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Article Summary: While Mari Sandoz was published at age 11 in the *Omaha Daily News*, she experienced a "long and grueling apprenticeship" prior to achieving a level of success in her field. This article illustrates her struggle from the viewpoint of the editors, publishers, and agents with whom she dealt.

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Photographs / Images: Mari Sandoz as she appeared in the early 1920's [courtesy Mari Sandoz corporation, c.1971]; Detail from Junior Writers' Page, *Omaha Daily News* April 26, 1908; Mari Sandoz in front of the old Sidney Grade School No 2 in the early 1920's [courtesy Mari Sandoz corporation c.1972]; Melvin Van den Bark, 125-1926 [University of Nebraska Archives]; Clyde Boston home at 1225 J Street, Lincoln, Nebraska, where Sandoz occupied a single room in the house for thirteen years [courtesy of the Mari Sandoz Corporation, c. 1972]; Mari Sandoz shortly after winning the nonfiction contest for 1935 from the *Atlantic Monthly* [Dwight Kirsch photograph]



Mari Sandoz as she appeared in the early 1920's. (Photograph courtesy Mari Sandoz Corporation, copyright 1972)

THE LITERARY APPRENTICESHIP OF MARI SANDOZ

By Scott L. Greenwell

Mari Sandoz began writing when she started school. At age 11 her first story, written secretly since her family viewed fiction as an idle waste of time, was submitted to the *Omaha Daily News* and published on its junior page.¹ The printing of this story set in motion one of the most successful and distinguished writing careers in the history of Great Plains literature—also one of the most unusual. Yet nearly thirty years passed between that initial publication and the establishment of Mari Sandoz firmly as a writer. Not until the 1935 publication of *Old Jules*, winner of the *Atlantic Monthly* nonfiction contest and Book-of-the-Month Club selection, did the author acquire the leisure to write full time. She was nearly 40. In the years that intervened, Sandoz experienced what has been described as “a long and gruelling apprenticeship.”² The eight or ten years immediately preceding *Old Jules* were particularly difficult, at times bitterly frustrating. It is the twofold purpose of this article to capture something of Sandoz’ enormous struggle to become a writer and to explore, both from the viewpoint of the author and from that of the editors, publishers, and agents with whom she dealt, the reasons that such a talented individual had to wait so long and work so hard to achieve success.

Born in the Panhandle of Nebraska the year Bryan first campaigned for the presidency, Sandoz grew up with little opportunity for schooling. When she finally enrolled at age 9 in

Junior Stories

d they would never
t when they went
y would not get
ext time.
N WALTERS,
de, Trenton, Neb.

Wherder.

(original)
ce a herder who was
ntil a beautiful cow
d, but he did not
e belonged.

morning out of a
a forest. He let
to her as he did
e then followed
to collect his

er a long ways.
nd a beautiful
ever saw before.
s hat. He then
e and it opened.
told him to follow.

a took him in a castle
room where he found
gold. The little man
ould take as much as

He told him not to
he could come and
ver he liked. He
ts and by filling his
e flower he picked
little man pointed
arned him again
y. He did not

get more money
and went home.

The Broken Promise.

There was once an old giant who
taught a school. One of his schol-
ars was a little boy of about 10 years
of age. His name was Jacob.

One day his teacher asked Jacob,
"How much is twelve times twelve?"
Of course he didn't know what it was
because this was his first year of
school.

So he had to stay in school when
the other children went home. There
was a little scratching noise in a
corner and a fairy appeared. She came
over to where Jacob was and asked
him if he would like to kill the giant.
He said, "yes," and he became a
giant, stronger than his master.
And then the fairy appeared and she
asked Jacob if he would promise to
always love and give his life for her.
If so, she would send him a princess
for his own. He promised and then
fairy said, "Come," and a beautiful
princess appeared. They lived happy
enough until one day a giant and a
witch appeared. When the fairy saw
them come she turned Jacob and his
wife into mice that they could es-
cape. When the witch saw that she
ordered 100 cats to come and kill the
mice. One cat got hold of the prin-
cess and the fairy turned Jacob into
a cat, too, to go and kill the other
cat. But what do you suppose he
did? When he saw that it would cost
his life he went away. So that is the
story of a broken promise. And now
he is a spook.

MARY S. SANDOZ
Hay Springs.

Age 11. Fifth Grade.

monthly wages.

He had to follow h
On the way he fou
flower, one like he n
so he put it in his
came to a big gat
A little tiny man
and so he did.

The little man
and then in a
two big piles of
told him he sh
he could carry.
forget the key so
get more when
filled all his pocke
hat he dropped th
on the way. The
to the flower and w
not to forget the k
take notice what the
and thought he coul
whenever he liked to.

He left the castle
The cow didn't ap
any more. When
some more money
back to the castle
the gate.

He met the fi
he never coul
forgot the key
flower was the
the flower but
like it again.

Age 13, Seventh

Mr. Brown.

It was a cold, dre
kind of a day for st
had just vnished t
about his experier

*Detail from Junior Writers' Page, Omaha Daily News, April 26, 1908.
Original hand-lettered head. Type reset for legibility.*

what was called the old Peter's school, District 165, she spoke only a few words of "hybrid" English and attended only when family conditions permitted.³ But by the age of 17, after no more than four and one-half years of formal learning, she was able to pass the rural teachers' examination and became a teacher herself. Between times she had written a few "sappy" children's stories and continued to submit them to the Omaha newspaper under fictitious names. In these years, too, Sandoz became acquainted with the world of books, beginning with *Robinson Crusoe*, the first book she ever owned, and culminating with the works of Joseph Conrad, her favorite novelist, and Thomas Hardy. Sandoz was attracted to the author of *Lord Jim* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus* when her young acquaintances were still reading Harold Bell Wright and "the backless remains of Mary J. Holmes."⁴ Yet her adolescent literary taste did not strike her as eccentric until after she became a reader in the Department of English, University of Nebraska, and found that if Conrad were to be read by the students there, he had to be crammed down their throats "as a goose might be fattened, only the readers remained lean, at least spiritually!"⁵

Of the many phases in the life of Mari Sandoz, the period from her late teens, when she left the Old Jules place, until her arrival in Lincoln half a dozen years later is the most mysterious. It is almost as if five or more years were lifted from the middle of the young author's life and the two ends joined to close the gap. The effect is largely the author's creation. She sought purposely to obscure any detailed knowledge of this period in her life. We know, for example, that Sandoz taught school in Sheridan County on and off between 1913 and 1920, did the same thing for a year or more in Cheyenne County, and worked for a short time as a stenographer in Osceola, all before taking up permanent residency in Nebraska's capital. We also know that the author was married in 1914 and divorced five years later.⁶ But beyond this very little is actually known. The thousands of letters in the Mari Sandoz collection at the University of Nebraska contain only veiled references to these years, and not a single reference is made to the fact that the author was ever married. In fact, there are no indications that Sandoz ever discussed the latter either publicly or privately, and apparently succeeded in keeping the information from many of her closest confidantes.

