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Willa Cather's Friends on Pittsburgh's North Side

The Gerwig House

By Peter M. Sullivan
Shortly after her arrival in Pittsburgh in July 1896, Willa Cather revived a friendship with someone she had known in Lincoln, Nebraska, and had likewise moved to Pittsburgh four years earlier. Not only did George Gerwig offer Willa Cather frequent welcome diversions from a demanding job in the alien city; he and his wife Margaret also would contribute greatly to Cather’s career. The Gerwigs were active in the city’s German social and cultural life, and Cather’s contact with that world would figure prominently in the short stories and novels that earned her a place among the literary elite in early 20th-century America.

Previous authorities on Cather’s writing and career have noted this friendship with Gerwig, an Allegheny City native who had befriended Cather in Nebraska while she was a young reporter in the early 1890s, but a focus on Gerwig’s “Deutschtown” enclave (now part of Pittsburgh’s North Side neighborhood) offers a cultural context for viewing Cather’s all-important first experience with urban life in the East. These were also the peak years of influence for the German community in the burgeoning industrial metropolis; thanks in no small measure to Gerwig and his wife, they would become very important years for Cather’s personal and literary development, as well.

A demanding schedule as managing editor of Home Monthly magazine – the job that brought Cather to the city at age 22 – made visits with friends especially valuable. As Kathleen Byrne and Richard Snyder noted in their 1980 book on Cather, such visits helped relieve her tensions. George
Gerwig was one of the first persons Cather called on after her arrival in Pittsburgh, and the authors mention her friendship with the Gerwigs several times, though without reference to the ethnic flavor of the Deutschtown neighborhood.¹

Gerwig held an M.A. in English and was writing drama criticism for the Nebraska State Journal when he befriended Cather in Lincoln (where he was also selling insurance).² After Gerwig returned to Pittsburgh, Cather succeeded him as drama critic for the Journal; one Cather authority believes Gerwig was a mentor for Cather's increasing skill as a drama critic.³ Her candid reviews of performances touring the Midwest earned the young journalist some of her earliest acclaim as a writer.

Once she moved here, Gerwig introduced Cather to Allegheny City, home to wide, paved boulevards and more parks than any other district in the region. Even today, there are numerous reminders of a robust “Deutschtown” in the names of streets, a Lutheran church with an inscription in German on its façade, the renovated Eberhardt & Ober brewery with a cobblestone courtyard and German restaurant, a half-timbered building that serves as the home of the Teutonia Männerchor, and the H.J. Heinz Company along the Allegheny River.

Although Cather achieved literary prominence with novels about Nebraska and the immigrant settlers who tamed an inhospitable prairie, she published several short stories with Pittsburgh settings. Best-known is “Paul’s Case” (1905), a psychological study of a young man drawn irresistibly to the glittering world of the theater while working as an usher at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Hall.⁴ Paul’s rampant imagination compels him to steal money and plot an escape to New York, but news that the theft has been discovered and that his father has already made restitution means he will be soon deprived of the resplendent atmosphere of his luxury hotel suite. Rather than face this, he takes his life in a railroad yard in Newark.

This early Pittsburgh story contains references to German culture. While ushering in Carnegie Hall, Paul observes the soloist at a performance, a German woman well past her youth, but who, in her satin gown and tiara, projected an air of achievement—a “world-shine,” Cather terms it—that made Paul oblivious to any possible defects.⁵ The scene reflects the era when German opera singers regularly appeared in Pittsburgh and, as in the story, were lodged at Oakland’s former Schenley Hotel. The story also reflects Cather’s admiration for artists who struggled to attain success, and her well-known passion for the music of Wagner.

In a lesser-known apprentice work that appeared in 1902, “The Professor’s Commencement,” Cather depicts a teacher being feted by colleagues for his many years of service at a city high school. She describes a sensitive though dispirited protagonist, noting that passages from Tristam and Isolde or lines from Heine could make his eyes “flash out at you like wet cornflowers after a spring shower.”⁶ The reference to the 19th-century German poet suggests a bittersweet occasion and the self-irony of one who, perhaps by choice, is locked into a lifelong situation. In the
narrative, the professor recalls his early decision to stay at the school, attended by children of mill workers, rather than take the opportunity to study at a German university. The comment implies the prestige accorded to German education at the turn of the century.

