

Mari Sandoz

HERITAGE

MARI SANDOZ HERITAGE

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Linda Hughson Ross was born and raised in Sioux County, Nebraska. She received her BA in English from the University of Wyoming in 1966 and her MS in Education from Chadron State College in 1978. She is currently an instructor of English and Journalism at Sheridan Community College in Sheridan, Wyoming. This article is adapted from her master's thesis.

THE LAND, THE EARTH, THE SKY: THE INFLUENCE OF THE GREAT PLAINS ON ITS INHABITANTS BASED ON THE WORKS OF MARI SANDOZ by Linda Hughson Ross, Master's Thesis, June 1978, Chadron State College

INTRODUCTION

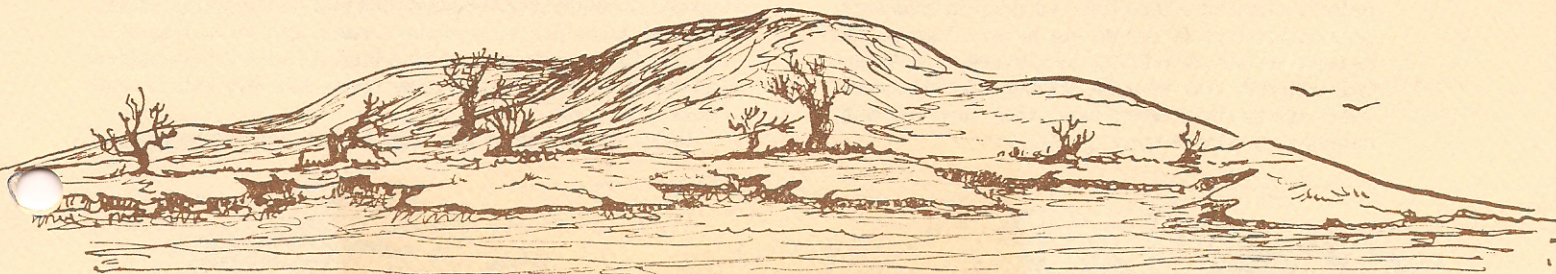
Some of my earliest and most vivid memories are of the elemental forces of nature—blizzards, hot winds, drouth, flash floods—those same forces with which all inhabitants of the Great Plains must contend—the earliest as well as the most recent. Coupled with these is another memory, perhaps more vivid because it is more recent, that of returning to the Great Plains after a three-month visit to the East Coast. After having spent that time in an environment dominated by concrete and people with a horizon visible only an arm's length away, I remember experiencing a feeling of exhilaration and freedom as I drove through the Sandhills at three o'clock in the morning. I truly felt at that moment that I had come "home."

Because of this feeling for the land, because I feel I have been profoundly affected by the land, and because my father's family has lived in Western Nebraska since 1886, I became interested in investigating the way the Great Plains area, primarily Western Nebraska, has influenced and affected its inhabitants. Whereas much has been written about man's use and abuse in his trial-and-error process of adjusting and adapting to the Great Plains, and of his eventual, and at least, partial success in molding the land to suit his needs, very little has been written about what this land has done directly to the people in the process of their adaptation. How did this land mold and change them? How did it affect them?

To investigate and examine this aspect of man's habitation on the Great Plains, it was necessary to find an author who was familiar with this area; one who had been influenced by this land. Such an author had to be Mari Sandoz, I decided. Not only was she born and raised in Western Nebraska, but she was acquainted with many of those who saw the passing of the frontier. She had listened to the stories the old-timers told Old Jules; had seen them cross at the age old ford on the Niobrara; and had experienced prairie fires, drouth, hail, settler-cattlemen feuds, blizzards, and the coming of spring to the prairie. More important than these, however, was her desire ". . . to understand something of the white man's incumbency on the Great Plains from Stone Age Indian to the present, to understand something of what modern man does to such a region, and what it does to him" ("Forward", *The Beaver Men*, p. xv). This desire found expression in her short stories, novels, and non-fiction works. Through Sandoz' works on the Indians, the homesteaders, and the cattlemen, I have attempted to show how the Great Plains shaped, molded, and influenced the inhabitants. The chapters in the thesis discuss the influencing characteristics of the land, primarily of the Great Plains; the Indians, who were the first human inhabitants of the area; the homesteaders; the cattlemen; and the pioneer women who came alone or with their men to settle the Great Plains and whose lives were profoundly and often tragically changed in their doing so. The final chapter deals briefly with the modern-day cattlemen who must still cope with an often hostile environment.

