

Interview with Charles Brantner

Interviewed by Ray Larson for the Heritage Education Commission

April 9, 1986

Charles Brantner - CB

Ray Larson - RL

RL: [missing text at beginning] Moorhead from 1962 to 1965 and was elected to the Clay County Commission in 1965, took office in 1966, and has served on that Clay County Commission for 20 years and is still presently a member. This interviewer is Ray Larson representing the Heritage Education Commission.

Casey, I'll just let you give us a little of your personal background and just elaborate on that as you wish.

CB: Well, to start with, my parents were from Iowa and Illinois and they had homesteaded out in North Dakota in a sod hut in 1909 and they got burned out in a prairie fire, so they came to Clay County up in the Borup area. I am the youngest of 13 children and we all were born at home and things were quite different in those days. Parents were very active. My dad was very active; he was also at one time on the county commission and he was a horse breeder and a raiser of horses and a farmer and dealt in real estate. In nationality, my mother was Irish and my dad was German and Danish and Dutch, so kind of call ourselves just more or less American. We moved up to [unclear] in the Moorhead area in about 1946 and have lived there ever since and enjoy it immensely. We live five miles out of town and it's just close enough to town so you can be aware of everything that's going on and yet we have the peace of the country. My mother died when I was 10 years old so I stayed with different relatives and then I went to school at the Crookston AC, which was a boarding school at that time, and graduated from there from high school in 1950. Prior to that I went to grade school and to Borup School when the grade school closed down. Then I attended North Dakota State University for two years. My occupations are really quite varied. I am a farmer and have farmed for 30-some years. I raise sugarbeets and small grain. I also raise Arabian horses and judge horses throughout the United States and Australia and Canada, so I've had a very varied occupation and lifestyle; and it's caused some pressures on the family but I've enjoyed it immensely. I really like to travel and like to work with people and that's another reason I like to be in politics.

RL: Did you tell us what year you were born?

CB: Oh, pardon me, 1932--October. I'm 53 years old.

RL: Do you have a family?

CB: Four sons. One son works in Arizona, one son's an attorney in Minneapolis, one's an architect in Dallas, and the youngest boy lives with me; in fact, he's a senior at Moorhead State and he's trying to get into graduate school in psychology. I'm a single parent.

RL: You may have covered some of these questions in your personal background, but what motivated you to become involved in politics?

CB: Well, I guess it's the fact that one of my favorite subjects in school was history, and my dad, like I mentioned, at one time was a county commissioner, and I suppose that always was in the back of your mind. You kind of grew up in a home and surroundings in which we discussed and thought about politics. I know I've always felt that 80 percent of what you end up doing is what you've been kind of raised in those type of surroundings unless you really pursue something different. And there was always an awareness thing in our family, especially through my dad, of what was going on as far as those times--that's years ago--was the starting of labor unions and co-ops, as far as the farming industry was concerned, so it really was awareness then.

RL: Did he hold office?

CB: He held county commissioner's office for one term in the late '30s and '40s. Clay County.

RL: When you ran for the county commission, how did you arrive at the decision to run at that particular time?

CB: A lot of people get involved when really something happens so you want to be involved. Of course, drainage and the roads and ditches are big items for county commissioners and we'd had some minor drainage problems. Then plus the person that was on the County Board at that time was a man I'd known and respected for years that was in our district, and he was retiring.

RL: And who was he?

CB: John Mansager. And John was retiring, and so I felt if you were going to get involved, there was a good chance to run even though we were young and we had things pretty well under control. The kids were getting old enough to help us on the farm.

RL: Who was your opponent?

CB: Oh, I had five opponents the first time in the general. Charlie Stiever [spelling] was one, Hjelmer Guttormson, and Fred Kreps, and Vince Nogowski, and there was one other one, I think.

RL: How was the vote? Was it a pretty good majority?

CB: Well, it ended up, of course, that Mr. Guttormson was endorsed by the DFL at that time; he was chairman of the Democratic Party. He and I won the primary and then in November I won the general election. That was one of the most educational experiences and exciting things I've done--walking door to door and meeting the people. That's my philosophy and I'd rather meet 20 percent of the people personally than have them contacted via letter or flyer, all of them.

RL: Now, your area, you represent part of the City of Moorhead, too, then?

CB: Right. Areawise, I represent the largest area of Moorhead. It's from Main Avenue north, all of north, come up to 14th Street and go over two blocks down to 16th and out east through Pierce Trailer Court.

RL: And then how far into the county.

CB: I represent two townships--Oakport Township which is right north of Moorhead, of course, an urban township, and Kragnes Township, the adjoining township to the north of that.

