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An Interview with Assassination Eye Witness Bill Newman

Edited by Ian Griggs

Introduction

For three particular researchers, William Law (Oregon), Ian Griggs (UK) and Mark Rowe (California), one of the highlights of the 1997 JFK-Lancer Conference in Dallas, Texas was the opportunity to conduct a video-recorded interview of assassination eyewitness William E Newman, Jr. He was standing on the north side of Elm Street and can be seen plainly on many films and photographs as he and his wife Gayle throw themselves to the ground and cover their two children when the shots ring out. The chance for Ian and Mark to be part of this interview came about thanks to Oregon-based researcher William Law who had been in regular correspondence with Bill Newman for several months. The interview took place on the afternoon of Thursday 20th November 1997 at the office of the successful electric company which Mr Newman owns and operates at Mesquite, east of Dallas.

The nature of the interview

What follows is a shortened version of the interview, transcribed directly from the video film which William Law shot. Nothing considered relevant has been excluded. It is immediately evident that much of this was not in the normal form of a question-and-answer session but rather an opportunity for Mr Newman to recall the events of the day and give his account of what he and his family did, saw and heard. He does not speculate on what may or may not have happened, preferring to just relate the facts as they affected him and his family. *(The italicised comments in brackets, contained within the text,*

have been added at the editorial stage - ILG)

Mr Newman also spoke about his part as an eyewitness in the Clay Shaw trial and gave a good insight into the personality and bearing of Jim Garrison.

Bill Newman's story

WILLIAM LAW opened the interview with the following words: "Well, Mr Newman, we'd just like to know what you saw on November 22nd, 1963."

BILL NEWMAN then related his recollections as follows:

"Alright, I'll do my best to tell you what I saw. You know, it's been some time ago and what I have learned over the years is that you're influenced from the time, the day of the assassination up to this time. Your story tends to be tainted or influenced to what you have learned or what other people have seen.

On the morning of November 22nd 1963, Gayle and myself and our two sons, Clayton and Billy, went out to Love Field to see President Kennedy and Mrs Kennedy come in. We saw the 'plane land and there was a large crowd of people and I can remember, I believe I had Clayton with me - which was the youngest boy - and we kinda ran up to the fence line and we got a very good view of the President and First Lady but Gayle and Billy did not. The parade route had been published in the newspaper so we jumped in our car and we drove down near the intersection of Elm and Houston Street. We parked behind I think it was J P Awalt (phonetic -

ILG) and Company, one of the buildings there.

We walked a short block or so to the intersection of Houston Street and Elm. There was a crowd of people there, as you are well aware, waiting for the parade to come by and we just walked in behind the crowd of people along the sidewalk towards the triple underpass and where the last two people were, we just fell in beside them. And if I remember correctly, it was an older lady - which is probably my age or younger now (Bill Newman was in his mid-fifties at the time of this interview - ILG) - and a younger woman standing there. We were about probably halfway from the intersection of Houston and Elm to the triple underpass, on the north side of the street. We'd been there a very short time, probably no more than five minutes, and you could hear the noise and the crowds cheering as the parade came down Main Street. I can remember seeing the President's car turn right on to Houston and go that short block and turn left on to Elm and coming towards us.

"I thought someone had thrown a couple of firecrackers"

And the President's car was out the distance of one lane from the kerb line and some one hundred and fifty or two hundred feet from us, some short distance, when the first two shots rang out. And it was a boom-boom. They were very close together and I could remember thinking "Boy, that's a poor thing to do." I thought someone had thrown a couple of firecrackers at the side of the President's car.

At that moment I didn't realise that it was gunfire and the President had been shot. I can remember his arms go up and I even testified in the Dallas Sheriff's Department later that day that he raised up in the seat. I think if you were to read the statement you'll find that I said he raised up in the seat and there again, after seeing the Zapruder film many times, I realise that he didn't raise up - he just kinda came forward or made a motion, and apparently he was hit by one of the first two shots. As the car got closer to us I could see that something was wrong. I could see Governor Connally

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and I could see his eyes protruding and I could see him holding himself and I could see the blood on his shirt. *(Bill and Gayle Newman's affidavits given to the Dallas Sheriff's Department can be found as part of CE 2003 at 24H 218/219 - ILG)*

".....a bewildered look on his face"

I can remember that the President looked to me like he was sorta looking into the crowd with a bewildered look on his face. And as the car got directly in front of us, and we were on the kerb's edge, and the President was probably not much further than I am from you *(about ten feet - ILG)* the third shot rang out and I can remember seeing the side of President Kennedy's head blow off *(here, Mr Newman indicated with his right hand the area of his head immediately above his right ear - ILG)*. There was black matter and then greyish and he fell across Mrs Kennedy, into her lap, and she jumped up and hollered "Oh my God, no. They've shot Jack."