We are all—city and rural dwellers alike—ultimately dependent upon the land for our food if for nothing more; but those settlers who first came to the Great Plains to make their homes and lives were and are vitally dependent upon it. Not only is it the source of their livelihood, it is also their life. For such reasons the Great Plains dwellers have been significantly shaped by the land, the earth, the sky.

The following material has been taken from Chapter IV, "The Cattlemen: Emperors of the



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

Grassland." I chose to use excerpts from this chapter because of my ranching background but primarily because **The Cattlemen: From the Rio Grande Across the Far Marias** by Sandoz often seems to be the most neglected of her non-fiction works. This is unfortunate because this work chronicles the rise and fall of the cattle kingdom from the era of the free range up to the present day and is a most definitive work on the cattle industry. In it she avoids the cliché generally associated with cowboys and ranching and goes beneath the romance and the legendary code of the West to give an accurate picture of the dedicated cowmen who lived on the cattleman's frontier. Of particular fascination in this book is Sandoz' explanation of man's long association with, and his deification of, the cow; and her understanding of man, cow, and land in relation to each other. Here, as in her other works, her prose is clear, precise, and fluid, and it carries with it the sharp scent of the grass, the sage, and the vast unbroken sweep to the horizon.

THE CATTLEMEN: EMPERORS OF THE GRASSLAND

There it lay, reaching as far as the eye could see, a vast oceanic expanse of grass—a windy endlessness eternally blowing, surging, moving—a sea of grass waiting to be harvested, waiting for a harvester now that the buffalo was gone. Onto this sea of grass marched a harvester, the cow. Led, followed, driven by man, the cow came from the South and spread over this sea of grass. She did not question or wonder, envision or dream, desire or take; but together the cow and the sea of grass vitally influenced the man in his habitation of the High Plains. Because of the cow, the man attempted to create and sustain an empire of grass.

The Great Plains area, which had been lying idle and useless, became the heart of the most distinctive and unique institution that America had yet produced; and it was an institution and industry that was uniquely and peculiarly adapted to its environment. Its development was possible primarily because of the land—that vast, seemingly limitless expanse of grass, the physical basis of the cattle kingdom and of the cattle industry. This field of grass provided a natural home for horses and cattle and the grasses possessed remarkably high nutritive value. What became apparent almost immediately was that the cattle in this region

. . . grew larger than their ancestors in the lower bottoms, perhaps due to the iodine shortage that lengthened both men and animals over so much of the Great Plains country, and surely due to the nutritious grasses that got too little moisture to be washy, . . . (*The Cattlemen*, p. 296)

Besides the obvious advantages of good soil, plentiful, hardy grasses, and more meat per pound, the area had another distinct advantage—no one seemed to be interested in it. Here, then, was a land for the taking, a land in which to build an empire, to make a fortune.

The availability of the free land, the pull of the wide open spaces, the ease with which one could become a cattleman, and the rise in beef prices created a rush to cow country. For many, this rush was prompted by more than a desire for great wealth. Mari Sandoz points out that it was also prompted by man's age-old identification with the cow:

It was a new bonanza—not of gold but of something better, something that touched deep in man's nature, a bonanza in something he could grow and develop as his own living handiwork, a creature that stirred him twenty, twenty-five thousand years ago as the magical being that nurtured him, helped shape his destiny (p. 237).

But the primary factor was the greed for quick profit. This desire caused them, especially, the absentee eastern and overseas' owners, to overgraze the land and to saturate the market with too many cattle.

Then, that force which had more effect on the men and the industry than any other in the area, that force which could not be controlled or coerced or predicted—Nature—stepped in. And she did so in two forms: excessively dry summers and falls and devastating winters. The land and the cattle went into the winter in weakened and poor condition, and winter that year—1886-87—did nothing to co-operate. In *The Cattlemen*, Sandoz vividly recreates that winter and its effects:

The wind came, first sneaking in little puffs here and there along the tablelands and blowing harder as the temperature fell. The mist turned to snow thick and white, to cling to the northwest side of every weed and bush and cottonwood, until they were lost in the driving blizzard (p. 259).

