

Former ATF Informant Ruffles Edges of Oklahoma Bombing Investigation

PAUL QUEARY | Associated Press | February 23rd, 1997

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) _ At a distant edge of the Oklahoma City bombing investigation stands Carol Howe _ former debutante, former racial supremacist, former federal informant.

What truth or clarity she may bring to accounts of the April 19, 1995, blast that killed 168 people is uncertain. She claims to be a white-separatist insider turned government informant, a good citizen who warned agents of a conspiracy to blow up federal buildings at least five months before the Oklahoma City disaster.

Federal officials won't go on the record about Ms. Howe. Privately they dismiss her as unstable, cut loose by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms for unreliability.

Her account of undercover life and allegations about bomb plots and scouting trips to the federal building months before the explosion was related to a free-lance writer whose article appeared Feb. 11 in the McCurtain Daily Gazette of Idabel, Okla.

In the article, she asserts she overheard Dennis Mahon, a white supremacist, and Andreas Strassmeir, a German national, plot bombings of federal buildings while meeting at Elohim City, an armed, white separatist enclave in far eastern Oklahoma.

She told free-lancer J.D. Cash she relayed those conversations to her ATF handler well before the bombing.

She further claims to have seen Timothy McVeigh, the prime suspect in the bombing, at Elohim City in December 1994.

This much is known to be true:

_ Ms. Howe lived at Elohim City for some months in 1994. She went there initially with Mahon, a prominent member of the White Aryan Resistance who romanced her after she wrote a letter to WAR in 1993. During this period, she appeared on German television with Mahon to advocate violence as a means to reach the goal of a racially pure, white society, at one point lifting a sleeve to show off a swastika tattoo on her upper arm.

_ The ATF recruited her in 1994 after she had a falling out with Mahon. She fed information to agent Angela Finley for several months before parting ways with the agency in early 1995.

_ She met with FBI agents on April 21, two days after the bombing, and recounted the purported conversation between Mahon and Strassmeir.

In the Gazette interview, Cash quotes Ms. Howe as telling him, ``Sometime in November there was a meeting, and Strassmeir and Mahon said it was time to quit talking and go to war. I reported all this to Angie," the ATF agent.

But federal officials debunk the idea she gave them advance warning of a bombing conspiracy. Neither Mahon nor Strassmeir has been implicated in the Oklahoma City bombing.

And Mahon denies ever having a conversation about bombs with Strassmeir. He dismisses Ms. Howe as an abuser of prescription painkillers and a compulsive liar.

Ms. Howe did not respond to Associated Press requests for interviews, which were relayed through her lawyer and her parents. Telephone calls to Ms. Finley at her Tulsa office went unreturned.

The Gazette, which has a daily circulation of 6,200, has published several stories by Cash that have aired assorted conspiracy theories about the Oklahoma City bombing. Although federal officials privately disparage the accounts, a gag order from U.S. District Judge Richard Matsch prevents them from commenting for the record.

Ms. Howe routinely passed polygraph tests on the truthfulness of her reports during her time as an informant, the Gazette reported.

Ms. Howe first caught the public eye in December after her boyfriend, James Viefhaus Jr., recorded an answering machine message at the Tulsa home they shared that threatened to bomb federal buildings in 15 cities. Viefhaus is jailed on a federal charge of making a false statement regarding a bomb threat. The house was also the headquarters of the National Socialist Alliance of Oklahoma, according to the FBI.

Because her name was mentioned in accounts of the Viefhaus arrest, her April 21, 1995, statement to FBI agents surfaced in documents provided the defense by prosecutors in the bombing case.

Then, last month, the Gazette reported Ms. Howe could place McVeigh and his friend, Michael Fortier, at Elohim City in late 1994.

McVeigh and Terry Nichols are the only two people charged in the bombing. McVeigh's trial on federal murder and conspiracy charges is set to begin March 31. Fortier, a longtime friend of McVeigh's, pleaded guilty to a firearms charge and is expected to testify for the prosecution.

McVeigh's lawyer, Stephen Jones, said none of the material he'd seen offers any evidence McVeigh ever visited Elohim City or met Ms. Howe.

``Clearly, she doesn't know Tim McVeigh," Jones told the AP.

Strassmeir, who has returned to Germany, and lawyers for McVeigh have said the two knew one another only from a brief encounter at a Tulsa gun show in 1993. Mahon says he had seen McVeigh at gun shows but never spoken to him.

``We have no reason to believe that anyone other than Nichols and McVeigh committed the bombing," Leesa Brown, a Justice Department spokeswoman, said recently.

Howe's emergence rekindled interest in Elohim City, which has figured prominently in conspiracy theories about the Oklahoma City attack because McVeigh received a traffic ticket nearby in 1993 and telephoned someone at the compound 12 days before the bombing.

Authorities, however, have not linked the bombing and the compound.

``Elohim City is not a current subject of interest" in the ongoing investigation, a law enforcement official in Washington said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

EDITOR'S NOTE _ Associated Press Writer Michael J. Sniffen in Washington contributed to this report.