

# The Bizarre Legacy of Prep

By Bill Richards

Washington Post Staff Writer

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif.—A decade ago a gaunt, white-haired fundamentalist preacher named Wesley Swift roamed the desert towns here, preaching a doctrine of earthly fire and brimstone and preparing his followers for the Armageddon of a coming Communist takeover.

Swift eventually died in the sinful Mexican border city of Tijuana, and the Communists never showed up.

But a bizarre legacy of those days is beginning to turn up as swarms of federal, state and local police work on what many of them call the strangest case encountered here in years.

Since a pair of hikers accidentally stumbled on a box of .30 cal. machine gun ammunition in the desert near here two weeks ago, police raiding squads have discovered nearly 20 tons of military supplies—from a halftrack troop carrier to machine guns and rocket launchers to emergency supplies of food, clothing and even condoms—all carefully packed and inventoried in a series of backyard bunkers and desert hideaways.

The discoveries comprise what investigators here believe is the largest store of illegally hidden arms ever found in this country: enough guns, explosives and ammunition to equip a small army of several hundred troops, according to Los Angeles County Sheriff Peter Pitchess.

Pitchess' department is coordinat-

ing the search efforts of more than a half dozen law enforcement agencies. Last week, after his raiders found eight tons of arms in two separate locations, he suggested to reporters that the culprit might be "a paramilitary organization . . . a group who hoped to overthrow our form of government."

Now authorities aren't so sure what they have found. Of the five suspects they have arrested on illegal weapons charges, one has dropped dead—only moments after investigators led him out of a bar where they picked him up—and the rest have not offered much of a convincing story.

"I've been in police work a long time and seen just about everything," said a puzzled police lieutenant Friday, "but this thing is absolutely mind-boggling."

Police investigating the case concede it is probably Swift—were he alive—who could provide the key information on where the weapons came from and what they were to be used for.

Swift died in 1970, nearly blind and enfeebled by illness and old age. But not before he organized a network of paramilitary groups in the 1960s around the desert towns east of Los Angeles.

A former state attorney general's office investigator last week recalled Swift and described him as "extremely emotional."

"He could move people against Communists, Jews, blacks or anything

else he wanted to," said Eugene Price. Price, now retired; kept track of Swift's activities during the mid 1960s.

"I don't think he ever had more than 100 real hard-core followers, but he would travel through the churches around Los Angeles preaching anti-communism, and he was absolutely dedicated," Price said.

A 1965 intelligence report Price helped write described the California Rangers, which Swift organized here, as "a secret guerrilla warfare unit."

Swift, once a rifle instructor for the Ku Klux Klan, was a prolific organizer, police said, putting together such groups as the California League Against Communism, the Anglo-Saxon Christian Congregation and the Christian Defense League.

Most of the groups, including the California Rangers, have disappeared. State intelligence sources here say they believe the groups folded after Swift died.

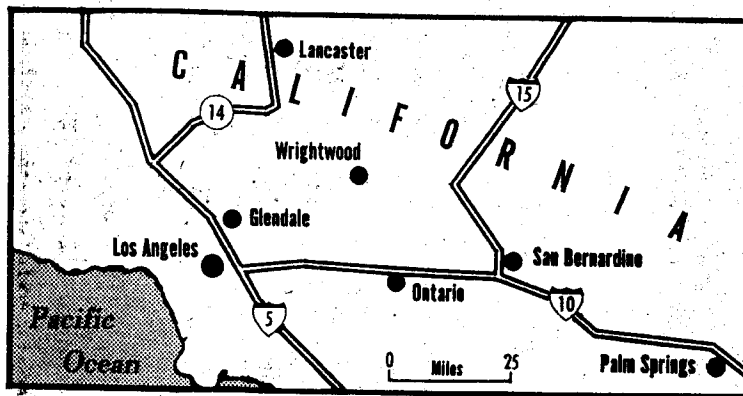
No one, including police, is believed to know whether Swift was responsible for the weapons caches. But police have turned for some answers to Donald G. Wiggins, 41, the owner of a foundry supply business who was the first suspect arrested in the case. Wiggins' family has linked him to Swift in the 1960s.

After the discovery of the first store of weapons, in a series of desert bunkers near the town of Lancaster, investigators traced the ownership of the land to Wiggins. When they searched his home and business they found tons of arms and equipment, all painstakingly packed away in 30-gallon drums and meticulously inventoried.

Wiggins, now charged with 20 counts of possession of explosives and illegal firearms, told authorities he was just the caretaker for the arms and said they came from a mysterious man named "Jeff Martin."

Wiggins also gave authorities the name of "William Weaver," whom he said he met at a meeting in the 1960s and who was the original owner of the Lancaster land where the arms supplies were found. Wiggins said both "Jeff Martin" and "Weaver" disappeared in 1974.

Police say they believe that Weaver never existed and they have their doubts about Martin as well, although an all-points bulletin has been put out for Martin. So far, police say they have not traced fingerprints or sources of the guns to determine if others are involved.



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Map shows Glendale, home of gun dealer Michael D. Stringer; Wrightwood, where a halftrack and tons of guns and ammunition were found; and Ontario, where Donald G. Wiggins, charged with illegal arms possession, lived.

# arations for an Armageddon



Associated Press

An Army halftrack is towed from a garage owned by Michael D. Stringer at Wrightwood, a mountain town.

That leaves Wiggins—an alleged army of one with as much as \$100,000 in carefully oiled and packed weapons and supplies, hidden in bunkers that police say were arranged for “free fire” zones to kill any invaders near their desolate location.

Wiggins' mother, Edna Methe, told reporters last week that Wiggins had attended one of Swift's gatherings in the mid-1960s. But Wiggins has stopped talking, and authorities do not know whether the meeting was where he supposedly met Weaver and Martin.

Edna Methe, 64, her husband, Arthur M. Methe Sr., and Arthur M. Methe Jr.—Wiggins' stepfather and 20-year-old half-brother—were arrested last Wednesday on illegal weapons charges. The elder Methe, 55, collapsed and died of a heart attack after he was arrested at a bar.

Another wrinkle was added to the mystery last week when police, acting on an informant's tip, raided a garage in the isolated mountain town of Wrightwood some 30 miles from the site of the original discoveries. They found a military halftrack painted olive drab and bearing up-to-date California license plates and a sealed concrete bunker with additional tons of guns and ammunition.

The owner of the garage, a Glendale gun dealer named Michael D. Stringer, accompanied by a lawyer, surrendered Friday to police. Because of the similarity in the discoveries, police initially believed Stringer, 33, and Wiggins might be linked.

Now they say there is no indication that Stringer was involved with Wiggins or with any ultra-right-wing group. But police are still checking to determine if any connection exists.

Wiggins and the Methes lived in a small pink house in Ontario, a blue-collar community on the fringe of the low desert east of Los Angeles. Neighbors there said Wiggins was a silent man who ignored them.

“You'd hear the whole family up all night sitting and talking in the kitchen or someone typing until dawn,” said Christine Morgan, who has lived next door to the Methe house for 15 years. “They were all so weird I thought at first they were Communists,” she said.

Authorities now believe that what they may have on their hands are the remnants of a once-active right-wing army. Wiggins, said one federal investigator, may have been a caretaker, entrusted with an arsenal for an army that no longer exists.