

FBI AGENTS QUIZ CHURCH LEADER OVER RAMPAGE - INVESTIGATORS LOOK AT HALE'S CONTACT WITH SMITH BEFORE ATTACKS

Chicago Tribune - July 8, 1999

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Matthew Hale, the leader of an East Peoria-based white supremacy group, is emerging as an important link in the investigation of last weekend's deadly rampage that police believe was the work of Benjamin Smith, a former group member.

Four investigators with a task force of local and federal police probing the shootings arrived at the Hale family's East Peoria home shortly before 9:30 p.m. Wednesday to question him about his ties to Smith, a Wilmette native and until recently a member of Hale's World Church of the Creator.

Hale consented to be questioned, but he insisted that a Tribune reporter and photographer who were already present be allowed to remain. He said it was the first time authorities have questioned him about Smith and the shootings.

Throughout the session, Hale, 27, shaken but businesslike, teetered between defending his friend Smith and distancing himself from the shooting spree. Hale has said repeatedly that he had no knowledge of any violence Smith might have contemplated.

Two FBI agents, accompanied by two Skokie police officers, sat on a couch and Hale sat in a straight-back chair while his father, Russ Hale, a retired East Peoria police officer, sat in a rocking chair. On the coffee table in front of the agents were leaflets and a white supremacy newsletter called *The Struggle*.

The FBI agents repeatedly asked Hale why he did not call police during the three-day shooting spree, because Hale said he suspected Smith might be the culprit. At one point, Hale, throwing his hands up, said, "I just didn't do it."

"I felt this was something you could do yourselves," he told the investigators. "You're the police. . . ."

"When you haven't heard from a friend you heard was going to the Chicago suburbs and you usually talk to him every other day or so, and the suspect is driving a light blue Ford Taurus, my dad and I both kind of wondered.

"And if you don't like that answer, too bad."

At that point, FBI agent Robert Brown said, "No Matt, I like that answer. I like it."

The agents asked Hale to sign a warrant allowing them to search an East Peoria storage locker where Hale and Smith last met, on June 28, but Hale refused to sign, saying, "They taught me in law school never to sign away my rights."

Hale told the authorities that he had nothing to hide but was refusing on principle.

Authorities asked Hale at what point he started thinking Smith might be involved in the shootings. Hale said Saturday night--a day after the shooting spree began on Chicago's North Side.

"I heard it was a blue Taurus and I hadn't heard from him for awhile, so I was starting to wonder," Hale said.

FBI agent Brown responded, "So at that point, you knew it was Smith?"

Hale said, "I was hoping to hell it wasn't him."

The agents also asked whether Hale had tried to call Smith and find out; Hale said he left a message on Smith's answering machine at his apartment in Downstate Morton. He said Smith never called back.

The agents also asked whether Smith had called Hale as the killing unfolded and Hale said, "Absolutely not."

An FBI spokesman in Chicago declined to comment about where Hale might fit in the investigation.

"We're not going to comment about Matt Hale," spokesman Ross Rice said. "He has not been arrested or charged."

Smith died Sunday night near Salem, Ill., after a chase by police. An autopsy by Marion County Coroner Tom Nicolay determined that Smith died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to his chest, just below a tattoo that read "Sabbath Breaker."

Earlier Wednesday evening, before authorities showed up at Hale's home, Hale showed the Tribune a brief certified letter that Hale said came from Smith and had been mailed from Wilmette to East Peoria on Friday.

Hale said the letter proves that Smith had renounced his membership in the World Church because he no longer believed in following legal means to promoting white supremacy. Hale has said he preached non-violent remedies to Smith and other members of the organization.

The letter, written in black ink on the back of a certified-letter card, stated:

"Although I have not been a member of the World Church of the Creator since April 1999, due to my past public support of that legal religious organization run by Matt Hale, I find it necessary to formerly (sic) break with the World Church of the Creator because I am unable and unwilling to follow a legal Revolution of Values."

Hale said he did not pick up the letter until about 5 p.m. Wednesday because he had been busy with media interviews.

Hale said he was not surprised to receive the letter.

"I always felt I should have received something from him and I was kind of hurt when I didn't," Hale said. "I had just been hoping for some sort of explanation."

Hale said the moment he picked up the letter at the post office he realized it came from Smith.

"It's shocking to see his writing after all of this," Hale said.

FBI agent Rice said he was not aware of the letter Hale said he received from Smith, and authorities did not question Smith about it during their Wednesday night interview.

Hale's accounts of his relationship with Smith have changed several times in recent days.

When first contacted by the Tribune on Sunday after Smith was named in an arrest warrant in connection with a shooting in Bloomington, Ind., Hale told a reporter that he had met Smith once, about eight months ago, but didn't know him well. Hours later, he acknowledged that he was well-acquainted with Smith, saying the two had last seen each other about one or two weeks before the weekend shooting spree.

"About 10 days ago would be accurate," he said, telling a reporter that he and Smith had met in an East Peoria restaurant to discuss Hale's efforts to get a license to practice law in Illinois.

Wednesday night, Hale told the Tribune that he last saw Smith on June 28, five days before the shooting, when Hale opened a storage locker and gave Smith pamphlets and other literature to disseminate.

Before the shooting spree, in an interview last Friday, Hale said the recent denial of his law license because of his white supremacist views violated his right to free speech.

"If people can't speak, violence automatically results in society," he said. "I'm really concerned that our society is heading toward, basically, a police state in which people just can't exercise certain views without being arrested and persecuted.

"We have to decide now whether we are going to be a society of people who can speak their minds and not be penalized or be a totalitarian society in which people only express opinion by violence," he said.

Hale said he wasn't inciting people to violence. "We're not encouraging that at all. We encourage our members to be calm, to be patient, to maintain their status and their wits."

Late Wednesday, after the agents finished questioning Hale, investigators apparently searched the locker and pulled a trailer up to the unit about 10:30 p.m.

Hale told the Tribune the locker is filled only with literature and other personal belongings, such as pots and pans.

Caption: PHOTOS 4

PHOTO (color): (Matthew) Hale . PHOTO (color): (Benjamin) Smith. PHOTO: Matthew Hale listens as an FBI agent questions him about Benjamin Smith on Wednesday in his Hale's home in East Peoria. Tribune photo by Bonnie Trafelet. PHOTO: The purported `Smith letter' Matt Hale, leader of the white racist organization World Church of the Creator, claimed Wednesday that he received a letter sent from Wilmette via certified mail by follower Benjamin Smith on Friday, the same day Smith allegedly began a multi-state rampage.

Edition: CHICAGO SPORTS FINAL

Section: NEWS

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Index Terms: SHOOTING ; MURDER ; MULTIPLE ; RELIGION ; BLACK ; ETHNIC ; FEDERAL ; PROBE POLICE ; CHICAGO TRIBUNE ; INTERVIEW ; VIOLENCE

Dateline: EAST PEORIA

Record Number: CTR9907080424

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