

In the matter of Kenneth Michael Trentadue

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by J.D. Cash, McCurtain Gazette

Editor's note: Scheduled for Denver, Colo., today, attorneys for the family of the late Kenneth Michael Trentadue will renew their long-running campaign for what they see as truth and justice, this time in front of a federal appeals court, arguing that a loved one was tortured and murdered by members of the Department of Justice in Oklahoma City.

Since the death of Kenneth Trentadue on Aug. 21, 1995, the government has spent millions on legal expenses, trying to escape responsibility for the suspicious death of an inmate left in the sole custody of federal government employees. The family is trying to collect the \$1.1 million a judge awarded them for severe emotional distress he said was caused by federal officials, but it represents only a small portion of the damages they may someday receive if the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals orders a new trial in the case. Recently, Salt Lake City attorney Jesse Trentadue asked this newspaper to review a substantial body of evidence he has collected concerning his brother's mysterious and gruesome death - a death that the government claims was a suicide.

Both the death and its aftermath were bizarre. So heavy were the pressures following Trentadue's strange death that the investigating Oklahoma medical examiner, terrified of retaliation from the Justice Department, wrote the IRS, begging the agency to perform a "protective audit" on him.

The Trentadue family believes a cover-up surrounding their loved one's death reaches to persons serving at the highest levels of government in the state of Oklahoma and the federal government at the time of Kenneth Trentadue's death.

Recently the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Orrin Hatch, renewed his plea for the government to reveal what it knows about what happened to Kenneth Trentadue after he was brought to Oklahoma City in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing. Among the many questions family members are asking is: Did the government bring Kenneth Trentadue to Oklahoma City and torture him because federal agents mistakenly thought he was the elusive John Doe 2 - once the subject of a nationwide manhunt after the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City?

First in a series

By J.D. Cash

Oklahoma City was the center of the news universe throughout much of 1995. The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building focused the world's attention on the state Capitol where journalists from around the globe filed

thousands of stories about the April 19 bloody terrorist attack that took the lives of 168 persons, 19 of them children.

On August 10, 1995, indictments were handed down in Oklahoma City by a federal grand jury.

After months of hearing witnesses and examining physical evidence, the panel found there was sufficient evidence to charge Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols as principals in a conspiracy to bomb the Murrah federal building with a weapon of mass destruction.

Grand jurors also concluded there were "others unknown" who helped the pair commit the terrible crime.

Forty-eight hours after the indictments were announced, Nichols and McVeigh were brought into a packed federal courtroom for arraignment on multiple counts of murder and conspiracy.

In the stately chamber only a block from where a 7,000-pound bomb decimated much of downtown Oklahoma City, the two former army buddies listened with heads bowed as the indictments were read. Also present, over a hundred reporters scribbling notes - occasionally looking up for a glimpse at the two most vilified men in the United States.

The bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City was the most sensational crime in America since the assassination of President Kennedy. The spectacle drew scores of the most recognized reporters and journalists from around the world.

On Aug. 18, only a few miles away from ground zero of the attack, a prisoner from California was very quietly whisked into Oklahoma City on a jet aircraft belonging to the Department of Justice. There were no news camera trucks or reporters there to record this event.

Moments after landing, Kenneth Trentadue and a number of other prisoners were led in shackles into the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Prisons' new \$80 million Federal Transfer Center (FTC) constructed for short-term confinement of some of the nation's most dangerous criminals.

Whether the government's star witness in the Oklahoma City bombing case was also at the transfer center that day is a matter of speculation.

Michael Fortier had been taken into federal custody on Aug. 7 after his formal plea agreement was approved and signed by U.S. Attorney Patrick Ryan and Oklahoma County District Attorney Bob Macy.

Under heavy federal surveillance around the clock, Fortier had been cooperating for months with the FBI - providing snippets of information about McVeigh, Nichols, and their activities and associates.

No evidence has been uncovered yet that Fortier ever mentioned to the FBI the name of Kenneth Trentadue or his alias, Paul Brockway - the name Trentadue used back in the days he robbed banks.

However, records obtained by this newspaper do show that FBI agents during a long series of interviews on June 21 and 22, 1995, asked Fortier about McVeigh's connections to bank robberies. Fortier was vague about what he knew about McVeigh's associates and any bank robbery plot.

McVeigh's sister, Jennifer, though, had already admitted under intense pressure that she helped launder proceeds from at least one bank robbery in which her brother participated.

Jennifer McVeigh told the FBI on May 2, 1995, that her brother had been involved with a bank robbery group made up of like-minded men. Like Fortier, she divulged no names.

Search for John Doe 2

In the frantic days after the bombing, the FBI issued worldwide alerts focusing on a second subject present when the truck used to carry the explosives to the front entrance of the Murrah building was rented in central Kansas two days before the attack.

By the date of the arraignments of McVeigh and Nichols, though, no further arrests had been made by the FBI in the bombing case.

Appearing to step away from other suspects, the bureau seemed to be making an about-face in the high-profile case, telling the media that there may have been some confusion about a second subject at the truck rental. Maybe there wasn't a John Doe 2 after all.

Justice Department officials told the press that the three witnesses at the truck rental might have been confused when they were originally interviewed.

The clear impression given by these high-ranking officials was that the witnesses from Elliott's Body Shop recanted their earlier statements regarding the presence of someone else with McVeigh when the truck was rented.

And finding out otherwise was impossible for most reporters, because the witnesses in Kansas were under intense pressure by the FBI not to talk to the press. A full-time private security guard had even been placed at the Junction City, Kan., business to keep the media away.

As a result of all the secrecy, few outside the top rungs of the FBI and Justice Department were aware that a number of suspects were still at large.

