

The Story Catcher

A publication of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society

Caroline Sandoz Pifer: Her Sister's Keeper

Some of this story is Caroline's memories compiled Sybil Malmberg Berndt with Caroline's friends, Marge Keyser, Adah Dukat, Olive and Jim Dorsey, and through other sources.

In May 1910, Caroline was the last child born to Mary and Jules Sandoz on the "River Place," south of Hay Springs, Neb., but no one welcomed her. To oldest sister, Mari it meant another baby to care for. To her mother Mary, who was back working outside within 10 days of the baby's birth, it meant more work and another mouth to feed.

When she was young, Caroline felt like an only child because Mari was already teaching school and Flora was four years older. Flora, she remembered, helped her by braiding her blonde hair and tying it in blue ribbons that were peeled off of Blue Ribbon beer bottle labels.

Caroline had young playmates though. Adah (Riggs) Dukat and Marian and Marjorie Margrave would ride their fancy horses over from the Margrave's J6 Ranch just north of the Sandoz fruit farm.

From birth until age 18, she shared her mother's bed and the door of the bedroom was locked at night to Jules.

When fog rolled into their valley, her mother would tell wonderful stories of her happy life in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, where the fog would last for days or even weeks during the winter.

There was no store between Ellsworth and Gordon back then except the Sandoz store; and as a young girl, Caroline was put in charge of it. She would wait on customers, count the change out loud and climb up and down on a little stool so she could reach the cash register.

By this time, Jules had lost most of his sting and her relationship with him was different from that of her siblings. Riding beside him on the spring seat of the wagon, she would listen for hours to his orations about Rosalie, the great University in Zurich, where he studied medicine and all about the Napoleonic Wars.

Jules talked about the things that fascinated him as a student of history and about the mysteries of the universe—the earth, the land and sky—as they rode across the prairie.

She also remembered seeing her father limping home with his "feterli" on his shoulder laden down with game for her mother to cook.



Caroline Sandoz Pifer often felt like an only child. She is shown here in her one of her brother's dogs in 1922..

Happy Birthday, Caroline

On May 21, Caroline will turn 99. To send greetings, cards or remembrances to:
Caroline Sandoz Pifer
Countryside Care
500 E. 10th Street
Gordon, NE 69343

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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.

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 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.

Her Sister's Keeper *cont.*

When she started school at 4, Caroline didn't have far to go as it was held upstairs in the Sandoz barn. Mari was the teacher for her first two years and pressed her very hard because she didn't want anyone to think she showed favoritism. Siblings James, Fritz and Flora as well as several neighbor children attended school in the barn as well.

And it was a spectacular barn. With its 600-foot roof spreading out from its 20-foot gable top in long, gradual wings down almost to the ground, it was similar to a barn Jules had seen near Neuchatel. In the center of the loft was the schoolroom, but the barn was also used as a community center and dances were held there once a month.

Caroline remembers another important event taking place there when a traveling man brought a reel of travelogues and an amazing machine that showed the pictures on a wall of the barn that her mother had covered with white sheets. Soon after Jules died, the wonderful old barn met its demise when a tornado-like wind lifted the east roof off and laid it on a hillside across the valley.

Mari's Influence

Mari married Wray Macumber when Caroline was 5 and she went to stay with them while her parents picked fruit on the River Place. She had never been away from her mother before, but she remembers enjoying herself in Mari's spotlessly clean home with pretty geraniums blooming on the window sills.

When Caroline's friends came to visit, Mari entertained them royally by telling their fortunes and granting them wishes with cards and showing them all of her hats decorated with ribbons, flowers and feathers. Mari's mother-in-law, Mrs. Macumber, apparently influenced Mari's hat fetish as she had been a milliner in Iowa before moving to the Sandhills.

Caroline did not get melancholy at Mari's place until she broke a dish and waited for punishment that did not come. When Mari didn't even scold her, Caroline suddenly felt overcome with homesickness.

*"Get your education" rang in their ears
any time they were around boys.*

When she was older, there were boyfriends, as well as many girlfriends, but college was first in Flora's and Caroline's minds, thanks to Mari, who wanted her sisters to get an education.

