



SCRIPPS HOWARD

The Knoxville

Final Edition •

SUNDAY MORNING

JFK: Oswald trail FBI probed trip the two made to Mexico

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Aliases. Bogus passports. Unknown sources of income. Odd travel patterns.

Like a Texas dust storm, they swirled around the life of John Howard Bowen, a shadowy for-

mer Knoxville man who claimed to be an itinerant preacher and a missionary to Mexico.

The FBI picked up his twisting trail while investigating Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged assassin of President John F. Kennedy. Bowen had just turned 76 at the time, but the FBI found him a most nimble adversary.

After a haphazard investigation, the FBI cleared him of any significant link to Oswald and wrote him off as a small-time "con man" and "religious quack."

Yet when he died in obscurity two years later, the FBI blocked public notice of his death and told a Baptist minister to never reveal his accidental discovery of Bow-

News-Sentinel

\$1.50

NOVEMBER 28, 1993

led to ex-Knox man

en's dual identities.

FBI records show the bureau sent copies of its internal report of Bowen's death to several other government agencies — including the Central Intelligence Agency.

Earlier, the FBI had sent some reports of its investigation of Bowen to the CIA. Recently declassified CIA files in the National Archives include a CIA copy of an FBI report of nearly 100 pages on Bowen, Oswald and a bus trip they took to Mexico in September

1963.

The CIA maintains it has no records of Bowen.

Bowen told the FBI in repeated interrogations that he had never laid eyes on Oswald in his life.

He was lying.

The FBI had proof that showed Bowen sat next to Oswald for 19 hours on the bus to Mexico City and spoke with him.

The FBI also learned that "Bowen" was the main alias of British-born Albert Alexander

Osborne, who traveled extensively — and illegally — throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico.

When Bowen died in a San Antonio, Texas, hospital of kidney failure on Aug. 31, 1966, at age 77, he had been staying at the Christian Servicemen's Center, a small mission in San Antonio. The hospital asked the mission's director,

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Oswald

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Rev. Lyman Erickson, to locate Bowen's family.

Now 68, retired and living in New Kensington, Pa., Erickson has broken the silence the FBI imposed on him 27 years ago.

"The FBI told me to forget everything I knew about him, told me to forget I ever knew him, and told me that I must never speak of this matter to anyone," Erickson said. "The final words the FBI man said to me were: 'Just forget you even heard of him.'"

Erickson was going through Bowen's belongings to find names of next of kin when he discovered, concealed in a makeshift false bottom of Bowen's kit bag, a full set of identification papers in the name of Albert Osborne.

Erickson said the discovery of those documents triggered his memory of a conversation in which Bowen told him about meeting Oswald.

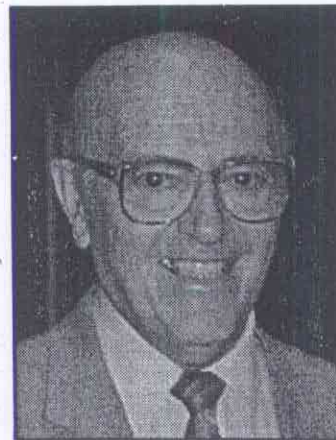
"His words to me were, 'I traveled to Mexico with Lee Harvey Oswald, and I was called in and questioned about it,'" Erickson recalled. "Not, 'I just happened to sit next to Oswald,' but 'I traveled with Oswald.' I remember that very clearly because those words caused me to start to wonder a little about who he really was. But I didn't press him on it, and he never said anything more about it."

Erickson reported his discovery of the documents to two agents in the FBI field office in San Antonio.

The next morning, one of the agents called Erickson back to the FBI office. The agent told the minister that Bowen's real name was Albert Osborne. He then pulled the name of Osborne's sister, Ada Osborne Amos, from a



Special to The News-Sentinel
Albert Alexander Osborne,
also known as John Howard
Bowen.



Special to The News-Sentinel
The Rev. Lyman Erickson

thick file. She lived in Gary, Ind.

Erickson said the agent told him he could contact her for permission to bury the body, "then he gave me my other instructions to keep quiet about it all."

FBI documents confirm that Erickson reported the death and dual identities and other records corroborate the rest of Erickson's account.

Before contacting Erickson, The News-Sentinel obtained Osborne's burial file from the Roy Akers Funeral Chapel of San Antonio. It contained a hand-written note that read: "Rev. Erickson asks us not to run notices in paper as FBI requested it be kept quiet as possible. He will be in Friday morning to make arrangements for Mr. Bowen."

