



The Shadow - Did He Ever Really Exist?

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The stripper sits in a dark booth in a Tulsa topless bar called Lady Godiva's. She sips a Coke and stares at a picture of Timothy McVeigh, the man accused of setting the bomb that killed 168 people in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995. She studies his face for a long moment.

"Yeah," she says, nodding. He's one of three guys who were in Lady Godiva's 11 days before the bombing.

She has long blond hair and she's wearing a light blue bikini and knee-high white go-go boots. She introduced herself as Cassie, but that's just her stage name. She won't reveal her real name. In her line of work, that can be dangerous. Cassie looks at another picture, this one an FBI sketch of John Doe Number 2, the bombing suspect who was never apprehended, who prosecutors now say was an Army private with no connection to the bombing.

"I recognize him," she says. "He's the one who was sitting in a back booth, talking with other girls."

She remembers the night of April 8, 1995, vividly, she says, because there was a wild screaming match between two strippers in the dressing room. That tiff was captured on a security videotape that was avidly replayed by Lady Godiva's owner, Floyd Ratcliff, who thought it was hilarious. After the bombing, Ratcliff saw that the video also showed one stripper telling the others about a customer who said he'd be famous after April 19. Ratcliff took the tape to the FBI. He also gave copies to the media. It's been shown on TV in at least two countries.

Cassie gets a signal. "I gotta dance," she says. She leaves the booth and climbs up on the stage. As the PA system plays a slow rock number, she steps out of her bikini and goes to work.

Outside, a TV crew from MSNBC is waiting to tape interviews with Cassie and other dancers who supposedly saw McVeigh with John Doe 2. This isn't the first TV crew to come to Lady Godiva's since that dressing room video surfaced. The Canadian Broadcasting Corp. was here a few months ago. So was the tabloid show "Extra!" Not to mention the print and radio reporters and, of course, the FBI agents.

Lady Godiva's has achieved a kind of cult fame: It's a must-see stop on the John Doe 2 mystery tour.

'With Others unknown'

He stares out from one of the most famous sketches of the decade, perhaps the century. His dark hair is swept straight back, his jaw is square, his lips are full, his gaze is intense. A T-shirt hangs from his thick, muscular neck.

The FBI released the sketch on April 20, 1995, the day after the bombing. It was accompanied by a description: John Doe 2 was a white male in his late twenties or early thirties, about 5 feet 9 or 10 inches tall, 175 to 180 pounds. He had a tattoo on his left biceps that "appeared to be a snake or a serpent." The feds put a price on his head: \$2 million.

On April 25, the FBI released a second sketch, which showed John Doe 2 wearing a baseball cap. Six days later, the bureau released a third, this one depicting him in profile.

The sketches were published in hundreds of newspapers, shown over and over on television. An FBI hot line received more than 10,000 calls from people who thought they might have information. More than 1,000 state and federal agents followed the leads. At least a dozen men who resembled the sketch were hauled into custody, several of them at gunpoint, at least one of them on live television. None proved to be the right person.

There was a huge buildup and then ... nothing. The most intensive manhunt in American history failed to find its man.

In August 1995, the federal grand jury investigating the bombing indicted McVeigh and his Army buddy Terry Lynn Nichols (who does not resemble John Doe 2) on murder charges. In a phrase that still resonates, the grand jury alleged that the two men had conspired "with others unknown."

Now, a week before McVeigh is scheduled to go on trial, the "others" remain unknown, if indeed they exist, haunting the proceedings like apparitions.

Early this month, the case against him was thrown into deeper confusion when the Dallas Morning News reported that it had obtained confidential defense notes indicating that McVeigh had admitted to the bombing, saying he'd acted alone and done it during daylight hours to ensure a high "body count." The defense countered by saying the "confession" was a fake designed to persuade a witness to talk to defense investigators. The entire case is like that: Each hard fact is surrounded by layers of theory, speculation or spin.

As events have played out, John Doe 2 has become a legend, a kind of Lee Harvey Oswald for the '90s -- the shadowy central figure in countless conspiracy theories that attempt to explain an incomprehensible horror. He has joined the ranks of people famous for disappearing mysteriously -- Ambrose Bierce, Amelia Earhart, Jimmy Hoffa -- and the ranks of creatures who are frequently sighted but never captured, like Sasquatch or the Loch Ness Monster.

There are lots of theories: John Doe 2 is an Iraqi terrorist. Or he's an American Nazi. Or a federal agent. Or a common criminal hired by McVeigh and Nichols to help with the scut work of mass terror. These theories have been popularized in right-wing newspapers and magazines, as well as in the video "Oklahoma City: What Really Happened?," which was produced by Oklahoma state Rep. Charles Key, and the book OKBomb! Conspiracy and Cover-Up, by Jim Keith, who is billed as the "author of Black Helicopters Over America."

But the most widely accepted alternative to the official theory was developed by a reporter for a tiny Oklahoma newspaper and carried to the wider world by an Alabama militia member who produces an online newsletter called the John Doe Times. In that theory, John Doe 2 is Michael William Brescia, a 24-year-old, part-time college student from Philadelphia who was recently indicted on conspiracy charges in connection with a white supremacist bank-robbery ring called the Aryan Republican Army. The mother of two boys killed in the Oklahoma City bombing has gone so far as to name Brescia as a defendant in a wrongful death suit. And mock wanted posters featuring the John Doe 2 sketch and Brescia's picture have been plastered near his Philadelphia home. Brescia declined to talk about the accusation, but his lawyer, Brian McMonagle, vigorously denied it: "He had nothing to do with that unspeakable tragedy." Federal prosecutors agreed, saying they have found no link between Brescia and the Oklahoma City case.

