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UNSOLVED MYSTERY

A new year, but the Kennedy mystery

By Warren Patton

"Here's the first shot..."
A train of open limousines emerges on a 23-inch monitor, and Robert Groden richly clicks off seven such intrusions into what has been called the greatest home movie ever made. It lasts less than 30 seconds, the core of them mesmerizing Groden for nearly a quarter century since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was played out at 14.3 frames per second.

We see the president falter, his head erupt and thrown violently backward into the lap of his wife, mortally wounded; it shows Texas Gov. John Connally grimace, collapse, grievously perforated; and a blood-splashed Jackie Kennedy grope in shock for bits of bone, in a pathetic attempt to put her husband back together again.

Groden, a photo-optical specialist at Photo Wizard in Wayne and an internationally recognized researcher on the assassination, is part of a team of investigators who refuse to relax their grip on what they term the nation's most outstanding unsolved murder. Even after 25 years, they remain resolute that the government has more than it wants to tell about the events of and beyond Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas.

The investigators ridicule skewed government research and even manufactured evidence that supports the lone assassin hypothesis of the Warren Commission. They cite its preposterous demands on any triggerman, particularly one as inept as Lee Harvey Oswald who was reported to be, scoring two hits on three shots in less than six seconds at a moving target; and how a bullet that the autopsy surgeon said inflicted a non-transit wound in the president's back somehow emerged from his throat — through what Parkland Hospital surgeons perceived as an entrance wound — bored through Connally's rib, collapsed his right lung, smashed the largest bone in his right wrist and reappeared on Kennedy's stretcher in almost pristine condition.

Critics refer to this missile as "The Magic Bullet."
They pore over typewritten documents with looking glasses, measuring character widths to isolate bogus corrections; they study anatomy to synthesize vivid details in autopsy photographs and reports.

They relive crucial events through eyewitnesses; those, they say, who haven't been murdered yet. Nearly 20 have been silenced by some sort of violent act.

Groden's thesis has been the most intensive existing analysis of the mulling Zapruder film, which he knows like an appendage. He's seen it "10,000, 15,000, 20,000 times" and still marvels at its power and the secrets it continues to spill out.

It is the fulcrum of the claim that John F. Kennedy was killed by a collective — which may or may not have included Oswald — and that the United States government remains an accessory after the fact through a conspiracy of silence.

Groden has presented evidence before two government commissions, both compelled by his unique photo analysis which diverged sharply from the official consensus. The forums were only partially sympathetic and somehow most of the rickety construction of the 1964

Warren Commission survived for the record — though recent opinion polls show that 80 percent of the American public doesn't buy it.

"If it hadn't been for the Zapruder film," says Groden, "they would have gotten away with it. The coverup would have been undetected."

The truth emerges

Robert Groden, six-foot-plus made six-foot-plus-something by a thick shock of peppery hair, is an unlikely researcher possessed. He's unfailingly gracious, a devoted father of four children (Robbie, 15; John, 13; Melanie, 11; and Michael, 7) whom he has drawn in many ways into his 22-year zeal to peel apart the layers of deception which shroud the Kennedy assassination.

Robbie's godfather is pioneering critic Harold Weisberg. John is named for the president. Comedian/social activist Dick Gregory, whom Robert calls the inspiration for the second government investigation, is godfather to Melanie. Robert's wife Christine has been a confidante, researcher and even stealth courier. Clearly, this is not his mission alone.

His voyage of discovery began in 1966, three years after graduation from Forest Hills High School ("where Simon and Garfunkel went") in Queens, N.Y. He readily embraced the Warren Report, at first. "I wanted to believe it. I think most of us did."

That is until the day that someone — Groden won't say who or how — gave him a bootleg print of the film taken in Dealey Plaza by Dallas businessman Abraham Zapruder.

