

## Retired K-State professor pens 2nd novel, 'Cottonwoods'

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Immigrant brothers Torval and Rolf Hauge believe their part of the American Dream has come true when they're asked to become partners in a large cattle company in western South Dakota.

It's 1907 and the brothers—hard and earnest employees—have worked a variety of ranching jobs in the area in the 10 years since their arrival from Norway. At first hesitant, they decide to join with the Malcom brothers to work the JM Ranch, but they soon discover outside forces threatening to wreck havoc on their lives in this story of unfolding adventure by a local author.

This is the second novel by Manhattan resident George Brandsberg, a South Dakota native who retired from the K-State's communications department in 2000.

His first novel, published in 2006 and found in many local elementary school libraries now, was *"Afoot: A Tale of the Great Dakota Turkey Drive."* He's also written several nonfiction works, including the soon-to-be-released *"The Deadly Snow: A Cold War Memoir."* Brandsberg will be signing copies of his books at local bookstores in November.

The narration in "Cottonwoods" slips between an omniscient narrator and Rolf, one of the brothers, in addition to one or two other main characters.

Rolf, at 28, is three years younger and more easygoing than the recalcitrant, often brusque Torval, but he usually respectfully defers to his older brother, who has recently been appointed foreman of the JM Ranch. Both men have their hands full, however, when they discover some of their best cattle have been shot and find other ranch property tampered with.

Brandsberg has created some memorable characters. Rolf is a steadfast person and good man, despite knowing his share of heartbreak. His betrothed, Kari, was left back in the Old Country. His current relationship with the mysterious Rose Bloom seems ill fated from the start; her cousin Magnus is an unstable bully bent on destruction.

The Malcolm brothers—the happy go lucky Will who resides on the JM Ranch and the wily Milwaukee lawyer Frank—seem opposite in disposition but are united in their love for the ranch.

The character back-stories are always interesting, fleshing out the characters themselves beautifully. For example, this is Will's wife, Nelle: "She was a handsome woman with auburn hair, intelligent, pleasant company. A farm daughter from Nebraska who had spent five years as a school teacher in the raw lands of eastern Wyoming, she had an earthy sense of humor, a boundless curiosity."

Torval is a hard worker with a soft spot for the ladies—whether it's one or two on Saloon Street back in town, the ranch cook with unknown motives, or the woman from Ohio he's accidentally enticed to come west with a vague promise of marriage. He's prideful and stubborn, and not an easy man to get along with, even for his own brother Rolf.

The turn-of-the-century era comes alive because of the author's diligent attention to detail and skilled use of language. Passages about the horseless carriage are humorous while others, like this description of the ranch cook, are more poignant. She is described as "a blonde woman a bit past the flower of youth, slightly worn at the corners."

The land itself—the plains and buttes and canyons of South Dakota—is one of the main draws here, and the author has brought it to life in this very entertaining novel.

Robin Edmunds is a freelance writer and Manhattan resident.

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