Issue No. 3 Fall 2026

The Story Catcher

Newsletter of the Mari Sandoz Society



2026 Pilster Great Plains Lecture Examined the Tension Within the National Park Service's Mandate to Preserve Nature Unimpaired

Dr. Peter Kopp presented the Pilster Great Plains Lecture on September 17, 2026, at Chadron State College. Kopp is an associate professor of History and co-director of the Public History and Museum Studies Program at the University of Colorado Denver. As a public historian specializing in the history of agriculture and the environment, his work explores the intersections of landscapes, agriculture, tourism, and public memory in the American West. He's the author of *Hoptopia: A World of Agriculture and Beer in Oregon's Willamette Valley* and the forthcoming *Chile Pepper King: Fabián García and the Botanical Transformation of the Borderlands.*



Author and Pilster Lecturer Peter Kopp gives an engaging presentation on Sept. 17, 2026, in the Chadron State College Student Center Ballroom. (Photo credit Elizabeth Chase)

Kopp's Pilster presentation introduced the somewhat paradoxical 1916 mandate that created the National Park Service to preserve resources "unimpaired" while also making them available for public use. Herein lies the dilemma. He echoed Ken Burns by stating, "National Parks were America's greatest idea." Kopp's reasoning is that we don't fight about parks, and they're fun to experience. The evolving nature of the National Park Service is important as this year is the 110th Anniversary.

The Pilster Lecture was a condensed version of several lectures Kopp and former chief historian of the National Parks, Dwight Pitcaithley, put together. Kopp suggested that historically, there's a reason we experience the parks the way we do. For example, Yellowstone, in 1872, was the first National Park designated. The number of visitors was fairly low, however, because it was tough to get there. Thus, mobility turned into a central issue. The problem with the 1916 mandate is the phrase "preserve unimpaired." Stephen Mather and Robert Sterling Yard, along with Horace Albright, were in charge of the National Park Service around this time They needed to find a way to sell the parks to the American people since Yellowstone only had 1,000 visitors when it was first designated as a National Park. The trio came up with the slogan 'See America First,' which was an attempt to keep Americans spending their vacation dollars here at home. Roads into and through the Parks became known as a necessary evil, in their eyes. Keeping the area around the Parks unimpaired meant the roads were awful. There was no maintenance, no concrete. The group decided that to get people there, they would have to impair the landscape to get crowds in and out.

Kopp discussed the different phases the National Parks Service went through to ensure visitors could visit parks without issue, including road building styles that changed the way we visit. Roads were built into the landscape so people would drive through the most scenic routes during Phase I. Robert Sterling Yard, one of the trio of the National Park Service was upset with roads being built through National Parks.

(continued on page 2)

Pilster Lecture continued...

He felt the roads were ruining the Parks, rather than preserving them. To protest, he created the Wilderness Society, which supported no roads. Phase II was the introduction of the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC gave young men jobs during the Great Depression and also helped transform the American landscape. But the CCC built roads and buildings, and this complicated the idea of 'preserving unimpaired.' By the 1950s, cars had increased to 60,000 from just 8,000 in the 1920s. There were more people in the world, too, so the rustic style of Phase I was no longer working. Cracks were appearing in the roads that had been built decades earlier.

Phase III was the last phase of roads created by the National Parks Service and became how we experience National Parks today. It was a ten-year plan to upgrade the infrastructure of the parks and was called Mission 66. It had included a new campaign to get people to visit the parks. Congress awarded a billion dollars to repair and build roads, buildings, and visitor centers. It would seem the phrase 'to preserve unimpaired' has been thrown out the car window. At this point, parks were so crowded that visitor centers moved to include lots of big windows. People were to come in, look at the park, and head on down the road.

Kopp wrapped up with a question for the audience, "Is this how we experience National Parks today? Is it 'preserving unimpaired'?" He believes that the original National Park Service trio of Mather, Yard, and Albright would be disappointed with the parks today, but with the onslaught of people and cars, what other possibilities are there? He concluded his presentation with a discussion of this quote: "to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." Various opinions were voiced, but the overall theme that emerged was that visiting the parks as we do today has gone the opposite route of 'preserving unimpaired.'

The Pilster Lecture is made possible by a gift of land in northwest Nebraska near Whitney in Dawes County, by the late Esther Pilster. The gift established an endowment with the Mari Sandoz Society as 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, 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 view the recording of this year's Pilster Lecture,** go to www.marisandozsociety.org and click on Pilster Lecture under About the Society, Events & Activities.