In many ways, it made for sorry screening. Zapruder, in his 60s and afflicted with vertigo, was using his Bell and Howell camera for just the second time; he had even needed secretary Marilyn Stitzman to steady him on a cement pedestal. The motorcade image leaped around the frames and almost off-screen before the fatal head shot, partially because a horrified Zapruder screamed over and over: "They've killed the president!" But he never stopped filming until the presidential limousine disappeared under a triple underpass, while Secret Service Agent Clinton Hill pounded the rear hood in frustration.

Time Inc. purchased the film negative from Zapruder within the next few days for a reported \$250,000. As a photographer, Abraham Zapruder was one great businessman.

Groden, at the time a college student studying photo optics, centralized and enhanced the images and blew the reconstructed print up to 35 mm. What he discovered in the film, which was jealously protected by Time Inc. and had been seen by only a few dozen people to that time, was so stunning that Groden kept it locked inside for more than seven years.

That graphic head explosion proved the president had been fired upon from the front, while the government had assured the nation that Oswald alone had shot at him from behind. "I knew what few people did, and I didn't know who to turn to," said Groden. "I was literally afraid."

Groden eventually was convinced by a friend to air his film at a symposium of assassination critics in 1973 in Georgetown.

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Robert Groden, who works at Photo Wizard in Wayne, has investigated the Kennedy assassination.

What new evidence

By Warren Patton

Even after a quarter century, no statute of limitations has been afforded the assassination of President John F. Kennedy by independent investigators. A number of significant details have surfaced recently which further take issue with key elements of the theses proposed by the Warren Report and the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

Among them:

• Minute analysis by photo-optical specialist Robert Groden of the Zapruder film strongly suggests a total of seven shots were fired at the presidential motorcade from as many as four locations. The images relate directly to shot impulses recorded by a dictabelt through an open police radio microphone in Dealey Plaza that day.

The president appears to have been struck twice (in the throat and in the back) in the first volley and is impacted in the head almost simultaneously by fatal shots from the rear and right front. (This might also have been recorded as one shot on the dictabelt, which acknowledged six gunshot "fingerprints.")

Texas Gov. John Connally, riding in front of the president in the limousine, shows no evidence of injury until nearly a half-second after Kennedy; the government, however, has insisted both were originally wounded by the same bullet fired from behind by Lee Harvey Oswald in the Texas School Book De-

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Assassination investigation

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The fervor remained largely underground, says Groden, until a screening at another symposium in Boston in 1975. "We expected 500 people," he recalls. "We got 3,000, in each of three sessions."

The Boston Globe played up the story on page one. Dick Gregory was impressed by Groden's optics that he flew Robert and Chris to Chicago for a national symposium. Despite the fact that it was his expertise which people flocked to see, Groden credited Gregory's drive for causing "all hell to break loose."

Geraldo Rivera broadcast the now-released film in prime time on "Good Night, America," President Gerald Ford, an author of the Warren Report, bowed to public pressure and impaneled the Rockefeller Commission to evaluate the evidence. Out of that grew the Church Senate Investigating Committee and the reopening of the case in Congress through the House Select Committee on Assassinations following a resolution by U.S. Rep. Thomas Downing (D-Va.), who had been stirred by screenings of the Zapruder film by Groden in his office on The Hill.

Investigation falters

Groden was hired by the Select Committee as a special photo consultant. "It was the most photographed killing in history," he said.

"Back in 1976 they knew — they knew," Groden added, pounding his sofa for emphasis, "that there had been a conspiracy. They had the evidence: the pictures, testimony from credible eyewitnesses, the government documents."

Momentum, however, they did not have. Downing declined to run for re-election after 1976. Two conspiracy hawks, chief counsel Richard Sprague and Rep. Henry Gonzalez (D-Texas), had a bitter falling out and stepped down. Into the breach as chief counsel entered a far less intrusive G. Robert Blakey.

In 1979, the committee completed its hearings by grudgingly accepting the existence of a second "probably Mafia" assassin — who fired a shot that missed, it said. This revelation came after an audio expert presented testimony "with 95 percent certainty" of four shots that had been recorded from an open police motorcycle radio in the motorcade. The committee then reaffirmed the original conclusion that three shots came from Oswald's crude Mannlicher-Carcano rifle in a span that crack FBI sharpshooters couldn't effectively duplicate and left the identity of the second gunman up to independent researchers.

