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The Fourth Tramp; Oswald's Lost Cellmate and the Gunrunners of Dallas
By Ray and Mary La Fontaine

TRUTH IS not only stranger than fiction; it also emerges more slowly. Consider the unlikely story of John Elrod, a long-lost witness to events surrounding the murder of President Kennedy 31 years ago. A recluse who now lives in Tennessee, Elrod says that he had a brief conversation with Lee Harvey Oswald in the Dallas City Jail late on the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963.

If Elrod's story is true - and many of its details have been confirmed - the accused presidential assassin knew about the inner working of a gunrunning network that was under investigation by federal agents in Dallas in the fall 1963. These gunrunners trafficked in weapons stolen from U.S. government arsenals. And, according to recently released FBI documents, two of them were suspected of supplying guns to anti-Castro groups that were planning to mount an invasion of Cuba in the last week of November 1963. The Elrod story indicates that Oswald was privy to one of their gun deals and willing to talk about it the day he was arrested.

Elrod's account is not recent. He first told it to family members in the days after the Dealey Plaza tragedy and repeated it to the FBI 30 years ago this month in August 1964. The FBI discarded Elrod's story as unfounded. But Elrod left the Dallas jail convinced that Oswald had not killed the president.

Oswald, according to Elrod's account, was acquainted with Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby and a man arrested in Dallas while transporting stolen weapons on Nov. 18, 1963. Those guns, according to the sworn testimony of a federal agent, were intended for a Dallas gun dealer named John Thomas Masen. Masen was, in the view of the agent, an ardent member of the Minutemen, a right-wing paramilitary organization. The only store in the Dallas area that sold the type of ammunition used in the shooting of President Kennedy, the FBI later learned, was owned and run by John Masen.

On Nov. 24, 1963, Oswald, who told reporters that he was a "patsy," was killed by Ruby.

Elrod's story renews the long-standing question: What was really going on in Dallas in November 1963? Along with other new evidence emerging from the government's long-secret JFK files, Elrod's story lifts

that something was preying on his mind. It had happened nine months before, in the less stormy days when he and Jackie lived in Dallas.

Elrod said that on the afternoon of Friday Nov. 22, 1963, he was walking on a Dallas street having just heard that President Kennedy had been mortally wounded in Dealey Plaza two miles away. Suddenly, police squad cars pulled up and he was arrested. He soon found himself on the fifth floor of the Dallas jail "for investigation of conspiracy to commit murder," a charge that was later dropped.

As a sergeant in the Shelby County Sheriff's Office wrote in his report on the August 1964 incident, Elrod wanted the deputies in Memphis to know that he had information "on the murder of Lee Oswald (sic)."

Elrod now says he was in the same cellblock as Oswald and told the authorities as much. The FBI report on the incident doesn't mention Oswald's name. It just says that Elrod spoke of his "unknown cellmate."

(A) Elrod recalled sharing a cell with two other men in the Dallas County Jail. In the corridor outside the cell, the cellmates saw an inmate with a badly battered face being led by jail guards. Elrod said that he heard one of his cellmates say he recognized the injured inmate despite his "smashed up" face.

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(A) The cellmate Elrod recalled said he had seen the battered man previously in a motel room with four other men. The men in the motel room had been advanced money under some type of contract, and the man with the injured face received some of the money. He wasn't injured then and he drove a car loaded with guns, a Thunderbird. That was all Elrod could remember his cellmate saying, except for the most important thing: that one of the men in the motel room had been Jack Ruby.

So the Memphis sheriff's office called in the FBI, which sent over two agents, Norman L. Casey and Francis B. Cole, to interview Elrod. The agents dictated a two-page report summarizing Elrod's story. The value of what he had to say was, in the eyes of the FBI, essentially nil: "hearsay information he had received from his unknown cellmate."

Any remaining possibility of the agents taking Elrod seriously was laid to rest the following day, when they received the FBI identification record on John Franklin Elrod. It showed Elrod had been arrested five times - but not on Nov. 22, 1963.

Who failed to produce the arrest records in August 1964 that would have lent credibility to Elrod's story? A spokesman for the Dallas Police Department says that the FBI had access to all of the department's records. The current head of the Dallas FBI office, Oliver "Buck" Revell, has repeatedly declined to be interviewed about the incident.

The Dallas Police Department files discovered in 1992 confirmed that Elrod was in the Dallas City Jail on the day of the assassination. Other key details of Elrod's story have been independently verified. But what was most remarkable about his account was how it dovetailed with the long-neglected testimony of Frank Ellsworth, a federal agent working in Dallas at the time.

reported back to the FBI.

