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Article Summary: Of the seven children born to Charles Fectique and Mary Virginia (Jennie Boak) Cather, only Willa acquired fame as an author. This article provides information on the successes of each of her siblings, bringing the family into perspective.

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WHAT HAPPENED TO THE REST OF THE CHARLES CATHER FAMILY?

By MILDRED R. BENNETT

Charles Fectique and Mary Virginia (Jennie Boak) Cather had seven children, of whom Willa, born December 7, 1873, was the oldest. She was named Wilella, after a younger sister of Mr. Cather's, Wilella Grant Cather, who had died in 1869 at four years of age. From childhood, however, she was known only as Willa or Willie. The other children, each successful in their own right, have been over-shadowed by their famous sister, and this brief piece is intended to bring the whole family into perspective. I have relied heavily upon quotes from their children, the nieces and nephews of Willa Cather, so in truth this is their story not mine.

The second Cather child was Roscoe. Here are the words of his daughter, Virginia Brockway:

Roscoe Cather was born June 24, 1877 at the family home in Virginia.

After graduating from high school in Red Cloud he taught for a time in a country school, and then taught in Fullerton, Nebr. There he met my mother (also a teacher) Meta Elizabeth Schaper of Havelock, Nebr. After they were married (I think it was July 28, 1909, but am not positive) they moved to Lander, Wyoming where Roscoe opened an abstract office. Their three daughters, Virginia, Margaret and Elizabeth [twins] were born in Lander.

In 1921 he moved the family to Casper, Wyoming where he became president of the newly organized Wyoming Trust Company.

In 1937 the family (including the two younger daughters, Margaret and Elizabeth) moved to Colusa, California, a little town north of Sacramento. Roscoe and his brother Douglass had bought the controlling stock in the First Savings Bank of Colusa, and Roscoe served as president of the bank until his death in September, 1945. He is buried in the family plot in Red Cloud.

His daughter, Virginia, goes on to say, "I do want to say that he was a wonderful person and the best father any one could

have. I *never* saw him lose his temper. He could get angry, but his anger was impersonal, *never*, never the petty personal kind." His widow, Mrs. Meta Cather died August 28, 1973, in Denver.

Charles Douglas Cather (Douglass—Willa preferred that it be spelled with two s's and he obliged), the second son, was born in Virginia and reared in Red Cloud. Regarding name changes, it is interesting to note that five-month-old Douglass is enumerated as "Garfield" in the 1880 census for Frederick County, Virginia (Willa is enumerated as "Willie"). The Cather family was Republican in politics and, though living in Virginia, had supported the Union cause during the Civil War.

Douglass held various positions in railroading, mainly with the Santa Fe from about 1900 to 1920. His niece, Helen Southwick, remembers: "Before that time he had worked on the family farm and done some mineral prospecting in Mexico (like Emil in *O Pioneers!*). At various times throughout his life he made investments in Mexican mines. He always had friends in Mexico and he spoke the language well."

An honest man (like Captain Forrester in Willa's *A Lost Lady*), he paid his men in cash from his deposit boxes, when the banks failed. He loved life in his frank, open-hearted way. He was successful in business, having been identified with large oil operations at Huntington Beach, California. Cather was unmarried. He was a 32nd degree Mason. He died June 14, 1938.

Jessica Virginia Cather was born August 26, 1881, near Winchester, Virginia, in the family home known as Willow Shade. The family moved to Webster County, Nebraska, when she was about a year and a half old. She graduated from Red Cloud High School in June, 1899, and taught country school and South Side Grade School for five years.

On October 6, 1904, she married James William Auld, a Red Cloud banker. They had three children: Mary Virginia Mellen, November 11, 1905; William Thomas, July 15, 1908; and Charles Cather, September 18, 1911. After a divorce in 1933, Mrs. Auld moved to Palo Alto, California, where she died suddenly on Thanksgiving Day, 1964. The Auld mansion is now the Webster County Museum.

Mrs. Auld was a charter member of Chapter Y of Nebraska P.E.O. She took an active interest in it and returned to Red Cloud for her fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the



From left are Charles F. Cather, Virginia (Boak) Cather, and Willa Cather. (Photographs for this article were loaned by the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial.)

chapter, and she was honored in Palo Alto on the sixtieth anniversary of her membership.

Her son Dr. William Thomas Auld recalls:

When Grandfather and Grandmother [Cather] celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary [December 5, 1922], all of their seven children were alive (there had been no infant, etc., deaths) and all except Douglass were there for the occasion. Since the dinner was at the Royal Hotel, we three children were able to attend. A most memorable occasion! The Reverend Bishop Beecher [of the Episcopal Church] came from Hastings to act as Master of Ceremonies and say Grace. Willa, whose skill as a raconteur was equal to her ability as a writer, told us about her early years in Virginia, where she lived until she was nine. One story I remember: Grandfather and Grandmother seem to have been an active young couple, and when they went ice skating in the winter, Grandfather would cut an evergreen bough and use it as a sled to pull Willa over the ice.