Erickson does not recall making that request to the funeral home. He also does not remember if the FBI asked him to make it.

"If their records say I did, then I guess I did because that would fit in with what the FBI had told me," he said.

The funeral home's records show that no notice was sent to any newspaper.

Erickson conducted a simple pauper's graveside service for Osborne.

"I buried the man, but I'm not sure who he really was, and I have no idea what he was," Erickson said. "I can't help but wonder if he was some type of covert agent. But as to for who or what purpose, or if that is even so, I would have no way of knowing."

Among Osborne-Bowen's possessions was a Mexican bank book, listing "Alberto" Osborne as the account holder, and John Howard Bowen as a beneficiary.

The Banco de Comercio de Puebla, which issued the book, said its records show the account number on the book was registered to Nestor Pereyra — a name that appears nowhere in the available documents on Osborne-Bowen.

If Osborne-Bowen was linked to Oswald or the JFK murder, there is no hint of it in any available record. Nor is there indication as to why the FBI would want to silence news of his death.

All known records of Bowen are not available, however. Several documents pertaining to him

remain classified in the National Archives, and several Freedom of Information Act requests by The News-Sentinel are pending.

Albert Alexander Osborne was born in Grimsby, England, in 1888 and served in the British Army from 1908 to 1914. He served in Arabia, the Middle East, India and finally in Bermuda, where he was discharged in 1914.

He entered the United States to visit his sister, Ada Osborne Amos, then went to Canada.

There is scant record of the next 20 years. He apparently moved around often in Canada and the U.S. It is unclear when or why he adopted the Bowen alias, and he later gave conflicting stories about that.

A pleasant, solidly built man with a ruddy complexion, he often appeared much younger than his age and could slip in and out of his British accent as easily as he changed his names.

He claimed to have been in Knoxville as early as 1929. The First Baptist Church roster shows he joined there in November 1934. He does not appear in the city directory until 1938, the year that he, along with several prominent Knoxvillians, chartered the "Campfire Council," a youth activities group.

He became the council's executive director, and the council established a campground in Sevier County.

When allegations were raised that Bowen had made sexual advances toward some of the boys, the Campfire Council was quickly disbanded in 1943 and replaced with a local chapter of the Boys Club of America.

Bowen quietly left town. After living in San Antonio and New Orleans, he lived again in Knoxville in 1946 and eventually moved away for good.

Because the Campfire Council allegations were not made public, Bowen was unchallenged when he returned to Knoxville to visit small churches and lecture about his "missionary" work in Mexico.

By the 1950s, he had established dual permanent residences: a seedy apartment hotel in Laredo, Texas, and a house in Texmelucan, Puebla, Mexico, about 100

miles southeast of Mexico City.

In April 1958, he was deported from Mexico after authorities there discovered he was using aliases. Yet, he soon returned to his Mexican home and continued using the same dual identities.

In late September 1962, he returned to Knoxville as Bowen and spoke at a Sunday afternoon mis-

sion rally at the North Glenwood Baptist Church on Oklahoma Avenue.

During that stay in Knoxville, Fred Allen Jr., then the church's pastor, said Bowen declined to stay at his home and later said the reason was because he "didn't want to risk getting me involved in something."

Allen had known Bowen for years and had never heard him utter such a peculiar remark.

"I didn't have any idea what he was talking about," Allen said. "I wish I had asked him, but now I don't know that he would have told me the truth."

During the same visit, Allen said, Bowen also remarked that he "felt it was a very dangerous thing for the United States to have a Catholic as president." Bowen was referring to Kennedy, the nation's first Catholic president.

The next and apparently final time Bowen returned to Knoxville was in 1964, and this time he was evading the FBI. His friends who helped him hide were then unaware of his double life and today have asked for anonymity.

Bowen, they said, complained that the FBI was "following, hounding and harassing" him all over the country.

"He said the FBI was accusing him of passing something to Oswald, they would not believe that he hadn't, and they wanted to know what it was," one of those friends said. "He said, 'If I passed him something, it was just one of my (religious) pamphlets or newspaper or something like that.'"

Oswald arrived at Laredo from New Orleans on Sept. 26, 1963 and transferred to a bus of the Mexico-based Flecha Roja ("Red Arrow") line. Several passengers later told the FBI that Oswald a

Bowen sat side by side on the front row. They kept those seats, except for occasional mingling with other passengers, all the way to Mexico City.

