



## Louise Pound: A Folklore and Literature Miscellany

Volume 1  
Number 2 *The Cather Issue*

Article 3

July 2019

# Literary Legends: The Secret History of Cather and Pound Halls

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### Recommended Citation

Lime, Harry (2019) "Literary Legends: The Secret History of Cather and Pound Halls," *Louise Pound: A Folklore and Literature Miscellany*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 3.

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# THE SECRET HISTORY OF CATHER AND POUND HALLS

by **Harry Lime**

Campus folklore assigns a curious origin to the University of Nebraska's Cather and Pound Residence halls, which were demolished in December of 2017. Legend holds that the dormitories, dedicated in 1963, were monuments to the love their namesakes had for one another. As with any oral story, there are as many variants of this tale as there are tellers, but the following version, shared by someone who attended the university in the 1990s, contains the core elements:

When they were students in Lincoln, Willa Cather and Louise Pound fell madly in love with each other, and they used to hook up where Cather and Pound halls are. It was secluded and private and wasn't part of campus then. One night, Louise's brother caught them and told his sister she could never see Willa Cather again because she was ruining his family's reputation. Willa and Louise ended their relationship but they never got over each other, and in their wills, they left money and instructions to build dorms on that spot so that they could be together forever.





According to preeminent legend scholar Bill Ellis, “legend telling in its natural context is a means of expressing anxieties about a group’s cultural worldview, as well as a safe way of questioning what important institutions define as ‘real’ and ‘proper’”.<sup>1</sup> Legends, in other words, help communities engage with events and ideas excised or omitted from “the official record.” For example, legends about Indian burial grounds, which are popular on campuses across North America, enable students to engage with the bloody history of the land they are on, a history universities rarely promote through official records. In the case of the Cather/Pound legend, students inscribe an LGBT narrative into the margins of the university’s official history through a story that, rather significantly, echoes the idea of college as a time and place for exploration and conflict associated with sexual identity.

Contributing to the legend’s resiliency, a number of elements lend the story an aura of truthiness. For one, Cather and Pound did know one another while attending the University of Nebraska, and they were close. Cather, in fact, was infatuated with Pound, an “infatuation” she later felt she took too far. Moreover, they did have a dramatic falling out that was largely due to Pound’s brother Roscoe, but not because he caught them *in flagrante delicto*. Cather had included a scathing caricature of Roscoe Pound in the *Hesperian* (see following pages), and the Pound family was outraged. Cather and Louise Pound would eventually reconcile, but they would never be as close as they once were.

Most importantly, Cather and Pound’s lives defied gender norms. For a time at college, Cather cut her hair close and went by the name Will, and Pound, who was a pioneer in women’s athletics, generated outraged headlines throughout Nebraska for riding a bicycle from Lincoln to Beatrice. Moreover, neither woman ever married, both living lives that were, in heteronormative terms, unorthodox. All of the intimate relationships in Cather’s life were with women, whereas Pound embodied the New Woman ideal and, other than an intense-but-long-distance relationship with Ani Königsberger resisted romantic entanglement throughout her life. In short, Willa Cather and Louise Pound challenged what important institutions define as “real” and “proper,” and while this part of their stories may not have been noted on plaques of dedication, Nebraska students preserved the “truth” of these women’s lives through campus legend.

1. Bill Ellis, *Aliens, Ghosts and Cults: Legends We Live*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003, p. 12.

Then a softer



ROScoe POUND, 1870.

... must drink. "I'll come," he said, and added in a voice that was wild and boisterous, "When there's whiskey round you kin allers count Peachy in."

"PASTELS IN PROSE."

by Willa Cather

The primitive curtain was down, the orchestra were tuning up their peices, and the chapel was full of people waiting for the exercises to begin, when she dropped in, unannounced, unexpected, smiling and bland. She swept up the aisle and her gown seemed to sweep and float wide in the same manner that her Senior robe used to. Her head was thrown back and a little to one side, and her lips were parted in a smile that was thoroughly jolly and utterly insincere and supremely delightful. It was a pleasure to be within the radius of that smile, even if one knew it was entirely heartless. Her eyes shone with the old enthusiasm and vivacity which made even those who disliked her admire her. She passed on up the

le with that air of semi-abandon and  
er sang froid which was always particu-  
y her own, and the same little breeze  
ch used to make the halls so dangerously  
ghty seemed to follow her still. As she  
ed along, she embraced friends and foes  
y, freely and with ardor. Her caresses  
a peculiar mixture of sentimentality and  
iness which is hard to define. She  
ed the laugh that everyone remembered  
l, even the skeletons in the museum  
he meditative bust of Socrates, and  
one could not tell why, it made one  
ther gay and "festive" and like old  
o hear that laugh, that, like her man-  
s breezy and audible, never blowy or  
She passed on, embracing subject  
bject and handling them all just as  
l to handle her many friendships and  
ips, with neatness, enthusiasm and  
Yes, she is still the same, and one  
of it. Probably for generations to  
will be suddenly dropping in on  
g and inexplicable as an animated

