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MARI SANDOZ AND HER 1956 FIFTY-YEAR PREDICTIONS

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Wintertime 1956 in New York City for Mari Sandoz was a time of reassessment. She had been thinking about a commitment she made, and it was time to meet it. She had agreed to compose predictions about American life for the next fifty years (from 1957 to 2007) that along with at least 57 others would be placed in a time capsule and stored in the cornerstone of the building that housed KETV in downtown Omaha.

Sandoz typed up her predictions on her typewriter in her relatively new apartment and entitled the five double-spaced pages “December, 2006 A.D.” and sent it off. The time capsule was to be opened and shared with the public in the next century in 2007 and without much fanfare, the capsule was dug out and made available. Of course, Sandoz kept copies of her

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predictions, and they can be found today in the Sandoz Archives at Chadron State College.²

This brief paper is going to “encapsulate” two aspects of this event. First, we need to know the context in which Sandoz created her predictions. Making predictions about the future is not an easy matter. So many aspects must be considered, let alone limiting one’s creativity to five pages. She must have felt constrained when she sat down before her trusty typewriter. Second, we will analyze her predictions and think about how successful she was in her future observations. After all, unlike Mari we do have the advantages of hindsight.

CONTEXT

The context of the previous few years for Mari Sandoz shook her world. She was extremely productive as a writer. Moreover, by this point in her career she had achieved national recognition as a writer of significance. Sandoz was invited hither and yon and often honored, and she sought to see her readers as often as she could while meeting her writing commitments and battling her publishers.

From 1953 to 1957, Mari Sandoz published four books and prepared for publication two other books. This is an author who was on top of her craft. She had to be working early in the morning until late at night, seven days a week. In 1953, *Cheyenne Autumn*, her masterful and sensitive treatment of the Cheyenne Indian diaspora, appeared in print from her New York publisher McGraw-Hill. *Cheyenne Autumn* was immediately followed by a history of the bison on the Great Plains. *The Buffalo Hunters: The Story of the Hide Men* was published in 1954 from Hastings House, also in New York. Next came *Miss Morrissa: Doctor of the Gold Trail*, also from McGraw-Hill in 1955. One year later, another novel, *The Horsecatcher* appeared from Westminster Press in Philadelphia. These years also found her preparing the foundations for two other books: a history, *The Cattlemen: From the Rio Grande Across the Far Marias*, published by Hastings House in 1958; and a collection of her short essays, *Hostiles and Friendlies: Selected Short Writings of Mari Sandoz*, her first publication with the University of Nebraska Press in 1959.³ Five years and six books!

² Mari Sandoz, “December, 2006 AD,” typescript, pp. 1-5, prepared in December, 1956; typescript today deposited in Mari Sandoz High Plains Center and Archives, Chadron State College, Chadron, NE [hereafter cited as Sandoz Predictions].

³ Helen Winter Stauffer, *Mari Sandoz, Story Catcher of the Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 291-92.

Sandoz, however, did not confine herself to writing histories and novels. She also published eight articles, among them “Nebraska,” an article for *Holiday* magazine in May 1956. In January of 1956, she gave an acceptance speech to the Westerners Chicago chapter, which had bestowed its Distinguished Achievement Award upon her.⁴ Carl Sandburg, when he wanted Sandoz to contribute to a folio he was preparing, said of the Sandhills native, she was “. . . the very rare and superbly American Mari Sandoz.”⁵ It is within this flurry of writing and publishing and recognition that Sandoz composed her predictions.