The reason for the author's silence has become the subject of much speculation among Sandoz followers and is compounded by the fact that the rest of her adult life is a relatively open book. The author managed to smooth over the discrepancy in years simply by shuffling her date of birth around. Her married name, Marie Macumber—the name used to write her first serious stories and the name by which she was known during her college days—was written off with equal ease as just another pen name. Despite the uncertainty, however, these years were extremely important to the literary apprenticeship of Mari Sandoz. It was during this period that the author established the independence which came to characterize her career, and developed the determination to live life as a responsible, mature adult. It was also a period of decision. Having concluded long before that she needed an education, she had to decide where and how that goal could be achieved by a working woman with no outside assistance.

A major turning point in the author's career came when she decided to move to Lincoln, first to attend business school and later, June 5, 1922, to enroll in the University of Nebraska. Without a single high school credit, the author was forced to hang around the outer office of Dean W. E. Sealock until the "bushy-haired" administrator relented and admitted her as an "adult special." "I suppose that I could have worn down the resistance of someone else," the author recalled years later, "but I was getting pretty discouraged with everyone insisting that after teaching five years I should go through high school."⁷ So, for the next eight years the author held down jobs intermittently in a drug laboratory, reading freshman English papers, proof reading on the night side for both Lincoln newspapers, researching for the Nebraska State Historical Society, and finally as an editor for *School Executive Magazine*, a publication for school administrators. She seemed to enjoy her "university work" and only once got seriously behind in her finances and had to borrow \$50 from the Scottish Rite Educational Welfare Association.⁸

Sandoz longed to be a doctor, but the realities of her educational and financial situation automatically precluded any serious attempt in that direction. During her second year, however, an event transpired that gave her new direction. Either in the first or second semester of 1923-1924, Sandoz prepared a

paper for a required English course that was so well written it caused the professor to question its authenticity. From that moment on it became increasingly apparent that writing was the only acceptable career for Mari Sandoz.⁹ The following year the university offered a night class on the short story. By the end of the semester the instructor, Melvin Van den Bark, whom Sandoz credits with having taught her everything teachable about writing, offered her a job reading papers and asked her to assist in the preparation of a course in short story writing.¹⁰ On a \$35-dollar-a-month stipend, Sandoz continued to assist Professor Van den Bark for the next year and a half and to attend classes full time. These were lean years for the author, despite the mere \$8.00 per month she paid for a room, but the experience of working with an individual who kept the creation of literature constantly before her was invaluable.¹¹

By this time Sandoz was beginning to take her writing very seriously. In 1925 she wrote "The Vine," her first major publication and the first piece ever published in the *Prairie Schooner*.¹² A year later she won honorable mention in *Harper's* intercollegiate contest for the short story "Fearbitten" and soon thereafter won recognition by having her name added to O'Brien's Roll of Honor of American Writers.¹³ It was one thing, however, to have one's short stories appear under the wagon bows of the then-fledgling *Prairie Schooner*, and quite another to sell them to a major publication with nation-wide circulation. Even for someone like Sandoz, who considered herself "the non-balk champion at obstacles if they are big enough," this seemed an impossible hurdle.¹⁴ By the summer of 1928, she had accumulated some thirty stories in what seemed to her to be in salable form. The stories ranged in length from 1,500 words to over 10,000 and varied in type from mere "flippancies" to the painful as represented by "The Vine."¹⁵ In addition the author had a novel, *Ungirt Runner*, "in its embryonic and cynical state," along with a collection of informal essays.¹⁶ Yet none of the publishers seemed interested. Six months later when the figure climbed to "approximately forty finished short stories seeking a port," the results remained the same.¹⁷

After numerous rejections over a two-year period, Sandoz decided it was time to secure the services of a literary agent. "I have decided that I need a literary agent," she wrote in August,



Mari Sandoz in front of the old Sidney Grade School No. 2. Sandoz taught at the Dalton School in Cheyenne County in the early 1920's. (Photograph courtesy of the Mari Sandoz Corporation, copyright 1972)

1928, but cautioned, "I may be mistaken—what I need may be a junk man."¹⁸ The following June, Sandoz enlisted the aid of New Yorker Margaret Christie, an enthusiastic young agent as new to the business as her Nebraska client. But Sandoz admired the agent's frankness and sincerity, and freely allowed her to handle what Sandoz fondly called her "brain products."¹⁹ Christie's initial recommendation was an immediate change of names from Marie Macumber to Mari Sandoz, calling the latter "by long odds the best writing name."²⁰ She then concentrated on bolstering the author's sagging confidence and in familiarizing editors with her name by asking them to read her material whether they were interested in it or not.²¹

Throughout the summer and fall of 1929, Sandoz suffered from recurrent spells of depression and seriously began to question her ability as a writer. In September of that year, she told her agent that "if my hunch is correct. . . you are finding my stories not only unprofitable but tedious," and requested that they be returned "*en masse* with your statement, or whatever is your custom."²² The agent reassured Sandoz that she was intensely interested in her work and attempted to restore a measure of self-confidence in the author. The fact remained, however, that magazine editors were no more interested in Sandoz' work now than they had been six months before. But the agent did make a very important contribution. Her efforts helped to clarify the reasons that Sandoz' material was not selling. After talking the matter over with a number of editors, the agent arrived at this explanation of the problem: "It seems that at the moment they [the editors] are not particularly interested in good writing and they are definitely uninterested in unhappy, stark realistic characteristic stories." The agent further stated that "the consensus of demand is for a fast moving, hold-the-interest, romantic-angled up-to-the-minute tale. They also want comedy, light in structure, well plotted and sophisticated."²³

