

White Like Me

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BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE

It's been a week since I became a skinhead. Seven nights ago I did a few tequila shots, and then I did a few more, and then I said "Let's do this" to a friend of a friend who's in beauty school. She cut away the long hair I've had since I was seventeen — fourteen years ago — until only an inch remained. Then she broke out a razor, dialed it to one, and shaved the remains of my once-proud mane down to little more than a five o'clock shadow on my scalp.

During the seven days that followed, I've learned a few things.

I've learned that my scalp is just as vulnerable to solar radiation as are other parts of my body that I normally don't point toward the sun. I've learned that simply by dressing a certain way — peg-legged blue jeans rolled up at the cuffs, Doc Martens boots and a tight black shirt with the picture of a crucified Nazi on the front — I often inspire fear in people who don't know me.

I've learned that even though it's very wrong of me, I like that — sometimes.

When the Cherry Creek Arts Festival power shopper who parks next to me dings the side of my pickup with the door of her \$40,000, never-seen-a-speck-of-mud SUV, I like her reaction when she's about to just walk away but then catches sight of me. All of a sudden, she's truly sorry and calling me "Sir."

But when I get on an elevator in the lobby of an apartment tower and the only other rider is a young black woman who glances at me and then hops out as the doors are closing, well, I've learned I don't like that at all.

I've also learned what it's like to be harassed by the cops because of the way I look. Less than 48 hours after I shaved my head, I found myself down on my knees, with my hands behind my head, while a Denver police officer searched my vehicle without a warrant. I hadn't so much as flicked a cigarette butt out the window. My offense was hanging out in public with a bunch of guys with shaved heads dressed like neo-Nazis. They were real. I was posing to get a story.

We were in the parking lot of a grocery store, trading rumors about whether the Rocky Mountain Heritage Fest was happening or not, when the cops rolled up on us. They emptied our pockets, looked through our cars, asked for ID, took our photographs and then told us to get lost.

These, of course, were members of the same Denver Police Department in trouble over its secret spy files, which civil libertarians have been raising holy hell over of late. Leftist activists had phoned the cops with what they knew was a false report of "neo-Nazi types" dealing drugs; had those same activists been subjected to similar treatment at the hands of law enforcement, I'm sure they would have called the ACLU and held yet another press conference the next day to vent their righteous indignation.

When I called the DPD as a reporter, a police spokesman cited the drug-dealing tip as justification for searching the skinheads. But the police had already had us under surveillance before that tip came in; there were unmarked police cars all over the supermarket parking lot. If they didn't know that the citizen complaint was a lie, they should have.

Truthfully, though, at the time, I was thrilled to get searched. I thought it would foster a sense of camaraderie between the skinheads and me. I wanted that badly, because up to that point, they had seemed decidedly unconvinced that I was who I said I was. According to my cover story, I was a neo-Nazi skinhead who had recently moved to Denver from Alaska. I had read about that day's white-power festival online and was looking to network with my Euro-American brothers and sisters in the Rocky Mountain region.

When I concocted this identity, I had thought it would only have to carry me through small talk inside the festival, shouting over loud music. But anti-racist protesters wreaked so much havoc that the festival's site kept changing, as did the location of the checkpoints where directions to Heritage Fest were to be handed out. As a result, I was spending way more time standing around talking to skinheads in parking lots than I had bargained for, and something about me was sending up red flags.

I think it was my unadorned arms. All the other skinheads I met that day who were in their late twenties and early thirties had been in the movement so long that their arms were covered with Nazi tattoos. I had none. I should have used henna. (Instead, I came up with some excuse about skinheads being so rare in Alaska that Eskimos would gang up on anyone with a white-power tattoo.)

After the police broke up our little Safeway confab, the other skinheads invited me to follow them to the next checkpoint: the American Motel in Wheat Ridge. During the twenty-minute drive, I severely freaked out, convinced they were leading me into a trap. I chanted the mantra that Tim Roth's undercover cop character employed in *Reservoir Dogs*: "They don't know shit, and they're

not going to know shit, because you're super cool." I chanted it over and over, looking at myself in the rear-view mirror.

I didn't feel super cool. I felt sphincter-puckered.

