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The Garrison Case

Oddballs and Omens in Old New Orleans

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By MERRIMAN SMITH

NEW ORLEANS (UPI) — For a nation — and a world — still distressed by the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a new and dismaying chapter in the case is being written here.

The central figure is Jim Garrison, politically ambitious District Attorney of Orleans Parish. He is an enormous man with a basso profundo-robusto voice and an investigative technique to match.

Mr. Garrison's evidence comes in part from some of the seamiest sides of the New Orleans demi monde. It includes witnesses bedeviled by booze pills and psychoneuroses — people who believe society has wronged them since birth.

The District Attorney's firm intention is to prove that President Kennedy's death was planned in New Orleans by anti-communists, American and Cuban, in retribution for the botched-up Bay of Pigs invasion and for the President's failure to pull down Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

Mr. Garrison's investigation produced its first arrest last Wednesday night. Clay Shaw, 54, former managing director of the International Trade Mart at New Orleans, was charged with participating in a conspiracy to murder President Kennedy.

The nature of Mr. Shaw's alleged conspiracy was not disclosed, but Mr Garrison has promised that many more arrests would follow.

Whether he can prove his overall case is another matter. At this point it seems doubtful that the investigation and promised court trials will produce much more than the fact that some Cubans in New Orleans in 1962-63 and some American oddballs did indeed speak wishfully of seeing President Kennedy killed.

Mr. Garrison hopes to prove that Lee Harvey Oswald sat in these sordid councils before going to Dallas where the President was slain. That would be contrary to the Warren Commission conclusion that Oswald was the sole assassin and was not involved in any conspiracy, foreign or domestic.

Mr. Garrison does not believe this. He believes there is a good chance Oswald "didn't kill anybody"; that at the most, Oswald may have fired the shots that wounded Gov. John Connally of Texas and hit President Kennedy in the throat, but that the killing shot which hit the young President's head came from another gun, another assassin.

With all respect to the hard-driving, hard-living 45-year-old district attorney, his case so far has to be described as flimsy. In his currently powerful position, he can arrest almost anyone for anything. But proof will come harder, particularly considering the credibility of some of his sources.

EXHAUSTED

Having to work with such informants does not dismay Mr. Garrison. He has pushed himself almost to the point of physical and mental exhaustion to complete what he considers a durable case. And he believes he has it.

I spent hours talking with him — in a dignified old restaurant nestled in the city's famous French Quarter and in the book-lined study of his spacious home.

"We have definitely found out how they killed President Kennedy and we're going to prove it," he told me. "I'm going to get every last man involved in killing President Kennedy and a number of other persons who, in my judgment, are accessories after the fact."

INDIFFERENT

History may not be changed appreciably by the Garrison investigation, but it could influence his own political fortunes. There is considerable talk that his friends may push him for Lieutenant Governor this fall. Of such talk, he says, "I couldn't care less."

He would like nothing better than to show up the Warren Commission and particularly

JIM GARRISON
"No ifs . . . no ifs"

the FBI, for which he worked as an agent for about four months in 1952.

The 6-foot-6 District Attorney who packs a revolver under his coat (sometimes he forgets the gun and wears only the holster), refuses acidly to share his investigation at this stage with the FBI or any other Federal agency which failed to turn up the evidence which he now has.

FILES

What makes Mr. Garrison so confident? He says his files are overflowing with evidence.

It must be noted, however, that much of this evidence is based on the words and deeds of men and women of known instability. District attorneys, of course, must listen endlessly to stool pigeons, drunks, punks, dopeheads and downright nuts. But most criminal investigations feature one or more witnesses of reasonable stability whose versions can be used to measure or evaluate evidence offered by others.

If Mr. Garrison has any such witnesses he has kept it a close secret.

Here are some of those who have figured in his case so far:

• An unfrocked airline pilot, fanatically religious, who sometimes dressed in vestments of a priest in something he called the "Orthodox Old Catholic Church of North America," and a known sexual deviate.

This was David W. Ferrie who, on George Washington's Birthday last month, was found dead in bed, wearing a red wig and mascara eyebrows. (He had no eyebrows of his own.)

Ferrie, one of the foundation stones of Mr. Garrison's case, was labeled promptly by the District Attorney as a suicide. The coroner and two doctors who conducted an autopsy attributed death to hemmorhage of a blood vessel at the base of his head. Ferrie was in an advanced stage of hypertension which was not helped by his frequent use of stimulant, depressant and euphoric pills.

• A convict of Cuban extraction with a penchant for armed robbery, burglary and pushing narcotics.

This professional tough, Miguel Torres, has not behaved so pugnaciously of late. Whining for protection, he was questioned by Mr. Garrison's men in Angola State Prison, moved to the New Orleans Jail, then into the jail hospital for even greater safety.

One theory is that Miguel may be more afraid of the Cosa Nostra, which is well represented here, than he is of Mr. Garrison or any alleged conspirators.

(Local experts on the subject say the mobsters with big cars, big rings and big cigars are quite unkind toward independent purveyors of narcotics, pinball machines and girls.)

• Jack S. Martin, 51, a native of Phoenix, Ariz., also known variously as Edward Stewart Suggs, Col. Martin and Bishop Martin (affiliation, Orthodox Old Catholic Church of North America).

A self-styled expert on electronic eaves-dropping, Martin describes himself as "author, a former newspaperman, professional soldier, adventurer and philosopher."

Some of Mr. Garrison's critics say Martin is highly important to the case. Martin agrees most enthusiastically. But not Mr. Garrison. The District Attorney and his staff questioned Martin countless times, as have the FBI and Secret Service. His stories are highly contradictory.

