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## WILLA CATHER'S PITTSBURGH YEARS 1896-1906

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IT is a pleasure to be with you this evening and to have this opportunity of talking with you about the Pittsburgh years of Willa Cather. She was in Pittsburgh from 1896-1906 and called Pittsburgh the birthplace of her writing. At times I may seem to give you more Pittsburgh than Cather — a fault acceptable perhaps to Historical Society listeners.

In the preface to *The Song of the Lark* Cather said, "The life of a successful artist in the full tide of achievement is not so interesting as the life of a talented young girl 'fighting her way,' as we say. Success is never so interesting as struggle — not even to the successful, not even to the most mercenary forms of ambition."

The Pittsburgh years were years of struggle and were vitally interesting and important. Too often these Pittsburgh years are passed over with a mere mention. In 1955 Dorothy Canfield Fisher told Mildred Bennett, President of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial in Red Cloud, Nebraska — who was then writing a Cather biography — that she should "emphasize the importance of the City of Pittsburgh in those years for Pittsburgh was more vital, more creative, more hungry for culture even than New York . . ."

Steel, oil and coal fortunes were endowing Carnegie Institute with

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An address delivered before the Society on October 17, 1967, by Mrs. Byrne, who is a leading authority on the life and works of Willa Cather. Mrs. Byrne belongs to numerous educational, learned and professional societies. She is a Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania, a speaker of note and an outstanding teacher. Mrs. Byrne has a book on Willa Cather in preparation. Illustrated with many photographs of Pittsburgh as it was in Willa Cather's time, the book will also contain letters from friends, admirers and pupils of Miss Cather.—Editor

its library, its art gallery, and its concert hall. The people of Pittsburgh were building their city on creative industry and they were therefore more hospitable to the arts. Among the attractions about which Pittsburgh could boast at the turn of the century were such fine structures as the Frick building, the Carnegie building; such fine shops as Horne's, Reymer's, Hardy and Hayes, Grogans; performers at the Alvin, such as Sir Henry Irving, Ellen Terry, John Drew; a Grand Opera House with Louise Homer; Burton Holmes lectures; and . . . in November 1897, President and Mrs. McKinley attended the opening performance of the Pittsburgh Symphony. Yes, at the turn of the century there was a great deal here to attract a young person of the ability and promise of Cather. She found Pittsburgh struggling and reaching just as she herself was struggling and reaching. The years would bring a record of fine achievement to each.

Nevertheless, years passed after the Pittsburgh decade before Cather realized what Pittsburgh had done for her; but in such stories as "Paul's Case" and "Double Birthday" she recreated the city and its people. In Pittsburgh she matured and enriched her understanding and defined her goals. Pittsburgh prepared her to move with self-possession into wider and more challenging areas.

Willa Cather was born in Virginia near Winchester. An 1873 date has been established by a family letter rather than from the sketchy Virginia records. Cather was fond of shifting her birthdate, and 1876 appears on her tombstone.

The family moved to Nebraska when Willa was nine years old. Dorothy Canfield, who met her before she was twenty, thought that an imaginative and emotional response to this drastic change was at the core of her fiction.

Cather attended college in Lincoln, Nebraska, and was graduated in the spring of 1895. She had worked as a drama critic and reporter of the *Nebraska State Journal* during her last two years at the University. When she returned to Red Cloud she was restless and unable to feel her old contentment at home. The financial situation made her realize her obligation to earn her living. She applied for a teaching job at the University, but her application was turned down.

The following year she made a trip back to Lincoln to visit the Gere family. Charles Gere, the father of her friend, Mariel, was the founder and owner of the *State Journal*, and while there she met Mr. Charles Axtell, a Pittsburgh businessman of Axtell, Orr and Company. He was planning to bring out a new magazine, to be called

*The Home Monthly*, and offered Cather a position as one of its editors. She accepted it.

When she wrote Mariel about her first impressions of Pittsburgh, she mentioned that she had been met at the station by Mr. Axtell who took her to his ivy-grown house in the hills above the river. His conventional home, from the outside, did little to encourage her and, inside, a stern portrait of an ancestor seemed to frown his disapproval of her and to remind her of those at the University who had said that she was incapable of filling a teaching job because she was headstrong and irresponsible.

Her approach to her new work was optimistic. The publishers, good businessmen though not literary men, undoubtedly because of Mr. Gere's glowing recommendation, trusted her abilities from the beginning. Mr. Axtell briefly showed her the publishing plant located in the Heeren Building at Eighth and Penn and promptly left on his vacation, leaving her in charge of making up the first two numbers of *The Home Monthly*. Such trust demanded success! It was not too long before she was managing editor in every way but in name.

