

**UNANSWERED QUESTIONS** / One man's determined investigation into the suspicious death of his brother while in police custody has rekindled conspiracy theories about who else was involved in the Oklahoma City bombing

# Did others help McVeigh?

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Kenneth Trentadue was no angel. In the 1980s, he did time for robbing banks. But in a strange twist, the circumstances behind his violent death 10 years ago in prison are playing out in U.S. federal court in a case that hints at a wider conspiracy in the Oklahoma City bombing.

Recently released documents unearthed because of a lawsuit against the FBI suggest that the long-standing allegations may not be so far-fetched.

The lawsuit, brought by Trentadue's brother, Jesse, has convinced a federal judge in Salt Lake City to order the FBI to produce hundreds of sealed documents in recent months, and even members of Congress are backing him in his fight for additional information.

The documents Jesse Trentadue is seeking revolve around the FBI's investigation into whether a well-organized gang of white supremacist bank robbers—known as the Aryan Republican Army—played a role in the April 19, 1995, bombing that killed 168 people and injured hundreds. Neither Trentadue nor his brother was involved with the group.

The bank robbers, who advocated the takeover of the U.S. government by neo-Nazis, stole \$250,000 from 22 banks in the Midwest. Six members of the group were arrested in 1996 and 1997. Three served time and were released, two remain incarcerated, and another died in prison.

Though the government originally charged Timothy McVeigh, Terry Nichols and "others unknown" for conspiring to bomb the Murrah Federal Building, authorities have since denied that others were involved.

The recently released documents, however, indicate that the FBI was investigating a broader conspiracy months after insisting that McVeigh and Nichols were the only suspects.

## Man believes his brother was murdered while being questioned

Jesse Trentadue, a Salt Lake City attorney, thinks his brother was murdered during an interrogation because he was mistakenly thought to be involved in the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building and the robberies. The reason, he said, was that his brother bore an uncanny resemblance to one of the robbers, as well as to the elusive John Doe 2 bombing suspect.

Trentadue said that his brother and bank robber Richard Lee Guthrie had similar features and that each sported a tattoo of a dragon on his left arm. A description of John Doe 2 also noted a tattoo of a dragon or serpent. A grand jury, however, found no evidence of foul play in Trentadue's death.

Kenneth Trentadue, 44, was found dead on Aug. 21, 1995, in a maximum-security prison cell at the Federal Transfer Center in Oklahoma City, only 11 days after McVeigh's indictment. Prison guards said he was hanging by a bed sheet, but his body had been battered and the cell was splattered with blood.

Photos taken after Trentadue's death and examined by *The Kansas City Star* show a cut on his throat and head and numerous bruises on his body. The medical examiner later said that the death was a hanging, it was the bloodiest and most violent one he had ever handled.

"His throat was cut; he was beaten head to toe," Jesse Trentadue said.

The death surprised many, as it was ruled a suicide, but a federal judge later ordered the government to pay \$11 million to the Trentadue family for emotional distress suffered over the handling of the case.

In 2004, Jesse Trentadue filed two Freedom of Information Act requests, asking the FBI to produce documents he thought contained information that held clues to his brother's death. Last May, the FBI acknowledged in court that it had located about 340 documents that may satisfy Trentadue's request. The FBI has since turned over two dozen records, but they had been heavily redacted.

Those documents revealed that authorities had investigated Elohim City—a white separatist compound in northeastern Oklahoma that McVeigh called just days before the blast—and its possible ties to the bank robbers and the bombing.

"McVeigh may have been trying to recruit other individuals to assist him," states a Jan. 26, 1996, FBI Teletype memorandum.

Another Teletype, dated August 1996, stated that Guthrie told the FBI that another person had participated in some of the bank robberies and shared some of the loot.

The name of the person has been redacted, but Trentadue and others contend it was McVeigh. After the bombing, McVeigh's sister, Jennifer McVeigh, told FBI agents in a sworn affidavit that in December 1994, her brother gave her three \$100 bills that he said came from a bank robbery he helped plan.

In November, Trentadue filed more documents in court, including a sealed transcript of a hearing in an unrelated case. At the hearing, a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent said that prior to the bombing, an undercover informant at Elohim City told authorities of a threat to blow up federal buildings. The informant's testimony, however, was not allowed at McVeigh's trial.

The FBI is resisting the release of more documents because it said information about its intelligence gathering efforts would be disclosed and confidential informants would be put in danger. The agency has asked U.S. District Judge Dale Kimball to halt the disclosures.

Trentadue and others said the documents could lead to additional arrests in the bombing and embarrass the agencies involved in investigating the worst domestic terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

The FBI continues to deny that there was a larger plot and maintains Trentadue's allegations are



Rescue workers stand in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building following a truck bomb explosion on April 19, 1995, in downtown Oklahoma City. One hundred and sixty eight people died as a result of the explosion. Timothy McVeigh was executed by lethal injection in 2001 for his role in the bombing.

unsubstantiated. The agency has declined further comment on the case.

Some congressmen, however, have come to Trentadue's aid. Last summer, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, a California Republican, asked FBI director Robert Mueller to turn over all the documents that Trentadue wanted.

"It has been a decade since Kenneth Trentadue died... in the most troublesome and suspicious circumstances," Rohrabacher wrote. "Further attempts by your agency to obstruct this case will only undermine the FBI's credibility in the eyes of the public." A court ruling on the release of more FBI documents is expected soon.

Trentadue described his brother as a "good boy" but admitted "he was no saint. He robbed banks."

"Yet he had been trying to turn his life around. He just happened to have the misfortune of looking exactly like (bank robber) Richard Lee Guthrie," Trentadue said.

