

Story Of Mystery Man Is Told *Sept. 5, 1976*

Ex-Tampan In JFK Plot?

★

A U.S. Senate intelligence committee report last June raised new doubts as to whether President John F. Kennedy's assassination was the work of one person acting alone. Since then, investigators have been following new leads that often point to Fidel Castro's Cuba and connections in Miami and Tampa.

This series of articles explores the Tampa connections. It is based on reports of the Warren Commission, transcripts of U.S. Senate and House hearings, recently declassified files of the FBI and CIA, and interviews with many government officials and federal and private investigators across the United States.

★

By SKIP JOHNSON And TONY DURR
Tribune Staff Writers
(First in a Series)

Investigators looking into the assassination of President John F. Kennedy invariably become intrigued with the story of a former Tampa man named Gilberto Policarpo Lopez.

When they talk about him, they use such terms as suspicious, mysterious — even incredulous.

But although they all want badly to talk with him, they can't. Lopez left for Cuba the day after Kennedy was killed, and he hasn't returned.

THIS IS Lopez' story as pieced together from various governmental agency records, congressional reports and interviews with federal and private investigators:

Lopez was born in Cuba in Jan-

uary 1940. He had one brother who, in the early 1960s, joined the Cuban military and was sent to Russia to study.

In 1960, Lopez got a passport from the U.S. Consul's office in Havana. The passport was to be valid until January 1963.

But in May 1962, Lopez requested and got permission from Cuban authorities to return to Cuba. He went there in July, staying only two weeks before coming back to the United States.

THE NEXT month, Lopez married

Please See Page 10, Col. 1

Today's Chuckle

To those doctors who are contemplating going on strike, remember that time is a great healer.

Sept 5, 1976

Ex-Tampan In JFK Plot?

• From Page 1

an American woman and they lived in Key West for nearly a year. Then, in June 1963 — five months after his passport had expired and five months before Kennedy was assassinated — he and his wife moved to Tampa. The marriage lasted only two more months before Mrs. Lopez left her husband and moved back to the Keys in August 1963.

She later told FBI agents she left him because of marital difficulties. She also characterized him as pro-Castro, an opinion backed up by interviews with other relatives and friends.

Those interviews also turned up conflicting statements on why Lopez left Cuba and why he wanted to return there. Some said he left Cuba to avoid being drafted by the Cuban military. Others said he wanted to return there because he was afraid he would be drafted into the United States military.

ON NOV. 17, 1963 — one day before Kennedy visited Tampa and five days before he was murdered in Dallas — Lopez attended a meeting at the home of a member of the Tampa chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

Another person thought to have been at that meeting was Lee Harvey Oswald, who would be arrested five days later on charges of assassinating President Kennedy. Recently declassified FBI files quote "operatives" as saying Oswald met with members of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee in Tampa on that date. That information was never confirmed.

Lopez' attendance at the meeting, however, was confirmed.

"**THERE WAS** some talk about (Lopez) having been at the residence for some time waiting for a telephone call from Cuba which was very important," an FBI memorandum said later. "It was understood that it all depended on his getting the 'go-ahead order' for him to leave the United States. He indicated he had been refused travel back to his native Cuba . . ."

Apparently, however, the permission came through, for on Nov. 20, only two days before the president was killed, Lopez obtained a Mexican tourist card from the Honorary Consulate of Mexico in Tampa. The card was marked "d.f.," which means Mexico was to be his final destination before returning to the United States.

LOPEZ' TRAIL becomes cloudy for a few days after that. Two investigators quote the same source as saying he was spotted in Dallas the day Kennedy was killed, but both admit the information has not been confirmed. Without Lopez' own testimony, they say, it probably cannot be confirmed.

Nevertheless, Lopez' trail picks up again on Nov. 23, 1963, the day after Kennedy's assassination. The Mexican border, which had been closed as soon as Kennedy was shot Nov. 22, was reopened the next day, and Lopez was one of the first persons to cross. Records at the Nuevo Laredo crossing point show he crossed in a private automobile, but they do not show whether he was driving. The FBI speculates he may have been a passenger in a private automobile, but they know nothing else.

Lopez arrived in Mexico City on Nov. 25 where he checked into room 203 of the Roosevelt Hotel. He stayed there until 7 p.m. Nov. 27, when he checked out and headed for Mexico City's international airport.

At the airport, a Cubana Airlines plane was waiting for him. Lopez and the airplane's nine-man crew boarded together and left for Cuba. There were no other passengers aboard.

LOPEZ' PASSPORT would have been worthless for such a trip because it had expired almost a year earlier. The only way he could have gotten into Cuba, then, would have been by obtaining a Cuban 'courtesy visa.'

Such visas are available only to close friends of Fidel Castro's regime. Mexican officials say they don't even exist.

They say anyone traveling from Mexico into Cuba must go through customs where his name and passport number are verified. Then his passport is checked again to make certain the Cuban visa is entered. Finally, the traveler is photographed and allowed to board the airplane. Mexican officials say the system cannot be beaten by anyone, regardless of his political power, social standing or money. No one is immune, they say.

BUT FORMER CIA Director John A. McCone says otherwise. Testifying before a congressional committee several years ago, he described the little-known Cuban system like this:

Special friends of Fidel Castro who want to enter Cuba anonymously are

Please See Page 11, Col. 5

Ex-Tampan In JFK Plot?

• From Page 10

told to go to Mexico, listing that as their final destination (as Lopez did). Only in Mexico, they go to the Cuban Embassy where they get slips of paper that serve as visas. These slips are attached to the passport and can be thrown away once on the Cubana Airlines plane. Thus, McCone said, there would be nothing on the passport to show the traveler had been anywhere but to Mexico.

It is through this system that Lopez is thought to have gone to Cuba.

LITTLE ELSE is known about Lopez' travel. But one FBI report did say a woman member of the Tampa chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee telephoned Cuba at 5 a.m. one day in December, a couple of weeks after the assassination, and confirmed Lopez arrived there safely "via Texas and Mexico."

Another FBI report, this one dated September 1974, quoted an unidentified source in Cuba as saying Lopez was still in Havana, but that he was not working. It added that he was spending a lot of time playing dominoes.

Efforts to reach Lopez by phone last week were fruitless. A telephone operator in Havana said there was no listing for a Gilberto Policarpo Lopez.

BEYOND THAT, nothing — except for a similar story of another man who took a similar Mexico-to-Cuba

flight the night of Nov. 22, only hours after Kennedy was killed.

A Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities gives this bare-boned account:

"On Dec. 1, 1963, CIA received information that a Nov. 22 Cubana Airlines flight from Mexico City to Cuba was delayed some five hours, from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m., awaiting an unidentified passenger.

"This unidentified passenger arrived at the airport in a twin-engined aircraft at 10:30 p.m. and boarded the Cubana Airlines plane without passing through Customs, where he would have needed to identify himself by displaying a passport.

"The individual traveled to Cuba in the cockpit of the Cubana Airlines plane, thus again avoiding identification by the passengers."

THE CIA was never able to identify the man or furnish Senate investigators with any further details. The best it could do was to provide the committee with information for the following footnote:

"The CIA also received highly reliable information that many of the Cuban diplomatic personnel in Mexico City had gone to the airport at about this time on Nov. 22. Again, there is no evidence CIA checked on this information."