Death Rode the Blast

By ROBERT J. RODER, Nakusp, B.C.

When raging blizzards blew devilish fury across the scantily sheltered plains of east central and southern Alberta, old timers are very apt to pull their chairs closer to the sides of roaring rookery fires and start reciting the hardships, comedies and tragedies of pioneer days. Among the stories they are told is one that is often repeated, the story of a long ago blizzard and three men who faced death in its blinding icy blast.

To begin with our story we must go back to the year 1890, the centennial in the city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, a son was born to Mr. and Mrs. Brainard. He was a husky baby, and was duly christened Wul- bert Leroy, a handle that was soon changed to plain Lee as he grew into boyhood. After some years the call of the west toiled the brains of Brainard, Mountain View, Mont., where young Lee became in turn a No. 1 cowboy and later a well-to-do rancher on his own.

In his late twenties, Lee Brainard woof and won himself a wife. She was by that time a splendid specimen of man- hood, 180 to 200 pounds of bone and muscules with a stocky 5 ft. 6 in. frame. He had sandy-brown hair, steel grey eyes and little fear of any man, animal or the worst that Nature and the weather could do. In a sense, so far as his first and only son was born, whom they named Albert Day and the elder Brainard looked forward to the time when his son could ride with him on the range.

For some years Lee Brainard and his little family prospered and were happy but then tragedy struck and troubles came. First Mrs. Brainard died and later, other ranchers and settlers started crowding in and taking up the range that Lee Brainard had worked up as his own. In time he married again to give his son a woman's care but the problem of restricted, over-grazed range still bothered him. Besides that, he was getting tired of the enormous amount of work entailed in putting up huge supplies of feed each year in order to keep this stock through the long cold winter months.

From time to time Lee heard stories from wandering cowboys of a country that was truly a rancher's dream, a country where wind would periodically sweep through mountain passes from the Pacific all winter, so that cattle could graze out practically the whole winter. A country where a man with courage, some capital and stock of his own, could carve himself a cattle empire from the thousands of square miles of unenclosed range where grass grew as high as a longhorn's belly.

The story of the Chisholm Belt of Alberta fired Lee Brainard's imagination. So much so that in the mid-winter of 1906 he outfitted two covered wagons and with his son and faithful old hired hand called names, he started a herd of some 700 head of stock in a northeasterly direction. There were all of four yearling and adult cattle carrying the reversed L. P., a full crop of calves and all of 100 or more horses. They made an impressive sight as they wound their way among the hills leaving their old range behind them forever.

Brainard had several extra riders along at first but after a time the animals got over their homesickness and he managed to get them back only once. They had not pushed the stock but let them graze their way in the general direction of the new range to which they were heading. One memorable day they crossed the U.S. Canadian border at Wildhorse, then they pushed on to Lake Pakowski and skirted the lofty Cypress Hills on their western side. It was a glorious adventure for all of them. Up at the break of dawn, breakfast over a chip fire and on again to see what wonders they would lay eyes on before the setting sun saw them prepare their evening meal at a fresh camp-site.

Occasionally they would meet a rancher or cowboy on the trail and correct the course of their travels from the directions they gave. Then one day young Albert rode back all excited and when they rode ahead with him they saw before them the mighty valley of the South Saskatchewan. By evening they were all able to ride into the frontier Canadian town of Medicine Hat, feast their eyes on all the sights and buy themselves some treats and supplies.

It was at Medicine Hat that Brainard's onward progress was almost stopped. When the Mounted Police heard that he was going into new country at the end of summer with no feed supplies or buildings put up at his new location, they were at the point of prohibiting him from going on. With the Police warnings ringing in his ears that he was taking an awful chance, he headed for the Government Land Office. There further disappointment awaited him. All locations for large spreads along the South Saskatchewan, the Bow and the Red Deer Rivers were already taken up by ranching companies and individual ranchers. However, north of the Red Deer was a vast expanse of country with only a few scattered claims marked upon it.

