

## **Bank Robbery Spree Tied to Supremacists: Gang Espoused Takeover, FBI Says**

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The young man in jeans walked onto the used-car lot in Des Moines, Iowa, pointed at the white 1979 Buick LeSabre, and bought it on sight for \$750 cash.

``He didn't test-drive it, didn't even start it up," remembers Jay Helton, manager of Mr. Lee's Autoland. ``He asked me if the thing ran, and I said: `It's a good ol' car.'"

Something about the buyer made Helton queasy. So he photocopied the man's Alabama driver's license that balmy March afternoon in 1995.

Helton still had the copy a year later, when the FBI agents came.

The Iowa car dealer's instincts were right. The man wasn't from Alabama. He was from Ardmore, Pa.

Somehow, the FBI said, he and his friend, a Philadelphia teen-ager, fell in with two older men from the Midwest and went on a bank-robbing spree that started after Thanksgiving 1992 and didn't end until last Christmas. The ring hit 22 banks in seven states.

Federal court documents portray a strange, latter-day sort of James Gang that roamed the Midwest in harrowing style - and may have been bankrolling groups on the nation's white-supremacist fringe.

The robberies netted at least a quarter of a million dollars, none of which has been recovered.

The robbers left unexploded bombs behind in banks and abandoned getaway cars. They spoke to each other in gibberish. Their disguises included hard hats, law-enforcement insignia, Bill Clinton masks, even Santa Claus hats.

They tweaked their FBI pursuers with mocking cartoons and letters sent to local newspapers.

They lived in motels and rode around in used cars, like the LeSabre, purchased in other people's names - sometimes in the names of retired FBI agents. They packed automatic weapons - and Aryan Nation literature.

Scott Anthony Stedeford, 27, engineer's son, commercial artist, rock musician, high school graduate, is one of four men charged, so far. Also charged is his

former roommate, an orphaned teen named Kevin McCarthy. He turned 19 in June.

Both said they were innocent.

At a recent hearing in Des Moines, a federal prosecutor said the gang called itself the Aryan Republican Army, espoused the overthrow of the government and planned to use the bank booty to finance white-supremacist groups.

One suspect, Richard Lee Guthrie Jr., 38, has confessed and is cooperating with investigators. He said the gang gave money to far-right groups, but he hasn't named them publicly.

FBI agents in Cincinnati arrested Guthrie in January after a car chase. Two days later, Peter K. Langan, 37, was nabbed after a shootout with the FBI in Columbus, Ohio.

In the murky world of white-supremacist groups, the accused men have crossed paths with some notorious people.

McCarthy stayed for a time in the same Oklahoma compound that has been mentioned in the Oklahoma City bombing investigation. And Guthrie told the FBI that he met Stedford through a Berks County, Pa., right-wing leader named Mark Thomas.

Thomas, 44, who faces no criminal charges, has been to the Idaho right-wing compound once frequented by Randy Weaver, the key figure in the 1992 Ruby Ridge standoff.

Stedford and McCarthy had no prior criminal record. The two older defendants in the bank-robbery spree had previous felony convictions.

Langan, the son of a CIA employee, was born in the Mariana Islands; he ran away from home at 16. Guthrie tried to join the elite Navy Seals' underwater squad - but left after being court-martialed in 1983.

In court documents, federal investigators said a search of the bank robbers' ``safe house" in Columbus yielded pipe bombs, guns, extremist literature, bomb-making equipment, federal law-enforcement apparel, and ammunition.

FBI agents found similar items in a search of a storage locker the group had rented in Shawnee, Kan. Included was a copy of Adolf Hitler's ``Mein Kampf."

Guthrie's confession - and a trail of documents, including the bogus Alabama driver's license - led investigators 1,000 miles east, to Philadelphia.

On May 22, FBI agents arrested Stedeford at Sound Under, the Upper Darby, Pa., recording studio where he had worked as a guitarist.

Two days later - the same day McCarthy was arrested in the Bustleton section of Philadelphia - federal agents searched a Camden apartment where Stedeford had lived since December.

There, they confiscated more of the same: a Ruger handgun, a shotgun, boxes of ammunition, a police scanner, false Social Security cards, blank birth and death certificates, supremacist literature, a walkie-talkie, T-shirts with law-enforcement insignia - and a stack of CDs recorded by Stedeford's band, Cyanide, which played the loud, ``speed-metal" music.

Guthrie has told authorities he was introduced to Stedeford by Thomas, the middle-aged white supremacist who lives in a ramshackle farmhouse near Allentown, Pa., and spreads his beliefs on the Internet.

Young people ``talk about him (Thomas) as someone they would follow," said Ann Van Dyke, an official with the state Human Relations Commission who monitors hate-group activity across Pennsylvania. ``He has become a father figure to many of them."

