

Excerpt No. 2

“THE NEIGHBORS”

Chapter 3

FOR MORE THAN TWO YEARS, only a handful of people knew about the Mitchell family’s terrible loss of newborn lambs and ewes following the fateful snowstorm that struck their remote ranch in April, 1959.

The first to hear of the matter were veterinarians Dr. R. M. Buck of Belle Fourche and Dr. Robert Policky (pronounced poe-LISS-key) of Spearfish, both in South Dakota. At Dr. Buck’s suggestion, Preston Mitchell wrote a letter to Dr. George H. Goode, State Veterinarian in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

A couple of days later, William A. Scott, a federal veterinarian, came to the ranch to investigate. On later visits, Dr. Scott brought a weeds specialist, U.S. Grant Kuhn III, a veterinarian connected with the Air Force base in Cheyenne, and Frank C. Knowles, another DVM from the Agricultural Research Service, part of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, who was also stationed in Cheyenne.

Only Dr. Kuhn mentioned radiation or nuclear fallout, saying it had nothing to do with the loss of the sheep and warning the Mitchells not to talk about what had happened or seek publicity about it. “And don’t even think of trying to blame the federal government for any of your problems,” he warned them.

Other significant visitors were the two mysterious rock hounds--or engineers--or surveyors--one named “Mr. Wolf” and the other unidentified--who appeared unexpectedly after the first veterinarians had visited the ranch. Mr. Wolf and his companion came for lunch and stayed all afternoon, asking dozens of questions about the Mitchells’ problems and urging them to take Billie Jeanne, their sickly one-year-old daughter, to a physician.

No one ever offered a satisfactory explanation of who these men were. The Mitchells and their attorneys guessed they might be secret agents snooping around on behalf of the federal government or some agency of the Department of Defense. Later, Dr. Kuhn told the Mitchells the so-called rock hounds were “communists.”

Within three miles of the Mitchell place, several other families had small ranches. These included the Miller, Carlson, Viergutz, Kimball, Pearson, Geis, Bunny and the Marxon families. None of them came to the Mitchell place in April, 1959, when they were losing lambs and grown ewes.

“You don’t tell your neighbors to come and see all the dead sheep on your place, I’ll tell you that,” Laura Mitchell said. “It was bad enough to have it happen, let alone tell anyone about it.”

At the time, if the neighbors had any inkling of the problems occurring on the Mitchell place, they apparently didn’t say anything about it. Or if they did, they only gossiped about it among themselves.

Two years later, when the Mitchells filed suit against the United States of America, asking for \$994,461 in damages resulting from accidental or deliberate exposure to nuclear fallout, the neighbors reacted instantly and vehemently.

“What kind of kook would stoop to anything as idiotic as that?” they asked. Rather than show any sympathy, they seemed to look for any excuse they could find to blame Preston, Laura and their children for losing so many sheep.

When Federal Bureau of Investigation agents began combing the Bear Lodge area for information about the Mitchells’ claims, neighbors eagerly reported that the sheep that died had not been adequately fed or cared for and such losses were to be expected. Some of the neighbors seemed to be intent on ruining the Mitchell family’s credibility related to the facts of the case.

Preston “Dig” Mitchell, the older son, was attending high school in Sundance, Wyoming, at the time and recalled sitting in a class, perhaps civics, “when the teacher mentioned a rancher in their county that claimed his sheep had been radiated. I mean I just had to sit there and listen; it was embarrassing because I assumed my neighbors knew who he was talking about.

“I would have been a freshman or sophomore and just had to sit there and take it, you know. I didn’t speak up and

say, 'Well, that was my parents.' The teacher was talking about people trying to sue the government and this and that. He didn't think they were allowed to do that. I think they have to get some kind of permission to [sue] and he thought they had been [given permission]. But I was too shy to tell him, set him straight. Nowadays I would. I wouldn't be ornery about it, but I'd just tell him," Dig added.

**This is the end of Excerpt No. 2,
"The Neighbors."**

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