

Amish bishop describes beard-cutting attack

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CLEVELAND (RNS) Law officers testified Wednesday (Sept. 5) about the chaotic and bizarre scene they discovered the night of Oct. 4, 2011, when they arrived at the Holmes County, Ohio, home of Raymond Hershberger, a 79-year-old Amish bishop.

The officers recalled that clumps of gray hair lay on a rocking chair and on the floor of the living room, and a crowd of people were crying and yelling in Pennsylvania Dutch, their first language.

Hershberger's son, Levi, told the officers that "Some guys broke in and gave Grandpa a bad haircut," a Sheriff's Department detective said.

The testimony opened the second week of the hate-crime trial of Amish bishop Samuel Mullet Sr. and 15 of his followers. They are accused of conspiracy and kidnapping in what prosecutors describe as hair-cutting attacks on nine religious enemies and estranged family members.

Detective Joe Mullet, who is not related to any of the defendants, and his boss, Sheriff Timothy Zimmerly, described Raymond Hershberger as tearful and disconsolate, his hair and beard chopped off in chunks, and cuts bleeding on his scalp.

Hershberger's son identified the "Bergholz Boys" as the attackers.

Several days later, the detective interviewed the five suspected attackers from the Jefferson County community of Bergholz. He said one of them, Levi Miller, regretted joining the group. But "he said if he had known he was going to get caught he would have cut off a lot more beard hair," Mullet testified.

Samuel Mullet's 19-year-old grandson, Melvin Shrock Jr., recalled that all of the beard-cutting raiders convened at the bishop's house later that night. Johnny Mullet told his father "We got two of them," Shrock recalled.

Asked the motive for the attack, Melvin Jr. said, "Because they weren't living right."

Samuel Mullet, 66, is the religious and social leader of about 18 families in Bergholz, about 100 miles from Cleveland.

He is charged with orchestrating -- but not participating in -- the beard-cutting and hair-clipping raids last year.

Beards and long hair are sacred symbols of an Amish follower's devotion to God. To cut either one is considered humiliating.

The case is the first in Ohio to apply a landmark 2009 federal law, and has attracted national and international attention. To obtain convictions, federal prosecutors must establish that the cutting of beard and head hair is bodily harm, and that the attacks were religiously motivated.

Defense attorneys have denied that religion was behind the beard cuttings.

But Detective Fred Johnson said Johnny Mullet explained that Hersberger was attacked for serving on an Amish committee of bishops that overturned a decision

by his father, Sam Mullet, to excommunicate several families that left the Bergholz community.