

REPORTERS REMEMBER: 11/22/63

by

Sheldon Inkol

On Saturday, November 20, 1993, I slipped away from the ASK symposium in Dallas to attend a conference at Southern Methodist University entitled "Reporters Remember: 11/22/63." Other researchers in attendance included Gary Mack, David Murph, David Perry and Stan Szerszen. It was a very valuable experience—well worth the ten dollar entrance fee—and I am writing this article for the benefit of the many assassination researchers who could or did not attend.

The conference assembled many of the journalists who covered the Kennedy assassination and featured a series of panel discussions on that subject. Among the more than 70 reporters who participated in the conference were several whose names should be familiar to most researchers: James Altgens, Tom Alyea, Hugh Aynesworth, Tom Dillard, Jim Featherston, Robert Huffaker, Bob Jackson, Ike Pappas, Lawrence Schiller, Bert Shipp, Wes Wise, Mary Woodward Pillsworth, Tony Zoppi and others. I was surprised to see James Leavelle (who was handcuffed to Lee Harvey Oswald when Jack Ruby shot him), FBI agent Robert Gemberling (who supposedly identified Robert Barrett as the "mystery FBI man"), and Gerald Hill (referred to by some as the "Mr. Everywhere" Dallas Policeman) also in attendance. In other words, it was a gathering of witnesses, investigators and reporters connected to the events of that weekend in November that has probably never been equalled in number or quality, and will undoubtedly never be equalled again. An assassination researcher's dream come true...and also a researcher's nightmare.

Why? Unfortunately, I was able to talk to only a very few of the conference participants, and there were many others whom I knew had valuable information to share—if only I knew the right questions to ask them! I regret the lost opportunities, but present here the information I was able to gather which I felt to be little-known or startling. There were likely many other nuggets of gold unearthed at the conference, so I should point out that the organizers planned to make the day's events available in video-tape, transcript, and possibly on audio-tape. The conference was sponsored by the Journalism Sequence, SMU Center for Communication Arts. Darwin Payne, a Professor of Journalism at SMU and himself one of the participants, was the Conference Coordinator.

The Reporters. The media affiliations described below were those held by the participants on the weekend of the assassination.

James W. "Ike" Altgens, Associated Press photographer, is

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well-known for his famous photos of the assassination. He related how he had another picture lined up at the moment Kennedy was shot in the head. Altgens froze and didn't take the picture. Skull fragments landed at his feet. Altgens was very adamant—almost angrily so—that all the shots came from the Texas School Book Depository, and he cited medical and ballistic "evidence" to show this.

Tom Alyea, television newsman for WFAA-TV, had several interesting things to say, but unfortunately didn't have the time to say them. He identified himself as the only newsman who covered the floor-by-floor search inside the Depository. He insisted that a bag with three-day-old chicken bones was found on the fifth floor, not the sixth. He claimed to have filmed the "sniper's nest" before the boxes were rearranged. He stated that no rifle was found on the roof of the Depository. He had more to say, but the panel moderator had to cut him off due to time constraints, which was a fate which befell just about every reporter who spoke. Alyea suggested that audience members question him later, but unless I am mistaken, he quietly left the conference and was not present during the question-and-answer session. His departure may have had something to do with a sarcastic comment one of the subsequent panelists made regarding Alyea's claims. ASK participants may have seen the JK Facts Preview Edition on sale at the symposium. This publication promises to tell Alyea's full story, and seems to be written by Alyea himself. A one-year subscription to JK Facts is available for \$34.00 from P.O. Box 4266, Tulsa, OK 74159.

I was not aware how important a source Hugh Aynesworth of The Dallas Morning News is. Although not interviewed by the Warren Commission, he was near the Depository when shots were fired and interviewed witnesses, saw Oswald's capture at the Texas Theatre, was in the basement of police headquarters when Oswald was shot, and was in attorney Tom Howard's office as the Ruby family planned how to defend Jack Ruby. Aynesworth revealed that the police received a tip that the killer of Officer J.D. Tippit was hiding in an "old furniture store," which turned out to be a storage space. The tip didn't pan out. Aynesworth doesn't remember how he got it, but he obtained a list of Oswald's various addresses that weekend as well.

