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PAN" BY R. TRANK

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CHAPTER 25

The Canadian Frauds

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Dramatic news events always attract interest and discussion among large numbers of the public. Often when one first learns startling facts concerning a major news story, individuals find personal satisfaction in revealing these tidbits of information to those not already "in the know."

It is not so uncommon for some individuals to claim to possess inside knowledge of an event and for some who perhaps were only on the periphery of the event to go so far as to claim to being at the actual scene of the action. From the time of the death of the philosopher Socrates in ancient Greece, to the death of General James Wolfe in 1764 on the Plains of Abraham at Quebec, as well as at the death bed of assassinated President Abraham Lincoln at the Peterson Boarding House on the morning of April 16, 1865, various persons have claimed to be where they actually were not when great men died. Though in close proximity at the time of the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, aide Jesse Jackson was not on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel beside the mortally wounded civil rights leader. Yet Jackson on more than one occasion would later describe to audiences of his cradling of the dying Nobel Peace Prize winner in his very arms.¹ In dramatic, emotion-packed situations, some seem to be drawn to stretch a story of their close association with the people or events out of an emotional or psychological desire to be part of it. Human nature, wishful thinking, and possible nearness to these events often weigh in to convince some people to claim what did not occur — their presence at significant events.

There are numerous examples of various fakers, publicity seekers, and mentally imbalanced individuals who unfortunately often present themselves after the fact as legitimate spectators or even participants to history. With the development of rapid transportation and speedy communications, individuals can be at a location soon after a breaking news event or can at least quickly learn information about such events. In extreme cases one could fabricate a story, enabling him to fool others with passable knowledge of what actual witnesses did see.

The Kennedy assassination took place in a public setting before the eye and ear witness of hundreds of spectators. Given the nature of the event, the resulting confusion and the speed with which the shooting was communicated to the public, anyone with a devious mind and the semblance of a veracious story could claim to have been an "Everyman" present at this critical moment of American history. It would be the

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somewhat difficult and unrewarding task for others to prove the negative that someone who claimed to have been at Dealey Plaza had actually not been there. The burden of proof would be on those attempting to debunk such stories. At least several of these suspected non-witnesses are briefly discussed in other chapters. Both Beverly Oliver and Gordon Arnold claimed their presence at the assassination scene, though only telling their tales many years after the event when proof of their not being there would be even harder to prove. Two other purported witnesses, each claiming to have made pictures of the assassination events, surfaced from our neighbor to the north — Canada. One of these Canadian claimants' stories was quickly investigated, while the others' claims are even today shrouded in obscurity.

Norman Mitchel Similas was born at Barrie, Ontario, Canada in 1929 of Swedish descent. In his teenage years during the 1940s he had several run-ins with the law including earning a one-year probation on a breaking and entering charge. Employed by a variety of different firms over a 15-year period, Similas seemed attracted to promotional, advertising and sales job opportunities. In 1963 he lived with his wife and three children in Willowdale, Ontario, a suburb of Toronto. In late 1963 Similas was employed by the *Canadian Beverage Review*, the trade publication of the Canadian beverage industry. In 1963 the American Bottlers' Carbonated Beverages annual convention was held in Dallas, Texas. The event ran from November 18 to 22 with the Dallas Trade Mart on Stemmons Freeway serving as headquarters. Similas was assigned to attend and photograph highlights of the convention and to obtain copy for his publication. Preparing for these activities, he brought some 15 twelve-exposure rolls of 120 size film for use in a Japanese Mamiyaflex type camera.²

More than half a year after his trip, Similas recounted his experiences in Dallas in a Canadian magazine article published in ghost-written form "as told to Ken Armstrong." The article began, "I am a Canadian who crammed enough memories into 72 hours to haunt me for the rest of my life." A first-time visitor to Dallas, Similas, from his post-assassination perspective, said he had found the Dallasites he met to be generous, warm-hearted and hospitable, but possessing a hardness, "... and a rightist political philosophy so alarmingly extremist that I soon learned to button my lips when politics were discussed."³ While attending the bottlers' convention, Similas later claimed to have personally met and photographed Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, a keynote speaker at the convention. Boasting in the magazine article to having fooled two local photographers about in which car Johnson would be arriving, Similas told of his later being able to get exclusive pictures of Johnson. The Vice-President reportedly asked Similas, "Say, you're the young man who fooled the other photographers, aren't you?" Placing his hand on his chest, Johnson is supposed to have asked Similas, while posing for his camera, "Shall I look like Napoleon?"⁴

