

# THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

---

VOLUME 65

APRIL 1982

NUMBER 2

---

## WILLA CATHER'S EARLY CAREER: ORIGINS OF A LEGEND

HELEN C. SOUTHWICK

**I**N April 1978 the lead article in this magazine was "History's Unweeded Garden: Common Errors in Western Pennsylvania History" by George Swetnam. In it he showed how errors that find their way into print tend to be repeated and soon become accepted as facts. More recently, in 1980, Norman Mailer was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for his book, *The Executioner's Song*. Asked why he called it a novel, he replied that all biography is in some degree fictitious.<sup>1</sup> The shortcomings of historical and biographical research which these authors bring to our attention could scarcely be better exemplified than by the fictionalized portrait of the youthful Willa Cather that has emerged in recent years, based largely on a succession of reinterpretations of some recollections of Mrs. Elizabeth Moorhead Vermorcken, who wrote under her maiden name, Elizabeth Moorhead. She was one of the first writers to provide a written account of Willa Cather's life in Pittsburgh. In 1950 the University of Pittsburgh Press published her short and charming reminiscence, *These Too Were Here: Louise Homer and Willa Cather*. However, by the time she wrote her book, some forty or fifty years after the fact, her

---

Mrs. Helen C. Southwick was formerly librarian at the Shady Side Academy. She is a niece of Willa Cather and serves as a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial of Red Cloud, Nebraska.  
—Editor

1 Interview with Norman Mailer on the "Dick Cavett Show," 1980.

memories had become so confused and so blended with hearsay and fantasy that a highly romanticized story emerged.

Vermorcken's color-enhanced version of Cather's life in Pittsburgh has had a great appeal for later biographers, who have usually accepted it without question. Although she was doing for Willa Cather what Parson Weems had done for George Washington, the largely mythical character of Vermorcken's contribution escaped recognition. Interestingly enough, the Homer and Cather sketches were among seven sketches in a manuscript that Vermorcken submitted to the University of Pittsburgh Press. Only the two were selected for publication because a staff editor and an outside reader felt that the others were overly sentimental and that some of them were not entirely factual.<sup>2</sup> In particular, one on Walter McClintock, a naturalist, contained invented dialogue and imagined scenes. The fictionalized aspects of the Willa Cather sketch, on the other hand, were not at all apparent. Vermorcken's sketch is well written and interesting, and with its publication, the author gained recognition as something of an authority on Willa Cather's Pittsburgh years.

Elizabeth Moorhead Vermorcken was born in Pittsburgh shortly after the end of the Civil War. Her family connections on both sides contained persons of distinction. Her grandfather, James Kennedy Moorhead, was a successful industrialist and a member of Congress. In 1942 she wrote, "His grandchildren are scattered, and today not one of his descendants by the name of Moorhead remains in Pittsburgh. He was the great door-post of the house and after his death the family began to fall apart and was never what it had been."<sup>3</sup> She was bright and eager for education at a time when not many women were being educated. She longed to go to college but says she was sent "to an expensive boarding-school in one of the most beautiful suburbs of Philadelphia where I was happy enough but obtained nothing that could possibly be considered education."<sup>4</sup> After her graduation, she spent a winter in Paris, where she learned to speak French. In 1891, when she was about twenty-five, she married Frederick Vermorcken, an impoverished Belgian artist, but the mar-

---

<sup>2</sup> The material on file at the University of Pittsburgh Press was made available to me through the courtesy of the director, Frederick A. Hetzel. The subjects of the five other sketches in the Vermorcken manuscript were: Andrey Avinoff, John A. Brashear, Helen Esquerre, Harold Geoghegan, and Walter McClintock. They were later published by the Boxwood Press (1955) under the title, *Pittsburgh Portraits*.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Moorhead, *Whirling Spindle: The Story of a Pittsburgh Family* (Pittsburgh, 1942), 221.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

