

Residents Remember 'John Does' in Junction City



The Washington Post

April 22, 1995 | Thomas Heath; Walter Pincus

As soon as the FBI released composite sketches of two men then known only as "John Doe 1 and 2" Thursday afternoon, people all over the prairie town began to wonder whether it was possible that the suspects in the deadliest terrorist attack in U.S. history could have been living quietly in their midst.

"I beat one of them at pool, twice," said Miguel Cruz, who hustles tables at J.C. Sports Bar.

One of them allegedly turned out to be Timothy James McVeigh, who was arrested by federal authorities Friday afternoon and charged in the Oklahoma City bombing. He and his alleged accomplice, the other John Doe, were said by authorities to have rented the truck that became the deadly bomb here in Junction City, 275 miles to the north.

Meanwhile as of late tonight it appeared that police were still seeking the other man who may have recently roamed the streets, the stores and the bars of Junction City.

Bob McDowell, 47, is certain that he saw the pair one week ago at a local convenience store and at Yesterday's bar on Washington Street, which is the main drag.

"One guy looked intense" as he waited to hop on a video game McDowell was playing. "It scared the hell out of me," he said.

Sylvia Niemczyk of the Texaco Food Mart said she recalled the suspects as cash-paying customers who bought gas several times over the last two months.

"They came in a couple of times a week," said Niemczyk. "They were clean cut. Casual. No problems."

McVeigh first began to frequent this area some five years ago when he was stationed at Fort Riley, home of the Army's 1st Infantry Division, which lies just beyond this town of 50,000, according to federal authorities. And, he began to leave a clear trail here again this week.

McVeigh and his alleged accomplice, the other John Doe, rented the truck at Elliott's Body Shop on Golden Belt Boulevard. That was on Monday afternoon.

Although little is known about what happened to them and the truck between then and when the bomb exploded just after 9 a.m. Wednesday, interviews with people around town today provided the first details of the suspects' activities as they prepared to set off on their deadly mission.

The suspect who did all the talking, apparently McVeigh, had given the employees a fake name, "Robert D. Kling," when renting the truck. Ryder spokesmen were on the scene to say they had followed procedures and they were helping with the investigation.

In fact, the suspects had presented a false South Dakota driver's license when they rented the truck and said they were driving it to Omaha. The birth date on the license read, April 19, 1970.

April 19 is the anniversary of the fire at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Tex., and is the same day that the bombing took place in Oklahoma City.

Before renting the truck, McVeigh allegedly went out with Eldon Elliott, the shop owner, to look at the truck. The suspects acted like many other GIs in their twenties from nearby Fort Riley who often rent such trucks to move their families.

The FBI checked with several area stores in Junction City, looking for anyone who may have sold them ammonium nitrate fertilizer, the main bomb ingredient.

The FBI also thoroughly searched the Great Western Inn on the edge of town, leaving two rooms, 107 and 110, covered in fingerprint powder.

Rose Johnson, a maid at the motel, said she cleaned both rooms, singles with large beds, and that two men similar to those in the composite pictures had stayed there Monday night.

They were gone Tuesday before Johnson arrived for work at 9 a.m. Both beds and bathrooms were used. Showers had been taken. The two left their keys in rooms. They apparently paid ahead of time, about \$30 apiece.

Where the suspects went next and where they assembled the bomb and loaded it into the rented truck remained uncertain tonight, but investigators were focusing a great deal of attention on a peaceful old railroad stop, 30 miles away, known as Herington.

FBI agents there were questioning Terry Lynn Nichols, apparently an associate of McVeigh's. Dressed in blue jeans and accompanied by his wife and young daughter Nichols drove into town and turned himself into police this afternoon, minutes after McVeigh's arrest was announced.

Federal agents descended on Herington just as they had Junction City and turned it upside down today, talking to everyone from real estate agents to cable-TV installers, in order to get a handle on a possible witness in the bomb plot.

As Nichols was being interviewed in the town's public office building, it looked like most of the citizenry had surrounded the main square to get a look at the celebrity -- or whatever he was. Video cams whirred, mothers screeched at impatient kids and elderly folks watched from the comfort of their cars. Some folks pawed at the blue GMC pickup truck that the witness had driven to the police station.

Herington Police Chief Dale Kuhn said "there's been no arrest, and no person had been taken into custody," Kuhn said, but almost seven hours later Nichols was still being interrogated.

People here have become accustomed to violence because of the Big Red One infantry division that shoots out of Fort Riley to trouble spots around the world. But in down times, people in these small towns turn their mind to other things. For the young soldiers, there are dozens of bars throughout town -- places like the Hollywood Supper Club, Malibu's or the Alibi. Other than Fort Riley, the big employers are the local foundry, fast-food stores and that most precious dividend of the plains: the wheat crop.

"Everybody in the Midwest is kind of shocked . . . that something like this could happen in the heartland," said Gary Devin, a Junction City businessman. "People are used to having their men in war because of Fort Riley, but not domestic violence coming to this area."