The feds have their own theory, which is also somewhat ambiguous. They do not deny the possibility that John Doe 2 exists, but since June 1995, they have contended that the man in the sketch is actually Todd David Bunting, an innocent soldier who happened to rent a truck the day after McVeigh allegedly rented the one used to deliver the bomb. This January, in a widely publicized move, the prosecutors reaffirmed the Bunting theory. But in a less-publicized aside, they also conceded that the three people who said McVeigh rented the truck still believe that somebody was with him. If it wasn't the man in the sketch, who was it? And what about all the people who say they saw John Doe 2 with McVeigh in Kansas and Oklahoma?

Those questions will almost certainly be raised during McVeigh's trial, which is scheduled to begin on March 31, because it is, of course, in the defense's interest to poke holes in the prosecution's version of the case.

"We will certainly contend," McVeigh's lawyer, Stephen Jones, said in a pretrial hearing, "that there is a John Doe 2 and maybe 3, 4 and 5 ..."

'John Doe Number 2 remains at large'

John Doe 2 was born in Junction City, Kan., early on the morning of April 20, 1995.

Less than 24 hours earlier -- at 9:02 on the morning of April 19 -- a truck bomb made of nearly 5,000 pounds of fertilizer and fuel oil exploded in front of the Alfred P. Murrah

Federal Building in Oklahoma City, ripping the front off it, scattering debris for blocks, killing 168 people and injuring more than 500.

Within hours, the FBI found one of the truck's axles, which bore a vehicle identification number, and quickly traced it to Elliott's Body Shop, a Ryder rental outlet in Junction City. The feds called Elliott's to say that agent Scott Crabtree was coming to interview the three workers who had witnessed the rental transaction -- owner Eldon Elliott and two employees, bookkeeper Vicki Beemer and mechanic Tom Kessinger.

Before Crabtree arrived late that afternoon, the three gathered to discuss what they remembered of the transaction, according to a brief filed by the prosecution. All three recalled the man who had rented the truck -- he used the name Robert Kling -- but only Kessinger remembered another man accompanying Kling. By 3 the next morning, an FBI artist was huddled with Kessinger in a room at nearby Fort Riley, producing sketches of the two suspects.

Later that morning, when the sketches were released to the public, Kling was identified as John Doe 1, the other man as John Doe 2. Meanwhile, FBI agents were swarming all over Oklahoma City and Junction City, showing the sketches to anyone they thought might have seen the suspects. At the Dreamland Motel in Junction City, owner Lea McGown identified John Doe 1 as Timothy McVeigh, who had stayed at the Dreamland from April 14 to April 18.

Immediately, the FBI started searching for McVeigh. They found him in a jail about 80 miles north of Oklahoma City. He'd been pulled over by a police officer 90 minutes after the bombing because his yellow Mercury Marquis had no rear license plate. The cop noticed that McVeigh was carrying a concealed pistol and arrested him.

McVeigh's driver's license listed an address in Decker, Mich., that turned out to be a farm owned by two brothers, James and Terry Nichols. The feds immediately grabbed James Nichols. A few hours later, after hearing his name on television, Terry Nichols turned himself in at a police station near his home in Herington, Kan., about 30 miles from Junction City. Both men were held as material witnesses, but only Terry Nichols was charged in the case. Neither man resembled John Doe 2.

At a news conference announcing the arrests, Attorney General Janet Reno reminded Americans that the case was not yet closed.

"John Doe Number 2 remains at large," she said. "He should be considered armed and dangerous."

'The sketch was bad'

The sheriff stopped Scott Sweely on Interstate 75 in Georgia and ordered him to crawl out through his car window and lie face down on the pavement.

Sweely's red BMW carried Oklahoma plates, and somebody who'd seen him at a gas station called the cops to say he looked like John Doe 2. Now, the sheriff handcuffed Sweely and hauled him back to the police station, where the FBI grilled him for nearly four hours before concluding that he was exactly what he claimed to be -- an innocent 32-year-old man who'd just left the Air Force and was moving to Florida.

Sweely was one of at least a dozen men picked up after the bombing because somebody thought they looked like John Doe 2. A Minnesota man was stopped at gunpoint on a freeway near the Mall of America. An FBI SWAT team roused a pair of drifters from their sleep in a cheap motel room in Missouri. An Australian tourist was seized at gunpoint in Ontario, Canada. An Army deserter with a vague resemblance to the mystery suspect was arrested in California, then fitted with a bulletproof vest and marched into a Los Angeles federal building through a crowd of angry people yelling, "You coward!" and, "I hope you die!"

Something wasn't working. The FBI had expected a lot of bad leads.

