

WILLA CATHER
in
JAFFREY

by
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Foreword

Willa Cather in Jaffrey is based on a talk given by the author on July 10, 1992, at the AMOS FORTUNE FORUM in the Jaffrey Meetinghouse, steps away from Willa Cather's grave in the Old Burying Ground.

Long-time Jaffrey resident Margaret C. Bean has had an active interest in the town's history over many years. She transcribed the diary of Dr. Frederick Sweeney which was used by Willa Cather in *One of Ours* and transcribed, edited and published *Hearing by the Grand Jury on the Death of William K. Dean . . .* (1989). She is presently working on a study of the one-time Jaffrey sculptor Viggo Brandt-Erichsen.



Miss Cutler

WILLA CATHER

in

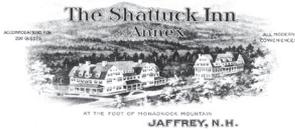
JAFFREY

WILLA CATHER, who captured the very essence of the Nebraska plains and the pioneer spirit in such books as *My Ántonia*, *O Pioneers!*, and *The Song of the Lark*, is buried in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

Willa Cather was born in Virginia but was still a very little girl when her family moved to Nebraska. Childhood impressions were deeply etched on her author's mind. It was from her Nebraska roots that she drew her strong recollections and recreated the people and land in the books that have earned her a place as one of America's great authors.

Willa Cather made her first visit to Jaffrey in the early summer of 1917.¹ She spent a few weeks visiting her friends, the Jan Hambourgs, who were staying at The Shattuck Inn. Willa Cather was given rooms of her choice on the very top floor of the Inn. She was to come back to those rooms many times. Jaffrey's mountain, pine-scented wood and wild flowers, became a favorite place to write. Autumn was especially beautiful.

Her biographer, Edith Lewis, describes her rooms in The Shattuck Inn:



September 22, 1933

Dear Miss Cather:

We were once again delighted with the good news that you were planning your usual autumn visit to The Inn on October 2nd.

Eleanor and I send our kindest regards.

Very sincerely yours,

George Austermann



George and Eleanor Austermanns (1)

They had sloping ceilings, like her attic room in the old days in Red Cloud, and on the roof directly overhead she could hear the rain in wet weather. Her windows looked out over woods and juniper pastures toward Mount Monadnock, with its very individual outline. . . .

That first summer the Inn was crowded with guests, and to give her greater quiet and seclusion two Pittsburgh friends, Miss Lucy Hine and Miss Acheson, who rented a place called *High Mowing* not far from the Shattuck Inn, had the idea of putting up a tent in their meadow-land for Willa Cather to work in.

This turned out an ideal arrangement. The tent was about half a mile from The Inn, by an unused wood road, and across a pasture or two. Willa Cather loved this solitary half-mile walk through the woods, and found it the best possible prelude to a morning of work.²

The Hambourgs were friends of the Graham Blaine family of New York—later owners of *High Mowing*—and Willa Cather was welcomed into their friendship. The bond between the Blaines and Willa Cather carries a poignant story:

Willa Cather knew the Blaine youngster, Harrison. Years later, in 1943, Harrison Blaine was in military service in World War II. He wrote to Willa Cather and while we don't have his letter, we do have the letter³ she wrote him in response on June 9, 1943:

Dear Harrison Blaine:

What a nice letter you wrote me! I am glad you did not repress your first impulse. I think you will be interested to know that there is a singular connection between "My Ántonia" and High Mowing. Before Mrs. Blaine bought that lovely place, Mrs. Robinson let it for two summers to old friends of mine. A considerable part of "My Ántonia", from page 163 through 263, was written in a little tent which I put up at the bottom of the hill which slopes from your mother's house toward Stony Brook Farm. The tent was very simple – no floor – pegged down to the ground. Inside it there was nothing but a table and a camp chair. I was living at the Shattuck Inn that summer and autumn, and every morning, after a very early breakfast, I used to go up the Stony Brook Farm road and cut through the hedge into Mrs. Robinson's property and to my tent. I carried a little portfolio with my papers and pens. I always left my ink-bottles in



The Shattuck Inn (2)

the tent. No one disturbed me. I had two good hours of work and then, in the heat of the day, I used to climb the stonewall and go back to the Inn through the shady wood which still lies at the foot of the hill. The wood was well kept in those days. Lady's-slipper and Hookers' orchid used to grow there. Once, in the late autumn, I met an agreeable fox in the wood.

