

Excerpt No. 3

FROM THE DEADLY SNOW

CHAPTER 5: THE DOCTORS

“HUMAN MEDICINE”

PRESTON MITCHELL DID NOT believe in running to the doctor every time a child had a runny nose, a skinned knee or a headache. For one thing, it was 25 miles to the nearest physician’s office and for another, the rancher thought the doctors charged more than they were worth, at least most of the time (even if an office call cost only \$3 or \$4 at that time). It was a Mitchell family joke to say that you didn’t go to the doctor unless you had a broken bone protruding through your skin or a wound that was bleeding so hard that no one at home could stop it.

The April 17, 1959, snowstorm that ushered in the death of scores of newborn lambs and adult ewes also cast a shadow of illness over the family members. The futile fight to save the dying lambs soon left the parents and the older children exhausted, aching to the bone and feeling like their insides were churning.

In the worst condition was little Billie Jeanne, just a year old, lying in her crib, listless and barely able to whimper. Preston later recalled that the whole family had had bloody noses, headaches, pain in their stomachs, vomiting, bloody stools, fatigue, dizziness, and loss of hair.

Billie had been suffering for at least two weeks when the self-described “rock hounds” came to the ranch and asked a steady stream of questions and finally insisted that Preston and Laura take their little girl to their family doctor.

According to records from the Tri-State Clinic, the Mitchells brought Billie Jeanne to see Dr. Melvin Marousek on June 23, 1959, more than two months after the snowstorm.

In 2003, the author interviewed both Dr. Marousek and Dr. Freeman Gilbert, the Mitchell family physicians. In a conversation that lasted only a minute or two at his front door, Dr. Gilbert said he didn't recall hearing anything definitive about the Mitchells' claim of being exposed to radioactivity. Nor did he believe that any governmental conspiracy was involved in the case.

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Freeman J. Freeman was born Dec. 5, 1911, at Belle Fourche, SD, and grew up on the family farm south of town and on a ranch near Buffalo. He graduated from Belle Fourche High School in 1930 and Union College in Lincoln, NB, before attending Seventh Day Adventist-affiliated Loma Linda School of Medicine east of Los Angeles, CA. Dr. Gilbert graduated in 1941.

After completing medical school, he spent a year as an internist at Porter Hospital in Denver, CO, then a year at the Boulder Sanitarium, serving as Boulder County physician. He returned to Belle Fourche in 1943 to practice medicine, intending to settle down and raise his growing family.

However, in the summer of 1944 he was inducted into military service, caring for wounded soldiers in hospitals in Pennsylvania, New York state, Louisiana, Virginia, and West Virginia. He was discharged from active duty in 1946 and returned to the practice of medicine in Belle Fourche.

In 1951, he was a major in the 196th Medical Corps, first in Camp Carson, CO, Fort Richardson, AK, and at Fort Meade near Sturgis, SD. His practice resumed in Belle Fourche from 1951 to 1966. By this time his family included his wife, two sons, and a daughter.

In 1966 he returned to Fort Meade, and practiced medicine there until his retirement in 1982. Not wishing to retire completely, he rejoined Dr. Marousek in Belle Fourche on a part-time basis from December, 1993 to 1994.

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Doc loved being outdoors as a result of growing up on the farm and ranch. As a young man, he taught himself fly fishing and tying his own flies. He would spend a Sunday afternoon angling in Spearfish creek and, never came home empty-handed. His family said that often their mother, Ethel, would pack a lunch, and the youngsters would play in the water. She would read, and Doc would fish. In later years, the couple went to the Big Horn

Mountains of Wyoming on their annual vacation, taking grandchildren with them, instilling in all a love of the mountains and the great outdoors.

In his obituary, a Belle Fourche newspaper stated that Doc “will long be remembered as a kind, considerate, patient and gentle man, a wonderful father, and respected physician.”

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