That's normal in high-publicity cases. But after a week of intense searching, the feds hadn't found the real John Doe 2. Maybe the sketch was faulty. Tom Kessinger, the mechanic who'd helped create the drawing, told the FBI he wasn't happy with it. The hair bothered him. The guy had been wearing a baseball cap, so Kessinger had never seen his hair. He could have been bald on top. So the FBI created a second sketch by drawing a baseball cap on the first sketch.

When that didn't work, the bureau called in Jeanne M. Boylan.

After producing nearly 7,000 sketches of suspects over 20 years, Boylan was America's foremost forensic artist. She has been summoned frequently to assist with high-profile cases, including the Polly Klaas kidnapping and the Unabomb murders.

"I got called," she says, "because the leads were going nowhere."

She arrived in Junction City a week after the bombing and was taken to Elliott's to meet Kessinger. He was a Kansas country boy, a 44-year-old mechanic who'd suddenly found himself the key witness in the biggest manhunt in American history. He was very nervous.

"The first thing he said was that the sketch was bad," Boylan recalls.

"He said, 'That's not what I saw.' I was very casual in my response. I said, 'Okay, what did you see?' Internally, I was thinking, 'What's going on here?'"

Kessinger told her the whole story, she says. He'd been sitting behind the counter at Elliott's, watching Kling -- the man who rented the truck -- chat with Vicki Beemer while she typed out the rental form.

Kessinger's attention was focused on Kling, who was prattling nervously, but he recalled seeing another man lurking in the background. That man never talked to Kling, or even looked at him. He simply drifted in, stood staring at posters on the wall, and drifted out. Kessinger recalled the man's baseball hat and his black T-shirt, but not much about his face, which he'd seen only in profile.

"He never saw this man from the front view," Boylan says. That fact stunned her. The John Doe 2 sketch was, after all, a front view.

It had been created using a method Boylan considers dangerously manipulative: The sketch artist had shown Kessinger the FBI Facial Identification Catalogue -- a book of 960 photographs of faces, all of them front views -- and asked him to point out the pictures that showed the correct nose and eyes and chin. The artist then used Kessinger's choices to create the sketches. In the case of John Doe 1, this method yielded a sketch that looked remarkably like McVeigh. In the case of John Doe 2, however, it produced a front-view sketch of a man never seen from the front, a bare-headed sketch of a man never seen without a hat.

Boylan concluded that the sketch was useless.

Gently questioning Kessinger about exactly what he'd seen, Boylan created her own sketch, this one a profile. She showed it to Kessinger, who suggested a few small changes and then approved it. "He was very relieved that we finally got it right," she says.

After completing her sketch, she briefed half a dozen FBI officials. "I said, 'We have major problems. This witness never saw the guy from the front and he never saw him without a hat.'" She recalls one of the frustrated FBI officials muttering, "How did this happen?" She remembers replying: "The questions were never asked."

A few days later, the FBI released her drawing. By then, though, the first sketches had been played and replayed countless times on television for 10 days, burning themselves into America's collective memory as the face of John Doe 2.

Citing a gag order issued by the judge in McVeigh's trial, the FBI declines to comment on the creation of the sketch. So does Kessinger. But Boylan is candid about her opinion of that first drawing. "It never should have existed," she says. "Misinformation is worse than no information at all."

'I'm John Doe Number 2'

In the FBI's Las Vegas office, agent Debbie Calhoun laid two pictures down on the table. The first was the original John Doe 2 sketch, the one Boylan had denounced. The second was a photograph of Terry Nichols's 12-year-old son, Josh.

"Do you see a resemblance?" Calhoun asked. She was interrogating Lana Padilla, who is Terry Nichols's ex-wife and Josh Nichols's mother. Padilla stared at the pictures. She

knew that her son had been visiting his father in Kansas on the day the truck was rented. She also knew that Josh had repeatedly said he was not in Elliott's that day. But she did see a resemblance in the pictures. "The longer I stared," she wrote in a memoir titled *By Blood Betrayed*, "the more the pictures started to blend together."

"I think Josh could be our John Doe 2," Calhoun said, according to Padilla's account. "He was there. He's the right size. And if he was wearing dark clothing or the clerk saw him from a distance, his build could easily be mistaken for an older man's ..."

Padilla listened and looked at the pictures, thinking that she did see a lot of Josh in the John Doe 2 sketch. She summoned her son, who had been in another room with another FBI agent.

"Look at these pictures, Josh," she remembers saying. "In this shot, you do look a lot like John Doe Number 2."

"I think you were there," Calhoun said.

"I was there," Josh replied. "I'm John Doe Number 2." He waited a moment, then laughed. "Just kidding."

His mother didn't think it was funny. Neither did the FBI.

For two weeks, hundreds of FBI agents had been hunting for John Doe 2, and all they'd found were innocent look-alikes and lots of people who claimed they'd seen McVeigh with somebody other than Terry Nichols shortly before the bombing.

At the Dreamland Motel in Junction City, housekeeper Hilda Sostre told the FBI she saw a man who looked like John Doe 2 walking toward a Ryder truck. Connie Hood, a visitor at the Dreamland, said she saw John Doe 2 there. Her husband said he saw McVeigh and Doe sitting in a Ryder truck.

Thirty miles away, in Herington, Barbara Whittenburg told the feds that McVeigh, Nichols and John Doe 2 ate breakfast at her diner the day before the bombing. A retired teacher said he'd seen McVeigh and Doe at a gas station in Herington the previous night.

