

# The Story Catcher

Newsletter of the Mari Sandoz Society



## *“The Northern Cheyenne Homecoming: Reclaiming, Renaming, and Reframing History”*

2025 Pilster Lecture to Feature Gerry Robinson, Northern Cheyenne Historian & Author

The **2025 Pilster Great Plains Lecture** will be presented by Northern Cheyenne historian and writer, **Gerry Robinson**. The title of his lecture, **“The Northern Cheyenne Homecoming: Reclaiming, Renaming, and Reframing History”**

The lecture is returning to Chadron State College after a year hiatus. It will take place on Thursday, September 18th at 7:30pm Mountain Time at the CSC Student Center Ballroom. The lecture will be recorded.

The inspirational story of the 1878 Northern Cheyenne return to their homeland has been studied and shared by many historians over the years. Mari Sandoz was one of the first to take an in-depth look at their ordeal from the perspective of a true ally. Other authors have followed in her footsteps, each tempering their compassion with a more stringent academic analysis and discussion. All of their works have provided valuable insights into Northern Cheyenne history, as well as a better understanding of the broader history of Immigrant/Indigenous relations in the American West. The time has arrived, however helpful as these authors have been, to hear from those on the Indigenous side of that relationship.

Utilizing and building off of the historical record, this presentation endeavors to relate a balanced and factual Northern Cheyenne evaluation of this historic trek. It will showcase recent discoveries and developments that have occurred along the trail as the result of an ongoing archeological survey and a growing tribal commitment to relate what took place from the Northern Cheyenne point of view. This effort actually had its beginning in the early days of the journey itself, when a man named Curley made clear to the soldiers pursuing them the reason why the Northern Cheyenne had left their assigned agency. He shouted at them, “Go back and tell them we are going

home.” The Northern Cheyenne did not see their journey as an “Exodus,” or an “Odyssey,” as it’s since been called in the dominant narrative. There are no Cheyenne words for such things. In their minds, and in their hearts, they were simply going home.

The displacement stories of the Cherokee Trail of Tears, the Dine’ Long Walk, and The Nez Perce Flight of 1877, among others, all follow the dominant narrative of a forced removal that ended in devastating loss and sorrow. Many initially believe that the Northern Cheyenne Homecoming story also follows that same narrative, however, a closer look reveals that the sacrifice and loss of those involved resulted in the achievement of their goal as identified by

(continued on page 2)



## Pilster Lecture continued...

Curley – meaning that which has been framed as a great tragedy is instead a most remarkable victory. Given that understanding, and considering the collective sentiment that history is told by the victor, it is long past time that the Northern Cheyenne shared their own accounts of their great success. This is only one Northern Cheyenne account of that triumph, but it is presented out of respect for Curley's request.

Robinson is a Northern Cheyenne tribal member and historian who was raised at the heart of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in southeastern Montana. His book, *The Cheyenne Story: An Interpretation of Courage*, won the 2019 Western Heritage Award for Outstanding Western Novel. It is the first book in a trilogy he is writing that shares the tragic, yet inspiring story of his ancestor's exile to Indian Territory in the late 1800's and their determined struggle to return to their homeland in the northern plains.

Motivated by a love for his cultural heritage, encouraged by family and friends and supported by many dedicated allies, Robinson's ongoing research has led to the discovery of multiple forgotten sites along the path of his ancestor's extraordinary trek. In addition, he is currently involved in a pair of trail projects that acknowledge his ancestors and their heroic effort – The Northern Cheyenne Healing Trail, a 2.5-mile interpretive trail to commemorate their 1879 escape from Fort Robinson, NE, and The Northern Cheyenne Homecoming Trail, a multi-state project to identify the 1,100-mile route taken by the Northern Cheyenne during their epic flight north and to have it recognized as a National Historic Trail.

His writing can be found in *The Great Plains Quarterly*, *Annals of Wyoming*, *Wyohistory.org*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Many Mountains Moving*, and elsewhere.

Dr. Kurt Kinbacher, CSC Professor of History and chair of the Pilster Lecture for the Mari Sandoz Society said that Chadron State College "is one of the most prominent cultural and intellectual institutions in western Nebraska, and the Pilster Lecture series enhances the greater

community's access to engaging scholarship and art. Having the lecture on campus is helpful in fulfilling the college's mission -- to deliver "experiences that foster knowledgeable and engaged leaders and citizens to enrich the High Plains region and beyond."