riage was not a happy one. By the winter of 1894-1895, it had ended and she was back in Pittsburgh.<sup>5</sup> Very little is recorded about her life between this time and 1910, when she began an eighteen-year teaching career at Carnegie Technical Schools, now Carnegie-Mellon University, except for the fact that she spent part or all of the time in New York writing articles and short stories that were published in some of the leading magazines of the time. After her retirement from teaching in 1928, she wrote three novels with Pittsburgh backgrounds. Then, during the depression of the 1930s, having lost her house in Pittsburgh and a good deal of her money, she went to Italy to live in Florence. There she began a book, which she called *Whirling Spindle*, about her forebears, her family, and her friends in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. She completed it in Pittsburgh when she returned here following Italy's entry into World War II, and it was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1942, eight years before the publication of *These Too Were Here*. She died in Pittsburgh on June 2, 1955, at the age of eighty-nine.

The errors in Willa Cather biographies attributable to Vermorcken would not be of much significance except for the fact that some of them have been used to attribute Lesbian overtones to Cather friendships. These errors are the allegations that Isabelle McClung threatened to leave home unless her parents invited Cather to live at their house, that the two friends shared a bedroom, and that they spent nearly all their evenings reading together, away from the rest of the family.

The allegation of McClung's threat to leave home does not appear in Vermorcken's book, but in *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, by E. K. Brown and Leon Edel, published without documentation in 1953.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt that the story came from Vermorcken. She told it to me before the book by Brown and Edel was published, and she said she was the only one who knew it. She also told me that E. K. Brown had consulted her when he was in Pittsburgh doing research. Professor Brown died before he had finished writing his book, and his friend Leon Edel was asked to complete the unfinished chapters so that the book could be published. Edel was engaged at the

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 260-61. Vermorcken recalled attending a concert by Ethelbert Nevin and that shortly before or after the concert, he had given a recital at a dinner party at the home of her cousins, the McClellands. The chronology in John Tasker Howard, *Ethelbert Nevin* (New York, 1935), gives December 21, 1894, as the date of the concert and January 3, 1895, as the date of the recital at the home of the McClellands.

<sup>6</sup> E. K. Brown and Leon Edel, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York, 1953), 97.

time on his definitive biography of Henry James, the first volume of which was also published in 1953, and thus was not able to undertake the task of organizing Brown's source notes. As a result, the book was published without footnotes. However, as it was considered an official biography, other writers have relied on its authority.

Dorothy Goodfellow, the Pittsburgh poet and writer, recalls hearing George Seibel say it was actually Judge Samuel A. McClung, Isabelle's father, who first suggested that Willa live at their house so that she could help Isabelle in her study of languages, especially French — a language that Cather had been reading and speaking with the Seibels.<sup>7</sup> Cather's friendship with George Seibel and his wife Helen is well documented. Dorothy Goodfellow and her late husband, Donald, met the Seibels in the late 1930s and shared a close friendship with them as long as the Seibels lived. In 1963 Helen Seibel was emphatic in her statement to Dr. Kathleen Byrne, a Cather biographer, that she had never heard of any opposition in the McClung family to Cather's living with them and said she was certain there was none. She pointed out that Cather would never have gone there if there had been, because she had too much pride to stay where she was not wanted.<sup>8</sup>

In 1970 James Woodress published his book, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art*. He quoted Vermorcken's statement that Cather and McClung read together "evening after evening" in "the bedroom they shared"<sup>9</sup> and Brown and Edel's account of McClung's threat to leave home. He attributed the latter story to Edith Lewis, because he thought she had been Brown's and Edel's chief source of such information. Lewis, however, has published as a book the notes she made for Brown. In the book, which she called *Willa Cather Living*, she says that "Isabelle apparently had no difficulty in persuading her father and mother to invite Willa Cather to become a member of the McClung household. Mrs. McClung was naturally kindly and welcoming to everyone. And even the stern judge seems to have taken a great liking to Willa Cather from the first, and to have unbent toward her as he did to few people. She found him always a kind and considerate friend."<sup>10</sup> Woodress characterized Cather's friendship with Isabelle