For Groden and other critics it was virtually the Warren Commission happening all over again, rife with a paper trail of discarded evidence which didn't fit the conventional wisdom.

He refers to the police dictabelt in Dallas which had actually perceived six audio "fingerprints" of shots and echo patterns in Dealey Plaza through an open police motorcycle microphone. Under committee direction, test microphones perceived four such impulses from select firing positions. A few more tests of suspected firing points, Groden insists, could have resolved all of the impulses "to 100 percent accuracy."

It is the fallacy, Groden says, of the government investigating itself. Digging too deeply into the murky background of Oswald might have blown what former Pennsylvania Sen. Richard Schweiker said was his "special relationship" with the intelligence communities of the FBI, the CIA and even the military, and their unholy alliance with organized crime to neutralize Cuban leader Fidel Castro. It was far easier to condemn a dead man than to burrow into the Stygian nightmare of covert intrigue.

Assassination critics have contended that rogue elements from those very organizations might have been active in neutralizing the president.

"People ask us for credible answers," said Groden, "when the answers are incredible."

From among his 43 file drawers of evidence, Groden pulls out crudely altered photographs purporting to show Oswald in a militaristic pose. "The world's first chin transplant," he says. He explains how even autopsy photographs of the president were doctored to disguise evidence of firing points from the front. Key materials in the archives relating to the investigation have simply evaporated or emerged in battered form — such as the government's spliced, third-generation version of the Zapruder film.

"They say a young technician damaged it," Groden said. "Interesting how the splices correspond exactly with the first two shots."

Void in reporting

Also submerging the true story, says Groden, is the virtual disregard for it by U.S. newspapers, leaving British news organizations to produce much of the best investigation. Even the purpose of the critics has been, in many ways, nullified like many oars pulling against each other in a common scow.

Some have tried to co-opt each the work of rivals, one going to the ex-

treme of attempting to steal Groden's film materials from a briefcase. (Fortunately, it was the wrong briefcase.) Suspecting on another occasion that he and Gregory were being followed, Groden had Chris deplane well before him with crucial materials hidden under her blouse.

Such creeping insecurity has been reinforced by the unnatural deaths of many witnesses who disclosed conflicting testimony. One of them, former Dallas Deputy Sheriff Roger Dean Craig — onetime Dallas Policeman of the year who had been totally disabled by two mysterious car accidents — had agreed to be interviewed by the Grodens in 1975. When they arrived in Texas, Craig had been found shot to death. Robert and Chris covered the expenses for his funeral.

"We're not a united front," said Groden of the critics. "That's probably why we haven't been killed. That's the strength of the other side. They don't have to kill us because they know in some way we'll destroy each other."

But Groden presses on. A 600-page manuscript, "High Treason," with 52 pages of photographs, is in the hands of a major publisher. If that fails, Groden will publish it himself. He points proudly to the fact that it contains the first visual evidence from the Zapruder film that destroys the credibility of the doctored autopsy photos.

Just months ago, he even isolated a ghostly face in a window from a slide of the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository opposite of the purported sniper's nest, taken just after the assassination when Oswald was seen four floors below.

"That's the frustrating thing; who do I go to with this?" Groden asked.

He says he still envisions yet a third government investigation, largely because of new evidence (see accompanying story) that has emerged within the last few months. "All it takes is one honest congressman," he insists.

His research, laboratory and consulting work still consume up to 30 or 40 hours a week, adding to his considerable investigation tab of "dozens of thousands of dollars," not to mention sweat equity.

"Sure, I'd like to lead a normal life, play more with my kids," he said. "But this is a chance to change history, hopefully for the better. The question is, if Oswald didn't kill the president, then who did?"

"And if he did do it," Groden said, "I contend the government went to a lot of trouble to frame a guilty man."