The day after Kenneth Trentadue died, the chief investigator for the Oklahoma state medical examiner filed a complaint with the FBI and said prison authorities' assertion that Trentadue had committed suicide was not consistent with the medical examiner's report. A medical examiner's

report shows he contacted Justice Department representatives, telling them that although he could not determine the exact cause of death, he thought Kenneth Trentadue had been tortured.

Questions about his brother's death escalated, Jesse Trentadue said, when he received an anonymous call around December 1995 telling him his brother had been killed because he fit the profile of bank robber Guthrie.

However, Trentadue never was able to contact Guthrie. In 1996, nine days after pleading guilty to 19 bank robberies and agreeing to co-operate in the investigation, he also was found hanging in his cell while in federal custody in Kentucky. The death was ruled a suicide.

Meanwhile, questions lingered about Kenneth Trentadue's death in prison. During a 1997 Judiciary Committee hearing, Senator Orrin Hatch told Attorney General James Reno that "it is apparent to me that not only are the bank robbers, it looks like someone in the Bureau of Prisons or (someone) having relations with the Bureau of Prisons murdered the man."

The Justice Department months later issued a news release revealing that a grand jury had concluded its investigation into Kenneth Trentadue's death and that no indictments would be returned.

But that didn't satisfy some authorities. In March 1998, Oklahoma Assistant Attorney General Patrick Crawley complained to Justice Department attorneys.

"The real tragedy in this case appears to be the perversion of law through chicanery and the misuse of public trust under the guise of some aberrant act of federalism," Crawley said. "In the succession of either illegal, negligent or just plain stupid acts, your clients succeeded in derailing the medical examiner's examination and, thereby, may have obstructed justice in this case..."

Later in 1998, the medical examiner suddenly changed the cause of death from unknown to suicide. In a news release, he said his findings were based on new information developed by Oklahoma City police that Trentadue had been alone for the previous 17 hours.

The following year, the inspector general released a report stating that Trentadue had committed suicide and that there was no evidence of a cover-up surrounding his death. However, the report noted that the Bureau of Prisons and FBI mishandled the investigation and that four federal employees had made false statements under oath.

So far, no one has been prosecuted.

## Suspicion about his brother's death spurred Trentadue to dig deeper

Jesse Trentadue wouldn't have fought so hard for the FBI documents if he hadn't become so suspicious about his brother's death. Executed in 2001, Trentadue said he received more disturbing news: a phone message from an acquaintance of McVeigh, telling him that his brother was murdered because the government mistakenly believed he was Guthrie.

Determined to find out more about the bombing investigation, Trentadue three years later filed the Freedom of Information requests with the FBI for Teletypes and other documents. When the FBI said it could not find the Teletypes, Trentadue produced redacted copies that he said he had obtained from other sources.

Then he asked Kimball, the federal judge, to order the FBI to turn over those documents and any others related to Elohim City, the bombing, the bank robbers, McVeigh and others, including former Kansas City Ku Klux Klan leader Dennis Mahon. Mahon had visited Elohim City prior to the bombing, and several of the bank robbers had either lived at or had close ties to the compound.

Kimball said the FBI had not made a good-faith effort to find the requested records, and he ordered the agency to provide unredacted copies of the documents. Since then, the two sides have been fighting over the documents in court.

## TIMELINE

- ▶ **January 1994-December 1995:** The Aryan Republican Army robs 22 banks. During that period, several of the robbers live at or visit Elohim City, a white separatist compound in Oklahoma.
- ▶ **April 5, 1995:** Timothy McVeigh places a call to Elohim City. An FBI Teletype memo later said that was "a day that he was believed to have been attempting to recruit a second conspirator to assist in the OKBOMB attack."
- ▶ **April 19, 1995:** A truck bomb explodes outside the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 and injuring hundreds.
- ▶ **April 20, 1995:** Authorities release sketches of two suspects. The next day, they arrest McVeigh, who resembles the sketch of John Doe 1.
- ▶ **June 14, 1995:** Authorities announce that John Doe 2 was a soldier from Fort Riley, Kan., who had rented a truck the day after McVeigh.
- ▶ **Aug. 10, 1995:** A federal grand jury indicts McVeigh, Terry Nichols and "others unknown" for conspiring to bomb the federal building.
- ▶ **Aug. 21, 1995:** Kenneth Trentadue is found dead in his prison cell. Prison officials said he hanged himself; medical examiner said he was abused and tortured. His brother, Jesse, said an anonymous caller told him later his brother was killed during an interrogation about bank robberies.
- ▶ **1996-1997:** Six Aryan Republican Army bank robbers are rounded up and eventually sent to prison. One said that two fellow bank robbers were involved in the bombing, but he later recanted.
- ▶ **July 12, 1996:** Bank robber Richard Lee Guthrie, who pleaded guilty to 19 of the bank robberies, is found hanging in his prison cell.
- ▶ **June 2001:** McVeigh is executed by lethal injection. An acquaintance of McVeigh's tells Jesse Trentadue that Kenneth Trentadue was killed because he was mistaken for Guthrie.
- ▶ **August 2004:** Jesse Trentadue sues FBI for not producing documents relating to its investigation of connections between the Oklahoma City bombing and bank robberies.
- ▶ **July 2005:** After federal judge orders agency to do another search, FBI turns over two dozen heavily redacted internal reports to Trentadue. The documents indicate the agency was looking into ties between the bank robbers and the bombing months after it said that McVeigh and Terry Nichols were the only ones involved.
- ▶ **September 2005:** A federal judge in Oklahoma orders government to pay Trentadue family \$11 million for the emotional distress caused by prison officials' handling of Kenneth Trentadue's death.
- ▶ **November 2005:** The FBI asks Judge Kimball to reverse his order to produce more records. The judge is expected to rule soon.