It is clear that it was Mr. Charles Axtell who hired her to come to Pittsburgh. It has never been clear who the Orr of Axtell, Orr was. As late as March 22, 1962, F. B. Adams, Jr., Director of The Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City, wrote me, "I was never able to find out anything about the Orr family." Mr. Adams had the impression that Fordham W. Orr had been the important member of the organization.

In my efforts to find further information on this, I wrote one of Cather's former students, the late Mrs. Margaret Gilson, and in reply to my question, "Who was Fordham W. Orr?" she wrote, "Now you are delving into my family history. The Fordham Orr about whom you are inquiring was the son of Thomas E. Orr of Axtell and Orr. His name was Fordham Newell Orr, not Fordham W. My grandmother's maiden name was Nancy Beers, one of her brothers was Fordham Beers. Mary Beers Orr was the wife of T. E. Orr. Fordham Newell Orr was named for his grandfather and T. E. Orr's brother, Newell. Fordham Orr never worked for his father" . . . So much for the Orr of Axtell, Orr.

The material featured by *The Home Monthly* — designed to compete with the *Ladies' Home Journal*, a home and fireside publication — did not correspond to Cather's literary ideal so it was fortunate that she regarded her new work as a challenge. Contributors were scarce for this new magazine so Cather wrote for it under a variety

of pseudonyms. A careful reading and comparison with her known writings have brought some of these to light. The writing of Sibert, Henry Nicklemann, Helen Delay, John Charles Asten and a number of others can be attributed to Cather. Certain drama and book reviews appearing in the *Lincoln Courier* under Cather's full name between September 1897 and March 1900 appear in the *Pittsburgh Leader* under "Sibert." This is helpful for identification.

George Seibel, a fellow writer and friend, vouched for her use of Henry Nicklemann and suggested that it came from a folklore figure in Hauptmann's *Die Versunkene Glocke*. Further confirmation of this is found in that the identical article, "When I Knew Stephen Crane," appears both under Nicklemann's name in the *Pittsburgh Library*, I, June 23, 1900, and under Cather's name in *Lincoln-Courier*, XV, July 14, 1900. Much has been done to identify these pseudonyms and much remains to be done. They give some indication of the time-consuming work that Cather did, and often resented doing with *The Home Monthly*.

There were some compensations. She met many interesting people. The one she considered the most stimulating was Rudyard Kipling, with whom she told friends somewhat proudly she spent forty-six minutes. When she showed her serial, "The Count of Crow's Nest," to one of her friends, a manuscript reader on *Cosmopolitan*, he offered one hundred dollars for it, but — she needed it for her own paper. Such incidents, however, made her feel that she was coming into her own intellectual country. She enjoyed the manuscript reading and the proofreading was not too difficult.

Cather formed many rewarding friendships in Pittsburgh and that with George Seibel was one of the first. He was then a free-lance newspaperman and proofreader, later director of the Carnegie Free Library at Allegheny. George Seibel dropped into the offices of *The Home Monthly* one day and offered to write an article on "Richard Wagner's Wild Pranks," and there he met Cather. She looked to him about eighteen, plump and dimpled, with dreamy eyes and an eager mind. She took that article and others, but most important, here began the Cather-Seibel friendship.

Cather went to the Seibel home once or twice a week to read French. Their reading covered a vast territory which is described in detail in George Seibel's delightful article, "Miss Willa Cather from Nebraska," printed in the *New Colophon*, September 1949. He tells, "When Willa came to those French soirées, we usually first had a simple supper. It was before the days of calories or vitamins. Noodle

soup, plebeian but nourishing, potato salad, larded with delicious slices of cucumber, cookies of crisp and crackling texture, left a pleasant taste . . . Flaubert was our chief delight, and Willa's impeccable style was achieved by a sedulous study of this merciless master . . ."

Seibel describes a Christmas eve with Dorothy Canfield Fisher. In a letter which she sent to Seibel, she also tells of this Christmas eve which she and Cather spent with them just after her father, who had been chancellor at the University of Nebraska when Cather was a student there, had come to Ohio State University as president. In that letter she tells, "(the Christmas tree) proudly winked and shone and dazzled like something out of a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale. There was a cherished cat, called Hasenpfeffer; all sorts of delicious things to eat — and — wonderful cosmopolitan talk, too." The Seibels were very cultivated people, knowing French as well as German. With (Willa's) passionate appreciation of every opportunity for enlarging the horizon of her culture, she drank in admiringly the atmosphere of this pleasant, friendly home . . . "That evening I remember Mr. Seibel standing before that enormous tree, he looked up at it and quoted to us a Heine Christmas poem and we found it wonderfully fine as he rolled it out in his rich German. Willa was enchanted by it, got the book out from the shelves back of us and copied off all the poem, and before I had gone on from Pittsburgh to Vermont had made an admirable rhymed translation of it, the first translation I had ever seen made. And that poem was accepted by a magazine, a real magazine that paid checks, was published in their next Christmas issue, with a full-page illustration of the Wise Men, their animals, their attendants and the star. I still have that, one of Willa's first literary successes — very thrilling to her and to me."

