

IN SMALL-TOWN OKLAHOMA, A NERVE CENTER FOR THE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT \ IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE MUCH BUT ELOHIM CITY, AUTHORITIES SAY, IS A TRAINING CENTER FOR ZEALOTS

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You can't travel but a few miles in these Brushy Mountain foothills before running into some kind of house of God. Dozens of small churches dot the landscape between black-oak forests and farm fields freckled with huge round bales of hay.

But Elohim City, the armed, 1,000-acre, white-separatist compound founded 25 years ago by former Mennonite Robert Millar, is a place apart - invisible to the surrounding society, eight miles from the nearest paved road.

Out here, where upholstery is duct tape, and fine dining is 10 miles back at Sammy's Taco Ranch, the red-dirt road to Elohim City is lined with ``Keep Out'' signs. Kick up dust until it narrows to nothingness, and you've arrived.

It looks like a ramshackle trailer park, but federal authorities say the Christian Identity enclave of 80 to 90 zealots is a training center for white supremacists that has figured frequently in criminal investigations.

Elohim City received a brief phone call from Timothy McVeigh, the accused bomber of the Oklahoma City federal building, two weeks before the April 1995 explosion, according to phone records obtained by the FBI.

Millar, who has been interviewed by federal investigators, says authorities suspect that McVeigh, a gun enthusiast, may have been trying to contact Andreas Strassmeir, 37, a German-born weapons buff, who ran the compound's perimeter security. Strassmeir returned to Berlin several months after the bombing.

AT A GUN SHOW In a recent phone interview, Strassmeir said he had met McVeigh ``for a total of five minutes'' at a gun show and apparently gave McVeigh one of his business cards, with Elohim City's phone number on it. Strassmeir said he never had any other contact with McVeigh.

``There are probably hundreds and thousands of people who met Tim McVeigh,'' he said.

Elohim City was mentioned again last month in the indictment of four Pennsylvania men accused of plotting to rob 22 Midwestern banks. All four - Michael Brescia and Kevin McCarthy of Philadelphia, Scott Stedeford of

Ardmore, and Mark William Thomas of Berks County - spent time at the compound.

Interviewed last summer, Millar denied having any prior knowledge of the Oklahoma City bombing or the bank robberies.

``Here we are a little . . . rustic place, in the middle of nowhere, purposely in the middle of nowhere," said the 71-year-old patriarch of Elohim City, a community of 10 to 20 mobile homes and rough-hewn buildings made of fieldstone, wood and hardened urethane foam.

``I can see where this has developed. Law enforcement can look at Elohim City and say, `Strassmeir lived there and we're suspicious of him. Mike, Kevin, Scott lived there, and it's alleged they've been involved in bank robberies. Twenty two! What kind of a place is this?' "

OHIO GUNFIGHT Authorities were asking that question again on Feb. 15 after two brothers exchanged shots with Ohio Highway Patrol officers and escaped. Millar said the two men, whom police identified as Chevie O'Brien Kehoe, 24, and Cheyne C. Kehoe, 20, had spent time at Elohim City. NBC Nightly News, citing unidentified police sources, said at least one of the men got weapons training at the compound.

Interviewed last summer, Millar, dressed in a blue-and-white polo shirt, pale blue slacks and brown shoes, cut a gnomelike figure. He is 5-foot-6, slightly built, with thatchy white hair, bushy eyebrows and a broad white goatee.

Descended from Scots and Alsace-Laurentians, he was born in Canada in 1925. His knowledge of the Bible is mostly self-taught. He came to the United States in 1952 to lead a church near Oklahoma City. He moved to Ellicott City, Md., in the mid-1960s and back to Oklahoma in 1973. He and his wife, Elsie, have eight children and 36 grandchildren. Everyone at the compound calls him ``Grandpa."

The floor of the bubble-shaped chapel where Millar agreed to be interviewed was covered with blue shag carpeting. About 90 moviehouse chairs were anchored to the floor. The name of God - Elohim, in Hebrew - was written on a wall in ancient hieroglyphs. Three flags - the American, the Confederate, and the flag of the Church of Jesus Christ - sprouted from poles above the entrance. A cluster of flags representing the dozen or so households that make up the compound decorated a facing wall.

In the Christian Identity belief system he has adopted, Millar explained, the calendar begins with the spring equinox. The Sabbath day varies from year to year. On that day, each family brings its ornate flag to the center of the chapel and makes ``a presentation before the Lord, as well as a financial offering," Millar said.

On a wooded slope marked by a white cross is the grave of Richard Wayne Snell, a two-time murderer who was executed in Arkansas on April 19, 1995, hours before the Oklahoma City bombing. Snell's victims were a black state trooper and a white shopkeeper he suspected of being Jewish. Millar was Snell's spiritual adviser.

Adding a surreal touch is a 60-foot work boat parked outside the chapel on a rusted, broken-down trailer. High and dry, it looks like a wildly out-of-place Noah's Ark. Millar bought it 12 years ago in Baltimore and had it shipped here.

``You can travel all the way to New Orleans on the Salisaw River," he said by way of explanation.

At Elohim, survivalism rules.

``We have a high quality of life, but a low-cash-flow requirement," said Millar. ``When a man gets married, we cut down a tree, saw up some boards, so he doesn't spend 25 years paying off a mortgage. He builds the house. We help him."

The men and women of Elohim grow vegetables and hunt deer for meat. An artesian well provides drinking water. Members are self-employed, mostly in construction jobs. They live together, but not communally. People are responsible for putting groceries on their own tables. Children are home-schooled using Scripture and Psalms.

Millar finds support in the Bible for his philosophy of ethnic separatism: ``One of the great commandments is to honor your mother and father. So if a person is [black or Hispanic], why dishonor his own rich heritage and background. . . . Somebody said, 'You're not a racist, you're a purist.' I sort of liked that."