To make matters more confusing, Jeff Davis, who delivered Chinese food to a Mr. Kling in McVeigh's room at the Dreamland, insisted that the man who answered the door there wasn't McVeigh or Nichols or John Doe 2. And the owner of the Dreamland and her son both swore that they saw McVeigh sitting in a Ryder truck on Easter Sunday, the day before he allegedly rented a Ryder at Elliott's. That truck had the Ryder logo painted over.

In Oklahoma City, the eyewitness sightings were equally confusing. A Tulsa banker told the FBI that he was certain he saw McVeigh driving a car that was following a Ryder truck -- and that the car had two passengers. Mike Moroz, who was working at a tire store

near the Murrah Building, told agents that McVeigh pulled into the store's parking lot that morning to ask for directions while somebody sat in the passenger seat. And a woman injured in the bombing said she saw a man who looked like John Doe 2 get out of the passenger side of the truck just before the explosion.

There were others, too, some of them crackpots, but some quite credible.

For the FBI, it was a nightmare trying to sort out all the John Doe 2 sightings.

And where, they wondered, did Josh Nichols fit in? He might possibly have been the John Doe 2 who appeared at Elliott's, but he definitely wasn't the John Doe 2 seen with McVeigh in Oklahoma City on April 19. By then, Josh was back with his mother in Las Vegas.

"I don't want to talk anymore," Josh told the FBI agents on the night they suggested he might be John Doe 2. He folded his arms and turned his back. "I'll only talk to my dad."

"You know," Calhoun told his mother, "he could be arrested as a material witness."

"Arrest a 12-year-old kid!" Padilla remembers yelling. "Over my dead body!"

The FBI didn't arrest Josh Nichols. But for weeks, agents tailed him wherever he went.

They were still shadowing him on the morning of May 10, when his mother picked her local newspaper off her front lawn. On the front page was a banner headline: FBI QUESTIONS NICHOLS' SON. Beneath it were two pictures -- the first John Doe 2 sketch and Josh's seventh-grade yearbook photo.

The paper quoted an anonymous federal official: "He's large for his age -- a big kid. Because of his size, it is possible that someone mistook him for an adult. It's a possible explanation."

'If ... John Doe 2 is innocent'

A month later, the FBI proposed another possible explanation: It had found John Doe 2, and he had nothing to do with the bombing.

On June 14, 1995, the Justice Department released a cryptic statement about "an individual" who had been in Elliott's on a different day than Kling: "That individual resembles the sketch previously circulated as the second of the two men who rented the truck on April 17, and who has been called John Doe 2." After interviewing this "individual," the FBI had concluded that he "was not connected with the bombing."

The statement ended with a sentence that raised more questions than it answered: "The FBI is continuing to investigate whether there was a second man who participated in the rental of the Ryder truck on April 17."

That was the official statement. Unofficially, the feds identified the "individual" as Todd Bunting, a 23-year-old Army private stationed at Fort Riley. Bunting and a friend rented a truck at Elliott's on April 18, about 24 hours after McVeigh allegedly rented his. Bunting held a news conference, confirming the FBI's statement and demonstrating that he did, indeed, look a bit like the John Doe 2 sketches.

But neither Bunting nor the Justice Department could explain why the Elliott's witnesses -- who weren't talking to reporters -- had linked Kling with a customer from a different day. Nor could they say whether Kling was alone when he rented the truck or had been with somebody other than John Doe 2.

"There are all sorts of permutations possible," said one unidentified Justice Department official. "We're still trying to figure this out."

McVeigh's lawyer, Stephen Jones, enjoyed the confusion. "If they have decided John Doe 2 is innocent," he asked, "what does that say about the witnesses that claim to have seen him with John Doe Number 1, my client? Obviously, either the witnesses or the government are confused, or perhaps both."

Back in Oklahoma City, Glenn and Kathy Wilburn, who'd lost two grandsons in the bombing, scoffed at the idea that John Doe 2 was a case of mistaken identity. What about all the other witnesses who'd seen John Doe 2? Were they all mistaken, too? It didn't make sense. Somebody, they concluded, was covering something up.

They'd met a reporter named John Cash, who was pursuing the bombing story for a tiny rural newspaper called the McCurtain Daily Gazette, and he was as skeptical as they were. They decided to help him find out what had really happened. They figured they owed that much to their grandchildren.

'We're not crazy'

Kathy Wilburn flicks on the light, revealing a big bedroom with two small beds, their pillows piled with stuffed animals. "This is their bedroom," she says. She's 43, slender, redheaded. "It's just like it was that morning when they left for school."

She's talking about her grandsons, Chase Smith, who was 3 years old when he was killed in the bombing, and Colton Smith, who was 2. Colton was a chubby little guy with a powerful sweet tooth, she says. She picks a crumpled candy wrapper and a lollipop off the dresser. "After he died, I cleaned out under his bed and found his little M&M wrapper and his sucker."

The boys' mother, Edye Smith, had moved into her mother and stepfather's brick house in Oklahoma City after she got divorced. It was convenient. Edye and her mother both worked at the IRS in downtown Oklahoma City, a few blocks from the Murrah Building.