Additionally, "the Pilster Lecture this year fits the vision of the Mari Sandoz Society – "to amplify the voices of the dispossessed and challenge the romanticized view of the West through education, publication, and outreach." It promises to deliver on the ideals of the Society and CSC as the Cheyenne nation is very much a part of the Plains region, and their experiences here are important to everyone's understanding of the past and present."

Anyone who has visited Fort Robinson State Park or stopped to read roadside historical markers will have some knowledge of US and Native American relations in the nineteenth century. While Indigenous people still live in the region, there is often something quite abstract about the wars that dispossessed the Cheyenne, Lakota, and Arapaho nations of their lands, their economies, and many of their lives. Not all histories are glorious, but they can all teach us something about ourselves and the world around us. Kinbacher said "I hope that listening to Gerry Robinson gives people a greater sense of who the Cheyenne are as a nation and how they experience historical events. The past is still very present in their worldview, and gaining a greater understanding of the local, violent past can provide a measure of healing to all involved."

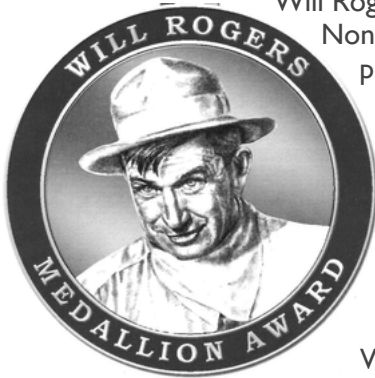
The Pilster Lecture is made possible by the 2006 gift of ranchland in northwest Nebraska near Whitney in Dawes County, by the late Esther Pilster. The gift, which established an endowment with the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, was a tribute to her late husband Raleigh, who grew up on the ranch, and his parents John and Grace Pilster. As a beloved teacher and school administrator for 44 years, Esther served 29 years as principal at Boyd Elementary School in Omaha. Esther wanted her gift to honor the courage and tenacity shown by Raleigh's parents and others who lived on the Great Plains.



# Sandoz and the Battle of the Little Bighorn Awarded a 2025 Will Rogers Medallion

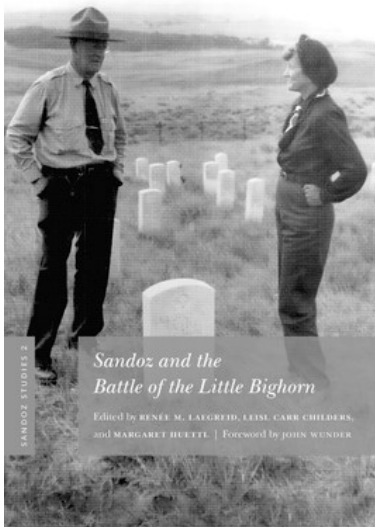
*Sandoz Studies, Volume 2: Sandoz and the Battle of the Little Bighorn* edited by Sandoz Society board members Renée M. Laegreid and Leisl Carr-Childers along with Margaret Huetl the director of Indigenous studies and an assistant professor of history at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh has been named a recipient of a 2025

Will Rogers Medallion Award in the category of Western Non-Fiction. This Sandoz Society supported book was published by Bison Books (University of Nebraska Press) in 2024.



Will Rogers was a respected writer and cowboy entertainer whose work embodied and demonstrated the traditions and values of the American cowboy. The Will Rogers Medallion Award was originally created to recognize quality works of cowboy poetry that honored the Will Rogers heritage, but has expanded to include other works of Western literature and film. Each year

WRMA gold, silver and bronze medallions are presented to authors, poets, songwriters, filmmakers and other creators in 20-plus categories in recognition of outstanding chronicling the legacy of the American West and its peoples. Final rankings will be announced November 1, 2025, at the annual WRMA Banquet and Award Ceremony taking place in Will Rogers' hometown of Claremore, Oklahoma.



To order a copy of *Sandoz Studies, Volume 2, Sandoz and the Battle of the Little Bighorn* along with *Sandoz Studies Volume 1, Women in the Writings of Mari Sandoz* and other titles by Mari Sandoz, please visit the University of Nebraska Press website where you can place your order: <https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/>

Or you purchase these books through your favorite local bookseller.

