

Conspiracy chaser tracks down the missing pieces

By KATHRYN HARRIS
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He has kindly eyes and a kindly manner — traits he says he appreciates in others.

But Robert Lee Lewis can lean angrily into your face when he's trying to get his point across.

One recent day, he gave an FBI agent a 45-minute tongue-lashing for tracking him down by telephone in Clearwater and interrupting his work. (The FBI agent declined to tell The St. Petersburg Times why Lewis was sought out.)

Lewis, 37, is a self-styled investigator who says he promised God in 1972 that he would do something good with his life if he kicked his heroin habit. He claims for the past four years he has been unraveling a conspiracy of numbing dimensions.

HE HAS BEEN staying in the home of a Clearwater lawyer who offered him refuge while he alternately tries to write a book or interest newspapers in his work.

Lewis says he can link the deaths or disappearances of the late president John F. Kennedy; his brother Robert; former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover; newspaper columnist Dorothy Kilgallen; former Louisiana Congressman Hale Boggs and former Teamster Union president James Hoffa, to name a few.

He blames organized crime and the CIA and a cabal of powerful politicians and businessmen for these deaths and what he sees as pervasive corruption.

Lewis, with briefcases under his arm and a head crammed full of dates and events, travels the country talking to college professors, newspaper reporters and politicians or their aides on Capitol Hill.

Some of them are listening.

"He came to this committee a year ago," confirms Larry Kieves, a coordinator in Washington, D.C., for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. "We recorded his information and are in the process of doing an investigation of the (Kennedy) assassination, and some of his information was helpful."

Kieves says, "He's a nice fellow. Sometimes I question his beliefs a bit . . . but it's interesting. It's always fun to talk to him."

Not far from Capitol Hill, Lewis found other listeners intrigued by the Warren Commission transcripts he had unearthed in the National Archives.

"HE CALLED THEM to our attention, which had never been done before," says Tad Szulc, a former New York Times reporter who now is a contributing editor to The New Republic.

The transcript excerpts — to which the political journal devoted an unusual 37 pages in its Sept. 27, 1975 issue — reflected the Commission's organizational woes when it began to investigate John Kennedy's death, and some dissatisfaction with the FBI's insistence that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin.

Lewis' name appears in the acknowledgements for that story. Szulc says, "He's not a reporter in the normal sense of the word," but he says Lewis was "very helpful" as a researcher.

Lewis shrugs at the mention of a series of articles being published in Rolling Stone, the counterculture magazine, which allege that the CIA wanted John F. Kennedy killed because he planned a "thorough housecleaning of the agency." That is something Lewis says he has been telling publishers since 1972 to little or no avail. Likewise, Lewis gives a nod to Rolling Stone's allegation that Jack Ruby, the Dallas nightclub owner who gunned down Oswald, represented the (international crime) Syndicate's Chicago chapter.

With a fourth-grade education, Lewis says, he has made little effort to sell polished drafts — only his information.

THAT ALONE HAS gotten him into tight situations, he says. "I've lost four cars with sugar in the gas tank since my story broke in The New Republic. That was an attempt to get me from getting around to the universities.

" . . . You bet your sweet a-- I'm scared," he says. "I'm not a coward."

"I know he gives a number of stories like that. Stories that you can't be sure of," says Father Thomas King, a Jesuit priest on the Georgetown University campus who befriended Lewis four years ago.

"I think he's a very sincere person," Father King says. "It's just that when conversation turns to his conspiracy theories, sometimes he gets carried away."

On Capitol Hill, one politician's aide who listened to Lewis for a few hours says, "The guy is one of the true paranoids. The man sees a conspiracy in everything. Be careful of this man."

And yet, two years after those conversations, the aide says he finds himself thinking about Lewis. "You talk with Bob Lewis and you go home wondering, 'Does he have something?' And it bothers you and it bothers me."

When he finds his mind drifting to Lewis' theories, the aide — who insists on anonymity — says he goes back to an old rule of thumb: "How could a conspiracy that broad be maintained?" And I satisfy myself that Lewis was a paranoid or I push it out of my mind."

THE AIDE AGREES with the words of Father King, who says of Lewis, "I think he's a colorful character . . . I've told him the biggest story will be Robert Lee Lewis."