Old-timers who had survived ten, twenty, or more winters were desperate. . . . The dead were piled in coulees, in canyons, in arroyos, and along the foot of the caprock—along any barrier. . . . they (the cowmen) could walk along the drift fence north of the Canadian River all the way from Indian Territory to New Mexico, and along another from Ellsworth to Denver—400 miles—without stepping off swelling carcasses of dead cows (pp. 266-67).

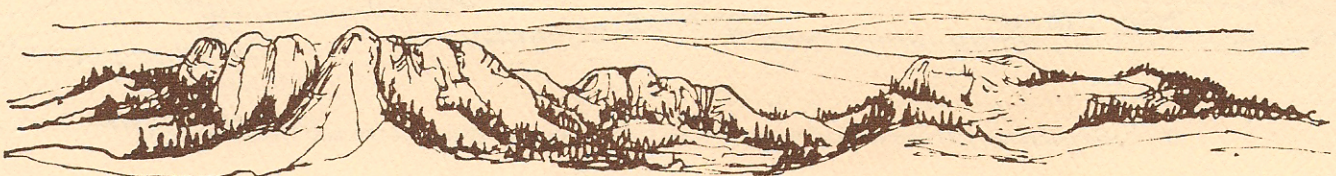
Worse, perhaps, than the cattle losses was the feeling that this dreadful winter had created in men—the dedicated, the true cowmen. They had seen what the storm was doing to their herds, they had heard their bawling over the roar of the wind, they had seen the blood tracks on the ice-hard snow, and they had been able to do nothing. Now they rode the prairies and saw and smelled the dead cattle—cattle that had been trusted to their care—and they were sickened:

Men like Granville Stuart, who had found the cattle business engrossing, compelling, all their lives were suddenly shocked and disgusted with it. Some never wanted to own another cow as long as they lived. It was as though a whole way of life had failed them, a basic faith betrayed them, an idol fallen (p. 268).

As the land and the cow had earlier drawn man to the grassy open plains, the land and the cow again combined to influence and affect man's habitation of the area. If he were to stay in the business and survive, he would have to adopt new methods. The winter of 1886-87 changed the face of the ranching industry and truly marked the end of an era.

In a country where a man was known by his cows, the dedicated rancher fought for the cows and for the grass—fought not just to preserve his domain, the open range, his way of life, or the chance for larger profits. Often he had risked his life, not for money or profit, but for the cow because to him the cows were much more than a way to make a living. This man had learned to conform to the demands of his environment; and, eventually, he had learned to conform to the land laws and he had adjusted and adapted to the presence of the settler, and he had done so because the land lay deep within him. As such it had molded and shaped not only his existence, but his beliefs and outlooks as well.

In his habitation of the High Plains, the cattleman had

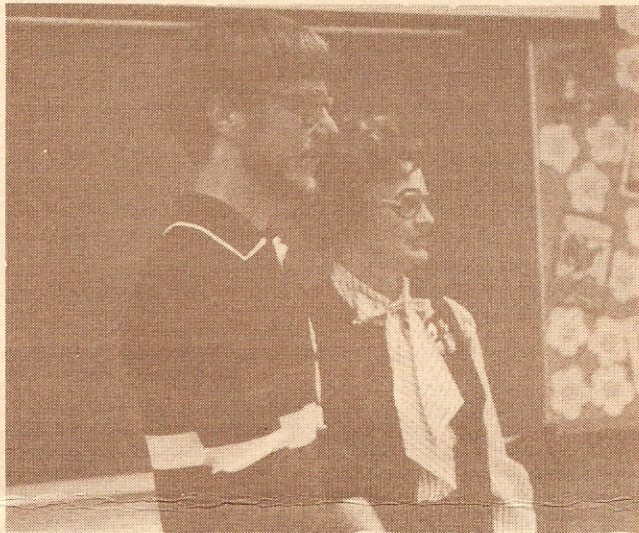




Members of the Sandoz family attended the dinner in Gordon after the Sandoz Country Tour.

MARI SANDOZ SCHOLARSHIP

The Mari Sandoz Scholarship for 1979-80 has been awarded to Richard Erhman of Hay Springs, Nebraska. Dick is pursuing a course of study with majors in Earth Science and History. The scholarship was presented by Celia Ostrander, granddaughter of Old Jules and niece of Mari Sandoz. The scholarship is awarded by the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society through the generosity of the Mari Sandoz Corporation. The scholarship was awarded during Mari Sandoz Day activities at Chadron State College on May 11.



