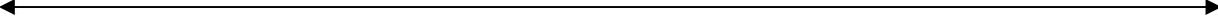


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# Author's Postscript

## to the novel COTTONWOODS

By George Brandsberg



SEVERAL DECADES PASSED between the time I first started thinking about writing a book about the Johnston-Paul-Brandsberg Company and I actually began putting it on paper. The J-P-B Co. was headquartered on the JM Ranch seven miles east of Belle Fourche, SD. It included all of the land bound on the north by U.S. Highway 212, the Belle Fourche River on the south, the north-south lane into Fruitdale on the east and a line just west of the Belle Fourche River bridge on the west side. The land totaled about 4,000 acres. In the 1950s it included farms owned and operated by Chris Brandsberg and John Dusing. In the early days, the mid 1800s, a man named McMaster assembled the ranch by combining several homesteads.

My siblings and I grew up on the western part of that ranch. Our Uncle Toby Brandsberg owned the eastern part until he divorced his wife, sold his farm and moved to Illinois.

Included in my research for Cottonwoods was several hours' interview with my father, Chris Brandsberg, in the early 1960s, during which I asked him to recount some of his favorite stories about his life in America. That's the source of the anecdote about drinking chokecherry wine at Buckingham place and digging post holes for Jorgan Boe's fence-building crew. Toby Brands-

berg had that job for a year before Chris did. They called it wasting their first year in *Amerika*.

During this session, I asked Dad several questions about the Johnston-Paul-Brandsberg Company, whether it had any problems and so on, looking for some hint of the dramatic or sensational to use in fashioning a novel. Of course, nothing like that came out of the conversation. The partners “were all honest, hard-working men,” he said, so I started with their situation and populated it with an entire set of new characters.



Hereford cattle on the JM Ranch

Years later, about 1990, I renewed my research on this project. This time I searched through Dad’s old letters and found 13 of them were from the Old Country, written in Norwegian. A graduate student in Germanic Languages at the University of Kansas translated them, giving me some insight into what life was like in Norway around the turn of the century. These letters were from the eldest Brandsberg brother, Tønnes, and the parents of the family. The content of these letters suggested that Chris, the youngest son, was the only one of the family’s immigrants to correspond regularly with family members back home. So, when our family traveled to Europe in 1982, it was with some hopes of finding letters my father had written,

recounting his experiences and keeping the folks back in Norway informed.

When I asked our cousin in Norway, Tor Brandsberg, he said, yes, there had been some old letters in the attic of the ancient house on the farm that is still in the family when they added the second story, jacking up the roof. Unfortunately, mice had shredded the letters to a smelly nest of confetti, , so what was left was discarded. But the translations of the letters from Norway provided a clue about a little book, *The Celtic Romance*, written by a neighbor, Johann Sehl, who had spent 13 miserable years in America before going home to stay.

Johann appeared to be a dedicated and aspiring writer and a fanatical Socialist. He was probably regarded by many neighbors as an oddball. Most of the people he worked for in the U.S. were not very nice to him. Even so, his impressions as an immigrant were useful to my project.

Also, I used the interlibrary loan system to borrow microfilm copies of the newspapers published in Belle Fourche between 1900 and 1920, searching for any information that might shed light on the J-P-B Company. Fairly frequent mentions of the comings and goings of Will and Frank Johnston appeared in print, but there was nothing about the brothers Brandsberg, Chris and Toby, until they joined the company property qualified people for mention in the newspapers.

Additional research included sending questionnaires to various relatives and former neighbors to gather additional information. Then, too, I interviewed Doris Shipley, Art Grimsbo, Orin Sterns and Louise Johnston, who were all very helpful. And, of course, I read a pile of books, both about Norway and early-day South Dakota.

But the mountain of material I had gathered did not add up to a novel. There were interesting tidbits, but nothing suitable for doing a book. My approach was to create a set of central characters in the likeness of the principals of the J-P-B Company and a few other Butte County residents.

So, instead of having a story about the Johnstons, John Paul and the Brandsbergs, I launched into writing a tale of the Malcolms, John Saul, and the Hauges, purely fictitious characters. Except for a few people who were actual neighbors of the JM Ranch—Dick Grady, William Matthews, John Faulkner, the Helmers, the Jeremiasons, Fred Fuller, the Rae Brothers, the Stearnses and a few others—the characters are fictitious. There was a real Charles Finch who ranched near the mouth of the Sand Creek Canyon near Beulah, WY, near where Chris Brandsberg spent part of the winter of 1907-08, caring for a pen of fed cattle, but everyone else from the Beulah area in this story are imaginary.