I switched to the "14 words," a white-power motto that Nazi skinheads know by heart, which I had memorized in case I was asked to recite it: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children."

Still repeating myself, I pulled into the motel parking lot. The skinheads came over to my truck, which was borrowed from a friend, and told me to turn on the CD player. I thought that was pretty crafty: They wanted to find out what kind of music I had in there. Luckily, for the past two days I'd been listening nonstop to a white-power heavy-metal band called Beserker, getting down the lyrics and riffs so that I could carry on a conversation about my favorite hate-rock band.

Now the guttural roar of Beserker's lead vocalist singing the praises of the Aryan master race blasted from the speakers. I thought to myself, "I'm pulling this off."

Then one of the skinheads looked beneath the passenger seat.

I'd given my borrowed vehicle's interior a cursory inspection, checking for incriminating evidence. I'd taken down the yin-yang amulet dangling from the mirror, but I hadn't looked beneath the seats.

"What's this?" the skinhead demanded. He was holding up an Ani DiFranco CD.

A siren went off in my brain, followed by one overpowering realization: "I'm a dead man."

I stammered something stupid about it being my buddy's truck and how his girlfriend's younger sister was a hippie chick and she must have left it in there. I sounded like a high school kid trying to tell his mom that the bag of pot she found in his sock drawer was just something he was holding for a friend.

"Go ahead, throw it down and stomp it," I said.

"That's all right," the skin replied. He laid the disc down on the seat. "Is she white?"

"What?" I asked.

"Your friend's girlfriend's sister. Is she white?"

"Yeah, definitely. She's white."

"Then you should try and talk to her, get her to be more aware. Maybe you should bring her to the show tonight."

I said I'd do that. He gave me a hotline number to call a few hours later for directions to the festival. I left, riding a sweet adrenaline high east on I-70 until I looked at the gas gauge and noticed it was on empty. Past empty, in fact. About-to-run-out-of-gas empty. I pulled off the freeway at the next exit, which landed me at a convenience store at about 40th and York. Let's just say they don't get a lot of white guys dressed up like Nazi skinheads in that part of town.

As I filled the tank, I was hit with hard stares from all sides. I didn't know what else to do, so I smiled and waved, turning in circles, trying my damndest to look like the goofiest white boy in the world.

It was no problem.



Skin Deep

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Leon, a 29-year-old pipefitter and self-proclaimed "Soldier of the Fourth Reich" from West Virginia, was wearing a T-shirt printed with the picture of a blue-eyed girl with blonde pigtails, dressed in a Hitler Youth uniform, smiling prettily while holding up a canister of Zyklon-B cyanide gas.

"Got Jews?" the shirt asked.

Three times, Leon karate-chopped his right hand over his heart and then thrust it upward in a Nazi salute. Three times, he cast his jagged voice into the Western world's most infamous rallying cry.

Sieg heil! Sieg heil! Sieg heil!

Leon was one of over 150 white-power skinheads and neo-Nazis crowded inside a rented hall in an Arvada strip mall on Saturday, July 13. This was Leon's first visit to Denver; he had taken time off work and driven halfway across the country to party with his white-power brethren at the Rocky Mountain Heritage Fest.

A one-day festival featuring big-name hate-rock bands such as Final War, Max Resist, Intimidation One and H8 Machine, Heritage Fest had been hyped on white-power Web sites and in mass mailings since early June as the first event of its kind in the Rocky Mountain region.

Every year, a different portion of the country hosts a Heritage festival; last year's was held in West Virginia, and the year before that, it was in Michigan. The 2002 Heritage Fest drew Nazi skins from Colorado as well as at least seven other states (Texas, Oregon, California, Virginia, West Virginia, Minnesota and Michigan) and Germany, a country referred to by the Americans in attendance as "the Fatherland."

The bands played on a low stage in front of a red, white and black Iron Eagle swastika flag. The hall — tile floor, fluorescent lights — was lined with vendor tables selling hate-rock T-shirts and compact discs, posters of Hitler and copies of *Mein Kampf*, *The Turner Diaries* and *Who's Really Running America? (Answer: The Jews)*.

