

Mari Sandoz

HERITAGE

Chadron, Nebraska

Vol. 4, No. 1

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SANDOZ COUNTY TOUR

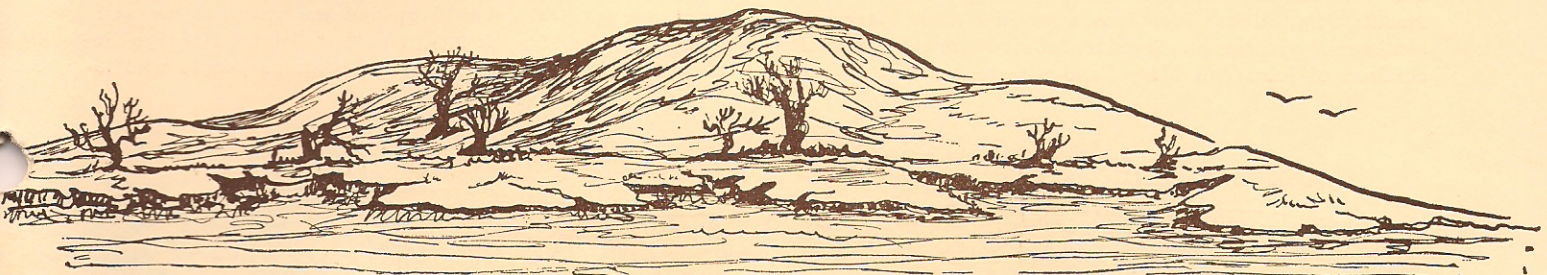
June 29, 1974. The late Mari Sandoz would have liked the day. She would have enjoyed knowing that on a hot and dry Nebraska Sandhill summer day some one hundred people in a forty car caravan went "into the hills, the land of deep-grassed valleys, blue lakes: home to Jules, the habitation of gray wolves, cattlemen, and rattlesnakes to the girl [Mari]." (*Old Jules*, p. 327) She would have appreciated knowing that despite the turbulent reception of *Old Jules* in her homeland thirty-nine years earlier, people from Gordon, Rushville, Hay Springs, Chadron, Crawford, and Alliance came to re-trace and re-live some of the incidents described in the book. She would have been pleased by the fact that all but one of her siblings, a former teacher and former student were present; as well as friends and admirers from North Carolina, Wyoming, South Dakota, Colorado, and from the length and breadth of Nebraska. She would have understood that their presence implied that her work was worthwhile and that it was enduring. With her sense for the dramatic moment, she would have been delighted to know that for a day her beloved Sandhills were the principal stage for a 1974 tribute to her, to her father, to her family, and to the people of the upper Niobrara country.

The day began with free coffee and donuts served by Mr. and Mrs. Richard Loucks in the Cowboy Museum at the Gordon City Park, courtesy of the Gordon Chamber of Commerce. With Caroline Sandoz Pifer — Mari's youngest sister — acting as the tour guide, the group departed from Gordon on a one hundred and ten mile trip through Sandoz Country. Caroline's commentary was accompanied by anecdotes from her brothers, Jules and James, and her sister, Flora. Brother Fritz was unable to be present, but his wife, Blanche, and James' wife, Marie, both were in attendance, as were many other members of the Sandoz family. As a result, tour participants were treated to rare pieces of Sandozology throughout the day. Vance E. Nelson, Fort Robinson Museum curator and chairman of the Sandoz Society, served as the moderator for each of the site stops.

Proceeding from Gordon, the first stop of the day was at the Mari Sandoz historical marker. Erected by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1967, the marker is located on the east side of Nebraska Highway 27, thirty miles south of Gordon. It stands, in a valley overlooking Bunger Lake, as a commemoration to Mari Sandoz as a writer and of her country — the High Plains region. From this site, said Caroline, one can see where Martha from the short "Martha of the Yellow Braids" lived, and it is in this valley that the idea originated for Mari's short story "The Devil's Lane". According to Jules, the lake was named after Billy Bunger, an old Spade Ranch cowboy. "When we came in here," Jules said, "this little piece of land where the lake is now, that was dry land, and it was Spade Ranch land. They deeded that and the homesteaders never did get that. My Dad located around it. It was deeded land as a result of soldiers from the Civil War stripping the land."

Moving from the marker, the tour wound its way to the second Kinkaid claim filed by Old Jules. (He abandoned his first claim after the snake bite incident.) Identified today as the Sandoz Fruit Farm, it is owned and operated by Flora Sandoz. It is here that Mari chose to be buried on the side of a hill with a full view of the orchard. According to Flora, she selected the site during a visit back to Nebraska from New York because it appealed to her as a desirable spot for an Indian chief to be buried. In response to a question from the audience as to why she was buried on that particular place on the hill, Caroline retorted in typical Sandoz fashion: "Because this was as high as the undertaker could go."

In a more serious mood, Chadron State College Professor of History, Richard Loos-



"By understanding this one drop of water, I hope to discover something of the nature of the ocean."

brock, stood beneath Mari's grave and read selections from **Old Jules** that had been chosen by his students as appropriate for the occasion. For some, he said, the dominant issue was the man — Old Jules himself. For others, it was the description of the country — "bright with promise and full of the potential for future growth." Almost without exception, he said, his students were impressed by Mari herself — "the mature young girl with the inquisitive mind."

During the lunch break at the Fruit Farm, tour participants were served cold drinks, courtesy of the Sandoz family. Thanks to Flora's hospitality, they were also able to see the library that Mari started in the Sandhills and mementoes from her professional career. Souvenirs on sale by the Smith Lake 4-H Club and impromptu walking tours by Caroline were crowd pleasers. According to James, the old Sandoz General Store on the Fruit Farm "was a square building with a pointed roof on both sides. In later years my brother Fritz helped my Dad and they took one side of that out and put down an addition and made it a low roof." That building still stands on Flora's place, but it has been moved from its original site.

After lunch the tour began its backward trace chronologically from the Sandhills to Old Jules' first homestead on Mirage Flats, south of Hay Springs. On the way, a short stop was made at the Swiss Beguin Cemetery, where cold drinks were furnished by the William E. Colwell family. Located on a sandy bench, the cemetery stands as a silent and nostalgic reminder of Old Jules' efforts to add "to his Swiss settlement on Pine Creek and on the South flats, interspersing his country men with any other determined farmers he could get". (**Old Jules**, p. 105) The landscape here, Caroline said, is what Mari used for the setting for the Oxbow Country of **Slogum House** fame.



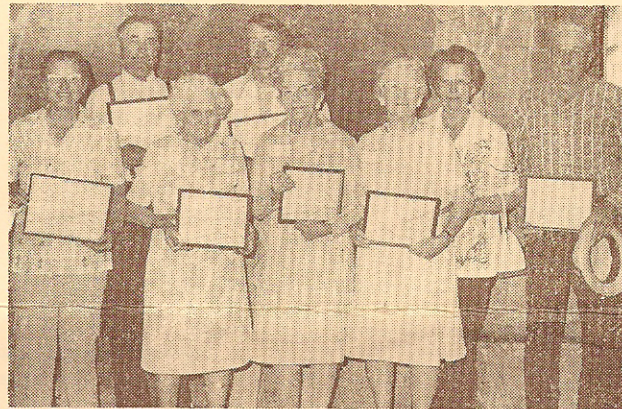
Elsie and Charles Letcher

Following essentially the same route that Mari took to bring her father home from the Sandhills after the snake bite incident, the tour proceeded to what Mari called "The River Place." Owned now by Mr. and Mrs. Charles Letcher, the River Place even today is a special place to come. A day earlier the Letchers' had turned on the windmill to insure that cold drinks were available for thirsty and dust-bitten mouths. Physical considerations aside, the River Place is a sentimental visit for any Sandoz buff. It is here that the six children of Jules and Mary Sandoz were born. It is here

that, with the exception of Caroline, their most vivid memories of their childhood remain. It was here that the Freese troubles occurred, where Indian Hill was (and where Mari) spent the time behind the stove listening to the stories told by Indians, trappers, and other frontier tale spinners. It is where a still productive orchard bears witness to the horticultural activities of Old Jules and his family.