Martin has told a variety of tales linking Oswald with Ferrie. One version was that Ferrie hypnotized Oswald who went to Dallas under a spell; that Ferrie was waiting for Oswald in Dallas with a get-away plane on Nov. 22, 1963, and that Ferrie and Oswald were heavily influenced by W. Guy Bannister, former FBI agent, later deputy chief of the New Orleans police force and then head of a private investigation agency before his death in 1964.

FANTASY?

Martin, an episodic drunk and no stranger to jails and mental wards, has a pattern of talking and recanting. He told the Secret Service the lurid story about Ferrie being the get-away pilot, then took it back as being nothing but a fantasy. He told me in turn the Secret Service lied, that he had taken back nothing. He also told me that Ferrie had a rifle identical to the one used by Oswald and that on one occasion Bannister pistol-whipped Ferrie over something related to the anti-Castro movement.

Before I mentioned our conversation to anyone and was sitting in my hotel room studying my notes on Martin's jumbled conversation, he was on the phone to a New Orleans TV station denouncing the UPI and me for having distorted what he said.

Martin is worth remembering, however. At about the time of Ferrie's death, Martin was quite apprehensive about his own safety and left town. He told me he moved around for more than a week, finally reaching a point 1000 miles away. We picked up reports of his presence as far away as Rosarita Beach in Baja, Calif., more than 2000 miles from New Orleans, and at various locations in Mississippi and Texas.

In any event, this took financing of a sort and Martin

DAVID FERRIE
No eyebrows

Merriman Smith, UPI White House reporter who won the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Kennedy assassination, went to New Orleans last week to look into charges that the murder of the young President involved a conspiracy spawned in Louisiana. This is his report.

is perennially busted. Where did the funds come from? Asked whether he gave Martin walking - around money, Mr. Garrison waved off the question and said he would not be so foolish as to attach any definitive importance whatever to information from this kind of source.

• **David Lewis, 26, New Orleans bus company freight handler and self-described private investigator. Lewis was part of the Bannister-Ferrie-Martin set.**

Lewis, too, fears for his life enough to disappear periodically. His motivation in the case seems to involve profit and status. He rebuffs reporters with a lordly "no comment." But moments later he tries to peddle for an outrageous sum a tape recording which he made with Martin "naming names." UPI was invited to start the bidding for this tape in the neighborhood of $1000. It hardly seemed worth it.

What does Lewis know to connect Oswald with the assassination and/or the so-called conspirators? "Plenty," he says to some, "nothing" to others.

He is supposed to have done some investigative work for Bannister and for Ferrie, but Mr. Garrison's staff doubts that Lewis was much more than an errand boy with a taste for high adventure.

In a case such as this, however, a casual relationship in 1962-63, retold many times, can blossom in the mind of the teller into something of major importance. Lewis is supposed to have overheard some of those bound together in their hatred of Castro communism by a mutual wish for President Kennedy's death. But it would seem that anything he has to say in court would have to relate to the words and deeds of two dead men, Bannister and Ferrie, and the mercurial moods of Martin.

• **Carlos Quiroga (who may be in either New Orleans or somewhere in Texas) and Sergio Arcacha.** Both were involved in the Cuba liberation movement in New Orleans on or about the time Oswald was there. Mr. Garrison has been trying to question Arcacha, who is in Dallas. As of early this past week, the Cuban refused to budge and would not talk with Garrison's investigators in any place but the Dallas city jail and then only when flanked by Dallas detectives.

Quiroga and Arcacha must be considerably more important to the Garrison case than some of the other publicly identified figures. Mr. Garrison does not like discussing their relationship to his inquiry, but concedes that they are prime names on his roster of persons to be questioned.

• **Bernardo Torres of Miami, Fla., self-styled investigator reported to have offered his help to Mr. Garrison.** Mr Garrison is not enthusiastic about this Torres (who apparently is not related to Miguel) because he doesn't seem to have much to offer. Bernardo Torres has described himself rather warmly as one of those assigned to guard President Kennedy when he made his moving speech to survivors of the Cuban refugee brigade which was chopped up so badly in the 1961 invasion. The Secret Service has no record whatever of Bernardo being involved.

These are only some of the 35 or more people who currently show up in Mr. Garrison's inquiry. The investigation reaches into the Cuban colony of Miami and the Texas towns of Dallas and Houston, in addition to New Orleans. There are a number of Cubans with whom he would like to talk, but they have long since dropped out of sight.

"The only way they can get away is to kill themselves," he says, revealing his zeal for the chase.

HOW FAR?

What about District Attorney Garrison's future? Some of his admirers express confidence he will make it all the way to the

DAVID F. LEWIS
"No comment"

Governor's chair in Baton Rouge. Others see beyond the governorship. Some say that if he brings off this conspiracy case, his credentials as a high quality law-and-order man might put him on a future Democratic national ticket, possibly as Vice Presidential candidate.

Meantime, the case has a long way to go if he is to be hailed as the man who revised history. He might be able to make some relatively minor arrests and get relatively minor convictions. But at this point, it seems most doubtful he can prove the existence of a genuine operating plot. Nor does he seem at all close to finding or proving the existence of a second assassin.

At one point, I wanted to ask him about his future. It was long after midnight and he was slumped in a big reclining chair in his library. The desk was piled high with files and papers relating to the case. His slightly bulging eyes were stitched with tiny red lines of fatigue and his dark hair curled down over his forehead.

"If you pull this off . . ."

He cut off my question and shook his fatigue momentarily. Rising to his full height, he said forcefully, "No ifs — no ifs. I will. I will."