The People's Recorder Statewide Events Focused on Sandoz Coming in the Spring 2027

The People's Recorder, an award-winning podcast about how history is recorded, is bringing a series of five hybrid and in-person events to communities across Nebraska. In partnership with the Mari Sandoz Society and with the help of Humanities Nebraska, the moderated discussions will dive into topics such as the literary legacy of Mari Sandoz, the work of poet and artist Weldon Kees, and the importance of preserving oral history. An additional topic will be the influence Sandoz had on the WPA's Federal Writers' Project, which employed thousands of out-of-work writers when it was active from 1935 to 1943. The writers documented and collected stories of ordinary Americans–voices overlooked or erased by history.

Scheduled for Spring 2027, the series includes the following organizational partners and locations of the events:

- Mari Sandoz Society – Lincoln and Kearney
- Jane Pope Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors at Bennett Martin Public Library – Lincoln
- Prairie Schooner – Lincoln
- Gage County Historical Society – Beatrice
- Lincoln County Historical Museum – North Platte
- Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center – Chadron

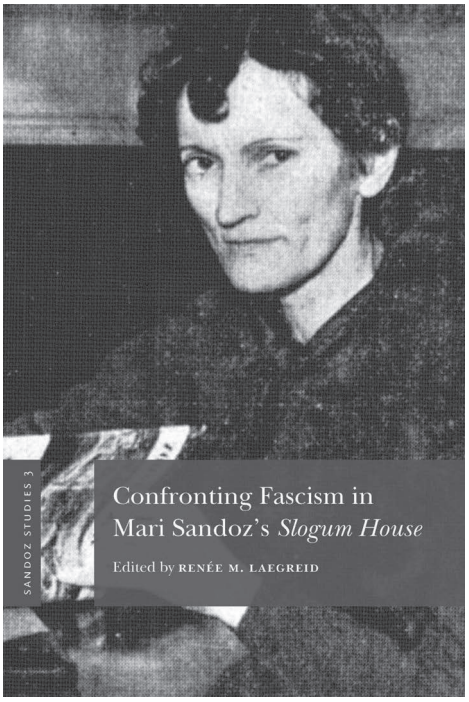
Learn more about *The People's Recorder* at www.peoplesrecorder.com. Listen to the Nebraska episode, "Episode 10: A Creative Incubator" wherever you listen to podcasts.

Watch for more detailed information about how you can attend and participate in these free public events.

New *Sandoz Studies Volume 3* Re-examines the Authoritarian Themes in *Slogum House*

The University of Nebraska Press in partnership with the Mari Sandoz Society recently released a new essay collection that confronts the legacy of fascism and tyranny in Mari Sandoz's most controversial novel.

Mari Sandoz's *Slogum House* shocked readers with the story of a ruthless Nebraska matriarch determined to enrich herself and her family at any cost. Sandoz drew inspiration from the rise of authoritarianism in 1930s Europe as she penned this cautionary tale of the U.S. West, paying careful attention to how inequality and the arbitrary exercise of power can cause suffering for people, land, and animals. When first published in 1937 *Slogum House* faced harsh reviews: Cities and libraries banned it, politicians decried its negative portrayal of frontier life, and readers wrote to Sandoz, chastising her for coarse language and tawdry scenes. But Sandoz's historical knowledge, coupled with her unflinching personal observations, created a work that challenged a complacent and exceptionalist narrative of the region. These multidisciplinary essays reveal how *Slogum House* unsettled readers and critics and continues to offer lessons for Sandoz's time as well as our own. "I was General Editor of the Sandoz Studies series when I decided to focus on *Slogum House* for volume 3. With the current concern over the threat of authoritarianism in the US I thought the timing was right to focus on this book, her allegory to fascism. I selected authors who I knew could bring compelling insights to the novel and they did—this is an excellent volume," said Renée Laegreid, Sandoz Board Member and General Editor of the Sandoz Studies series.



The purpose of Sandoz Studies series is to present new, diverse, and innovative scholarship on Mari Sandoz, her work, and her life. Each volume focuses on one aspect of her work, either on a particular book, or a specific theme. Each volume includes essays by leading scholars in their field, an up and coming graduate student, and a previously published essay related to the volume that warrants reintroduction to Sandoz readers.