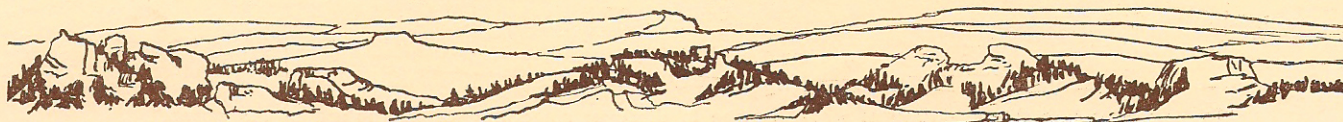
From the Sandoz River Place, the tour moved westward to Mirage Flats and the site where Old Jules suffered his fall down the well in 1884. This was where he had his first homestead, his first post office, and where he planted his first trees. Evelyn Sturgeon Mills, daughter of Elmer Sturgeon, related her recollections of how her father remembered the well incident. Her father, she said, was one of the two men who found Jules on the old military trail, and assisted in his removal to Fort Robinson where he was treated by Dr. Walter Reed of later yellow fever fame.

At this point, William E. Colwell, owner of the Pepper Creek Ranch, assumed the role of tour guide and led the car caravan through his ranch to sites associated with the first Mirage Flats Irrigation project. The ranch is now operated by his son, John. Although Jules Sandoz did not participate in the irrigation project himself, Mari mentioned it prominently in **Old Jules**. This was the first time that the Sandoz Society had included the stop on its tour, and it proved to be one of the more informative spots. Evelyn Sturgeon Mills again contributed to the commentary by reading selections about the project from early newspaper accounts. No evidence of the flume is extant, but Colwell was able to point out some of the original ditches that carried an abundant amount of hope but very little water to the parched land during the dry period of the 1890's. The drought-like conditions on this day in June 1974 made the efforts of the early Sheridan County farmers particularly meaningful. And one could not help but feel a touch of sadness that the dream had never materialized, but as Mari wrote "it was something to have dreamed."



Honorees at Camp Norwesca. Back row: Jules Sandoz, Monty Weymouth, Elsie Letcher and Charles Letcher. Front row: Caroline Sandoz Pifer, Nan Strotheide, Marie Surber Hare and Nell Marcy.

June 29, 1974, was an awareness day of the hardships, humor, and accomplishments of the people of which Mari Sandoz wrote, and of a life which she experienced first-hand herself. Because **Old Jules** was the theme book of the day and because **Old Jules** chronicled the story of the early settlers in Sheridan County, the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society thought it equally fitting to recognize people who to-



day still carry on in the tradition of the pioneer spirit. For this part of the day's activity the tour group moved from Pepper Creek Ranch to Camp Norwesca, south of Chadron. Waiting for them there was a western style cookout prepared and served by Don and Leona Berlie of Chadron. Special napkins, courtesy of Mrs. John Olson and the Nebraska Cow-Belles, were a part of the table setting. Black and white mounted prints of Mari's books taken by Monty Weymouth and God's Eyes made by the United Student's Club at Chadron State College were on sale.

Ten Sheridan County residents were presented certificates of recognition by master of ceremonies, William E. Colwell. The certificates were water colors designed by Ellen Larson, vice chairman of the Sandoz Society. Five of the certificates were presented to Mari's brothers and sisters — Jules, James, Fritz, Flora, and Caroline — for their "cooperation and support in perpetuating the memory and work of Mari Sandoz." Charles and Elsie Letcher were presented a certificate "in grateful recognition for their hospitality and cooperation in making the birthplace of Mari Sandoz available to the public." Reva Evans was recognized for her promotion of the work of Mari Sandoz in the **Gordon Journal**. Marie Surber Hare, Nell Marcy and Nan Strotheide were recognized for their assistance in providing information about the history of Sheridan County to the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society. The final award of the evening went to Monty Weymouth of Chadron "for his photographic efforts to enhance the mission of preserving the memory of Mari Sandoz."



Ron Hull

Mari Sandoz often referred to her books as her children. Through her twenty-one published books, she left a significant family to help pass "the best of our society, the best of our history, and the best part of us" along to each succeeding generation. That is the significant legacy of Mari Sandoz, according to Ron Hull, program manager for the Nebraska Educational Television Network. Speaking at the dinner held at Camp Norwesca during the conclusion of the second Sandoz Country Tour sponsored by the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, Hull entitled his address "The Art and Legacy of Mari Sandoz."

As a close friend of Mari's, particularly since 1959 when she did fourteen one-half hour television shows with him, Hull let it be known from the beginning that he was not an objective admirer. Mari, he said, was a fiercely independent spirit with a steel-blue mind. "To appreciate her as a person and as an artist you must know that," he urged. She was, he claimed, a serious scholar who also wanted to be a financial success. She always gave of herself by reading and criticizing manuscripts for students, and "she really cared."