James Donald Cather, the fifth child, was born in Red Cloud, December 12, 1886, and educated there. He went to Greybull, Wyoming, in 1907 to join brothers Roscoe and Douglass. Later he was involved in retail merchandising in Colorado and Nebraska. He married Ethel May Garber, daughter of Edward Stanton Garber, in 1913. She was a granddaughter of Abram Garber, brother of Governor Silas Garber. James and Ethel's daughter, Helen Louise Southwick, writes: "Her aunt Lyra (*the Lost Lady*) made by hand lovely things for my mother's trousseau. As a young girl she had been educated in a convent school where she had been taught that lady-like art of fine needlework." James and Ethel had two children, Helen and Charles. In 1930 James and wife moved to California to join brother Douglass. James died August 18, 1966.

Elsie Margaret Cather was born in Red Cloud, January 13,



Roscoe and Douglass Cather



John E. (Jack) Cather

1890, just prior to Willa's graduation from high school and her moving to Lincoln to attend the University of Nebraska. Elsie graduated from high school in 1908 and spent two years at the University of Nebraska and two years at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. Her aunt, Mrs. Franc Smith Cather, who was a native of Massachusetts, had been graduated from Mount Holyoke in 1869. Also, by this time Willa was living in New York City.

After finishing college Elsie taught at Lander, Wyoming, where brother Roscoe and family were living. She also taught in Iowa and Cleveland, Ohio. Illness in the family, however, brought her home to Red Cloud, and during part of 1919, she taught English in the local schools. She then went to Lincoln and obtained a position at Lincoln High School, where she taught English until her retirement. She died in Lincoln, May 21, 1964.

Her memory is highly regarded by her former students, and friends remember her as a person devoted to helping others; particularly she was kind to the old. Hundreds of students remember the helpful classes they had from her in English. She, too, was gifted in writing but limited herself to skits for local presentation and other unpublicized works.

John Esten (Jack) Cather, the youngest child in the family, was born in the family home in Red Cloud on January 10,



James Cather



Elsie Cather

1892, while Willa was away attending the university. His daughter, Ella Cather Lewis, says:

Our father attended grade and high school in Red Cloud, then went to the University of Nebraska at Lincoln like his sister, Willa. He majored in Chemical Engineering and participated in two varsity sports (Football and Track). In his senior year he transferred to Carnegie Institute of Technology at Pittsburgh, where he lived at Judge McClung's with his sister, Willa.

In 1916 he accepted a position as analyzing chemist with the British government, a position held throughout the war.

While on assignment with the British Government in Smethport, Pennsylvania, he met and married Irma Wells, grand-daughter of Sylvanus Dwelley Freeman, Surgeon General with the Union Army throughout the Civil War, and later with President Juarez's Revolutionary Army that overthrew the empire of Maximilian [in Mexico] in 1867. They had two daughters, Catherine and Ella Virginia.

After the War he became the chemical engineer for the Friese Industries in Cincinnati, Ohio. In the early twenties he became an analyzing chemist for the Standard Oil Company of Indiana at Casper, Wyoming. Several years later he transferred to the Kendall Oil Company at Bradford, Pennsylvania, where he was innovative in perfecting high octane gasoline.

In 1936 he moved with his family to Whittier, California, where he was a partner with his brothers, Douglass and James, in oil production in Huntington Beach, Long Beach and Santa Fe Springs.

Dad died in Long Beach on August 24, 1959 of a coronary occlusion.

His widow and daughters are presently living in Long Beach, California. My sister Catherine is an elementary teacher with the Los Angeles City Schools, and I am an Associate Professor in the Speech-Theatre Arts Department at Long Beach City College.

His son-in-law, Harry Lewis, husband of Ella Cather Lewis, also writes:



Jessica Cather

John Cather was a man with patrician manners and a gentle nature. He looked much like pictures of his father. He was an avid reader; he could sit for hours daily deeply engrossed in historical novels and enjoying the vicarious experiences in which he found himself, but when family conversations aroused his interest, he could emerge suddenly with wry and appropriate comments.

He was a gifted raconteur who could give a light touch to his reminiscences of his youth in Nebraska, his family, or his brief apprenticeship as a fiction manuscript reader in New York under the guidance of Willa, or the momentous occasion when he escorted Geraldine Farrar [noted soprano] and his sister to the opera.

This light touch he possessed prevailed even when he would be motivated to spin tales about investments—or to discuss the current scene in politics.

Willa had influenced his early years and had guided him in his college curriculum; therefore he had acquired a classical background in literature. This background was revealed in his speech pattern in which classical allusions, literary or poetic quotes were appropriately inserted into his conversation to dramatize the point he wished to emphasize.

Jack (John) was a most devoted husband and father. He was loving, generous and indulgent with his wife and daughters.

Of the Charles Cather family, once quite large, Willa Cather is survived by two sisters-in-law, seven nieces, and three nephews. From the Virginia mountains and the Nebraska plains, the children of Charles and Jennie Cather went out into the world, and in extraordinary ways left their marks upon it. Many of their grandchildren returned to Red Cloud in the autumn of 1971 for a reunion, visiting once again the small town in the valley of the Republican where so much of their family heritage is being preserved by the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial.