

# Beard-cutting attacks throw spotlight on Ohio Amish

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CARROLLTON, Ohio (RNS) Arlene Miller's 15-year-old daughter had just awakened her and her husband, Myron, saying that about a half-dozen Amish men were at the farmhouse's back door asking for Myron.

It was close to 11 p.m. on Oct. 4 -- long past calling hours for those seeking an audience with Myron, a bishop with the Mechanicstown Amish church in Carroll County, Ohio.

When Myron reached the door, the men attacked almost immediately, trying to force him outside, tugging on his long beard. "They finally got him out on the cement out there and took a big pair of scissors and started to cut his beard," Arlene Miller said.

The attack, and a similar one in Holmes County earlier the same night, have brought unwanted national attention to Ohio's Amish community and exposed a widening rift between mainstream Amish and followers of Sam Mullet, a 66-year-old bishop who rules a breakaway group -- some call it a cult -- in an 800-acre compound outside the rural town of Bergholz.

It also has put the spotlight on the strange punishment some say is doled out for crossing Mullet. The hair and beard cuttings are meant to be degrading and insulting to the men, according to Amish experts. Once married, Amish men let their beards grow and women do the same with

their hair, believing such action is prescribed by the Bible.

Police say the five men who attacked Miller that night were three sons and two followers of Mullet. Two hours earlier, police believe they attacked Raymond Hershberger, a 74-year-old Amish bishop in Holmes County, according to Holmes County Sheriff Tim Zimmerly.

The group got into Hershberger's house by saying they wanted to discuss religious matters. They held the bishop down in a chair and used scissors and battery-operated clippers to shear off his beard.

"They held him down and said we are here for revenge for Sam Mullet," the sheriff said.

In a recent rare interview with The Associated Press, Mullet said he didn't order the attacks but acknowledged that he didn't stop them. Mullet said the beard cuttings in Holmes County were to send a message to Amish people there that they should be ashamed of themselves for calling his community a cult.

In particular, Mullet was upset that Hershberger had not honored the ex-communication of two families who left Mullet's group, the sheriff said. Hershberger was one of many Amish bishops across the region who criticized Mullet for his order to shun the families.

In the attack on Myron Miller, Mullet was upset with a recent church order suggesting that Mullet's son, Bill, should shun his father, according to Arlene Miller. The Millers had helped the son leave his father's group in 2004, she said.

"Our community church here, not just Myron, but the whole church, advised Bill that he shouldn't have anything to do with his dad," Arlene Miller said. "We believe that made Sam mad."

The five men arrested in the attack on Hershberger are all charged with aggravated burglary and kidnapping. All are free on bond posted by Sam Mullet. Each could face up to 20 years in prison if convicted on both felony counts.

Meanwhile, a Carroll County grand jury will decide if similar charges will be brought against the five men in the attack on Miller, according to Carroll County Prosecutor Don Burns.

So far, Sam Mullet has not been charged.

"He's saying that he didn't do it, but they consulted with him, they had a meeting with him," said Sheriff Fred Abdalla of Jefferson County, home to the Mullet compound. "He knew who all the targets were going to be, he sanctioned it and he sure as hell never told them not to go."

Abdalla said one of the suspects told him: "If the clippers didn't break, we were going to get four more guys" that night.

Tucked into the hilly, remote countryside in northwest Jefferson County, the tiny town of Bergholz has a motto of "wooded hills and warm hearts" and a hitching post in front of a local bank.

Inside the town's lone restaurant, the lunch crowd seemed a tad amused by the attention Mullet's group was getting from the outside world.

"I can't believe how far it's gone," said one Bergholz resident who declined to give his name inside Marshall's Restaurant and Carryout. "It was on Jay Leno, and my niece from Dayton called me and said, 'What's going on in your town?'"

Rumors about the Mullet compound have circulated for years, and none of them have been good. One local resident said earlier this year several members of Mullet's group had their beards shorn as punishment.

"They just showed up one day and their beards were gone. They said it was punishment, but they didn't really say for what -- I assumed it was for working outside the group," said the woman, who asked that her name not be used, fearful of Mullet's group.

The Mullet compound sits in a valley about five miles outside of Bergholz, down a winding dirt road with a one-room Amish schoolhouse serving as the landmark next to the road. As many as 17 families -- almost all related to Mullet -- are said to be living there.

In his interview with The Associated Press, Mullet said he was upset that other bishops were interfering with his right to punish members of his group who had broken rules.

"You have your laws on the road and the town -- if somebody doesn't obey them, you punish them," he told the AP. "But I'm not allowed to punish the church people? I just have to let them run over me? If every family would just do as they pleased, what kind of church would you have?"

Although Mullet's sect has been in the media spotlight for the past week, David McConnell, an anthropology professor at The College of

Wooster, said Mullet has long been infamous among the Amish.

McConnell, co-author of "An Amish Paradox," which focused on the Amish settlements in Holmes County, said Mullet has long been considered a renegade by other Amish groups who "rules his church members with an iron fist."

"Even before all of this broke, he was out in left field," McConnell said. "No other Amish church district would affiliate or have fellowship with them. That in itself is a powerful statement of how isolated he is from the mainstream."

McConnell said no Amish bishop he knows of would condone cutting hair or beards as punishment.

"The fact that he has lashed out and retaliated against other Amish bishops in a way that is so inconsistent with Amish values is the best illustration of why he's an outlier," he said.

As she sat in a wooden chair near the back door of her farmhouse, Arlene Miller acknowledged that bringing charges against the attackers who roughed up her husband is difficult for Amish.

"We're not pressing charges for revenge, we're pressing charges because they need help," she said. "That community is messed up bad."

Abdalla, the Jefferson County sheriff, said he has been hearing reports that Mullet is keeping members of his group in chicken coops as punishment and engaging in marathon religious lectures that leave members bewildered and sleep-deprived.

"I'm really starting to understand the power he has to brainwash these people," Abdalla said. "I think a lot of the people who live out there are going to end up needing psychological counseling for what they have been through."