

Survivalist groups lose support after Rulo incident

LINCOLN (AP) — The independent attitude of Nebraska's farmers, an improved farm economy and the horrors of a survivalist cult at Rulo have put a damper on survivalist and extremist group activity in the state, some experts say.

"The scapegoating of bankers, Jews and the government which is espoused by extremist groups has been rejected by the independence that those farmers show," said Jack Kay, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor who has researched rural reaction to the farm crisis and the influence that has been exerted by the rhetoric of radical right-wing groups. Nebraska farmers take responsibility for their financial situation, he said.

The idea of blaming others for the agricultural community's economic woes was "more alluring" three or four years ago when the tidal wave of farm foreclosures and bankruptcies first swept across the Midwest, said Kay, director of forensics in the department of speech communication. "And even then, only a very small percentage (of Nebraska's farmers) were expressing sympathy with the survivalist-extremist cause."

Even that small flame of support for such groups appeared to flicker out as the horror story of two murders on a survivalist cult farm near Rulo began unfolding in late 1985, Kay said.

The bodies of Luke Stice, 5, and James Thimm, 26, were found buried on the farm, and cult leader Michael Ryan subsequently was convicted of second-degree murder in the boy's death and of first-degree murder in the slaying of Thimm. Ryan now faces death in the electric chair.

Ryan's son Dennis was convicted of second-degree murder in the torture killing of Thimm, and was sentenced to life in prison.

"All of the publicity about Rulo really put a stop to it. It was the first time that people saw the totality of the radical right's appeal — the cult mentality, and when they took a look at the madness, it put a stop to any sympathy or empathy they might have

had" for the extremist approach, Kay said.

Former Lancaster County District Judge Samuel Van Pelt said he also thinks extremist activity died down in Nebraska after the Rulo story was told — at least from the standpoint of violent rhetoric and public visibility.

In addition, he said, the state's agricultural economy has changed for the better since late 1984, when Van Pelt conducted a special investigation for then-Gov. Bob Kerrey into the Nebraska State Patrol SWAT team killing of indebted farmer Arthur Kirk of Cairo.

Kirk was shot to death when he ran from the back door of his farmhouse and fired twice before his rifle jammed. As part of his investigation, Van Pelt reviewed various Posse Comitatus-type pamphlets and related documents that were seized at Kirk's home. However, Van Pelt said he didn't include that material in his 607-page report to Kerrey because it wasn't definitely established that Kirk was a member of the Posse, a militant anti-tax group.

Since Kirk's death, Van Pelt said, "there has been a ton of (federal) money pumped into this state and other Midwestern states to help bolster the farm economy. There haven't been a lot of people in the last year or two who've realized that they were losing everything" as many other farmers did a couple of years earlier.

Nicholas O'Hara, special agent in charge of FBI operations in Nebraska, said the views of Van Pelt and Kay are valid, "but I also think that it has to do with law enforcement success across the country.

"People are going to jail for making threats and committing acts of violence, and there's less enthusiasm (for extremism) because of that. People have found that such groups are not democratic in form or substance, and those with common sense are getting out" of the organizations.

Tempering optimism with realism, however, O'Hara said some hard-core extremists "are still active and looking for a (new) cause" now that the farm economy has im-

proved."

Nebraska State Patrol Capt. Jim Burnett agrees. "Some of the same folks are just laying low, and I'm keeping my fingers crossed in hopes that it will stay that way. I don't know if it's the calm before the storm or not," Burnett said.

White supremacists appear to be shifting their recruiting efforts to some of the nation's racially troubled population centers as their quest for support in rural America becomes a tougher row to hoe, Kay said.

And in keeping with that change in environment, the sympathy-seeking tactics being used to attract followers also have become more radical.

"Before, those groups were advocating pro se (do-it-yourself) lawsuits and things like that" for farmers facing foreclosure.

"They weren't talking about a white revolution or Aryan warriors that will arise and take over the world," as some of those organizations now are proselytizing.

"They've gone far beyond protesting taxes and the government, and they're now expressing a religious belief that there is a worldwide conspiracy (on the part of all non-whites) and that the Jews are the children of the devil.

"They also recognize that the best recruiting potential is in heavily urbanized areas where racial turmoil and unrest already exists," said Kay, who has researched the rhetorical strategies of extremist right-wing groups and the social and political influence resulting from them.

The most frightening aspect of the movement is the increasing involvement of young people in the white supremacy cause — particularly in the form of the Aryan Youth Movement-White Student Union, which claims to have 15 chapters nationwide, but none in Nebraska.

Nebraska State Patrol Lt. Bob Clinkenbeard and Lincoln police Sgt. Bill Larsen, who direct the intelligence units of their respective agencies, said there has been no indication that any elements of the Aryan Youth Movement-White Student Union are active in this area.

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