On their way to work, they would drop the boys off at the Murrah day-care center. Edye was feeling sick on April 19, 1995, but she went to work anyway because her colleagues were planning a birthday party for her. She was about to blow out the candles on her cake when the bomb exploded. She and her mother hustled down to the street to see what had happened.

"It was like entering the twilight zone," Kathy says, still standing in her grandsons' room. "There were big sheets of glass still falling from skyscrapers around us. I looked up and said, 'Edye, the babies!' " The two women sprinted to the Murrah Building and stared in horror at the smoldering hole where the day-care center had been. "When we looked, we knew the babies were gone."

In the weeks after they buried their grandchildren, the Wilburns heard all kinds of rumors -- that the local bomb squad's truck had been seen near the Murrah Building before the bomb exploded, that employees of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had been warned to stay home that day, that the feds had had prior knowledge of the bomb plot. The authorities tried to quash the rumors. The local sheriff said the bomb squad's truck was seen downtown because some of its members were scheduled to testify at the county courthouse. The ATF said rumors that its workers had been told to stay home were "entirely false," and that four of its employees had been injured in their offices. But the

Wilburns were skeptical. They started making phone calls, asking questions.

"The more questions we asked, the more questions there were to ask," Kathy says. "We're not crazy. We are bereaved. But we're not rumor-mongers. We work with facts and we want to know the truth. We deserve to know the truth. We paid the price."

She turns out the light in her grandsons' room and walks into the kitchen. It's decorated like a '50s diner, complete with a traffic light, a big red Coke sign and a life-size cardboard cutout of Marilyn Monroe. There's also a green file cabinet stuffed with information on the bombing and, on the refrigerator, the mock wanted poster that identifies Michael Brescia as John Doe 2.

Sitting at a counter is her husband, Glenn Wilburn, 45, a gray-haired, soft-spoken CPA. He's got a shoe box full of tapes -- interviews he and John Cash have done for their investigation. "John and I stumbled into each other by accident," he says. "I showed him what evidence I had, and he became totally intrigued by it. Since then, we've worked hand in hand on this."

John Cash wanders in from the living room, opens the refrigerator and takes out a Budweiser. He lives a couple of hundred miles away, in Idabel, Okla., but he spends a lot of time at the Wilburns' house. He's wearing a checkered work shirt and a close-cropped salt-and-pepper beard. As always, he's got a Marlboro in his mouth.

Cash is 44 and a little vague about his background. He says that he graduated from law school but never took the bar exam, that he worked as a banker before moving to the country to write a novel, that he'd written more than 1,000 pages when the Murrah Building was bombed. He lost a friend in the building and started his own investigation, publishing dozens of articles in his local paper.

For the past two years, Cash and the Wilburns have traveled across the West, interviewing eyewitnesses and chasing down denizens of the violent, far-right subculture that McVeigh and Nichols traveled in. They've interviewed people who refused to talk to other reporters and they've accumulated an impressive collection of supposedly secret FBI documents on the case. Now they think they know who John Doe 2 is. And they're pretty sure about John Does 3, 4 and 5, too.

It's a long, complicated conspiracy theory that is mocked by both the prosecution and the defense. It would be easy to dismiss this theory as groundless, paranoid speculation except for one problem: Pieces of it have proved true.

'Tim and five others'

"I'm 90 percent sure -- I'll leave a 10 percent opening -- that John Doe 2 is most likely a young man named Michael Brescia of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," Glenn Wilburn says, sitting in his kitchen. "And if he's not, that's okay, because Michael Brescia is in there somewhere. We've got another five men besides Tim [McVeigh] down there that morning. Tim and five others."

The foundation of the whole Cash/Wilburn theory is one simple, uncontested fact: On April 5, 1995, Timothy McVeigh placed a call from a motel room in Kingman, Ariz., to Elohim City, a heavily armed, quasi-religious right-wing compound in eastern Oklahoma. The call lasted one minute and 46 seconds. It is not clear whom he was calling or why.

Brescia, then a 22-year-old college dropout, was living at Elohim City at the time. So was Andreas Strassmeir, a former German army lieutenant, who has acknowledged in an affidavit that he once met McVeigh at a gun show in Tulsa, where they discussed the government's siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Tex. Elohim City was also the home of Kevin McCarthy and Scott Stedeford, who were recently indicted with Brescia on charges of conspiring to commit a string of bank robberies pulled off by the Aryan Republican Army. Another man indicted in the ARA case, a Pennsylvania white supremacist preacher named Mark Thomas, was a frequent visitor to Elohim City.

Cash and the Wilburns believe that McVeigh and Nichols were part of the Aryan Republican Army, and that the Oklahoma City bombing was an ARA operation. They claim that a source they won't identify told them that Strassmeir was an ATF informer who'd infiltrated the group and reported its bombing plans to his handlers. They believe the ATF was poised to capture the culprits red-handed in the early-morning hours of April 19.

When the bombers failed to arrive by dawn, they surmise, the feds left, figuring that their information was bad. The bombers -- McVeigh, Brescia and other ARA members -- arrived a few hours later, found the building unguarded and blew it up. Realizing that their bungling had resulted in 168 deaths, the feds covered up the Strassmeir connection and the identity of John Doe 2.

