

# **To Him, Murrah Blast Isn't Solved**

**Lawyer investigating 1995 Oklahoma City attack says loose ends indicate likelihood of neo-Nazi connections**

Chicago Tribune | December 10, 2006

By Howard Witt, Tribune senior correspondent

**SALT LAKE CITY** — Another envelope from the FBI landed in Jesse Trentadue's mailbox last week, bearing a copy of another secret memo from the FBI's investigation into the Oklahoma City bombing more than a decade ago.

Like thousands of other pages that the Salt Lake City lawyer has extracted from the government over the years via a series of lawsuits and Freedom of Information Act requests, this latest document was heavily censored to obscure the names of most suspects and informants. But a few key words stood out among all the ones that had been covered over: "Aryan Nations" and "explosives" and "bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building."

By itself, the three-page document was no smoking gun. But read alongside all the others that overflow Trentadue's file cabinets, the FBI memo was another small piece of a puzzle he has been doggedly trying to solve: whether neo-Nazi conspirators helped Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, the only plotters ever charged and convicted for the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, and whether federal government agents failed to heed warnings of the scheme.

The FBI, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the Justice Department have all long insisted that the answer to both questions is a resounding "no." No one besides McVeigh and Nichols participated in the bombing that killed 168 people, U.S. officials say, and no federal agency knew anything in advance about their plans for a crime that, before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, ranked as the worst act of terrorism ever on U.S. soil.

**Links vigorously pursued**

Yet the documents Trentadue has obtained, despite heavy redactions, reveal that FBI agents vigorously investigated whether McVeigh was part of a neo-Nazi gang that staged a series of bank robberies across the Midwest in the mid-1990s.

And the memos suggest that the FBI, the ATF and the Oklahoma state police all had informants inside a white supremacist enclave near Oklahoma City that McVeigh contacted and may have visited as he advanced the bombing plot.

Such loose ends in one of the most exhaustive criminal investigations in U.S. history continue to feed the fervid imaginations of conspiracy theorists, who have variously asserted that Oklahoma City was the work of neo-Nazis, Iraqi provocateurs, Muslim radicals or the federal government itself.

Nichols has dropped tantalizing, if self-serving, hints that he and McVeigh, who was executed for the bombing in 2001, were not the only participants in the crime. From his cell at the federal Supermax prison in Florence, Colo., where he is serving a life sentence, Nichols wrote Trentadue last month that he possessed "substantial evidence" that "clearly reveals the involvement of `others unknown'" in the plot.

But even far more credible experts still have doubts.

"After the Oklahoma City bombing, the government wanted to be able to go in and say we got 'em all and this is it, and they didn't want to hear about anybody else," said Danny Coulson, a retired FBI agent who was part of the bombing investigation. "But I think sufficient questions are there that the American people deserve answers."

"It is entirely possible that more people were involved in the Oklahoma City bombing" than McVeigh and Nichols, said Mark Potok, chief analyst at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala., a group that monitors extremists and furnished intelligence to the FBI after the blast. "But whether that means there was a larger conspiracy, we don't really know."

Trentadue, 59, does not much resemble a wild-eyed conspiracy theorist. A civil litigator at a mainline Salt Lake City law firm, he started probing the Oklahoma City bombing only as a tangent to his real interest, which was investigating the mysterious death of his younger brother Kenneth while he was being held in a federal prison in Oklahoma City on a parole violation four months after the Murrah building attack.

"I didn't start out trying to solve the Oklahoma City bombing," he said. "I started out to find out why my brother was killed, and it led me to the bombing."

Kenneth Trentadue's body had severe cuts and bruises, and signs of possible strangulation with a pair of plastic handcuffs, but prison officials insisted he hanged himself with a bedsheet.

What potentially linked him to the Oklahoma City bombing was his strong resemblance to one of the members of the neo-Nazi bank robbery gang that the FBI was investigating for possible ties to McVeigh.

Jesse Trentadue believes federal agents mistook his brother for one of the bank robbers, killed him during an interrogation about the Oklahoma City bombing and then tried to cover up the crime--a belief fueled by the disappearance of key evidence in the case and the rush by prison authorities to scrub Trentadue's cell before any investigators could examine it.

The Justice Department's inspector general examined the case in 1999, finding that the response of prison officials to Trentadue's death was "significantly

flawed" and that the FBI's investigation exhibited "significant deficiencies." Separately, a judge in Oklahoma ruled that the federal government had subjected the Trentadue family to extreme emotional distress and awarded it \$1.1million in damages. But neither the inspector general nor the judge nor a federal grand jury ever found any evidence that Kenneth Trentadue's death was anything other than a suicide.

If Jesse Trentadue never managed to prove in court that his brother was murdered, he at least managed to unearth the most comprehensive set of documents yet seen about the FBI's investigation into the Oklahoma City bombing.

Those documents indicate that a white supremacist enclave in eastern Oklahoma called Elohim City was under scrutiny by federal agents and the Southern Poverty Law Center even before the Oklahoma City bombing, because it served as a crossroads and training ground for several neo-Nazi groups. Moreover, an undercover informant for the ATF told her handlers in the months before the April 19 blast that some Elohim City residents were talking in general terms about bombing federal buildings.

#### Calls from McVeigh

Meanwhile, members of the Aryan Republican Army bank robbery gang were using Elohim City as a safe house between crimes, staying at the home of a German national named Andreas Strassmeir who was a paramilitary trainer at the compound. McVeigh had met Strassmeir at a gun show, and twice in the weeks before the bombing, McVeigh called Elohim City, the FBI investigation found. The first call, to Strassmeir, came on a date in early April when the Aryan bank robbers were staying at the compound.

Other reports tied McVeigh to Elohim City and the bank robbers as well, including an informant's claim that McVeigh had visited the compound in 1994; claims made and later recanted by some of the bank robbers that McVeigh had participated in their heists; and a statement McVeigh's sister made to the FBI that he had once given her several \$100 bills that he said had come from a bank robbery.

But Jon Hersley, who was the FBI's primary case agent for the Oklahoma City bombing investigation, said the FBI ruled out Strassmeir as a participant or witness in the bombing case and that agents never established any ties between McVeigh and the bank robbery gang, despite months of investigation.

"We wanted to make sure ourselves whether there was any connection between them, and there wasn't," Hersley said.

Trentadue remains unconvinced, however.

"The FBI had informants in these groups all over the country," he said. "So they knew more than they have ever said about McVeigh and the bank robbers and who else may have been involved in the Oklahoma City bombing."

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