

Mari Sandoz Country...Beyond the Book

The Nebraska Sandhills, home to Mari Sandoz, treats the traveler to a remarkable variety of scenic beauty and rich history. It is a land of contrasts, where the constantly changing mosaics of sky, water, farmland, sandhills, pine clad hills, and buttes exert a special magnetism. Wildlife and wildflowers abound.

This large geographic area is made up of lakes, meadows, marshes, and grassy hills created by wind erosion following the disappearance of an inland sea some 100 million years ago. This is the country immortalized in the writings of Mari Sandoz.

The places on this map allow you to experience the settings depicted in Mari’s books. You will see where she was born, grew up, where some of the events described in her books occurred, and where she is laid to rest. The stories in her landmark first book, *Old Jules* (1935), take place largely in this area where Mari’s father, Jules Sandoz, established his homestead, gardens and orchards.

Please consider your safety when visiting locations on this map. Drive carefully. Most of the roads shown on this map are hard-surfaced. Follow only well-marked routes. There are some locations including the unpaved roads leading to the gravesite and on the Sandoz orchards and homeplace that may require 4-wheel-drive and dry conditions. Do not attempt to traverse floodwaters, muddy trails or roads.

In order to view sites far from the road, a camera and field glasses are advised.

When traveling the Nebraska Sandhills you should prepare for the remote terrain and sparsely populated area with very few services. There is limited to no cell phone service, and rapid weather changes. Ensure you are carrying ample water, maintaining a full gas tank, and watching for wildlife (including rattlesnakes). Cattle, deer, and other animals frequently cross highways.

The Sandhills are primarily made up of large privately owned cattle ranches, not public lands. Please respect all fence lines and grazing livestock. Do not venture onto any unmarked roads or trails, or trespass onto private property. Also be very aware of extreme fire danger as dry windy conditions can quickly fuel a wildfire with just one small spark.

About Mari Sandoz

Mary (Mari) Susette Sandoz, the oldest of Jules Ami and Mary Elizabeth (Fehr) Sandoz six children, was born on May 11, 1896 on the family homestead at Mirage Flats near the Niobrara River in rural Sheridan County, Nebraska. She became a prolific historian and author, renowned for her authentic depictions of the American West. Rejecting romanticized tropes, she utilized meticulous research to humanize the ranchers, settlers, and Native Americans whom she grew up among in the Sandhills. Her 1935 masterpiece, *Old Jules*, and her biography of Crazy Horse established her as a preeminent chronicler of the region, celebrated for her nuanced, unbiased portrayals during an era of widespread prejudice. Her aim was to understand all of life by understanding this one part of it, how a person shaped the Plains country, and how it shaped them. She died on March 10, 1966, in New York City and is buried on a hillside overlooking the Sandoz Sandhills ranch south of Gordon, Nebraska.

17. Spade Ranch Historic Marker

West side of Nebraska Highway 27, north of Nebraska Highway 2 at Ellsworth, NE

The Spade Ranch historic marker commemorates one of the largest Sandhills cattle operations founded by Bartlett Richards around 1888. The Spade was a massive, influential operation in the Nebraska Sandhills known for its role in the development of the region. Mari’s book, *The Cattlemen* (1958), is a detailed historical account that chronicles the rise of the American cattle industry. It covers the expansion of cattle ranching, detailing the lives of ranchers, the development of cattle towns, and the evolution of the industry. It covers the growth of massive ranches, cattle drives, the impact of weather and market changes, and the individuals behind the expansion of the cattle industry, like those working the Spade Ranch. It is the second book in Sandoz’s “trans-Missouri” series that focuses on the development of the West, alongside The *Buffalo Hunters* (1954) and *The Beaver Men* (1964).

18. Greenwood Cemetery Alliance

2323 CR 58, Alliance, NE

The Alliance (Greenwood) Cemetery is located one mile east and 1/2 mile north of Alliance and is where the gravesites of Jules Sandoz, Mary Fehr Sandoz, and Flora Rose Sandoz (Block 8, Section 5) are. Mari’s father, Jules Ami Sandoz, was born on April 21, 1858, in Fenin, Neuchâtel, Switzerland and died on November 13, 1928 in Alliance. He was educated at Berne University, in Switzerland, studying medicine and farming. In addition to being a horticulturist, he was a pioneer postmaster, locator for new settlers, and a close friend to local Native American tribes. Mari’s mother, Mary Elizabeth Fehr Sandoz, was born on March 20, 1867, in Schaffhausen, Schaffhausen, Switzerland. She married Jules Ami Sandoz in 1895. She died on August 19, 1938. Mari’s youngest sister, Flora Rose Sandoz, was born on May 12, 1906 and died on April 30, 1995.

