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THE CAMPFIRE

It was October 15, the opening day of elk season. Overcast and cold, a typical opening day.

About eight o'clock in the morning, a call came in, someone had poached several elk. About a half hour later, another call. Someone else had seen the same thing and wanted to meet me. I had already started that way, but as usual I was many mile away without a good road between where I was and where I was going. About an hour later I arrived and gave directions to the other warden who was helping me.

We headed to the camp of the hunters suspected of being involved in the violations. The report indicated that several elk had been shot and left along with a buck deer. We were looking at overlimits of elk and deer out of season.

We arrived at the camp about 10 o'clock and found 15 men all standing around a very large campfire keeping warm and trying to dry off. As we approached, a sudden hush fell over the hunters. Two more hunters came up the hill to the fire. I questioned them about their hunt, looked at their licenses and went to check the hunters at the fire. My partner was watching this whole thing in case there was a sign of trouble, which there could have been real easy. I had arrested about half of these guys at one time or another. They were experienced poachers and we were in their camp. I started around the fire gathering licenses and checking the physical descriptions of the hunters I didn't know. I got about half way around the fire and realized I was getting no where. So, I turned to one guy and said, "Who shot the deer?" He said, "I did." Well, not only did I about fall over from shock, but when I looked at my partner, the expression on his face said it all. Nobody confesses that easily when the evidence was as thin as ours. Talk about your basic outhouse luck! Not only did we not know who shot the deer, the ridge was so big that we would never have found the deer especially since it had started snowing and there was about 4" now on the ground.

There were 13 elk shot that morning. We confiscated 4 elk, one deer and wrote numerous citations.

TWENTY YEARS AGO

A young new game warden was checking pheasant hunters when he observed two elderly gentlemen walking beside a narrow weed patch. Their black lab was working the weeds between them. This young warden noted that it was still a half hour before legal shooting hours and these two guys were walking back to their truck, so they had obviously been hunting for a while. He asked to see their licenses and saw they were long time residents of the area as well as old enough to have pioneer licenses. The warden asked them why they were hunting before legal hours, at which point a heated discussion ensued. One of the hunters ranted, "If this were twenty years ago, I'd kick your ass." To which the warden replied, "You probably could have, I would have only been six years old."

THE CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

One early fall Thursday evening, I was sitting at home enjoying a quiet peaceful moment. I had about three years of experience at this point and thought I was ready for anything.

Antelope season was going to start the coming weekend. The phone rang and an excited male voice said two guys in a pickup were shooting at antelope 15 miles south of town. When I reached the area, nothing was there. The radio dispatcher called to say the informant had driven back out there to keep track of the vehicle. They had turned around and were back in town somewhere. My informant wrote down the license plate, vehicle description and suspects' descriptions. With the help of the dispatcher, I got the address and headed that way.

By this time it was dark as I rolled up to a trailer house on the south end of town. I could see one guy go into the trailer and another one washing out a carcass on the tailgate of the pickup. I called a highway patrolman for backup and got out.

Feeling pretty confident and very lucky, I walked over to this guy and identified myself. I looked at the carcass and smugly asked to see his antelope license. Anyway, it looked like an antelope, smelled like an antelope and the informant had seen them shooting at antelope. When he replied, "This is not an antelope, this is a domestic sheep.", I had to think quickly. I asked to see the hide of the "sheep", knowing the drunk was about to be caught lying now. I walked over to the barrel that he pointed to, expecting to find the antelope hide. Looking in, there was a fresh warm sheep hide lying in the bottom. I pulled it out and stretched it out on the ground. There was a red paint brand on its back and one of its ears was notched. I figured these drunks had killed a rancher's sheep. With the highway patrolman watching them, I called the brand inspector and asked him to come out and look at the sheep and identify the brand.

Upon questioning the guys about the sheep, their "story" was all legal.

His friend had come out to help butcher the sheep which had been kept in a small pen behind the trailer. The sheep escaped and ran through town and out toward the west. It took them 20 miles to catch the sheep. As they were explaining the story, I looked at the ewe's mouth to estimate the age. This sheep exemplified the term, "broken mouth ewe". She had seen her better days about 10 years ago.

When the brand inspector arrived, he looked at the brand and knew which rancher the sheep belonged to. We confronted the guy about this, and he was told he was going to jail. I don't remember who made this statement, but our rustler was not impressed. I forgot to mention our man was very large and an unemployed construction worker. After he heard he was going to jail he looked at the three of us and said matter-of-factly, "I don't think you three are big enough to arrest me." All that practice of self defense tactics and arrest and control techniques didn't give me much self confidence with this giant. The patrolman grabbed on arm, the brand inspector and I latched onto the other and we all ended up in a heap on the ground, with the patrolman on the bottom. We got his arms under control and I got out my handcuffs. My cuffs were so dirty that I could hardly get them open, and his wrists were so big, I hardly got them closed again. All this while we were rolling on the ground.

The real story on the sheep killing finally came out in court. The trip started out as a fishing and drinking excursion. They did more drinking on the way out there and decided to scrap the fishing and go back to town to get their rifles and go antelope hunting. By this time, they were too drunk to hit any antelope, so they ran through a highway fence into a bunch of domestic sheep, killing the old ewe. Both men were convicted and sentenced to the State Penitentiary.