

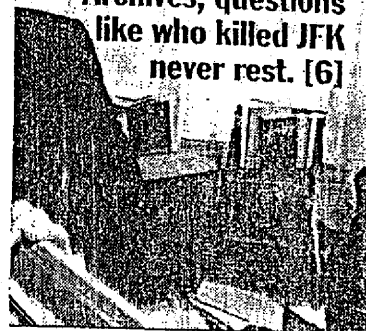
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Hit Records  
At the Assassination  
Archives, questions  
like who killed JFK  
never rest. [6]



## The Killing Files

### D.C.'s Assassination Archives and Research Center

**"S**heer bullheadedness" is one reason Bernard Fensterwald is still determined to prove, 25 years after Dallas, that JFK's murder followed a plot and triggered a cover-up.

Another reason has to do with restoring public faith in the U.S. government. "The case has never been solved," he says. "And I think a lot of skepticism towards the integrity of the government comes from this case."

Fensterwald isn't alone in his conviction, of course. Nor in his bullheadedness. By his own reckoning, "in excess of 100 people are actively working on the case at the moment." These sleuths are a busy bunch. They poke through old news clippings, take pictures of Dealey Plaza, interview witnesses, publish newsletters, write books, and raise righteous hell on talk shows. They attack "lone-nut" theorists who believe Oswald acted without help. They sue the CIA and the FBI. And sometimes they say terrible things about one another.

But Fensterwald may be the only sleuth who has amassed the papers of his colleagues and invited the public to come and take a look. His Assassination Archives and Research Center, housed in a low-rise building at 918 F St. NW, warehouses several dozen file cabinets crammed with court papers, FBI documents, newspaper clippings, reports, lists, transcripts, and memos—plus a few tons of books, photos, audio tapes, and movies.

"We have the complete FBI files on the John Kennedy case, and they are indexed," says Fensterwald. "We also have large collections of interviews of people who were not interviewed by the Warren Commission or the House Select Committee on Assassinations. And whenever new books come out or we get new materials, they go into our master index."

Though most of the AARC's holdings explore the murder of JFK, there are reams on the RFK and King assassinations as well as poop on killings in distant lands and from by-gone eras. "We have massive files on the attempt on the pope's life," notes Fensterwald. "And there is a file for every country."

AARC is a non-profit foundation that relies on the deep pockets of Fensterwald, who runs a criminal law practice in Arlington. He says the archives' annual operation costs are \$40,000, only a small fraction of which comes from private donors and members.

There are now 100 members—mostly journalists, authors, and independent researchers—who each pay dues of \$25 a year. Some of them, such as D.C. crime writer Dan Moldea, belong to AARC simply because they believe in the project, though they may never have browsed in its file drawers or borrowed any of its books. "If I needed something and I couldn't find it in my own library, I wouldn't hesitate to go over to the AARC," notes Moldea, who is investigating the investigation of the Robert Kennedy assassination. (He believes both Kennedy murders were mob hits.)

AARC members Tony Summers and John Davis have used the center in their research. Summers is the author of several non-fiction books, including *Goddess*, a Marilyn Monroe biography, and *Conspiracy*, a book about the Kennedy assassination. Davis, who lives in New York City, plumbed the archives in researching a book on organized crime in the Gulf Coast that will be published this fall.

Also, another member points out, "There are TV producers around that are doing stories on the 25th anniversary. When they come to Washington, they want to interview people, and the place they start is Fensterwald's office. They can get names and addresses and phone numbers and documents and the latest leads and the latest gossip about the case from that office. So in that respect, it's quite valuable." (This member asked not to be quoted by name. "It's nothing personal," he says. "I just don't want my name associated with the Kennedy case because of some other research I'm now doing.")

Fensterwald's penchants for trading gossip and stockpiling information on the Kennedy assassination have made some colleagues leery of his motives. Sherman Skolnick, a Chicago-based buff who runs a telephone hotline on assassinations and government corruption, claims Fensterwald has long acted as "sort of a vacuum cleaner." In Skolnick's view, Fensterwald sucks up information on other conspiracy theorists and their work, but never does anything constructive with the information.

In Fensterwald's only book on the JFK assassination, *Coincidence or Conspiracy?*, written with Michael Ewing in 1975, there should have been a detailed section on links between the JFK murder and the Watergate affair, Skolnick claims. "Fensterwald was absolutely in a posi-

tion to bring out some of that because he had been the attorney for one of the Watergaters, James McCord," says Skolnick. (Skolnick's assertion is specious. If any of the Watergaters confessed involvement in the JFK assassination to their attorneys, lawyer/client privilege would preclude their attorneys from discussing it.)

Skolnick says that at an assassination seminar held in D.C. in 1973, he confronted Fensterwald, charging that the attorney knew about the Dallas-Watergate connection. Skolnick says Fensterwald's cohorts shouted him down.