Recruiters from the two of the most prominent white-power organizations in the country, the World Church of the Creator and the National Alliance, circulated through the crowd, distributing membership forms, stickers and propaganda films on DVD. Skinheads from Minnesota handed out campaign literature for Larry Leininger, that state's White Working Man's Party candidate for U.S. Senate.

Leininger's platform: "Reestablish segregation. Enact and enforce new laws against mixed-race marriages and breeding. Repeal Hate Crime laws and domestic violence laws. Abolish affirmative action. Stop all aid to Israel. Stop all immigration into the country. Pull out of the U.N. Clean up our lakes, rivers, ground water, and air."

Whenever Nazi skinheads try to gather in this country, Anti-Racist Action protesters try to stop them, often with the assistance of national hate-group monitoring organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League, which share intelligence with local ARA chapters in cities where white-power events are scheduled.

The Rocky Mountain Heritage Fest was funded by Heritage Press, a Colorado Springs-based mail-order house specializing in white-power texts. In order to prevent ARA from spoiling their plans, the event's organizers tried to keep the festival's location a secret until just a few hours before it was scheduled to start.

They failed.

Heritage Fest's chief organizer was "Jen 88," a 23-year-old resident of the Denver area. (H is the eighth letter of the alphabet, making "88" neo-Nazi code for "Heil Hitler.") "As far as how I feel and why I wanted to do [the festival], it was because there are lot of people in Colorado and a lot of other places who are racially aware just like I am," Jen 88 says. "I wanted us all to be able to unite here in Colorado and to let people know here that we don't have to hide just because we feel the way we do."

One of the investors from Heritage Press, 28-year-old "Thor," says the festival cost \$8,000 to stage. "We lost most of it," he says. "That sucked. But we still consider it a success in the end, because a lot of people tried to shut us down, but we still had a show. That's the way we look at it. We came out on top in an unfair situation.

"I mean, come on, you have gangster rap bands that come out here, and no one is shutting them down, but as soon as someone says, 'I'm white and I'm proud' and they want to have a pro-white concert, everybody wants to cry about it and keep it from happening."

The first sign of trouble for the skinheads came a week before the festival, when computer hackers sabotaged the Heritage Press Web site, redirecting its traffic to an audio-file archive of prank phone calls from "Britney Spear's penis."

About that same time, ARA radicals sent out e-mail bulletins and posted fliers across the Denver area announcing that a "White Power/Nazi festival" was headed this way. The flier showed a swastika being crushed beneath a black leather boot.

"TAKE A STAND against racist terror," it read. "SLAP White Supremacy in its racist face...We MUST NOT sit back ideally [sic] and watch our communities be terrorized by NAZI SCUM."

The e-mails and fliers called for anti-racist protesters to meet at ten o'clock the morning of the festival at the new Martin Luther King Jr. statue in City Park. From there, the plan was to organize a protest march culminating in a demonstration outside the Aztlan Theatre, where Heritage Fest was supposed to begin that afternoon — a closely guarded nugget of information the anti-racists purloined through means they refuse to reveal.

Jen 88 says that only she and four other people knew the true location of Heritage Fest. She suspects that ARA activists either hacked into her private e-mail or called around to local music venues, inquiring about private events booked for July 13.

In the weeks leading up to that date, the only details about the site available online were a photo of a pristine mountain lake and the teaser "within 70 miles of downtown Denver." This posting led many skinheads to speculate that the festival would be held outdoors in the high country. In fact, Jen 88 had booked a historic theater in a predominantly Mexican-American neighborhood.

Located on Santa Fe Drive near Tenth Avenue, the Aztlan is owned by Tim Correa. In mid-June, he remembers, a young man and woman came to see him about renting the theater for what they called "a punk-rock show."

Jen 88 remembers it differently. "I never misled him," she says. "I described the music to him as music that sounded like hardcore black metal with a lot of politically incorrect lyrics. I never identified anything as being white-power, because that tends to scare people away."

Correa agreed to let her have the Aztlan on July 13 for \$1,600. He drew up a contract, which they both signed.

On Friday, July 12, Correa was visited by a Denver police officer.

"He said he came to notify me that the concert at my theater the next night was going to be a skinhead gathering," Correa says. "He asked if I knew that. I told him no. The officer also said there was a flier being circulated that was calling for a protest demonstration against the event."

