

Man remains missing after one year; sheriff looks for new leads

By TOM BETZ

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A year after the disappearance of a 44-year-old Goodland man, a new sheriff wants to reacquire the public with the case, hoping he might stir up a fresh lead.



McClelland

"I want to try some new things we haven't tried in the past," said Sheriff Kevin Butts. "I have talked to the mother and step-father and assured them I will try to find out what might have happened last year."

On Nov. 24, 2003, Sherman County sheriff's deputies got a call about 5:30 p.m. on an argument at the home of Mark Peden, 6940 County Road 19, about 3 1/2 miles north of Goodland. On the phone, Marci Peden told dispatchers her husband was in an argument with a man holding a knife. She said her husband had a shotgun.

Jimmy McClelland, 5920 County Road 14, allegedly the man with a knife in the argument, reportedly ran from the scene. He has been missing since that night.

Many rumors have circulated since McClelland's disappearance last year. Some had him found dead in the creekbed near Kanorado.

Others said McClelland had checked into a treatment center, hitched a ride to Denver or caught a train headed west.

Sheriff Butts knows there has been a lot of speculation about what happened, mostly because of the high interest in the case and the number of friends McClelland had. He said the department has followed up on every report without finding anything.

Many people, including members of his family, now believe McClelland is dead, but that his body may never be found. Family members have ideas about who was responsible, and feel that the former sheriff did not do everything he could have.

One reason some think McClelland might have run away before deputies arrived that night was that he was on probation for a drug conviction, and because he had a knife, he might have had his probation revoked and had to spend time in prison. However, family members

believe even the threat of prison would not have stopped McClelland from at least calling home to see if it was OK to return.

"I don't believe the threat of prison was that great," Sheriff Butts said. "This was his first drug offense, and I do not believe that would have kept McClelland away this long without some contact with his family."

Other things complicate the investigation, including the fact that a woman who was with McClelland that night, the only witness to the fight other than the Pedens, died just four months later.

Details of the events of that night and the argument are pretty one-sided, and that leaves room for rumors to develop. Butts said he is looking at all the information and may consider a search warrant for the Peden property.

"We know McClelland and Peden had an argument," former Sheriff Doug Whitson said last year. "We do not know exactly what it was about. McClelland apparently took off running on foot before the deputy arrived."

Whitson said Deputy Burton Pinalto, the first officer to arrive, did not see McClelland running away. Mark Peden told him McClelland had run away.

Sheriff Butts said Sunday that the Pedens said the scuffle took place near a shop south of their house. They claimed McClelland had come at Marci with a large knife. Mark Peden said he had a shotgun and fired it three times over McClelland's head. When that did not stop him, he told officers, he hit him with the gun.

Heather Marie Bissett, 42, Goodland, was with McClelland, a former Union Pacific railroad track worker. Butts said Bissett and McClelland had met while both were in a rehab program, and the couple was living together at a rural home.

Bissett apparently was pushed down in the scuffle. Butts said she had driven off in McClelland's yellow pickup before deputies arrived. Deputies found her in the pickup about a mile south of Pedens' and charged her with drunk driving. Butts said she had no idea what had happened to McClelland after she left.

Whitson said Bissett told deputies she had told McClelland to get in the truck, and when he didn't, she drove off, leaving him talking to

Peden in front of the shop.

Bissett died suddenly of pneumonia Monday, March 29, at the Goodland Regional Medical Center.

Deputies searched around Peden's house that night until about 3 a.m., and they went back out again the next day with dogs and a plane. The search did not turn up any sign of McClelland. Whitson said the deputies found a set of footprints they felt were his tracks heading to the southwest, but they lost them after a quarter of a mile.

Whitson said the footprints were not from anyone involved in the search, but there was no proof they belonged to McClelland.

Butts said he went to the home of McClelland's sister, Tammie Skrdlant, where she lived with Leonard Barnes about 3 1/2 miles north of Pedens', and asked if she had seen him. Butts said he spent some time on a nearby hill watching with a night vision scope to see if McClelland was heading to his sister's.

"I saw some deer and other animals," Butts said, "but no sign of any person."