RL: Do you know what the population of your district might be?

CB: No, it varies, but it's right just under the 10,000 figure.

RL: So you actually represent 10,000 people.

Who were your role models, Casey? I think you mentioned probably your dad was.

CB: My dad and one of my brothers who has passed away, Joe. He was a good guy.

RL: How did your occupation help you--you had several occupations that you were involved in--but how did your occupation help or hinder your involvement in politics?

CB: Well I think the type of occupation, the farming we did in the Valley, we always had some livestock; we grew up with it. But when we got really involved in sugarbeets, more or less we just fed to some livestock in the winter so we weren't pressured like a dairy person or somebody that's hitting the clock seven days a week. It worked in quite well and at that time the sons were old enough and were attending school here; they could help in the summer as far as getting the crops on and off. In the wintertime, it was more or less break time and the closeness to town--five miles we lived from the Court House, or six--so to me it was just an ideal office to hold; better than being away.

RL: So you had plenty of time to devote to this.

CB: Yes, you have to have time. And really you have to be pretty much self employed to really serve or have a lenient boss because it does take a lot of time.

RL: You have a lot of meetings there.

CB: It's more so every year, too.

RL: What do you feel were some of the lasting changes you've made in the community up to this point?

CB: Well, of course, some of the things that the county has really been involved with is the upgrading of our road systems and some of the bridges we've built that are ideal structures, and of course then we as a county donated heavily to the Hjemkomst Center and the Heritage Center and got that started off the ground and that's going to be a very important part, I feel, in the education for the young people and a tourist attraction for the area. We just don't have enough to offer the people, I feel. And we were also involved in the Moorhead Sports Center hockey arena.

RL: The county contributed to that, too.

CB: Right, right.

RL: Are most of the county roads hard surfaced now?

CB: No. We have 1700 miles of roads to maintain; and we have approximately 350 that are hard surface roads.

RL: Is that kind of an ongoing project to hard surface them?

CB: It's budgeted, you know. We get state monies back and federal monies on certain of those roads and it depends upon how the monies are available and we award bids, of course, but it's on a need basis. These have to be designated roads, roads that are designated years in advance of what is a county and what is a state-aid road.

RL: Up to this point, in the 20 years you've been on, what do you feel was the greatest failure or disappointment or things that happened that disappointed you during your term?

CB: I can't say that they're failures. I've had a couple of things that I've been disappointed with and I guess one is that twice we've voted on an issue for a new Court House and we outgrew ourselves. It is a business; it's an industry. And we've had to split up; in other words, the Social Service Department's in a separate building that's away from it. It's just like running your own business. When you do that, you lose a real amount of efficiency. And I just felt that if the people could really be aware of that and of how much more efficient we could operate, that the vote would be different. Of course, the last time, now the farm economy has gone bad, so it's the rural vote that hurt it. But that would be one of the things. And the other thing is a mandate, or the problems we have always had for the last ten to fifteen years I've been involved, and that's a solid waste problem. That's really an issue we're going to have for the rest of our lives and our children will be faced with it

and that's the mandates from Minnesota Pollution Control Agency where they kind of change rules, and in all fairness they are growing. They learn by mistake on these systems, and we just have a hard time upgrading and affording some of the requirements they place on us.

RL: The present Court House is about 30 years old, is that right?

CB: It's a little bit older; it was built in 1954.

RL: We might dwell on this a bit, Casey. This bond issue was rather soundly defeated, wasn't it?

CB: Right. Well, it was ironic because it did pass within the City of Moorhead, and they are roughly about 60 percent of the population. But it really was defeated soundly in the rural area. In many, many townships it was like 40-0 or 12-0 or 15 voters [unclear] and I guess that does relate to the economy.

RL: Do you think there might have been any feeling of hostility towards this project being in Moorhead?

CB: No, I don't think it being in Moorhead. I think, being really frank, the stigma attached to it is Social Services. People have a problem, you know, unless they understand the needs of people, and when you mention Social Services, right away they feel that there's this person getting this free handout that's a moocher or does not want to work and, really, that is not true because there may be per se, but most people, you know, they're pretty proud and they don't go up there unless they need it. I think you're aware here at the University that a lot of students that go to school and they get started going by the help and aid they receive from the state, and we're just making better people if we can do that with them and get them back in the workforce.

RL: How are you proceeding now that the defeat of the bond issue--you're still going ahead with some of these projects from the funds that you have?

