

Standoff in Montana Tests

By Tom Kenworthy
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ROUNDUP, Mont.—Nothing in his career as an English teacher and attorney for Musselshell County quite prepared John Bohlman for the day last spring when it appeared this normally peaceful town in the plains of central Montana was about to be swept up in a full-blown civil insurrection.

Officials in several central and western Montana counties had been struggling for some time to cope with a homegrown movement of anti-government militants calling themselves "freemen." Originating in the farm crisis of the 1980s, the movement had evolved from resistance to tax foreclosures on farms to aggressive repudiation of all forms of government authority.

Adherents refused to license their cars, set up their own common law courts, filed multimillion-dollar liens against local officials who crossed them, issued bogus money orders, and had begun boldly threatening to arrest, try and punish local prosecutors and judges—all based on a hodge-podge political theory drawing on the Bible, the Magna Carta and selected parts of the U.S. and Montana constitutions.

But what had seemed up to that time a

marginalized, peculiarly American brand of political kookiness took a decidedly ugly turn on March 3. A tense encounter with sheriff's deputies ended with the arrests of seven armed freemen whom authorities believed were bent on kidnapping a neighboring county prosecutor, and death threats from around the country directed at Bohlman and other county officials.

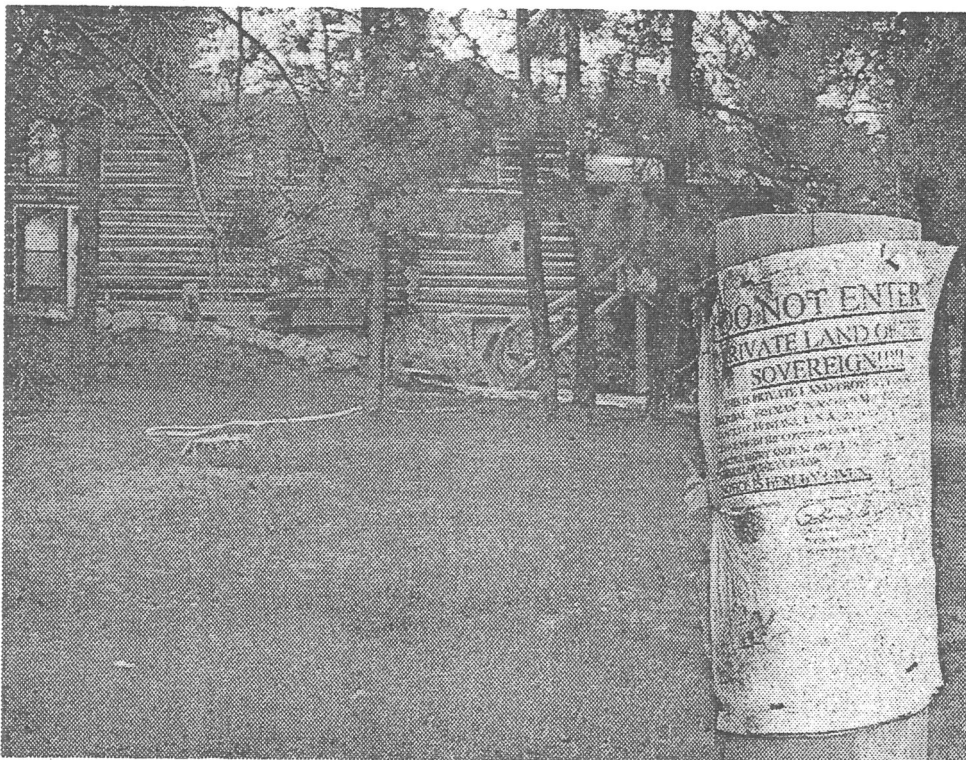
Six months later, several freemen remain defiantly holed up in a cabin south of Roundup. Authorities are anxious to bring them to justice on a variety of state and federal charges but wary of provoking another bloody shootout that, like Waco, Tex., and Ruby Ridge, Idaho, could become a symbol of government oppression for militiamen and other extremists.

The continuing standoff in Roundup represents the toughest and most frustrating test to date for Montana authorities, who are cracking down on criminal behavior by some of those associated with the militia, the freemen and other government protesters.

Elsewhere in the state, local police and state investigators have managed to collar other high-profile fugitives who have given the Big Sky state a reputation as a bastion of extremism.

See MONTANA, A7, Col. 1

Resolve to Avoid Bloodshed



BY LARRY MAYER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Several anti-government "freemen," wanted on a variety of state and federal charges, have been holed up for six months in a fortified cabin in the Bull Mountains of central Montana.

Gordon Sellner, a heavily armed tax protester who brazenly avoided arrest for almost three years in the Swan Valley of western Montana after shooting a sheriff's deputy, was himself shot and arrested in July. Calvin Greenup, an elk rancher and paramilitary leader in the Bitterroot Valley near the Idaho border, decided to take his chances in court rather than make good on his vow to shoot it out with officers seeking to arrest him on charges of threatening local officials.

