

# The Story Catcher

Newsletter of the Mari Sandoz Society



## Pilster Lecture “The Northern Cheyenne Homecoming: Reclaiming, Renaming, and Reframing History,” Much More than Expected

Anyone traveling west out of Fort Robinson State Park has to know what they're looking for if they hope to catch a glimpse of the Northern Cheyenne Monument, first unveiled to the public in 2016. Two Northern Cheyenne tribal elders, Edna Seminole and Rosie Eaglefeathers, had the vision to create the monument but knew that wasn't enough. Their next immediate mission was to build a trail from the army barracks to the memorial.

The two elders have since “traveled on,” as Pilster lecturer Gerry Robinson, Northern Cheyenne Historian and author, says, but their vision has taken on a life of its own as The Northern Cheyenne Healing Trail edges closer to becoming a reality.

Robinson, author of *The Cheyenne Story: An Interpretation of Courage*, is currently part of the team helping to create the 2.5-mile trail commemorating the 1879 escape of the

Cheyennes from Fort Robinson. The story of the escape is a tragic one, but people on both sides - descendants in the Northern Cheyenne Tribe as well as relatives of the men in the army imprisoning them - have expressed a need to heal and hope the trail will provide an opportunity to do so.

Mari Sandoz wrote *Cheyenne Autumn* as a historically accurate account of what the Cheyennes endured. She also detailed their trek from Oklahoma northward, which is the basis of a second project, the Homecoming Trail. Featuring Northern Cheyenne Gerry Robinson as the Pilster speaker is fitting.

Attending the lecture, one might think they were settling in for Robinson to describe the escape from the barracks on that cold January night back in 1879.

(continued on page 2)



Author and Pilster Lecturer Gerry Robinson speaks to the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society and guests Sept. 18, 2025, in the Chadron State College Student Center Ballroom. (Photo credit Tena L. Cook/Chadron State College)

## Pilster Lecture continued...

They might think they were about to hear a detailed account of the Northern Cheyennes breaking out the windows and heading out into the snow wearing little more than rags, with the army in pursuit.

But Robinson had a different tale to tell, of a different trail project. The Northern Cheyenne Homecoming Trail is a multi-state project identifying the 1,100-mile route taken by the Northern Cheyennes during their flight north. The goal is to get this trail recognized as a National Historic Trail.

Robinson shared his research findings of both of the new Homecoming and Healing Trails. While talking about the Homecoming Trail, he mentioned that locations of battle sites were written about by several authors, none of whom had actually visited them. For example, the Turkey Springs site in Oklahoma, the first battlefield along the trail back home, has a state historical marker placed in the wrong location.

One of the first indicators Robinson noticed upon visiting the site was that the terrain didn't match any historical account he had read. The military wrote extensive notes about the area where the Turkey Springs battle took place, and Robinson couldn't find any of the areas described in those military reports. None of the geographic elements described could be located at the marked site.

Working with others interested in finding the correct location of the battlefield, Robinson was part of the team determining the correct battlefield area. When looking

through a list of archeological contractors, Robinson discovered the name Algonquin Consultants and knew he was onto something unique, as the Cheyenne language is an Algonquin-based language. It took a phone call for Robinson to meet Rebecca Hawkins, who eventually revealed that she and her husband had adopted two Northern Cheyenne children twenty-five years ago.

Hawkins admitted that this project was so important to her that her company would provide its services without charge. Algonquin Consultants carried through on that promise, even though they have done a great amount of work on the battlefield project.

Robinson offered other fascinating descriptions of the way people and events fell together, which kept the large crowd riveted and wide-eyed as he explained numerous findings and surprising developments during his CSC lecture.

Earlier in the day, Robinson had met with interested students for a small, informal discussion during a time when CSC doesn't hold classes.

The Society's connection to Chadron State was also highlighted at the lecture. As president of the Mari Sandoz Society, Shannon Smith mentioned during the introduction of Robinson, "We really want to emphasize that we are devoted and committed to Chadron State College. Our Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center will be gaining exhibits that will bring stories of the Northern Cheyenne and the Lakota, and the Homesteaders who came to this region."