19. Knight Museum and Sandhills Center

908 Yellowstone Ave., Alliance, NE

The Knight Museum and Sandhills Center features five areas of local history: Life in the Sandhills, Native American Life, Life in the Country, Life in the Town, and The Railroad. Pioneer memorabilia, artifacts, and railroad history are some of the highlights of the museum’s collection. Visitors will get a glimpse of how generations of people lived and experienced the Nebraska Sandhills.

20. Northern Cheyenne Breakout Monument

The 1879 Northern Cheyenne Breakout Monument honors the courage and sacrifice of the Northern Cheyenne who escaped imprisonment at Fort Robinson. It commemorates those who perished during the subsequent pursuit by U.S. soldiers, an event the Supreme Court later called one of the “most melancholy of Indian tragedies.” The monument is a four-sided, 16-foot tepee-like tower representing the four cardinal directions. It is crowned by the Northern Cheyenne Morning Star symbol. Faced with sacred Minnesota pipestone and set on a 196-square-foot concrete base, there are plaques on each side listing the names of both survivors and casualties from this sad but important historic event.

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1. Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center

1000 Main Street, Chadron State College, Chadron, NE

Located on the campus of Chadron State College in the historic former college library, The Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center is a learning center for the study of Nebraska and High Plains culture, literature, and history. The center showcases a collection of Sandoz materials including manuscripts, sound recordings, and personal effects from Sandoz’s New York apartment. The center is also home to the C.F. Coffee Gallery with interpretive exhibits exploring the development of the cattle industry on the High Plains. Within the collections at the center, there are a number of oral histories of regional ranching families, and a 6,000-volume library focusing on the High Plains region. Permanent exhibits include a gallery dedicated to Sandoz’s life and literature. Outdoor exhibits include a Heritage Garden with fruit trees similar to those grown by the Sandoz family, plants brought to the High Plains by early settlers, and native plants used by the Lakotas.

2. Museum of the Fur Trade

6321 Highway 20, Chadron, NE

Located 3-miles east of Chadron, this internationally recognized museum is dedicated to preserving the history of the fur trade. The museum stands on the site of James Bordeaux’s trading post, which was established for the American Fur Company in 1837. All items in the collection are original pieces and include the oldest known point blanket from 1775, firearms that were owned by Kit Carson and Tecumseh, and crop seeds that were obtained directly from Indigenous peoples over 125-years ago. Drawing on the stories her father and his acquaintances shared about the fur traders and trappers, Mari Sandoz wrote *The Beaver Men* (1964). The book examines the fur trade as a fundamental piece of Western history, focusing on the French and British-American struggle to control the region’s natural resources.

3. Walgren Lake

Walgren Lake (formerly Alkali Lake) near Hay Springs, Nebraska has long been the purported home of an elusive “sea monster.” Descriptions range from a “roaring, devastating sea reptile” that came on land to devour cows, horses, and comfields, to a giant with flashing green eyes that spit fire, with a head like a huge oil barrel. Colonel John G. Maher of Chadron, who wrote for Eastern newspapers and has other tall tales to his credit, likely started the hoax. Hay Springs citizens have become proud of their legendary monster. The Walgren Lake Monster is mentioned in Mari Sandoz’ book, *Old Jules* (1935). She also wrote the short “novelette”, *Ossie and the Sea Monster*, based on the legend.

4. Old Jules Well Accident Site

Jules Sandoz suffered a severe, crippling accident at this well in the 1880s. He was being pulled up from a newly dug well by two friends when the frayed rope twisted and broke. He fell roughly 65-feet to the bottom of the well causing a severe, compound fracture to his left ankle. Eventually, his entire leg became infected. He was treated by Dr. Walter Reed at Fort Robinson. While he managed to survive, he never regained full use of his leg and struggled to walk the rest of his life. The incident is documented in the book *Old Jules* (1935).

