

The Sister's Story: A special report For Figure in Oklahoma Inquiry, Ties of Blood and Something More

By JOSEPH B. TREASTER

At Niagara County Community College, in the rolling farmlands of New York State near the Canadian border, Jennifer McVeigh was the kind of earnest, inquisitive student professors dream of having in their classrooms.

Engaging, loquacious and fun to pal around with, she seemed the very antithesis of her brother, Timothy J. McVeigh, the taciturn, solitary, gun-loving veteran of the Persian Gulf war, who is accused of playing a major role in the devastating bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

A slender woman with a friendly smile, Ms. McVeigh presided over a college club that raised money for needy families, wrote articles for the campus newspaper about preserving the environment, held part-time jobs and still managed to consistently make the dean's list.

"Most schools would be very proud to claim her," said Arthur Taylor, one of Ms. McVeigh's teachers at the community college in Sanborn, N.Y., where she received an associate degree with honors in liberal arts and science in May.

But there is another side of Jennifer McVeigh that closely parallels the personality of her brother and that has made her a central figure in the investigation into the April 19 bombing that killed 167 people and injured more than 400. Friends say brother and sister share an intense mutual admiration as well as deep concerns that the Federal Government has become an enemy of the American people.

Ms. McVeigh rarely spoke of politics with her friends. But in March she wrote a letter to the editor of her local newspaper in upstate New York, referring to the assault on the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Tex., and the killing of the wife of a white supremacist in Idaho, two incidents that her brother often railed against, as examples of Federal infringements on personal liberties.

Seeking to strengthen their case against Mr. McVeigh, Federal agents have repeatedly questioned his sister, who at 21 is six years his junior, and they have seized from her some of the same kinds of books, audio tapes and pamphlets that have been connected with Mr. McVeigh and that are popular with white supremacists and members of anti-government paramilitary groups.

Three years ago, Ms. McVeigh shipped to her brother 700 rounds of military ammunition -- the kind that can be used in a machine gun or an assault rifle -- when an upstate New York gun shop refused to do so. As an attempt to encourage her cooperation, agents have told her she may face Federal charges for the shipment, although the penalty would probably be nothing more than a suspended sentence.

In scores of letters and telephone calls, friends and investigators say, Mr. McVeigh coached his sister on his political philosophy and, only a few months before the explosion, friends say, she began to show signs of also embracing her brother's love of weapons. As a young teen-ager, one acquaintance said, she used to hate guns. But the acquaintance, John Donne, said that in April "she was talking about how she wanted to get a pistol."

Until recently, Federal investigators and friends say, Ms. McVeigh has been polite but limited in her responses to questions about her brother, apparently trying to protect him without bluntly defying investigators. But on Wednesday she testified before a grand jury in Oklahoma City.

The Daily Oklahoman reported yesterday that she had been granted immunity from prosecution and quoted her lawyer, Joel C. Daniels, as saying, "She was informed she is not a target; she is not a subject of this grand jury."

Mr. Daniels added, "Of course she is extremely relieved about that because now she knows for sure she will not be indicted."

Last night, there was no answer at Mr. Daniels' office and a family member said he was not at home.

Neither prosecutors nor Ms. McVeigh or Mr. Daniels would say what the woman told the grand jury. But witnesses outside the Federal courthouse said she spent several hours in the grand jury room and that when she abruptly swept out of the room at about noon she appeared to be in tears.

In Oklahoma City and at the modest ranch-style house that she shares with her father, William E. McVeigh, in the hamlet of Pendleton, N.Y., just outside Buffalo, Ms. McVeigh has shied from talking to reporters. But through Mr. Daniels she has insisted that she had nothing to do with the bombing.

Before her grand jury appearance, Mr. Daniels said Ms. McVeigh had been "cooperating extensively, very, very extensively" with investigators. But Federal officials said then that while she had met with them many times, she had not been very forthcoming. "I don't know if defiant is the right word," one official said. But, he said, her responses had been very limited. Questions Deepening Inquiry By Federal Agents

Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation first paid a call on Ms. McVeigh within hours of her brother's arrest on April 21, two days after the explosion. She was visiting a high school friend, Dennis Sadler, in Pensacola, Fla., staying in the house he shared with Mr. Donne and another roommate, David Huckaby. The agents' questioning began cordially, Mr. Huckaby said. But, he said, before long one of the agents threatened her, "If you don't help us we'll charge you, too."

