

Virginia

Back Creek Valley in Frederick County, Virginia, at the end of 1873 was a thinly settled district on the Northwest Turnpike linking Winchester and Romney, some thirty miles to the west. The farms in that part of the Shenandoah Valley, which lies some fifty miles west-northwest of the national capital, were mostly hilly, and their thin, rocky soil was not well suited to agriculture. The farmers would have been poor even if marauding soldiers had not destroyed their crops, driven off their stock, and burned their barns during the Civil War. Because the land was poor, field hands were not needed there as on the richer plantations farther east. No family had owned more than a few slaves before the war, and many settlers who did not believe in slavery owned none and worked their stony acres with their own sweat. So much of the land was still wild forest that the lumber they had in abundance was of no value at all. The people along Back Creek were predominantly Protestant, a mixture of Calvinists from Northern Ireland and German Lutherans, many newly arrived in the United States, augmented by native Pennsylvanians or older immigrants who had moved down into Virginia. Some, like Willa Cather's parents, were fourth-generation Virginians.

Less than a decade after the Civil War ended, the South was still recovering from the wracking agonies of the terrible conflict. Although Virginia escaped much of the punishment inflicted on the Confederacy during Reconstruction and was readmitted to the Union by 1870, the state had lost thousands of its young men and had been a battleground during much of the war. The Shenandoah Valley in particular was a strategic highway connecting North and South. Winchester, the county seat, stood at the crossroads of major highways running north and south, east and west, the latter being the Northwest Turnpike. The area had been stubbornly fought over throughout the four-year struggle, and Winchester changed hands many times. One resident of the area remembered: "So rapidly did it change hands that the inhabitants found it necessary [each morning] to look to the surrounding forts to see which flag was floating over them." The register at the Taylor Hotel had many pages with names of officers of both sides under the same date: Union officers had eaten dinner; Confederate officers had spent the night.

"Stonewall" Jackson had humiliated the Union forces under General Nathaniel Banks in the Shenandoah Valley in May 1862. General Philip Sheridan had turned defeat into a victory with his famous ride from Winchester to Cedar Run in October 1864 and had finally defeated Confederate general Jubal A. Early there the following March, a few weeks before Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse. Although the valley was largely Southern in its sympathies and did not, as West Virginia did, split away from the Confederacy, many pro-Northerners lived there, and the sectional differences that divided father and son, brother and brother, sister and sister, were nowhere more evident. Prominent among the Union supporters in the valley was William Cather, grandfather of Willa.

The Cather family originated in Wales. After Willa Cather had become a well-known novelist, she received a letter one day from a Cather in England asking if she were a descendant of the Jasper Cather who had emigrated to America from Northern Ireland. This distant English cousin explained that the original family home was the Cadder Idris, the highest mountain in Wales, from which the name apparently had come. An ancestor in the seventeenth century, the cousin also reported, had fought for Charles I, and in appreciation Charles II after the Restoration had given land in Ireland to Edmund and Bertram Cather, twin brothers, who then had settled in County Tyrone. There is a Cather coat of arms in British records of heraldry: a buck's head cabossed on a shield surmounted by a crest of a swan among reeds with the motto "Vigilans non cadet" ("He who is vigilant will not fall").

This Jasper Cather, who was the first Cather in America, was a red-haired schoolteacher who settled in Western Pennsylvania around the middle of the eighteenth century. He fought in the Revolution, but little is known about him until he turned up in Frederick County, Virginia, after independence and bought land on Flint Ridge, two miles southeast of Back Creek Valley. In 1786 he married Sarah Moore, who bore him seven children, one of whom was James Cather, the great-grandfather of Willa, born in 1795. James in 1819 married Ann Howard, whose parents had emigrated from Ireland in the last year of the eighteenth century, when she was an infant. She bore James eight children, one of whom was William, the grandfather of Willa.

James Cather, who was much admired by his grandson Charles, Willa's father, was a man of some distinction in the community. A local historian describes him as "above the average farmer in intellect. Possessed with rare physical strength and wonderful energy, these qualities gave him an advantage over weaker men. Always informed on the current topics of the day, his conversational abilities were admirable. Young men were always benefited by having him as a friend." James, who lived to be eighty, is much like Mr. Cartmell, the postmistress's father in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. As young Rachel Blake overhears him talking to his daughter, she thinks that his "talk had a flavour of old-fashioned courtesy." Mr. Cartmell also believes, as James Cather and his widowed daughter Sidney Gore did, that owning slaves is wrong.

James, however, sided with the South during the Civil War. Though he opposed both slavery and secession, he believed strongly in states' rights, and as a member of the legislature voted with the majority when Virginia left the Union. He made the same painful decision many southerners made that fateful spring. Robert E. Lee wrote his sister on April 10, 1861: "With all my devotion to the Union and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home. I have therefore resigned my commission in the Army, and save in defense of my native State, with the sincere hope that my poor service may never be needed, I hope I may never be called on to draw my sword." The choice was easier,

however, for James Cather, farmer, than for an army officer and West Point graduate.

William Cather, Willa's grandfather, grew up on the Flint Ridge farm and in 1846 married Emily Anne Caroline Smith. William and Caroline are important characters in *My Ántonia* (1918), though they are seen there as an elderly couple after they have joined the westward movement and resettled in Nebraska. Cather's narrator, Jim Burden, who goes to live with his grandparents after the death of his Virginia parents, describes his grandfather: "My grandfather said little . . . I felt at once his deliberateness and personal dignity, and was a little in awe of him. The thing one immediately noticed about him was his beautiful, crinkly snow-white beard . . . His bald crown only made it more impressive. Grandfather's eyes were not at all like those of an old man; they were bright blue, and had a fresh, frosty sparkle." In his photograph William looks like an Old Testament prophet, and in keeping with this appearance, he was deeply religious. In his youth his conscience had led him to drop his inherited Calvinism and become a Baptist.

