

As Nichols trial rolls on, grand jury probes conspiracy theories

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OKLAHOMA CITY — As jurors in Terry Nichols' bombing trial hear evidence in Denver, a grand jury here is poking through the ragged edges of the Oklahoma City bombing case looking for a larger conspiracy.

Could the plot have gone beyond Nichols and Timothy McVeigh to include white separatists and militants? Is it possible the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms knew of the attack in advance and stayed away from the federal building on April 19, 1995, when the blast killed 168 people?

When a state lawmaker and the grandfather of two young bombing victims began their petition drive for a grand jury probe into these questions earlier this year, Attorney General Drew Edmondson called the quest "the worst kind of paranoid conspiracy pandering." The Daily Oklahoman described it as "a weird and misguided exercise." Federal officials denied the accusations and even one of the grand jurors called the process a waste of time.

But the grand jury seems to be warming to its work. In occasional meetings since June 30, it has taken testimony from more than 50 witnesses ranging from a Klansman-turned-preacher to a structural engineer who helped design the doomed Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

The men who pushed for the probe — State Rep. Charles Key and Glenn Wilburn, who died of pancreatic cancer soon after the panel convened — were driven the conspiracy theorist's favorite question: What did the government know and when did it know it?

The ATF denies any advance knowledge and maintains its agents were in the building. Federal prosecutors say they now doubt the conspiracy was larger.

But the grand jury has heard two days of testimony from former ATF informant Carol Howe, a former debulante who claims she told agents she had overheard Tulsa white supremacist Dennis Mahon and German national Andreas Strassmeir discuss bombing federal buildings before the attack. Both men deny any involvement, and neither was ever named as a suspect.

At both her appearances, Howe

refused to speak with reporters. Federal agents say she had been cut loose as an informant before the bombing, then briefly reactivated after the attack. They said when she failed to provide any useful information, she was dropped again.

Attorneys for Timothy McVeigh tried to call her at his trial, but a judge ruled her testimony irrelevant. Her attorney, Clark Brewster, said she has also been called to testify for Nichols.

The grand jury also called Ma-

hon, who refused to testify. Strassmeir has returned to Germany.

The panel has called nearly all the witnesses on a list proffered by Key, but almost none of the federal officers who can address the central theories behind the investigation. And nearly all of those officers are bound by a judge's gag order until after Nichols' trial.

Apparently undaunted by that temporary lack of access, the grand jury is expected to meet every other week through December, although the course of their

investigation remains unclear.

A look at some of the specific issues the panel has investigated:

■ **John Doe No. 2:** Federal prosecutors now say the sketch of the mysterious John Doe No. 2 depicts an innocent Army private who used the same truck rental agency as McVeigh. The panel heard from several people who say they saw McVeigh in Oklahoma City with another man before the bombing.

■ **Prior ATF Knowledge:** While the blast killed eight federal agents, none were from the ATF.

The grand jury heard from Bruce Shaw, the husband of a bombing survivor, who claims a federal agent at the scene told him the ATF had been warned away from the building.

One agent testified in McVeigh's trial of making a daring escape after the blast. Two agents claim they were trapped in a falling elevator when the bomb went off. However, their account is disputed by two technicians who told the grand jury that the elevators did not fall.

■ **The Two-Bomb Theory:** Two of the most enduring conspiracy theories are the existence of a second bomb or a secret cache of explosives in the federal building itself. The seismic record of the bombing, which shows two events, helped spark these theories.

But two geophysicists interviewed by the grand jury backed the government view of a single ammonium nitrate and fertilizer bomb, saying a single shock traveled at different speeds through separate layers of rock.