

Mari Sandoz

HERITAGE

Chadron, Nebraska

Vol. 1, No. 2

Spring 1972

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MARI SANDOZ: PIECES TO AN IDEA

Linda M. H. Lusk

My purpose in this article is to suggest—and only suggest—that while all of Mari Sandoz' work possessed a rare authenticity, combined with much excellent writing, her Indian novels surpass her "white" books.

There is, it seems to me, an air of depression in even the most jubilant of her white novels, as if the successors to Old Jules had dropped the spade to clutch at fool's gold. Part of this impression, I'm certain, derives from her evident preference for the past over the present and future.

I offer this thesis in spite of the fact that Mari's works of life in the white world are more numerous than her Indian books. Several books are of mixed character, including *Hostiles and Friendlies*, *Love Song to the Plains* (which leans toward the white viewpoint, however) and *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*. The latter occupies a special place. It is primarily concerned with the men of Custer's army, but is very much an Indian book in mood, tone, color.

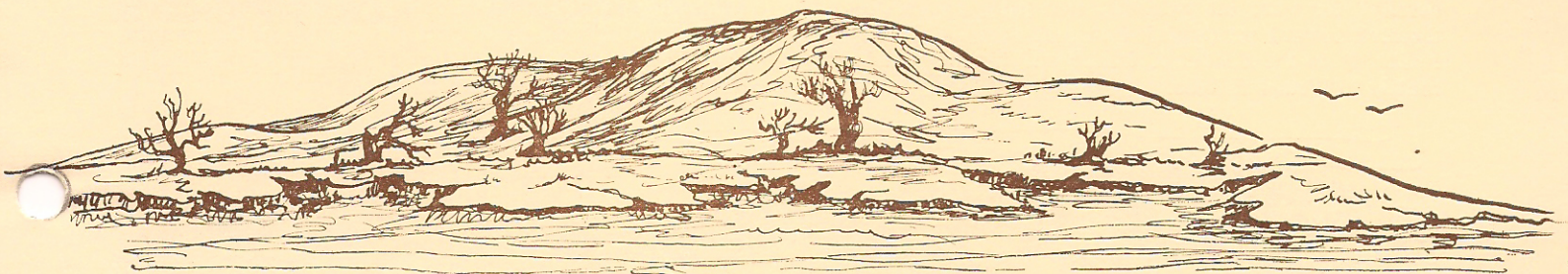
While it is always risky to generalize about an author, certain things can be said of Mari's work. Whatever the subject, she was meticulous in her research, first in the library and then on the site. She speaks of taking the manuscript of *Crazy Horse* back to the areas where he lived and died, and of returning with *Cheyenne Autumn* to the Last Hole where the scrap of Dull Knife and Little Wolf bands ended their flight.

Another asset is her native familiarity, again beyond research, with her subjects—many of whom were relatives and neighbors. Thus much of the controversy over *Old Jules* and *Slogum House*—the truth pinches. It can hardly be said that she lived so intimately with the subjects of her Indian books, since most of them were dead before she was born.

Yet despite her closeness to her white subjects, or perhaps because of it, there persists an air of futility. Old Jules, despite her love of him and her knowledge that he had to be tough to survive, appears needlessly harsh. In *Slogum House*, the "good" characters remain subject to Gulla's cruelty. They have freedom of a kind, but it is a compromise, and they know it. (We cannot help but see in Libby some reflections of Mari.)

Capital City and *The Tom-Walker* both move from historical reality into fantasy where corruption reigns over a particular region of the West, a microcosm for the world. Charley Stetbetor's victory in Kanewa seems for Mari to epitomize the victory for corruption and fascism with the cooperation of a lazy, ill-informed citizenry. *The Tom-Walker*, one of her finest overviews of history, containing some of her best-drawn characters, ends similarly with the loosing of the "guyascutus." One cannot help but think that though Mari often expressed confidence in the American way, she feared for its morality.

Though *The Buffalo Hunters*, *The Beaver Men* and *The Cattlemen* are histories rather than novels, they move inevitably from exploration through exploitation; they are white man books, in which the Indian appears as victim, and Mari's tone belies her sympathies.