Of course, some of the people at the hotel knew that I went to the tent to write, but no one knew what I was writing.

After the book was published I never happened to tell anyone that part of it was written in the tent at High Mowing. It is not my habit to talk about any piece of work I have in hand – that would spoil the fun of it for me. I finished the book in New York that winter, and I think you are the only person to whom I have ever confided the fact that a portion of that particular book was written in the tent. But since you love High Mowing (as I do) and since you really care for the book that was partly written there, it seems to me you ought to know there is a very real connection between the book and the place.

The next summer and autumn I was working in the same tent upon "One of Ours", but I stayed too late into October and got a bad touch of influenza. It was a very rainy autumn and the tent, having no floor, used to get pretty wet. After that year the Shattucks were kind enough to let me have several rooms on the top floor of the hotel, where there was no clattering of feet over my head. I worked very happily on other books. Since the hurricane altogether destroyed the beautiful wood behind the hotel, I have not gone there so often. My favorite walk for the afternoon was through that wood as far as the Ark, and back again to the Shattuck Inn. The next time I am in Jaffrey I will certainly go to see your mother at High Mowing, and I hope you will be there to have tea with us.

You say you have a personal reason for writing about Ántonia. But have I not an even more personal reason for replying to you? That book and that place are always associated in my mind, though the actual scene of the Western book was so far away.



Likely site of Willa Cather's tent with Monadnock and Stony Brook Farm in the distance. (3)

Cordially yours, and hoping that we shall meet in Jaffrey,

Willa Cather

Now this paragraph from the letter leads to another Jaffrey story:

“The next summer and autumn I was working in the same tent upon *One of Ours* but I stayed too late into October and got a bad touch of influenza.”

Dr. Frederick C. Sweeney, the local doctor, was called whenever a guest at The Shattuck Inn was in need of medical attention. It was 1919 and he had just returned from France where he’d served in the Medical Corps. He was called to see Willa Cather to treat the influenza she speaks of in her letter. He had attended her before and they had become friends.

It was Dr. Sweeney’s habit to talk with his patients, in part just his energy, and in part to relax them. His experiences in the War were often brought out, the characters of the men he had worked with, places in France he had seen, an influenza epidemic on shipboard, incidents of all kinds.

This time she asked, rather surprisingly, if he had kept a diary. He said he had. She asked if she might read it. He firmly refused, saying it was very rough and personal, “simple stuff jotted down from day to day—not meant for anyone else to read.”

She persisted, even using the argument to which he had the least resistance, that it would help her to be quiet. He relented and brought the scribbled pages on his next visit. She promised she would not read it critically but that she was genuinely interested in his experience. She returned it at a later visit.

Edith Lewis, in her biography of Willa Cather, describes it this way:

She worked on *One of Ours* all through 1919. Late in the summer she went back to Jaffrey, where she again had her tent. It was a very rainy season, and writing in her tent in the rain, she got a severe attack of influenza. The local doctor attended her; and in one of his visits she learned that he had served as a medical officer on a troop ship of the A. E. F. during a very bad influenza epidemic which broke out on board; and that he had kept a diary all through the voyage. He let Willa Cather borrow this diary; and it was from this that she wrote the part of *One of Ours* called *The Voyage of the Anchises*.

