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The Elevators

Additional testimony linking Oswald with the [southeast corner] was provided by the testimony of Charles Givens, who was the last known employee to see Oswald inside the building prior to the assassination. During the morning of November 22, Givens was working with the floor-laying crew in the southwest section of the sixth floor. At about 11:45am the floor-laying crew used both elevators to come down from the sixth floor. The employees raced the elevators to the first floor. Givens saw Oswald standing at the gate on the fifth floor as the elevator went by. Givens testified that after reaching the first floor, "I discovered I left my cigarettes in my jacket pocket upstairs, and I took the elevator back upstairs to get my jacket with my cigarettes in it."(132)

The passage above seeks to incriminate Oswald on the basis of the testimony of Charles Givens, who was introduced in the previous discussion as a member of the floor-laying crew. The value of Givens' account, however, is questionable in light of the fact that little of what he said rings true. Sylvia Meagher, in an essay written more than thirty years ago, characterized his testimony as "strange."

Consider Givens' claim that he had returned to the sixth floor, after the "elevator race", in order to retrieve his jacket and cigarettes. The quote above, taken from Givens' deposition before David Belin, is found on page 349 (volume VI); however, on page 347 the following exchange takes place:

Belin: Did you wear a jacket to work that day?
Givens: I wore a raincoat, I believe. It was misting that morning.
Belin: Did you hang up your coat in [the first-floor "domino room"], too?
Givens: Yes, sir.

Belin apparently missed, or chose to ignore, Givens' contradictory accounts of where he had placed his jacket that day. It is possible, of course, that Givens wore two jackets to work, and that he hung up his wet "raincoat" on the first floor and took another jacket, containing cigarettes, upstairs; it is also possible that Givens had returned to the first floor sometime that morning to get his raincoat from the domino room, and that he took it back upstairs with him — presumably after it had dried out.

The fact that Belin and other members of the Warren Commission did not follow up on this obvious conflict in Givens' testimony tends to incriminate the Commission more than it does Oswald, the intended target of incrimination. But this could have been a mere oversight — even Meagher missed this one in her essay on "The Strange Testimony of Charles Givens."

But other conflicts are not so easily dismissed. This is especially true of the discrepancies between individual members of the floor-laying crew regarding their activities at lunchtime on November 22. The elevator race mentioned in the passage above is a case in point:

The following exchanges are taken from the depositions of Danny Arce, Charles Givens, Billy Lovelady and Bonnie Ray Williams under questioning by assistant counsels Joseph Ball and David Belin. (Some of the Q&A is presented here out of order, but not out of context.)

Ball: Did you have sort of a race that day, do you remember?

Arce: Yeah.

Ball: Tell me about it.

Arce: Well, me and Bonnie Ray and, I'm not too sure, I believe it was Billy Lovelady, were on the same elevator, and Charles Givens and the other guys [?] were on the other one and we were racing down.

Ball: Which elevator were you on?

Arce: We have two of them that go up, the same deal and I was on the one facing east.(VI,364)

* * *

Belin: What elevator did you take down?

Givens: The east elevator.

Belin: Any particular reason why you took the east one rather than the west one?

Givens: Well, I don't know whether you call it a particular reason, but on the west, you have double gates on that.

Belin: Who was on that [east] elevator — do you remember?

Givens: That was Bonnie Ray Williams, and Billy Lovelady, and Danny and myself.

Belin: Who won?

Givens: Well, the east elevator beat the other one down...(VI,351,348,352,354)

* * *

Ball: Did you come down the elevator?

Lovelady: Right.

Ball: Who did you go down with?

Lovelady: Let me see — I think it was Bonnie Ray Williams on the side I was; I believe so.

Ball: Were you having a race with the other boys?

Lovelady: Yes, sir; sure was.

Ball: You were on the west elevator?

Lovelady: Right.(VI,337)

* * *

Ball: Now, did you go downstairs?

Williams: We took two elevators down. I mean, speaking as a group, we took two down.

Ball: Was there some reason you took two down?

Williams: We always had a little kids game we played racing down with the elevators. And I think one fellow, Charles Givens, had the east elevator, and me, and I think two or three more fellows had the west elevator. And we were racing down.

Ball: Who was driving the west elevator?

Williams: I don't remember exactly who was.

Ball: You were not?

Williams: I don't think I was; I don't remember.

Ball: Who was driving the east side elevator?

Williams: I think that was Charles Givens.I was on the opposite elevator.....

Ball: Well, [the FBI] reported here that you went down to the fifth floor, and you did so by going down on the west elevator.

Williams: The east elevator. The reason I was able to determine whether it was the east elevator is because I think when you questioned us the other day, the other fellows — I told you I didn't remember which elevator first. But the other fellows said they had the west elevator... If they are sure they had the west elevator up, that only leaves the east elevator.*(III,167,168,172)

* This last Q&A appears to confuse two separate downward elevator trips; after the race, Williams reportedly returned alone to the sixth floor (as did Givens in retrieving his jacket) where he ate his lunch before taking the elevator down to the fifth floor to await the motorcade. Ball appears to be asking about the latter trip; Williams appears to be referring to the former.

to be continued