Caroline Cather, whose father kept a popular tavern on the turnpike, was descended from Jeremiah Smith, who came to Virginia from England in 1730. He had been deeded land on Back Creek in 1762 by Lord Fairfax, who, one remembers, once had employed George Washington to survey his vast holdings. The deed to this small parcel of Fairfax's five million acres still remains in the possession of Cather descendants. To Jim Burden his grandmother appears "[a spare, tall woman](#), a little stooped, and she was apt to carry her head thrust forward in an attitude of attention . . . She was quick-footed and energetic in all her movements. Her voice was high and rather shrill, and she often spoke with an anxious inflection . . . Her laugh, too, was high and perhaps a little strident, but there was a lively intelligence in it. She was then fifty-five years old, a strong woman, of unusual endurance."

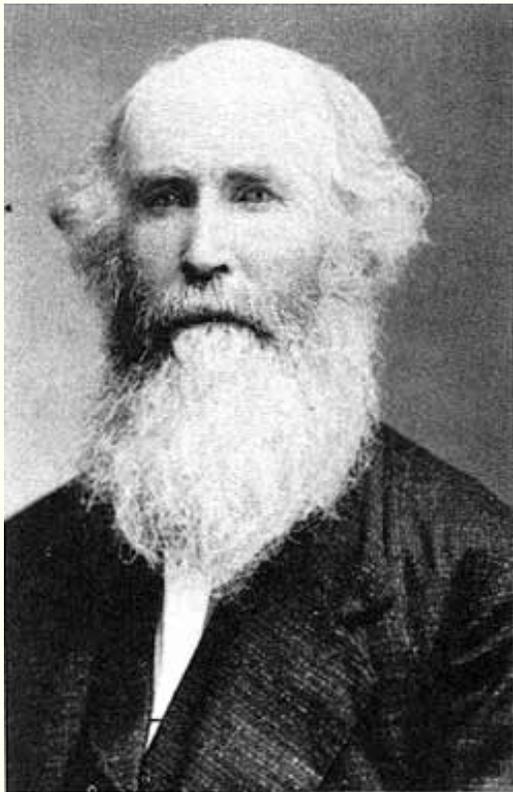
In 1851 William and Caroline settled on a farm about a mile east of the village of Back Creek. William bought 130 acres and later more than doubled his property. He built a large, solid three-story brick house on the north side of the turnpike and named it Willow Shade. It still stands on the outskirts of what is now the town of Gore. Across the façade are five large single windows, each with twelve panes, and behind is a brick extension rising two stories. Each room once had a fireplace, and surrounding the house in the nineteenth century were great willow trees. A stream ran through the front yard, spanned by a rustic bridge, and a spring from the mountain behind provided cool water for refrigeration and household use. A flight of steps still leads to a porch supported by white columns and an entranceway into the second story. Across the turnpike is a steep hill that cuts off the view from the lower story.

As an adult, Cather remembered the kitchen on the ground floor as being the most pleasant room in the house, also the most interesting. The parlor was stiff and formal except when it was full of company, which was often, but the kitchen was comfortable. Besides the eight-hole range, there was a huge fireplace with a crane to lift heavy pots. There was always a roaring fire in the winter, which was kept up at night after the stove fires went out. There were three kitchen tables: one for making bread, another for pastry, and a third covered with zinc used for cutting up meat. There were also tall cupboards used for storing sugar and spices and groceries. The farm wagons brought supplies from Winchester in large quantities so that the Cathers did not have to make the trip often. There was a special cupboard that held jars of brandied fruit, ginger, and orange peel soaking in whiskey. Vegetables for winter were kept in a storeroom at the back cooled by the spring that supplied the house. This house and its surroundings are the center of all of Willa Cather's early memories.

Before she was born, however, the war split the Cathers and alienated neighbors. William and Caroline, as strong Union supporters, broke with William's father and brothers and sisters. Their two sons, Charles (Willa's father) and George, were too young for military duty at the beginning of the conflict, but before the end they were sent across the border less than five miles away to West Virginia to avoid conscription into the Confederate Army. As the war went on around them, the Cathers lived in fear of trouble. Both Confederate and Union troops were continually moving up and down the turnpike and demanding of local residents food and shelter. The Cathers were lucky, however, and survived the war with no great loss of property. On one occasion a neighbor who had remained friendly warned them that Confederate soldiers were about to raid the valley and take all the stock of Northern sympathizers. The Cathers took their animals to the neighbor's barn until the threat passed. Later they returned the favor when Union troops swept through the area. At still another point in the war when an epidemic of measles broke out among occupying Confederate troops, the Cathers turned Willow Shade into an emergency hospital.

The events of the war in Back Creek Valley are vividly recounted in [the diary of William Cather's sister, Sidney Gore](#), a widow who lived in the village and kept a rooming and boarding house. She quartered and ministered to soldiers of both armies and could hear the cannon and rifle fire from the battles fought around Winchester. But no real battles were fought in Back Creek. The Gores' greatest problem was hiding food, money, and livestock from thieving bushwackers who straggled through the valley. Mrs. Gore's son remembered that they put their bread in pillowcases after each meal. They tied their money up with medicinal herbs that were hung from the rafters. They built secret closets in the attic, induced the hens to lay their eggs deep in the woods, fattened their hogs in pens hidden in large piles of firewood, and hid the family silver under a false bottom in the kitchen woodbox.

There were agonizing moments, however. Mrs. Gore was stunned when Union troops killed her neighbor in August 1863. The neighbor had been surprised when asleep by soldiers' appearing at the window and without reflecting had grabbed a gun and fired a shot. Whereupon fifty Union soldiers opened fire. On another occasion Willa Cather's Aunt Sidney opened the door to find a Union officer who asked for James Cather. When she said that she was his daughter, the enemy officer introduced himself as her cousin, but family members on opposite sides during the Civil War was a commonplace in Back Creek.



