

Oklahoma City Tragedy/Bread crumbs/Thin Trail of Clues Led Police to Truck Rental Site, Suspects

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When federal investigators launched their mission to determine who blew up the A.P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, they began looking for truck parts.

They would have loved for someone to step forward and confess or for a witness to identify a suspect. But they knew there was a better chance of finding an axle or bumper or license plate.

If they could find a truck part amid almost unimaginable destruction and if it was marked with a vehicle identification number (VIN), that might be the end of a piece of string that would lead them to the "perps" -- cop talk for perpetrators.

The feds knew the perps might be of any political stripe -- left, right, foreign or domestic.

"The premise was it could have been anything from a nut that had a Social Security problem to AWOL military personnel that had a complaint with the recruiting office," said a Justice Department official, who requested anonymity, in explaining how the task force approached the case.

But first they had to find a truck part.

The bomb that destroyed the Murrah Building may have been hidden inside a car and it may forever be called a car bomb. But the agents knew that a crater so deep and a blast wave so strong more likely were caused by more explosives than could have been concealed in the back seat or trunk of the average sedan.

A Ryder rental truck with a 20-foot cargo box, for example, can hold 1,250 cubic feet or 7,000 pounds of material.

When a homemade bomb composed of fertilizer and fuel oil explodes inside the cargo box of a truck, the vehicle disintegrates, but it does not vaporize.

Axles are among the biggest parts likely to survive. The federal experts found one truck axle the afternoon of the blast.

And, it had a VIN.

A bumper and a license plate were found and added to the valuable junk pile.

What the Justice Department official called "good, old-fashioned police work" had given the government's most advanced criminal investigators their piece of string. They began following to see where it would lead.

Over the next 10 days, a nation's revulsion and fear began to be transformed into relief and amazement as a speed-of-light investigation produced identifications, arrests, charges, evidence and a possible motive for the worst act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history.

Almost sooner than could have been anticipated, the FBI tracked the truck to a Ryder rental dealer in Junction City, Kan. Employees there provided descriptions of two men who rented the truck two days before the April 19 explosion.

One renter had given a false name. The other had not offered identification. Thus, the FBI did not know the true names of the suspects, but the agency had composite sketches of John Doe No. 1 and John Doe No. 2 and circulated them nationally.

From the truck rental shop, agents carried the sketches to restaurants and motels around Junction City.

When agents stopped at the Dreamland Motel and showed the John Doe sketches, a clerk recognized No. 1 as resembling a man who had stayed there from April 14 to April 18, the day before the blast.

The registration record identified him as Tim McVeigh. Although his car license plate was from Arizona, he listed a small Michigan town called Decker as his home.

The agents suddenly had two names for the same John Doe sketch. For all they knew, motel patron "McVeigh" was as fictitious as the "Bob Kling" who rented the truck.

Meantime, calls were flooding into a toll-free FBI hot line. One caller who claimed to recognize John Doe No. 1 told the FBI on Friday, April 21 that the man was Timothy McVeigh.

The caller, a former co-worker whose identity has not been disclosed, told the FBI that McVeigh had "extreme right-wing views, was a military veteran and was particularly agitated about the conduct of the federal government at Waco in 1993," according to Justice Department documents.

An FBI raid intended to end a standoff with Branch Davidians at the cult's compound near Waco was staged on April 19, 1993. It ended disastrously. The religious cult's home was consumed by flames. At least 76 people inside died.

The government blames self-styled messiah David Koresh for starting the fire. His surviving followers and sympathizers blame the government. The FBI began to surmise McVeigh might be a Branch Davidian sympathizer.

Whoever rented the Ryder truck had used a counterfeit driver's license. Because the date of issue of the license could have been faked as easily as the rest of the information, it normally would have been meaningless.

But the date on this license did not escape the FBI's attention.

This counterfeiter and possible bomber dated his false license April 19, 1993.

Nationally, the FBI scoured every available databank to try to determine where McVeigh might be.

Ironically, McVeigh had been in jail in Perry, Okla., 66 miles north of Oklahoma City, since 10:20 a.m. Wednesday -- 78 minutes after the blast, according to Noble County Undersheriff Raymond Henry.

State trooper Charlie Hanger had stopped McVeigh's car on Interstate 35 north of Perry because it did not have a license plate. McVeigh was arrested rather than ticketed because the trooper realized the bulge in McVeigh's clothing was a handgun.

Even more ironic, the Noble County sheriff's office failed to make the connection between McVeigh and the sketch of John Doe No. 1 despite what now seem to be clear similarities.

Well into Friday morning, the FBI still was keeping McVeigh's identity to itself. Local law enforcement agencies around the nation, including the sheriff's department in Perry, were looking for a nameless face in a composite sketch.

If there is a defining moment in a major criminal investigation in which investigators shout "Bingo!" it may have occurred when the FBI's continuous computer search revealed that an Oklahoma law enforcement agency had run a routine check to see if McVeigh had any outstanding warrants.

Reports that the Noble County sheriff's department ran such a check or entered McVeigh's arrest into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) were erroneous, Henry and Sheriff Jerry Cook said late last week.

The routine check was run by Hanger, the arresting state trooper.

"I know he ran him (McVeigh) through NCIC ... from his car on Wednesday morning," Sheriff Cook said a week later. "I'm sure he did that."

Hanger's accessing of the NCIC left the lightest of footprints. In the FBI's computer search for McVeigh, there was only an indication that someone else had been looking for the same name.

"The computer system is nationwide and you can check what terminal that (Hanger's inquiry) came out of," Cook said.

Hanger's computer is attached to the regional office of the Oklahoma Highway Patrol in Pawnee. Cook believes, but the Highway Patrol and FBI refuse to confirm, that the Pawnee office was contacted by federal agents in Oklahoma City.

Knowing where Hanger was assigned, Pawnee dispatchers would have referred the call to Noble County.

"The first call we got was from the ATF command post in Oklahoma City," Cook said. "That agent I was talking to, I'll remember it from now on. I'm talking to him, I don't know what's going on. He asked me if we had Timothy McVeigh in jail. I checked and said we did.

"Immediately he said, 'Yes! Yes!' I thought, 'What's they deal?' I hear him tell somebody in the background 'They've got him in Perry,' and then he told me (that McVeigh was a bombing suspect) and that got me excited and surprised."

Suddenly, federal investigators knew where their prime suspect was, but they did not even know why he was being held.

The discovery that McVeigh had been arrested about an hour after the blast and about 88 miles north of Oklahoma City (and about 23 miles north of Perry) while carrying a concealed weapon was the clincher.

And it was still Friday morning, barely 48 hours after the bombing.

"I think everything turned out great," Cook said after having a week to reflect on the whirlwind events.

U.S. marshals rushed to Perry and took custody of McVeigh.

Overall, "it was a quick response to the situation," a Justice Department official said with considerable understatement.

More than a week after the blast, FBI spokesmen in Washington and Oklahoma said the agency was too busy chasing leads and other possible suspects to celebrate the early accomplishments in the case.

But a federal magistrate who presided over a hearing for McVeigh on Thursday acknowledged the "indelible trail of evidence which begins at Junction City and ends at the front steps of the Murrah Building.