

# ELUSIVE ENDING

BY BRANDON BEARD

WILL *Oklahomans ever*

*find* **CLOSURE** *for the*

*federal building*

**BOMBING ?**



**M**any Americans easily recall where they were on the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963. There are many, too, who can tell what they were doing on Dec. 7, 1941.

It's true that the impact of these dates — the assassination of President Kennedy and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which launched the United States into World War II — are forever stamped on our national memory.

But even if you lived outside the borders of Oklahoma before April 19, 1995, and you aren't able to remember your whereabouts at 9:02 that morning, just ask around. There are plenty of people in the Sooner state who can recall that moment

when life as they knew it changed dramatically.

Since the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building six years ago, it is doubtful that many people in this country haven't seen or heard the words "Oklahoma City" and immediately thought of the blast that April morning or the 168 lives that were claimed as a result.

We in Oklahoma — and especially Oklahoma City — have been the focus of local, national and international news almost perpetually since then. And with the pending May 16 execution of the man responsible for the crime, Timothy McVeigh, the attention seems to have returned in full force.

There is no question that the act was heinous, earning the title of the worst terrorist act ever committed on American soil and setting a city, state and nation on ear. The show of worldwide support and respect for the "taking-care-of-your-own" spirit our citizens displayed has become almost as legendary as the blast itself.

But if you are a citizen of Oklahoma, then you must also have noticed some other factors in the years since the bombing: elected officials making constant reference to the event and the almost-daily media accounts that find a new and unexplored facet of the incident.

Most would agree that, as home to the most deliberate violent act in our nation's

history, it is right and just that we never lose sight of what happened that day. But as we memorialize the dead, pay tribute to their survivors and console the thousands who were affected in some way by the bombing, a series of unsettling questions linger.

Will Oklahoma City forever be linked to April 19, 1995? Have we latched on to an unfortunate event and allowed it to define who we are? What effect, if any, will McVeigh's execution and the planned trial of his accomplice, Terry Nichols, have on our ability to find closure?

Are we obsessed with the bombing?

The responses to these questions differ with each person asked. But while most

*continued on next page*



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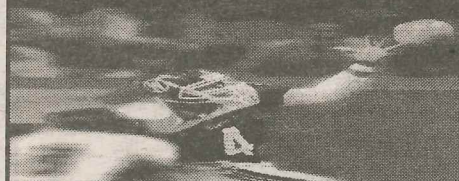
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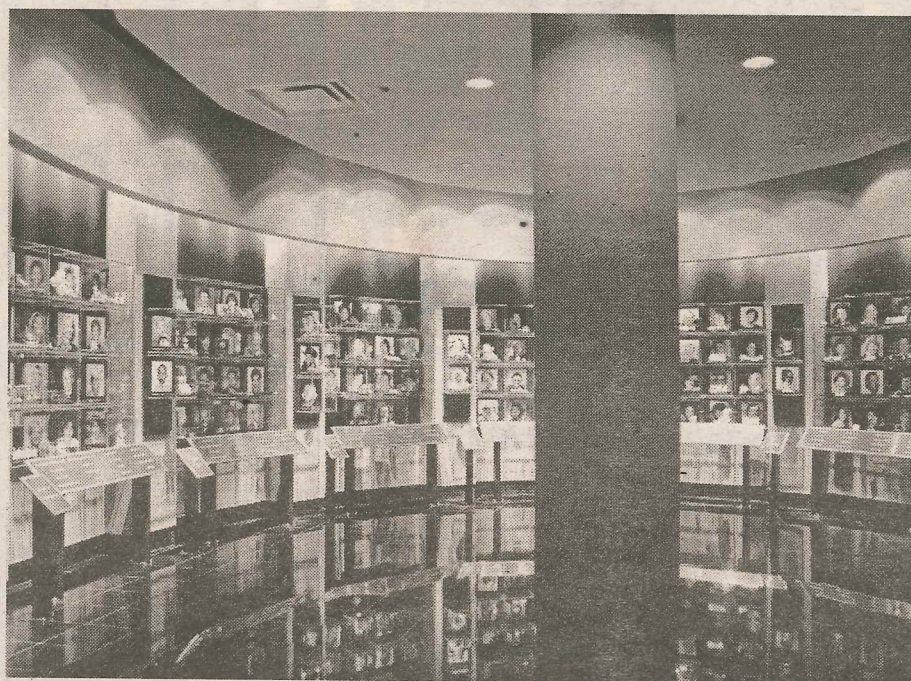

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## Bombing continued



In a central part of the Oklahoma City National Memorial, the 168 victims of the April 19, 1995 Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing are memorialized at the museum.

everyone agrees on the emotional impact that accompanied the bombing, not everyone is on the same page in terms of what it means for the future of our city and state.