In Mexico City, Oswald left the bus station alone. There is no known evidence of further contact between him and Bowen.

Bowen returned to Laredo on Oct. 2. Oswald returned to Laredo the following day, en route to Dallas and his destiny.

Bowen went to New Orleans. Shifting into the Osborne identity, he went to the Canadian Consulate's office and applied for a passport under that name. As proof of Canadian citizenship, he displayed a set of Canadian Army service and discharge papers.

Those documents were false, but he was issued the passport on Oct. 10.

Using that passport, he went to Europe in mid-November 1963. Available records do not indicate if Osborne went to Europe by boat or plane or where he got the money for such a trip.

The records also contain no indication that the FBI made any effort to answer those questions.

The FBI did spend much time and effort reproving what it had quickly established earlier — that Bowen's claims to be an ordained minister were unfounded and that his "missionary" activities were probably bogus.

President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. Oswald was arrested 90 minutes later.

Two days later, inside Dallas police headquarters, Oswald was shot dead by Jack Ruby, a night club owner with extensive Mafia connections.

Osborne returned to New York on Dec. 5 on an Icelandic Airlines flight that originated in Luxembourg, and he began making his way back to Mexico.

By then, the FBI, tracking Oswald's pre-assassination movements, was looking for the man they thought was John Howard Bowen.

Available records reveal flaws in the FBI's investigation of Bowen.

The FBI had decided to question all of Oswald's fellow bus passengers. Inexplicably, instead

of the passenger list, the FBI only obtained the baggage manifest — which only listed passengers who checked baggage.

The FBI did not ask for the complete passenger list until three months later, at the conclusion of its probe. By then, the list and its only duplicate copy had disappeared.

A bus company manager told the FBI that "shortly after the assassination," two men flashed Mexican federal police credentials, asked for the list and then seized it. These men already had the duplicate copy, the bus manager said. The list was never located, and the men who took it were never identified.

The FBI eventually identified Bowen from the baggage list and tracked him to his Puebla home, where they questioned him.

Since the FBI then had no picture of Bowen, he got away with identifying himself as Osborne. He told the agents that "Bowen" did not live there but had used the address to receive mail. He also gave the FBI false leads about Bowen.

Meanwhile, the FBI ran the name "John Howard Bowen" through all of its field-office files. In early December 1963, the bureau turned up two hits: one in Houston and one in Knoxville.

In Houston, Bowen had been arrested in 1953 for suspicion of starting a small fire at a hotel. He was fingerprinted but never charged. No other information about the incident is available.

The Knoxville FBI office discovered in its files a 1942 complaint that Bowen had stomped an American flag and made anti-American statements. But an investigation determined the allegations were unfounded and apparently originated from a neighbor mad at Bowen for letting dogs run loose at the Campfire Council site in Sevier County.

In early December 1963, the FBI learned that Bowen had reportedly left for Europe. So agents searched for passport and travel records. Unaware that Bowen was traveling as Osborne, the search was fruitless.

Mexican border records con-

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He will be in Friday
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Bowen.*

Special to The News-Sentinel
A note in the burial file of Albert Alexander Osborne at the Roy Akers Funeral Chapel in San Antonio relays an FBI request to not run a notice of the death in the newspaper.

firm a "Bowen" birth certificate connected to the man now known to be Osborne, and Erickson saw an American passport in the Bowen name.

"I saw that passport when he stayed at the Christian Serviceman's Center," Erickson said. "When he was alive, I only knew him as John Bowen. If he had shown me a passport with any other name, I would have noticed that. It would have triggered a big warning to me about him."

FBI agents were beginning to have suspicions about his identity when they interviewed him twice more, once at Laredo and once in Alabama. He gave his name as Bowen in both interviews.

Although hampered because each interrogation was conducted by different agents, the FBI finally determined that Bowen and Osborne were the same person. They also developed proof that he was Oswald's seatmate. Wanting to question him further, the FBI tracked him to the Nashville area.

On Feb. 25, 1964, blunt in-

structions were air mailed from FBI headquarters to the Memphis FBI office: Locate Osborne-Bowen as quickly as possible and interrogate him again — vigorously.

“Press him for full specifics concerning nature of his activity since June 1962... Ascertain why he has used dual identity and why he was untruthful during the three previous interviews.”

The rest of the message clearly shows the FBI's wariness from its earlier jousts with him.

“Interview of Osborne-Bowen is to be handled by mature, experienced agents who are to definitely pin him down regarding points indicated above.”