Similas also says that during his trip he also met Jack Ruby, who had freely given out a number of passes to his Carousel Club to convention goers. Using the free passes, Similas and several companions arrived at the club on Thursday night, November 21. They were personally ushered by Ruby into a front-row seat, Ruby's "bear-like arm"

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around the Canadian's shoulder. "He came to our table several times during the burlesque and comedy act." When asked by Similas if he could take pictures of the entertainers, Ruby reportedly told Similas, "Sure, but why don't you save your film for President Kennedy when he drives through the city tomorrow. The parade route is just down the street." Ruby was described by Similas as a ". . . fast-talking, emotional guy like Sgt. Bilko." Bilko was a popular TV comedy program in which the sergeant, played by Phil Silvers, was a rapid mouthed wheeler-dealer.⁵

On Friday Similas claims to have taken Ruby's advice and gone to the area of the motorcade route. In his various accounts of his activities around 12:30 that afternoon, Similas's positions in the Dealey Plaza area shift according to which account of his one reads. From the day of the shooting Similas claimed to be an eyewitness and a photographer of the assassination events, though when one looks over his various recollections, they just don't add up to a credible account. By September 1964 Similas would tell a Royal Canadian Mounted Police interviewer, "I took my first picture as the lead motorcycle passed in front of me. At the same time as I took the first picture I heard the first shot fired. I didn't take any more pictures until a bus carrying the presidential Press party came into view. I started with a fresh roll of film and there were three exposures left when it was all over." [Nine pictures taken?] Similas initially thought the shots came from the direction of the triple underpass. He also claimed to have taken a picture of the Texas School Book Depository Building after seeing an agent in the follow-up car looking in that direction. "The President's car veered towards me and then took off accelerating very quickly."⁶ It is interesting to note that the first bus in the motorcade was just making the turn from Main Street onto Houston, an entire diagonal block away from Similas, at the time the President's car was speeding down Elm Street following the shots..

Sometime after 12:30 on the day of the shooting, Similas returned to his hotel and called both his employer and the *Toronto Star* newspaper, telling them he had been a close witness to the assassination. If as later evidence seems to indicate, Similas did not actually see the shooting scene, but perhaps had seen the motorcade earlier on, or as it rushed to Parkland, his possible boasting of first-hand knowledge of the shooting may have originated from his phone calls home. Shortly after his call to Canada, Similas received a call at the hotel for a taped interview by a Hamilton, Ontario, radio station. His notoriety as a witness had begun. The *Toronto* newspaper had also briefly interviewed Similas on the phone, and besides running the story itself in its own paper, the *Star* distributed it through the Canadian Press Syndication. A number of newspapers throughout Canada and the United States picked up the story, which appeared in print by the next day. The story recounted that Similas, a 34-year-old Willowdale resident, was taking pictures of the motorcade when he witnessed the shooting from only 10 feet away. It then quoted his story:

I was in Dallas on a convention and I decided to snap a picture of the President as the motorcade rolled by.

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The crowds had thinned out just past an overpass near the Trade Mart, so I had a good position when the motorcade came by at about 8 miles an hour.

Then I suddenly heard a sharp crack. The first thing that came to my mind was that someone was setting off firecrackers. I turned away from the President's car and looked back to where the noise seemed to come from.

Then somebody — I don't know who it was — yelled: "The President's been shot."

I swung back to look at the car. A Secret Service man ran up with his gun drawn. A policeman beside me drew his revolver and his eyes searched the crowd.

Then another shot rang out and a third almost immediately on top of it.

I was still staring at the car. The Secret Service man opened the car door and I saw the President slumped down to the floor and falling toward the pavement.