**The JM Ranch in the 1950s**

William T. “Billy” Moses was an actual lawman of wide repute who tracked criminals as far as New York City, hauling them back to Butte County for trial. Billy’s wife and then his son died unexpectedly and afterwards the lawman got into a bad marriage and his career deteriorated. His

killing (or perhaps severely beating) a petty crook in a wool house in Belle Fourche was regarded as excessively brutal, so he resigned as sheriff and became a livestock detective in Montana, where he was killed in 1914 in a struggle over a gun with an old friend from Texas who had given refuge to Billy's estranged wife. The friend was acquitted.

When writing fiction, I like to use real places as scenes for the action and include incidental neighbors by name as long as doing that doesn't reflect negatively on them. I think doing this helps create the illusion of reality.

Chris and Toby Brandsberg did homestead on Arpan Flat, on land just on the north side of Indian Creek, that included the site of the original Arpan Store. When water for irrigating failed to appear, they relinquished their claims and rented a farm in the Belle Fourche valley from a man named Bomford. I have never been able to determine exactly where this was, but it may have been near Fred Fuller's place two or three miles east of Belle Fourche since Chris Brandsberg worked for Fuller occasionally.



Horses on the JM

The lawsuit in which the Hauges (pronounced HOW-gaze) and the Red Water Land and Canal Company attempted to evict the widow, Maghi Bertalino, from a nearby farm (her real name was

Bartalino) really did happen with the Brandsberg Brothers as plaintiffs with the Red Water company's lawyer. The judge allowed the woman to keep her land as a tenant and the Brandsbergs ended up paying all the legal fees.

Chris Brandsberg survived the runaway of a team of horses pulling a dump-type hay rake as occurs in chapter 17. His only injury was a sliver lodged in the back of his neck.

Items from newspapers that found their way into the book include the advertisement "WANTED: A WIFE" without any information who ran the ad. Also, the account of Hattie Wallace masquerading as Jim Footner, the skilled cowboy, came from the Belle Fourche papers, probably printed as a joke on the newspaper, as did the sad final story of the hooker Daisy Smith. At that time, Belle Fourche had a red light district on the west end, the denizens of which were frequently fined for liquor violations. I think Fifth Avenue in Belle is still called Saloon Street by some locals.

The Johnston Lateral did indeed break in the draw above the JM farm pond in 1908, probably as a result of poor soil engineering, not sabotage. A government crew quickly built a wooden flume which was later replaced with a steel one supported by a wooden trestle. Interestingly enough, in recent years, the flume has been replaced with dirt banks similar to the original earthwork.

There was a real August Keskatello (renamed Lucertola, "lizard," in the novel) who died in a stump blasting accident across the river from the JM. Nestor Daniels claimed that he had seen his brother-in-law, one of the Ericksons, kill Keskatello and blow up his body to destroy the murder evidence. An investigation proved

Daniels was trying to frame Erickson. Daniels ended up in prison for perjury. It seems understandable that Sherriff Moses would suspect Torval of killing Lucertola after of the brutal beating the Eyetalian had given him. This kind of violence never happened to any of the J-P-B partners.

No “Bloom Gang” ever operated in Western South Dakota, but there was a Guffy Gang that stole cattle on what was left of the open range, spiriting them away at night, using a chain of conspirators to drive the animals from the Moreau River area to the Bad Lands and sold. Chris Brandsberg was a juryman on the Guffy trial, where he learned that the gang had gotten away with some of his cattle and Toby Brandsberg’s, (after the J-P-B Company had dissolved).

Former employees of the JM Ranch, Charles M. Helvey, and his teenage wife, met a man named William McChaddo and soon after the men induced the young woman to forge Toby Brandsberg’s signature on a check for \$125.50. The forgery and its being passed in a Belle Fourche bar occurred in September, 1908, but the arrest didn’t take place until January of 1909. As a result, Helvey and McChaddo went to prison. This episode suggested the story line of Mildred Greenleaf’s

altering a company check after Torval fired her.

Will Johnston did actually own a Hupmobile car which gave him fits. The chapter, “The Automobilist,” was inspired by what Louise Johnston told me, as well as a paragraph among the news items from Fruitdale, stating that Henry Stearns had bought a new auto and was learning to drive it, even though some local fences had suffered. “But therein lies another story,” the newspaper commented.

The Johnston family members were renamed Malcom in the novel. Chris and Toby Brandsberg were renamed Rolf and Torval Hauge after a village located near their hometown, Sokndal, in southern Norway.

One winter, probably after Chris Brandsberg finished working at the HO (Holcomb) Ranch east of Rapid City, he repeated the essentials of Grades 1 through 8 in a nearby country grade school. His final test was to write an essay, *Washington's Life*, produced elsewhere on this web site. Click on the title to read this document.

Torval Hauge's "little bit of Norway" is a small piece of granite I picked up as a souvenir while hiking on the Brandsberg farm in Norway in 1982. For Torval, it served as a security blanket when he was feeling low.



This is no doubt far more than most readers wish to know about how COTTONWOODS came to be written.

—George Brandsberg