Prior to April 1995, Oklahoma, although rich in American Indian and Western history, hardly registered on the national consciousness. Aside from the state's dying oil baron status, images of the Dust Bowl, its penchant for producing country and western musicians and its college football tradition, Oklahoma had been without something to make most of the world — or most of the nation, for that matter — take notice.

Then, as suddenly and unexpectedly as the blast itself, the state was thrust into every living room, newsroom and barroom in the world. But amid the shock and devastation came a public response rarely, if ever, witnessed before. It could be seen almost everywhere you turned — the devotion of rescue workers, the absence of looting, the thousands of people lined up to donate blood. Surely, if one thing was able to capture our attention in the immediate fall-out from the bombing, it was this.

"I think the bombing really showed a sense of basic American goodness," said Dr. Edward Linenthal, professor of religious studies at the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh. "So there were fascinating discussions about American innocence and its loss and what did the bombing reveal about who we were."

Linenthal, a historian who has written several books on memorialization, has been traveling to Oklahoma City since 1997 to research his upcoming book on the bombing, "The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory," and the memorializing of it.

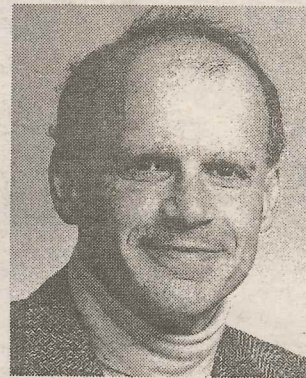
Linenthal said that while Oklahoma City's image forever may be linked to the

bombing, that's not necessarily a bad thing. He said the other side of the coin also would be noted in the pages of history books.

"The bombing will inevitably be tied up with the city's memory, and it should be," he said. "These sorts of horrific events can be important parts of our memory, as well. But it's also going to be remembered in the next breath as a kind of, I think, model for how mass violence can be engaged, encountered and dealt with in a remarkably honest way."

Linenthal said the way Oklahomans dealt with and almost immediately began the discussion of memorializing the event is just as noteworthy.

"Often times in the past, we've simply forgotten these places out of shame — paved them over, repainted them, torn them down, burned them down," he said. "There are very few sites of mass violence that have been memorialized in the culture and none as intensely as Oklahoma City."



Dr. Edward Linenthal

Linenthal said part of why Oklahoma City has been able to focus so intently on the 168 people who died — placing them, their stories and their lives so prominently in the Oklahoma City National Memorial's adjacent museum — is because, in comparison to other sites of mass violence, the number of dead is comprehensible. Unlike the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., where millions of people are memorialized, it's easier to individualize these 168 — to make them tangible.

Local historian and attorney Bob Burke said while the resilience of Oklahomans in recovering from such an incident likely will be remembered for generations to come, concerns remain that it may take a backseat to the blast itself and the lives lost.

"Unfortunately, from a historical perspective, what will be seen is that worst act of domestic terrorism in the history of the United States," he said.

