

Oklahoma City Tragedy/Base camp/McVeigh Made Contacts From Motel in Days Before the Blast

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JUNCTION CITY, Kan. -- They were hardly the faces of terror. More accurately, according to those who saw them, they were the faces of middle America.

The three polite, well-groomed strangers wandered in and out of convenience stores, gas stations and bars in this small Army town, impressing few people as being anything other than typical.

But within a week, two of them were suspects in the deadliest terrorist attack in U.S. history -- the bombing of the A.P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City -- and the other was charged with conspiring to manufacture bombs.

Residents of Junction City and nearby Herington saw Timothy James McVeigh, Terry Lynn Nichols and a man identified by the FBI only as "John Doe No. 2" frequently, albeit briefly, in the week before the bombing. When sketches of the suspected bombers began popping up around town and droves of federal agents fanned out across Geary County, residents began wondering if they had missed something about the mysterious strangers.

McVeigh, in particular, impressed the woman from whom he rented a motel room as "kind of like a salesperson."

"He was very nice and friendly to me," said Lea McGown, the owner and manager of the Dreamland Motel in nearby Grandview Plaza, where McVeigh spent four nights just before the bombing. "That's one thing most people don't want to understand."

McVeigh haggled McGown down from \$24 per night to \$20, and paid cash up front. McGown put him in Room 25 -- "The Soldier's Room."

Because the room is more easily cleaned than others, McGown said, motel employees traditionally assign it to soldiers or others they believe may be messy. Although McVeigh was well-groomed, McGown said, she gave him the room because he was driving a rusted and beat-up yellow Mercury.

Her fears were unfounded, though. McGown said McVeigh was tidy and nondescript.

"There was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing unusual at all," McGown said. "He'd go in his room. I never had anything to do with him. He was one of the quiet clients."

But according to the FBI, Tim McVeigh was anything but nice and friendly. Investigators say that, at the same time he was impressing McGown with his politeness, McVeigh was scheming to launch an attack against the federal government he despised. Instead of destroying the American government, the bomb-laden Ryder truck blew apart Americans, including more than a dozen children.

McGown, whose motel lobby is decorated with a woven American flag sporting the words "God Bless America," said she tries not to think about the possibility she may have been speaking with McVeigh at the very time he plotted the bombing.

"That's something you can't think about," she said. "If you think about stuff like that, you'll be scared for the rest of your life."

But others in Junction City and Herington can think of little else these days. While some are planning for this weekend's bowling tournament at the 24-lane Big Bowl on Washington Street in Junction City, which had motels sold out this weekend, others wonder how one, two or three of their own could have been responsible for such a heinous crime.

Thirty miles south of Junction City, in Herington, Kan., neighbors and business people said they knew little about Nichols, who bought a small home on Second Street in late February.

A clerk at the nearby Cardie's Corner Quick Shop, who asked not to be identified, said Nichols sometimes stopped by in the afternoon for gasoline or coffee, but spoke very little.

"We really don't know anything about him. If we did, we'd tell you. He really didn't have any friends."

The connections between McVeigh, Nichols and possibly John Doe go back to Fort Benning, Ga., in May 1988. Coincidentally, McVeigh and Nichols joined the Army on the same day, May 24, 1988, and became friends during basic training in Georgia. Both ended up at Fort Riley in Kansas where the friendship continued.

Nichols, 40, of Decker, Mich., left the Army on a hardship discharge on May 15, 1989, less than a year after he entered. McVeigh, a Pendleton, N.Y., native who won a Bronze Star during service in the Persian Gulf War, left active duty on Dec. 31, 1991, and joined the New York National Guard the next day, according to Army records.

Nichols and McVeigh stayed in touch through the following years, according to FBI affidavits which place both at the 500-acre Decker, Mich., farm of Nichols' older brother, 41-year-old James Nichols, in 1992 and 1994.

Although neither of the Nichols brothers is charged in the Oklahoma City bombing, they are charged with conspiring with McVeigh to manufacture bombs. Both are being held without bond as material witnesses in the case against McVeigh.

Terry Nichols and McVeigh wandered through the early 1990s. McVeigh lived in New York, Arizona, Michigan and Kansas; Nichols spent time in Michigan, Nevada and the Philippines before returning to Kansas in 1994.

He worked for six months or so at the nearby Donahue Ranch before buying the home on Second Street in Herington in late February.

It was at Nichols' Herington home that witnesses first reported seeing McVeigh and a man resembling John Doe No. 2 about April 12, but the men spurred no suspicions.

"They look like rural America," Herington Police Chief Dale Kuhn told reporters. "They fit right in with the rest of us."

Federal agents later reported finding 33 firearms, blasting caps and an anti-tank weapon in the basement of Nichols' home. The FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms also is investigating the theft of 199 sticks of dynamite and nearly 600 blasting caps from a quarry near the Donahue Ranch, where Nichols worked until October 1994.

Marion County Sheriff Ed Davies said the theft from a Martin Marietta Aggregates quarry locker was discovered Oct. 3.

"We're looking at it, being related to explosives," Davies said of a possible connection with Nichols. "It's a lead, and it's a natural direction to look at."

Two days after the initial Kansas sightings at Nichols' home, McVeigh had checked into the Dreamland Motel, ordering Moo Goo Gai Pan from a local Chinese take-out restaurant the next day.

Other motel patrons say they were unaware of McVeigh's comings and goings, but according to the FBI, he continued to travel. At 3 p.m. April 16, McVeigh called Nichols at home and asked him to come get him in Oklahoma City. Nichols left later that day, and the two men arrived back in Junction City about 1:30 a.m. on April 17.

Later that day, two men identified as McVeigh and John Doe No. 2 walked into Elliott's Body Shop in western Junction City and rented a Ryder truck. The man signing the rental agreement identified himself as Bob Kling of Redfield, S.D., and said they were going to Omaha. The FBI later identified the men as McVeigh and Doe.

McGown, the motel owner, said she could not remember which day McVeigh brought the Ryder truck back to the Dreamland Motel, but she remembers that she didn't like having it parked under a streetlight at the edge of the parking lot, because it blocked other motel patrons. She asked her son to have McVeigh move the truck, which he did without argument.

"He did what he was told," she said.

At the crack of dawn, Tuesday, April 18, McVeigh again called Nichols. The two met at 7:30 a.m., when McVeigh borrowed Nichols' pickup. By checkout time at 11 a.m., McGown said, McVeigh was gone, as was the Mercury and the Ryder truck.

Just before noon, McVeigh and a man believed to be Doe walked into Gracie & Co., a hair-styling salon a few miles from the motel.

They wanted haircuts but were told the salon was booked.

The two "acted a little disappointed, and then they walked out," she said.

The next time McVeigh was seen publicly was the next day, outside the A.P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City 24 minutes before the explosion. The last witness reported seeing him there as late as 8:55 a.m., only minutes before the massive explosion

Caption:

Mug: 1. Timothy James McVeigh (p. 22); Drawing: 2. John Doe No. 2 (p. 22); Photos: 3. Lea McGown, owner of the Dreamland Motel near Junction City, Kan., stands outside the motel as she talks about suspect, who stayed at Dreamland from April 14 to April 17 (p. 22); 4. This is a copy of the registration card that suspect filled out for his stay at the Dreamland Motel (p. 2

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