Robinson closed by mentioning that we are turning a corner in the way we talk about Native American history. "Because of our ancestors, we are still here in our homeland and our ancestors' stories live on through us. It's time that we start telling them ourselves."

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 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.

To watch the recording of this year's Pilster Lecture, go to [www.marisandozsociety.org](http://www.marisandozsociety.org) and click on Pilster Lecture under About the Society, Events & Activities.



Gerry Robinson, writer, historian and member of the Northern Cheyenne Nation, speaks to Chadron State College students and faculty about his work on Sept. 18, 2025, in Old Admin. (Photo credit Shelby Westinghouse/Chadron State College)

# Sandoz Society Unveils Refreshed Website

The Mari Sandoz Society has officially launched its redesigned website, offering an enhanced online experience for members, researchers, and enthusiasts of the acclaimed author and historian.

The new website provides a more streamlined platform to explore Sandoz's legacy and the rich history of the High Plains region she chronicled. The relaunch aims to better reflect the Society's mission: to encourage and promote an understanding of the literary and historical works of Mari Sandoz, honoring the land and people about whom she wrote, with a commitment to prioritizing Indigenous perspectives in its programs. Key features and updates of the new website include:

- **Improved User Experience:** The website features a clean, modern design and improved navigation, making it easier for visitors to find information about Sandoz's life, the Society's mission, and upcoming events.
- **Enhanced Resource Accessibility:** The site provides easier access to educational resources, publications, and information on the extensive archival collections available at the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center at Chadron State College, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the University of Nebraska-Kearney.
- **Integrated News and Events:** Visitors can stay up-to-date with the latest news, including information on the annual Story Catcher Festival, the Pilster Great Plains Lecture Series, and Sandoz digitization projects, through a dedicated blog.
- **Seamless Donation Options:** The site simplifies the process of supporting the Society with your financial gifts.
- **Photo Gallery and Historic Sites Information:** The site includes a new photo gallery and information on Sandoz historic markers and sites, allowing virtual exploration of locations significant to Mari Sandoz's life and work.

The relaunched website serves as a vital digital hub for the Society's ongoing efforts to preserve Sandoz's legacy. To explore the new website and learn more about the Mari Sandoz Society, visit [www.marisandozsociety.org](http://www.marisandozsociety.org) or scan the QR code below using your smartphone.



## 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 501c(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.

# A Message from the President

Dear Friends and Supporters of the Mari Sandoz Legacy,

For more than half a century, the Mari Sandoz Society has carried forward the work and spirit of one of the most courageous literary voices of the Northern Plains. Today, we stand at a defining moment. We have the opportunity not simply to preserve Mari's legacy, but to activate it for a new generation of writers, scholars, and readers who continue to search for clarity and truth in our shared history. **And you can help!**

This year, we are launching the **Mari Sandoz Legacy Initiative**, a coordinated, multi-institution effort to protect and elevate the full archive of Mari Sandoz's letters, research materials, and writings and carry forward her commitment to supporting emerging writers. Through strategic partnerships with colleges across the region, we are ensuring that her work receives the academic care, visibility, and access it deserves.

The Society is now collaborating with four institutions, each advancing a critical part of this vision. **Western Colorado University** continues to host the **Mari Sandoz Story Catcher Writers Festival**, a vibrant and growing literary gathering rooted in Mari's commitment to creativity and truth-telling, and we fund the **Mari Sandoz Emerging Writer Scholarship** in their nationally recognized Graduate Program in Creative Writing.

**Chadron State College** remains the home of the **Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center**, where we continue to invest in public exhibits, events, and community engagement. As a testament to Mari's enduring relevance, we face the good challenge of outgrowing the Center's archival space. The archival collection is therefore relocating to the **University of Nebraska-Kearney (UNK)**, where dedicated professional staff and preservation specialists will ensure its long-term care and expand its availability to scholars nationwide. These materials will join UNK's collection from Sandoz's biographer, Helen Winter Stauffer. UNK will serve as a primary archival repository supported by experts intimately familiar with Sandoz's life and work.

