

The Story Catcher

A publication of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society

Pilster Lecture Series Scheduled

The Mari Sandoz Heritage Society is launching the Pilster Great Plains Lecture Series designed to bring speakers of national renown to the Chadron State College campus.

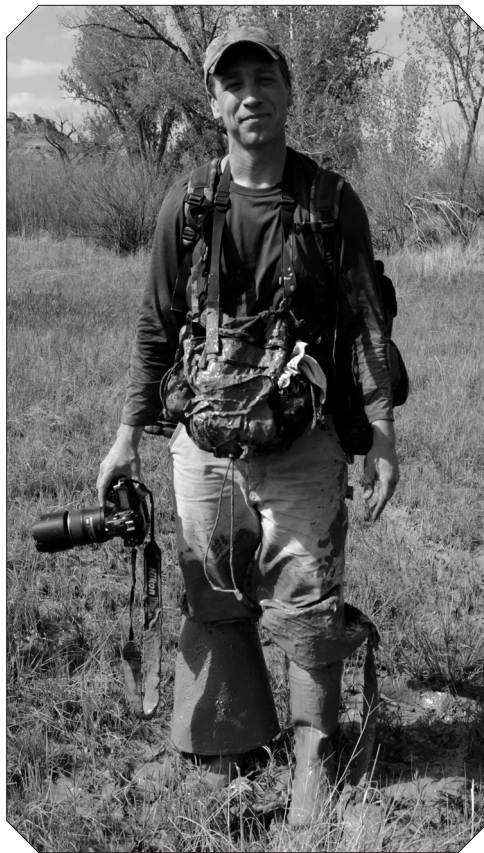
The program will contribute to the educational mission of the college, the student body and faculty and citizens living in the high plains area.

“This auspicious series has been made possible through the Esther and Raleigh Pilster Fund established by Esther Pilster,” said Ron Hull, Sandoz Society board member. “One of the purposes of the fund is to establish a lecture series focusing on the Great Plains.”

The inaugural lecture series will be given by nature photographer and Nebraska native Michael Forsberg with writer and novelist Dan O’Brien on Thursday, Oct. 28, at 7 p.m. (MST) in Memorial Hall on the Chadron State College campus. The Pilster Great Plains Lecture Series is free to the public.

Forsberg will share his work documenting the vast Plains landscape—its lakes, prairies, plants and animals through the photography from his latest book.

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Michael Forsberg, whose photographs depict landscapes and wildlife of the Great Plains, is a national photographer from Lincoln.

Pilster Legacy Established in 1800s

In 2006, Esther Pilster gave a gift of 3,731 acres of ranchland in northwest Nebraska near Whitney in Dawes County to the Mari

Sandoz Heritage Society. The gift was a tribute to her late husband, Raleigh Pilster, who grew up on the ranch, and to his parents, John and Grace Pilster.

In June, 1886, Henry Pilster and a friend, Joe Sides, came to Dawes County to seek homesteads and built dugouts northwest of Whitney. Later in the year, they returned to Pittsburgh and brought their families west. Raleigh Pilster’s grandparents, Henry and Hulda Pilster homesteaded the original ranch.

When Henry’s son, John was 19, he purchased a quarter section of land in the area near his parents’ ranch.

As the ranch grew to nearly 6,000 acres, it became home to 1,200 ewes, making the flock the largest in Nebraska. Raleigh Pilster was born on the ranch in 1913.

Sandoz Heritage Society Board Member Dan McGlynn recently sat down with Esther Pilster, a veteran Nebraska educator, at her retirement home in Omaha to talk with her about her life and the donation of ranch land to the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society.

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The StoryCatcher

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 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 and related topics.

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 visit 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.

Pilster Lecture Series (cont.)

O’Brien collaborated with Forsberg in the book, *Great Plains: America’s Lingering Wild*, by providing essays to accompany the photography.

Through this recent book and his lectures, Forsberg has created an exquisite, bittersweet love song to the Great Plains, demonstrating that the Plains are a dynamic but often forgotten landscape—overlooked, undervalued, misunderstood, and in desperate need of conservation.

Forsberg earned a degree in geography with an emphasis in environmental studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and later worked at NEBRASKAland magazine as a staff photographer and writer for six years before starting his own photography business and gallery. Forsberg and his wife and business partner, Patty, have developed exhibitions of photographs from his books.

His images have appeared in publications including Audubon, National Geographic, Natural History, National Wildlife and in books published by National Geographic and Smithsonian. He is also the author of *On Ancient Wings: The Sandhill Cranes of North America*.

