

Kennedy Film Puts the Originator Of Conspiracy Theory in Spotlight

NYT Dec. 20 1991 p. A13

By FRANCES FRANK MARCUS
Special to The New York Times

NEW ORLEANS — About eight months ago Judge Jim Garrison called his longtime friend Judge Jim Gulotta with a pressing question. He had just received a large check from Oliver Stone, the director of "J. F. K." the new movie about Mr. Garrison's investigation of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

"Look, Jim, I got a check," Judge Gulotta recalls Mr. Garrison telling him. "What do I do with it?"

The question was not surprising, Judge Gulotta says, because Mr. Garrison, while extremely bright and literate, "doesn't understand investments" and was not interested in financial strategies.

"He always saw the big picture," Judge Gulotta said. "Details were for somebody else to worry about. He just wanted to know the bottom line."

When President Kennedy was shot in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Mr. Garrison was the District Attorney in New Orleans. In February 1967 he created an international sensation when he announced his investigation into a supposed plot to kill President Kennedy. By early 1969 Mr. Garrison's theory had been thoroughly discredited.

Until the movie thrust him into the limelight once again, Mr. Garrison was just another judge on the 12-member State Appeals Court here and somewhat of a recluse, though he gained attention in 1988 with the publication of his book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," which inspired "JFK." His 1976 novel, "The Star Spangled Contract," received less notice.

Judge Garrison had said he would be retiring from the bench in November

Vincent Canby reviews Oliver Stone's film "J. F. K." about the assassination. The Living Arts, B1.

at the age of 70 but heart disease forced him to stop working two months early. His friends say that today he is seriously ill. He refuses to talk to reporters.

As Judge Gulotta says, "The Court of Appeals is not in the forefront of public exposure," unlike the job of District Attorney, which Mr. Garrison held when he unsuccessfully prosecuted Clay Shaw, a prominent New Orleans resident. Many people in New Orleans who admired Mr. Shaw have never forgiven Mr. Garrison for the prosecution.

Mr. Garrison was elected judge in 1978, four-and-a-half years after being tried and acquitted in Federal District Court for bribery and conspiracy to protect illegal pinball gambling. During the 1973 trial, in which he acted as his own attorney, he was in his third term as District Attorney.

Just weeks after the trial, he lost his bid for another term by 2,221 votes and unsuccessfully contested the election on the ground of voter fraud. But in 1978 he won an appeals court judgeship with the help of his usual supporters, blue-collar workers and blacks.

During his tenure as District Attorney, an era when job discrimination against blacks was common, Mr. Garrison hired many blacks for his staff.

Performance Criticized

While admirers and critics alike said Mr. Garrison assembled an outstanding group of assistants, he was criticized by many New Orleans lawyers over his performance on the bench.

"He has not been a distinguished jurist," says William Wessel, an attorney who once represented Mr. Garrison in a civil case and who represented the winner in Mr. Garrison's last race for District Attorney. Many lawyers here say Judge Garrison was not diligent.

"He relied more on his staff than other judges" but "I don't think he's lazy," Judge Gulotta said of his friend, whom he has known since they were students at Tulane Law School. "He will do those things that interest him. In cases involving complicated legal principles, he will get into tooth and nail. The mundane things don't interest him.

"I have fussed at him for his lack of collegiality" with his fellow judges, said Judge Gulotta. "He has no small talk at all. He tended to stay in his



Associated Press

Jim Garrison in 1967, when he was the District Attorney in New Orleans.

office for lunch and send out for a hamburger or a salad."

His colleague Judge Steven Plotkin said, "He could entertain himself endlessly thinking about themes and philosophies and issues in life."

A lawyer, Russ Herman, said Judge Garrison's opinions were well-reasoned and sprinkled with quotes from Shakespeare, Dickens and Keats. "Sometimes his decisions read like the chapters of a novel."

Among the things that do not interest Mr. Garrison is the upkeep of his home, says Judge Gulotta, who lives near the two-story nondescript white brick house where Mr. Garrison lives with a 32-year-old son, Jasper, and his cat, Maxie.

Before Mr. Garrison became seriously ill, he often left his house around 7 or 8 P.M. to take a walk and drop in unannounced on Judge Gulotta, who says the routine never varied. First checking to see if the Gulotta family cars were in the carport, Mr. Garrison would ring the doorbell. Judge Gulotta and his wife, not really wanting company at that hour, would delay answering.

"Then he would bang the doorknocker and say, 'I know you're in there,'" Judge Gulotta said. After Mr. Garrison was ushered in, he would drink a Diet Coke and talk about the Kennedy investigation, the appeals court administration and the finances of retirement.

"He was interested in what his pension would be, but he wanted me to figure it out," Judge Gulotta said.