Roscoe Pound

\* \* \*

He was one of those who came back to us on Charter Day, in his own mind, at least, one of the heroes of yore days. He was tall and slender and wore his hair parted in the middle. He stood around the halls button-holing old acquaintances and showing the University to them. He exhibited the campus, buildings and faculty with an air of proprietorship and pleased condescension. He was, by the lengthy words he used, a member of the botanical seminar. He called everything by its longest and most Latin name, and the less his victim knows about botany the more confidential he becomes and the more copiously he empties forth Latin words upon him. In his early youth he was a notorious bully, and all the very little boys of the neighborhood used to be afraid to go past his home. Now he bullies mentally just as he used to physically. He loves to take rather weak minded persons and brow-beat them, argue them down, Latin them into a corner, and botany them

into a shapeless mass. It is the same bully instinct a little refined. He seemed very enthusiastic about University matters, but it seemed rather boyish and minature in a man of his age. It was not a large kind of enthusiasm, that could take in principles and beliefs, it was a petty traditionary sort of enthusiasm that was confined to a few people and incidents. He is liberal to all University enterprises, but it seems to be rather to perpetuate his own name and fame among the students. He has no particular business except hanging around the University in order that people may ask who he is and be told what fine marks he used to get in his classes. He has ability enough, but he just seemed to quit growing when he graduated. He has never got past the blue-ribbon, sheepskin, "vos salutamus" stage. He is a University graduate, and that's all he ever will be in this world or that to come.

high gods who dwell at ease beyond reach of sunlight or shadow. She has nothing to hope, nothing to fear. She can flunk no flatter, profs. and instructors have lost their power over her. She has been released from an evil spell. She no longer trembles when she meets her French prof. When one skips class occasionally it is not pleasant to meet one's prof., but when life is one long delicious skip, it is different. She even feels rather superior to her French prof. now, she has got so far beyond French, she rather pities him. She is a sort of Childe Roland who is beyond the power of fate.

It was at the Junior promenade. He had never danced in a large crowd before, and he was initiated in that terrible struggle. He was young and he was a thor-

Ahem... \* \* \*

She sits in the back row in the chapel talking to a boy. She makes every effort to entertain him and seems to succeed. At last his class bell rings and he goes. She smiles and waits patiently for the youth who enters. So she continues chapel time, after chapel she goes to the hall and converses until dinner time. She goes home, dines and hurries back to the office of her duties. The afternoon she goes to chapel, until drill time. Then she goes to the armory and smiles sweetly down at the gallery. The next day her routine is the same, save that she does not have a drill. She carries a few books which she never opens them. Those who sit in the back row of the chapel toil and sweat as they spin. The first term she goes to chapel and gymnasium and the second semester her interest in it will not be necessary for her to do any more, and she is glad to stop work getting very heavy. The bell ring and the classes come and the bell does not trouble her bland serene. She thrill her soul with terror. She is like the

**Roscoe Pound of Harvard Dies; Headed Law School 20 Years**  
*from front page of NYT, July 2, 1964*  
 His 'Social Interests' Theory Influenced the New Deal — Scholar in Many Fields

Special to The New York Times

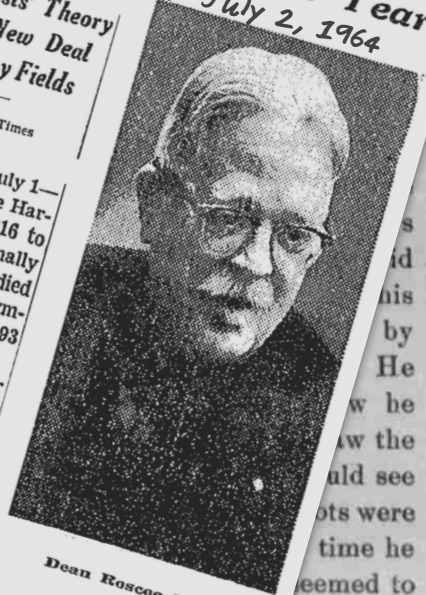
CAMBRIDGE, Mass., July 1—Roscoe Pound, dean of the Harvard Law School from 1916 to 1936 and an internationally known authority on law, died tonight in the Stillman Infirmary at Harvard. He was 93 years old.

From 1953 until last year Dean Pound had been at his office in Langdell Hall daily, continuing his writing and keeping up with his correspondence.

Observing Dean Pound's 92d birthday on Oct. 27, 1962, Earl Warren, Chief Justice of the United States, paid him this tribute:

"His devotion to the law, his contributions to the education of members of both bench and bar, and his great contributions to the jurisprudence of our country have not been excelled in history."

In certain parts of Nebraska there grows a rare plant — a lichen known as the roscoepoundia. It was discovered by Roscoe Pound, the man who di-



Dean Roscoe Pound

rected the botanical survey of the state from 1892 to 1903, and was named after him. At one time the future dean of the Harvard Law School was as enthusiastic a botanist as he was a jurist.

This contrast was typical of Dean Pound's remarkable diversity of interests. One of the world's first scholars in modern jurisprudence, dean of Harvard Law in the 20 years that have

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