

## 25 years later, Waco aims past notoriety that followed Branch Davidian saga

By PHILLIP ERICKSEN

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The ATF holds a press conference a day after the Branch Davidian raid. Media briefings became routine during the siege.  
Staff photo — Rod Aydelotte, file

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**B**efore too long, receiving 3 a.m. phone calls from Australian radio stations was typical for Bob Sheehy Jr.

International media had descended on Waco, and it was his father's mission to tell them nobody in Waco had anything to do with David Koresh or the tragedy that unfolded at the Branch Davidian compound.

So the younger Sheehy, who got the long-distance calls because of a vague phone book listing, directed the reporters to his father, who was Waco's mayor.

Sheehy Sr. **died** in 2012 after a battle with Alzheimer's disease. He held frequent media availabilities in early 1993 during the 51-day siege that ended in a deadly blaze and was followed by decades of questions into government overreach, religious zealotry, press freedom, child abuse and much more.

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The siege started after a shootout Feb. 28, 1993 — 25 years ago — that left four U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents and six Davidians dead. The fire 51 days later killed 77 Davidians, including Koresh.

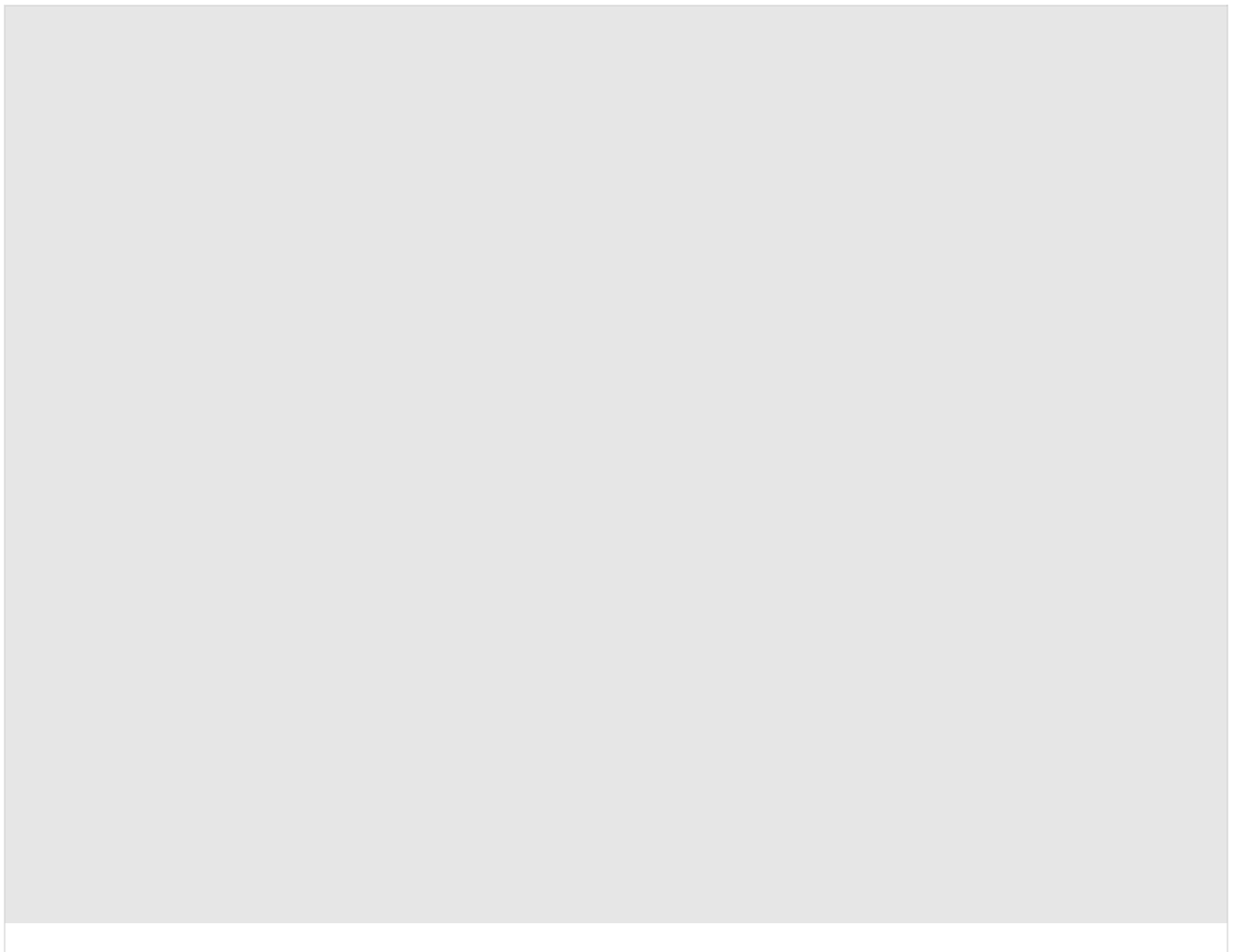
Waco's lack of connection to the events and deep empathy for the survivors was not always conveyed by media at the time, according to multiple officials who watched it play out. Methodist Children's Home

took in children who escaped the fire, and most of the city watched in horror, with the world.

