the south section line and 720 meters west of a center point of the east section line.

JAN 16 1981