

Man's Search For 'Real Story' of Blast Grabs Headlines

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A week after the Oklahoma City bombing, a former banker/small-business owner/lawyer sauntered into the McCurtain Daily Gazette office in Idabel, Okla., and proposed a story.

J.D. Cash said he had information that federal authorities had been illegally storing explosives in the Murrah Federal Building, leading to a second - and possibly deadlier - blast April 19, 1995.

"I didn't know the guy from Adam, and I wasn't wild about carrying the story," recalled Bruce Willingham, editor and publisher of the 6,500 daily-circulation newspaper. "But then I got it confirmed from a reliable law enforcement source that explosives really had been carried out of the building after the bombing." Until recently few in the mainstream media paid much attention to Cash's stories. Now - thanks to The Dallas Morning News - Cash is the subject of national media attention because of his involvement in the so-called "McVeigh confession." "I just talked to 'Good Morning America'; I've got the Tulsa World wanting to write my life story; Time is working on something; The New Yorker is doing something; and so is George magazine," Cash said last week.

Cash's name surfaced after The Morning News reported Feb. 28 that it had obtained a defense document that said bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh admitted setting off the bomb in the daytime to ensure a higher "body count." McVeigh's lawyer, Stephen Jones, at first called the purported confession a hoax. Then Jones said it had been stolen by The Morning News.

On March 3, however, Jones said not only was it stolen, but it also was a phony document prepared by the defense to lure a potential witness into talking. That was the same thing the McCurtain newspaper said in a press release it issued - two days earlier.

Jones also said that the effort to interview the potential witness had been aided by two other persons, "one of whom is now deceased, and the other is an individual who writes frequently about the Oklahoma City bombing case." That individual was Cash.

Last Tuesday, Cash told reporters that Richard Reyna, a private investigator working for the McVeigh defense team, showed him the phony document more than a year ago and that "we laughed about it." And Cash denied that he or Reyna gave the material to the Dallas newspaper. Reyna could not be reached for comment.

All this has raised questions about Cash, his articles and his role in the bombing case. He's been suspected of being everything from a CIA agent to a neo-Nazi to a member of the McVeigh defense team - all of which he denies.

Getting the 'real story' Cash, 44, is an Oklahoma native whose father was a fighter pilot in World War II and whose mother once worked for a congressman from Oklahoma. He has an undergraduate degree in economics and a law degree from the University of Tulsa, but he never practiced law.

For several years Cash worked at a savings and loan near Tulsa.

He later did real-estate title searches for the federal government.

But he became disenchanted and moved to southeast Oklahoma in 1992 and built a log cabin in the mountains about 40 miles north of Idabel, the McCurtain County seat.

He was hunting, fishing and working on a novel about missing Nazi gold in the last weeks of World War II, he said, when the Oklahoma City bombing occurred.

Cash said he became interested in covering the story for a newspaper because a friend of his was killed in the blast and ``because the rest of the press was missing the real story. ``I knew from my own experiences that law enforcement maintained arsenal rooms in federal buildings and often kept raid explosives like hand grenades and C-4 explosives in those rooms," Cash said.

``I learned that people had witnessed agents removing explosives from the building." Cash went to the Gazette, and Willingham gave the information to another reporter to check out and then ran the story. Federal authorities acknowledged that a small amount of explosives had been stored in the Murrah building but denied that they contributed to the destruction.

For the last 22 months Cash has worked full time on the bombing investigation. His articles include a report that McVeigh made a phone call to a German national who lived at Elohim City, a white separatist compound in eastern Oklahoma, two weeks before the bombing.

Others reported that McVeigh's sister told authorities that her brother had asked her to launder money stolen in bank robberies. Cash also was the first to write about an Elohim City resident who he believed was the elusive John Doe No. 2 bombing suspect. The man tagged by Cash was indicted in January in a series of Midwest bank robberies allegedly committed by a band of white supremacists. The man federal authorities tagged as John Doe No. 2, a Fort Riley private, is no longer a suspect.

The government has denied most of Cash's allegations, particularly those about having prior knowledge of the bombing.

Another issue that has arisen is Cash's association with the McVeigh's defense team. Cash said he first contacted Stephen Jones shortly after the bombing to talk about a story he was working on.

``I called and told them about it, played them an interview tape, then developed a relationship with the defense," he said.

That's how he met Reyna.

``I introduced him to a whole lot of people in the (white supremacist) movement," Cash said. ``I traveled with Reyna extensively when he did some of the interviews. " Why does Cash enjoy such access to the defense?

``One of the reasons is that I've respected Jones' wishes," he said. ``Some of the things he wanted kept closed, I didn't write about them. I even did an off-the-record interview with McVeigh and never wrote about it.

``I think they've enjoyed some of the stuff I've written. ... But I don't think they're terribly thrilled at the witnesses we've found that put McVeigh at the crime scene. " Jones defends his working with Cash.

``It's true that J.D. on two occasions has assisted the defense," Jones said. ``J.D. has access and entree to a number of people that might best be described as being in this Aryan Nations, white supremacist/separatist movement. But we've never paid him, and we made it clear that he was not a defense investigator. " The ``McVeigh confession" is one of the occasions the defense worked with Cash, Jones said, ``and there was an earlier instance in which we wanted an entree into someone in the white supremacist movement, and he was successful in getting us an interview. " ``But we are not working hand in glove. " Far-flung ties Cash also has developed a close relationship with Glenn and Kathy Wilburn, an Oklahoma City couple whose two grandchildren, Chase and Colton Smith, were killed in the bombing.

``Now, we're good friends," he said. ``They bought me a cemetery plot with their family in Oklahoma City, near Chase and Colton's. " Glenn Wilburn said it didn't bother him that Cash had worked with the defense team of the man accused of killing his grandsons.

``We've never found any piece of information that's exculpatory to Tim McVeigh," Wilburn said. ``But it brings others into the picture, and that's what we want - the truth. If it takes working with the defense to do that, then so be it. " Leonard Zeskind, a Kansas City author who's writing a book about the white supremacist movement, said Cash's work was far from objective.

``Anybody that speaks from the same platform as Louis Beam and is welcomed as one of the family at a white supremacist meeting can't claim to be searching for the absolute truth in the Oklahoma City bombing," Zeskind said.

Beam is a key figure in the far right who has advocated violence against the government.

Cash acknowledged that he had written articles for Media Bypass, a publication that caters to right-wing groups, and Jubilee, a publication of the far-right Christian Identity movement.

He also says he spoke at Jubilation, a convention of right-wing extremists at South Lake Tahoe, Calif., last April.

``I spoke right after Louis Beam," Cash said.

Still, Cash doesn't believe he's done anything unethical.

``You've got to be willing to say, 'I don't care what people say about me. We're going to get to the bottom of this.' ""

Caption: Photo (color)