How Willa Cather Chose her Names

MILDRED R. BENNETT

WILLA CATHER came by her interest in names naturally. In Civil War times when Mrs. William Cather (Willa's grandmother) was expecting a baby, William Cather (Willa's grandfather) said, "If Grant wins this campaign in Virginia, I'm going to name that baby Grant."

The baby girl was named Wilella Grant.

The family tradition in regard to names continued with Willa's father. He and his wife went to see *The Merchant of Venice* shortly before the birth of their fourth child. Charles Cather declared that if his baby was a girl he would name her Jessica because he liked that character and the actress who played it. Their baby, Willa's younger sister, was named Jessica.

Willa herself (born December 7, 1873) had the given name of Wilella Cather, and her father said in a letter to his brother that she was named for "our little sister," Wilella Grant. But she was always called Willa or Willie. When she was big enough to have anything to say about it, she called herself Willa Love Cather for Dr. Love, the physician who had delivered her. Then when she studied Latin, she changed her name to Willa Lova Cather.

About 1900 she wrote a poem called "The Namesake" and it was dedicated to her uncle Willie Sibert Boak who had died in the War Between the States.

> "And I'll be winner at the game
> Enough for two who bore the name."

At about that time she took the name of Willa Sibert Cather, a name she used as her legal signature until her death.

So she was interested in names and what they stood for. When she was in Pittsburgh she wrote an article, "Some Personages of the Opera" (*The Library*, March 24, 1900) in which she said the following about Frau Ernestine Schumann-Heink.

> "When she arrived in St. Louis this season, a would-be wit said, 'Here is Schumann-Heink, but where are the nine ?' He

> referred, of course, to Frau Schumann-Heink's nine children, the youngest of which was born in New York last winter. It has been the custom of the itinerant Schumann-Heinks to name their children after the hotel in which they happened to be born, and last winter Frau Ernestine astonished Mr. Grau by suddenly packing her chattels and decamping from the Astoria, declaring that she would inflict upon no child such a name as Waldorf-Astoria Schumann-Heink."

Cather's account in regard to the names of the Schumann-Heink children is pure fiction, but it serves to show her interest — and perhaps perverse delight — in names.

One of the characteristics of Cather is that she used real names of real people. Sometimes this was fine. Sometimes it was not so fine.

In *My Ántonia* the story is told by James Burden. There was a James Burden in *Red Cloud,* Nebraska. He ran a grocery store. Willa Cather went into his store one day and said, "Mr. Burden, would you care if I used your name in a book?" And he said, "No, Miss Willa, I would be very happy if you used my name in a book." Between the real James Burden and the fictional, there is no connection — only the name.

This is the only instance where Cather asked permission to use anybody's name, unless it would be the name Fred Ottenburg (*The Song of the Lark*) which was a version of the name of Fred Otte, whom she knew in Pittsburgh. And in the cases of James Burden and Fred Ottenburg, we find admirable characters, so there is no trouble here.

In *A Lost Lady,* Cather has a character called Frank Ellinger, and he is not precisely praiseworthy. He carries on an affair with Marian Forrester, the lost lady, and then abandons her to marry a rich young clinging vine named Constance. There was a Frank Ellinger in Red Cloud. His name appears often in the papers of the 1900 period. No one has ever produced any relationship between the real and the fictional Frank Ellinger. So, it appears here that Cather just took the name outright as she often did, sometimes for a hero, often for a villain.

If you remember your Willa Cather, you will know Wick Cutter in *My Ántonia,* the vile money lender who cheated everybody and finally shot his wife and then himself. There were Cutters in Red Cloud. The Dr. Burleigh of "Neighbour Rosicky" received his name

from a Dr. Burleigh whom Willa Cather knew in Pittsburgh. In one of her early stories, "The Affair at Grover Station" she portrays a scoundrel — a murderer — named Freymark. There was a Freymark in Red Cloud, a clothier.

One may suspect that her choices were not always blind ones. For instance, the mother of one of Willa's girl friends had the unusual name of Flavia. Some of the early letters Willa Cather wrote indicate that she did not really like the woman. One is not then surprised to find an early story titled "Flavia and Her Artists," wherein poor Flavia is too stupid and self-centered to know that her artists are really pretenders and freeloaders, making fun of her behind her back. The original Flavia was an artist — and this reference is too pointed to ignore. Because of such incidents there are people in her home town and home state who regard Cather's memory with something less than devotion. A further incident will illustrate this.

