

J.F.K. Death 'Plot' Riddles

By HAYNES JOHNSON

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NEW ORLEANS — On Lafayette Square, across the street from the magnolia trees, the azalea bushes, the statue of Benjamin Franklin, and the newspaper plant of the Times-Picayune and States-Item, are two vacant offices, which now carry "for rent" signs. One office entering from the Camp Street side, once housed Cuban exiles involved in anti-Castro activities after the Bay of Pigs invasion; the other, on the Lafayette Street side, was the headquarters for Guy Banister Associates, Inc., a private detective agency.

In the days before and after the Bay of Pigs the Cubans met often in Banister's office. And there, two people are reliably reported to have informed District Attorney Jim Garrison, Lee Harvey Oswald was seen with the Cubans and the group around Banister. That group included three of the persons whose names have surfaced since Garrison's investigation of President Kennedy's assassination became public a week ago Friday. They are: Jack S. Martin, David Lewis, and David William Ferrie.

Martin and Lewis were employed by Banister's firm, Martin as an investigator and Lewis as a messenger and office man. Ferrie, who died this past week, had been working closely with Banister in anti-Castro activities and also had retained Banister's firm to help him in a morals case in which he had been charged.

One of the Cubans who used to go to Banister's office told this reporter, in the course of a seven-hour conversation ending early Saturday morning, that Garrison has questioned him a number of times in the past month. Garrison told him, the Cuban said, that

witnesses have stated they saw him there with Oswald and the others. The Cuban flatly denies it, and says he has offered to take a lie-detector test and truth serum if necessary to substantiate his position. He has not been asked to take such tests, he says.

That same Cuban, who wants to remain anonymous, in fact did meet Oswald at Oswald's apartment on Magazine Street in August, 1963. He had gone there in an attempt to learn about Oswald's pro-Castro dealings in New Orleans and about Oswald's supposed Fair Play for Cuba Committee organization in the area. They talked for about half an hour, and Oswald gave him some literature as they left, he said. Then, he promptly reported his contact with Oswald to the New Orleans Police Department.

After President Kennedy's assassination, the Cuban again repeated his account of meeting with Oswald to the Secret Service. The Warren Commission was fully aware

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of his meeting. After investigating that one incident and a host of other rumors involving Cubans—both for and against Castro—it concluded that Oswald had acted alone in killing the President.

Although the FBI is maintaining a strict "hands-off" position in connection with Garrison's highly-publicized investigation, and will not discuss the case, it is clear that the government places little credence in what has been turned up so far. In the view of some who have been closely acquainted with the case, Garrison's material is a rehash of old material, with some new elements added. The district attorney's motives are being questioned; there is increasing talk that he wants to use his inquiry as a political springboard, that

he intends to run for lieutenant governor this year and higher office later.

"He has a long list of fraudulent issues," said one highly placed official here, in referring to Garrison "but he's as quick as a cat and he always lands on his feet."

That same official, who was not willing to be quoted by name, also said that Garrison might well be the shrewdest politician in Louisiana since the flamboyant Huey Long ruled the state.

In the face of criticism and worldwide attention and speculation, Garrison has grown ever bolder in his public statements. Finally, on Friday, he said flatly he had "solved the case" of the Kennedy death "beyond the shadow of a doubt." He says he knows the key individuals, the cities involved, and promises arrests. But when pressed to be more specific, he remains enigmatic, and poses a parable for the public:

The key to the whole case is through the looking glass," he told reporters. "Black is white, white is black. I don't want to be cryptic but that's the way it is."

Try at Riddle

This dispatch is an attempt to unravel some of that riddle and to place Garrison's investigation in perspective. What emerges is a tangled web of plot, counter-plot, and counter-counter plot; of rumors and wild talk of some fact, some fiction; and, in the end, a tantalizing question mark. The one thread that winds through all stories involves one of the central problems of John F. Kennedy's two years, 10 months and two days in the White House — the problem of Cuba.

