

Mystery leaves sleuths up in the air

Farmers and officials try to solve 'The Great Whirly-Bird Caper'

BY DONNA TOMMELLEO
ETTERS — All right, Agatha Christie fans, get out your pen and paper and get ready to solve one of the greatest mysteries of the year.

However, once you have all the clues, you still may come up empty-handed. Don't fret. You're in good company because even the Pennsylvania State Police, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, environmental engineers, state legislators, veterinarians and farmers have not yet solved the "Great Whirly-Bird Caper."

It began on an autumn day in October in the Central Pennsylvania community of Etters. Around noon dairy farmers Jane Lee and her brother-in-law

Jeremiah Fisher were in a pasture assisting a cow that was experiencing calving problems. Finally they delivered a 150 pound Holstein bull calf, which was a little slow getting started, said Lee.

Lee and Fisher were still in the field when they said they saw a blue and white helicopter that landed in nearby field, owned by Elias Connelly. The chopper pilot left the craft, scooped up a soil sample, boarded the chopper and was gone.

"The entire episode didn't last more than five minutes," Lee explained. Connelly was plowing the very same field at the time, however, his back was to the

helicopter and he was unaware of the incident, said Lee. Mrs. Connelly explained that no one had asked permission to take a soil sample.

Before we go on readers, let's add one more item, which you may or may not find useful. Fisher and Lee's Holstein dairy sits within four miles of Three Mile Island. Lee was one of the dairy farmers who said she had experienced health problems with the herd and other animals following the initial TMI incident in 1979.

About two months prior the to soil sampling, Lee said she observed black smoke emerging from the cooling towers which are quite visible from her farmhouse. When she questioned officials at the plant, she was informed that Metropolitan Edison was just testing.

Lee explained that following the helicopter siting, she assisted in four consecutive abnormal births, including the large bull calf. Up until that day, she recorded 18 consecutive normal births.

However, Dr. J. Cable, a veterinarian with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture who recorded the initial research on area animals following the 1979 incident, said the abnormal births were never brought to his attention.

"She (Lee) hasn't said anything to us and never brought anything into the lab," said Cable. "That's what our labs are for."

Cable, who also has a post doctorate in radiation, admitted that there was a small amount of iodine released in the atmosphere from the nuclear plant.

"But the effects they're claiming just don't fit in with the dosage."

Meanwhile readers, we still have to solve the case of the elusive chopper. Lee said that she along with several neighbors had noticed an increase in helicopter traffic about a month before the siting. Since the soil sampling, Lee explained the aerial traffic has markedly declined.

Lee reported the helicopter to State Representative Bruce Smith (R — York, Cumberland). Smith said he was unable to locate the source of the chopper.

The state police, who operate



Etters dairy farmer Jane Lee administers to the needs of a premature Holstein calf. The heifer was born after the mysterious helicopter siting.



These criss-cross back legs of this heifer, were just some of the problems Lee encountered in a wave of abnormal births.

similar blue and white crafts were informed of the incident.

"We've had at least six inquiries," said Cpl. Harold Hartman. "It wasn't our helicopter and I honestly don't know who it was."

Hartman explained that following the initial 1979 TMI incident, the state police were called to perform radiological monitoring from the sky. Since then, said Hartman, Met Ed has contracted private companies for such monitoring.

The Federal Aviation Authority also turned up a big fat zero. FAA Flight Service supervisor Ray Fitton said that without the

registration number from the aircraft, the chopper would be difficult to trace.

Gerry LaRoche, NRC environmental engineer was also questioned about the incident.

"We haven't been able to locate the source of the helicopter. We've investigated every lead we can think of," said LaRoche.

Well readers, have you solved this confusing whodunit, yet? This one may take some time. While Jane Lee and several other interested persons continue to ask questions, a chopper pilot sits somewhere with a bag full of soil, grinning like the cat that just ate the canary.

Pastureland emerges from strip mine scars

QUICKSAND, Ky. — Post-mining land use presents numerous challenges for strip mine reclamation efforts throughout the United States, with the creation of new pastureland emerging as a real potential in the future, according to a five year study by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

"Under proper management, a good portion of the many thousands of acres disturbed annually by surface mining in the eastern United States could be developed into new pastureland," says Charles F. Gilbert, manager for the SCS Plant Materials Center in Kentucky.

These results were brought to the forefront during the 73rd Annual Meeting of the American Society of Agronomy, December 3, in Atlanta, Georgia. The studies

were made possible through a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grant.

Most surface mined land today is reclaimed with plants that mainly provide ground cover and reduce soil erosion. Present federal laws require many strip mine sites be returned to their original contours. Therefore, little use can be made of this mountainous or sloping land except for forestry, wildlife, and recreation.

Another method of mining in the Appalachian Region, called mountain-top removal, creates large tracts of flat rolling land. With proper management, many other land uses are possible.

From an agricultural standpoint, it was decided to test the value of growing hay and pasture plants on surface mined land. Results could demonstrate the viable alternative of raising livestock.

Establishment studies were conducted from 1976 to 1978. Then, clipping studies were carried out from 1978 to 1981. Many kinds of forage plants were compared to standard strip mine plantings.

"It has been determined," Gilbert pointed out, "that some of the new plants tested produced more hay than the standard planting mixture of 'KY-31' tall fescue and 'interstate' sericea lespedeza. These were a mixture of Causasian bluestem — a warm season bunchgrass introduced from the USSR — with 'Appalow' sericea lespedeza, a legume, and a mixture of 'Blackwell' switchgrass, a native warm-season prairie grass, with 'Interstate' sericea lespedeza.

"Furthermore, certain warm-season grasses grown on reclaimed surface mined land can be used to produce more hay and supplement tall fescue and 'Interstate' sericea lespedeza."

"Warm-season grasses perform well because they grow under intense sunlight on dry sites with poor soil, and produce higher yields than cool-season grasses, under the same harsh conditions," he said.

Gilbert concluded, "At a time when our nation's farm land is being lost, it is encouraging to

learn level land can be made that will add to our farmland base. As we become more energy self

sufficient, a good spin off from surface mining could be new pastureland."

Farm bill

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tion for farmers against export embargoes, and programs for agricultural research, extension and teaching.

"All Americans are gripped today by a painful recession. Our agricultural producers feel the sting of high interest rates and inflation the same as any other business man or woman."

The President continued, "The Agricultural and Food act of 1981 recognizes the importance of the market place and emphasizes the great export potential of American agriculture."

Reagan then turned to domestic affairs and announced that 30 million pounds of surplus cheese, purchased by the Commodity Credit Corporation and stored around the nation, will be distributed to each state. The states are responsible for re-

distributing the cheese, valued at \$43 million, to non-profit organizations that provide service to low-income families and individuals.

Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Penrose Hollowell said, Tuesday, that Pennsylvania is already distributing much cheese through non-profit groups. The state, however, will look for ways to broaden the eligibility of other such groups.

Many state groups now receiving surplus dairy products are schools, senior-citizen groups and low-income persons, explained Hollowell.

Hollowell urged any group which may be eligible for the surplus cheese program but is not now receiving any surplus, to call Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Surplus Food Program at 717-787-2940.

