

Lee Harvey, beloved brother of Robert

LEE: A Portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald by His Brother. By Robert L. Oswald with Myrick and Barbara Land. Illustrated. Coward-McCann. 246 pp. \$5.95.

By Jean Stafford

Robert Oswald remembers his younger brother, Lee Harvey, with affection and with pity, and while he does not surprise or illuminate and pretty much repeats what he, and others, said before the Warren Commission, his book has a certain human appeal. Robert emerges from these pages as a decent man of native dignity and his memories seem genuinely fond; fond and touching by their very ordinariness and simplicity. As boys they waded and fished in a Texas creek, as men with wives and children they had family get-togethers at Robert's house and while the womenfolk were in the kitchen basting the Thanksgiving turkey, the men lounged in the sitting room swapping stories of ventures and revels in the Marines and later on, after dinner in mid-afternoon, they commemorated the occasion in Kodachrome. He has tried, he says, ever since Lee killed President Ken-

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Robert L. Oswald

nedy (for he is in no doubt about that) to puzzle out the reason why; he can see how the seeds of his brother's Gothic romanticism were sown, but he does

not understand, any better than anyone else, how they grew to bear such poisonous fruit.

Of Marguerite Oswald's three sons, Lee had the thinnest time of it because he was alone with his mother the most. She had been separated from her first husband before his child was born but he, John Pic, shared Robert's father, Oswald, their mother's second husband, for a few important years. Lee was born two months after Oswald died. Because she was now obliged to earn a living and could not simultaneously take care of her three children, Mrs. Oswald tried a number of expedients. She sent the two older boys to a boarding school which they hated so keenly that she removed them after a few months and put them into a home for orphans or children with only one parent. Here they were relatively happy; when he was three years old, Lee joined them there. But before that he had had a vagrant life: his mother moved from house to house and job to job and each change brought a change in the child's life—now he was at Aunt Lillian's house, now he was in his mother's house cared for by baby-sitters who did not spare the rod, now he was back at Aunt Lillian's but just for the day when his mother came to fetch him after work, as often as not picking a quarrel with her sister: "Marguerite's easy to get along with . . . as long as she gets her own way," said Aunt Lillian, and, Robert goes on, "While John and I were in the Bethlehem home, seeing Mother only on weekends and holidays, we didn't see many of her outbursts, but later on we saw plenty of them. I guess Lee learned at a very early age that Mother was *not* easy to get along with when she didn't get her own way."

Lee had been in the home for a little more than a year, enjoying the society of his big brothers and the other children, when his mother married her third husband, Mr. Ekdahl, a Yankee electrical engineer stationed in New Orleans. Mr. Ekdahl "knew how to talk to boys" and the three brothers took to him at once; speaking of his mother at that time Robert says pensively, "Mother was then 37 years old but looked younger. She was still slender and remarkably pretty and vivacious. Her dark hair had not yet begun to turn gray, and she wore it long. It framed her face, setting off her vivid blue eyes. Lee's eyes were like hers—clear and blue with dark lashes."

Lee left the home with the Ekdahls and for the next few years lived with them in Texas where Mr. Ekdahl had been transferred and traveled with them wherever business took them. John and Robert were moved from the home to a military academy in Mississippi and saw their brother only when they went home during school

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holidays. They were under the impression that the Ekdahl ménage was a happy one; the house was large and comfortable, by far the best the Oswald boys had ever known, and their mother was being supported. In fact, the household was wretched; Marguerite nagged, she and her husband were at loggerheads, he stayed more and more away from home, she often left him in high dudgeon and then came back; the child Lee was their captive audience. "He kept his feelings to himself and didn't show how much he worried over

the danger of losing the only father he had ever known."

Presently he did lose his genial surrogate father in a clamorous divorce. Marguerite, resuming the name Oswald, moved from the pleasant house, took John and Robert out of the academy which they had grown to love, and established them in a house in Fort Worth so close to the railroad tracks that the beds and tables trembled whenever a train went by. From that time on, until they were old enough to enlist, all three boys lived with their mother who, continuing her New Orleans pattern, constantly changed jobs and houses so that the boys constantly changed schools. John and Robert had been away from her so much that they did not really know her but, knowing her now, they kept their distance. Her discipline was erratic and emotional. "If we did something she didn't like, it made no difference whether it was trivial or serious, she made a big fuss over it . . . or else she gave us the silent treatment and wouldn't talk at all." One day Robert brought home a few Danish cigarettes given to him by a school friend; he did not hide them because his mother knew he smoked occasionally, but when she saw that they were foreign, "she let out such a shriek, you'd think I had robbed a bank." She accused him of using dope and threatened to take the cigarettes to the police to have them analyzed. She suspected evil and intrigue in the most commonplace gesture, she sensed sinister motives in anyone who happened along — among the many scandals she has concocted is that Jack Ruby is not dead, that another man's body occupies his grave and that he is at large, preparing for his next assignment which quite possibly will be another assassination. This love of mystery she passed on to Lee. Robert speaks of his "lifelong enjoyment of intrigue, his use of false names, his mysterious behavior even when he had nothing to hide."

Lee was about 13 when Mrs. Oswald pulled up stakes, packed her car and drove up to New York, a move that Robert looks upon as the beginning of the end. It was at this time that Lee, a reasonably good and tractable pupil, began playing hooky — "He was not only playing truant from school . . ." his brother writes and adds, sententiously but with sad sincerity, "That year he began to play truant from life." In October of 1952, he enrolled in a junior high school in the Bronx, and by the following January, he had been absent for 47 out of the 64 school days.

Friendless and fatherless and, except in basic fact, motherless, he must have been, in his deprivations and futile rebellions, a tragically angry child. Because of his persistent truancy, he attracted the notice of the authorities and was placed for a time in the city house of detention for delinquent children where he remained silent and aloof: "If Lee seemed standoffish at Youth House, he was simply reacting the way he always did to any suggestion that he be one of the gang." He was released on probation on the condition that he be given help by a psychiatrist, preferably a man, and on the further condition that his mother seek psychotherapy for herself. She ignored these stipulations and later on denied that they had ever been made. Robert says, "If she had faced it — if she had seen to it that Lee received the help he needed — I don't think the world would ever have heard of Lee Harvey Oswald."

Robert is not surprised that Lee went to Russia; he is not amazed — as Mrs. Oswald is not amazed — that

on his own he mastered the difficult language sufficiently to live and work there and to marry a Russian girl who had not a word of English. He accepts, with no more than the most perfunctory inquiry, both his brother's infatuation with the USSR and his disaffection after a year. If he were more complicated, if he had known his brother better, he might have been led into interesting speculations upon the early days in Moscow when, down to \$28, in limbo with the Soviet visa office and with the United States Embassy, discouraged from exploring the city because of the bitter cold, Lee spent six weeks in his hotel room, living on credit and studying Russian eight hours a day.

The only real news Robert brings is that when Marina first arrived in America she seldom smiled because she was missing a tooth which she had herself extracted in Minsk. There is a possibility, but I'm afraid a faint one, that Marina will tell us about this brave operation in *her* memoirs of Lee.

But while the book is only a pastiche of scraps of memories and borrowings from the Warren Report and quiet statements of personal shock and grief, there is a kindness about it, a brotherliness, and I am glad that from time to time in his lonesome, nutty life Lee met up with Robert. I do not know quite why Robert wrote the book but my feeling is that his intentions were honorable and that what venality there is in him is modest in quantity. He tried, brow furrowed, to tell the pathetic truth and did not seem to realize that it was already in the public domain.