



the Story Catcher

A publication of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society

Death, Murder, and Mayhem on the Plains

Two Chadron State professors presented original research on Mari Sandoz at the 34th Interdisciplinary Great Plains Studies Symposium Death, Murder, and Mayhem: Stories of Violence and Healing on the Plains in April. Sponsored by the Center for Great Plains Studies, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and University of Nebraska at Omaha, the symposium examined the representation of violence on the Plains from multiple, interdisciplinary perspectives.

The organizers encouraged explorations of “the haunted land of the Great Plains” that “has long suggested stories of conflict and loss, of wrenching change and difficult healing.”

Dr. Katherine Bahr and Dr. Matthew Evertson, both teachers in the department of English and Humanities at Chadron State, addressed these themes in their presentations. Bahr and Evertson are also members of the board of directors of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society.

Evertson had previously presented portions of his analysis at the Western Literature Association Conference and more recently at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for the special course series “Mari Sandoz: Story Catcher of the High Plains.”

Bahr’s study had its genesis in a paper she presented at the 2006 Mari Sandoz Heritage Society Conference, which focused on Sandoz’s 1947 novel *The Tom-Walker* and its themes of the aftermath of war and war’s effects on

society. Abstracts of both papers are printed here.

“Haunted Houses, Hurting Bodies & Healing Earth: Sex and Violence in the Settlement Narratives of Mari Sandoz.”

by Matthew Evertson.

Mari Sandoz’s 1937 novel *Slogum House* is a still-shocking portrayal of a boarding house on the edge of both the law and settlement in the Nebraska Sandhills in the late 1800s where the ruthless matriarch, Regulla (Gulla) Slogum, manipulates the lawmen, cattlemen, and local officials who can’t resist the bodies she prostitutes, including her own daughters.



Seeking land, power and revenge, Gulla exchanges the bodies of her family for both legal claims to homesteads, but also illegally, by gleaning information from and about her customers and then blackmailing or manhandling the prominent patrons of Slogum House.

Her ultimate goal is to own and control all of the land within a 20 mile circle of Slogum House. Her legacy begins by using her own body to entrap Ruedy Slogum, becoming pregnant in hopes that she will then become a part of his prominent family in Ohio.

Spurned by the Slogums, she forces her new husband West, where land

and power might be accumulated. She begins immediately to bear the offspring that then become the bodies she bends to her own interests—including her thuggish sons who help enforce order among the patrons at Slogum House, and the alluring daughters, who help attract the customers themselves.

As the narrative progresses, Gulla Slogum becomes the manipulative, patriarchal figure who obsesses over the “lay of the land” and its possession, ruling from her unsightly fortress of Slogum House rising artificially out of the “oxbow flat” country of the Niobrara river, with a crow’s nest for watching external threats, secret passageways for spying and listening to activities within the house, and a whole host of unsavory and cruel actions brewing inside.

Continued on page 2

Mark your calendar
for the 2009 Annual
Conference
March 26-28,
2009
at Chadron State
College, Chadron,
Nebraska

The StoryCatcher

The "Story Catcher" is the title of a book by Mari Sandoz and it is the title of Helen Winter Stauffer's autobiography of Mari, "Mari Sandoz The Story Catcher of the Plains."

The StoryCatcher is published four times a year by the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

The Sandoz Society seeks to build an appreciation of Mari Sandoz's body of work, to preserve the literary works and legacy of this premier historian, and to raise funds to support these efforts. Each year, the Society hosts a conference that celebrates and studies the works of the author.

Additionally, the Society provides collections on loan to the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center at Chadron State College. These materials and financial support from the Society's endowments support the College's academic, archival, research, and outreach programs.

Address changes should be mailed to 2301 NW 50th Street, Lincoln, NE 68524.

Contributions to the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society are tax-deductible. To join the Society, fill out and mail the form on the back of this newsletter. For more information, e-mail marisandoz_society@windstream.net, or www.marisandoz.com.

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*, she was a tireless researcher, a true storyteller, and an artist passionately dedicated to the land.

With her vivid stories of the last days of the American frontier she 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.

Death, Murder, and Mayhem cont.



