

The Housewives' Underground

"For almost three years now, there has been an unorganized, quiet network of housewives, editors and students who have the 26 volumes of evidence in their homes, go over the material, clip newspapers and correspond with one another. They have played a very important role in developing the body of dissenting information. I'm part of the network."

—Mark Lane, author, *Rush to Judgment*

The key stations on the bustling network, surprisingly, are operated by three housewives, all of them would-be Margaret Rutherfords. They possess little in common besides an obsession for refuting the 10 months of diligent probing, the examination of thousands of witnesses and the millions of words collected by the Warren Commission.

Mrs. Shirley Harris Martin, a blue-eyed mother of four, functions as the Midwestern axis of the underground. The chain-link fence guarding her brick home in Owasso, Oklahoma, a suburb of Tulsa, surrounds a garage stuffed with newspaper and magazine articles related to the assassination.

Since February, 1964, she has driven her red Rambler compact the 300 miles to Dallas on seven different occasions. A Japanese tape recorder is customarily sewn inside her purse. She conceals a wire recorder beneath one of her armpits. Her family accompanies her, bringing cameras which have photographed every inch of Dealey Plaza, a stopwatch to retrace the timing of the fatal motorcade and notebooks in which they crosscheck the whereabouts of witnesses they feel should have been questioned by the Commission.

"Men are wonderful, but it takes a woman to do the boring work," says Mrs. Martin, whose admiration of Kennedy prompted her to convert to Catholicism. "Of all the drippy women in Tulsa, I was the only one who did go down [to Dallas]. I know the city by heart now. I could have sat around ticky-tacky like everyone else. But if some of us don't work as hard as we can, the same thing might happen again in another city, with Robert Kennedy the victim this time. I worry about the Kennedys."

It was Mrs. Martin who introduced Lane to Mrs. Marguerite Oswald by mailing the assassin's mother a copy of his unsolicited defense brief published in the *National Guardian*. "The rumors were that Oswald was going to be pinned for his psychological background as a boy of 12," she says. "Nothing sends me into such a fury. Joan of Arc heard voices at puberty. Lee Oswald was a jerk, but he was a good American boy. He got a very dirty deal."

Her admiration of Lane is just as unequivocal. She named one of the 11 stray mongrel dogs she has rescued from highways after Lane's second wife, Anne-Lise. "I won't say he took Kennedy's place," she says, "because no one could. But he's up there."

Mrs. Martin helped arrange several of Lane's filmed interviews and acted as liaison between Lane and previously untapped sources. Often, her detective work leaves much to be desired. She reports quizzing the Very Rev. Oscar Huber, pastor of the Holy Trinity Church in Dallas, who performed the last rites over



Marguerite Oswald examines Warren Report.

the dead president. Father Huber, according to Mrs. Martin, revealed graphic details of an entrance wound over Kennedy's left temple—evidence which, if true, would support the existence of a second assassin.

The priest denies ever meeting Mrs. Martin or having any knowledge of such a wound. "His face was covered with blood, but I saw no wounds," he says. "I did not know where he had been shot and I had no thought of looking for anything like that."

The graying Agatha Christie fan, nevertheless, conveyed her frequently misleading reports to fellow investigators and anyone she thought would listen. "When the case first started," Mrs. Martin recalls, "I was sending out 100 letters a week. I even sent one to a newspaper in Kuala Lumpur." She spent up to \$200 a month telephoning buffs like Mrs. Joseph A. Field Jr., her West Coast counterpart in Beverly Hills, California.

The wife of a stock broker, Mrs. Field employs a thinly-disguised pseudonym (Marjorie Deschamps) to conceal her activities. A vicious German Shepherd intimidates unwanted guests at her \$250,000 home, where Lane likes to float around the swimming pool between engagements. With his encouragement, Mrs. Field first compiled 30 bulging scrapbooks and numerous 50-pound file boxes of clippings and transcripts. Working with a glue-pot and oversized cardboard posters, she then constructed over 100 "panoplies"—detailed charts listing the names and movements of witnesses to the killings of Kennedy and Officer Tippit.

"The American people have been tragically deceived," says Mrs. Field. "One of the most heinous crimes in modern history remains unsolved." She maintains that the Commission pursued a preconceived case and categorically dismisses its ballistics evidence, or as she calls it: "all that argle-bargle about the rifle."

Perhaps her greatest contribution to the cause, besides her generous support of Lane prior to the publication of his book, concerns her research into "doctored photographs." The February 21, 1964, cover of *Life* magazine, showing Oswald brandishing the

murder weapon in his left hand and a pistol on his hip, immediately looked suspicious to her. To prove that shadows cast in the photograph were counterfeit, she dressed her teenage son as Lee Harvey Oswald and coached him into assuming an identical position, before snapping away with her own camera.

She passed a print of this amateurish re-creation among sympathizers attending a party in her honor hosted by Mrs. Sylvia Meagher (pronounced Marr), a widow who functions as the Eastern delegate of the housewives' alliance. Edward Jay Epstein, one of those present in the West Greenwich Village apartment, took closer notice of Mrs. Meagher's furnishings. "When I saw all those books on flying saucers," he recalls, "my heart dropped." Mrs. Meagher's book, which is entitled *Subject Index to the Warren Report and Hearings and Exhibits*, costs four dollars and runs 152 pages. The publisher is Scarecrow Press.

As a World Health Organization research analyst stationed at the United Nations for nearly 20 years, Mrs. Meagher labored in virtual anonymity. The Report of the Warren Commission offered the perfect opportunity to make herself known. Almost every night and weekend for nearly a year, inspired by Bartok's *Divertimento* playing on a phonograph, she tackled the 26 volumes of testimony and exhibits with uncommon zeal.

Since its initial press run of 1,000 copies, already sold out, Mrs. Meagher has gained added stature by reviewing books written by other scavengers and making public appearances of her own. Another one of Mrs. Meagher's pastimes is monitoring radio broadcasts. Recently, she heard attorney Louis Nizer—a staunch advocate of the Commission's findings—mistakenly refer to the first identification of the murder weapon, pronouncing it howzer instead of Mauser. She immediately contacted Lane. Within 48 hours, he was ridiculing Nizer's error in one of his speeches.

Like most assassination buffs, Mrs. Meagher has never visited Dallas nor has she interviewed anyone of significance directly related to events three years past. Despite her disturbing lack of first-hand knowledge, she is revered as the indispensable authority. "Sylvia has done the most boring work imaginable," says Mrs. Martin, "and that's to curry-comb that lousy document they call the Warren Commission hearings."

Mrs. Meagher considers herself an unsung heroine, certainly not a scavenger. "I haven't gotten a nickel from my book," she says. "Nobody ever realizes the time and the money that I've spent." Her Herculean efforts could prove financially worthwhile with the release of *Accessories After the Fact*, her first full-length book which will be published in the fall. "I think the Manchester book will have worn off a little by that time," she says. "It seems like propitious timing. It will take a lot of work."

In order to complete the book she has completely abandoned her first love, the ballet. "I don't know what to give up next," she says.