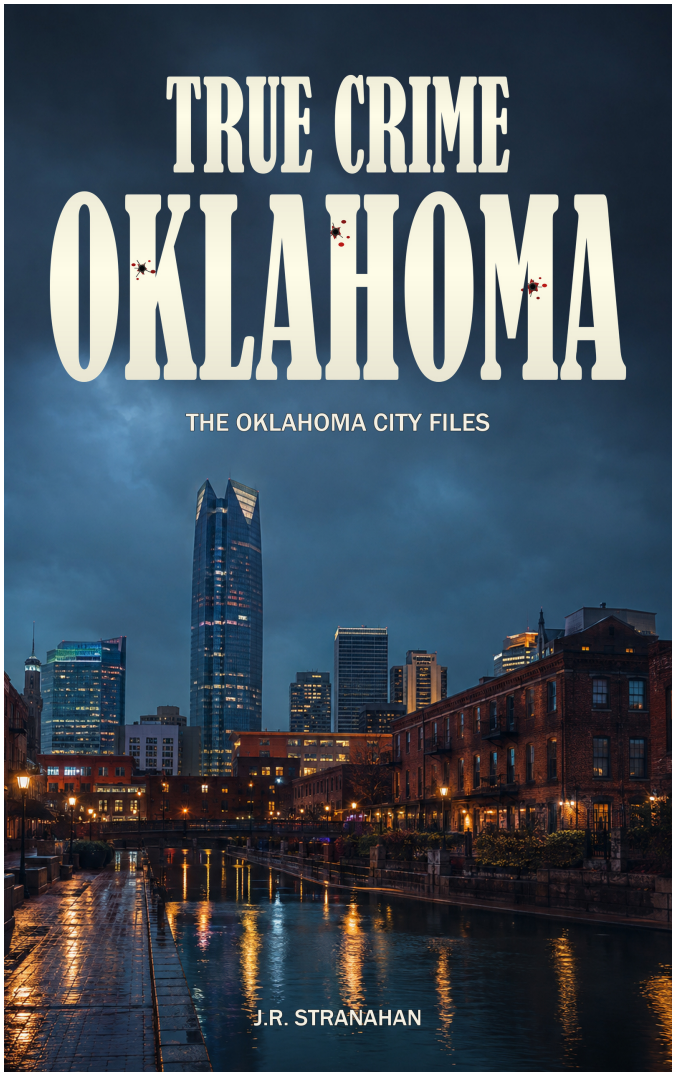
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The Building on Fifth Street

Richard Dean had finished his first cup of coffee. At his desk in the Social Security office, he was working on paperwork carried over from the day before. His account of April 19, 1995, begins with those small details, the things an employee might remember about any Wednesday until there was a reason to remember everything.

At 9:02, a flash and an immense force drove him from his chair. Darkness followed. Ceiling tiles, glass, office partitions, and pieces of his workstation fell around him. He could hear people trying to get free. He could also hear a heavier sound overhead, which he later compared to gravel being dumped from a truck. The upper floors of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building were collapsing.

Dean's account does not describe an immediate, complete understanding of what had happened. He worried first about his sight. He thought his eyes were open but could not see. The air was difficult to breathe. When he could begin to make out his surroundings, the familiar arrangement of the office was gone. B1

The Murrah Building contained federal agencies, a credit union, and a day care center. People came there to work, to ask about benefits, to conduct business, and to leave children with caregivers before going to their own jobs. A visitor to the Social Security office did not need an interest in national politics. A question about a payment was enough to bring someone through the door.

The bomb outside killed 168 people, including nineteen children. Hundreds more were injured. Damage extended through downtown Oklahoma City, affecting more than 300 buildings. Those figures describe the scale of the attack. They do not describe what a person inside could see in its first minutes. B2

Dean heard coworkers calling. Sharon Paulsen and LaQuita Cowan were beneath debris. He helped them toward the emergency exit at the

rear of the office, where the damaged breakroom admitted daylight. Then he went back.

On another trip into the office, Laura Bode reached him and held on. He carried her out. Cold water was pouring from a broken pipe overhead. What had been an air conditioning system had become another danger to anyone pinned to the floor. Dean alerted a firefighter, who tried to use his radio and then went outside when interference prevented the call.