When Willa Cather wrote *One of Ours*, she used a character called Brother Arthur Weldon. Now she had known C. R. Welden (spelled with an *e*) at the University of Nebraska: he had been her classmate, and he had become a Baptist preacher and had been in Red Cloud in 1896–1897.

Brother Weldon in *One of Ours* is a leech-like personality who attaches himself to weak-minded women — or foolish women — and persuades them that devotion to the church is much more important than devotion to their husbands. He also likes the good rich meals these soulful women prepare. He is a more or less emasculated preview of Elmer Gantry.

When *One of Ours* was published, a minister in Lincoln, Nebraska who knew C. R. Welden, took great offense and preached a sermon for Welden and against Willa Cather. He said,

> "The book mentions one name. The description we would scarcely recognize... but the man whom she names was a classmate of Miss Cather, and later was pastor at Hastings, as represented in the book. We know him. He was 'One of Ours,' a member of our church, quiet and dignified... because of a nervous breakdown, [he] went into business, and now if you wish to reach him by name at Hollywood, and if you wish to see him you had better make an appointment, for he is an outstanding business man in that growing city,

> and bids fair to be able to buy out half his class some day. So much for one 'timid and lazy.'"
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> *Nebraska State Journal*, Feb. 19, 1923, P. 6, Col. 4

It happened that in the congregation who heard this sermon were some women who had bought stock from Mr. Welden when he was in Lincoln, and the stock (through no fault of Mr. Welden's) had become worthless. When the ladies heard that he was doing so well in business, they procured his address and wrote for their money, which he refunded.

One of Willa's friends in Lincoln wrote Willa thinking she would find it an entertaining incident. But Miss Cather was not amused. She wrote back that she was sorry she had gotten Mr. Welden into trouble.

It is difficult to determine whether or not she considered the possibility of offending her friends and acquaintances by indiscriminate use of their names. If the possibility did enter her mind, she must have rejected it, for she went right ahead using real names, whenever it suited her purpose.

Another source of names for her was literature. In a thesis, "Willa Cather and her Conception of Creative Personality: an Interpretation" by Artemis Pelantova (University of Chicago, 1927), Miss Pelantova points out a parallel between Ibsen's "The Master Builder" and *Alexander's Bridge*. In *Alexander's Bridge*, the main character is a builder, and he has a fatal flaw in his character. He ends up with two women, his wife and an actress named Hilda who is somehow the embodiment of his lost youth. In his confusion he does not watch his bridge building, the bridge collapses when he is on it, and he — along with many workmen — is killed. A look at Ibsen's "The Master Builder" will show another builder who was lured to his death by a fatal urge back to youth, embodied in a woman called Hilda. Here Cather borrowed not only a name but a theme too.

A further comment on names in *Alexander's Bridge* is provided by Dr. L. V. Jacks in an article, "The Classics and Willa Cather" (*Prairie Schooner*, Winter, 1961). Speaking of classical sources for *Alexander's Bridge*, he says,

> "If this connection has not been previously recognized, the reason perhaps is that the name Miss Cather gave to her

protagonist, Bartley Alexander, was obviously suggested by the name of the philosopher and educator Hartley B. Alexander, whom she knew when both were students at the University of Nebraska in the '90's. This distracting similarity probably forestalled further speculation about the choice of this particular name for the title character. Yet there was an Alexander with whom Miss Cather was intimately acquainted long before her undergraduate days — one of that company which came intensely to life for her when she began to read the classics as a girl of eleven in Red Cloud: 'Paris, the son of Priam king of Troy by Hecuba, also called Alexander' (Lemprière, 445). The parallel with the classic tale becomes apparent when it is recalled that Paris-Alexander was wed to the river-nymph Oenone before his voyage to Greece and his meeting with Helen. Like Paris, Bartley Alexander voyages across the sea and meets a woman with a fatal attraction for him; like Paris, he is unfaithful. Disaster befalls both men and at the hour of their death each recalls his deserted wife."

Willa Cather used classical allusions all through her work. For example, the boat on which Claude Wheeler (*One of Ours*) sails for Europe is the Anchises, named for the father of Aeneas. In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Vergil has Anchises telling his son the fates that are to attend him. In the use of the name Anchises Cather hints at the fates that await Claude and his companions.