Nobody worked harder than Mari Sandoz. She used to say, Hull remembered, "that time is your most valuable commodity and you don't waste it." And use it she did by writing, re-writing, revising and polishing. "She was her own best critic and she was always true to her art," he said. She worked at her writing in a methodical way, like a sculptor who cuts away from a stone. Hull believed that one of Mari's special talents was her ability to use common words to carry the same meaning for everybody, and yet giving those common words a very special meaning. The best example of this, he felt, was in **Crazy Horse** where she created a rhythmic prose pattern that is art at its best.

By following her own rule that a writer should work in a field where there is a strong emotional identity, Mari concentrated her efforts on the trans-Missouri West. "By studying our part of the world," Hull said, "she gave it to us."

DONORS TO THE SOCIETY

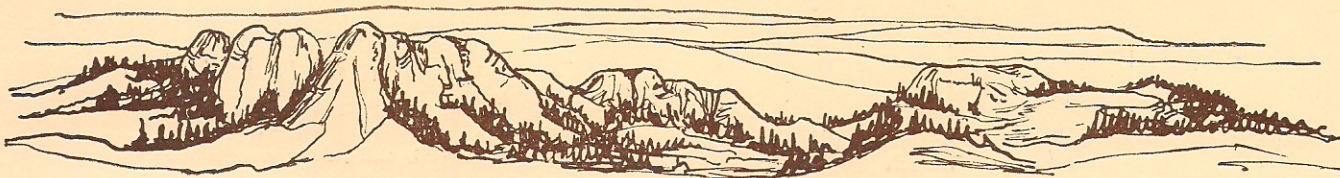
Donations in the amount of \$775 for the matching money grant from the Nebraska American Revolution Bicentennial Commission have been received from twenty-seven individuals, all of whom wish to remain anonymous. An anonymous donation from an organization in the amount of \$575 has also been received. In addition, a \$2,000 grant from the Woods Charitable Fund, Inc., of Lincoln and Chicago has enabled the Society to reach its goal of \$5,000.

William E. Colwell of Chadron has given a copy of the speech which he made at the dedication of the Mirage Flats Flood Retention Dam on June 16, 1974. The speech is particularly significant because Colwell incorporated information from primary source material such as homestead certificates, land abstracts, and newspaper accounts concerning the first Mirage Flats Irrigation project of the 1890's.

Helen Stauffer of Kearney has presented the Society with a copy of her University of Nebraska Ph.D. dissertation entitled **Mari Sandoz: A Study of the Artist as a Biographer**.

Her study focuses on the biographical writing of Mari as represented in **Old Jules**, **Crazy Horse**, and **Cheyenne Autumn**.

The Council of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society is pleased to acknowledge the receipt of these gifts.



BICENTENNIAL GRANT

Thanks to the \$5,000 grant from the Nebraska American Revolution Bicentennial Commission that was matched by supporters of the Sandoz Society, the Society was able to sponsor a workshop entitled "Pioneer and Plains Indian Folklore" at Camp Norwesca from August 12-16, 1974. Roger L. Welsch was the instructor for the graduate level course that is part of the Society's three prong plan for the use of the matching grant monies. The other two aspects of the program being the great person series and the high school mini-cultural weekend.

"It was the best educational experience of my life," wrote one of the thirty-one students following the conclusion of the workshop. Another said, "it's about time that those of us in western Nebraska got an opportunity to have something like this." In short, it was a success and Roger Welsch made it so. The solid content of the course came through by telling tall tales; singing the music of the folk; explaining misconceptions of Plains history and folklore; suggesting ways for museums to make history more meaningful; and by discussing techniques for preserving, documenting and publishing history.

Underlying it all was Welsch's ability to spark his students with an intense desire to become folklorists themselves. The full measure of the man came through, however, in the wonderful way he had of involving his children in the happenings of the course, and by his nonchalant way of including both them and the family dog, Fleagle. One student said it best, when she filled out the evaluation form at the end of the week: "Roger Welsch is a great teacher and a good and decent human being."



Welsch's son, Chris, during workshop held at Camp Norwesca.

