



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### OKLAHOMA SCOOPS

**M**ORE and more people are paying attention to the news coming out of Idabel, Oklahoma. A small timber town in the southeast corner of the state, Idabel is home to the *McCurtain Daily Gazette*, a county paper that, for some time now, has been scooping the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, the A.P., CNN, and the networks with stories—mixed in with local reports of gospel singings, cattle prices, and school-lunch menus—about the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, in Oklahoma City, which took a hundred and sixty-eight lives two years ago in April. Last week, the *Gazette* was in the national news because of rumors that its reporter on the case was the source of what the *Dallas Morning News* had published as a confession by the chief bombing suspect, Timothy McVeigh. The *Gazette* not only denied the rumors but declared that the confession was a hoax designed to smoke out a potential witness—a charge that was confirmed by Stephen Jones, McVeigh's attorney in Denver, where the bombing trial is scheduled to start on March 31st.

This was all quite heady for a newspaper with a circulation of only sixty-five hundred, but its reporter J. D. Cash, whose entire journalistic career has been devoted to the bombing, seemed to take it in stride. In covering the labyrinthine investigation into the case, Cash, a forty-four-year-old Tulsan who had had a successful career in real estate and banking, has written some sixty stories on the subject, many of them controversial. Last September, a series of Cash articles placed McVeigh in a Tulsa topless bar eleven days before the explosion, boasting to a

stripper that “on April 19, 1995, you’ll remember me for the rest of your life!” The exotic dancer was reported to have identified in photographs McVeigh and two friends from Elohim City, a white-separatist compound east of Tulsa. In January, Cash and the *Gazette* printed excerpts from an F.B.I. statement given by McVeigh’s sister, in which she confessed to having laundered stolen money at her brother’s request. Just a few weeks ago, the paper came out with its most provoca-



tive revelation to date. This Cash exclusive quoted one Carol E. Howe to the effect that, as a paid informant for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms on activities at Elohim City, she had warned of plans to target various federal buildings, among them the one in Oklahoma City. (Howe’s statement remains unconfirmed, and the A.T.F. has refused to comment, citing a gag order by the judge in the case.)

Many of Cash’s scoops have been picked up by the more powerful media, with grudging, sometimes skeptical acknowledgment. A *Washington Post* story last week described Cash as a “conspiracy theorist” while granting that a number of his “major” articles have “held

up.” The credibility of some of Cash’s sources—notably Howe—has been questioned, as has the degree of his own involvement. (It was a private investigator for the McVeigh defense who had showed Cash the purported “confession” while they were travelling to meet with members of the far right last year.) Still, on one of the country’s biggest stories the media establishment has found itself trailing a news organization with just seven reporters on its payroll.

In his office on Central Avenue, Bruce Willingham, the owner-publisher of the *Gazette* (and a smaller sister paper, the *News*), scarcely looks the part of a crusader. Soft-spoken and rather cuddly in appearance, Willingham, who is forty-two, was a reporter for the *Gazette* and a part-time chicken farmer when he bought the two papers, in 1988. It was a big jump, he says, from fryers to publishing, but he had been the editor of his school paper in Asheville, North Carolina, and had taken writing classes at Chapel Hill. Under Willingham, who says that his favorite writer is still Mark Twain, the *Gazette* became popular for its “Call the Editor” column, which invites readers to sound off. (A recent correspondent wrote, “There are several negative names that come to mind when I think of Joe Bob. . . . What is the definition of dung beetle?”) Politically, Willingham describes himself as a conservative on fiscal matters, a progressive on racial and social issues.

The *Gazette* hadn’t raised its sights much beyond McCurtain County until Cash, who looks a bit like Harry Dean Stanton, appeared in Willingham’s office, ten days after the bombing, with

an article based on interviews with technical experts and with witnesses who had been at the site of the explosion. Cash quoted an assistant fire marshal who claimed to have seen a bomb squad leaving the building with unexploded munitions after the blast. The article speculated that the matériel might have been part of a government arsenal whose presence contributed to the bomb damage. Willingham took Cash on after checking his sources and satisfying himself that his new reporter had no hidden agenda. Cash's journalistic debut was awarded a statewide prize for investigative reporting.