When Mari visited, she loved going to dances with them at various homes and halls. However, Mari could see that Caroline and Flora were popular, so she kept them on the straight and narrow. "Get your education" rang in their ears any time they were around boys.

Caroline graduated from Gordon High School in 1927 and attended Chadron State College from 1928-1929. Years later, after going back to Chadron State College, she finally graduated in 1981.

Her first teaching job at the Hebbert School paid 60 dollars a month and from 1929 to 1933, she worked as a teacher in Sheridan and Cherry Counties.

Continued on Page

Her Sister's Keeper *cont.*

After Jules died in 1928 and Mari had returned to Lincoln, Flora and Caroline shared the responsibility of taking care of their mother. Mary could not write English or make out a check. But, Mary's business sense was much better than that of Jules because in no time she had paid off all of his debts and saved enough to pay for the home place three times over.

In spite of Mari's constant criticism of Caroline's choice of boyfriends, she married the young man with the "cold blue eyes" in 1935.

With husband Bob Pifer, the handsome Spade cowboy, she had two daughters, Eleanor and Mary Ann, who were the apple of their father's eye.

As a ranch wife and mother, Caroline was active in her community, serving as a school district moderator for 10 years and on the election board for 15 years. Additionally, she was a member of the local garden club from 1954 through 1992 and the Nebraska Historical Society from 1968 through 2001.

Teaching New Generations About Mari

When Mari died, Caroline was named executrix and was responsible for carrying out many distinctive orders regarding Mari's last wishes and the management her literary estate.

While the bulk of Mari's research collection, letters and memorabilia were placed in the archives at Love Library at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, her personal papers and belongings were brought to the Pifer Ranch south of Gordon.

For more than two years, Caroline copied Mari's correspondence on her sun porch in her spare moments. These letters, dating back to 1929, became "Memoranda from Mari Sandoz Letters" published in *The Gordon Journal* from 1970 to 1972 and later in a four-book series, *Making of an Author*.

The collection grew as Caroline continued to include materials sent by friends and admirers and clippings she collected related to Mari. She also added typed introductions to Mari's letters and short works.

Along with her friends, Lloy Chamberlain and Sybil Berndt, she established the Mari Sandoz Room in a store in Gordon. Mari's memorabilia and life story were preserved in her hometown and it created interest in Mari's life and work for more than 20 years. Caroline also maintained a small museum south of Gordon on Highway 27 and a bookshop at her home.

In 1991, she had Mari's last remaining novel, *Foal of Heaven*, published.



While shooting "Song of the Plains: The Story of Mari Sandoz" in 1976, Dick Cavett (upper left) interviewed the remaining Sandoz siblings. Flora is standing next to Cavett. Seated in front: Caroline Pifer, Jules, Jr. and James Sandoz.

As Caroline had hoped, new generations were becoming acquainted with Mari's contribution to history and literature.

For a number of years, Caroline gave the "Old Jules" tour where she talked about Mari and led many busloads of students, tour groups, writers and individuals to sites in the Sandhills. Her intimate knowledge of the places and stories depicted in her sister's writing made her a popular hostess.

In 1997, when Caroline finally left her beloved ranch, she sent the bulk of her collection (filling a truck with 44 boxes, 29 suitcases and furniture) to the Mari Sandoz High Plains Center on Chadron State College's campus.

This collection includes some carbon copies of Mari's letters, thermo-copies of her correspondence, multiple drafts of her books and short stories, as well as works in progress, financial records, assorted clippings, pictures, hats, clothing and artifacts.

Caroline carried out the last of Mari's wishes "to have a repository on the vast Great Plains to hold her life's work for posterity and so the world might benefit."

For more information about the Caroline Pifer collection go to www.marisandoz.org, Newsletters, September 2007 or contact the Mari Sandoz High Plains Center at 308-432-6606. ❀

The Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center celebrates the life and literature of Mari Sandoz and the culture of the High Plains. The Center is located at Chadron State College, 1000 Main Street, Chadron, NE 69337. Web site: www.csc.edu/sandoz

The Last Prairie: A Sandhills Journal

by Stephen R. Jones

Excerpted from the book by Stephen R. Jones, International Marine/Ragged Mountain Press; (2000). Last Prairie is blend of science, natural history, ethnography, and memoir.