(He later told her an amusing incident that happened to him:—He was



Dr. Frederick C. Sweeney (4)

relating one of his experiences during this epidemic to a friend, and the friend said coldly: “That isn’t a true story. You took that from Willa Cather’s book!”)⁴

From Dr. Sweeney’s daughter, Dorothy, we learn more. She said the next time her father saw Willa Cather he confronted her with this incident. She explained that he had been so reluctant to let her see his diary, she didn’t dare ask him to let her use the material.

“But I had my young soldier in Hoboken, ready to board a troop ship and had no possible idea what a troop ship would be like.”

On his next visit she presented him with a copy⁵ of the limited first edition in which she had inscribed:

*For Frederick Sweeney who gave me so much inspiration
and information for the fourth Book of this story—from
its grateful author, Willa Cather*

Another happy consequence was that Dorothy Sweeney, a teenager at the time, was invited several times to have tea with Willa Cather, a heady experience for a young girl, especially one who planned to be an English teacher.

The book and original diary are on display at the Jaffrey Civic Center. A typewritten copy of the diary is available for reading both there and at the Jaffrey Library.

While the diary is not remarkable, it does give minute details of the ship, its size, the crew, the food. Particularly graphic are the details of the flu epidemic, the ominous nosebleed, the lack of medicine, the burials at sea. She wove this into the story in her masterful way.



Dr. Sweeney’s house on Main Street (5)

She even describes Dr. Sweeney: “The doctor was a New Englander. He was a brisk, trim man, with piercing eyes, clean-cut features, and gray hair just the colour of his pale face.” A good description of Dr. Sweeney. Occasionally, when in Jaffrey, she called at his house.

One of Ours was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

Another Jaffrey bond that holds a rather dramatic story was Willa Cather's friendship with George and Eleanor Austermann.

Eleanor was the daughter of the Shattucks, owners of The Shattuck Inn. When her parents retired in 1929 Eleanor and her husband, George, ran the Inn.

Eleanor had graduated from Wellesley College in 1926 and married George in 1927. He was a graduate of Boston University Law School and a member of the Massachusetts Bar. George had a midwestern background and, with friendly respect, he and Willa Cather often joshed about prairie life.

Eleanor Austermann always referred to Willa Cather as *Miss Cather*. She remembered how she enjoyed a hearty breakfast with bacon, not too well done. That she would attend the little musicals after dinner and take time to talk with some elderly ladies who were residents of the Inn.

They didn't have her sign the register until several days later so that her name would not be on the open page.

Eleanor remembered, too, when a student at Wellesley College, seeing a classmate with a book by Willa Cather.

"Why are you reading that?" she asked her.

"It's required reading in my English course."

"It is? I know Willa Cather but I didn't know she was required reading."

"You *know* her? How do you know her?"

"She's been coming to our Inn for years. But I didn't know she wrote important stuff."

Eleanor remembered Miss Cather trudging off after breakfast to her favorite spot, with her portfolio and a folding chair. She remembered the middy blouse and skirt she wore, almost a uniform, although she would change into a dress for dinner.

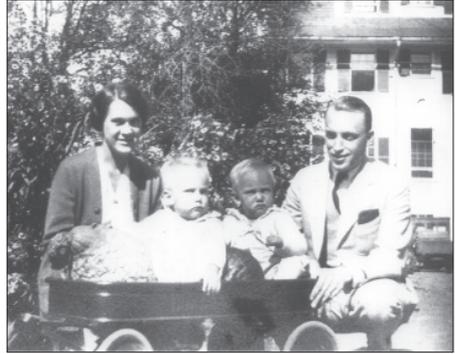
She considered Miss Cather a friendly but a private person who came to Jaffrey to write, and appreciated being able to come and go as she pleased.

She made no special demands about accommodations, Eleanor recalled, although she requested the top floor rooms where there wouldn't be a clatter of footsteps over her head.

And she asked that her chair in the dining room face away from

the other guests so she could eat quietly.

The Austermanns found her comfortable to be with and unchanged by her growing fame. Their friendship continued through the years. Willa Cather would ask about their young family and they sent her pictures. She responded with notes of appreciation and with high praise for the “husky young boys.”