However, senior level FBI agents working the case knew that the witnesses at Elliott's Body Shop never wavered in their belief a second subject was with McVeigh when the truck was rented.

And the bureau was certain that the man with McVeigh at the truck rental was not Terry Nichols. Nichols had an ironclad alibi for that time, placing him many miles away when the truck was rented.

The description

In the wake of the bombing, federal agents distributed a description of the man who was present when the Ryder truck was in Kansas. John Doe 2 was variously described to be muscular, with a dark complexion, 185 pounds, approximately 5-foot-eight to five-foot-10 inches tall, and bearing a tattoo on his left arm. Several reports stated that he could be driving an older model pickup truck.

According to an employee at Elliott's shop where the Ryder truck was rented, John Doe 2 had a very unusual tattoo partially visible beneath his T-shirt.

Mechanic Tom Kessinger told federal agents that it might have been a tattoo of a serpent or dragon.

Kessinger explained his early dealings with the FBI in a 1996 interview with this reporter.

"I just saw part of a tattoo that I thought could have been the tail of something below his shirt, John Doe 2's T-shirt. I told the FBI it may have been the tail of something like a dragon or serpent. I could only see a part of the tattoo. I was guessing about the part that was hidden under the shirt I couldn't see."

Regardless of the fact the witnesses at the truck rental were holding firm, by the time the much-anticipated murder and conspiracy trials for McVeigh and Nichols began in Denver in 1997, the government was working overtime trying to dismiss evidence that there had ever been a John Doe 2, or any other suspects that might muddy their cases against McVeigh and Nichols.

Also at this time, the Justice Department was under tremendous pressure to explain one of the most bizarre murders to ever take place in the federal prison system.

The Trentadue nightmare

According to Jesse Trentadue, his younger brother took a different route after their parents in 1961 uprooted and moved the family from the coal mining camps of West Virginia to the land of promise: sunny southern California.

Jesse Trentadue sought a better life than his coal-mining father had known. He would find it through a good education.

With an athletic scholarship to pave the way, the older brother graduated from the University of Southern California and then Jesse Trentadue went on to study law at the University of Idaho.

Kenneth Trentadue traveled a much different route to his fortunes: He robbed banks.

In 1982, Kenneth Trentadue was arrested and sent to federal prison where he served six years for his criminal lifestyle.

At the age of 37, he came out of prison with a new perspective. He set out to get married, raise a family and take what legitimate jobs he could find.

"My brother was pretty easy going about life," Jesse told this newspaper. "His wife Carmen is Hispanic with family and property in Mexico. Jesse took construction jobs in the states when the family needed money. Much of the time they spent at Carmen's place in Mexico or in San Diego."

Still responsible for living up to the terms of his parole agreement, Kenneth Trentadue had a real problem with his parole officer - the fellow wouldn't let him drink beer.

"We went through the administrative hearing process trying to get the beer drinking ban lifted," Jesse Trentadue recalled.

"Kenny was working, married and a good provider. He just wanted to be able to have a beer. They wouldn't let him. So in 1989, Kenny just quit reporting to his parole officer and a warrant was issued. No one came looking for him. And nothing came of it until 1995."

It was just weeks after the Oklahoma City bombing when a border guard near San Diego stopped Kenneth Trentadue while he was making one of his regular trips into the country for work. The arresting officer said he thought Ken Trentadue was drunk.

Days later, on July 10, 1995, U.S. Marshals took Trentadue into federal custody after locating him at the county jail on the Mexican border.

Documents obtained by the McCurtain Daily Gazette show that the arresting officer noted Trentadue's alias of Vance Paul Brockway, his height, 5 feet, 8

inches; weight, 200 pounds; brown hair; brown eyes and a dragon tattoo on his left arm - visible all the way to his elbow.

Adding to the suspicious nature of the situation, Trentadue did not divulge his wife's name or U.S. address - only providing authorities his parents' address in Westminster, Calif., as a contact.

When this information was compiled, an unfortunate picture emerged: Trentadue appeared to be an almost perfect match for the subject of a worldwide manhunt: John Doe 2.

Making matters even more suspicious, Trentadue was driving a 1986 Chevy pickup very similar to the one the FBI believed John Doe 2 might be traveling in. And possibly sealing his fate, the arresting officer noted that a check of the national database of criminal records turned up four hits for Trentadue, a.k.a Vance Paul Brockway - at least one was for bank robbery.

Suddenly, after six years of being ignored by the authorities, Kenneth Trentadue was arrested and flown all the way to Oklahoma City - supposedly to attend a hearing for violating his parole agreement in southern California.

His family now wonders if Trentadue might not have really been a target for interrogation by agents working the OKBOMB case. But whatever the reason for Trentadue's Aug. trip to Oklahoma City soon turned to disaster.

On the morning of Aug. 21, the acting warden at the Oklahoma City Federal Transfer Center, Marie Carter, called Trentadue's mother to inform her that her son had committed suicide hours earlier.

During this brief conversation, Trentadue family members say the prison official asked for permission to cremate the body.

Mrs. Trentadue said she would consult the rest of the family, including the widow.

The acting warden responded, "He's not married?"

Stunned but suspicious, the mother of the deceased told the prison official, "Yes, he's married and he also has a 2-month-old child and his brother is a lawyer. We'll get back to you!"

Recently, Jesse Trentadue told this newspaper: "When we look back on that first conversation with the acting warden, she didn't know Kenny's real name or anything about him that was accurate. She seemed to think she knew everything about someone that he wasn't. Who the hell did she really think he was? Did someone kill him trying to get him to confess to being involved with the Oklahoma bombing?"