That evening, Correa received several calls from ARA agitators threatening to picket his theater the next day. Early Saturday, he called Jen 88.

"I asked if she knew about the flier, and she said yes, she'd seen it two days earlier," he remembers. "I asked her if the flier was talking about her event, and she confirmed it was."

Correa told her the show was canceled. When she threatened to sue for breach of contract, Correa said he'd take that chance.

"It became quite evident to me that the concert would invoke a high risk of violence, either between the protesters and skinheads or the skinheads and the members of the community around the theater," he says. "Because of that safety risk, plus the fact that I was deceived by the renters, who chose not to inform me of their controversial standing, I decided I had to cancel the concert. I would have been a fool to go ahead with it."

Later that morning, three male skinheads showed up at the theater and got in his face. "They were very adamant about the show going on," Correa says, "and they were very angry with me, but I just kept telling them, 'No way.' I gave them every cent of their money back, and they finally left."

Meanwhile, the ARA activists were congregating at the MLK statue in City Park. For all the flaming rhetoric of the fliers, though, only about 25 protesters showed up, most of them in their teens and early twenties. One kid with spiked hair sported a shirt that read "Nazi punks fuck off." They seemed more interested in playing soccer and singing songs than in making plans to confront the skinheads; they also seemed blissfully unaware of the danger they were in.

On July 11, a message had appeared on a white-power bulletin board on the Stormfront Web site: "Let me get this straight? A bunch of commies, faggots and A.R.A. race traitors are gonna all get

together at a statue of Martin Luther Coon? What could be better? We should be there also and throw a surprise boot party on their heads."

The post was signed by a member of the Midland Hammerskins, a seven-state sect of a hard-core international gang that started in Dallas in 1987 and whose members regard themselves as the storm-trooper elite of white-power skinheads. The Midland Hammerskins claim Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, Kansas, Missouri and Iowa as their territory.

Jen 88 had hired the Midland Hammerskins to provide security and logistical support for Heritage Fest. Fortunately for the bright-eyed protesters at City Park, that meant the Hammerskins were so busy trying to salvage the festival that morning that they had no time for stomping traitors to the Aryan race.

As part of the subterfuge designed to protect the event's location as long as possible, Jen 88 had sent out a mass e-mail five days before the festival, directing anyone interested in attending to proceed first to a checkpoint. There, she promised, exact directions to the festival would be available throughout the afternoon of July 13. The checkpoint was identified as the parking lot of the Safeway at East Evans Avenue and Downing Street — in the University of Denver neighborhood.

Road-weary skinheads began to gather in the parking lot around 1 p.m. But no one was around to give them directions — because there were no directions to be had. Jen 88 was still scrambling to secure another venue. All dressed up with nowhere to go, the skinheads hung around the Safeway as their numbers grew. Weekend shoppers looked aghast at the milling throngs of shaved-head, jackbooted Nazis.

Just after 2 p.m., six Midland Hammerskins in a dark-colored Mercedes with faux European license plates pulled in and spread the word of a new checkpoint: the American Motel in Wheat Ridge. This prompted a skinhead exodus, while the Hammerskins stayed behind to pass the word to stragglers.

Four unmarked police cars had been lurking in the far corners of the parking lot. A few minutes past 2:30 p.m., they suddenly moved in. At the same time, four or five marked Denver Police Department cars converged on the Hammerskins from all directions. The police officers, led by a large African-American cop in uniform, ordered the skinheads to clasp their hands behind their heads. The police searched the skins as well as their vehicle, then took photographs of their faces and tattoos. No arrests were made.

"We were racially profiled and deliberately harassed," Issac, head of the Hammerskins security cadre, complained later that afternoon. "They had no just cause to search us. It was bullshit. We have a constitutional right to assemble, and that right has been getting trampled in Denver everywhere we go. I didn't hear anything about the police searching those faggots in the park."

According to DPD detective John White, the searches were prompted by "a complaint call from a citizen who reported that several individuals described as 'neo-Nazis' were selling drugs behind the Safeway." This provided the officers the legal basis to conduct the searches, he says.

"In terms of photographing them, that's pretty much standard procedure where any gang members are concerned to document the contact in that manner," White adds. The police officers did not find any illegal drugs and made no arrests.