It was not to be, however.

On March 3, 1964, at the Nashville YMCA, the mature, experienced agents pressed the 76-year-old man hard.

He never wavered from his claim he had never seen Oswald in his life — even when he was

confronted with bus-company records and eyewitness statements of other passengers.

The fact that he has been identified and described by fellow passengers as having been a seatmate of Oswald does not appear to disturb Osborne,” the Memphis FBI office reported in a teletype to headquarters after the interrogation. “It appears Osborne may be a con man obtaining funds for pretended use on missionary work in Mexico, and it may be for this reason that he becomes vague, non-specific, when questioned...”

Other FBI reports suggest that he was “senile” or a “mental case.”

He was neither, Erickson said. “Up until the time he got sick and died, he was clearheaded, completely lucid, and he was a quite intelligent man.”

The FBI finally decided on the con man answer when it decided to suspend its investigation of Osborne-Bowen several days later.

In the Nashville YMCA interview, the FBI agents did press him into admitting he was not an American citizen and that Osborne was his real name.

He told the agents that since he had admitted his true identity, he would have no further reason to lie about Oswald. He continued

to insist he had never seen Oswald.

“The bona fide identification he possessed were (British) birth certificate and Canadian army enlistment papers,” both in the Osborne name, the Memphis FBI office declared in a teletype to headquarters after that interview.

Once again, though, he had hoodwinked the FBI.

The Osborne birth certificate was indeed “bona fide,” but the Canadian documents could not have been.

Osborne never served in the Canadian army, investigators from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) would discover many months later.

The Canadian documents that fooled the FBI agents were apparently of high quality, since they were the ones used to obtain a real passport for Osborne from the Canadian government.

Shortly after the final interrogation in Nashville, the FBI advised the Warren Commission, on whose behalf it was investigating the Kennedy assassination, that it was suspending the Osborne-Bowen probe.

In June 1964, as the Warren Commission was preparing its final report of the assassination, one of its staff lawyers remained concerned about the Osborne-Bowen episode.

“Albert Osborne’s escape from the custody of the Mexican police and from the FBI must be dealt with frankly in our text, or at least in a footnote,” W. David Slawson wrote in a June 4 memo. “We should explain to the public why we have not demanded a

full-scale ‘manhunt’ to find him. If we do not take the initiative in explaining all this ... someone later will accuse us of hiding the fact that an ‘important witness’ was permitted to escape.”

Slawson’s remarks were contained in a memo that was once classified “top secret.” Though it has since been released, portions of the copy now available in the National Archives are still blacked out.

Slawson’s use of “escape” and “custody” are puzzling because there is no available record that Osborne-Bowen was ever arrest-

ed. Slawson, who now teaches law at the University of Southern California, did not return telephone calls to The News-Sentinel.

When the Warren Commission report was issued in September 1964, it concluded that Oswald was the lone gunman and no conspiracy was involved in Kennedy’s death.

The 800-plus page report barely mentions Osborne-Bowen. It states there was “no basis” for suspecting him of being involved in the assassination.

That may well be true, but the report ignored Slawson’s concerns and adroitly danced around Osborne-Bowen’s unexplained deceptions.

It identifies him only as “Albert Osborne, an elderly itinerant preacher,” and states: “Based on the contrary evidence and Osborne’s lack of reliability, the Commission has attached no credence to his denial that Oswald was beside him on the bus.”

There is no mention of his aliases, his sophisticated passport frauds or his vague explanation of his income and travels.

In 1977-78, a congressional committee re-investigated the assassination and concluded that Oswald was one of two gunmen who fired at Kennedy, probably as part of a conspiracy involving Mafia figures and Cuban political extremists.

Erickson said he considered reporting his experience with Osborne-Bowen and the FBI to the congressional investigators. At that time, he still had Bowen’s address book. It has since been lost or thrown away.

“I don’t know if any of this would have meant anything, but I wish now I had come forward when that was going on,” he said.

The conflicting conclusions of the two investigations, and various other theories, continue to spark doubt and debate about the events in Dallas 30 years ago.

In 1978, then-CIA Director Richard Helms emerged after giving secret testimony before the congressional committee that was re-investigating the JFK assassination.

According to the Aug. 10, 1978, Washington Post, Helms said that “no one would ever know who or what Lee Harvey Oswald ... represented.”

Helms could just as easily have been talking about Albert Alexander Osborne — alias, John Howard Bowen.