In national stories about the *Morning News* controversy last week, it was pointed out that several of Cash's articles had been reprinted in *Jubilee*, a publication of the Christian Identity movement. Cash says that he gave permission to reprint them simply to gain access to far-right sources. "Anyone who implies that I am a neo-Nazi is a liar or a fool," he added, mentioning that he has received at least one threat from the "paranoid right." For now, he said, he has no higher ambition than to continue coming up with scoops for the *Gazette*. "Talking to those militia guys, if you told them you were from the New York Times they'd either shun you or likely shoot you," he said. "Me, they don't worry about."

## SILENCE OF THE LAMB

UNTIL Dolly the cloned sheep came along, Roslin was a dozy Scottish village rejoicing in its ordinariness. Situated in the heart of Midlothian, near Edinburgh, it boasts a couple of castles in the neighborhood, including Hawthornden, the former home of the Elizabethan poet William Drummond, which is now a writers' retreat. There is also Roslin Chapel, which draws pilgrims for its architecture and an association with the mysterious Knights Templar. But Dolly, as they say in these parts, is another kettle of fish altogether.

One day last week, not long after the world learned of the Roslin Institute's success in cloning Dolly, using cells taken from a six-year-old ewe, scientists at the facility declared a "media-free

day." Researchers, who had been surprised to find themselves under the microscope of the international press, were locked in their labs. Dolly herself was not around, even to say hello. The fields surrounding the institute were powdered with snow, and empty. Dr. Ian Wilmut, the beer-drinking, bearded front man for the project, had gone to ground; he has had an unlisted home number since the institute was targeted by animal-rights protesters, in 1989.

In the bar at the Roslin Glen Hotel, the regulars professed to know little of Dolly beyond her name. Had the village been affected by her discovery? "You mean like Chernobyl?" one man said, taking a deep swig from his pint of beer. "You see what effect that had on sheep, running around with six legs and the like. There's bound to be some fallout." When it was remarked that Dolly was hardly comparable to a nuclear disaster, he acknowledged, "Maybe you're right, but who can tell?" Informed that President Clinton had called for a report on the ethical and legal implications of Dolly and the possibilities of cloning human beings, the beer drinker, who declined to be named lest his wife find out where he was, responded with a grimace. "Who in the name of hell would want to clone Clinton?" he belched.

Over in the rectory, the local Church of Scotland minister, the Reverend Mr. James Manson, confessed that, teleologically, Dolly was not a particularly hot



topic in the area. He himself had not yet felt it necessary to base one of his sermons on her. As for the cloning of human beings, his wife, for one, was steadfastly against it. But, surely, he was asked, the Bible offered some guidance on the matter? The good minister paused for thought, then remembered that he had indeed slipped a topical reference into the previous Sunday's sermon, when he'd intoned, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

## FACING THE MUSIC

TO the joy of the city's dance fans, the recent season of the Paul Taylor Dance Company went on as advertised, but it was a near thing. Until the afternoon of the opening night, at City Center, the company wasn't sure it would have musicians in the pit. Taylor, after three years of giving performances to taped music, a practice he abhors, had engaged the New York Metamorphoses Orchestra to play for his two-week season, and had advertised the fact. The Metamorphoses, composed mostly of recent music-school graduates, is a new—and nonunion—orchestra. As rehearsals got under way, its members began hearing from Local 802 of the Musicians' Union. The local thought that the Taylor company and the orchestra should sign long-term union contracts with set pay scales. But the company couldn't afford to pay union-scale wages, which have been rising steeply for the last few years.

Taylor, who had been hiring union musicians for twenty years before he ended up using taped scores, believed, as he said later, that the time had come to take a stand. "I saw it as a moral issue, not just an artistic one. These union demands create a false division—it's like art versus labor—and this is very, very dangerous for art." While Taylor had always been willing to meet with union representatives, he intended to carry on with the season as planned. The union said no dice.

Union pressure can be harrowing: threats, fights, tears. Even after Taylor's lawyers agreed to a compromise solution, the young musicians were still going through their own crisis. Eugene Sirotkine, the orchestra's founder and conductor, was faced with a long-range decision whether to unionize, which to him meant a choice between artistic freedom and having to play commercial gigs to cover the cost of a union band. On the day of the dress rehearsal, 802 threw a picket line outside the City Center stage door. The members of the orchestra would have crossed it out of loyalty to Sirotkine, but word came just in time that he had signed an agreement similar to Taylor's, which amounts to a pledge to





unionize in the near future, terms and wages to be discussed. The union had stepped down a bit, and the Taylor season was salvaged.