1. Grandfather William Cather. Courtesy of Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society (WCPMC-HSHS).



2. Grandmother Cather. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



3. Grandmother Boak.



4. Cather's Aunt Franc (Mrs. George Cather). Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



5. Jennie (Virginia) Cather, Willa's mother. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



6. Charles Cather, Willa's father. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



7. Roscoe Cather, Willa's oldest brother. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



8. Douglass, Willa's brother. Courtesy of Helen Cather Southwick.



9. Willa reading to Jack and Elsie Cather. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



10. Cather with nieces: Virginia and twins, Margaret and Elizabeth. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



11. Cather and niece Helen Louise. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



12. Charles, Willa, Jennie (Virginia), and Douglass Cather. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.

The tragedies of fratricidal war are poignantly set down in Walt Whitman's memory of his experiences as a volunteer nurse in Washington hospitals: "**I staid to-night** a long time by the bedside of a new patient, a young Baltimorean, aged about 19 years . . . very feeble, right leg amputated, can't sleep . . . held on to my hand and put it by his face, not willing to let me leave. As I was lingering, soothing him in his pain, he says to me suddenly, 'I hardly think you know who I am . . . I am a rebel soldier.' I said I did not know that, but it made no difference . . . In an adjoining ward I found his brother, an officer of rank, a Union soldier . . . wounded in one of the engagements at Petersburg . . . It was in the same battle both were hit. One was a strong Unionist, the other Secesh; both fought on their respective sides, both badly wounded, and both brought together here . . . Each died for his cause."

After Lee's surrender the Back Creek boys came home to their farms and set about planting their neglected fields, which had been farmed in their absence by the women and children. Most of them had been Confederate soldiers. They still had their land, but there were few horses left to work the soil, most having been driven off or killed as the tide of battle surged back and forth. They also had to replenish their livestock. Cather writes in *Sapphira*: -"The Rebel soldiers who came back were tired, discouraged, but not humiliated or embittered by failure. The country people accepted the defeat of the Confederacy with dignity, as they accepted death when it came to their families. Defeat was not new to these men. Almost every season brought defeat of some kind to the farming people. Their cornfields, planted by hand and cultivated with the hoe, were beaten down by hail, or the wheat was burned up by drought, or cholera broke out among the pigs. The soil was none too fertile, and the methods of farming were not very good.

"The Back Creek boys were glad to be at home again; to see the sun come up over one familiar hill and go down over another. Now they could mend the barn roof where it leaked, help the old woman with her garden, and keep the woodpile high. They had gone out to fight for their home State, had done their best, and now it was over. They still wore their army overcoats in winter, because they had no others, and they worked the fields in whatever rags were left of their uniforms. The day of Confederate reunions and veterans' dinners was then far distant."

William Cather, however, profited by his Union allegiance and after the war was appointed sheriff for Frederick County by the military government, a job that he performed with the aid of his sons as deputies. He also ended the war more affluent than his neighbors, and after life returned to normal hired a Baptist preacher to conduct a school at Willow Shade. All the people of the neighborhood, Northern and Southern sympathizers alike, were invited to send their children. In addition, he sent some of the older ones-including his son Charles and a neighbor's daughter, Mary Virginia Boak, who had had three brothers in the Confederate Army-to school in Baltimore. These acts helped heal the wounds caused by the war, and the healing process was abetted further when Charles Cather and Mary Virginia Boak fell in love. They were married on December 5, 1872, in the home of the bride's mother, Rachel Boak.

Rachel Boak, whose influence on her granddaughter was considerable, has been portrayed indelibly as Old Mrs. Harris in Cather's story of that name and as Rachel Blake in *Sapphira*. Her family history furnished the plot of that novel: her father was the miller and her mother the title character. She was the one who helped the slave Nancy escape via the underground railway to Canada. In real life she had been born Rachel Elizabeth Seibert in 1816. She married William Lee Boak at the age of fourteen and was widowed at thirty-eight.

Her husband, who was three times a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, died in Washington as an official of the Department of the Interior. When Rachel returned to Virginia with a family of five, her father bought her a house in the village. There she raised her children and ministered to the sick, as Rachel Blake does in the novel. She abhorred slavery, as the William Cathers did, but when the war came, her three sons served the Confederacy. Only two returned from the war. William Seibert Boak died at nineteen as the result of wounds received at Manassas.

Cather in 1902 dedicated a poem to his memory, "The Namesake," and after going to Pittsburgh adopted Seibert as her own middle name, though she always spelled it Sibert. She also liked to pretend that she was named for this uncle she never had met. She writes:

Somewhere there among the stones,

All alike, that mark their bones,

Lies a lad beneath the pine

Who once bore a name like mine,-

Flung his splendid life away

Long before I saw the day.

And the poem ends:

And I'll be winner at the game

Enough for two who bore the name.

Cather also wrote a story in 1907 with the same title as the poem, in which a sculptor explains to his colleagues that the inspiration for his statue *The Color Sergeant* came from his uncle who was killed in the war. Cather's mother always revered this brother and kept his sword and a Confederate flag with her when the family moved to Nebraska.

When Cather was editing the *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh, she wrote an article on nursing as a profession for women. She used her grandmother as an example "of those unprofessional nurses who served without recompense, from the mere love of it. She had a host of little children of her own, poor woman, but when a child was burned, when some overworked woman was in her death agony, when a man had been crushed under falling timber, or when a boy had cut his leg by a slip of the knife in the sumach field, the man who went to town for the doctor always stopped for her on the way. Night or day, winter or summer, she went . . . I have often heard the old folks tell how, during those dreadful diphtheria scourges that used to sweep over the country in the fifties, she would go into a house where eight or ten children were all down with the disease, nurse and cook for the living and 'lay out' the dead."

Grandmother Boak as Rachel Blake in *Sapphira* is a "short, stalwart woman in a sunbonnet, wearing a heavy shawl over her freshly ironed calico dress . . . a woman of thirty-six or-seven, though she looked older." The set of her head was "enduring yet determined," her face broad, "highly coloured," her "fleshy nose, anchored deeply at the nostrils," her eyes grave and dark, "set back under a broad forehead." As Grandma Harris, she is seen by her neighbor Mrs. Rosen: "There was the kind of nobility about her head that there is about an old lion's: an absence of self-consciousness, vanity, preoccupation-something absolute. Her grey hair was parted in the middle, wound in two little horns over her ears, and done in a little flat knot behind. Her mouth was large and composed,-resigned, the corners drooping."