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

Occasionally, as in *Miss Morissa* and *Son of the Gambler Man*, Mari deals more or less exclusively with white subjects, still in the west, but almost out of contact with Indians. And both of these books, though no doubt as well researched as others, and on topics fascinating to Mari, fall short of her major work. It is as though the white world did not hold enough color to bring her talents into full play. The characters live, but they do not vibrate. *Crazy Horse* vibrates.

On the other hand, two short novels, *The Horsecatcher* and *The Story Catcher*, in which she turned entirely to the Indian world, would be difficult to surpass in their class. Both, like most of Mari's work, grew from history, but are full of fine and loving detail, often almost poetic in its expression: "Be empty and without skin, so no one can capture the thought of your body, of you." 1

But when Mari really moves into the past, the character of her work changes. The characters in *Cheyenne Autumn* probably suffer little more than those in *Slogum House* or *Capital City*. Yet they seem more noble in the end, more victimized, more dignified in defeat. They are wrapped in the color of Mari's romanticism; some might call this sentimentality, but it seems to me of better quality than that, more nearly true poignancy. Mari's handling of the visions of Crazy Horse, for example, contains less of the skeptical nature that she displayed in other matters. She seems to accept as fact his vision, though elsewhere she had said she viewed all matters of religion as merely anthropological study. This view is somewhat confirmed by her discussion, in *These Were the Sioux*, of the Indian concept of responsibility for the state of the universe, and his place in it. Her words there closely parallel her own directions to her sisters regarding her burial.

Love Song to the Plains, moving from distant to recent past, definitely moves in tone as well from leisurely tasting of time to a feeling that Mari is merely fulfilling obligations in acknowledging Nebraska's present qualities.

Mari's last book, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*, seems to demonstrate her awareness of the conflict between her Indian and white books. Though basically about whites, it is firmly Indian in tone. Consider not only the aura of fate that films the book, the premonitions of both sides in the battle, but the resume which concludes it. Mari takes the opportunity, her last in life, to remind readers of the broken treaties of the United States in contrast to Canada, "who took over her entire region without one battle with her Indians by the simple expedient of keeping her treaties;" of the destruction of the buffalo; the depression of the 1890's; the economic "necessity" for war; the extermination policy, especially as directed toward peaceful Indians, all leading directly or indirectly to the deaths of Custer and his men, and ultimately to Wounded Knee.

Finally then, it seems to me that Mari strove for historical accuracy, and that more subtle accuracy of tone, of nuance, in all her work. Her commitment to the Indians rather than the whites was not an intellectual commitment, and so not easy to catch hold of. It was rather a commitment of nostalgia.

NOTES

1. Sandoz, *The Story Catcher*, 76.
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DONORS TO FUND



This lithographic portrait of Mari, donated by James F. Carr, was one of eleven illustrations drawn for the limited edition of *Old Jules Country* by Mary Bryan Forsyth.

Two former friends of Mari Sandoz have made significant presentations to the Heritage Fund. Eugene G. Gottschalk of St. Petersburg, Florida, has given his 1938-1961 correspondence from Mari, and an assortment of clippings on the Sandoz family. Included in the Gottschalk collection is a postcard from the late Louise Pound, which says, in part, "I have often held her (Mari) up for enlightenment as to certain words in *American Speech*, e.g. 'corny' and 'grasshopper plow'." Contents of the remainder of the collection offer Mari's views on her publication difficulties and her writing themes.



Mr. Gottschalk retired in 1959 from the post of general statistician in the office of comptroller, after a career of 45 years with the New York Central Railroad. He met Mari in New York in 1937, and after reading her first books, he decided to become a Sandoz collector. Mari, he has said, gave him the inspiration to carry on after he suffered a slight heart attack. Mr. Gottschalk presented his Western history book collection to the University of Wyoming several years ago, but had retained his Sandoz correspondence for a more appropriate setting. The Mari Sandoz Heritage Fund is proud to have been chosen as that source.

The second gift comes to the Fund from James F. Carr of New York City, and consists of seventeen Mari Sandoz books and ephemera. In making the presentation, Mr. Carr wrote, "The books are the first group of what I hope will be a near complete set of Mari's books . . . They are, in just a very small way, a tribute to a friend who I wish I could do more for."

