

By Connie L. Sheehan
Senior Editor

Nebraska authors preserve Old West memories

For some students, the names Neihardt, Sandoz and Cather are nothing more than buildings dotted across a sprawling university campus.

But lucky are the ones who know these names for their real worth; some of Nebraska's best-known poets and authors.

"Nebraska does a good job in honoring its authors," said Ann Billesbach, reference specialist with the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Bess Streeter Aldrich

Carol Miles Petersen didn't plan to become one of the leading experts on the life of Nebraska author Bess Streeter Aldrich, "the research just snowballed that way."

Petersen currently is researching

the first biography written on Nebraska author Bess Streeter Aldrich. While teaching at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, Petersen jokingly asked her class why everyone writes about other Nebraskan authors and not Bess Streeter Aldrich.

"And the class asked why I didn't write about her," Petersen said.

Petersen said she first was asked to represent Aldrich on a discussion panel, then wrote an article and eventually gave a presentation in Elmwood, Aldrich's hometown.

"Each time I had to do more research on Aldrich's life," Petersen said, and it just kept growing.

Petersen said she gets most of her information from Aldrich's three surviving children and from research done in the archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

"The archives hold personal letters, telegrams and clippings, most of them donated by family members," she said.

Petersen said Aldrich wrote about 160 short stories, all of which were published, and 11 novels. One story was illustrated by a young Norman Rockwell, she added.

"Some of her books have never gone out of print," Petersen said, "and in 1931 Aldrich was one of the top three writers in the country according to sales."

Petersen said Aldrich's stories are historically correct.

"But she weaves the history into the story so the reader isn't even aware of it," she said.

Petersen said some of Aldrich's historical background comes from her family's pioneering experiences and the later adventures of her own life.

Her parents, James Warren and Mary Wilson Streeter, homesteaded in northeastern Iowa and Bess was born the youngest of eight children in 1881.

Bess graduated from Iowa State Teachers College in 1901 and taught

several years. Bess then married Captain Charles Aldrich, the youngest U.S. captain in the Spanish-American War.

The Aldrich family eventually moved to Elmwood where Charles and his brother-in-law decided to purchase the American Exchange Bank, Petersen said.

"She (Bess) didn't want to move to Nebraska because she remembered how her mother used to pack old clothes for the poor people in Nebraska and she didn't want to eat dried apples and wear old clothes," Petersen said.

But Bess changed her mind after arriving in the middle of a duststorm to find her neighbors had set the table with her china, fixed the dinner meal and were waiting for her to arrive at the new house.

"She realized Nebraska would probably be a pretty good place after all," Petersen said.

Willa Cather

Billesbach should know how much work is dedicated toward preserving these author's pasts since she served as curator for the Willa Cather Historical Center in Red Cloud for 10 years.

The centers don't use a "George Washington slept here interpretation" when setting up the centers, she said.

"We want to show how these places affected her writing," Billesbach said, "not that this is the house she slept in or the chair she sat in."

Many locations in the town of Red Cloud have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places, she said.

The center includes six buildings

and a variety of tours have been developed for Cather fans who stop to visit.

Visitors may take a town tour that includes her home and the Red Cloud depot, but this tour is held only twice a day, once in the morning and again in the afternoon, Billesbach said.

Tours are given throughout the day of Cather's childhood home, which was detailed in her story "Old Mrs. Harris."

Visitors also may hike through the "Willa Cather Prairie," 610 acres of native prairie developed by the Nature Conservancy, named in honor of the author.

"There is also a self-guided countryside tour which directs drivers through 40 miles of southern Webster county," Billesbach said.

Billesbach said that even though Cather traveled extensively, the author always thought of Nebraska as home.

"She was torn between her travels and her life in Nebraska," she said.

But some Red Cloud residents still remember when she lived in town and it's good that the information surrounding the author's life is being collected now before it's forgotten, Billesbach said.

Mari Sandoz

Caroline Sandoz Pifer, sister of author Mari Sandoz, says her family wasn't the visiting kind; everyone always ended up at the Sandoz home instead.

"And I'm still waiting for the phone to ring," Pifer said, referring to the tours and individuals who visit her Sandhills home to tour the memorabilia of her sister.

Pifer said between the tours of college classes and elementary children, she works in her garden or on the new collection of unpublished Sandoz stories she hopes to publish.

