

Behind the New

FEBRUARY 24, 1967

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Orleans Probe

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New Orleans, Feb. 24—The investigation here into the possibility of a conspiracy in the assassination of President Kennedy was triggered last November in New York.

It began with a conversation between Sen. Russell Long (D-La.) and his good friend, Orleans Parish District Attorney Jim Garrison.

Long expressed doubts about the Warren Commission finding that Lee Harvey Oswald, alone, had killed the President. He took issue with the Warren Commission's ballistics experts who found that Oswald's rifle could have fired the fatal shots in rapid succession.

"If Long could be concerned, I felt there was more here than met the eye," Garrison recalled recently.

He immediately began reading up on the assassination, including "every page of the 26 volumes" of the commission's report. He also examined much of the material written by critics of the report. He even read a book by Oswald's mother.

Garrison had been in New York on a private trip concerning some oil holdings. His talk with Long had created for the DA as much interest as striking oil.

His thoughts turned to the events immediately following the assassination on Nov. 22, 1963. Jim Garrison had played a part in those events, but had been brushed aside by the F.B.I.

Garrison hadn't forgotten this. He still hasn't.

At every press conference he has held here regarding his conspiracy investigation Garrison has made plain his feelings that a "suspect" he arrested "three or four days after the assassination," had been totally disregarded by the F.B.I.

He has expressed bitterness

at the FBI's failure to send a copy of the statement taken from Garrison's suspect more than three years ago.

On Wednesday, Garrison's suspect died here, and the possibility of murder arose at once. Garrison, however, announced that same day that the suspect, David W. Ferrie, 49, a pilot, was an apparent suicide, having taken an overdose of pills from about 15 bottles found in his apartment.

Today Orleans Parish Coroner

Nicholas Chetta said a chemical analysis of Ferrie's body showed he died of natural causes, that there "is no indication whatsoever of suicide or murder." A ruptured artery in the brain was the cause of death, he said.

Ferrie was not a well man, existing on "coffee, cigarets and Jello," as he remarked recently. He was suffering from encephalitis, he said. Bottles of pills were almost everywhere about his littered apartment.

Physically he was quite weak. Mentally he was tormented. He knew Garrison had renewed his interest in him as a suspect in a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. He had been questioned. He was constantly being watched by Garrison's men. He kept hearing that Garrison was questioning some of the seedy acquaintances about town with whom he had associated occa-

sionally.

He started getting anonymous calls telling him the net was closing; that Garrison would soon arrest him.

Then a week ago the story of Garrison's conspiracy investigation broke in the newspapers here.

Ferrie could stand it no longer. He called a newspaper and told his story. He emphatically denied having ever known Oswald and assured the reporter that he certainly had not been involved in any plot to kill a President.

He told how he had been working as an investigator for an attorney here and had finished a court case the day Kennedy was killed.

He had decided to go to south Texas with two friends to hunt and relax. They had left that day. When they returned three days later they were arrested by Garrison's men as "fugitives from Texas." Garrison says the other two men were in the clear.

Ferrie was turned over to the FBI. He told his story to both the FBI and the Secret Service. He never heard from the federal agents again. Neither did Garrison.

Garrison had arrested Ferrie originally in a police dragnet in Orleans parish for anybody who could have been connected with a plot to kill the President.

Ferrie was already in the police files after arrests on morals charges. He was an excellent pilot. His name came up with others. Two days after the assassination, some hours after Jack Ruby killed Oswald, Garrison sent some men to pick up Ferrie. Ferrie was out of town. He was a suspect from then on.

"Supposedly I have been pegged as the getaway pilot in an elaborate plot to kill Ken-

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ned," Ferrie said recently. But, Garrison admits weather was too bad for flying between New Orleans and Dallas the day of the assassination. Ferrie had gone to south Texas by car.

"We felt it was rather peculiar," Garrison said after Ferrie's death, "that a man would suddenly take a trip to south Texas on the evening of the assassination when everybody else in the country was home watching television."

Revival of Suspicion

But all this had almost been forgotten until Garrison talked with Long in New York. Word got around that Garrison was interested in the assassination again.

Oswald had lived here. The summer before the assassination he had been active in a "Hands Off Cuba" campaign, handing out leaflets, making public speeches.

Garrison pulled out the Oswald file. There were pictures of Oswald in groups of pickets. Garrison's men called in some of their best stoolpigeons and informers and showed them the pictures. Gradually some of the people in the pictures were identified.