Dean found Sharon Littlejohn badly injured beneath rubble. He could not move her safely by himself. He went for help and returned with Oklahoma City police sergeants Richard Williams and Keith Simmons. The three men carried her over the wreckage and out to Robinson Avenue.

He borrowed a flashlight and returned again with firefighters. This time he could point to places where people should have been sitting. Some could no longer be helped. He found his supervisor, Carol Bowers, a friend of more than twenty years, dead. They found Katrina Wreggit alive near her desk and took her up through a skylight. Dean continued searching after the firefighters were called to the second floor. Eventually he left without finding anyone else alive. B1

People looking for people

Elsewhere in the same office, operations officer Eric McKisick had begun a nine o'clock appointment. Langston University was considering accepting surplus equipment. He had taken a visitor toward the back to see the typewriters and other items available for donation. B3, B11

In his later oral history, McKisick recalled assuming at first that an electrical failure had caused the explosion and darkness. He tried to move toward the front, found the way blocked, and turned toward light coming from the rear. Coworkers helped one another across overturned workstations. Pipes were emptying water into the wreckage.

McKisick's young daughter sometimes attended the day care center upstairs. She had been ill the previous week. His wife had decided to keep her home one more day. In recalling that decision, he did not treat it as a detail of an investigation. It was the decision that kept his child out of the building.

He went back inside after getting out. On his last return, he called for anyone who needed help. When no one answered, he initially believed everyone might have escaped. Only later did he understand that silence could mean something else. B3

The people outside could not immediately give their families a complete account either. Telephone service was overwhelmed. A coworker, Nancy Shaw, reached her family and passed along contact information for other survivors' relatives. After being directed away from the building, McKisick and others found shelter in a business where a television showed the damage. Until then, he had not seen the missing front of the building. Burning vehicles had kept him from reaching that side. B3, B11

The television picture was information about a disaster he had already survived. His account preserves that strange gap between being present and knowing what had happened. His son, he later learned, had been told at school that everyone in the building had died. The child did not know his father was alive until he got home. B3

Shaw described the same difficulty from the other end of the telephone. When she got through at about 9:30, her family had been watching television images of the building. They knew its exterior destruction better than she did. She knew something they desperately needed to hear: she was alive.

In her account published that June, Shaw said she gave her mother the names and numbers of other families to contact. The phone had come from her desk. She had found it in the darkness before climbing with coworkers across the wreckage toward the rear exit. An object she managed to retrieve became a way for several households to learn that someone had survived. B11, p. 9

The day care center had been part of Shaw's family routine too. Returning from maternity leave the previous year had been easier because her son George was upstairs. At lunchtime she could visit him and play with the children. She sometimes brought him down to show coworkers, and she served on the center's board. The federal building had felt safe to her.

Repeated respiratory infections had led her to remove George from the center before April 19. Like McKisick, she survived knowing that a different decision about a child's care could have placed that child in the building. She did not describe the decision as foresight. Illness had changed an ordinary arrangement before anyone knew there was danger.

Shaw had arrived around seven that morning to process claims. A coworker sought help with a case at 8:30. They were finishing when the explosion forced her hair against her face and her clothing against her body. She remembered turning away and bending down. For a moment, she believed she was being burned. Then the coworker called to her. Shaw checked her arms and body and realized she was not injured as she had feared.

Smoke and dust made breathing difficult. They covered their mouths and noses with clothing. There were dangling wires, falling material and running water. Fear of a further collapse competed with fear of touching an electrical line. Eventually four coworkers gathered at Shaw's desk and made their way out. Her account records cuts, bruises and breathing trouble. It also records what she did not see: the worst devastation at the front of the building. Police kept directing the group farther away. Only at a restaurant, looking at its television, did she understand the extent of the destruction. B11, p. 9

Another employee, Dan DeMoss, had stood by the office's large front window at 8:50. He then moved to a computer toward the back to write a letter. Dennis Purifoy, the assistant district manager, worked behind him. The blast knocked DeMoss from his chair and sent his computer past

his face. When he could get up, he pulled Purifoy from beneath rubble.

