

'The Deadly Snow Is Riveting and Important'

BY DAVID KROMM

GEORGE BRANDSBERG OPENS his book writing, "Sometime in the afternoon, fog crept down the valley, drawing a veil of silence over the little ranch and preparing 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."

That evening it snowed and the snow had an eerie glow. The next afternoon from the kitchen window, one of the children remembered that the "snow was pinkish-purple, almost ultraviolet. Very beautiful."

But the family fell ill, most of the sheep died, ewes, rams, and lambs, some 400 in all. Wildlife animals (mice and deer) also died as did fish in the pond. Almost two years after the snowstorm, in April, 1961, the Mitchell family filed a lawsuit against the United States of America in the U.S. District Court in Cheyenne, Wyo.

They sought damages totaling \$994,461. The author tells what happened and presents the conflicting explanations as to why. In 1999, Brandsberg began his quest to uncover what occurred that day 40 years earlier, intermittently continuing for nearly 20 years, exhaustively interviewing many persons involved, reading contemporaneous and subsequent newspaper coverage, and locating numerous related official documents.

Fairly soon after the event, the Mitchell family came to believe that the cause of the ensuing problems was radiation poisoning. A local medical doctor that treated them thought that was possible, and their sheep exhibited the symptoms.

But what could be the source of the radiation in rural northeast Wyoming? Situated in the northwestern reaches of the Black Hills, the Mitchell ranch was bordered by other ranches and a national forest, more than 20 miles from the nearest real towns, Sundance in Wyoming and Belle Fourche in South Dakota.

The Deadly Snow numbers 404 pages and is organized into seven sections and 26 chapters. The sections are titled Introduction, The Family, The Doctors, The Lawyers, The Reporters, Conclusions, and Appendices. Brandsberg talked to dozens of people who could be identified.

He got to know the mother, Laura Mitchell--her husband had died in 1991--and all six of their children. A brief chapter is devoted to the parents and each child. Neighbors tended not to support the Mitchell family's claims of radiation poisoning. Most of them respected Preston, whose grandfather homesteaded the land and who was known as a good hunter and popular guide, but they were not as positive about Laura, who some saw as a messy housekeeper and was often away from home.

Information continued with numerous persons associated with the agencies involved in the accounting for the incident and the legal case. Brandsberg describes the players and their roles well.

He sets the radiation poisoning stage by reviewing the developing of nuclear weapons through the 1940s and 1950s, reporting in detail on radiation contamination in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan and on Pacific islands subsequently used for testing such as Bikini and Enewetek.

Nuclear testing began at the Nellis Air Force Gunnery and Bombing Range in Nevada in 1951, and he tells of the consequences for soldiers ordered to view to atomic bomb blasts, sometimes at distances of only two miles, and for ranching areas in southwest Utah, downwind of the Nevada testing site. In each domestic complaint the government, usually in the form of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, denied any radiation causes.

Although Mitchell family members were examined at Los Alamos and hearings were held with their personal physicians to provide medical evidence and veterinary findings were collected, their lawsuit was denied Dec. 23, 1961

When Brandsberg was collecting his research, most of the documentation describing what happened to the Mitchell family and their ranch could no longer be found. The author was told that the records did not exist. Congress passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act in 1990. But it did not include the Mitchell family.

The Deadly Snow is riveting and important, but I felt that to provide greater ease in understanding the story, the book should have included maps of both the ranch and the surrounding area and an index especially of the main people, places and events. Although references are listed at the end of each chapter, the reader wishing to pursue information contained in the volume would appreciate the specific sources he identified with some form of footnoting when they are discussed.

This memoir is good and timely reading, as we live in an era of both governmental officials lying and increasing nuclear tensions. I very much enjoyed the book and highly recommend it.

*David E. Kromm is a Professor Emeritus in Geography
at Kansas State University.*

**This is the end of Dr. Kromm's review
of *The Deadly Snow*.**

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