Fensterwald says Skolnick is "generally considered an idiot."

"There are certain individuals who have been mentioned in connection with both [JFK's assassination and Watergate]," says Fensterwald, "but I couldn't see any connection between the

murder in Dallas and Watergate."

Fensterwald confirms that he was one of James McCord's attorneys, and says that Skolnick was shouted down at the seminar because he was disruptive. As for the assertion that the AARC is a handy way for Fensterwald to spy on other conspiracy theorists, Fensterwald says that is "complete baloney." He adds, "What we do try to do is collect the research of other respectable researchers and make it available to everybody."

**W**hatever Fensterwald is up to, his warehouse of woes is an exotic, amusing place to visit. The best time to stop by is any time Jim Lesar is in.

The AARC's vice president, Lesar is a lawyer who runs his solo practice out of the archive's office. He specializes in Freedom of Information cases, and some of his lawsuits have resulted in big gains for the archives. The most substantial of these is a trove of 80,000 pages of FBI records on the JFK assassination.

Lesar, whose AARC position earns him no salary, is precisely the type of host you want when visiting a place that begs to be explored. After giving you a quick tour of the five-room suite, he excuses himself and returns to his desk. The stacks and cabinets are yours to plumb at your leisure.

No area is off-limits, though the bulk of the collection is housed in two adjoining rooms and a hallway beside them. Lesar often urges visitors to examine a pair of cartons in the hallway, both crammed with brown envelopes that are labeled and alphabetically arranged.

Inside an envelope labeled "Lawson" (Oswald) are seven plastic packets, each with three or four photographic negatives showing closeup shots of laundry tags on shirt collars. As every detective knows, vital clues often reside in such places. Without a magnifying glass and light table, though, it's hard to tell whether the tags came from a Mexican laundry or an American one.

Nearby is an envelope marked "Oswald, Marina." The single slide within shows a magazine page with a photo of a woman holding a little girl. Caption: "Mrs. Marina Oswald with her youngest daughter, Rachel. This innocent babe is liable to be marked for life unless the true facts are discovered." Was Marina really an innocent babe? And whatever became of Rachel?

"Oswald, Lee" is one of the bulkiest envelopes of the lot. In addition to a batch of transparencies, it contains four large black-and-white prints that conjure ancient horrors. November 24, 1963: Jack Ruby stepping out of the crowd, taking aim. August 9, 1963: Oswald's mug shots in New Orleans. Undated: Oswald in a back yard, holding a bolt-action Mannlicher-Carcano rifle and wearing a holstered pistol. February 21, 1964: same photo, made into a Life cover.

In a file cabinet drawer marked "Oswald," there are folders labeled "Oswald in Abilene," "Oswald & Beckley Street," "Oswald Exhumation," "Oswald & Leaflets in New Orleans," "Oswald & Paper Sack For Gun."

The paper-sack folder contains dozens of letters, reports, and news articles, many referring to an FBI in-house memo written by Special Agent Vincent E. Drain, dated November 30, 1963. The heart of the memo says, "Lt. Carl Day, Dallas Police Department, stated he found the brown paper bag shaped like a gun case near the scene of the shooting on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository Building.... It was immediately locked up by DAY, kept in his possession until it was turned over to FBI Agent DRAIN for transmittal to the laboratory."

As all assassination buffs know, it was Agent Drain who took Oswald's rifle from Dallas to Washington, then back to Dallas, within a 40-hour period. Oswald's palm print, which Dallas police did not find on the gun, eventually was detected by the FBI. Could the print have been made posthumously? This and other unanswered questions have led some independent investigators to suspect that the FBI was involved in the assassination, and then in a cover-up. Which helps explain why Drain's paper-sack memo also got scrutinized.

Several drawers are marked "RFK." One contains a folder labeled "RFK-Enquirer 10-28-75." Inside is a clipping from the *National Enquirer*, an exclusive story about scientific evidence proving that Sirhan Sirhan had been

hypnotized before assassinating Kennedy.

**G**inger Lawson will earn \$3,000 for spending the summer in this hushed, musty office suite with the ghost of Lee Harvey Oswald. That's hardly a killing, but she needs the experience.

A May graduate of James Madison University, Lawson plans to attend grad school as a history major, so last spring she wrote to several non-profit groups asking for a summer job in research. The best offer came from Fensterwald. Because the AARC's collection is open

searchers to help with that task who better he can afford it, which he says isn't very often. Lawson's assignment is to organize the AARC's materials on Oswald's November 1963 visit to Mexico City.

Suspected visit, that is. "He may not have even been there," says the researcher, who hopes to find some document, some tidbit within a paragraph, that proves Oswald went to Mexico City before he assassinated the president. With unthinkable luck, she may even discover something that shows what Oswald did down there, whom he met with, what was discussed.

