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Mari Sandoz seated at desk
(Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society)

**CONQUERING A WILDERNESS: DESTRUCTION AND
DEVELOPMENT ON THE GREAT PLAINS
IN MARI SANDOZ'S *OLD JULES***

by

Lisa R. Lindell

Jules Ami Sandoz came to America in 1881 at the age of 22. Following a three-year sojourn in northeastern Nebraska, he headed further west, settling in the recently surveyed region northwest of the Nebraska Sandhills. In *Old Jules*, the biography of her pioneer father, Mari Sandoz presented a character filled with conflicts and contradictions. Pitted against Jules's dynamic vision of community growth was his self-centered and destructive nature. Well aware of the more unsavory qualities exhibited by her father, Sandoz nonetheless maintained that he and others like him were necessary to the development of the West. This recognition did not preclude Sandoz from deploring the cultural devastation suffered by the Native Americans in the face of westward expansion. She saw the destruction of the Plains Indians' way of life as an irrevocable loss not only for the Native Americans but for the immigrant populations as well.¹ Through her candid depiction of Jules's personality and his complex relations with the inhabitants of the Niobrara region of Nebraska in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sandoz effectively conveyed her theory of the varied and paradoxical forces which shaped the history of the Great Plains.

Upon its publication in 1935, *Old Jules*, winner of the *Atlantic* nonfiction prize, attracted the notice of a number of prominent reviewers. These reviewers typically focused on the eccentricities of the central character and on the honesty, frankness, and objectivity of the author. Generally, they reacted positively to the book's unusual subject matter, style, and setting.² Some readers, however, took exception to the book's frankness of expression and to Sandoz's harsh portrayal of her father.

Beyond those contemporary reviews, *Old Jules* received relatively little critical analysis until modern feminists rediscovered this powerful book. They have tended to center upon the violent, domineering nature of Jules and other pioneer men

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in Sandoz's work and the extent to which the abuse of women was socially accepted on the frontier.³ A broader character analysis seems worth pursuing.

Sandoz regarded her father as a representative figure in the development of the American frontier. In her biography, she sought to capture the essence of Old Jules, striving to convey both the universality and the individuality of his character. In a letter to Mrs. J. W. Babcock, who was planning to review *Old Jules*, Sandoz expressed her perception of her father's role:

It gradually dawned upon me that here was a character who embodied not only his own strengths and weaknesses but those of all humanity—that his struggles were universal struggles and his defeats at the hands of environment and his own insufficiencies were those of mankind; his tenacious clinging to his dream the symbol of man's undying hope that over the next hill he will find the green pastures of his desire.⁴

The dream that galvanizes Jules is the dream of frontier development, of progressive movement in which he serves as the guiding force. When Jules, as a young man and recent emigrant from Switzerland, first beholds the unsettled Niobrara River country, he knows instinctively that this is where he belongs and immediately envisions a flourishing settlement:

Jules saw his home and around him a community of his countrymen and other homeseekers, refugees from oppression and poverty, intermingled in peace and contentment. There would grow up a place of orderliness, with sturdy women and strong children to swing the hay fork and the hoe.⁵

From 1884 until his death in 1928, Old Jules ceaselessly plans the growth of the community and battles for the rights of the settlers. Jules declares, "I am not in this business for the money. I'm trying to build up the country" (270) and reinforces this assertion by often foregoing a portion of his locating fees and generously supplying destitute families with provisions and lodging. He promotes and encourages settlement by sending numerous letters to family and acquaintances in Switzerland and to prospective landscekers throughout the United States. On behalf of the settlers, he continually complains to government officials, including President Theodore Roosevelt, about the illegal fencing of free land by the cattlemen and their use of underhanded, often violent tactics to drive away settlers.

It is important to recognize that, in Sandoz's portrayal, Jules's far-reaching

vision and ability to influence western development are due in large part to his enormous ego. Elaine Limbaugh underscores the paradoxical nature of Jules's egotism in "A Feminist Reads *Old Jules*":

It was Jules' ego which fed the passion that drove him and dominated his life. On one hand, his ego enabled him to garner success in the face of unbelievable difficulties. On the other hand, this same ego tended to absolve him from the distractions of human love and compassion.⁶

However, Jules's indisputable visionary qualities cannot mask his abusive and violent behavior. Embedded in his ego-fueled vision is the drive to take advantage of weaker figures to achieve his ends. Jules's relationships with his successive wives⁷ exemplify his custom of subjugating the desires and needs of others to his own need for domination. His assertion that "women who won't obey their husbands are worthless" (95) and his habit of striking his wives when they question his authority underscore his chauvinistic nature and violent tendencies. Two scenes in particular reveal Jules's patently cruel treatment of his family:

When the little Marie [Mari] was three months old and ill with summer complaint, her cries awakened Jules. Towering dark and bearded in the lamplight, he whipped the child until she lay blue and trembling as a terrorized small animal. When Mary dared she snatched the baby from him and carried her into the night and did not return until the bright day. (215-216)

On another occasion, Jules strikes his wife Mary across the face with a wire whip when she is unable to hold a bull calf that is to be castrated: "I learn her to obey me if I got to kill her!" he rages (230).

Egocentric and stubbornly proud, Jules rarely expresses regret for his actions or admits to any wrongdoing. His abrasive personality often alienates potential friends:

No one had ever been able to work with Jules long. The settlers who carried his surveying chain often considered throwing it into the sand and walking to the railroad without land. Few went hunting with him more than once, although they got game enough. (314)

Sandoz realistically analyzed her father's character in a letter to Frank C. Hanighen of Dodd, Mead & Company: "Jules was no Hamlet. He did no soul searhing. He was almost never conseious of wrong or fault in himself. Others made mistakes and compelled him to make them. His anger was never against himself."⁸

However, careful study of Sandoz's narrative voice reveals that it was not the author's purpose to condemn the conduct of her father. She used a matter-of-fact and nonjudgmental tone to describe Old Jules's actions and personality, presenting the negative aspects of his character bluntly and realistically but not with the intent of turning her readers against Jules.

It was the formidable task of eommunity development coupled with Jules's forceful, far-sighted vision that Sandoz recognized and admired . In her biography, she conveyed her father's visionary, passionate nature through her references to his eyes. Allusions to Jules's "live, piercing, far-focused eyes" (416) and to their burning intensity occur frequently. In her earliest description of Jules's appearance, Sandoz focused on his eyes

. . . as strange and changing as the Jura that towered over his homeland. They were gray, and glowed at a lusty story well told, withdrew in remote contemplation of the world and the universe, or flashed with the swift anger and violence of summer lightning.
(4)

The eye/visionary metaphor is woven throughout the biography.

Friends and acquaintances of Old Jules remark upon his ability to focus on the future of the region, to visualize a thriving community and to cultivate experimental crops and orchards. Rosalie Droz, the object of Jules's lifelong but unfulfilled love, writes him from Switzerland that he "saw only the far, the large, the exalted canvas," while she "preferred the smaller, the more familiar things" (191). Big Andrew, an early settler of the Niobrara region, likewise philosophizes about Jules's visionary qualities:

"Maybe he see what we don't. He is like the tree that grow on the bluff of the river--the pine. He get the wind and the storm that do not touch us who are the cottonwood and the willow near the water. But his root is strong and he see the cloud from far off--and the sun before she shine on us." (39)

In comparable terms, the county clerk describes her meeting with Old Jules and her impressions of him:

"He pointed out what he saw in the country the day he came. There was something of the prophet in him, a prophet who remains to make his word deed. He is rooted in a reality that will stand when the war and its hysteria are gone, a sort of Moses working the soil of his Promised Land." (406)

Johnny Jones, a long-time acquaintance of Jules, reflects upon the prophetic qualities of the old settler: "There's something in the old locator--maybe what the old Sioux call a vision." (403)

In fact, the content of Jules's powerful vision both mirrors and diverges from the essential visions of the native dwellers of the Plains portrayed by Sandoz in her two later biographical works, *Crazy Horse* and *Cheyenne Autumn*.⁹ In their desire for stability, coherence, and the freedom to follow their chosen lifestyles, the protagonists of these three works share a similar dream. Yet, Old Jules's aims are quite different from those of Sandoz's Native American characters. In contrast to the orientation of the Lakota and Cheyenne leaders who heroically struggle to preserve their people and traditions in the face of cultural devastation, Jules dreams of creating a new society. Although he respects the traditions of the Lakota and the Cheyenne, Jules is fully prepared to sacrifice their customs and lifestyles in order to further his own ambitions.