Dorothy Canfield was in preparatory school at the time and along with the prestige Cather had enjoyed on the Nebraska campus because of her writing — she had now added her independent life gained by having a position paying one hundred dollars a month and living in a boarding house and having her complete freedom. Such success and independence was rarely achieved by a young woman in the 1890's. These were visits of golden days to Dorothy Canfield who never came to understand what people meant when they spoke of Pittsburgh as noisy, dirty, dark and grimy. For her, Pittsburgh remained wrapped in happy, young memories.

Later Cather brought Seibel a sheaf of manuscripts to read — the poems to be collected in *April Twilights*. He mentions the velvet cadence of her voice as do some of her former students. Seibel and

Cather became amicable rivals in the accumulation of libraries. In a letter which Mrs. Seibel wrote me last spring she told me that Mr. Seibel and Cather bought sets of books on the installment plan. Mrs. Seibel is now ninety-three years old and very alert.

When Cather began visiting the Seibels she was living at the boarding house home of Mrs. Marie Eyth, 6012 Harvard Street, East Liberty. Occasionally she came home early in the afternoon to work on stories. Mrs. Eyth provided a cup of coffee and Cather's Nebraska conscience made her drop a coin into a vase on the mantel to repay the landlady for the extra trouble. Mrs. Eyth could always spare a cup of coffee but she did not intrude on Cather's privacy. Even then the privacy, which later in life became somewhat of an obsession, was a real necessity to her. She rode her bicycle to and from work and sometimes would race the electric cars when excess energy so dictated. Her landlady played the piano and at times Cather would bring home a new composition of Ethelbert Nevin for Mrs. Eyth to play. In this humble boarding house with a screen to divide bed from workshop, Cather began writing her first important things. This was the Pittsburgh Cather was beginning to know.

In spite of this she was often homesick. Occasionally in *The Home Monthly* she found an outlet for this feeling. She also found expression for it in articles such as "Jack-a-Boy," which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1901. In this she advises encouraging a young boy to read but not to let him feel that this means he may also write; discourage his writing and if he must write he will in spite of everything. These undoubtedly were reflections about herself, warning herself of the loneliness and hardship of writing but feeling that nothing could stop her. This theme appears many times in her writing. She found escape, too, in the Symphony, Victor Herbert's, and in devoted friendships, Lizzie Hudson Collier of the Pittsburgh Stock Co. and others in the world of art.

George Seibel describes her as — like Goethe — having eyes in every pore. Expression never was easy for her; she had to toil for perfection like her idol, Flaubert. Away from her writing table she was always absorbing life. One week they skipped a reading of their freshly imported *Cyrano de Bergerac* because Cather went to a picnic of the Glassblowers' Union with the labor editor of the *Leader*.

During her Pittsburgh years she spent part of each summer with her family in Red Cloud or with her brothers on hunting expeditions. In the summer of 1897 in Red Cloud Cather received word that *The Home Monthly* had been sold. She promptly wrote George

Seibel for suggestions about getting work on a newspaper. She did not hesitate to accept the offer from the Pittsburgh *Leader* at seventy-five dollars a month when it came. She was expected to edit and write headlines for all telegraph news that came in from eight A.M. until three P.M. She worked until midnight on Saturdays.

In Lincoln from October 1897 to May 1900 the Lincoln *Courier* continued printing her column, "The Passing Show." The *Journal* ran a column by her from Washington, D.C., from December 1900 to March 1901. She sent back correspondence for the *Journal* from July to October in 1902 when she went to Europe. In her column for October 23, 1897, are the beginning ideas for "The Sculptor's Funeral" — printed in *McClure's*, January 1905, and included in *The Troll Garden*, also 1905.

About this time she was working on *April Twilights*, a book of poetry that would come out in 1903, published by the Richard Badger Co. Another comment about "The Passing Show" — Harry Finestone has remarked that frequently "The Passing Show" was composed of articles which Cather had written for Pittsburgh periodicals — book reviews which appear in *The Home Monthly* under the pseudonym of Helen Delay or in the Pittsburgh *Leader* signed with her middle name reappear, sometimes slightly rewritten. In 1903, while she was on vacation in Nebraska, Cather met Edith Lewis, who had been enthralled by the columns of dramatic criticism signed Willa Cather and published in the Lincoln *Courier*. Because of this enthusiastic admiration, Mrs. Sarah Harris, editor of the *Courier*, invited Miss Lewis to her home to meet Cather. That summer of 1903 Miss Lewis saw Cather on two other occasions, also visiting her in Pittsburgh at the McClung home, and their lifelong friendship was formed. In the summer of 1904, Cather visited her for a week in New York City. The following summer Cather again visited her. Finally Lewis and Cather made their home together when Cather joined the staff at *McClure's*, and until her death in 1947. When Cather died, Miss Lewis was named her literary executrix.

