

20 years later

Weisberg still digging into Kennedy

By SYLVIA V. LONG

FREDERICK, Md. — On Nov. 22, 20 years ago, chicken farmer Harold Weisberg was quietly gathering eggs.

A former newspaper reporter and U.S. Senate investigator, Weisberg had planned to retire peacefully to his Hyattstown farm. But it hasn't turned out that way.

Weisberg, then 51, was a man who liked to stay informed. He kept a small radio hooked to his belt, and the news bulletin he heard in the chicken house that day was not good.

President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated during a parade in Dallas, Texas. Announcers said a man named Oswald had fired three shots, in less than six seconds, at the presidential motorcade. Oswald was said to have used a Mannlicher-Carcano rifle.

A World War II veteran, Weisberg knew something about rifles. The Mannlicher-Carcano, he said, "at its best was a lousy rifle" incapable of firing accurate, successive shots.

"What shocked me most of all," he said, "was that what we were being told would make it impossible to try (Lee Harvey) Oswald" fairly in court.

Weisberg's peaceful life was about to end.

"I had no deadlines to meet and I had a lot of questions," he said, eating crackers and thinking back over the years since — years of battles with politicians on television talk shows and then with federal lawyers in court. He still has two lawsuits pending. He is fighting for documents about the Kennedy killing that he says have been withheld from him since the late 1960s and early 1970s.

His wife Lillian, who has typed, prepared for printing and indexed most of Weisberg's writing since 1963, says simply, "I've survived it."

For Weisberg, the battles continue, but his victories have made it all worthwhile. "I was the first private citizen to make extensive use of the Freedom of Information Act," he said.

Oswald, accused of killing the president and later gunned down himself, is the subject of just some of Weisberg's files in the cabinets that line the basement walls of Weisberg's home off Old Receiver Road.

He has filled approximately 60 file cabinets with more than 200,000 pages of federal memos and documents he has secured with the help of court orders and Congressional legislation — that he lobbied for — that makes it mandatory for federal officials to comply with the Freedom of Informa-



Harold Weisberg at his typewriter

tion Act.

He is known for having the largest library on 1960s assassinations outside CIA and FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., and he has written seven books on the contradictions in government accounts of what happened that November day.

He says his latest findings are that Oswald had a top security clearance from the CIA and that James Earl Ray could not have killed Martin Luther King. However, he won't say what his evidence is because he is saving it for future books.

Since the late 1970s, professors at Hood College have used Weisberg and his library as source material for courses on the politics of assassination. The theme of the courses are not who killed Kennedy and King, says history professor Jerry McKnight, the course instructor.

"The assassinations of the 1960s have intrinsic

assassination

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value," says McNight. "But more importantly, I think students ought to get hands-on experience with documents (that) I think unquestionably demonstrate or show how the federal government operated or failed to operate at the time of a national crisis."

Sitting in his living room, the now 71-year-old Weisburg faces stacks of the seven books he has had published by small publishing firms.

Making money and publishing best sellers were not his strengths, he said. Weisberg collected information but had trouble, particularly in 1964, finding anyone who would print it.

"My agent said 'Nobody's going to publish anything but the official account,' and then she quit," said Weisberg of his first attempt to sell "White-wash I" his initial challenge of the federal Warren Report findings on the Kennedy shooting.

"And she was right. Nobody would," he said.

He estimates he approached 100 publishers in 1964 who turned down his request to publish his first book. One publisher tried to steal the book, his said. Another said Weisburg would have to rewrite it and argue that the government killed Kennedy. "I said the hell with this. There was no basis for it, but you know, publishers want something that can sell," he said.

Owners of a publishing house in Washington started to print it, but then changed their mind after lawyers reminded them most of their business was with the federal government.

He finally found a publisher who charged him \$500 to print it.