When they had restocked their wagons and decided on their approximate destination, the cattle and horses were rounded up and the river forded. Up the winding trail out of the valley the long line of animals plodded, with calves and colts frisking beside their mothers. Up, up and up they went till the land levelled off into rolling prairie again. Though he did not know it, Brainard was heading out of the Chisholm belt and for disaster. Of all the hearts that beat so strongly that day very few were to be defeated by the time spring would come again.

Some days later they saw another majestic sight, the wide deep valley of the Red Deer River. This they followed westwards until a suitable ford was located, seeing established ranches from time to time. As land along the river was all taken up, Brainard decided to go up the first large sized creek he found. This proved to be Berry Creek which they followed past the range of one Fred Mudge till they came to a spot about three miles north of where the town of Killarney now stands.

Here Lee Brainard found the answer to his dream. The deep, poorly grassed coulee of the Berry Creek widened out at this point to a vast meadow stretching northward for dozens of miles east and west as far as the eye could see. Not a fence, not one homesteader's shack marred the landscape. In the flat, blue grass predominated, while on the uplands, prairie wool and other fine grasses grew as thick as the hair of a dog and high as a man's knees. There were some willows along the creek for shelter and fuel and in the creek itself, plenty of water for stock.

So they decided to go no further. One covered wagon box was lifted off its gear for their home. Wood and chips were gathered for fuel but too little of either, while not far away, millions of ton of coal lay untouched just a few feet under the top of the earth.

Somebody had to watch the stock all the time to keep them from straying back. It was now already September and thousands of ducks and geese came.

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winding southward. Brainard, believing he was in the Chinook belt and in for an early winter, spent most of his time riding
around eagerly exploring the country.
On one such ride he came upon the ranch of the Hunt Brothers about forty miles
due north of his location, near where
Endiang now is. They got to talking
about the coming winter and Hunts
stated they urgently needed to bring all his
calves and yearlings to them for wintering
on a share basis, as Hunts had large
amounts of hay put up. But Brainard
was stubborn and refused to take up the
offer. Later he was very sorry indeed
that he had not done so.

September passed and October came.
Antelope bands moved southward and
overhead, large flocks of Sandhill Cranes
did the same. Still Brainard made no
worthwhile preparations for the coming
winter. What a shock it was when he
woke up one morning and found the
ground covered with snow. As it was
only the middle of October he felt sure
a Chinook would come along any day and
melt it all off. But instead of a Chinook
coming, more snow fell and a little later,
still more. Brainard made a trip to
Brooks for supplies in a foot of snow and
on his return, as far as can be learned,
they moved camp and all their stock over
to the hilly country around Dowling Lake,
where winds kept ridges and some grass
halfway free of snow. There was some
shelter there from the ever blowing wind
but still they were in a desperate plight
with only a covered wagon for themselves
and no barns or sheds of any descrip-
tion for the cattle. Week after week
the weather continued to be cold and
stormy and by Christmas they had en-
dured enough hardships to kill any aver-
gage man.

The old year ended without a break
and January brought more severe bliz-
zards and cold than any they had pre-
viously experienced. Temperatures were
30 below and colder all of the time.
Some of the cattle were already dying
and if others hadn’t followed the horses
who pawed and kicked and whined and
sounded as if hell would have gone under.

Death hovered over the camp. Nature
was bent on their destruction and with
little or no fuel and not much more in
the way of food they were in a poor posi-
tion to fight back.

As Brainard looked out day after day
on a world of drifting snow and heard the
pitiful bawling of his dying cattle he bit-
ted back his tears and got to listening to the Mon-
ties at Medicine Hat and his further
foolishness in not taking up the offer to
have his young stock wintered. Perhaps
it was just too late to save part
of the cattle and themselves. Brainard
resolved at the very first spell of half
decent weather as many cattle as
he could and get over to the Hunt
Brothers ranch.