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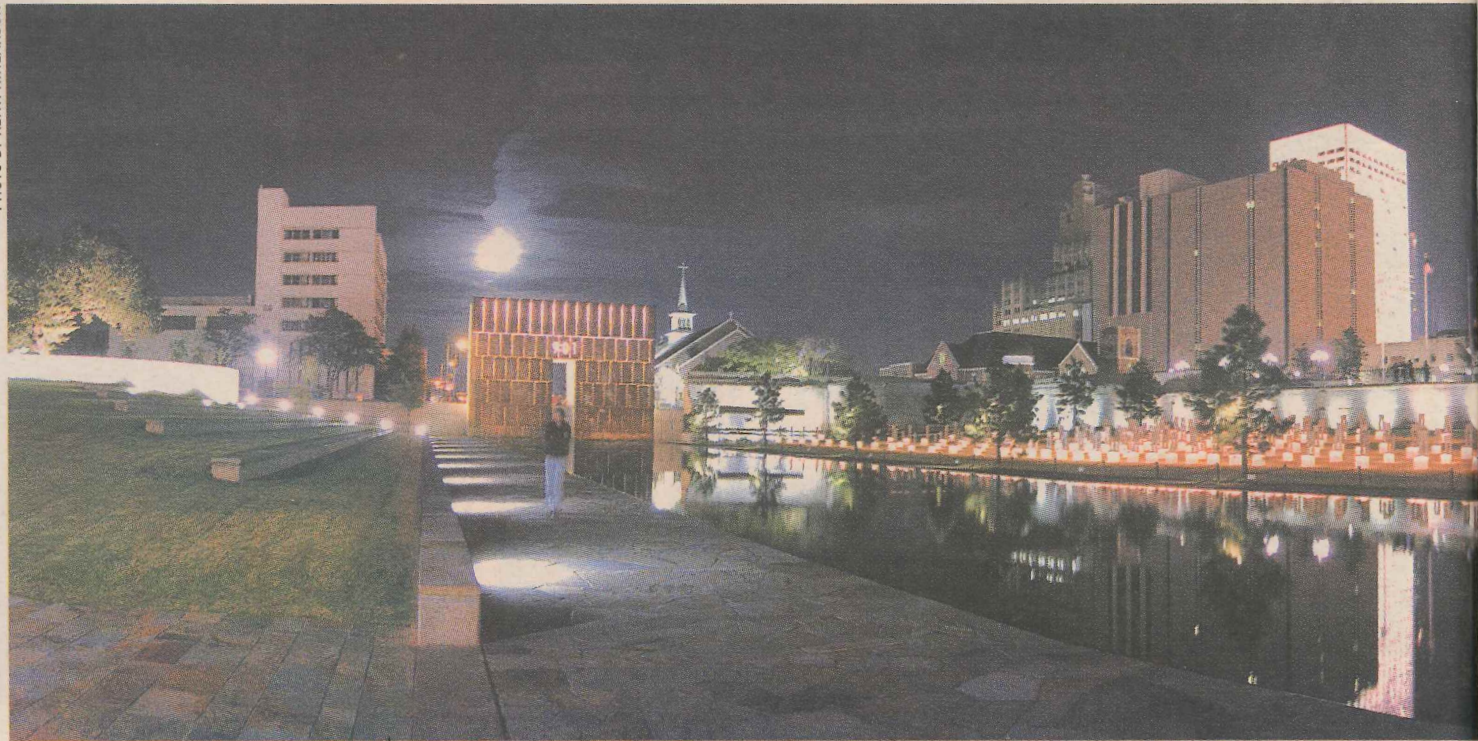
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## Bombing continued

PHOTO BY KEITH RINEARSON



The Oklahoma City National Memorial, shown here at night, is considered by many to be one of the most unique memorialization spots in the nation.

"I think it's just simply because of the terrible violence and the destruction that was caused. A century from now, that may be the story rather than how resilient we were and how we picked up the pieces afterwards," Burke said, noting that major national events that follow could put some distance between Oklahoma and that legacy.

"I think big events in Oklahoma like [the University of Oklahoma's national football championship] all at once take precedence over it," he said.

"So, I'm thinking over the years that hopefully we will lose that label. I would hope that 20 years from now — and it may take that long — when people think of Oklahoma, they would think of something that has happened in the recent past and not think of Oklahoma City: 'Oh, yeah, that's the bombing.'"

State Sen. Cal Hobson, D-Lexington, hasn't shied away from expressing his views on the bombing, specifically the decision by Oklahoma County District Attorney Bob Macy to try bombing co-conspirator Nichols in district court.

Hobson has said he doesn't believe that taking that road will do anything in the way of advancing the state or healing the wounds from the bombing. He has said it will do little more than serve as a bitter reminder.

Addressing the national fascination with the bombing, Hobson said it is often the first topic of conversation when he speaks to someone who isn't from Oklahoma.

"It's true that in almost every speech I give outside of the state, if I'm asked a question about the state, it's not about cowboys and Indians anymore; it's about the bombing," Hobson said. "At first, it was everybody was sympathetic, as they should be. But as time has passed, you do get to that point where, for the image of your city, you would hope to begin to move to some of the wonderful improvements of the MAPS program and talk about that progress."