E. K. Brown has said in his biography of Cather that we can best obtain a coherent picture of her slowly maturing personality and of her growing confidence in her artistic future from her dramatic criticism. "The Passing Show" articles might almost serve as a diary of her Pittsburgh years. There are glimpses of her at plays, the opera, the art gallery and the horse show. She comments on the latest book, the latest literary gossip and the life of Pittsburgh's Bohemia. Her reporting on plays, actors, concerts, musicians, operas and singers

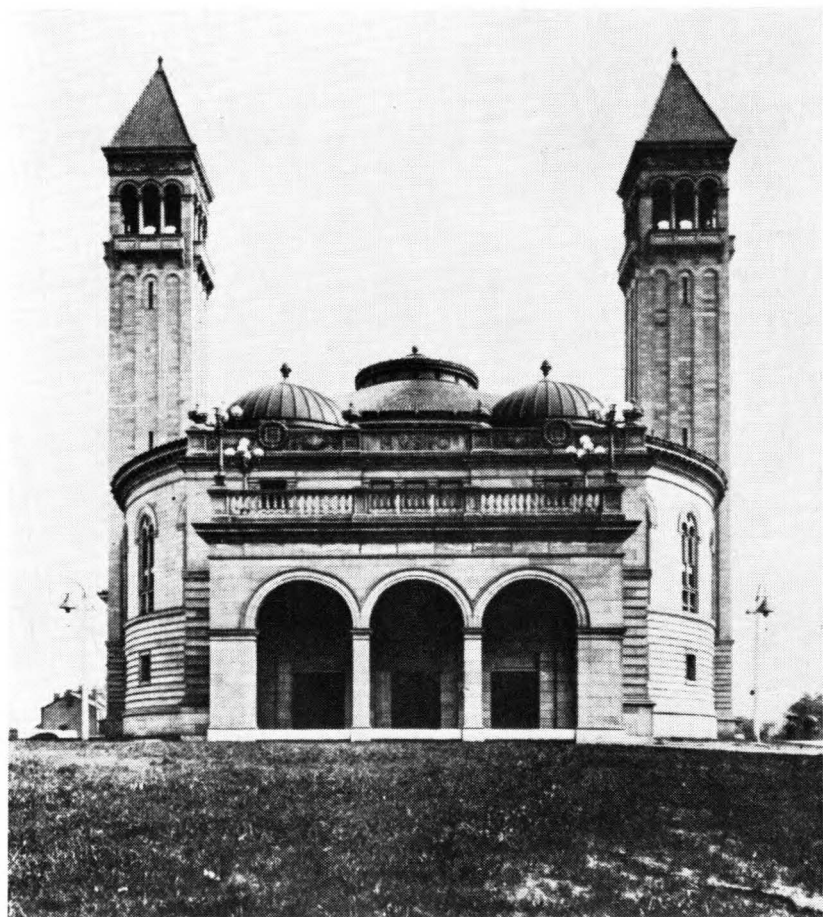
brought Cather into the world of artistic standards, the world in which she naturally belonged. She found great friendliness and hospitality. She wrote biographical material about their personalities as well as critical evaluations when she met such notables as Richard Mansfield, Minnie Maddern Fiske, Kipling, F. Marion Crawford, John Philip Sousa, Melba and other artists. She was interested in how these celebrities acquired artistry and conquered through long discipline and tenacity of purpose. Some of this material in time filtered into her novels. This is a record of her experience and a revelation of her artistic growth.

She began to go to New York and was very interested in Broadway. One summer she was guest drama critic for the *New York Sun*. In May 1898, Cather went to Washington, D.C., to visit her father's cousin, Dr. Howard Gore, a professor of geology. She was caught up in a social whirl — farewell dinners for Dr. Gore who was about to leave on the Wellman Polar Expedition. She met the Turkish chargé d'affaires, the Norwegian ambassador, and the secretary of the German legation.

She found Lillian Thekla Brandthall, Mrs. Gore, the daughter of a former Norwegian ambassador, most interesting. Lillian, a belle from Oslo and a relative of the King of Sweden, was full of stories of court life. She could sing Grieg's songs and read Ibsen in a very special way. Some of these Washington experiences were to emerge in transmuted form in *The Professor's House* and the Nordic influence is evident in *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*. But it was to be France which was to have the greatest influence on Cather. All this came into her life during the Pittsburgh years.

