

Host Admits Racist Acts at 'Roundups,' Blames Militia

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By Michael Abramowitz
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KNOXVILLE, July 19—A retired federal agent who organized annual beer and rafting parties for law enforcement officers acknowledged today that several racist incidents had occurred at the gatherings in eastern Tennessee but suggested that an extremist militia group had exaggerated the events to embarrass the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

Gene Rightmyer, who retired last

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ogizing District officers in videotapes of the roundup that were broadcast last week.

"We're investigating the allegation and if it's true, it's totally inappropriate and will be dealt with harshly," said interim Chief Larry Soulsby. That sort of behavior will not be condoned in the department."

Soulsby said he ordered an internal affairs investigation yesterday. Over the years, Rightmyer said, law enforcement officials from Maryland—"some state troopers, some locals"—

year from the ATF, defined the gatherings as "a bunch of good old boys having a good time."

The racist displays that have occurred since he first began hosting the event 16 years ago were not sanctioned by him and other organizers and Rightmyer said in an interview that he went out of his way to police the event.

Rightmyer said that while the vast majority of the 300-odd friends and law enforcement officials who attend his "Good 'Ol Boy Roundup" every spring are white males, blacks, worn-

en and other minorities also are invited. "For about three or four years or more, I've given a speech, that I don't care who you are, that if you have a badge—no matter what sex or race you are—you're blue as far as I'm concerned," he said.

In Washington today President Clinton depicted the roundup as "an event literally overflowing with racism, a sickening reminder of just how pervasive these kinds of attitudes still are." In a speech on affirmative action, Clinton said any federal officers who go along with such

behavior "ought to think about working some place else."

Both the Justice and Treasury departments have opened wide-ranging investigations into reports that federal agents have attended the roundup, and the Senate Judiciary Committee will hold a hearing on it Friday.

The D.C. police department is investigating allegations that some of its officers participated in the event, the department's interim chief said yesterday.

At least two officers reported rec-

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that a handful of D.C. officers had attended in recent years but he did not remember them attending this year.

"At one time, we had about 40 to 45 from the Maryland area," Rightmyer said, adding that they were attracted by "some of the best motorcycle riding areas in the country."

Rightmyer suggested that the controversy has been whipped up by extremist militia groups.

Many militia members have expressed anger over the ATF's involvement in the Waco siege and harbor other grievances. But he expressed dismay that the militia's allegations have been repeated by senators and other top officials with little knowledge, he said, of the facts.

"I'm not amazed, but I'm disappointed," Rightmyer said.

His account differs sharply from the portrait that has emerged since militia members infiltrated the gathering and began disseminating a video that has touched off a national controversy. The video shows vendors selling T-shirts depicting the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in gun-sight cross hairs

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—Jeff Randall,

Gadsden Minutemen

as well as District police officers have also attended the roundup. He said

and others with the slogan "Boyz on the Hood," with police officers surrounding a black man spread-eagled over a police cruiser.

The video also shows a cardboard sign with a racist epithet supposedly posted at the entrance of the campground to keep African Americans out.

Rightmyer said today that the sign had appeared at the 1990 roundup, not this year as suggested by the militia-produced video. Rightmyer said that when he saw the sign he immediately demanded that it be taken down.

"I know I said, 'I don't want this here, I don't appreciate it,'" Rightmyer said. "That could not have been up there more than 15 minutes."

Jeff Randall, a co-founder of the Gadsden Minutemen, the militia group that has taken the lead in publicizing the roundup, today rejected the



Law enforcement officers in Eastern Tennessee at "roundup," where several racist incidents have been videotaped. PHOTOS BY WJLA-TV



Racist posters, such as this one, and T-shirts were evident at parties.

suggestion that he was motivated by anger with the ATF when he attended this May's gathering, posing as an Alabama police officer.

"I wasn't even thinking about Waco when I went in there," Randall said in a telephone interview. "I thought I would expose it because they keep saying militias are racist. We're 10 percent black. I wanted to expose who was racist first."

Rightmyer said the roundup actually began as kind of an office party for agents in the Knoxville office in 1980. He chose a beautiful site on the banks of the Ocoee River, a popular East

Tennessee tourist spot where the Olympics whitewater canoeing competition will be held in 1996.

Within a few years, the event had ballooned to more than 300 people, with only a small fraction from ATF and other Treasury Department agencies.

Rightmyer said he began renting a private campsite and began charging \$100 a person for those who wanted to raft. The price tag included a cap, T-shirt, standard meals of seafood gumbo and rib-eye steaks and "all the beer you could drink," he said.

Giving an interview today in a downtown Knoxville law office, about 30 miles from his home, Rightmyer, 53, described a boisterous annual party that involved volleyball matches of overweight law enforcement officials, baseball caps emblazoned with the letters MOB (for Mean Old Bastards), beer-drinking competitions and skits involving nominations for "Redneck of the Year."

Only once, he said, did the skit go over the line, with one person wearing a white sheet like the Ku Klux Klan leading around someone else in black face.

"It was in bad taste and in poor humor," he said. "If my memory serves me right, it was their first year there and they were trying to impress people. And they were not impressing."

Staff writer Ruben Castaneda contributed to this report.