

# the Story Catcher

*A Publication of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society*

## New Exhibit: Role of Books

“Fact, Fiction, and the New World: The Role of Books in the Making of America,” is now on display at the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center on the Campus of Chadron State College through March 7.

The exhibition is organized by Humanities Texas, the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, with support from T. L. L. Temple Foundation and locally sponsored by the Van Hoff Endowment of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society.

The availability of books and the spread of literacy profoundly influenced the discovery of the New World. Looking for people, places and things that were described in books, explorers defined their encounters by referring to names and ideas from popular stories and ancient legends.

“Fact, Fiction, and the New World” will encourage people to think about the power of stories and the lure of newly found lands. This bilingual panel exhibition highlights the ways in which books determined what people looked for in the New World and how they interpreted what they saw.

People may view the exhibit during regular business hours through March 7. The Center is open to the public from 8am to 12 noon (MST) and 1pm to 4 pm Monday through Friday and 9am to 12 noon and 1pm to 4 pm on Saturdays. The Center is closed on Sundays and College Holidays. There is no admission charge for the Center or for this exhibit. For more information about viewing hours or to arrange group visits, contact Center Director Sarah Polak at 308-432-6401.

Humanities Texas develops and supports diverse programs across the state, including lectures, oral history projects, teacher institutes, traveling exhibitions and documentary films. For more information, please visit Humanities Texas online at <http://www.humanitiestexas.org>.

The Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center celebrates the life and literature of Mari Sandoz and the culture, history and ecology of the High Plains. The Center is integral to Chadron State College and serve its academic, social and cultural needs. The Center’s collections reflect the culture and history of the myriad, diverse people who have encountered this region and the ecology of the High Plains.



*Title page to Utopia, by Sir Thomas More, in the copy owned by Fray Juan De Zumarraga, first Archbishop of Mexico. This work exercised strong influence over the first missionaries in Mexico, some of whom attempted to organize their parishes by the Utopian model. Photograph Courtesy Benson Latin American Library, University of Texas at Austin.*

# Flores Says Big History Shaped Great Plains

The sweeping expanse of Sandoz Country is part of the Big History that shaped the Great Plains, says University of Montana professor Dan Flores, featured speaker at the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society annual Pilster Lecture at Chadron State College.

Flores, the A.B. Hammond Professor of American History, says he discovered Mari Sandoz literature of the Great Plains 30 years ago and has kept her books close at hand during the 20 years he has lived on the plains. "Old Jules is a densely rendered description of the pathos and drama of the human condition in the 1880s and 1890s," he said. The drought of the 1860s foreshadowed a major ecological shift.

He traces the history back to Santa Fe in 1610. For centuries we have been engaged in trying to remember where we came from, he said. "Drought and dust plagued great expanses of the plains," he said. "We de-buffaloed, de-wolfed and de-grassed the Plains" with crude implements and later mega farm machines. No place remains the same across Big History where space plus culture equals place.

Now we interact with already created places and that big history is divided by state lines. Geology and topography are static. Climatology and biology have evolved. The mammoths and the bison needed carbohydrates from vegetation that wouldn't grow because the land featured 320 days of sunshine swept by drying winds. The land that once was grazed was now farmed and the people who ranched were replaced by the people who farmed.

More than 300 people attended the thought-provoking lecture followed the next day with speakers who challenged, expanded on and contemplated Flores assertions using, in many cases, the writings of Mari Sandoz and her realistic reflections on the culture of the times.

The lecture series is funded from an endowment created from the sale of Dawes County ranchland that long-time educator Esther Pilster endowed to the Sandoz Society in 2006.



Flores greeted visitors following his lecture

## Water Played a Role in Society For Native Americans

Susan Miller's explanations of indigenous approaches to drought and the environment, fueled by her Native American background and insights, outlined the importance of how water shaped the very leadership perspective of her ancestors and solidified or destroyed standing in their communities. Water is not only the giver and sustainer of life, but it also plays a role in social standing and influence, she said. The Plains were drier in the west than in the east, so the tribes in the west focused on hunting, gathering and trading while the tribes in the east concentrated on farming. That western plains culture meant that the tribes traveled wherever the cows (Buffalo) were. They provided food and hides and bison products. The Mississippian people and the Wichitas took up farming, Miller said.

Where the land is dry, the people dispersed. Where the land is wet, the people came together. The colonization of the tribes in the 1930s helped them to survive the Great Depression, she said.

"How far you could go for water depended on how much you could carry," Miller said.