A few years ago I made every possible effort to find someone in Pittsburgh who had worked with Cather on the Pittsburgh *Leader*. I finally located a Mr. Crawford Pepper, retired in Portland, Maine. Unfortunately, about one week after my letter reached him, his daughter notified me he had died. Nevertheless there is a record of his remembrance of Cather in an article written by George Swetnam. During Mr. Pepper's freshman year at Allegheny College he had become friendly with Edwin P. Couse. By the time Pepper was studying law, Mr. Couse was telegraph editor of the *Leader*. He often went to Couse's office around four in the afternoon. One day he found a young lady with flashing blue eyes sitting opposite Couse at his large flattop desk. Couse introduced her as Miss Cather, his new assistant. At the *Leader* she did some reporting, helped on the telegraph desk and was drama critic for four years. Pepper said that Cather was un-

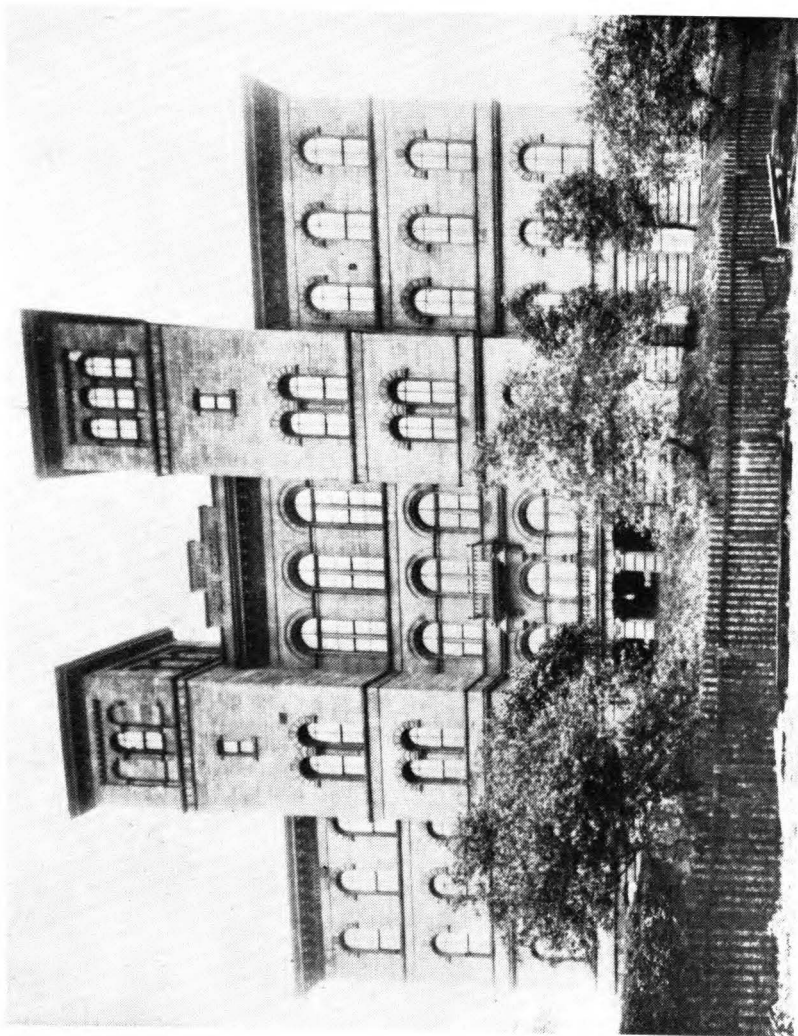




Courtesy of Carnegie Library

CARNEGIE MUSIC HALL, PITTSBURGH  
(circa 1900)

Here Willa Cather found in the world of art, escape from her loneliness and became friends with many well-known artists. Carnegie Music Hall plays an important part in "Paul's Case."



Courtesy of Carnegie Library

OLD CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL  
Bedford and Crawford  
(circa 1900)

Willa Cather taught here 1901-1902 and wrote during these winters most of the poems later published in *April Twelights*, 1903.



Courtesy of Carnegie Library

HOTEL SCHENLEY  
(Exterior — *circa* 1900)

Here Willa Cather interviewed many celebrities and also spent many pleasant social hours with friends.



114 17th STREET, SOUTH SIDE  
(circa 1900)

The George Seibel home where Willa Cather visited often and where she and Dorothy Canfield Fisher spent a memorable Christmas Eve.

conventional in both dress and conversation. She wore skirts much too short for that day, and mannish-looking shirtwaists. They called her "Bill" and she seemed to like it. Pepper felt she was the most argumentative person he had ever met. She disputed on any subject that he or Couse brought up. Mr. Pepper knew many important people, for example, William Lyon Phelps and James Whitcomb Riley, but he declared that none did he remember with more pleasure than a cub reporter for the old Pittsburgh *Leader* whom he used to call "Bill."

