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Archives contain bullet, JFK's shirt and Oswald letters

WASHINGTON (AP) — Stacked on institutional green metal shelves in a dreary, off-limits nook of the National Archives is virtually every shred of evidence of the crime of the century, the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Behind a vault door are hundreds of gray cardboard boxes filled with materials used in two government investigations; from tedious bureaucratic documents to chilling reminders of that dark day in Dallas 25 years ago Tuesday.

There is the 6.5mm, Mannlicher-Carcano bolt-action rifle that Lee Harvey Oswald bought for \$20 through a mail order house. It is still tagged with a "commission exhibit" label from the Warren Commission's investigation a quarter-century ago.

There are the three shell casings that Oswald left at his sixth-floor perch in the Texas School Book Depository overlooking Dealey Plaza.

There's the bullet, an incredibly unblemished copper slug, which the Warren Commission said killed the president and wounded then-Gov. John Connally of Texas as they rode in the motorcade. Conspiracy theorists say the bullet, found on a stretcher at Parkland Memorial Hospital, could not have pierced both Kennedy and Connally and remained virtually intact.

Concrete chunk

There's a piece of Dallas in the collection, a one-foot chunk of concrete street curb removed from Dealey Plaza because of an early suspicion that it contained bullet fragments. The curb was found to contain fragments of lead but not the copper of the kind of bullets used by Oswald.

Scattered among reams of FBI and Secret Service reports are fragments of the lonely life of Oswald, a Marxist who lived in obscurity and died in infamy and who the Warren Commission concluded was acting alone when he killed Kennedy.

They include academic records and letters to his mother.

The Warren Commission, appointed by President Johnson shortly after the assassination,

transferred its estimated 360 cubic feet of records to the National Archives in late 1964.

More than 95 percent of those records, along with physical evidence collected by the FBI and other government investigators, is available to researchers.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations also has its records, another 300 cubic feet of materials, housed in the same room. Most of the House panel's records have been sealed for 50 years, and a small band of Kennedy researchers have failed to persuade Congress to open them for public scrutiny.

Mined for clues

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the National Archives was seen as a gold mine of clues for authors and self-styled sleuths who were convinced they could unravel the mysteries of the Kennedy assassination and prove that Oswald was part of a conspiracy.

Interest in the materials was renewed in 1978 when the House committee concluded that Kennedy probably was killed as the result of a conspiracy.

There is little activity involving the records these days, according to Marion Johnson, a government archivist for 40 years and chief overseer of the Kennedy records. He said no authors or scholars are conducting regular research on the assassination at the National Archives.

Some of the Kennedy assassination materials are off-limits.

The slain president's clothing, including his monogrammed pin-stripe shirt soaked with blood, are available only with special permission from the Kennedy family.

The same is true of the 52 black-and-white and color photos of the autopsy. A set of the graphic photos, made clandestinely at the time of the autopsy by a Secret Service agent who was one of the few people who had access to them, have appeared recently in a reprint of a conspiracy theory book and on a segment of public television's "Nova" series that was devoted to the assassination.