

Excerpt No. 1

OF THE DEADLY SNOW

CHAPTER ONE, "A SUDDEN STORM"

SOMETIME IN the afternoon, fog crept down the valley, drawing a veil of silence over the little ranch and preparing it for the coming of a frightening carrier of sickness and death. It was Friday, April 17, 1959, and the Preston Mitchell family was busy with the start of lambing.

The ranch straddles a ridge in the Bear Lodge Mountains in the northeast corner of Wyoming. This is on the northwestern edge of the Black Hills in an area that even today is fairly remote. In 1959, the ranch buildings were nestled in a valley reached only by a dirt road. Through the south side of the property flows Alum Creek, while the northern portion is crossed by Pine Creek.

The ridge between the two streams towers 500 feet above the lowlands. Crossing it calls for a four-wheel-drive vehicle, a healthy horse, or a hearty appetite for climbing. A forest of pines mixed with scrub oak and other species and patches of native grassland cover the mountains. Besides being good cattle and sheep country, Crook County has long been an excellent place to hunt whitetail and blacktail deer.

A few days earlier, Bill Donald, a gangly, soft-spoken man, had driven in with his dark green 1950 International truck, easily recognized by the ridge tent that covered the cargo deck. As a sheep shearer, Bill worked alone and was well known among the farmers and ranchers with small flocks in western South Dakota and Northeastern Wyoming. This year, Preston and Laura Mitchell had decided to shear the animals heavily laden with wool because they had plenty of shelter in sheds to protect the mother ewes and their newborn lambs from winter weather.

In other years, they might opt for tagging before the lambing season arrived. This entailed trimming wool away from the ewes' posteriors and udders to keep them dry and sanitary. Then, after lambing the Mitchells would have Bill return to shear the rest of the wool from all the ewes and rams.

At first, the snow wafted down slowly, in large, feathery clumps. As evening approached, it came down in smaller flakes, falling faster, as the mountain air got colder.

Inside the shed, an occasional ewe would bleat calmly, but outside these sounds were absorbed in a short distance by falling snow and a gentle wind.

This was a time of great optimism for Laura and Preston. They had been on the ranch for 18 years and they expected a successful lamb crop this year would enable them to pay off their mortgage.

Outside, the snow had an eerie glow in places, as if the headlights of a car were shining on it. Or as if moonlight illuminated it. Laura said their son 11-year-old Preston Herman, called Dig by family members, noticed that the snow did not feel chilly.

"I actually thought I was big—that I had practically grown up—because my pant legs were soaking wet from bumping up against the sheep, but my legs didn't feel cold," he said later. "I had noticed our dad and other grownups never complained about being cold when outdoors, even after their clothing got wet."

Dig had another vivid memory of the snow. The next afternoon he looked out the kitchen window, which faced south. "It was kind of like the very beautiful. The snow was a pinkish color, pinkish-purple, almost ultraviolet. Beautiful."

PAT, 15-YEARS OLD, remembered having a similar impression of the snow. She said as a small child, she had frostbitten her toes and always felt cold in the winter. "But that year I wasn't cold, even out in the barn, you know, where the wind was blowin'. And we commented on this. That even though the temperature was cold, the snow wasn't cold." Pat recalled lambing the next spring (1960) when the Mitchells had a few sheep that appeared healthy, even though most of the surviving ewes were in bad shape. "We had the ewes in the corral and it was my turn to care for them. I remember a ewe started lambing and

she had eight lambs or more. I can't tell you how many for sure because it's been too many years. But I remember the eight lambs, which is nothing normal. They just kept coming, one after another. She'd lie down and have one. She'd get up, walk around the corral a little bit, lie down and have another."

As the lambs were born, they started out almost-normal size and they ended up being like a puppy, the last one was very tiny. This was totally unusual. I mean it just wasn't anything you'd expect or see as a kid," Pat said.

She also noticed that when they went through a neighbor's pasture later, the Kimballs had calves in the herd with extra legs and extra tails, highly unusual.

One of Pat's most vivid memories of the storm was the color the snow. She said, "I can remember coming home from school and looking down in that draw below the house and the snow was red. It was like it would be over at Sand Creek, near Beulah, where the soil is red. But we have no red soil. And there's no red soil in the area of any kind, which made it odd."

Laura went out to pasture with one of the younger girls to bring in some sheep that weren't going to lamb. "We waded in snow, in some places up to our waist, because in the draws where we lived, the snow would be deep. Probably 20 to 30 inches had fallen and the wind had blown it around some. And you'd be trying to hit the ridges, but, in that deep of snow, you can't tell quite where the ridge is. We went out and made a trail to bring those sheep in and I can remember feeding them hot coffee trying to warm them up. You tried anything. You honestly tried."

More than 125 lambs had been born when they started to die. From nearly 20 years of experience caring for newborn lambs, Laura had learned many ways to snatch a chilled, weak, dying lamb from the grasp of death. Wrapping them in towels, drying them and taking them to the house where the kitchen became a makeshift emergency room, were her first steps to saving them. Sometimes she put a heat lamp on a baby to restore its body warmth; often she warmed up some milk and fed it to a struggling newborn.

The Mitchells' ewes were typically healthy, dropping twins or triplets most years. Because a ewe has only two teats, it can normally suckle only two

lambs. So the weakest one of triplets is crowded out by its siblings and has to depend on other care for survival. Typically, these weak extra lambs are removed from their mothers and are called orphan or “bum” lambs. Penned away from the flock, they were fed and nurtured by a human substitute, sometimes the wife of the rancher or an older child.

Laura had noticed that sheep have a habit of bleating when they die, as if protesting their imminent loss of life. This year’s lambs died silently. They just went, no matter what anyone tried to do to save them. Other than being weak, the new lambs showed no distinct symptoms of illness.

A few days after the storm had passed, lambs would be playing outdoors, romping and bucking, butting heads and playing “king of the mountain,” and suddenly keel over dead. Try as they might, there was nothing the Mitchells could do to stop the dying.

“When we were trying to save those lambs, I got up at night and fed them every two hours,” Laura recalled. “I had heat lamps on them. I did everything I could and still they died.”

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