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Sheriff Bill Decker, left, leads Jack Ruby to his sanity trial in 1966, and sits at his desk, right, in November, 1963.

Texas Lawman J. E. (Bill) Decker Dies

By Martiin Weil
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J. E. (Bill) Decker, an oldtime Texas lawman and former Dallas County sheriff, whose career encompassed the days of Bonnie and Clyde and the aftermath of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, died Saturday in Dallas.

Mr. Decker, had custody of both Jack Ruby, who killed President Kennedy's alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, and Richard Speck, convicted of mass murder in Chicago, during his 21-year tenure as sheriff.

The lawman who resigned a few days ago after taking office in 1949, rode in the left rear seat of the lead car of President Kennedy's ill-fated Dallas motorcade on November 22, 1963.

It was to the Dallas County jail that Mr. Decker supervised that Oswald was to have been transferred when Ruby killed him in

the Dallas city jail on November 24, 1963.

Oswald was not in Mr. Decker's custody at the time of the slaying.

Although Mr. Decker may have been most widely known for his role in events surrounding the assassination, his career in law enforcement went back many years before he ever became Dallas' sheriff.

Law officers throughout the Southwest had long recognized his ability to establish rapport with criminals when necessary and for his part in the celebrated ambush of bandits Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker.

Mr. Decker is credited with making possible the May 23, 1934, ambush near Sailes in Bienville Parish, La., by telling officers when and where the two bank robbers were due.

Zealous in protecting his sources as he could be skillful in cultivating them, Mr. Decker was always tight-lipped when asked how

he knew the whereabouts of the notorious pair.

"Somebody told me," was all he would ever say.

In the Texas of the 1920s and 1930s, with many of the characteristics of the frontier still remaining, a lawman's reputation counted for a lot and spread widely. Mr. Decker inspired trust, even among criminals.

A feared gunman named Raymond Hamilton once walked out of a boxcar in Fort Worth to surrender to Mr. Decker, while lawmen massed for a grim shootout.

Although Hamilton carried two weapons, Mr. Decker walked in front of the siege party and called: "This is Bill Decker, Raymond. Come on out."

Mr. Decker once explained: "It just takes a lot of different kind of people to make a world and the criminals are human too."

After being held in the Dallas County jail on charges of killing Oswald,

Ruby died in January, 1967, of a blood clot in the lung, apparently a result of cancer.

Ruby's family claimed that he had been neglected, but Mr. Decker denied it.

Calling Ruby a "fair-haired prisoner," Mr. Decker said he got preferential medical treatment.

Richard Speck, convicted in the slaying of eight student nurses in Chicago in 1966 had also been held in the Dallas County jail at one time.

Speck was sentenced in Texas to 490 days in jail for a knife attack on a woman, and served part of his term in Dallas, before being transferred to a state prison.

Mr. Decker's death Saturday came two days short of his 72d birthday, which would have been today.

A chronic sufferer from emphysema, Mr. Decker had been incapacitated for several weeks before his death in Baylor Memorial Hospital.