Sandoz Studies, Volume 3: Confronting Fascism in Mari Sandoz's Slogum House (with an introduction by Peter Boag) is available for purchase from the University of Nebraska Press. https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/nebraska/9781496249302/sandoz-studies-volume-3/

Want to go paperless? Email info@marisandozsociety.org

The Story Catcher

The Story Catcher is the title of a book by Mari Sandoz and the title of Helen Winter Stauffer's biography, *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 Society are tax-deductible. To join the Society contact visit our website at 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

This year marked the 150th anniversary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, one of the most studied events in American history. Yet nearly a century after the battle, Mari Sandoz was the first who dared to tell its story differently. Published shortly after her death in 1966, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn* challenged the familiar Custer mythology and brought Native perspectives to the forefront. And Mari did more than reinterpret history. She made it come alive.

Mari Sandoz was not simply a historian of the American West. She was one of America's remarkable literary voices. As we look toward 2027, the Mari Sandoz Society is preparing to shine a brighter light on this groundbreaking writer and her place in American literature. Thanks to supporters like you, we are building the foundation to do it.

Our partnerships with four institutions of higher education continue to flourish. At the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the University of Nebraska at Kearney, we are working to preserve and expand access to Mari's extensive collections of correspondence and research. Chadron State College remains the home of the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center, while Western Colorado University carries forward her literary legacy through the Story Catcher Writer's Festival and the Mari Sandoz Emerging Writer Scholarship.

We continue to deepen our relationship with the Northern Cheyenne through support of their Journey Home Committee and its work to share their history in their own voices, including the planned Healing Trail at Fort Robinson. Your gifts make this work possible. And there is so much more to do!

We are uncovering new dimensions of Mari's life and writing, making her collections accessible to future generations, supporting new scholarship, and introducing her work to audiences who have yet to discover this remarkable American author.

Will you make a year-end gift to help us carry Mari's legacy forward? Every gift, whatever its size, helps us preserve her work and bring her stories to new generations. With a contribution of $150 or more, you will join our Story Catcher Circle and receive the latest edition of Mari's *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*. A compelling new introduction by historian Dr. Elaine Marie Nelson traces Mari's long struggle to publish the book during her cancer treatment.

What better way to honor the 150th anniversary of Little Bighorn than by rediscovering the fierce, unvarnished voice of Mari Sandoz? Thank you for believing, as we do, that her stories still matter.

You may fill out the form on the last page of this newsletter and mail back to us with your check. You may also give securely anytime or set up a sustaining recurring donation on our website, 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

Mari Sandoz in Omaha, March Events Scheduled at the Joslyn Castle

While Mari Sandoz spent most of her life in the Nebraska Sandhills, Lincoln, and New York City, her literary career shared several notable historical intersections with Omaha. We are excited to share that the Mari Sandoz Society will be holding a three-day series of fun and exciting events at the Joslyn Castle in Omaha in March. Mark your calendars for March 4-6, 2027. Planning is still in progress but watch for more detailed information and schedule of events in early 2027.

A Step Inside the Sandoz Center Archives Reorganization

This past summer, two Chadron State College students under the direction of Sandoz Society Board Member and assistant professor of Political Science Dr. Gabriella Pruitt-Santos worked in the archives at the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center making substantial progress organizing and documenting items in the space. They sorted and inventoried books, non-shelved archival boxes and materials, miscellaneous documents, sculptures, artwork, copies of original manuscripts, along with other archival materials from the Sandoz collection. They also worked to manually catalog documents stored in boxes or left on tables. One of the students is spending the fall semester continuing to work on the project. "She's proceeding with the sorting of archival materials and reviewing and organizing records provided by the previous archivist. She is also trying to compare inventory lists to determine if anything is missing. The only issue, at this time, is a way to scan documents to refrain from causing damage, and deciding on a way to label pieces without permanently marking them," said Santos. Dr. Santos uses experiential learning to empower her students' academic and professional development. This project is valuable to scholars wanting to use these materials and it provides students with important hands-on archive opportunities.