Naturally, Sandoz' work contained almost none of the above. For the most part her stories were harsh, often brutal tales of human conflict and man's inhumanity to man. Even the titles—"Exiles from Lethe," "The Hounds of Fear" ("Fearbitten"), "Death on the Hump," "The Devil's Lane," and "The Track of the Beast"—suggest bleakness, darkness, and gloom. At the time even *Ungirt Runner* bore the working title *Murky River*. But perhaps the most striking example of Sandoz'

early writing is "Victorie," an unpublished short story based upon childhood recollections along the Niobrara River at the edge of a Polish community.²⁴ It is the bizarre tale of a young Polish girl named Victorie who is about to marry Anton Pulaski, an enterprising Sandhills homesteader. Just before the wedding, however, Victorie's older sister, Kate, claims she is pregnant by the same man and forces Anton to marry her instead. The night of the wedding Victorie drowns herself in a nearby swamp. Anton blames the death on Kate and begins years of cruel and sadistic punishment. To make sure she never forgets the tragic incident, he buries Victorie on a hilltop overlooking the couple's sod house. After the marriage Anton begins to drink heavily, and during a drunken rage rapes his wife and a daughter is conceived. The child, also named Victorie, is used to make life even more difficult for Kate and is herself despoiled in the process. The second Victorie grows up a delinquent and eventually runs off to Chicago where she becomes involved with gangsters. Gradually Anton mellows. Then one day Victorie unexpectedly returns with a seamy male companion and, finding both parents asleep, sets fire to the house and drives away unaware that a recent flash flood has left a huge washout in the road. The car plunges into the abyss, killing both occupants just as Anton retrieves his wife from the burning house. The story ends with the man more or less repentant and Kate forgiving.

Sandoz' literary agent found the grisly tale so shocking she admonished the author to put it away. She considered it not only bad for her reputation as an author but for her sanity as well.²⁵ And the agent was not alone in her assessment. The author's close friend, Eleanor Hinman, also read the story and was so terrified by it she had trouble sleeping or working. She was completely overcome by the thought of Sandoz "slipping about so unobtrusively with all that wrath and judgment in your soul!" "It's not strange you have headaches," she told the author.²⁶ Sandoz appeared gratified by the reactions, however, and vowed to keep "Victorie" always before her "as a mark to shoot at, a theme I can never hope to exceed, [a] force that I shall probably never equal again if I write fifty years."²⁷ As a final note, she added: "As for that sort of thing harming my mind—children, dogs, and old people are still inordinately fond of me."²⁸

Despite her repudiation of the criticism, however, the agent's strong reaction to the story left Sandoz unable to touch the novel

she was currently writing without feeling an overwhelming sense of futility. "If I finish it [*Ungirt Runner*] as it is written," she told Christie, "you'll fire it back—and I can't write it any other way, not for any amount of money that it might bring me." Concluded the author, "I'd rather stack hay or teach, or even scrub floors."²⁹ Unless she could shake this lethargy she feared there would be no novel at all; that it would wind up in her cabinet to yellow along with a lot of previous work.³⁰ Years later Sandoz considered it a blessing that the publication of *Ungirt Runner* could not rise to haunt her with its less finished style, but in the fall of 1929 the novel seemed an important step in the long apprenticeship.³¹

The business relationship with Margaret Christie continued until mid-summer 1930 before it abruptly ended. Sandoz was growing weary of revising her material at the suggestion of others without results. Besides, having to work through an agent caused her to lose contacts with editors, contacts which had cost her much time and effort. So, with less than a month to go before the anniversary of their association, Sandoz wrote to her agent "that unless something tangible materializes by that date, the relationship be definitely terminated."³² But the association had not been entirely fruitless. It resulted in the sale of a two-part article, "The Kinkaider Comes and Goes," to *North American Review*.³³ It was Sandoz' first sale outside the newspapers and would have been significant for this reason alone. But the article was important for another reason; its publication seemed to authenticate or legitimize the Sandhills locale.

Sandoz had long contended that eastern editors and publishers were skeptical of the Sandhills region, at least as she portrayed it—some to the point of questioning its very existence.³⁴ As early as 1928, she began to associate this "editorial prejudice" with the rejections of her short stories.³⁵ Whether these charges were justified or not, it is apparent that Sandoz' use of the local vernacular did create problems for those not intimately familiar with western Nebraska. As one reader summed up the complaint in connection with one of her shorter works: "In this story the author presupposes certain knowledge on the part of her readers which the average person does not possess. Lacking this knowledge, the story becomes meaningless to such an extent that the reader takes no further interest in it."³⁶ Although the use of the vernacular remained a steady



Melvin Van den Bark (1925-26), whom Sandoz credited with having taught her everything teachable about writing. Van, as he was called, was an English instructor at the University of Nebraska and remained a life-long friend of the author. (Photograph in the Mari Sandoz collection, University of Nebraska Archives and Special Collections)

source of contention between Sandoz and her publishers for years to come, the appearance of the article between the prestigious covers of the *North American Review* added credibility to the locale, making it seem more real. It also provided Sandoz with her largest readership to date, and provided the incentive to keep writing.

By 1929 Sandoz' will to write had so intensified that it came increasingly into conflict with the need to earn a living. As a result, she decided in September to quit a steady job with *School Executive Magazine* to write full time. Three months later her savings were wiped out in an Alliance, Nebraska, bank failure. News of the disaster left the author feeling "as helplessly driven as Hardy's *Tess*."³⁷ It is difficult to discern from the correspondence just how desperate Sandoz was at the outset of 1930, but a timely loan from Eleanor Hinman seems to have averted some kind of tragedy. In a melodramatic but strangely touching letter of appreciation, Sandoz writes:

Had you [Hinman] called a day sooner or later you would never, in all probability, have known. And I would have been free forever from a sense of responsibility to a human being or a man-made principle. Now I must stagger on, I presume, with some semblance of notice to the Kantian duty whip that hangs over me for the remainder of my life!

