

The Story Catcher

Mari Sandoz Heritage Society



The Past, Present and Future of Mari Sandoz Country

A recap of the fall 2023 Pilster Great Plains Lecture & Sandoz Symposium

In 1931, Walter Prescott Webb wrote *The Great Plains*, thought by some to be a seminal work about the development of the American West. Turns out, Webb's classic description of the interaction between the land and the people who lived there was, at best, controversial. Speaking at the annual Pilster Great Plains Lecture in Chadron, Dr. Andrew Graybill asked simply "What's So Great About the Great Plains?"

Graybill, Professor and Director of the Clements Center for Southwest Studies at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, is the author or editor of four books. He taught at the University of Nebraska from 2003-2011. He's a recognized historian who has done his research. When Webb wrote the book, he didn't let the facts get in the way of a good story, Graybill said. He acknowledged that the book has been one of the most influential, widely known, and controversial works in western history. Webb said the influences have been so powerful as to put a characteristic mark upon everything that survives within its borders. He singled out the six-shooter revolver, barbed wire, and the windmill as evidence of the new phase of civilization required for settlement of that arid, treeless region. He claimed that all three were invented on the Great Plains to make life more bearable.

He drew on history, anthropology, geography, demographics, climatology, and economics to substantiate his thesis that the 98th meridian constituted an institutional fault—comparable to a geological fault—at which "practically every institution that was carried across

it was either broken and remade or else greatly altered." Graybill pointed out that the six-shooter was invented by Colt at his factory in Hartford, Connecticut, the American version of the windmill was also invented in Connecticut in a factory moved in 1850 to Illinois – windmills were first used in the 9th Century in Persia. Barbed wire was first manufactured in Kent, Ohio, in 1867. Joseph Glidden improved the design and received a patent in 1874 in DeKalb, Illinois. None of those places, Graybill said, were anywhere near Webb's highly touted 98th meridian. Note, Cozad, Nebraska, is on the 100th meridian. Webb wrote history as he experienced it, not from an academic perspective. That's where the facts disappeared. *The Great Plains* book is a "work of art, not history," Graybill said.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Fred Shannon wrote a 109-page critique of the book. Webb, obviously incensed, declared "I would not prostitute the book by accepting the Shannon manuscript as an appraisal." Shannon insisted that the book was derivative of secondary sources and Webb had neglected to consult primary material himself. Webb answered that he skimmed on the scholarly apparatus so as not to "clutter up the text." Can the book be saved?

Graybill said three key attributes underpin the book's enduring reputation, starting with its sheer ambition. "Webb wasn't afraid to tackle big subjects. He preferred subjects that offered plenty of elbow room," Graybill noted from a review by Harper's. Webb was also a "big ideas" historian, in sharp contrast to many who were more "nuts and bolts."

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The book is truly interdisciplinary and Webb read widely across multiple disciplines, chiefly anthropology and geography, but the hard sciences too including biology and geology. Graybill said a colleague explained: Webb wrote primarily for one person: "an imaginary Bostonian who was not a professional historian, writer, or critic, but a man of wide culture ... who could be interested in a slice of non-Bostonian history."

The Pilster Lecture was made possible by the gift of ranchland in northwest Nebraska near Whitney in Dawes County, by the late Esther Pilster. The gift, which established an endowment with the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, was a tribute to her late husband Raleigh, who grew up on the ranch, and his parents John and Grace Pilster.

"Mari Sandoz's Homeland: Past, Present and Future," was the title of the annual symposium the day after the Pilster lecture. The return of the event to Chadron ended a hiatus started by the Covid-19 Pandemic and followed by two years of livestream on the internet and in-person gatherings in Lincoln. The focus of day-long speakers and panel discussions was on the High Plains and its natural and human history to create increased interest in studying that history and local or regional stories. Beloved author Mari Sandoz, 1896-1966, is celebrated for her histories of the Native Americans and homesteaders living on the High Plains. She lived and wrote in Lincoln, Denver and New York City, but the dominant subject of her work was the place and the people of the High Plains where she was born and reared, where she centered her research and gained insights into the events and personalities that populate her histories. The event was funded in part by Humanities Nebraska and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment as well as the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society.

