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MARI SANDOZ
NEBRASKA SANDHILLS AUTHOR
A CENTENNIAL RECOGNITION



FIG. 1. *Mari Sandoz*, c. 1950s. Courtesy of Mari Sandoz Collection, University Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

AN INTRODUCTION

BARBARA RIPPEY AND JOHN R. WUNDER

1996 marks the centennial year of Mari Susette Sandoz's birth to Swiss immigrant parents, Mary and Jules Sandoz, on a homestead in Sheridan County, Nebraska. Mari, the oldest of the six children in the Sandoz family, was shaped and hardened by her father's temper and by bearing the brunt of hard physical work both outdoors on the homestead and as her mother's helper. The people of her neighborhood were the kind of people who not only witnessed but made history, the kind of people whose lives and stories could be transformed

into literature. Red Cloud, Robert Henri, Crazy Horse, "Gulla Slogum," Dull Knife, even her father Jules, and many others became the subjects of the pen and typewriter of Mari Sandoz.

John G. Neihardt, Nebraska Poet Laureate, and neighbor of Mari's in the Nebraska Hall of Fame, wrote of "interknitting" as an art form and a life form. In his poem, "L'Envoi," Neihardt explains how "My God and I shall interknit/ As rain and Ocean, breath and Air. . . ."¹ So too did Mari Sandoz. She chose to interknit history and literature in a blend of form and substance that explained life on the Great Plains.

Mari Sandoz's Nebraska was the Sandhills of the northwest part of the state. These grass-laced sand dunes are a distinctive geological formation covering several thousands of square miles. They were prime buffalo country and they remain prime cattle country. To thrive in the Sandhills is to understand its environmental make-up and the delicate relationship of human beings with the earth. Often Mari Sandoz wrote of the beauty of the land and the respect the inhabitants had for it. She gained fame through writing about a region

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FIG. 2. Photograph of Mari Sandoz by Gertrude Kasebier. Courtesy of Sandoz Family Corporation.

from which she had physically alienated herself, first by her flight from the Sandhills to Lincoln for learning, then from Nebraska to Colorado, and finally from the West to the East, an East so often the villain in her protagonists' struggles.

Known for her pungent writing style and her extensive research on the Great Plains, Sandoz centered her work on her social concerns. She basically saw the West in terms of conflict. There is seldom any question about where Mari's values and emotions lie as she blends historical data with fictional episodes to win her readers' minds and hearts. Interpreting Sandoz's themes of conflict as well as her idiosyncratic methodological approach to her craft is the subject of the four essays in this special issue of *Great Plains Quarterly*.

Betsy Downey, in the first essay, "She Does Not Write Like a Historian: Mari Sandoz and the Old and New Western History," scrutinizes Sandoz's limited historical training and her use of both Old and New Western History modes in her Great Plains series. Downey's investigation of Sandoz's departure from the norms of the historical writing of her time clarifies the eclectic choices Sandoz makes in her use of mixed methodology and mixed genre. Downey highlights the ambivalence or disregard Sandoz displays concerning the proper mode of writing history, particularly as it is highlighted by Sandoz's use of fictional passages in her histories and biographies. Downey also explains that although Sandoz's use of Old Western History—heroic male conflicts over power—dominates much of her



FIG. 3. Mari Sandoz at Van Vleet's ranch, 1947. Courtesy of the Sandoz Family Corporation.

work, it exists side-by-side with her New Western History sensibility toward the cost of the struggle to women, Native Americans, and the environment. Sandoz regarded her view of history as the "true" history.

It was not unusual for Sandoz to portray a woman co-opting men's power by adopting what traditionally had been viewed as a man's role (as she and other women were doing as published authors). Glenda Riley, in "Mari Sandoz's *Slogum House*: Greed as Woman," explores why Sandoz would choose a woman as the evil antagonist in her first novel. Gulla Slogum's thievery, deceit, and murderous ways typify a major Sandoz concern, the manipulations of a select few who enrich and empower themselves by keeping public lands and a decent living from poor desperate landseekers.

In many of Sandoz's works, Native Americans are the main or corollary recipients of violence as they lose their homelands. The worth and the plight of Plains Indians interlocked into one of Sandoz's major social concerns, although she never attempted to dissect the morality of "poor desperate landseekers" taking over tribal lands obtained by government trickery and force. In Lisa R. Lindell's "Recasting Epic Tradition: The Dispossessed as Hero in Sandoz's *Crazy Horse* and *Cheyenne Autumn*," one sees how Sandoz shaped the heroic qualities of Native Americans into an epic detailing dispossession and defeat. These "biographies" focus Sandoz's admiration for Indians, but her choice of epic structure, according to Lindell, betrays her fear that the Lakota and Cheyenne "golden age" will never return, their material defeat

having a destructive concomitant cultural force. Plains Indians were frequently the subject of Sandoz's writings, and she is one of the first historians to portray them not as savages and not as nameless victims but as actors in their own history, as human participants with diverse destinies.

Mari Sandoz's admiration for the Lakotas and Cheyennes who lived on the Plains in the years before her birth and during her childhood was only a part of her yearning for the West during her later years in her "outpost" in New York. She died there in 1966, but she is buried in her beloved Sandhills. Sandoz had brighter hopes for the homesteaders and their children than for the Indians and their children, whose case she eloquently pleaded before congressional committees.

The fourth essay, "Mari Sandoz's Portrait of an Artist's Youth: Robert Henri's Nebraska Years," by Helen Winter Stauffer, details the success of Robert Henry Cozad (later Robert Henri), another child of the Plains who was also the victim of earlier sorrows. Robert is the son of John J. Cozad, the founder of Cozad, Nebraska. In Sandoz's novel *Son of the Gambler's Man*, based on historical fact, Robert has

to flee the Plains and change his name, not because of his desire for success (he is still a young boy) but because his gambler and community developer father is running from a murder charge. Henri rises from that ignominious beginning to a successful life as an artist and teacher.

Sandoz's social concern was always for those who found themselves on the lower rungs of society, as typified in these essays about homesteaders, Native Americans, and the unjustly accused or those hurt by family association. A basic need in Sandoz's writing is that justice be done by the "law of the land" or through the "law of success" in the court of public opinion. Sandoz brought her concerns before her readers both to awaken them to an awareness of injustice and to stir them to action, and she used her native Plains as the setting. She may have seen her own "justice" assured by the measure of her hard won writing success.

NOTES

1. John G. Neihardt, "L'Envoi" from *The Poet's Town* (1908-12), in *Lyric and Dramatic Poems of John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 167.