Nonte said that Masen had told him that the planned attack "centered upon Cuba" and involved a huge rebel force "staging at unknown Caribbean bases." Masen claimed his knowledge of a military operation came from a "weapons buyer" at the University of Miami. The university housed the JM Wave Station, a CIA headquarters in south Florida for operations against Castro's Cuba. When it came to Cuba, the bureau evidently viewed Masen as a valuable source.

One of the FBI agents aware of the intelligence reports on Dallas gunrunning, according to recently released FBI documents, was a man named James Hosty.

Hosty was also the agent in charge of the bureau's file on Lee Harvey Oswald before the Kennedy assassination. Oswald was a 24-year-old ex-Marine who had defected to the Soviet Union and returned to the United States two and a half years later. Hosty's address and license plate number were found in Oswald's personal notebook. This notation, moreover, appeared in the notebook under the date of "Nov. 1, 1963."

That was the same day that the Dallas FBI office received an inter-office communication on Masen. One of the recently released documents shows that Hosty was assigned to follow up a lead on "John Thomas Masen, IS (Internal Security) - Cuba". Two weeks later, on Nov. 15, 1963, Hosty wrote a reply about Masen which mentioned "Capt. George Nonte."

In this same time period, the first two weeks of Nov. 1963, Hosty told the Warren Commission that he was trying to find Lee Oswald to determine if he was working in any job that might give him access to classified information. He twice visited Oswald's estranged wife, Marina, on Nov. 1 and Nov. 5, but claimed he could not find Oswald either time. Oswald responded by writing Hosty a note and delivering it to the Dallas FBI office. No one can remember the exact date that Oswald visited, although a receptionist guessed it was Nov. 12, 1963.

At the same time, Frank Ellsworth's investigation was coming to a head. On the evening of Nov. 18, 1963, the ATF agent was preparing to arrest John Thomas Masen. In his sworn testimony and a 1993 interview, Ellsworth recalled arranging with Masen to make a big buy of stolen guns - the latest and best stuff, he had been assured.

But again the FBI acted behind Ellsworth's back. Unbeknownst to the ATF agent, an FBI agent and four detectives of the Dallas Police Department were conducting a stakeout at a lonely intersection just blocks away. According to court records from the resulting criminal trial, the lawmen crouched in two unmarked cars watching a pale blue 1962 Thunderbird convertible pull up alongside a white Dodge. They saw two men get out and start passing a number of high-powered rifles and shotguns from the white car to the adjacent convertible.

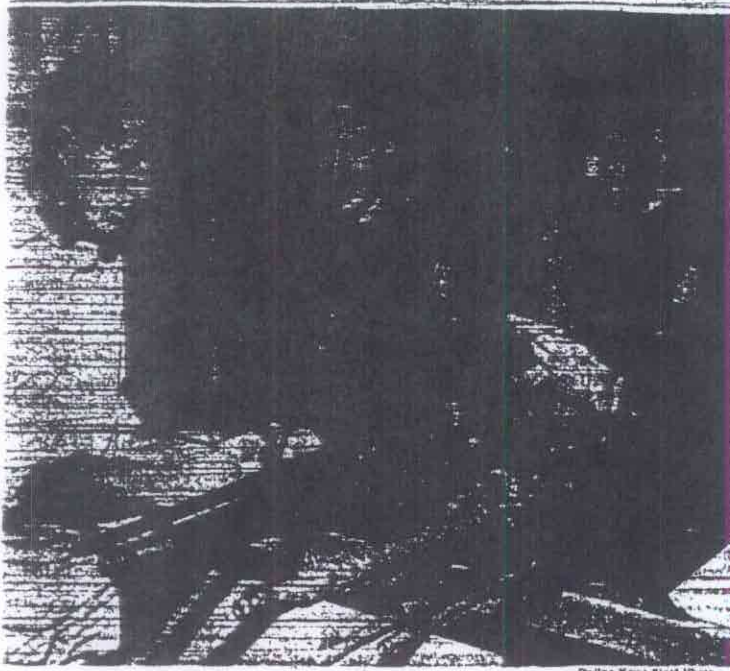
When the Thunderbird pulled away, the FBI agent and two detectives radioed for help. Two Dallas police officers cruising nearby in their

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Dallas News Staff Photo.

Police property room clerk B. J. Smith checks in the arsenal recovered by officers J. B. Allen, center, and J. R. Sales Monday night.

