

Arizona Town is Wary of FBI's Search for Clues in Oklahoma City Bombing

Dallas Morning News

July 14, 1995 | Stephen Power | Page: 32A | Section: NEWS

KINGMAN, Ariz. - When Valerie Hilton thinks about the FBI agents overrunning her town, she grins and points to the hottest-selling item in her store - a white cotton T-shirt with the words "I survived the FBI 1995."

When James Rosencrans thinks about the FBI, he bangs his fists against the NBA Jam video game at the local grocery.

"They're trying to get me," said Mr. Rosencrans, 29. "They say they don't want to see me indicted, but I don't trust them."

Somewhere between Mrs. Hilton's laughter and Mr. Rosencrans' fear lie the sentiments of most Kingman residents toward federal investigators.

In the last week, the FBI has renewed attention on the desert town as it probes the April 19 Oklahoma City bombing. Investigators are believed to be searching remote parts of the surrounding Mojave Desert for a buried duffel bag or large package that could hold important evidence related to the attack that killed 168 people.

The search reportedly began after a tip from Michael Fortier, a Kingman resident and ex-Army buddy of chief bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh.

People who know Mr. Fortier said they have no idea what the buried treasure could be. Many said they don't care. But for some, like Mr. Rosencrans, the FBI's intensifying search is yielding nothing but fear.

A former next-door neighbor of Mr. Fortier, Mr. Rosencrans worries that the FBI will eventually target him and other Kingman residents who have ties to Mr. Fortier.

Federal prosecutors subpoenaed Mr. Rosencrans to testify last week before a grand jury in Oklahoma City hearing evidence in the case. But Mr. Rosencrans' testimony lasted only five minutes; he said he refused to reveal the names of six people who may have bought guns from Mr. Fortier or Mr. McVeigh.

Mr. Fortier hosted Mr. McVeigh during his travels.

Despite his refusal to divulge names, Mr. Rosencrans said many of his old friends "treat me like I've got the plague."

"They know I'm in a whirlwind of trouble," Mr. Rosencrans said Wednesday, during an impromptu interview at a 24-hour grocery store. "They don't want to end up getting in trouble like I'm going to."

He even wonders whether the FBI had anything to do with the death last December of Duke, his pit bull.

Other ex-associates of Mr. Fortier worry about the scope of the FBI investigation.

A neighbor of Mr. Fortier who asked to remain unidentified said he knows several Kingman residents who may have information that could help federal investigators. Most bought or sold guns to Mr. Fortier and Mr. McVeigh on the local gun show circuit, he said. Others knew Mr. Fortier from childhood.

But the neighbor said the residents are afraid to step forward, fearing that they, like Mr. Rosencrans, might become linked to the bombing in people's minds.

"No one's going to say: 'Tim McVeigh, Mike Fortier? Oh yeah, I knew them,'" the man said. "That bomb killed little children, mothers and fathers. No one wants people to think they had something to do with that."

For years, people who moved to Kingman usually did so to escape the traffic and hassles of big city life. The town has only 13,000 residents.

Most say they like the town's warm weather. Others prefer the outdoors. Residents can hunt elk in the nearby Hualapai Mountains or go for walks in the scrub brush that stretches for miles.

Still other residents come to Kingman to get away from big government. Now they find big government is catching up with them - in the form of the FBI.

"Most people here would just like the investigation to conclude and the guilty persons to be prosecuted," said Kingman Vice Mayor Lester Byram. "We're no different than people in other parts of the country."

Across town, other residents - even those who don't know Mr. Fortier - said they worry about the FBI's investigation. But most don't fear the FBI would target them.

Mrs. Hilton, owner of Archie's Bunker, said customers are staying away from her military surplus store. Sales have fallen by about a third, she said, ever since FBI agents questioned her in May about a check for \$54.82 written to the store Dec. 12, 1994, by Mr. Fortier.

Mrs. Hilton, who sells everything from \$5.95 dummy grenades to \$17 Marine fighting knives, said she does not remember what Mr. Fortier bought.

"People don't want to come in here if they think the FBI is here," said Mrs. Hilton, 46. "They don't have any information to give, so they don't see why they should be answering questions."

For some residents, escaping the FBI seems impossible. Many complain about seeing agents driving slowly through their neighborhoods at all hours of the day.

At the Liberty Bell gas station next to Archie's Bunker, Vickie Alberts said she's noticed people she presumed to be FBI agents watching her customers from vans with tinted windows parked across the street.

She said her husband James was standing in line at the supermarket a few days ago when the man ahead of him dropped his wallet. A big, silver FBI badge fell out.

"I don't mind the FBI being here, I just want them to get their work done," said Mrs. Alberts, 52 who moved to Kingman last September from Colorado. "People who want to go out don't want to be bothered or videotaped."

Outside the FBI, no one in Kingman knows when the agents will leave. County and city law enforcement officials said the FBI is giving them little information. A man who answered the phone Thursday at the FBI's temporary headquarters in Kingman declined to answer questions.

Vice Mayor Byram said FBI officials told him the number of agents in town has dwindled from 100 in May to about two dozen this week. The agents work out of a temporary command post at Kingman's Arizona National Guard Armory.

On Thursday, about a dozen cars, most with tinted windows, were parked in front of the armory. Men wearing sunglasses and shoulder holsters streamed in and out of the building all day. An armed soldier in camouflage fatigues turned back reporters who tried to enter the building.

Earlier, spokesmen for the Mojave County Sheriff's Department and the Kingman Police Department said they had no idea agents were searching the desert.

"The FBI is not involving our department in their investigation," said Lt. Case Mullen, of the Kingman Police Department. "We don't mind that. Some people are just tired of the bad publicity. This is a good place to raise a family. Some of the people who are being reported about aren't exactly pillars of the community. But life goes on."

Caption: MAP(S): (DMN) FBI concentrates efforts.