

Search for Mystery Accomplice Shows Plight of Bomb Inquiry

After Almost Two Months, Many Questions Remain

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On the day before the Oklahoma City bombing, an unidentified man with long, dark hair paid a lunchtime check for himself and the two men charged in the explosion, Timothy James McVeigh and Terry Lynn Nichols, according to a worker at the lunch shop.

This worker and one of her co-workers identified both McVeigh and Nichols to the FBI, but said the unknown man, who paid with a \$50 bill, did not look like any drawing or photograph shown to them.

The three men seemed to be together, conversing with one another, at a Subway Sandwich Shop in Junction City, Kan., on April 18, according to the accounts given by the two workers. The long-haired man is the first person to come publicly to light who was seen with both McVeigh and Nichols in the days before the bombing.

The episode underscores the unanswered questions that still confront the FBI almost two months into an investigation unmatched in recent history for its size and scope. The man once known on wanted posters as McVeigh's swarthy, tattooed confederate, "John Doe No. 2," has faded into obscurity, replaced by one or more men for whom there are no reliable sketches.

Law enforcement officials also are considering the possibility that there is no other accomplice waiting to be identified, despite what witnesses told investigators at the start of the inquiry.

"We have some confusion here," said one official who described the situation as perplexing. Said another: "We might have spent two months looking for the wrong guy."

The lunchroom encounter also could pose problems for Nichols's alibi for April 18. His lawyer has indicated Nichols was at an auction of military equipment at Fort Riley at the time the workers said they saw him at the sandwich shop about nine miles away. Investigators believe Nichols and McVeigh spent hours that morning at Geary State Fishing Lake mixing the ingredients for the 4,800-pound truck bomb that killed 168 people at the federal building in Oklahoma City April 19. The investigators emphasize Nichols didn't sign in at the auction until after noon.

Nichols claims, through his lawyer, that he lent McVeigh his pickup truck at 7:30 that morning and that McVeigh dropped him off at the auction. Nichols has said he browsed around, "eventually signed in as a bidder" and got the truck back from McVeigh sometime after 1 p.m.

He made no mention of meeting McVeigh at the sandwich shop on South Washington Street or of a long-haired benefactor who picked up the check.

One of the workers there, Joanne Van Buren, said yesterday that she first noticed McVeigh and the unidentified man sitting at separate tables, but conversing with one another, around 12:30 p.m. "But that doesn't mean they were together," she said. "They could have been talking about the weather for all I know."

Nichols entered about 10 to 20 minutes later and joined McVeigh and the other man, Van Buren said. The second worker, who identified herself only as Miriam, said she thought McVeigh and "the other guy" were in the shop by 11:30 a.m. and that Nichols came in somewhat later. She said the three men left separately.

Both she and Van Buren said they had seen McVeigh and Nichols, separately, as customers on prior occasions, but neither of them recognized the third man. They said his hair was longer than that of the John Doe No. 2 sketched by the FBI early in the investigation.

The sketch of John Doe No. 2 was based on descriptions furnished by the owner and two employees of a rental outlet where on April 17 McVeigh rented the Ryder truck used in the explosion; McVeigh was reportedly accompanied by another man, heavily tattooed with a tattoo on his left arm. After a massive manhunt, the FBI found a man strongly resembling John Doe No. 2, Army private Todd David Bunting. But the FBI says Bunting was at the rental outlet a day earlier, on April 16, and had no connection with the bombing.

The bureau still is trying to determine whether there was a second man, who may or may not look like the composite sketch, with McVeigh at the rental outlet.

There have been several other reports of a man or men who were either with McVeigh or Nichols in the days around the bombing and who did not look like the FBI's sketch of John Doe No. 2. A neighbor of Nichols, Marla Jarvis, said she saw Nichols and a man in a red baseball cap "working on the wooden screen door" of Nichols's house a few hours after the bombing.

Another witness, who delivered Chinese food to McVeigh's motel room in Junction City on April 15, said the man who answered the door was neither McVeigh nor John Doe No. 2. And two women said on a cable network broadcast this week that they had seen McVeigh in the days before the bombing with a man who does look like the drawing. Staff writer Walter Pincus contributed to this report.