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BIGHORN SHEEP POACHING

On October 3, 1984, two non-resident hunters from Illinois reported the possible poaching of a Big Horn Sheep ram on the Ferris Mountains. At the time of the call, I was out checking deer hunters. Dispatch had tried to contact me by radio but I had been out of my vehicle most of the day on foot and had not received the message. When I returned home the only information concerning the violation was a message from my wife: "Two hunters from Illinois camped in Miners Canyon near Sand Creek may have witnessed the poaching of a Big Horn Sheep and that the two hunters were leaving the next morning at first light." I received this information at 10:30 in the evening when I came home after checking deer hunters all day and camps for several hours that night.

I almost decided not to follow up on the report since Sheep season was currently open and the hunters were leaving at first light. I knew if I left for the camp at this hour it would be around 1:00 in the morning before I would get there. I decided to leave early in the morning and try to catch the hunters before they departed. Deer season was open in the Ferris Mountains and if I missed the hunters who reported the violation, I could always check deer hunters in the area.

I left the next morning at 4:00 for the two hour drive to the location of the non-resident hunters' camp. I arrived a little after 6:00 just as the two hunters were breaking camp. When questioned concerning the possible violation they witnessed, they told me that they were "On Stand" deer hunting when they saw 5 Big Horn Sheep rams run into some trees about a half mile away. They heard two shots and then saw 4 rams run out of the other side of the trees. While they didn't actually see anyone shoot any animals, one ram didn't come out of the other side of the trees. I explained to the hunters that Sheep season was open and it may have been a legal harvest. The two hunters said that all the rams appeared to be young and they didn't think any of the rams would have had a 3/4 curl (minimum legal ram in Wyoming). They also said they didn't see the hunters who had done the shooting and didn't go to the area as they didn't want to confront the poacher or poachers.

I asked if they had seen or talked to any other hunters in the area that day. They told me that the only other hunters they thought were in the area were two hunters who had stopped to talk to them earlier. The two Illinois hunters said that two "Indian" looking subjects had talked to them along the road. These two hunters were driving a bright yellow Chevy pickup, and one distinguishing feature of the truck was it had "BIG" tires, "REAL BIG" tires and twin CB antennas on the back.

The two Illinois hunters were in a hurry to leave and they didn't want to take the time to walk back into the area where they witnessed the possible violation, but they did point to the general area. From their camp I could see trees up on the side of the mountain where they thought the ram may have been killed.

The area where the ram was last seen was on a slide rock type mountain which was accessible only by foot. It was over an hour's climb up the steep slide rock from the end of the road to the area where the violation may have taken

place. I searched the area for most of the day with no success. Toward evening, my dog "Bear", a Chocolate Lab, ran down a steep chute in the middle of a slide rock area and when I called him, he would not come back. Try as I might, the dog stayed down in what appeared to be low growth evergreens. I finally went down the slide and upon reaching "Bear", realized there was a dead Big Horn ram under a bush. The "bush" turned out to be evergreen boughs that had been used to cover the ram. I went up to the head of the slide and there was no evidence of anyone pushing or sliding the ram down the chute. All evidence had been carefully covered up. In the area where the ram had been concealed, the slide marks could be seen where they had not been brushed over. That evening when I returned home, I called several informants in the area from Casper to Riverton to Lander to Rawlins, along with surrounding game wardens, in an effort to find a yellow Chevy 1/2 pickup with real large tires and twin CB antennas. The next day, October 5, the Enforcement Specialist from Lander, Gary Good, and I returned to the location of the ram and necropsied the animal in an effort to obtain a bullet. We had no success since the bullet broke up on impact. We found numerous lead and brass fragments, but not enough to indicate what caliber of rifle was used. Gary and I carried the ram of the mountain to be used as evidence as necessary. When I got home that evening, there were no reports on the suspects' vehicle.

I went back up the following day and continued to look for any other evidence: footprints, cartridge cases, clothing, cigarette packs, and anything else that could tie the violators to the kill. I tied flagging high in a tree just above where the chute started (where the ram was shot), trying to figure out any angle from where the shots came from and searched the areas. "Bear" and I searched the area all morning and afternoon. I had pretty much given up and dejectedly sat on a rock. At my feet was a rifle case. I picked it up and identified it as a fresh .308 Winchester, manufactured by Federal. I knew the two Illinois hunters who reported the violation were both using .270 Winchester rifles and they had seen no one else in the area prior to the two "Indians" in the yellow truck. It was very likely whoever shot the ram had used a .308 Winchester rifle. I searched the area and found several good footprints that showed a wavy type print common to "Guide Boot" type hunting boots. It was unknown what kinds of boots the Illinois hunters had, but that information could be obtained.

When I returned home in the evening, I had two different reports of possible suspect vehicles. Both reports were from Rawlins, one from a reliable informant and one from Rawlins Game Warden Dennis Smith. Both reports were for the same vehicle and they had the license plate number. The vehicle was registered to an Omar Travisio. I called the Illinois hunters and found they both wore boots with cleated soles and neither had a .308 Winchester caliber rifle.

The next day, October 7, Dennis and I went to the address of Omar Travisio. No one lived in the apartment anymore. Dennis and I checked with the resident manager of the building who told us Travisio had vacated the apartment about two months earlier without leaving any forwarding address.