During this time, there were personal setbacks for Mari Sandoz. In 1954 Sandoz learned she had breast cancer. Her surgery interfered with her proofing of *The Buffalo Hunters*. She never forgave the error committed by the Hastings House publishers of misspelling Bismarck, North Dakota, and even worse, locating Bismarck in Minnesota on a map.⁶ She was not going to let her illness get any further in the way of her career. Nebraska was celebrating the centennial of Nebraska Territory (not unlike this year’s celebration of the Sesquicentennial of statehood), and she gave an address at the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln, titled “The Look of the West.” She was present for Mari Sandoz Day, declared in Nebraska for August 23, and then commenced six weeks of interviews.⁷ The year 1954 also brought the death of a close friend, journalist Don Hollenbeck, who was driven to suicide by Senator Joseph McCarthy and his witch hunts. Sandoz learned to fear McCarthy. She pictured him as a demagogue, like her characters in two of her previous novels, *Capital City* (1939) and *The Tom-Walker* (1947).⁸

A near catastrophe occurred in January 1956 when a fire broke out in the apartment above hers. She was home and managed to save many of her voluminous notes, although there was significant water damage. She then had to move to a new apartment which she made sure was in a brick building.⁹ June that same year witnessed the death of her dear friend Louise Pound, who had been a teacher of Sandoz and a constant source of important folklore information.¹⁰

⁴ Ibid., 292.

⁵ Ibid., 181-82.

⁶ Ibid., 197-98.

⁷ Ibid., 200-202.

⁸ Ibid., 197. See also 290-91.

⁹ Ibid., 217.

¹⁰ Ibid., 218.

Death of friends and writing colleagues, fire and the near loss of her many letters and research notes, cancer and surgery, and demagoguery struck Sandoz in these momentous years. But she still found a way to construct her predictions with optimism.

THE PREDICTIONS

Who wrote these predictions? Among the 58 who foresaw the future were 54 men and 4 women. Joining Sandoz were Lilly Dache, a beautician who owned a beauty spa in Florida; Carol Morris, Miss Universe of 1956, born in Omaha, moved to Iowa, and after the pageant did movies and married Texas oilmen; and Denise Martin, President of Nebraska Girls State. Sandoz was listed as “an authoress.”¹¹

The men included a number of corporate leaders and politicians. Many of President Dwight Eisenhower’s cabinet participated, including Herbert Brownell, Jr., Fred Seaton, Arthur Summerfield, and Sinclair Weeks. Others included J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI; Carl Curtis, Nebraska Senator; Omaha Mayor John Rosenblatt; and Nebraska Governor Victor Anderson. Education leaders included Rev. Carl Reinert, president of Creighton University; Dr. Milo Ball, President of the University of Omaha (later UNO); and Dr. Harry Burke, Superintendent of Omaha Public Schools. Interestingly, controversial Teamster president Dave Beck; Harry B. Coffee, President of the Union Stock Yards Co. of Omaha; and V. J. Skutt, President of the Mutual Benefit Health & Accident Association are listed. Corporate leaders encompassed Walt Disney, J. C. Penney, and Henry Luce, President of Time Magazine, among many others. Additionally, many in corporate television and journalism were invited.¹²

How Mari Sandoz stood up against this wide range of participants is not known. There is no evidence that the group ever met together. The list is, however, dominated by Omaha residents and leaders.

What predictions did Mari Sandoz make? Sandoz described the changes by 2007 in six core areas: the environment and water, travel, life and labor, the “Century of the Mind,” the advancement of art, and diplomatic relations. The breadth is impressive.

Sandoz predicted that a population explosion would occur in Nebraska during these fifty years, and it would concentrate along the Missouri and Platte Rivers. This suburban growth embraced

¹¹ Sandoz Predictions, “Prophecies of Achievements by the Year 2007 for Deposit in KETV Cornerstone,” pp. 1-3.

