

The Bitterroot & Mr. Brandborg: Clearcutting and the Struggle for Sustainable Forestry in the Northern Rockies. By Fred H. Swanson. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011. xiii + 356 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. Cloth \$39.95.

In the summer of 1971 Wyoming Senator Gale McGee interrupted a family vacation at the request of retired Forest Service supervisor Guy “Brandy” Brandborg to look over timber harvests on Montana’s Bitterroot National Forest. As the senator and Brandborg observed a large clearcut with bulldozed terraces gouged into the mountainside, McGee remarked that the scarred site was “a crime against the land and the public interest” (p. 1). Later that fall newspaperman Dale Burk’s photo of McGee and Brandborg viewing the clearcut made the front page of the New York Times. That event, writes Fred Swanson, marked the “ascent to a national stage of what might have remained a parochial issue from Montana’s backcountry” (p. 2).

In this thoroughly researched study, the author places Minnesota-born Guy Brandborg (1893-1977) at the center of a riveting local story with national implications for the Forest Service. Born to Swedish immigrant parents, Brandborg’s family valued farmer cooperatives, socially responsible public policies, and shared a deep mistrust of powerful economic interests. Young Brandy first moved west in 1913 for a summer job in Glacier National Park and returned to nearby Choteau the following summer and a job with the Forest Service on the Lewis and Clark National Forest. That winter he enrolled in the agency’s ranger school in Missoula and then in June 1915 he returned to the Lewis and Clark, beginning a forty year career with the Forest Service.

Brandy later served as district ranger on the Helena National Forest where he met Edna, a divorced woman with a small child. The two married just before Brandborg was

transferred to the Nez-Perce National Forest in northern Idaho. From his base in Grangeville, he helped build lookouts and putting in trails and telephone lines. He traveled extensively through the backcountry, deepening his appreciation for landscapes beyond the reach of the industrial world. Brandborg was on the Nez Perce during the huge Selway fire of 1934, an inferno that convinced him of the need to fight wildfires. Following the recommendation of District One chief Evan Kelley, Brandy was named supervisor of the adjacent Bitterroot National Forest, a post he would hold until his retirement in 1955.

By the time he settled into the Bitterroot's headquarters in Hamilton, Brandborg was a firm believer in the social utility of forestry—conservative and selective harvests, employing local workers, and providing a steady supply of logs to local mills. He encouraged ranchers to practice better conservation on their grazing allotments and fought agency superiors who wanted to accelerate road building and increase the allowable cut. Brandy survived those struggles into the postwar era, even in the face of overheated lumber markets. However, “his fiercely local approach was growing increasingly out of step with the times,” according to Swanson, “in favor of larger combinations of capital that could make use of new forms of power and resources production” (p. 108). Brandborg retired in 1955, and with the old supervisor gone, the Bitterroot National Forest shifted into maximizing production to meet regional and national harvesting objectives. The wholesale turn to clearcutting brought an abrupt end to Brandy's conservative harvests—and brought years of acrimony and controversy to the Bitterroot Valley. Brandborg would devote the remainder of his life fighting the Forest Service and its new management regime.

Brandy was not alone among those criticizing the new forestry practices. Others questioned whether harvesting rates were sustainable, arguing that the timber industry was unduly influencing the cut. Although Brandborg believed that national forests were important to community well being, he viewed trees as something more than a capital resource. In a chapter titled “Collision Course,” Swanson recounts the series of exposes of clearcutting, culminating in reporter Dale Burk’s series in the daily Missoulian in late 1969. The Sierra Club and its lobbyist Brock Evans became involved at the urging of Brandborg, but for very different reasons. Brandy was a social conservationist who saw the Bitterroot important to the livelihood of valley families, while Sierra Club members were more interested in preserving pristine environments.

Amid task force reports, Senate hearings, and numerous studies, the Bitterroot became a national story and the poster child of the need to reform forest practices. But it was the intransigent Brady and his skills in organizing the opposition that garnered opponents a voice at the negotiating table. Together, Brandborg and other Bitterroot activists provided the impetus for the beginnings of a new vision for national forest management. This book deserves a wide reading.

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