---

7 Statement at the Cather Circle dinner, Dec. 7, 1980.

8 Kathleen D. Byrne and Richard C. Snyder, *Chrysalis: Willa Cather in Pittsburgh, 1896-1906* (Pittsburgh, 1980), 42.

9 Elizabeth Moorhead, *These Too Were Here: Louise Homer and Willa Cather* (Pittsburgh, 1950), 49.

10 Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather: A Personal Record* (New York, 1953), 53. John W. Jordan, *Encyclopedia of Pennsylvania Biography* (New York, 1914), 1: 167, describes Judge McClung as "a man of widest reading, a brilliant

as "the one great romance of her life" and "a great love that lasted a lifetime."<sup>11</sup> He did not attempt to define what he meant by the terms "great romance" or "great love," but the book was widely read and influential, and it was after its publication that others felt free to suggest a Lesbian relationship. However, in response to a question on the Lesbian inference at a national conference on Willa Cather, Woodress disavowed any intention on his own part to suggest a Lesbian relationship, saying that Cather was too much involved with her art and work to invest any time and energy in sex of any kind.<sup>12</sup>

Cather's friendship with McClung and her family began at least as early as 1899.<sup>13</sup> In the fall of that year she had been their guest at their house at 1176 Murray Hill Avenue for a short time after she returned from her summer vacation in Nebraska. A little more than a year later, she spent the winter (1900-1901) in Washington, D. C., translating French documents and letters relating to the Paris International Exposition of 1900 and assisting her cousin, James Howard Gore, juror-in-chief of the exposition, in the preparation of the jury's report to the United States government.<sup>14</sup> The report was published by the government in 1901 in six volumes, two of which bear the name of Gore as author. It is probable that those volumes were largely the work of Cather, as Gore was occupied by the responsibilities of his professorship in mathematics at the Columbian (now George Washington) University.

Shortly after the report was completed, Cather was offered both a job and a home back in Pittsburgh. The Central High School was in need of a teacher to finish the year. According to the *High School Journal*, Miss Heard, a recent graduate of Vassar, who had herself been hired as a replacement in January, had resigned because of failing health.<sup>15</sup> There has been considerable speculation as to how Cather got the job. It is quite possible that Judge McClung suggested her as a candidate. He may, indeed, have been asked to help recruit

---

writer, an impressive and effective speaker. . . . Himself a steadfast friend, he possesses the faculty of inspiring in others the most loyal attachment."

11 James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (New York, 1970), 86, 91. *Roget's Thesaurus* lists friendship, liking, and admiration among the synonyms for love.

12 Conference held in Hastings and Red Cloud, Nebraska, June 14-20, 1981.

13 Woodress, *Willa Cather*, 92.

14 *Webster County Argus* (Nebraska), Nov. 23, 1900. Reprinted in the *Red Cloud Commercial Advertiser* (Nebraska), Nov. 19, 1930.

15 *High School Journal* (Pittsburgh), Jan. 1901, 133; Easter 1901, 194. The teacher was probably Miss Gertrude Heard of Mount Washington, who graduated from Vassar in 1900.

a person who could step into the position at that time in the school year. B. H. Patterson, who seems to have been a ranking member of the English department (he held the chair of belles lettres), and who himself was leaving at the end of the year, was the judge's fellow alumnus of Washington and Jefferson College.<sup>16</sup> The judge took a "deep interest" in the college and its alumni. He also had a "keen and helpful interest in civic affairs"<sup>17</sup> and may have been acquainted with some of the members of the Board of Education who lived in the East End not far from Murray Hill Avenue.<sup>18</sup>

In the "Changes in the Faculty" notes of the Easter 1901 issue of the *High School Journal*, it was noted that "Miss Cather, another new teacher, has now taken Miss Heard's place in Room 19 as teacher of Latin, Algebra and Composition. Miss Cather is a graduate of the University of Nebraska, '95, and has been engaged in literary work for Pittsburgh newspapers and is an accomplished linguist." There had been no evidence that she taught algebra until Byrne and Snyder reported the recollections of Frances Kelly, a former student at Central High School.<sup>19</sup> The fact that she did teach algebra explains why Cather had to work very hard, lost twenty pounds in not much more than three months, and returned to Nebraska in a state of exhaustion as soon as school was out.<sup>20</sup> It had been assumed that she had forgotten so much Latin that she had a struggle with that subject. But Latin had been one of her enthusiasms; she had read and studied the language and literature with facility and pleasure, and she had a solid background in it. On the other hand, she had always had trouble with mathematics and her background in that discipline was thin.<sup>21</sup> One wonders why she would take on such a difficult task when she had become fairly well known as a journalist. A possible explanation is that she knew there was to be an opening in the English department the following year and believed, or was told, that being on the faculty would put her in line for that position, which she did get.

