

Victim lost leg; thieves stole his tractor

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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."

They needed to plant grass seed on the conservation land, she said, and the deadline was April 15. Sev-



These tractors are similar to the four that were allegedly stolen including a 1973 International 1066 (top left), a 1984 Allis-Chalmers 8070 (top right), a 1976 John Deere 4630 (above left) and a 1963 Case propane tractor (above right).

eral people offered the loan of a tractor, she said, and they borrowed one.

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 Orie, and some of the family took him to Goodland for ice cream and a hamburger at McDonald's.

He's well-cared for in the nursing home and says they're good to him, she said, but after the trip, he told everyone he "got out of jail for a day."

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 Orie 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. He always had small veins in his legs, Mrs. Ritter said; that ran in his family. As long as he could be active, she said, his heart could pump enough blood, but once he became bedfast, he couldn't get blood to his veins.

At Christmas, she said, they could tell he was getting bad, and shortly after, they took him to Colo-

rado 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. "They opened arteries," she said. "I never got to go out there, but our daughter is a floor manager there, and they put him on her floor."

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."

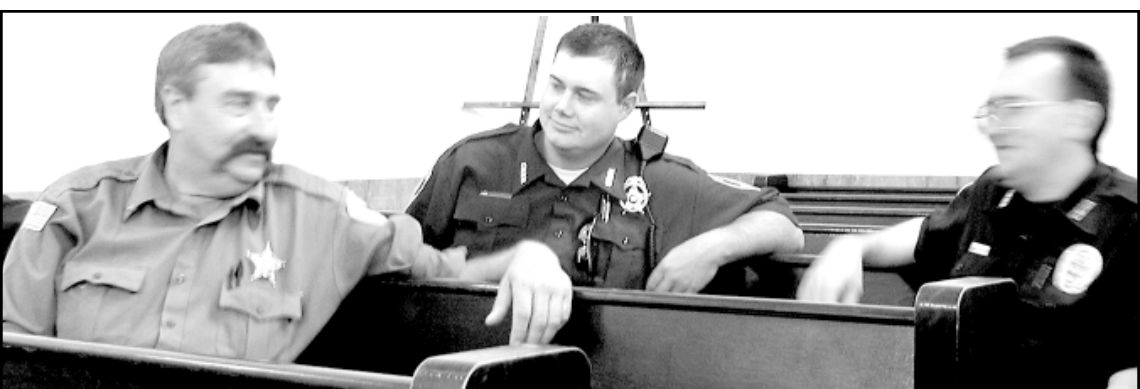
He said he has been working full-time as an equipment operator for the Kansas Department of Transportation.

"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.



Wallace County Sheriff Larry Townsend (left) talked to Cheyenne County Deputy Cody Beeson (center) and Undersheriff Craig Van Allen while they waited to testify at Teegan Callicrate's preliminary hearing last Tuesday. They were dismissed when Callicrate decided to waive his right to the preliminary hearing. Townsend said Van Allen was really good to work with, and combining their information was a key to solving the tractor thefts. Photo by Sharon Corcoran/The Goodland Star-News

Thieves betrayed by a tire track

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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 different 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."

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Pins on sale!

Special color souvenir pins featuring the giant Vincent van Gogh sunflower painting on the big easel in Goodland are now on sale.



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