One of the highlights of the course came on the day when Nebraska authors and the Plains were the major topics for discussion. Mari Sandoz, Willa Cather, John G. Neihardt, and Wright Morris received most of the attention. Many students commented later that they were especially appreciative of the remarks made by Caroline Sandoz Pifer about her sister. Caroline took the course for credit, as did

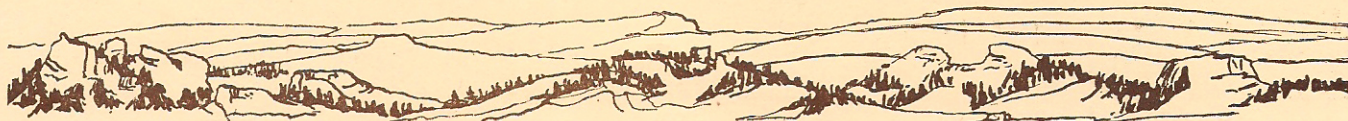
Scott Greenwell, a doctoral candidate at the University of Nebraska who is also in charge of organizing Mari's papers in the University archives.

Other students and their hometowns were: Mary Ellen Adam, Alliance; Evonn K. Carter, Gering; Dorothy N. Conger, North Platte; Janet Denison, Holdrege; Lois Dubry, Stapleton; Marie Dunlap, Scottsbluff; Vernie Erickson, Fremont; Joie L. Garton, Oshkosh; Mary A. George, Bayard; Phyllis Gillett, Harrison; Jean Graham, Roscoe; Marion Grothen, Alliance; Don and Lavonne Horn, Mitchell; Janelle R. Johnson, Trenton; Danyne Killham, North Platte; Lois Klingsporn, York; Geneva W. Koch, Gering; John Mangimeli, Omaha; Mary Miller, Elgin; Julia Oaks, Veteran, Wy.; Phyllis Osborn, Chadron; Darlene Ritter, Fremont; Ellen Schritt, Grand Island; Ella M. Studnicka, Sidney; Linda Stuhr, Norfolk; Catherine Williams, Scottsbluff; Darlene Wright, Tecumseh; and Judith Zuver, Rushville.

Only two schools and approximately 20 students participated in the high school mini-cultural weekend held on the Chadron State College campus on July 19-21, 1974. Sponsored by the Sandoz Society, students from Holbrook and Beaver City arrived on the campus on July 19 for a western style cookout prepared and served by Don and Leona Berlie of Chadron. During the remainder of the evening they had the choice of going swimming or attending a special showing of the movie based on Mari's book **Cheyenne Autumn**.

Early the next day, July 20, they boarded the bus for Toadstool Park. Former Chadron State College Professor of History, Richard Dougherty, took them on a guided tour through the formations. From here they went to the Hudson-Meng Bison Kill site. CSC Professor of Earth Science, Larry Agenbroad, and his crew interpreted for them, and later the students were able to eat lunch with Agenbroad and his crew at the campsite. After lunch, Agenbroad displayed and explained some of the artifacts that have been recovered from the site. Toward the middle of the afternoon the students and their sponsors departed for Fort Robinson and the Centennial celebration going on there. The remainder of their day was free, except for a guided tour around Fort Robinson led by museum curator, Vance E. Nelson.

On their final morning, July 21, the students once more were up for an early breakfast at the campus center. Their first stop of the day was at the Museum of the Fur Trade, near Chadron. Charles Hanson welcomed them there, and allowed them several minutes to browse around the museum. Later he took them on a guided tour of the museum grounds. Back in the bus once more, and off to the Sandoz Fruit Farm, south of Gordon. Caroline Pifer met them at the orchard and immediately challenged them to a walk up the hill above Mari's grave. Lunch time found them in Flora Sandoz' front yard for a sack lunch gathering. Following lunch, Flora visited with them and invited them in to see Mari's library and other personal mementoes, and Caroline guided them around the homestead. "Those Sandoz sisters are really terrific," remarked one young man as he boarded the bus to go home.