Eleanor and George Austermann and their twin boys (6)

Willa Cather’s most dramatic and impressive bond with Jaffrey is that she chose to be buried here.

Her grave, in a shaded corner of the Old Burying Ground behind the Meetinghouse, draws a surprising number of visitors each year.

No reason has ever been confirmed to explain her wish to be buried in Jaffrey but Eleanor Austermann told this poignant story:

Eleanor remembered vividly the day they learned of Miss Cather’s death. She remembers it vividly because of all that happened.

She and George had been in Boston and were returning to Jaffrey in the early evening. It was Thursday, the 16th of April 1947. Their car radio was on and the news came over the radio that Willa Cather had died.

They were sad and subdued as they drove along home. Their friendship had been heartwarming and special. Even when Willa Cather no longer came to Jaffrey they kept in touch with her and had visited her several times in her New York apartment. Their last visit had been as recently as the year before.

As they pulled into their driveway they heard the telephone ringing and hurried in to answer it.

It was Edith Lewis, Miss Cather’s secretary-companion. She had been trying to reach them to tell them about Miss Cather’s death. But there was an even more urgent reason for her call.

Before she died Miss Cather had made a special request. Edith Lewis was to call the Austermanns and ask them to arrange for her to be buried in the Old Burying Ground behind the Meetinghouse.

And would they find an Episcopal minister to officiate. She was sure Mr. Austermann could take care of everything.

George’s first challenge was to buy a plot in the cemetery. There were almost none available but he knew the plot next to his own was free and he was able to purchase it. He found, though, because it was a corner lot on a

small hillside, it had partially washed away and stones had fallen from the wall enclosing the ground. He arranged for the soil to be restored and the wall repaired. He even helped with it himself.

Eleanor Austermann, a member of the Congregational Church in Jaffrey Center, asked the minister, Dr. Anders G. Lund, if he knew of an Episcopal minister. It happened that his own son, Godfrey (Anders G. Lund, Jr.), was one, and it was agreed that he would officiate at the burial service for Willa Cather.

Information was relayed to Edith Lewis and arrangements made for the heavy bronze casket to be taken by train to Worcester, and then by train to Jaffrey.

There weren't many at the service when the burial took place.* Willa Cather's two brothers, John and James, a niece and a nephew, a few friends, Edith Lewis and the Austermanns.⁶

It was a quiet and dignified service when Willa Cather, one of America's great authors, came back to Jaffrey to stay.

As she stood quietly at the grave side that day Eleanor Austermann remembered another time when she had been in this very cemetery. It was a bleak November day in 1933, fourteen years before. She recalled that there had been a light covering of snow on the ground.

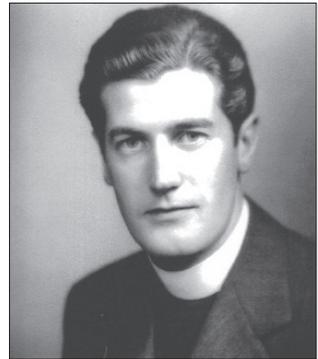
It was the saddest time of her life. One of their four-year old twin boys had died suddenly. The shock of his loss was almost unbearable. Almost blinded in grief, she remembered only dimly seeing Willa Cather standing there at the graveside among family members and friends.

Now here Eleanor was, among the mourners for Willa Cather, so unexpectedly being buried here in this very cemetery.

Miss Cather had been a guest at the Inn when the twin boys were babies. She had watched them grow into sturdy little toddlers, doubly enchanting. She was at the Inn when one little boy was struck with an illness that ended his life so suddenly.

She felt their grief. Eleanor remembers that she touched her arm, silently, as if to say she understood their anguish was beyond words.

Thinking back to that cold day in November, Eleanor said she could not but wonder if it was then, sharing deep human suffering, that Willa Cather chose this place for herself. Willa Cather loved the natural beauty of Jaffrey. She had done much of her writing here. And now in her presence this place had been hallowed by the burial of a little boy.



