

FBI destroyed evidence linking McVeigh to group

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WASHINGTON — The FBI and prosecutors ordered the destruction in 1999 of evidence from a bank robbery they once suspected linked Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh to white supremacists who were threatening before McVeigh's bombing to attack the government, documents show.

The evidence included a surveillance videotape of a bank robbery by some of the supremacists that occurred in Ohio five months before the bombing. The FBI lab compared the tape to pictures of McVeigh, but concluded a match was "inconclusive," internal memos show.

The 1999 destruction order, obtained by The Associated Press, was unusual because at the time McVeigh and one of the bank robbers had legal appeals pending.

And the government knew, but had turned aside, an offer from one of the bank robbers, Peter Kevin Langan, to provide information about possible other conspirators in the McVeigh case. Langan and his lawyer claim he still possesses Oklahoma City information the government hasn't heard.

FBI officials said Wednesday they were still trying to determine whether the videotape and other evidence was actually destroyed, but remain confident all

those responsible for the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building have been punished.

"Every lead, regardless of its credibility, was thoroughly investigated to its conclusions," FBI spokesman Mike Kortan said. "While conspiracy stories continue to circulate, no evidence that other individuals were involved in the bombing was corroborated by the investigation."

Dan Defenbaugh, the retired FBI agent who led the Oklahoma City investigation, said while he knew about the original effort to link McVeigh to the robbery, he was troubled by the evidence destruction order and unaware of it.

"Normally, all evidence is held by the FBI until the completion of all appeals," Defenbaugh said.

The videotape and connections to bank robbers were among thousands of pages of documents gathered by AP that show FBI investigators in the Oklahoma City case gathered evidence linking McVeigh to white supremacists who the government had been told before the bombing were threatening to attack government buildings.

Some of those supremacists, including the robbers, frequented an Elohim City compound in eastern Oklahoma where a federal informant warned federal law enforcement weeks before McVeigh's bombing that members were agitating to attack the government.

The FBI connected McVeigh to Elohim City through hotel receipts, a speeding ticket, prisoner interviews, informant reports and phone records and strongly suspected in the beginning that members there were familiar with his plan, the memos show.

"It is suspected that members of Elohim City are involved either directly or indirectly through conspiracy," federal agents wrote just days after McVeigh detonated a truck bomb on April 19, 1995, outside the Murrah building and killed more than 160 people.

Several documents obtained by AP were not provided to the bomber's defense before he was convicted, and his original lawyer said he believes the omissions kept jurors from considering other possible accomplices in the case.

"They short-circuited the search for the truth," attorney Stephen Jones said. "I don't doubt Tim's role in the conspiracy. But I think he clearly aggrandized his role, enlarged it, to cover for others who were involved."

McVeigh was executed in June 2001.

The documents also include a teletype from FBI headquarters in August 1996 that reported McVeigh called Elohim City two weeks before his bombing, a call to a home where members of the violent Aryan Nation bank robbery gang were present.

McVeigh made the call on April 5, 1995, moments after calling the Ryder truck company where he rented the truck that carried his deadly fertilizer bomb. *

The FBI teletype revealed that the gang members were familiar with explosives and had made a videotape three months before McVeigh struck vowing a war against the federal government and promising a "courthouse massacre." The Murrah building was across the street from the federal courthouse in Oklahoma City.

The teletype also noted that two of the robbers left Elohim City on April 16 for a location in Kansas a few hours from where McVeigh was doing the final assembly of his bomb.

Defenbaugh, who supervised the Oklahoma City investigation, told AP he never saw the memo. He said while he didn't consider the teletype a "smoking gun" that would have changed the outcome of the probe, his investigative team "shouldn't have been cut out. We should have been kept in on all the items of the robbery investigation until it was resolved as connected or not connected to Oklahoma City."

Defenbaugh said he also was surprised to learn, from AP interviews and documents, that prosecutors in 1996 made and then withdrew a plea bargain offer to Langan, one of the imprisoned bank robbers.