CB: Absolutely. We've had about \$400,000 some that we had earmarked or saved for our building fund, but it's so ironic because we have to spend so much of this money because a Court House does not even meet the standards as far as electrical and fire, etc., etc. We've got some PVC's in there and asbestos has to be removed in older offices. It's a real sound looking building from the outside, but we have to really update it irregardless and, of course, then we have to go out and rent and find some other space for the offices where they're crowded.

RL: So the result will be probably that the project will cost more, then?

CB: It's going to come close to costing more and it's going to be piecemeal. Like I mentioned at the start, it won't be the efficient thing you wanted.

RL: I think you probably mentioned some of this, how the state and national problems--war, economy, finances, and so on--play in the community during your years. Some of the involvement of the commission in areas that were imposed upon them by the state and federal agencies.

CB: Right. I'm sure you're aware, but it's kind of life--every time you get something, if you get so-called free money, there's a string attached to it. And by that, I mean if you relate it to various social service programs. We'll take just for an instance, foster homes, if you are going to place children. And they'll come in and say you have to have a certain type of a kitchen. You know, it can't be the same house you've raised your family in and you have to put certain sinks and things like that in, and it really takes it away from the people and yet the cost is there. The monies are not there to do it, but the rules are there, so it raises the cost for the counties and the local taxpayer. It's quite confusing. If you don't go along with those mandates, then you don't get participation from the state or the federals back with their money on a cost-sharing basis.

RL: What do you perceive as the power structure in government politics during the 20 years you have been in? Influential people or influential [unclear].

CB: You know, the Kennedy family was very popular and a strong family. Then the LBJ and during that time, we had not really a war; it was a police action they called it, the Vietnam War we went through. And I think you're aware of some of the problems that the young people had and still have trying to recuperate from that and they aren't young people any more that was created at the universities. In government, we went through really a heyday, no different than we did in agriculture. By heyday, I mean everything was and has been on the boom up until about two years ago in the community. In other words, it wasn't really a whoa or a holdback because everything was going on inflation and so really we as a county here are very lucky. This area's really been blessed as far as crops and relates to the economy because it's directly agriculture. We'd never had problems. For years, we've always been a very fluid or liquid county as far as assets are concerned; we still are. But we want to keep it that way. We've never been strifed because we've never had the real highs and real lows that if you happen to be in a mining area. I never felt that the power structure from the federal level affected us so much. It's starting to now and the same with the state now because the state is starting to cut back with some of the monies they send back to the counties and that really affects our budgets.

RL: Has there been someone that you've called on for advice or support during your years in office?

CB: I guess I'd have to answer that--how I go for advice--if it's a drainage problem or an agriculture problem or a problem uptown, I pick out the person that I respect in that field and would consult them because I feel in every field that there's more or less well qualified people if you'll search them out. When you serve on something like being on a county board, you have such a varied amount of things you can be involved with and I relied on a couple of the older commissioners that had been on the board when I was there, and Thornley Wells was one here from Moorhead and Orlin Pratt from Ulen, Minnesota. They

were on the board when I first got on and Conn [spelling] Bjerke was our executive secretary for years and was just a super person to rely on.

RL: What kind of coverage did you get from the media--press, radio, and television--and did you feel that the press has been giving you good coverage, favorable coverage?

CB: I think they've been very good. At times, it's hard if you're dealing with, let's call it a personal problem, with help. As a county board, it's like a board of directors of a corporation, really. The bottom line is that we're responsible for what they do and if you have somebody that really has made an error or that you have to really be frank and talk to them. With the open meeting laws, it's pretty hard to do, but yet the people in the press have been very fair about either walking out or not reporting those things and letting us iron out our issues. I feel we've had very fair and very good coverage as a whole here.

RL: The press is present at all your meetings.

CB: Right. Yes, there's an open meeting law, I'm sure you're aware, in the state of Minnesota. Two elected officials cannot meet without the press being aware of it or being there.

RL: How about community changes that you've seen during your 20 years. What are some of the changes that you've seen? I think you alluded to probably some of those things in an earlier question here, but what are some that you've been both happy and unhappy about?

CB: I've seen a lot more cooperation, if you want to call it, from the county and the city than when I first got on the county board. Like we mentioned the Sports Arena and then the arena north of town at Centennial Park out there and when they started the youth hockey program and we used it in combination with the 4-H kids who contributed, so they could show for the 4-H Roundup in the fall. And again I guess I credit some of that to the media and the press plus the people on the City Council of Moorhead because there's just been a way better rapport established between the two identities because when you have a city this large in a county, it would be awful easy to get a power struggle started and I've never had that feeling in the last few years.

RL: How did the nature of your community involvement change over the years? I think you've probably touched on this, too.