The anonymous false tip about drug dealing was the handiwork of the Anti-Racist Action crew.

"It was minimal effort with maximum effect using the telephone," says local ARA organizer Ken DeBacker.

While the Hammerskins were being searched outside the Safeway in Denver, the American Motel in Wheat Ridge was turning into skinhead central.

Hammerskin sentries were posted outside the front entrance of the motor lodge, which neighbors Pigskins, a sports bar on the frontage road off I-70 just west of Kipling Street. Inside the motel, shirtless skinheads displaying tattoos of swastikas, Hitler and the white-power slogan "Blood and Honor" roamed the halls. The music of Intimidation One, a Portland hate-rock band named after a 1994 Oregon hate-crime law passed in response to skinhead violence, blasted from one room full of neo-Nazis speaking German.

The lyrics: *Die Jew! I hate you! Line you up, cut you down! Where you belong is in the ground!*

A score of skinheads sunned themselves on concrete balconies overlooking the motel parking lot, where twenty or thirty more skins walked the pavement beneath the motel's gargantuan American flag and a red neon sign advertising rooms for \$19.95 a night.

Jen 88 had contacted the motel's manager three weeks before the festival and negotiated a group rate. "We chose it because it was easy to get to from every major freeway people were coming in on," she says, adding that the manager let the skinheads use the motel's banquet room as a command center. "They were really good to us."

The manager of the American Motel did not return repeated messages seeking comment. The motel's owners, who live in Independence, Missouri, could not be reached.

According to Jen 88, the Wheat Ridge Police Department had the motel under surveillance by Friday night. "We saw them out there, checking us out — marked cars and unmarked," she says. "We saw them taking pictures, so we snapped some back."

Wheat Ridge PD commander Jack Chism confirms that officers were keeping an eye on the Nazis. "We had information that they were coming to town, and they've had some incidents of violence in the past, so we wanted to make sure that didn't happen in our city," he says. "We had heard the Hammerskins from Missouri were going to be there, and they're a more violent group, known to pack weapons. But everything turned out fine as far as far as we were concerned. There were no serious incidents or arrests."

On the afternoon of the festival, skinheads clustered at the motel under the searing sun and traded rumors of venues being chased and lost all over the city.

"I have to give kudos to the ARA today," said Issac. "Everywhere we go, they're calling in on us, and so far, they're winning the day. They may have stopped the revolutionaries, you know, but they'll never stop the revolution."

The stated mission of the American neo-Nazi skinhead movement is to create a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant-only homeland within the United States by using ballots or bullets — or both — to overthrow the U.S. government, which the skinheads call ZOG, for "Zionist Occupied Government."

Before these skins could return to plotting the overthrow of ZOG, however, Jen 88 and the other Heritage Fest organizers first had to pull off a rock concert.

After several hours of frenzied phone calling, Jen 88 says, she cut a deal to hold the festival at the Post 23 American Legion Hall in Aurora.

"I went out there, and I was very blunt with them," she says. "I told them that it was going to be hardcore music and that there were going to be a lot of military-like kids, who were pretty much a bunch of skinheads. They didn't seem to have a problem with that." Jen 88 signed a contract to rent the hall, then left to help transport the bands and their sound gear. "I didn't get ten minutes down the road before I got a call that the cops were there," she says. She turned around and drove back to Aurora. "I got there, and basically the police were telling them, 'Do you realize a bunch of hatemongers are going to be here?' and scaring the hell out of them, when all we were trying to do was have a show."

Jen 88 doesn't know how the police found out about the new venue so quickly. Maybe she was followed. Maybe the police or the ARA were somehow monitoring her cell-phone calls. "It was so quick the ink wasn't even dry on the contract," she says.

"There were no Nazis or anyone else here Saturday night," says a woman answering the phone at Post 23, "and we have no further comment on the issue."

Jen 88 has no plans to take legal action against the American Legion, but Correa is another matter. "We're going to sue him, because we have great losses because of him," she says. "Because of the change of plans with all the different venues and all the confusion, we lost a considerable amount of money due to lost ticket sales, beer sales, food sales, everything. A lot of people didn't get to come because of the ruckus."

Based on the e-mails he's received in the days following the festival, Thor says, "There were at least another hundred skinheads driving around looking for us that night."