Kent Biffle, Dallas Morning News, was allowed into the Texas School Book Depository. He said that the police were so nervous he thought he was going to get shot. After interviewing some employees, he stepped out of an office and was confronted by two police officers with riot guns aimed at him. According to Biffle, there was no immediate connection made between the events in Dealey Plaza and the shooting of Officer Tippit. The officers present were "relieved" to find out it was J.D. Tippit who was killed, and not another Tippit who was "well-liked." Biffle claimed to have witnessed Roy Truly drawing attention to an employee named Lee Oswald who hadn't returned after lunch.

Bo Byers, Houston Chronicle, remarked that the presidential limousine "nearly stopped" during the shooting.

Vivian Castleberry, Dallas Times Herald, revealed that her first cousin, Peggy Burney, was Abraham Zapruder's assistant—"and was next to him when he shot his famous film. She called and said, 'Vivian, today I saw the President die.'" Castleberry's statement went unchallenged.

Mike Cochran, Associated Press, was with the Secret Service agents at the Cellar in Fort Worth the night before the assassination. He also served as one of Oswald's pallbearers, along with other conference participants Eddie Hughes, Jon McConal and Preston McGraw.

Jimmy G. Darnell, WBAP-TV, was in the motorcade and filmed the chaos after the shots. Along with NBC cameraman Henry Kokajan, Darnell filmed witnesses at the courthouse. Back at Love Field, he filmed Kennedy's body being loaded aboard Air Force One. "Dallas police confiscated that film, never to be returned."

Gary DeLaune, KLIF Radio, claimed that Jack Ruby always had lots of money and his .38 revolver with him. Ruby, who "was desperate for something to do," was given the idea of bringing sandwiches to the police station by KLIF personnel, who just wanted to get him out of the way. DeLaune was in the basement when Oswald was shot and said that he himself got in by walking down the ramp; there was no security there. Ruby later told DeLaune that he was looking for him when he went down to the basement.

Jim Featherston, Dallas Times Herald, heard "at least three" shots from his post at Main and Houston. He is the reporter who approached witnesses Jean Hill and Mary Moorman, and refutes Hill's accounts of the assassination's aftermath. Featherston stated that he was "not completely satisfied with the Warren Report, but I don't think we'll ever figure things out."

Robert S. Huffaker, KRLD AM-FM-TV News, also spoke in the first panel at ASK. It is unfortunate that the researchers at ASK didn't know more about Huffaker, because I am sure we would have had better questions for him if we did. Huffaker was the newsman who got Dallas police chief Jesse Curry to assert on CBS Radio and TV that the FBI knew of Oswald and his whereabouts before the assassination. He was also the newsman who broadcast the shooting of Lee "Harold" Oswald live, and he told an amusing story explaining that error. Huffaker also "analyzed" the Zapruder film with Dan Rather! Richard H. Strobel and David Taylor, both with the Associated Press, also mentioned seeing the Zapruder film "in Zapruder's office with others," after which they entered into a bidding war between NBC and Time-Life.

Ike Pappas, WNEW-News, stated his opinion that Oswald was the lone gunman, but that there was some kind of Cuban connection. He thinks it most likely that Oswald was acting on behalf of Fidel Castro.

Darwin Payne, Dallas Times Herald, went to the Depository immediately after the shots were fired and interviewed witnesses. Payne located Abraham Zapruder and "stayed at his office for a couple of hours trying to get film." He also went

to Oswald's rooming house on Friday night, and to Ruby's apartment on Sunday after Oswald was shot. Payne believes he can explain why no one could get a hold of Chief Curry the night before Oswald's murder. Payne had made a late telephone call to Curry and woke him up. He thinks that Curry then took his phone off the hook.