They helped coworkers trapped near the stockroom and waited for firefighters to lower a ladder through a skylight. Purifoy then went back to search elsewhere. He heard Lorri McNiven answer his calls. She had been knocked unconscious and had climbed onto filing cabinets after coming to. She remembered looking at her watch at 9:50. Barefoot, soaked with water and covered in fiberglass, she called for help. Purifoy found her above the level of the desks, and they left through the rear. B11, pp. 7-8

These accounts do not share a single clock or vantage point. Some employees were outside while others were still trying to climb free. One person could be using a telephone as another called from a room beyond the rescuers' sight. The building's broken offices held many separate emergencies, and familiarity with a coworker's voice could matter more immediately than knowing what had caused them.

Judy Walker was away from Oklahoma City when the bomb exploded. She and her husband, Bob, both worked for Social Security. They had met through the agency in 1985, married the following year, and moved together as their jobs changed. In Albuquerque they had helped paint a hot air balloon mural at their workplace. When Bob obtained a claims representative position in Oklahoma City, Judy accepted a lower position so they could move together.

By April 1995, she was taking a training course in Dallas. After hearing about the bombing, she flew home. She searched hospitals with a friend. Bob needed daily medication following heart surgery, a practical worry that remained while the family waited. Relatives came from out of state. His body was recovered on May 2.

They had recently bought a motorhome for trips and family reunions. Judy described those plans in an agency remembrance published that June. The new vehicle had belonged to a future they had expected to share. B4

At the credit union on the third floor, Florence Rogers had been meeting with eight employees. In an account preserved by the FBI, she described being thrown backward and surviving on a remaining section of floor. The colleagues who had been with her were gone.

FBI bomb technician Barry Black was at Tinker Air Force Base when he learned of the explosion. His wife, Kelly, worked at the Murrah Building. He did not learn she was safe until she reached his pager about ninety minutes later. She and two coworkers had left the garage around nine, passing the truck before the blast.

These were not yet separate stories of rescue, investigation, and mourning. They were happening at once. People arriving to help were also looking for people they knew. B5

A number on a piece of metal

Jim Norman, an FBI agent working northwest of downtown, heard the explosion in his office. He reached the area within about fifteen minutes. Debris blocked the streets. He parked two blocks away and continued toward the damaged building as people moved in the other direction.

Local firefighters, police, medical workers, and civilians were already responding. Federal personnel joined them. Command arrangements had to be made while rescuers searched. Officials had to consider whether another explosive device might be present without losing sight of people who might still be alive. Evidence collection began in a place where saving lives had the immediate claim on everyone available. B5

Investigators needed to identify what had delivered the bomb. On April 20, a piece of the truck supplied a route out of the wreckage. A vehicle identification number on its rear axle led to a rental business in Junction City, Kansas.

Employees at Elliott's Body Shop helped produce a drawing of the man who had rented the truck. The inquiry moved to the nearby Dreamland Motel. People there associated the drawing with a guest named Timothy

McVeigh.

By April 21, investigators had a name. McVeigh was already in jail. B2

Oklahoma Highway Patrol trooper Charles Hanger had stopped a yellow Mercury on the morning of the bombing because it had no license plate. The federal appellate record places the stop seventy-seven minutes after the explosion. Hanger discovered that its driver was carrying a concealed firearm and arrested him. At that point, the stop was a traffic and weapons matter, not an arrest for the bombing.

The separate investigations converged in Noble County. The man identified through the rental truck had not disappeared across the country. He had been detained during an ordinary enforcement stop before investigators in Oklahoma City knew whom they were looking for. B6

That convergence was a major break, but it was not the completed case. A sketch and a motel identification could direct investigators toward a suspect. Prosecutors would need to prove who planned the bombing, who helped carry it out, and why the pieces of evidence belonged together.

The ensuing inquiry reached rental transactions, motel registrations, telephone records, storage facilities, stolen property, people who knew McVeigh, and material recovered from his clothes. His whereabouts before April 19 could be tested against records generated before anyone knew there would be a federal murder trial.

The eventual appellate opinion describes a case made from both witnesses and objects. Some witnesses had participated in criminal activity and had strong reasons to cooperate. That made corroboration important. Their accounts could be compared with independent records rather than accepted solely because they supplied a detailed story. B6

The people who knew beforehand

Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier were central to the investigation. Fortier and his wife, Lori, had heard McVeigh describe his intentions before the attack. According to the evidence later presented at trial, McVeigh told them in 1994 that he and Nichols intended to take offensive action against the federal government. He spoke of destroying a federal building.

