Willa's New Home on the Prairie

So it turns out, finally, that much of the trip you might take to Catherland, to south-central Nebraska, where Willa Cather grew up, tends to trace the life of one of her own central characters, Antonia Shimerda, from My Antonia, itself a hymn to the prairie. It’s as much about Antonia as it is about Willa.

Willa Cather left Red Cloud, NE when she went off to college and never really returned. If you follow the trails the Willa Cather Center sets out, what you follow is much of the life of the tireless Antonia, a prairie-earth mother who stays and bears eleventy-seven children, while working the land with her husband. That Antonia is buried there, not all that far from the desolate place her immigrant Czech family put down American roots.

If you take the drive out into the country, to the Divide, as Cather herself called it, you'll see where the Cathers, fresh out of the American South, determined to live on the endless, unforgiving country, a plot of rolling prairie that had just been bailed when we ambled up some time ago, a piece of ground so featureless that if it weren't for a half-buried sign marking the spot, we could well have taken that dirt road right on past and never noticed Cather’s childhood once stood there.

The young Willa Cather lived there only a year or so before her grandfather moved to town, having realized he wasn't the farmer he thought he could be when he grabbed that cheap land. But Antonia’s family stayed, even though her immigrant father ended his American homestead experience tragically when he shot himself in the barn on his dirt-poore homestead.

The model for “my” Antonia was Anna Sadilek, who left the countryside to go to town and work for a well-to-do family. The Cather tour takes you into that fancy old 19th century house a block west of the Cather's town place. There, behind the kitchen, in a back room so small you can barely turn around, sits a bed where Anna slept, a working girl off the farm and in the city, population 1500.

On a dirt road just outside of town, be sure to stop at the grave of the man who got Anna pregnant before she was married, a pregnancy that meant she had to return, for a time, to her mother's place in the country.

But Anna’s life, like Antonia’s, ends elsewhere in robust familial joy. Just up the road from where she and her husband are both buried, in nearby Bladen, you can still walk around the house where she and her husband and family put down their own solid roots in the hard Nebraska earth. Out back, you can still swing open the tall white doors of the cellar made famous in the final words of the novel, a womb-like dugout from which all those hearty farm kids emerge.
What I’m saying is that a good, long trip to Red Cloud, Nebraska, is as much about Anna Sadilek Pavelka as it is about the mysterious, Pulitzer Prize winning Willa Cather, Red Cloud's most famous citizen.

But if you like good stories, you won’t mind.

Once upon a time, novelist Sarah Orne Jewett told Willa Cather that Cather ought to abandon the idea trying to sound like some citified Henry James and instead write the stories she loved, the stories she'd picked up as a child on the broad land she'd been blessed to know as a girl. That advice led her to remember once more her old friend from the country, Anna Sadelik Pavelka, who was reborn in *My Antonia*.

That great American novel is a love song to the Plains, to the women who lived there with the quiet conviction that life, no matter where you happened to be set down, was always there to be lived.

*My Antonia* is a gift from a wonderful writer who left the country and never married, to an earthmother farm wife who stayed and did. It's a novel full of love for a place and a person, a heroic woman who prospered on that red prairie grassland.

If Cather herself knew that a trip out to Red Cloud was as much about Anna Pavelka as it was about Willa Cather, I don’t think she’d mind one little bit.