Jackie Kennedy was sitting on the left side of the car and Governor Connally on the President's right.

I could see a hole in the President's left temple and his head and hair were bathed in blood.

The agent looked in and gasped: "Oh, my God, he's dead."⁷

Although this account might sound authentic to someone who knew little about the assassination, to someone familiar with the film evidence and other eyewitness accounts, this Similas version is fraught with blatant inaccuracies of the most obvious kind. Clearly, many eyewitnesses did miss parts of the event or mistakenly interpreted some of the evidence. This account, however, is of events and positions that never were.

Desiring to return home to Canada, Similas was unable to make airline reservations. With baggage, camera and film in hand, he caught a Greyhound bus connection from Dallas to Chicago, so informing his office. At a rest stop in St. Louis he bought several newspapers which were filled with assassination news, and read them as the bus proceeded to Illinois. Arriving at Chicago at about 6:30 p.m. November 23, Similas contacted Trans-Canadian Airways about a reservation and was told he had a message to call a local number. The regional Associated Press bureau had learned of Similas's probable passing through Chicago and wanted to speak with him and inquire about possible newsworthy pictures for which AP would pay — if usable to them. Similas showed interest and a car was sent to pick him up and bring him to the AP office. He handed over all of his exposed but undeveloped film to AP's day news photo editor, Ray Jefferies. Also present at the time was night photo editor Waldo D. Butler. The rolls, several only partially exposed with merely 4 or 5 shots on them, were speedily developed

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and examined prior to their being fully dried.⁸ Jefferies later recalled that he carefully examined the negatives and by virtue of his 30 years' experience, he could "read negatives as well as prints." They showed nothing that AP did not already have. Many of the negatives were of individuals and groups taken at the Bottlers' Convention, while some showed crowds lining a street, probably taken in anticipation of the presidential motorcade. Jefferies believed he recognized on two negatives what he thought could be the rear end and the front end of the President's car. No occupants were evident and, "There was a lot of movement in the pictures as if he [Similas] was being pushed around in the crowd."⁹

Jefferies had found nothing newsworthy in the batch. At the time Similas, for his part, did not claim to the AP editor that he made any exceptional pictures. Jefferies would later recall that he felt somewhat skeptical that any of the pictures had been taken during or after the shooting, as it appeared these pictures might have been taken from a location on the route other than at the Texas School Book Depository area. No buildings were discernibly clear, and windows (much less objects behind windows) were just not visible. Skepticism concerning Similas grew when he was reluctant to describe his personal recollections. Jefferies had to drag out responses from the Canadian. Similas would only confirm to Jefferies that the President's car passed in front of him and people in the car were "Bending over as if they were folding up." When asked why he had not taken pictures of the shooting, Similas hesitatingly answered he thought that he had, but at the time all was confusion. Jefferies was left with the clear impression that this reluctant witness probably had not witnessed the assassination at all. Of Similas' later claim to having taken revealing though now missing pictures, Jefferies would comment, "they probably cooked up the story to make a fast buck."¹⁰

As Similas was to catch an 8:30 flight to Toronto, Jefferies offered to drive him to the airport. The negatives were not dry, however, and Jefferies promised to send them immediately by mail express to Similas at his home address. Later that night Butler packaged all the negatives and delivered them to an air express office for next-day delivery.

When finally arriving back home, Similas was contacted by Colin Davies, a reporter/photographer for the *Toronto Telegram* who interviewed Similas and subsequently looked over his negatives when they arrived from Chicago. According to Similas, while examining the negatives the reporter exclaimed, "There looks like two people at this window." Similas later claimed that this negative showed the southeast corner window of the Texas School Book Depository and there were two people in it. According to Similas, the reporter then stated he thought he saw what appeared to be a rifle barrel between them. This negative strip containing three exposures was given over to the reporter so that he could show it to his editor. The editor visited Similas the next evening and looked at the rest of the negatives, borrowing the strip of three containing shots of Ruby's Carousel night club.¹¹

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A newspaper photo
of Norman Similas