It gets more complicated, of course, but that's basically The Theory. It manages to explain the enduring mysteries of the bombing -- the identity of John Doe 2 (Brescia), the identity of other people seen with McVeigh (various ARA members), how the bomb plot was funded (the ARA bank robberies), why items stolen from an Arkansas gun dealer were found in Nichols's house (the robbery was an ARA job), the Ryder truck with the logo painted over (an ARA vehicle) and why the bomb squad was in downtown Oklahoma City before the bomb exploded (they were part of the team waiting to bust the bombers).

Of course, the theory is, to put it mildly, unproven. There is no credible evidence that Strassmeir was an ATF informer or that Brescia is John Doe 2. Both men steadfastly deny the accusations, and the FBI, which investigated them, failed to link the pair to the bombing. The ATF denies that Strassmeir was an informer or that it had prior knowledge of the bomb plot. The prosecutors of the Oklahoma City case deny that there's any connection between McVeigh and the Aryan Republican Army, and so does McVeigh's attorney, Stephen Jones.

And yet ... some of Cash's conclusions have proven prescient. He named Brescia as a member of the ARA bank-robbery ring months before Brescia was indicted. He quoted from a hitherto-secret FBI affidavit in which McVeigh's sister, Jennifer, stated that her brother had given her three \$100 bills that he claimed had come from a bank robbery. And recently, he published an interview with Carol Howe -- a Tulsa woman who the government acknowledges was a paid ATF informer -- in which she told him that she had met McVeigh at Elohim City about four months before the bombing.

Although Cash's stories appear in the McCurtain Daily Gazette, a newspaper with a circulation of only 6,500, his influence is far wider. His reporting has been picked up by newspapers ranging from the far-right Jubilee to the leftish Village Voice to the London Sunday Telegraph. His stories are regularly posted on the Internet in the John Doe Times by Alabama militia member Mike Vanderboegh. Both Cash and the Wilburns have been interviewed for countless TV and newspaper features, particularly after the Wilburns' daughter filed her wrongful death suit against McVeigh, Strassmeir and Brescia last fall.

Leesa Brown, who handles media inquiries for the Denver-based federal prosecutors in the bombing case, spends a good bit of her time fielding questions from reporters following up Cash's stories. "Sometimes I feel like I work for him," she says. "He generates so much of my workload."

Brown operates under a heavy handicap in dealing with Cash's theories: She, like the rest of the prosecution and defense teams, is working under the judge's gag order. "The

toughest job in PR has to be trying to answer conspiracy theories when you can't draw from your facts," she says. "It makes it tough."

But Cash is not covered by any gag orders, and he promises that he'll keep producing stories of conspiracy and coverup. And, he says, the best is yet to come. "Even if you don't believe anything I'm saying," he tells a skeptical reporter, "leave yourself some wiggle room, because a lot of this stuff is going to come out."

'The grassy knoll'

Hoppy Heidelberg doesn't buy John Cash's theory. He says it's a "red herring" designed to obscure the real truth.

What's the real truth?

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he says. He's right about that. He claims the feds blew up the Murrah Building themselves, for the same reason they blew up the World Trade Center -- so they'd have an excuse to pass a repressive antiterrorism bill. He also says there were two McVeighs in Oklahoma City, just as there were two Oswalds in Dallas.

Heidelberg's outlandish views have turned him into a major embarrassment to most John Doe theorists, but he used to be their hero. That was back in October 1995, when he was kicked off the grand jury that indicted McVeigh and Nichols: He violated his oath of secrecy by publicly proclaiming that the prosecution was hiding the identity of John Doe 2.

"They needed me off the grand jury because I was asking too many questions," he says. "All my efforts to bring up John Doe 2 were thwarted, and it became obvious that they weren't going to prosecute John Doe 2."

The Todd Bunting theory is "a hoax," he says. The real John Doe 2 was "working for the government."

Last year, Heidelberg, a horse breeder, tried to parlay his 15 minutes of fame as a dissident grand juror into a political career. He ran in the Republican primary for the Oklahoma state Senate, pledging to get to the bottom of the bombing case. He made it to the runoff but lost there. He says the Republican establishment "sabotaged" his campaign, but he also concedes that the voters weren't ready for his conspiracy theory.

"It's too uncomfortable," he says. "I wouldn't want to believe it myself."

Heidelberg, it would seem, is working way out on the aliens-kidnapped- Elvis end of the spectrum. On the other hand, he's not the only one who believes that the government is hiding something. Charles Key does, too, and he's in a position to do something official about it. The five-term Republican state representative won reelection last November

with more than 70 percent of the vote, which he sees as a mandate to continue his crusade against the bombing "coverup."

In 1995, Key produced his videotape, "Oklahoma City: What Really Happened?," which featured Cash, the Wilburns and other critics of the government's investigation. Just last month, Key and Glenn Wilburn won an Oklahoma Supreme Court case that gave them the right to petition for an Oklahoma County grand jury to investigate the bombing. If they can gather 5,000 signatures in 45 days -- and they almost certainly can -- a grand jury will be impaneled to reinvestigate the case. Now, Key is sponsoring a bill to appropriate \$500,000 in state funds to pay for the new grand jury.

These efforts have earned him much mockery in the local press. The Tulsa World termed his views "nutty," and the Daily Oklahoman accused him of trying to create "the equivalent of the grassy knoll in Dallas."

