

Guilty pleas unveil the tale of eco-arson on Vail summit

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December 14, 2006

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By the time the firebombs exploded, “Avalon” was well on his way down from the top of Vail ski area, breaking his trot only long enough to stash empty gas cans beneath a fallen tree.

A half-mile away, the stately Two Elk ski lodge roared into flames, and Avalon – the nom de guerre used by Bill Rodgers, a slightly built, alternative-bookstore owner from Prescott, Ariz. – was making his getaway from one of the nation’s most destructive acts of eco-terrorism.

The next day, as tendrils of smoke wafted off the mountaintop, he would rendezvous in Vail with an accomplice known as “Country Girl,” and together they drove in his Toyota pickup to a Denver library, where they composed an e-mail communiqué claiming responsibility.

“This action is just a warning,” they wrote, explaining their act as a protest against the ski area’s expansion plans into terrain thought to be a home of endangered Canada lynx. “Putting profits before Colorado’s wildlife will not be tolerated.”

A year after a nationwide dragnet solved the mystery behind dozens of eco-terror attacks across the West, Chelsea Dawn Gerlach – a.k.a. Country Girl – and Stanislas Gregory Meyerhoff on Thursday formally pleaded guilty to the 1998 Vail fires in an Oregon federal courtroom.

Gerlach and Meyerhoff, both 29, have joined eight other self-proclaimed eco-saboteurs in admitting their roles in the attacks. All are now awaiting sentences in April.

Newly available court documents, testimony and interviews provide details of the five-year “eco-terror” spree and the breaks that led to the downfall of the secretive, loose-knit clique behind them.

Between 1996 and 2001, a group of about 20 devoted activists who called themselves “the Family” tried to right what they saw as major environmental transgressions by torching government facilities, research buildings, logging and meatpacking companies and even SUVs at a Chevrolet dealership.

It took nearly 10 years of investigation by local, state and federal authorities, a lucky break and a turncoat insider for the FBI to break up the leaderless ring of militant environmentalists.

The blaze at Vail – which caused an estimated \$15 million in damage – was the Family’s highest-profile achievement: carefully executed, breathtaking in its scale and impact, and responsible for shining the national spotlight on eco-terror.

The group, which often claimed its actions as the work of the Earth Liberation Front, started in 1996 with a failed arson attempt on a Forest Service ranger station in Oregon. But its members became more sophisticated – and destructive – with each ensuing attack.

School for sabotage

Rodgers, who was 33 at the time, had proposed the plan for Vail at one of the gang's irregular meetings, dubbed "book club," according to prosecutors.

Gerlach and one-time boyfriend Meyerhoff had been enlisted for the job, as were Josephine Sunshine Overaker, Rebecca Rubin, Kevin Tubbs and Jake Ferguson.

The week of the October 1998 Vail attack, Rodgers drove his pickup to Colorado with Ferguson, a drifter who had found acceptance among environmental activists.

Gerlach, who first met Rodgers when she was 16 and just getting started in environmental activism, and Meyerhoff, a would-be college student who has since renounced acts of eco-terrorism, followed, participating first in an aborted attack on a Wyoming wild-horse facility.

In a hotel room along the way in Utah, the group assembled what Meyerhoff called "hamburgers": model-rocket fuses that would ignite gas-drenched sponges stuffed into 5-gallon plastic buckets filled with diesel fuel and gasoline.

Rodgers, who chose the name Avalon from a mystical account of the King Arthur legend, literally had written the book on such devices, a photocopied manual for eco-terrorists called "Setting Fires with Electronic Timers."

He later lamented that he had not distributed the manual so others loyal to the cause "would have avoided being arrested," according to an arrest affidavit.

On Oct. 18, Rodgers, Meyerhoff, Gerlach and Ferguson drove a couple of vehicles up the winding dirt road at the ski area to the snow line, where Gerlach's truck got stuck. There, they unloaded the ready-made gas bombs and hid them until the next day.

Discouraged by the distance of the cache from Two Elk lodge, Meyerhoff abandoned the project and headed back to Oregon in Gerlach's truck.

Gerlach, though, stayed behind, and the next day, she dropped Rodgers off at the cache to launch their rampage.

Alone that night on the ski area's mile-and-a-half-long summit ridge, Avalon planted numerous 5-gallon buckets filled with the diesel-gasoline mixture inside Two Elk Lodge, the ski-patrol headquarters, Buffalo's Café and the Camp One snack shack. He also put them beneath the operator shacks of four chairlifts.

Dressed in black, he scampered so stealthily that three elk hunters camped just outside one structure never even heard him.

By 3 a.m., as Avalon trotted down the slopes, the mountaintop already was engulfed in flames; witnesses later said it resembled a volcano.

Authorities were stumped. Even the most promising clues – the gas cans that Rodgers left behind that were found by hunters two years later – had been wiped clean of fingerprints.

Then, a fluke occurrence tipped investigators to Ferguson, and the threads began to unravel.

A break in the case

In 2001, Heather Coburn reported to police in Eugene, Ore., that Ferguson, her housemate, might have stolen her car. She later found it a short distance away and dropped the report.