Not that I'm not grateful—very, for the rope that you throw to me, but after having gone down for the last time, suffered all the misery of drowning and having arrived at that blissful state of semiconsciousness when everything has a lovely greenish translucence, to be dragged back to hard realism is not particularly agreeable. Especially not when the suspicion that chance will compel a drowning sooner or later anyway persists.³⁸

Now the reader can make from this what he will, but Sandoz contends that she was far from contemplating suicide. Rather, she viewed the experience in a positive light. She explains that for the first time in her life she had attained complete detachment, "a disinterest in material things," along with the ability to see how very comical her struggles had been. For a brief spell misfortune seemed to vanish, leaving her "one week of absolute freedom in a fetter-weary world."³⁹

Paradoxically, the poverty which seems to have threatened the author's career may very well have saved it in the end. Sandoz had until the first of the year to decide whether or not to sign a two-year teaching contract in Nevada.⁴⁰ But the bank failure precluded that possibility by leaving the author with neither the means to get there nor the funds to live on for a month without wages. She had little recourse but to remain in Lincoln and continue as before.

The months ahead found Sandoz once again proofreading newspapers, six to nine hours a day—"all about butter fat and balanced rations for hogs [she lamented]. . .terrible but even I must eat."⁴¹ Later that summer, after breaking off relations with her agent, she considered moving to New York City to look after her own manuscript marketing. But in order to do this she had to be assured of a job in advance, preferably as a manuscript reader for a magazine or a publishing house. In a letter to a New York employment agency setting forth her qualifications, she wrote: "I am a rather adaptable person, a good typist, and willing. I understand most kinds of office work and fit in well with men, probably because I am straight forward and ask no favors on my sex."⁴² The venture never materialized, however, and the author's attention turned to free lance writing.

Sandoz considered herself equipped to write on a wide range of topics by 1930 and tried repeatedly to interest newspaper and magazine editors in her work. She proposed articles on such unseemly subjects as the psychology of men who cruise the streets in automobiles searching for "pick-ups," a practice she referred to as "curbing,"⁴³ and went so far as to make weekly visits to the Nebraska State Penitentiary to study the inmates.⁴⁴ Later in the year she proposed an ambitious trip to Mexico City "to study the people en route and particularly the art of the Mexican school children," volunteering to remain there as long as necessary.⁴⁵ In the coming year her interest in free lancing

continued, and her research for the Old Jules biography unearthed a great deal of prospective material. Two junkets to the Indian reservations of Montana and South Dakota in 1930 and 1931 likewise resulted in the gathering of much worthwhile information. She also contacted Nebraska Governor Charles W. Bryan for permission to write about his personal and political life, and as a final scheme late in the year, submitted a list of topics to David E. Smiley of the North American Newspaper Alliance, hoping to attract an offer there.⁴⁶ As a result, Sandoz spent much of her time in 1930-1931 writing Sunday features which, although they had little trouble selling, paid poorly and in the author's words "are so bad for any latent talent I might possess."⁴⁷

In the meantime the author's inventory of short stories grew to about sixty. As she told the editors at Dodd, Mead, there were enough stories using the Sandhills locale alone for an entire volume.⁴⁸ Yet, with so many stories on hand and still no sales, it is not surprising that the author's confidence in her ability to write creative fiction began to waver again. She saw new flaws in her writing and blamed them on her sagging confidence. In a letter to another literary agency she confided that "years ago my work, whatever its immaturity, never lacked sureness," and she wondered if perhaps her family's antagonism toward her writing was not justified after all.⁴⁹ But with all her difficulties with fiction, Sandoz' talent as a writer did not go unrecognized. When B. A. Botkin, folklorist and former student of Louise Pound at the University of Nebraska, read some of her accounts of life in the Sandhills, he immediately recognized her ability to produce significant material of a scholarly nature. He was not interested in her more "plotty" stories, but he was extremely impressed with her sketches of Sandhill's characters and amusements, her use of the regional dialect, and her authentic presentation of customs and beliefs.⁵⁰ Botkin gladly featured some of her material in the 1931 issue of *Folk-Say*, an annual volume of regional literature published by the University of Oklahoma Press.⁵¹

As the Lincoln years progressed, Sandoz' dissatisfaction with contemporary American literature became increasingly evident. Life for her was a serious business, a struggle, and any artificial treatment of it was a major insincerity in her eyes.⁵² From the beginning she viewed herself as a serious writer, one who saw



The Clyde Boston home at 1226 J Street in Lincoln. Sandoz occupied a single room in the house for over thirteen years while struggling to become a writer. Located a few blocks from the Nebraska State Capitol, the house is no longer standing. (Photograph courtesy of the Mari Sandoz Corporation, copyright 1972)

nothing more disgusting than the modern, romantic tales appearing in much of the popular literature of the day. Her early short stories might even be seen as something of a reaction to the popular trend in fiction. She also found the American novel objectionable and developed a strong preference for its European counterpart. "I am tired to death of novels that seem only painted figures on gauze or perhaps even exquisite chiffons, but transparent, lifeless save for the wind of the author's agitation," she wrote Frank C. Dodd.⁵³ She wanted American novels "in which the push of life thrusts itself upon the reader, even if there is only one character in a desert."⁵⁴ For those readers who were squeamish about the use of realism in fiction, she recommended Faulkner and Dorothy Parker, not as models, but as an antidote against less realistic literature.⁵⁵ Faulkner's "A Rose For Emily" in particular had a certain unpleasantness she found "very conspicuous in life."⁵⁶ And when Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* came out, she thanked the author for a "rare experience" and for not once threatening her illusion of reality.⁵⁷

In the spring of 1932, Sandoz returned to school full time for

the first time in five years. She had been working on the biography of her father for at least three years, having begun the actual writing early in 1931, and she needed more assurance in the field of frontier history. She therefore enrolled in a course under John D. Hicks on the West after 1829.⁵⁸ Before the semester was over she sent the manuscript out twice to publishers and, while nothing explicit was reported, the implication was that the book was too strong for a biography. According to Sandoz, "The idea of anyone writing with European detachment about a member of your own family just doesn't go well with publishers in this newly sentimentalized age."⁵⁹ As a novel, the book appeared to stand a better chance of getting published.