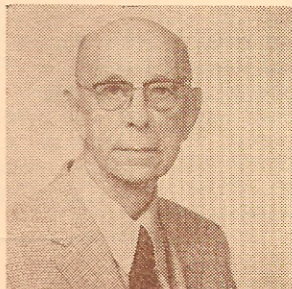
Included in Mr. Carr's donation are signed, first or limited editions of **These Were the Sioux**, **The Battle of the Little Bighorn**, **The Story Catcher**, and **The Beaver Men**. There are also first editions of **Bits of Silver**—containing selections from Mari's writings edited by Don Ward, **Der Pferdefaenger**—German edition of **The Horsecatcher**, **The Christmas of the Phonograph Records**, **Crazy Horse**, and **The Cattlemen**. **The Battle of the Little Bighorn** has a signed page of manuscript tipped in, with a fold-out plate and the text of two Custer letters added. **The Beaver Men** is boxed with a signed bound key map, with two signed pages of early manuscript tipped in.

Other items in the Carr collection are: a separately printed and signed **New Introduction by Mari Sandoz to the Cheyenne Indians**, a signed first edition of the "Far Looker" from **The Sight-Giver**, a signed "Dakota Country" from **American Heritage**, a signed lithographic portrait of Mari, a signed kuechli recipe, and a southwestern Indian pottery bowl finished in shiny and flat black, and signed "Juanita". The bowl was selected by Mr. Carr as a memento from Mari when Caroline Sandoz Pifer closed her apartment in May 1966.

The Gottschalk and Carr gifts join earlier donations from Arthur G. Vetter of Denver and Wallace Stegner of Los Altos Hills, California.



JIM CARR
"Tribute to a friend"



E. G. GOTTSCHALK
"Mari inspired"

The Fund is pleased to announce the forthcoming opening of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Room on the ground floor of the Chadron State College library. The room will be used for housing and displaying all material donated to the Fund. A more detailed account will appear in the next issue.

MARI SANDOZ DAY

State Senator Leslie Stull has forwarded a copy of Legislative Resolution No. 23 passed by the Nebraska Unicameral on January 24, 1972, to the Mari Sandoz Heritage Fund. The resolution calls for an annual observance of May 11 as Mari Sandoz Day in Nebraska, and "that the citizens of the State of Nebraska reflect on their heritage and remember their ancestors" on that day.

In attempting to promote Mari Sandoz Day 1972, the Heritage Fund has received generous support from the local communications media, KCSR radio station of Chadron, in cooperation with the Chadron State College forensics team and their instructor, Bill Crenshaw, will broadcast hourly readings from the works of Mari Sandoz. KCSR will also feature an in-depth report on the significance of Mari's writing and related biographical information.

BY AND ABOUT MARI

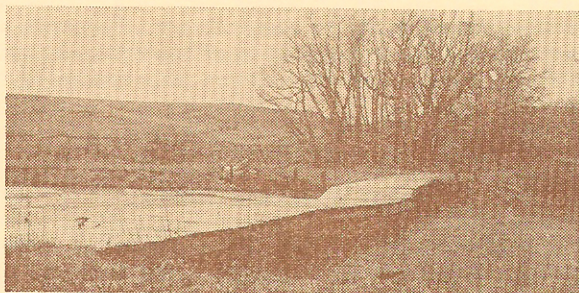
Many inquiries have been received asking for guidelines on prices for Mari Sandoz books which are out-of-print. **Bookman's Guide to Americana** compiles quotations from recent out-of-print booksellers' catalogs for the purpose of recording prevailing prices in the broad field of Americana. The price data presented here should be interpreted in terms of edition, date of publication, interest, and condition of book. For the most accurate estimate of the commercial value of a book, however, it is still best to consult the dealers' catalogs.

The 1972 edition of **Bookman's Guide to Americana** lists the following price quotations on Sandoz books:

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| The Buffalo Hunters (1954) | \$ 5.50 |
| Capital City (1939) 1st edition | 12.50 |
| The Cattlemen (1958) | 6.50 |
| Cheyenne Autumn (1953) Author's presentation copy | 25.00 |
| Crazy Horse (1942) 1st edition | 45.00 |
| Old Jules (1935) | 3.75 |
| Slogum House (1937) 1st edition | 12.50 |
| The Tom Walker (1947) | 10.00 |



HERITAGE NOTES



Bridge leading from Sandoz River Place to site of Old Jules' first homestead.

