

# The Kansas connection to the Oklahoma City bombing

By Stephanie Bergmann

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HERINGTON, Kansas – On April 19th, our nation marked the 20th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, an attack that still haunts the families of the 168 people killed, plus a small town in Kansas that today, still bears the scars.

Herington is where the plot for the worst domestic terrorism in U.S. history was concocted by two men who lived there only a few months.

“They would sit out here every afternoon in the sun and talk,” recalled Mike Wendt, a lineman in Herington.

“We were rebuilding all these lines back here,” said Wendt, as he pointed out the power lines that cross behind the former house of Terry Nichols, a newcomer to town in 1995. Army buddy, Timothy McVeigh, who also lived in Herington for a short time, often came to visit.

“They said, ‘Would you join us for a beer?’ And I said I wish I could!” said Wendt.

What seemed friendly soon turned sinister. Then, U.S. Attorney for Kansas, Randy Rathbun, remembers a phone call from his boss, Janet Reno.

“I picked up the phone, and she said, ‘Randy, there’s a Kansas connection to the OKC bombing.’”

Investigators had traced the Ryder truck that carried the bomb back to the office near Herington where it was rented.

“Literally, this came together so quickly,” said Rathbun, “simply because an axle off the truck was found two blocks away

Then, a search warrant for Terry Nichols’ house uncovered guns and bomb-making evidence that would later convict him and McVeigh of building a weapon of mass destruction at nearby Gearey State Fishing Lake.

The fallout for Herington was immediate, the town linked to a terrorist in headlines across the country.

“It shatters a small town,” said Kim Morris of the Herington Times.

Residents were sometimes harassed when they’d travel, like during a mission trip to Oklahoma City.

“A church youth group went down to see where the bombing was, and they were spit on, food thrown at them,” said Wendt.

Soon, many people in Herington, once proud of their small town and its railroad history, began hiding it.

“I would always say I’m from the Manhattan area or Junction City area. I wouldn’t say Herington for a long time,” admitted Wendt.

Even years later, strangers would stop in town, just to see where Terry Nichols had lived.

“A lot of people would come through, and if you had a nickel for everyone who would sit on the front porch and get their picture taken, you’d be wealthy,” said Marla Sheppard, who lived down the street from Nichols.

The woman who lives in Nichols' former house now says she isn't bothered by its history, especially since the house has a new number and color.

"My landlord actually changed the address. He said he did that because people kept coming by," said Amanda Floyd, the young mother who rents the house.

Terry Nichols again made news in Herington during the 10th anniversary of the bombing. Federal investigators came back to the house to look for more explosives.

"One of the agents said they had gotten some intel from the prison where Terry Nichols was that he told another prisoner that there was additional stuff in the house that ATF, FBI didn't find," said Herington Fire Chief, Ken Staatz.

He showed us the crawl space in the house where federal agents found more blasting caps, not enough to pose what they called an "imminent" danger, but enough to put Herington back in the harsh national spotlight.

"It was really sad times, and we still get a little bit of that," said Wendt. "It was pretty hard for us because these people weren't from Herington. They weren't local people."

Yet locals will bear the black eye on the town's reputation, as long as the nation remembers one of its darkest days.

Terry Nichols is now serving 161 consecutive life terms in a Colorado prison. His wife and son moved out of Herington soon after the bombing.

Timothy McVeigh was executed in 2001.