Those skins would have found what they were looking for on Ralston Road, between Independence and Garrison streets.

Gregory Wolfe, owner of Small Gatherings, a rental hall in an Arvada strip mall, says he received the call just after 7 p.m.

"They said right away they were skinheads and they'd been having a lot of problems that day," Wolfe remembers. "I agreed to rent to them. I disagree with them vigorously, but I believe they have as much right as anybody else to freely express themselves."

Wolfe never heard from any anti-racist protesters. "I might have thought differently about things if I knew fifty or a hundred counter-demonstrators were going to be chanting outside," he admits, "but we lucked out, because they didn't track [the skinheads] this far."

The skins were good clients, and Wolfe says he would rent to them again. "They promised to clean up after themselves, and they did so admirably," he says. When two Arvada police officers showed up at Small Gatherings to ask Wolfe if he knew what he was getting into, he told them: "I do, and I'm fine with it."

The Rocky Mountain Heritage Fest finally got under way a little after 10 p.m. on Saturday, July 13, and lasted until three the next morning. Security was tight outside. Midland Hammerskins patrolled the parking lot and surrounding retail complexes; in and out, access was strictly controlled.

"No more than five people outside at any one time," said the Hammerskin collecting a cover charge of \$35 at the door. "If you want to smoke and there are already five people out here, tough shit. We've had too many problems today, and we don't want to attract any more attention."

Still, a fight broke out early in the back of the hall behind several rows of folding chairs, between a scrawny Hammerskin and an unaffiliated skinhead who proved himself a fool by rising to the bait of the smaller man's shoves and insults. As they exchanged blows, other Hammerskins descended. They quickly separated the combatants, wrapped up the fool in a tangle of pain-compliance holds, then dragged him out of sight as his wife, a squalling infant in her arms, pleaded for mercy.

"He is not leaving this fucking building," yelled the Hammerskin who had caused the fight. "Do you hear me? He is not leaving this building on his own legs!"

The first band, local hate-rock trio Denver City Troopers, took the stage at half past ten. They played a short but furious set, culminating in a song introduced as "Maximum 88." The second band of the night, Orange County's Max Resist, lit a fuse beneath the sweaty skinheads in the slam-dancing pit with "Tales of Honor," a buzz-saw three-chord tribute to Hitler deputy Rudolf Hess.

The bands' audience consisted of mostly young white men wearing blue jeans, Doc Martens boots and either black shirts with white-power symbols or no shirts at all, the better to display their tattoos. A smattering had on World War II German army uniforms or International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers labor-union apparel.

About forty women were scattered through the crowd, turned out in gear ranging from Scottish Highlands ceremonial dress to Daisy Duke shorts and baby-doll tees with "88" or the flag of Norway on their fronts. At least ten children were there, including one dark-haired lad who was dressed all in black. His shirt was decorated with a Celtic cross encircled by the encouragement to "Support your local M.H.S.," in honor of the Midland Hammerskins.

Cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon were stacked in three-foot-high rows near the soundboard and freely distributed for a buck a can. On a wall across from the stacks of beer was a National Alliance recruitment poster. It bore the symbol of the National Alliance — a Y-shaped "Life Rune" surrounded by laurels — and a chunk of text titled "The Law of Inequality."

It read: "Our world is hierarchical. Each of us is a member of the Aryan (or European) race, which, like the other races, developed its own special characteristics over many thousands of years during which natural selection advanced it along its evolutionary path.

"Our race evolved in the more demanding environment of the North, where surviving a winter required planning and self-discipline. We therefore advanced more rapidly in the development of the higher mental faculties — including the abilities to conceptualize, to solve problems, to plan for the future, and to postpone gratification — than those races which remained in the relatively unvarying hot climates."

Demonstrating the higher mental faculties passed down to him by his Nordic forefathers, Leon drained his Pabst Blue Ribbon and leapt into the slam-dancing pit. Lowering his head, he charged into another skinhead like a ram in mating season, then threw up his arms and bellowed, "White pride!"

A few feet away, the young boy in the Celtic cross T-shirt stood at the foot of the stage. He threw up a *Sieg heil!*, then looked around shyly, as if to make sure he was getting it right.