Illinois inmate says

Antioch producer believes in evidence

By MICHAEL HYTHA
Staff writer

Two dents in a bullet casing and a man who claims to have put them there persuaded independent television producer Bob Vernon that Lee Harvey Oswald did not kill President Kennedy.

Now Vernon is pushing a documentary he hopes will convince America that he knows who did.

Vernon, who guards the 1¾-inch shell in a bedside drawer in his Antioch home, is one of a few hundred researchers who ride herd on every new factoid trickling out of government assassination files, more than 32 years after John F. Kennedy's motorcade made its fateful turn into Dealey Plaza in Dallas.

What separates Vernon's assertions from the multitude of conspiracy theories — plausible to crackpot — is the .222-caliber shell, which he contends is the most significant physical evidence to come to light in three decades. And unlike other speculations, the FBI, and not conspiracy theorists, first put the dime on the man he did it
NEW JFK THEORY EMERGES

TV PRODUCER Bob Vernon claims that James Earl Files, seen on the screen, was the real assassin of John F. Kennedy.
who claims to have fired it, mashed it between his teeth and left it at the scene.

The FBI later dismissed the 54-year-old career criminal, James Earl Files, as a liar. Skeptics also doubt the authenticity of the shell, which was not found until 1987.

"It's the truth, or I'm not fat and bald-headed," said Vernon, a former New Orleans music producer turned assassination investigator.

Files says in a 1994 videotaped interview with Vernon that he and others were ordered to Dallas by the Chicago underworld. Files said he stood behind a white picket fence on the infamous "grassy knoll" in Dealey Plaza as a back-up shooter to Charles Nicoletti, whom Files described as a more experienced mob hitman.

When the other gunman's first shots failed to strike Kennedy in the head as planned, Files said he fired his high-powered scoped pistol, striking Kennedy a fraction of a second after the other shooter's final round.

The syncopated shots, according to Files and Vernon, account for the puzzling whiplash appearance of Kennedy's head — first forward and then sharply backward.

"Mr. Files has withstood scrutiny," Vernon said. "He is who he says he is. He's done what he says he's done."

A legion of disbelievers

Others doubt Files, who is doing 50 years in an Illinois prison for attempted murder of two police officers.

The FBI agents who interviewed Files in 1993 said his story is fabricated. One of those agents, Robert Pecararo, said Files' knowledge of the assassination and the underworld was "academic" rather than first-hand.

"It was the typical story that he's the only one alive who has this knowledge, and the rest are all dead," said Pecararo, a retired agent working as an insurance investigator in Tampa.

"The guy's a liar."

Even many conspiracy believers say Files' story is just the latest in a series concocted in pursuit of notoriety and royalties.

Underworld, CIA links

Conspiracy theorists generally reject official findings that Oswald acted alone and that neuromuscular reflexes or the "jet effect" of quickly exiting cranial tissue account for Kennedy's whiplash movement.

They focus their suspicions on organized crime and the Central Intelligence Agency. Kennedy's crackdown on the underworld angered the criminal bosses and his failure to provide military support for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 infuriated the CIA and Cuban refugees intent on overthrowing Fidel Castro.

The grassy knoll gunman is not solely the creation of enterprising conspiracy theorists. A House of Representatives committee concluded in 1979 that at least four shots were fired, including one from the knoll. Experts later discredited the evidence used to reach that finding, but theorists still routinely cite the report.

Vernon has been trying for four years to prove that Files was that grassy knoll gunman.

Dogged pursuit of facts

A high school student when Kennedy died, Vernon got hooked on conspiracy theories much later. He became intrigued at a 1987 debate after listening to former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, the man lionized by movie director Oliver Stone's 1991 release "JFK."

Vernon, who made a living by promoting and managing New Orleans musicians, still juggles a handful of music and video projects. But the 48-year-old Louisiana native now spends much of his time linking up
to Dallas the two men under whom he claims to have worked. Chauncey Holt, who said his business forged identification for the CIA, said he drove Nicoletti from an Arizona ranch to Dallas. Former CIA pilot Robert "Tosh" Plumlee said he flew Johnny Roselli, whom Files said was another underworld figure, into Dallas early that morning.

Witnesses' accounts

Two witnesses corroborate part of Files' account, saying they brought a .222-caliber Remington casing, purportedly dug up on the grassy knoll, had two unexplained crimps.

Vernon sent the shell to a forensic dentist who said the dents were consistent with teeth marks.

He also has assembled other experts and stacks of documents that he said confirm Files' role in the assassination and those with the military, CIA and organized crime.
A weapons expert

One point that lends Files credibility among some conspiracy theorists is that he makes no claim to know what happened at the top. He was just a driver who knew weapons and how to shoot them.

"One thing that is interesting is that he has not made himself into Col. Files," said former CIA agent and author John Stockwell, who has a "tiny" financial stake in Vernon's project. Stockwell said Vernon has pushed him aside, apparently because of suspicions over his past CIA ties and a more cautious approach. Vernon said the concern sprung from past CIA efforts to grab Stockwell's royalties.

One unexplained issue is why Files is talking now.

He says he spoke initially only because he warmed up to West, who set him up with a Houston attorney in a nearly successful effort to win immunity from prosecution for the assassination. West also helped convince the warden at Stateville Prison in Joliet, Ill., to put Files in a single — meaning safer — cell.

Files' supposed co-conspirators, Nicoletti and Roselli, were murdered in gangland slayings in the 1970s. Files refuses to implicate any living mob figures involved in the assassination, including a man who Files said killed Dallas police Officer J.D. Tippit 45 minutes after Kennedy was shot.

The Warren Commission concluded Oswald killed Tippit and fled to a nearby movie theater, where no one arrested him.

No place in history

Some say Files' reason for talking now is simple: cash.

While Vernon said Files would not benefit financially, his daughters would get a share of the proceeds.

As for his place in history as the man who, he claims, fired at least one of the shots that killed Kennedy, Files said he wants no part of it. "I don't even want to be remembered in history. I'm nobody," Files stated in his interview with Vernon, suggesting he never chose to target Kennedy or anybody else. "I just followed the orders. To me it was like taking out the garbage."
Awed by mob, he just bit bullet, pulled trigger

By MICHAEL HYTHA

Staff writer

James Files’ claim to have shot President Kennedy hinges on his purported ties to organized crime and the CIA and a few key plot twists that stretch, but do not necessarily defy, imagination.

In a videotaped interview with producer Bob Vernon, Files, a silver-haired prison inmate with a pencil-thin mustache and focused brown eyes, describes how he ended up in Dealey Plaza at 12:30 p.m. on Nov. 22, 1963:

He was born in Alabama, but shortly afterward moved with his family to California and then to an Italian neighborhood in Chicago, where he remembers looking up to one old-time mobster who threw him $5 bills for polishing his hubcaps.

Files said he enlisted in the Army in 1959 and was sent to Laos, where he trained Laotian soldiers to handle small weapons and explosives. After his return home, he said CIA operator David Atlee Phillips recruited him to run guns and to train anti-Castro Cubans in Florida.

Meanwhile, Files fell in with Charles Nicoletti, a man he said was an un-...
Thank you for your help with this story.
-Michael