Cather's interest in German culture is seen further in a 1925 story titled "Uncle Valentine," appearing some two decades after she departed Pittsburgh and took a position in New York. The novella-length story depicts the idyllic atmosphere of suburbs near an industrial city resembling Pittsburgh at the end of the 19th century. The central figure, Valentine Ramsay, modeled on Pittsburgh composer Ethelbert Nevin (a friend of Cather's who died in 1901), has recently returned from Europe. His travels included a pilgrimage to Bayreuth to hear Wagner's music dramas. At a neighboring estate, Valentine's friend and supporter Charlotte Waterford, in anticipation of his return, has refurbished a music room so that its polished wooden interior and candlelight suggest a chamber "such as the petty kings and grand dukes of old Germany had in their castles." During a "golden year" at the Ramsay house, Valentine, known as "Uncle" to Charlotte's children, composes most of the works for which he is later known.

The story recalls that Valentine, as a young man, would often go to the city and "dawdle about the Steinert's music store and practice on their pianos." The Steinert boys were "great friends," and also musical. Names can suggest traits in Cather's writings, and the German "stein," for "stone" or "rock," implies the loyalty of the boys assisting their friend early in his career, and recalls the many German music shops located downtown in Nevin's day.

A journalist for several years, Cather wrote a feature for Pittsburgh's Daily Leader on Christmas traditions on the South Side, emphasizing the German custom of "Pelznickel." Cather had become familiar with that district and its heritage on visits to a friend, George Seibel, a talented German American writer, book critic, and librarian, who had approached her about publishing a story on Wagner in Home Monthly. They soon became friends, and with him and his wife Helen, Cather would enjoy stimulating hours reading French literature, and also some German works. At these sessions, Cather and her friends read Hauptmamm and Heine, and Cather remained an admirer of Goethe and Schiller.

Cather's exposure to Pittsburgh social life began soon after her arrival in the city. George Gerwig invited Cather on an excursion by steam-launch that went 30 miles down the Ohio River, and he introduced her to many of his friends. Margaret Gerwig then took her along to a woman's club meeting at which Cather gave a vigorous oration on Carlyle, based on an essay she had written as a student.

The German section of the city contained many stylish residences built in the early 1890s by architects from Pittsburgh and beyond. Gerwig had grown up on Cedar Avenue, the "residential showplace" of Deutschtown, and he and his wife were living in the family home there when Cather arrived in the city. Cedar Avenue, being at the edge of attractive East Park, stimulated residential construction. By Cather's day, the former pasture land had grown to feature groves of stately trees, a shallow lake, and lawns criss-crossed by paths. The rustic environs beckoned to Cather and her friends, the Gerwigs, and invited pleasant strolls.

According to Cather biographer James L. Woodress, Gerwig had made a trip to Lincoln in the spring of 1896. Cather was job-hunting and had written to Charles Gere, a friend and owner of the Nebraska State Journal, asking for assistance with an instructorship at the university, but this...
had not led to a position. Woodress suspects that George Gerwig may have known of the opening at *Home Monthly*. In any case, Cather was offered the position of managing editor and headed east in June.

A few months after Gerwig’s visit to Lincoln, on June 4, 1896, he married Margaret McGrew of Pittsburgh. A note in the Sloote Collection at the University of Nebraska suggests the bride was from Allegheny; however, Pittsburgh newspapers report that the wedding was at Margaret’s home in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh. There are McGrew families listed in the *Pittsburgh and Allegheny City Directory*, though none begins with “A.P.”, the initials of Margaret’s father. An account of the nuptials mentions that because of the recent death of Margaret’s mother, a quiet ceremony was held.

Descriptions of the wedding appeared in the social columns of local papers and refer to George’s position as secretary of the Board of School Controllers for Allegheny.

One paper observed that George was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Gerwig of Allegheny. *The Pittsburgh Daily News* mentions the couple’s plans for travel to “Yellowstone park,” and another paper refers to plans for travel “through the West.” George and his new wife, the report concludes, expected to reside for a time with George’s parents at 66 Cedar Avenue. His father was secretary of the Teutonia Insurance Company, a name that easily suggests an association with the German immigrant community. Edgar C. Gerwig, a relative also living in the home at the time, was, like George, an employee of the Allegheny City Board of School Controllers.

By 1898, George and Margaret Gerwig
Allegheny High School on Sherman Avenue, where Cather taught from 1903 to 1906. George Berwig's office was also at the school, which was a few blocks west of his residence. The 1869 building was replaced in 1931.