In May, Forsberg received the Great Plains Distinguished Book Prize from the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for *Great Plains: America’s Lingering Wild*.

Dan O’Brien is a rancher-falconer-writer who is also a great storyteller. He will recount some of his experiences with Forsberg, and discuss the critical importance of water in sustaining life on the Plains.

O’Brien is the author of numerous books of fiction and nonfiction. His works include *Spirit of the Hills*; *The Contract Surgeon*, winner of the 2000 Western Heritage Award for Fiction; *Buffalo for the Broken Heart*, chosen as the One Book South Dakota Selection for 2009; *The Indian Agent*; and a short story collection, *Eminent Domain*, which won the Iowa Short Fiction Award.

In addition to his literary efforts, O’Brien has raised bison commercially for more than three decades on the shortgrass prairies of South Dakota.

Hull said the annual lecture series will highlight a person of note speaking about a particular aspect of the Great Plains.

“Examples of possible lectures may include such areas as the ecology, history, economics and cultural aspects of the Great Plains region” he said. “These are all areas about which Mari Sandoz wrote in her Great Plains series and her book, *Love Song to the Plains*.” ❀



The Memorial Hall/Fine Arts building is the first building at the main entrance of CSC. For information on getting to and around the Chadron State Campus, visit <http://www.csc.edu/visitors/location.html>.

To learn more about Michael Forsberg’s work, visit www.michaelforsberg.com.

Pilster Legacy (cont.)

“At the age of 93, her ability to recall names and dates that cover nearly a century is amazing,” McGlynn said. “She has a twinkle in her eye that defies her age.”

Esther, her brother and two sisters grew up on a farm outside Wymore, Neb. about 12 miles southeast of Beatrice.

Life growing up on a farm in Nebraska during the 20s and 30s wasn't easy, she said.

“We lived through dust storms and saw grasshopper invasions that would wipe out an entire field in a matter of minutes.”

A tornado hit our farm when I was growing up, she said. When we came out of the cellar, the tornado had taken everything except the house. Because farm life was so difficult, I decided I didn't want to live on one when I got older.

Esther graduated from high school in 1934 and spent the following year at Peru State Teachers College in Peru, Neb.

“Even though I didn't have a degree, I got a job teaching fifth through eighth grade at Union Center. I signed up for college extension courses, but it took me 25 years to finally get my teaching degree,” she said, laughing.

Meanwhile, Raleigh Pilster had graduated from Whitney High School in 1932 and attended Chadron State College for two years

before going to the University of Nebraska to earn bachelor's and master's degrees in agriculture.

After graduation, Raleigh had planned to return to the ranch in Whitney, but hernia problems ended his ranching career. Instead, he took a teaching job at the high school in Filley, Neb., not far from Union Center where Esther was teaching.

They met when Raleigh came to a program at her school.

“Before the program began, I fell down the steps of the school and really hurt my back. Raleigh showed up and carried me back up the stairs.”

When they got married in 1939, Raleigh was teaching high school in Verdigre, Neb. Later, they moved to Neligh where Raleigh took a better-paying teaching job.

“Back then, I couldn't teach if I was married— something about



Highly respected former educator, Esther Pilster is spirited and quick to recall events over the near century of her life.

not allowing two incomes in one family,” Esther said. “But the school board came to me one day and asked if I would take over for the regular teacher who quit. No one else could teach on such short notice, so they waived the rule and I accepted.”

In 1950, Esther and Raleigh moved to Omaha. He taught junior high for several years before joining the faculty at Burke High School in about 1970. Although agriculture was not a major curriculum area in the Omaha schools, he developed ag-related judging teams that placed high at state and national competitions.

Esther found an elementary teaching position in South

Omaha.



Esther Pilster donated over 3,700 acres of ranchland in northwest Nebraska to the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society as a tribute to her late husband, Raleigh, and his parents.

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Fourth Graders Portray Famous Nebraskans

Note: Nebraska history comes alive for fourth graders across the state each year when, as the Nebraska Department of Education decrees, students shall, "by the end of fourth grade, be able to identify significant individuals, historical events and symbols in their community and in Nebraska and explain their importance."

Matt Evertson—board member of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, Chadron State College teacher and scholar of Sandoz's works—witnessed a special "Nebraska Day" program presented by fourth graders in Chadron, Neb.

In the gymnasium of East Ward Elementary School, fourth grade teacher Stephanie Cogdill and music director Chris Dickerson led their students through a series of performances, musical numbers and a traditional circle dance.

