

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Newspaper archive powered by 

January 17, 2004

**Section:** Local

**Edition:** Final Chaser

**Page:** B3

## MAN, 2 COUSINS HELD IN DEATH OF DEL MONTE EXEC KILLING MAY BE RACIALLY MOTIVATED

*Brent Whiting and Michael Kiefer, The Arizona Republic*

Montana authorities arrested three people in the slaying of a Del Monte executive whose body was found Sunday in a shallow grave west of Phoenix.

A 22-year-old man and two juvenile runaways, all from Missouri, were taken into custody Thursday after a traffic stop in Billings, Mont., Yellowstone County Sheriff Chuck Maxwell said. The arrests marked the last stop in a bizarre odyssey in which the three armed themselves and set off for Arizona. "It was a weird deal," said the highway patrolman who pulled them over.

Without offering details, Maxwell said investigators determined from questioning the suspects that they may have a connection to the shooting death of **Pedro Corzo**. **Corzo**, 35, general manager of the Southwest region for Del Monte Fresh Produce, vanished Jan. 9 while on a trip to visit farms in remote areas of western Maricopa County.

His body was found Sunday in a rugged desert area about 20 miles southwest of 543rd Avenue and Baseline Road following an air and ground search. He was buried in a shallow grave about a half-mile from his Ford Explorer. Maricopa County sheriff's investigators were en route Friday to Billings to talk with the suspects, who have been identified as Justin A. Harrison, 22, and his cousins, Joshua Aston, 16, and Nicholas Aston, 15, all from St. Peters, Mo. The two juveniles are brothers.

The arrests were made at 3:45 p.m. Thursday, about the same time **Corzo's** widow, Shelly, 34, made an emotional plea for her husband's killers to be brought to justice. Officer Toman Baukema of the Montana Highway Patrol spotted Harrison's 1985 Chrysler New Yorker driving about 20 miles under the legal speed limit on Interstate 90. He noted that the occupants were young and that the car was loaded down. Baukema ran a database check on the license plates and learned the car was

associated with two runaways from Missouri who were possibly armed, and he pulled it over, he told the Republic.

Harrison admitted having weapons and produced two rifles and a shotgun. But Montana authorities did not have any reason to think a crime had been committed. "We basically decided we weren't going to do anything to them," other than call their parents and secure the weapons, Baukema said. Baukema then spoke to a detective in Missouri who told him that the trio may have been planning some criminal activity in Arizona.

Detective Gerry Pollard of the St. Charles County Sheriff's Office said the boys were reported missing by their father "a couple of weeks ago." The father also said the boys had been making comments about going to Arizona to hurt somebody, Pollard said.

According to Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, the three youths shaved their heads after they left Missouri. Along with the weapons, investigators found handwritten notes detailing the ethnic makeup of Dateland, in Yuma County. Montana law enforcement officials contacted the Yuma County Sheriff's Department, and they contacted Arpaio's office.

At a press conference Friday, Arpaio produced a flier from the St. Charles County Sheriff's Department, naming the two juveniles as runaways believed to be in the company of their cousin. All three were thought to have tattoos in the shape of a pretzel on their lower backs or upper arms, according to the flier, which also said that they were headed to Dateland .

"Harrison has made statements that they plan to burglarize homes in (the) desert and will shoot anyone who resists," it said. "We believe robbery is not the motive," Arpaio said, based on evidence at the crime scene that he refused to detail. Arpaio stopped short of saying that **Corzo's** murder was racially motivated. He could not explain the "demographics" in the youths' notes and could not say if their newly shaved heads made them skinheads.

On Friday, Ron Rockwell, a Glendale clergyman for the **Corzo** family, said if the killers have been caught, then that comes as welcome news. "We would never want this to happen to somebody else," Rockwell said when reached at the **Corzo** home in Peoria. Rockwell, pastor at Harvestime Assembly of God Church, said Shelly **Corzo** had no immediate comment about the arrests.

Shelly **Corzo** has a daughter, Veronica, 3, and is eight months pregnant with a son, to be named **Pedro Jr.**