CB: If you mean like whole new activities, like for years I was a 4-H Director, and pretty quick you just get spread too thin; you can't do that. And I was a trustee on the church board and a charter member of the Dilworth Lions Club when it was formed. Another account for that is the fact that the county government has gotten busier and if you're going to serve and do a good job, you have to get involved and pretty quick there is just a limit to the things that you can do, so you want to kind of specialize and stay in one field.

RL: So you had to give up some of your previous activities.

Did you assume other leadership roles in the community before, and I think you mentioned that, too--4-H and service clubs and so on.

Did your family support or discourage your involvement in community affairs including politics?

CB: Well, like I mentioned, I was the youngest of 13 children; and that relates kind of to who you use for your roles and who do you go to. Well, I guess I respect all my family pretty well and they kind of keep you in line. We get together and it really helps to have a family that size because your awareness is spread throughout the area plus other people. It helps a lot to have a large family and they supported me real well.

My own family was good and the boys were always interested. My sons were interested in what you're doing and it helps a lot.

RL: Has there been any time that you've been in politics that you had to deal with stress that came about because of certain issues or things that you had to do?

CB: That I had to deal with stress? Yes. Are you asking how I deal with stress?

RL: How do you deal with it?

CB: How I deal with stress, and some people might laugh, is with physical work. And that's one thing about farming. If you back out and get on a tractor and my sons would know if you had a tough time, just leave him alone for awhile and he's going to recuperate. And I really like to ride horseback or something like that by myself and go back to the realities.

RL: Would you like to see your children or grandchildren involved in politics?

CB: Absolutely, absolutely. Like I mentioned, I have a son that's an attorney. You know, anyone can complain. In life you hear them all the time. But if you try to come up with some of the answers or if you get involved, then I think you have a different outlook or aspect on life as a whole.

RL: Everybody loves a winner and I take it that you've never lost an election.

CB: No, I haven't.

RL: You've never been defeated. When you left the town board, it was to move to the county commission, and you won the primary and then you won the general election.

What are your plans as far as continuing on the commission? Do you see the time when you're probably not going to run or let someone handle it or what?

CB: Oh, eventually, I guess. One time I was endorsed for the State Senate and I wish I would have maybe taken a shot at that, but it's ideal to be here to try to get elected to that.

It would be hard to be defeated. You have to be honest about it. I know one of the saddest things--we never have had an election party. I'll never forget that because one of my friends who was a commissioner, I was at their place one night and they were having a party for the election and they lost. That's quite embarrassing or quite hard to handle, you know. There are just certain things to me that have to be private and handled within your family.

RL: You mentioned that you were asked one time to run for the Senate from this district. Do you aspire to a higher office?

CB: I had at that time, and I don't think now. I guess I really think there a time, kind of like raising a family or anything, there's a time when you should be involved and do these things. Right now I guess I'd say "No." I'm very content the way it is.

RL: If you could name one or two things that you feel were accomplishments, what do you feel is your greatest contribution to Clay County in making it a better place?

CB: That goes back to the relationship for the young people, as far as like the Sports Arena and the Hjemkomst Center that the young people will be able to use. I happened to make the motion for that that the county start putting the dollars into that. Plus if you want to get on a real serious vein, is the work that we have done and I've been the chairperson of that for years, and that's the solid waste committee, as far as the landfill is concerned. And that's going to be something that's going to affect us one way or another and our children forever. We really take it serious. I know a lot of people feel we don't, but it's really the danger of polluting water and things like that. I like to feel we've had and ran one of the best landfills in the state of Minnesota and we have. It's been monitored and ran accurately. Hopefully, we've done it right; but yet there's always a fear that something's going to pollute it. But we've really tried, and I feel that's been a very important part of my being on the county board is that awareness. Plus I think I really brought a touch of the rural into town because of the area I represent, being a farmer and also representing town. I think you really establish a rapport with city council.

RL: Are there any projects or concerns that you would like to accomplish during the time that you are going to be serving on the commission?

CB: Of course, right now we're working on a new solid waste landfill. I'd like to see that completed, and I think that's one reason when people wonder why you keep on. It's just like your own life or job; there's always something to look forward to, to do better. And I would still like to see us (but I guess that would be awhile now) get a new Court House in Clay County and really have an efficient operation that everyone could be proud of.

RL: Now you've been involved with judging horses and you raise Arabians. I think you've also been active in possibly getting a racetrack in the area.