Charles Cather, Willa's father, was an amiable young man, soft-spoken and tender-hearted. He was tall, fair-haired, gentle, and did not inherit the inflexible will and evangelical zeal of his Calvinist-turned-Baptist father. He was handsome in a boyish southern way and never hurt anybody's feelings. Willa Cather loved him dearly and was always much closer to him than to her mother. Before his marriage Charles had studied law for two years, and though he never practiced, he often was called on to help his neighbors untangle their affairs; when he gave up farming in Nebraska to open an insurance office in Red Cloud, his legal training was useful. He appears in a partial portrait in "Old Mrs. Harris" as Mr. Templeton, an easygoing businessman who hates to press his debtors: "His boyish, eager-to-please manner, his fair complexion and blue eyes and young face, made him seem very soft to some of the hard old money-grubbers on Main Street, and the fact that he always said 'Yes, Sir,' and 'No, sir,' to men older than himself furnished a good deal of amusement to by-standers." But his appearance was deceiving. Charles Cather operated Willow Shade profitably, later made money farming in Nebraska, and as a businessman in Red Cloud supported a large family.

Mary Virginia Boak, Willa's mother, who had taught school in Back Creek Valley before her marriage, was a woman of energy and force. Handsome and domineering, she provided the power that drove the household, often producing sparks, and she more than made up for Charles's easygoing manner. She ruled her family tyrannically, exacted strict obedience to a domestic discipline, and punished disobedience with a rawhide whip. Her children, however, apparently never objected to her draconian measures for enforcing good behavior. She also had a great capacity for enjoying life and for caring about things-whether the coffee was hot, whether a neighbor's child was ill, whether the weather was right for a picnic. She had the good sense to let her children develop their own personalities. Willa Cather remembered in her old age that her mother kept her seven children clean but allowed them to be individuals from the time they could crawl. She cared for their bodies and kept her hands off their souls. They were all different, and she let them be different. As

Victoria Templeton in "Old Mrs. Harris," she is seen through the eyes of the title character: "Victoria had a good heart, but she was terribly proud and could not bear the least criticism." Willa inherited her mother's temperament, and the two often clashed.

One of Mary Virginia's projects early in her marriage was to bring her divided families together again. She planned a large party at Christmastime in 1875 and drove about the valley issuing her invitations in person. Because of her charm and the fact the Boaks had been staunch supporters of the Confederacy, none of the pro-Southern relatives was able to decline. The war, of course, had been over for a decade, and it no doubt was time for reconciliation. Besides, as the William Cathers were such a prominent part of the family, it was very inconvenient to keep up the enmity. Everyone showed up, and the party was a great success. William's mother, Ann Howard Cather, then seventy-seven, attended the festivities and had the satisfaction of seeing her sons and daughters once again at peace with each other.

Charles and Mary Virginia (usually called Jennie) lost no time in starting a family. By March 1873 Jennie was pregnant. Caroline Cather, her mother-in-law, wrote to one of her daughters after Jennie began to have morning sickness that Charles's Jennie was sick and had called the doctor twice. "I went up to see her with your Aunt Sidney and I think we understand her case as well as the Dr. and think he was not needed as much now as he may be after while, but I did not tell her so for she is so easily insulted. I knew she would fly right up for she thinks she is awfully sick. Her mother and Charley [have] a happy time waiting on her." Less than eight months later, as the winter began mildly, Willa Cather was born in her grandmother's house in Back Creek Valley on December 7, 1873.

She was named Wilella after her father's youngest sister, who had died of diphtheria in childhood, but she was always called Willie by her family and oldest friends. Willa was her own invention and appears in her own hand in the family Bible, altered from the original Wilella. The weather turned cold in January, when the first report of the baby appears in the record. Charles wrote his brother George, who had gone west to Nebraska: "We have just been treated to a slice of cold weather; the first of the season-last week we had three of our coldest days so far. The thermometer stood at 10 above zero We filled our ice house during the freeze Jennie and I were at town today. Jennie went to have a tooth drawn, the first time she has been out. We left the baby at home with its grandma. She said it did not cry once while we were gone. She grows very fast, and is just as good as she is pretty." This description is perhaps a proud father's exaggeration, for the earliest photograph extant is not particularly attractive. It shows a rather square head, very prominent ears, and a large nose, but by the time Willa was a little girl her features had refined, and she begins to be recognizable as the adult Willa Cather.

In the fall of 1874 William and Caroline Cather left Virginia to visit their son George, who had married a New England girl and had taken up a homestead in Nebraska. They left Charles and Jennie in charge of the farm. The young Cathers and the baby moved into Willow Shade, where they lived until they too, in 1883, decided to go west. In mid-February Jennie wrote her sister- and brother-in-law in Nebraska that Willa was walking and beginning to talk. She was then fourteen months old. While Jennie minded the baby and looked after the house, Charles supported his wife and child by raising sheep. Not much of his father's land could be farmed profitably, but sheep found a ready market in Washington and Baltimore. He ran the farm efficiently and, according to his nature, tender-heartedly. When his favorite sheep dog cut its paws, he fashioned little leather shoes to protect its feet from the rocks, and, Willa Cather remembered, the dog would come begging for its shoes. Her most vivid memories of early childhood, however, were the times her father carried her with him when he went out at night to drive the sheep into the fold. Her poem "The Swedish Mother," published in *McClure's Magazine* in 1911, recalls this early experience. The mother is telling the child about her childhood:

All time in spring, when evening come,

We go bring sheep and li'l lambs home.

We go big field, 'way up on hill,

Ten times high like our windmill.

One time your grandpa leave me wait

While he call sheep down. By de gate

I sit still till night come dark;

Rabbits run an' strange dogs bark,

Old owl hoot, and your modder cry,

She been so 'fraid big bear come by.