Matt Everson

Meanwhile, her husband builds an Eden-like retreat nearby in a place he calls "spring branch canyon," spending most of his hours in a "one room soddy that seemed to grow out of the earth and was a part of it..."

Retreating to his womb of safety, surrounded by high sandstone walls, Ruedy finds refuge growing flowers and plants and nurturing the critters that crowd around his porch, with the gurgle of the spring in the background, a reverse earth mother set in stark contrast to the cruel, domineering and masculine Gulla.

Filled with disturbing images of the human violence set in contrast to the healing plains (animals tortured and killed, the castration of a rival love interest, deadly car wrecks, bloody shootings, bone-crushing brawls and a whole host of grizzly deaths played against the political, social and familial maneuverings of a colorful and conflicted community of settlers) *Slogum House* is one of Sandoz's most daring novels and one of her most complex portrayals of homesteading on the Great Plains.

"Collateral Damage: Veterans and Domestic Violence in Mari Sandoz's *The Tom-Walker*"

by Katherine Bahr

The reputation of Nebraska author Mari Sandoz has never reached the status of her contemporary Willa Cather, but she is the undisputed matriarch of literature produced in and about the northwest region of

her state. Sandoz's biographer, Helen W. Stauffer, refers to her as a "noted western historian, novelist, biographer, lecturer and teacher."

Her histories and biographies, particularly *Crazy Horse* and *Old Jules*, have received considerable recognition, but her fiction has been somewhat less successful. Nevertheless, whatever the perceived shortcomings of her literary style, Sandoz explores powerful, universal themes through her regional settings and characters.

She, like a number of her contemporaries, was particularly concerned about the horrors of war, but unlike many writers, she focused on the home front and on the victimization of veterans by opportunists and corrupt politicians.

While *The Tom-Walker* (1947), is a difficult and possibly tedious read, it is remarkable in its depiction of the ugly, almost unmentionable, effects of war on the domestic lives of returning soldiers.



Schooled by her nation's immediate experience with World War II, Sandoz could just as well have set her stories after the Gulf War or during the current Iraq conflict. Some things, it seems, never change. Among the veterans of her own region, she finds her universal theme.

In *The Tom-Walker*, Sandoz writes about the aftermath of war, about the traumatized soldier's return to the home front following the first wave of parades and patriotic fervor. In her episodic accounts of three veterans, stretching from the American Civil War to World War II, she depicts the collateral damage war inflicts on families in the form of an intimate, personal, domestic violence brought on by what WW II era psychology was just beginning to diagnose as post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Continued on page 3

Book Club Explores Book, Author First Hand

Nine members of the First Tuesday Book Group of Omaha visited the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center in Chadron in June. The women made the trip to explore the origins of Mari Sandoz and her 1942 novel, *Crazy Horse*. Their selection of *Crazy Horse* was spurred by its selection for the One Book, One Nebraska initiative in 2007.

Upon their arrival at the Center, director Sarah Polak led the women on a tour of the Sandoz exhibits and gardens, and later participated in their book discussion. They asked her about Native Americans' perceptions of Sandoz's work, and about the factual accuracy of the book. The discussion took interesting new turns when Polak asked the group how their understanding of the story might have been affected by current events in Iraq. To complete their visit to the Center, the women met with archivist Anne Greenia.

The book group's trip itinerary was planned by member Nancy Gallagher to include as many activities as possible. In just four days, in addition to the Sandoz Center, the group visited the Sandhills Country Club; Sandoz's home and grave sites; Museum of the Fur Trade; Fort Robinson State Park (where they were given a guided tour by Fort Robinson Museum curator Tom Buecker); Coffee Warbonnet Ranch in Sioux County; and Crazy Horse Monument in South Dakota.



Nine members of the First Tuesday Book Group who visited the Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center in Chadron were Paula Ashford, Nancy Bebringer, Nancy Gallagher, Eva Jay, Linda Johnson, Ruth Keene, Jane Olson, Terrie Ringwalt and Sue Rusie, all of Omaha.

The country was particularly beautiful due to recent rains, and the women remarked often on the beauty of the terrain and the great variety of wild flowers, birds and wildlife. Of the visit to the Sandoz grave-site, member Eva Jay said she was especially struck by the huge sky and the sound of the wind.

