

Miller Boyd

A story Stephen Bouser wrote for the Springfield Daily News in Missouri about a family caring for a deer led to a libel lawsuit.

In a rural part of Missouri, the Tanksley family took in a deer as a pet. The story circulated, and the newspaper wanted to report it.

“I remember pulling into the driveway of this little house out there in the country,” said Bouser to his students during a lecture at The University of North Carolina. “When I got out of my car, the back door opens and the first thing I see is this beautiful half-grown white tailed deer running out like a deer to greet me.”

The Tanksley’s learned of a deer being raised by a family in a pen and being fed fattening food in order to eventually kill the deer as though they had shot it during hunting season. Bouser wrote the story of the Tanksley family taking the deer as a pet in order to prevent its fate under the other family’s care. He purposefully left out the name of the other family involved.

“I pretty much forgot about it, went about my business, studying all day and working all night, but a few weeks later I am surprised to receive this official-looking envelope in the mail,” Bouser said. “I open it up and it is from a law office informing me that I and Springfield Daily News are being sued for something called libel.”

Libel is publishing something that is false or defamatory. While Bouser left out the name of the other family, it was not difficult for the town to determine who previously owned the deer.

“You don’t have to name someone to libel them as long as you identify them in some way,” said Bouser.

To appease the family, he wrote a retraction even though he viewed it as untrue that the family was not planning on killing the deer. The family was satisfied and dropped the lawsuit against the Springfield Daily News.

“Often it is not the big story that you are writing about somebody, you tend to be really careful when you’re writing most stories,” said Bouser. “A lot of times they can sneak up and bite you with some relatively insignificant story that has some angle or two that hurts somebody or damages somebody’s reputation.”