Last, 'way off, she hear de sheep,

Li'l bells ring and li'l lambs bleat.

.....

Then come grandpa in his arms

Li'l sick lamb that somet'ing harm

He so young then, big and strong,

Pick li'T' girl up, take her 'long.

Early memories of childhood are like islands in an empty sea-isolated and unconnected to each other. As an adult, Cather's earliest memory was of a ride in a steamboat when she was still an infant. She could remember the terror she felt as she held tightly to her mother while being taken on board. She also recalled another occasion at about the age of three when her parents went ice-skating on Back Creek and took her with them. Skating was a sport they loved and one that she also enjoyed later in Nebraska. She was not content to sit and watch, however, but wanted attention. Her indulgent father cut a pine bough, set her on it, and pulled her across the ice. She remembered still another time when she was taken visiting up on Timber Ridge. She was supposed to walk home because it was all down hill, but as she was on her way a violent rainstorm came up, and she was wearing only a pair of light slippers. Providentially, Snowden Anderson, a man she hardly knew, came up from his house on the Hollow Road riding a gray horse and wearing an old gray Confederate Army overcoat. He stopped, picked her up, sat her on the old cavalry saddle in front of him, and took her home. She remembered feeling contented and safe. Children, she thought, knew when people were honest and good. They did not reason about it. They just knew. At least that is the way she felt about her Virginia childhood some sixty years after.

Many of the incidents of her childhood, however, come from the recollections of her parents. Her mother was fond of showing her daughter's early linguistic proficiency by telling of the visit of a little cousin named Philip Frederic, who came to Willow Shade with his parents. The house was full of guests, as it often was, and Philip Frederic was put in Willa's crib while she slept with her grandmother. After the cousin left, however, Willa refused to go back to her bed: "No, no," she kept repeating, "[my cradle is all](#) Philip Frederic'd up." Her precocity was demonstrated other times after she had listened to her grandmother read to her from *Peter Parley's Universal History*, one of Samuel Goodrich's enormously popular children's books. She would make a chariot by putting one chair upside down on another, climbing on top, and driving the chariot. She would sit silently for long intervals riding while an invisible slave ran beside her repeating the words, "*Cato, thou art but man!*"

Her grandmother Boak, who had come to live with them, took charge of her preschool education, read to her from the Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, as well as from Peter Parley. The Bible she absorbed so thoroughly that her writing throughout her life is loaded with biblical quotations and allusions. John Bunyan's allegory of the Christian life made a deep impression. It was a book, she wrote nearly half a century later, with "scenes of the most satisfying kind; where little is said but much is felt and communicated." At the end of her career, in *Sapphira*, she has her miller read Bunyan as he wrestles with the moral problem of slavery. Before she was old enough to go to school, her father took her to a private school nearby where older children were being taught, and she was allowed to sit quietly and listen. Her father would carry her over on his horse and leave her there for half a day. Later she attended a school kept by a Mr. Smith in Back Creek.

There is no record of serious illness during Cather's childhood, but she had the usual colds during the damp winters. When she was shut up in the house, she remembered many years later, her parents would send for Mary Ann Anderson (the mother of Snowden), who lived up on the ridge, to come down and help out. Cather used to watch out of the front windows, hoping to see Mrs. Anderson come down the road: she was such fun to talk to and very kind to a sick child. She became a great favorite and appears as Mrs. Ringer in *Sapphira*, the woman who "was born interested." Cather renewed her childhood friendship with Mrs. Anderson when she returned to Virginia in 1896 and heard from her all the stories of the lives of people she had known as a child. "She got a great deal of entertainment out of the weather and the behaviour of the moon. Any chance bit of gossip that came her way was a godsend . . . Her spirits bubbled into the light like a spring and spread among the cresses."

Mrs. Anderson's simple-minded daughter Marjorie was one of Cather's companions, though much older, after she came to work at Willow Shade as nurse and housemaid. She and Willa roamed the woods and fields together and often walked up the double-S road, which Cather later thought the most beautiful piece of country road she had found anywhere in the world, to visit Margie's mother and listen to her tales of local folklore. Cather loved Margie, who served the family with single-minded devotion for the rest of her life. She and her brother accompanied the Cathers to Nebraska, and she was ultimately buried in the family plot in Red Cloud in 1928. Margie lived in Cather's imagination as Mahailey in *One of Ours*, Mandy in "Old Mrs. Harris," Sada in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and the title character in the poem "Poor Marty," written after Margie died. In *One of Ours* Cather writes: "[She had never been sent](#) to school, and could not read or write. Claude, when he was a little boy, tried to teach her to read, but what she learned one night she had forgotten by the next. She could count, and tell the time . . . and she was very proud of knowing the alphabet . . . [However] Mahailey was shrewd in her estimate of people, and Claude thought her judgment sound in a good many things. He knew she sensed all the shades of personal feeling, the accords and antipathies in the household, as keenly as he did, and he would have hated to lose her good opinion." Cather understood this humble and defenseless woman, felt very protective of her, and when she visited Red Cloud in later years she often spent hours talking to Margie in the backyard or working with her in the kitchen. Both women shared a fondness for children. Margie loved to talk of old times in Virginia; and Cather's father, who subscribed to the weekly Winchester paper, always told her the news from home. After she died, Cather wrote in "Poor Marty":

Little had she here to leave,

Nought to will, none to grieve.

Hire nor wages did she draw,

But her keep and bed of straw.

Companions more Cather's own age included Mary Love, the daughter of the doctor who delivered her. Mary's grandfather had been minister to France in 1860-61, and Mary's mother liked to talk about her education in France and her experiences as a diplomat's daughter. Cather's lifelong love affair with France may well have begun with these accounts. Willa also had the companionship of her brother Roscoe, called Ross by the family, who was born in 1877. Douglass, who came along in 1880, did not become her close friend and confidant until they were growing up in Red Cloud years later. Jessica, the fourth and last child born in Virginia, was eight years younger, very different from Willa in temperament, and the two sisters had little to say to each other.