And I turned to Gayle and I said "That's it - hit the ground." And we turned and pushed our kids down on the grass behind us. It's referred to now as the grassy knoll. We covered our kids - our two children that were two and four years old at the time.

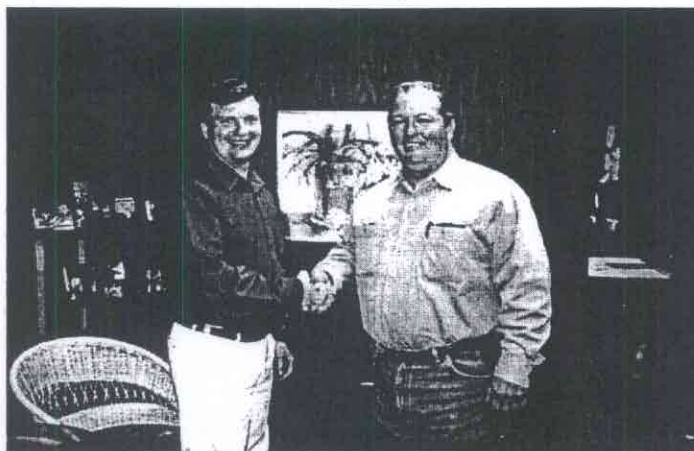
".....the shots were coming from behind us"

And what ran through my mind was, with that third shot, that the shots were coming from behind us, directly over the top of our heads. Normally, when I'm talking with a group or someone like yourselves, I leave it at that and the person gets round to saying "Behind where? Behind to your left or behind to your right?" - the left meaning the school book depository and the right meaning the picket fence. From my view it was just

"behind" and it was a visual impact I believe it had on me of seeing the head wound and seeing President Kennedy go across the seat. That gave me the impression of the shot being fired from behind and if I refer to it as "shots" I'm really talking about three shots - the first two and then the one that I recognised as gunfire.

".....and the car momentarily stopped"

And then I can remember that when we were on the ground - I'd like to bring this up if I may - looking back over my shoulder I can remember, I believe it was the passenger in the



William Law (left) with Bill Newman (photograph by Ian Griggs)

front seat - there were two men in the front seat - had a telephone or something to his ear and the car momentarily stopped.

Now everywhere that you read about it, you don't read anything about the car stopping. And when I say "stopped" I mean very momentarily, like they hit the brakes and just a few seconds passed and then they floorboarded and accelerated on."

LAW: "But you don't really see that in the Zapruder film."

NEWMAN: "No, you don't. But anyway, that's the impression I'm left with."

LAW: "Several people said that the car stopped."

NEWMAN: "Yes, and then they shot on. You know, through the overpass,

the railroad overpass, and that's the last we saw of them. We stood up and just a few moments later, a man by the name of Jerry Haynes, who was a local person here, "Mr Peppermint", him and another fellow, came up to us and said "What happened? What did y'all see?" and we said "Well we saw the President shot" and he said "Would you go to WFAA with us?" *(WFAA-TV was a major local television station situated next to the Dallas Morning News building - ILG)* and we said yes we would and we started to cross in the direction of WFAA. If I remember correctly, on Commerce Street, he just stopped a car and said to the man: "This man saw the President shot - would you carry us to WFAA" and he said "Sure" and we jumped in his car and went to WFAA.

We said basically what I've said here. *(The film footage of this interview - the first to be given by any eyewitness to the assassination - can be found on "The Kennedy Tapes", a seven video set of the entire WFAA-TV*

coverage of the events of 22nd to 24th November 1963 - ILG)

At the Dallas Sheriff's Department

After that, there was a man there - I guess he was from the Sheriff's Office, Bill Decker's Office, because that's where he carried us. And we went to Bill Decker's office and Gayle and myself both gave an affidavit of what we saw and I think, if I remember correctly, there was sixteen of us and they detained us for several hours, three, four, five hours, and what they were actually doing was reviewing all these statements to try to see if - they kept us there just to question us if necessary and of course they did not question myself or Gayle at that time and they turned us loose.

It was probably ten o'clock at night or something. It seemed like it was after

dark and I couldn't tell you what time of day. You know, in fairness, they looked after us, but they just detained us there. You know, in the event that they saw a conflicting statement and that's pretty much it."

**Some questions and answers
- and Jim Braden!**

LAW: "You say you were totally focused on the car, so when the shot hit him in the head, would you say the shot hit him in the side of the head, in the side of the temple? Or couldn't you tell?"

NEWMAN: "Well I think that I testified or made a statement to the extent that it looked to me like the side of his head blew off and his ear blew off. Now I quit saying that now, that his ear blew off because I've seen autopsy pictures of the President with his ear intact, but you know, there's no way to see a replay of it. I mean it was just like that and whether that was an entrance or an exit wound I can't tell you. I can tell you that the President did go across the car, which gave me the impression that the bullet was coming from my direction, hitting the President, knocking him across the seat.

