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Las Garrison's Roller Coaster Stopped?

By Gary Ronberg
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THE FALL of 1966 the Warren had been out for almost two years. The official inquiry into the assassination of President John F. Kennedy had stated in voluminous detail that Harvey Oswald had not only shot the President, but had acted Officially, at least, there had been no conspiracy to kill the President.

ny, however, disputed the findings of the Warren Commission. Some labeled the report a federal cover-up. The tragic events in Dallas in November 1963. In homes and offices, restaurants and bars and at cocktail parties throughout the world, it was said that there had been a conspiracy to kill Kennedy, and that the key players in the plot still were free.

where was the discussion more heated than in New Orleans, in the big and honky tonks along Bourbon Street. Conspicuous by his absence, however, was James Garrison, the district attorney. Garrison, who recently toured the area in a white leather jacket, buying drinks for the bartenders, was nowhere to be seen. For soon had it that for some mysterious reason, the midnight oil was being burned at the D.A.'s office at the intersection of Tulane and Broad.

AN ARTICLE in the New Orleans magazine, one writer suggested that Garrison had deserted his old haunts, and his career was on the rocks. He was morose and undecided about his future. So far he (Garrison) had only political "wrote David Chandler." But roller coasters always come to a halt at

the bottom." The only flaw in Chandler's assessment was that it was seven years premature.

Twelve days ago Garrison's roller coaster indeed came to a halt — at the bottom — but not before he had shaken the world with a wild "investigation" into the Kennedy assassination. What he was doing in the fall of 1966 was preparing a probe to prove that the President had been the victim of a conspiracy which included Oswald, an obscure figure named David W. Ferrie and Clay Shaw, a prominent New Orleans businessman. Before Garrison was finished Ferrie was dead, like Oswald, and Shaw — though ultimately acquitted — was all but destroyed.

Amazingly, Garrison didn't get hurt until Dec. 15, when he was defeated in the Democratic primary by Harry Connick. The election was one of the closest in the city's history, and it took the massed strength of the New Orleans financial establishment to unseat the controversial incumbent.

Connick's campaign was finely-tuned and highly-organized, and Connick never denied charges that he was spending about \$250,000 on the election. By contrast, Garrison's drive was haphazard and disorganized; he had virtually no staff and conducted most of his campaigning in bars, restaurants and lodge halls, buying drinks for anyone who would listen to his jokes and political promises.

ONE WONDERS why the election was as close as it was. Not only was Garrison humiliated in his tissue-paper prosecution of Shaw, as recently as last summer he was charged with giving and accepting bribes to protect illegal pinball machine gambling. The fact is that in any other city in the South, Garrison would have been a nobody. But in New Orleans, with its large Catholic population, he has been able to capitalize on white longshore-

men and truck drivers who were as outraged as blacks over the assassination of Kennedy.

Garrison had already lost the Shaw case in 1970, but still was elected to a third term after asserting that the Federal Government was out to get him. Blacks, who represent about 25 per cent of the city's population, voted for him almost unanimously and he got heavy support from poor white areas. In the eyes of the majority of the electorate, Garrison was a crusader determined to slice through a federal cover-up of the assassination and reveal the "truth."

Garrison got extremely good mileage out of this approach. As he stood trial for the pinball bribes last summer, the Government thought it had an air-tight case, complete with a witness who testified that he had carried money to Garrison and even recorded their conversation on tape. But the district attorney, again charging that he was a target of a conspiratorial government trying to shut him up, won an acquittal.

Under the circumstances, the acquittal of Shaw would have steered most district attorneys to other business at hand. But not the flamboyant Garrison. Shaw had maintained that he did not even know Oswald and Ferrie, and a 12-man jury believed him unanimously. But no sooner was the verdict announced than Garrison was charging Shaw with perjury.

The New Orleans States-Item demanded Garrison's resignation, saying that "He has shown himself unfit to hold the office. He has perverted the law rather than prosecute it." The newspaper said the "persecution" of Shaw was a "perversion of the legal process such as has not been often seen." SHAW, whose personal finances had been depleted by his defense, was

spared further agony only when a United States district judge issued a permanent injunction in May of 1971 forbidding Garrison to prosecute Shaw on the perjury charge. Judge Herbert W. Christenberry's 21-page ruling said that Garrison's perjury charge was "brought in bad faith and that such bad faith constitutes irreparable injury, which is great and immediate."

Then Christenberry lashed on Garrison's motives for bullying Shaw, saying that Garrison had significant financial interest in the prosecution because of a book he had written on his investigation, titled "Heritage of Stone."

"It is obvious," Christenberry said, "that the sale of Garrison's book may be promoted by the publicity resulting from the continued prosecution of Clay Shaw." Christenberry then criticized what he called Garrison's "quest for publicity in the case," his use of outside finances in the investigation, his tactics of obtaining information and his continuing harassment of Shaw.

Since his primary defeat, Garrison has not been seen and has been unavailable for comment. A spokesman said, however, that the district attorney is not conceding defeat and may even investigate the election, charging that certain districts reported what appeared to be suspicious vote totals.

CONNICK outpolled Garrison by 64,952 votes to 62,731, but assistant district attorney John Volz said that there were differences in the vote totals between the Dec. 15 election and the November primary, in which Connick forced Garrison into the runoff.

"In one precinct where in the first primary we got 575 votes, in this past primary we got 65 and Connick doubled what he had in the first primary," Volz said. "I'm not saying that

because we lost that precinct is abnormal, but the volume of the vote turnout is questionable."

Volz said that any investigation of the election would not be under the auspices of the district attorney's office, but conducted instead by Garrison's campaign officers.

Now the hot question in the bars and restaurants along Bourbon Street is, once again, "Where's Jim Garrison?" No one knows if the midnight oil is burning at Tulane and Broad, and no one can be sure if the D.A.'s roller coaster is permanently stopped—or merely stalled—at the bottom. In any event, the next move is up to Jim Garrison.



JAMES GARRISON who recently lost a campaign for re-election as district attorney of New Orleans. (AP Photo)