Stanley Williams has written, "Perhaps Miss Cather's real training for the craft of writing began with her work on the Pittsburgh *Leader* as dramatic critic."

One of the memorable friendships which Cather formed during these years on the *Leader* was with the musician, Ethelbert Nevin, who composed "La Lune Blanche" for her. Ruth Crawford Mitchell tells us in "Queen Anne's Lodge" that in 1898 Ethelbert Nevin came home to Sewickley to be near his mother who was seriously ill. The Nevins found a cottage near the old homestead. He called it Queen Anne's Lodge for his wife, the queen of his heart.

The music room became the rendezvous of a gifted circle. One evening, Cather recalled, it was twilight and some half-dozen were seated around the room when Nevin began to sing. There was only candlelight in the room — lamps were never used there. Cather described the scene: "The composer's face was in the shadow but the light fell on that noble head and touched the hair already gray with the labor of giving five hundred compositions to the world in the last ten years. Gray hair above a face so young, so lyric, so mobile is a strange thing to see. It is as though the kiss of the Muse had left its visible mark, and tells that if his wooing of her has been happy it has not been altogether painless." Here again Cather is explaining the pain of creative genius.

Nevin is the gifted brother in "A Death in the Desert" published in *Scribner's*, January 1903, and included in *The Troll Garden*. While with the *Leader* Cather had occasion to review books by many authors, James, Shaw, Kipling, Zola, Norris and Tarkington. These books were in 1899 their authors' first works. These reviews allow us to measure her daily critical improvisations against the judgment of posterity.

She began the review of *McTeague*: "The great printing presses of the country go on day and night year after year grinding out the mediocre. When in all this output of ink and paper, these thousands of volumes that are rushed upon the booksellers' shelves, one appears

which contains both power and promise the reader may be pardoned some enthusiasm. Excellence always surprises . . . ." In concluding, she says, "*McTeague* is an immense achievement for a young man. It may not win at once the success which it deserves, but Mr. Norris is one of those who can afford to wait."

Cather felt that *The Gentleman from Indiana* was, despite its glossy finish, an insipid novel. She said of Mr. Tarkington: "His view of life is so shallow and puerile and sophomorically sugary that grown-ups will have very little patience with it."

Her opinions were decided and outspoken. Some items are interesting for their relation to her later writings. The story of "Peter Sadelack, Father of Anton" (*The Library* I, July 21, 1900, p. 5) closely parallels the story of Mr. Shimerda, father of *My Antonia*, here for the first time sketched in a short story, then nineteen years later becoming an integral part of a novel.

The review of John Buchan's *A Lost Lady of Old Years* (Pittsburgh *Leader*, LV, July 22, 1899, p. 6) perhaps suggested more than the title of one of her own later novels. Marion Forrester of *A Lost Lady* and the heroine of this Scottish romance have similarities. Burgoyne, the music critic on the *Leader* whose desk was next to hers, is probably the prototype for dour Scott MacGregor of *The Professor's House*. Burgoyne was highly intelligent on many subjects. She mentioned him often, especially to one of her closest friends, Mrs. Lawrence Litchfield.

Cather did not write about musical composition but about voices, personalities and dramatic interpretations, undoubtedly because of her association with Burgoyne. She has described him in "The Men Who Make the Pittsburgh Papers."

Cather knew well many aspects of Pittsburgh during these years of journalism. In 1901 she wrote articles for the *Gazette* and *The Index*. She not only observed and wrote about the artistically educated and uneducated as they made use of the beautiful Carnegie Art Gallery but she wrote of Mulberry Street, a real "melting pot," the Hill District with its "chicken cellars," the South Side and Mount Oliver. She was steeping herself in people and all attracted her. Setting and scene also attracted her. In "Paul's Case," "The Schenley [Hotel], in its vacant stretch, loomed big and square through the fine rain, the windows of its twelve stories glowing like those of a cardboard house under a Christmas tree."

In the February 1929 issue of *The Forum*, "Double Birthday" shows that Cather's more than twenty years absence from Pittsburgh

had not dulled her memories: "The sheer cliffs of Mount Washington . . . with the row of lights far up against the sky, always made one think of some far-away, cloud-set city in Asia . . ."