Sandoz highlighted the disparate perspectives of the Native Americans and Jules in an incident involving the sacredness of land. Oglalas camped along the Niobrara warn Jules against entering the land of rounded hills to the east, calling it "the land of the Gone-Before-Ones": "Strange things happened to those who went. If they came back, the tongue was twisted and none could understand" (28). But Jules sees the land differently, eyeing it as a potential place of settlement and as a source of food. He enters "the forbidden land of the Indians" (80), hunting the plentiful game and gathering the abundant fruit. Many years later, Jules files on land to the east: "the sandhills . . . still drew him as they had the day on the top of Deer Hill with the Sioux" (307). Driven by his expansionist vision, Jules ignores the sacred prohibitions of the Oglalas. Above all else, the advancement of his own dream is his priority. Bent on conquering and developing the land, Jules is heedless of the destructive consequences for Native Americans.

Throughout *Old Jules*, Sandoz traced her father's powerful impact upon community development. Midway through the novel, she surveyed the general conditions in northwestern Nebraska two decades after Jules's arrival, conditions which, to a large extent, stemmed from Jules's unswerving efforts at settlement and development:

By 1906 the Indians along the Niobrara, the big game,--elk, deer, even antelope,--were gone. The winters were still cold, but now there were railroads, good houses, fuel, warm clothing, better roads. The summers were still dry, and . . . the farmers on the table from Alliance to Gordon were doing what Jules said must be done: learning how to handle their soil, practising diversified farming, finding drouth-resisting crops. When corn failed, wheat often succeeded, and despite bugs and early freezes there were usually potatoes and Indians from Pine Ridge to pick them up behind the digger. (276-277)

While Sandoz respected the visions of each of the central characters in her three Great Plains biographies, she recognized the divergent routes by which her Native American protagonists and Old Jules pursue their dreams. The differing circumstances out of which these figures operate play a significant role in determining the nature and content of their visions. The indefatigable efforts of the central characters of *Crazy Horse* and *Cheyenne Autumn* to save their people and their traditions arise from within vital, long-established communities. In contrast, Jules, working in relative isolation, attempts to create a community. He is motivated by a desire to fulfill personal plans and dreams and a need to wield power over others, or at least to command their respect. He regards himself as one who must "keep moving always ahead, always alone" (76) and often boasts: "I had to fight for it alone--for all I got" (401).

Emanating from Jules's high regard for individualism is his respect for independent, self-reliant figures, those who stand alone, resolute and unafraid. Only a few men earn Jules's unalloyed admiration. Two such figures are Gentleman Jim, an uncommon outlaw whom Jules first encounters in Valentine and who later saves his life, and Crazy Horse, of whom Jules hears many tales during his stay at the Fort Robinson hospital (following a sixty-five-foot fall into a well): "Somehow Crazy Horse reminded him of the man in the saloon at Valentine, the one with the beautiful Winchester. Lone men, both of them, self-reliant. It would be good to be so" (51). Another who gains Jules's full respect is the Oglala chief, Young Man Afraid of His Horse, whom Jules meets in the chief's tipi at a Fourth of July celebration in Rushville:

Across from the opening was the older man, with no beads now, no paint, no feathers, and yet he was easily the finest there, this Young Man Afraid.

A long time the Swiss stared, but the chief gave no sign to this

deepest discourtesy to a Sioux. Finally Jules sat and smoked, but inattentively. The thing that had drawn him to the man with the Winchester at Valentine he found once more, here, and in an uneducated Indian. (66)

Despite the gulf between Jules's often self-centered, individualistic aspirations and the selfless, community-inspired aims of Sandoz's Native American protagonists, Jules is able, in fact, to respect their strength of character as they struggle to preserve their way of life.

In his relations with Native Americans, Jules differs from the typical pioneer, who usually feared and mistrusted the indigenous peoples. Soon after his arrival in the Niobrara country, he befriends a group of Oglalas camping across the river, particularly a young Oglala named White Eye. Jules spends many hours with these Native Americans, hunting with them and learning something of their knowledge about nature, their customs, and the tremendous losses they have experienced. As a sign of their respect for Jules, the Oglalas dub him "Straight Eye," a tribute to his hunting skills. His friendship with the Indians and his sympathy for their plight remain with him throughout his life. On his hospital deathbed, Jules is visited by his old friend White Eye:

One day the room was suddenly full of Indians. In the centre was White Eye, an old man between two graying sons. It was bad, this, to find Straight Eye in the medicine house with women in black robes to keep friends away. Jules was pleased, but soon the old Oglala led his people into the sunlight. "It is the land of the Gone-Before-Ones," he said, and the young Indians looked at him tolerantly. (420)

In an early discussion with acquaintances, Jules denounces the butchery of the Native Americans and the theft of their land. However, when he is reminded that he was "glad enough to come and take up a piece of the country," Jules refuses to accept any personal responsibility for the displacement of the native people, responding that the Indians had made him welcome (87). This disavowal of individual culpability is based on self-serving motives. Acknowledging accountability on this score would thwart Jules from pursuing his dreams of community development.

