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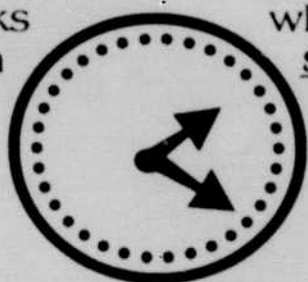
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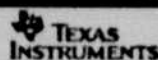
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Stranded man who died left letters about ordeal

MISSOULA (AP) — A Montana man, who died while stranded in his vehicle high atop southwestern Oregon's Coast Range last winter, apparently survived for nine weeks hoping for a rescue that never came.

In letters he wrote to family and friends before he died, Dewitt Allan Finley, of Kalispell, said his fate was in God's hands and he was prepared for whatever might come.

The Missoulian newspaper carried an account Monday of Finley's final days and the letters he left behind.

The 56-year-old Finley was a newcomer to the Northwest who had spent most of his life in the Los Angeles area. He disappeared last Nov. 14 while on a sales trip for the S and S Camper manufacturing company near Kalispell, where he had worked for several months as a salesman.

His employer, Elmer Sieler, sent another company employee to search for him, called towns and sheriff departments across southwestern Oregon, put up posters offering a \$5,000 reward and even hired an airplane to fly the rugged timbered country where Finley last had been seen departing Coos Bay en route to Grants Pass.

Sieler feared Finley might have met with foul play or had an accident that left his vehicle hidden below a road somewhere.

Finley's body was finally discovered on May 20, the same weekend that the story of his mysterious disappearance had been set to air on the TV series *America's Most Wanted*.

His missing pickup camper was found melting out of a snowbound forest road high in the mountains south of the Rogue River, according to Lt. Mike Andall of the Curry County Sheriff's Department in Gold Beach, Ore.

Sieler said a couple trying to make it over the road got stuck down below Finley's truck, spotted it and hiked up to investigate.

Finley had opted to take a scenic route to Grants Pass, following a national forest road that parallels the Rogue River, one of the locations for the filming of the Meryl Streep movie *River Wild*, which also was filmed on rivers near Kalispell and Libby.

Stranded without food when he was overtaken by an early-winter storm, the tall, burly man managed to survive for weeks on water from snow. He checked off the passing days on his calendar.

Letters he wrote on sheets from a legal pad were found in stamped, sealed envelopes addressed to his fiancée, his children and relatives, and to Sieler, who explained that Finley always carried materials to write to clients while on sales trips.

In his poignant letter to Sieler, Finley described how he attempted to drive via national forest roads from Coos Bay south to the Rogue River country, then east over the Coast Range toward Grants Pass.

But near the top of the range, even his four-wheel-drive failed to negotiate a road surface that had been coated with ice. Finally, the wheels slipped off the single-lane paved roadway into the gravel on the mountain side of the road, and Finley stopped for the night.

It's unclear what happened next. Sieler thought Finley was carrying tire chains and perhaps hoped to wait until daylight, then put them on.

But the letter explains that the storm raged over the mountains for three days, stranding the pickup in deep snow.

It was still hunting season in the area, according to Andall, but the road Finley had taken is not maintained in winter and is not popular with hunters or snowmobilers.

Rather than attempting to hike out some 18 miles to Agnes, the last town he had passed, Finley apparently resolved to try to wait out his ordeal in hope of eventual rescue, though he hadn't told anyone which route he planned to follow.

"He believed his chance was best there" in the pickup, Sieler said.

Sgt. John Sevey of the Curry County Sheriff's Department speculates that Finley could have gotten out in the first few days but was probably too weak to make it after 10 days or so without food.



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