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Conspiracy Connection

Conference on JFK's killing

Selling Of The Slaying

Dallas — It might be called the merchandising of the assassination.

Inside the towering Hyatt Regency Hotel, where more than 600 conspiracy buffs are commemorating the 30th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's murder, a vast ballroom serves as what can best be described as an assassination supermarket. Hucksters peddle all manner of assassination memorabilia from books to pamphlets, from audio to videotapes, from T-shirts to paintings. And business is brisk.

The accused assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, while living in New Orleans, constituted an unofficial one-man chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Here, for $20, you can buy a T-shirt making you an instant member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

Writers of books with a certain celebrity — among them John Davis, author of "Mafia Kingfish" — stand poised at their booths to sign autographs for cash customers.

"The case is not closed," argues a flier promoting a conspiracy book. "Despite rumors to the contrary, the assertions that the Warren Commission was right have been exaggerated."

A Dallas firm called Audio Cassettes offers tapes ranging from $10 to $30 on such subjects as "JFK 101: An Assassination Primer" to "Oswald in Mexico City." A conspiracy researcher named Dan Sarver offers an audiobook called "Assassination Fascination" for $24.95.

Last year, a Florida developer who paid $220,000 for the gun Jack Ruby used to shoot Oswald was at the gathering selling bullets certified as having been fired from the gun for $495 each.

All this profit-making is perhaps in keeping with the nature of the Assassination Symposium John F. Kennedy. This third annual conference, run by the SXSW Corp. of Austin, is itself a for-profit venture. Attendees are charged up to $175 each. Roland Swenson, one of four SXSW board members, said the company began by running music and film festivals.

"Somebody suggested we should do an assassination convention," Swenson said. "We tried it and it was very successful. So we've kept doing it."

Is the corporation ever accused of profiteering on a tragedy? "Oh, sure, that comes up occasionally," Swenson said. "But it's not like we're making a whole lot of money."

How much?

"We'll probaby make about $50,000 this week."

— Michael Dorman

By Michael Dorman
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Dallas — A tall, slender writer named Thom Hartmann — whose sober mien is not concealed by a luxuriant brown beard — let his eyes roam briefly yesterday upon the ballroom full of assassination buffs seated before him. Only after a further pause for effect did the speaker pronounce his judgment.

"The mob murdered John F. Kennedy," said Hartmann, who is researching a book on the assassination. "Santos Trafficante and Carlos Marcello had Kennedy killed. They had decided to kill him to head off prosecutions against them. They used a Cuban connection to try to throw the blame on Fidel Castro."

Do tell, some might say. For stories purporting to implicate mob bosses Marcello and Trafficante — both now dead — have been floating around for decades. The House Assassinations Committee reported 15 years ago that it had intensively investigated reports of the mobsters' involvement and found no solid evidence to support it.

But none of that seemed to matter to the conspiracy advocates gathered here for a conference commemorating today's 30th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. Hartmann's purported revelations were applauded as lustily as if they broke some significant new ground.

Many of the more than 600 people attending the conference — from virtually all 50 states, Europe and Asia — express deep resentment of those who ridicule their fascination with notions of a conspiracy. They resent being referred to as "buffs" — preferring "researchers."

They also resent the very name of Gerald Posner, author of the conspiracy-debunking book "Case Closed." Boos resound every time his name is mentioned. The "researchers" confront head-on the idea that they are virtual members of a cult.

