

Banning *Slogum House* in 1938

As the recipient of the 2023-2024 Mari Sandoz Research Award, I delved into the Nebraska bans on Sandoz's first novel, *Slogum House*. Drawing on newspaper accounts and archival material held at the Mari Sandoz Heritage Center at Chadron State College, the Mari Sandoz Collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the Helen Stauffer Collection at the University of Nebraska-Kearney, I explored the political and cultural dynamics that spurred the bans and the debates readers, critics, and politicians had about the book's content and literary merit. The following is a brief research summary. The complete essay will appear in *Sandoz Studies*, Volume 3, published by the University of Nebraska Press.

Slogum House is the brutal story of Gulla Slogum and the fiefdom she built around her eponymous road-ranch and brothel. She turned her sons into cattle rustlers and murderers, harassed homesteaders, and carved out her own county. It was also an allegory for fascism, built on her study of the political headwinds in Europe. Filled with violence and sex, when it appeared in 1937 readers initially welcomed her unvarnished account of homesteading in Western Nebraska. Yet, by the new year a growing chorus of Nebraskans deemed the book dirty, dishonest, and obscene. The McCook Public Library banned *Slogum House* in January 1938. Omaha's mayor, Dan Butler, soon followed and removed public library copies from circulation.

Early reviews were positive but pointed to the rougher elements of the book. As the *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*'s reviewer noted, "This book demands a second reading, for with the coefficient of shock thus reduced, its real power is more effectively exercised."¹ The popular Civil War historian and journalist Bruce Catton labeled *Slogum House* "a true book." Instead of romanticizing the homesteading period, Sandoz recognized it "was in some respects

¹ "Footnotes," *Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, November 28, 1937.

an ugly chapter.” Ultimately, Catton believed *Slogum House*, “may shock you, and certainly it will disturb you – but you will remember it.”²

Others welcomed the bans. The McCook paper argued *Slogum House* was more of the same “filth which seems to make [Sandoz’s] novels popular.”³ Omaha’s Mayor Butler proclaimed *Slogum House* “rotten and filthy” when he banned it. He could not believe such a book made it into print or past the librarians at the Omaha Public Library.⁴ Others followed. Pawnee City and O’Neill banned it outright. Gordon also, a shocking outcome for a local writer. Nevertheless, the book sold well in town.⁵ Alliance and Scottsbluff kept copies in their libraries, but limited circulation to adult patrons.⁶

National reporters soon picked up the story. Book bans were not uncommon at the time, but the suppression of another western historical novel by an author so recently lauded for the portrayal of her homesteader father, drew wide press and public interest. Reporters found her in Boston, where she was staying with her editor, Edward Weeks. Sandoz was back east conducting research for *Cheyenne Autumn*, which she published in 1953. She told the *Boston Post*, “I have been informed that Mayor Butler is staging a city-wide campaign against rackets and vice. I cannot understand how my novel comes into such a situation.”⁷ Upon reflection, she told a *Washington Post* reporter that, “I doubt if [Mayor Butler] ever read the book.”⁸ In other words,

² Bruce Catton, “A Book a Day – A Darker Chapter From Pioneer Life – ‘Slogum House,’” *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, December 14, 1937.

³ “Book Review,” *McCook Gazette*, undated clipping, Folder 6: Articles – Slogum House, Box 1, Helen Stauffer Papers, CTR.

⁴ “Butler Bans Mari Sandoz’ ‘Slogum House’ as Rotten,” undated clipping, Folder 6: Articles – Slogum House, Box 1, Helen Stauffer Papers, CTR.

⁵ “Only A Few That Way,” *The Sutton Register*, January 27, 1938.

⁶ “Sandoz Book Is Being Banned by Neb. Libraries,” *Alliance News*, undated clipping, Folder 6: Articles – Slogum House, Box 1, CTR; Undated Scottsbluff clipping, Folder 6: Articles – Slogum House, Box 1, Helen Stauffer Papers, CTR.

⁷ “Mari Sandoz Shocked at Banning of Her Book,” *Boston Post*, January 18, 1938, Folder 6: Articles – Slogum House, Box 1, Helen Stauffer Papers, CTR.

⁸ “Omaha Ban on Her Latest Book Amazes Authoress Mari Sandoz,” *The Washington Post*, January 28, 1938.

he banned it based on hearsay and rumor, not the novel's actual content. As she continued her research trip she offered further comments, signaling a disinterested stance on the bans. She told the *New York Herald Tribune* reporter that it was "no particular honor to be banned in Omaha, and no reflection either."⁹

Omahans rallied in defense of Sandoz. The *Omaha World-Herald* published an editorial criticizing the mayor's ban.¹⁰ Rabbi David A. Goldstein of Omaha's Beth-El synagogue publicly rebuked the mayor, arguing that "Mayor Butler might just as well ban the Bible or William Shakespeare. It seems to me that our mayor is going a step too far."¹¹ Although Butler defended the ban, he refused to ban other controversial books in the coming months. Eventually, the press attention subsided and Mayor Butler turned his attentions elsewhere. At some unrecorded date, *Slogum House* returned to the shelves of libraries in McCook, Omaha, O'Neil, Pawnee City, and Gordon, where it remains today.

Sandoz drew on this episode in her next novel, *Capital City*. Building on the analysis of the potential for fascism that animated *Slogum House*, this novel illuminated the social and political contours of a fictionalized Great Plains capital. In the novel, the writer Abigail Allerton's book is lauded and then swiftly denounced, a flash of critical whiplash known to Sandoz. The local condemnation is followed by a book ban.¹² This was not the last word on banning *Slogum House*. In 1944, a proposed paperback Armed Services Edition published by Council on Books in Wartime for soldiers on the front was halted due to the book's political content, likely her positive descriptions of the Farmer's Holiday Movement in the book's

⁹ "Mari Sandoz Indifferent To Omaha Ban on Book," *New York Herald Tribune*, January 21, 1938.

¹⁰ "The Mayor Doesn't Like It," *Omaha World-Herald* (Evening Edition), January 18, 1938.

¹¹ "'Slogum House' Gets More Free Publicity," *Alliance Times and Herald*, January 21, 1938; "Banned Book Sales Brisk," *Omaha World-Herald* (Evening Edition), January 18, 1938.

¹² Mari Sandoz, *Capital City*. New Edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 148, 150-151.

Depression-era section. This ban did not hold. The first paperback edition of *Slogum House* was distributed to soldiers by the end of 1944. Amid the furors over the novel, Sandoz took a disinterested stance, turning to other projects and concerns. She did because she believed her work would outlast the outrage. She was right.