Bert N. Shipp, WFAA-TV, related how Sheriff Bill Decker told him that the back of Kennedy's head was blown apart. Shipp made no mention of receiving a 30.06 cartridge that was supposedly found in the bushes near the Depository by an unidentified mailman. (This information was published in Cover-Up by J. Gary Shaw and Larry Harris, on page 155.)

John Weeks, Dallas Times Herald, was an editorial page staffer. He "realized" they had earlier printed a letter on the editorial page from an "O.H. Lee" who urged "fair play" for Cuba, but he could not find the original.

Wes Wise, KRLD-TV and Radio, was able to set the record straight in regards to the rumor that he saw Jack Ruby in Dealey Plaza at the time of the assassination. He did see Ruby at the scene, but it was on Saturday, not Friday. Although this story is published to this day in assassination literature, Wise said that no author has ever asked him about it. Wise gave the good advice that newsmen should check at least two sources, and preferably three. Wise was actually at the Trade Mart when Kennedy was shot, "where he was asked by Secret Service and FBI to identify suspicious persons from Adlai Stevenson attack."

Mary Woodward Pillsworth, Dallas Morning News, admitted that the shots she heard "seemed" to come from the grassy knoll, but she feels that they did indeed come from the Depository. She expressed annoyance that Jim Garrison and Mark Lane used her early account to indicate a grassy knoll gunman without even speaking to her. She also mentioned that the presidential limo "nearly stopped" and that the Secret Service reacted very slowly.

Tony Zoppi, Dallas Morning News, watched the motorcade from the Adolphus Hotel marquee, where he was having lunch with FBI agent Will Hayden Griffin. The first time they thought the motorcade was coming they were wrong: It was Honest Joe in his station wagon, driving by a few minutes before the motorcade. The night before, Zoppi claimed to have been present at a Dallas club with Joan Crawford and Richard Nixon also in attendance. Actor Robert Clary (best known as LeBeau on Hogan's Heroes) introduced Nixon to the audience by saying, "I didn't vote for him." Zoppi feels that this embarrassing incident had something to do with Nixon's hasty departure the next morning. Without naming him or his book, Zoppi repudiated the work of author David Scheim and denied having any ties to organized crime. While talking about his friend Jack Ruby, Zoppi mentioned that Ruby liked to drop names. An example he used had Ruby asking him if he knew "Kup," meaning television personality Irv Kupcinet, whose daughter Karyn, coincidentally enough, was murdered shortly before the assassination and is often listed among the "mysterious deaths."

Other Witnesses. I learned from Robert Gemberling that he identified Robert Barrett as the "mystery FBI man" under false pretenses. He was told by his interviewer that Barrett had admitted to being the man, which is not true. Gemberling now states that he is certain Robert Barrett is not the mystery man photographed in Dealey Plaza.

A woman in attendance, previously unknown to researchers, identified herself as one of the people who processed the Zapruder film. With some difficulty, Stan Szerszen established contact with her. I urge anyone with relevant questions for her to contact Stan. His address is 16 Shagbark Road, Shelton, CT 06484.

Questions and Answers. The conference closed with an opportunity for the audience to hand in questions written on 3x5 cards. The reporters were able to field most questions with little trouble.

For me, the highlight of the day was to see Gerald Hill in action. On the day of the assassination, Hill was a Dallas police sergeant. He assisted in the investigations at the Texas School Book Depository and the Tippit murder scene, and was one of the officers who apprehended Oswald at the Texas Theatre. On this day, Hill had an answer for everything. On three occasions he stepped up to the microphone to field challenging questions. I found none of his answers to be satisfactory.

The audience's curiosity had been piqued by Tom Alyea's persistent mention of the chicken bones found on the fifth floor. This, of course, would suggest that evidence had been moved up to the sixth floor to give the impression of a coldly calculating assassin eating his lunch while waiting for his victim. Gerald Hill explained Alyea's observation by revealing that chicken bones had been found on both floors!

