

JFK ASSASSINATION

Is the 'Second Oswald,' Alive in Dallas?

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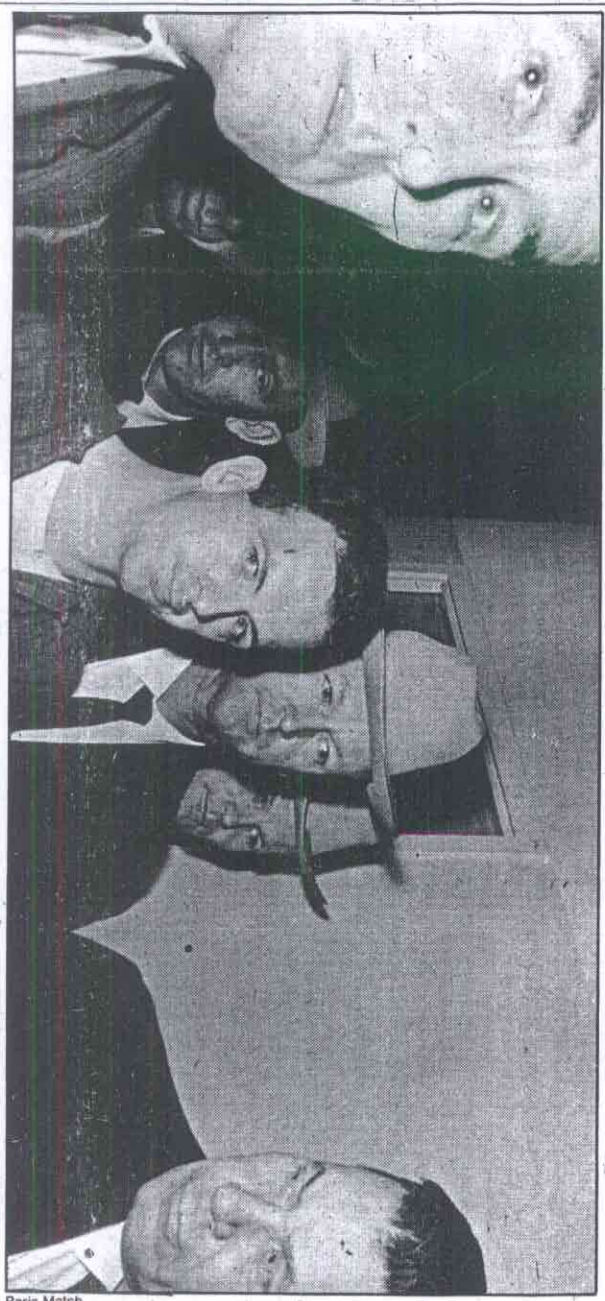
DALLAS—In mid-November 1963, shortly before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a curious arrest occurred in Dallas. It did not seem so curious at the time—simply a young man, allied with local right-wing Minutemen and charged with a violation of the National Firearms Act. When the fellow managed to raise bond, his release received a routine okay from his arresting federal agent, Frank Ellsworth of Treasury's Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) division.

But a few days later, when Frank Ellsworth was called to a police interrogation room to question Lee Harvey Oswald about the rifle found in his alleged assassin's nest, the agent was certain that he'd made one of history's most tragic mistakes.

"Oswald was sitting in a chair about 10 feet from the doorway," Ellsworth would remember. "And all I could see was headlines that I'd just turned loose the man who killed the President."

He hadn't. However, the man Ellsworth had arrested and released was, in his words, "an absolute dead-ringer for Oswald—

'In several instances where witnesses believed they'd seen Oswald, they were actually seeing his "twin."'



Oswald just before his death: Was he set up by a double?

Paris Match

identical build, weight, coloring, facial features, hair. They were like identical twins; they could've passed for each other."

* * *

Of all the mysteries that still surround the Kennedy assassination, few have proved more intriguing than the possibility of a "second Oswald." Almost from the moment of Oswald's arrest, perfectly credible witnesses claimed to have seen him driving a car (though Oswald didn't drive). They had seen him in a gun shop, at a rifle range and cashing a check in a grocery store. The problem was, especially in the month of November 1963, wherever "Oswald" was supposed to have been seen, he was really someone else.

Of course, it is hardly uncommon for false reports of identification to arise during a much publicized investigation. Apparently for this reason, the Warren Commission dismissed even its most reliable witnesses as cases of mistaken identity. It remained for the commission's critics to speculate that an Oswald look-alike might have been used by someone in a conspiracy. One scholar, Professor Richard Popkin, even devoted a whole book to that question ("The Second Oswald," 1966).

The notion of an Oswald "double" being involved in a conspiracy takes several forms. Obviously, Oswald being seen in two places at once would serve to confuse detectives forever. Besides this, Popkin and others hypothesize, a look-alike could have helped blaze a trail of misleading evidence to implicate Oswald as an assassin—even if Oswald never really fired a shot. The two most famous "double

Oswald" incidents make a conspiracy theory feasible, at least. One involved a "Leon Oswald" who came with two Latin companions to the door of a Cuban woman, according to police and FBI reports, and who apparently had voiced the opinion that the President ought to be killed. When this occurred in Dallas in late September 1963, Oswald was supposedly on his way to Mexico. The other incident was the repeated sighting by several witnesses of "Oswald" target-practicing at a Dallas rifle range shortly before the assassination—almost always at times when the Warren Commission concluded he'd really been somewhere else.