Each member of the class dressed as a famous Nebraskan and gave a biographical presentation of that character. Evertson said he was struck by how many of these people had been written about or appeared in the works of Mari Sandoz: Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, Buffalo Bill Cody; and pioneer women such as Minnie Freeman, Rebecca Winters and Susette "Bright Eyes" LaFlesche Tibbles.

But, Evertson was most interested to see Mari Sandoz portrayed by his daughter, Julia. Dressed in a high-collared blouse, a black lace shawl and, of course, a complementary pillbox hat, she looked the part.

Evertson admits he was a proud papa when she stood before the microphone and recited from memory the piece she wrote entitled, "Mari Sandoz."

"I was born on May 11, 1896, in Mirage Flats, Neb., in a shack. Mirage Flats is south of Hay Springs. My dad's name was Jules Sandoz and my mom's name is Mary Sandoz. I was the oldest of six children. Therefore, I was expected to do the job of a man.

As a child I grew up in the Sandhills. I started school when I was nine years old. I finished eighth grade when I was seventeen because my learning was interrupted often. Then after eighth grade, I secretly rode to Rushville to take the rural teacher's exam. I passed the test and became a school teacher.

I managed to go to college for three years at the University of Nebraska. That's where I wrote my first book, *Old Jules*. It's about my father. It won the Atlantic \$5,000 Award. I was

married when I was 18. My name became Mari Macumber. It was an unhappy marriage. It lasted five years and ended with divorce. That fall I moved to Lincoln. In 1928 my father died. A year after that I changed my name back to Mari Sandoz.

I am famous in Nebraska for all the books I have written. I wrote over 27 books, some of them are *Crazy Horse*, *The Cattlemen*, *Cheyenne Autumn* and *Old Jules*. I also wrote a novel called *Slogum House*. I was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Nebraska in 1950. I also won the Levi Strauss award in 1964.

I worked the last months of my life on the book called *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*. I died of cancer on March 10, 1966. I was 70 years old. I am buried on a hillside overlooking the Sandoz Sandhills. People today remember me as a biographer, a novelist, a teacher of creative writing, a regional historian and an authority on the Plains Indians." ❀



Working with their teachers, the fourth graders of an elementary school in Chadron portrayed famous Nebraskans as shown here: Demi Rosas (l) as Grace Abbott; Hannah Kennell as Minnie Freeman; and Julia Evertson (r) as Mari Sandoz.

Board Member Ron Weedon Dies

Ron Weedon, a Chadron State College professor of physical and life sciences and Mari Sandoz Heritage Society board member, died in May. He was 71.

He came to Chadron State as a biology instructor in August 1971 and taught courses in botany and microbiology. The professor's research involved medicinal plants and he developed the High Plains Herbarium at CSC, which grew to be the second largest in Nebraska.

Weedon became known for his long hours on campus and many philanthropic roles.

He contributed to the construction of the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center and, more recently, donated funds to the new High Plains Wildlife Collection of taxidermy. ❀

Pilster Legacy (cont.)

Both of them remained active in the teaching profession until they retired. She was a beloved teacher and school administrator for 44 years, including 29 years as principal of the Boyd Elementary School in Omaha.

Raleigh was named Nebraska's outstanding vocational education teacher when he retired at age 70. A park at 88th Avenue and Boyd Street near Boyd Elementary is named the Esther Pilster Park in honor of her dedicated service to that school.

The couple had Nebraska football tickets for more than 50 years and seldom missed a home game. Raleigh went because of his love for the Huskers, but Esther went for other reasons.

"Before the games, Raleigh would go tailgating and I would head for the Miller & Paine department store to do some shopping, she said. "He didn't like it, but I always managed to show up in my seat just before the kickoff."

Following Raleigh's death in 2002, Esther established the Esther and Raleigh Pilster Fund, an endowment with the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society. Esther said she had great admiration for the courage and tenacity shown by Raleigh's parents in their life on the prairie north of Chadron and she wanted to honor their lives and the lives of others who lived on the Great Plains.

"Raleigh and I made many trips to the Pilster ranch where he grew up. After he died, I thought the land should belong to the people in the western part of the state," she said. "I'm just glad the society could sell it and put the money to good use." ❀

An endowment fund serves as an investment in the future, enabling the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society to perpetuate and analyze the literary and historical works of Mari Sandoz and to honor the land and the people about which she wrote.

Your gifts support educational events, as well as the program and maintenance needs of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Center.

To make a gift or find out more information about the Sandoz Society's endowments, please contact Lynn Roper, president, 402-473-1831 or Wally Seiler, treasurer, 308-762-4693.

