

Suicide Rocks White Supremacist Probe

Death: Body of admitted member of right-wing group of bank robbers is found in jail cell. He had recently agreed to inform on extremist organizations.

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CHICAGO — An admitted member of a right-wing extremist group of bank robbers was found dead of an apparent suicide Friday morning in a county jail in Kentucky, jolting a growing federal investigation into white supremacist violence.

The death of 38-year-old Richard Lee Guthrie Jr. came little more than a week after his pledge--according to a sealed plea agreement in U.S. District Court--to provide authorities with information about organizations "whose goal is the overthrow of the U.S. government or engage in domestic terrorism."

Guthrie had confessed his involvement with the Mid-Western Bank Robbers, who taunted the FBI for nearly two years, wearing fanciful costumes, leaving pipe bombs at crime scenes and stealing more than \$250,000. He pleaded guilty in April to three bank robberies in Ohio and last Wednesday to 16 more in seven states, as well as to weapons charges and credit card fraud.

Guthrie also has been identified by law enforcement sources as one of the four masked men in a videotape made by a group called the Aryan Republican Army, which advocates killing Jews, deporting blacks and setting up a Bible-based nation.

In his last known interview, a 10-minute phone call on Thursday responding to a letter from The Times, Guthrie said he was planning to write a book that goes "a lot more deeper" than the robberies, about his life and the white supremacist movement. "It'll all come out," he said.

Authorities said Guthrie's discussions with investigators covered a broader range than the robberies.

Former Aryan Nations spokesman Floyd Cochran, who has renounced the movement, said that Guthrie was a frequent visitor to the white supremacist group's headquarters in Hayden Lake, Idaho.

Two other men, Kevin McCarthy and Scott Anthony Stedeford, also are being held in connection with the robberies. An FBI agent filed an affidavit in Des Moines stating that Guthrie said he met Stedeford through Pennsylvania Aryan Nations leader Mark Thomas.

McCarthy, 19, lived in a trailer on the property Thomas rented. According to another former follower of Thomas, McCarthy had also lived at Elohim City, an Oklahoma compound of believers in Christian Identity, a white supremacist religion.

In exchange for Guthrie's cooperation, U.S. Atty. Edmund A. Sargus, based in Columbus, Ohio, agreed to recommend a sentence of 25 years on firearms charges and 51 to 63 months on the robbery charges. Despite the use of pipe bombs in the robberies and the discovery of more in safe houses and storage lockers, explosives charges were "conspicuously absent," one source familiar with the case noted.

According to his public defender, W. Kelly Johnson, Guthrie had recently been told he would soon be transferred from the Kenton County Detention Center in Covington in preparation for testimony at a Columbus, Ohio, hearing for his boyhood friend, Peter Langan, also charged in the robberies.

Sargus called Guthrie's death "pretty upsetting."

Ed Boldt, FBI spokesman in Cincinnati, said: "Any time you lose a source of information, it's going to hurt." But he noted that "we already talked many times" with Guthrie and that the robbery cases involved more evidence than Guthrie's word.

Another official in Washington downplayed Guthrie's reliability.

The death is being investigated by the U.S. Marshals Service, which had formal custody of Guthrie. Because there are no federal lockup facilities in Ohio, he was being held at the Kenton County jail.

Jailers' logs indicate that nothing was amiss in Guthrie's cell, where he was kept in isolation, at 5:22 a.m. A guard discovered the body, hanging by a bedsheet from a ceiling air vent, at 6:06 a.m., U.S. Marshal R. Allen Smith said.

Two notes, one addressed to his lawyer and one to a family member, were found.

Guthrie's younger brother, Nicholas, said in a phone interview from Virginia that he thought the death was suspicious. "What bothers me is he was looking toward the future," he said.

Indeed, Richard Guthrie breezily told The Times on Thursday: "I got a lot to do in the next few weeks. I got a couple of grand juries to present to."

Times staff writer Ronald J. Ostrow in Washington contributed to this story.