CB: Right. I've been on the task force and, of course, we are, in my opinion, ideally located for a racetrack. We are halfway between Minneapolis and Winnipeg. Being involved with horses, there's a lot to cross a border, you know. That's an international border and if

you're hauling animals across there, it's quite difficult. And why I mention that is because the people I know in the horse industry would much rather run their horses in this area than go into Canada because of the hassle at the border and the exchange on monies. It's a large investment. Again, it relates to our economy at this time. At this time we as a county have contributed \$10,000 and the city has contributed \$20,000 for a feasibility study to see the feasibility of having a racetrack within this area.

RL: Have any results of that study been made known to you at this time?

CB: No, at the present time they're not back yet.

RL: In your opinion, what do you think the chances are? Do you think we'll ever have a track here?

CB: I think we'll have a track here, but it's big and it's serious business. And again that's an educational thing because this area in the summertime, if they can afford it, go to the lakes. And, of course, horse racing is a summertime deal. To me, the track has to be located where you can attract the people from the lakes area--Detroit Lakes--and surrounding, plus stay close enough to Fargo with the gambling they have there and the accessibility of the 4-lane roads and the airports. I feel that we should be the out-of-metropolitan area track for the state of Minnesota--this area. Of course, they have one at Canterbury Downs in Shakopee, which is the metropolitan area. And I really feel, in all honesty, that we are the natural setting for the second so-called track in the state.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

RL: Okay, we've touched on the feasibility of whether the population would support it. What about the moral aspects of it and how do you see that your constituency might relate to the issue of the gambling process involved?

CB: Well, my constituents, or the people that contact me, they know that I have horses. But I have never had anyone really negative about it. We've discussed it on the county level, of course, with the possibility of the increased load for the sheriff's department has been mentioned for gambling or some of the elements that might be with it. But I've all the confidence in the world that we have the capabilities of running a clean operation. That's the main thing is how it's started and how it's handled.

RL: Would you anticipate, say, the opposition from, you know, the people that are anti-gambling interests?

CB: Well, not really heavily because I know that there's a lot of people that go from this area--I've always said if you want to see a lot of people, you go to Assiniboine Downs in Winnipeg or you go to Minneapolis to Canterbury Downs and there's just a lot of people here that do like the aspect of gambling.

RL: So you think this community would support it?

CB: I really do.

RL: Would that ever come to a vote of the people? I mean, the county, would they have to vote on it, say as a county?

CB: No, one of the things the county would be faced with where you would hold hearings and that would be as far as a zoning ordinances and, of course, there you may run into opposition where they would locate a track if somebody didn't want it or the noise or parking problems or police problems or whatever you might have to contend with. But, you know, when you think of a track, there is so much more to it than just a track. It's the people that would be employed with a track like the veterinarians and the feed business and gasoline and fuel.

RL: It would add a lot of jobs.

CB: Absolutely. We could visualize--I hate to put a number on the jobs--but it would be a very big boost for employment in this area.

RL: Okay, is there anything that you would like to leave on the tape, Casey, or add to anything that you've said?

CB: Well, no, except I guess I've always looked at being on the county board--it's been kind of like a privilege or an educational thing. To me it's been invaluable because I really like people and I like to travel and it's a real good combination of both, not that we travel so much. I think it's very educational. That's like when you ask if I would recommend any of my family or my children or whatever to get involved in politics, absolutely yes. Of course, I guess I look at it so different. I don't even consider myself a politician and I don't know why. In the 20 years I've been on, I've never had ten phone calls in my life; so if I get one, I weigh it very seriously because to me I use that as a poll or information as to what the public is thinking. That's why when you ask, "Who do you use as roles or where do you go for advice?" Well, if I ever get a phone call or have a problem, I know the people I feel that are qualified in that field to call and talk to them and they will level with me. That's what it takes.

RL: Not a lot of party politics on the county commission.

CB: Absolutely; we've tried to keep that out. Of course, they've tried at different times in the legislature to have you labeled as a Democrat or run partisan. I have to relate the first year I ran for County Board, I was going door to door in north Moorhead and I came to this lady's house and I gave her my card. And she said, "Well, what party are you?" I said, "It's a nonpartisan office." She said, "Well, you've got to belong to a party." And I said, "Well, I'm basically a Republican." And she said, "Well, I'll have to give you your card back." I said, "Why did you do that?" And she said, "Well, I'm a Democrat." I said, "What's that got to do with it? I have 11 sisters and brothers and we're about half and half. I'm a Lutheran and have two sisters that are married to Catholics. We still get together at Christmas and talk to each other." And she said, "You know, give me your card back; my

son's even a Republican." [Laughter] A cute lady, and it ended up her son and I were good friends.

RL: Thank you, Casey, for your involvement in this.

CB: Thank you.

[End of Interview]