

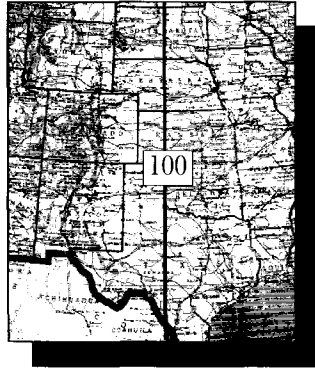
The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Green Hills of Grayest Sand

Old Jules is more than the title of a book by Mari Sandoz it is the name of one of the monsters of American letters: the Simon Legree of the pioneer household who, married four times, drove one wife to the insane asylum and struck the fourth in the face with a handful of four-foot wire stays, after which she tried to poison herself with strychnine. ("I learn the g--d--- balky woman to obey me when I say, 'hold [the bull calf].'") A former medical student and scion of a proud upper-middle-class family in Zurich, this immigrant from Switzerland arrived in the Nebraska Panhandle in 1884 at the age of 25 to settle on a dugout claim, equipped with little more than a Vetterli single-shot rifle, the stamp collection he had begun as a boy, a team of horses and a wagon, and a spade. Jules Sandoz had scant use for the "American" pioneers coming into the country but affection for the Sioux Indians, who admired his marksmanship and took him along on extended hunting trips in the Sand Hills. He became a surveyor and a locator, settling fellow Swiss (including several of his brothers) on claims of their own; ran the local post office from his house; resisted the wealthy "English" cattlemen who fenced the land and tried to drive the farmers off their own claims (by lead colic, when intimidation didn't work); and planted orchards and vineyards in a series of horticultural experiments that earned him a reputation as the Luther Burbank of the Sand Hills. Also, he begat six children for Mary, his last wife, to rear. The eldest, Marie (she changed her name to Mari when she became an author), was born in 1896 without benefit of a doctor in the little house in the canyon of the Niobrara River she later called the River Place, where her father moved after abandoning the dugout on the west side of the Niobrara.

Mari Sandoz grew up conversing with her Sioux friends on Indian Hill, above the River Place. She died in 1966 in New York City, where she had moved in the 1940's to be near her publisher and indulge her taste for the theater. In between, she wrote 22 books: mostly non-fiction, but including several novels as



well. Her aim, she wrote, was

to understand as much as possible about man, shaped by and shaping his world. . . . I restricted myself to the trans-Missouri country—and its nearer settlement origins—examining modern man's occupancy in the region from the stone axe to the A-bomb and jet propulsion. Through the discovery of this one region, this one drop of water, I hope to discover something of the nature of the ocean.

So the books kept coming: *The Beaver Men*, *The Buffalo Hunters*, *The Cattlemen*; *Crazy Horse*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, *These Were the Sioux*, *Winter Thunder* . . . The first, *Old Jules*, a biography of her father, is the best known of her works as well as, perhaps, the best. "You know I consider writers and artists the maggots of society," Jules wrote his daughter when he learned of her literary activities. On his death day, he requested that she write the story "of his struggles as a locator, a builder of communities, bringer of fruit to the Panhandle."

It's 234 miles from Laramie, Wyoming, to Chadron, Nebraska, with Laramie Peak in the Medicine Bow—the same Laramie Peak that the girl Marie used to strain to glimpse over the horizon from Indian Hill—in sight for 174 of them before the descent from the Pine Ridge escarpment begins. Chadron, home to Chadron State College, is a town of 5,000 people, plus change. Driving in on the main street, I recognized Ed Detrixhe in his Carhart overalls coming out of a bookstore around the corner and followed his truck to the motel room he had checked us into an hour before. It had been better than a 500-mile drive from Clyde, Kansas, to Chadron,

spread over a two-day trip to allow for investigation of the local necropoli along the way (cemeteries having a particular interest for Ed). We drank a couple of beers in the room before going to supper at the Old Main Street Inn, and sat up late over a bottle of brandy and a handful of publications orienting visitors to Mari Sandoz country.

By morning, an early September weather disturbance caused by a cold-air mass from Canada had passed through, and the sunshine struck directly from a washed sky as if earth's atmosphere had been lifted away at the horizon. We made an early start from Chadron, headed east to Hay Springs, then south across the high brown tableland to Mirage Flats, where *Old Jules* settled his Dutchmen more than a century before.

Ed carried a map he had acquired on his last trip to the Sand Hills, drawn by Mari's sister Caroline Pifer (still alive today at age 91), whom he met in 1990. This map was a cartographical disaster, completely out of scale and giving inaccurate mileages between the indicated points of interest. We were looking for the Church of the Sacred Heart, built on a lot donated by Old Jules to the Catholics (in the interest of community-building rather than of piety). Though the country looked familiar to Ed after nine years, a lack of topographical distinction inherent in something called the Flats made identifying landmarks difficult, although the Sand Hills themselves were visible now, floating like a tumultuous fogbank on the eastern horizon across the Niobrara. Finally, he stopped to ask directions from a farmer inspecting the damage the previous night's frost had done to his tomato plants and learned we were less than a mile from the church on the washboard road.

