

Ryder Truck, Trail of Food Take Bomb Inquiry Along Back Road

Reported Sightings of Suspects Studied Up and Down U.S. 77

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NEWKIRK, Okla. - They grabbed burritos at a convenience store here. They stopped for a beer at a Perry, Okla., steakhouse. They bought coffee at a Mulhall, Okla., quick mart.

Skirting the major thoroughfares, they meandered along a 270-mile stretch of back roads known as U.S. Highway 77 from central Kansas into central Oklahoma. Ultimately, witnesses conclude, the travelers reached the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, where they delivered what federal prosecutors say was a devastating anti-government message in the form of a 4,800-pound truck bomb.

The back roads between Junction City, Kan., and Oklahoma City have emerged as a key component in the circumstantial case that the government is amassing against the prime suspects in the case, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols.

Not only do witnesses along the route place Mr. McVeigh with a Ryder rental truck, they also reinforce eyewitness accounts that others, possibly including the elusive John Doe No. 2, were in his company before the April 19 attack that killed 169 and injured hundreds.

"It's an anchor on the circumstantial evidence you have," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Steve Mullins, a prosecution spokesman.

"And with all the witness sightings here {in Oklahoma City} and elsewhere, you have the possibility of other people involved, and that investigation is still going on," he said.

Just why Oklahoma City's federal building was targeted, and why the suspects might have taken a rented truck from Junction City to Oklahoma City via U.S. 77, remain a mystery.

But one thing now seems clear: If they had hoped to escape notice in rural, mid-America, it didn't work. According to witnesses, they stuck out because they were clearly outsiders.

In Newkirk, just south of the Kansas-Oklahoma line, there is often heavy truck traffic, possibly to avoid the scrutiny of state troopers and weigh stations along the Kansas Turnpike stretching from Kansas City to Wichita to the Sooner border.

Yet, the clerks on duty April 18 at the E-Z Mart on U.S. 77 remembered a Ryder truck, possibly accompanied by a pickup truck. They told authorities that the men stopped for gas and also bought burritos from the freezer section.

They also said that only one of the two men came inside the store. They said the customer entering the store had physical characteristics similar to Mr. Nichols'. His attorney, Michael Tigar, has said that Mr. Nichols was in Herington, Kan., about 150 miles away, on April 18 and 19 performing ordinary household tasks and running errands.

The other driver, who resembled Mr. McVeigh, remained outside with the truck, according to witnesses.

The E-Z Mart clerks could not be reached for comment, but Newkirk Police Chief Mike Landis confirmed the essence of their reports and noted that FBI and other federal agents had interviewed the workers. A former store employee also said authorities dusted the store for fingerprints.

Mr. McVeigh's attorney, Stephen Jones, declined to comment on the eyewitness reports because "I haven't gotten rat {expletive}" from the government in the discovery process. Federal prosecutors are supposed to divulge such witness statements so defense investigators can interview the witnesses themselves.

Previously, Mr. Jones has said that the defense probably will benefit from eyewitness accounts that Mr. McVeigh was not alone in Oklahoma City right before the bombing. At least one witness there helped authorities with a composite sketch of a stocky suspect known as John Doe No. 2. But such a suspect has not been apprehended, leading Mr. Jones to question whether the government has identified the mastermind of the bombing.

After leaving Newkirk about midafternoon on April 18, the men are believed to have driven south to Perry, the town where Mr. McVeigh was jailed 90 minutes after the bombing for carrying a concealed, .45-caliber Glock pistol. He initially was stopped for speeding and for driving a car without a license plate.

The day before the bombing, according to witnesses, Mr. McVeigh and a stocky companion stopped at Perry's Cattle Baron's Steakhouse, Restaurant and Club, where they had a beer.

The establishment's owners, Terry and Judi Leonard, had been out catering an event and arrived at the restaurant between 7 and 7:30 p.m. They said they noticed a yellow Ryder truck in the parking lot. Mrs. Leonard said she wondered aloud to her husband about who might be moving.

Inside, she said, she noticed two strangers sitting at a table near the door to the bar area. She said she didn't pay close attention to them, but one of her

customers called the FBI after Mr. McVeigh's arrest to report that he was one of them.

That customer, who could not be reached for comment, told Mrs. Leonard that he "bumped into" Mr. McVeigh in the hallway between the dining hall and front door.

Another of Mrs. Leonard's friends also was in the club that evening. She said she probably would not have noticed the men except that, as she and her husband entered, she noted that at first glance one of the two closely resembled her nephew.

"I glanced at the guy to see if it were my nephew, but it wasn't my nephew," said the woman, who asked not to be identified.

She described the man as about 6 feet tall and about 260 pounds. She said he was "bulky, not fat" and had "curly, brownish hair." But she said she couldn't say for certain that he was similar to the composite sketch of the square-jawed, stocky John Doe No. 2.

According to Mrs. Leonard, the FBI interviewed all the customers and employees in the club area that evening. None was called to testify before the federal grand jury that indicted Mr. McVeigh and Mr. Nichols in August, Mrs. Leonard said.

The assistant U.S. attorney, Mr. Mullins, said he was not aware whether any of the Cattle Baron's witnesses were called to testify before the indicting panel. But he said he "would doubt if any of those fact-intense witnesses" were called, because prosecutors typically seek to summarize evidence rather than parade in a long list of witnesses.

Mr. Mullins also declined to specify what federal agents had learned about where the bombing suspects had spent the night before the bombing.

Several Perry residents said the talk around town was that the men stayed at a motel along Interstate 35. But the motel's general manager, Melinda Strutton, said she pored over registration cards from that night and found none with Mr. McVeigh's name or the names of aliases he is alleged to have used. The clerk on duty that night, who identified herself only as Peggy, also said she did not recall anyone resembling Mr. McVeigh staying there.

Early the next morning, however, the men reportedly stopped for coffee at Jackie's Farmers Store in Mulhall. A store employee on duty one recent morning declined to be interviewed. The store's owner, in a subsequent telephone interview, said later that she was uncertain whether federal agents ever verified Mr. McVeigh's presence in her market that morning. She said she was not on duty at the time.

Other witnesses said the Mulhall postmaster, Mary Hunnicutt, also was in the store and stood next to Mr. McVeigh. Ms. Hunnicutt said she had been advised by the FBI not to discuss what she had seen, because she might be subpoenaed to testify at trial.

She did say that she had not been called to appear before the grand jury that charged Mr. McVeigh and Mr. Nichols.

Mr. Mullins said it is too early to tell what role, if any, the eyewitness accounts along U.S. 77 will play in the bombing trial, scheduled to begin May 17 in Lawton, Okla. Mr. McVeigh and Mr. Nichols could face the death penalty if convicted.

"I just don't know which form it will take," he said. "I don't know how we're going to tell the story."

But he said the accounts bolster circumstantial evidence in the case, potentially reducing the number of "plausible scenarios" that could be offered by the defense as alibis.

Caption: CHART(S):/MAP(S): (DMN) Clues Along U.S. Highway 77.