

## Can the hermit priest save the Oyster River?

By John Gregg

A Vancouver Island hermit priest has deserted his wilderness retreat to do battle with a modern devil, a developer whose schemes threaten to spoil the river fishing the hermit cherishes. Father Charles Brandt was described three years ago in Panorama as a master craftsman in the art of restoring and binding ancient books and a scientist studying the life cycle of the west coast salmon from the hermitage he had established midway between Courtenay and Campbell River, three miles up the Oyster River.

"But," says the hermit today, "I soon found out it wasn't the paradise I first thought it was."

It was in late 1972 that Brandt first trained his environmentalist's sights three miles downriver on Pacific Playgrounds, the beginnings of a 340-acre waterfront development with subdivisions and golf course, trailer parks and man-made lake. Brandt did not quarrel with the development itself but with the developers' plans for the river, which he called an "ecological disaster about to happen".

Because the foreshore—that area between the highest and lowest tides—cannot be owned in B.C., any person hoping to develop that land must seek permission from the provincial lands department. Brandt first became peeved that Pacific Playgrounds had dredged out a boat basin and knifed a small channel into the river although he couldn't find any record of permission being granted for that work. He became more incensed when plans were announced to carve another channel 1,700 feet from the boat basin through the foreshore and the estuary into the Strait of



Father Brandt would rather fight cutthroat trout than developers, but the former may vanish unless he tackles the latter.

Georgia to accommodate deep-sea vessels.

"Young fish—salmon, steelhead, cutthroat—spend one to six months in the estuary, feeding, climatizing, undergoing physiological changes to adapt to life in the ocean," Brandt explains. "The channel could well affect water quality, marine and fresh water organisms and utilization of the

area by adult and juvenile salmonids. Oil slicks and small spills will be detrimental to fish feeding in the area."

While Brandt petitioned Environment Canada for a long-term study of the estuary and had to accept a compromise six-month study in April, the developers were gearing up for immediate dredging. "For heaven's

sake," the priest exclaimed, "let's not start digging around in the estuary before we know the answers."

Local wildlife clubs were also concerned and soon the B.C. Steelhead Society sought out the hermit's hideaway and urged Brandt—because of his knowledge of the river, his degree in biology, his experience



as a technician with the Fisheries Service—to lead a campaign against the proposal.

The hermit put his books aside. Up and down Vancouver Island he marched, speaking to clubs, digging into official archives, buttonholing bureaucrats at all levels of government. He turned up a long-ignored file in the Victoria Parks Branch office and learned that the foreshore the developers wanted to slice up had been “reserved and set apart for the recreation and enjoyment of the public” by a 1937 provincial order-in-council. He began to use this information as a club. “What kind of precedent would this set?” Brandt demands. “Would other resort owners be allowed to dredge channels through a recreational reserve?”

Backed by the Steelhead Society and the Vancouver zone of the B.C. Wildlife Federation, Brandt pressed the B.C. Director of Lands to withhold permission at least until Environment Canada’s experts could complete their study. A meeting with lands director W. R. Redel on May 23 brought hope of victory—the channel would not be approved before receipt of the Environment Canada report in December.

The developers were a little miffed. “These people just don’t believe in progress,” Playgrounds director George Ward, an ex-Edmonton oil-drilling contractor, told Panorama. “We’ve been plagued by these environmental kooks. They seem to be spearheaded by one guy. I



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Brandt has less time for bookbinding.

don’t want to say anything about him, I’ve got my own ideas.”

One of those environmental kooks has also got his own ideas about one guy. “The efforts that Father Charles has gone

through are outstanding,” said B.C. Steelhead Society president Barry Thornton. “Permission for the channel would have been granted immediately if Father Charles hadn’t been there with all the pertinent data.”

As Brandt’s crusade generated mounting publicity largely opposed to the Oyster River scheme, Pacific Developments produced an eight-page advertising tabloid for insertion in three Island newspapers, the Campbell River Courier, the Upper Islander, and the Courtenay Comox Free Press, defending its plans. This claimed no studies had shown the proposed channel to be environmentally hazardous. Brandt promptly wrote a letter to each paper quoting the provincial Fish and Wildlife Branch’s opposition to Ward’s dredging. Phil Bickle, owner of all three papers, refused to print the letters on the grounds they might be “libellous or slanderous” and Bickle’s reporters began to find that stories they wrote about the Oyster River and its guardian never appeared in print.

However, the crusade gained another favorable boost when a Campbell River TV crew came seeking out the isolated hermitage and taped an hour-long documentary on the river and its problems for local showing. It soon became clear the local rumblings were being heard in far-off Ottawa. In July, Brandt called in to a Vancouver hotline show featuring Environment Minister Jack Davis to ask what he

knew about the situation. “Davis said that more people are writing in about the Oyster controversy than any other problem in our area,” Brandt recalls.

In August, the priest won another round. When a newly created environmental committee recommended to the Comox-Strathcona Regional Board that it back Pacific Playgrounds’ channel proposal, other board members were aghast. Led by fiery commercial fisherman Norm Lysne, they shot down the resolution. Present at the meeting, Father Brandt was seen by reporter Paul Nicholson “dancing through the aisles with joy”. Nicholson’s story on this further Brandt victory did appear in the Campbell River Courier, at a time when boss Bickle was on holidays.

The channel controversy has transformed the hermit priest into something of a public figure. And that disturbs him. “People seek me out here,” he says. “That’s St. Benedict’s idea of monastic life, it’s open. But still . . . it bothers me some.”

And so Father Charles Brandt impatiently awaits the Environment Canada report due in December and the decision soon after from the lands department. He may then have to return to the fray, but he’s longing for the day when the controversy ends, when the proposed channel is once and forever halted.

There are books to be bound, prayers to be contemplated . . . and fighting cutthroat to be caught.

## Goin’ down the road: those prairie grain elevators are dwindling

By Rachel Kilsdonk

Talk about your status symbols — how about owning your own prairie grain elevator?

There it stands on the two-section spread of bigtime Alberta farmer A.J. Wilson, near Rosedale, 100 feet high, capacity 40,000 bushels — the kind that farmers for miles



rail lines in the past decade has left many small elevators high and dry. It’s cheaper today to staff and operate one large elevator than several scattered “small” ones.

Only a few elevators have been bought and moved away, crib and cupola, for farm