

## **2 Ryder Trucks Were Used in Oklahoma City Bombing**

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By J.D. Cash with Jeff Holladay

It has been more than a year since the small Kansas communities of Junction City and Herington were thrust into the spotlight in the wake of the April 19, 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City.

Following the arrests of bombing suspects Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, both were inundated by hoards of media.

That's because, the government alleges, the flint hills of central Kansas served as the launching pad for a carefully crafted conspiracy to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

Answers on "who" and "why" remain as elusive as the infamous "John Doe No. 2" mystery that originated there, even as the focus of the case has shifted elsewhere. Yet what has happened in these communities serves as an analogue and a microcosm of widespread conviction that the government's case is, at best, selective — and, at worst, a cover-up.

The unconditional faith that these American heartland folks once had in their government is now shaken by a growing skepticism and downright cynicism. At issue here in this core of the nation's heartland — the symbol of unalloyed patriotic fervor and solid, church-going values — is the government's inability to provide credible answers and to make arrests of those they believe conspired with Nichols and McVeigh.

### **A 2nd Ryder Truck**

"This is a farm community," said Barbara Whittenberg, "and we don't miss much of what folks are up to." Whittenberg, who is the owner-operator of Herington's Santa Fe Trail diner and motel, apparently doesn't miss much, either.

"Terry (Nichols) lived just a block from here, and he and McVeigh would come in from time to time. I served breakfast to McVeigh and Nichols and another person...the Saturday before the bombing." While they were eating, she said, a Ryder rental truck was parked outside. "But now we know it wasn't the one that was used in downtown Oklahoma City," she said. "And we all know there are other people involved in this thing, but the FBI acts like they don't believe any of us!" With a feigned conspiratorial air, she adds, "or maybe they do know everything and (officials) aren't going to do anything about it."

Among many of the locals who vividly recall activities of McVeigh and Nichols in the days before the bombing, there is a certitude that the defendants had, for a time, a second Ryder truck.

But FBI agents evince no interest, they say.

The problem the government has with the reports is this:

They would indicate the use of a second Ryder truck. And that, in turn\* could raise questions about whether, as some local residents believe, McVeigh might have been a "fall guy" for other conspirators in the other track.

Here's why: The rear axle segment recovered only hours after the bombing was traced to Elliott's Body Shop in Junction City. It belonged to a 1993 Ford truck chassis.

Computer records and eyewitness testimony of Elliott's employees clearly indicate that a person fitting the description of McVeigh rented that vehicle at 4:22 p.m. Monday, April 17, 1995.

The upshot: Any witness recollections of McVeigh, Nichols and other persons associated with a Ryder truck prior to Monday afternoon differ with what the federal grand jury was told when the two suspects were indicted last Aug. 10. "If there is one thing certain in all this, there was a second Ryder truck, asserts Stephen Jones, McVeigh's defense attorney.

"And the men who built the bomb did so on the 10th, 11th and 12th of April...days before my client came to Junction City."

Parroting this theory is Michael Tigar, who represents Terry Nichols, McVeigh's co-defendant.

Here's what he told the Nichols family last year after the arraignment:

"The bomb that blew up the federal building was built by other people several days before McVeigh 'showed up'...and the government's case will suffer when that comes out."

### The Government's Case

Terry Nichols had only recently purchased a home in Herington\* Kan., when Timothy McVeigh arrived from Kingman, Ariz., on Friday, April 14. The government contends the pair set about putting the final touches to their plan to blow up the Oklahoma City federal building during the next few days. Federal authorities say McVeigh called Elliott's Body Shop on that same Friday and reserved a 20-foot Ryder truck. On the following day, Saturday, April 15, 1995, McVeigh went to Elliott's to put a deposit down on the truck, the government says. Then, on Monday afternoon, April 17, Elliott's employees said a man fitting the description of Timothy McVeigh — but using the alias "Bob Kling" — paid for and left with a 1993 Ryder rental truck.

On both that Saturday and Monday, employees of the rental establishment maintain that McVeigh was accompanied by the mysterious subject of a nationwide manhunt — "John Doe No. 2."

The government still contends that it wasn't until Tuesday morning, April 18, 1995, that McVeigh and Nichols took the truck to Geary Fishing Lake, south of Junction City.

While there, federal authorities contend, they mixed a fertilizer and fuel oil bomb. Moreover, prosecutors told the federal grand jury, it was this very same truck that was used to carry the bomb from Kansas to Oklahoma City, where it was subsequently detonated by Tim McVeigh in front of the federal building at 9:02 a.m., April 19, 1995.

But was it? Or was there another truck involved? And was that other truck involved in the bombing? Eyewitness accounts from Kansas raise questions about the government's assertions.

### Different Trucks?

April 9, 1995, was James Sargent's last day in the military at Fort Riley, so the Herington resident decided to begin his retirement with some fishing. Arriving Monday morning, April 10 — two days before McVeigh leaves Kingman, Ariz., to drive to Kansas — Sargent clearly recalls seeing a yellow Ryder truck parked at Geary State Fishing Lake.

And off and on during that day, he recalled several men working in the cargo area of the truck. Parked near the rental truck was a rust-colored pickup truck and a white sedan., he said.

The next morning, the rental truck was still there, he said.

"I really began to wonder why someone would be wasting their money on a rental truck out there at a lake," especially since no one was fishing, he said.

Sargent was perplexed and curious. "I could never see what was going on because they had the truck backed down to the edge of the water, and so no one could see inside the cargo area unless they were in a boat."

And Sargent was fishing from the bank of a lake, he said.

