

Did the Unabomber try his hand at living in Portland?



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By TOM BATES

Anne Hughes remembers his perpetual smile. "A little mischievous," is how she describes it.

Beth Simer, an Anne Hughes Coffee Room regular, also recalls the smile. At first glance it was friendly, but on second it was more knowing or mocking, she says, "like he was savoring a private joke."

Maybe he was savoring a private joke -- on all of us.

On Nov. 12, when The Oregonian published a photograph of Leo Frederick Burt alongside a strikingly similar police sketch of the Unabomber, Hughes and Simer both experienced instant recognition: "That looks like the guy in the Coffee Room!"

Simer remembers him reading magazines in the Powell's Bookstore coffee shop on West Burnside Street. He was about 6 feet tall, 185 to 190 pounds with broad shoulders on a lean, rangy frame.

That fits the general description of Leo Burt from his college days in Madison, Wis., where he helped set off a fertilizer bomb in 1970, killing a young post-doctoral researcher and damaging 26 campus buildings.

"The look that he had in (The Oregonian's) picture -- that was his look," says Hughes, who presides over the popular literary hangout. "That's exactly how he looked."

Burt has not been seen since September 1970. The FBI considers him a suspect -- one of many -- in its Unabomber investigation. Not only does he match the Unabomber's description, but he is believed to frequent the San Francisco Bay Area, the Unabomber's current base of operations.

In the November story, The Oregonian reported that an article published by Burt in 1972 shows uncanny similarities in phrasing and philosophy to the Unabomber manifesto, published two months ago in The New York Times and The Washington Post.

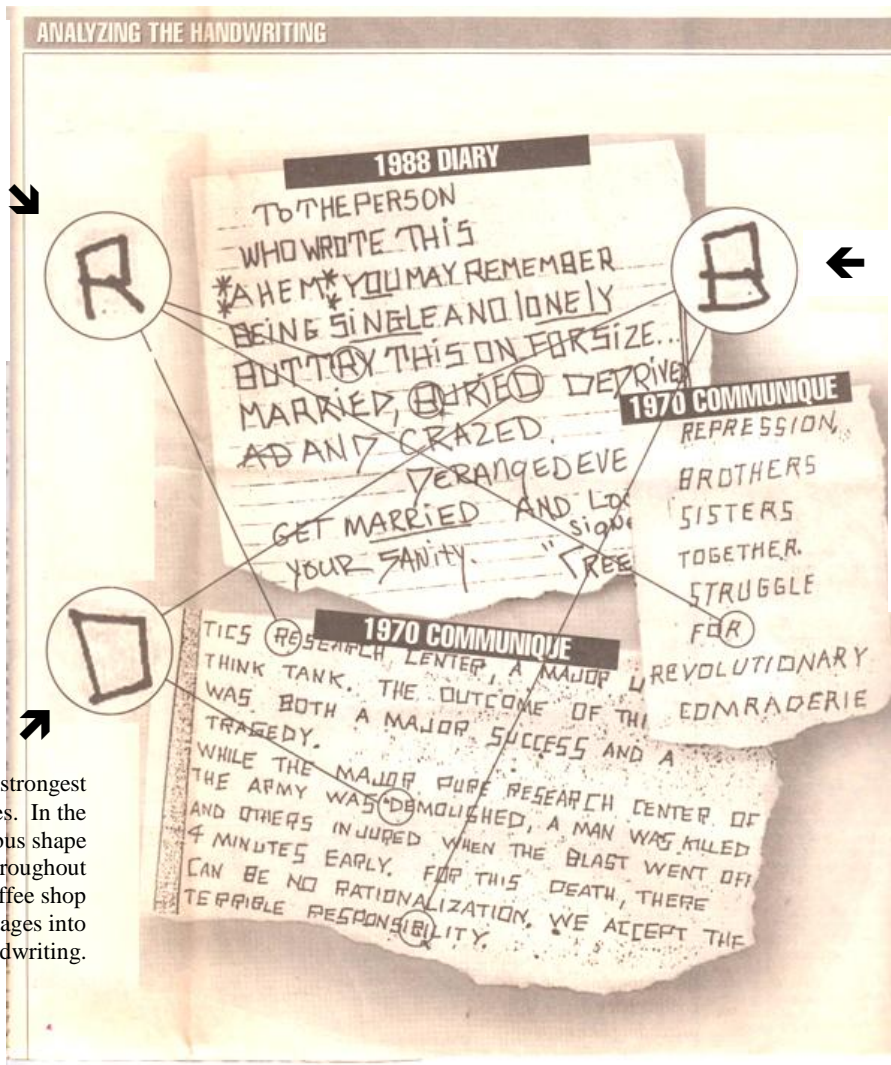
If Hughes and Simer are right, Burt may have lived in Portland from 1988 to 1992, a time when the Unabomber was lying low. The Burt look-alike was a Coffee Room regular then, coming in about 5 p.m. and leaving by 8 p.m.

The stranger wore an old Army trench coat, a ragged blue T-shirt, plain old canvas tennis shoes and wire-rimmed glasses. But Simer was most struck by his walk, a jaunty, loose-hipped stride that reminded her of Mr. Natural in the old "Zap Comics."