"The sound of the wind blowing across the open grassland has been described by many writers, but it has to be experienced to be appreciated," she said.

The First Tuesday Book Group, which celebrated its 25th anniversary last year, has read Nebraska authors

in the past, including Jonis Agee, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Willa Cather, Tillie Olsen, and Wright Morris.

According to Sue Rusie, "This was the first time we traveled as a group to further explore the roots of a book or its author. We had so much fun we're planning another trip, but we haven't selected the book yet."

Other works on the group's reading list this year include *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee; *Tender is the Night*, F. Scott Fitzgerald; *Indian Killer*, Sherman Alexie; *Tortilla Curtain*, T.C. Boyle, and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Michael Chabon. ✂

Death, Murder cont.

But a second definition of domestic violence is at work in the novel. Sandoz also describes America's collective hostility towards its veterans once the war is over, a hostility that develops as the men begin demanding the jobs, medical care and pensions promised them.

Scapegoated by politicians, the protesting veterans, along with other displaced workers, become the objects of abusive propaganda and the victims

of gas attacks by riot police. Sandoz, with varying degrees of success, tries to connect each veteran's dysfunctional and abusive family relationships with a growing national war-induced psychosis of domestic violence.

Bahr first became interested in this topic while reading *The Tom-Walker* and an issue of the Ladies' Home Journal around the same time. The Journal has a regular feature called "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" in which a marriage counselor shows troubled couples how to reconcile their differences.

The February 2006 issue would have touched a nerve with Sandoz. The marriage-to-be-saved involved an American veteran of the Iraq war. At the beginning of therapy, his wife laments, "The fun-loving, upbeat guy I married is now dark, defensive and short-tempered. He scolds fast-food workers, swears at other drivers and picks fights with me. He has started smoking again, has lost his sex drive and is constantly telling me he needs 'space.' I feel like I have lost my best friend."

Continued on page 5

The Future of Collections is in Digitization

Ann Greenia, the archivist for the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center, recently had the opportunity to attend a conference in June on the digitization of small museum and library collections and to collaborate with the nations' top leaders in the fields of preservation and digitization.

The conference, entitled: "Connecting to Collections," was sponsored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and hosted by the newly remodeled Denver Art Museum, the Denver Public Library and the Denver Historical Museum, in Denver, Colo. Partners who participated in the forum include the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, Bank of America, American Association for State and Local History, Metal Edge, Inc., Archival Storage Materials, and the Getty, Henry Luce and Kress Foundations.

One forum, "Collaboration in the Digital Age," is a traveling forum that focuses on the preservation of America's collected heritage.

What is Digitization?

Cornell University Library defines digital images as "electronic snapshots taken of a scene or scanned from documents, such as photographs, manuscripts, printed texts and artwork." Digitization has now become the standard approach to "copying" paper or photographic collections. It is commonly used for copying audio materials and is increasingly being adopted for moving image items. The ongoing debate is whether the resultant digital object can ever be a true substitute for the original item, providing the viewer or listener with the same experience.

Greenia feels this is a valid concern because digitization captures what the archive community describe as the "essence" of an item—its essential information content—rather than necessarily creating a totally faithful reproduction of the analogue original.

Why Digitize?

The main reasons to digitize are to enhance access and improve preservation. By digitizing collections, cultural heritage institutions can make information accessible that was previously only available to a select group of researchers. Digital projects allow users to search collections rapidly and comprehensively from anywhere at any time.

Digitization can also help preserve precious materials. Making high quality digital images available electronically can reduce wear and tear on fragile items.

"After attending the conference in Denver, it is my assertion that the center is on target with preservation," said Greenia. "In the future, after careful planning and goal setting, selected parts of the collection will be digitized and available on the Center's Web site.

Greenia became the archivist for the Caroline Sandoz Pifer Collection* at the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center in October 2007.

She has been working diligently to complete the cataloging of the collection, prepare the shelf guide and find funding for publication and eventually digitization.



Ann Greenia is the archivist for the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center.

Greenia urges readers to get out and appreciate original objects in collections by revisiting their favorite libraries and museums.