Although Mari Sandoz did not complete any formal historical training or education, Sandoz relied on her own experiences growing up in northwest Nebraska to tell her stories. Not to downplay her time dedicated to the extensive and significant research in archives across the country, but it is Sandoz's intimate connection to the High Plains region that allowed her to describe these people and places in a much deeper and more meaningful narrative. Now in the twenty-first century, local residents and institutions seek to preserve and share this history within these northwest Nebraska communities. This panel discussion raised awareness and described the importance of being able to preserve this local history within three respective communities, thus honoring and continuing Mari Sandoz's legacy and research interests. The panelists, Christine Ambrose, of Chadron, Phyllis Krotz, of Rushville, and Harlen Wheeler, of Gordon shared their own and institutional projects, plans, and efforts to preserve and maintain local history in the heart of Sandoz Country.

Preserving and Sharing Plains Indian Culture and History Today was the topic for Donovin Sprague of Sheridan, Wyoming. Born and raised on the Cheyenne River Reservation, Donovin is a Minnicoujou Lakota, enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, and a descendent of both Chief Hump and Crazy Horse. He is a nationally renowned public historian and educator and has traveled the world to share his knowledge.

Donovin was the head of American Indian Education for the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, and the University of Northern Iowa and is currently a Professor of History at Sheridan College, Sheridan, Wyoming. Sprague's knowledge of traditional Native American historical sources makes him one of the premier experts on the topics and he has worked with several tribes across the country including the Choctaw Nation and the Citizen Potawatomi Nation of Oklahoma. He is also a consultant to museums around the country including the Smithsonian National American Indian Museum and the new Museum of Westward Expansion at the archway in St. Louis, Missouri. His museum historical research and written captions are at the George Heye Center American Indian Smithsonian Museum in downtown New York City. Donovin is also a tour guide, an author of 10 books, an artisan, and a musician.

Sprague said that museum exhibits, public presentations, books, documentaries, films, music, and art tell the stories of Indigenous cultures around the world. In every medium there have been instances of cultural appropriation by non-Indigenous people and sometimes the narrative being told has come from an outside perspective that can promote inaccurate, insensitive, and even completely false characterizations. He said Mari Sandoz worked hard to dispel misconceptions about Plains Indian history and culture while telling unvarnished truths in appropriate and respectful ways in her stories about Native American Dispossession.

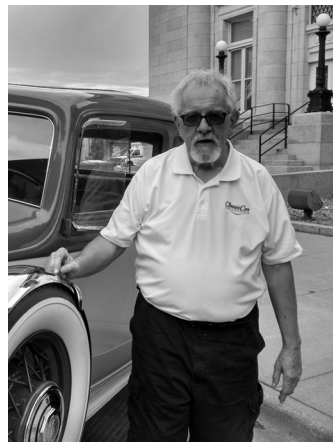
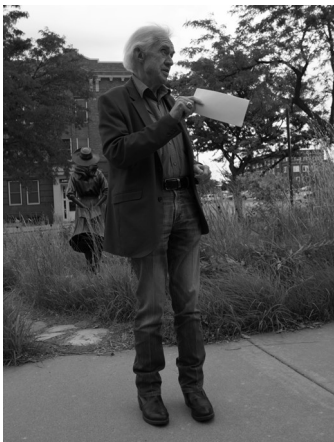
Chadron State College professors Matthew Evertson, Markus Jones and Mary Clai Jones discussed Teaching with Mari Sandoz on the High Plains. They explored ways to teach using materials and themes related to the High Plains and how they have incorporated elements of that into their writing and teaching. They use Mari Sandoz books and short stories, the resources of the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center and attributes of the landscape in Sandoz Country.

Video recordings of the 2023 Pilster Great Plains Lecture and Mari Sandoz Symposium can be found on the Mari Sandoz Society YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/@marisandozsociety>

A Note from Our President...