Throughout most of the summer of 1932 the manuscript remained in publishers' hands, but without results. Finally, in October she decided to enter the biography in the *Atlantic Monthly* nonfiction contest under the title *Old Jules: The Man From the Running Water*.⁶⁰ Although the book clearly began as a novel—Sandoz consistently referred to it as fictionized or novelized biography in its early stages—she now attempted to authenticate the book as a work of nonfiction. She described in detail the lengthy process by which it was researched and written, and included with the entry a few of the hundreds of letters and documents pertaining to Old Jules and his community. She explained her selection of materials for the book this way: "I followed as faithfully as I could the actual sequence of events choosing, of course, from an unusually unwieldy profusion of events and incidents those that seemed to me most revealing and those intrinsic parts of the rhythmic pattern of life on the Running Water [Niobrara] during the last forty years."⁶¹ She likewise expressed hope that her ten years in Lincoln were sufficient to give her some perspective on the material. Her intention was not to become a center of focus in the book. Rather, in her words, "I struggled for detachment, for the gossamer of reality, unpleasant, amusing, sentimental at times, tragic often as life was in our Panhandle."⁶²

The *Atlantic Monthly* Press held *Old Jules* until the following May before rejecting it. According to Edward Weeks, editor-in-chief of the press, *Old Jules* was one of thirty out of more than one thousand book-length manuscripts reserved for final judgment.⁶³ Even so, Sandoz did not take the rejection

lightly, especially after it had been held so long. She charged the editors with not reading the manuscript, and expressed her conviction that they were losing a book "that will be important as a record of pioneer life after we are all dead."⁶⁴

The rejection by *Atlantic* left Sandoz feeling like an arrogant, egotistical fool for believing that she had anything important to say, much less the ability to say it. In her words, "I had, as all my acquaintances and my friends had always implied, simply been trying to live above my fellows, to live without work."⁶⁵ Although she continued to write in the months ahead and tried repeatedly to interest publishers and newspaper syndicates in her work, defeat seemed more and more imminent. With the rejection notice came the realization that eight solid years of writing had netted just \$250 in publications, nearly all of which came from articles that, in the author's words, "weren't fit paper for a Wyoming out house."⁶⁶ In all this time Sandoz managed to sell but a single short story—"Pieces to a Quilt" to *North American Review* (May, 1933)—out of an alleged total of seventy-eight. Some of the stories had as many as thirty-two rejection letters. Consequently, without a decent job and unwilling to sit in Lincoln and starve in an emotional stupor, her only choice was to swallow her pride and return to the Sandhills where she could at least eat properly and perhaps get back into teaching.⁶⁷ As she explained to an Omaha reporter some years later:

I was all washed up. I was through. I had no money and I feared no writing ability. I remember the day that my funds were so low I couldn't afford anything but a sack of cinnamon rolls—and I was allergic to wheat, which gave me sinus trouble. I suddenly realized the end had come. I was licked.⁶⁸

Before leaving Lincoln, however, Sandoz acted out one of the strangest incidents in her entire life.

On the eve of her departure, Sandoz in the company of two friends heaped a large quantity of papers into an old washtub and set them on fire. This action has generated what can only be described as a minor myth. An account of the event in a popular western magazine reads as follows:

The lengthening shadows of afternoon offered promise of some relief from the heat of that late summer day in 1933. . . . In the alley behind an apartment house on Lincoln's J Street . . . three women stood around an old galvanized iron washtub as the last flickering embers of its content died. For nearly an hour a dark-haired young woman carried out first one armload of paper and then another and dumped them on the pyre. Twelve years of writing, nearly eighty-five short stories laboriously written and rewritten and rewritten again, and submitted and rejected endlessly by publishers, vanished in the flame and smoke.

Earlier that day what must have been a final blow to the young woman came in the mail. . . . *Old Jules* had been rejected.⁶⁹

One of the spectators was quoted years later as saying that the author silenced their protests by calling her short stories not good enough.⁷⁰

Aside from the fact that there were three women and a fire, practically every other detail in this account is erroneous. In the first place the figure eighty-five short stories is exaggerated. Sandoz herself does not place the number above seventy-eight, and it appears that this, too, may be an exaggeration unless the author included in her total story sketches, rough drafts, and perhaps different versions of the same story. If there were in fact seventy-eight short stories, the author did not consider all of them publishable, since her correspondence files reveal that fewer than half that figure were ever actually mailed out to prospective publishers. Secondly, it is misleading to label *Atlantic's* rejection of *Old Jules* as the "final blow" in the author's decision to leave the capital. The rejection was unquestionably a traumatic experience, but it came in the spring of the year, not late summer. Besides, Sandoz does not appear to have left town until the end of October.⁷¹ Meanwhile, between the time the manuscript was released by the Boston publisher and Sandoz' trip west, *Old Jules* was completely rewritten twice and sent out to at least one other publisher. On the day of her departure, it was in the hands of Dodd, Mead.⁷² Finally, by comparing a list of short stories sent to publishers prior to the burning with a list of those mailed out after the author's return from the Sandhills in 1934, one can readily see that the same stories were sent out after the incident as before. The only difference is the addition of one or two stories written during the Sandhills stay. Similarly, the author's letter files reveal that she still claimed to have the same large number of short stories on hand after they were supposedly all burned.⁷³

It can only be concluded, therefore, that Sandoz did not destroy years of work as it has been reported. This is not to suggest that a fire was not struck and that papers were not destroyed. There were, after all, witnesses to a burning. What it does suggest, however, is that the fuel for the fire has not been accurately disclosed. It also suggests that Sandoz herself had a hand in the propagation of the myth, a myth she continued to support for years to come. For example, in a discussion of her

writing from the twenties, she says: "Now the only two [short stories] that I didn't burn back in 1933 (when I tried to put all the writing business behind me, once and for all) sound like echoes of the experimental writing of the 1928-1935 period. 'The Smart Man' dates from the late 1920's and was out when I burned the rest."⁷⁴ Coming from Sandoz these words carry a touch of irony, since she spent so much of her adult life dispelling myths about others—groups as well as individuals.

