

Behind the Badge: The Smiley Face Case

By Jeff Mock

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EARLY OCTOBER of 2008 was a busy month and it was just starting. I decided to take a Friday night off and do a little fox hunting. It didn't take me long to regret that decision.

At 11:45 p.m. retired Deputy Emory (Dick) Grassmyer called me on my cell phone. "Jeff, I got a call from one of my neighbors down the valley. Someone is spotlighting and just shot out of the vehicle." I told Dick I was fox hunting, using my personal vehicle, at the other end of the county. I wasn't going to be able to get there in time; it would have taken me at least an hour to get there. Dick said he would keep an eye out for the vehicle and see if he could get a license plate number for me.

Dick was able to get a license plate number; it came back to a white Jeep Cherokee. I had several cases to work on, so I turned the case over to deputies Abe Henry and Shawn Dillon. Saturday morning Abe and Shawn were tracking down the vehicle registration, but weren't getting much cooperation from the vehicle's registered owner. The owner indicated that the vehicle was being driven by his son Jimmy, and that he had had a falling out with Jimmy and didn't know where he was living at the time.

Saturday night into Sunday morning I picked up another poaching case. The poachers had shot a nice 10-point and I was waiting for them when they came back to pick it up: Nothing like catching them red-handed. I got back to my house around 4 o'clock Sunday morning.

My cell phone woke me at 7 a.m. Deputy Shawn Dillon was running a trapline in Lingle Valley. "Jeff, I'm in Lingle Valley and just found a bunch of fresh deer dumped along the road." Still clearing the cobwebs out of my head I told him to figure out how many deer we were talking about and preserve any evidence that he finds. He called back a little later and told me that there were six, all shot with a small-caliber firearm. They were all skinned and partly butchered. "I found something else, but I don't know if it is important," Shawn said. "It's a little, looks like it's metal or plastic, smiley face about the size of a nickel."

"Photograph it and bag it, you never know what might be important," I told Shawn.

A few hours later I went to the location to take tissue samples in case we needed them for DNA testing. It certainly was quite a scene. Parts of six deer were scattered around a small pull off right next to a forestry road.

Dick Grassmyer called to tell me he had just received an anonymous call. "The guy told me that the white Jeep you guys are looking for is now green." The operator, Jimmy, had painted it. I passed on the information to deputies Dillon and Henry. Abe indicated that he was making some progress, that he thought he knew where Jimmy was living, but that he hadn't caught him at home yet.

Several days later Abe and I were in the area, working on another case, and he suggested that we go see if Jimmy was home. Pulling into the complex we noticed a freshly painted green Jeep Cherokee. "I'll get to the door and see if Jimmy will come out and talk to us," Abe said. I was standing beside the Jeep, looking in the window, and I didn't like what I saw.

It turns out that painting the exterior wasn't the only thing Jimmy had done to it. All of the carpet had been removed and the interior had been painted with a bed-liner like substance. So much for getting evidence from the carpet. Jimmy came out of the house, and we told him why we were there. Jimmy denied any wrongdoing and consented to a search of his vehicle.

Through my training I knew that if a deer has been placed in a vehicle, hiding all the evidence is hard, and certain areas almost always provide evidence. In this case, though, some of those places had been removed when the carpet was taken out. Regardless, Abe was able to find several drops of blood and deer hair. When presented with this evidence, Jimmy admitted to having shot a deer Friday night and transporting it in the Jeep. I asked Jimmy if he knew anything about the six deer that were dumped in Lingle Valley; he denied any knowledge of those deer, but said he hoped I caught the slob who did it.

Needless to say, Jimmy was now at the top of our suspect list for those six deer. We just didn't have everything that we needed to prove it. Over the next couple of weeks we got a little bit of information regarding the six deer, including Jimmy's name, but not enough for me to file charges. I had several requests for information published in local newspapers and broadcasted on local radio stations. They soon paid off.

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I received a Turn-In-A-Poacher report from the PGC Headquarters. The individual sending in the report indicated that he found six deer early on a Saturday morning, hidden under some brush next to a garage in Milroy.

The next day I figured out who owned the garage, Billy, and planned to pay him a visit. Law Enforcement Supervisor Tim Marks (now retired) was available and went with me to interview Billy.

As it turned out, Billy is Jimmy's brother-in-law; I liked where this was going. Billy said that Jimmy did use the garage from time to time, but he didn't know anything about any deer. Billy said that he didn't have anything to hide and that we were more than welcome to look in the garage.

Billy got the keys and we all walked down to the garage. Billy opened up the door and turned on the lights. Tim was first through the door, and as he stepped in he started chuckling and pointed down. I had a hard time not grinning, too. There, on the floor of the garage, were several little round metallic smiley faces.

Jimmy showed up several minutes later. At first he tried to deny any knowledge of the six deer, but when I showed him the overwhelming evidence against him, including the smiley faces, he realized he had been had. Jimmy then told me the whole story and confessed to shooting all six deer in New Lancaster Valley that Friday night.

Jimmy's confession ended several weeks of investigation and closed a rather big case that without the help of the public and deputies Dillon and Henry, I may have never been able to close. When I had all the facts of the case put together, I called retired Deputy Dick Grassmyer. First I wanted to thank him for all his help. Second, I wanted to give him a hard time. It turns out that when Dick got the license plate number, Jimmy had all six deer stacked like cord wood in the back of the Jeep. If Dick hadn't been retired, it would have been the vehicle stop of a lifetime.