The Mari Sandoz Society is emerging from the ashes of a rough year. Late last spring, we lost two of our founding fathers, men who led this organization for decades. Ron Hull passed away in April and John Wunder died in June. We featured stories about their wise and impactful leadership in the Spring 2023 and Summer 2023 newsletters, and it is safe to say that our organization would not be where we are today without them. And in this newsletter, I am sad to report that our long-time writer and editor, J.L. Schmidt, passed away on April 21. J.L. was a beloved and well-known newspaperman in Nebraska, having covered major stories in our state over many years. His *Capitol View* column kept Nebraska's governors and legislators on their toes and was a mainstay in most of the state's newspapers, including nearly a month of columns that were written and published after he passed. He was absolutely fearless in calling out hypocrisy, self-dealing, and dumb moves on the part of politicians, no matter their party, and he gave credit where, and when, credit was due. The Sandoz Society was blessed to have his brilliant interviewing and writing skills editing and publishing our top-notch newsletter for the last ten years, and this is another grievous loss for our organization. Indeed, this loss of creative, intellectual energy and vast personal networks, during a time of presidential transition from Lynn Roper to me, is a sign that it is time to reflect upon our accomplishments and create a new vision for the organization based upon the people and resources that we have today. The legacy of Ron, John, J.L., and the many other devoted Mari Sandoz enthusiasts who have been a part of our society over the last five decades is one we are very proud to carry on. We have substantial ongoing projects, enthusiastic new scholar board members, new partnerships with universities and tribal councils, new publications and videos, and word is getting out about Mari Sandoz' remarkable impact on Western History. So now, it is a time to review, renew, and refresh our vision. Mari—and Ron, John, and J.L.—have set us on the right path and I hope you will join us as we embark on this new adventure.



(left to right) Ron Hull, John Wunder, and J.L. Schmidt (photo credits: Elizabeth Chase and Jillian Wenburg)

Story Catcher Workshop Returns to Gunnison

The highly popular summer writing workshop sponsored by the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society was held once again at Western Colorado University in Gunnison, Colorado, June 4-7. The 2024 retreat was set in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, with the Western Colorado University Campus as the classroom, and the Gunnison Valley, Crested Butte and Grand Mesa National Forest as the playground. With an emphasis on writing about the environment and eco-poetry, the Colorado setting was a

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The Story Catcher

The "Story Catcher" is the title of a book by Mari Sandoz and it is the title of Helen Winter Stauffer's biography of Mari, *Mari Sandoz: The Story Catcher of the Plains*. The Story Catcher is published four times a year by the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, a 501©(3) non-profit organization. The vision of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society is to perpetuate and foster an understanding of the literary and historical works of Mari Sandoz and to honor the land and the people about which she wrote; Native Americans, ranchers, farmers, and the people who settled the High Plains country. The Society hosts an annual conference, the Pilster Great Plains Lecture Series, and a writer's workshop. Additionally, the Society provides collections on loan to the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center at Chadron State College in Chadron, Nebraska.

Address Changes

Address changes should be mailed to:
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Contributions to the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society are tax-deductible. To join the Society contact visit our website at www.marisandozsociety.org



Mari Sandoz

The feats, the passions, and the distinctive speech of the West come alive in the writings of Mari Sandoz (1896-1966). As the author of 23 books, including *Old Jules*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, and *Crazy Horse, the Strange Man of the Oglalas*, Sandoz was a tireless researcher, a true storyteller and artist passionately dedicated to the land. With her vivid stories of the last days of the American frontier, Mari Sandoz has achieved a secure place as one of the finest authors in American literature and one of Nebraska's most important writers. As a historian and as a novelist, Sandoz was inducted into the Nebraska Hall of Fame in 1976 and posthumously received the coveted Wrangler Award from the Hall of Great Westerners.

Story Catcher Recap...continued from page 3

natural fit said Story Catcher co-directors Steve Coughlin of WCU and Matt Evertson of Chadron State College. Last year's workshop was held at Custer State Park in South Dakota.

Once again, a recognized group of published writers and mentors served as staff for the four-day event. Representing a wide variety of disciplines and diverse parts of the country, each faculty member offered guidance and instruction during the day and sparked discussion with readings of their works each evening. This year's staff included J.C. Hallman, author of several non-fiction books including *The Chess Artist*, *The Devil is a Gentleman*, *Utopia*, *Wm & H'ry*, and *B & Me*; Rilla Askew, author of five novels, a book of stories, and a collection of creative nonfiction; Pamela Uschuk, the author of eight books of poems; Steven Cole Hughes actor, director, playwright, and Assistant Professor and Director of Theatre at Western Colorado University; Karen Auvinen an award-winning poet, mountain woman, life-long westerner, writer, educator, speaker, and author who is also on the Graduate Faculty in Nature Writing at Western Colorado University

and directs the Creative Minds Residential Academic Program at CU-Boulder; Haesong Kwon formerly on the Chadron State College faculty who now teaches at Dine' College on the Navajo Nation reservation; and Karen Hausdoerffer who teaches environmental writing at Western Colorado University and English for adult immigrants at the Center for Adult and Family Education.