The Mari Sandoz Society Board of Directors would like to extend a heartfelt **THANK YOU** to retiring board member **Karen Kelley** of Denver, CO.

Karen is a Nebraska native and served as our board secretary for many years. She would travel to Chadron and Lincoln to attend board meetings as well as the annual Pilster Lecture and Symposium. We are grateful for her contributions to the board and to the Society and will miss her presence in our work.

## The Story Catcher

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*. This newsletter is published multiple times a year by the Mari Sandoz Society, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Our mission is to encourage and promote an understanding of the literary and historical works of Mari Sandoz and to honor the land and people about which she wrote. In the spirit of Mari Sandoz, the society will amplify the voices of the dispossessed and challenge the romanticized view of the West through education, publication, and outreach. Mari Sandoz advocated for Native Peoples throughout her life, and in keeping with that spirit, the Society commits itself to devote a substantial portion of its resources to prioritize Indigenous perspectives in our projects and programs. Sandoz wrote extensively about Indigenous dispossession; we likewise feel a duty to acknowledge this history and work toward reconciliation and healing.

## Address Changes

Address changes should be mailed to:  
**P.O. Box 6808, Lincoln, NE 68506**

Contributions to the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society are tax-deductible. To join the Society contact visit our website at [www.marisandozsociety.org](http://www.marisandozsociety.org)



## 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*, Sandoz was a tireless researcher, a true storyteller and artist passionately dedicated to the land. With her vivid stories of the last days of the American frontier, Mari Sandoz 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.

The Mari Sandoz Society Presents the 2025



*Mari Sandoz*  
SOCIETY

# Pilster Great Plains Lecture

Featuring Gerry Robinson, writer, historian and member of the Northern Cheyenne Nation

“The Northern Cheyenne Homecoming: Reclaiming, Renaming, and Reframing History”

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## Date & Time

18 September 2025

7:30pm

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## Location

Chadron State College  
Student Center Ballroom

# Re-imagined Story Catcher Festival A Huge Success

Event Featured Former U.S. Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo

Storytelling, creativity, and literary exploration was celebrated at the **2025 Story Catcher Festival**, held on the campus of Western Colorado University April 9-10.

The Festival was born out of the Story Catcher Summer Writing Workshop and Festival held for the past 12-years at Chadron State College, in the Black Hills of South Dakota and at Western Colorado University. The event is now jointly sponsored by the Mari Sandoz Society and Western Colorado University and held in Gunnison, Colorado during the spring academic semester.

This year's event brought together experienced writers, poets, and thinkers to lead a series of craft workshops, readings, and discussions. The events drew nearly 500 participants both in-person as well as through virtual participation over the two days of the Festival.

For attendees, the Festival provided a chance to connect with like-minded people, find inspiration, and gain insight from some of the most respected voices in contemporary storytelling. This year's Festival emphasized the power of storytelling to preserve and amplify Indigenous voices. Inspired by author Mari Sandoz, whose work centered on celebrating human narratives, the event helps the Society and WCU carry on her legacy by fostering emerging talent and supporting writers from diverse backgrounds.

The conclusion of the Festival featured a special evening with **Joy Harjo**, three-term U.S. Poet Laureate of the United States from 2019-2022 who read several of her poems and shared stories from her life. An attendee wrote that "Harjo's (poetry) readings helped them see how writing can be used not just to express emotion, but to pass on wisdom, culture, and resilience."

Mark your calendar for the 2026 Story Catcher Festival that will take place April 10-12 at Western Colorado University in Gunnison, Colorado. The 2026 Festival will feature **Aimee Nezhukumatathil**, author of the book of food essays *Bite By Bite: Nourishments and Jamborees* and the *New York Times* best-selling illustrated collection of nature essays, *World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks & Other Astonishments*. Nezhukumatathil is the poetry editor for *Sierra* magazine, the story-telling arm of The Sierra Club and is also a professor of English and Creative Writing in the University of Mississippi's MFA program. A variety of writers and workshop leaders will join Aimee in exploring our place in this world of wonders, addressing issues related to our environment and living in the West.



TOP PHOTO: Joy Harjo reads in Kinkaid Concert Hall at the Conclusion of the Festival (photo by Morgan Raspanti)

MIDDLE PHOTO: Byron Aspass guides participants through his "memory map" exercise in an afternoon session in the Taylor Hall Studio Theater

BOTTOM PHOTO: Young Lance Recipients with Joy Harjo. Left to Right, Ashana Lansing, Joy Harjo, Shannel Garcia & Jalen S. Smallcanyon. (Standing) Sage Yazzie.

