



A SURVEILLANCE CAMERA at Western Metals Recycling in Denver captured Orié and Verna Ritter's tractor (above) being towed in on a flatbed trailer along with a pickup cab that actually was scrap metal. Tire tracks where thieves loaded the Ritters' tractor on the trailer were instrumental in law enforcement identifying the trailer used for the thefts. The tracks had shards of glass from the tractor's windows, which thieves broke out to reduce the amount of drag from the wind as they drove to Denver.

Thieves betrayed by a tire track at scene

By Sharon Corcoran

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Tire tracks, crime scene photos, a security camera video, all were instrumental in tracking down a pair of tractor rustlers — and discovering that the tractors and a stolen truck all apparently had been run through a shredder and sent to a mill where the metal would be reused.

Law enforcement officers from three counties shared information as they discovered their stolen tractor cases were all related. Wallace County Sheriff Larry Townsend said they followed tracks from the Orié Ritter farm and knew which direction the thieves had gone after loading his tractor on a flatbed trailer.

A video from a surveillance camera in Goodland gave them a picture of the trailer and two men with Ritter's tractor, and tire tracks helped them identify the trailer.

"They took really good pictures at the site of the theft," Townsend said. "Combining that with information from Cheyenne County, we found the trailer we thought had been used in the theft. We knew the size and tire treads."

What threw officers at first, he said, was that the thieves didn't appreciate the value of the tractor.

"We thought the tractor would be resold to be used," Townsend said. "We didn't think of it being chopped."

He said they contacted sales, auction barns and used-tractor-parts dealers in a 300-mile radius and came up empty handed. After combining his information with what Cheyenne County Undersheriff Craig VanAllen had, Townsend said, they went to Denver and

looked at salvage yards.

They found Ritter's tractor, two tractors belonging to Sam Goodale of St. Francis and a tractor belonging to Brent Cook of Edson had all been taken to Western Metals Recycling, tying together cases from Sherman, Cheyenne and Wallace counties.

Agencies in the three counties did most of the investigation, Townsend said, but the Kansas Bureau of Investigation helped early on, and Doug Murphy of the Quad-County Task Force helped with interviews. Goodland Police officer Doug Whitson and Sherman County Sheriff Kevin Butts also helped with interviews, Townsend said.

Townsend said had been thinking a lot about the case and kept trying to think of ideas on how to solve it, then he woke up during the night and it came to him — maybe someone in Goodland had a surveillance video. He called and asked several businesses and found a gas station that did. It was aimed to film people stopped at the pumps, he said, but it caught the thieves in a pickup towing a trailer with the Ritters' International on the flatbed.

It's kind of far away and at 10:30 at night, Townsend said, but it was enough to make out the tractor and estimate the size of trailer and compare it to the size of the tracks at the scene and the length of the trailer from where the truck stopped to where the ramp was let down.

Townsend and Van Allen also got video surveillance footage from Western Metals Recycling showing the thieves' pickup pulling a trailer with the tractor and a piece of a pickup on the flatbed. It's a differ-

ent world now than even five years ago, Townsend said; more and more places are using video surveillance.

But finding proof in the case was a close call.

"If we had even been one day later in going to Denver," he said, "all we would have gotten would have been a picture of the pickup pulling the trailer and the cab of the pickup on it. The tractor wouldn't have been in what they would have kept on file."

The Denver recycling center didn't do anything illegal in accepting the tractors, Townsend said. They're in the scrap business, and they don't know what kind of condition a tractor is in when someone brings it in.

They wouldn't have started the tractors, VanAllen said; they took a big magnet and lifted them off the trailer. Mark Joyner from Western Metals Recycling is listed in court documents as a witness.

"They were very helpful and open to us," Townsend said.

The best advice for farmers, he said, is to keep their implements as close to home as possible or next to somebody else's homestead. That's not a guarantee, he said; it's hard to hedge against a thief.

Television glamorizes police and crime scene investigation, but Townsend said it's just part of his job.

"Track them down — that's what people hire us to do," the sheriff said. "It's good when we can put it together."

"I'm happy to put it behind us. I'm disappointed we couldn't return the tractors to the owners, but I'm glad to put it behind us."

Victim loses leg/tractor

By Sharon Corcoran

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Orié Ritter was in the hospital in Colorado Springs having his leg amputated around the time his tractor was stolen, and his family didn't tell him about the theft until later.