But Key persists. "We need to bring all these things to the grand jury and let them decide," he says, sitting in his office in the state Capitol, casually clipping his fingernails. "Let's not decide ahead of time."

He's not a nut, he stresses, he's a reasonable man with an open mind. Of course, he does have some theories.

"Here's what I would guess right now as to who did it," he says. "I think you've got Middle Easterners involved as well as neo-Nazi Aryan Nation types. I've got the feeling maybe Middle Easterners funded this thing and gave some technical advice and the other guys carried it out."

'To make John Doe #2 disappear'

Timothy McVeigh smiles. He chats with his lawyers. He rocks back and forth in his chair. He glances around the Denver federal courtroom.

In court for a pretrial hearing, McVeigh is wearing a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up halfway to his elbows. His light brown crew cut is a bit longer than it was on April 21, 1995, when he was shown on TV being led out of an Oklahoma jail wearing an orange shirt and a somber look. He's not somber now as he banters playfully with his defense team. He's 28, but he looks younger. There's a boyish energy about him as he squirms in his seat, waiting for the hearing to begin.

A few feet away, Terry Nichols sits at another table. He doesn't look around or rock in his chair. He sits motionless. Behind his glasses, his face is ashen. He's 42, but he seems much older. He wears the stunned look of a man who's just been told he has a terminal illness.

Nichols, who will be tried after McVeigh, does not glance at his old Army buddy, who does not glance at him. Their cases have been severed, and so has their friendship. Now, as they face death by lethal injection, it's each man for himself.

John Doe 2 is not in the courtroom, of course, but his presence can be seen downstairs, in a tiny alcove where more than 10,000 pages of legal documents in the bomb case are available to the media. Some of them have been censored -- "redacted" is the euphemism the lawyers prefer -- with heavy black lines blotting out whole sections. But it is still possible to follow the trail that John Doe 2 cuts through the case and to discern the effect he is likely to have on McVeigh's trial.

He's present in the very first document -- the arrest warrant for McVeigh, which states that "two persons had rented the truck" and that the sketches of John Does 1 and 2 are "fair and accurate depictions of the individuals." He's present in the indictment, too, with its allegation that McVeigh and Nichols conspired "with others unknown." He's also present in many of Stephen Jones's early motions demanding information from the prosecution on various shady characters who "might be John Doe No. 2."

About a year into the case, the legal papers about John Doe 2 begin to focus on the issue that will almost certainly arise in McVeigh's trial -- a battle over the eyewitness identifications at Elliott's Body Shop.

On May 1, 1996, Jones filed a motion that included a note he had received from head prosecutor Joseph Hartzler -- a "confidential" letter that contradicted the government's public assertion that John Doe 2 was probably Todd Bunting. In it, Hartzler informed Jones that the Elliott's witnesses had been shown a picture of the baseball cap that Bunting wore when he picked up a truck on April 18, the day after Kling rented the truck used in the bombing. "They both stated that the cap was not the same one they saw on John Doe II," Hartzler wrote, "and they reaffirmed that this second individual accompanied `Kling' when he rented the truck." Hartzler also added this: "The existence and identity of this John Doe II, whom we are confident is not Mr. Bunting, is the subject of a continuing investigation."

The letter, Jones said in his motion, "indicates that the Justice Department is still searching for John Doe No. 2 and may be releasing disinformation to lessen public pressure to find John Doe No. 2."

Later, Nichols's attorney, Michael Tigar, filed his own brief hammering the prosecution on the issue. "It now appears," he wrote, "that the government is seeking to make John Doe #2 disappear. Fortunately, there are so many witnesses that this may prove a futile effort."

In response, the prosecution called Tigar's charge "unfounded" and added this: "Indeed, all the Elliott's witnesses continue to state that to the best of their recollection a second person accompanied `Kling' when the Ryder truck was rented on April 17." To make matters more mysterious, the next 10 lines have been "redacted."

Then, on January 28 of this year, the prosecution switched its stance again, officially resurrecting the Todd Bunting theory. In a long brief, the government disclosed that Kessinger was the only one of the three Elliott's employees who could ever recall John Doe 2 well enough to describe him. Now, after a November interview with a prosecutor and two FBI agents, Kessinger was "confident that he had Todd Bunting in mind when he provided the description for the John Doe 2 composite." Kessinger, the brief continued, is "now unsure" whether anyone accompanied McVeigh. But his two co-workers "continue to believe that two men came in to rent the truck."

In that brief, the prosecution speculated that the defense might use "Kessinger's admitted confusion" to challenge his identification of McVeigh. That's precisely what happened when Kessinger testified at a pretrial hearing last month. First he said he thought that someone had accompanied McVeigh, then he said he wasn't sure. He was sure, though, that he'd "made a mistake" by describing Bunting during his interviews with the sketch artists: "My memory was in error."

"How can you be so wrong 60 hours after the event and so right a year and a half later?" Jones asked him. "Could you be changing your mind because the government wants you to?"

"No," Kessinger replied.

At the same hearing, both Kessinger and his boss, Eldon Elliott, positively identified McVeigh as the man who had rented the truck used in the bombing. And Elliott testified that McVeigh was not alone. "I saw another man standing there," he said. "The second man was a little shorter than me."