After living on nothing but thin beef
for weeks, a break came at last in the
weather on the 29th of January a warm
and welcome Chinook blew in from the
southwest and they immediately got into
a fever of preparation to pull back. So
mild did it feel that they were able to
work in their shirt sleeves before even-
ning. It is almost safe to assume that

some cattle who were too weak to be
mowed had to be shot on this day. But
next morning with the first light of dawn,
they were shouting and yelling with high
hopes and on their way.
The going proved to be decidedly
tough. Horses were driven ahead to break
a trail for the calves, yearlings and other
cattle to follow. Brainard’s stallion and
another horse were soon in a lather pull-
ing the covered wagon. The animals had
to be rested from time to time and al-
lowed to eat a little. As the morning
progressed the sun came out brightly and
the Chinook eased them. Just another
day at the most and they would be safe
from the death that was staring them
all in the face.
As near as can be learned, the party
must have travelled almost straight north
for a dozen miles or more, perhaps to
avoid some terribly hilly country and
depth snow that took them towards the
south end of Sullivan Lake. By that time,
many of the animals were all in, so a
halt was made. Saddle horses were
turned out to paw for grass and Brain-
ard also freed his team. The wind had
died completely away and in a soft, mild
air the boy and White started a fire of
willow twigs and roasted some frozen
beef. When they had all rested and
eaten they would push on again as far as
the good hard towards Hunts.

They were busily filling their famished
bellies when Albert Brainard suddenly
looked around in a startled way, sprung
up and yelled, “For God’s sake! Look
what’s coming!”

Out of the northwest a grey wall was
moving in upon them. It towered high
into the heavens; before it, whirling
eddies of snow whirled like so many ser-
pents. In a minute the sun was blotted
out and the men realizing their danger,
moved out into the snow to catch up
their saddle horses. Brainard himself
cought his stallion but before they reached
the other horses the whirling, blinding
storm had already struck and the horses
got away. Some of the cattle made
for the shelter of the willows, others
vanished forever in the storm.

For awhile the men took cover in
the covered wagon but the wind blew
through as if it were a sieve. Hour by
hour it became colder and when they
could stand it no longer, the men and the
boy had to get out and exercise them-
selves in order to keep from freezing to
death. Night closed down and through
all the awful hours Brainard kept his
son, himself and White periodically
marching in circles near the wagon. From
time to time they tried to make fires by
breaking off willow branches but the
storm kept smothering the flames with
drifting snow and the hurricane-like wind
whipped away what little heat was ever
produced.

The eerie world of morning found them
all sheathed in frozen snow and ice,

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ghostly moving in a screaming hell of wind and whirling snow. Breathing was
difficult, their legs were playing out. How long until they were up? Who would
be the first to go down? Fate soon supplied
the answer.

The temperature had by that time dropped from the previous day and the icy
winds drove like a knife through their clothing, numbing them to the bone. Of the three, Brain-
ard had the closest call. He had on a genuine mink fur cap, while the others
had on only caps of woolen cloth. The
order was beginning to tell on White and
noticeable through that of the older man. But sud-
denly White went limp, slipped from the boy's grasp, and went sprawling in the
snow.

The boy's shout brought Brainard but
all their efforts to revive White were of
no avail. At last the truth dawned upon
them that their only companion of the
trail and campfire was dead. White
had been Albert's constant companion all
through the trail. Now he was a ball of
snow and now that White was dead, the boy
lost all will to fight and live. Brainard
pummelled him, grabbed him, pleaded with him and then tried to talk him into trying
to fight their way against the storm to
Hunt's but all to no avail. Finally Brain-
ard struck out into the storm trying to
carry his son but that was too much for
even his splendid strength.

The next hour was one of the bi-
setting of Brainard's life and at the end of it
nothing lived but the lifeless body
of his son down beside that of
storm's first victim. Lesser men would
have given up the struggle then and
their under such fearful odds, but not Brainard.
Realizing that no horse would face the
awful storm, he managed to undo the
harness off his stallion and turn him loose for a chance at life.