# Mari Sandoz's Legacy Lives On: Nature Writing Students Claire Thompson and Lizbeth Bárcena Awarded First Scholarships

Two students in Western Colorado University's Graduate Program in Creative Writing's Nature Writing concentration are the beneficiaries of the newly established Mari Sandoz Scholarship.

**Claire Thompson**, recipient of the 2024 inaugural scholarship, is a teacher, writer, and Forest Service trail worker who returned to school to prioritize her own writing and have the rigor and community offered by one of the few place-based environmental programs in the country. Thompson is currently working on her thesis and is writing about her place, its past people, and its current struggles. "With Sandoz's work and legacy in mind, I've spent my first semester delving deeper into explorations of my own relationships to the landscapes and communities that have shaped me," she said. "Last fall, I learned more about the displacement and ongoing legal battles of the Wenatchi tribe, on whose ancestral lands I've been living and working for close to a decade, and whose traditional fishing grounds have been developed into a bustling Bavarian-themed tourist town that barely acknowledges its first inhabitants. I drafted an essay exploring my own relationship, as a public-lands employee, to both the exploitation and stewardship of this place that I've come to call home, too. I'm looking forward to revising and developing this and other related work!"

The 2025 recipient is **Lizbeth Bárcena**, a writer, naturalist, and designer exploring the desert Southwest. Originally from Guadalajara, Mexico, she now splits her time between Los Angeles and the desert community of Borrego Springs, where she volunteers for the State Park and nonprofits in the Colorado and Mojave Deserts. "I am humbled to be able to acknowledge Mari Sandoz's work and contribute to her message and legacy that revered the landscapes and Native People of the Great Plains and the West," she noted. "Receiving this scholarship means the opportunity to advocate and further investigate the landscapes and voices of the West, which have been the focus of my literary explorations. By participating and volunteering for the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society, I plan to build upon my knowledge of the natural world and the human and non-human relationships and their stories. "As a woman and Mexican American, my writing reflects on diversity, the unrepresented voices, the unique cultural perspectives, and the complex relationships to illustrate how we survive life's challenges in a changing environment. The desert is my muse, and at the center of all my work are stories inspired by the ecology of our deserts in the Southwest, which centers on resilience,

adaptiveness, wonder, and fragility. My writing journey has taken me into the outdoors where I volunteer for non-profits to educate, conserve, and restore our deserts. It has also led me to examine the more profound questions about human and non-human life, environmental ethics, and our role on Earth. I aspire to share those stories and hope to inspire others to explore and protect their natural surroundings."



Claire Thompson (left); Lizbeth Bárcena (right)

Dr. Laura Pritchett, who directs the Nature Writing program, hoped to express just how much the financial contribution means to students. "The simple truth is that money is the number one reason talented applicants are not able to pursue an advanced degree," she said. "Let's face it: Schooling is expensive, writing is often not lucrative, and money is a barrier. This scholarship not only supports significant writing about place and helps a student, though — it also has the benefit of reminding contemporary writers of one of our great forebears. Sandoz's name and spirit are kept alive. It's a win-win."

Mari Sandoz (1896-1966) was a novelist, biographer, and one of the earliest writers of creative nonfiction, as seen in her biography, *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas*. Sandoz' writing emphasized the environmental and human landscape of the West and was recognized for her no-nonsense yet deeply evocative style. She was passionate about sharing her hard-earned and well-honed writing skills, and taught Advanced Novel Writing at the Writers' Institute Summer Session at the University of Wisconsin. The Mari Sandoz Society, which also sponsors the Story Catcher Festival, held in the spring at Western Colorado University, offers this scholarship to ensure the legacy of Mari Sandoz and her passion for writing and love of the landscapes and peoples of the West.

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# Support the Mari Sandoz Society By Joining or Renewing Your Membership!

Thank you! Your financial support is important to the Society's programs and activities. Each dollar helps us preserve and share the important work of Mari Sandoz.

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[www.marisandozsociety.org](http://www.marisandozsociety.org)

The Mari Sandoz Heritage Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. All contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law. Membership is annual.

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