As for Biblical names, she used, for example, Sapphira for the conniving woman in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Sapphira is jealous of Nancy, the slave girl, and uses every kind of means, short of murder, to eliminate her.

You will remember Sapphira of the Bible. Ananias and Sapphira, in the very early church, sold their property and although everyone was giving all his proceeds to the communal fund, these two made it up between them to keep back part of the money. Ananias came into the assembly and said, "Here is the money from the property."

"Is this all you got for it?" Peter asked him.

"Yes," he said, and dropped dead.

In about three hours his wife, Sapphira, came in and Peter said, "How much did you sell that land for?" and she gave the same figure that her husband had given.

Peter said, "Why are you lying? Your husband has just died. They have just carried him out." And she too dropped dead.

Here, then, Willa Cather did not take a theme; but the type of character of the first Sapphira — selfish and underhanded — comes out in Cather's Sapphira.

A discussion of the names in Willa Cather's work would not be complete without a few words about the foreign names. French names such as Chevalier, which she used in an early story, "The Dance at Chevaliers," and in the character of Amédée Chevalier in *O Pioneers!*, present no problem. There were Chevaliers in Webster County, and there was a real Alplosen de Mar, a real Severine and a real family named Genereaux ("The Dance at Chevaliers"). Willa Cather knew French and she would have known names to use and how to spell them, had there not been well-known French names available.

As for Scandinavian names, there was a real Carl Lindstrum (Cather spells it Linstrum [*O Pioneers!*]) and there were real Hermannsons ("Eric Hermannson's Soul"). And before Willa Cather wrote either *O Pioneers!* or *The Song of the Lark*, she had spent two prolonged vacations with her cousin Howard Gore, and his Scandinavian wife, Lillian Thekla Brandthall, daughter of a former ambassador from Norway to the United States. She was also a cousin of King Oscar of Sweden. Cousin Lillian had read Ibsen to Willa — this would account for the name Thea ("Hedda Gabler") and the Gores had a Swedish housekeeper whose son was named Thor.

In regard to the Czech names, Otakar Odlozilik, formerly of Czechoslovakia and now professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, says in a letter of Nov. 4, 1960,

> "As far as the names in Willa Cather's novels are concerned, I have this to say:
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> "The most puzzling name of Czech origin seems to be that of Krajiek in *My Ántonia.* It puzzled not only me but also some of my friends. When we visited Mrs. Lucille Pavelka [this refers to Professor Odlozilik's and the author's visit to the daughter of the prototype of *My Ántonia*] she gave me the cue. The real name was Křeček with diacritical marks as I have them. You would have to ask somebody who knows Czech to pronounce it for you and then you will see how close

> Willa Cather came with what she probably thought was the best possible transcription. In correct Czech you would hardly find a word in which j would be followed by i and another vowel. That is why we were puzzled. Krajek would be enough."

Another name which Professor Odlozilik discusses is Cuzak.

> "There exists a name in Bohemia, not too common but not exceptional, Kozák. What is its origin I cannot tell you but the Czech form for the Cossack warriors is Kozák. I do not think personally that this is the derivation. Koza in Czech is goat: Kozák could be either a goatherd or dealer selling or buying goats. I suspect that Willa Cather knew a family with that Kozák name and tried to give approximately the same sound. It is quite conceivable that she never saw these Czech names, Křeček and Kozák, written or printed and that she just remembered the sounds."

If Willa Cather had seen any of these names printed, it is most probable they would not have been spelled correctly. The names Cusic and Cusack both appear in early papers — probably a phonetic spelling by the editor. There is a Bohemian name which appears as Kralik, Kralic, and Kralick.

Willa Cather uses the name Struble — the name in Webster County is Strobl. Cather spells Arneson as Arnson, and Sadilek as Sadelack. Apparently spelling things as they sounded was a common practice with her.

Professor Odlozilik has another interesting point in regard to *My Ántonia.*

> "That stress over A, *á*, in the name of Antonia. It is true that in Czech the stress is on the first syllable but it is not unusually strong enough to require marking. Also the ending in that name would not be *a* but *e*, that is Antonie."

Another Cather trait is to choose names by their meanings. In the book *O Pioneers!* the chief character is Alexandra. (Cather had a penchant for certain names — Alexandra is one of them.) Alexandra, a strong woman, defends the weak, takes care of the land, defends the land, loves the land. There is even an old character, Crazy Ivar. The rest of Alexandra's family and the neighbors want to carry him off to the insane asylum in Hastings, Nebraska. Alexandra won't hear of it because she thinks he has more sense than all the others

put together, and he probably did have. Now when you look at the meaning of the name Alexandra, you find it means a defender — one who wards off — so here we have a name taken for its meaning.