Acknowledgements

In 1989 I visited Caroline Sandoz Pifer on her spectacular ranch south of Gordon, Neb. Over the ensuing years she shared her knowledge of the history and ecology of the Sandhills, introduced me to local ranchers and helped me track down obscure places and sources. I thoroughly enjoyed and profited from our bird-watching excursions and our far-ranging conversations.

A Sense of Home

The hand-painted sign on State Highway 27, a few miles north of Mari Sandoz's grave reads "Sandoz Books and Museum 6 miles." A dirt road rolls east through hay meadows and conical dunes and branches off to the right where another sign reads "Caroline Sandoz Pifer .5 miles."

Caroline Pifer's modern ranch house sits on a hill with a view to the south over some of her ten thousand acres of rolling mixed-grass prairie and sub-irrigated meadows. A small notepad beside the screen door invites visitors to sit on the porch and enjoy the wildlife. Birdfeeders hang from several of the 50 species of trees and shrubs in her garden.

Caroline, an energetic, independent, gracious, and a very funny woman of 80-some years, invites me in and takes me down in the basement, where Sandoz memorabilia are displayed. After a brief tour, we sit at the kitchen table over coffee discussing far-ranging topics such as pioneer history to the shorebird population decline to cosmology. I ask her what she likes about living in one of the remotest parts of the Sandhills.

"I guess it is what everyone else would hate, but I like the isolation. I enjoy company, but I like to have the next day off."

I am today's company, and our agenda includes a ranch tour. We climb into an old pickup and head off across the country with the big bluestem brushing against the hood and the truck rocking from side to side over gopher mounds and other minor obstacles.

"I'd let you to drive, but then I'd have to give directions and it would take too much time," she says as we top a

steep hill and bounce down into a narrow, green valley.

I see a pair of black terns swooping over the bulrushes and two trumpeter swans standing beside a muskrat house.

"I could have this drained and grow some more hay, but I like to keep it this way for the birds."

Caroline Pifer's ranch is one of the finest representatives of native-mixed grass prairie I have ever seen. Only a handful of weeds, a few signs of overgrazing, bluestem and switch-grass growing four to six feet tall, red-wing blackbirds, curlews, marsh hawks and white-tailed deer everywhere. It hasn't always been that way she says. "When papa first came to this country many of the hills were bare of grass, and there were blow-outs everywhere. There was hardly a tree to be seen."

I wonder how it feels to live in a place where the view from the front porch barely changes during a lifetime, where you can grow and bond with the landscape, where memories both bitter and sweet, have no place to hide.

Caroline was the youngest of Jules and Mary Sandoz's six children. By the time she was born in 1910, life had begun to soften at the Sandoz ranch. The country was mostly settled. A doctor lived within a couple of miles of the house, and neighbors came almost daily to trade at the Old Jules's small store or to pick fruit from his orchard. Saturday night barn dances began at sundown and lasted until dawn.

"We had a real community. We had people within a mile or so every direction, and there was never a shortage of someone to play with...if we had time to play."

Caroline married Robert Pifer in 1935. They started out with \$500, seven head of cattle, a saddle horse and 33 acres of rented farmland. Caroline would walk to her mother's house with a rifle in hand hoping to meet a cottontail or two.

"Soon there wasn't a rabbit left in the whole country, they'd all been shot and eaten, for nearly everyone not on relief, was at least short of money."

But, she adds cheerfully, "We didn't mind the Depression so much because everyone else was so hard up."

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The Last Prairie cont.

“When we got married in ‘35, we didn’t have anything, but no one else did either, she said.” An optimist at heart, Caroline Pifer seems like the type of person who could do almost anything—ranching, surviving the depression, teaching or becoming a writer. Each summer several score of “Sandoz buffs” visited the small museum in her basement or dropped by to chat or to buy a book. In 1987, Caroline wrote a book of her own, a carefully crafted biography of her brother Jules, *Son of Old Jules*. It will be her last.

“When Mari died, someone had to do something. She wanted me to finish her autobiography, but I didn’t really want to do it...When I got that book out, *Son of Old Jules*, I discovered I could never write like she did. So I have lost all interest in writing. When I turned 80, I said, “This is it, now I can relax.” ❀



Pifer is shown in her college graduation photo in 1981.