The timing was deliberate. April 19 was the anniversary of the end of the 1993 siege at the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas. McVeigh's anger about Waco became part of his stated explanation for attacking people in Oklahoma City. His reasoning treated employees of the federal government as collectively responsible for actions taken elsewhere. B6

The people in the Social Security waiting room had no part in that argument. Neither did the children upstairs. McVeigh's stated motive helps explain his selection of a target; it does not turn the occupants into participants in a dispute with him.

The prosecution's account traced preparations into the autumn of 1994. It included stolen firearms sold to obtain money, travel, correspondence, and rental arrangements. Fortier's knowledge placed him in a position unlike that of a bystander who recognized a face after seeing the news. He knew about the intended attack before it happened. He later cooperated with the government and testified. His criminal case resulted in a twelve-year sentence. B5, B6

McVeigh's communications with other people mattered too. The trial evidence included letters about retaliatory violence and warnings that he was moving from political propaganda toward action. Prosecutors used those communications to explain the preparations documented elsewhere. The argument was cumulative: the records, physical evidence, and witnesses pointed toward the same planned attack.

The defense challenged that account and sought to develop evidence of other possible participants. Suggestions about additional conspirators became a durable part of the bombing's public history. In the criminal proceeding, however, a suggestion needed a connection to evidence the jury could properly consider. A theory did not become proof merely because the crime was large enough to invite one. The appellate court reviewed the challenged exclusions and upheld the trial judge's decisions. B6

A trial outside Oklahoma

Finding a court capable of trying the case required decisions before a jury could hear a witness. The bombing had struck federal employees, damaged downtown, and affected people across Oklahoma. The original district judge was recused. Judge Richard Matsch took responsibility for the federal prosecution in December 1995.

In February 1996, the trial was moved to Denver. Later that year, Matsch ordered separate trials for McVeigh and Nichols. The change of city could not erase national news coverage. Its purpose was to reduce the particular pressures of trying the case in a community directly affected by the attack. B6

The approach of trial brought a new publicity problem. News reports in early 1997 claimed to describe admissions McVeigh had made to his lawyers. His defense disputed the reports' accuracy. The articles were not sworn testimony, yet potential jurors could encounter them before ever entering the courtroom.

The court questioned prospective jurors about what they knew and whether they could decide the case from admitted evidence. Hundreds of people completed an initial questionnaire. Individual questioning followed. The defense argued that publicity had made a fair proceeding impossible. Matsch declined to assume that every person who had seen a report was therefore unable to serve. B6

Jury selection began on March 31, 1997. The jury and alternates were sworn in on April 24. The guilt phase included twenty-three days of testimony. The jurors then had to decide eleven charges: three bombing-related offenses and eight murders of federal law enforcement officers.

Those eleven counts were not a statement that only eight people had been murdered or that the other deaths were less important. They reflected the federal charges selected for this prosecution. The bombing had killed 168 people, and the witnesses described damage far beyond the individuals named in the murder counts. B5, B6

On June 2, the jury found McVeigh guilty on all eleven counts.

The penalty phase began two days later. It required another decision, one that the guilty verdict did not settle automatically. The defense presented evidence about McVeigh's life and beliefs. The government presented aggravating evidence and testimony about the harm he had caused. B6

What the families were allowed to say

The families who testified did not all arrive at the same point in their accounts. Some described the last time they had seen a person alive. Others described telephone calls, hospital searches, or waiting for news. These were events they had lived through while investigators were finding the truck and locating its renter.

Diane Leonard described searching hospitals for her husband. John David Florence described waiting a week to learn his wife's fate. Kathleen Treanor spoke about realizing that her daughter and her in-laws had been at the Social Security office for an appointment that morning. Gary Campbell remembered his daughter showing him her office and speaking about her career. B6

The defense objected to the emotional force of this testimony. A death sentence, counsel argued, could not be decided through grief alone.

Matsch imposed limits on photographs and other material. He also instructed jurors to make a reasoned decision rather than let passion or prejudice determine the punishment.