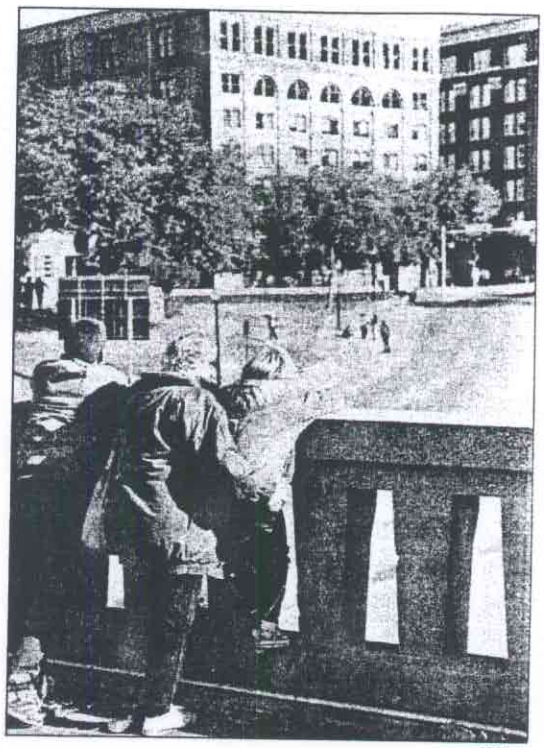
"We are not here as members of a cult," said conspiracy advocate Cyril Wecht, a Pittsburgh forsensic pathologist who has challenged some of the medical evidence in the case. "We are not fanatical zealots. We hurt, we bleed, we cry and we are puzzled by the great mystery. We know the Warren Commission report is incorrect."

On Saturday night, there was a candlelight vigil near the grassy knoll where many conspiracy buffs believe an unidentified gunman fired at the president. Lee Harvey Oswald's widow, Marina Oswald Porter, stood shivering in the cold in a lightweight blue coat and told about 200 spectators: "Thirty years ago, we lost a wonderful leader. If John Kennedy came back to earth for one day, I think he would be very disappointed and maybe die from what he would see. For the last thirty years, everything's gone downhill. If we bring the country back to everything he stood for, that would be the best we could offer."

Porter, who said shortly after the assassination that she believed her husband was the sole killer, put it diffferently at the vigil. "If I thought Lee Harvey Oswald was responsible for John Kennedy's death, I would not be standing before you tonight," she said.

Dealey Plaza, site of the assassination, is to be dedicated today as a national landmark. The featured guest will be Nellie Connally, widow of former Texas Gov. John Connally, who was wounded in the assassination.

Michael Dorman, a freelance writer, covered John F. Kennedy's assassination for Newsday. His books include "The Secret Service Story."



AP Photo

From a Dallas overpass, people view the assassination site

30 Years Later: Bounty of Guns, Rivers of Blood

By Alfred Lubrano
STAFF WRITER

New York — When John Kennedy was murdered 30 years ago today, then-Speaker of the House John McCormack lamented, "My God, my God. What are we coming to?"

That the answer decades later would be the anonymous shooting of Pamela Mascaro last Christmas on the Grand Central Parkway; the pack-slaying of Yusuf Hawkins in summer-hot Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, in 1989; and the ritualistic execution of Little Man Simmons four years ago Thanksgiving in the Castle Hill Houses in the Bronx, McCormack could never have foreseen.

Americans in 1963 thought they had witnessed the nadir of contemporary existence when Lee Harvey Oswald fired on their president.

Then Oswald was murdered on television, and the entire country learned what 10-year-olds in Brownsville, Brooklyn, 1993, could recite with bored detachment: A shot human dies squirming in pain.

Having survived the assassination, America three decades later dies slowly in the streets.

"Getting shot is all messed up," says Wilson Murphy, shot with five 9-mm. bullets in the brain, arm, hand, liver and lung. A quadriplegic confined since April 8, 1991, to Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Roosevelt Island, Murphy understands violence as do few others.

"First, I felt like a pinch in my bicep," he says, recounting the day he stopped to talk to a man on a Bushwick street who, as it happened, was marked for death. The man died in a hail of drug dealer's bullets. Murphy, 33, got bloody.

"Bullets burn, man. It was hot, like on a stove. Then I got hit in the lung. I couldn't breathe. When you're shot, all you want is cold water, I guess 'cause you're so hot from the bullets burning in you.

"Your blood comes out thick, and I saw pieces of my brain on the street. God kept me alive, I guess. It's been three years, almost, but now I can

Please see GUNS on Page 18

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