"People are always calling to ask what these unpublished stories are about," Pifer said, "and it would just be easier to have the stories published than to retell them every time someone calls."

Pifer said her sister's stories are based on her life in the Sandhills and the surrounding community.

Their parents were homesteaders, she said, and the two adults and six children lived in a three-room frame house set in the Sandhills near Gordon.

Pifer said Mari graduated from eighth grade and passed her teaching certificate exam.

"So, she was my teacher for a couple years at the local grade school," Pifer said.

Pifer said her sister moved in 1919 to Lincoln and eventually ended up at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to work on credit hours for another teaching certificate.

Louise Pound influenced her writing while at UNL and even took Mari around town to read at poetry meetings, she said.

Her most popular book, "Old Jules," was published in 1935, Pifer said.

"Old Jules" is a family story and 249 people from the area are men-

tioned in the story," she said. "Old Jules" portrayed the life of her father, Pifer said, and even though he seemed a little extreme in his actions, everyone gets a little ornery sometimes in life.

John G. Neihardt

Hilda Neihardt says her father, author John G. Neihardt, loved young people and included his children on many of his adventures.

"He said that people his age weren't enthusiastic enough," Hilda said. "They had lost their sense of wonder."

She speaks of growing up in the West her father knew and one can see her sense of wonderment for that period still runs strong.

"It's incredible to talk to someone who knew all these people," Hilda said as she ran over the list of famous old-timers her father often visited.

His appearance on the Dick Cavett Show in the early '70s impressed the host to a point where his "mouth would just fall open" when her father began to speak of his famous Old West acquaintances, she said.

"He made it a point to know all the old-timers who were still alive at the time."

Hilda said her father did a lot of research for his writings and then filled in this research with the firsthand information from these old-timers.

"A good example is the story of Crazy Horse's death, which was gotten from an army officer present at the time," she said. "The officer was so upset about the death that he asked to be transferred out of the Indian Services."

The author also used many of his own childhood experiences in his works, she said.

Born in 1881, her father spent his childhood living in a sod house on the Kansas plains, Hilda said. But eventually the family moved to Nebraska to join other family members.

After graduation, Neihardt held a variety of jobs but a highlight in his life was his job as clerk with J.J. Elkin, an Indian agent, she said.

"Here he got to know the Omaha tribe very well," Hilda said. "He thought of them as fine people and appreciated their way of life."

John G. Neihardt was appointed Nebraska Poet Laureate in 1921, she said, and remained so for 52 years, as long as any Poet Laureate in history.

"Nebraska was always important to father," Hilda said.

Hilda said she currently is writing her own memoirs about her father's trips.

"He didn't write any personal references, just the information obtained for his stories," she said.

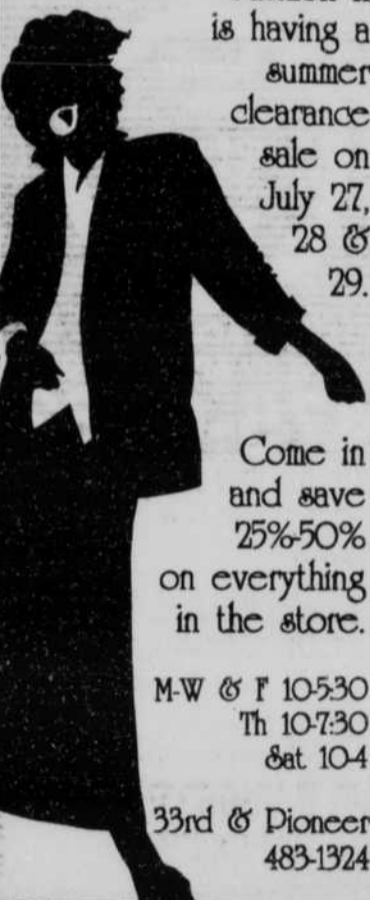
During the writing of "Black Elk Speaks," Hilda accompanied her father three times during his meetings with the medicine man, Black Elk.

Neihardt said she was 14 years old, old enough to remember, and the memories are still very clear.

"Now everyone is dead -- father, Black Elk, the Indian agent and Black Elk's daughter -- and if I don't do it, the memories will be lost," she said.

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