For a musical choreographer not to have live music is a serious deprivation. As Taylor says, with an orchestra the dancers listen more carefully and respond more vividly. "Live music is for the theatre; canned music is for restaurants and elevators." But live music was only the immediate issue: what's still at stake is the cost of producing dance in New York. This is something the union has not shown much concern for in the past. Now, however, it has signed an agreement with the Taylor company expressing its wish to find a long-term solution. A statement from Bill Moriarty, the president of 802, set a hopeful tone for negotiations: "Our ongoing understanding is that both public and private funding for arts groups has suffered in the past five years or so, and any agreement that we reach with the Paul Taylor company will be informed by that understanding."

So far, so good. The drama behind the Taylor season could prove to be the beginning of a new accord between more practical performing artists and less recalcitrant and ham-handed union officials, but we may never know unless something catalyzes the situation. Now might be a good time for the Giuliani administration to set up a special commission to oversee better relations between the two sides; if only in the interests of cultural tourism, the city has a role to play. It was small dance companies like Taylor's that helped make New York the cultural capital of the world not so long ago. Nowadays New York has less and less to show for itself. Those same dance companies find themselves fighting, on a bare subsistence level, for standards of quality that they once

took for granted. (Like Taylor, the Alvin Ailey company has taken to advertising live music as a special attraction.) Too often, the orchestra pit is dark. How long before the stage is, too?

## THE ANSWER MAN

A COLD rain was beating down on Washington early one recent weekend morning when Lanny Davis, a special White House counsel who is the President's chief spokesman on the soft-money scandals, called back. He apologized for phoning at eight o'clock, then explained, "My pager has gone off twelve times in the last hour and it's Saturday. I'm trying to sneak in some calls before my wife wakes up and takes an axe and ends it all."

Davis, more than most foot soldiers in the Beltway wars, had good reason for feeling vulnerable. He had just survived the worst week so far in a brief career that has been unusually stressful. Scarcely had the press finished chewing on the latest evidence of fund-raising zeal by Harold M. Ickes, the former deputy chief of staff, when the overeager hospitality of the President himself was revealed in the memo that turned the Lincoln Bedroom into a B. and B. For the past several months, Davis had been on duty from seven-thirty in the morning until well into the night, taking more than a hundred calls a day, preparing statements for the media, and appearing on talk shows—all in the service of putting the best face possible on the latest Clinton mortification. He was still smarting from the moment on "Nightline" when his reference to the more than nine hundred people who had spent nights in the White House

as the President's "friends" had prompted Ted Koppel to exclaim, "I don't see anything in the . . . President's notation referring to 'friends.' This is strictly money that we're talking about here." Davis now insisted plaintively, "I actually said 'friends and supporters,' and Koppel kept saying 'friends.'"

Davis is a fifty-one-year-old lawyer who was enjoying a partner's life as a litigator in the Washington firm of Patton Boggs when he was tapped for the White House, last November. He had twice run unsuccessfully for Congress and put in twelve years on the Democratic National Committee before catching the White House's attention with television appearances as a Clinton defender. When his predecessor, Mark Fabiani, quit just as Whitewater was metastasizing into the current mess, Davis stepped into a job that had been turned down by various other lawyers around town.

Davis maintains that since Fabiani's departure the job has got tougher, with the rate of White House embarrassments seemingly on an exponential rise. "I wouldn't call them 'scandals,'" he said, referring to Whitewater and related matters. "I'll call them 'problems' with a beginning, middle, and probable end. What I'm dealing with is a series of issues that are literally geometric. Every issue that comes up leads to ten new ones, and those ten lead to another ten. It's created a seamless, endless demand for information."

Not the least of Davis's trials is constant grumbling by the press and White House aides that he is too starry-eyed for the job. Why, then, does he stay? One reason, he said, is to be found in his first name, which was inspired by his mother's fondness for the hero of the Upton Sinclair series of the forties, Lanny Budd, an international doggoer who rubbed shoulders with real-life figures like Winston Churchill and F.D.R. Another reason is the influence of his father, an unshakable Democrat who died two months before Davis was named special counsel. "He taught me an appreciation for politics as a noble activity—which is contrary to what most people think today," his son said. ♦

*"Oklahoma Scoops," Darcy O'Brien; "Silence of the Lamb," Alan Taylor; "Facing the Music," Arlene Croce; "The Answer Man," Mary Jacoby.*