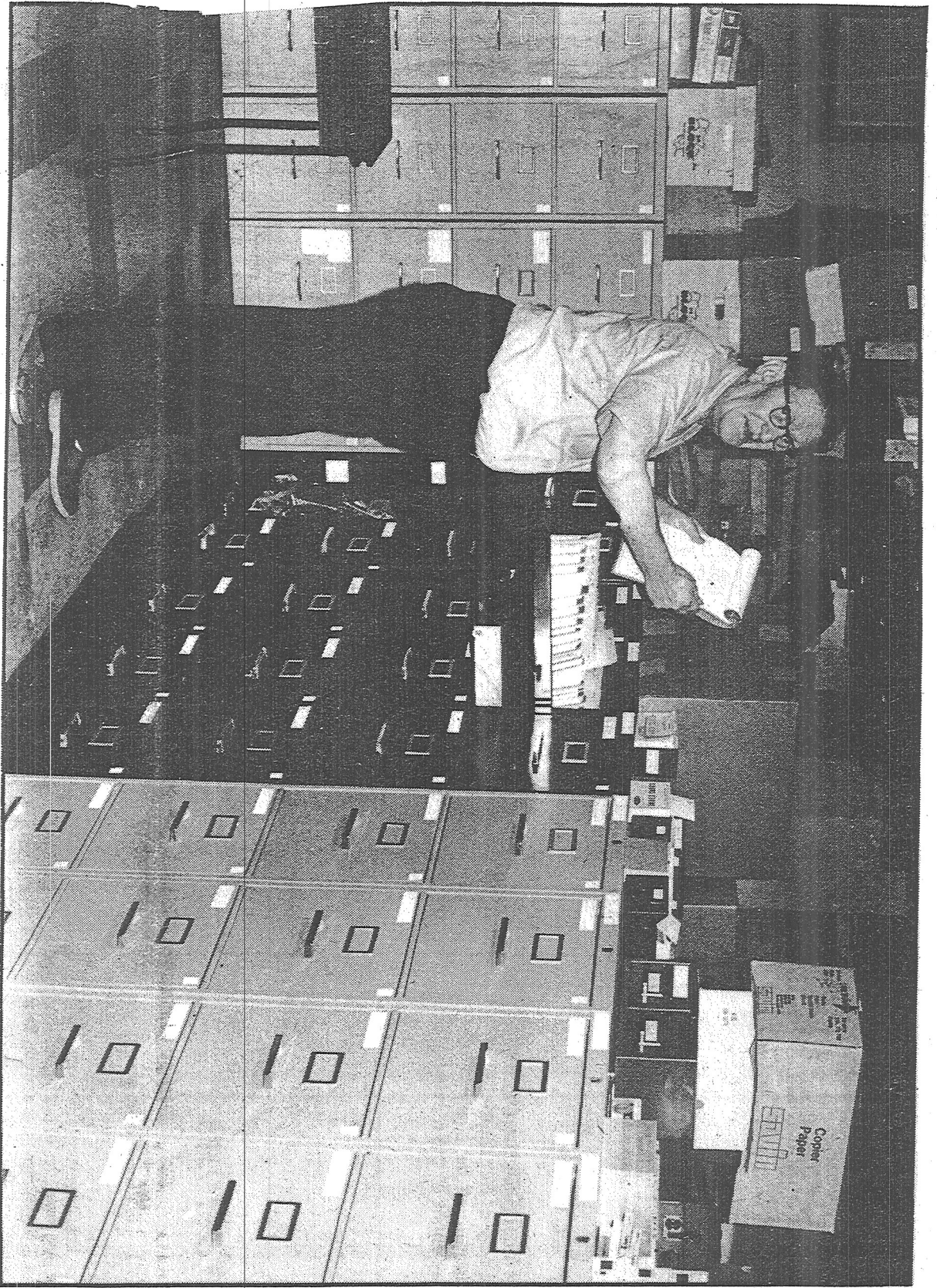
The first book was his largest seller — the furor that surrounded it led him to television and radio shows across the country. More than 23,000 copies were sold. The income went to pay for the cost of paper and copying documents.

The Weisberg's monthly income is now limited to Social Security checks and the occasional work Ms. Weisberg does as a tax consultant.

Weisberg has wanted to write his book on the King assassination for several years. But troubled by a circulation problem that requires him to spend his mornings in physical therapy and thwarted by lingering court battles, he hasn't had the time.

"If I could live to be 100 and stay in good health I couldn't finish writing the books that need to be written," he said.

"I'm glad I've been able to do as much as I have," he says. "Sometimes the system works."



Harold Weisberg and some of the approximately 60 file cabinets that line the walls of his basement.

Photos by Sylvia Long