Caroline Sandoz Pifer Celebrates 100th Birthday

By Sybil Berndt, Mari Sandoz Society board member

The room was full of anticipation as the guests arrived for Caroline Sandoz Pifer's 100th birthday. One hundred red roses were placed around the room and more roses were near where Caroline and her daughter, Mary Ann sat.

Caroline was at her best when her girlhood friends, Margie Margrave Keyser and Adah Riggs Dukat talked of being best friends for a lifetime including little girl fun, playing on the Niobrara bridge and riding their horses like the wind and grown-up barn dances.

The afternoon went by quickly with many relatives and friends gathering again to honor Caroline. ❀

Sybil Malmberg Berndt and Caroline Pifer have been friends since 1957 when Sybil and her husband, Don Malmberg, moved to the Dan Hill Ranch next door to Bob and Caroline Pifer's ranch.



Caroline Sandoz Pifer (l) and Sybil Malmberg Berndt (r) celebrate Caroline's 100th birthday. Pifer is Mari Sandoz's youngest sister.

Storyteller Rippey, Husband of Barbara, Dies

Jim Rippey, a story-teller known for his attention for accuracy and detail, died earlier this year following a brief illness. He was a wonderful compliment to his wife Barbara Rippey, who was a board member of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society from 1991 to 1997 and a portrayer of Mari Sandoz. Barbara has long been a Sandoz fan and did presentations where she impersonated Mari by wearing similar clothing including a hat pulled down over one eye. The couple was often together at Sandoz Society functions and at events where Barbara did her portrayals. Today, Barbara is living in the Omaha area. ❀

When I Discovered Mari Sandoz . . .

By Marcia Sandoz Perry
Nix

I was born Marcia Sandoz Perry. As a girl growing up in Indiana in the 40's and 50's, I was not fond of my middle name, Sandoz. It was a bit foreign sounding, unlike my friends who had pretty middle names such as Lynn, Susan and Lou.

As I got older, I began to realize the name was special. My grandmother was a Sandoz and the family was quite proud of the Swiss background.

When he was 5 years old, my great grandfather, Louis Albert Sandoz, came to America from LeLocle, Switzerland, with his parents, Philip and Alida.

More recently, family members have returned to Switzerland and come back with treasured Sandoz watches and histories of the family accomplishments, both past and present.

My high school English teacher discovered my Sandoz roots and encouraged me to get to know Mari and her writings. During this time period, films based on her books – *Cheyenne Autumn* and *Crazy Horse* – were released, which also increased my pride in the Sandoz name.

Over the years, I became more passionate in my investigation of Mari. I became a member of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society as a way of gaining further knowledge about the Sandoz line.

As a member of several book clubs, I have found other Sandoz admirers who enjoy the exchange



Marcia Nix finally made it to her first Sandoz Heritage Society conference.

of Great Plains literature. Several years ago, my husband and I planned to attend our first Mari Sandoz Heritage conference and we found out first hand what a whiteout on the Plains was really like. We were stranded in Wyoming with roads closed in every direction and missed the conference.

The 2010 conference topic, “Son of the Gambler Man” called to me for several reasons— first, the Sandoz connection and, second, the art connection.

I am a retired art teacher and Robert Henri was the subject of a paper I wrote while attending the University of Arizona. The conference in Chadron was stimulating, full of new information from knowledgeable sources, including the history of the Cozad family.

Now, I am proud to claim the name. In fact, I continued the tradition by naming my daughter, Sarah Sandoz.

Marcia Nix is a retired art teacher who lives in Phoenix with her husband. ✨

By Anne Pagel

The first time I saw the Nebraska Sandhills was in early March 1971. It had been unseasonably warm and virtually all of the snow cover between Omaha and Sidney was gone. We drove along Interstate 80, passing mile after mile of dry, colorless grass.

“How can you be so attached to the Sandhills?” I asked my husband. “There’s nothing here.” “You have to learn how to look at it,” he said.

Two years later, after a wet spring, we made another Sandhills trip. It was early June and, this time, I had just finished reading *Crazy Horse: Strange Man of the Oglalas* and was about halfway through *Old Jules*.

As we drove through rich, rolling grasslands punctuated by Broken Bow, Dunning, Thedford, Mullen, Hyannis, Rushville, Hays Springs and Crawford, I was captivated.

The wildflowers, lakes and big, cumulus clouds were beautiful; but, more surprising, the land’s vastness stimulated an almost physical sense of freedom.

