

TIME

THE WHITE CITY ON A HILL

By James L. Graff

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Travel six miles up a dirt road in Oklahoma's Ozarks and you will reach a 400-acre, semi-religious encampment called Elohim City. There you will find a vine-covered structure roofed over with polyurethane foam, looking oddly like the cottage in the tale of Hansel and Gretel. This is the Worship House. Within it Elohim's spiritual father, Robert Millar, 71, preaches a mix of Christian Scripture and heterodox tales of Germanic, Celtic and Scandinavian tribes—the true Israelites who will provide God's terrible soldiers at Armageddon. Lately, though, the elfin, white-bearded patriarch of the Christian Identity compound has been making a big point of how Jesus ministered to outcasts. "My king ate with publicans and sinners and had a prostitute wash his feet," Millar told TIME last week as he sat in a black Lincoln Continental near Elohim City. The reason for these scriptural lessons may be that Millar has also been "fellowshipping," as he would put it, with disreputable characters, including an errant government informant who may become a wild card in the Oklahoma bombing case.

Millar was born in Canada and raised a Mennonite before "heeding a call" to the U.S. in the early 1950s. In 1973 he moved to the Ozarks with 17 followers, including his four sons, and founded his city, giving it the name Elohim, which means God in Hebrew. His religious retreat has its own liturgy, its own calendar (the year begins with the spring equinox) and its own clock (the day begins at noon). The city's guest list over the years has been a veritable Who's Who of the radical right. Tim McVeigh called Elohim two weeks before the Oklahoma bombing. Some reports link him to former Elohim resident Andreas Strassmeir, a mysterious German weapons buff with neo-Nazi ties. And up a wooded slope in the settlement, marked by a simple white cross, is the grave of Richard Wayne Snell, a fanatic who allegedly conspired to blow up the Oklahoma City federal building 12 years earlier. He was executed the night of April 19, 1995, about 12 hours after the explosion. Kevin McCarthy, who has admitted his role in the Aryan Republican Army's Midwest gang of bank robbers, stayed in Elohim several times, where he was visited by many of his coaccused.

One of the most tantalizing mysteries of Elohim City, however, is the controversial notion that a young visitor named Carol Howe heard advance word there about the Oklahoma City bombing and warned the Federal Government. Howe, a former honor student at Tulsa Metro Christian Academy, fell in with Tulsa's Skinhead set. Before long she found herself at the side of Dennis Mahon, leader of White Aryan Resistance and the purveyor of Tulsa's Dial-a-Racist phone

line. Mahon, 46, who until recently kept his Airstream trailer at Elohim, claims that his first contact with Howe was a letter she sent him in the spring of 1993.

"She wrote that she was 23, pure Aryan, considered beautiful and wanted to fight for her race and culture," says Mahon. "So, hey, I sent her some tapes." Mahon says he was soon sexually involved with Howe, and he started taking her out to Elohim City in early 1994. By the late summer, though, their relationship had soured, and Howe filed a restraining order accusing Mahon of threatening to "neutralize" her when she tried to leave the movement.

Howe has since secluded herself, reportedly at her grandfather's ranch near Austin, Texas (TIME'S repeated attempts to speak to her, relayed to her lawyer, have gone unanswered). But in the interim she became an informant for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and is the purported source of contentious variants in the story of the Oklahoma bombing. Last week the McCurtain Daily Gazette, an Oklahoma newspaper, published what it said was an interview with Howe by J.D. Cash, whose work has also appeared in the antigovernment press. In Cash's interview, Howe says she learned that Mahon and Strassmeir (whom she claimed she "kinda had a relationship with") were casing the Murrah Building and two other federal buildings. In Cash's account, Howe insisted she had reported this to the ATF.

Sources in the Federal Government admit that Howe was a paid ATF informant in Elohim City from August 1994 until March 1995, but they say her 38 surreptitious tapes contained no evidence of a bombing conspiracy in the works. Only when she was debriefed two days after the bombing, government sources say, did she claim that Mahon and Strassmeir had discussed bombing government buildings. Agents familiar with the interview considered her answer speculative; in any case, she offered no additional details.

Government sources say that Howe's tapes didn't even provide evidence for busting Strassmeir or Mahon on weapons charges. In autumn 1994, Howe invited Strassmeir and other Elohim residents to her apartment in Tulsa. She asked them to paint three unarmed grenades orange and green like Halloween pumpkins. They obliged. But when she asked them to help her arm the grenades, they refused, as Mahon says he later did too. "I knew she was bent," he says. "She was the one always talking about killing and bombing," in an attempt, he contends, to entrap others at the compound.

Howe's charges, if they are substantiated, may bolster McVeigh's defense. But it is unclear if his lawyer Stephen Jones will risk calling her to the stand. Her testimony could be effectively attacked by prosecutors, citing ATF records that show she was fired as an informant because of erratic behavior and unreliability. Still, Jones believes the government has proof that Strassmeir and Mahon were involved in a bombing plot and was "obligated" to disclose it. At any rate, in the

wake of recent reports about faulty FBI lab procedures, the government does not need Howe's tales to muddy the case.

In Elohim City "Grandpa" Millar deplores the entire episode, saying it is another opportunity for the media to besmirch Christian Identity. The settlement has been declared off limits to the press. But speaking from the front seat of the Lincoln parked in the rain-drenched gravel of a country-store parking lot near the settlement, Millar says he would welcome Howe back. "It was not unusual for unstable people to seek us out," he says. "The Church of Jesus Christ exists for such people." And so, apparently, does Elohim City. —

With reporting by Patrick E. Cole/Tulsa and Elaine Shannon/Washington