In Madison, Burt was known for his "keep on truckin' " walk.

From the Coffee Room's opening in 1985, Hughes has kept guest diaries for customers to write in. The diaries offer a unique window on Portland's intellectual underground; they also offer a tantalizing clue to Burt's possible presence.

Using copies of Burt's letters collected a few years ago while researching a book about the Wisconsin bombing, I found no evidence of Leo's classic Palmer-style handwriting -- an elliptical cursive style traditionally taught in Catholic elementary schools, where Burt learned it -- in the diaries. But one entry practically jumped off the page.



The capital R with a slanting leg is one of several letters that match in both documents. However, the 1970 communiqué also has straight-legged R's. And in the 1988 diary entry, the writer seems to lose his concentration. His natural R appears toward the end of his note.

The B provides another pattern match, but a fairly common one, according to Jacqueline Joseph, a Portland forensic graphologist. More interesting, Joseph says, is the malformed B in the word "Buried" in the diary. The lower front portion of the letter collapses inward. Joseph found the same defect in the communiqués—in the word RESPONSIBILITY at the bottom of the excerpt shown here.

The D affords one of the strongest pattern matches. In the communiqué, it is a rhombus shape that varies only slightly throughout the document. In the coffee shop diary, it degenerates by stages into the person's natural handwriting.

"TO THE PERSON WHO WROTE THIS," it said, referring to an adjacent diary entry on the subject of loneliness, "YOU MAY REMEMBER BEING SINGLE AND LONELY BUT TRY THIS ON FOR SIZE. . . MARRIED, BURIED DEPRIVED AND CRAZED. DERANGED EVEN."

The note concludes: "GET MARRIED AND LOOSE (sic!) YOUR SANITY. Signed: CREEP." Whoever made the entry obviously is disturbed. But what jumps out is the writer's use of block lettering in an attempt to disguise his handwriting. Why go to all that trouble?

The distinctive printing appears in the second volume of the Coffee Room's voluminous diaries, in June 1988. Remarkably similar lettering can be found in a communiqué written 18 years earlier on the occasion of the Wisconsin bombing -- by none other than Leo Burt.

In the last week of August 1970, when Burt penned the so-called "Communique No. 1" explaining the actions of the Madison bombers, he had good reason to disguise his handwriting. His involvement in the bombing was not yet public knowledge. He was not yet on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. He still harbored hopes of a career as a left-wing journalist.

Why would a visitor to the Anne Hughes Coffee Room disguise his handwriting in June 1988? It doesn't make much sense -- unless the visitor was someone who, like Leo Burt, was wanted by the law.

The Oregonian turned to Portland forensic graphologist Jacqueline Joseph, who examined the diary entry and copies of the communique and several of Burt's letters written in the last week of August 1970. Were they written by the same person?

Joseph's conclusion: "Maybe yes, maybe no." Several differences prevented her from offering a definite opinion. The diarist, for example, dots his i's, even when they are capitalized. Burt, in the 1970 communique, did not. The diarist's natural handwriting shows through toward the end of his note. Burt, in the 1970 document, maintains the block lettering throughout.

But Joseph also found an intriguing pattern match in the letter D, a rhomboid shape whose angles are formed the same way in both the 1970 communique and the 1988 diary entry. Most interesting, however, was her discovery of a malformed B.

In both the communique and the diary, the B is one box stacked atop another -- a common-enough construction, according to Joseph. But in both documents, she finds a B whose lower front leg collapses inward. In handwriting analysis, such an idiosyncrasy is considered a strong indicator, Joseph says.

In the months after the Wisconsin bombing, Madison radicals fled to the West Coast to avoid the FBI investigation, some settling in the Bay Area and others taking up residence in communes scattered from Willits, Calif., to McMinnville, Ore. Burt's co-conspirator, David S. Fine, hid out in Los Angeles, then moved north to San Rafael, Calif., where he was captured in 1976.

Burt, according to sources in the Madison underground, was living in an apartment in San Jose, Calif., in 1976.

Burt's three co-conspirators were caught and punished, and rejoined society by 1980. Fine obtained a law degree from the University of Oregon and settled in Portland.

Burt remains unaccounted for, his fugitive status an unending source of frustration to federal agents. For herself and many others, Simer says, the Anne Hughes Coffee Room is like a living room where solitary and shy people can enjoy the "illusion of being with people."

The Burt look-alike "would come in with a book or two, get a cup of coffee and sit at a table for a couple hours, then go away," Simer says. "He was always alone."

In the summer of 1992, I saw a Burt look-alike in the crowd at a Portland concert by blues musician Charlie Musselwhite. Back in the late '60s, Musselwhite often performed at the Nitty Gritty, Burt's favorite Madison bar.

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Then, that fall, came the publication of my book "Rads: A True Story of the End of the Sixties," a book about the Wisconsin bombing that included Burt's FBI wanted poster in its photo section.

"When the book came out, he never came back," Hughes says. "I never saw him again."

Tom Bates, the author of "Rads: A True Story of the End of the Sixties," writes about cultural divide and social justice issues for The Oregonian's Living in the '90s team.

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