A determination of the exact reason that Sandoz staged such a dramatic event, leading her peers into thinking she had actually destroyed years of hard work, is a matter for speculation. Perhaps this was simply her way of coping with the pressures of a difficult profession, pressures made even greater in 1933 by personal poverty and the Depression. Or perhaps the burning was the only way a proud and stubborn person like Sandoz could acquire the sympathetic understanding of friends without appearing weak and dependent. But the fact remains that Sandoz had a history of reacting to stress by threatening to burn her own manuscripts; *Old Jules* itself did not escape the threat of flames.⁷⁵ In any event, the whole affair takes on the air of a sacrificial offering, a sort of cleansing by fire in preparation for a new beginning. And this much it was.

The fall of 1933 was unquestionably the darkest period in the author's career. But Sandoz never gave up the urge to write, despite her statements to the contrary, and the return to the Sandhills was calculated to prevent her from having to do so. Within a very short time she converted an old garage located on the family ranch into crude writing accommodations, and furnished it with a new trash burner purchased with money earned from writing a speech.⁷⁶ There she could stay up late, rattle the typewriter, strut up and down when she hit a snag, and "pile the maggoty remains of cigarettes high, and no one says a word." The shack had all the "fragrance of burning cowchips!" she added.⁷⁷ After the day's work Sandoz routinely entered the shack, with its back turned symbolically toward the ranch house, and worked on *Slogum House*. She was greatly concerned over the rise of Hitler and wanted to study the will-to-power individual. In the process she lost the melodramatic concern with her own failure.⁷⁸

But the Sandhills deprived the author of cultural contacts, and



Mari Sandoz shortly after winning the Atlantic Monthly non-fiction contest for 1935. (Dwight Kirsch photograph)

the change in address from Lincoln to Ellsworth seemed to make a difference in the way publishers responded to her work. Where publishers once included letters with her manuscripts, they were now returned with polite rejection slips only.⁷⁹ So, at the suggestion of Addison E. Sheldon of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Sandoz applied for a job under the Civil Works Administration.⁸⁰ When an offer came shortly after the New Year, she returned to Lincoln bearing the rough draft of her new novel.

Apparently some of Sandoz' closest friends experienced growing concern over the author's recurrent depression, but they never seemed to doubt her ability to handle the mental and emotional conflicts. Hinman, for example, was positive that Sandoz would eventually attain a position of distinction in the world of literature. She compared Sandoz' current situation to that of a young eaglet forcibly brought among the barnyard fowl, and was convinced that a society existed in which the author could thrive as the eagle does in the upper air.⁸¹ Hinman and others knew that Sandoz was a gifted writer and thought it only a matter of time before her work would gain recognition and a demand for it develop.

Immediately after returning, Sandoz began a new copy of *Old Jules* and soon started it on its alphabetical rounds to the publishers. Meanwhile, she was given considerable responsibility and leeway at the State Historical Society, supervising the various federally sponsored projects, acting as associate editor of *Nebraska History Magazine*, and assisting Superintendent Sheldon with the society's other publications. Finally, after more than a dozen trips out, *Old Jules* won the *Atlantic Monthly* nonfiction prize for 1935. By this time the excitement and anticipation had worn smooth, but like a long Nebraska drouth the literary apprenticeship of Mari Sandoz was over. Although Sandoz contends that there were no real turning points in her career, "just a sort of spiraling," the publication of *Old Jules* set the spiral in vertical motion.⁸²

The reasons for the long apprenticeship of Mari Sandoz really begin with her childhood and the environment into which she was born. Although the Sandhills provided her with a rich and unique source of writing material, the ability to write had first to be learned. Growing up as she did in a family that possessed an

aversion to writing, and with little opportunity for a sound education, Sandoz was unable to develop her writing skills until she became an adult. Even then the craft was largely self-taught through the difficult process of trial and error. Yet, childhood privations need not be a hindrance, and in some instances become the forcing ground of talent. In the case of Sandoz, she never regretted or felt ashamed of her youth, and neither did she consider it a serious handicap to her career. The fact is, she believed her early years provided the strength, perspective, and courage "to look upon life squarely as it must be lived. . . [and] to face it all with comparative calm."⁸³ Nevertheless, her background left many gaps which had to be filled before a successful writing career could be launched, and this took time. In addition, the desire to write and the need to earn a living resulted in great personal hardship and added untold months to the apprenticeship period. As Sandoz once observed, "It is a cruel fate that thrusts aspirations and ambitions upon those without means,"⁸⁴ and while Sandoz had plenty of ambition prior to the publication of *Old Jules*, she had very limited means. But the most crucial factors in the author's delayed success seem to rest with her work itself.

In some respects Sandoz' early writing was ahead of its time. In the fast-moving carefree era of the 1920's, the demand was for light stories with simple plots and happy endings. By contrast, Sandoz' stories were morbid and depressing, better suited for a later decade. Yet Sandoz probably could have adapted her writing style to fit the twenties' formula if she had chosen to do so. But she aspired to a degree of literary artistry, and for this reason her more serious works, which included nearly all of her early fiction, were written for herself and the market was considered later. Since work at the more creative level almost always demands greater preparation with fewer monetary rewards, Sandoz' literary apprenticeship was naturally prolonged. Similarly, Sandoz was concerned with external rather than internal human conflicts—an approach that gained little recognition in the age of Freud. Not until the Depression produced a shift away from the concern for the inner workings of the individual and towards a greater emphasis upon man as part of a social unit did her work seem relevant.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, her interests and the form of her writing were changing.

As the years of apprenticeship mounted, Sandoz became increasingly interested in historical research and writing. In view of her research on Indians at the State Historical Society and her work on *Old Jules*, this comes as no surprise. What is surprising is that the transition took so long. For years Sandoz could do little more than give her short stories away, yet she had no trouble selling articles.⁸⁶ But the high literary ambition, the constant striving for artistry, appears to have darkened her vision and delayed the awareness that perhaps fiction writing was not her greatest strength. As her career gathered momentum, however, the author began channeling more of her energy into nonfiction and history. In view of her success with the latter forms, one is tempted to conclude that her early emphasis upon the short story and the novel delayed her establishment as a writer.