But to date, there has been no roundup in Roundup, no conclusion to the stalemate that began in March when sheriff's deputies stopped freemen Dale Jacobi and Frank Elena on a vehicle registration charge. Tipped that freemen might be plotting to kidnap, try and execute a prosecutor in retaliation for the sentencing of Garfield County freeman William L. Stanton on state "criminal syndicalism" charges in Miles City, deputies were still surprised at what they found in the two men's car.

In their possession were semi-automatic rifles, a large cache of ammunition, plastic handcuffs, duct tape, radio and video equipment, more than \$80,000 in cash and gold and silver coins, and a hand-drawn map of the town of Jordan pinpointing the location of the local prosecutor's home.

The men were arrested on concealed weapons charges but later that day, five of

their associates arrived at the jail in two cars, armed with weapons and equipped with radios, and demanded their release. In a tense confrontation with deputies, all five were arrested.

That was only the beginning of Bohlman's ordeal.

Over the next few days, as news of the confrontation spread on fax and computer networks, Bohlman and other local officials received scores of telephoned death threats. Bohlman donned a bulletproof vest and his secretary and a deputy moved family members out of town for protection.

Six months after he appealed to President Clinton for federal help in bringing to justice "men whom I consider terrorists," Bohlman is still waiting for the posse to arrive.

Several of the men facing concealed weapons charges from the March incident remain at large in the Bull Mountains log cabin of freeman Rodney Skurdal with his associate Leroy Schweitzer, themselves wanted on a variety of state and federal charges. The IRS has seized Schweitzer's crop dusting plane to cover part of a \$400,000 tax lien and has taken title to the home of Skurdal, an ex-Marine who has claimed to be a former driver for Richard M. Nixon.

From their fortified 20-acre redoubt, behind a menacing sign warning visitors to keep their distance, the freemen issue a steady stream of legalistic ramblings justifying their rebellion. "Common Law Precept

Coram Ipso Rege" begins one 19-page example. It proclaims the superiority of the white race and the purported Biblical and constitutional foundations for their own self governance, signed by "the Honorable Justice Rodney O. Skurdal, 'per curiam,' Clerk/Prothonotary of Necessity, in Law."

Skurdal is less voluble with the press. "I have no comment, please don't call back," he said when reached by telephone.

Skurdal, Schweitzer and the others remain free in large part because law enforcement takes seriously their threats of violence and has been stymied in catching them unaware.

"They have the capability to be very violent," said Musselshell County Sheriff G. Paul Smith, whose six-man department must cover 1,850 square miles of central Montana and is ill-equipped to handle the standoff alone. Smith says he has requested help from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, which he says have been "more than cooperative."

But the cautious approach of law enforcement has angered local officials here and elsewhere in the state who have borne the brunt of the intimidation, harassment and violent threats.

Bohlman says the federal authorities have caught "Weaver fever," referring to the violent confrontation between the FBI and Randy Weaver in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, that is the

subject of an ongoing congressional investigation.

"Apathy on the law enforcement side has encouraged these people to cross over the fringe," agreed Martha A. Bethel, a municipal judge in Hamilton in the Bitterroot Valley. A single mother of three, Bethel has been subjected to numerous threats of violence, been followed to her rural home late at night, and had people vow to firebomb her house—all because of her role in enforcing routine traffic laws against freemen.

Federal officials insist that their commitment to arresting law breakers is undiminished, and that caution has always been their credo when facing potentially violent resistance.

"I think federal law enforcement has always been very reluctant to go knocking down doors," said Sherr S. Matteucci, the U.S. attorney in Billings. "Law enforcement by its nature requires considered, planned, cautious action that is based on probable cause or evidence. It takes time to do it right and that's what we want to do."

Ken Toole, who monitors anti-government activity for the Helena-based Montana Human Rights Network, credits state and local authorities for taking the threats more seriously than before and moving more aggressively. "They were all slow to react, they were caught flat-footed," said Toole. "Now they understand it is important to be active."

"They are the last on the list of problems

we have had to deal with," said Joseph P. Mazurek, Montana's attorney general, who defends the gingerly handling of the Roundup standoff. "We'll do everything we can not to put officers or others in harms' way. In some respects, the public's patience has been tried, but law enforcement has erred on the side of making arrests without causing violent confrontations."

Mazurek says he is heartened that many of the communities facing freemen and other anti-government activity are rallying in support of their local officials. On the state level, an anti-extremist coalition has been formed and is mapping plans for a ballot initiative that would toughen state laws against threatening government officials.

Longtime residents of Roundup say the freemen, who have turned their quiet town into a magnet for anti-government militants, have little local support. "Some people agree with what they expound—less government—but don't agree with their methods," said Eric Rasmussen, editor of the weekly Record Tribune, which has stopped accepting legal ads from the freemen.

Up the street at the county jail, meanwhile, Sheriff Smith chafes at the continued lawlessness in his backyard and vows to get his men. "Arrests are going to be made," he said. "Just when and how I can't disclose."