Awardees of the Emerging Writer scholarships and Young Lance Fellowship also had a chance to share their work with their fellow participants. The Young Lance Fellowship is dedicated to helping underrepresented writers capture and share their stories. It was named after the young protagonist in Mari Sandoz's 1963 novel *The Story Catcher*, as the "Young Lance" develops his talents and eventually earns his new name and honor, "Story Catcher," the recorder of the history of his people. The Emerging Writer scholarships are awarded to graduate students, teachers and part-time authors whose writing shows promise. The workshop, scholarships and fellowship are supported with funding from the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society.



TOP ROW L-R: Day 2 morning craft session with J.C. Hallman (left). Open mic contest winners (L to R): Carmen Dunn, Sami Peil, Lindsey Royce, Jess Hickey (center). Day 4 morning poetry craft session with Pam Uschuk titled "Tanagers, Aspens, Bears & Mountain Creeks: A Generative Eco-poetry Workshop" (right).

BOTTOM ROW L-R: Day 3 morning craft session with Rilla Askew titled "Characters in Place: Place as Character" (left). Publishing roundtable featuring all of the writers-in-residence instructors (L to R): Karen Hausdoerffer, Rilla Askew, Steven Cole Hughes, Pam Uschuk, Karen Auvinen and J.C. Hallman (center). Young Lance Fellowship Awardee Josafina Garcia (right).

Photo credits: Matt Evertson

Society Supports Northern Cheyenne Efforts to Preserve Their History and Promote Healing

In the early 2000s, Mari Sandoz Society board member Ted “T.R.” Hughes gifted a 1,121-acre property adjacent to Fort Robinson in Northwest Nebraska to the Northern Cheyenne people. T.R. spent the prime of his life supporting the reintroduction of bison to the Great plains and to preserving the story of the Northern Cheyenne “breakout” so that this tragic history would never be forgotten. This property, now owned by Chief Dull Knife College, is permanently protected through a conservation easement with the Nebraska Land Trust. T.R., who passed away in 2015, will always be remembered through this amazing gift, now the site of a monument designed by the Northern Cheyenne to commemorate their ancestors’ bravery and fortitude. T.R. followed in Mari’s footsteps. When she published *Cheyenne Autumn* in 1953, she hoped to elevate the nation’s awareness of this dramatic and tragic story. Sandoz spent her professional life, from 1940 to 1965, advocating for justice for American Indians—it was an especially dark time in U.S. relations with our nation’s Indigenous Peoples. Her letters are the correspondence of an activist with long-standing relations with tribal communities for whom she vigorously sought social justice. Dr. Kimberli Lee published some of this correspondence in *“I Do Not Apologize for the Length of This Letter”: The Mari Sandoz Letters on Native American Rights, 1940-1965*. Lee wrote that Sandoz was not above using her celebrity as leverage, yet she proved over and over to be a responsible ally, sensitive to the communities’ best interest and solicitous of Native leaders.

The Sandoz Society is proud to follow the lead set by Mari and by T.R. in announcing our support of the Northern Cheyenne Journey Home Committee. This committee was founded by a Tribal Council resolution in 2003 to “coordinate, facilitate, and preserve the commemoration of the Fort Robinson Breakout site and the memory of those tribal members lost.” Since 2003, the committee has overseen the acquisition and conservation of T.R.’s land gift and has completed a monument that was dedicated in 2016. Today, the committee is working on several very important projects, including building a pathway from the fort to the monument following the trail the Cheyenne took to escape the fort. This trail will be linked to the national Rails to Trails trail across America, and will be called the Northern Cheyenne Healing Trail. It will include signage and covered seating areas for contemplation in a curated interpretation of the event completely designed by the tribe’s cultural experts. The project has received significant funding for design and building from the National Park Service and the Mellon

Foundation. A separate team is working on mapping the entire trail from Oklahoma to Montana that the Cheyenne took during their epic “journey home.” Once mapped, they will seek National Historic Trail designation from the National Park Service. The Sandoz Society is proud to support the Northern Cheyenne people in these important efforts. We will help share this important story and support elders and cultural leaders travel to our region. Like Mari, we seek to be a responsible ally, taking our cues from the tribal leaders and being sensitive to the needs and interests of the people. Mari would have it no other way.