At about the same time the March vacancy at the Central High

---

16 *Ibid.*, Oct. 1901, 12.

17 Jordan, *Pennsylvania Biography*, 1: 167.

18 Charles Reisfar, Jr., secretary of the Board of Education, lived at 5814 Howe Street; board member David R. Torrance at 5604 Baum Boulevard, and Samuel Andrews, the superintendent of schools, lived across Baum Boulevard at 314 Stratford Avenue.

19 Byrne and Snyder, *Chrysalis*, 58.

20 Cather to George and Helen Seibel, July 17, 1901, cited by Mildred R. Bennett in her introduction to *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912* (Lincoln, Neb., 1965), xxii.

21 Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather*, 2nd ed. rev. (Lincoln, Neb., 1961), 214, 257.

School occurred, the McClungs were moving into a new house. On March 1, 1901, the house on the corner of Murray Hill Avenue and Fair Oaks Street was deeded to S. A. McClung by John Elder, a contractor, of 501 Shady Avenue. It was given the number 1180, being just next door to the house at 1176 Murray Hill Avenue, where the McClungs had been living since they moved to the East End from Allegheny City in 1895. Cather must have moved into the new house at about the same time the McClung family did. She was given a room on the third floor and a separate room for a study. Elsie Cather, her youngest sister, after reading Vermorcken's book, said that the statement that Cather shared McClung's room was in error. Elsie recalled that she had spent a school holiday in Pittsburgh as a guest of the McClungs when she was a student at Smith College (1910-1912) and had stayed in the room on the third floor that had been Cather's when she lived in the house and which was kept for her to use whenever she came to Pittsburgh. Elsie remembered being shown about the house and seeing McClung's room on the second floor. At that time Cather's books were still in her third-floor study, for she had no place for them in New York until she moved into a spacious apartment on Bank Street in the winter of 1912.<sup>22</sup>

People in Pittsburgh who know the former McClung house have always been puzzled by Vermorcken's description of the window which "gave on a downward slope across gardens and shaded streets towards the Monongahela River and green hills rising beyond."<sup>23</sup> The river is more than two miles away, and because of the topography, neither it nor the green hills beyond can be seen from any window of the house. This description is an example of Vermorcken's romantic tendency to disregard facts in order to achieve a dramatic effect.

It is doubtful she knew anything about the living arrangements in the house. She says that McClung fitted up a corner of the attic where Cather could write.<sup>24</sup> The house has no attic, but as Elsie remembered, a finished third floor with separate bedrooms and a bathroom. Though other writers have described the house as large, as indeed it is, Vermorcken told me that there was not a separate bedroom available for Cather, and thus it was necessary for her to share McClung's room. Elsie Cather told me that she was sure her

<sup>22</sup> Cather to Elsie Cather, no date, but internal evidence establishes it as December 1912.

<sup>23</sup> Moorhead, *These Too Were Here*, 49-50. Woodress, using Vermorcken as his source, says, in *Willa Cather*, 92, "The McClungs lived at 1180 Murray Hill Avenue in a fashionable East End residential area that overlooked the Monongahela River."

<sup>24</sup> Moorhead, *These Too Were Here*, 49.

sister would never have accepted the McClungs' invitation, in spite of their kindness to her and their beautiful house, if she could not have had a room of her own. Privacy was always important to her. She had had her own little attic room in Red Cloud, and even in college she never had a roommate. It is interesting to note that Brown and Edel, who cite Vermorcken as a source, do not say that McClung shared her room with Cather. Professor Brown had gone to Nebraska to do research, and while he was there, he had had several long talks with Elsie Cather, who was probably his primary source on Cather family history and on Cather's life before she went to New York.