Exploring in the storm, he found some of his cattle were frozen to death standing
unmoving. His hopes were dashed. So he
axed out of the wagon, chopped pieces of
meat off them and ate it raw. Then set-
ing his course by the direction of the
wind, he followed the sound of the
horses of the Hunt ranch. Hour after hour he
struggled on, sometimes stumbling over
drifting snow, and going on again. Every-
where he looked was the same, a whirli-
ging, screaming grey-white maelstrom
of snow. By late afternoon he was some-
what delirious and saw the figure of a
long dead friend coming toward him with
an outstretched hand. When Brainard
tried to pull off his own mitten to shake
with the apparition before him, the icy
blast of wind against his wrist was shock
enough to snap him back to sanity. Some
ingenuity had suddenly jumped upon
against an obstruction and either fainted

That could very well have been the end of
the trail for Brainard but the next thing he
knew he had fallen over a fence and was once more alert and ready to
fight for life. He found he could no
longer stand and so he set out on his
hands and knees along the wire. Even then
he had to stop and rest at times. The fence
led him past some feed corrals and at
last to the Hunt Brothers shack. Crawling
around it, he located the door and
gotten in. Jack Hunt, one of the
brothers, heard the noise and thinking
it was a steer, yelled, "Get to hell out of
there!"

Brainard yelled back, "I won't get out!"
and in a few moments they were drag-
ging in his body and binding their best to
thaw out his frozen face, hands and feet
with kerosene.

Because of the great distance to the
railroad and the deep snow and severe
cold it was impossible to get Brainard to
a hospital for a long time, and it is a
credit to the Hunt Brothers (Harold, Jack
and Alfred) that they saved him from
dying. His face and hands were in ter-
rible shape for weeks and he lost all his
toes but one. When they finally could
move him he was sent back to Montana
where he spent the rest of the winter in
a hospital.

When weather permitted, Harold Hunt
rode out and located the bodies of Al-
bert Brainard and White and buried them
in the snow as best he could in order
to keep coyotes from eating them. He
made several more trips later on to see
that they were still well covered. So
severe was the winter that it was not
till the 6th of May that the Mount-
poled Police were able to come out
from Stettler and take in the bodies.
At that time there was still plenty of
snow but the boy's face had become bare
and hungry crows had eaten off his nose.

By June Lee Brainard was back in the
saddle again, riding hundreds of miles
to see if any of his cattle had survived.
Of the 600 he found only about 15 head
that had probably drifted away early in
the fall and gotten into the herds of
other ranchers who had fed them. He
continued to find horses, among them his
stallion, for six or seven years afterwards,
some turning up away in Saskatchewan.

In spite of the crushing blow that Fate
had dealt him, Brainard had his wife
come from Montana, brought in a fresh
herd of cattle and built up a nice ranch
north of Richdale. But it was not des-
tined to last long. In the fall of 1919
one of the biggest grass fires in the
history of the country burned out his em-
prise of horses. The range fire was
the same after that. Luckily his
hay stacks escaped. With the coming
of the railroad in 1913 the country was
thrown open for homesteading and soon
Brainard was crowded far worse than he
had been in Montana. The next year
was a very dry one and Brainard found it
hard to get a supply of feed and he never
wanted to face a winter without it again.

So Brainard took up the search for his
dream country again and he found it up
in the beautiful hills and valleys around
Fort St. John, B.C., where he moved in
1917.

After his near brush with death, Brain-
ard made a resolution. No blinds were
ever allowed on any of the windows of
his home. He wanted his lights to shine
out at all times of the year and be a
 guideline to safety and shelter for anyone
who might be lost in the darkness or a
storm.

Lee Brainard ranched on in the Fort
St. John country until 1938 when he died
at the ripe age of 73. Across the bor-
der in Alberta they named a post office
after him and down around Richdale a
school was named in his honor and the
Brainard Flats still bear his name. On
hearing the names of these places and
even without hearing of them, people of
the west are long going to remember the
stamina, courage and remarkable sense
direction of the man who faced the
fury of a mid-winter blizzard alone
and won through to live for many more
years of useful life.

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