A few days later, another woman – an environmental activist known as “Sparrow” – went to police and asked to see the stolen-vehicle report as well as that of an unrelated arson attack at a Chevy dealership.

Authorities had never before connected Ferguson to the attacks, but the inquiry alone was enough for an association.

Federal agents tailed Ferguson and, after building a case against him for his involvement in several other cases, in 2004 coerced him to wear a wire to collect evidence against other members of the family.

“I didn’t roll,” Ferguson told The Seattle Times. “People rolled on me, and I was faced with a situation where I could go to jail for the rest of my life.”

Ferguson elicited incriminating comments from Rodgers and Meyerhoff, among others, helping build the case that would bring the Family down.

Prosecutors have not revealed any charges against Ferguson, but observers suggest that they likely are pending his cooperation in the other cases.

“Never did I imagine that things would turn out like this,” Rodgers, the ringleader, wrote from jail. “...This is the ultimate betrayal, delivered straight into the hands of my enemies.”

After he committed suicide by placing a plastic bag over his head last December, the others, one by one, reached plea deals, many even agreeing to testify against the others to shorten their sentences.

Several who pleaded guilty have requested forgiveness, noting that their fiery eco-terror spree had ended long before authorities caught up with them.

“These acts were motivated by a deep sense of despair and anger at the deteriorating state of the global environment,” Gerlach said in court in September. “But I realized years ago that it was not an effective or an appropriate way to effect positive change.”

The repentance rings hollow for many.

“Instead of using reason and logic, they used firebombs and destruction,” said Robert Jordan, the FBI’s special agent in charge in Oregon. “Instead of using peaceful, lawful methods, they used fear and threats.”

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Inside “the Family”

Federal authorities have accused seven people of being involved in the 1998 Vail arsons.

Name: William C. Rodgers, a.k.a. “Avalon”

Age: Deceased

Role: Ringleader who set fires

Where he is now: Committed suicide in jail

Quote: “I chose to fight on the side of bears, mountain lions, skunks, bats, saguaros, cliff rose and all things wild. I am just the most recent casualty in that war.”

Name: Chelsea Dawn Gerlach, a.k.a. “Country Girl”

Age: 29

Role: Primary accomplice

Where she is now: Pleaded guilty to 26 counts of conspiracy, arson and attempted arson related to the Vail fires and other crimes. Prosecutors have recommended a 10-year prison sentence.

Quote: “These acts were motivated by a deep sense of despair and anger at the deteriorating state of the global environment.”

Name: Jacob Jeremiah Ferguson, a.k.a. “Sketcher D”

Age: 34

Role: Primary accomplice who has since cooperated with authorities

Where he is now: Living in Eugene, Ore. Has not been charged.

Quote: “You get fed up with it because you’re so much into it with your heart, and then you get insomnia and can’t sleep at night,” he told Rolling Stone.

Name: Stanislas Gregory Meyerhoff, a.k.a. “Jack” or “Country Boy”

Age: 29

Role: Traveled to Vail but left

Where he is now: Arrested in Charlottesville, Va.; pleaded guilty to 54 counts of conspiracy and arson. Prosecutors have recommended a 16-year prison sentence.

Quote: “I pray that the court is merciful with those who have renounced these crimes and have moved on to be students and professionals.”

Name: Kevin Tubbs, a.k.a. “Bobby Pants,” “Dog,” Ronald Calloway

Age: 37

Role: Conspirator

Where he is now: Pleaded guilty to 13 crimes. Prosecutors have recommended a 14-year prison term.

Quote: “I was motivated only out of a desire for positive social change, but I have long since realized events like those actually do more harm than good.”

Name: Josephine Sunshine Overaker, a.k.a. Lisa Rachelle Quintana, Maria Quintana

Age: 31

Alleged role: Conspirator

Where she is now: Believed to have fled to Europe.

Name: Rebecca Jeanette Rubin, a.k.a. Kara

Age: 33

Alleged role: Conspirator

Where she is now: Believed to have fled to Canada.

– *Compiled by Steve Lipsher*

Eco-sabotage attributed to “the Family”

Oct. 28, 1996: Ranger station in the Willamette National Forest, Oregon

Oct. 30: Ranger station in the Willamette National Forest

July 21, 1997: Meatpacking firm in Redmond, Ore.

Nov. 30: BLM wild-horse facility in Burns, Ore.

June 21, 1998: Department of Agriculture office in Olympia, Wash.

Oct. 11: BLM wild-horse facility in Rock Springs, Wyo.

Oct. 19: Two Elk Lodge and other structures at Vail ski area

Dec. 27: U.S. Forest Industries office in Medford, Ore.

May 9, 1999: Childers Meat Co. in Eugene, Ore.

Dec. 25: Boise Cascade office in Monmouth, Ore.

Dec. 30: Bonneville Power Administration tower near Bend, Ore.

Sept. 6, 2000: Police department substation in Eugene, Ore.

Jan. 2, 2001: Superior Lumber Co., in Glendale, Ore.

March 30: Chevrolet dealership in Eugene, Ore.

May 21: Jefferson Poplar Farms in Clatskanie, Ore., and the University of Washington horticulture center in Seattle

Oct. 15: BLM wild-horse facility in Litchfield, Calif.

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