

They toil with a devotion bordering on obsession, lone sleuths bent on solving the crime of the century: Who shot JFK?

The Searchers

Ulric Shannon is seventeen years old. Recently, he spent \$1,000 of his own money to buy the 880-page *Report of the Warren Commission* on the assassination of President Kennedy and the accompanying twenty-six volumes of testimony and documents. He had already read the commission's official account of the shooting of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, and many books critical of the report—but that was beside the point. Shannon is a Kennedy-assassination researcher laying in his store for the decades of work to come. He expects to continue indefinitely, possibly going full-time once he's out of school. "Probably when I'm seventy I'll do it as a hobby," he says. That'll be 2044.

Shannon's introduction to the case began innocently. Merely a high-school student in Montreal, Quebec, writing a paper on Kennedy, he read the Warren Report and accepted its conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone nut assassin, and that the man who shot him, Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby, was a lone patriot avenging the president's death. Then Shannon stumbled onto *Conspiracy*, a book by Anthony Summers, a former investigative reporter for the BBC, and was converted. It was the testimony of the witnesses.

"Not one thought the same as the Warren Commission," says Shannon. The official story has Oswald shooting three times from *behind* the presidential motorcade, but most witnesses said shots also came from in front, which would mean conspiracy and cover-up. "That just completely bowled me over," he says.

He became a student of the case. It was politics, science, Agatha Christie, and Sherlock Holmes. "It just looped in everything that really fascinated me," he says. Now he is one of hundreds of people who sift and re-sift the facts, looking for clues, leads, and strange coincidences, hoping for transformation. They are in libraries studying documents, on the road tracking down septuagenarian witnesses, at home in front of the fire, mentally tracing the bullet trajectories. Eventually, they may feel compelled to write a book to set it all straight.

They are a curious confederacy. Deeply cynical about the integrity of our governmental institutions, many are nevertheless political conservatives whose lifestyles are anything but alternative. And their cynicism is matched by an equally extreme idealism. They believe that if the government admitted the truth

By Maura Sheehy

it would not only repair the nation's psyche but recapture some of the goodness that was lost with Kennedy. "We will finally be able to trust the government," says one. To the researchers, all time, all reality, bears the effects of the lie.

Meanwhile, a dozen colleges and universities are offering courses on the assassination, nurturing a new generation that just now may be turning the pages of the Warren Report for the first time. Their moment of awakening is around the corner, and then they, too, will be "in the case," as they say in the field.

With the release of Oliver Stone's new assassination epic, *JFK*—starring Kevin Costner, Joe Pesci, and Gary Oldman—the researchers hope for renewed national attention to the case. "It feels like 1976 again," one says, referring to the year that the House of Representatives set up the Select Committee on Assassinations to investigate the case. The committee concluded the shooting was "probably the result of a conspiracy," but sealed all the supporting documents until 2029.

"IT'S A SWAMP," SAYS JOHN DAVIS, author of *Mafia Kingfish: Carlos Marcello and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, about the case. "You get sucked into it, and you never get out. I got sucked in around 1982 and I've been bogged down ever since."

Dressed in a double-breasted pinstriped suit with a pocket square, Davis is sixtysomething, an urbane and worldly New Yorker. He is a Bouvier, related to Jackie Kennedy on his mother's side. He went to JFK's funeral and wake. He was, he says, "right there with poor Bobby, who was looking so upset, and Rose, who was being so stoic." He wrote a definitive biography, *The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster*, and a book on the Guggenheim family. He thought the assassination researchers were a bunch of nuts, until he got close to G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel to the House Select Committee. He was shocked to compare the FBI summaries on Oswald and Ruby that had been sent to the Warren Commission with the recently declassified raw FBI documents from which they had been drawn. "I realized [FBI director J. Edgar] Hoover only sent over the things that would aid in the incrimination of Oswald," he says. There were hundreds of documents linking Ruby to organized crime and signaling that major Mafia bosses were interested in seeing Kennedy dead, which the commission never saw.

"You start to think, I'm going to get to the bottom of this," says Davis. "Not as

an ego trip, but to set your mind at rest."

