Willa Cather's View of WWI from Nebraska

Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* is 100 years old, published the same year tens of thousands of doughboys were killed in France and Belgium, thousands more dying of epidemic influenza even before they arrived in Europe. Cather’s classic novel brings the region alive, just as does “Roll Call on the Prairie,” an essay she published in the Red Cross magazine.

Today, Willa Cather’s tall-grass people are the “small wonders.” Here’s what she wrote.

“[When] the United States entered the war, people along the Atlantic seaboard felt concern as to how the Middle West... would respond. Again and again, I heard New York business men and journalists say that the West wouldn’t know there was war until it was in the next county.

Myself, I scarcely realized what being “in the war’ meant until I went back to Nebraska... In my own town... there was nothing but the war... One saw white things gleaming in the sun off through the trees; boys in their shirts and trousers, drilling in the schoolhouse yard...

When the First Division, largely made up of Western men, made our debut at Cantigny,... casualty lists began to appear in the New York papers, and morning after morning I saw the names of [men from] little... country towns, where nothing so terrible or so wonderful had ever happened to drag them into New York newspapers, towns hidden away in miles of cornfields... Their names came out one after another [to bring] their home towns into the light... like a long roll call, all the little prairie towns answering that they were there.

The women were ‘in the war” even more than the men... Diet and cookery... were revolutionized... The neighbor women began to tell me how to make bread without white flour, cakes without eggs or oatmeal, how to sweeten ice...
cream and puddings with honey or molasses. When my father absentmindedly took a second cube of sugar at breakfast, he felt the stony eyes of his women-folk and put it back with a sigh.

There wasn’t a church social in our town all winter and spring. Late in the summer [of 1918], the first church supper of the year was given in the basement... of the Methodist Church... an unusually good one—lots of fried chicken with cream gravy, mashed potatoes and scalloped potatoes, half a dozen salads, white biscuits, coffee with all the sugar you wanted, ice cream, and cakes and cakes. One old lady who had “partaken,” turned to me and said it seemed like old times... adding, with a twinkle in her eyes, “And I don’t believe he’d begrudge it to us, this once, do you?”

“He? Who?”

“Hoover,” [she said].

While I was at home, the fourth Lovemann boy was drafted—his three brothers were already at the front. The father was a farmer, and a farmer’s sons are his arms and hands. The merchants and bankers went out into the country and worked late, helping the farmers whose sons were gone, to save their grain... No parties but war parties... no football, no baseball, no skating rink.

A bedridden woman [I know] begged young girls to bring her garments [for the war effort] to her, so that she could work buttonholes, lying on her back.

Not a woman makes her husband’s underclothes [in the old fashioned] way, [because the Red Cross insisted men’s underwear for the Belgian people had to be created in the Belgian way]. Western women have a natural intolerance of slow, old-fashioned ways; they economize in effort and in time... Yet [they] made hundreds of pairs of these [old-fashioned] drawers.
Why?... Our women admired the Belgians... The everyday ways of a very foreign people [besieged by war] had come through to us, people who are otherwise so sure that our own [ways] are best.

When I saw... smart, capable Western women patiently making drawers with fifteen buttonholes and smiling with pride, I thought that was poetry.

Many old feelings must have been rooted out and new feelings born to make them want to do it, love to do it, in that tedious way that was against the tempo of their own lives.”

That’s what Willa Cather saw, back home, out here on the home front 100 years ago.