Two days later, the agents returned with a warrant to search the room in which Ms. McVeigh had been staying as well as her teal and silver pickup truck. It was in that search, according to the agents' written report, that the authorities obtained the books, audio tapes and pamphlets. Her friends in the house said agents later showed them letters sent to her in New York from her brother.

The evening of the search, the agents began questioning Ms. McVeigh again, Mr. Huckaby said. Again, things seemed to start smoothly. But then, Mr. Huckaby said, he and his roommates, who were sitting across the room, heard her exclaim, "I'm not going to help you kill my brother."

Federal agents also searched the McVeigh home in upstate New York, but the authorities have been unwilling to say what they found. While in Pensacola, the young men in the house said, Ms. McVeigh burned some papers concerning her brother. "She did it out of panic," Mr. Sadler said. He would not say if he saw her burning the papers, but added, "It was nothing that would have been important anyway."

Though many of her friends describe her as a sweet, quiet person, Ms. McVeigh has also displayed a bold, adventurous streak that set her apart from most others on her campus and in the surrounding small towns where quiet and conformity are the norm.

She was daring enough, for example, that one of her part-time jobs was as a waitress at the Crazy Horse Saloon, a raunchy barn of a bar, not far from her father's house, that features a sweeter form of mud wrestling called Jell-O wrestling. Wearing short-shorts and cowboy boots, she served Budweisers and margaritas to a clientele of hard-drinking urban cowboys. But sometimes she would change into a leotard and biker shorts and, teaming up with another waitress, jump into an ankle-deep pit of Jell-O and try to pin a challenger recruited among the young men at the bar.

To fulfill her community college's requirement for a physical education class, Ms. McVeigh chose not volleyball or

bowling or swimming, but a self-defense course taught by a black belt in karate. "The course is a combination of martial arts techniques for personal survival," said Robert Heisner, her instructor. "She was not athletic or gifted, but she seemed to have a desire to learn."

"She seemed to have a lot of heart and she went for it. She did well."

When Federal agents began questioning Ms. McVeigh, relatives thought she should hire a lawyer, but she told them she was confident she could handle the situation on her own. Indeed, it was not until the F.B.I. advised her to get legal representation that she engaged Mr. Daniels, one of the mostly highly regarded criminal defense specialists in Buffalo

One of the pamphlets the agents picked up from Ms. McVeigh was titled, "You May Not Have a Country After 1995." One of the tapes was "Watch Out For Martial Law," by the Idaho singer and songwriter Carl Klang, whose music is popular among those who call themselves Christian Patriots.

Three copies of The Patriot Report, a national far-right newsletter, were found in the house where she was staying in Pensacola. George Eaton, the publisher, who lives in Muldrow, Okla., said Ms. McVeigh wrote to ask for a subscription several months ago.

Mr. Donne, the acquaintance of Ms. McVeigh in Pensacola, said that Mr. McVeigh had written a note in one of the pamphlets encouraging his sister to read certain passages.

But what she reads and what she thinks, Ms. McVeigh told The Buffalo News in one of her few substantial exchanges so far with a reporter, "are my personal business."

"They're trying to make me look like a bad person because of the things I read," she said. "They want somebody to blame this on."

She said she "had nothing to do with" the bombing.

Among the materials found in the searches, the authorities say, were more than two dozen letters from Ms. McVeigh's brother. Some of the letters, they say, suggest that Mr. McVeigh was plotting something. But, they say, he was not clear about his objectives.

In one letter, quoted in The Buffalo News and confirmed by investigators, Mr. McVeigh advised his sister: "Be careful on the phones, because the G-Men are watching. Use the pay phone." In another, cited in Newsweek, he instructed her not to write him after April 1, "even if it's an emergency.

"Watch what you say," the letter said, "because I may not get it in time, and the G-men might get it out of my box, incriminating you."

Last December, according to The Los Angeles Times and The Buffalo News, Ms. McVeigh told friends at a Christmas party that "something big is going to happen in March or April and Tim's involved." But she later denied ever saying that. [Travels A 'Free Spirit' Hits the Road](#)

Ms. McVeigh was always a "free spirit, uninhibited," said her aunt, Jean Zanghi, a retired nurse who lives in Rochester, N.Y.. "If Jennifer wanted to do something, she would do it."

