Jay Yost

Born in Red Cloud, Nebraska, in 1957, Jay Yost is one of the youngest members of the board of governors of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, based in Red Cloud, Cather’s hometown. “Few Americans seem to realize what a treasure they have in Red Cloud, a veritable little ville musée,” A. L. Rowse wrote. Gay men have been a devoted presence among those appreciative few since the Cather Foundation was established in 1955, and Yost is a solid link in that lineage. Jay Yost lives in New York City with his partner, Wade Leak.

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, our family’s idea of fun was getting in the car and driving somewhere. Most of our forays consisted of touring our hometown and the rest of Webster County, discussing who lived in a certain house when and what connections we had to those folks on one side of our family or the other. As my parents regaled us with stories of a home’s now-departed inhabitants, I couldn’t help but imagine what those houses and farmsteads looked like when their owners were young and ambitious and proud of their small piece of Western civilization on the prairie. It was these rides that planted the seeds of my fascination with seeing how things had been. My craving for imagining the past was further encouraged in the late 1970s when my history-crazed sister gave me a copy of Webster County: Visions of the Past, a wonderful book that chronicles the architectural heritage of each of the county’s sixteen precincts.

When I lived in France in 1980, after college, Paris was in the midst of cleaning the exteriors of all its buildings. It was just amazing to see things going from “before” to “after.” Even as a kid I was always wanting to fix things up, make them look good again, make broken old things work again. I’ve always been meticulous and anal-retentive. There was an irregular, empty lot catty-corner across the street from where we lived, where the road jogged a little bit, with hedge apple trees behind it. I would mow it and put in little plantings, and there was a log in the middle of it for visitors to use as a bench. I called it Pooh Corner, a quaint little natural setting I created and tended, like an English garden.

I’ve always been captivated by old houses, and there were three or four really beautiful ones in Red Cloud that I remember loving as a kid. Of course, they’re gone now. While they were being torn down, I would wander around in them after the wreckers had left for the day, trying to picture what had been where. One great old house with a mansard roof had huge bowed
wooden beams, like somebody had bent the wood. I couldn’t believe they were tearing it down.

Fascinated with an Eastlake bedroom set of my grandmother’s, I tried to imagine what kind of house it would have been in. I started picking up a few antiques when I was in high school. By then I had my own bedroom, so I kept my antiques there, including an Eastlake table and mirror. It was mostly junk that I would fix up, things I would find at garage sales or be given by old ladies who didn’t want the stuff anymore and knew I liked it. I was a big plant freak too. If you know how Victorian rooms used to look, filled with lots of plants and stuff, that’s how my bedroom looked. I had forty-some plants in there.

My father had a meat-packing plant, so I usually worked there, but one summer during high school he had me work on landscaping the yard full-time. I really got into it. We built a deck, laid brick walks, built terraces in the higher part of the backyard, constructed a small barn. I also envisioned a secluded little patio with a fountain, but it was never built. I was creating little rooms outside, imagining how people would relate to those spaces. That’s how I always thought about houses too—how a house made you feel, whether intimidating or cold or comfortable. I didn’t like newer houses; they made me feel like I was cooped up inside a trailer.

I was always a bit strange. In high school I went out for football for a couple of years, then refused to because I hated it. I joined Pep Club: one guy and fifty-five girls. I wore neck scarves and wooden beads, coordinated my outfits, had my hair done in an Afro, and was the only kid in Red Cloud wearing earth shoes. I’m sure my parents must have been dying a thousand deaths, but they never said anything. I got really involved in the church, was a Jesus Freak for a while, going to both the United Methodist and Assembly of God churches. It was pretty wild. I even spoke in tongues eventually. By about my junior year in high school I dropped the Jesus Freak thing, but I spent much of my senior year going to Methodist church meetings. Being a minister was one thing that I always tested high for.

Growing up in Red Cloud, I loved to attend the Cather events, with all the academics and other people coming into town. You could always spot the Cather people, as we always referred to them, walking around like alien invaders. I would go to the spring conference. I’d pad around the museum. I’d go to the dedication ceremony when the Cather Foundation would acquire another building. In junior high I was thinking how cool it was that they were buying these old buildings, protecting them until they could restore them. Wherever I go, I gravitate toward this stuff. It’s something that just keeps following through.

On April Fools’ Day in 1996, I bought my own old house in Red Cloud. It’s at Ninth and Seward, a block from where I grew up. When my parents
would work late on Saturdays, my sister and I stayed overnight with the old widow who lived in that house. She would have a couple of widow friends come over on Saturday nights to watch TV. The house was kind of creepy and smelled a little like a nursing home, but it was also really cool: it had staircases both front and back, and one of the stairway windows had red glass panes, so that everything was red when you looked outside. The place also had a big old barn, a carriage house.

I must have had another life as a Victorian, because I'm just way too attracted to everything that has to do with the period from the 1880s to World War I. When I was a little kid, running my fingers over the etched glass in those two front doors, dashing up the stairs, looking out that red window, I tried to imagine the original owners, what kind of life they had there. I thought how cool it would be if I could have a life like that and how wonderful I would feel if I lived in a space like that, with all the woodwork and moldings, chandeliers and fireplaces.

