

## Racial Slayer Killed Himself in Struggle

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The killing ended here just off a two-lane state highway where Benjamin Nathaniel Smith shot himself to death as law enforcement authorities struggled to remove him from a van he had stolen in a nearby town in this rural section of southern Illinois.

Smith's death about 10:40 p.m. Sunday also put an end to a string of weekend shootings through two states during which he is believed to have killed two men and wounded nine others. All of the victims, and others who were shot at but not hurt, were members of racial or religious minorities.

Smith, 21, a follower of an East Peoria, Ill., man who heads an organization that espouses racist and antisemitic views, shot himself three times as two Marion County sheriff's deputies and three Salem police officers closed in on him on the southern outskirts of this town of 7,800 people.

The sheriff's deputies who were involved in apprehending Smith, Todd Garden and David Hiltibidal, said today they were driving in separate squad cars when Hiltibidal spotted Smith driving the stolen van north on state Highway 37 toward Salem about 9:30 p.m. Sunday.

Hiltibidal, 36, said he followed the van for about five miles before attempting to stop it as it entered Salem. Suddenly, he said, the vehicle swerved off the road to the left, crossed a culvert and slammed into a metal pipe on the side of the road directly across the highway from the Little Egypt Golf Cart Co.

Their guns drawn, the officers said that they approached the van, shouting for Smith to show them his hands, but that he did not comply. Hiltibidal said that when he entered the van through the passenger's door, Smith reached for a duffel bag on the floor by the passenger seat of the vehicle. At that point, he said, he shoved Smith into the space between the two front seats. As they grappled there were two muffled shots from a small-caliber weapon. He said he did not see the weapon during the struggle.

When the law enforcement officers first saw Smith, they said, his neck was already covered with blood, the result of what authorities said today was a self-inflicted gunshot to his chin, apparently at the time that the van ran off the highway. In the van the officers found a .22-caliber semiautomatic pistol and a .380-caliber semiautomatic pistol, the types of weapons used in the murderous, drive-by shootings.

The two officers said that Smith said nothing during the confrontation in the van; he went to his death apparently without telling anyone why he had embarked on the shooting spree.

Marion County Coroner Tom Nicolay said today that Smith suffered from three self-inflicted wounds -- to his chin, chest and right thigh -- from a .22-caliber weapon. He was rushed to Salem Hospital but did not regain consciousness as emergency room doctors worked for 40 minutes to save him, he said. Nicolay said doctors restored Smith's heartbeat twice, "but the third time they couldn't get him back."

Smith had "massive bleeding from the gunshot to the chest," Nicolay said. He added that it was impossible to determine whether Smith shot himself deliberately during the struggle in the van or whether the gun discharged accidentally.

Today, Hiltibidal, whose face bore scratches from his encounter with Smith, said that Smith put up strong resistance as the officers tried to remove him from the van. "We

were aware that this guy was out there," he said of the suspect in the drive-by shooting rampage that began Friday night in a quiet Chicago neighborhood. "We sure weren't aware he was down here."

"I would rather have been at a Fourth of July celebration eating homemade ice cream," said Garden, 31. "This guy needed to be caught, but it's not my favorite thing to do."

According to Marion County Sheriff Gerald L. Benjamin, Smith stole the van from a woman and a child at a gas station in the small town of Ina, Ill., about 40 miles south of here. He said that the woman, whose husband was inside the gas station at the time, at first refused to surrender the van, but that Smith then pulled a gun on her and she fled with the child.

None of the officers fired a weapon during the confrontation with Smith, Garden and Hiltibidal said. "They did a good job, made a good stop," Benjamin said of the officers. "Done it by the book."

Tonight, FBI technicians were in Mt. Vernon, Ill., examining the 1994 Ford Taurus that Smith used during his three-day rampage before abandoning the vehicle in Ina. There was a flak jacket on the passenger side floor in the front, along with a \$5 bill and \$1 bill, an empty pack of cigarettes and empty soft drink bottles.

Smith, who had attended the University of Illinois and was most recently a criminal justice major at Indiana University, was at one time a member of the World Church of the Creator, which is headed by Matthew Hale of East Peoria. Hale, a self-avowed racist and anti-Semite, recently had his application for a law license rejected by an Illinois state board, which ruled that his racial and religious views made him unfit to practice law. Hale said today that the board's rejection of his appeal may have triggered Smith's rampage.

The shootings believed to be the work of Smith began early Friday night in Chicago's West Rogers Park neighborhood, home to the largest concentration of Orthodox Jews in the city. In six separate incidents, the gunman in the light blue Taurus shot six Orthodox Jewish men as they made their way through the neighborhood after Sabbath evening synagogue services.

From there, the gunman drove to the Chicago suburb of Skokie, where he fired seven shots at Ricky Byrdsong, the black former head basketball coach at Northwestern University who was walking near his home with two of his children. Byrdsong, 43, was struck once in the back and died later Friday night.

The same night, in the Chicago suburb of Northbrook, the gunman shot at an Asian couple as their car passed his. They were not injured. He next surfaced Saturday morning in Springfield, Ill., where he injured one black man, and that afternoon in Decatur, where authorities believe he wounded a black minister. Late that night, in Urbana, Ill., he shot at a group of six Asian University of Illinois students, wounding one.

On Sunday, the gunman was in Bloomington, Ind., where he fired at a group leaving a Korean church. The gunfire killed Won-Joon Yoon, 26, a doctoral student at Indiana University who was struck twice in the back.

In Bloomington today, Police Chief Jim Kennedy said Smith was known for distributing material from "an extreme right-wing group" that apparently was Hale's World Church of the Creator. Kennedy said the material, which he said sparked protests from Bloomington residents, was "a tabloid type of thing which attacked

African Americans, Jewish people, just about any ethnic group or any racial group that doesn't meet their values."

Tonight, Nicolay said Smith's body had not been claimed by his family and remained at the morgue at St. Mary's Hospital in Centralia, Ill.

Caption: B&W PHOTO AP/CHAMPAIGN COUNTY (ILL.) SHERIFF

Benjamin Nathaniel Smith in a February 1998 booking photo.

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