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THE LANE-SPARROW EXCHANGE: A COMMENT

The FBI documents published in Six Seconds in Dallas are not the only FBI reports relating to Julia Ann Mercer to be found in Commission Document File 205. These additional reports shed light on the recent exchange between Mark Lane and John Sparrow (TLS, March 28, 1968).

The FBI first interviewed Miss Mercer on November 23. The report of that interview, dictated by Special Agent Wallace R. Heitman on November 23, makes no mention of any photographs being shown Miss Mercer. In substance it very closely recapitulates her November 22 affidavit (CD 205, pp. 313-314). During her next interview on November 25, she was shown by Special Agent Heitman some photographs of Lee Harvey Oswald and his New Orleans associates. She advised that neither Oswald nor any of his associates appeared to resemble the men she had seen with the pick-up truck (CD 205, p. 315).

Mr. Lane's assertion that FBI interest in Miss Mercer "began to wane" as soon as she proved incapable of connecting Oswald with the pick-up truck is mistaken. The FBI continued its investigation by checking fourteen air conditioning firms on November 27 (Miss Mercer had noticed the words "Air Conditioning" on the truck.), and continued checking out these leads until December 9, 1963 (CD 205, pp. 317-319). On November 28 Miss Mercer was interviewed by the FBI for a third time. The full report of that interview deserves quoting.

Julia Ann Mercer... was shown a group of photographs which included a photograph of Jack Ruby. Mercer could not identify any of the photographs as being identical with the person she had observed slouched over the wheel of a green Ford pickup truck parked about 10:50 AM at a point near the place where President Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963.

She then was shown a photograph of Ruby, and she advised the person in the truck had a rather large round face similar to Ruby's, but she could not identify him as the person.

She then was shown a photograph of Lee Harvey Oswald, and she stated that Oswald was of the same general build, size and age as the

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identify him as being the one who took the package from the truck.
(CD 205, p. 316)

Thus it would seem that Julia Ann Mercer was shown a picture of Jack Ruby just as Mr. Lane indicated. But it would also appear (if we can believe the FBI reports) that she was shown Ruby's picture on November 28, 1963 (after Ruby shot Oswald), and not on November 23, 1963, as she now recollects it.

One critical fact has been overlooked by both Messers. Lane and Sparrow in their discussion of the Julia Ann Mercer incident. Both have mistakenly assumed that Miss Mercer saw the parked truck on Elm Street just east of the railway overpass, and that the "grassy hill" she mentions is in fact the "grassy knoll" leading up to the stockade fence and concrete pergola on the north side of Elm Street. A close reading of her November 22 affidavit and her November 23 FBI interview shows that this is a mistake. "At a point about 45 or 50 feet east of the overhead signs of the right entrance road to the overpass," Miss Mercer observed, "there was a truck parked on the right hand side of the road." But as photos of Dealey Plaza show (see 24H543-547), these overhead signs are located some 200 feet beyond or west of the railway overpass. Thus the vehicle seen by Miss Mercer was parked 150 feet beyond the railway overpass. The "grassy hill" she mentions lay between the railway overpass and the more distant highway overpass and was not the famous "grassy knoll". The incident she mentions did not happen in Dealey Plaza at all, but rather at a distance of some two city blocks from the center of the Plaza.

What is the outcome of all this discussion?

Surely it is cause for amusement that neither of the disputants was sufficiently familiar with the geography of the assassination site to realize that the alleged incident occurred not in Dealey Plaza but two blocks away. Mr. Sparrow's attack on Mr. Lane for not mentioning the FBI reports is clearly unfair; the reports in question did not become available until long after Rush to Judgment was published.

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Likewise, Mr. Lane's claim that Julia Ann Mercer was shown a photo of Jack Ruby on November 23 would seem doubtful in light of the cited FBI report indicating she was shown Ruby's photograph on November 28. On the other hand, I think I went too far in Six Seconds in Dallas in saying that Patrolman Murphy's interview by the FBI "effectively puts to rest any lingering doubts about the pickup truck seen by Julia Ann Mercer", just as Mr. Sparrow went to far in suggesting that this same interview "removes any possible suspicion about the truck and its occupants." Mr. Lane's arguments on this point are quite telling; Patrolman Murphy is, after all, only a hearsay witness with respect to what happened at the truck after he left. Yet it also is doubtful whether this minor incident (which did not even occur where Mr. Lane thought it occurred) can bear the heavy weight of significance he ascribes to it. If this discussion shows anything, it demonstrates the ease with which a molehill can be transformed into a mountain.

----- Josiah Thompson