

# **Lincoln Log: Report From Ground Zero**

Thomas Nybo

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Lincoln is the type of town where you don't worry about drive-by shootings—you worry about driving into a deer. So imagine Lincoln residents' surprise when they learned the FBI had fingered long-time resident Ted Kaczynski — known locally as "The Hermit" — as one of America's most notorious and elusive killers.

As anyone in Lincoln will now tell you, the Unabomber's reign of terror has spanned 18 years, claimed three lives and injured 23 others. Among the injured was John Hauser, a graduate student who dreamed of being an astronaut before his fingers were blown off on May 15, 1985, when he opened a package the Unabomber sent to the University of California at Berkeley.

What most of them won't tell you is Ted Kaczynski fits the stereotype of a killer

"He's just a hermit," Dan Rundell told me April 3, a few hours after he heard the news that the man he once gave a bicycle to might be the Unabomber. "He lives by himself, rides into town on his bicycle, checks his mail and goes back into the hills. Just a real quiet guy. I saw him a couple of days ago."

We were standing in front of the Handimart convenience store and Rundell appeared to be in a mild state of shock — only partially because of Kaczynski's reported bombings. Locals were coming out of convenience stores and bars shaking their heads in disbelief as reporters from across the country randomly called Lincoln phone numbers in search of information

"The New York Times is on the phone," one wound-up local said before jumping into his four-wheel drive pickup and zooming off in a cloud of dust and exhaust.

"They've called about everybody in town, I swear," said Rundell, a volunteer fireman and EMT.

When Rundell's wife Emily finished a phone interview she joined us. I asked her what thoughts entered her mind when she heard the news.

I thought 'No way,'" she said. "I thought of other people but not him, not Ted."

As I walked away from the Rundells, a pack of reporters and photographers from across the street made their way toward the Rundells.

A few miles down the road from Kaczynski's shack stands the Lincoln branch of the Lewis and Clark County Sheriffs Office, a cinder-block building no bigger than a double-wide nailer. Kaczynski travelled past this building every time he pedalled into town to check his mail or buy a sack of flour.

When I asked a deputy in mirrored sunglasses if he knew the FBI had been staking out Kaczynski's shack for the past couple weeks, he shook his head.

"We were never informed of a thing," he said icily from behind the wheel of his truck.

The next night patrons watching TV at the Wilderness Bar laughed as Lewis and Clark County Sheriff Chuck O'Reilly tossed a stack of papers into the air in frustration over not being informed of the bust, the owner of the bar told me Friday. Since Kaczynski's capture, the number of deputies in Lincoln has gone from one to four, Carol White said.

It's like he's coming in to terrorize Lincoln because he wasn't let in on the big action," she said of O' Reilly.

White interrupted our conversation to sell one of her Unabomber T-shirts to a couple from Laurel. The T-shirts read "Did the Unabomber hide in the Wilderness? Bar." She had 80 of the shirts printed within 24 hours of hearing the news of Kaczynski's capture. By Friday, more than half of the \$14 T-shirt had been sold. One of the shirts was on display behind the bar, hanging from the barrel of a shotgun mounted high on the wall.

The bartender, a stocky woman wearing jeans, a turquoise-and-pink Brushpopper and a belt buckle the size of a small Frisbee eyed my notebook suspiciously when I walked in the door. But when I told her I worked for a weekly paper in Choteau, she treated me like kin and introduced me to White. When I finished talking with White, she asked me if I'd like to sign in like the other reporters, including one who used her office the night before to transmit a story in her computer across the phone lines to San Francisco.

"Sign in? Sign in where?" I asked.

She then led me to the women's bathroom, made sure no one was inside and pointed to a Budweiser chalkboard on the wall. I grabbed a piece of chalk and scribbled "Choteau Acantha" between "San Francisco Chronicle" and "Associated Press."

By Saturday night, Lincoln had quieted down. At the Wilderness Bar, the TVs were turned off and talk had little to do with (lie Unabomber, the FBI or Larry King. The bulk of the press had migrated to Helena, where Ted Kaczynski had spent the prior three nights. When I walked away from the Wilderness, I could hear two Lincoln men swapping hunting lies and stories from Vietnam.

By that time, my job as a reporter was done. I drove up the road past Kaczynski's shack in search of a Choteau friend's cabin. Beneath the inky-black sky, I had little luck reading the names on the mailboxes and questioned the reception I might receive if I began knocking on cabin doors and asking for directions.

All was not lost, however. In anticipation of such misfortune, I had tossed a sleeping bag in the bag of my truck. And as I headed back toward Lincoln to find a camping spot, I heard the curious wump, wump, wump that means only one thing: flat tire.

"Fantastic," I thought "Flat tire. I'll just pull off to the side of the road and camp in the back of my truck. Seems safe enough."

As I lay shivering in my sleeping bag — which I discovered had a broken zipper and an insulation rating of about 50 degrees — I clenched my teeth and willed myself to sleep.

Several hours later—or maybe 20 minutes, I couldn't really tell — I heard the distinct rumbling of a V-8 engine, followed shortly by an obnoxious spotlight glaring through the fogged windows of my topper. I heard men talking and thought of the squealing-pig scene in the movie "Deliverance." I remembered I was just half a mile from the home of Ted Kaczynski, the man believed by some to be more dangerous than crack.

I opened the topper's door, peeked out and was immediately greeted by the high-powered spotlight of an FBI agent

"What are you doing?" Came a loud voice.

"I've got a flat tire," I said, squinting. "I'll fix it in the morning and be on my way."

To my surprise, the agent asked whether I needed any help, which I politely declined ... consideration of my exhaustion and disorientation. Before he hopped into his sport utility vehicle and motored down the muddy road, he asked one more question.

"You're not with the media are you?" he said with equal parts suspicion and anger, catching me off guard.

A million thoughts raced through my mind but only one word raced through my mouth.

"No."

I was about to explain to him that although I made my living as a reporter, I wasn't on assignment — I was looking for a cabin with "McDunn" written on the mailbox when I hit a rock and got a flat tire and that I didn't have a flashlight and that I was cold as hell. But he was already gone.

The Ted K Archive

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The Choteau Acantha (Montana), April 10, 1996. <[mthspublic.newspapers.com](http://mthspublic.newspapers.com)>

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