This 1906 plat book shows the Berwig residence on Cedar Avenue facing East Park.
had moved a few doors down from his parents’ home to 75 Cedar Avenue. As the city directory reveals, they later lived at 60 Liberty Avenue before settling at 906 Cedar Avenue in 1902. Number 906 Cedar Avenue was actually old number 66 – the home of his parents where George had spent much of his life. A visit to the home today finds the number 66 incised in a stone block at the left of the front door. The change of numbers can be seen at other residences along Cedar Avenue, too.21

A remark by Cather biographer James L. Woodress that George “had moved to Pittsburgh” in 1892 suggests his coming to a new locality.22 But the Teutonia Insurance Company, from all appearances, to have been a family-owned casualty firm that at various times employed Charles, Edgar, and George. According to the U.S. Census of 1900, both of Charles Gerwig’s parents came from Germany, and it is likely that he would communicate in German with many of his clients.23

During Cather’s regular visits to George Gerwig’s home, she would have become acquainted with the family’s German background and experienced the ambience of Deutschtown. In the story “Double Birthday,” written late in Cather’s career, turn-of-the-century Allegheny is evoked through the memory of old Dr. Engelhardt, a man of German background who shares the same birthday with his nephew, Albert. In this 1929 tale, Cather recalls the Allegheny Market and delivery boys in aprons running across a park with orders for the Engelhardt family.24 This was a scene Cather would have observed in East Park, when sitting with the Gerwigs on the front porch of their home. The story includes a scene outside the high school chapel, where Dr. Engelhardt first hears the voice of Marguerite Thiesinger, a talented German girl from the neighborhood who becomes his protegée.

At the time Cather began her new assignment in Pittsburgh, George Gerwig’s school district office was in the high school building at 53 Sherman Avenue. In the city directory, his name appears under municipal government listings as secretary of the board from 1895 on, and he held the post at the time of Cather’s appointment as an English teacher at Allegheny High School. It is reasonable to assume George’s membership on the board was to her advantage.

During his tenure in the school district, George also had other employment. Residential listings for 1901 show his occupation as teacher. He is also listed that year as a clerk for Teutonia Insurance, and his name appears for several years as the company’s secretary.

The history of the Gerwig residence likewise provides insight into the development of the Deutschtown community. The house was part of a plan by Pittsburgh architect Martin L. Myerling.25 It included connected brick houses of identical design, deeded to Mary E. Schenley, who had extensive real estate holdings in Allegheny and Pittsburgh. Schenley’s role as a community benefactor is cited by Cather in an early review of a book about Pittsburgh, in which she mentions the gift of 400 acres in the city’s Oakland district for what is now Schenley Park.26 It appears that the Gerwigs leased the house for many years from Schenley, then upon her death in 1903, the real estate was placed in a trust whose members included Andrew Carnegie. Not until 1920 does the deed to the property reflect ownership by a member of the Gerwig family.

In 1920, Charles W. Gerwig (George’s father) purchased the house “in consideration of one (1.00) dollar, and other valuable consideration, lawful money of the United States” from the Schenley Trust.27 City directories show the Gerwigs at the house since its construction, and the Gerwig name appears on the Plat Map for that residence as early as 1891, with the name Mary E. Schenley printed large across several blocks of Cedar Avenue property.28 The house was sold by Charles Gerwig in 1926; there have been several owners since. It remains a residence, and is in the Cedar Avenue historical district.

The architecture of the former Gerwig home is impressive. It has two-and-one-half stories in red brick, with a pointed arch that rises above a steep mansard roof. A circular stone design lies within this arch and is divided by wooden frames into windows and a door opening onto a balcony with an iron railing. This diminutive balcony is perched upon a turret-like bay with glass windows on the second floor, reminiscent of the Engelhardt home in Cather’s “Double Birthday,” depicted as a house “with gables and turrets.”29 The adjoining residence has identical features. The spacious porch on the first floor offers a congenial place for leisure time with family and friends, and high parlor windows allow ample sunlight. The wooden railing of the porch has been restored, and though the house is over 100 years old, its architecture
still suggests the past elegance of the Deutschtown that Cather visited, and which found a place in her fiction.

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2 James L. Woodress, Willa Cather: A Literary Life (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987), 111.


5 Cather, “Paul’s Case,” 37.


8 “Uncle Valentine” in UVOS, 5.

9 “Uncle Valentine” in UVOS, 6.


13 Willa Cather to Charles Gene, March 14, 1896.

14 Woodress, 111.

15 Slote Collection, Love Library, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Box 2, Folder 5, 11.


20 Pittsburgh and Allegheny City Directory 1896, 389.


22 Woodress, 111.

23 Twelfth Census of the United States 1900, Schedule no. 1, Population B, vol. 2 – 3 (3rd Ward, Allegheny City, Pa.)