Which raises the questions: who is Lewis and why is he going around the country saying these frightening things?

He is the 13th child of 16, he says, born in 1939 in New York and reared in New Jersey. His eldest brother, Cy, says Bob is a thoughtful man.

When he was young, Bob Lewis says, he once stole a pair of skates for his sister and ended up in a reformatory.

"I had too much spirit to stand it, being away from my family and they couldn't break my spirit so I kept running away . . . I hold the record at the State Home for Boys in Jamesburg, N.J."



St. Petersburg Times — STEVE HASEL

Robert Lee Lewis began his self-appointed crusade against fraud and conspiracy in 1972.

("How many times did he say he ran away?" asks the school's superintendent genially before confirming that a Robert Lewis — no middle initial — indeed was there in the early 1950s.)

Lewis says he served in the armed forces and yet again in a reformatory for stealing his uncle's credit card and writing bad checks. It was, he says, "the last crime I committed."

HE WAS WORKING for a Mercedes-Benz dealer in California in 1967 when a staircase collapsed, sending him to a series of hospitals, back operations and a dependency on drugs.

When his doctor took a three month trip to Europe, Lewis says, he could not renew a prescription for codeine, "so I started buying morphine on the street. When I couldn't buy morphine I started buying heroin.

"... I was strung out for about 4½ years." When he found out that the woman he was living with was pregnant, and his mother kept praying for him and he began to sus-

pect that he was not getting a fair settlement in workmen's compensation, Lewis says, he decided to change his ways.

That was in February 1972. He took his crusade against suspected fraud in insurance companies to Washington, D.C., quickly branching off into other investigations. He earned a living as a repairman, he says, and lived frugally.

By Lewis' own estimation, he has spent 8,000 hours doing research in the National Archives and the Library of Congress.

He says he is doing it for the sake of the children: his 4-year-old daughter and his 63 nieces and nephews. "I just don't like the idea of living in a society where the people are being suppressed and there's two forms of justice: one for the rich and one for the poor."

Neither the Jesuit priest, nor Lewis' brother Cy, nor a Secret Service man who once interviewed Lewis say they doubt Lewis' sincerity.

"**WHAT HE SAID** was so mind-boggling I stopped taking notes after a while," recalls the aide on Capitol Hill. Perhaps Lewis should be left alone for hours to dictate his findings to a tape recorder, the aide suggests: "Transcribe the damn thing and study it. That's the only thing to do with this guy because he sounds so awfully good."

But then, the aide asks, "What do you do with that? Do you publish it?"

Here are just a few of the stories Lewis says he is developing:

✓ **Of Jack Ruby:** "It was a lie when the Warren Commission stated that Ruby had no credible links with organized crime. That was the biggest lie that the Warren Commission told."

✓ **Of Hale Boggs,** the longtime Congressman from Louisiana who served on the Warren Commission and disappeared in 1972 on a flight to Alaska: "He was murdered after he got on the plane and dumped out in about 10,000 square miles of timberland. The pilot's living in Australia. They changed the numbers on the plane when it landed in Fairbanks, Alaska. I found that out from a senate investigator."

✓ **Of the 1965 death of newspaper columnist Dorothy Kilgallen,** who died in her sleep of a reported combination of alcohol and barbiturates: Lewis says she was the only one who interviewed Jack Ruby, and he suggests that she might have been murdered.

✓ **Of J. Edgar Hoover,** the former FBI director: Lewis insists he did not die a natural death — "He was blackmailing everybody."

✓ **Of the 1974 death of Karen Silkwood:** Her fatal car wreck was no accident, Lewis says, because she was on her way to meet a newspaper reporter "exposing . . . how they (Atomic Energy Commission officials) continually lied about the safety factors of the atomic energy plants." The woman "had all the documents with her and not one of them was found."

✓ **Of James Hoffa:** Lewis says Hoffa disappeared "because he was a link to the Kennedy assassination and (Sen. Frank) Church, D-Idaho, was going to call him up to testify about it." (When asked about that, Kieves, the coordinator for Church's select committee probing the intelligence communities, says, "I don't think anybody ever ever thought of it. I think the answer should just be no.")