Sacred Heart was a dusty stone block with cracked walls, standing within a shelterbreak of brown trees on five acres of sunburnt ground that crackled underfoot. We tried the locked doors, then walked back to the cemetery behind the church, its stones inscribed with familiar names: Freese, Minten, Peters, Staskiewicz, Skudlas—Skudlases and Staskiewicz buried within ten feet of each other, and Victoria Staskiewicz lying off by herself a little. Ed Skudlas, having been in the bushes with the bloom-

Victoria as well as with her older sister, married Maggie after she informed him she was pregnant. When in due time he discovered the lie, he looked up Victoria, whom Maggie had scared into keeping her mouth shut about her own pregnancy. By now, Victoria had produced Ed's child; two years later, she poisoned herself with strychnine and died, aged 19. Today, the Staskiewicz and Skudlars lie all together, almost side by side, under thin, weedy soil in back of the locked-up church with its Mass schedule dropping, letter by yellowed letter, from the announcement board standing to the left of the concrete steps.

Half a mile south from Sacred Heart, we came to the dugout site, where practical jokers dropped Old Jules 65 feet to the bottom of the well he was digging. They left the injured man by the side of the road for the soldiers to find on their way over to Ft. Robinson, and Jules was treated by the post's Army surgeon, Dr. Walter Reed, who wanted to amputate but was dissuaded by the patient's threat to kill him if he removed the injured foot. Though Jules kept his foot, it never healed, and he remained a cripple for the rest of his life. "I can make a living better crippled than lots of men with two good feet," he said.

We took the road east from the vanished dugout and crossed the Niobrara River, shallow and shrunk but freely flowing still in its meandering channel, to the River Place whose stone marker sits behind a wire fence just above the high-water mark. "When Mari and I were here in '92, we wondered why Jules left all this for the Sandhills," Ed remarked. "After we saw the Hill Place, though, we realized that—in this case, anyway—he was n't crazy." (Ed's marriage to a Mari of his own produced uncertainty for either of us only when the name came at the beginning of a sentence, and then only for the space of a couple of seconds or so.)

The foundation was still outlined in the grass, not over 20 feet by 20, after someone moved the house away, leaving a thin debris field—bits of bottles and china, the brass ends of shotgun shells—like a foundered ship's. Following the fence-line, we came to a couple of forlorn apple trees dying branch by branch, 25 yards apart. More than a century old, they were all that remained of Old Jules' orchard, just enough strength left to bear a few wormy apples hanging haphazardly like forgotten ornaments on an abandoned Christmas tree. Ed and I picked an apple each, polished them on our shirt sleeves,

and ate carefully around the wormholes. The flesh was firm and pleasantly chill, a tart communion host bringing us into the presence of a long-dead past. Between the orchard and the river, ash and hackberry trees grew and, below them, the currant bushes from which Old Jules made his wine. Lastly, we climbed Indian Hill and from its small summit looked out over the valley where the corpse of the Sioux Chief Conquering Bear had lain out on its funeral scaffold in 1854. Though I stood on my toes to look over the horizon, I couldn't see as far as Laramie Peak, either.

The Sand Hills begin on climbout from the eastern rim of the Niobrara canyon. They are not made of the gravelly mixture Wyoming calls sand but of *real* sand—beach sand from an ancient sea formed by moisture and the wind into gray dunes that in time caught the blowing prairie-grass seed and soddied themselves. Here and there, blowouts occur in the sod, sandy craters on which human beings lay automobile tires to keep them from expanding until entire hills are lifted and spun away on the winds. Between the hills and ridges, folded over and softly rounded, are many lakes, ponds, and sinkholes, surrounded by dark reed beds and spotted by flocks of waterfowl. In Jules' time, the Sand Hills were home to wolves, coyotes, deer, elk, antelope, and rattlesnakes, as well as birds; today, only the wolves are gone from them, along with the Indians who have been replaced by white ranchers (some descendants of Jules' settlers, a few of them Sandozes) scattered over the mostly depopulated country. The Sand Hills, like a heaving, green sea arrested in motion, are a surreal place: impressionistic, haunting, and mystical, a vague and separate world uplifted from the surrounding plains above which they seem to float, without an earthly contact.

