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Ex-Tampan Key Figure In JFK Probe

Lee Headed Pro-Castro

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(Third in a Series)

Perhaps the strangest thread of all in the weirdly woven tapestry of the Tampa connection to the killing of John F. Kennedy belongs to Vincent T. Lee.

Lee, 49, a former Tampa man with close ties to Lee Harvey Oswald and Fidel Castro, has been named in several investigative reports concerning

the assassination of Kennedy. Yet, the former merchant marine has not been called for testimony since a brief statement to the Warren Commission in early 1964 when he gave false information concerning his background and his association with Lee Harvey Oswald.

TO UNDERSTAND Lee's mysterious appeal to those carrying on investigations into the Kennedy assassination, three things must be remembered:

1 — Lee knew Oswald on a closer-than-casual basis.

2 — Lee was the acknowledged master of illegal travel to and from Cuba.

3 — Lee has done everything possible to deny he ever knew Oswald and to confound investigators.

LEE'S STORY begins in Tampa in 1960 when he regularly made headlines during the next two years as the leader of the pro-Castro organization

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Group

known as the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

Tampa, not Miami, was at that time the hotbed of both pro- and anti-Castro activities, and Lee was in the thick of the action, publishing pamphlets and newsletters, writing vociferous letters to area news media and organizing demonstrations and fund-raising events for his hero, Premier Castro.

Lee was the founding father of the
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**Web Of Intrigue Surrounds Vincent T. Lee
...and his connection to the Kennedy assassination.**

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FPCC, and this organization of pro-Castro supporters spread from its hub in Tampa to become a nationwide network, which later numbered among its membership one Lee Harvey Oswald.

DURING LEE'S years in Tampa, he not only headed the FPCC, but also became involved in the Communist Red Star Cadre here, according to an FBI associate who started the front organization.

According to Joe Burton, soon after he formed the Red Star Cadre, he was approached by FBI operatives who asked him to bring Harold S. Wilson, another Tampa man, into the organization. The FBI also made an unusual request: that Wilson be given the important job of processing all membership applications.

One of the first membership applications handled by Wilson was for Vincent T. Lee.

DURING LEE'S leadership of the FPCC here, he invoked the wrath of U.S. Rep. William Cramer of St. Petersburg. Cramer was upset over the communist activities of the FPCC and Lee's personal travel and sponsorship of others' travels to and from Cuba. At that time, travel to Cuba was prohibited by the United States government.

Cramer began waging a somewhat lonely fight in Washington to have the FPCC placed on the U.S. Justice Department's list of subversive organizations.

By 1963, Lee was no longer in Tampa. He had left Hillsborough County — literally dropped out of sight — in late 1962. But, when Lee reappeared, it was with a flourish. He turned up in New York City as the national chairman of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

However, he had not abandoned his pro-communist, pro-Castro arm in the Tampa Bay area. He left his compatriot, Harold Wilson, in charge and maintained close contact with the organization here.

But, investigators were closing in on him.

IN FEBRUARY 1963, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee called the FPCC leader for testimony concerning the activities of the FPCC.

Under the questioning of committee counsel Jay Sourwine, however, Lee was like a stone wall, answering not even the most basic questions.

How much trouble anyone had in

pinning down Lee can be seen from this excerpt of those Feb. 14, 1963 hearings:

"Mr. Sourwine: Are you the Clarence Theodore Lee who was born in New York City Aug. 11, 1927? (Lee is reported to have changed his name from "Clarence to Vincent".)

"Mr. Lee: I respectfully decline to answer that question. I invoke my privileges under the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States."

Any and all other questions posed to the FPCC leader by that committee were met with the same broken-record style answer.

ALTHOUGH Rep. Cramer's fight to have the FPCC listed as a subversive organization had proved fruitless, Cramer did manage to get the House Un-American Activities Committee to call the FPCC leader for testimony.

Those proceedings were in May 1963, but again there was little to be heard from the former Tampa resident. Lee invoked the Fifth Amendment 75 times under the questioning of the congressional committee, answering only questions that revealed his name, place and date of birth (New York City, Aug. 11, 1927) and his education, (12 years of school).

Following Lee's non-cooperation with that committee, the Justice Department's internal security division initiated plans for criminal prosecution against the FPCC leader.

WHAT THOSE two investigating committees wanted, but didn't get, was information on Lee's own illegal trips to Cuba, his sponsorship of such trips for others, and alleged financial support for the FPCC directly from the Cuban communist government through its United Nations personnel.

Any criminal prosecution never

came for Lee, and the next time the public heard from the FPCC leader was on the day following the killing of President Kennedy.

Lee, in a speech in Buffalo, N.Y., said, "I think the death of the President is a very shocking thing. I deplore this action. I greatly sympathize with the family of the President and with the nation as a whole because of the deplorable thing that has occurred."

ALSO IN THAT speech, Lee vigorously denied any connection between Oswald, who was under arrest in Dallas, and the Fair Play for Cuba

Committee.

Referring to news reports that named Oswald as a leader of the FPCC in New Orleans, Lee said he had never heard of Oswald and Oswald was not and never had been a member of the FPCC.

Only a short time later, Vincent T. Lee was proven a liar when investigators uncovered a bundle of letters from Lee to Oswald in Oswald's personal effects — plus an FPCC membership card for Oswald with the signature of Vincent T. Lee.

But, the relationship between Vincent T. Lee and Lee Harvey Oswald was more than casual. It was more than an FPCC business relationship.

For Lee was Oswald's friend and sponsor during the months leading up to the violent death of President John F. Kennedy in Dealey Plaza in Dallas.

NEXT: Lee and Oswald together in Tampa.