Elohim City - described by Millar as a spiritual place where every family ``has a weapon . . . and most of them are crack shots" - has been in the news before. Timothy McVeigh, the accused Oklahoma City bomber, placed a call to Elohim City before last year's explosion, federal investigators said.

Experts said it was not unusual for hate groups to reach out to the young and impressionable.

``They have methodically, strategically looked for young people to draw into the movement," said one hate-group expert who has advised government agencies. ``They cannot be underestimated."

By the early 1990s, Stedeford had latched on to the trappings of the skinhead world.

Kevin McCarthy was smart but unruly, disruptive yet likable, resourceful but easily led. To many who knew him, he was potential unfulfilled.

Unlike Stedeford, McCarthy seemed to have discipline problems throughout his youth. His mother died when he was small. His father, who was seldom around, died later. For most of his life, McCarthy lived with his grandmother.

``He's a very ambitious boy," said his grandmother, who asked not to be named. ``That's why it's so heartbreaking for something like this to come up."

When McCarthy was on the cusp of adolescence, his grandmother and her husband moved to the Jersey Shore. It was there, against a Wildwood backdrop of Ferris wheels, roller coasters and taffy shops, that he first began associating with skinheads, said Sean McCoy, who met McCarthy when the boy was 12 or 13.

At the time, McCarthy's grandmother was married to Edward J. O'Neill. According to his son, Tim O'Neill, of Philadelphia, the stepfather tried in vain to rein in the boy before the couple divorced a few years ago.

``There wasn't much discipline with him," Tim O'Neill said of McCarthy.

In the early 1990s, the grandmother returned to Philadelphia. Around that time, McCarthy had become acquainted with Mark Thomas and, according to Thomas, lived for several months on Thomas' Berks County property.

In a recent interview, Thomas initially said he could not talk about McCarthy because he was the young man's minister, requiring confidentiality.

He said he ``tried for more than a year" to enroll McCarthy in a local high school, only to be rebuffed by local officials. But he insisted that he had no role in sending the youth to Elohim City.

``I don't know how he got there," Thomas said. ``He went on his own initiative."

Whatever the impetus, the move was disastrous for McCarthy, Tim O'Neill said.

``I think that was the downfall of everything," O'Neill said.

In the rolling, wooded hills near the Oklahoma-Arkansas border, between hardwood forests and fields speckled with bales of hay, small churches dot the landscape everywhere.

But Elohim City, the 1,000-acre Christian Identity compound founded 24 years ago by itinerant pastor Robert Millar, is a place apart - virtually invisible to the surrounding society, eight miles from the nearest paved road.

``We came here to be able to control the environment," explained Millar, 70, who leads a community of about 100 adherents who live in a cluster of 10 to 20 mobile homes and rough-hewn buildings.

The Canadian-born Millar said he remembered McCarthy fondly and that Thomas arranged McCarthy's stay at Elohim City. But Millar denied any connection between his community and the spree of bank robberies.

``If what they allege is true, I wonder who on earth could have influenced a nice boy like that to get involved in such things," he said of McCarthy. ``He was a

nice, quiet, cooperative, intelligent person. Law enforcement will have our complete cooperation."

As for Elohim's beliefs, Millar denied that the group was anti-government.

``We are opposed to governmental misuse of tax money," he said. ``We are opposed to governmental agencies' acting contrary to the American government's constitutional principles. We are opposed to ``some" of the actions of government. We're not ``anti-government." . . . Our people are all self-employed, and we all pay taxes."

The men and women of Elohim are all self-employed, mostly in construction-type jobs. They live together but not communally. Each man is responsible for his own family and for putting groceries on his own table, Millar said. They grow vegetables and hunt deer for meat. Children are home schooled.

``We ARE racist," Millar acknowledged, ``but we aren't anti-Semitic. I think it's better for races and cultures . . . to have relationships within their own ethnic group. That doesn't mean isolationism, but it means separatism."

Millar acknowledged being questioned by the FBI, but said he doubted that the government suspects him of having had any influence over the bank robberies.

In rural Pennsylvania, Thomas, the right-wing leader who represents a common thread linking at least three of the suspects, would not say whether the FBI questioned him.

The self-proclaimed Christian Identity preacher operates a major regional outlet for right-wing propaganda from his trash-strewn farm.

He lives with his 21-year-old wife, Wendy, and their year-old daughter on the farm, where for years he held skinhead and neo-Nazi rallies, sponsoring the Hitler Youth Festival in April 1994 and White Pride Day last October.

In an interview June 28, Thomas, who wears an Aryan Nations belt buckle, said he had been under a lot of stress because of the reports about the bank robberies. He said questions from reporters had been unending.