America’s Implacable High Plains

By Richard Manning

Excerpted from an article by Richard Manning, a freelance Montana writer, who specializes in environmental issues.

Caroline Pifer was a Sandhills rancher, still on the land when I talked to her in the mid-1990s.

During a lifetime in the Sandhills she saw the waves of human folly rise and crash against the hard face of the place. She says that before the Kinkaid Act, “you had 160 acres and you couldn’t even starve to death on that.” Given 640 acres, though, the farmers figured out how to starve to death just fine.”

(Editor’s note: People who took homesteads under the Kinkaid Act were known as Kinkaiders and from the time the bill was signed in 1904 until 1917, over nine million acres were distributed. That figured out to be roughly 14,000 individual claims. Much of Nebraska’s Sandhills region was unsuited for farming and 640 acres was not a large enough piece of land to ranch successfully.)

The Kinkaiders left within a generation, and the hills went back to grass. Caroline’s own story wraps into this denouement. During much of Jules’ feuding with the cattlemen, his particular nemesis was the Spade Ranch.

Now the lands of the Spade Ranch are Caroline’s, that is to say, Sandoz land. This, however, is not a posthumous victory for the old man. Caroline doesn’t farm; she raises cattle. The very fields Jules plowed and protected with a rifle have gone back to grass. All that remains of his famous orchards are a museum-piece vestige.

Those who stayed, like Caroline, learned the same lesson that successful grassland people all learn sooner or later, usually the hard way, that grassland is best left to grass and grazing. The landscape was called on to teach the lesson one more time.

Caroline Sandoz Pifer, 82 when I talked to her, lived alone then on her ranch of 10,000 acres, one old lady on a ranch roughly the size of Manhattan.

That seemed unusually stubborn to me at the time, so as delicately as possible, I asked her why, at her age, she didn’t move to town.

“Because this is heaven,” she said, delivering a look reserved for the feeble-minded.

Just before visiting Caroline, I had tried to drive up to a neighboring ranch, but failed. The mile-long driveway was covered in snow that late winter day. The ranch was obviously deserted, so I walked in because I knew that this ranch used to be the Jules Sandoz’s place and held the grave of Mari.

I found it, and later told Caroline it was too bad the old place was deserted. Not deserted at all, she told me. Her sister Flora, three years older than Caroline, lived all alone on that ranch. The driveway was not cleared of snow, because she simply got the supplies she needed in the fall and stayed put all winter. The Sandhills have driven a lot of people away, but those who stuck it out really stuck.

The solitude of the prairie is like no other, the feeling of being hidden and alone in a grassland as open as the sea. Unless one has walked pure prairie, it is difficult to imagine how such a sense of freedom can flow from a tough-spirited landscape that hands down harsh rules.

Years ago, a discouraged Kinkaider wrote a more concise version of the same sermon on a sign as he left the Sandhills: “God made this country right side up. Don’t turn it over.” ❀

T.R. Hughes Receives Spirit of Sandoz Award

Each year, the “In the Spirit of Mari Sandoz Award” is given to person who has contributed significant, tangible work to the mission of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society.

By CON MARSHALL

A long-time supporter of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society who has a special interest in Native Americans and helped them preserve their culture received the “In the Spirit of Mari Sandoz Award” during the society’s annual conference at Chadron State College on Friday, March 27.

The award went to T.R. Hughes, who raises buffalo on his RimRock Ranch northwest of Crawford and has developed a particularly close relationship with members of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe based in Montana.

Ron Hull of Lincoln, a veteran member of the Sandoz Society board and its past president, said Hughes has been a faithful and hardworking member of the society and has an “abiding interest and respect for the culture and history of Native Americans.”

The award is given annually to an individual who has significantly advanced the work of the Sandoz Society.

Hughes was born and raised in Seward, Neb., where his family owns Hughes Brothers, Inc., a firm with about 300 employees. He is past president and chairman of the board of the firm.

Hughes said when he was in the eighth grade his social studies teacher introduced him to Mari Sandoz’s work by having his class read “Crazy Horse” and “Cheyenne Autumn,” both of which he found fascinating.