Obviously, both witnesses are in for some intense cross-examination at McVeigh's trial.

Not only will the John Doe 2 mystery affect the identification of McVeigh at Elliott's, it has already affected the prosecution's ability to place McVeigh in Oklahoma City on the morning of the bombing. Many people told the FBI that they saw McVeigh there, but the prosecutors have disclosed that they will call only one of them to the witness stand. He happens to be one of the few who say they saw McVeigh alone. Why give Jones an opportunity to play the Doe card? one Justice department official asks with a shrug. After all, Jones certainly won't call any witnesses who saw his client in Oklahoma City, with Doe or without.

So John Doe 2 -- a man who may not even exist -- is likely to become a factor in the biggest terrorism case in American history. Not the only factor, of course: The prosecution says it has overwhelming evidence -- chemical residues, telephone records and other eyewitness identifications -- linking McVeigh to the bombing. Of course, the defense will attempt to refute all that evidence, too.

How much will John Doe affect the trial? That depends on whom you ask.

"It may complicate the issue for the government," says Jones, "and it may make our task easier -- to get a jury to acquit Tim McVeigh."

Hartzler, the head prosecutor, scoffs at that idea. He believes he has enough evidence to prove McVeigh guilty without any eyewitness testimony. He gets irked by speculation about John Doe 2. "People need to have patience and wait to hear the trial evidence before they reach any conclusion," he says. "Many questions about the whole incident will be answered at the conclusion of the trial."

Jones disagrees. He figures John Doe 2 will live on no matter what happens at the trial. "How do you disprove that he exists?" he asks. "You don't disprove it if you convict Tim McVeigh and you don't disprove it if you acquit Tim McVeigh."

John Doe 2, he says, "has more lives than a cat."

`You're going to remember me'

At Lady Godiva's, Cassie dances to the edge of the stage, then steps on a front-row table and squats so the customers can stick money into her G-string.

Floyd Ratcliff ignores her. He's in his tiny back-room office, rewinding the videotape that has made his strip joint famous. He's 52, and he's been running Lady Godiva's for a decade. He's wearing a blue Calvin Klein shirt with an American flag on one shoulder and the letters USA on the back.

He stops the tape. It shows three half-naked women in the dressing room. Wrong spot. He keeps rewinding. He always has a security camera going in the dressing room, he explains: "It keeps down thieving." Usually, he only keeps the tapes for about a week, but on the night of April 8, 1995, there was that cat fight between two strippers. "It was so comical, I kept the tape," he says. When one of the strippers applied for a job at another bar, Ratcliff sent the tape to the owner of that club, who noticed the now-famous reference to April 19, 1995.

Ratcliff has that spot lined up now. Tara, a longhaired brunette in a low-cut black dress, bursts into the dressing room and starts telling another dancer what a customer just told her: " `I'm a very smart man ... And you're going to remember me on April 19, '95. You're going to remember me for the rest of your life.'"

Tara has left Lady Godiva's and moved away, Ratcliff says. But before she disappeared, he says, she identified that customer as Tim McVeigh. And several strippers who were there that night have supposedly identified pictures of Strassmeir and Brescia as the men who accompanied him. And that's not all. Dale Culpepper, the club's bouncer, remembers escorting the rowdy strippers out of the club that night and seeing one of them squat to urinate behind ... a Ryder truck with its logo painted over.

It's a fascinating story. But there are problems. McVeigh was almost certainly in Kingman, Ariz., on April 8, 1995. He checked into the Imperial Motel there on March 31, paying for seven days in advance. On April 7, he paid for five more days. His car never left the parking lot. A maid told investigators that she saw him every day. Strassmeir has also denied that he was ever in Lady Godiva's.

None of this bothers John Cash. He points out that McVeigh was making lots of phone calls from his Imperial room all week, and that the calls abruptly stopped on April 7. Maybe McVeigh flew to Oklahoma and met the Aryan Republican Army crowd from Elohim City. And maybe they all stopped at Lady Godiva's before using the logo-less Ryder to haul bomb supplies. Maybe. Maybe not.

Cash is in a back booth, sipping a beer and interviewing a stripper named Angel. Lady Godiva's has closed for the night now, and Angel is wearing a heavy white Irish-knit sweater. She was here that night, she says. "I'm on the video. Five people called me up and said, 'You're on TV!'"

Cash shows her a picture of Brescia. "This guy looks familiar," she says.

He shows her a shot of McVeigh. She studies it for a while. "If his hair was blonder, he might be the guy," she says. Then she adds this: "You had better pictures the last time I talked to you."

"I've never talked to you before," Cash replies.

What does that say about Angel's ability to recognize faces? Or about anybody's ability to remember people casually encountered months earlier?

But that doesn't matter. John Doe 2 has become a legend now. He has entered the realm of myth, where truth is not only impossible to ascertain, it's almost irrelevant. Maybe he'll be captured and convicted someday. If not, he'll remain eternally at large, the one who got away, the mystery man at the center of countless conspiracy theories.

It's possible that he never lived. It's likely that he'll never die.

And now the crew from MSNBC is ready and Cassie starts to do her dance for the cameras.

Peter Carlson is a staff writer for the Magazine. Richard Leiby, a staff writer for The Post's Style section, assisted in the reporting of this story.