It is Garrison's obvious contention that Cubans were somehow involved in the President's death. From what can be learned at this time,

his case appears to rest on one theory about the assassination: That Oswald was working with an anti-Castro rightwing organization and actually intended to kill Fidel; that Oswald's publicly pro-Communist activities in New Orleans and his attempt to enter Mexico and secure a Cuban visa were a ruse to enable him to carry out that Castro assassination objective; that when Oswald was denied entrance to Cuba, the plot shifted, and Kennedy, accused of letting down the Cubans at that Bay of Pigs, became the target. This theory has been examined at length in the past and has been discarded.

To these basic ingredients, Garrison seems to have added new factors. These are among them:

- The existence of a training camp for Cubans in a Parish across Lake Pontchartrain in the summer of 1963 where, supposedly, Oswald went for the purpose of participating in the plot to kill Castro;

- The later movement of an American, who reportedly organized that camp, from New Orleans to Houston;

- Two canceled checks drawn on the New Orleans Bank of Commerce in New Orleans in the summer of 1963, used to help pay the way back to Miami for two of the Cubans from that camp;

- The departure of other Cubans from New Orleans to Miami, and one to Dallas;

- Documents from an anti-Castro organization which operated briefly in New Orleans in 1962 and then was disbanded;

- A photograph of Oswald distributing pro-Castro literature in Canal Street here which shows a man supposedly later photographed behind a sign in Dealey Plaza in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

Crucial Tie

These are among the scraps that Garrison is known to be considering. On the surface, these seem to fall into much of the speculative character of the host of sensational books written about the assassination. Their value remains undetermined. Beyond this, everything is shrouded in conjecture.

Out of all the smoke, one thing is certain: To prove any conspiracy Garrison must be able to link Oswald with others. That is where the relationship between Guy Banister's detective agency and the Cubans becomes crucial.

But more important, initially, is what the Warren Commission has determined about Oswald in New Orleans.

New Orleans first became a part of the Oswald story on Sept. 20, 1959; then, nine days after his release from the Marine Corps, Oswald took a ship from New Orleans to Le Havre, France, as the first step of his journey to Russia. Three years later after his return to the U.S., Oswald came back to New Orleans in late April, 1963, seeking a job. The next month, his wife and daughter joined him here. From then until the third week in September, the Oswalds lived on Magazine Street in the city. While his family went back to Texas, Oswald traveled to Mexico seeking a Cuban visa. On Oct. 4, he joined his family in Texas.

As is well known, Oswald tried to organize a Fair Play for Cuba Committee a pro-Castro group, in New Orleans, passed out literature on the streets, and engaged in broadcast debates about Cuba. From these activities grew a number of conspiratorial theories about his supposed connection with Cuban groups, again both pro and anti-Castro. The Warren Commission investigation concluded that:

"Without exception, the rumors and allegations of a conspiratory contact were shown to be without any factual basis, in some cases the product of mistaken investigation."

Nothing New

Nothing that Garrison has made public yet in any way alters those findings. His case, therefore, must dispute those conclusions by showing that Oswald had sinister relationship with others. There, the trail comes back to Banister's office.

What follows is an account of each of the principal links of that part of the story, based on interviews and other sources, and told in sketches of the man whose names are now being discussed here and elsewhere.

GUY BANISTER — W. Guy Banister, former FBI Agent, former New Orleans police official, militant anti-Communist, private detective, and once publisher of a weekly newspaper in this area, was found dead of a heart attack in his apartment here June, 1964. He had had a stormy and colorful career: 10 years before his death he had retired as the special FBI agent in charge of Chicago's FBI office. During his days with the bureau he had participated in some of the FBI's most celebrated cases — including those of Roger Tuohy and John Dillinger.

In 1955 Banister joined the New Orleans Police Department as chief investigator and supervisor of training, the third ranking member of the force. His career was relatively brief and stormy. He engaged in public quarrels with his superiors and, at one point, charged they had conspired to "defeat justice" by stopping a police investigation. In 1957, when he was assistant police chief, he was suspended after he was involved in a barroom incident in which he was accused of drawing a gun in a Bourbon Street bar. He was then dismissed for what the police superintendent called his "open defiance."

