

Bombing Recalls 1983 Plot - Earlier Plan also Targeted Oklahoma

Dallas Morning News

July 22, 1995 | Victoria Loe | Page: 1A | Section: NEWS

FORT SMITH, Ark. - An intricate web of parallels suggests that the Oklahoma City bombing suspects may have worked from a blueprint drawn more than a decade ago.

The links between the earlier bombing scheme and the April 19 blast are inconclusive. But they indicate how and why suspects Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols might have been drawn to replicate the 1983 plot.

Not only that; two weeks before the bombing, Mr. McVeigh

apparently tried to contact a close associate of the plotters.

Lawyers for Mr. McVeigh and Mr. Nichols, the only two people charged in the attack that killed 168 people, could not be reached for comment Friday.

A spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Oklahoma City said he did not know whether investigators were exploring possible connections between the 1983 and 1995 schemes.

"I can't tell you that it isn't being considered," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Steve Mullins.

The earlier plot, which also targeted Oklahoma City, was the work of two men, federal authorities alleged.

One was James D. Ellison, the leader of a paramilitary religious community in northern Arkansas who was sentenced to 20 years in prison on federal racketeering charges in 1985.

The other was Richard Wayne Snell, who was executed in Arkansas on the day of the Oklahoma City bombing. He was convicted of murdering a Texarkana pawnbroker whom he reportedly believed was Jewish.

A third man, closely linked to Mr. Ellison and Mr. Snell, was questioned by investigators in the Oklahoma bombing when they learned that Mr. McVeigh had placed a call to his isolated religious community. He is the Rev. Robert Millar, leader of Elohim City, home of a gun-toting sect on the Oklahoma-Arkansas border.

Mr. Ellison, who recently moved to Elohim City, declined to be interviewed. Mr. Millar said he did not want to discuss the McVeigh phone call.

Plot discovered

The earlier plot was revealed in 1988, when federal prosecutors in Fort Smith tried Mr. Snell and 13 other men - including leaders in the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan Nations and other racist groups - on charges that included attempting to subvert the U.S. government.

Mr. Ellison, already in prison on the racketeering charge, was the prosecution's star witness.

In February 1988, he testified that in late 1983, at Mr. Snell's request, he had accompanied Mr. Snell on visits to federal buildings in "Oklahoma City or Dallas" to assess what it would take to destroy them. He said he later drew up designs for rocket launchers to do the job.

Mr. Snell's widow, Mary, said recently that her husband did not participate in the scheme, which she said was all Mr. Ellison's idea.

"Ellison was the granddaddy of everything that went on," she said. "He was the mastermind."

In any case, the Associated Press account of Mr. Ellison's courtroom testimony, which was relayed to newspapers nationwide, detailed the attack plan, including the reference to Oklahoma City.

In December 1988, according to a confidential FBI informant in the Oklahoma City case, Terry Nichols' brother James told the informant that it was possible to build a bomb that would destroy a federal building.

According to the unnamed source, who was quoted in an affidavit the FBI filed May 3 in Detroit, James Nichols searched his tool shed and eventually located "a newspaper article containing a reference to the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City."

Although Fort Smith is more than 800 miles from the Nichols farm in Decker, Mich., the brothers, particularly James, have associated with people who might have taken a special interest in the 1988 trial.

Some of the defendants were charged with plotting to assassinate officials they blamed for the death of radical tax protester Gordon Kahl. Mr. Kahl belonged to the Posse Comitatus, whose members, including some Midwestern farmers, reject any government authority above the county level.

James and Terry Nichols have claimed that they are exempt from federal taxes, said that the U.S. currency is bogus and tried to renounce their U.S. citizenship - tactics common to the Posse Comitatus.

Although there is no evidence that they belonged to the Posse, the head of the Michigan Militia unit in their county, who calls himself a good friend of James Nichols, said his group includes former Posse Comitatus members.

Mr. McVeigh visited the Nichols farm several times beginning in 1992 or 1993, sometimes staying for months at a time. A neighbor, Phil Morawski, said Mr. McVeigh listened eagerly to complaints about the government's mistreatment of farmers.

Chilling book

Another apparent philosophical link between Mr. McVeigh and the Fort Smith defendants is *The Turner Diaries*, a fictional account of a racist, anti-Semitic uprising against the U.S. government.

Mr. Ellison told the Fort Smith jury that the men on trial there had used the novel as inspiration for a host of crimes, including counterfeiting, armored car robberies and the killing of Denver talk show host Alan Berg.

Mr. McVeigh has been described as an admirer of the novel, whose central events include the bombing of FBI headquarters. Several friends and acquaintances said he urged them to read *The Turner Diaries*, and one said Mr. McVeigh sold copies at gun shows.

In virtually all respects - the composition of the bomb, its size, how it was delivered, the time of day it exploded, the timing of the attack in relation to other events - the Oklahoma City blast was a carbon copy of the one described in the book.

Mr. McVeigh's wanderings also have taken him to Arkansas at least twice in recent years.

In March 1993, according to Hot Springs, Ark., gun collector Roger Moore, Mr. McVeigh visited him after traveling to Waco during the Branch Davidian siege.

On Oct. 12, 1993, Mr. McVeigh received a traffic ticket on a rural highway north of Fort Smith and about 10 miles from Elohim City, the religious sect run by Mr. Millar. The route, which is not a main thoroughfare, is one of two roads leading to the remote, self-contained community of about 100 people.

Mr. Millar has been associated with both Mr. Snell and Mr. Ellison for many years.

He brokered Mr. Ellison's surrender to federal officials after a four-day armed standoff in 1985. He served as Mr. Snell's religious adviser until Mr. Snell's execution.

Mr. Millar has denied having any contact with Mr. McVeigh. A phone call

But on April 5, immediately after Mr. McVeigh allegedly called to reserve the Ryder truck that officials believe was used in the bombing, he placed a phone call to Elohim City.

When the call came to light, Mr. Millar denied that it had taken place. He later said officials had convinced that him the call was made, but he maintained that no one in the community remembered talking to Mr. McVeigh.

Four days after the Oklahoma City bombing, Mr. Ellison completed his parole and moved to Elohim City, where he married a

granddaughter of Mr. Millar.

Mr. Snell - whose pending execution became a rallying point for some militia groups - lived just long enough to learn of the Oklahoma City bombing.

Prison guards who watched him in his final days said he told visitors there would be a bombing, although he did not say where or when. The guards did not record the comment in their detailed death-watch log.

Mrs. Snell said the one warning that guards did write down, that there would be "hell to pay," reflected Mr. Snell's belief in the imminent collapse of the U.S. economy.

"He was always saying things like that," she said.

The widow said her husband knew nothing of the impending Oklahoma City tragedy, which he would have deplored.

Guards who kept the death-watch log wrote that Mr. Snell watched the news accounts of the blast "smiling and chuckling.