We also remain committed to our partnership with the **University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL)**, home to more than 25,000 pages of letters and research materials that Mari donated upon her death in 1966. This collection is actively being processed and selectively digitized with the Society's support—an investment essential to future scholarship.

**To sustain and grow this work, we ask you to make a meaningful annual contribution** to the Mari Sandoz Legacy Initiative. Please consider making a donation, or a recurring gift as one of our sustaining donors. Donors contributing \$150 or more will become part of our Story Catcher Circle and will receive an autographed copy of Dr. Kimberli Lee's book *"I Do Not Apologize for the Length of This Letter": The Mari Sandoz Letters on Native American Rights, 1940-1965* as our thank you.

You may fill out the form on the last page of this newsletter for your donation and mail us your check. You may also give securely anytime or set up a sustaining recurring donation on our website, [www.marisandozsociety.org](http://www.marisandozsociety.org). Your generosity ensures that Mari's words—and the histories she labored to preserve—continue to speak for generations to come.

With gratitude,

Shannon D. Smith, President  
Mari Sandoz Society



# Northern Cheyenne Journey Home Committee Healing Trail Update

A quick check-in with Gerry and his brother, Major Robinson, revealed continued advancement on the Healing Trail. According to Major, “We are working with our engineers to survey the trail and finalizing our schematic design package with our architects. We will also be completing the Healing Trail documentary by the end of November to release to the public. As always, we are planning our January 9th Northern Cheyenne Commemoration event at Fort Robinson.” Gerry added that they are going to start actively planning for sesquicentennial events that will take place along the trail in 2028. “We would love to have anyone interested in helping, financially or planning-wise, to reach out, especially if they’re situated along the trail itself.” The Northern Cheyenne Healing Trail is a commemorative landscape of gathering, ceremony, and remembrance along the historic route of the Fort Robinson Breakout and Massacre. In 1878, after being imprisoned in Indian Territory, tribal leaders Dull Knife and Little Wolf led 300 Northern Cheyenne people back to their Montana homeland. U.S. troops pursued the group, killing 64 individuals and violently detaining 70 more. A modest monument now marks the Breakout site, on grassland that Northern Cheyenne tribal members hope to reclaim, reshape, and activate through collective memory and cultural healing. This five-mile stretch—from Fort Robinson in Nebraska, a site commemorating frontier military history, to the massacre site—offers an opportunity to retell this history through an Indigenous lens. It is also a sacred space for healing, where Northern Cheyenne youth run 400 miles each winter from Fort Robinson to their reservation in southeastern Montana, honoring their ancestors’ path. Designed in close collaboration with community members and Tribal leaders, the trail integrates Cheyenne values of respect, knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality.

## Save the Date! 2026 Pilster Great Plains Lecture Announced

Mark your calendars for September 17, 2026 for the next Pilster Great Plains Lecture, held on the Chadron State College campus in Chadron, Nebraska. The featured speaker will be Dr. Peter Kopp, Associate Professor of History at the University of Colorado Denver, where he co-directs the Public History and Museum Studies Program. In that role, he has worked on Denver’s East High School History Project, Colorado Encyclopedia, The Murals of Las Cruces Project, and a variety of museum exhibitions.



## In Memorium....Celia Sandoz Ostrander Barth

Celia Sandoz Ostrander Barth, granddaughter of “Old Jules” and niece of Mari Sandoz, passed away on August 22, 2025, in Hay Springs, Nebraska. She missed reaching her 100th birthday by seven days. *Winter Thunder* by Mari Sandoz was dedicated to Celia and based, in part, on her experience of being stranded on the prairie with students when their bus crashed on the way home from school in Cherry County.

