

Unabomber's legacy resonates 25 years after arrest in Montana

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It was 25 years ago this week that a small Montana mountain town was thrust into the international spotlight as FBI agents and other law enforcement converged on a tiny cabin and apprehended a loner nicknamed “the Unabomber,” who sparked terror for nearly 18 years by mailing bombs that killed three people and injured nearly two dozen others.

The story of Ted Kaczynski still easily comes to the mind of many, conjuring images of a scruffy, pencil-thin, anti-social, angry man. He was a destructive recluse who had a genius IQ of 167 and was captured as a result a search that culminated in Lincoln in what was the largest manhunt in FBI history that cost nearly \$50 million.

But Lincoln residents, in an April 4, 1996, Independent Record story the day after his arrest, say he was a “sweet little neighbor” or was the “polite man who would ride his bike to town a few times a week.”

He pleaded guilty in 1998 and is serving eight life sentences without the possibility of parole. He was also ordered to pay \$15 million in restitution to his victims.

Kaczynski, 78, is now being held at USP Florence ADMAX, a federal “supermax” maximum security prison at Florence, Colorado. These prisons typically have up to 23-hour-per-day, single-cell confinement. Inmates have minimal contact with staff and others.

Lincoln sits along Highway 200 about 52 miles north of Helena and about halfway between Missoula and Great Falls. The tree-shrouded town of about 860 residents is known for its beauty, its recreation opportunities, its Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture in the Wild park, the Race to the Sky dog sled race and for being the home of Hi-Country Jerky and Wild Game Seasonings.

And it’s now known for being the home of the Unabomber.

Kaczynski was arrested April 3, 1996, in his self-made 10-by-12-foot cabin (some say the cabin was 10 by 14 feet) five miles south of town on Humbug Contour Road. The cabin, which had a wood stove but no electricity or plumbing, was filled with explosives and bomb-making books. He had also compiled 40,000 handwritten journal pages that included bomb-making experiments and descriptions of Unabomber crimes – and one live bomb that was ready for mailing, the FBI states.

Property records at the time showed Kaczynski, along with his brother, David, bought the 1.4 acres in 1971.

Kaczynski told Theresa Kintz, the former editor of Earth First! Journal in a four-part documentary, “Unabomber – In his own words” now being shown on Netflix, that Lincoln was not as secluded as he would have liked, “but it was a beautiful piece of land. It was in the mountains and so I bought it.”

It was the first interview he allowed and was three years after his arrest.

“If you use any common sense at all, your chances of getting caught are practically zero,” he said. “If there is nobody there to see you, the only danger is if you talk to somebody else and tell them what you’re doing and they don’t keep their mouth shut.”

“I just don’t like living in this damn system,” he said. “I got out of it by getting into the mountains, but the system wouldn’t leave me alone.”

Kaczynski said the cabin had been part of his life for 25 years.

The main thing was to get rid of the industrial system by whatever means necessary and to get into the wilderness, he told Kintz.

According to the Netflix documentary, Kaczynski had disputes with neighbors, attacking one's cabin because the neighbor rode his motorcycle on a trail. He went over one day when he knew people would not be home and took an ax to the cabin then defecated in their bathtub.

He poured sand into the engine of a sawmill of another neighbor, forcing it to shut down until it could be repaired. It's believed he was irritated by the noise.

Tom McDaniel, who was a Helena-based FBI agent who aided in the arrest of Kaczynski, said Lincoln is a good area to hide out if you like to keep to yourself.

"It's rude in Montana to ask someone their business," he said.

Kaczynski, who won a scholarship to Harvard University at the age of 16, said some people thought he was "in cahoots with space aliens" or was seen as a cult figure. But he said he wanted to be used as a symbol for promoting revolutionary activity.

Kaczynski was born in Illinois. In addition to Harvard, he attended the University of Michigan and taught at the University of California at Berkeley and then lived for a time in Salt Lake City.