LAW: "At Sheriff Decker's office, were you with other people, other witnesses?"

NEWMAN: "Yes."

LAW: "Did any of you talk amongst yourselves as to what you'd seen, and share information?"

NEWMAN: " I don't recall that. We were all kinda stunned, to tell you the truth. The one little story that I can recall - and now, of course, it gets

tainted here, because at the time, I hadn't heard the stories on the man, but there was one man there that was in the building next door to the school book depository and he had said he had gone in there to use the telephone and he came back out on the street and the police officers or someone grabbed on to him and the crowd nearly got out of hand. They said "Oh, he's the man that shot the President" and things got a little unruly, so I heard. Well this particular gentleman - I can't tell you his name - he seemed to be very nervous and very upset. He was sitting nearby and I said a few words to him and his comment to me was he was supposed to catch a 'plane, he was supposed to be somewhere else and he had to call this office."

ROWE: "That was Braden, wasn't it?"

GRIGGS: " Was this gentleman wearing a hat, can you remember?"

NEWMAN: "Yes, I think he had a hat. And apparently he was supposed to have had some criminal past."

GRIGGS: "Yes, this is a gentleman called Jim Braden."

NEWMAN: "Yes, of course. I learnt that fifteen or twenty years later. I can remember him. Of the individuals that were in there, he seemed to be the one that was the most upset that he was being detained.

LAW: "Roy Vaughn said that he is the one that apparently took him in and he had credit cards in his wallet and you didn't see a whole lot of that in '63. So he felt that was real unusual.

The part I am interested in - well, I'm interested in all of it - is Garrison, the Garrison trial. Can you give me some of your impressions of that, your part

in it?"

**Jim Garrison and the
Clay Shaw trial**

NEWMAN: "Well, Gayle and myself did testify in the Garrison trial. I think she went down on the Friday and testified if I remember correctly, and I had the flu. We were supposed to be there together and I was still running a fever but I recovered enough that I went down on Monday and testified. Garrison asked me every question beforehand that he asked me on the stand and I understand I was the first individual that he himself examined on the stand.

What he liked about what I had to say was the fact that the President went across the car seat. And he just asked me where I was at and what I saw and I told him. I can remember in our interview I had said - and he wasn't trying to put words in my mouth - but I had said it was like he had been hit by a baseball bat. I mean he just kinda flew across that seat. He wanted me to emphasise that on the stand and I can remember him saying to me "Now, Mr Newman, is there anything else that you'd like to elaborate on?" I can remember looking at him and saying "No, sir". Then I was cross-examined and the minute I stepped off of the stand, I realised what Garrison had wanted me to say. He wanted me to make the baseball bat statement.

I was really impressed with the man. He was nothing like the character that Kevin Costner played in the movie. I can say that. In the movie you had the feeling that Garrison was a person who was kinda the outsider looking in. Kinda the new boy on the block who was trying to flush the system or something. You know, a kinda naive sort of guy. Jim Garrison impressed

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me to be someone who was anything but naive. He seemed to me really to know what he wanted and what he was after and seemed to be a very powerful individual to me. That was the one thing in the JFK movie that just kinda jumped out at me. This was not the Jim Garrison that I met.

"The Warren Commission - we were not called"

GRIGGS: "Could I ask you a couple of questions before we close, Mr Newman? Going back to the Warren Commission, you were not called to testify, were you?"

NEWMAN: "That's correct. We were not called."

GRIGGS: "Were you surprised at that? You were one of the closest

witnesses to this thing but they never called you."

NEWMAN: "Well, yes, I was somewhat surprised - and somebody told me along the way that the reason we did not testify before the Warren Commission was because we said the shots came from behind. But I can't tell you why they didn't call us, close as we were. I would say that we were the closest two individuals to the President as spectators. We were the closest two individuals to the President when the third shot was fired."

LAW: "You see, that's why people like us like to talk to people like you - because we can't understand it either. Nowadays, you'd want people that were the closest unless you don't want something to come out maybe."

NEWMAN: "When I'm dealing with assassination people I try to stick to what I know and not what I feel or what my opinion is so I pretty well told you what I know. Obviously you knew what I was going to say before you came here today. I would like to say in turn that the vast majority of people I have dealt with because of the assassination I consider to be first class people. I've learnt that the Lincoln assassination is still being studied and I realise that the Kennedy assassination will be looked at for many, many years to come."

LAW: "Well, Mr Newman, I appreciate your time."

NEWMAN: "You're very welcome."

GRIGGS: "Thank you very much."

NEWMAN: "You bet."

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