Despite the long and arduous apprenticeship, however, the years—particularly the decade after 1925—were important to the author's career. These were years in which Sandoz learned the craft of writing and acquired the technique, style, and point of view which sets her work apart. These were also years in which the author acquired a huge body of materials—both in research form and in writing—from which she could draw once her work came into demand. Hence, her long apprenticeship enabled her to build for the future, and, although it may not have appeared so at the time, to take advantage of success once it came. Whereas prolonged disappointment breaks many potential writers, Sandoz persevered and fortunately for her readers this perseverance paid off.

NOTES

1. Mary S. Sandoz, "The Broken Promise," *Omaha Daily News*, Junior Writers' Page, April 26, 1908.

2. Virginia Faulkner, "Introduction," *Sandhill Sundays and Other Recollections* by Mari Sandoz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), vii.

3. "Nebraskan" in *Keeping Posted*, *Saturday Evening Post*, CCXI (March 4, 1939), 88; quoted in Sandoz, *Hostiles and Friendlies: Selected Short Writings of Mari Sandoz* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), xvii.

4. Sandoz to H. L. Mencken, May 28, 1931, Mari Sandoz collection, University of Nebraska Archives and Special Collections. The latter will hereafter be abbreviated to read UNA-SC.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Sandoz' marriage to Wray Macumber was "dissolved and set aside, and wholly annulled" on August 30, 1919. See "Summons District Court, Sheridan County, Document M, No. 2941," Sheridan County, Nebraska. Quoted in Judith L. McDonald, "Antaeus of the Running Water: A Bibliographical Study of the Western Nebraska Years of Mari Sandoz, 1896-1922," unpublished research paper, University of Denver, 1972, 43.
7. Sandoz to Marie Dugan, June 5, 1955, UNA-SC. Reprinted in the *Gordon Journal*, December 13, 1967.
8. Sandoz to Maude M. Demel, January 13, 1936, UNA-SC; Mary Lane [Eva Mahoney], "Mari Sandoz," unpublished undated MS, UNA-SC, 13. Sandoz borrowed the money from the Scottish Rite on November 26, 1923, and paid the note in full on June 27, 1935, just days after winning the Atlantic Monthly prize.
9. Lane, "Mari Sandoz," 13.
10. Sandoz to William Adams, March 21, 1939, UNA-SC; Sandoz to Jacques Chambrun, July 3, 1941, UNA-SC.
11. Sandoz to Adams, March 21, 1939, UNA-SC.
12. Marie Macumber [Mari Sandoz], "The Vine," *Prairie Schooner*, I (January 1927), 7-16.
13. Sandoz to Robert M. Baldwin, February 23, 1928, UNA-SC; Sandoz to August Lenniger, August 30, 1928, UNA-SC; "Autobiographical Sketch of Mari Sandoz' Early Years" in *Hostiles and Friendlies*, xvii. The recognition Sandoz received in *Harper's* Intercollegiate Contest inspired the much-quoted lines from her father in which he termed writers the maggots of society.
14. Sandoz to Mamie Meredith, December 18, 1933, UNA-SC.
15. Sandoz to August Lenniger, August 30, 1928, UNA-SC.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Sandoz to Editor, *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, January 1, 1929, UNA-SC.
18. Sandoz to August Lenniger, August 30, 1928, UNA-SC.
19. Sandoz to Margaret Christie, June 29, 1929, UNA-SC; and Sandoz to Christie, September 5, 1929, UNA-SC.
20. Christie to Macumber [Sandoz], June 27, 1929, UNA-SC.
21. Christie to Sandoz, October 5, 1929, UNA-SC.
22. Sandoz to Christie, September 30, 1929, UNA-SC.
23. Christie to Sandoz, October 5, 1929, UNA-SC.
24. Sandoz to editors, *Harper's Magazine*, August 30, 1930, UNA-SC. There are several versions of this story, and all are contained in the Mari Sandoz Corporation papers, Gordon, Nebraska. An interesting comparison can be made between "Victorie" and Chapter XIII of *Old Jules*, titled "A Polish Wedding." Sandoz, *Old Jules* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1935), 261-65.
25. Christie to Sandoz, October 8, 1929, UNA-SC.
26. Eleanor Hinman to Sandoz, n.d., c. spring, 1929, UNA-SC. Sandoz was a lifelong sufferer from migraine headaches.
27. Sandoz to Christie, October 12, 1929, UNA-SC. Actually "Victorie" is not very well written. For one thing it covers too much time—forty years—for a short story; and for another, the material with its many action lines and complicated plot is really better suited for the novel. But everyone did not find the tale as objectionable as Christie and Hinman. The Omaha Woman's Press Club awarded Sandoz \$50 in prize money for the story in 1930 and extended an invitation to have her read it at their annual tea. Synthia M. McMillan to Sandoz, February 23 and March 3, 1930; and Sandoz to McMillan, March 4, 1930, UNA-SC.
28. Sandoz to Christie, October 12, 1929, UNA-SC.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Sandoz to Charles Gaude, Jr., April 15, 1939, UNA-SC.

31. Although Sandoz was right about the book's style, portions of *Ungirt Runner* are highly autobiographical, and since it lacks the mature restraint and emotional detachment of *Old Jules* and the other published recollections, it offers insight into the author's early life and thoughts not found elsewhere. It presents a great challenge to some future biographer.

32. Sandoz to Christie, June 3, 1930, UNA-SC.

33. "The Kinkaider Comes and Goes: Memoirs of an Adventurous Childhood in the Sandhills of Nebraska," Vol. 229 (April, May 1930), 422-431, 576-583.

34. Sandoz to Christie, February 16, 1930, UNA-SC.

35. Sandoz to Frederick Lewis Allen, October 1, 1928, UNA-SC.

36. Quoted in Christie to Sandoz, March 22, 1930, UNA-SC. In a review of *Old Jules* five years later, Bernard DeVoto treated the problem in a rather more amusing manner when he noted: "Her accents and rhythms, her assumptions, even her vocabulary, are alien. When she speaks of a blowout, the customers will wonder if they had tires in the middle eighties, and if they managed to attach any meaning to niggerwool it will probably be as a brand of tobacco." DeVoto, "A Violent Fighting Pioneer," *Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. XIII (November 2, 1935), 5.