In the fall of 1890, rumors run rampant that Indians from the Pine Ridge Agency are on the war path. General Miles asks Jules to scout them out and attempt to persuade them to return to the agency. Jules heatedly refuses, retorting, "I have

lost no Indians. You lose any, you hunt for them" (129). In December, though, when news arrives of the massacre of Big Foot's band at Wounded Knee, Jules braves a coming storm to ride up to the battle site:

From a hill to the north he looked down over the desolate battlefield, upon the dark piles of men, women, and children sprawled among their goods. . . . Here, in ten minutes, an entire community was as the buffalo that bleached on the plains. . . . The man suddenly knew that he was very sick. (131)

Through her depiction of her father's revulsion at the scene at Wounded Knee, Sandoz showed Jules's spiritual side. Although Jules would never assume personal responsibility for the cultural displacement of the native people, he does implicitly acknowledge cultural responsibility for the annihilation at Wounded Knee. After viewing the carnage at Wounded Knee, Jules writes to Rosalie in Switzerland. In the letter,

he poured out all the misery and confusion of what he had just seen. A deep pessimism held him. There was something loose in the world that hated joy and happiness as it hated brightness and color, reducing everything to drab agony and gray. (131)

When his neighbors press Jules for his opinion of the battle, he pronounces it "a blot on the American flag" (132). Certainly, Jules does not regard the inhuman treatment of the native peoples as a blot on himself but on the government of which he is a part.

The brutality which Jules unleashes upon his family is impossible to reconcile with his abhorrence of the brutal treatment suffered by Native Americans. Perhaps Jules somehow seeks to justify his abusive behavior toward his women and children with the rationalization that their care is his responsibility alone and touches no one else. The subjugation of the indigenous peoples with its far-reaching, cultural-historical consequences, on the other hand, awakens and offends Jules's spiritual sensibility. Here he recognizes that such an injustice leaves a blight on both oppressed and oppressor.

It is ironic that the very qualities which contribute to Jules's success as a community leader and a developer of the region manifest themselves in reprehensible behavior. Jules's mammoth ego not only enables him to believe in his abilities as a community developer but also drives him to dominate and abuse the members of his household. His passionate, volatile nature often provokes him to

erupt in anger and violence; his ability to hold fast to and bring to fruition his own dreams threatens to be subsumed in stubbornness and an unwillingness to listen to the opinions of others; and his capacity to view the "exalted canvas" allows him to leave everyday, menial tasks to his family. When his wife Mary brings up the subject of work, Jules is indignant: "You want me, an educated man, to work like a hired tramp!" he roared, and threw her against the wall" (199). Jules follows the same line of argument when a friend questions his work habits: "I work my head. I'm not a *Grobian* with a strong back and a weak mind" (278).

Reflecting on the deep chasm separating Jules's exalted vision and his often malicious behavior, Sandoz observed: "But in Jules, as in every man, there lurks something ready to destroy the finest in him as the frosts of earth destroy her flowers" (46). Big Andrew, though, defends his friend's ways:

"Jules is then only what he must be. . . . One can go into a wild country and make it tame, but, like a coat and cap and mittens that he can never take off, he must always carry the look of the land as it was." (375)

Sandoz echoed this theme in a letter to Adolph Kaufman, who had contacted her about writing his biography: "Even the least probable man can learn to conquer a wilderness, but not without having it live on in him, unconquered, to the end"¹⁰

As she developed her historical vision, Sandoz came to believe that individuals like Jules were essential to the settlement of the West, despite the fact that their actions could be offensive and even uncivilized. She wrote in a letter to Mrs. L. A. Hornburg:

People who are disturbed by *Old Jules* forget that only the strong and the ruthless stayed--that the squeamish may be nicer to live with but they conquer no wildernesses. If you look into history you will find that vision is always accompanied by a degree of thoughtlessness, impatience, and even intolerance for others.¹¹

Through her portrayal of her father, Sandoz ultimately concluded that the very qualities that can sabotage the dream of coherent community are the qualities that make possible its realization. With eyes open to the destructive potential in Jules's attitudes and behavior, Sandoz yet believed that the dream transcended the elements that might have overthrown it, even as she mourned and decried the devastating effects of this dream on the displaced Native Americans. She believed that Jules's hardness, his unwillingness to allow himself to become weak through a

sense of personal responsibility, his sympathy for the plight of the victim in society, and even his cruelty to those close to him were attributes that fueled his drive to achieve settlement of the Niobrara region.