Northern Cheyenne Journey Home Committee members Clara Whitecrane, Major Robinson, and Vincent Whitecrane present Sandoz Society President Shannon Smith with gift blanket in honor of the Society’s support of their January 9th commemoration event in Chadron. (photo courtesy Shannon Smith)

My Lunch With Ron

Reflection from Society Board Member, Dan McGlynn

Most of us who knew longtime Sandoz Board member Ron Hull were sure if anyone would live to be 100, it would probably be him. He was the Energizer Bunny if ever there was one. But sadly, Ron passed away last year on April 20 at the age of 92. That’s why the lunch I had with him five years ago means so much to me now. It was because of the Mari Sandoz Society that I got to know him. But we also shared a passion for classic movies and for the actors who starred in them. For a long time, Ron and I had talked about getting together for lunch. In March of 2019, we finally made that happen. I met him at his office at the Nebraska Public Media building in Lincoln. When I arrived in the lobby, I told the receptionist I was there to see Ron. “Mr. Hull will be right with you, sir,” she said. I was amused at the mister and the sir references. In a few minutes, Ron came out in the lobby smiling. We shook hands. “It’s so nice of you to come all the way from Omaha,” he said to me. As we walked to the parking lot, he asked, “Do you like Vietnamese food?” I said yes. “Good. There’s a really good place to eat not far from here.” Before we took off,

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New Board Members Came to Sandoz From Different Yet Similar Paths

New Sandoz Board members Dan Hobbs, Laura Pritchett, Nathan Tye and Gabriella Pruitt-Santos came to their knowledge of and passion for Mari Sandoz from different paths with one common thread, her words about the West.

Dan Hobbs is a professional pianist who lives in New York City, far from his roots in Gordon, Nebraska. He works at a bank but remembers fondly the time as a kid he spent playing in the original Mari Sandoz Museum in the top floor of Chamberlin Furniture Store in his hometown. It took years of convincing by longtime board member Christy Chamberlin, his aunt, to become a member of the board. Hobbs decided it was time to reconnect with the Old West. “This is the west. This is real history. The Sandoz High Plains Center on the Chadron State College campus is an amazing resource. I have learned how Mari always found something new about which to write,” he said. Plus, the stillness and calmness of the high plains are “a welcome relief, almost magical” from life in the Big Apple.

Laura Pritchett said when she was in middle school she read Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* – and Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. “I felt like my mother’s Nebraska family suddenly had stories. They themselves didn’t have any stories—I don’t have a single one that came from them personally, believe it or not—but I know they felt seen in those two books,” she said. It wasn’t until college that Pritchett, who now teaches at Western Colorado University, read *Old Jules*, which was sitting on her mother’s bookshelf and then, from her library, *The Battle of Little Bighorn*, and then *Slogum House*. “I don’t remember her mentioning Sandoz, but it was an old, much-loved copy, so I have to believe it meant a great deal to her. By then, I was settling into a love of literature from the West,” she said. After a master’s degree at Colorado State University and a PhD at Purdue, her focus became contemporary literary writing in the complex West. Her personal writing goal was to “re-invent the Western,” which she’s gone on to do, publishing seven novels to date that are all set in rural Colorado, and hopefully tackle

myths and stereotypes as well as tell stories of complex, working class lives. During her teaching sessions at the Story Catcher writing workshop in Chadron, she learned about the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society. Some time spent at the High Plains Center on campus was a “sweet, calm moment of remembering my literary and genetic forebears,” she said. Pritchett said her deepest, most sincere interest lies not in history generally or the historical figure Mari specifically, though she is absolutely fascinating, but in her intentions, in the forward-reach of her legacy.