The distinction was difficult in practice. Describing who a dead person had been would inevitably make the loss less abstract. A parent did not need to offer an explicit opinion about McVeigh's sentence for an account of a missing child to be painful to hear. The court nevertheless had to distinguish relevant testimony about the consequences of the crime from material that would make the proceeding unfair. B6

On appeal, McVeigh challenged testimony from twenty-seven penalty-phase witnesses. The Tenth Circuit considered both individual accounts and their combined effect. It concluded that the testimony had not deprived him of a constitutionally fair sentencing proceeding. The government had presented only a portion of the bereaved families, the judge had restricted some evidence, and jurors had deliberated rather than returned an immediate decision.

The jurors also accepted several mitigating propositions about McVeigh's beliefs concerning Waco and federal law enforcement. That did not mean they agreed with his conduct. It showed that their decision had included consideration of the defense case. They still selected death. Matsch formally imposed the sentence in August 1997. The Tenth Circuit affirmed the conviction and sentence in September 1998. B6

Nichols's federal jury reached a different verdict in December 1997. It convicted him of conspiracy and eight counts of involuntary manslaughter. He received life imprisonment. He was later tried in Oklahoma state court. That prosecution also ended in life sentences after the jury could not agree on death. In a later interview, state trial judge Steven Taylor described imposing 161 terms of life without parole. The separate outcomes should not be compressed into a claim that the two men received identical federal convictions. B5, B7

The files found before the execution

By the spring of 2001, McVeigh was approaching execution. Then a records failure inside the FBI reopened a question that should have been settled before trial: had the defense received the investigative material the government had agreed to provide?

On May 8, officials disclosed that hundreds of documents had not been turned over. Attorney General John Ashcroft postponed the execution for a month. The discovery was not a new witness claiming to know who had parked the truck. It concerned the government's handling of its own investigative records. B8

The problem had emerged through work on the archive. The bombing investigation had generated an enormous volume of paper. As records were being gathered from field offices, employees noticed items that did not appear in the central file. Some documents had reached the central investigation in one form but not another. Others had been misfiled or lost in transit. Field offices had sometimes treated material as too insignificant to forward even though the disclosure arrangements required it.

The investigators handling the case had promised a broader disclosure than the minimum category of evidence favorable to the defense. Their obligation included reports of interviews and investigative activity that might not seem important to an employee reviewing a file years later. The judgment that something was unimportant could not replace the agreement to produce it. B8

The later inspector general's inquiry traced warnings back months before the public announcement. Analysts found discrepancies in January 2001. Managers did not establish an effective timetable for resolving them or promptly inform the prosecutors and senior officials who needed to know. By the time the issue reached them, the execution was close.

The numbering system made the failures harder to detect. Documents received central identifiers when they arrived at the task force. A document that never arrived could therefore be missing without leaving a conveniently numbered gap. Separate offices maintained their own files and practices. An investigation could have collected information somewhere without the lawyers responsible for disclosure possessing it in the form they needed. B8

Ultimately, more than a thousand previously undisclosed documents were identified. Some offices had also destroyed records during the archiving process. The inspector general found that instructions about preservation and destruction had not been followed consistently. Investigators could not establish in every instance that a destroyed document had already been provided to the defense.

That uncertainty was serious. It did not establish that the destroyed material exonerated McVeigh, and it did not justify presenting an unknown document as if its contents were known. It established that the FBI could not fully demonstrate compliance with an obligation on which a capital prosecution depended. B8

The inspector general's report, published in March 2002, found no intentional effort to conceal the newly discovered documents. It attributed the failure to mishandling, inadequate systems, and failures of management and communication. Those findings distinguished bureaucratic misconduct and neglect from a proven plot to suppress evidence. They did not make the disclosure failure harmless as a matter of institutional practice.

McVeigh had been executed on June 11, 2001, after the postponement. The report came afterward. Its recommendations addressed the next investigation as well as the failures of this one: records needed consistent controls, managers needed to respond to warning signs, and prosecutors needed accurate information about what their investigators held. B5, B8

Returning to work

For the surviving Social Security employees, the dates of the trials and execution were later chapters. In the first weeks, there was the problem of returning to work with people missing.