Vermorcken is also indulging her fondness for romance in her description of Cather and Isabelle McClung spending "evening after evening" reading novels together. As Byrne and Snyder recognized, most of Cather's evenings would have had to be "devoted to the work she brought home from school [and] preparation for the next day's classes. . . ." <sup>25</sup> Having had teaching careers themselves, Byrne and Snyder take a realistic view and say that "Whenever they could, she and Isabelle would vanish shortly after dinner and retire upstairs to read Flaubert, Tolstoy, Balzac, and Turgenev and to share their responses." <sup>26</sup> In addition to her full-time teaching, Cather was doing an impressive amount of writing: poetry, short stories, newspaper articles, and probably after 1903, editorial work for her future employer, S. S. McClure. Her first two books, *April Twilights* (poetry) and *The Troll Garden* (short stories) were written at the McClung house, as was a novel that she destroyed because it did not meet her standards. <sup>27</sup> Cather had a number of other good friends and many acquaintances in Pittsburgh. <sup>28</sup> She had been living in the city for nearly five years before she became a member of the McClung household. McClung, who had always lived in the twin cities, as Allegheny and Pittsburgh were then called, was involved in artistic, cultural, intellectual, and civic activities, and she had many friends. <sup>29</sup> Vermorcken, who herself says that "Isabelle was distinctly an individual in her own right," <sup>30</sup> does not say that McClung and Cather

<sup>25</sup> Byrne and Snyder, *Chrysalis*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Bernice Slote, "Willa Cather as a Regional Writer," *Kansas Quarterly* 2 (Spring 1970): 13. See also, Alice Booth, "America's Twelve Greatest Women: Willa Cather," *Good Housekeeping*, Sept. 1931, 35.

<sup>28</sup> See Byrne and Snyder, *Chrysalis*, for information on some of Cather's friends in Pittsburgh.

<sup>29</sup> The earliest records of the Tuesday Musical and the Civic Club of Allegheny County show Isabelle McClung as a member of those organizations. Willa Cather also belonged to the Tuesday Musical from 1903-1906.

<sup>30</sup> Moorhead, *These Too Were Here*, 50.



Willa Cather  
and Jan  
Hambourg,  
Avignon,  
France



Willa Cather with  
the Hambourgs'  
dog, Giotto,  
Ville d'Avray,  
France, 1923



spent all their leisure time together, but as she mentions no friends other than herself, she creates that impression.

The indications are that Vermorcken knew Cather and McClung only slightly, and not in 1905 and 1906 as she says, but probably in 1914 or 1915 when Cather was in Pittsburgh working on her novel, *The Song of the Lark*. Most of that book was written at the McClung house, and it was dedicated to Isabelle in appreciation. Jack, Cather's youngest brother, was a student at Carnegie Tech in those years. It could have been through him that Vermorcken, who was one of his teachers, met Cather and McClung. Though she says she met them in the spring of 1905 and saw them frequently during the summer, it has now been established that Cather spent the summer of 1905 in Nebraska.<sup>31</sup> I can find no evidence that Vermorcken herself was in Pittsburgh in 1905. The biographical note on the cover of *These Too Were Here* says that she returned to Pittsburgh from New York in 1910 and began her teaching career that year. The faculty records at Carnegie-Mellon University concur. She gave the same date to Dorothy Goodfellow, who wrote an introduction to *Pittsburgh Portraits*, and to George Swetnam in an interview published in the *Pittsburgh Press* on April 26, 1953.

The fact is that *These Too Were Here* places a number of other events in 1905 that must have occurred several years later. There is a description of teas that McClung gave on Sunday afternoons for her friends and neighbors, and the guests she mentions (none by name) indicate a time later than 1905.<sup>32</sup> Some of them were said to have been members of the faculties of the departments of drama and music at Carnegie Tech. Byrne and Snyder have pointed out that the Carnegie Technical Schools (the forerunner of Carnegie-Mellon University) did not open until October 1905 and had no departments of drama or music at that time. In 1912 the name was changed to Carnegie Institute of Technology and the music department, among others, was added. The drama department, the first in the nation, was established in 1914.<sup>33</sup>

