

The Shootout Over Ruby's Gun

An angry footnote to the JFK assassination

Locked away in a safety-deposit box on Dallas's north side lies one of the world's most famous guns: the .38 Colt Cobra revolver that Dallas strip-joint operator Jack Ruby used to kill Lee Harvey Oswald on Nov. 24, 1963. Ruby died a little more than three years later, but the fight for the rights to his murder weapon has lived on ever since. The bitter 23-year-old dispute pits Jules Mayer, an attorney and executor of Ruby's estate, against Ruby's own family—and the IRS against them both. This is more than a quarrel among claimants to the few belongings Jack Ruby left behind. "It's one of the last points of interest regarding the Kennedy assassination that hasn't been settled," said Peter Bargmann, Mayer's attorney.

Millions of Americans were watching on live television when Ruby lunged out of a crowd in the Dallas Police building and fired point-blank into Oswald's stomach. As President Kennedy's accused assassin dropped to the floor, Ruby—and his gun—were taken into custody. When Ruby died in 1967, Mayer stepped forward with a handwritten copy of Ruby's will, sparking the first of a long series of legal wrangles between Mayer and Ruby's heirs. "Mayer should have never been the executor in the first place," complains Ruby's brother Earl, 75, who says he was in the process of drawing up a new will just before Jack's death. "I wanted to pay Mayer his fee and have him release the gun and all Jack's clothing and personal effects, and he refused to do it."

Earl Ruby is not the only one making claims on his brother's gun. Even before

Ruby died, the IRS entered the fray, claiming Ruby owed \$46,000 in back taxes. Later, the State of Texas chimed in with a much smaller claim of its own. In a vain attempt to raise cash for the creditors, Mayer has offered the gun to dozens of potential buyers over the years, ranging from Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum in London to the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. While the Ruby family claims he has no right to sell the gun at all, Mayer has turned down offers for as high as \$100,000, thinking the price was too low.

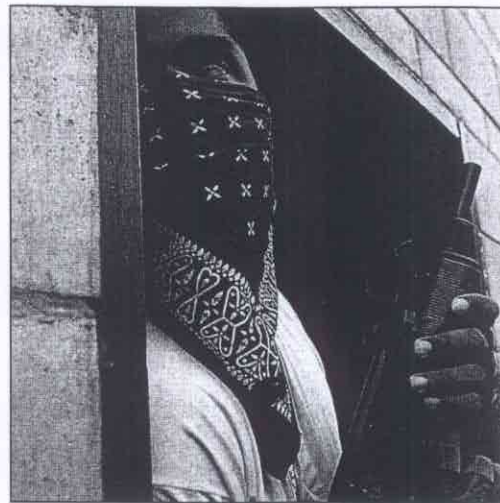
The squabble may finally be drawing to a resolution. Later this month, a jury is scheduled to hear the outstanding claims against the Ruby estate. Not that there's much to it. "You can fit all the property of the estate in a small box," says Bargmann. Besides the gun, Ruby left his heirs the Neiman-Marcus suit, alligator belt and the Cavanagh hat he was wearing when he shot Oswald. Ruby also left behind a ring, a watch, two pairs of swim trunks, a shower cap and an athletic supporter.

Grassy knoll: Though short on glitz, the trial should offer plenty of eerie atmospherics for assassination buffs. Judge Robert E. Price's probate court, where the case will be heard, is kitty-corner to the old School Book Depository building. The window where Lee Oswald squeezed off his fatal shots at the presidential motorcade is visible from the courtroom. Perhaps trial watchers will spend lunch breaks on the grassy knoll, pondering one of the few unfinished chapters surrounding President Kennedy's death.

PETER ANNIN in Dallas

Who owns the famous murder weapon? Millions watched Oswald's killing on live TV

BOB JACKSON—DALLAS TIMES HERALD



WAYNE MILES—GAMMA LIAISON

Mean streets: Exploiting violence?

Selling Fear to L.A.'s Poor

Life-insurance companies have never been shy about the hard sell. But two firms drumming up new business in crime-plagued Los Angeles neighborhoods have found a new low. The Los Angeles Times recently reported that American National Insurance Co. and Golden State Mutual Life have been using fear tactics to sell policies to families with children at risk from gang- or drug-related violence. Agents from American National's Inglewood office are reportedly cashing in on the bloodshed by scanning newspapers for recent drive-by shootings. They then visit the troubled neighborhoods with clippings in hand to persuade frightened families to buy \$5,000 or \$10,000 policies (costing about \$10 a month) to cover funeral costs. Golden State uses a similar approach. "I at least wait a while, maybe a week [before visiting such a neighborhood]. During grieving time, people don't want to deal with things like that," Compton agent Jerome Young explained to the Times.

Spokesmen for both companies denied any knowledge of the sales tactics and said they disapproved. State regulatory authorities have been mute. But community leaders are angry. Leon Watkins, director of the Family Help Line in south-central Los Angeles denounced the practice as a "form of carpetbagging" that adds to the exploitation of a downtrodden community plagued by drugs and poverty. "It's a horrible situation. It's really sick," he says. "There's a liquor store on every corner taking advantage [of dismal conditions]. Then you have drug dealers taking advantage. Now you have the insurance companies taking advantage. Who's next?" ■