Ritter, of Sharon Springs, is in long-term care in Tribune today. His wife Verna said the theft was among several events that made the last year pretty tough for the couple. She is 85, and he recently celebrated his 88th birthday.

Brent Cook of Edson, whose tractor was taken from the diesel repair department at the Northwest Kansas Technical College, said he didn't want to talk about the case yet.

The tractor was in the diesel technology department for repairs, said College President Ken Clouse, and the student had some wild idea and decided to steal it. It was crushed in Denver, Clouse said, and won't be retrieved.

Sam Goodale of St. Francis said he has been paying his son-in-law to farm for him since both of his tractors were stolen. One of them was a family heirloom, he said, and a truck that was taken from the same Quonset was one his father bought when Goodale was a boy.

Goodale says the fuel in his tractors was worth about as much as the thieves got for them, and he had put a new battery in one shortly before it was taken. After stealing his tractors and truck, the thieves padlocked the Quonset, he said, so it was tough to get in to check them.

The Ritters' tractor was sitting on their Conservation Reserve Program land with a seed drill hooked to it when it was stolen, Mrs. Ritter said.

"One of the neighbors drove past the farm every day," she said, "and when he saw the tractor was gone and saw tracks, he called our son-in-law and asked if they had sold the tractor."

When both sons-in-law told him "no," she said, the neighbor called the sheriff. He worked on it until he found out what happened to it.

The thieves unhooked the drill and left it, she said, probably because it doesn't weigh much and wouldn't bring much as scrap. It's a good thing they left it, she said, adding it is probably worth more to her family than the tractor.

She was surprised that Western Metals Recycling, a Denver scrap yard, took the tractor as scrap.

"It's worth more to sell," she said. "We spent close to \$10,000 in the last few years getting it in shape."

All the thief had to do, she said, was unhook the tractor and drive it onto a flatbed. She said they had fixed the tractor because they didn't want to buy another one when they are getting ready to retire.

Besides her husband losing a leg and the tractor theft, Mrs. Ritter said, they have had other hardships during the year. He has been in the hospital most of the time since October, and Medicare only pays for a certain number of days. When you run out of days, she said, you have to stay out of the hospital at least two months before the program resets.

Medicare isn't paying anything for Mr. Ritter's care now, she said, adding that soon he'll have been out of the hospital two months, but she doesn't know if Medicare will pay for his long-term care since he isn't in a skilled nursing home. And, she said, supplemental insurance doesn't pay unless Medicare does.

Added to all that, she said, lightning struck last July, burning more than 350 of their trees before the tractor was stolen.

"It's been a bad year," Mrs. Ritter said.

Despite it all, the family has not lost their sense of humor. When their sons were visiting, she said, they joked that they needed to steal a tractor to get some farming done, adding "apparently it's pretty easy to do."

The couple has had support from their sons and five daughters, along with grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren, she said. There have been a lot of visitors for Orié, and some of the family took him to Goodland for ice cream and a hamburger at McDonald's.

Mrs. Ritter said she doesn't understand John Stephens' involvement in the crime. He'd have graduated from the Northwest Kansas Technical College this spring, she said, and he could have had a good job, but now he's messed up his life. She said one of her grandsons graduated from the college this spring, and she noticed Stephens wasn't listed on the program.

"I feel sorry for the parents," she said. "I don't think they had any idea he was doing this. I heard they just cried when they heard Orié was in the hospital getting his leg taken off at the time."

She doesn't seem to have a lot of sympathy for the man who confessed to stealing their tractor, though.

"I'm worried that they'll slap his hands and let him off," she said before he was sentenced.

She was also concerned about the low amount of restitution set in Stephens' plea agreement.

"I don't think we'll ever get anything from these guys," she said. "They're trying to say it was only worth \$4,800. We had it in shape because we didn't want to have to buy another one when we're about to quit farming."

A local dealer placed the \$4,800 value on it, said Wallace County Sheriff Larry Townsend. At Stephens' sentencing, Wallace County Attorney Charles Mosier said his research indicated tractors like it were valued between \$4,800 and \$6,500. Mrs. Ritter brought receipts showing the amount of money they put into the tractor in the past year or so and asked that she be able to recoup some of that as well.

Showalter, representing Stephens, said he and Stephens recognized the \$4,800 amount in the plea agreement but that he had explained things to his client, and Stephens agreed to the \$6,500.