Why do we talk about the bombing so

much? Hobson has an explanation for why it has become such a popular topic for the state's politicians.

"I think it's obviously the most politically safe thing one can do is to talk about the loss and to talk about the damage and the destruction to the families. I mean, that's what politicians are going to do because it's a very safe commentary," he said, noting that the topic rarely comes up in the halls of the state Capitol these days and that he is asked about it less than in years past.

Hobson added that although he admires such phrases as the "Oklahoma spirit" and the stories of "unified Oklahomans," he believes Oklahomans would have stepped forward if the bombing had occurred somewhere else.

"Quite frankly, there are fine people in every city in America, and if this had happened anywhere else, we would've gone to their rescue just as folks came to ours," he said.

Linenthal referred to this phenomenon as the "progressive narrative" — one of among four ways the bombing has come to be related, he said. He said the progressive narrative — the kind often heard in political speeches referencing the bombing — focuses less on the bombing itself and more on the response and the supposed good that came out of it. However, Linenthal said that while this narrative may have become more of a focus than the actual event, that doesn't make it dishonest or insincere.

"It's that transformation of a horrific event that confronts us with the danger of meaninglessness and wasted lives," Linenthal said. "You turn it into a narrative of civic renewal."

Burke said he has asked himself why the topic keeps coming up. He said that talking about it is important.

"There is some value to talk about that in the future and not from the healing process," he said. "There is some value historically. It makes us better people by us all concluding that Tim McVeigh was a monster to do this. And it's good for us as a society to conclude only a monster could do this because then we somehow say something about our culture, about how we have melded together a belief that this is wrong — this is not the way to go about expressing dissent to your government."

But talking about such a traumatic event can have mental health benefits, too, according to one local counselor. Judy Mee, an Oklahoma City licensed professional counselor who has worked with several bombing victims and families, said talking about events such as the bombing can be helpful in the healing process — something which, she said, often is not given enough time.

Mee said one of the things she has noticed since the bombing is something that is becoming common in our society at large: not wanting to deal with pain, addressing it only briefly and then moving on, perhaps to avoid it as much as possible.

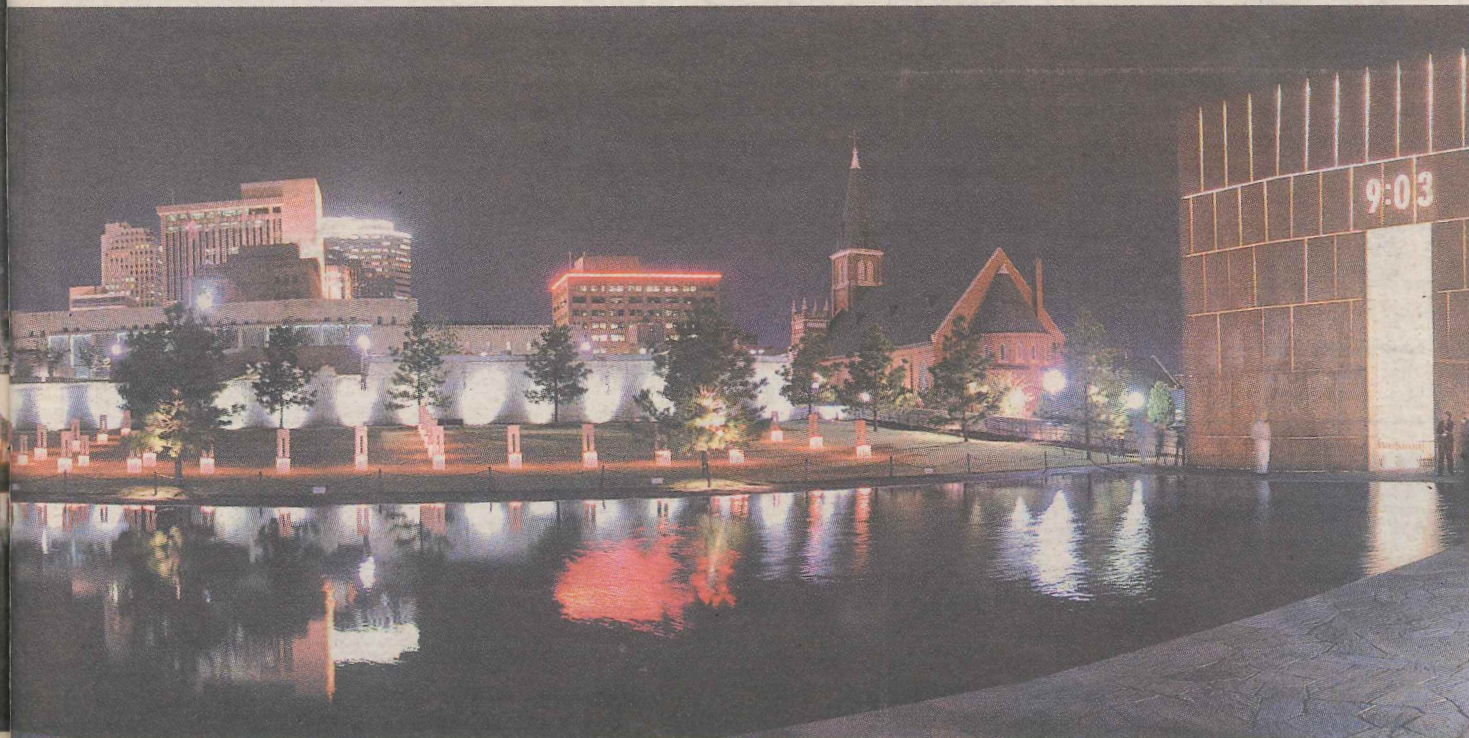
"It's that we live in a fast-paced society and we want to do everything fast, including grief," she said. "And we don't really have the understanding about the grief process and that it takes time to grieve and address the pain."