When later interviewed by investigators, Davies recalled the meeting with Similas quite differently. He stated it was Similas who excitedly drew the reporter's attention to a window asking if the reporter didn't see two people in it. Davies said he felt it was the power of suggestion and that Similas wanted to see the two people in the negative so badly that he actually believed he did. The reporter believed the negatives worthless from a news standpoint, but according to Davies, he did not have the heart to disappoint Similas. He offered to take the negatives to his photo editor who would decide what should be done. Davies believed that Similas had indeed witnessed the assassination and that this man ". . . was sure going to get a lot of mileage out of the story." A photo of Similas, coupled with a short article, appeared in the Monday edition of the *Telegram*, but without any of the pictures he had taken. Similas called the newspaper requesting his nega-

tives be returned. On Wednesday he received a letter from the paper with an apology that the borrowed negatives had been lost. An enclosed check for \$50 was given in lieu of them. The next day he received three 8 x 10 prints with their negatives, which had been the ones loaned to the photo editor. He never received back his original strip, and by the time the FBI investigated the circumstances concerning Similas in September 1964, the photo editor had died.¹²

Similas's game, whatever it was, might have developed no further and he simply relegated to a footnote in history as a witness to the assassination with a less-than-accurate recall of events. A few months following the assassination, his story, however, was mentioned to Kenneth G. Armstrong by a mutual friend. Armstrong was editor of a Toronto-based periodical called *Liberty Magazine* and published by Harold Cook of the Fengate Publishing Company. Armstrong, thinking the story might make an intriguing article, contacted Similas. A three-hour conversation ensued, during which Similas promised to produce pictures which he had taken prior to and during the assassination, including one which showed two faces and a gun barrel at a window. Armstrong was excited about the potential story and the promise of important and unpublished photos. He wrote up a two-part article for his magazine, allowing Similas editorial review of all material. In the first article, published in July 1964, Similas is quoted to say, "I witnessed from a distance of less than seven feet the assassination of President Kennedy, and unwittingly photographed his assassin or assassins as a rifle was leveled at him from a nearby building. . . . One of the pictures I took as the presidential car passed, showed two figures beside the gun barrel in the window." Unfortunately no such picture accompanied the story. Armstrong was aware of the essential need of the photos to prove the article, and was told by Similas that they had been mailed. But they did not arrive for the first article's publication. Armstrong, suckered into printing the story without the Similas

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pictures, hoped they would turn up for the second installment. They never arrived, and though galley proofs were made of the second article, *Liberty Magazine* ceased publication, folding for lack of financial backing.¹³

To one on the lookout for plots and conspiracies, the lost Similas negatives and prints and the non-publication of the second article installment are fodder for their theories. To a reasonable observer, however, Similas's story, even with fragments of truth within it, appears on the whole unreliable. The article's published quotes attributed to Similas about the two men and a rifle barrel in the Texas School Book Depository were soon drawn to the attention of the Warren Commission investigation. The Commission requested the FBI to learn the facts and, ". . . If possible obtain the photographs referred to." A flurry of paper activity followed with the setting up of interviews in the United States, Japan and Canada, and including investigative mutual assistance being offered by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Through Canadian contacts whose identities are still unavailable through the Freedom of Information Act, Similas was interviewed and an investigation conducted. One late September 1964 cablegram from the Ottawa Legate to the FBI states, "[deleted words] Similas's eyewitness account based on assumption and misinformation probably deliberately to further his reputation as reported and to make his story saleable."¹⁴

By the end of October 1964, no Similas assassination pictures had been located, and his account was seen to be flawed by most all investigators and interviewees. As the Warren Commission had presented its final report in late September 1964, the Similas matter was moot and just allowed to drop.