Young Willa Cather roamed the woods and the fields. She visited the mill house where her grandmother had grown up and the mill on Back Creek where her Great-grandfather Seibert had been the miller. There were plenty of rabbits in the woods, and she set traps that her father made for her. When she revisited Virginia thirteen years after the family moved away, she walked straight to her traps and found them still intact. A little to the west of Willow Shade was a suspension bridge over the creek. There she liked to walk to the middle and recite, "[I stood on the bridge](#) at midnight, / As the clocks were striking the hour."

Life at Willow Shade was orderly, comfortable, and continuously interesting. It was a stable world for a child to grow up in. The Cathers were better off than many of their neighbors, and there were always servants in the house to talk to and a few field hands, both black and white, on the farm to watch. There was a huge sheep barn, standing three stories and a loft above its ground-floor pens, where children could play. Spinning and quilting, butter-making, preserving, and candle-making went on regularly. Old women from the mountains came down to help during the busy seasons. Butchering, sheep-shearing, tanning of hides were done on the farm. During the winter evenings the black help sat around the kitchen fireplace, cracking nuts, telling stories, and cutting old clothes into strips, winding the strips into balls to send to Mrs. Kearns a neighbor who made them into rag rugs. There was also a steady stream of guests at Willow Shade. The tin peddler and Uncle Billy Parks, the broom-maker, came often and were housed overnight in the two-story wing at the back of the house. Cather remembered once emptying her savings bank and giving the contents to Uncle Billy. More important guests, relatives from all over, friends from Winchester, sometimes even Washington, came to visit or stop over on their way somewhere else. It was open house most of the time.

The orderliness and continuity of Lather's first nine years in Virginia left their mark on her values and personality. Her old friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who knew her from the time she was sixteen, wrote that she spent this formative "period of life which most influences personality in a state which had the tradition of continuity and stability as far as they could exist in this country, and in a class which more than any other is always stubbornly devoted to the old ways of doing things." Lather always cherished tradition, and the older she grew, the more she felt the need to cling to the values she had grown up with. She watched with profound sorrow the ravages of World War I, then the Great Depression, and finally, late in her life, World War II and felt at the end that the world she knew had largely vanished.

By far the most memorable event of Cather's childhood occurred when she was five. This was the return of Nancy Till, the ex-slave her grandmother had helped escape. The event is recreated as the epilogue for *Sapphira*. On a clear, windy March day in 1879 Cather was in bed with a cold in her mother's bedroom on the third floor of Willow Shade. She had been put there so that she could watch the turnpike to see the stage when it appeared. Nancy was coming home from Montreal, where she had lived for twenty-five years following the midnight flight in which Rachel Boak had taken her across the Potomac River and delivered her to agents of the underground railroad. Suddenly her mother hurried into the room, wrapped her in a blanket, and carried her to the window as the stage stopped before the house. A woman in a black coat and turban descended. Then she was put back to bed. Old Till, who worked for the Cathers and was Nancy's mother, stayed in the room with the child so that the recognition scene could be enacted in her presence. There was talking on the stairs, and a minute later the door opened: "Till had already risen; when the stranger followed my mother into the room, she took a few uncertain steps forward. She fell meekly into the arms of a tall, gold-skinned woman, who drew the little old darky to her breast and held her there, bending her face down over the head scantily covered with grey wool. Neither spoke a word. There was something Scriptural in that meeting, like the pictures in our old Bible."

Sixty-four years later Cather still could remember the scene as though it had just happened. She wrote in 1943 that [Nancy's dress](#) in the novel is described in more detail than she could remember about a friend she had seen the week before. It all happened just as she told it, and it was the most exciting event of her life up to that time. Nancy already had become a legend in the community, and Mrs. Cather often had sung her daughter to sleep with,

Down by de cane brake, close by de mill,

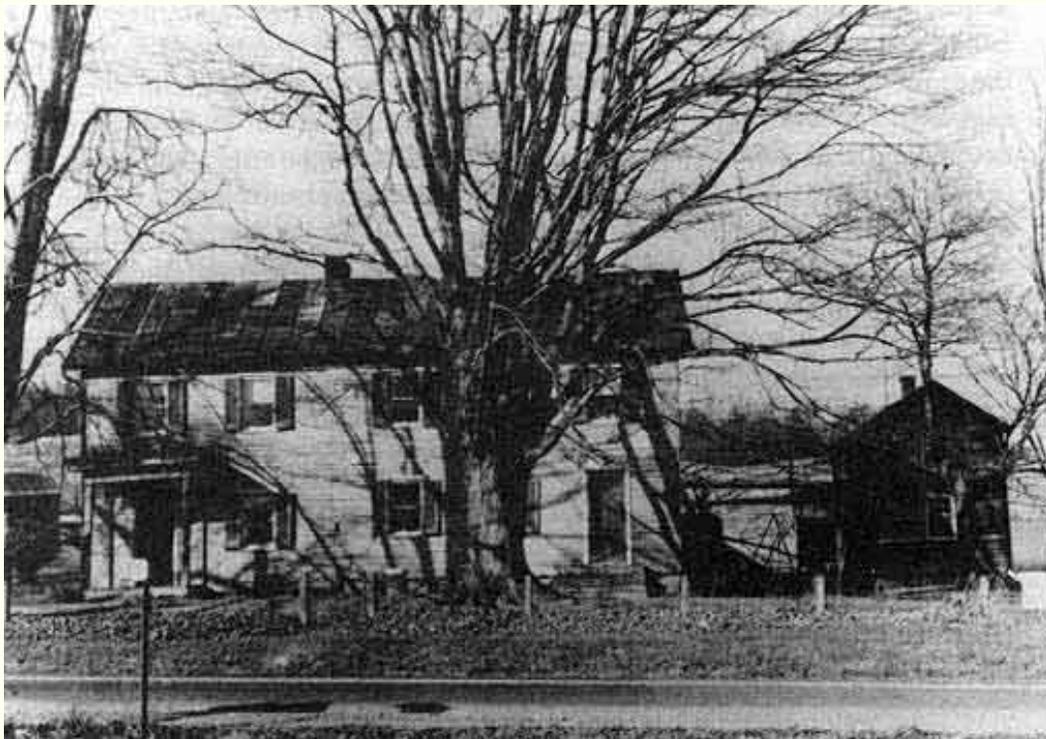
Dar lived a yaller gal, her name was Nancy Till.

