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Willa Cather, Back Home, 1918

James Calvin Schaap

Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* is 100 years old this year, published the same year tens of thousands of doughboys were killed in France and Belgium, thousands more dying of epidemic influenza before and after they arrived in Europe.

She was in New York back then, a citizen of the East, living in a place most Nebraska townspeople might well have despised, but also a place lots of their children dreamed of to escape the stiff confinement small-town life can create on the Plains.

But part of Willa Cather never really left Nebraska, so when the war was raging, she wrote an article, “Roll Call on the Prairies,” for *The Red Cross Magazine*, a memoir that took on Eastern arrogance about anything—life itself—beyond the Hudson River, but also lauded her home. She explained why:

[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.

But she knew different. “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.” The war dead were listed on casualty lists in the eastern press, and she wrote, “the names of men appeared from towns hidden away in miles of cornfields.”

But what she discovered back home was that women too contributed to the war effort:

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.

Women were sewing underwear in a fashion no one had ever dreamed of doing.

The Red Cross had asked that seamstresses back home create underwear for the suffering Belgian people in precise Belgian fashion, despite what she called “western women’s intolerance” of “slow, old-fashioned ways.” In that article, she told her New York friends that she’d never seen anything like it, a fully engaged community supporting the war effort:

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

But Cather also knew small-town pettiness. One of her most anthologized stories, “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” documents intolerance all-too-often grown in insular small towns. Another, “Paul’s Case,” examines loneliness that often ac-
companies all of us, young and old, east and west.

But this year especially is the time to pull out Cather’s *My Antonia*, maybe her finest novel, and a tribute to a prairie queen, a tough pioneer woman who knew life’s adversities but kept working and, more importantly, kept loving.

And this is the time to visit Red Cloud, Nebraska, a hometown so far off the beaten track that you’ll have to hunt to find it, a place that hasn’t grown in the last century, not at all. In fact, it’s become a whole lot smaller since the days the Union Pacific brought hundreds of passengers daily into the station and through town.

Even if you’ve never read *My Antonia*, if you visit Red Cloud, the town will tell the story. For years, I took classes down to southern Nebraska, on all-day excursions that always left a mark because much of the tour around Catherland traces Cather’s life, as well as the life of *Antonia*’s central character, Antonia Shimerda. Truth be told, that grand little tour of the region is as much about Antonia as it is about the novelist who put that life on paper.

Willa Cather left Red Cloud, Nebraska, when she went off to college in Lincoln, and she never returned to live, only to visit. If you follow the trails the brand new Willa Cather Center sets out in the prairie, what you follow is much of the path the tireless Antonia took too, a prairie-earth mother who stays in the region and bears a dozen children while working the land with her husband. That Antonia is buried there in rural Nebraska, not all that far from the desolate place her own immigrant Czech family put down first American roots.

If you 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, lived for a time in endless, unforgiving country, on an empty and often barren stretch of rolling prairie, a piece of ground so featureless that if it weren’t for a half-buried sign marking the spot, you could take that dirt road right on past and never notice where Willa Cather’s childhood home once stood.

Anna Sadilek, Cather’s prototype for Antonia, was a childhood friend way out there on the Divide, where life was rich only in relationships. Willa herself 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 Anna Sadilek’s family stayed, even though her immigrant father ended his American life tragically, when he shot himself in the barn on his dirt-poor homestead.

Anna Sadilek left the country eventually 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, where, there behind the kitchen in a back room so small you can barely turn around, sits a bed where Anna Sadilek slept, a working girl off the farm and in the city, population 1500.

On a dirt road a mile or so southwest 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, just outside of nearby Bladen, Nebraska, you can still walk around the house where the two of them and their family put down their own solid roots in the hard
Nebraska earth. Out back, you can swing open the tall white doors of the storm cellar made famous in the final words of the novel, a womb-like dugout from which all those hearty farm children emerge.

What I’m saying is that the whole tour around Cather’s Red Cloud, Nebraska, is as much about Anna Sadilek Pavelka, who is *My Antonia*, as it is about the far more mysterious, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Willa Cather, Red Cloud’s most famous citizen.

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

Once upon a time, a New York friend, Sarah Orne Jewett, told Willa Cather that Cather ought to abandon 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 Nebraska land she’d been blessed to know as a girl, the stories she hadn’t forgotten and never would.

That advice led her to remember once more her old friend from the country, Anna Sadilek Pavelka, who was reborn in *My Antonia*. Cather explained her fascination, her love, in this way:

She was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, and her love of people and her willingness to take pains. I did not realize all this as a child, but Annie fascinated me and I always had in mind to write a story about her.

*My Antonia*, a century old this year, is a love song to the Plains, a hymn for the women, and men, who lived there and everywhere with the quiet conviction that life, no matter where you happened to be set down, is always there to be lived and loved.

*My Antonia* is a love song from a wonderful writer moved east but never really left and never married, and to an earth-mother, farm wife who stayed and did. It’s a love song for a place and a person, a heroic pioneer woman who prospered on that red prairie grassland, more than a century ago.

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.