A Flair

Banister drifted into investigative work, bought a weekly newspaper, the West Bank Herald across the river here, where he employed, among others Jack S. Martin. By 1960, he had formed his own detective agency and brought Martin along with him. In those days, Banister continued to act with a flair. One prominent New Orleans citizen remembers Banister coming into a downtown hotel with a gun strapped to his leg, drawing the pistol, slamming it on the table saying "this is power."

Banister, without question, was actively involved in the pre-Bay of Pigs days. Whether in fact his office was the center of an arms cache, as is alleged here, is not known, but it is a fact that Cubans met there along with David Ferrie, a former pilot, and that they were observed by two of Banister's employes,

Martin and David Lewis. These last two men seem to be principal original sources of information in Garrison's current investigation. These are the outlines of Banister's office, and his background; again there is nothing substantive to indicate that he was personally involved in any supposed "plot."

JACK S. MARTIN — Martin, 52, is undoubtedly the most controversial figure of all those mentioned recently. He is supposed to have provided the initial leads for Garrison.

Martin's story, in fact, has been told before and dismissed as un factual by government investigators. It is authoritatively reported that Martin furnished information to Assistant District Attorney Herman S. Kohlman here. Later, Martin is said to have disavowed his story entirely when questioned by the FBI during the Warren Commission investigation.

What Martin has said since then must come either from himself or from Garrison. Garrison is not saying; Martin is not here. He left town some time at the end of last month and has not been heard from since.

His wife says that is not unusual. Jack she says, takes off alone for several months every year. Mrs. Martin saw this reporter for some hours the other day in her home and talked at length about her husband and the case. Although she has answered phone inquiries, it was the first time any newsman had been to see her, she said.

She seemed to want to talk and, although she was highly distraught, dwelt at length about the effect of the recent publicity on her and her 9-year-old son, Jack, Jr., who was making models in the living room.

"They have asked me if my husband is a nut, if he is a psychiatric case," she said. "They have asked me a number of uncomplimentary things. Now, my husband does drink but he drinks less than a lot of other people. I have tried to get him to join Alcoholics Anonymous and some years ago I did get him to go into the New Orleans Charity Hospital for his drinking. That's before I stopped trying to change him."

Then she said:

"Jack really isn't a man of mystery. He isn't. Jack is known from coast to coast. Jack is a plain ordinary, middle-aged man, thin but getting a pot belly, who comes home,

puts on his slippers and holds his dog in his lap—a man who makes model planes for his son and chapel (a religious chapel in the house) for his wife and hundreds of ecclesiastical heraldry for his friends."

It's Bizarre

To illustrate her point, she walked around the 150-year old house, badly run down, but which she is trying to renovate. She pointed to her husband's cases, to pictures of her husband with Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz in Hollywood; with a mayor of New Orleans, and to personally autographed "best wishes" photographs from among others such as Richard Nixon and Guy Banister. To this reporter, the entire experience was bizarre.

Physically, Martin is small and thin, with a mustache. He was in the Flying Tigers before World War II with the rank of "Colonel." Since the war, according to his wife he has been a reporter, a public relations man and a private investigator. "Whenever there's excitement or intrigue going on there's Jack," she said once. "He's a natural for it."

In talking about the Garrison investigation, Mrs. Martin said she had known Ferrie and a number of anti-Castro Cubans. She said she had never met Oswald, although she had heard the rumor that:

"Guy Banister's office was in this building, so were the Cubans and so, theoretically, was Lee Oswald's."

'Hot Seat'

She believes that the key figure is David Lewis, who had worked with her husband and Banister and in recent years has been employed at the bus terminal here.

"Lewis has an amazingly retentive memory," she said. "If anyone is of interest in this case it is David Lewis. Dave Lewis is sitting in probably the hottest seat in history."

