

‘Cottonwoods Is an Action-Packed Ranch Story,’ by David Kromm, Ph. D.

February 8, 2016

Operating a ranch near the Black Hills of South Dakota, a property with good grasslands, irrigation water, and accessibility to town and railroad, sounds like an ideal situation in 1907. Two young Norwegian immigrant brothers are invited to partner with two American brothers, one a lawyer in Wisconsin, to operate the ranch. But the alliance leads to threats to the ranch and many people. Someone is out to destroy the ranch and its people if need be. For much of the book the two sets of brothers don't know who is behind a series of unfortunate and often dangerous events. Who can they trust?

Almost poetic portrayals of the landscapes and the weather provide a great setting for the work of the ranch and the intrigue. An evocative essay relating Will Malcom's thoughts gives an informative sense of the importance of the cottonwood tree in the life of those inhabiting the semiarid plains.

Brandsberg tells of one year at the JM Ranch, operated by the Malcom brothers, Will and Frank, and the Hauge brothers, Rolf and Torval. Cattle are rustled, buildings burned, and people threatened by a mysterious force that no one is able to identify for most of the period. The author knowingly writes about daily ranch activities and irrigated farming techniques common to that era, all the while relating the unfortunate events transpiring. And the emotions of the brothers.

The major characters are real and easily identified with, while minor ones inform the reader what is taking place in the daily life in the larger society and give better understanding of the main players. Because the reader relates to both the people and the ranch, the ending is

somewhat unsettling. All one hoped for could not be.

There is much action, including the breaching of an important irrigation canal, a tense standoff, grisly murders, bloody fistfights, and other dangerous encounters. In one, while hunting for the cattle thieves in a rugged area, Rolf is captured by two members of the gang responsible for all the misfortunes. Rolf is told to take off his boots, roll up his pant legs, and walk up a rocky slope to an area infested with rattlesnakes. Being more agile and fit, Rolf navigates the irregular terrain, made slippery by a rain storm, better than his assailants. One of them is attacked by a rattlesnake and tumbles and runs down to his horse and leaves. The other one, named Burt, tells Rolf to continue walking up to the top of a butte where people seldom go so that he can blow Rolf's brain out with his pistol. Rolf was able to get over a rise that blocked Burt's view. When he came into view Rolf was waiting for him with a rock that he hurled into Burt's head. That story was separated into two parts by an even more elaborate plan to kill Frank Malcom, one of the other brothers in the same partnership, who was also searching for the cattle thieves.

Life is softened by brotherly love, steamy romance, and the cottonwood trees. A new Hupmobile humorously introduces the JM Ranch to the automobile age.

Cottonwoods is a fine western novel that nicely tells a tale about living on the early 20th century modernizing frontier of western South Dakota.

David Kromm taught Geography at Kansas State University for 38 years before retiring as a Full Professor Emeritus. He was awarded approximately \$1 million in research grants to study groundwater depletion in the American High Plains and won the K-State Outstanding Undergraduate Teacher Award and the Phi Kappa

Phi Research Scholar of the Year. He is the author of one book and co-author of another book and some 40 journal articles and book chapters. He has traveled to more than 50 countries and has been married for 55 years with three children and seven grandchildren.

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