During the critical research community's flurry of activity in 1967 and 1968, verification of Similas's story and his photographs were pursued. Several determined researchers including Richard Sprague and Gary Murr personally contacted Similas and were turned off by his evasiveness and promise of producing the photographs which never materialized. Some researchers continued to find evidence of the conspiratorial hand of the FBI having manipulated the evidence to discredit Similas. Yet Similas's pronouncements and activities, the stories of his having sent photos which never arrived, and his less than upstanding reputation among friends and acquaintances brought the thoughtful researcher to a conclusion that Similas and his assassination related photographs were principally a fraud.¹⁵

It was the graveyard shift at Dallas police headquarters early on March 24, 1964, the day after a Tarrant County jury had found Jack Ruby guilty of the premeditated first-degree murder of Lee Oswald. City Hall night switchboard operator Patsy Pair received a call from Canada. On the other end of the line was Victoria, British Columbia telephone night supervisor Bernice Williamson with a man on her line who had requested her to make a collect call to the Dallas Police Department. The man said he had some films of the Kennedy assassination, and Williamson had spoken with him long

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The probable alcohol-laced phone prank in March 1964 resulted in a waste of investigative time, effort, and money; and like so many aspects of the Kennedy case, even though the probable truth was discovered by investigation, the rumors continued to persist.²⁶

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CHAPTER NOTES

1. Ralph David Abernathy, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down*, p. 449-450.
2. Harold Weisberg, *Photographic Whitewash*, p. 215-217.
3. Ken Armstrong, "The Dallas Puzzle," *Liberty*, 7/15/1964, p. 13, 20, 33.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
5. Ken Armstrong, "The Dallas Puzzle, part II," obtained by Trask through FOIA request #288,780, 12/1987; "Oswald Killer Like TV's Sgt. Bilko Says Willowdale Man Who Met Him," *Toronto Telegram*, 11/25/1963, p. 10.
6. Weisberg, *op. cit.*, p. 217-218.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 217; "10 Feet From President," *New York Times*, 11/23/1963, p. 5. Several other publications picked up Similas' account including *TV Radio Mirror* in which the story was quoted on page 20 of their February 1964 issue.
8. Weisberg, *op. cit.*, p. 218; FBI report on Waldo D. Butler, file #105-82555-5093, 10/9/1964 & FBI report on Ray Jefferies, file #105-82555-5179, 10/21/1964 from Trask FOIA request, *op. cit.*
9. *Ibid.*, Jefferies, p. 3-4.
10. *Ibid.*; Memorandum, Stephen Merrill, 500th INTC Group, G-2, U.S. Army, Japan, file #105-82555-5179, 10/21/1964, from Trask FOIA request, *op. cit.*
11. Weisberg, *op. cit.*, p. 218-219.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 218-219, 221.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 221-222; Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p.13.
14. Airtel, To: Legate, Ottawa, From: Director, FBI, file #105-82555-4765, 9/4/1964, p. 2; Cablegram, To: Director, From: Legate, Ottawa, no. 113, file #105-82555-4856, 9/15/1964; *Ibid.*, no. 114, file #105-82555-4940, 9/18/1964; *Ibid.*, no. 120, file #105-82555-5002, 9/23/1964; Airtel, To: Director, From: Legate, Ottawa, file #105-82555-4940, 10/2/1964, all from Trask FOIA request. The author made an attempt, through an administrative appeal, for the disclosure of two paragraphs deleted from the October 2, 1964, airtel. In June 1988 the appeal was denied and the material remains classified. The deleted material possibly deals with names of a person or persons in Canada assisting in the investigation including the possible surreptitious obtaining of the galley proofs of the unpublished article, "The Dallas puzzle, part II."
15. Letters from Gary Murr to Harold Weisberg, 11/18/1967 & 12/8/1967; Letter from Richard Sprague to Murr, 1/4/1968; Letter, Murr to Sprague, 1/16/1968; Letter, Weisberg to Murr, 12/23/1967, all from the Richard Sprague Papers, Special Division Collections at the Georgetown University Library, Washington, D.C. An examination of other photos and films taken on Elm Street at the time of the assassination shows no unaccounted man taking pictures of the scene as close as Similas claims to have been located to the President's vehicle.
16. *Hearings Before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, v. 5, p. 256; v.12, p. 443-445; v. 19, p. 445-447.
17. Seth Kator, *Who Was Jack Ruby?*, p. 2.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 149-150.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 154-155, 162-163; *Hearings*, *op. cit.*, v. 5, p. 254-258.
20. *Ibid.*, v. 5, p. 256-258; v.12 p. 443-445.