Dick Ehrman and Celia Sandoz Ostrander.

MARI'S BROTHER BEGINS MEMOIRS

Jules Sandoz, oldest son of Old Jules and brother of Mari Sandoz, has begun writing his memoirs in collaboration with his youngest sister, Caroline Sandoz Pifer. The first installment appeared in the Omaha **Sunday World-Herald Magazine of the Midlands**, November 12, 1978.

The primary subject of this first installment is Jules' relationship with his Grandmother Fehr, "Grosmitter." He tells of growing up in a "woman's world" until he was six years old.

Jules makes several references to his sister Mari and comments on other members of the family and various incidents of his early childhood.

FRITZ SANDOZ SCHOLARSHIP

The winner of the Fritz Sandoz Scholarship has been announced. This year's recipient, Sam Hucke of Hemingford, Nebraska, is a repeat winner. Sam was awarded the same scholarship last year. This scholarship was established by Blanche Sandoz, widow of Fritz, and is awarded to a student in agriculture at Chadron State College.



Sam Hucke, winner of the Fritz Sandoz Scholarship.

NEW DIRECTOR OF HERITAGE SOCIETY

Wayne Britt, a native of Rushville, Nebraska, has taken over the duties of Director of the Society on the Chadron State College campus. He succeeds Carla Chlouber who has accepted a position at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater.

Wayne, while a student at Chadron State College, was a member of the original committee which founded the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society. After graduating from CSC he served for four years with the U. S. Navy and recently received his Master of Arts degree from the University of Denver. He is now an assistant librarian and instructor of educational media at CSC.

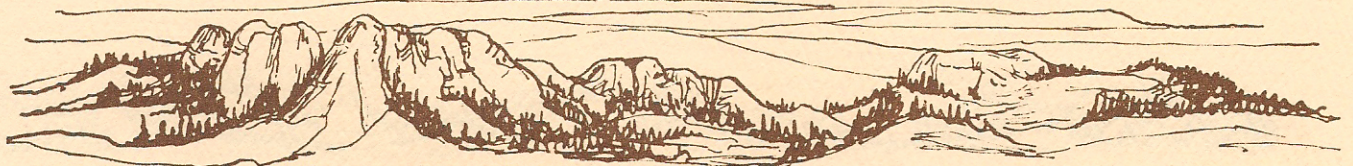
Wayne is also the great-grandson of Louis and Eugenie Pochon. The Pochons were part of the Swiss settlement on Pine Creek and are mentioned several times by Mari Sandoz in the biography of her father **Old Jules**.

MARI SANDOZ YOUNG WRITERS' CONFERENCE

The Mari Sandoz Young Writers' Conference sponsored jointly by the Chadron State College Department of English and the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society was held on April 6 and 7 on the CSC campus.

The guest consultants for this year's conference were J. V. Brummels, the Poet-in-Residence at Wayne (Nebraska) State College, and Bruce Kennedy, a journalist and author of the book **COMMUNITY JOURNALISM**, from Greybull, Wyoming.

Approximately one hundred high school and college students from western Nebraska participated in the general and special sessions on the opening day of the conference. The conference ended on Saturday morning with a breakfast and poetry reading by Mr. Brummels.



learned to adapt, to adjust, to survive. Perhaps because his heyday was shortlived, the grassman and his cowboys have become the dramatic, romantic figures of the West, but to many, Sandoz included:

... the rancher is the encompassing, the continuous and enduring symbol of modern man on the Great Plains. His number had grown vast and varied through the long years since the first Spanish cows trailed their dust eastward from the Pecos, and his stories have become as numerous as the Longhorns that burgeoned in the new land (p. xiv).

and even though these stories are often legendary and imaginary, they are based on the reality that man, were he willing to comply with the laws of Nature—that Nature that sent blizzards howling unhobbled out of the north—and adapt to these laws, he could survive on the Plains. To the cattleman such adaptation came high but to him no price was too high to pay for the cow—that “deep-lying and ancient mystic symbol” (p. 266)—and for the empire of grass.

