

Back to Birmingham

They were four girls in church--until a bomb blew them away. Three decades later, the Feds may finally be ready to crack the case

David J. Garrow.

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Just after 2 a.m. on Sunday, Sept. 15, 1963, A blue-and-white 1957 Chevy carrying four white men pulled up next to the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. Two of the men got out, and one tucked a box behind an exterior staircase, against the church's outer wall. A black passerby noticed the men and their distinctive car--the Chevy had a long "whip" radio antenna. Eight hours later, at 10:19 a.m., five young women were straightening their clothes in the ladies' lounge just before services when a huge explosion tore through the church. One of the girls, 14-year-old Cynthia Wesley, was decapitated; three others--11-year-old Denise McNair and 14-year-olds Carole Robertson and Addie Mae Collins--also died instantly. Addie Mae's younger sister, Sarah, survived, but lost an eye; parents and parishioners pulled her from the rubble, the smell of dynamite fresh in the air. Though no other act of terror during the movement would claim as many lives, the case was never completely cracked.

Last week the Justice Department and the state of Alabama announced that they had reopened the investigation, throwing fresh light on the murky subculture of truck-stop racists that was at the heart of the South's worst moments--and on how J. Edgar Hoover's peculiarities may have helped guilty men go unpunished. By coincidence, Spike Lee has just released a documentary on the church bombing, "4 Little Girls." But the probe is part of a larger, more important trend: a series of visits back into the deadly days of the movement. First came the 1994 conviction of Byron de la Beckwith for the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers; James Earl Ray, Martin Luther King Jr.'s convicted killer, wants a new trial (a judge said he might order more tests on the rifle that allegedly killed King). The interest in the se long-dormant case s is a sign that the New South is still de desperate to make sense of the bloody baggage of the Old.

In the Birmingham of the early 1960s, 16th Street was a natural target. King had used the church as a staging ground for his marches against segregation earlier that year, and the integration of the city's schools had just gotten underway that month. Even before the Sunday-morning blast, Birmingham had become known as "Bombingham" on account of the city's violent KKK chapter, Eastview Klavern 13. One local Klansman, a former city employee named Robert E. Chambliss, was so active in racial terrorism that he was nicknamed "Dynamite Bob." But there was a cultural catch in cracking down on the KKK: some city police officers, like the commander of Alabama's state troopers, were Klan supporters. Cops sometimes came from the same kind of Southern world as the more virulent racists: sons of poor farm country, the Klansmen were likely to be manual laborers. These were the people--the ones who might lose a job to a black, or have a kid in public school where black children were being integrated--most likely to turn to hate.

"Dynamite Bob" Chambliss was one of those whites, though police never really pursued him on the church bombing. But the black passerby identified Chambliss as one of the car's occupants, and two female friends of Chambliss's wife secretly told authorities that Chambliss had

confirmed his role. Still, it took 14 years for the state to bring him to trial. He was convicted of the bombing in 1977, and died in prison. But that left the other conspirators, whose identities were known to authorities, unaccounted for.

The central problem was the FBI. The Feds had at least one major informant--Gary Thomas Rowe--inside Eastview Klavern 13. In 1964 the local U.S. attorney admitted that "the FBI knows who bought the dynamite, who made the bomb [and] who placed it there." FBI files, long under wraps, show that Hoover rejected a 1965 recommendation from his deputies that all the suspects be charged. Why? Hoover disliked King, but the director had other reasons, too. Hoover focused the FBI's resources on sure things, and he doubted that a white Alabama jury would convict the men. And he was reluctant to reveal his informants and questionable wiretapping in court.

According to the FBI files, there were at least five potential members of the bombing conspiracy. Troy Ingram, who may have made the bomb, is now dead, but Thomas E. Blanton Jr. (allegedly the owner and driver of the Chevy) is still alive, as is Bobby Frank Cherry, who FBI reports say planted the bomb along with Chambliss. Both men have denied involvement. Last week an FBI official said there were no new suspects in the case, only new information. Perhaps one of the female informants close to Chambliss is now willing to incriminate his alleged co-conspirators; perhaps a former girlfriend of Blanton's (his alibi for that night) is coming forward; maybe an aging Klansman is coming clean. Whatever the specifics turn out to be, the case is proof positive that William Faulkner had it right: in the South, he once wrote, "the past is never dead. It isn't even past."

GARROW is the author of "The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr." and the Pulitzer Prize--winning "Bearing the Cross."