“You read some of the initial reports and descriptions of Waco,” said Sheehy Jr., a La Vega High School teacher and McLennan Community College trustee. “It’s like, ‘Have y’all even opened your eyes around here?’ They came in here with their preconceived ideas with what the city was.”

A British newspaper famously described Waco as “a one-horse town where the horse has died.” Local cuisine “ranges from hamburgers to cheeseburgers” and “fresh vegetables appear to be illegal,” according to the overseas correspondent.

**> 25 years later: Original coverage from 1993**



## **Branch Davidian tragedy at 25: How the story overtook the storytellers**

City spokesman Larry Holze, a councilman at the time of the siege, said stations broadcast poverty in East Waco. Other Wacoans remember an old police car that advertised a local restaurant portrayed on TV as if it were still in use by local law enforcement.

The question many Wacoans still have 25 years later: Why is the city still associated with the tragedy that happened some 10 miles east?

Many point the finger at national and international media. Much of the reporting was done from Waco, the closest city to the Branch Davidian compound. Daily press conferences were held at the Bosque Theater, where the Waco City Council met.

The Associated Press Stylebook, the comprehensive reference manual most journalists swear by, says a story's dateline "should tell the reader that the AP obtained the basic information from the story in the datelined city."

Thus, most Americans saw "Waco" at the start of each article they read about the events.

"Everything was Waco, Texas," Sheehy said. "What are they going to say, pasture in the middle of nowhere?"

Mount Carmel, as many Wacoans pointedly mention, was 11 miles from the Waco Convention Center. It is around the unincorporated community of Elk and about 5 miles from Axtell.

Fairly or not, Waco has become tied to bizarre news largely out of residents' control: the 1953 tornado that killed 114 Wacoans, Baylor University basketball and football scandals and the May 2015 shootout

between rival biker groups at a local restaurant.

“We get tied into these things,” Sheehy said. “What drives me nuts is the people thinking, ‘See how crazy Waco is?’ We’re in Waco going, ‘Why does this stuff happen to us?’ ”

Holze said one account showed the sign to the neighboring city of Beverly Hills and called it “the best of Waco.”

“The good news is our citizens are no strangers to dealing with tragedy. ... Through the years, the true heart of our citizens has endured and carried us through the tragedies,” Holze said.

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Other locals interviewed for this story said Waco has handled the negative attention better than Elk or Axtell could have, and that the influence of Chip and Joanna Gaines has clearly improved Waco’s image.

Some wonder why Prairie Chapel Ranch, a vacation spot for then-President George W. Bush, is known to be in Crawford, while Koresh is associated with Waco. Bush’s trips there were frequently in local and national headlines during his presidency.

“It was a smart political move on the Bush family,” Holze said of the ranch’s branding, noting that Crawford is an incorporated city much larger than the community of Elk.

The Bushes’ separation from Waco came in the wake of city leaders tackling an image problem caused by the siege.

Local leaders discussed how best to improve Waco’s image, and they

decided on a minimal approach.

“The fact that no matter what you do, it’s not going to be read by all citizens as something you should be doing,” Holze said. “They’re going to think you’re capitalizing on the tragedy to improve Waco tourism or promoting Waco based on it. ... We would not aggressively plan anything other than continue with the same thing Mayor Sheehy had said: to let people know that this did not happen in Waco and it was a tragedy.”

Holze also said he received a call from leaders in Columbine, Colorado, after the 1999 shooting that left 15 people at Columbine High School dead. They wanted to know what Waco had done after the tragedy at Mount Carmel.

Twenty-five years later, the next generation of local leadership says the stories of Koresh and the siege hold little resonance.

“In the day-to-day effort to increase financial security, reduce our poverty rate, grow our economy, bring new business in and continue to attract young professionals to this community, the impact that the siege has on that conversation is such a small factor, if it comes up at all,” said Waco Councilman Dillon Meek, who was 8 years old in 1993.

Magnolia Market at the Silos averages more than 30,000 weekly visitors hoping to glimpse HGTV stars Chip and Joanna Gaines. The local economy is improving and the city boasts a positive bond rating.

In the midst of this growth, the Paramount Network series called “Waco” drew the ire of residents eager to keep the event in the past. In the pilot episode, the opening shot of Mount Carmel identifies the compound as located in “Waco, Texas.”

One of the show's creators, Drew Dowdle, **told the Tribune-Herald**, half jokingly, he had "a heavy burden of guilt" over the title.

"We spent a week in the Baylor libraries ... and when we'd leave, the librarians would say, 'Please don't call this Waco,' " Dowdle said. "I told them we can't promise you that, that it wasn't totally our decision. ... But what else do you call it?"

Sheehy's suggestions: "Shootout at Mount Carmel," "Standoff at Mount Carmel," "The Koresh Story," or just about anything else.

"(The creators) knew 'Waco' could get people's attention and they could make money," Sheehy said.

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He said he occasionally shows his La Vega High School students a documentary recounting the events.

