

25,000 Interviews Traced Terror Trail Government and Jurors Reached Same Conclusion of Who Wrought Horror

Rocky Mountain News

June 3, 1997 | Lynn Bartels | Page 19A | Section: LOCAL

The terror the jury said Timothy McVeigh inflicted on the heartland came at 9:02 a.m. on April 19, 1995.

The legal proceedings in the terrible case were moved to Denver by U.S. District Judge Richard Matsch. He ruled that Oklahomans were too traumatized by the bombing to give McVeigh a fair trial.

In a choreographed and streamlined case, prosecutors over 18 days portrayed McVeigh as a political extremist who decided it was time to quit talking and to act.

McVeigh's inspiration came from the racist novel *The Turner Diaries* and from federal agents' confrontation with a religious cult outside Waco, Texas, exactly two years earlier, on April 19, 1993.

"Something big is going to happen," McVeigh confided weeks before the bombing to his sister Jennifer, who reluctantly testified against her big brother.

And something big did happen.

In the shadow of Fort Riley, Kan., where McVeigh's career as a soldier had risen, then plummeted, he rented a Ryder truck in Junction City, Kan., using the phony name Robert Kling.

He packed the 20-foot yellow truck with ammonium nitrate fertilizer and stolen blasting equipment and drove to Oklahoma City.

At 8:57 a.m., a security camera at an apartment complex one block from the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building eerily caught the Ryder truck slowing creeping forward.

At the same time, Helena Garrett was dropping off her 16-month-old son Tevin at the day-care center on the second floor.

McVeigh parked the truck in front of the Murrah Building and walked quickly away.

Five minutes later, black smoke, falling glass and a lifetime's heartbreak filled downtown Oklahoma City.

A frantic Garrett, who worked nearby, ran to the Murrah building and tried to climb a pile of rubble to the second floor while she futilely screamed her son's name.

Halfway across the country, in Kingman, Ariz., McVeigh's good friend, Michael Fortier, had finished a nightlong binge of drugs and video games.

The news came on.

Fortier stared at what looked like a badly damaged nine-story dollhouse, the same building McVeigh had pointed out to him only five months earlier.

“Tim did it,” Fortier said.

The government quickly came to that same conclusion, and it has never wavered during the most exhaustive criminal investigation in American history.

Federal agents conducted 25,000 interviews, collected more than 7 tons of evidence and amassed hundreds of thousands of documents in their journey to justice.

McVeigh's lawyers tried to say it wasn't enough.

Not a single witness put McVeigh in Oklahoma City the morning of the bombing. Not a single witness saw McVeigh build the bomb.

But the doubts the defense raised by calling 25 witnesses in four days were not enough.

The 12 Coloradans who were sworn in April 22 believed the government.

The jury believed Fortier, who testified that McVeigh, the best man at his wedding, plotted to blow up the Murrah building and showed him where he would hide his getaway car.

The jury believed Fortier's wife, Lori, who said McVeigh was living in their trailer when she helped him make a phony driver's license in the name of Robert Kling.

The jury believed FBI chemist Steven Burmeister, the lab's shining star, who found explosives on the earplugs McVeigh was carrying when he was arrested 75 minutes after the blast.

The jury relied on circumstantial evidence, including McVeigh's fingerprint on a receipt for ammonium nitrate, and the key to a Ryder truck found in the alley where McVeigh said he planned to stash his getaway car.

Then there was the most compelling evidence of all: the color pictures of 168 innocent people who were in the worst possible place at the worst possible time.