From her obituary: Because of no telephone in the Sand Hills, A.R. Modisett carried the message of her birth to her father by horseback to their home. She was the oldest child of Jules Alexander Sandoz and Mary Matilda “Kicken” Sandoz; and the granddaughter of Jules Ami Sandoz “Old Jules” and Mary “Fehr” Sandoz. Celia, her brother Earnest, sister Marguerite, and her parents lived on a ranch in Sheridan County until 1938. On May 19, 1951 Celia married Orville Lester Ostrander in Scottsbluff, NE at the Presbyterian Church. Four children were born to Orville and Celia: Jules Edward in 1952, Mary Celia in 1953, Cash Orville in 1955, and Myrtle Emmaline in 1956. On May 1, 1959 the family moved to the Pine Creek Ranch 18 miles south of Rushville which Celia’s father had purchased from Claude Wuthier. Two years later in 1961, Orville and Celia welcomed their fifth and final child, Marlene Flora to their family. They ran a successful cow/calf ranching operation there for the next 38 years. Orville died of complications from emphysema at the ranch on October 14, 1997. Celia married Lyle Lawrence Barth on September 14, 2001 at Pleasant Point Church in rural Sheridan County. They also made their home on the Pine Creek Ranch. The couple went on several trips and enjoyed many dances together with their friends. Lyle died on November 28, 2016.

# Mari's Relative Becomes Newest Member of Society

One of the newest members of the Sandoz Society can claim Mari as a family member. Peg Gilbert's great-grandfather was Peter Sandoz, who along with Paul, were brothers to Ami Sandoz, "Old Jules" father, and one of the uncles he recruited to live in the Sandhills. "You will find my great-grandfather Peter mentioned several times in the book Old Jules and especially connected to the rattlesnake bite episode," Gilbert says.



New Sandoz Society board member Peg Gilbert, as Mari Sandoz, during one of her presentations through the Nebraska Humanities Speakers Bureau (photo courtesy Peg Gilbert)

Gilbert's father was an identical twin, born in Rushville, Nebraska. His mother, Wilma Sandoz Carter, who was Pete's daughter, lived on the Peter Sandoz ranch near the Jules Sandoz ranch when he was born. "My father and his twin brother

spent many summers working on the ranch under the care of Peter," explained Gilbert. When asked about becoming acquainted with Mari's books, Gilbert replied, "Her books were always in our home, plus Pete's saddle, chaps, and branding irons. I got the feeling when my father talked about the time he spent on the ranch that it was some of his happiest memories."

Two years after Gilbert was married, her parents came to visit and her dad insisted they go to the Sandhills so her husband could meet some of the family and tour the sites. Gilbert and her husband are now retired. She was a registered nurse and he is now a dedicated historian and author of three books of historical fiction. They have traveled extensively, including to all the Presidential libraries, as they value the nation's history.

"In 2015, my husband and I attended the fifth international Sandoz reunion in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, to experience Sandoz history prior to their immigration to the United States. We had the opportunity to interact with Sandoz family members from all over the world at the Sandoz

church and winery. We saw the home where Jules was born, and much more."

When Gilbert's father's twin passed away, he left all his Sandoz information and memorabilia to her. She has a personal scrapbook that Peter kept specifically of Mari and several personal letters to him from Mari's younger sister, Caroline. Gilbert planned to donate most of the items to the Sandoz Center in Chadron. "While I was there, a history teacher from Oshkosh was buying some of Mari's books. He became so excited that he was at the Sandoz Center and meeting a Sandoz relative. We began talking, and he asked me if I would consider giving a presentation for his aunt's restaurant, called "The Most Unlikely Place" in Lewellen, for their season finale. He encouraged me to look into the Nebraska Humanities Speakers Bureau." Gilbert contacted them and was invited to audition, even though their auditions had closed for the year. They felt the need for this topic. She put a program together, auditioned, and was accepted. "In the last two years, I have had the opportunity to share Mari's story, 'The Life and Drive of Mari Sandoz,' to over 600 people in Nebraska. The program is in the first person, and I portray her at the end of her life," Gilbert says. Gilbert continues to be available through the Speakers Bureau but also considers other requests. "I have a passion for being an ambassador to share the Mari Sandoz story throughout our state and also to 4th-grade students as part of their Nebraska history curriculum. She can be contacted at [pagilbert19@gmail.com](mailto:pagilbert19@gmail.com)."

