

The 'Umbrella' Plot Holds No Water, JFK Panel Learns

Washington — (AP) — By his own description, Louie Steven Witt is an exceedingly private person. But once, just once in his 53 years, he slipped out of the mold to stage a modest political protest.

For that, his name will be forever recorded in the annals of the investigation of President John F. Kennedy's murder. The fellow has turned out to be the sinister "umbrella man," but he seems not to have a sinister bone in his body.

The "umbrella man" theory lay in ruins after Witt's testimony yesterday before the House Select Committee on Assassinations. Today the committee was to examine other conspiracy theories which have arisen despite the Warren Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, killed Kennedy.

The "umbrella man" theory was one of the oddest. It was based on photographs showing a man twirling an umbrella near Kennedy's limousine when JFK was shot to death in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. It wasn't raining, so conspiracy theorists argued that the man had to be either firing a poison dart through his umbrella or signaling someone else to fire a rifle.

The "umbrella man" remained anonymous until the committee distributed the pictures and appealed for information about him last July. Witt, a Dallas warehouse manager, saw the pictures and realized to his chagrin that he was the "umbrella man."

What, Witt was asked yesterday, was he doing with the umbrella? "I was carrying that stupid umbrella intent upon heckling the President with it," he explained.

Witt had heard that umbrellas "were a sore spot with the Kennedys" dating from the years family patriarch Joseph P. Kennedy was the U.S. ambassador to England and had supported British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's policies toward Adolf Hitler. Joseph Kennedy suffered from the criticism when Chamberlain's policies were later castigated as appeasement.

Because Chamberlain often carried an umbrella, his critics made the umbrella the symbol of the policies they hated.

Someone had told Witt the Kennedys had been irked by a previous umbrella-brandishing demonstration. And if he could only remember who it

was, he said, "I'm sure I would have taken the umbrella and clouted him over the head with it in the past two weeks."

When he went to see the Kennedy motorcade on his usual noontime walk, the politically conservative Witt said, he planned to stage his own umbrella protest of Kennedy's liberal politics.

Witt said he deliberately chose an uncrowded spot along Dealey Plaza so his "big, clumsy umbrella" would attract as little attention as possible.

When Kennedy came into sight, Witt was struggling to raise the umbrella, heard what sounded like firecrackers, realized from all the commotion that "something terrible had happened," and sat in stunned silence for a few moments. He said he felt his protest was "a bad joke gone sour."

With Witt's explanation on the record, there remained only the matter of whether a weapon was inside the umbrella.

Witt had brought it along, an ordinary black umbrella, decrepit from 15 years' use and labeled with a committee exhibit sticker.

No, he said, he really didn't want to demonstrate how he had raised it in his protest.

Struggling to contain his amusement, Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), the committee chairman, called on a staff member to open the umbrella.

Then, as committee aide Cynthia Copper tussled with a sticky release button, Stokes noticed the umbrella was pointing directly at him. "Maybe you ought to turn the other way with it," he said, guffawing.

As she shifted the line of fire, the contraption sprang inside out, baring nothing but bent and tarnished ribs. The room rocked with laughter. Witt wasn't laughing.

"Well," Stokes chuckled, "I guess there's no gun in it."