

4-6-2018

A Story Behind a Story: The Ohio Roots of Willa Cather's Characters

Joan Milligan
University of Dayton, jmilligan1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/ul_blog

eCommons Citation

Milligan, Joan, "A Story Behind a Story: The Ohio Roots of Willa Cather's Characters" (2018). *University Libraries Blog Archive*. 154.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/ul_blog/154

This Blog is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries Blog Archive by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlange1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

University Libraries

[Blogs at UD](#) / [University of Dayton Libraries](#) / [A Story Behind a Story: The Ohio Roots of Willa Cather's Characters](#)



FRIDAY APRIL 6, 2018

[Blogs at UD](#) →

[University
Libraries Blog](#) →

[University
Libraries Website](#) →

[Marian Library
Blog](#) →

[Get RSS Feed](#) →

[Subscribe to
UD Newsletter](#) →

A Story Behind a Story: The Ohio Roots of Willa Cather's Characters

By Joan Milligan

Willa Cather's novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is based on the true story of Jean-Baptiste Lamy and Joseph Machebeuf.

The two French priests, renamed Bishop Jean Marie Latour and Joseph Vaillant in the novel, go to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to reinvigorate the diocese, recently added to U.S. territory at the end of the Mexican-American War. Cather's description of sunsets that send a "copper glow over pine covered mountains" and the men crossing arid stretches of land on horseback will forever tie the two priests to the Southwest in readers' minds. However, their first experience of the United States was in Ohio, where they spent more than 10 years (1839-1850). Machebeuf was assigned to Sandusky, in northern Ohio, and Lamy was sent 90 miles south to Sapp's Settlement, now known as Danville.

Danville was the site of the second Catholic church in Ohio — St. Luke's, a log structure built by the settlers in 1822 in the rolling hills of Knox County. Visits from clergymen were few and far between during the settlement's first 25 years due to poor roads and difficulty of crossing several deep creeks in winter. Lamy was fresh out of seminary when he was named the remote community's first resident pastor. He spoke very little English when he arrived in 1839, but he was well-liked and rallied the community to finish the frame church they had begun. Times were tough, but by April 1841, it was done. Author Paul Horgan reports, "[I]n the first year, St. Luke's at Danville saw a thousand persons present at the Feast of the Resurrection, most of them were not even Catholics."

PREVIOUS
POST

60 years of
National
Library Week:
'Libraries
Lead'

in 1958, long before folic acid, salt, nurses, agriculture, food allergies, robotics and handwashing had their own awareness weeks, the American Library Association launched National Library Week in "the fight against ignorance, indifference, illiteracy and inefficiency." The fight continues ... with libraries still on the front line.

[Read More](#)

Lamy went on to lead the Newark and Mount Vernon communities in building their churches. After seven years in central Ohio, Lamy was called to the Cincinnati area to serve at St. Mary's in Covington, Kentucky, in 1847. It was while he was acquiring land and materials to build a cathedral that word of his capabilities and religious zeal reached the pope in Rome. Clearly Lamy was the kind of man they were looking to send to Santa Fe. Lamy was ordained a bishop at St. Peter in Chains Cathedral in Cincinnati in November 1850. With this, Lamy's "beloved Ohio" fades away, and the better-known part of the story begins.

FURTHER READING

Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) is on many lists of 100 best American novels. Read [Roesch Library's digital copy](#) or see [one of our first editions](#) in Rare Books or the U.S. Catholic Special Collection.

See also: Paul Horgan's *Lamy of Santa Fe: His Life and Times* (1975). More about Machebeuf: Albert Hamilton's *The Catholic Journey Through Ohio* (1976).

— *Joan Milligan is Special Collections Cataloger for the University Libraries.*

NEXT POST

Get out of your Roesch Library fines

It's time to clean out your cupboards and help fill St. Vincent de Paul's pantry. Roesch Library is offering fine forgiveness during National Library Week.

[Read More](#)



Share



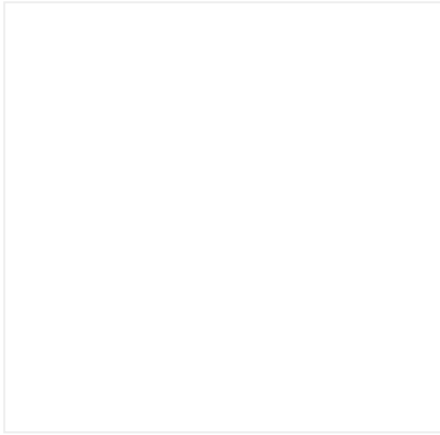
Topics

- 📖 Libraries
- 📖 Faith/Mission

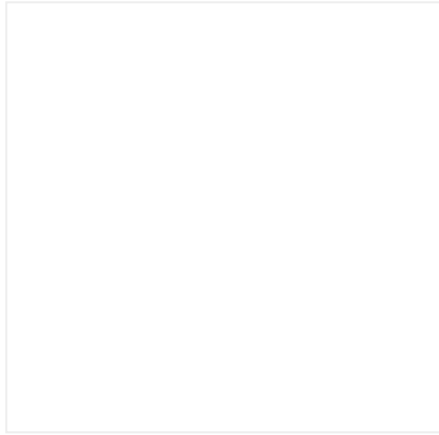
Aptly ▾



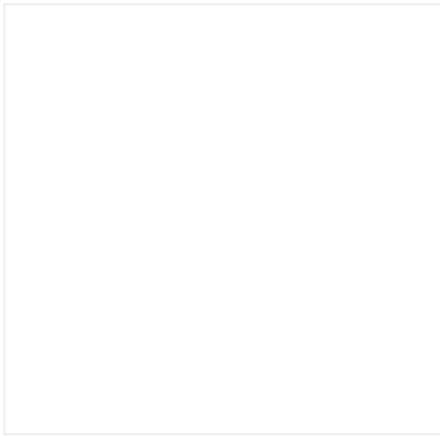
What's going



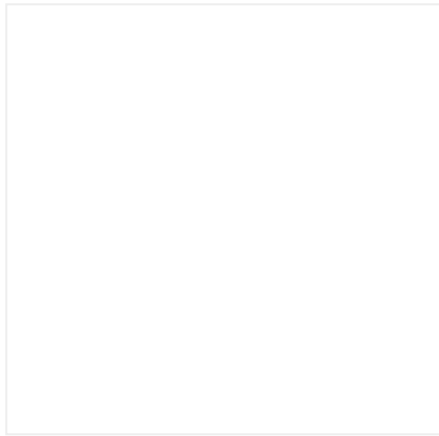
'The first time that we met'



As war rages, some Ukrainians look to Mary for protection – continuing a long Christian tradition



Historian of Black Catholic nuns joins University of Dayton faculty



Putin puts international justice on trial – betting that the age of impunity will continue

Powered by



Apply →

Careers

Visit →

Contact

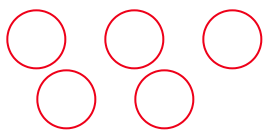
300 College Park
Dayton, Ohio
45469
937-229-1000

info@udayton.edu

[Directions](#)

[Request Info](#) →

[Give](#) →



[Academic Calendar](#)

[Alumni](#)

[Libraries](#)



[PORCHES](#) [POLICIES](#) [REPORT A CONCERN](#) [PRIVACY & TERMS](#) [NONDISCRIMINATION](#) [DIVERSITY](#)