The Sandoz Center is Booming—And Laure Sinn is the Powerhouse Driving Its Popularity

Located on what Laure Sinn calls the "wild west side of campus" at Chadron State College is the Sandoz Center. It's the original, and continued, home of all things Mari Sandoz is Laure Sinn, who has been the Sandoz Center Program Coordinator for over four years. Sinn is the first face people see when they enter the Sandoz Center. "The students love coming here, whether it is for a class, tour, or just a quick getaway. I always ask them where they are from and what they like to do. I have a scavenger hunt set up for them - find 16 horseshoes - and they really get into it searching all over the exhibit area. I want them to feel comfortable and for them to know that they are always welcome. I also try to ask them if they have any little 'snippet' of information regarding this area that they might want me to share. It's amazing when they come up with something and offer it to share with other students, guests, etc. It is very exciting, and I feel honored, when staff stop by to visit and want me to share with students what we have going on here, whether it has some historical backing, or they just want their students to feel more engaged with campus. Sometimes they will just pay a visit so that they are more aware of the exhibits and so they might be able to incorporate something into their classes. The largest groups that visit us here in the Sandoz Center, are guests/tourists that are from literally all over the United States, and at times, foreign countries. (It pays to be able to speak some French for sure!) I love hearing what they have to say about where they are from and what they do for a living, whether they work or if they are retired. If they feel comfortable talking they will open up about asking questions and sharing some information about this area that I have never read or heard. There have been numerous times that someone has shared some trivia about the area or about the people that have lived and worked here. It is the best compliment when the people say that they really enjoyed their visit, it was worth stopping by, they want to come back, and that they are going to tell their friends and family to be sure to come by."



Nebraska History class taught by Dr. Sam Herley at the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center with Laure Sinn providing information about Mari Sandoz (Photo credit Daniel Binkard/Chadron State College)

Sandoz Mentor Honored in Bronze

by Lynn Barney

Louise Pound was honored September 18, 2026, with the unveiling of a bronze sculpture on the UNL campus adjacent to Louise Pound Hall. She was a woman of many firsts, now including the first woman to have a sculpture on the UNL campus.

Louise Pound (1872-1958) taught English for 50 years at the University of Nebraska, earning her PhD from the University of Heidelberg in one year, presenting her dissertation in German and graduating magna cum laude in 1900. As one of the first female professors in the U.S., she received national acclaim for establishing an entirely new academic field of study—American English. She was a distinguished literary scholar and author who wrote about Nebraska folklore.



Top Photo: Louise Pound (left), Louise Baker Wilson (middle), Mari Sandoz (right). Photo from Caroline Sandoz Collection, 2003.001.00455

Bottom Photo: Recently dedicated bronze sculpture of Louise Pound on the campus of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. (photo courtesy, Lynn Barney)



She was also an accomplished athlete who fought on behalf of women to play competitive intercollegiate sports. A championship athlete, she represented the University of Nebraska, the city of Lincoln, and the state of Nebraska in tennis, golf, cycling, and basketball. In 1894 she earned a Nebraska men's varsity letter in tennis. She won the Lincoln city golf championship for 26 straight years and was the first woman inducted into the Nebraska Sports Hall of Fame in 1955.

Mari Sandoz took English classes from Louise Pound in the 1920s. Pound strongly encouraged and influenced her to write about the people and places she knew and to stick to her own pungent idiom, the tangy language of the Sandhills. Pound advised Sandoz to tell her story in her "own words."

Louise respected the "speech of the homesteader, the cowboy, the wildcatter, the ex-convict." When editors admonished Sandoz to change the dialect of her characters saying "nobody talks like that," Pound gave Sandoz the courage and confidence to uphold her skill at capturing the story and for using the language of the pioneers.

Before the editors of the Atlantic Monthly Press awarded Sandoz the 1935 prize for *Old Jules*, the editor, Edward Weeks, wrote Louise in May 1935 asking her to verify Sandoz's account of her fathers' life. Louise responded favorably to his request, and *Old Jules* won the award to launch Mari Sandoz into publication.

After years of success , Mari was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Literature by the University of Nebraska in 1950 due to Louise Pound advocating for her with the English Department and the Board of Regents. The degree meant a lot to Mari as it removed the stigma of her missing high school education and made up for the lack of a college degree.

Two Nebraska icons whose meeting at the University in the 1920s enriched their writing careers, are now enshrined in bronze in Lincoln--Mari Sandoz in the state capitol and Louise Pound, her mentor, on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus.

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.

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*The Story Catcher Circle level with gifts $150 and above will receive a copy of Mari Sandoz's, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*

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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 for further discussion.

The mission of the Mari Sandoz Society is to promote and support an understanding of Mari Sandoz, her literary and historical works, her encouragement of creative writers, 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 employ storytelling, education, and publication to amplify the voices of the dispossessed and challenge the romanticized view of the West.

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.

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