“Both books had a great impact on me,” Hughes said when accepting



T.R. Hughes of Crawford received the “In the Spirit of Mari Sandoz Award” during the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society’s annual conference at Chadron State College in March. With him are his wife Kay, David Sandoz (left) of Valentine and Ron Hull of Lincoln (right.) Sandoz and Hull, members of the society’s executive committee, made the presentations, which included a Native blanket that Hughes has over his shoulders.

his award. “Mari Sandoz told the stories of Crazy Horse and the Cheyenne with honesty and compassion. Mari’s works instilled a desire to know and understand American Indian history, culture and, most of all, the people as individuals.”

He also noted that he was bothered by the movies of that era in which Indians were frequently “mowed down.”

“I became sympathetic to Indians when I watched those movies. They were people who had mothers and fathers who loved them just like everybody else,” he said.

While Hughes was living in Seward, Concordia College, which is located there, began recruiting Indian students. During that time, Hughes became close friends with Ted Risingsun, an adviser to the students and the great grandson of Chief Dull Knife, a leader of the Northern Cheyenne.

Hughes said Risingsun encouraged his people to become educated and to adopt new ways that would help them improve their lives.

In 1978, Hughes purchased the RimRock Ranch northwest of Crawford. In 1995 when he retired from the family business, he and his wife Kay moved to the ranch, bringing a herd of buffalo they had been raising since 1968.

The ranch is close to Fort Robinson, site of the infamous Cheyenne Outbreak on Jan. 9, 1879 when the Cheyenne, led by Chief Dull Knife, broke out of the barracks at Fort Robinson and headed up White River and to the buttes northwest of the fort. Before the fighting ended, at least 64 Cheyenne and 11 soldiers had died.

In 1983, Hughes purchased a ranch that contains land and buttes which the Cheyenne crossed in their attempt to return to their homeland in Montana. *Continued on Page 7*

T.R. Hughes *cont.*

Hughes donated 365 acres of the land to the Dull Knife College Foundation in Lame Deer, Mont. and sold the remaining 735 acres to the foundation for less than he had paid for the land.

He also helped the Cheyenne elders in their effort to build a monument below the buttes in honor of the ancestors' struggle for freedom.

Hughes was instrumental in helping coordinate and sponsor the Cheyenne Breakout Run over the past 10 years.

It begins at Fort Robinson each January with young Cheyenne forming a relay to carry an eagle feather staff some 300 miles to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana. Prior to the start of the relay, an education day led by tribal elders and historians takes place in Commanche Hall at Fort Robinson.

In January 2009, there were about 150 middle school and high school students along with 50 adults involved.

"If there hadn't been the breakout, there wouldn't be a reservation for the Northern Cheyenne in Montana," Hughes said.

"They would have been sent back to Oklahoma. The story is being passed on to younger generations and there is increased pride in their heritage."

Hughes said he especially admires Mari Sandoz's work because she made a great effort to obtain the Indians' view point while nearly all the other histories of skirmishes with Indians is written from the white man's perspective

"She was someone who would listen and record the Indians' side of the story," Hughes noted. "She is highly respected by the elders for trying to provide the true history."

Hughes has been on the board of directors of the Sandoz Society since shortly after he and his wife joined in 1992.

Sandoz Conference Highlights



Ron Hull (left) of Lincoln, president emeritus of the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, visits with Lois Veath, vice president of academic affairs at Chadron State College, and Joseph Wydeven, professor emeritus at Bellevue University, following Wydeven's keynote address at the society's conference at CSC at the Mari Sandoz Annual Conference.



Phyllis McCain of Norfolk, cousin of author-photographer Wright Morris, opened the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society's annual conference by discussing his photos that were on display in the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center at Chadron State. Several of the photos were taken about 60 years ago on their grandparents' farm near Norfolk.

Thank You Conference Sponsors

The annual conference is presented each year
by the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society
with assistance from the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center
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and the DeMarco Conference Speaker Endowment

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Mari Sandoz Heritage Society
1208 Laramie Street
Alliance, NE 69301.
marisandoz_society@windstream.net
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