In moving from the River to the Hill Place, Old Jules transferred his family some 30 or 40 miles eastward by wagon. The entrance to his last home, owned by Mari's niece Celia Ostrander since her sister Flora Sandoz's death in 1995, is signaled by an historic marker beside the paved highway. Ed turned his Dodge truck into the dirt track leading away from the road at a right angle, then made another right-angle turn to the left across a cattleguard. "Oh," he exclaimed as the truck topped a rise, "it looks different than it did in '92."

We were looking into a long valley

stretching between a straight ridge on the south side and broken hills making a barrier to the north. The valley was green, with marsh grasses in the bottom of the swale where, in spring, the shallow lake formed that Jules had put a rowboat on. At the eastern end of the valley, against the hills, two houses stood beneath mature shade trees, facing an apple orchard lying against the ridge. Beyond the valley, an expanse of blue water crinkled the afternoon sunlight. At the western end, opposite where the Dodge stood idling, a fenced plot showed against the steep rising behind it. "Over there's where she's buried," Ed said. He added, "They cut down the orchard between there and the dry lake—just scores and scores of fruit trees."

A sign pointing to the gravesite invited visitors to make themselves at home in the orchard, planted by Flora to Harrelson apple trees. Though the trees did not look well tended, the apples tasted fine. The single-story, cream-colored house that Jules built had been prettified since his time with windowboxes filled with flowers and other female improvements. We turned the truck around in the yard, drove back down the valley, and parked in the two-track below the grave.

Mari Sandoz lies parallel to the hillside beneath a handsome stone of purple granite surrounded by the wild prairie grasses. The guestbook, placed in a mailbox set on a post, was signed by people from around the United States and the world, the better part of them women. Celia, who tends the grave, signs in every time she pays a visit to the site. We added our names and took a few pictures. "She's been here 35 years already," Ed remarked, gently. Jules, who died in Alliance in November 1928, is buried in the cemetery over there, with Mary beside him.

Old Jules was refused by 13 publishers before being accepted by Hastings House in New York in 1935. According to Helen Winter Stauffer, Mari's biographer, the manuscript unsettled many editorial readers, in part because of the author's vengeful attitude toward her father in earlier drafts of the book. Now she lies where he ought to lie, the rise of the hill behind the grave plot greenly vivid in the light of the evening sun, pink tufts of Little Bluestem grass tossing on the wind, a living tombstone behind the granite one. Nothing here now but silence and peace—a final reconciliation, achieved by art and by eternity, between the violent undefeated pioneer and his firstborn child, the dauntless artist he so strangely sired.

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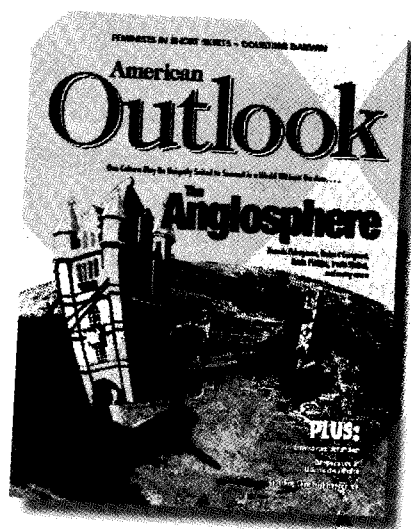
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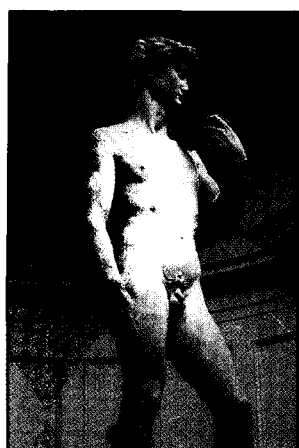
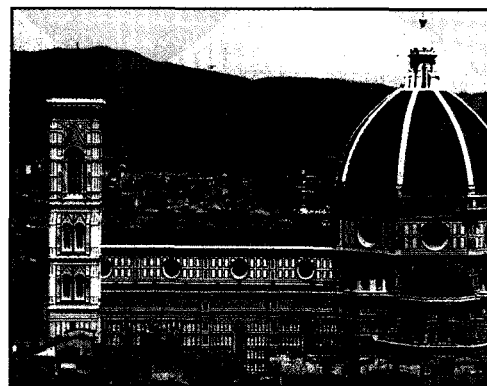
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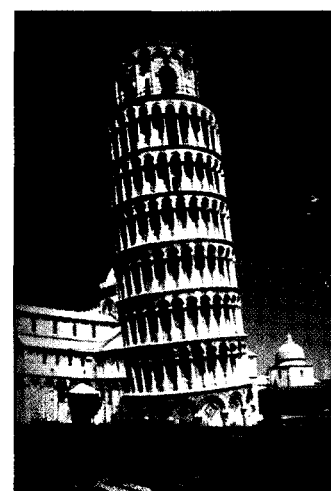
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