A special invitation is issued to all members of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Fund to participate in the Sandoz Country Tour on June 24-25. Full information on the tour is enclosed with this issue of **Mari Sandoz Heritage**. Highlights of the tour include: an opportunity to meet and visit with Mari's brothers and sisters, and on-site stops at Mari's grave, Old Jules' last orchard, Mari's birthplace, and Old Jules' first homestead. The June 24 activity will center around locations mentioned in **The Cattlemen, The Christmas of the Phonograph Records, Love Song to the Plains, Old Jules, Old Jules Country, Sandhill Sundays, Slogum House, and Winter Thunder**, with Caroline Sandoz Pifer serving as narrator.

On June 25, Vance Nelson, curator of the Fort Robinson Museum, will interpret Mari's Indian writing as expressed primarily in **Cheyenne Autumn** and **Crazy Horse**. The scene of the stabbing and subsequent death of Crazy Horse, and a retracement of the Cheyennes outbreak and escape route will be featured.

Mari's books, Sioux pottery made especially for the Sandoz Country Tour, and other native art and craft items will be on sale throughout the tour. The cost, including the June 24 breakfast and dinner and a small registration fee, is \$4.75. Breakfast and dinner reservations for June 24 should be made by June 14. Send all reservations and inquiries to: Mari Sandoz Heritage Fund, Chadron State College, Chadron, Nebraska 69337.

Members who joined the Mari Sandoz Heritage Fund by January 1, 1972 will find their charter certificates enclosed in this mailing. Over 150 charter certificates were issued to friends, admirers, and relatives of Mari Sandoz.

Since the membership year corresponds with Mari's birthdate, May 11, all annual memberships are renewable at this time. Continue your investment in preserving your cultural heritage by renewing your membership at an annual cost of \$4.00; sustaining annual \$10.00; life (individual) \$75.00; or commercial annual \$100.00.

COMMENT

Recently, while packing before leaving on a trip to the East Coast, I tossed a copy of **Old Jules** in my suitcase. My intention was to reread it, in preparation for the tour of Sandoz Country coming up in June. A recent outing over this same ground with the Mari Sandoz Heritage Committee had convinced me that I needed to refresh my memory with regard to the order and location of the events that occurred within the book.

While I was gone I attended the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, in Washington, D. C. One of the sessions there was entitled "Writing the Social History of One's Own Family As a Teaching Device." The panel members, mostly history teachers at large state and municipal colleges in the east, had agreed that the average high school graduate arrived at college as a freshman knowing only one thing about history—that he hated it. In order to introduce him slowly and gently to the events of the past, these instructors had encouraged students to write, not just a genealogy of their ancestors, but a social history of their family. This was to stress not only the transformation of the family over the years, but the causes underlying that change. By so doing, the individual learned that he was "a piece of the main", and that the history of the United States or of the western world was in large part simply the history of thousands upon thousands of individual families.

It was not until I was on my way back home, still engaged in reading **Old Jules**, that it dawned on me that I had been contemplating the same thing from two different angles. For what is **Old Jules** but a social history of the Jules Sandoz family? True, Mari Sandoz said that it was the biography of her father, and she hoped that it was also the biography of the community on the upper Niobrara, but it is also the story of the basic unit of society, a family.

Just as the student discovers within the history of his own family the seeds of the history of a people, a nation, an age, so does one discover in **Old Jules** the foreshadowing of many of the other books which came from the pen of Mari Sandoz. **Crazy Horse, Love Song to the Plains, Slogum House, and Miss Morissa**; all of these and others, are present in embryonic form in **Old Jules**.

The student, discerning why his grandparents and his parents think and act the way that they do, and Mari Sandoz, attempting to understand her "one drop of water", are both simply voyagers on an exploration of that land where "no man is an island."

Richard J. Loosbrock, Ph.D.
Assoc. Professor of History
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Sandoz Country Tour

June 24-25, 1972