

Case Has Driven ATF 'Up The Wall' (Preview)

Sheryl Stolberg and Mark Gladstone
Los Angeles Times

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WASHINGTON — With each new explosion, investigators painstakingly reconstructed the Unabomber's bombs, piecing together scattered bits of flashlight batteries, lamp cords, matchsticks and the lovingly carved wooden components that would ultimately be recognized as his signature.

They ran off on tangents. Once, they scurried after a mysterious message — “Call Nathan R wed 7 pm” — that had been imprinted, invisibly, on one of his communiques. The FBI scoured drivers licenses and phone books, tracking down some 12,000 Nathan Rs across the land

They tried to gather DNA samples from stamps the Unabomber may have licked. They stored 22 million pieces of information in computer databases, including countless students who had been refused grants. They raided the house of a Colorado Springs man who, neighbors complained, darkened all his windows — one of hundreds of wrongly targeted folks who were not dangerous, just weird.

They even posted a message on the Internet about his modus operandi. “We want to cover all our bases,” an FBI spokesman said at the time.

For the thousands of local, state and federal law enforcement authorities who worked on the Unabom case since the first explosion in Chicago 1978, the investigation was for the most part a lengthy exercise in frustration, lurching from one false start to the next. Thousands of leads were pursued. All turned up dry.

“He’s been driving us up the wall for 18 years,” said Bob Holland, a retired explosives expert for the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Department who worked on the case for 11 years.

Some years, such as 1987, when the only known sighting of the bomber in Salt Lake City led to the widely circulated drawing of the mustachioed, hooded suspect — investigators felt they were tantalizingly close. Authorities carted that picture around to countless places, hoping to turn up a clue. They found nothing.

Other years, including the six the bomber was dormant, from 1987 to 1993, the Unabomber seemed as cruel and distant as ever; back then. Holland said, the going theory was that the Unabomber was in prison, or maybe dead.

“God Almighty.” said Pete Smer ... [end of preview]

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(Continued on page A10)

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