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A bent for the macabre side

Claude Lewis

It's been wisely said that "nature abhors a vacuum."

So does lawyer Mark Lane.

Wherever there is controversy, or the possibility of conspiracy, carnage, or killing, look for Lane. The surprise is that his name has not yet surfaced in the controversy at the First Baptist Church of Concordville on Baltimore Pike in Delaware County. But there is still time.

Perhaps the events at the church have not yet been so celebrated that they have come to Lane's attention. When word reaches him that some have charged a mini-Jonestown in the making, Lane will provide expert legal language — and national noise.

Lane is a man for causes. We discovered him in the '60s, or rather he, us. Every profession has its oddballs.

Baseball got much of its color from Charles O. Finley and William L. Veeck. Tennis can claim Jimmy Connors and Ilie Nastase. Serious golfers have been stunned by Lee Trevino hot-dogging across the green. The feminist movement has (and can keep) Bella Abzug. Broadcasting boasts — and roasts — Howard Cosell. Muhammad Ali owns two titles, one the world heavyweight champion, the other the loudest mouth in all of boxiana.

On a trip to Algiers I found Dr. Timothy Leary, the high priest of drugs, under arrest by none other than Eldridge Cleaver, a very "different" individual in his own right.

Most of those we question possess at least an element of respectability. We may disagree with them but only occasionally with disgust. Mark Lane is different. In the field of law, he stands alone. Oh, there are others, but none approach Lane's strange history of headlines and legal alliances.

A former Lane law partner, Seymour Ostrow, described Lane's reputation as largely "an illusion." Ostrow claims that Lane made much of his role in helping found a narcotics clinic that purported to have a cure for drug addiction, a cure that did not exist. "I don't think they did terribly much except publicize themselves," Ostrow said of the clinic operators.

Lane once was peripherally involved with the civil rights movement. When that didn't work for him, he got himself elected to the New York State legislature. His two years in Albany were controversial but did not provide the national platform he sought, so he went on to other rewards.

He has an affinity for the darker side of the American culture. He finds death a legal attraction.

He projected himself right into the middle of the Kennedy assassinations. He turned up as the lawyer for Marguerita Oswald, the mother of presidential killer Lee Harvey Oswald. He was one of the chief proponents of the conspiracy theory in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and served as one of James Earl Ray's attorneys, arguing on national television — and rather unconvincingly too — that Ray did not receive a fair trial. He was such an irritant before the House Select Committee on Assassinations that many were as repelled by him as they were by Ray himself.

Earlier, the atrocities of the Vietnam war occupied Lane's mind full time, and in 1968 he was a figure in the police riot at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. His latest known connection, and perhaps the most bizarre, is with the Peoples Temple where 900 perished last November in an ugly phantasmagoria of suicide and murder.

Lane seems perpetually attracted to mayhem, chaos, the ugly and the profane. He has a unique way of turning someone else's anguish into a Mark Lane profit, either through books, movies or a national spotlight.

I don't know many ugly men, but Mark Lane is one of them. Not for what he looks like, but for what he's become. He seems a fit subject for study. Psychiatrists should dissect his childhood; it might tell us a lot we don't know.

Wherever there is calamity, grotesqueness, perversion and despair, Mark Lane is not far away.

Some might say attorney William Kunstler might be there, too. Others will point accusingly at Charles Garry, the Peoples Temple's chief attorney and the man who worked most closely with the Black Panthers. But there is a difference.

Lane seems to wallow in the worst part of life and what makes it so uniquely perverse is that he enjoys it.

When he turned up at the Guyana murder scene, it was no surprise. It was natural for him to be there. He had as much a place in that pastiche of poison and pain as did Jim Jones, the founder of the Peoples Temple.

Lane survived, while Jones didn't. There will be other atrocities and Lane, who apparently can't help it, will turn up amid the debris. Clearly, he's one of a kind.

Thank goodness!

(Claude Lewis is a Bulletin writer.)