Jim Marrs, author of *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*, was a reporter for a Dallas newspaper when his moment came. The Warren Commission said Oswald had fired three shots within 5.6 seconds with a Mannlicher-Carcano bolt-action rifle. "Well, then and now I had some bolt-action rifles," says Marrs, "and the key point is, you don't get a bang-bang from a bolt-action rifle. You get a bang-tsch-tsch, tsch-tsch-bang as you work the bolt." Most researchers believe it would have been impossible for such a weapon to get off so many shots so fast. "It just didn't jibe," he says.

For Mark North, a thirty-eight-year-old lawyer in Austin, Texas, it was the way Kennedy's head slammed back against the car seat in the Zapruder film—the eighteen-second home movie of the assassination shot by a dress manu-

then, two days after the assassination, in front of a nation of television viewers, Ruby appeared from out of the crowd in the basement of the Dallas Police Department and fatally shot Oswald as he was being transferred to the county jail. "The scuttlebutt was always that Ruby was Mafia," says Shaw, "so it was hard to believe he was just a businessman stepping in to do his patriotic duty."

Shaw's research resulted in a 1976 book laying out his theory that members of the military-industrial complex who were upset by Kennedy's increasingly liberal policies devised a public execution. "There were so many other ways they could have gotten rid of Kennedy," says Shaw. "They could have exposed his dalliances, could have drowned him in the White House pool, or put one of those poisons in him. Why did they choose to blow his head off in the streets in public

LEFT, FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: BETTMANN, WIDE WORLD, WIDE WORLD, BETTMANN, WIDE WORLD, RIGHT: PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA

Gary Shaw and Larry Howard, founders of the JFK Assassination Information Center in Dallas, where the unofficial story is anshrined.



facturer on his lunch break. The Warren Commission had said Kennedy was shot from behind. "I was raised around weapons," says North, "and I know basic Newtonian physics." It seemed unmistakable to him that Kennedy had been shot from in front. Last fall, he published his contribution to the field, *Act of Treason: The Role of J. Edgar Hoover in the Assassination of President Kennedy*.

In 1963, Gary Shaw was living in the small Texas town of Cleburne. For a big Saturday night out, he and his wife would drive into Dallas and go dancing at the Carousel Club, Jack Ruby's place. Ruby would work the room, stopping to glad-hand and slap the men on the back. And

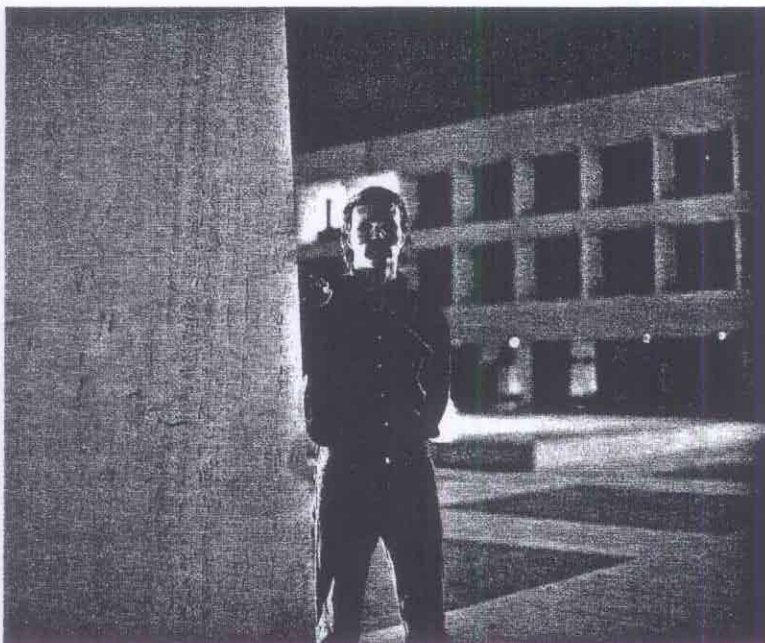
view? I think they were saying to anyone who wanted to advance to this high office, 'Do it our way.'

The case intoxicates its devotees not only because of its emotional power but because at first it seems so easy to solve. The inconsistencies in the official story are legion, and compelling circumstantial evidence of governmental involvement in both the assassination and the cover-up is readily available. And yet the official story is never incontrovertibly discredited.

Thus, there are casualties among the researchers. Baltimore-based Harrison Livingstone is one. Twelve years ago, his former Harvard English professor, also a buff, encouraged him to look into the ➔

inconsistencies in the medical evidence. Livingstone became absorbed in it, and in 1989 collaborated with another researcher, Robert Groden, on *High Treason*. The book, which explores the theory that a group of politically interested businessmen and intelligence operatives seized control of the country by killing Kennedy, reached number two on *The New York Times*' best-seller list. But the case, as always, lived on, impervious to their assault.

