

Mystery of John Doe No. 2 Pervades Conspiracy Investigation

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OKLAHOMA CITY - As U.S. Attorney Patrick Ryan prepares for the trial of Terry Nichols, a county grand jury meeting a few blocks away probes the shadowy corners of the Oklahoma City bombing case, interviewing witnesses who say they saw John Doe No. 2. Asked about the reports of the mystery suspect, Mr. Ryan shrugs.

"I can't reconcile it," he said. "I don't believe for one minute that any of these people are not telling the truth or what they believe to be the truth.

"When you have 22,000 people interviewed, you're going to have a certain number of random statements that don't jibe, perhaps, with the remainder of the investigation. " The mystery suspect known as John Doe No. 2 made his public debut in a sketch released by the FBI shortly after the bombing.

After a nationwide manhunt, federal prosecutors announced that the sketch had actually depicted an innocent Army private.

But reports of John Doe No. 2 sightings persist, and they helped spark a petition drive that impaneled the Oklahoma County grand jury investigating allegations of a larger conspiracy in the April 19, 1995, bombing that killed 168.

"I saw two individuals, Timothy McVeigh and John Doe Number 2, cross Fifth Street just minutes before the blast," said Rodney Johnson, who was driving a catering truck that morning. Mr. Johnson was among several witnesses who testified last week.

The original sketch of the dark-haired, olive-complected suspect came from a description provided by a mechanic at the Junction City, Kan., body shop where the truck used in the bombing was rented. So, discrediting that sketch cast doubt on reported sightings of John Doe No. 2 in Oklahoma City.

"There is a certain power of suggestion that occurs when widespread media reports describe a person," Mr. Ryan said. "I do think that that has the potential at least for distorting recollections. " Mr. Johnson, however, said he gave his account to authorities before the sketches were released. He says he was interviewed several times by FBI agents and believed he was going to testify at Mr. McVeigh's trial.

"I believe the reason they didn't use me in the trial would be because I would testify there is a John Doe Number 2," Mr. Johnson said.

Although he does not object to sitting out the trial, he criticizes officials for trying to make the mystery man disappear.

"I do not believe it's beneficial for the government to deny the existence of the John Doe Number 2," he said. "I believe that it just fuels the conspiracy theorists. " Other accounts seemed less credible in light of other evidence.

One witness called by the grand jury last week, Gary G. Antene, said he saw Mr. McVeigh and John Doe No. 2 at a model airplane shop in Oklahoma City a few days before the bombing.

"I saw John Doe Number 2, and he was interested in 100 percent nitromethane aviation fuel," Mr. Antene said.

Nitromethane, a potent racing fuel, is believed to have been an ingredient in the truck bomb that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. But a model airplane shop would be a poor source for the large quantity of racing fuel needed for a truck bomb.

Evidence offered at trial indicated that Mr. McVeigh assembled the materials for the bomb well in advance.

Another man who was called recently, Kingman, Kan., convenience store clerk Richard Sinnett, said he saw Mr. McVeigh and John Doe No. 2 early on the morning of the bombing in a three-vehicle caravan that must have included at least two other men.

"I saw a Ryder truck pulling a trailer that had a large circular tank on it, McVeigh and another John Doe who was putting gas in the truck, about \$20 worth," Mr. Sinnett said. The translucent plastic tank was sloshing with more than 800 gallons of an unknown liquid, he said.

Mr. Sinnett said he was never interviewed by the FBI, although he was subpoenaed to testify by Mr. McVeigh's defense. He was never called.

Mr. Sinnett described a slightly different John Doe No. 2, a man with light brown hair and a light complexion. But he said he realized who he had seen when he saw the first sketch.

"The eyes were perfect. I recognized him right away," Mr. Sinnett said.

The grand jury was impaneled by a petition drive led by state Rep. Charles Key, R-Oklahoma City, and the late Glenn Wilburn, an Oklahoma City accountant whose young grandsons were killed in the bombing.

Mr. Wilburn, who died of cancer shortly after the grand jury convened June 30, contended that federal prosecutors ignored evidence of a larger conspiracy. He

also said agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had prior knowledge of the bombing.

The ATF has vehemently denied any advance knowledge, but the grand jury is hearing witnesses who support the allegations.

Among those witnesses was Bruce Shaw, who says an ATF agent at the bomb site told him that agents had been warned to stay away from the federal building that morning.

Mr. Shaw, who served as a pallbearer at Mr. Wilburn's funeral, refused to discuss his testimony with reporters, striding grimly in and out of the building.

Mr. Shaw and most of the approximately 20 other witnesses called by the panel thus far appear on a list of 39 people Mr. Key submitted to the grand jury. The grand jury is expected to meet again this week.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ryan is preparing for the comparatively straightforward task of trying Mr. Nichols, who is accused of helping to build the deadly truck bomb.

"I can't prosecute unknown phantom individuals," Mr. Ryan said.

Caption: PHOTO(S): (Associated Press) U.S. Attorney Patrick Ryan (right), with Deputy U.S. Attorney Merrick Garland in this file photo, says he believes the sincerity of people who say they have seen John Doe No. 2.

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