



GARY WILLS

## Back in Dallas After Eight Years

DALLAS — Jetting into Dallas still seems, somehow, the quintessential American act. The tall downtown buildings shoot up out of the prairie like a clustering of oil wells, sucking up huge volumes of electricity. Jets from every quarter of the sky jam in on Love Field, while other planes spring up, like a restless flock of settling or startled birds.

The last time I was in Dallas for an extended period was eight years ago, when I was working on a series of "Esquire" articles about Jack Ruby. Much has changed since then.

The legendary Bill Decker, last of the six-gun sheriffs, is dead — he was still joining shoot-outs in his seventies, but died peacefully in bed. A TV announcer is the mayor now. Bill Alexander, the mean prosecutor of Jack Ruby, is back in private practice. Ruby's club — where emcees used to joke that strippers would

overdo things and turn the place into a parking lot — has been turned into a parking lot. Bernie Weinstein's club, which Ruby always envied and tried to equal, has fallen victim to the topless craze: Why pay for a band and an emcee when you can get your nudity right away for the price of a beer? Weinstein was shattered at the decline of an art, and quickly died after the club's shutting.

I thought, eight years ago, that Bill Willis was the wisest man in Dallas. I still think so. He is one of those people who move through life gently shaking their heads in disbelief at human folly. An athlete and trainer of gymnasts, a drummer for various bands, he had worked for Jack Ruby and tried to restrain his fits of violence. Willis, who goes off alone to read and write between his day job in gyms and night job in clubs, would have to define big

words for Ruby, who liked to try them out on people he wanted to impress.

Bill took me to see the memorial to Kennedy — they were still undecided what to do about that, back in 1966. It is not even visible from the assassination site, which is still presided over by the Dealey monument. The Kennedy memorial is tucked behind a building on an irrelevant spot. Why? "Cheap land," Bill supposes.

On the plane down I had read Gore Vidal's labored attempt to link E. Howard Hunt and the Watergaters to Arthur Bremer and the attempted assassination of Wallace. Vidal argues, on literary grounds, that Bremer could not have written the diary accepted as his at the trial. The spelling is not consistently bad, or bad on a plan (but surely a fake illiteracy is more likely to aim at consistency than

would the up-and-down moody young man, impetuously jotting things at intervals).

Vidal is certain that a young semi-illiterate would not fill his pages with so many literary references — to Hamlet, Melville, Tolstoy. I asked Bill if Jack Ruby, ungrammatical and poorly educated, liked such literary flourishes: "Hell, yes. Jack was always starring in a different play. Some part of him kept shouting 'I exist' in the center of a stage. He asked me things like, 'Is the Bolshoi ballet really good?' He loved to sound cultured."

None of this argument would matter to Gore Vidal, I admitted to Bill since Vidal thinks Ruby was in on some grand conspiracy, too. "Wheew," Bill said, and started chuckling, shaking his head at that old unshakeable human folly that never ceases to astound him.