37. Sandoz to Hinman, January 10, 1930, UNA-SC.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. Sandoz to Christie, December 8, 1929, and January 6, 1930, UNA-SC.

41. Sandoz to Christie, May 5, 1930, UNA-SC.

42. Sandoz to Personnel Placement, New York City, August 11, 1930, UNA-SC.

43. Sandoz to William L. Chenery, *Collier's Magazine*, August 4, 1930, UNA-SC. The article on "curbing" is titled "The Stranger at the Curb" and is in the Mari Sandoz Corporation papers, Gordon, Nebraska.

44. Sandoz to editors, *Liberty*, August 16, 1930, UNA-SC.

45. Sandoz to King Feature Syndicate, December 10, 1930, UNA-SC. See also Sandoz to Information Bureau, University of Mexico, November 26, 1930, UNA-SC. Sandoz proposed to make the trip with Louise Austin, art instructor at the University of Nebraska.

46. Sandoz to Charles W. Bryan, September 5, 1931, UNA-SC; Sandoz to David E. Smiley, December 7, 1931, UNA-SC.

47. Sandoz to B. A. Botkin, September 8, 1931, UNA-SC.

48. Sandoz to Editors, Dodd, Mead, November 18, 1930, UNA-SC.

49. Sandoz to Bernice Baumgarten, Brandt & Brandt, January 16, 1931, UNA-SC.

50. Botkin to Macumber [Sandoz], March 26, 1931, UNA-SC.

51. Sandoz, "Sandhill Sundays," in *Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany*, edited by B. A. Botkin (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1931), 290-303.

52. Sandoz to Baumgarten, January 3, 1931, UNA-SC.

53. Sandoz to Frank C. Dodd, January 28, 1932, UNA-SC.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Sandoz to _____ Deweese, June 26, 1931, UNA-SC.

56. Sandoz to Editorial Offices, *Forum* and *Century*, August 25, 1933, UNA-SC.

57. Sandoz to Willa Cather, October 10, 1931, UNA-SC.

58. See Sandoz to Baumgarten, January 3, 16, 1931, UNA-SC; Sandoz to Lidia McCord, January 26, 1931, UNA-SC; Sandoz to editors, Charles Scribner's Sons, January 28, 1931, UNA-SC. Hicks comments on Sandoz' "admirable understanding of frontier conditions" in his autobiography, *My Life With History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 135.

59. Sandoz to Botkin, May 18, 1932, UNA-SC.

60. Sandoz to Editorial Offices, *Atlantic Monthly Press*, October 5, 1932, UNA-SC.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

63. Edward Weeks to Sandoz, May 18, 1933, UNA-SC.
64. Sandoz to Editorial Offices, *Atlantic Monthly Press*, May 8, 1933, UNA-SC.
65. Sandoz to Watson (Doc) Bidwell, July 8, 1946, UNA-SC.
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.* At the time of her departure, the total list of Sandoz' publications outside the newspapers included three short stories in the *Prairie Schooner*, the two-part article for *North American Review*, "Sandhill Sundays" for *Folk-Say*, "Pieces to a Quilt" also for *North American Review*, and an article titled "Musky, the Narrative of a Muskrat" for the November, 1933, issue of *Nature*.
68. Lane, "Mari Sandoz," 15.
69. Bruce H. Nicoll, "Mari Sandoz: Nebraska Loner," *American West*, II (Spring, 1965), 32.
70. Mamie Meredith's statement in *Hostiles and Friendlies*, f.n., xix; and her article, "Marie Sandoz," in *Roundup: A Nebraska Reader*, compiled and edited by Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), 382-386. The other witness was Marie Cronley.
71. The earliest letter written by the author from the Sandhills is to Eleanor Hinman and is dated November 5, 1933, UNA-SC.
72. Sandoz to Frank C. Hanighen, Dodd, Mead, September 30, 1933, UNA-SC.
73. Sandoz to Flora _____, May 27, 1935, UNA-SC; Sandoz to R. J. Brown, April 4, 1936, UNA-SC.
74. Sandoz, *Hostiles and Friendlies*, 126.
75. Sandoz to Tyler Buchaneau, Sun., n.d., c. spring, 1934, UNA-SC; Buchaneau to Sandoz n.d., c. spring, 1934, UNA-SC; and Sandoz to Buchaneau, April 30, 1934, UNA-SC. Buchaneau, a friend of the author living in New York City, had been carrying *Old Jules* from publisher to publisher. When no one would print the manuscript, Sandoz asked him to burn it.
76. Sandoz to Hinman, December 6, 1933, UNA-SC; and Sandoz to Meredith, December 18, 1933, UNA-SC.
77. Sandoz to Anne Longreen, December 6, 1933, UNA-SC.
78. Sandoz to Bidwell, July 8, 1946, UNA-SC.
79. Sandoz to International Publishing Service, December 2, 1933, UNA-SC; Sandoz to Hinman, December 6, 1933, UNA-SC; Sandoz to Longreen, December 6, 1933, UNA-SC.
80. Sandoz to Lulu Wolford, December 14, 1933, UNA-SC; Sandoz to Vance Thomas, December 16, 1933, UNA-SC.
81. Hinman to Sandoz, n.d., c. 1933, UNA-SC; Hinman to Sandoz, November 18, 1933, UNA-SC.
82. Quoted in Roger Lanenhen, "Turning Points," *Nebraska Alumnus*, LIII (June, 1957), 25.
83. Sandoz to J. E. Fisher, January 19, 1936, UNA-SC.
84. Sandoz to Fred Cornell, November 8, 1930, UNA-SC.
85. For an excellent analysis of this shift, see Robert M. Crunden, *From Self to Society, 1919-1941* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972).
86. Sandoz, "Anybody Can Write," *The Writer*, LVII (April 1944), 99-100; misquoted in *Hostiles and Friendlies*, xvii-xviii; Sandoz to Donald Beckman, January 8, 1955, UNA-SC, wherein Sandoz says in reference to the apprenticeship years: "I could sell articles any time I was willing to write them, but I hate to do the work."