Dr. Nathan Tye, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Nebraska – Kearney since 2019 teaches about Sandoz’ *Old Jules* at least once every academic year. Born and reared in Nebraska, Tye received his BA in history and theology at Creighton University and his PhD in history at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana. “I read a smattering of Sandoz growing up. Now as the Nebraska and American West specialist in our department, I teach *Old Jules*,” he said. “I find Mari fascinating and there is much in her life and her writing yet to explore.” In addition to his Nebraska history expertise, Tye is a literary historian. “I’ve published on Willa Cather and Walt Whitman, among others. I’m particularly interested in biographical research, identifying, and locating overlooked or unknown aspects of a particular author’s life or career,” he said.

Dr. Gabriella Pruitt Santos is an assistant professor of political science at Chadron State College. Dr. Pruitt Santos is a strong proponent of incorporating local culture and history into teaching global concepts in political science and she integrates passages from Mari Sandoz’s writings and class trips to the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center into her classroom lessons. She is currently working on projects that examine the use of new media in reconciliation processes between Indigenous and settler communities and political voice of marginalized populations in rural communities.

Society Supports 2024 History Day Awards at CSC

All 19 high school and middle school students who competed at the Western District History Day at Chadron State College qualified for the Nebraska National History Day State Contest in Lincoln on April 20. Sandoz Society board member Dr. Kurt Kinbacher presented \$50 awards on behalf of the Mari Sandoz Society to two teams from Crawford: Ada Norman and Amelia Betson, and Garrett Tollman and Tomi Reid. Reid and Tollman won the Mari Sandoz Great Plains Award for Senior division for their Group Exhibit “Homesteading: Opening One Door and Closing Another” and the Mari Sandoz Great Plains Award for Junior Division went to Betson and Norman for their Group Exhibit “The Great Improver: Hereford Cattle.”

Lunch with Ron...continued from page 5

Ron gave me the option of meeting him at the restaurant or riding with him. I opted to ride in his famous Mini Cooper convertible. (This was before I had heard of Ron's lead foot reputation.) Not to worry. Ron observed the speed limit both ways. Whew. The server took our orders. I got the soup dish Ron recommended. For the next two hours, I put my listening cap on. Ron told stories about his life including his bout with cancer. "In 2013, I was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. I found out about it just days before I was getting ready to go on a trip to Nepal. Both of my sons were going with me." His doctors strongly advised him to cancel the trip. "But I went anyway," he laughed. "I thought that if I was going to die, at least I'd be with my sons doing something I loved." As it turned out, his doctors were right. Ron got so sick he had to cut his trip short and return to Lincoln. "For the next few weeks, I just stayed in bed. All day. But later and by some miracle, the cancer disappeared."

He also talked about his friendship with such people as Walter Cronkite, Bill Moyers and author David McCullough. He was also friends with actors like Robert Taylor and Eva Marie Saint. The subject shifted to classic movies. "What's your favorite movie of all time?" I asked. Without a pause, he said *Casablanca*. The subject then moved to one of his longtime friends, Academy Award winner Eva Marie Saint. Ron and Eva Marie had been friends for a very long time. (I'm not sure if the two met when she was in Grand Island filming the television special *My Antonia* in 1995. Ron never mentioned that detail.). Eva Marie Saint starred in 21 movies and appeared in almost 50 TV films. She starred with Cary Grant in the 1959 classic *North By Northwest* as well as in one of the greatest movies of all time, *On The Waterfront* in 1954. It was her very first movie and for her role as Edie Doyle she won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. The movie was filmed in New Jersey, just across the Hudson River from New York City. The cast of the film included such greats as Karl Malden, Lee J. Cobb and of course, Marlon Brando. "She (Eva Marie) had it written in her film contract that she was not to work on the movie set past a certain time each day. The reason was that she was acting in a play on Broadway at night. She had to have enough time to prepare for her stage performances. "During the filming, different people took turns driving her into New York City. On one occasion, her driver was Marlon Brando." We both thought how amazing it would have been to have ridden with the two of them.

All too soon my lunch with Ron was over. But my memory of that day will be with me forever. One last thing about Ron. Although I had known him for nearly thirty years. I never heard him say a bad word about anyone and I never knew anyone who had a bad thing to say about Ron.

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