It is even possible, say the critics, that a look-alike could have fired some shots himself. As dubious as that may sound, a Dallas deputy sheriff named Roger Craig did give chase to a man who ran from the Texas School Book Depository and climbed into a light-colored Rambler station wagon a few minutes after the assassination. Later that day, Craig positively identified the man as Oswald. But, according to police sources cited in the Warren Report, Oswald was already far away from the building and riding a bus toward his home.

Last week, in the Dallas office where he now serves as a regional public affairs officer for ATF, Frank Ellsworth broke a 12-year official silence to confirm a look-alike's existence. While refusing to divulge his name and passing off the incident as "sheer coincidence," Ellsworth admitted that the man is still alive, well, and living in Dallas; that he had been interrogated by federal authorities shortly after the assassination and

found to have been "nowhere near downtown Dallas;" and that in several instances where witnesses believed they'd seen Oswald, notably including his constant practice in November at a Dallas rifle range, they were actually seeing his "twin."

If not for several other Ellsworth revelations about this mysterious personage, his existence might be dismissed as a curiosity of history. But, strangely enough, while the real Oswald was supposedly a fanatic Leftist and member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, his "twin" was an equally fanatic right-winger and member of the Minutemen. Like Oswald, he seems to have traveled in and out of Mexico. Like Oswald, he apparently associated with Cuban exiles. If his presence in Dallas was indeed "sheer coincidence," then why didn't the Warren Commission reveal it and clear up the rumors?

"Quite a number of officials—state, federal and local—were aware of this situation, because we talked about it," says Ellsworth. "We laid it to rest, and satisfied ourselves it was merely coincidence. I have a vague recollection that this man was questioned about the assassination, but not by me. Possibly nobody paid much attention because we had Oswald in custody. We weren't looking for a fugitive."

"I'd tracked this other fellow undercover through another man for several months before I actually met him. I think this began sometime in the summer of 1963. When I finally made contact with him, I led him to believe I was a crook. He claimed to have done some arms smuggling in and out of Mexico, but not when I was dealing

with him. I didn't have the impression he'd ever been into Mexico that much. And yes, there were rumors that he had some connection with the family of (Texas billionaire oilman) H. L. Hunt. I personally didn't place a great deal of credence in those rumors."

"But I do remember two instances where Oswald was supposed to have been at someone's house in North Dallas, and I was able to ascertain after the assassination that it was actually the look-alike. I wasn't keeping notes of where he was minute by minute, but these were instances where witnesses thought they saw Oswald in the company of several Minutemen. One of these times did involve a group of Minutemen at a rifle range. The look-alike knew all those people. Several of their names came up in my conversations with him, and I'd noted at the time that he was out shooting with them."

The Oswald look-alike was eventually convicted on "one of the gun violations," but Ellsworth says he cannot remember the sentence. Subsequently, the man gained his release and Ellsworth remained in occasional contact with him over the years.

Despite considerable prodding, Ellsworth refused to name him. He would say only that "He's straightened out and has a right to privacy." But there is already on record, in two recently declassified Warren Commission documents, at least a hint of who he might be. Here, the plot begins to thicken.

One document is a Warren Commission interview with Ellsworth, dated April 16, 1964. There is no mention of the Oswald "twin." The interview deals with Ellsworth's knowledge of Texas arms traffic

and lists Ellsworth's three revelations "of value":

"(1.) At the time of the assassination of the President, there was almost no information available to the government concerning the activities of Dallas Cubans and other groups in illegal armaments."

"(2.) An organization known as the Minutemen is the right-wing group in Dallas most likely to have been associated with any effort to assassinate the President."

"(3.) The Minutemen are closely tied to General (Edwin) Walker and H.L. Hunt."

"Mr. Ellsworth described in some detail his undercover efforts in procuring the arrest of a local gun shop owner who is an ardent member of the Minutemen. As a result of these undercover activities Agent Ellsworth learned that Manuel O. Rodriguez, apparently a Cuban survivor of the Bay of Pigs episode, was attempting to purchase arms in Dallas for Alpha 66. Rodriguez is also a member of the DRE."

Alpha 66, one of the most notoriously violent of the anti-Castro Cuban groups, maintained its Dallas headquarters on Hollendale Street, where an early sheriff's report supposedly had Oswald paying a visit. The DRE, or Cuban Student Directorate, was in Oswald's notebook; again, he is said to have attended a meeting where General Walker spoke in the fall of 1963.

A Secret Service memorandum dated April 24, 1964, is devoted entirely to Manuel Rodriguez, whom the Secret Service at one time had considered a potential danger to the President. On Page 2, it reads: "On 1-16-64 Agent Ellsworth, alcohol and tobacco tax unit, was interviewed relative to

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any knowledge he might have on the subject. Agent Ellsworth had recently worked in an undercover capacity while gathering evidence against *John Thomas Masen* (my italics) . . . for violation of National Firearms Act. Agent Ellsworth states that during his association with Masen, Masen had mentioned Rodriguez as being a Cuban who was attempting to buy arms—machine guns, bazookas, and other heavy equipment—from Masen . . .