At spring break this year, Ms. McVeigh set off alone in her pickup truck on a 1,100-mile road trip from Pendleton to Pensacola, smoking Marlboros and listening to country music. After spending a few days with Mr. Sadler and his roommates, she drove another 550 miles over to the east coast of Florida to visit her mother, Mildred Frazer, in Fort Pierce, and then went on to see her sister, Patricia, who is 29 years old and married, in Fort Lauderdale. Then she swung down to Key West before circling back to Pensacola, arriving on April 18, a day before the bombing.

"She loves her pickup," said one acquaintance.

Immediately after the explosion, she sat transfixed, like much of America, before a television set showing scenes of the wreckage and the rescue efforts.

"You couldn't peel her away" from the set, Mr. Donne said. He recalled that at one point she said, "Whoever did that should fry."

She was driving with Mr. Sadler when news came over the radio that her brother had been arrested as a suspect in the bombing. Mr. Huckaby remembers her saying later, "I can't believe I was saying the other day, 'Hang this person,' and it's my brother."

Ms. McVeigh's letter to the editor of The Union-Sun & Journal in Lockport, N.Y., published on March 9, was the first public sign that she shared her brother's political philosophy. In the letter, she compared proponents of gun control to Hitler and cited the incidents in Texas and Idaho as evidence of governmental abuse of authority. "If you don't think the Constitution is being perverted," she wrote, "I suggest you open your eyes and take a good look around."

Three years earlier, her brother had written to the same newspapers that crime was out of control and that America was in serious decline. "Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system?" he asked. *Beginnings Childhood Marked By Divorce*

Jennifer McVeigh was born in Lockport on March 5, 1974, the third child of William McVeigh and the former Mildred N. Hill. Mr. McVeigh worked as a machine operator at a General Motors auto parts plant in Lockport, a town of about 25,000 on the banks of the Erie Canal, a few miles from the family home in Pendleton. Mrs. McVeigh, who was known as Mickey, was a travel agent.

The Rev. Paul J. Belzer, the pastor of the Good Shepherd Roman Catholic Church in Pendleton, watched Jennifer growing up and taught her the fundamental beliefs of the church as she was preparing for First Communion. "She was a bright girl," he recalled, "full of energy."

In the early 1980's, after more than 15 years together, the McVeighs' marriage began to come apart.

"They broke up several times," said Father Belzer. "Mickey decided she didn't like it at home and would leave. After a while, she would come back."

But in 1984 she left and did not return. She took the girls with her and left their son, Tim, with her husband. Friends said they thought Mrs. McVeigh and the girls lived for a while in trailer parks in Lockport before buying a house in 1986.

William McVeigh, who friends picture as a gentle person of few words who liked bowling, golf and gardening and helped organize church picnics, had resisted the breakup. But he was not a demonstrative man and friends say he did not press his wife to remain.

"There didn't seem to be any shouting," Father Belzer said. "Whenever you're ready to come back, we're here, seems to have been Bill's attitude."

After Jennifer had finished the ninth grade at Emmet Belknap Middle School in Lockport, her mother decided to move to Pensacola, and the young woman studied at three high schools there. Two years earlier, Ms. McVeigh's sister, Patricia, who was then in her early 20s, had struck out on her own for Florida.

But Florida was not for Jennifer. After less than two years, she headed north to live with her father again and spent her last two years of high school at the Starpoint Central School in Pendleton, where her brother had studied before joining the Army four years earlier.

Tamah Alt, a counselor at the high school, remembers Ms. McVeigh as "a really nice girl, very bubbly." She took a bit heavier academic load than required, Ms. Alt said, and passed the state Regents examinations in English and social

studies. She was not in any school clubs, Ms. Alt said. But classmates said that as a junior she played on the girl's softball team.

Ms. McVeigh was not in the "preppie or cheerleader crowd," said Melissa Curtis, who graduated with her in 1992. But, Ms. Curtis said, "She had a lot of friends." Kaden Stellrecht, another classmate, who kept in touch with Ms. McVeigh until the bombing, said she "gets along with everyone."

