

BOMB INVESTIGATORS EXPLORE TERRORIST LINK TO UNSOLVED ROBBERIES

By David Johnston | The New York Times
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A week after the Oklahoma City bombing, federal agents have begun pursuing the money trail left by the suspects.

The agents are working on witnesses' reports that Timothy J. McVeigh and his confederates carried thousands of dollars in cash but worked just sporadically, law enforcement officials said Wednesday.

One theory that agents are pursuing is whether the bombers financed the bombing through criminal activities, the officials said. The authorities are examining recent robberies, including six unsolved bank thefts in Kansas City, Mo., and elsewhere in the Midwest in which two men used explosives.

In some of the robberies the two men, who were usually reported to have been armed, entered the banks wearing disguises like construction hard hats covered by camouflage netting. At times the robbers carried explosives in briefcases that they left in the bank when fleeing, the authorities said, apparently to complicate pursuit. The first such robbery was in January 1994, and the most recent was on March 30, when an undisclosed sum was taken from the Boatmen's Bank in West Des Moines, Iowa.

The officials cautioned that they have not definitely linked the Oklahoma City suspects to the bank robberies, but cited the inquiry as an example of how their investigation is expanding to consider every possible clue. Law-enforcement officials said they have puzzled over how the bombers paid for their travel expenses across several states and purchased the thousands of pounds of fertilizer and fuel oil required to build their bomb.

McVeigh, who is accused of planting the bomb, is known to have traveled widely from his last known address, in Kingman, Ariz. Witnesses have said they saw him in Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Michigan and upstate New York.

But his job history remains hazy since he left the Army in December 1991 and spent the next six months in the New York National Guard. He reportedly worked for a while as a security guard, but there is no indication that he held any job in recent months.

Investigators have pursued a number of ideas to explain how McVeigh financed a wanderer's life of rented trailers, older cars and inexpensive motels in rural towns. Agents have examined whether he might have been involved in drug

trafficking or had received support from an underground network of far-right paramilitary groups. The officials said they had reached no firm conclusions.

McVeigh paid cash in Junction City, Kan., on April 17 when he rented the Ryder truck that was apparently used in the bombing. He paid cash again when he rented a \$26.90 room at the Dreamland Motel in Junction City and ate in nearby restaurants.

Witnesses have told investigators that McVeigh and his associates carried large rolls of bills, sometimes thousands of dollars. But the truthfulness of some witnesses who have been tested with polygraphs is uncertain. Some showed deception in answers about McVeigh and his associates, the officials said.

The bank robberies began in January 1994 in Ames, Iowa. The robbers have reportedly struck twice in the vicinity of Kansas City, two times near Des Moines and once each near Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio, and Omaha, Neb. The most recent theft, the authorities said, was on March 30, when three robbers in West Des Moines left behind a gold-painted pipe bomb in an Easter basket.

A reference to banks was made at a hearing on Wednesday in Wichita, Kan., for Terry Nichols, one of two brothers accused of building illegal bombs with McVeigh in Michigan. A judge held up a government request to transfer Nichols from Wichita to Oklahoma City, where he would most likely be summoned to testify to a grand jury in the bombing case.