

Grand jury probes Okla. bombing conspiracies

The Associated Press

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 debutante 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, Ms. Howe refused to speak with reporters.

Federal agents say Ms. Howe 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 Mahon, 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.