Jack Ruby's gunrunning to

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Jack Ruby was running guns and ammunition from Galveston Bay to Fidel Castro's guerrillas in Cuba about 1957, a former poker-playing partner of the Dallas nightclub owner told The News Thursday.

James E. Beaird said he waited until 1966, almost three years after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and "nothing had come out so I called them (FBI) just to find out why . . . I was curious. However, they didn't see fit to even mention it to me again, so I never heard of anything they ever opened up on it."

Beaird said the FBI finally "sent a man out in 1976. I don't know why they did it then."

The agent interviewed Beaird at his home in Apache Junction, Ariz., in June 1976, a month after the Senate Intelligence Committee voted to recommend a new congressional inquiry into the Kennedy assassination. Senate investigators at the time had just discovered FBI files — suppressed since the assassination — showing that top FBI officials knew of CIA plots to kill Castro by enlisting the aid of Mafia hoodlums.

The FBI agent who interviewed Beaird in 1976 didn't mention in his report that Beaird had volunteered information about Ruby's gunrunning to the bureau in 1966. The report stated that since the 1963 assassination, "there had been so much speculation as to possible foreign connections and he (Beaird) thought it better not to mention his knowledge of Jack Ruby in Kemah (southeast of Houston on Galveston Bay)."

The Warren Commission in 1964 investigated numerous allegations of gunrunning by Ruby but concluded that no factual information existed.

Beaird told the FBI that he "personally saw many boxes of new guns, including automatic rifles and handguns," stored in a 2-story house near the channel at Kemah and loaded on what looked like a 50-foot surplus military boat.

"He stated each time that the boat left with guns and ammunition, Jack Ruby was on the boat," the FBI report said.

Beaird, who was an automobile dealer in Houston from 1955 to 1957, said Ruby "was in it for the money. It wouldn't matter what side, just one that would pay him the most . . . I don't even know who the ship belonged to. But he was in command of it. He went out every time it went. It was meeting a connection down there (in Cuba), that's all I ever heard."

Ruby would show up in Kemah, generally on weekends, to play poker and "just killing time until the boat was loaded," Beaird said, and usually was there not more than one or two hours.

"They loaded up at least twice while I was down there," he said. "Pickup trucks would carry it from the house over to this boat."

By 1959, Castro had taken control of Cuba and Ruby was beginning to switch sides as Castro threatened to force Mafia-backed professional gamblers out of the casinos in Havana.

One victim of Castro's efforts to oust

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Castro claimed

organized crime from Havana gambling houses was Lewis McWillie, who Ruby met in Dallas about 1950 when McWillie operated a Dallas nightclub. McWillie subsequently became a "violent anti-Castroite" and fled from Cuba in 1961, according to the Warren Commission.

Ruby in early 1959 ordered four revolvers shipped by Dallas gun dealer Ray Brantley to McWillie in Havana because McWillie "was a little worried of the new regime coming in, and evidently he wanted some protection," Ruby told the Warren Commission.

McWillie's former boss in Havana, reputed Mafia chief Santos Trafficante of Tampa, Fla., was arrested by Castro forces in April 1959 and imprisoned.

The Trafficante arrest happened about a month after Ruby was contacted by the FBI in Dallas as a possible informant. He met nine times with an agent during the time he was involved with Mafia intrigue in Cuba, but the FBI maintains he was discarded in October 1959 because he had no information of value.

Ruby contacted convicted gun smuggler Robert McKeown in the Kemah area in the spring of 1959 and offered $5,000 for each of three people if McKeown, a friend of Castro's, could help free them from Cuban prisons, FBI reports show. Ruby told McKeown the money would be coming from someone in Las Vegas, Nev.

McKeown told the FBI that in May 1959 he met with Ruby, who offered to trade Jeeps for the three prisoners. Ruby also offered McKeown $25,000 for a letter of introduction to Castro for an unnamed third party to show his good faith, McKeown said, but the deal never materialized.

In November 1975 McKeown asserted on a CBS-TV documentary about the Kennedy assasination that he also had contact with accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald.

McKeown stated that a person he later recognized as Oswald and an unidentified Latin-American had talked to him about buying high-powered automatic rifles several weeks [redacted] assassination.