A couple of weeks later, 17 volunteers and eight deputies walked, rode and flew a seven-mile section of Beaver Creek southwest of Peden's shop, hoping to find clues to the disappearance. At the end of the day, Whitson said at least he felt the search proved McClelland was not lying in a field in that area.

Since then, the sheriff's office has followed up on a series of rumors, but there has not been any contact from McClelland. Opinions are split about whether he may be alive and hiding.

Whitson said he listed McClelland in the National Crime Information computer in January for breaking probation because of his disappearance. Whitson said it was a way to get him in the nationwide criminal computer system to give his disappearance the broadest possible exposure. Missing person cases don't get that kind of treatment.

County Attorney Bonnie Selby said in January that McClelland had been sentenced on Nov. 3, 2003, on charges of unlawful manufacture of a controlled substance, and possession of a narcotic with intent to sell within 1,000 feet of a school. She said he was transferred to Community Corrections, and agreed that McClelland's disappearance violated the terms of the sentence. That could mean he would face prison

Family afraid man is no longer alive

Day by day, the family of a Goodland man missing for more than a year now after an argument at a rural home loses hope of ever seeing him again.

As the holidays pass, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and soon another Christmas—his wife and his mother admit they're no longer sure Jimmy McClelland, 44, is alive.

The family, unsure that the Sherman County sheriff's office touched all the bases in its investigation, has asked for help from other agencies and even an outside investigator.

The missing man's aunt, Marie Edwards, who helped with a search last year, said she believed if he was hiding, McClelland would have called home by Christmas. Next month will mark the second Christmas since his disappearance.

The fact that Mark Peden, who admitted firing a shotgun in an argument with McClelland the

night he disappeared Nov. 24, 2003, was the last person to see McClelland alive makes him a leading suspect in the minds of many family members.

"The bottom line is that Peden is the last person who saw Jimmy alive," said Jan McClelland, Jimmy's mother, a cook at the Goodland Regional Medical Center.

In March, former Sheriff Doug Whitson said he and a KBI investigator talked to Peden and his wife Marci, and they have no reason to doubt their story. Peden agreed at one point to take a polygraph test, but a couple of days before it was to happen, Whitson said, he backed out. Jan McClelland said she is hoping and praying that the new sheriff, Kevin Butts, will turn up something.

"There are a lot of things that don't add up right," she said Friday.

Jan McClelland said she was disappointed in how the investigation was handled last year, and that she has turned to others outside the

sheriff's department for help.

She said former Cheyenne County Sheriff Ray Lee of St. Francis offered to help, and he had talked to over 100 people in Sherman County about the missing man. She said Lee called the KBI and the FBI to try to get something more done.

"We sent the KBI all the information," she added, "but we never heard a thing."

While his mother has hope of finding Jimmy alive, she is no longer certain.

"Maybe he's alive somewhere," she said, "but I don't think so. It is a hard thing to say."

Jan McClelland said she was upset more was not done within the first few days, and thought a more thorough search of the farm should have been conducted.

"I don't have any respect for Doug Whitson," she said. "I liked him, but was disappointed that he did not get a search warrant for Peden's home."

time if he returned, she said.

McClelland and his wife Elaine, 40, were among six people arrested on Jan. 8, 2003, and charged with the cultivation of marijuana, possession of narcotics and drug paraphernalia, and manufacturing of methamphetamine.

Selby said McClelland's attorney, Paul Oller of Hays, arranged with the Union Pacific to reinstate him and to allow him to participate in their drug rehabilitation program, which he completed in the summer of 2003. Though he was reinstated, the railroad laid him off last November because they did not have any work.

Some people believe Jimmy McClelland is alive and will be found through a traffic stop somewhere in the country.

"I don't know what to tell his mother," Sheriff Butts said. "We need to find out what happened to bring this to a conclusion."

"Just not knowing is terrible for the family. I want to get Jimmy's picture out again, and maybe someone will remember something."

"The sightings have slowed down, but we will follow up on everything. I know that Jan and Elaine

(McClelland) have checked out a couple of sightings where people thought they saw Jimmy, and there was nothing."

Butts said he hopes that keeping the case fresh in people's minds will

produce a new lead.

He said the case if far from being solved, and he is hoping with the public's help there, may be some new facts that give him a chance to find the answers.

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