Another dramatic event occurred about the same time with five-year-old Willa as participant, but that experience was terrifying rather than exciting. She was playing by herself in an upstairs room at Willow Shade when a half-witted boy, the son of one of the servants, slipped into the room brandishing an open jackknife. He said he was going to cut off her hand. She was terrified. In recalling the

experience, however, Cather remembered that she was scared, but she also knew that she must not show any sign of fear. She began talking to the boy to distract him and edging towards the window. Outside the room was a tall tree whose branches one could reach out and touch. She suggested to the boy that it would be fun to climb out the window and descend to the ground without having to go back down the stairs. The new idea drove out the old one. The boy forgot what he had planned to do, went out the window, and climbed down the tree.

Though the strategem worked, the experience left a deep trauma. Throughout her life Cather had a horror of mutilation, especially of the hands. Time and again in her fiction this horror appears-almost like an obsession. In an early story written while Cather was still in college, "The Clemency of the Court" (1893), Serge is tied by his arms in prison until "they were paralyzed from the shoulder down so that the guard had to feed him like a baby." In "The Profile" (1907) one of the characters speaks of the human body as sanctified by nature, "but lop away so much as a finger, and you have wounded the creature beyond reparation." In "The Bohemian Girl" (1912) Eric tears his hand on a cornsheller. In "The Namesake" (1907) Lyon's hand and forearm are torn away by exploding shrapnel. In "Behind the Singer Tower" (1912) an opera singer jumps from a burning hotel, flings his arm out, and his hand is "snapped off at the wrist as cleanly as if it had been taken off by a cutlass." In *One of Ours* (1922) Claude Wheeler and his company move into a captured trench, at the top of which the hand of a dead German reaches out "like the swollen roots of some noxious weed." In *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), when a missionary is feasting with a group of Huron Indians, "they pulled a human hand out of the kettle to show him that he had eaten of an Iroquois prisoner." When Aunt Jezebel, the old slave who was born in Africa, is dying in *Sapphira* and will not eat, she is told that she must eat to keep up her strength. She replies that nothing would tempt her "lessen maybe it was a li'l' pickaninny's hand." In Cather's unfinished novel laid in medieval Avignon, which she was writing when she died, one of the main characters was punished for thievery by being strung up by the thumbs so that his hands became useless.

In respect to this horror of mutilation Cather's life imitated her art. In 1934 she tore the big tendon in her left wrist and had to have her hand in splints for over a month, and four years later someone accidentally smashed one of her hands while she was shopping in a drugstore. In 1940, after signing five hundred copies of a de luxe edition of *Sapphira* for Knopf in three days, she had to have her right hand tied up in splints. The next year her hand was still in such bad shape that an orthopedic surgeon designed a special brace, which she wore for eight months in 1941 and off and on for the rest of her life.



13. Cather's birthplace, Back Creek, Virginia. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



14. WillowShade. Courtesy of Margaret O'Connor.



Willa Cather

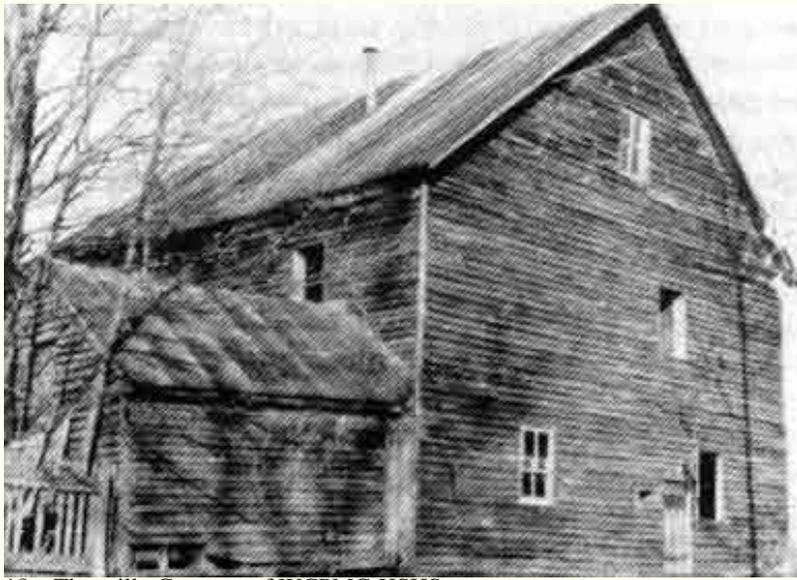
15. Cather as infant. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



16. Cather at the age of nine. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.



17. The mill house once owned by Cather's great-grandparents, who suggested the characters of Sapphira and Henry Colbert in her last novel. Courtesy of Margaret O'Connor.



18. The mill. Courtesy of WCPMC-HSHS.

If her quick wit saved her from the half-witted boy, on another occasion her wit must have embarrassed her elders. Among the guests who streamed through Willow Shade was an old judge to whom she apparently took an immediate dislike. The judge took the liberty of stroking her curls and addressing her with a string of platitudes that might have been acceptable to a child of less precocity. She stood it as long as she could, then blurted out: "I'se a dang'ous nigger, I is!" It is tempting to see in this episode the beginnings of Cather's adult distaste for the polite conventions and ritual blather of genteel southern society. Her friend Edith Lewis wrote in her memoir of Cather that "even as a little girl she felt something smothering in the polite, rigid social conventions of that Southern society-something factitious and unreal. If one fell in with those sentimental attitudes, those euphuisms that went with good manners, one lost all touch with reality, with truth of experience."