Gilbert has strong feelings about being a member of the Mari Sandoz Society. "I am honored to be part of the society and its passionate members who are dedicated to keeping the memory of Mari alive and honoring the great people who have made the Sandhills their home. I hope to add the personal touch of a relative to the dedicated members who so value her written works. As the parent of two grown children and a grandmother of four Nebraska grandchildren, I want them to know the history of the people who shaped our great state. Being a part of the Society, I believe, will also increase my knowledge to share with the public about her life."

Of the different projects the Society is involved with, Gilbert says, "I am most excited about the project to renew, revamp, and rewrite an Old Jules Trail and expand the program to Mari's life in Lincoln. This will be an important way to visually share her life in the Sandhills and later in Lincoln. Also, the project to make her written archival materials digitized and preserved so researchers can use her vast collection is important for the study of Nebraska's history."

## SUPPORT THE LEGACY OF MARI SANDOZ

*Your gift preserves Mari Sandoz's words, advances archival preservation, and supports the next generation of Great Plains writers.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZipCode: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Yes, I want to support this important work with a tax deductible gift of:**

- \$50.00
- \$100.00
- \$150.00
- \$250.00
- \$500.00
- Other Amount: \$\_\_\_\_\_

The Story Catcher Circle level of gifts \$150 and above will receive a copy of Dr. Kimberli Lee's book, "I Do Not Apologize for the Length of This Letter": *The Mari Sandoz Letters on Native American Rights, 1940–1965*

- Please mail my newsletter
- Please EMAIL my newsletter

Scan the QR Code if you wish to give securely online

**Enclose check payable to the:** Mari Sandoz Society

**Mail this form and payment to:**

Mari Sandoz Society  
P.O. Box 6808  
Lincoln, NE 68506



**Thank you for your support of the Mari Sandoz Society!**

### **A GIFT TO THE FUTURE**

A bequest to the Mari Sandoz Society endowment is a gift to preserve the history and legacy of Mari Sandoz and the High Plains. For wills, trusts and gifts, our legal name is Mari Sandoz Heritage Society. Our Federal Tax ID number is 36-3879773. Contact Lynn Roper, President Emeritus of the Society at [LRBARNEY@AOL.COM](mailto:LRBARNEY@AOL.COM) for further discussion.

The mission of the Mari Sandoz Society 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 vision of the Mari Sandoz Society will be to amplify the voices of the dispossessed and challenge the romanticized view of the West through education, publication, and outreach.

#### **Our Guiding Principle...**

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.



PO Box 6808  
Lincoln, NE 68506-0808

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



## BOARD MEMBERS

Broc Anderson	Kearney, NE
Sybil Berndt (Emeritus)	Chadron, NE
Holly Boomer	Gordon, NE
Leisl Carr-Childers	Fort Collins, CO
Steven Coughlin	Gunnison, CO
Peg Gilbert	Omaha, NE
Sam Herley	Chadron, NE
Daniel Hobbs	New York, NY
Renée M. Laegreid	Laramie, WY
Dan McGlynn	Omaha, NE
Genon Murray	Altamonte Springs, FL
David Nesheim	Chadron, NE
Laura Pritchett	Bellvue, CO
Gabriella Pruitt-Santos	Chadron, NE
Chris Steinke	Kearney, NE

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Shannon Smith, President	Gordon, NE
Dan Kusek, Vice-President	Alliance, NE
Brian Rockey, Treasurer	Lincoln, NE
Lynn Roper, Pres Emeritus, Asst. Treasurer/Investment Mgr.	Lincoln, NE
Heather Stauffer, Secretary	Syracuse, NY
Christy Chamberlin, Member-at-Large	Custer, SD
Matt Evertson, WCU Liaison, Story Catcher Festival	Gunnison, CO
Kurt Kinbacher, CSC Liaison, Pilster Lecture	Chadron, NE
Nathan Tye, UNK Liaison, Mari Sandoz Papers	Kearney, NE

## STAFF

Elizabeth Chase	Executive Secretary	Lincoln, NE
Heidi Beguin	Newsletter Editor/Public Relations Coordinator	Rushville, NE