While she was still reporting for the *Leader* in 1900 she would accept no extra assignments on the paper. Instead she was writing for *The Library* and also contributing to *The Index*. Charles Clark started *The Library* with \$20,000 which he had inherited. He had decided that Pittsburgh needed a literary journal like the *London Spectator*. He imported an editor from the cultured East named Ewan Macpherson. Both Cather and Seibel wrote for this magazine. The \$20,000 and *The Library* lasted just twenty-six issues and contained about twenty-four items by Cather. Only one story is signed with her name; the others appear under the pseudonym of Henry Nicklemann. The winter of 1900-01 she spent in Washington. For a Newsletter column she wrote "Winter Sketches in the Capital." In the February 16, 1901, issue she described the reception in Washington of the Pittsburgh Symphony under the baton of Victor Herbert with guest artist Mme. Schumann-Heink.

She wrote little fiction at this time but her verses and stories were more and more being accepted. With such acceptance it was obvious that she could hope ultimately to free herself from newspaper work, and devote her time to creative writing. This gave her the courage to turn to a profession which would give her shorter work hours and longer periods of freedom in the summer. She turned to teaching.

In March 1901, Cather had met Isabelle McClung, the daughter of Judge Samuel A. McClung. He was the presiding judge at the trial of Emma Goldman's associate, Alexander Berkman, who tried to assassinate Frick. McClung gave him the extreme penalty allowed by law. Isabelle and Cather met in the dressing room of a mutual friend, the actress Lizzie Collier. They vacationed together in Wyoming in July and when Cather returned to Pittsburgh in the fall, she was invited to make her home at the McClungs — which she did until she left Pittsburgh in 1906. As a member of this solid, respectable household, privacy and freedom from mundane cares were hers. This gave her more opportunity to write and she now had stimulating companionship and a richer, fuller life than she had ever known.

Aided by George Gerwig, Isabelle McClung's uncle, she was appointed to Central High School as a teacher of English and Latin. Her salary was \$650 annually. She taught at Central during 1901-2. In 1903 she went to Allegheny High to teach English and remained there until 1906 at which time she was receiving \$1300. In 1902

Isabelle McClung and Cather made a trip to Europe. Many of her impressions of that first trip to Europe much later became the themes of her mature and finest work. On this trip she had her first experience with the accumulated treasure of European civilization and she felt its weight and glory. There is a record of this in the letters she wrote to the *Nebraska State Journal*. George N. Kates later edited these in *Willa Cather in Europe*.

I have tried to learn more of Cather's schoolteaching years and also to meet as many people as possible who knew her during these Pittsburgh years. Cather left Pittsburgh more than sixty years ago, but an article in the *Pittsburgh Press* asking that any of her former students call me, set Pittsburgh buzzing about her. For weeks the mail brought letters and phone calls came: "I knew Willa Cather," from people who had formerly been her students. Numbered among these were judges, teachers, librarians, a rabbi, a priest, a medical doctor, a metallurgist and an eminent critic. It is highly interesting that the sterling integrity and demand for quality of Miss Cather attracted kindred spirits to her to share her intellectual treasures. Always her criteria of worth and quality were intellectual. She was attracted to, and attracted to herself, whether consciously or unconsciously, those of superior intellect.

Many of these former students are people of accomplishment who have made contributions to a better way of life for Pittsburgh. One of these, the late Margaret Duane Gilson, furnished a description of Cather at the turn of the century in an article which Alexander Woollcott published in *The New Yorker* in 1932.

As I mentioned, Cather began teaching at Central High in 1901 and at Allegheny in 1903, and as one looks over the high school *Journals* which were issued monthly, it is noticeable that in most of the issues, none of the teachers is commented on as frequently as Cather: January 1903 — "One of the most important contributions to the January *Scribner's* is the story, 'A Death in the Desert.' It is a particular interest to us because it was written by Miss Cather of our school Academical Faculty." And "One of the most noted and interesting events this month, especially to the Allegheny High School, was Miss Cather's attendance at a dinner in New York City in honor of Mark Twain's seventieth birthday. The dinner was given at Delmonico's by Colonel George Harvey, editor of *Harper's Magazine*. The author's birthday came on Thursday, November thirtieth, but owing to his promise of dining with President [Theodore] Roosevelt on that day, the celebration took place on the Tuesday following."



Then follows a description of the reception and dinner with comments on various notables. Next, during the evening, between the toasts, cablegrams from many of the European authors were brought in by attendants and read. Among them were messages from Rudyard Kipling, Thomas Hardy, George Meredith and A. Conan Doyle. A very interesting phase of the celebration was that the guests came from all over the United States (*Wah Hoo*, June 1906).

There could be no greater proof of Cather's integrity than her letter to her reporting class on June 2, 1906:

Dear Boys and Girls: — Now that I find that I shall not return to the High School next fall, I have a word to say to you. A number of my pupils in various classes, and especially in my Reporting Class, asked me, when I came away, whether I should be with you next year. At that time I fully expected to be. The changes in my plans which will prevent my doing so have been sudden and unforeseen. I should hate to have you think that I had not answered you squarely when you were good enough to ask whether I should return, or to have you think that I put you off with an excuse.

