The 'Oswald Plot,' or Something

By GENE ROBERTS
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NEW ORLEANS, March 18—No one was more surprised this week than newsmen in Baton Rouge when Perry Raymond Russo, a 25-year-old insurance salesman, proved to be the chief witness in an alleged plot to assassinate President Kennedy.

Only three weeks ago, Mr. Russo telephoned newspaper and television stations in the Louisiana capital to say that he had known the late David W. Ferrie, a former airline pilot, to be so "obsessed with Kennedy that he sometimes talked of killing him.

Had Mr. Russo ever known Lee Harvy Oswald? No, Mr. Russo answered. He had never even heard of him until President Kennedy was assassinated and Oswald was charged with the slaying.

When District Attorney Jim Garrison of New Orleans put him on the witness stand this week in a court hearing into the alleged conspiracy, Mr. Russo told a different story. He said he had not only known Oswald but had quietly sat in on a conspiratorial meeting in mid-September of 1963 and heard Oswald, Mr. Ferrie, and Clay L. Shaw, a retired business executive, talk of "triangulation of crossfire," scapegoats and escape route to Brazil and Cuba.

Meeting Followed Party

The meeting, Mr. Russo went on, had taken place immediately following a party which "eight or ten people" had attended at Mr. Ferrie's apartment in New Orleans.

Another witness, a former narcotics addict, testified that although he knew nothing of any conspiracy, he had once seen Oswald and Mr. Shaw talking together on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. At the time of the alleged conversation, he added, he was regularly taking three or four capsules of heroin daily.

With that, a panel of three judges ruled there was enough "probable cause" that a crime had been committed

Conrad in The Los Angeles Times

"Dallas re-run"

NEW ORLEANS DRAMA: District Attorney Jim Garrison, left, brought Perry Russo, right, before a preliminary hearing last week to tell a bizarre tale of hypnotism, "truth drugs" and an alleged meeting in September, 1963, at which Lee Oswald—the Warren Commission's findings to the contrary—conspired with others to assassinate President Kennedy.

to warrant a trial for Mr. Shaw on charges that he participated in an assassination conspiracy.

The ruling was not surprising. Not much proof is required in Louisiana to set a trial in motion. Judges can and do clear the way for trials if one or two people—usually law enforcement officers—say they have reason to believe a crime has been committed by a defendant.

More surprising, however, was the chain of events that led to the hearing. On Feb. 18, Mr. Garrison announced that he would make arrests in the Kennedy assassination case. And on Feb. 23, he asserted that he had "solved" the case and that the Warren Commission was wrong in concluding that Oswald had killed President Kennedy alone and without being a part of any conspiracy.

Yet, at the hearing, the only witnesses presented against Mr. Shaw were two people who did not talk to district attorney investigators until after he had said he had "solved" the assassination. Mr. Russo did not talk to Mr. Garrison's investigators until Feb. 27. And the narcotics addict, who was voluntarily in jail this week because he had felt an urge to go back on narcotics, did not talk to Mr. Garrison's staff until the day before he testified at the hearing.

What evidence then, did Mr. Garrison have of a conspiracy at the time he said he had "solved" the case? He was not saying, and newsmen were unable to find traces of any evidence prior to Mr. Russo's visit to the district attorney's office.

There were indications, however, that Mr. Garrison's theories about the alleged conspiracy had changed since he first said he had "solved" the assassination.

Three weeks ago, the six-foot, six-inch district attorney was talking of a "through-the-looking-glass conspiracy" in which anti-Castro forces set out to kill the Cuban Premier but changed their minds and decided to shoot President Kennedy instead.

But in his testimony at the hearing, Mr. Russo had Mr. Ferrie, who was known here to hold strong anti-Castro views, discussing the possibility of going to Cuba after the assassination to seek refuge.

Mr. Russo offered no explanation for this nor did he say why none of the "eight or 10 people" who allegedly saw Oswald at the party at Mr. Ferrie's apartment, has ever come forward to tell their story.

Warren Report Doubted

Whatever the hearing might have established about the presence or absence of the conspiracy, it did seem to indicate firmly that there are widespread doubts about the conclusions of the Warren Commission.

Although no exact count was possible, it appeared that more than 150 newsmen, photographers and television cameramen from throughout the world were in New Orleans to cover the hearing. And more often than not the stories and pictures they sent home were given prominent display.

It was clear, too, that New Orleans took the hearing seriously indeed. Dozens of sheriff's deputies hovered about the courtroom to inspect and frisk each person as he entered. They seemed especially concerned that an F.B.I. agnt or some other representative of the Federal Government might try to "infiltrate" the proceeding. Once, they ordered a newsman from the courtroom and double-checked his credentials on the suspicion that he might have been an F.B.I. agent.

Even the three-judge panel, which presided over the hearing, was caught up in the doubt surrounding the Warren report.

"If we are going to accept the Warren report as factual then we've wasted a week of time," said Judge Bernard J. Bagert near the end of the hearing.

"It is fraught," Judge Mathew S. Braniff added "with hearsay and contradictions."