Judge Glenn E. Schiffner said they couldn't go higher than fair market value, but the \$6,500 is within that.

Mr. Ritter was an engineer for Union Pacific Railroad, his wife said. After retiring, he went back to farming.

At Christmas, she said, they could tell he was getting bad, and shortly after, they took him to Colorado Springs for surgery.

"When they were loading him in the ambulance," Mrs. Ritter said, "I didn't have my medication, so I couldn't go with him. My daughter said she'd take me the next day, but we got over 30 inches of snow. I didn't leave the house for a month."

He ended up going back in March to have the leg amputated, she added.

Goodale said his tractors were in storage for the winter and had just been fueled and prepared for use this spring. There was \$400 to \$500 worth of fuel in them, he said.

Goodale said he took the Allis Chalmers to the Technical College

a few years ago to get it overhauled, and it was his main tractor. He used the older one for farming whenever the Allis broke down and also drove it in parades.

He had put a \$139 battery in one and drove it around the section to be sure it was ready for spring. His dad bought the truck new when he was a kid; Goodale uses it still and said it had become a fixture in the Quonset. When his son told him the truck and tractors were gone, he said, he didn't believe it at first.

"I thought he was B.S.-ing," Goodale said. "Then when I saw it was empty, it was shock, disbelief, depression."

"Ever since I was a kid, there was a truck there. I opened the door and there was nothing there."

It's still hard to believe, he said, and for what the thieves got for them; there was \$400-\$500 worth of fuel in them. You lose interest in everything, Goodale said.

"Part of my investment was my tractor," he said. "I'm a small farmer."

Goodale had a padlock hanging on the door to make it look like it was locked, but it wasn't, so they wouldn't have to worry about having the keys with them if they stopped by to check on things. The thieves closed the padlock, though, Goodale said; everything was gone except a panel off the side of one of the tractors, and they locked the door.

The Quonset is south of Wheeler, he said, and visible from K-27. He and his son stopped and checked on things sometimes on the way back from Goodland, but he had never really had to worry about anything being stolen.

"Everyone there knew everyone," Goodale said. "I never had anything stolen there before."

But this has really taken a toll. He is paying his son-in-law to farm because he doesn't have a tractor, and he's still trying to figure out how to move forward.

"The last few years with the drought have been tough," he said. "There were times when it was dry. I wondered if it was worth it. Now we're getting rain."

But now he doesn't have a tractor to farm with. It causes depression and hopelessness, he said, everything you had was taken away from you, so why work?

"Then to find out it's local guys and you knew their grandparents," Goodale said, "and they come from well-to-do families and never needed anything."

Farming has been part time, and Goodale says now that he is getting older, he will probably put the land in the Conservation Reserve Program. It has been in his family 100 years, so he won't sell.

"It was the home place," Goodale said. "I was born and raised there."

He said he has been working full-time as an equipment operator for the Kansas Department of Transportation.

"I'm the one who makes you slow down and gets you aggravated," he said, "and the one in front of you with the snow plow."

Goodale runs into a loss for words as he tries to explain what the theft has cost him. The Allis Chalmers was worth \$20,000, he said; the thieves could have sold it and gotten a lot more money than they did. The 1963 Case was an heirloom, he said, adding that he was going to give it to his grandchildren.

Both were taken to the crusher, along with his dad's truck.

"I still can't believe it," he said.

Obituary

Wade Sheldon Lee

April 2, 1976 - July 8, 2007

Wade Sheldon Lee, 31, Bird City, Kan., died Sunday, July 8, 2007. Mr. Lee was born April 2, 1976, in Benkelman, Neb. He was an over-the-road truck driver.

Survivors include his parents, Gail and Sherri Lee of Osborne and Sandy and Marvin Kuhn of Hays; a

son, Aaron Lee of Goodland; two daughters, Stephanie Lee and Danielle Lee, both of Goodland; three brothers, Wayne of Hays and Wyatt and Wylie, both of Osborne; and six grandparents, Clyde and Wilma Gleason of Plainville, Ray and Joann Lee of Wheeler, Faye Bradley of Osborne and Katie Hicks of Norton.

Services were held Friday, July 13 at 10:30 a.m. at Immanuel United Methodist Church, Bird City. Burial was in the Bird City Cemetery.

Memorials may be made to Wade Lee Memorial Fund.

Knodel Funeral Home, St. Francis was in charge of the funeral.

WANTED Bird City Times Associate-Editor

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