Sandoz summed up her feelings about her father in a letter to Herbert Cushing:

A man of less impatience and less violence could not have come from his sheltered and safe environment and stood alone, cap to his brows, gun across his forearm, against his entire little world. Such ego, such courage is given to but few of us. The world is full of ordinary women and children to be sacrificed. And by one of life's paradoxes, we were not sacrificed at all. Instead we were given a close look upon the lightning such as is granted to few. I, for one, have no complaint to make over my singed eyebrows.¹²

NOTES

1. Sandoz clearly made this argument in *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas* (1942; rpt., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953; rpt., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). What Sandoz may not have taken entirely into account in her writing is that the culture of the Native Americans was by no means wholly destroyed. Defying expectations of their disappearance, whether through death or assimilation, Native Americans have endured, preserving their culture, albeit in an altered and adapted form.

2. Stephen Vincent Benét, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune of Books*, called *Old Jules* "the best and most honest picture of its kind since Hamlin Garland's 'A Son of the Middle Border'" ("Breaker and Tamer of Hard Western Soil," 3 November 1935, 1). B. E. Bettinger concluded his *New Republic* review with the words, "Miss Sandoz has opened to the present public the pioneer West, which has been treated nostalgically, picturesquely, gruesomely, but never before with such salt of the great plains--salt of wit and sorrow" ("The Good Nebraska Earth," 25 December 1935, 205). Other reviewers who praised Sandoz's biographical treatment of her father were William Allen White, Robert Van Gelder, Bernard DeVoto, Stanley Williams, and Lewis Gannett.

3. Rosemary Whitaker and Melody Graulich view *Old Jules* as providing evidence of the connection between the human desire to acquire power and the displaying of violent behavior. Whitaker, examining *Old Jules* and Sandoz's novel *Slogum House*, discovers in

both works individuals "whose desire for domination carried with it a will for the violent pursuit of that desire" ("Violence in *Old Jules* and *Slogum House*," *Western American Literature* 16 (1981): 224); and Graulich, in "Violence Against Women in the Literature of the Western Family," *Frontiers* 7.3 (1984): 14, concludes that society's sanctioning of "male power and authority" inevitably leads to the abuse of women. Elaine Limbaugh, in "A Feminist Reads *Old Jules*," *Platte Valley Review* 17 (1989): 41-50, focuses on the women in the biography, particularly the four wives, and explores how Jules's character is illuminated through the women's struggles and experiences. See also Betsy Downey, "Battered Pioneers: Jules Sandoz and the Physical Abuse of Wives on the American Frontier," *Great Plains Quarterly* 12 (1992): 31-49; Melody Graulich, "Every Husband's Right: Sex Roles in Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules*," *Western American Literature* 18 (1983): 3-20.

4. Sandoz to Mrs. J. W. Babcock, 21 January 1936, University of Nebraska Archives and Special Collections. (Hereafter abbreviated as UNA-SC).

5. Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (1935; rpt., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 19. All further references to *Old Jules* are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

6. Limbaugh, "A Feminist Reads *Old Jules*" (note 3 above), 41.

7. Jules married four times. He abandoned his first wife Estelle; his second and third wives, Henriette and Emelia, left him. Jules remained married to his fourth wife Mary (Mari's mother) until his death in 1928.

8. Sandoz to Frank C. Hanighen, 21 November 1933, UNA-SC.

9. A careful reading of Sandoz's three biographies discloses her striking technique of depicting her personal historical vision of the West through her characterization of the books' protagonists. Through the differing perspectives of these characters, she communicated her view of the desecration of the Native American culture by the white settlers. In *Crazy Horse: The Strongest Man of the Oglalas* (note 1 above) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (note 1 above), Sandoz presented the Great Plains settlement experience from the standpoint of the displaced Lakota and Cheyenne peoples.

10. Sandoz to Adolph G. Kaufman, 25 February 1948, UNA-SC.

11. Sandoz to Mrs. L. A. Hornburg, 3 June 1936, *Letters of Mari Sandoz*, ed. Helen Stauffer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 106-107.

12. Sandoz to Herbert Cushing, 6 January 1936, UNA-SC.