

KANSAS BOMB CONNECTIONS

In the back of Lea McGown's scrapbook is a copy of Timothy McVeigh's motel bill for \$88.95.

It's handwritten.

It gets your attention.

McVeigh, a New York native, was one of two people charged in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, which killed 168 people. The other suspect was Herington resident Terry Nichols, whose roots are in Michigan.

Although the exact trail to the disaster is unknown, McVeigh and Nichols left numerous footprints in Kansas.

A couple of those footprints were in McGown's Dreamland Motel outside Junction City.

Now, 53 days later, the members of the media have gone. Their signatures and business cards are just mementos in McGown's scrapbook.

Last week, McGown and some other folks in places like Council Grove, Herington, and Chase County looked back on a sad time in history that involved them.

"McVeigh was well-spoken and looked OK, but his car was not great looking."

The Dreamland Motel is just off Interstate 70. McVeigh arrived at the one-story motel in a 1970s-model Mercury bearing Arizona tags. He rented a room there April 14, Good Friday.

"I think I can tell more about a person by the way they take care of their car than by the way they look," McGown said. "I let him bargain me down from \$25 to \$20 a night. I could tell he was real pleased with himself."

Would she mind if I looked at room No. 25 and took a few pictures?

"I'll give you the same rate I gave McVeigh. That way you can stay as long as you like and take your time with your pictures."

With tax that's \$20.23.

Eric McGown pokes his head around the corner. He turned 14 on the day McVeigh checked into Dreamland.

"I hope you're not going to write a lot of bad things about Junction City like some of the other news people have. My high school science teacher showed us some clippings that said people in Junction City were either military, farmers or militants."

Lea McGown's scrapbook is loaded with business cards and signatures from employees of "A Current Affair," "NBC Dateline," CNN, Newsweek, New York Daily News, Sacramento Bee, People Magazine, Denver Post, Philadelphia Inquirer, ABC News, "American Journal," BBC, and on and on.

"I wish I'd thought of getting business cards and signatures sooner," she said, "but the press was coming in too fast."

Room 25 is next to the office. It's like any generic motel room that's handy to an interstate, except this one is clean as a whistle.

Nice room.

McGown dismisses the comment with a wave of her hand

"It's not. I have much better rooms, but this is what you get for \$20. I have regular customers, like a bank examiner from Topeka. We have much better rooms here."

Council Grove, with a population of about 2,500, is about 35 miles South of Junction City. It's on the historic Santa Fe Trail. It claims to have the oldest restaurant west of the Mississippi, Hays House.

It's also the home of Boots U-Store-It, a self-storage facility on the north end of town.

Boots U-Store-It is run by Boots Hagen, a good-natured entrepreneur who collects old Packards.

"The man who rented number 40 said his name was Joe Kyle. He rented it in October. It goes for \$30 a month. He came back in February and rented number 37 from my secretary, Sherry Furman. Her memory is better than mine. She was able to describe him and his truck to the FBI."

Boots believes that the man who rented his storage units was really Terry Nichols.

"The FBI went all over these bins checking for fingerprints, and I don't know what all they checked for," Boots recalled.

Did they find anything?

Boots' smile grows into a loud laugh.

"What do you think? That's their padlock on there, and they're paying the rent for 'em. Cash."

Herington is 24 miles south of Junction City and 24 miles west of Council Grove.

Last September, a man was arrested in Herington for shooting at a woman during a domestic quarrel. The bullet grazed her cheek. It wasn't pretty, but she recovered. That was the first act of violence on record in the last 22 years.

Dale Kuhn recalled that statistic. He's the head of Herington's police and fire departments. Four years ago he retired as a battalion chief from the Wichita Fire Department.

Kuhn is the person who greeted Terry Nichols inside the Herington Police Department when Nichols turned himself in.

That was April 21.

"We knew he was coming in, and I stood right here in the entrance by the snack machines. I said, 'Can I help you?' and he said, 'My name is Terry Nichols. I've heard my name on the radio and seen it on TV, and I'm concerned about why it was there.'"

What was going through Kuhn's mind when a man suspected of blowing up a federal building was standing in his lobby?

"I was thinking, 'I don't want to muff up this case.' I wanted to make sure he was given his Constitutional rights. I had to remember that I had to presume this man was innocent."

Kuhn said they went into the interrogation room, did a body search and waited. The FBI arrived about 20 minutes

later and took over the investigation.

"We got 180 phone calls in 45 minutes, mostly from the press. From 3 to 11 p.m., we got over 600 calls. That night the parking lot outside our office looked like daylight with all of the TV lights. I went outside to read a prepared statement, and I was so wedged in by people and cameras and microphones that I couldn't have fallen down if I'd wanted to."

Kuhn had some nice things to say about the the FBI.

"They were all nice. They didn't treat us like country bumpkins. I think some friendships got established. I wouldn't be surprised if some of them came back to do a little fishin' and huntin'."

On the other side of Herington, at Main and Broadway, is the real estate office of Georgia Rucker. She sold Terry Nichols his house at 109 S. Second St.

The attractive mother of two is sitting in her front office talking about the day Nichols turned himself in.

"I couldn't even walk down the street without people trying to stop me. I hid out at my brother-in-law's house. A reporter from the Washington Post had a description of my car and came up and knocked on the door. He asked my sister if I was Georgia Rucker, and my sister just pointed to me."

"When I went to my office to face the music, this room was filled with people and cameras. One man with a TV crew pulled me into that room over there, closed the door and started asking me all sorts of questions. When he didn't get the answers he wanted, he just hurried out the door. I was getting pulled and pushed all over the office."

Rucker said the press parade lasted two weeks.

"I developed laryngitis and couldn't talk for two days. Some reporters hung around Herington until I could talk. It was really strange."

Rucker felt she had been taken in by Nichols.

"He really had me fooled. He acted like he was going to live in that house for a long time. He checked out the roof and furnace and even wanted to buy the lot behind the house until we found it was on a floodplain. He had references."

"I believed him when he said he was retired military. We have a lot of them around here. He said he didn't pay taxes and always paid cash for everything. When I asked him for his Social Security number, he said he didn't have one. I asked him how that could be and he said he had only his military serial number. I didn't think that could be possible and told him he'd have to work that out with the bank."

In the gray dusk, Kansas Highway 150 runs west out of Marion, looking like a long, rolling ribbon headed for infinity. It stretches for 17 miles with nothing even resembling a curve. It travels through some of the greenest grazing land the Flint Hills has to offer. Reality and bottom land return about a mile short of Elmdale.

Jim Donahue runs cattle on part of that grazing land. He and his son Tim cultivate some of it to feed their cattle in winter. They have hired hands to help with the operation.

Nichols worked for Jim Donahue for about six months.

Tim Donahue has stopped his John Deere to clean some mud off the planter he's pulling. The rain has set the planting operation behind. He's having a chat with his dad.

"I think this is the latest we've ever planted this 40 acres. It's been wet," the elder Donahue says.

He points at the planter.

"Terry Nichols fixed one of these that had broken down when he worked here. He darned near did it by himself. I thought he was above average when it came to workin' with machines.

"I thought it was a little strange that someone from Michigan was lookin' for work in the middle of Kansas, but he said he'd had a fallin' out with his brother, and he'd been stationed over at Junction City when he was in the Army."

With his head bowed, Jim Donahue crosses the field to his Dodge pickup.

"I guess Terry didn't like taxes, mainly."