CONCLUSION

Mari Sandoz' first-hand knowledge of the area and her awareness of the affect the land had on the people who lived on it give her literary works their power, for she wrote of the beauty and strength of the land as well as of its hardships and trials. Her innate feeling for the earth made it possible for her to capture the beauty in the changing colors of the prairie—the greens of spring, the tans and golds of late summer, and the red splashes of bushes in the gullies—in the freedom and movement of the wind across the grass, in the flight of the redtailed hawk, and in the clear blue of the sky that capped the vast expanse of plains. Because Sandoz was born to this land and not just on it, the body of her works is truly a “love song to the plains.”

Sandoz' insight into human nature; her belief in the beauty, power, and endurance of the land and its people; and her ability to express and develop these insights clearly show the influence that the High Plains and Northwest Nebraska had on those who came here to live. She shows the strength that was required to succeed, and the hardships and loneliness that caused defeat; but, more importantly, she shows how the land required adaptation. As the Indian had learned centuries earlier, the white man—both yesterday and today—has learned that success in this land of extremes requires the development of a right, harmonious relationship with the land, the earth, the sky.

SANDOZ COUNTRY TOUR 1978

Admirers of Mari Sandoz gathered for the biennial Sandoz Country Tour on June 24, 1978, to visit the sites made famous in her book about her father **Old Jules**. Over 150 people led by Vance Nelson, president of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society and curator of Fort Robinson, saw the dedication of a marker at the site of Old Jules' well accident south of Hay Springs. The marker was donated by Blanche Sandoz, widow of Mari's brother Fritz.

They also visited the River Place, where Mari Sandoz was born, and the Sandhills homestead where Old Jules last lived and where Mari's sister Flora still ranches and grows fruit.

The car caravan then went on to Gordon and a dinner for the tour participants. Dr. Helen Stauffer, professor of English at Kearney State College, spoke on “The Search for Mari Sandoz.” Dr. Stauffer has been doing research on the noted author and historian for the past ten years.

Providing commentary throughout the tour were members of the Sandoz family, including Mari's brothers and sisters, James, Jules, Flora, and Caroline.



Dr. Helen Stauffer, standing, delivered the address at the dinner for the Sandoz Country Tour, held June 24. On the left is Vance Nelson, who led the tour, and on the right is James Sandoz.



Members of the Sandoz family dedicated the marker at the site of Old Jules' well accident. From the left are James Sandoz, Blanche Sandoz, Caroline Sandoz Pifer, and Jules Sandoz. The marker was donated by Blanche Sandoz.



Caroline Pifer talks to the crowd at Flora's place during the Sandoz Country Tour.



SANDOZ BIBLIOGRAPHY

Rosemary Whitaker, Associate Professor of English, and Myra Jo Moon, Preparations Librarian, both of Colorado State University, Fort Collins, recently spent two days researching the collections of the Society. The purpose of the research was to aid them in compiling a bibliography of materials by and about Mari Sandoz for publication. If you have any comments or suggestions concerning such a bibliography you are asked to write to Rosemary Whitaker at the Department of English, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado 80523.

SONG OF THE PLAINS PREMIERE

The premiere showing of the film *SONG OF THE PLAINS: THE STORY OF MARI SANDOZ* was held in the Dawes Room of the Campus Center at Chadron State College on April 19, 1979.

More information about the program will be in the next issue of *MARI SANDOZ HERITAGE*.

GRAVES PHOTO EXHIBIT

The Graves photographic exhibit was displayed at Fort Robinson and the Cultural Center in Crawford, Nebraska. At Fort Robinson the exhibit was viewed by more than 3,000 people from 34 states and four foreign countries. The collection was also shown during a meeting of the Golden Eagles, a group of Chadron State College retired faculty members.

MEMBERSHIP DUES

Since the dues for membership in the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society cover from May 11 to May 11 of each year, it is time again for payment of annual dues. Membership rates are individual annual, \$4; sustaining annual \$10; life, \$75; and commercial annual, \$100.

MARI SANDOZ DAY 1979

A report of the activities for Mari Sandoz Day 1979 will be carried in the next issue of *Mari Sandoz Heritage*.



Mari Sandoz in later years. (Nebraska State Historical Society Photo)



Mari Sandoz in 1935, the year OLD JULES was published. (Nebraska State Historical Society Photo)