Ron McAllister Jenkins, KBOX Radio, said that he was in Parkland Hospital when Tippit's body arrived, D.O.A. Another reporter also mentioned seeing Tippit (or at least his casket) at Parkland while Kennedy's body was still there. Dave Perry, an authority on Tippit's murder, handed in a question about this, because Tippit was taken to Methodist Hospital, not Parkland. I found myself recalling the rumors that a Secret Service man had also been killed that day. Could this apparently unexplained body be tied to those rumors? Gerald Hill stepped up to the microphone again and explained that these reporters had seen Tippit's body at Parkland because the autopsy was performed there. Unfortunately for Hill, Dave Perry pointed out to me that the time-frame for this does not work.

My question was this: Why were so few of the witnesses to Oswald's arrest at the Texas Theatre ever identified or interviewed? The initial response from the reporters was that all of the police officers at the Texas Theatre had been interviewed. When the issue of non-police witnesses was broached, Gerald Hill stepped up for his third time at bat. He told the audience that most of the movie-goers up in the balcony were playing "hooky," and once they saw the police arrive, they ran out of

the building! The concept of people running out of a building the police have surrounded because they think a cop-killer is inside without being apprehended is almost too silly to warrant a response. Of the patrons who remained in the theatre, Hill stated that there were "very, very few," and that most of them were interviewed. After the conference, I approached Hugh Aynesworth, who witnessed Oswald's arrest. He saw no one running out of the theatre, although he arrived only in time to enter the theatre and see Oswald being captured. Aynesworth told me that he did not know how many patrons were in the balcony, but that there were around nine seated in the theatre proper. He spoke to one of the witnesses, but since he saw the arrest himself, he did not feel the need to conduct interviews. As far as I know, there are only two known people who claim to have been members of that audience. Aynesworth agreed with me that it is unusual that no others have come forward or been identified. (As a sidelight, Aynesworth told me that he interviewed Earlene Roberts shortly after the authorities searched Oswald's rented room on the day of the assassination. When Aynesworth saw the room, everything was gone except the curtains and a banana peel.)

The Results. A poll was conducted at the conference, asking whether Oswald acted alone or was part of a conspiracy. The results were printed in the Dallas Morning News the next day. Of the more than 200 people in the audience, 63 responded that Oswald acted alone while 80 believed there was a conspiracy, a much closer result than these polls usually obtain. Of the journalists who covered the assassination, however, 29 responded that Oswald acted alone while only three felt that he was part of a conspiracy. (Obviously, not every reporter in attendance took part in the poll.)

Assassination students and researchers must come to grips with these figures. It would be foolish to suggest that all of these reporters are covering up the truth. Why would they do this? Most of these journalists worked very hard to find the facts in the days and weeks following the tragedy, and breaking a conspiracy would have been the story of a lifetime. They obviously believe that there was no conspiracy, and those of them who feel there was one—like Ike Pappas—say so. Some of these men and women knew Ruby, saw Oswald in custody, saw Ruby shoot Oswald, and even heard the shots in Dealey Plaza. (Every reporter who specified the number of shots heard said that he or she heard three shots, with the exception of Jim Featherston.) Some of these reporters conducted the first and crucial interviews with many important witnesses. It is about time that those of us still investigating the assassination paid more attention to what these reporters have to tell us. And it is about time that we raised the standards of our evidence and research in an effort to convince these same reporters that there was a conspiracy after all. Maybe then the media will report what we feel to be the truth.

While staying in Dallas, I was fortunate enough to see a video-tape at my host's house that helped me put all eyewitness testimony into context. The tape included most if not all of the TV footage that was taken in the basement before,

during, and after Ruby shot Oswald; I had never seen most of it before. It was an eye-opener. Most of the journalists in that basement were trained and experienced observers who were waiting for Lee Harvey Oswald. When he finally appeared, all eyes were on him. He walked past the reporters, close enough to touch. And then Jack Ruby shot him. After the shooting, few of the reporters on camera knew what had happened. They began running around, asking each other what they had seen. Some of them didn't know that Oswald had been shot, or even that a shot had been fired at all. I heard one asking where the shot came from. Many of them had not seen Ruby commit the crime. They even asked whether Oswald's assailant had escaped! I can't understand how it could be possible for any of them not to have seen Ruby being apprehended, but many of them missed it. Robert Huffaker was told by a French reporter that he thought Ruby was a detective. Huffaker immediately turned to the camera and announced that the gunman was a man many of "us" thought was a Secret Service agent! That statement came from nowhere.