Over the years, Livingstone has grown more distressed, more furious, more paranoid, so that by now he speaks only in the language of conspiracy, even about fellow researchers. He's convinced "most of the critical community is an intelligence operation—in other words, has been co-opted by intelligence and police agencies who are deliberately planting misinformation to muck up this case."



Mark North, a lawyer whose new book says FBI director J. Edgar Hoover knew of a plot to kill the president but didn't report it, and then covered up.

He is anxious to expose the fraud he perceives in the ranks now that he's finished his next book, *High Treason II*, due out this spring. But he is tired, too. "I put my whole life and soul into this investigation and a lot of money, and it's taking too much out of me," he says. "It consumes everything you've got."

THE THRESHOLD TO DALLAS IS DEALEY Plaza, where three streets—Elm, Main, and Commerce—converge under a quaint triple-underpass railroad bridge.

Maura Sheehy wrote about the Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood in the June 1991 issue of Details.

"It's a swamp. You get suc

It happened here, on Elm. Nellie Connally, wife of Texas governor John Connally, had just turned to JFK and said, "You can't say Dallas doesn't love you, Mr. President." That's where the Zapruder film begins: the president's hands move to his throat, and the national agony begins.

In Dallas, the two versions of the Kennedy assassination stand in eternal face-off in rival exhibits only blocks apart. The floor of the old Texas School Book Depository building where Oswald is supposed to have crouched and fired has been dramatically transformed into "The Sixth Floor" by the image-conscious elders of the Dallas County Historical Foundation. There, the official story is enshrined. Behind glass, in a quiet corner

and salted frequently. A placard by the door reads: THE EXHIBITS. THE BOOK STORE. THE FILMS. THE THEATRE. THE TRUTH. Truth, here, is what is known to be false about the Warren Commission's version of the assassination.

Larry Howard doesn't do research, but he holds court here seventy hours a week, in constant kibitz with the buffs who come to pay homage. "I've taken a different approach," he says. "I didn't sit down and read a bunch of books." Howard describes his approach as "more personal, dealing with the people involved." He's made friends with Marina Oswald, Lee's widow, who lives near Dallas, and with other principals like Jeanne DeMohrenschildt, the widow of a reputed CIA agent who had become Oswald's best friend. "I'm not a scholar," he says, "but I'll tell you what George DeMohrenschildt's favorite dessert is."

When the economy fell out in Texas, he gave up his building business and put everything into the center, including his soul—and the soul of the quest, according to his detractors. The word is, Howard doesn't really care about it, he just wants to make money. His theory is a carbon copy of the one developed by Gary Shaw, his partner in founding the center. When Howard heard Oliver Stone was doing a movie, he contacted him. Stone flew Howard to L.A. and eventually awarded him an \$80,000 contract as a technical consultant. Pictures of the movie's stars with their arms around Howard at the center are framed in the gift shop. Sweatshirts that say *JFK, THE MOVIE* are on sale.

Howard says his daughter accuses him of loving JFK more than her, because he's never home. Then he tries to be upbeat. "I thought it would be fun doing this. And it has been successful, maybe not monetarily, but the people you meet—Stone, Costner—this is more rewarding."

ONCE A MONTH IN A PLAIN CLASSROOM in the continuing-education building of the University of Texas at Arlington, Jim Marrs can be found training a new army of researchers at his JFK Assassination Conspiracy Workshop. Tonight, twenty-three people—aged twenty to seventy, some in jeans and some in shirts and ties, three with tape recorders spinning—fill every chair. Marrs, short, paunchy, energetic, folksy, is their leader. His class is, in a sense, a support group, a society of true believers who come together to walk in

of the exhibit, the "sniper's perch" has been re-created with replica book boxes arranged around the window as they were found just after the assassination. This exhibit seeks to close the wound. It is a simulated trip through time: happiness and light and tragedy and mourning and anger and then resolution. It almost works. But there, at the end, in a book open for visitors to record their thoughts, the last entry of the day shatters the peace: "I still think that the shot fired from the ground is the one that killed JFK."

