

Agents in Kansas Hunt for Bomb Factory As Sense of Frustration Begins to Build

By DAVID JOHNSTON

WASHINGTON, April 29— Federal investigators are combing central Kansas, hunting for a secret bomb factory, the place where they believe the Oklahoma City bombers mixed, assembled and loaded an estimated 20 barrels of "ANFO" explosives into the 24-foot, bright yellow Ryder rental truck used in the blast.

Finding the place where the bomb was built would yield fresh clues about who built it and when, and possibly about how many people were involved. So far, the search has proved fruitless. But as one law-enforcement agent said today, "They had to build it someplace, and somebody had to see a big yellow truck."

Agents also kept up the hunt for the man they call John Doe No. 2, the second suspect in the bombing, centering their efforts in the vicinity of Kingman, Ariz., where Timothy J. McVeigh, who has been arrested in the bombing, lived off and on over the last two years. He was most recently identified there by the manager of a motel, the Imperial, who said Mr. McVeigh rented a room from April 1 to April 12.

But as they pressed on, law-enforcement officials said a sense of frustration was beginning to build. And they re-examined earlier interviews and studied their composite drawing of the second suspect, wondering whether the sketch that has been circulated around the world missed some significant facial detail.

The search for the bomb factory is radiating from Junction City, Kan., the Army town near Fort Riley, where Mr. McVeigh was stationed until his discharge in December 1991. Witnesses have said he rented the truck in Junction City, 270 miles north of Oklahoma City, on April 17. This meant that the bombers had a single day to pack the vehicle with nearly 5,000 pounds of ANFO explosives -- the letters stand for ammonium nitrate and fuel oil -- and rig it with a detonating cord and safety fuse before driving it to Oklahoma City. The bomb went off at 9:02 A.M. on April 19.

The facts investigators have pieced together so far suggest that the bomb was built near Junction City: Witnesses have placed Mr. McVeigh and possibly the second suspect and others at the Dreamland Hotel in Junction City for several days until the predawn hours of April 18.

At first, investigators speculated that a storage shed near Herington, Kan., 25 miles south of Junction City, could have been the site because it was rented by Terry Nichols, a friend from Mr. McVeigh's Army days who has been charged along with his brother, James Nichols, in an unrelated bomb-building conspiracy in Michigan.

Terry Nichols, who lives in Herington, has told the authorities that he was with Mr. McVeigh in the days before the blast, and that Mr. McVeigh told him "something big" was about to happen, but he said he had no idea that Mr. McVeigh was referring to the impending bombing. Mr. McVeigh also told him to clean out the storage shed if Mr. Nichols did not hear from him for several days.

Blue plastic barrels were found on Terry Nichols's property in Herington, but it is not clear that they match blue plastic fragments found at the blast site. Some witnesses saw a truck at the shed, and investigators have found truck tracks there. But law-enforcement officials said the area surrounding the shed appeared so clean that they doubted that a bomb weighing nearly 5,000 pounds could have been hurriedly made there without leaving some trace.

And investigators still do not know where the ammonium nitrate fertilizer or the fuel oil for the bomb were purchased, finding hundreds of businesses that supply such farm materials. Moreover, they are unsure when the chemicals were purchased, theorizing that the bombers might have bought them weeks in advance, in small quantities over a period of time to avoid notice.

In addition to the interviews in Kansas, crime scene investigators are combing the blast wreckage to find clues to explain the truck's travels since Mr. McVeigh rented it under an assumed name.

One priority is to find the truck's odometer, which would tell investigators how far the vehicle traveled before it was parked in front of the Federal Building -- a possible clue to how far away the the bomb was built. But most of the pieces of the truck are in fist-sized pieces or smaller.

Interviews by agents in Junction City have provided tantalizing clues about the truck and the people who rented it. One man intensively questioned by the F.B.I. is David King, who has been living in the Dreamland Motel for the last two months. He has told the Federal agents who have been swarming through the town for the last week that he saw the truck on April 17 -- and that a trailer was attached to it.

Inside the trailer was something large wrapped in dingy white canvas, he said. "It was a squarish shape, and it came to a point on top," Mr. King said in an interview. "It was about three or four feet high."

Mr. King said that later that day the trailer was gone, but the truck was still in the motel parking lot. He said that at about 3:30 A.M. on April 18, the day before the bombing, he saw Mr. McVeigh

sitting in the passenger seat of the truck looking at a map. Mr. King said that when he left the motel just before dawn Mr. McVeigh was still there, but that he was gone when he returned at about 7 or 8 A.M.

Mr. King's recollection appears to be consistent with statements made to the F.B.I. by Terry Nichols. Federal prosecutors said at a hearing on Thursday that Mr. Nichols told investigators that he met Mr. McVeigh in Junction City at about 7:30 A.M. on April 18, that Mr. McVeigh borrowed Mr. Nichols's pickup truck for a few hours and that the two men had then gone to the storage shed in Herington.

Mr. King also recalled that someone resembling John Doe No. 2 was staying in Room 23 of the Dreamland Motel. Mr. McVeigh was staying in Room 25. The motel manager, who could not be reached for comment today, has reportedly told investigators that no one was registered in Room 23. But Mr. King, whose room was next door, said he heard the television going just after midnight on April 18 and that he saw Mr. McVeigh and another man who resembled Mr. Nichols hanging around the room and getting sodas from the machine.

Based on Mr. King's statements, about six investigators with silver-colored attache cases descended on Room 23 late Thursday, Mr. King said. He said the investigators spent about five hours in the room.

Elsewhere in Junction City, investigators appear to be casting a wide net and retracing their steps as new information develops.

They have been showing residents here pictures of Mr. McVeigh and Terry Nichols, along with the composite sketch of John Doe No. 2. They have also been showing photographs of two other men, according to several people who have been interviewed. One is of a man in his 40's with long, scraggly, dark brown hair. The other is a formal military photograph taken during basic training. The photograph looks old and the young man in it is wearing an Army dress cap and has a chubby face, those interviewed said.

F.B.I. and military intelligence agents have not told the people they interviewed who the two men in the photographs are or why they are interested in them.

The F.B.I. has picked up the gray 1983 Pontiac station wagon that Mr. McVeigh

traded in five days before the bombing, said Don Hencke, who works for the Junction City junk yard that ended up with the car.

Mr. McVeigh traded the Pontiac and \$250 to buy the 1977 Mercury he was driving at the time of his arrest. Ron Kramer, assistant manager of a Junction city tire store, said that Mr. McVeigh, an occasional customer, had seen the Mercury parked in a lot nearby and offered to buy it from its owner, Tom Manning, the tire store manager.

In a sign of the level of detail of the search, the F.B.I has even taken from the Junction City

Municipal Court a speeding ticket Mr. McVeigh received on Feb. 22, 1990, which has his signature on it, court clerks said. Mr. McVeigh was stopped for going 33 miles per hour in a 20 mile-per- hour zone. The day after he was stopped, he pleaded no contest and paid a \$46 fine.

The F.B.I. has also twice interviewed Justin Barwick, the disk jockey for a dance club and bar called Club Alibi, who said he had seen Mr. McVeigh and a man resembling Mr. Nichols three to five times in the last six weeks. On one occasion, he said, they were with three other men. On one visit, Mr. McVeigh, dressed all in black, requested the song "Head Like a Hole," by the group Nine Inch Nails. The lyrics include these lines: "I'd rather die than give you control. Bow down before the one you serve. You're going to get what you deserve. You know who you are."