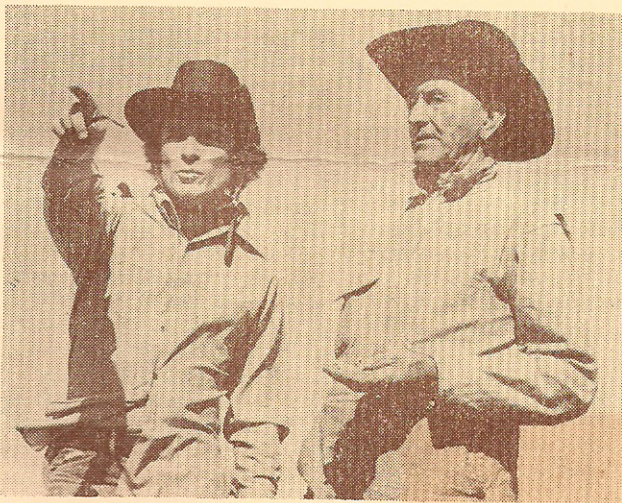
Caroline leads students up the hill

HERITAGE NOTES

Approximately a week after the Sandoz Country Tour, the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society in cooperation with the Sandoz family, had the pleasure of hosting former Nebraskan and ABC-TV personality, Dick Cavett. Cavett had been in Lincoln to attend the 20th anniversary of his high school graduation from Lincoln High, and had been encouraged by his long-time friend, Roll Hull, to take the time to visit Sandoz Country.

Accompanied by Jules, Caroline, Caroline's daughter — Eleanor Hamilton of Minneapolis, and Judy McDonald, Cavett visited in the homes of Jules, James, Flora, and Fritz Sandoz. Other highlights of his stay included taking the 1974 Sandoz Country Tour, riding horseback with Eleanor Hamilton on Caroline Pifer's ranch, and spending time around the Gordon area visiting with many of the residents.

Cavett believed that it was the first time that he had been in the area, and he frequently remarked about the magnificent sky that was always in full view. He lamented, too, that he had never taken advantage of the opportunity to become acquainted with Mari during the time that they were both in New York.



Dick Cavett and Jules Sandoz on Indian Hill

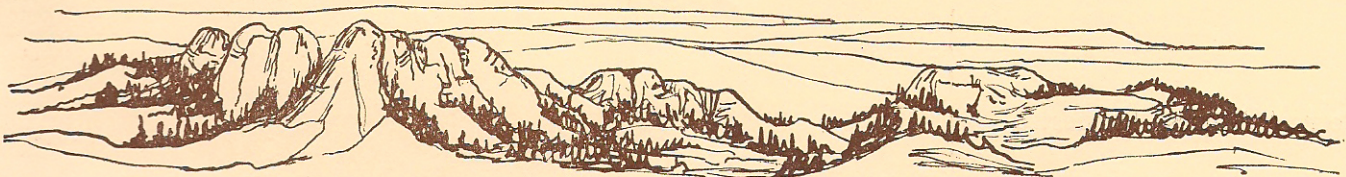
Changes on the Sandoz Society Council, since the last issue of the newsletter, have come about due to the continued efforts of the Society to expand the representation on the Council and to graduation. Caroline Sandoz Pifer of Gordon, formerly an honorary member of the Council, has been added to the governing board as a member with full voting privileges. Appointed as honorary members of the Council are the other brothers and sisters of the late Mari Sandoz — Jules of Gordon, Fritz of Lakeside, and James and Flora of Ellsworth. Other new members on the Council are Linda Hasselstrom of Hermosa, South Dakota, Allen Shepherd of Chadron, and Veronica Walters of Marsland. Ms. Hasselstrom is the editor of **Sunday Clothes**, a fine arts publication, and a student of Mari Sandoz' writings. Dr. Shepherd is an Associate Professor of History at Chadron State College and an authority on Nebraska history. Ms. Walters, a junior at Chadron State College, replaces December graduate, Janet Anthony of Lexington.

In addition to these membership changes, the internal administration of the Council has undergone some modifications. This has been precipitated by the resignation of Judy McDonald from the Chadron State College faculty. Ms. McDonald continues as the executive director of the Sandoz Society, and Ellen Larson has been designated as the on-campus coordinator for the Society. Inquiries about the Society should continue to be directed to the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, Chadron State College, Chadron, Nebraska, 69337. Ms. McDonald may be reached directly by writing her at University of Nebraska Panhandle Station, Scottsbluff, Nebraska 69361, or by calling 632-6811.

"Year 2000: Status of Women in Western Nebraska" is the title of a two day conference being planned by the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society. If funding sources materialize, the conference will be sponsored by the Society at Chadron State College on April 10-11, 1975. Ellen Larson, conference director, says that it is being "planned to help men and women of Western Nebraska become aware of hidden attitudes and habits of thinking that citizens must know in order to intelligently influence law making, curricula development and business management practice during the next twenty-five years."