Sixteen employees of the agency had died. Others were in hospitals. Dean's account recorded that Sharon Littlejohn, the last of four hospitalized employees to be discharged, left the hospital on May 22. Injuries and recovery did not fit the timetable of reopening an office. B1, B9

The replacement district office opened in a shopping mall on May 22, according to the agency's June 1995 report. McKisick's later oral history identified the location as Shepherd Mall, though his recollection compressed the interval to about two weeks. Employees from elsewhere came to help. The local staff could not simply resume its workload at full strength. Some survivors were able to return; others were not yet able to do so. B3, B11, p. 6

The work had begun moving before there was a replacement office. Regional employees identified telephone appointments scheduled for the day of the bombing and reassigned interviews. Calls from the Oklahoma City area went to service centers in Grand Prairie, Houston and New Orleans. A twenty-person unit in Dallas searched computer records for unfinished claims, appeals and other pending actions, then contacted people whose business remained unresolved. Nearby offices received additional help as more visitors came through their doors.

There was a separate concern at the destroyed credit union. More than five hundred Social Security beneficiaries had their payments deposited there. The agency initially feared it might have to redirect funds and reconstruct accounts. Instead, employees learned that the electronic databases remained accessible from another location. Customers could use temporary arrangements at Tinker Air Force Base. Letters went out explaining the situation, and employees were assured that their own pay would continue. B11, pp. 5-6

These were modest pieces of reassurance in a crisis that could offer little of it. A payment would arrive. A claim would be handled. A different employee would keep an appointment made before the bombing. The people performing that work were helping families avoid another immediate difficulty while the search for the missing continued.

The agency also arranged assistance for injured workers and bereaved families filing compensation and survivor claims. An institution whose ordinary purpose involved illness, disability, retirement and death now needed those services for its own staff. The June report described Department of Labor employees taking claims involving Social Security workers injured or killed in the attack. Many had already been processed within two weeks. B11, p. 5

Counseling began while recovery operations were still underway. Employees met with a trauma counselor on April 21, the first time many had seen one another since the explosion. Counselor Kathleen Thomas later described nightmares, disrupted memories and guilt among survivors who could not understand why someone sitting close by had died while they had lived. Those observations were hers, made while assisting the staff; they were not a diagnosis of every person who escaped. McKisick's later recollection of survivor guilt shows that the question remained meaningful to him long after the first gathering. B3; B11, pp. 5, 13

The agency's memorial notices also recorded how different the lost careers had been. Carol Bowers, whom Dean found near her desk, had begun as a clerk-stenographer in December 1961 and had worked for the agency for thirty-three years. Julie Welch had arrived through the Outstanding Scholar Program only the previous August, after graduating from Marquette and studying in Madrid. Ronald Harding had served in the Army and worked for the Air Force before joining Social Security in 1967; colleagues also knew him as a musician. Oleta Biddy taught Sunday school and a children's church choir. B11, p. 12

Such notices were necessarily short. They placed decades of work and family life into a few lines, beside photographs and names. But they preserved differences the collective description of federal employees could hide. Some had spent nearly an entire career at the agency. Others were starting one. Their interests and commitments extended beyond the office where they died.

Far from Oklahoma, the agency planted a memorial garden at its Baltimore headquarters. A redbud tree was planted a month after the bombing. Sixteen sections of walkway represented the sixteen dead employees. Stone recovered from the building became part of the garden. The memorial connected a national institution to coworkers many employees elsewhere had never met. B9

In Oklahoma City, remembrance grew around the place itself. The outdoor memorial contains 168 empty chairs, with nineteen smaller ones for the children. Names are etched into their bases. The surviving wall carries the names of people who lived through the immediate impact. Trees honor those who came to rescue and recover them. B10

There is no need to choose between remembering the victims and examining the investigation honestly. The people killed deserved a prosecution grounded in evidence and a record open to scrutiny. The survivors' accounts also deserve to be read as accounts of their own lives, not merely as introductions to McVeigh.

Dean remembered the positions of desks because he was trying to find colleagues beneath them. McKisick remembered an equipment donation because it had taken him away from his workstation. Judy Walker remembered a mural and a motorhome because she had shared a life with Bob before anyone outside that life knew his name. Those details belong in the record beside the axle number, the verdicts, and the dates of the sentences. B1, B3, B4

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