John Thomas Masen. Was this the Minutemen gun shop owner? And possibly the Oswald look-alike? For this answer, one must probe still deeper into the cryptic Warren Commission files. Sure enough, buried away in the National Archives is an FBI report dated March 27, 1964. It begins:

"Mr. John Thomas Masen, Owner, Masen's Gun Shop. . . advised he purchased about ten boxes of 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano, Western Cartridge Company, ammunition from Johnny Brinegar in early 1963 and that he sold these 10 boxes to individuals. He stated he was not able to recall the identity of any persons to whom he sold this ammunition . . ."

Strangely, the various government reports on Masen's activities don't overlap. The FBI was seemingly interested in finding the source of ammunition for Oswald's 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle. The Secret Service was curious about Masen's anti-Castro associates. The Warren Commission privately noted his connection with the Minutemen, but published nothing about him.

Putting all this information together, a pattern emerges. Ellsworth's Oswald look-alike was arrested shortly before the assassination; so was Masen. Ellsworth's look-alike had Minutemen connections, traveled in Mexico, and been nabbed on a firearms charge; so had Masen. If Masen was *not* the Oswald double, he must have had a pretty good idea who was. The question then becomes—were all these connections, including those with anti-Castro groups, merely "sheer coincidence?"

When subsequently questioned

about the information he gave the Warren Commission and Secret Service on John Thomas Masen, Frank Ellsworth did a double take.

At first, when I asked if Masen might be the Oswald look-alike, Ellsworth issued a hesitant denial. Then at the very end of the interview, suddenly he became confidential: "Look, you've got me boxed in," he said. "You're trying to get me to tell you something I'm not at liberty to tell without grossly jeopardizing myself and my agency. But if you can find Masen, the answer to what you've been trying to worm out of me will become immediately apparent."

John Thomas Masen is not listed in the Dallas phone book. He does, however, still work here; he is a gunsmith, apparently one of the best in town, operating in the back room of a sporting goods store in a North Dallas shopping center.

According to Frank Ellsworth, the Oswald look-alike had put on about 30 pounds over the years. So, it seemed, had Masen. He was about the same height as Oswald, a stocky, brown-haired, 36-year-old. And the moment we shook hands,

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an uneasy feeling settled over me. If you looked closely, you could still see a resemblance. There was no way to be sure, and yet. . . .

"If I saw a picture of Lee Harvey Oswald, I'd probably pick it out," he is saying, carefully smoothing some oil along the sight of a rifle. "But I can't really visualize his face. There was one man who used to come into the store—we see all the kooky ones—extremely weird, but . . . but no, I don't think he resembled Lee Harvey Oswald."

It is early evening, but Masen is working late. He talks while he works, adjusting and cleaning one rifle part, then another. When he hears the name of Frank Ellsworth, his eyes flash and his reply is acrid.

"I got set up on that situation. There was an agent from New Mexico who represented himself

as a buyer for the Cuban revolution against Castro. I sold him a couple automatic arms. It were a toy, at that time. They entrapped me into buying some parts. They finally dropped all charges except failure to keep proper records. I paid a \$200 fine, but they took my firearms license away. And this has cost me an enormous amount of money, not being able to deal in firearms. I recently applied for a presidential pardon, and was turned down."

Had he ever associated with the Minutemen? "I'd been to a couple parties. I knew some of the group. I realized they were gonna try to help take Cuba back and I was very sympathetic to the cause."

What about General Walker? "I met him back there. When things are unpleasant, you block them out. You try to forget. This has cost me \$20,000 or \$30,000 over the past 12 or 13 years. I don't know if I did any business with his people."

And H. L. Hunt? "Mr. Hunt was a fine man. One of my dear friends lived next door to them. But did I ever work for him? No. Did I ever receive money from him? No. Although I might have said I did at one time. You see, one of my dearest friends was in a sorority with a daughter. I met a good deal of the Hunts. I have some friends who were under the impression that the Hunts poured a lot of money in their coffers."

For a moment, Masen pauses. He gives me a long probing look, as if he knows precisely what I'm driving at. "Look, as I told them back then, if there was a Minutemen situation I'd been connected with, I couldn't have told 'em anyway. My life wouldn't be worth a penny. Realistically, that's what it amounted to."

"You know," he goes on, "I wouldn't be in your shoes. Going around asking people about the Cubans, the Kennedy assassination. Why should people talk to you? There's no way they can do anything but lose."

"One thing you should remember," says John Thomas Masen, "what may be a living to you"—there is another pause, another long look—"can be a life to them."

"But if you want my opinion, to think the assassination was the act of one man, well, it'd be a very hard thing to do. I've got some friends who are top marksmen who say it couldn't have happened like they said. I really don't believe this was the brainstorm of one deranged man. I think it was the sophisticated work of someone with a great deal of money, who could buy a life."