

Echoes of a Klan Killing

Four young girls die in a brutal church bombing and almost 37 years later, justice may finally be near.

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At 10:19 on Sunday morning, Sept. 15, 1963, a simple time-delay fuse triggered a dozen sticks of dynamite outside the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. The massive explosion tore through the church just before services. When the smoke cleared, parishioners found the bodies of 11-year-old Denise McNair and 14-year-olds Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley. No attack against the civil-rights movement was ever deadlier --or more frustrating, as two of the well-known suspects walked free for nearly 37 years.

Until last week. The arrests of former Ku Klux Klansmen Thomas E. Blanton Jr., 61, and Bobby Frank Cherry, 69, may have closed a sad chapter of Southern justice. It had opened with J. Edgar Hoover's failure to bring any charges after the initial FBI investigation of the bombing in the 1960s. Over the years, a new generation of lawmen put away Robert E. Chambliss, a violent Klansman known as "Dynamite Bob," who was arrested in 1977 and died in prison eight years later. Last week's arrests of Blanton and Cherry also came at the hands of a tough prosecutor, U.S. Attorney Doug Jones. The key testimony apparently came from family members and friends who had long been guilt-ridden over what they knew but were reluctant to talk about.

Building a case was never easy. By the early 1960s, almost two dozen dynamite attacks had struck homes and businesses in Birmingham. The investigators could document how Chambliss had purchased a case of dynamite shortly before the bombing. But even the FBI, with dozens of agents on the case and paid informants honeycombed throughout the Alabama Klan, could not gather enough evidence to persuade Hoover to recommend prosecution. Above all, Hoover feared the embarrassment of losing before a white jury.

In the 1970s Alabama Attorney General Bill Baxley and his lead investigator, Bob Eddy, reopened the probe. Only then did Chambliss's niece Elizabeth H. Cobbs agree to provide powerful evidence at his 1977 trial. Just before the bombing, she testified, Chambliss bragged that he had enough "stuff" to "flatten half of Birmingham." Afterward, she said, he insisted, "It wasn't meant to hurt anybody. It didn't go off when it was supposed to."

Baxley and Eddy did not have similar witnesses against the men they believe helped Dynamite Bob: Blanton, Cherry and Herman Frank Cash, who died in 1994. Blanton has long claimed that he had no involvement in the bombing and that his girlfriend at the time can confirm his alibi. Cherry, too, denies involvement in the bombing, but several of his family members, including an ex-wife, a granddaughter, a former stepdaughter and two former sons-in-law, have all given testimony against him. And the day before the new indictment was handed down, Cherry's 47-year-old son, Tom, who for years has lived next door to his father in east Texas, appeared before the grand jury.

Even if the suspected church bombers themselves can live for years with the guilty knowledge of the four young lives they long ago ended, the evidence is building that their family members

cannot. No trial date for Blanton and Cherry has yet been scheduled. But when the time comes, the two defendants may know the most important witnesses against them all too well.

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