The JFK Assassination Information Center is tucked away on the third floor of a bright and shiny cookies-and-T-shirts mall. Here the wound is kept open

ed into it, and you never get out."

the world of the assassination. Everyone knows all about Lee and Jackie and Jack. The babushka lady, the umbrella man, and badge man (as various people in pictures of the plaza have been dubbed) are all their friends, in a way, and in Marrs's class they come out from the shadows and reveal their stories. A few hours later, everyone goes home feeling better.

One man, now in his sixties, worked at Parkland Hospital when Jack Ruby was brought in with cancer. The scuttlebutt there was that Ruby was knocked off, injected with cancer. "I'll bet you a ten spot they did it," the man says. "Because right after he went to get a flu shot, he died of cancer."

A student at the U. of T. is there because he's interested in great mysteries, "everything from the Bermuda Triangle to UFOs to the Secret Accords of Yalta."

Jack White's there, a former graphic artist, now a full-time researcher. He thinks he's stumbled onto something in a photo said to show the outline of a second assassin—the badge man—hidden in some shrubs along the motorcade route. White thinks he sees another person there, too, wearing a hard hat, looking toward the School Book Depository. This is how the case is perpetuated at this level. The endless minutiae. The reworking, the re-proving.

Another researcher, Dave Perry, tells the class about a recent story in the *Houston Chronicle* suggesting the identity of one of three tramps picked up by the Dallas police immediately after the assassination. For years, the researchers have suspected the tramps were conspirators because they seemed too well groomed and because the police who brought them in for questioning let them go without keeping a record of their names or their statements. "Last year we had assassins coming out of our ears. This year it's tramps," says Perry.

Marrs prides himself on keeping an open mind, but he also tries to toughen up his recruits. He tells them that the tramp story is a good example of how researchers can muddy the case if they're not careful. "What happens over the years is, other writers start citing each other and each adds something. By the time you get to Livingstone and Groden, there's not a threadbare-looking thing on 'em. They've got good shoes, new haircuts. So you have to be careful."

The high point of the night comes when Marrs introduces former Dallas police

officer Tom Tilson. He is a very important man. He has what none of the people in this room will ever have: firsthand knowledge. To them, he is evidence. "Well, I've told it probably 10,000 times," says Tilson wearily, "but when you eyeball something, you know it." Right after the assassination, he remembers, he saw a man speed away in a car. He's sure it was Jack Ruby. The class grills him, practicing their steely method, feeling engaged. Did he know so-and-so on the force? Did he ever go to Ruby's club? But really, he's there so they can feel close to it for just a few minutes.

THE KENNEDY-ASSASSINATION RESEARCHERS believe that solving the case is a millennial duty. For the country to move for-

Jim Marrs, a former newspaper reporter, reads new armies of researchers to take on the case in his classes at the University of Texas.



ward, we must be able to know that our democratic system cannot be subverted. We must know we are on the side of good.

"My generation trusted this country and its leaders," says Shaw, who came of age during World War II. "My brother and I played war games in the yard against the Japanese and the Nazis. You had the darkness and the light. America stood for truth and brotherhood." After the assassination, Shaw felt betrayed. Now he thinks we have spun out of control—politically, economically, socially—and that the chaos began with the assassination.

Marrs expresses his feelings in the language of pop psychology: "We have a

dysfunctional society because we're a hypocritical, lying, deceitful society that's hiding away its skeletons in its closet. By understanding this period, we'll be able to figure out what's going on now." John Davis would be happy to see an end to the case. He has tried moving on and is now writing a book on reputed New York Mafia boss John Gotti. But, he says, "it's a letdown. Who the hell is John Gotti? It doesn't have much national or historic relevance after dealing with the Kennedy case, which is most certainly the crime of the century."

Marrs might as well be speaking for all of them when he says, "I know what happened. I just can't prove it." And like the others, he has a fantasy scenario, circular and grandiose, for how the

case can be solved. "I'd like to see the well-heeled and credible news organizations poll the research community," he says, "find out who are the competent ones, form a research team. Then throw about a million dollars behind it, let the researchers, who've spent their whole lives on this, see if we can nail down some of these loose ends. Then print the findings. Say, 'This is it.' Then we'll get to a national consensus—which we already have."

And so the dream goes on and on, the researchers overlapping one another, the facts and theories multiplying exponentially. Still, they push on. They have faith. They see no end, only more beginnings. ●