

Unsealed Documents Raise Questions About Bombing

Tuesday, July 22, 1997 - McCurtain Daily Gazette
By J. D. Cash

Documents recently unsealed in a federal criminal case here involving former Bureau of Alcohol, tobacco and Firearms "paid informant" Carol E. Howe raise more serious questions about the government's investigation of the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building.

They suggest the federal agency had advance warning of an impending attack on a federal building in Oklahoma City. Those explosive remarks are contained in a recently unsealed 70-page transcript from an April 24 pre-trial hearing on the upcoming trials of Howe and James Dodson Viefhaus, Howe's former Tulsa housemate.

Howe and Viefhaus face charges of placing a message on their answering machine last December alleged to contain a bomb threat.

The couple are charged with possessing components that could be used to build a bomb.

At the hearing on April 24, Howe attorney Clark Brewster was seeking an order from Federal District Judge Michael Burrage to release Howe's BATF reports and other investigative materials related to her undercover work for the government. At that late April closed session, which occurred just as the Denver trial of Timothy McVeigh was beginning, Brewster questioned Howe's BATF "handler" Angela Graham (formerly Finley).

He focused not only on Howe's work for the agency but her undercover project involving Andreas Strassmeir, Dennis Mahon and Elohim City.

"Now, you were interested in knowing as much as you could about Mr. Strassmeir, weren't you?" asked Brewster.

"Yes," replied Graham.

"What kind of guns he had?"

"Yes."

"And," Brewster asked, "the kind of threats he made about — to blow up federal buildings? You were interested in that, weren't you?" "I was interested in anything I could find out about any violation," Graham responded. "And Ms. Howe told you about Mr. Strassmeir's threats to blow up federal buildings, didn't she?"

"In general, Yes."

"And that was before the Oklahoma City bombing.

"Yes."

Public suspicions of a connection between Elohim City and the Oklahoma City bombing first surfaced in late May 1995, when the national media descended on the 1,000-acre compound soon after it was learned that Timothy McVeigh had made a call there only two weeks prior to the attack on the federal building.

Initially, the cult's religious leader said he had no knowledge of such a call and did not know anything about McVeigh before his arrest.

Later, the Gazette disclosed that the call was made to Timothy McVeigh and that the call was to Elohim City's "security advisor," Andreas Strassmeir.

The Gazette also reported that the call to Elohim city was made only seconds after the same phone records show a call made to a Ryder truck rental establishment in Arizona.

A resident of Elohim City, Joan Millar, subsequently admitted to the FBI that the call was, indeed for Andreas Strassmeir. Millar told an investigator for McVeigh that the caller said, "Tell 'Andy' I'll be visiting soon."

Strassmeir subsequently denied he ever got the call. He denied knowing why McVeigh would call him.

On Dec. 13, 1996, Howe-Dodson residence was raided by the FBI and Viefhaus was charged. Months later, after several news organizations followed up on a Gazette story that Howe was a BATF informant and had warned of a plan to bomb federal buildings by residents and visitors to Elohim City, she was also charge with Viefhaus.

Not only was Carol Howe an undercover agent for the ATF at Elohim City, providing information about talk of bombing federal buildings, but she also took a trip to Oklahoma City, the April 23 pre-trial hearing transcript discloses. Brewster pursued this angle with Graham, Howe's ATF handler.

"She called you before and said, "These folks from Elohim City want to go over and look at Oklahoma City.'"

Graham's response? "She had specific places they were going. It did not include the federal building."

Brewster, apparently dissatisfied with Graham's response, later hammered at the ATF handler with this line of questioning:

"And this was the place that Mr. Strassmeir was living, Elohim City?"

"Yes."

"And this is the gentleman that she told you about that had intentions to blow up federal buildings?"

Graham tried to downplay the line of questioning, claiming it was common militia rhetoric.

"Everyone out there is saying that same thing."

But Graham was forced to acknowledge that Tulsa Dennis Mahon, a White Aryan Resistance (WAR) leader, had been a focal point in the BATF investigation at Elohim City.

"What were the nature of the offenses you were investigating?" Brewster asked.

"Anything from explosives to illegal firearms."

"How long did that investigation go on?"

Graham replied, "I believe I closed my investigation — it began around August 1994 and I think it went through — technically to say — when the property of the investigation actually stopped, we stopped doing anything with that after I had her deactivated as an informant." (Three weeks before the Oklahoma City bombing).

The timing of the BATF's investigation into WAR and Elohim City coincides with the date the federal grand jury investigating the Oklahoma City bombing said the conspiracy began — Sept. 13, 1994. The Gazette had previously reported McVeigh checked into a motel room in Vian on the evening of September 12. Vian is approximately a 30-minute drive west of Elohim City.

Immediately after the April 19, 1995, Oklahoma city bombing, Graham said she reactivated Howe and sent her back to Elohim City.

But first the Tulsa BATF agent asked her to Find Dennis Mahon, the transcript shows.

"First of all," Brewster asked, "you had her come to the Tulsa office and call Dennis Mahon and tape it, didn't you?" Graham told the court, "I think we called from Oklahoma City."

Queried Brewster: "That's because you immediately suspected that Mr. Mahon had involvement in the Oklahoma City bombing, didn't you?"

"We wanted to see where he was, and that's all based on what the FBI wanted to do with her," Graham. said.

Referring to the racist novel *The Turner Diaries* that McVeigh sold at gun shows and that prosecutors repeatedly told the Denver jury was the blueprint for the Oklahoma City bombing, Brewster questioned agent Graham on the book as a vehicle of warning to

the feds. Graham conceded Howe brought her a copy of the novel and said, "Make sure you read this."

Curiously, despite the evidence and statements to the BATF and FBI, neither Mahon nor Strassmeir was ever picked up for questioning in connection with the bombing.

And, as the April 24 transcript reflects, every attempt was made to keep such information secret prior to the Denver trial of McVeigh.

At the end of the April hearing, for example, Judge Burrage said to Brewster that a "lot of this makes for good conversation...and it makes for sensationalism" but that he didn't think "it really has anything to do with the Oklahoma City bombing..."

"With that McVeigh trial going on, I don't want anything getting out of here that would compromise that trial in any way," the federal judge said, sealing the transcript.

"What do you mean by compromise?" Brewster asked. "Do you mean share with the McVeigh defense?"

"Yes," replied Burrage, "or something that would come up — you know, we have got evidence that the ATF took a trip with somebody that said buildings were going to be blown up in Oklahoma City before it was blown up or something of that nature and try to connect it to McVeigh in some way or something."

Eventually, of course, Carol Howe's testimony at the McVeigh trial was blocked by the Denver trial judge, Richard P. Matsch.

And that decision has since become the focus of McVeigh's appeal for a new trial.

James Veifhaus' trial begins today and is expected to finish by the weekend. Next week, the long-anticipated trial of Carol Howe is scheduled to begin. It is expected the government will argue to keep anything regarding the Oklahoma City bombing from coming up in that trial, as well.

Evidencing this, last week, prosecutors asked Judge Burrage to block Howe's attorneys from calling Agent Graham or her supervisor to the stand, claiming "Treasury Department employees are prohibited by law from testifying or otherwise furnishing information obtained as a result of their official capacities." The trial judge has yet to rule on the motion. But Burrage has indicated a reluctance to allow evidence Howe collected in the Oklahoma City bombing investigation into her upcoming trial. However, sources close to the grand jury in Oklahoma City say they will subpoena Howe after her trial in Tulsa is over.