Members of the Dante Alighieri Society were also said to have been guests at those teas. Through a letter that McClung wrote to Cather's mother<sup>34</sup> and my own correspondence with the Dante Alighieri Society in Rome, I have learned that Isabelle McClung

31 Slote, "Cather as a Regional Writer," 13.

32 Moorhead, *These Too Were Here*, 51.

33 Byrne and Snyder, *Chrysalis*, 105, n. 59.

34 Isabelle McClung to Mrs. Charles F. Cather and Elsie Cather, Feb. 1. No year, but internal evidence indicates 1910.

herself was instrumental in organizing the first Dante Society in Pittsburgh, but this did not occur until 1910. She told Cather's mother that she had had to write more than sixty letters in connection with the enterprise. The ones which she wrote to the headquarters of the Dante Alighieri Society in Rome are still preserved in the archives there and are said to be in almost perfect Italian.<sup>35</sup>

Another anachronism in Vermorcken's story concerns her account of Cather's first meeting with S. S. McClure, the editor and publisher of *McClure's Magazine*. She says that he returned from a trip to Europe in 1906 and found on his desk, wrapped to be returned, a rejected manuscript from an unknown writer. He unwrapped and read it, and was so impressed with the writing that he made a trip to Pittsburgh to meet the author and offer a position on his magazine.<sup>36</sup> Actually, by 1906 Cather had known McClure for three years. In her introduction to *April Twilights* (1903), which she edited for the University of Nebraska Press, Bernice Slote reported that the *Nebraska State Journal* of May 11, 1903, had printed a news item from a New York paper which said, "Miss Willa Cather of Pittsburg was in the city this week. She was summoned by the McClure people who of late have taken a lively interest in her literary work."<sup>37</sup> Bernice Slote, who has been engaged in Cather research for many years, believes that Cather did occasional jobs for McClure between that meeting in 1903 and the time she went to New York in 1906.

Vermorcken goes on to say that Cather accepted McClure's offer of a position, and at the end of the school year resigned from her teaching post and went to New York. Actually, she left Pittsburgh in the middle of the second semester. She seems to have taken a leave of absence at the time of the Easter vacation and gone to *McClure's Magazine* on a special assignment. An item in the March 1906 issue of the Allegheny High School student publication, the *Wah Hoo*, says, "When we return from our April vacation, we shall fail to see Miss Cather; but though the school will miss her very much, we feel relieved in knowing that next September she will again be able to take her classes."

Several of the key members of the editorial staff left *McClure's Magazine* on May 10, 1906, because of a dispute with the manage-

---

35 Renato Casarotto to Helen Southwick, Aug. 12, 1980.

36 Moorhead, *These Too Were Here*, 52.

37 Bernice Slote, introduction to *April Twilights* (1903): *Poems by Willa Cather* (Lincoln, Neb., 1962), xx.

ment.<sup>38</sup> Apparently as a result, Cather was offered a post as a permanent member of the staff. She must have made her decision to accept, and resigned from Allegheny High School by the end of the month. The June 1906 issue of the *Wah Hoo* printed her farewell letter, prefaced in the typically sentimental style of the period: "The following letter has been sent by Miss Cather to her reporting class in 307, and because we think everyone would like to hear from her, especially those who have known her at any time of their course, with the permission of the class, we publish it. We are truly sorry to hear that Miss Cather will not return, and we count it the saddest event of our school year. We, however, would rather grieve at her departure than not to have known her at all, for we feel that we have gained by being near her. We are proud of her success, and as friends we wish her much happiness, the fulfillment of her desires, and a splendid future." The letter was dated June 2, more than three weeks before the end of the school year. In it she said, "A number of my pupils . . . 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."<sup>39</sup>

Cather's friendship with Isabelle McClung and her family continued after she moved to New York.<sup>40</sup> She frequently returned to Pittsburgh during the years 1906-1915 to write in the quiet of the study on the third floor. In 1912 she stopped over on her way to the Southwest. When she arrived in Pittsburgh, she found that Mrs. McClung had become ill, so she postponed her trip in order to be of

---

38 Woodress, *Willa Cather*, 120. Quoted from Peter Lyon, *Success Story: The Life and Times of S. S. McClure* (New York, 1963).