Years ago I told my babysitter that I wanted to own her house some day. In the early 1990s I sent a letter to remind her of my interest. When she started to lose it to Alzheimer's, her daughter-in-law called me. I ended up buying the place for five thousand dollars, which is what the land is worth. The house was in such bad shape; anybody else would have just torn it down. Most people think I'm crazy to have bought it, but it's cited in the National Register as one of the three most significant houses in Red Cloud. I just thought it would be horrible to lose it. It was built in 1888 by Charles W. Kaley. There are three Kaley houses: an older one from the late 1870s, my house right beside it on the corner, and another built across the street in about 1907.

The house is being worked on slowly, slowly, like everything moves in Red Cloud. It took several thousand dollars to clear all the trees that had grown up on the property. Then they put on a completely new roof, but before they could do that, they had to rip out all the original chimneys and rebuild them, because the mortar had turned to dust. The siding and trim need a lot of work before the house gets a good paint job. A new foundation is the next big project, before we start any interior work. We did get the three stained-glass attic windows repaired: I want to illumine them with lights that will go on automatically at night.

The house is an uninhabitable shell, without heat or water or electricity. The heating was so inefficient that it would have cost several hundred dollars a month just to keep the pipes from freezing, so we had everything shut off. Then the barn collapsed under heavy snow, and the city ordered me to tear it down. Unfortunately the electricity ran to the barn first and then to the house, which shows how old the wiring was. Anyway, once you have the
electricity cut off, you have to be up to code in order to have it turned back on. So now I’m screwed. As soon as we get the foundation in, we’re going to start doing internal systems. There’s a little outbuilding, perhaps the washhouse or cookhouse, that we redid recently, so that’s cute now. It was in as bad a shape as the barn, but it’s much smaller, so it was a lot easier to do. I’d like to rebuild the barn and make it into a living space.

I still think of Red Cloud as my home. Once we’re retired, I tell Wade, we’re going to live in the house for a month in the spring and a month in the fall. Assuming my siblings and I won’t have my parents’ house after they’re gone, we can all get together at the Kaley-Yost House, and there will be enough room for everybody. The rest of the year I would rent it out to Cather scholars or other people who have a Cather connection, or to people who want to visit Red Cloud to get away from it all. I had made previous attempts to buy old houses around Red Cloud. My sister and I were going to buy one of the biggest houses in the county, north and east of town, but the owners decided they didn’t want to sell the abandoned place after all. Then I tried to buy the Wick Cutter House, a small house at Ninth and Cedar. When the Charles Kaley House came up, I felt like fate was telling me that I had to do it.

A building is kind of your history, and once you lose the building, you lose the memories. I’ve written letters to the Red Cloud newspaper, saying that every time I come home, they’ve torn down another piece of my past. Saying that if you take away all the old buildings, you’re really taking away people’s history. Pointing out the soulless quality of Republican City, a town up the river about thirty miles that was relocated and built anew in the 1940s, when they put in the dam. The buildings there lack character and dignity. They don’t embody people’s shared history; they don’t make people feel good about themselves.

We don’t really own these old buildings; we’re just stewards of them. Recently a tin cornice was removed from one of the buildings next to Dr. Cook’s old drugstore, across the street from the Red Cloud Opera House. It was a safety hazard, and they couldn’t get anybody to fix it, so they cut it into three pieces and took it down. When I was home, I noticed that it was missing, asked where it was, and was told that it was in the alley. I called the guy who owns the property, and he agreed to store it in the basement of the building. I’m getting the shop class at the high school to fix the cornice as a class project, and I’ll raise the money to repair the parapet wall that it’s attached to.

Red Cloud had a National Register survey done back in the 1970s, which designated four historic districts in the town as well as all the individual sites. For years I pushed for Red Cloud to adopt a historic preservation ordinance, even offered to help draft it. Now that the town has one, I’d
really like to work with the historic preservation commission to designate local landmarks and districts and to get a more potent version of the ordinance adopted. Right now, all it does is delay demolition. It needs to ensure that any alterations to historic structures are historically appropriate and that inappropriate structures can’t be built in designated historic districts. I found out, for example, that a new church is to be built behind the historic Saint Juliana Falconieri Catholic Church. Talking to the guy who owns the lumberyard, who designed the new building, I learned that it’s going to have wood siding and a metal roof. I tried to let him know that it’s important that the color of the roof be dark, so that it doesn’t stand out when you’re looking at the old church.

Around the turn of the last century one of the local newspapers published several little picture books of Red Cloud and gave them away to their subscribers. I’ve had them enlarged on color xeroxes, laminated, and bound. I gave copies to the library, the high school, the museum, and the Cather Foundation, so people can see how these houses used to look. A lot of what’s needed in Red Cloud is just education. Many people like having old buildings around; it’s important for more people to realize that they need to work for them.

Soon after I purchased the Kaley house, a niece of theirs lent me a turn-of-the-century photo postcard of the home showing a beautifully maintained Queen Anne house with her great-uncle and great-aunt sitting proudly in their horse and buggy on the lawn. I had the photo enlarged, and the detail is such that you can clearly see the nail holes in the skirt of the fence behind them. You can’t ask for much more when you’re trying to restore a gem of an old house.

Intrigued by the postcard of the Kaley House, I began collecting other real-photo postcards of scenes from Red Cloud and surrounding towns and of old opera houses in the region. The quality of many of these images is amazing, since the negative originally produced was often the same size as the postcard itself. Visual history of this quality allows us to see much of the world that Willa Cather saw growing up—the same world that she, while sitting in her New York apartment decades later, vividly recalled in her Nebraska novels. These photos also demonstrate how incredibly lucky we are that the buildings Cather knew are still in existence and how we can help to assure the town’s future by ensuring that we save its past.