Extending the time the truck was seen at the lake is a neighbor of Sargent's from Herington, who by coincidence had sold Terry Nichols and his wife, Marife, their house only a few weeks earlier.

Georgia Rucker drives each school day along Highway 77 to Junction City to take her son to a parochial school. Some 17 miles north of Herington, she and her son pass within 150 yards of the eastern shore of Geary Lake.

On the mornings of April 13 and April 14, 1995, the Herington real estate broker and her son noted the odd sight of a bright yellow moving van parked near the shore of the lake, "During that time of year, there isn't any foliage yet, and that truck really stood out," Rucker said. "My son and I kept joking about why people would be paying rent on a moving van while it just sat out there." "There were some other vehicles there," she added, "but I don't remember what kind."

Not until Tuesday did she drive the route again because the parochial school was out on Monday, April 17, 1995. On Tuesday, she again saw a yellow truck at the lake in the very same place. But what she and her son didn't realize until later was that it was a wholly different truck they'd seen the previous week.

It was the Ryder truck the Ruckers had seen that day which would be delivered to Oklahoma City.

#### Motel's Famous Guest

The Dreamland Motel in Junction City, Kan., is where Tim McVeigh would spend his last few days of freedom — and where witnesses would place him with a car and a Ryder rental truck that would later be linked with the Oklahoma City bombing by federal authorities.

"When he checked in (Friday, April 14, 1995), he was driving a yellow Mercury sedan," recalls owner-manager Lea McGown, who operates the '60's era roadside motel which parallels the main highway into Junction City.

"The car was trashy looking, but Mr. McVeigh was neat and seemed pleasant." The next day, McGown recalled that America's most notorious criminal defendant wheeled into her parking lot with a large moving van.

"Mr. McVeigh parked outside my office window and came inside," she said. "He asked if he could park the truck in front of his room...I told him no, he should park it under our sign — so others could get through the lot easier."

She described the yellow truck as the next-to-the-largest size that Ryder rents but said it was "an older model — maybe 8 to 12 years old."

The following day, on Easter Sunday (April 16, 1995), McVeigh pulled into the lot again at mid-afternoon.

Mrs. McGown and her son related some odd behavior they'd seen with McVeigh related to the rental truck. "For several minutes one day, McVeigh was outside my window — working with the latch on the cargo door of the older truck. Eric came in laughing and said, "Watch him, mother; he keeps wrestling with that latch — trying to get it to lock...AU he has to do is raise the door up and then slam it."

But McVeigh never raised the sliding cargo door. He was apparently concerned other guests in the parking lot might see inside the truck's cargo bed.

#### New Truck Arrives

But on Monday evening, April 18, 1995, McVeigh arrived at the motel in a different Ryder rental truck, the motel owner said.

It was smaller and newer, said McGown, who has been interviewed several times by the FBI and whose identification of a drawing of "John Doe No. 2" led federal officials to the Perry, Okla., jail where McVeigh was being held on unrelated traffic and firearms charges. "I never said anything about it to him, but I wondered what was wrong with the old one?" Mrs. McGown said.

The following morning, McGown said around 5 a.m., "I heard doors slamming and when I looked outside around 6, the truck was gone.

"I never saw Mr. McVeigh again until he was shown on television after his arrest."

#### Near Nichols' Home

There was one final sighting of a yellow Ryder rental truck in Herington — and it was just one block from the house of Terry Nichols.

Returning from a sales meeting in Manhattan, Kan., Carol (name protected by request) saw a Ryder truck in the parking lot of a diner in Herington just after midnight on April 19, 1995 — the day of the Oklahoma City bombing.

#### Coincidence?

"I saw a large Ryder truck and creamcolored, large mid-80's sedan sitting in the parking lot of the Santa Fe Trail's diner. At the time, I thought the owner of the restaurant's sister had just come to town." She explained Barbara Whittenberg's sister was moving to the town and was expected at any time.

Was this the "second" mysterious Ryder truck that witnesses associated with the cream-colored sedan at Geary Lake a week earlier?

Or was it the truck McVeigh is alleged to have used in the actual bombing? Meanwhile, in Perry,.,

About 7:30 p.m. the day before the bombing in Oklahoma City, patrons of the Cattle Baron's Restaurant near Perry recall two strangers sitting in the rear wing sipping beer and eating steaks.

Co-owner Judy Leonard, who said some customers had been interviewed by the FBI, offered this information:

"I saw the men —they were young. One had short, light brown hair, like McVeigh. The other..! don't remember as well as some of the customers do." But some customers "say it was McVeigh for sure and the John Doe No. 2 fellow," she said.

"One thing for sure: While the two were here that Tuesday evening, outside was a Ryder truck matching the description of the one used in the bombing," Leonard added.

### Bomb Material Transfer

Many witnesses interviewed in Junction City and Herington are today certain that on Tuesday, April 18, 1995 — the day before the Oklahoma City bombing — Timothy McVeigh and other conspirators transferred the barrels from the older Ryder truck to the truck McVeigh is believed to have rented Monday evening.

Theories abound as to why.

Some believe that the other members of the conspiracy wanted to tie McVeigh to the crime — making him the "fall guy."

Whatever the reason, residents interviewed all agree that the official line presented by the government is, among other things, incomplete — if, indeed, not misleading.

(Wednesday, investigative reporter J.D. Cash continues his interviews from Kansas, including possible links drawn between young people who were friend of Tim McVeigh and former Elohim City residents, including a man they knew as "Andy the German."

The story also details intriguing new evidence that Richard Snell, arrested at Broken Bow for the slaying of an Arkansas state trooper, may have known of the impending Oklahoma City bombing while he waited on death row in Arkansas for his own execution.)