Police Nab 2 Ex-Convicts With Load of Stolen Guns

By JOHN RUTLEDGE
A 60-mile-an-hour police chase ended in the capture of two ex-convicts hauling a load of stolen machine guns in a swank sports car at 6:40 p.m. Monday at Gaston and Hall.

Miller received deep face cuts when the blue 1962 sports car crashed into a utility pole. In the car police found two air-cooled .30-caliber machine guns, a .45-caliber "grease gun" sub-machine gun and two Browning automatic rifles. The weapons were identified as part of the lock-

time loser who listed his address as 328 S. Edgefield. Miller received deep face cuts when the blue 1962 sports car crashed into a utility pole. In the car police found two air-cooled .30-caliber machine guns, a .45-caliber "grease gun" sub-machine gun and two Browning automatic rifles. The weapons were identified as part of the lock-

on Sunday Law Awaited

DeFusco, said its customers signed them certificates and, as a result, it did not violate the law. Wade, who is scheduled to return Tuesday from a Southwest Texas trip, contends a state still violates the law. He resorts to "a subterfuge" and allows customers to sign the emergency certificates in wholesale fashion. First Assistant Dist. Atty. A. D. Jim Bowie noted the appeals court has scheduled a hearing Wednesday in another case. It will review actions of Dist. Judge Dallas Blankenship in another case. Bowie said, "Because of this, I anticipate we will wait some time before making any decision about Atlantic Mills. Prosecutors could file criminal charges against Atlantic Mills officials or seek a civil court order restraining them to stop selling the restricted items on both Saturdays and Sundays.

normal Sunday sales by Sparrows in Dallas and three other cities. Judge Blankenship set aside the order after a hearing Friday and Sparrow's lawyers went to the appeals court. The appeals court decision will give us a guide we can use in determining what action we should take in the Atlantic Mills case," Bowie said. "Because of this, I anticipate we will wait some time before making any decision about Atlantic Mills. Prosecutors could file criminal charges against Atlantic Mills officials or seek a civil court order restraining them to stop selling the restricted items on both Saturdays and Sundays.

Parking Lag Laid to Suits

DALLAS GOES INTO INDIVIDUALS IN JANUARY

Additional parking facilities for Dallas-Love Field patrons have been stymied by recent lawsuits, but the situation should improve within a year, Aviation Director George P. Coker Jr. told the City Council Monday. In an informal department head briefing, the aviation chief said that Dallas' master plan for Love Field "was the most publicized document of all — and anyone knew where and how long our runways were planned." Litigation by adjacent property owners held back the construction of the new 8,800-foot parallel runway for many months; also, the city hesitated to sell revenue bonds for almost \$1,000,000 worth of extra parking in the form of a second deck at the airport, Coker said. Love Field is a healthy operation, financially, Coker said. The annual revenue for the field alone is \$2,000,000 plus, including a little more than \$1,000,000 in concession revenues. Expenses of \$750,000 a year allow the healthy balance to go toward paying off revenue bonds and expansion expenses, he said. But the big financial lift for Dallas is in the airport tenants, such as commercial airlines, service companies, etc. "They give Dallas a \$40,000,000 annual payroll," said Coker. "Our Fort Worth opponents be-

fore the Civil Aeronautics Board in the regional airport hearing keep saying that Dallas will not lose this if Fort Worth gets the air line business moved to Carter Field. "But we know better than that," said Coker. "New Jersey, after a series of tragic accidents, diverted its air traffic 10 years ago to Idlewild," he said. "After 18 months, New Jersey had lost 30 per cent of its area apartment occupancy and 20 per cent of its retail shops." The recommendation from CAB Examiner Ross I. Newmann after hearing Fort Worth arguments to win Dallas flights this summer should be announced in the early spring and should be favorable to Dallas, the aviation director told the council. Based on the facts presented, I am not dejected as to the outcome," he said. "Parking problems at the airport should improve after December: airport employees will be directed to use a separate, temporary lot, Coker said. A recent permit granted Earl Hayes to install a valet parking service there (charge — \$1.50) should ease the situation also, he said. "There's no way to park 2,000 cars within 50 feet of the front door," Coker told the council.