If the breakup of the family had left any scars, they were not visible. "I didn't see any signs of any type of poor adjustment or any emotional problems," Ms. Alt said.

After high school, Ms. McVeigh did not go directly to college, but took a year off. "She was working three jobs," recalled her aunt, Mrs. Zanghi. "I don't know exactly where, at fast-food kind of places." Issues For 2 Siblings, A Turning Point

The origins of the political views of Ms. McVeigh and her brother are hazy. But some friends and relatives say they believe that the young woman was heavily influenced by her brother and that perhaps the Persian Gulf war was a turning point for him.

"When he came back, he seemed broken," said his aunt, Mrs. Zanghi. "When we talked about it, he said it was terrible there. He was on the front line and had seen death and caused death." She said that young Mr. McVeigh, a gunner on a Bradley fighting vehicle, spoke of killing Iraqis and had told her, "After the first time, it got easy."

In any case, Ms. McVeigh's philosophy seems to have developed in the three years since she left high school. Her inscription under her picture in the high school yearbook suggests a certain intensity. "Happiness," she wrote, "lies only within the heart of a true believer."

But in the section of the yearbook where she and her classmates wrote more extensively about themselves, Ms. McVeigh seemed very much the teen-ager. She listed her nicknames as "cat," "lady," "giggles," "sleepy," and "lp," and in one passage on her favorite things she wrote, ". . . getting down, sugar shack, dancing. . . & passing out, stayin' up all night, ac/dc, getting backstage meow! never say goodbye, buffalo bills, lights out, the ladies room. . . & the men's room meow? cowboy boots, steve, purr? dennys, playing, pool, alabama camping, snowballs -- gym class, do ya love me? let's rock roll! kitty kat!"

As for her future plans, she sounded a melancholy note: "Spend half my life in college, get rich, get old, buy a Craftmatic bed and die."

The summer of 1992, after her graduation, the authorities say, was when Ms. McVeigh shipped several boxes of military ammunition to her brother, who had just returned from the Gulf War. Her next published writing, articles on the environment in the Niagara County Community College weekly, *The Spirit*, in 1993, and her letter to the editor of the Lockport newspaper, suggested a much more serious young woman.

"Our individual efforts may seem small and limited," Ms. McVeigh wrote in one of her articles in *The Spirit*, "but combined they can create an enormous impact on the future of our earth."

Her writing to *The Union-Sun & Journal* in Lockport was prompted by a letter from another reader who favorably compared Danish socialism to American democracy and expressed concern at the rising influence of the Republican Party and the extreme right.

"I will admit there are many problems to America today," Ms. McVeigh wrote, "and maybe socialism does work, but it is certainly not the answer here in America."

"We need not change our form of government," she continued. "We need only return to practicing the form of government originally set forth by our founding fathers."

If Ms. McVeigh's unhappiness with the Federal Government was growing, it did not seem to be an obsession, and it did not seem to dampen her sunny disposition.

One of the exercises in Mr. Taylor's class in basic communications at the community college was a "self-disclosure" in which students were asked to give insights into themselves on everything from their most embarrassing moments to their political leanings.

"She never gave any indication of any hostility," said Maria DeFeo, another student in Mr. Taylor's class.

In her first year at the community college, Ms. McVeigh, who has told friends she wants to become an elementary school teacher, served as president of the Human Services Association, and won a student achievement award for raising money for poor families, according to Patricia Evans, the faculty adviser of the organization. "She was the organizer of the campaign," Ms. Evans said.

Before sending her letter to the newspaper, Ms. McVeigh showed it around her English class. "She was proud of the letter," said Mary Murray, another classmate. "She has strong opinions and she was just saying her opinion. I didn't see anything bad about it. It was the only time we even remotely talked about the Government."

To Ms. McVeigh's classmates, her innocence is obvious. "If she had had any indication that anything was going to happen," said Ms. DeFeo, "She would never have allowed it."

Photos: Jennifer McVeigh (Associated Press) (pg. A1); Jennifer McVeigh often seemed the antithesis of her brother, Timothy J. McVeigh, who is accused of playing a major role in the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. But friends say both share an intense mutual admiration as well as a deep distrust of the Federal Government. Ms. McVeigh is shown leaving her home in Pendleton, N.Y., on April 26, a week after the blast. (Associated Press) (pg. A18)