The FBI says he came to their attention in 1978 with the explosion of his first, primitive homemade bomb at a Chicago university. "Over the next 17 years, he mailed or hand delivered a series of increasingly sophisticated bombs that killed three Americans and injured 24 more," the bureau said on its website.

While most sources credit Kaczynski with 23 injuries, the FBI says it is 24. It is not clear why.

An FBI-led task force that included the ATF and U.S. Postal Inspection Service was formed in 1979 to investigate the "UNABOM" case, code-named for the UNiversity and Airline BOMbing targets involved. The task force would grow to more than 150 full-time investigators and others, the FBI states on a website on the Unabomber.

A bomb sent to Sacramento computer store owner Hugh Scrutton exploded in December 1985, killing him. It was the first fatality attributed to Kaczynski. In all, he committed 14 attacks, involving 16 bombs.

In 1994, Thomas Mosser, a Burson-Marsteller executive, was killed by a mail bomb sent to his home in New Jersey. Kaczynski wrote in a letter to The New York Times he had sent the bomb because of Mosser's work repairing the public image of Exxon after the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

On April 24, 1995, his last attack killed timber industry lobbyist Gilbert Murray. It was also in Sacramento.

Kaczynski had targeted airline companies with two bombs. One was in 1979 that failed to detonate on an American Airlines flight. Another was in 1980 that was sent to the president of United Airlines, who sustained minor injuries after it exploded.

In April 1995, he told the New York Times in a letter that the killings would stop if the paper printed what would eventually lead to his arrest.

Kaczynski's manifesto, a 35,000-word anti-technology tirade, was printed in The New York Times and The Washington Post. It was Linda Patrik, the wife of Kaczynski's brother, David, who first saw similarities in the writing style. She shared her suspicions with her husband. They contacted a lawyer, who then approached the FBI.

McDaniel, Jerry Burns of the U.S. Forest Service and fellow FBI agent Max Noel walked up to the cabin.

Burns yelled "hello" at the cabin, hoping it would lure Kaczynski outside.

"We wanted him out of that place because we figured he had a bomb in there," McDaniel, who is now retired, said in a recent telephone interview with Lee Newspapers. "As luck would have it, we heard the door open."

He said Burns told him the others were surveyors. McDaniel said he and Noel had maps in their hands. "We got fairly close to the doorway and we asked him to step outside and tell us where the boundaries were."

"Jerry grabbed a wrist and I grabbed his arm," McDaniel said.

McDaniel, who continues to live in Montana, said he is convinced Kaczynski would have killed again had he not been arrested.

"He had a bomb ready to go," he said, adding authorities sent a robot into the cabin to retrieve it.

In news reports from the time, Lewis and Clark County Sheriff Chuck O'Reilly said he was "totally disgusted" with how the FBI handled the arrest of Kaczynski by not notifying local law enforcement. He said the raid had gone on for several hours before he was told by the FBI about what was going on.

He called them the "John Wayne of enforcement organizations."

"Their attitude is 'We don't trust anybody but ourselves,'" he said, adding later that federal officials never gave a heads-up to local officials about a possibly dangerous person living in the area.

"Pick up a pen and quote me on this," O'Reilly told the reporter for the April 4, 1996, story in the Helena Independent Record. "The FBI has acted totally unprofessionally. The only way any law enforcement can be effective is for all law enforcement agencies to work together."

Reporter Charles S. Johnson of the Lee State Bureau wrote in an April 4, 1996, story that Lincoln residents said FBI agents had been in Lincoln for six weeks prior to the arrest.

The Independent Record reported that media "swarmed the muddy, rural road that led to the rustic home." Reporter Carolynn Farley wrote that it took the media a while to find the backwoods cabin.

"But when they did, the onslaught came with a vengeance," she wrote.