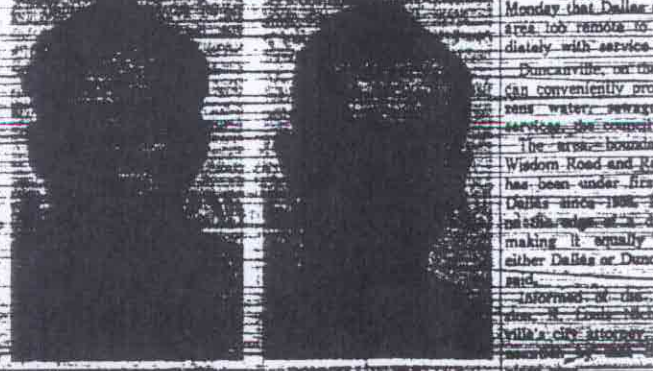
The Department Bureau of Statistics day it will soon a consumer price on prices of selected service establishments, the Washin of The News reports. The department dex will be issued starting in January er goods and which prices will include food, household furnishings, transportation and recreation. The Dallas Independent-Record said, included as a sample national consumer dex. The metropolitan area is the Texas city including consumer index.

There the outlaw car crashed board on into a utility pole. Sales said Whittar scrambled from behind the steering wheel and ran 30 feet on foot before Sales tackled him. Miller, his face backed by glass when his head plunged through the windshield, remained in his seat. He was treated at the Parkland Hospital emergency room when lifted along with Whittar for burglary. Whittar was later taken to Parkland under guard when he claimed he was ill. Allen and Sales found the stolen guns hidden on the back floor boards covered by a layer of pop bottles, and a gas heating stove.

City Mgr. Eight City Monday that Dallas area job removals to directly with service. Duncanville, or the can conveniently provide water, sewage services, the council. The area bounds Wisdom Road and has been under fire Dallas since 1960. A possible edge at making it equally either Dallas or Duncanville. "I'm informed of this," said Jim Whittar, a city attorney.

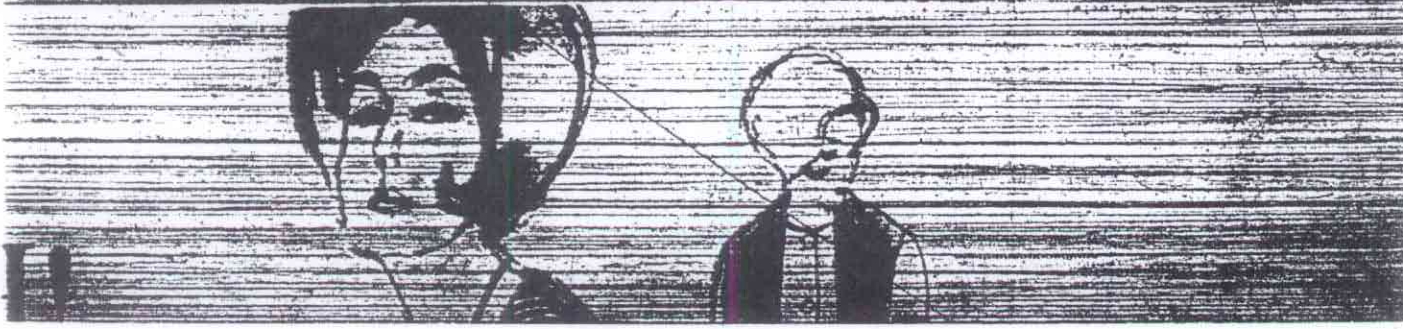
City Droops Bid to A Red Bird

The City of Dallas to give up annexation Red Bird Addition. The city council has voted to give up annexation of Red Bird Addition. The city council has voted to give up annexation of Red Bird Addition. The city council has voted to give up annexation of Red Bird Addition.



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with the Fort Hood arms thefts. They included James Hosty of the FBI and a U.S. Army counterintelligence officer named Edward J. Coyle. On the morning of Nov. 22, 1963, while the rest of the city buzzed in anticipation of President Kennedy's visit, the three agents discussed the Fort Hood case. In a 1993 interview, Hosty explained that Ellsworth was particularly interested in the possible involvement of the Dallas Minutemen in the thefts.

While Ellsworth shared what he knew with his colleagues, he didn't gain much information in return. In Hosty's account of the meeting, there was no discussion of the bureau's use of Nonte to obtain inside information (about the possible Cuba invasion) from Masen.

