

Plenty for FBI to probe in re-analysis of Oklahoma City blast - Beyond McVeigh

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WASHINGTON - The FBI agents given the unexpected job of reanalyzing evidence nine years after the original Oklahoma City bombing investigation have plenty of places to look.

Their mission is clearly stated in orders given Friday: determine if the years-old whispers that Timothy McVeigh had more accomplices can be corroborated or disproved from a small body of documents that apparently never reached the original Oklahoma City investigation.

The outcome may not be as clear.

A trail of hotel and car sale receipts, surveillance videos and interviews with convicted felons awaits the agents, offering them tantalizing but at times contradictory clues.

The starting point will be hundreds of miles away from the devastation of McVeigh's deadly 1995 bomb - in FBI files originally gathered in Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Omaha, Neb., where agents helped solved one of the most famous banking robbery sprees of the 1990s.

The Associated Press reported last week that agents in that white supremacist bank robbery case collected witness statements, blasting caps and even a driver's license that raised questions of whether the Aryan Republican Army bank robbery gang might have assisted McVeigh's plot. But they did not share all the information with their colleagues in Oklahoma City.

In a few instances, agents even allowed some evidence to be destroyed.

The disclosures shook the FBI veteran who oversaw the massive Oklahoma City investigation. For years, Dan Defenbaugh had insisted every legitimate lead was pursued.

But Defenbaugh says he did not know about some of the evidence unearthed by the AP in the robbery case and he no longer could say for sure his investigation saw everything it needed.

The FBI responded Friday by asking its inspection division to review some of that evidence and determine if more needs to be done. The inspection division is a unit of senior agents that routinely reviews the work of the bureau.

Ironically, the review will be conducted in the shadows of a related event - the Oklahoma state murder trial of McVeigh conspirator Terry Nichols. It begins Monday and may also shine light on the question of other accomplices.

Nichols faces the death penalty if convicted. Any evidence of additional, unpunished conspirators could mitigate his fate.

For Oklahoma City residents, old wounds are certain to be reopened. But at least some welcome a second look at a case that has spawned countless rumors and theories of wider conspiracies.

"I have prayed and asked God this time let the truth come out," said Jannie Coverdale, whose two grandsons were killed in the bombing. "I did not believe what the federal government had said. I had talked to too many people that had seen Tim McVeigh in Oklahoma City that morning and not one saw Tim McVeigh by himself."

The initial FBI review will be narrow, officials say. It will be limited to a review of documents from the bank robbery investigation that both included references to Oklahoma City and were not shared with the original investigation.

Those most familiar with the case predict the new review will run into a handful of old questions.

For instance, the FBI was unable to determine McVeigh's whereabouts or activities on some dates in the Oklahoma bombing chronology.

Agents in the bank robbery case documented several instances through interviews and hotel receipts in which the bank robbers were in the same general vicinity as McVeigh when some of those gaps occur.

Also, there is the unanswered question of who robbed Arkansas gun dealer Roger Moore, a crime that the government argued raised the money for McVeigh's bomb. Moore said the men who robbed him did not resemble Nichols or McVeigh.

The bank robbery investigation turned up a tantalizing clue. The robbers had in their possession an Arkansas driver's license in the name of Robert Miller, the alias used by Moore in his dealings with McVeigh.

The new inquiry will try to determine if the license is connected to Moore.

Some key pieces of evidence, however, are gone.

A bank surveillance video FBI agents once suspected might show McVeigh participating in a robbery with the Aryan gang was inexplicably destroyed in 1999.

So, too, were some explosive blasting caps, two Christmas packages and a duffel bag found in the possession of the robbers that match the contents seen in the trunk of McVeigh's car weeks before the bombing.

The FBI never determined what McVeigh did with hundreds of blasting caps he stole before the Oklahoma bombing.

The FBI has pictures of the six caps found in the bank robbers' possession that might help determine if they are linked to McVeigh.

Agents also interviewed witnesses who stated the robbers' caps originated with two gang members who were in Oklahoma just before the bombing, staying at a white supremacist compound that McVeigh called at least once.

None of the documents obtained by the AP proves the robbers or anyone else was involved with McVeigh. At most, they show the same FBI miscommunications seen in the Sept. 11 attacks plagued the earlier Oklahoma City case and allowed a handful of tantalizing clues to fall through cracks.

If the FBI chooses, it also could interview witnesses. The bank robbery investigation secured statements from at least two bank robbers and one ex-girlfriend that gang members had bragged they were involved with McVeigh's plot.

One of those gang members, Peter Langan, is promising to tell what he knows if given the chance to testify at Nichols' trial.

FBI agents could give Langan a grant of immunity from future prosecution and force him to tell what he knows. The same could be done with other gang members, some of whom already have denied their involvement.

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Caption:
Photo: news

The Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building following an explosion on April 19, 1995.

AP

Photo: news

Timothy McVeigh on April 19, 1995.

AP