She commended the people of Oklahoma City for allowing the families and victims plenty of time to grieve, providing them ample opportunity to deal with the grief in a healthy way. She said that, as a result, a lot of attention has been paid to the families and survivors. Though such attention has made them feel special, she said, most of them are



Judy Mee





ready to move on.

"I think for the most part, the families that I'm familiar with, they're not wanting to be focused on," Mee said. "They've had enough focus. They just really want to be able to just get on with their lives. I think they appreciate being honored, but I think they don't want anymore focus on them."

"From the ones I know, they're ready to move on, and my guess is the rest of them are, too. It doesn't help anybody to keep going back and going over it and over it and six years down the line and keep trying to reopen the wounds."

According to Linenthal, one of the most "insidious" things that came out of the bombing was what he called the "psychologizing" of the victims. He said that almost immediately some victims were characterized as "patients" because they didn't seem to get through the grieving process soon enough. He called this the "traumatic narrative."

"Such as the fact that you were sort of expected to get over it within an often unarticulated but certain period of time and then if you didn't, that meant something was wrong, and you were ill," he said.

"That the language of psychology took over what has formerly been profound questions that religious traditions have tried to respond to for thousands of years."

Linenthal said that grief yielded some positive things, however, such as the memorial itself. Also part of the "traumatic narrative," Linenthal said many victims acted out their grief in a myriad of ways, such as by taking a stance one way or the other on the death penalty, speaking out for victims' rights, calling for habeas corpus reform and even throwing their energies into planning the memorial.

Bob Johnson, chairman of the Oklahoma City National Memorial Trust, said that the building of the memorial and its accompanying museum and anti-terrorism center has been a big step toward ensuring that such an act never happens again and has allowed Oklahomans to rise above despair.

"We are acting responsibly to prevent other people from being victimized," he said.

"When we created the memorial as a place of remembrance and an educational facility to make sure the world never forgets what happens here, we're not acting as a victim; we're making sure the world does not become complacent and thereby elevating the risk of recurrence," Johnson said.

"So, I think ... as a community we are collectively acting responsibly. We're not retaining a victim title."

**W**ith McVeigh's execution only weeks away, recent media reports have thrust the bombing back into the national consciousness. But they also have led to criticism of the reporters responsible for that work by survivors and the family members of victims who bristle at McVeigh being given a platform for his views.

That development is part of what Linenthal has called the "toxic narrative." He said this narrative resulted in fierce divisions on many issues, emerging conspiracy theories and even arguments among victims and families, some of whom were thought to be getting too much media attention or not enough.

