

Conspiracy Museum Adds Plot Twist For Those With Wild Imaginations

By DAVID BARBOZA



DALLAS, May 27 — The voice coming from the television monitor tells of a vast conspiracy to control the White House. It says the Warren Commission Report was "born long before the President was assassinated." And it even asserts that Lee Harvey Oswald is still alive.

Make another selection on one of six video monitors and the ominous voice will declare that the "umbrella man," who is seen in the most complete film footage taken of the assassination, actually shot a poison dart into President John F. Kennedy's throat and that the White House is controlled by a group of financiers, war mongers and government bureaucrats, labeled the "Professional War Machine."

Glance to the left or right, and there is a 108-foot-long mural covered with abstract bloodstains that is meant to illustrate several more theories, all of which coalesce around one overarching conspiracy: a conspiracy that binds all conspiracies, from the death of Mary Jo Kopechne at Chappaquiddick (a plot to keep Senator Edward M. Kennedy from the Presidency), to the downing of Korean Airlines Flight 007 (a Central Intelligence Agency plot to prolong the cold war).

"It's really strange," Linda McCabe of nearby Plano said recently as she turned away from a monitor. "I think you'd really have to be into conspiracies to come here."

Another visitor advised on a comment card, "Seek help."

The videos are part of the Conspiracy Museum, an exhibit space that opened last month in Dallas, just three blocks from Dealey Plaza, where Kennedy was shot. In highly conspiratorial tones, the museum traces the American history of assassinations back to the Age of Andrew Jackson, who was the target of a failed attempt on his life.

The museum is the pet project of a Harvard-educated architect, R. B. Cutler, a self-proclaimed "assassinologist." Mr. Cutler, 81, who is from a wealthy family that made its money in the fertilizer business, says he has spent about \$400,000 on the museum, which promotes and displays his theories.

The museum is in the right place. City officials say about 6 million peo-

ple visit the Dealey Plaza area each year. More than 1,200 people have visited the museum since it opened on April 4.

"If we could export the Kennedy assassination to Japan," said one of the museum's three staff members, Ron Rice, "we'd be instant millionaires."

In recent years, attendance has nearly doubled at the Sixth Floor, the permanent exhibit on the Kennedy legacy that opened in 1989 in the former Texas School Book Depository, on the floor from which the Warren Commission said Oswald shot Kennedy. And several private companies now offer tours of other assassination sites, like the rooming house where Oswald stayed.

But for hard-core theorists, the Conspiracy Museum is the only place that aggressively examines the plot. Whereas the atmosphere in

'Seek help,' a visitor advises a museum near where Kennedy was shot.

the Sixth Floor is tight, professional and historical, that in the Conspiracy Museum is loose, free-thinking and speculative.

Gerald Posner, whose book, "Case Closed" (Random House, 1993), was widely praised as a convincing argument that Oswald worked alone, said Mr. Cutler was known for constructing one of the most thorough maps of Dealey Plaza. But as for Mr. Cutler, the theorist, Mr. Posner said, "Even among conspiracy theorists he's not in the mainstream."

Certainly, the museum is short on artifacts and long on suppositions, which are explained in its art work, diagrams and "video kiosks."

Its bookstore is stacked with Kennedy books, as well as titles like "It's a Conspiracy" and "Unsolved Texas Mysteries" and "Paranoid" magazine.

Admission is \$7 and includes a walking tour with Mr. Rice, a former police officer who says he has spent 18 years researching the assassina-

tion. Apart from the museum's "official" theories, Mr. Rice has a few of his own, and will show some fuzzy pictures as proof of his case.

The director, Tom Bowden, a former information systems analyst, says his goal is to push the museum's conspiracy theories into the mainstream. "We just want people to think," he said. "Maybe that way we can correct the textbooks so that they contain information about the larger conspiracy."

That "larger conspiracy" comes from Mr. Cutler, who claims the "Professional War Machine" is behind just about every political assassination in the past 30 years.

He calls the lone gunman theory a fairy tale, and contends that three men shot and poisoned Kennedy, one using a gas-powered umbrella pistol. Oswald was a "patsy," he says. In fact, he posits, Oswald was not even Oswald. He was an Oswald double named Alek Hidell, a C.I.A.-trained spy.

On the museum videos, Mr. Cutler's voice can be heard saying things like, "Clear the Oswald name of all guilt" and "You must never forget, the Warren report is a lie." Mr. Cutler, who practices Zen, ends each voiceover with the word, "ahimsa," meaning non-forcefulness.

While Mr. Cutler said one purpose of the museum is to help people come to peace with the events of November 1963, some visitors leave more confused than ever or frustrated with the spare displays. "I can't believe I just paid \$7 to hear somebody's opinion," said Henry Thomas of Fort Worth.

More visitors, though, are like Jay Wilson, an oil man from Stephens, Ark., who says that although he does not accept the museum's theory of the Kennedy assassination, he also doubts the Government version. "There's one thing for sure," he said, turning to his wife, Fay, "We know it didn't happen like they said it happened."

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Scott Anderson for The New York Times

"We just want people to think," said the director of the Conspiracy Museum, Tom Bowden, in front of a 108-foot-long mural that illustrates several conspiracy theories with abstract bloodstains.