Anders G. Lund, Jr. (7)

*April 29, 1947.



The inscription on Willa Cather's gravestone⁷ reads:

*That is happiness; to be dissolved
Into something complete and great.*

The quote is from *My Ántonia*: Young Jim Burden, 10 years old, has been orphaned and has come to Nebraska to live with his grandparents. He is alone in the pumpkin patch of his grandmother's vegetable garden.

I was left alone with this new feeling of lightness and content. . . . I sat down in the middle of the garden. . . and leaned my back against a warm yellow pumpkin. . . . The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers. . . . I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.⁸



Willa Cather's gravesite in
the Old Burying Ground. (8)

A Cather Miscellany

In 1931 Willa Cather was the cover story for the August 3rd issue of TIME magazine. An original copy is at the Jaffrey Civic Center.

In the same year Princeton University gave its first Honorary Degree to a woman. Willa Cather was the honoree.

A quote from E. B. White: “Take Hemingway and Willa Cather—two well known American novelists. The first is extremely self-conscious and puts himself into every sentence and every situation; the second is largely self-effacing and loses herself completely in the lives of her characters.”⁹

On September 17, 2003 First Lady Laura Bush, in an ongoing “Salute to American Writers,” hosted a breakfast reception in the White House honoring three women who wrote about the West—Willa Cather, Edna Ferber, and Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Pronunciation: There are those who maintain that Willa Cather herself said, “I’d *rather* be *Cather*.”

In its May 5, 1947 issue, TIME magazine wrote “. . .(rhymes with blather). . .”

Beginning on Tuesday, March 26, 1996, The Shattuck Inn was torn down.



Notes

- ¹ Willa Cather visited Jaffrey, usually in the autumn, until at least 1940 but not always annually. The years she definitely was in Jaffrey include 1917, 1918, 1919, 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1933, 1934 and 1940. She may have visited other years as well. She did write George Austerman in 1931 to say that she “. . . had hoped to be at Shattuck Inn about the first of October, but I am afraid now that I shall not be with you at all this year.”
- ² Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living; A Personal Record* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 103-04.
- ³ In the collection of the Jaffrey Public Library.
- ⁴ Edith Lewis, pp. 118-19.
- ⁵ On display at the Jaffrey Civic Center.
- ⁶ Margo Johnson remembers that the Slade sisters were present (telephone conversation with Robert B. Stephenson, August 1, 2004). Anders G. Lund, Jr., recalls that Dr. and Mrs. Seelye Bixler, Professor and Mrs. Ernest Bernbaum and Dr. Theodore A. Greene were among the local attendees (quoted in *Willa Cather Remembered* by L. Brent Bohlke and Sharon Hoover, compilers; Sharon Hoover, editor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 192-93).
- ⁷ The inscription on the gravestone gives her birthyear as 1876. Willa Cather was in fact born in 1873 (noted in “A Novel Approach” by Marion Marsh Brown and Ruth Crone, *NH Profiles*, August 1977, pp. 16-17; 43-45).
- ⁸ Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), pp. 19-20.
- ⁹ E. B. White, *Letters of E. B. White*. Collected and edited by Dorothy Lobrano Guth (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1978), p. 406.

Sources

- Photos 1, 2, 6. George and Elizabeth Austermann (son of George and Eleanor Austermann).
- Photos 4, 5. Wilson F. Sweeney (grandson of Dr. Frederick Sweeney).
- Photos 3, 8. Robert B. Stephenson.
- Photo 7. Gretalyn Lund Elman (sister of Anders G. Lund, Jr.).
- The photo of Willa Cather is from *Willa Cather; A Literary Life* by James Woodress (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987). It appeared in that book courtesy of Helen Cather Southwick. It is described as “Cather in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, about 1917.”
- Willa Cather’s signature is from a letter she sent to Mrs. Graham Blaine postmarked at Jaffrey, July 3, 1940.

Acknowledgments

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