The same is true of Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*. Claude Wheeler is a farm boy, much handicapped by his environment and by the cold-blooded fanatic he has married. Claude never really belongs anywhere. He realizes his potential in battle in World War I.

The name Claude means crippled or lame. And Claude Wheeler was crippled, not physically, but psychologically and emotionally. The name Wheeler means "one who readily turns about in opinion." Claude found stabilization only in death. This is the thought that comforts his mother when she grieves for him.

Not only is the name Claude Wheeler taken for its meaning. It is also an example of something we will discuss later — the use of Cather's own name or variants of initials: Claude Wheeler — C. W. or turned around W. C. And she did identify herself with Claude Wheeler as evidenced in her letters to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in regard to this book and this character.

But now I want to mention place-names. Cather writes in "Eric Hermannson's Soul" about the Lone Star Schoolhouse. There is no Lone Star Schoolhouse in Webster County, but there is a Lone Tree Schoolhouse and a North Star Schoolhouse. She combined the two names into Lone Star.

In the book *The Song of the Lark*, Cather calls the town Moonstone. There is on the main street of Red Cloud a long brick building, the Moon Block, built by Senator Moon of Michigan in 1886. Instead of writing about the Moon Block, she calls it the Duke Block, and the town is named Moonstone. In *My Ántonia*, she calls Red Cloud, Black Hawk. This may have been a substitution — one Indian name for another — or it may have been taken from the small Colorado mining town of that name.

Here is an illustration of how she fitted names to the tone of the story. There is a creek in the northwestern part of Webster County which is called Farmer's Creek. In "Eric Hermannson's Soul" Cather calls it Rattlesnake Creek, in keeping with Eric's struggle with sin. In *O Pioneers!* she calls it Norway Creek in harmony with the Scandinavian heritage of her characters. In *My Ántonia* she calls it Squaw Creek, which indicates the Indian background also inherent in the name of Black Hawk. And in the last story she wrote,

"The Best Years," she calls it Farmers' Creek, its real name, which is appropriate to the mood of her story.

There were certain names that pleased Willa Cather. She used Alexandra in "On the Gull's Road" and later in *O Pioneers!* Larry O'Toole was the innocent victim in "The Affair at Grover Station." Larry was the doctor's man in *The Song of the Lark.* Larry Donovan was the man who betrayed Antonia in *My Ántonia.* Peter is the name for Mr. Sadelack in the two early stories concerning the suicide, later used in *My Ántonia.* Russian Peter appears in *My Ántonia.* Peter is the name of Thea's father in *The Song of the Lark.* It is Professor St. Peter in *The Professor's House.*

A careful study of favorite names might provide a clue to more pseudonyms which Willa Cather employed when she was in Pittsburgh. As for the pseudonyms which we can identify, we find at least four kinds.

First she used names of relatives and friends. She had a cousin named Bess Seymour. She wrote under that name. She had a brother named Douglas. She wrote under the name of Charles Douglass (which was a combination of her father's and brother's name.) She used the name of a Red Cloud man, George Overing.

Some she took from literary sources like Henry Nicklemann from the German story, *The Sunken Bell,* by Hauptmann. But often she used cryptograms, the initials and syllables of her own name turned around and rearranged. John P. Hinz in his article "Willa Cather in Pittsburgh" (*New Colophon,* v. 3 [1950], p. 198–207) points out that this scheme accounts for such names as Gilberta S. Whittle and Clara Wood Shipman. In the first case she took the S. and the Bert from Sibert and used W. and a double *t* instead of a double *l.* In the second case, she reversed initials: Clara Wood Shipman — C. W. S. or W. S. C. for Willa Sibert Cather.

But the pseudonym which best shows her sense of humor and how she felt, when she was in Pittsburgh, about the whole business of making her own living and not being able to write exactly what she wanted to write and not having enough money to spend — and not being sure where she was going or how she was going to get there — all this is summed up in the name she chose for her book review column in the *Home Monthly,* 1896, and that was Helen Delay. And I am quite sure she meant exactly that: Hell and Delay!

Red Cloud, Nebraska