As Dennis and I drove out of the parking lot, we observed a yellow GMC pickup with large tires parked in the trailer park up the street. We went to the owner of the trailer park and he confirmed Omar Travisio did live at the trailer. We went to the trailer but the pickup was gone.

Dennis and I went to the County Attorney and secured a search warrant for the trailer for a .308 caliber rifle, Federal ammunition and a pair of hunting boots or shoes with the wavy tread. We enlisted the aid of a Carbon County Deputy, and the three of us went to the trailer and attempted to serve the warrant. Omar was not home and his wife said he would not be back until late. She wasn't sure where he had gone, but she thought maybe to his sister's house. The warrant was not served, but Omar's wife was told what we were looking for. She said, to her knowledge, none of the items were in the trailer and Omar didn't own or borrow any of those items. The decision was made not to serve the warrant until Omar was present. I had my doubts Omar's wife was telling the truth. We drove back to the Sheriff's office where my truck was parked. As fast as I could, I drove back to the trailer park and parked about two blocks away from the trailer. I had been observing the trailer about 10 minutes when Omar's wife came out carrying something that appeared to be a rifle wrapped in a blanket. She saw my truck and went back into the trailer with the item. I called Dennis on the radio and we again interviewed Omar's wife. We told her we would serve the warrant at this time if she didn't voluntarily give us the items we requested. She walked back into the trailer and came out with a rifle (.308 Winchester caliber), a pair of "Guide Boots" with wavy tread and a partial box of Federal .308 Winchester ammunition.

Omar's wife continued to insist she didn't know where Omar was, maybe with his sister, and she didn't know when he would get home. She also said Omar was working on the day of the violation and couldn't have been up in the Ferris Mountains. Omar worked for an oil field service company out of Bairoil. Dennis and I properly tagged and receipted the evidence and left the trailer. We drove by the sister's address, but no one was home.

The next morning I drove to Bairoil and talked to Omar's employer. According to their records, Omar was an operator on one of their rigs, but on the day in question, Omar's rig was down and he hadn't worked that day. Several people in the shop where Omar worked had heard him say he was going deer hunting in the Ferris Mountains since he didn't have to work. One of the shop hands said Omar had mentioned Miners Canyon, the place where the poaching occurred.

Warden Smith and I went back to Omar's trailer about 6:00 that evening and again Omar was not home. We interviewed his wife again. Again she said she didn't know where Omar was and didn't know when he would be home. She also insisted Omar had worked that day and he couldn't have committed the violation. I told her Omar had gone to work, but did not work that day, that several co-employees had heard Omar say he was going hunting in the Ferris Mountains, that Omar's rifle matched the caliber of the rifle that killed the ram, that the manufacture of the ammunition Omar used was the same as the manufacture of the ammunition that killed the ram and that the tread on the boots Omar wore to work that day matched the footprints found at the scene where the sheep was killed.

After Omar's wife found out Omar had not worked that day, she went to the telephone and made a call and said Omar would be there in 10 minutes. Omar came into the trailer and after a short interview, admitted to having killed the Big Horn ram and leaving it to go to waste. He said he thought it was a mule deer. Omar, at first, did not want to tell who the other person with him had been, but finally said it was a member of his crew, Hector Lopez. Hector and he had discussed what they were going to do with the illegal sheep and they decided to hide the ram and leave it. Omar gave us Hector's address. Dennis transported Omar and his wife down to the Sheriff's office for a formal statement.

I went to Hector's house, another trailer park and asked for Hector. According to the young woman who answered the door, Hector was not there but was expected soon. I waited and watched the trailer from a block away. In about 30 minutes a pickup pulled up and a male subject got out and entered the trailer. As I started to go to the trailer to see if that person was Hector, the male ran out of the trailer and jumped into his pickup and drove off. At first, when I attempted to stop the pickup, the driver refused to stop and only after turning on my siren did the guy stop the truck. I approached the driver and asked for some identification. The driver, Hector Lopez, was only concerned about one thing, that he was legal in the United States and kept giving me his Green Card. I finally calmed Hector down and explained I was a Game Warden and not with Immigration and Naturalization. When Hector finally understood all I wanted was information on the killing of the Big Horn ram, he was so relieved that he was more than willing to give a full and accurate account of what had happened on his deer hunt with Omar on October 3. Hector said he and Omar had been hunting and he and Omar had both shot at the Big Horn ram, but it was Omar who had hit and killed it. I took Hector down to the Sheriff's office and he gave a formal statement of what had happened on their hunting trip. Both Omar and Hector made statements that on the afternoon of October 3, Omar had shot and killed the Big Horn ram and both decided to conceal the ram and allow it to go to waste.

As a result of these statements, Omar Travidio was charged with Wanton Destruction of a Big Horn Sheep and taking a Big Horn Sheep without a license. Hector Lopez was charged with Accessory to Wanton Destruction of a Big Horn Sheep. Both Omar and Hector were represented by counsel and as a result of a plea agreement the court found the following:

Omar Travidio - Fined \$1,000.00 and court costs

30 days in jail with 16 days suspended

6 months probation

Suspension of Game and Fish privileges for 2 years

Surrender all firearms to the Carbon County Sheriff and not be in possession of firearms during his probation

Hector Lopez - Fined \$500.00 and court costs

30 days in jail with 23 days suspended

6 months probation

Suspension of Game and Fish privileges for 2 years