Cather always had ambivalent feelings about her southern background. When she revisited Virginia in 1913, she was eager to get away from the romantic southern attitude she found in both sexes, but the men in particular were all cowed and broken, good only for carrying wraps, dancing, and tipping their hats. She didn't go back to Virginia for a quarter of a century. In 1931 she did not want to be considered a southern writer and declined to serve on a committee of southern writers. During World War II when her niece and her doctor husband moved to Tennessee, she wrote an old friend that going south had to her a slight connotation of going backward. She told another old friend that southerners, herself included, scorn accurate knowledge and always think they can get by with "pretty near." She also never quite lost her southern accent, though she thought she had, and she was much surprised when she was vacationing incognito in New England in 1942 and someone recognized her, he said, by her southern accent.

On the other hand, she much admired her mother, despite clashes of personality, for her bearing as a southern lady and very much wanted to be one herself. When she was preparing to write her only novel about Virginia, she revisited the Shenandoah Valley in 1938

kind of summer morning to encourage idleness. Behind him were the sleepy pine woods, the slatey ground beneath them strewn red with slippery needles. Around him the laurels were just blushing into bloom. Here and there rose tall chestnut trees with the red sumach growing under them. Down in the valley lay the fields of wheat and corn, and among them the creek wound between its willow-grown banks. Across it was the old black, creaking foot-bridge which had neither props nor piles, but was swung from the arms of a great sycamore tree. The reapers were at work in the wheat fields, the mowers swinging their cradles and the binders following close behind. Along the fences companies of barefooted children were picking berries. On the bridge a lank youth sat patiently fishing in the stream where no fish had been caught for years. Allen watched them all until a passing cloud made the valley dark, then his eyes wandered to where the Blue Ridge lay against the sky, faint and hazy as the mountains of Beulah Land."

The next two stories making early use of the Virginia material are less interesting. "A Night at Greenway Court" is a story that takes place in 1752 at the manor house of Lord Fairfax near Winchester, a place Cather certainly had visited as a child. In addition, that noble lord would have interested her because of the land grant he had made to her ancestor. But the story is historical melodrama that probably owes as much to Cather's early fondness for Anthony Hope Hawkins as to her Virginia childhood. It is significant, however, that here Cather makes an early use of a male narrator to tell her story of dueling over a woman's honor. "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" is laid in Nebraska, but the story turns on a reminiscence of Virginia in which a woman urges her farmer husband to let their boys attend the circus. The couple discover that when they were children they both had attended the same circus in their native Virginia. The memory of this experience softens the hardness that had grown up between them, and the boys are sent off to the circus. This is a rather skillful use of what must have been a family story, and it creates what is rare in Cather's fiction—a tender moment of conjugal affection. The feeling is genuine, though the story still is apprentice work.

"The Namesake," which makes the last direct use of Virginia until *Sapphira*, has intrinsic interest that goes beyond its use of early memories. The story conjures up the image of the uncle who was killed in the Civil War, though the sculptor-narrator who tells the story in Paris makes the uncle a Pennsylvanian. Yet the tale makes clear the powerful pull of family and old memories. Lyon Hartwell, the son of American parents, was born and raised abroad. He is somehow able to capture the spirit of America better in his sculpture than any of his co-artists then working in Paris who have had genuine American upbringings. Hartwell explains to his friends the inspiration for his statue *The Color Sergeant*, which is the figure of a young soldier running and clutching the folds of a flag, the staff of which has been shot away. Hartwell had gone to Pennsylvania to take care of an invalid aunt living in his grandfather's house on the banks of the Ohio River. During his two years in Pennsylvania he had one day found in the attic an old trunk containing his uncle's clothes, exercise books, letters written home from the army, first books, and even some toys. Inside the cover of a dog-eared *Aeneid* was inscribed "Lyon Hartwell, January 1862," the year before he had gone off to war at the age of fifteen. Inside the back cover was a crude drawing of the federal flag, and under it in a boyish hand were two lines of "The Star-Spangled Banner." "It was a stiff, wooden sketch, not unlike a detail from some Egyptian inscription," Hartwell narrates, "but, the moment I saw it, wind and color seemed to touch it."

This experience establishes contact between the sculptor and the uncle for whom he has been named. The experience of that night, he relates, almost rent him to pieces. "It was the same feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived. For the first time I felt the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had not begun with me. It was as if the earth under my feet had grasped and rooted me, and were pouring its essence into me. I sat there until the dawn of morning, and all night long my life seemed to be pouring out of me and running into the ground." Cather's subsequent career was full of epiphanies like this, which inspired her novels, but when she wrote this story in 1907, the pull of family was strong, the tug of Virginia weak. She denied her uncle his allegiance to the Confederacy, for by that time she had not lived in Virginia for twenty-four years.

Cather's move to Nebraska was a decade in the making. First Willa's Uncle George and Aunt Franc went west in 1873, and the following year her Grandfather and Grandmother Cather left Back Creek Valley to visit Nebraska. They stayed a year, returned to Virginia, stayed only two years, then moved west for good. The Nebraska Cathers began urging Charles to join them, but he resisted for several years. In 1880 Charles went to Nebraska himself to see his father and brother and found them flourishing in their new prairie homes. But he still wasn't convinced. After he returned to Virginia, however, his four-story sheep barn mysteriously burned to the ground, and he took that as an omen. In February 1883, he auctioned off the farm and his equipment for six thousand dollars, and by April the family was in Nebraska. It was a formidable expedition: parents; four children ranging from nine to infancy; Margie Anderson, the hired girl, and her brother Enoch; Mrs. Cather's mother, Rachel Boak, and two of her grandchildren. Most of the furniture went into the auction, and the few things they moved, like dishes, were packed in barrels and shipped with them. Even Old Vic, the sheep dog, for whom Charles Cather had made shoes, was given to a neighbor. Willa remembered poignantly Old Vic on the day of departure. Just as the family was about to board the train at Back Creek, the old dog broke loose and came running across the fields dragging her chain. Young Willa felt that it was more than she could bear.