

# Oklahoma Scoops

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The Talk of the Town

More and more people are paying attention to 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 reporting 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 sixtyfive hundred, but its reported 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 provocative revelation to date. This Cash exclusive quoted on 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 traveling 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 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 material 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 reported 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."