The recent publication of a book chronicling the bombing and McVeigh's role in it has caused some ill feeling between the authors and those who feel they did nothing more than give him a forum to spread his anti-government views.

The book, "American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing," and its authors, Buffalo Daily News reporters Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, have been the center of considerable controversy in recent weeks, although the men attempted to donate a portion of the proceeds from the book to the Oklahoma City memorial.

Similarly, a recent article in Esquire magazine by former Oklahoma Gazette reporter Phil Bacharach also has drawn complaints. Bacharach, who is now a press aide to Gov. Frank Keating, is attempting to donate the \$6,000 he received for writing the piece, which featured McVeigh's letters to him.

The Michel-Herbeck donations were refused by the memorial and, as of press time, there was no word as to whether memorial officials would accept Bacharach's.

"It's about doing things that are right and that we're above board and making sure we do not give Timothy McVeigh a platform to further his cause. That's what it's about," said Kari Watkins, the memorial's executive director.

"Where we have to stand is that we cannot further his cause and ... two wrongs don't make a right. Just because somebody gave him a platform doesn't mean we should be a part of it."

Watkins said the Esquire article differs from the book in that it's not a biography of McVeigh. However, Watkins said it wasn't likely proceeds from it would be accepted.

Johnson wishes media members would refrain from doing any more interviews with McVeigh as his execution approaches. He said allowing the convicted terrorist to have a platform for his grievances is not in the public interest. While Johnson credits the media for their role in telling the story of the bombing, its victims and survivors, he said that society would have been better served if McVeigh had not been given so much attention.

"I think some of the platform that McVeigh has received goes beyond freedom of speech," Johnson said.

**D**espite the devastating nature of the bombing, some local officials feel the incident may have led to some positive turns.

"It did in this sense," said Oklahoma City Mayor Kirk Humphreys. "Before the bombing, Oklahoma and Oklahoma City were not thought of negatively by most people. They just weren't thought of. We weren't on the radar screen. And I think people did see some positive things about our state and city as a result of the bombing. And that's a positive side effect."

Humphreys said that while some credit for Oklahoma City's renaissance could be

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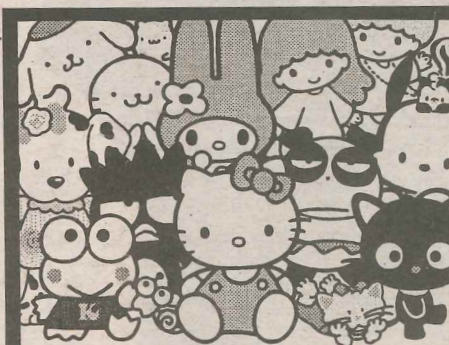
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## Bombing continued

given to the memorial, more credit should be given to the new federal campus slated for the downtown area. He also said the tourism benefits of the memorial will help the city overall.

"Certainly, you'll sell more meals in Bricktown and you'll sell more hotel rooms because of the bombing and the memorial and the museum; just like people go to Gettysburg," he said.

Hobson, who is the vice chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said the memorial has had a positive effect on Oklahoma's economy in terms of tax collections.

"I've watched monthly sales tax collections since that event, and we've been on nothing but a very strong upward ride throughout Oklahoma," he said, noting that Oklahoma City's tax collections have been slightly stronger than Tulsa's.

"It's a hell of a way to have economic development, but I expect, if anything, there was some up-kick because of it."

So, are we obsessed with the bombing? While most Oklahomans probably would say no, Burke indicated the issue is not that simple and that the answer would depend on

who you asked.

"I can only speak for myself. I'm not addicted to it. I'm interested in it," Burke said. "The greatest, greatest majority of those people have gone on with their lives because, unfortunately, that's what you have to do. That doesn't mean they've forgotten their loved ones."

What remains to be seen is if the McVeigh execution — and witnessing the execution, as some hope to do — and the planned trial of Nichols will bring the closure many hope it will.

Regardless of whether April 19, 1995,

will go down in history as another day of infamy, one thing is for sure: It will take longer than six years for Oklahoma to "put some finality to it," as Burke put it. That is, if there ever is finality.

As Oklahomans continually move toward that place where they live with the bombing and not in the bombing, perhaps Humphreys said it best.

"It's been a tension between remembering it and keeping your eyes on the horizon out ahead," he said. ■



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