"It is a fantastic way to stay cool, conserve on gas and have a great time finding new adventures," she said.

*Sandoz Pifer is Mari Sandoz' youngest sister. She kept and assembled Mari Sandoz' artifacts for decades before donating many items to the Center. The collection contains copies of Mari's many manuscripts, short stories, essays and poetry, research and personal notes, and correspondence.

In addition, the collections includes furniture from Mari's New York apartment, clothes, Native American artwork, dishes, books, and photos.

✂

The Mari Sandoz Heritage Center is located at Chadron State College, 1000 Main Street, Chadron, NE 69337. Phone: 308-432-6401. Web site: www.csc.edu/sandoz

Death, Murder cont.

She concludes, "I still love my husband, but I don't like him anymore."

These lines remind Bahr of the anger, the defensiveness, and the sexual dysfunction so graphically portrayed in the lives of the three protagonists and their wives in *The Tom-Walker*. And she began to see other parallels.

The Journal husband, like the two Milton Stones (father and son) in the novel, is somewhat self-reflective: "I'm still living in a state of heightened sensitivity—a 'combat mode' that probably saved my life in Baghdad but doesn't work at all on the home front."

The counselor's assessment that both husband and wife are suffering from a kind of post-traumatic stress is a commonplace observation in this day and time.

With her keen sense of the psychological impact of war, Sandoz uses strategically placed dreams and flashbacks to demonstrate a state of mind-under-siege. More importantly, she uses those dreams and flashbacks to connect the vet's emotional and physical attacks on his family to his combat-induced mental disorder.

Further, this dysfunctional behavior is an individual manifestation of a collective, national behavioral disorder, which Sandoz depicts through many historical events, such as the Klan's violence against racial minorities and police attacks on striking workers. ✂

A young soldier appeared in the doorway...she saw that the soldier was leaning on a crutch and that one britches leg was folded over high above the knee. She stopped, let her hands fall, and with a little crying in her throat she turned and ran back down the path...

From the train door the young soldier looked uneasily around his little home station, as deserted as any he had seen through all the Rebel country...But the engine was whistling so he reached a crutch stick down ahead of him like a tom-walker and swung off to the cinders, balancing himself awkwardly...

The Tom-Walker by Mari Sandoz

Mari Sandoz

High Plains Heritage Center



Sarah Polak, Center Director

We are well into the summer season here at the Center and, unlike many places, we are ahead in our tourist visitation. While we may not yet be seeing as many visitors as Mount Rushmore, our visitation is growing every year. This increase is due to many factors.

First, people are connecting to the center online. I am currently in the process of working on new content for a Center Web site that is projected to be four times the size of our current site. The new content and organization will make it easier for people to learn about Mari Sandoz and the resources we have here at the Center.

I am also working to secure funding to display our collections online. We have well over 15,000 objects, books, photographs, and documents in our collections. Our gallery space does not allow us to display all of the collections. By placing at least a portion of those collections on line, we will be able to create access to these wonderful materials.

Second, our exhibits are gaining regional attention. One exhibit in the Kiewit Gallery this summer was from The Field Museum in Chicago, Ill. Other exhibitions at the Center since the Summer of 2006 have been from:

- Great Plains Art Collection, Lincoln, Neb.
- Native American Quilt Study Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich.
- The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.—two exhibitions
- Missoula Art Museum, Missoula, Mon.

This fall, our Kiewit Gallery will feature an exhibition by Nebraska photographer, Michael Forsberg and one from the American Numismatic Association's Money Museum. Upcoming exhibits will travel here from the Kennedy Center for Visual and Performing Arts and other incredible collections from across the United States. It is unlikely these exhibitions would be in Western Nebraska without the Center's showcase and the financial assistance from the endowments of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society.

The third reason our visitation is up is that people are learning about us. We can have a great website, outstanding exhibitions, and amazing collections, but if no one knows about them, they will only collect dust. Thanks to our friends and partners such as Backyard Farmer, the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum and especially the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, people are making their way to Western Nebraska and to the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center.

I look forward to seeing you here at the Center soon and I hope that wherever your travels take you, that history and literature are a part of the journey. ✂

Sarah Polak, Director

Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center

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