These observations are not meant to discredit or embarrass the reporters in question, but merely to point out the fallibility of eyewitness testimony and how easy it is for a rumor to be started. We should all keep this in mind in regards to any statements made by witnesses—especially thirty years later.

DEEP POLITICS: A REVIEW

by

Jerry D. Rose

Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 413 pp. In the hue and cry over recent publication of Gerald Posner's *Case Closed*, Scott's far more significant work appeared quietly on the publication scene. After some fifteen years of quiescence, the erstwhile author of *The War Conspiracy* and *Crime and Cover-up* as well as several profound unpublished manuscripts, was apparently coaxed from his semi-retirement from "the case" by the furor created by Oliver Stone's JFK scenario of a change in Vietnam War policy between Kennedy's and Johnson's administrations. Scott devotes the second chapter of *Deep Politics* to a trenchant analysis of how this policy in fact changed fundamentally between NSAM 263 late in Kennedy's and NSAM 273 early in Johnson's administration. Scott's conclusions are essentially those of John Newman in *JFK and Vietnam*.

Before reviewing the substance of Scott's book, some consideration of its methodology. In one of Scott's earlier works he refers to his method as "reticular" rather than "linear." [1]

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Properly understood, there could be no better description of both the strength and the limitation of Scott's analytic style. In eschewing a linear approach, Scott reminds us that he is not a scientist by profession but a poet. We do not expect a poem to proceed in linear or cause-and-effect order, articulating an hypothesis and then marshalling the evidence for and against that hypothesis. We expect a poem to be reticulate in form, circling around a subject and showing the richness of unexpected connections between it and many other aspects of our experience. In the process we learn more not only about that "thing" but about many other things in our world of things. Scott's work has always been reticulate in the sense that it seems to meander through an astonishing network of unexpected "connections" between people and events: "the Dallas-Watergate connection" being the most obvious example. In the book under review, Scott *finally* comes upon a felicitous conceptualization of the "thing" that the discussion of the JFK assassination and these events circle around—namely the "deep politics" that Scott sees as part of the very *structure* of American politics: a "grey alliance" of the criminal underworld, the corporate overworld and selected intelligence agencies of government. This alliance effectively "runs things" in this society but none of the establishment political sociologies—be they liberal or conservative—can acknowledge these scandalous manifestations as reflecting other than aberrations from the "normal," civics-book style of constitutional politics.

This is the nature of Peter Dale Scott's essay or poem, if you will, on the JFK assassination. In circling about the deep politics of modern America, he does, indeed, show us many startling connections of the assassination to each of these elements of the grey alliance. He startled me the most when, in discussing the Huey Long assassination in Louisiana in 1935, he says (p. 97) that "behind the deep politics of the Kennedy assassination lie those of the Long assassination." Whoa! I knew nothing of the politics of Huey Long's assassination before reading a few pages in *Deep Politics* (and only a little after reading them). If Scott is right—and I feel that he is—this thing is deeper than I thought. (You've probably heard the joke: God himself announces that Oswald was the lone assassin and the critical researcher says "this cover-up goes higher than I thought!")

Well, I reticulate a bit. Peter Dale Scott knows as well as anyone that his treatise on the subject is not a poem, however much it may borrow the reticulate style of the poem (to the frustration, sometimes, of the linear-minded student). The poet uses his/her imagination to create images of unexpected connections between things—the poet literally "makes it up" in a way absolutely forbidden to the scientist who must live and work in the messy world of facts. In a complex situation like the JFK assassination, in which the facts are obscured by decades of cover-up, disinformation and commercial opportunism (both pro-conspiracy and anti-conspiracy), the individual student's "imagination" is an especially unreliable guide to the facts—seemingly somebody has imagined just about every thing about the crime. Every sentence in *Deep*