I had made many plans for your Senior work next year and had hoped that we should enjoy that work together. I must now leave you to enjoy it alone.

One always has to choose between good things it seems. So I turn to a work I love with very real regret that I must leave behind, for the time, at least, a work I had come to love almost as well. But I much more regret having to take leave of so many students who I feel are good friends of mine. As long as I stay in New York I shall always be glad to see any of my students when they come to the city.

I wish you every success in your coming examinations and in your senior work next year.

Faithfully always,  
WILLA S. CATHER

*The Reminiscences of Willa Cather as a Teacher*, by Phyllis Martin Hutchinson, reflect rather inclusively the information and attitudes in the calls and letters I received from former students. Her article also provides a telling account of education in Pittsburgh at that time. Among her various comments are: "Miss Cather reveled in opening up the Realms of Gold [Literature] to her students . . . She knew that the only way to write was to write, and she set us to writing themes . . . Themes were designed to teach us to observe carefully, then to describe and narrate clearly . . . While Miss Cather had strong likes and dislikes and was generally outspoken, she understood the sensitivity of teen-agers and never held us up to ridicule as some of the other teachers did . . . Her standard of marking was as low as her standard of what constituted good English was high . . ." A perfectionist, Willa Cather had little patience with the stupid or careless pupil — her personality could not be ignored — she was greatly admired by some of her students, and just as heartily disliked by others. This condition alone prevented boredom in class.

Her classes, however, were never dull. She was too much alive to endure routine and she usually had an interesting story of some celebrity she had known to highlight a point.

In a letter to Mrs. Hutchinson, Cather told her that the poems in *April Twilights* had nearly all been written during the two winters she had taught at Pittsburgh Central High School. In 1903 *April Twilights* was published. In 1962 Bernice Slote wrote in the introduction to a new edition of *April Twilights*: "*April Twilights* has its own value in the understanding of an extraordinary and human talent . . . Some of these poems have particular interest in the whole of Cather's writing; perhaps more than most artists she worked a single, intricate design in which elements changed names and language and form but always remained a part of the body. Nothing in Cather's work is unrelated to the whole. In the poems (as in the first stories, some of which she also rejected), we find the early sketches, the first motifs, the suggested design of her major work. Willa Cather often said that she had absorbed all of her material before she was fifteen. One might also say that she had most of it written down, in some form, by 1903." It has been said that Cather's poems, the ones she wrote by 1903, at least in some ways became her novels.

Miss Slote's statement certainly emphasizes the importance of the Pittsburgh years. Cather was in Pittsburgh from 1896-1906. From 1896-1900 journalism brought her to *The Home Monthly*, the *Leader*, the *Gazette*, *The Library* and *The Index*. From 1901-1906 she taught at Old Central High School and at Allegheny High.

During these 1896-1906 years her writing was published in *McClure's*, the *Cosmopolitan*, the *Critic*, the *Criterion*, and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Her two first books to be published, *April Twilights* and *The Troll Garden*, were published in 1903 and 1905 respectively. Is it any wonder that Cather called Pittsburgh the birthplace of her writing?

In closing I would like to mention that there is living in Pittsburgh a niece of Willa Cather's, Mrs. Philip Southwick, who is the librarian for the Middle School at Shady Side Academy and whose husband is a professor at Carnegie-Mellon University. Mrs. Southwick has many interesting and affectionate remembrances of her aunt.

Also, there is a Willa Cather Fund which was created in 1959 by a donation to public education in Pittsburgh through the generosity of a retired Pittsburgh teacher, the late Lida McHattie. She left \$5,000 to education in this city. The money was saved from a fifty dollars-a-month pension. An anonymous donor matched the gift so that \$10,000

was available for the creation of the Willa Cather Fund, to be administered through the Pittsburgh Foundation. It is now a much larger fund and has made possible a number of significant educational activities.

How important a novelist is Willa Cather? In 1938 Sinclair Lewis, after commenting that all choices depend on individual tastes and memory, said that his vote for the one greatest living American novelist would be Willa Cather. Lewis placed Cather's *A Lost Lady* with the best of Hawthorne, Crane and Howells as *among the classics of our fiction*. He concluded by naming the many areas written about by authors including degeneracy and phony holiness, but "Quiet and alone, Willa Cather has greatly pictured the great life."

It seems a coincidence that within the past few days I have received a letter from a dealer in old and rare books in New York asking if I would be willing to entertain the idea of letting them buy my Cather Collection. They would be interested.

Cather obviously grows more important as the years go by!