The meeting broke up around noon. Half an hour later, Ellsworth heard that the president's motorcade had been shot at and he rushed to Dealey Plaza to search for clues. At 2:30 that afternoon Lee Oswald was arrested in a neighborhood movie theater a few miles away on suspicion of shooting a policeman. Elsewhere, Dallas police were following up on tips from frightened citizens. John Elrod was arrested at 2:45 p.m. Before the end of the day, Elrod says that his cellmate, Lee Oswald, spoke of a gun deal involving a man with a "smashed-up" face, a Thunderbird loaded with guns - and Jack Ruby. (A)

Is Elrod's story really credible? Given Elrod's history of alcoholism, his account must be treated with caution.

And, indeed, one of Elrod's recorded claims proved not to be true. According to the FBI report of August 1964, Elrod said that he and his cellmate on Nov. 22, 1963 had been held in a "Cell 10." But the cells in the Dallas jail were designated alphabetically and by number: F-1 or C-8 or A-5. The reference to Cell-10 may have been Elrod's error or the FBI's in transcribing his comments.

Available documents support the remainder of Elrod's claims.

The cellmate on Nov. 22, Oswald, had seen a man with a "smashed up" face in the corridor outside their cell. The "unknown" Elrod cellmate said the man "was . . . driving a Thunderbird with a large quantity of guns contained therein," according to the FBI report.

This man was almost certainly Lawrence Reginald Miller. He was in Dallas City jail that day, according to jail records. He wasn't the driver of the Thunderbird on the night of Nov. 18 - but the Thunderbird he was riding in did contain a large quantity of guns. And his face, having collided with the Thunderbird's windshield, was definitely smashed up.

The claim that Oswald and Miller were at a meeting with Jack Ruby is the least substantiated aspect of his story. Elrod didn't recount the story to the FBI until August 1964, by which time Ruby was a household name. But if an inebriated Elrod added Ruby's name to his story after the fact, his invention was consistent with two very sober facts that were not publicly known at the time: First, the driver of the blue Thunderbird, Donnell Whitter, was Ruby's mechanic. Second, Ruby himself

Answering that question was made much more difficult by Jack Ruby's brazen execution of Oswald in the basement of the Dallas City Jail on the morning of Sunday Nov. 24, 1963. Minutes later, James Hosty, acting on orders from his boss, destroyed the note that he had received from Oswald just a week or two earlier - making the question of Oswald's communication with the FBI even more obscure.

Hosty testified that Oswald complained in the note about Hosty's harassment of his wife. But, as the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1978, Hosty's destruction of Oswald's note (which he did not disclose until 1975) also seriously impeached his credibility on the subject.

Elrod's story also casts doubt on Jack Ruby's puzzling stated motivation for killing Oswald. Ruby said that he killed the accused assassin to spare Jacqueline Kennedy the ordeal of coming back to Dallas for a trial. If Lee Oswald had sat in on a meeting concerning guns and money with Jack Ruby shortly before Nov. 18, 1963, then Oswald had damaging information about Ruby. The desire to protect that information, not chivalry, might have been the stripclub owner's real motive for killing Oswald. Ruby died in 1966.

Aftermath: Evidence Lost and Found

In late November 1963, as life in Dallas began to return to normal, John Elrod was released from jail. His older brother, Lindy Elrod, picked him up.

"John told me that day he was in the same cell with Lee Harvey Oswald, and that he knew Oswald didn't kill Kennedy," Lindy said in an interview in 1993. "He was very scared about something that happened. He made a 180-degree turnaround and left me in the lurch - never came back to his job."

John Elrod, who has never sought to profit from or even publicize his experience, returned to the safe obscurity of his mother's home. "He went home to mama," says his brother.

In January 1964, Rep. Henry Gonzalez, Democrat from San Antonio, wrote to the Warren Commission urging that the Minutemen be investigated in connection with the Kennedy assassination. Gonzalez noted that in March 1963, a Minuteman publication, "On Target," had identified 20 liberal congressmen as "traitors," warning them that "even now the crosshairs are on the back of your necks."

But the FBI proved remarkably incurious about one clue that led straight to the Minutemen. After the assassination, the FBI contacted all gun shops in the Dallas-Irving area, and found that only two had carried the type of Mannlicher Carcano 6.5 millimeter ammunition believed to have struck President Kennedy. Of these, only one gun dealer had reloaded bullets with the same kind of hunting load used in the shooting of the

seems clear. When John Franklin Elrod came forward in August 1964 and said he knew something about the murders of Lee Oswald and John Kennedy, he provided authorities with all the information he had. Thirty years later, the FBI and U.S. Army Intelligence have done less than the fourth tramp.

Ray and Mary La Fontaine are authors of "Oswald Talked: The New Evidence in the Kennedy Assassination" to be published this winter by Pelican.

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