By the time Kaczynski arrived at the Lewis and Clark County Jail later that night, three large mobile newsrooms were waiting as well as about 50 people, many of them journalists, some of them lookie-loos. Jail inmates pounded on the windows of their cells.

Lewis and Clark County Sheriff Leo Dutton remembers guarding Kaczynski as a reserve deputy for a couple of shifts.

“He was the politest inmate I have ever met,” Dutton recalled. “Anytime you talked to him, which was rare, his answers were a percentage.”

He recalled Kaczynski playing basketball.

“If you commented that he was doing well, he would reply with a percentage of the shots he was making versus missing,” Dutton said.

Dutton said Kaczynski wanted to run a certain distance each day.

“He had stepped off the exercise yard to know exactly how far to run,” he said. “He wanted to run one direction halfway and the other direction for the remainder. He ran a mile, so that meant a half mile one direction and then reversing directions.”

Cary Hegreberg was executive director of the Montana Wood Products Association at the time of the Unabomber arrest. FBI agents had contacted him nearly a year before, after California timber industry Gilbert Murray had become a victim of the Unabomber.

They told him not to let his children get the mail out of the mailbox anymore and to be cautious of anything delivered to the office. The Helena post office had been alerted as well, Hegreberg said. The FBI had offered the same advice to timber executives nationwide.

“That was a long time ago, but I still remember the chilling experience,” Hegreberg said Monday, adding it was heady times for the sawmill industry. He said it was thought the attacks were part of an ecoterrorism scenario.

“My kids were terrified at the time,” he said.

Hegreberg, now with the Montana Bankers Association, said it was a sobering irony that Kaczynski was taken into custody in Helena, just up the street from his office.

He also said that Kaczynski had spent a lot of time at the Lewis and Clark Library, so he had to have walked by Hegreberg’s office, which in retrospect, was kind of alarming.

He said he has never given the ordeal a whole lot of thought after Kaczynski was arrested and convicted.

“He obviously was a very disturbed individual,” he said.

Kaczynski came to Helena several times during the years he lived in Lincoln. It was said he would stay at the Park Hotel, asking for the cheapest room available. He also would stop at Aunt Bonnie’s Books.

Anna Fattarsi, who now owns the store with her husband, was then a manager when Kaczynski would stop by.

She remembers he wanted a lot of nonfiction and did not buy a lot of books on his visits, but did like the free books that were on a cart outside.

Fattarsi said his conversations were just formalities.

“He really didn’t open up,” she said. “He was a very quiet person.”

Fattarsi said the store kept a customer card on him and FBI agents asked to see it. However, the card did not tell them what types of books he was buying, just the number. She said they took the card for a while, but returned it.

She said she has Kaczynski's card to this day.

Fattarsi said several of the books found in Kaczynski's cabin had the Aunt Bonnie's stamp on them.

A media swarm came to the store shortly after the arrest, consisting of reporters from all the main TV stations and foreign companies. Some of them even bought books.

Fattarsi said Kaczynski's name does not come up often.

"I think Montana does have a lot of hermit-type personalities," she said.

Montana was in the spotlight for another reason as well during the time of Kaczynski's arrest.

Also going on in the state was what became an 81-day standoff between FBI agents and the anti-government group the Montana Freeman near Jordan. The standoff began March 25, 1996, and continued until June 14, 1996, when the last members of the Freeman surrendered.

The group had become increasingly frustrated by the government in the midst of foreclosure proceedings on the property near Jordan on which they gathered. Members were tried for various offenses, including bank fraud, mail fraud, making threats against public officials and the armed robbery of an ABC News television crew in 1995.

Kaczynski will spend the rest of his life in prison, living a life mostly in seclusion. It appears that his days in Lincoln are not far from his mind.

"What worries me is that I might, in a sense, adapt to this environment, in the sense that I'll actually become comfortable here and not resent it anymore," he said in the Netflix documentary. "And I am afraid as the years go by, I might lose my memories of the mountains and the woods. And that is what really worries me."

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