The television series reminds him of his father's message falling on deaf ears of national and international media. Meanwhile, Waco leadership encouraged residents to show compassion to survivors.

"We felt like we were beating our heads against the wall," Sheehy said.

Most longtime McLennan County residents have memories of the siege.

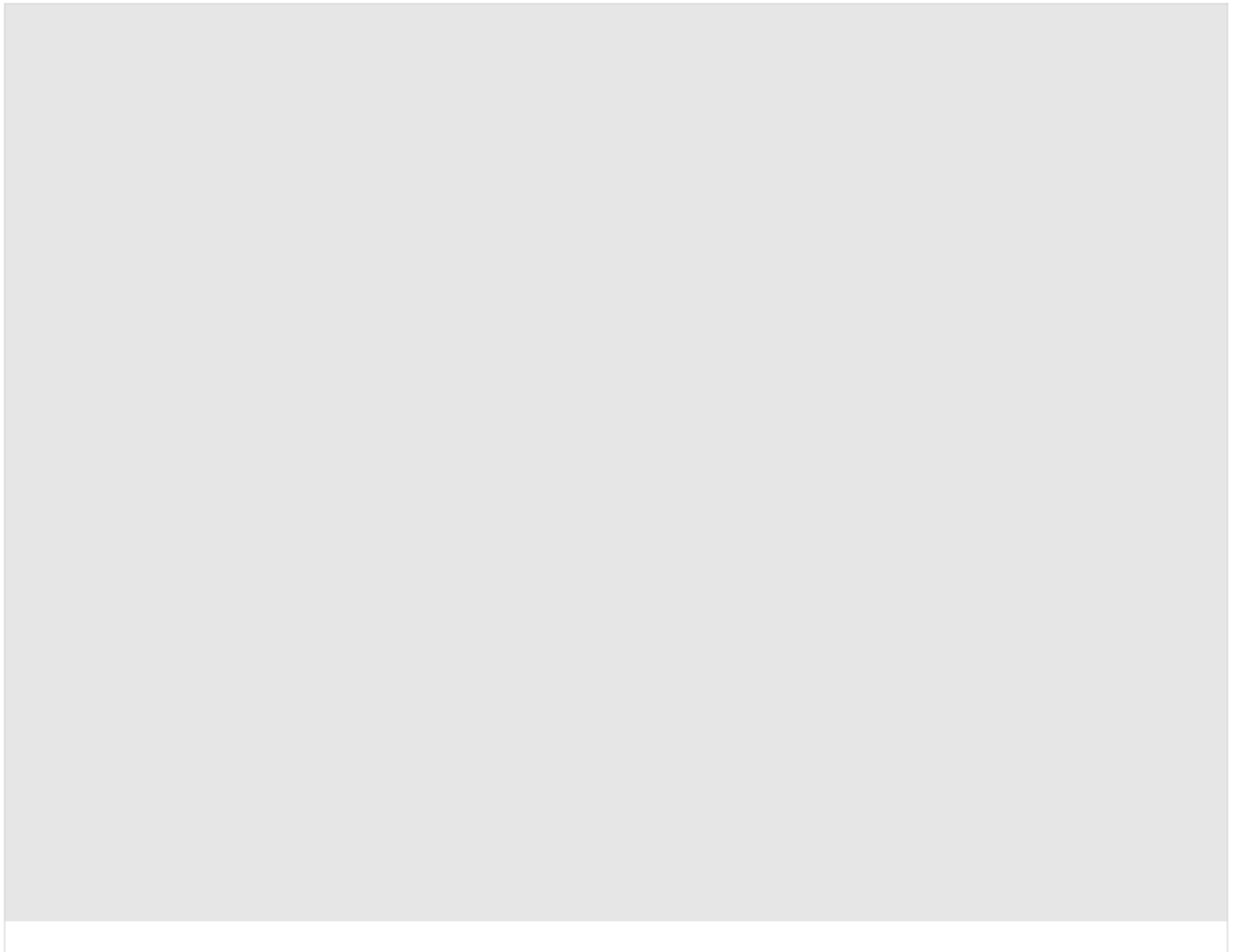
Chris DeCluitt, president of a local property management corporation, was overseas during the raid. In his travels since, he said a Paris police officer once asked him about the Branch Davidians. He said he remembers media portrayals as "a very negative impression of Waco itself and McLennan County."

And Craig Tusa, now a local business owner, was a field supervisor and paramedic at the scene of the raid. He said the events leading up to it and his interactions with the ATF during the shootout have scarred him.

“I don’t talk about it a lot,” Tusa said. “It’s not something I like talking about because it does stir up some of the old feelings. In my mind, it was yesterday. It was a really traumatic event.”

Each year, the April 19 anniversary of the fire is a memory most Wacoans have, similar to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Sheehy said.

“It’s weaved into our history, even though it’s not technically a part of it,” Sheehy said. “It’s going to be a part of our history whether we want it to be or not, whether we deserve it to be or not.”





**'Waco' series creators warn against 'us versus them' mentality**