

FBI Turns Focus to Unsolved Bank Heists

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OKLAHOMA CITY—FBI officials are actively investigating whether the conspirators responsible for bombing the federal building here may have financed their activities with a spree of unusual bank robberies across the Midwest.

Thirteen unsolved bank robberies in Nebraska, Iowa, Ohio, Missouri, Wisconsin and Kansas are being investigated by federal authorities for possible links to the April 19 bombing, according to knowledgeable sources.

These robberies were distinctive because the robbers—sometimes as many as three white men, all in their 20s or 30s—generally left behind a pipe bomb as a form of “calling card” when they departed the banks after the holdups.

While authorities cautioned that a link has not been established, they noted that Timothy J. McVeigh, the suspect now under arrest in the bombing case, often traveled with a wad of bills in his pocket.

In addition, prosecutors reported on Wednesday that when McVeigh told his friend, Terry Nichols, that “something big is going to happen,” Nichols responded: “Are you going to rob a bank?” Officials also are probing other possible sources of funds.

It is not unusual for contemporary terrorists to finance their activities by robbing banks. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several radical leftist groups—such as the Symbionese Liberation Army, which kidnaped Patricia Hearst—pulled such holdups. Even before they began to explore a link to the Oklahoma City bombing, law enforcement officials feared that the pipe bomb robberies—in the words of one source—“heralded a new age of terrorism in the Midwest.”

Sgt. Mark Walker, chief of the robbery division in the Columbus, Ohio, Police Department, said he remembers thinking that the robbers who held up a bank there on Oct. 25, 1994, were “almost taunting” law enforcement officials by leaving behind a pipe bomb that was not wired to detonate.

“By purposely leaving it behind, they were showing us, ‘Look what we can do,’” Walker said. “It served no useful purpose in the robbery.”

Law enforcement officials refused to disclose how much money was stolen in the 13 robberies, but Sgt. Scott Wiegert of the West Des Moines (Iowa) Police Department has estimated that the robbers average about \$10,000 in each holdup.

Ever since the bombing, FBI officials have been puzzled by the question of how the suspected conspirators financed their activities. McVeigh was not employed but traveled extensively.

Without exception, police who investigated the bank robberies said that it is highly unusual for explosives to be used.

“It was real strange,” said Ed Bolt, spokesman for the FBI in Cincinnati. “In 16 years, I’ve never seen anything like this.”

The first robbery in the string occurred in January, 1994, in Ames, Iowa, and the last was staged in West Des Moines in March. The number of robbers involved ranged from one to three.

Although the robbers used guns in the holdups, police said, they usually left a pipe bomb behind as they departed, apparently to distract police and bank employees. In some cases, the robbers told bank employees that they would detonate the bomb by remote control if police were summoned during their getaway.

The bombs were left behind in a variety of different containers, including a briefcase, a lunch bucket and an Easter basket. In addition, the robbers used a variety of items to simulate a detonating device, including a baby monitor, a toy cellular telephone, a radio antenna and a telephone pager.

Police and FBI officials called to the scene of these robberies usually detonated the pipe bombs as a precaution, even though they did not appear capable of exploding on their own. Several banks sustained damage in the process.

Likewise, whenever the robbers abandoned their getaway car after these holdups, police usually found a hand grenade in the glove compartment that was rigged to appear as if it were ready to explode. By the time of the last robbery, police in West Des Moines knew to look for the grenade, which they found wedged between the seats.

The bomb-toting robbers also wore various disguises, including a Santa Claus suit in Ohio. But they seemed to prefer dressing up like construction workers with hard hats and aviator sunglasses. In some of the robberies, the robbers covered their faces with Ace bandages.

The robbers who hit the Boatmen’s Bank in Overland Park, Kan., Sept. 21 last year wore a camouflage material over their faces.

After the West Des Moines hold-up, police produced a composite drawing of the man who purchased the getaway car from RVR Car Co. for \$560.

The robberies under investigation occurred in Ames on Jan. 25, 1994; Davenport, Iowa, Feb. 15, 1994; Green Bay, Wis., March 11, 1994; Kansas City, Mo., May 14, 1994; Springdale, Ohio, June 8, 1994; Springfield, Mo., July 7, 1994; Omaha, Neb., Aug. 3, 1994; Overland Park, Sept. 21, 1994; Columbus, Ohio, Oct. 25, 1994; Des Moines, Nov. 11, 1994; Middleburg Heights, Ohio, Dec. 9, 1994; Maryland Heights, Mo., Dec. 27, 1994, and West Des Moines, March 29, 1995.

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