

Like herding a flock of turkeys . . .

Adventure-filled 'Afoot' about a teen's role in a turkey drive across the Dakota Territory

AFOOT: A Tale of the Great Dakota Turkey Drive. George Brandsberg. The Cedartip Company, 2006. 174 pages. \$11.85 in paperback, \$22.80 in hardcover. Available at www.cedartip.com and other outlets.

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George Brandsberg's fast-paced *Afoot: A Tale of the Great Dakota Turkey Drive* is a tale of adventure for junior readers that highlights the importance of character, hardiness and persistence.

Afoot opens with Joshua Greene of Kankakee, Ill., being rolled of all his cash by two street thugs. At 13, he is inexperienced on the streets and is looking for his older sister. Orphans after their parents' deaths in an 1876 hotel fire in Chicago, the two teenagers have struck out on their own after their selfish Uncle Asa and Aunt Clara became their guardians, closed the Greene Family Bakery and separated the children. Joshua Greene is without funds, but not without a sense of higher purpose.

While this novel starts out with Joshua on his solo hero's journey, this work is about the need for strategic cooperation to survive in a hostile world. For wages of \$1 a day, grub and bedroll, he signs up with , the hard-drinking Rufus Peach for a 45 to 50 day trek to herd turkeys across the Dakota plains.

Joshua discovers his own talent for logistics on this trail, planning the purchase of food when it's found. that they're ill-equipped for feeding all of the men on the turkey drive. The logistics of the turkey drive provide enthralling insights into turkey behavior, their protection from coyotes and rustlers, and care—including the use of a wagon as a turkey hospital for those injured along the way.

The reality on the Dakota plains, as envisioned by Brandsberg, is of tough

weather and tougher people, from the Native Americans out to rustle turkeys to the hardened American outlaws who scheme and plot violence for their own gain.

Joshua discovers his turkey drive leader has a "wicked mouth and a vile spirit." He learns how to lead men and how to read personalities. He learns to get past his irrational fear of Native Americans; some are revealed as loyal and selfless friends and others as vicious enemies. He develops a growing sophistication, paying attention to his surroundings and planning his escape route given any situation. He learns to take up arms. He even develops a sense of hierarchy among their charges, with charming descriptions of the two lead male turkeys, Buzzard and Horace.

The price for mistakes may be individuals' lives, as in the scalping and stripping of three men who'd left the drive and struck out on their own. The surviving men in this caravan have it so hard that it makes one wonder how Lucinda, a young teenage girl with no known allies, might fare all alone.

With an unadorned writing style, the author maintains an old-school sense of style. Instead of

having his characters curse, he described one character as speaking with a "blast of profanity that would have scorched the paint off a pump handle."

At the heart of this fictional work is an actual 200-mile turkey drive described in an historical account which the author includes in an addendum. Brandsberg traveled this route by bicycle as part of his research and contacted historians, an anthropologist, a sociologist, a turkey farmer and others as part of the research for his inaugural novel.

