

## Mari Sandoz Believed Anyone Could Be a Writer

By Con Marshall

Although Mari Sandoz found that writing was extremely hard work, she believed anyone with literary power, or the ability to read, could also write well enough to have his or her work published at the 2012 Pilster Great Plains Lecture in October 2011.

The program was given by Ron Hull, senior advisor to Nebraska Educational Telecommunications and professor emeritus at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. With Hull's encouragement, Sandoz discussed her work and views on writing for ETV programs several times in the 1950s and '60s. The two formed a strong friendship. He visited her several times in her apartment at Greenwich Village in New York City and also in the hospital just before her death in 1966.

Clips of the ETV programs were interspersed with Hull's comments during the program, which was the second installment of the Pilster Great Plains Lecture Series.

Hull said besides being an extraordinary hard worker who "wasted precious little time," Sandoz was "scrupulously honest and didn't soften anything that she wrote," even when she knew some of those reading the material would be offended.

Her book, "Capital City," published in 1939, was banned in Lincoln because it told of some of the dubious activities that had taken place there.

Hull called her book, "Old Jules," the story of her father, "the definitive homesteading story in Nebraska." He said she

revised the book 14 times before it won a \$10,000 prize from Atlantic Press in 1935 and was finally accepted for publication. She then wrote 22 more books, most of them histories of the High Plains.

She once told Hull "the books are my children."

Although it is commonly believed that "Old Jules" was her first book, Hull said she confided to him that in 1931, she wrote a book on a psychological study she had conducted. It was accepted for publication, but when the publisher, who had kept it at least six months, finally returned the copy for some minor changes, she reread it and burned it in her backyard because she thought it was so bad.

Hull said Sandoz took notes on everything she saw and observed, including people, plants, animals, the land and unusual dialog. She had two large shopping bags hanging from door knobs in her New York apartment, he said. One was marked "People" and the other "Places and Things." They were filled with the note cards, and she sorted through them to obtain descriptions that she added to her stories.

"That way everything was authentic," Hull noted.

Because of her meticulous research and the fact that she often rewrote them several times, it usually took her about three years to complete a book, Hull said. Before she finished one book, she would start one or two more so her work would keep flowing.

During his last visit with her in the hospital, Hull said Sandoz told him the realization that she was dying didn't bother her as much as the fact that she had several more books planned that would never be written.

Hull noted that besides writing, Sandoz also enjoyed teaching and working with students. He recalled that she once told him, "The more you teach, the more they (your students) will teach you."

He closed his presentation by reading a letter written by Sandoz to students she was working with about writing. The letter was recently discovered by Sara Polak, the director of the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center at CSC.

In the letter, Sandoz told the students that if she could endow young Nebraskans with two items they would be a love for reading and courage. It said, "With a fondness for reading you will have all the strange and precious things of the world and never have to guard them against thieves and never have to dust them.

"And with courage you will find that all the obstacles of the world shrink away before you and are as nothing."

Hull, who has been honored numerous times for his leadership in telecommunications and was president of the Sandoz Society for at least two decades, has written a book that will be off the presses in about a year. He said he is unsure what the title of the book will be, but it is primarily filled with stories about people he has worked with during his career.