39 *Wah Hoo* (Allegheny High School), June 1906. The text of the letter can be found in Byrne and Snyder, *Chrysalis*, 63. Willa Cather wished her students success in their coming examinations. The graduation ceremonies were held on June 26 that year but there were a few days of school after that.

40 Ever since Cather's family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska, when she was ten years old, her important and lasting friendships had been largely with families. The first, and one of the best known, was with the Miner family, which became the Harling family in *My Antonia* (discussed in detail in Bennett, *World of Cather*). When she was in college, her friendships were with the Pound, Westermann, Gere, and Canfield families. See Brown and Edel, *Cather*, 64, for Dorothy Canfield Fisher's recollection of her family's friendship with Cather. In later years she had a warm friendship with the members of the Menuhin family, whom she met through Jan and Isabelle Hambourg. In 1980 Yehudi Menuhin wrote, "An Appreciation of Willa Cather" which appeared in *The Art of Willa Cather*, a publication printed by the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia in connection with an exhibition of Cather books. In it he said, "She was a person whom many could share, and perhaps the only one we five as a family, my parents and sisters and I actually did share."

help.<sup>41</sup> Mrs. McClung died the following year, but Cather's friendship with the rest of the family continued. Late in 1916 she wrote to her sister Elsie that several friends from Pittsburgh who were in New York for the holidays had been to tea at her apartment. Among them was Alfred McClung, Isabelle's brother.<sup>42</sup> At the time of Isabelle's death in 1938, Cather and Edith McClung Sawyer, Isabelle's sister, were in touch with each other, and the friendly and sympathetic letters Cather wrote to Sawyer are still in the possession of the McClung family.

In writing of Cather's early New York years, Vermorcken says that she visited her frequently in her apartment on Bank Street. Cather did not live there until 1912 and she left that apartment in 1927. Since Vermorcken was teaching at Carnegie Tech from 1910 through 1928, it is hard to see how the visits to the Bank Street apartment could have been frequent. Certainly she could not have been living in New York, as she seems to imply. Apparently she had been in the apartment, however, as she mentions a copy of a portrait of George Sand above the mantel in the living room and wonders "why Willa Cather had chosen this particular novelist to preside over her hearthstone."<sup>43</sup> In point of fact, it was not a copy, but an original etching by the French artist, Thomas Couture, and Edith Lewis says that it was chosen "not because she particularly admired George Sand but because she liked the etching."<sup>44</sup> Vermorcken does not mention having met Edith Lewis, as she surely would have done if she had made frequent visits to the apartment.

Cather and Lewis rented that apartment together; by combining their resources, they were able to afford a larger and more comfortable place to live than either could have afforded otherwise. Cather was leaving *McClure's Magazine* at that time, hoping to be able to make a living by writing, and she needed space in which to work. At first she did not earn enough money to meet her expenses, but she had lived frugally and saved her money, so she had a fund to draw on.<sup>45</sup> Brown and Edel say, "During the early years in Bank Street the apartment was often full of her friends. She was not so pressed for time as she

---

41 Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (New York, 1953), 78.

42 Cather to Elsie Cather, Dec. 30. No year, but internal evidence establishes it as 1916. Isabelle's brother was named Samuel Alfred McClung, Jr., and was called Alfred by the family.

43 Moorhead, *These Too Were Here*, 56.

44 Lewis, *Willa Cather*, 89. Thomas Couture (1815-1879) was a French artist who is best known as the teacher of Manet and Puvis de Chavennes.

45 *Ibid.*, 84-85.

had been; and the fatigue that often settled on her in later years was still a rare visitation. For a while she was at home to her friends on Friday afternoons: people from Nebraska and Pittsburgh, people she had met at *McClure's*, stage people, musicians, writers."<sup>46</sup> Vermorcken may have attended some of those Friday teas, perhaps during Easter or Christmas holidays, as the teas were not held in the summer months. Maybe she was one of the Pittsburgh friends who were there in December 1916 along with Alfred McClung.