According to Mrs. Larson, the resource people for the conference "will be drawn from a list of women who have made notable careers for themselves in various areas, women starting in careers, and academic personnel from the humanities area of Chadron State College, Kearney State College, Nebraska Western, and the University of Nebraska."

Funding for the conference is being sought from the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities and from a private foundation. It is hoped that the money will be available shortly after the first of the year, but, if it is not, the conference may have to be delayed. In either case, Sandoz Council members intend to see that the conference is held because it ties in so well with the mission of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society.



In December 1972, Sandoz Council Members Ellen Larson, Debbie Haverkamp Eberspacher, and Judy McDonald presented a proposal to the Nebraska American Revolution Bicentennial Commission seeking support for an \$893,000 cultural center in memory of Mari Sandoz. The proposal called for a combination archival-museum complex to be built on the Chadron State College campus to be known as the Mari Sandoz Center for the Study of Man. The Nebraska Bicentennial Commission subsequently endorsed the proposal, as well as similar proposals from the John G. Neihardt Foundation and the Willa Cather Pioneer and Educational Memorial. At that time, the three foundations honoring the Nebraska writers determined to collectively seek focal point status and full funding from the Bicentennial Commission.

Since that time the Bicentennial Commission has been able to award only small matching-grants to qualifying applicants. One of these in the amount of \$5,000 was made to the Sandoz Society in December 1973, and it was matched by members of the Society and interested supporters in Nebraska. This grant has been used for the Pioneer and Plains Indian Folklore course, the high school mini-cultural weekend (both are described elsewhere in this newsletter), and the great person program. This grant is scheduled to be utilized through August 1975 by the Sandoz Society. Both the Neihardt and Cather organizations also received \$5,000 matching-grants from the Bicentennial Commission. The Neihardt group chose to utilize their funds by hiring an architect for their proposed building and the Cather people used their money to catalog and classify materials in their archival collection.

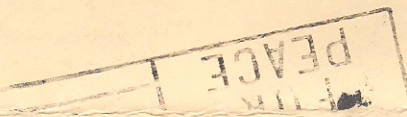
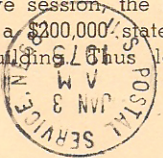
In the meantime, however, both the Cather and Neihardt groups continued to pursue other funding sources for the larger proposals they had earlier presented to the Bicentennial Commission. The result was that the Cather Memorial received a \$200,000 grant from the Woods Charitable Fund, Inc., to purchase land for preservation purposes, and the Neihardt Foundation elected to come under the umbrella of the Nebraska State Historical Society. During the 1974 legislative session, the State Historical Society sought and received a \$200,000 state appropriation for the John G. Neihardt building, thus leaving the Mari San-

doz Heritage Society as the only part of the triad that has not had its original proposal funded.

Although it appears at this point that funding will not be available through the Bicentennial Commission for the Mari Sandoz Center for the Study of Man, the Sandoz Society does not intend to give up its efforts to acquire funding for the building. Several possible alternatives are being explored. One of these is in cooperation with the Western Nebraska United Chambers of Commerce (WNUCC). At a recent meeting of the Chamber, the WNUCC reaffirmed its position supporting the building of a cultural center in the name of Mari Sandoz at Chadron State College, and it pledged its continued support. As a result of this reaffirmation, the WNUCC is making inquiries of the governor and legislature as to the status of the five cent cigarette tax law to determine whether it will end with the completion of the University of Nebraska field house and the Beatrice State Home recreation building. According to Roger Peterson, executive secretary of the Chamber, if it is to terminate at the completion of these projects, then the WNUCC will consider asking that: (1) it be continued to include the Mari Sandoz Center, or (2) it be continued to allocate money for various parts of the state with the first priority being the Mari Sandoz Center, or (3) it be allowed to drop for the good of the whole state.

This information is being provided exclusively to the members of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society in order that its membership can respond and react in an enlightened manner. If the WNUCC does seek legislative approval for the tax to apply toward the construction of the Mari Sandoz Center, the Society and its members will be called upon to defend and encourage the action. Hopefully, having this information in your hands before the fact will assist you in determining whether you want to support the action or not. No one will be pressured, but we will need all the moral support that we can get if the WNUCC elects to pursue the use of the tax for the Mari Sandoz Center.

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