5. Sacred Heart Catholic Church

The historic Sacred Heart Catholic Church of Mirage Flats operated for more than 100-years before

6. Sandoz River Place Homestead

closing around 2000. It was built in 1889 after Jules Sandoz and another settler, Andrew Van Den Heuvel gave five acres of land to build a church building and cemetery. Before 1889, mass had been held in the home of George Menton. The first building was erected at the site by the parishioners who donated their labor. It had a rock foundation and was built with lumber from the sawmills northeast of Hay Springs. A few years later the steeple was added, and better pews were installed. The parish cemetery was located on the church grounds to the rear of the church. The current church building was built in 1954. The parish grounds were landscaped, and cedar trees were planted all around the cemetery. At the same time, all of the unmarked graves received markers.

6. Sandoz River Place Homestead

Niobrara is the Lakota word for “running water.” Native peoples of the area once dried wild fruit for pemmican here. The Sandoz River Place Homestead was located here along the Niobrara River and was the first home of Jules and Mary Sandoz. It was also the birthplace of Mari Sandoz on May 11, 1896. None of the original buildings are extant.

7. Swiss Beguin Cemetery

The Swiss Beguin Cemetery, often called the “Swiss” cemetery, is a historic burial ground located near Pine Creek south of Rushville. Established by Swiss immigrants, the graves of early settlers including members of the Sandoz and Fehr families are located there. The landscape in this area provided the setting that Mari used in *Slogum House* (1937).

8. Sheridan County History Center

The Sheridan County History Center and the Armstrong House Museum house the complete story of Camp Sheridan and the Spotted Tail Agency along with numerous exhibits showing life in the Sandhills. The history center also includes a research library.

9. Former Chamberlin Furniture Store

The former Chamberlin Furniture store (now Hinn’s Home Furnishings) once hosted the Mari Sandoz Room, a collection and exhibit space in the northeast corner on the second floor of the store. The room served as a key hub for fans and scholars, featuring personal items, scrapbooks, photos, letters, clothing, books, records, and furniture belonging to Sandoz. The room opened on October 11, 1967, one year after Sandoz’s death, following efforts by her sister, Caroline Pifer, ranch woman Sybil Malmberg Berndt, and Lloy Chamberlin to honor her life and work. The Mari Sandoz Heritage Society was started here in 1971.

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11. Opening the Sandhills Historic Marker

U.S. 20 (2.5 miles east of the Cherry-Sheridan line) near Merriman, NE

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12. Mari Sandoz Room Roadside Museum

Located on the east side of Highway 27 south of Gordon was a small roadside museum and rest area. Inside the small building was a recreation of Mari’s Greenwich Village apartment in New York City where she lived and wrote. This little building was a satellite Mari Sandoz Room to the one in downtown Gordon at the Chamberlin Furniture Store. Many people remember stopping to visit this museum but it is no longer open or accessible.

13. Mari’s Gravesite and Sandoz Fruit Farm

The family moved from the “River Place” in 1910 to this homestead 33-miles south of Gordon. This second homestead is commonly known as the Sandhills or Orchard Place. Jules Sandoz’s house is located among the cluster of former ranch buildings at the eastern end of the lake. Mari’s gravesite is northwest of the lake on the hillside and the orchards of the fruit farm are located south of the lake.

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16. Mari Sandoz Historic Marker at Bunger Lake

East side of Nebraska Highway 27 near milepost 192

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24. The Council Tree Historic Marker

A lone cottonwood provided a landmark where the Allison Commission met with thousands of Lakota in a futile effort to buy the Black Hills. Based on the recollections of Lakota elders, Captain Christopher Robnson Chapter, D.A.R., of Crawford, marked what was believed to be the historic tree in May 1932. The cottonwood, sometimes called “the treaty tree,” died in the 1970s. It stood a few hundred feet south of the marker, looking toward Crow Butte. *The Great Council* is a short story written by Mari Sandoz, published posthumously in 1970 by her sister, Caroline Sandoz Pifer. It is a fictional narrative based on historical events involving Native Americans and the council held in September 1875.

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development of the Great Plains. Her writing emphasizes the harsh realities of their life and their role in the transformation of the frontier.

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