Since close scrutiny tends to discredit much of Vermorcken's testimony, the question arises as to whether less equivocal evidence has been cited in support of the supposition that Willa Cather may have had a Lesbian involvement. The answer is that it has not. It is true that Sergeant and Woodress have portrayed Cather as being distressed about Isabelle McClung's marriage to Jan Hambourg, a violinist, but both of these authors were aware that, as Cather had said,<sup>47</sup> the distress owed much of its origin to her knowledge that the McClung house would be sold and she could no longer retreat to the study at the house at those times when she wished to focus all her attention on a novel in progress. Perhaps because of the fact that as a child she had been uprooted from the original Cather home in Virginia, she became emotionally attached to most of the houses in which she lived and was saddened by their being torn down or sold. She was, in fact, greatly distressed during the last few years of her life when her parents' last home in Red Cloud, the house where she had visited them many times in the summer and at the Christmas holidays, was sold by her sister Elsie in 1941. Such feelings had been a central theme in *The Professor's House*.

McClung's marriage did not by any means end her friendship with Cather, who always remained in close touch with the Hambourgs. During the early years of their marriage they lived in New York, and Cather saw them often. She was their guest for Christmas Eve dinner

---

<sup>46</sup> Brown and Edel, *Cather*, 181.

<sup>47</sup> Woodress, *Willa Cather*, 173, tells of a Christmas letter Cather wrote to her Aunt Franc from the McClung house in 1915 in which she expressed her sadness in the knowledge that it would be her last Christmas in the house. Judge McClung had died in November, and Isabelle, who had inherited the house, was to be married in early April and leave Pittsburgh. In January 1915 Cather's friend Annie Fields, of 148 Charles Street in Boston, had died, and soon afterward, according to Barbara Rotundo [*American Heritage* 22 (Feb. 1971): 15], the house was torn down. Willa Cather's feeling for that house is indicated in her essay "148 Charles Street" in her book, *Not Under Forty* (New York, 1936). The death of Mrs. Fields and the destruction of her house would have made Cather especially vulnerable to the death of Judge McClung and the closing of his house.

the first year they were there, and they gave her two fine Russian candelabra as a Christmas gift.<sup>48</sup> In 1920, when she was in France, they traveled from their home in Toronto and took her on a tour of the battlefields of the First World War, where they helped her find the grave of her cousin, Lieutenant G. P. Cather, the prototype of Claude in *One of Ours*.<sup>49</sup> Later they traveled together through southern France and spent some time in Cavaliere, a small fishing village on the Mediterranean coast. In a letter that Cather wrote to her mother from there, she said that Jan Hambourg was a fine person to travel with and mentioned his patience and good nature.<sup>50</sup>

It is also true that much significance has been read into Elizabeth Sergeant's account of Cather's decision to destroy letters she had written to Isabelle which Jan returned to her after Isabelle's death in 1938. Since Cather had asked all her relatives and friends to destroy the letters she wrote to them, however, there is no reason to assign any special importance to the destruction of her letters to Isabelle. She wished all of her letters to be destroyed and added a clause to her will prohibiting their publication, not only to preserve her privacy, but also to keep some of her hastily composed writing out of print. As Leon Edel said, "To understand the art of Willa Cather . . . is to understand why she decided her letters should not to be published. She belonged to the addicted 'revisionists' of art, and since she could not have the re-editing of her correspondence — moreover, since that correspondence was unrelated to her work except perhaps as furnishing occasional marginal comments on it — she imposed the testamentary restrictions."<sup>51</sup>

Many of her letters survived, however. Among these are some to Elizabeth Sergeant which expressed rather extravagant admiration for the voice, character, and physical attractions of a young man from Vera Cruz, Mexico, whom she met in Arizona in 1912.<sup>52</sup> To the best of my knowledge, she never wrote a comparable account of an attraction felt for any woman.

---

48 Letter cited in footnote 42.

49 Lewis, *Willa Cather*, 120-21.

50 Cather to Mrs. Charles F. Cather, Aug. 12, 1920.

51 Editor's foreword to Brown and Edel, *Cather*, xxiii.

52 Sergeant, *Willa Cather*, 80-81.