It was as though time had been reconfigured. Things that had been so pressing when I had left Omaha the day before seemed remote. Had a wagon of pioneers or a band of Oglala Sioux on horseback appeared, it would not have surprised me.

Even after dozens of visits to the Sandhills, my response remains the same.

Continued on the next page

When I Discovered Mari Sandoz . . .

I still think about the laborious, lonely lives of the women and the men who settled there. I marvel at their courage, tenacity and faith.

For me, Mari Sandoz offered knowable, human faces and a historical context that led me to love this glorious, vibrant, complex land.

Anne Pagel grew up in Gadsden, Ala., and lived in Atlanta, Ga.; Miami, Fla., and Ballaghaderreen, Ireland, before settling in Nebraska with her husband, Bud. She is the curatorial assistant to Karen and Robert Duncan in Lincoln and is a contract writer for L Magazine. ❀

By Alfred “Bud” Pagel

It was 1936, I think. Maybe '38. Perhaps even 1939. I'm not certain. It was, after all, a few years back. I was, of course, in my first decade of learning ... basically still unaware of worldly ways, if you will.

But I was not so dim that I couldn't figure out something big was going on at our house. It had to do with trees, I came to understand. Trees and some woman named Marie (as she was called in most of Nebraska.)

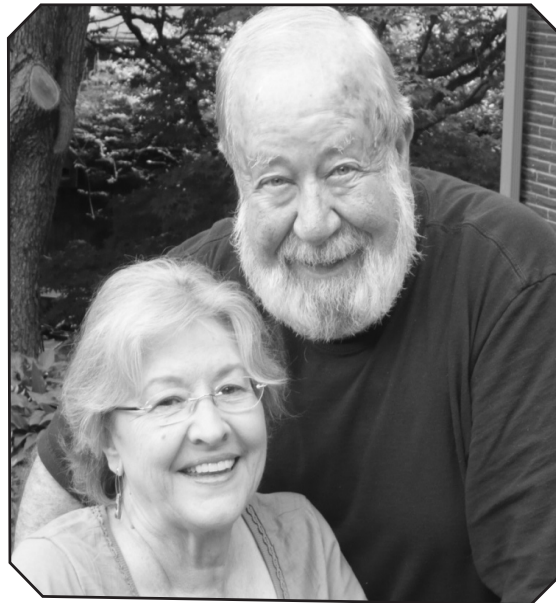
We're not talking just any kind of trees, my mother explained. No indeed. These were shelterbelt trees, the long straight-line forests that conservationists planted during the early dust-bowl years in hopes of taming eroding winds and capturing whatever rain might fall, no matter how scant.

Some thought all that new conservation stuff was worthless,

just more government bureaucratic nonsense. But the trees seemed to be helping, and folks across the nation were taking a closer look.

What better place to study this experiment, locals pondered, than right here in Antelope County.

“Nebraska has more shelterbelt trees than any state in the nation,” my mother explained. “And Antelope County has more shelterbelt trees than any county in Nebraska.” All that seemed to make good sense.



Bud Pagel grew up in Neligh, Neb. on the edge of the Nebraska Sandhills and over the years, his wife, Anne, learned to love the Sandhills' glorious vastness.

“But what's this Marie lady got to with it?” I asked.

“She's a world-famous writer,” my mother explained.

“So?” I persisted.

“So one of her books was about her father who was instrumental in bringing fruit trees to western Nebraska,” said my mother.

So the powers-that-be, my mother continued, decided she was the perfect celebrity to inspect our

shelterbelts.

“And,” I asked, “what's that got to do with us?”

“Well,” said my mother, with only the slightest hint of pride, “I've been asked to show her around.”

* * *

Epilogue: That was my introduction to Mari Sandoz. I never did meet her. But later I read the book about her dad and his fruit trees. I made it through some more of her books, too.

And I do have a remembrance of her visit, back there in the late thirties. Somewhere out in our garage is the family photo album. It's hidden away in stacks of boxes filled with priceless treasures that my wife insists will be sold “soon” in Lincoln's most splendid garage sale.

In the missing album is a photo of my mother proudly holding a barbed wire fence for Mari Sandoz as she carefully re-ends herself (pill box hat and all) through to an awaiting shelterbelt. Should we ever have the sale-of-sales, I'll make certain the Story Catcher has first publication rights on that picture.

Bud Pagel is a semi-retired professor with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism. He is also editor of the StoryCatcher and a Mari Sandoz Heritage Society Board member. He lives with his wife, Anne, in Lincoln, Neb. ❀

Where and when did you discover Mari Sandoz? Email your story to marisandoz_society@windstream.net.

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