Her talk was followed by a panel discussion of the importance of ranching and forestry on the plains. The 2013 Sandoz Conference featured diverse, yet interwoven topics that created a tapestry of the culture of Sandoz and the impact of her thoughts and writing on the lives that were lived in the evolution of the high plains and the lives that are being lived there now.

# Nebraska Sets Water Table to Feed the World

Jesse Starita of the Nebraska Water Center in Lincoln set the water table of the Great Plains for the opening of the 2013 Sandoz Conference at the Sandoz Center on the Chadron State College campus.

He delivered a serious analysis of what was, what is and what can be as Nebraska forges ahead as a leader in drought education in other countries and uses the technologies born of necessity over decades -- many of them pioneered in the heart of Sandoz Country. His explanation of the education needed in developing countries and the eye-opening statistics of success in some of those countries, set the stage for his colleagues and set the bar fairly high for the days' discussion enjoyed by more than 60 participants.

"There is unbelievable volatility of the weather on living in the Great Plains," he said. Nebraska was the epicenter of the drought of 2012, a drought that saw a 57 percent reduction in crop yields in parts of the state. That made the most recent event on a par with the droughts of the 1920's and 1930's. There was optimism as the growing season started sooner -- in March 2012 -- and some significant rain, but then a flash drought with high temperatures and low precipitation. "The snowfall on May 3, 2013, in Lincoln was the first on that date since 1967," Starita said. But Nebraska hasn't seen anything like the multi-year droughts in Mari Sandoz' time. He lauded conservation practices such as no-till farming and good governance such as the establishment of Natural Resources Districts in 1972. "Farmers are growing more with less," he said.

The Water Center was created with an endowment from the Robert B. Daugherty family. He was the founder of Valley Irrigation, pioneers in the development of center pivot irrigation. Daugherty died in 2010 and the center was created to study water impact and policy as well as development of better techniques in Africa, Brazil, Egypt and Spain. Water also means floods and quality includes things such as fecal coliform and oil contamination. Starita said the center is also studying ET, evapo transpiration, "getting enough water to the crop to make up for any loss through evaporation."

There are other issues that affect agriculture that are worth studying, he said. Between 38 and 40 percent of the corn crop is being used for ethanol.



Starita says Nebraska is a leader in drought studies

Production and that impacts the amount of corn being fed to cattle which also impacts the food chain.

"Business is not incapable of being an agent of change," Starita said. "Our challenges are matters of scale. Can we feed 9 million people?"

## "The Vine" and Drought Discussed

Speaking on the Gender of Drought, based on Mari Sandoz "The Vine," Lisa Pollard of Western Wyoming College said the role of Sandoz' strong female characters reflected much of the author's life and the experiences of the people -- men and women alike -- with whom she interacted. The success or failure of life on the Plains, often impacted by the abundance or lack of water, was clearly outlined in her writings in ways which not only reflect life as it was, but as a harbinger for days to come, she said.

Sandoz wrote about two women from Indiana who fought the stereotypes and moved west. "The Plains attracted men, repelled women and reshaped gender and family dynamics," Pollard said. She clearly addressed women's insanity on the plains, insanity and drought, mysticism and rain.

Mari had first-hand knowledge of the insanity of the plains. She was snow blind in one eye, something she suffered while feeding cattle for her father, Old Jules. She endured repeated beatings from her father who said he thought "writers were maggots of the world" Mari's own short marriage and divorce ended her drought of writing and at age 31 she wrote the Vine which was published as the first article in the first edition of Prairie Schooner. It was re-published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1943. Sandoz said she had "satirical intentions" in writing the acutely painful story, Pollard said.

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## **Spirit of Sandoz Award to Ann Van Hoff**



Hull, Van Hoff and Lynn Roper

Longtime Mari Sandoz Heritage Society Board member Ann Van Hoff of Omaha is the recipient of the Spirit of Mari Sandoz Award. Board President Lynn Roper of Lincoln and Past President Ron Hull of Lincoln made the presentation at the 2013 Conference luncheon at Chadron State College in September. Hull credited Van Hoff with being one of the people who made the Society a reality. He said she wrote the organization's bylaws and "really

kept everyone's nose to the grindstone. Every organization needs a person like Ann Van Hoff." He said Van Hoff gave of her time and money, but she also gave her sense of humor and honesty and does the work in the trenches.

Van Hoff said she grew up in Verdigre, in Knox County, "in the shadow of Old Jules' cabin." She said that's an area better known for Nebraska poet and author John Neihardt, but when she studied and taught, the focus was on Sandoz and not the other Nebraska authors. "I came to appreciate Mari very late in life," she said. "We both lived and worked in Manhattan (New York) at the same time" but didn't know each other. But the similarity was enough to get her interested in Sandoz.