¹² *Ibid.*

the Platte first. Then the Missouri developed as a vast park with “tasteful trees and shrubs” and “manicured neatness” on both sides of the river from Sioux City to the Mississippi River. Also along the rivers, “restorations” would be built, restoring how the area looked to the first pioneers.¹³

With increased population, water became more and more important. No doubt Sandoz reflected the crucial need for water in the Sandhills where she grew up. All droughts, Sandoz declared, would end except for those caused by manmade overuse. Plentiful water tables could be pumped. More significantly, Sandoz predicted “creating” water supplies from de-salting sea water, converting water from body fat, and turning waste products into water. “Like a new Moses, we’ll be able to produce water from the rock.” Nebraskans should not worry about water shortages.¹⁴

With the significant population increase, travel required solving the impediments to long-range travel. She predicted the development of transcontinental speed tubes where people traveled safely at high speeds. Folks on the East and West Coasts could reach Omaha in “less than an hour.” So successful would be these speed tubes that they were being developed for travel to Asia and Europe. Fatalities were to be one in every 10 million passengers.¹⁵

Surface travel would continue but the vehicles would have “antagonism fields” making collisions impossible. Sandoz did not predict driverless automobiles, but she did believe that “clumsy airplanes” would be replaced by “automatically sustained craft” – essentially pilotless. One would avoid air crashes by traveling in designated air lanes.¹⁶

As for life and labor, complex machines would be developed to do most labor. These machines – robots – would be supervised by other machines. This advancement could reach remote areas of the state. What people would do without jobs, Sandoz did not speculate about, but that is already an area of concern in today’s world.

Moreover, people would have an average life span of at least 100 years. What was exceptional now became ordinary. Cures for cancer and heart disease would be found just like those for polio and tuberculosis. Educational opportunity would expand, and those who did not take advantage of educational opportunities – she termed these people “shirkers” – would be shunned by society.¹⁷

¹³ Sandoz Predictions, typescript, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

After these projections, Sandoz turned to serious and thoughtful concepts. It is here where her readings of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung strongly influenced her thinking.¹⁸ She believed that 1856-1956 was the Century of Matter, when humans expanded their understanding of life and sought to command the physical world. This era would be followed by what Sandoz termed the Century of the Mind. During this era, humans would gain an understanding of the stages of human development through signals from the brain, discover newborn infants speak a language they must forget upon birth, and begin to probe the deep mind to find what caused prejudice, superstition, mob reactions, and sudden unreasonable and violent behavior. Medical advances have already had an impact because, she stated, mental hospitals are emptying and closing.¹⁹

Continuing with her thoughts on the Century of the Mind, Sandoz briefly noted that art would profit more than any other area of culture from new explorations and expansions of the mind. Art would bring new meaning to life and offer clues to the future.²⁰

Finally, Sandoz concluded that the greatest advance over the next fifty years would be in international relations, by way of advances in macroscopic behavioral understanding. Wars in the past, she posited, were mostly over monopolies of hunting regions, fisheries, trade areas, and gold and oil. But by 1956, we knew that power cannot be monopolized because it is found in the atom. A few realized that this discovery might lead to our destruction. Thus, for Sandoz, the ultimate universal force of atomic power will hopefully unify rather than divide humans into “one great whole.”²¹

CONCLUSION

Mari Sandoz was a brave prognosticator. In her predictions, she held out a number of challenges to the human condition. There is much to ponder and decipher. She completed these predictions for the general public because she believed that writers were “public servants.” The public buys books and essays, she noted, so she felt she and other writers owed them. And because of this universal debt, writers must not encourage “human injustice.” They, as she certainly did, must have a “strong sense of morality.”²²

¹⁸ Helen Winter Stauffer, ed., *Letters of Mari Sandoz* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. xix.

¹⁹ Sandoz Predictions, typescript, pp. 3-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²² Stauffer, *Sandoz, Story Catcher*, pp. 170-71.

As noted Sandoz biographer Helen Winter Stauffer has written, Mari Sandoz believed it was the duty of writers “to bring knowledge of western history to the attention of American readers and to draw attention to the evils, past and present, of our civilization, so that they could be corrected.”²³ Sandoz confidently felt that this noble purpose was achievable, and her predictions optimistically embrace this call.

What might Mari Sandoz make of today’s world? What will our society be like in 2067?

²³ Stauffer, *Letters*, p. xix.