One of these informers is a character around town who is known to most reporters and editors. He is always trying to sell a scoop. He tried to sell the Garrison scoop months before it was generally known that the DA was investigating the assassination.

Gathering the Evidence

He carries a gun and a badge of some sort, though he is not a bona fide law enforcement official. "He's the Jack Ruby of New Orleans," one man who knows him remarked.

But he had the ear of the police—and Garrison's. He became interested in the investigation. He decided to help Garrison.

The informer found another man, a baggage handler in the bus station, who had told him he knew Oswald. He had told of having seen Oswald in meetings with "four or five others."

The informer brought the baggage handler in to see Garrison.

"I never knew the information I had was so important until I spoke to Garrison," he told a Post reporter recently.

The Lie Test

Garrison gave him a lie test. The baggage man passed with flying colors. The meetings he spoke of had taken place during the summer before the assassination, long before anybody knew Kennedy would come to Texas.

Garrison's investigation located one man, a Cuban in state prison. He was transferred to the local jail where he could be questioned and where he still is. A second Cuban was located in Miami.

By the time the story broke in the newspapers last week, Garrison had spent \$8,000 in expenses, sending investigators as far away as San Francisco.

Apparently Garrison's investigation had not gone too well. His staff of 10 detectives had worked hard but had not been able to develop a conspiracy that would invalidate the Warren findings.

Garrison's About-Face

Privately, Garrison assured a local editor that the disclosure of his investigation last week was quite all right. But the very next day he excluded local reporters from his news conference and then blamed the papers for delaying to "months away" the arrests of the conspirators who would otherwise have been arrested "in a few weeks."

Fortunately, he said, the stories had only pinpointed persons who were either secondary or irrelevant to the investigation.

The gun-carrying informer

who had brought in the baggage handler has been missing from town for weeks. He is in Texas and has no intention of returning at this time. As late as yesterday he told a friend here by long distance phone that he still believes there was a conspiracy.

But this is the informer who once tried to tell an editor here "documented" proof that the Vatican was "sitting" on a big story. That Pope John had been canonized and they didn't want anyone to know.

"If Garrison had anything," one high official here suggested, "that guy wouldn't be hiding out of town. He'd be here acting like a wheel in Garrison's office."

Some Loose Ends

Ferrie was pinpointed in the first story about the investigation. On Monday, Ferrie was among those classified as secondary or irrelevant to the case.

After he was dead on Wednesday Garrison announced:

"The apparent suicide of David Ferrie ends the life of a man who, in my judgment, was one of history's most important individuals. Evidence developed by our office had long since confirmed that he was involved

in events culminating in the assassination of President Kennedy.

"Members of my staff have been maintaining a continual stakeout in the vicinity of Mr. Ferrie's house for a long period. Information from this observation, as well as from other sources, had caused us to become increasingly concerned, as our investigation progressed, about the possibility of his killing himself.

"Because of this, in a meeting in my house this morning (Wednesday) we had reached a decision to arrest him early next week.

"Apparently we waited too long."

What Is Involved?

Garrison admits that Ferrie was never in Dallas at the time of the assassination.

"We have known this for years, but this is not involved," Garrison said.

Precisely what is involved he won't say.

Did anyone to his knowledge fire at President Kennedy in Dallas in addition to the shots fired by Oswald, Garrison was asked.

"I have no reason to believe that Lee Harvey Oswald killed

anybody in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963," Garrison replied.

Garrison, who is 6-foot-6, is known here as both "the Perry Mason of New Orleans" and "the Jolly Green Giant." He is brash and publicity-conscious. He is ambitious, with an eye on Washington.

Victor in Many Battles

Garrison has been in one feud after another here during his five years as DA. He has taken on the police, eight judges and the mayor in pitched battle. He has won each time.

Most officials here and in Washington are sceptical of Garrison's case against the Warren Report. Nobody but his closest aides know what he actually has.

Local officials are concerned about knocking him down on this question. They feel Garrison is too shrewd to have started something like this if he had almost nothing. There is strong feeling that Garrison may have placed too much confidence in the missing informer and several other questionable persons involved in the investigation. But they feel he will survive in the end.

If, in the months to follow, he fails to come up with a case, local observers feel he can always blame the newspapers and the untimely death of Ferrie.