"In terms of hard physical evidence, I don't think [conspiracy theorists] have a leg to stand on," says Jim Moore, a Dallas man who has been studying the assassination for 21 years and who believes Oswald acted alone. But even obstinate believers in the lone-nut theory—like Moore—concede that Oswald's motives remain unknown; if someone could prove that the assassin met with intelligence agents in Mexico City, the lone-nutters' case would be badly damaged. If Lawson were to score, it would be a coup for Fensterwald.

They make an odd couple: the honey-haired history major born three years after JFK's death and the dark assassin whose image still spooks assassination scholars everywhere. But over the past six weeks, as she has immersed herself in the minutiae of his life, Lawson has come to feel quite close to Oswald; in fact, she thinks he probably was framed by the president's real assassins, whoever they were.

"When I started, I thought, 'Lee Harvey Oswald did it'—that's what you were brought up thinking," says Lawson, seated at a table with folders and note cards spread about her. "And now I am strongly questioning it, and I feel like I know him as a person rather than as the murderer of JFK."

The AARC grew out of the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, a project Fensterwald launched in 1969 to help solve the murders of both Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr. "That was 100 percent investigative work, rather than the collecting and preserving of research," he says. "We did have massive research files, but only members of the committee had access to them. We discovered somewhere in the early '80s that a number of more prominent researchers were either dying or growing old and losing interest, and their files were just becoming lost. So we thought, not having solved any assassinations, it would be better to turn into a scholarly group than an investigative group."

The archives opened in 1985. For the most part the AARC has attracted scholars, everyone from short-timers like Lawson who are intrigued by their first sniffs of an assassination plot to dedicated conspiracy theorists for whom the collection offers a long, intoxicating whiff.

But Fensterwald also has heard from an assortment of kooks. "They're not difficult to spot," he says. "There are certain anti-Com-

munist groups that are so extreme that they would blame every assassination in the world on the Communists. There are others who think that the Israelis somehow are behind all sorts of things that really don't make any sense." Fortunately, the majority of wackos write or phone the AARC, and only a few stop by. Most of the time, the place is as quiet as a crypt.

subject and include such topics as Lincoln, King, organized crime, narcotics trafficking, Nixon, the FBI, and the CIA. The collection also includes two shelves of fiction. LeCarre is represented, as are Robert Ludlum, Irving Wallace, Joyce Carol Oates (*The Assassins*), and William Safire (*Full Disclosure*). There are five E. Howard Hunt novels, all in the Signet paperback edition whose cover says, "Convicted Watergate Conspirator E. Howard Hunt, former CIA agent writing as David St. John." And there is *Assassins From Tomorrow*, by Peter Heath:

In past centuries, assassins were punished more severely. Take Francois Ravallac, the man who stabbed King Henry IV to death in 1610.

"His arm, the arm that had committed the murder, was then plunged into burning sulphur," writes J. Bowyer Bell in *Assassin!* "Next, with red-hot pincers, pieces of his chest, arms, thighs, and calves were torn off.

Molten lead, boiling oil and resin, and a mixture of molten wax and sulphur were poured into the gaping ribs, cauterizing the blood-and wounds in an excruciating operation to keep him alive for the next stage."

After Ravallac was drawn and quartered, Bell continues, "The crowd rushed forward and began hacking and ripping at the body with knives and sticks and swords. The limbs were torn from the executioners and dragged through the streets. The bits and pieces were burnt all over Paris and the ashes scattered."

Given Ravallac's fate, it would seem Lee Harvey Oswald got off easy. But, of course, Oswald never had a chance to be tried, and so it's possible that he didn't actually commit the murder of John F. Kennedy, in which case he got off hard. One intriguing bit of evidence in Oswald's apparent favor is a photograph of a man standing at the front door of the Texas School Book Depository. The man looks very much like Oswald and is wearing the same kind of shirt that Oswald wore over his white undershirt on November 22, 1963. A copy of this photo resides in the AARC, in a brown envelope labeled "Lovely." Billy Lovelady was a depository employee who may have been

the man in the picture.

"It looks to me as if it's Oswald," says Lawson, who has studied the photograph carefully, "and it was taken at the time the assassination took place. I guess that, out of everything, is sticking in my mind. He would never have had time to go up to the sixth floor and shoot the rifle at the time that picture was taken."

But the picture is not Lawson's immediate concern. Oswald's trip to Mexico City is what she's trying to confirm. And Lawson realizes that she's unlikely to come up with any definitive information by the end of August. "I'll only have worked on it for three months," she says. "And people have been working on it since Kennedy was assassinated and still don't know the answers."

What does she think of such people—the ones who, like bullheaded Fensterwald, are still puzzling over tiny details of the case after 25 years?

"I can see how it could happen real easily," Lawson says. "I don't know. You get drawn into it. First your interest is sparked and you're curious about it. And I can definitely see how you can become pretty much obsessed