

The Intentional Tourist
by Jarrod McCartney
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From time to time, I am going to use this space to feature guest columns. This month, Ashley Olson, Executive Director of the Willa Cather Foundation, takes the reigns:

In 1945, Willa Cather wrote to her lifelong friend Carrie Miner Sherwood, “I would rather go home to Red Cloud than to any of the beautiful cities in Europe where I used to love to go.” Despite spending most of her adult life in Pittsburgh and New York, Cather never forgot her hometown. She kept up on local news, supported friends who faced hardships through gifts of cash or goods, sent Christmas boxes to farm wives she met during childhood, and anonymously donated to local charities. She is associated with Red Cloud because the community became a setting in half of her novels and many short stories. Cather and Red Cloud came of age together. Her books offer us a glimpse into the community’s history.

This year marks Cather’s 150th birthday and the 100th anniversary of her Pulitzer Prize for ‘One of Ours’—a book inspired by Cather’s cousin Grosvenor, who was killed in action in France in World War I. It is also the publication centenary of her novel ‘A Lost Lady,’ which is not so loosely based on the life of Nebraska’s third elected Governor and Red Cloud’s founder, Silas Garber, and his wife, Lyra.

At the Cather Center, we have spent the last five years raising funds to restore Cather-related homes and buildings. Three major restoration projects are complete, and more are underway. We want Cather readers nationwide to be able to experience the places connected to her life and literature, and we hope local residents will take an interest in visiting them too. The historic sites and the exhibits being created for them will offer a glimpse into Cather’s life, as well as the struggles and successes of the real Webster County citizens who lived, labored, dreamed, and died here.

We invite you to join us at the Farmers and Merchants Bank on Thursday, June 1, at 5:15 p.m. to see the restoration of the building and be the first to preview a new exhibit, tentatively titled “Making a Place: A Long History of Red Cloud.” We are looking for feedback from residents of the community as we work to finish the exhibit by year-end. You’ll also learn some interesting facts. Which band of the Pawnee tribe farmed and hunted buffalo along the Republican River Valley? Where did Red Cloud get its name? (Hint: there isn’t widespread agreement!). What was life like in Red Cloud’s first stockade? Which President said “the men and women on the farms stand for what is fundamentally best and most needed in American life?”

This project is not just important because of its connection to Cather’s life and literature. It can help us connect historical moments to the present day. The objects and imagery on display will allow us to think about the experiences of those who shaped the community. Please join us!