DAVID LEWIS—Lewis, 26, a native of Houston, has publicly stated that he knows five persons involved in the assassination with Oswald. Lewis has appeared on television here, but has added nothing specific to that general comment. After leaving Banister's employe, he got a job with the Trailways bus line terminal in the baggage department. He is married, and has four children.

DAVID WILLIAM FERRIE— Ferrie's name first figured in the assassination three days after Kennedy's death in Dallas. He was arrested that Nov. 25 in New Orleans and charged with being a fugitive from Texas. In view of what is happening now, the newspaper accounts of the arrest are instructive. Ferrie, and two other young men, the papers here reported, were picked up "in connection with some leads of our own" D.A. Garrison was quoted as saying, knocking down reports the FBI or Secret Service had asked for the arrests.

Ferrie and his friends were released in two days and subsequent investigation by the FBI led the Warren Commission to dismiss him from serious consideration in the assassination. In fact, investigation proved, Ferrie was in New Orleans at the time of the assassination and no evidence was ever turned up to indicate that he knew Oswald or was in any way involved in the President's murder.

Fits Theory

Almost inevitably, though, Ferrie's personal character and background made him a natural candidate for a conspiratorial theory. He was a homosexual, who had been fired from his job as an Eastern Airlines pilot after he was arrested in a "crime against nature" case: he was a militant anti-Castroite who actively participated in Bay of Pigs activity in New Orleans; and he was clearly an intelligent but disturbed person.

Mrs. Jack Martin, for instance, recalls what she says was Ferrie's "preoccupation with Socrates."

"His constant reaction to every problem was to walk up and down the room beating his forehead and saying 'now what would Socrates have done?'" she remembers.

Ferrie had never tried to hide his activity on behalf of the anti-Castro Cubans here.

Repelling Man

Besides the facts surrounding his life, Ferrie himself was a singularly repelling figure physically. He was sickly, and his hair and his eyebrows had been burned off. Instead of buying an adequate wig, Ferrie affected a different, more striking device: He glued down his red toupee and false eyebrows with glucose cement.

After the latest flare of publicity in what is certainly

going to be only still another in an endless round of rumor and sensations about the Kennedy death, Ferrie, unlike Martin, was quite willing to be interviewed, even though he was seriously ill. On Monday this past week, he was interviewed by Theodore C. Link of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Garrison's investigation, he told Link, was "way off base."

The next evening, he spent four hours talking to George Lardner Jr., of the Washington Post, and denied ever knowing Oswald. Lardner was probably the last man to see him alive; Ferrie's body was found that day in his apartment.

The coroner has ruled Ferrie died of natural causes. Garrison has called him one of history's most important suspects, without spelling out why. Even if this investigation is totally discredited, as many think it will be, Ferrie's death undoubtedly will add even more fuel to those already inflammatory rumors surrounding the Kennedy assassination.

THE CUBANS — Depending on with whom you talk, there are anywhere from a minimum of four to a maximum of 14 names being bandied about in New Orleans. They are, at this writing, still anonymous but the names of several are already common knowledge.

This reporter has spoken with two of them here. The first, already mentioned in this story, spoke at great length in front of his wife in their living room. Like Mrs. Martin, he seemed to want to pour out what he knew. He was especially incensed, he said, at reading that Garrison was saying it might be 30 years before arrests were made — a remark the D.A. later amended to weeks or months.

Cubans Again

He spoke readily about his contacts with other Cubans and with Ferrie and Banister.

"Ferrie was active in the Cuban revolutionary front" he said. "I don't know when he got in but he was active. He tried to help us raise money. We used to go to Guy Banister's office and one of the reasons was because he is an anti-Communist. I don't know of any arms ever put in Guy Banister's office. There may have been before, I don't know."

He added, later, about Ferrie:

"Ferrie could dream of things — he was a very bright intelligent person — and one time I remember he was going to try and get a small submarine to get into Havana Bay and blow up one of those docks over there."

He also told of his meeting with Oswald and repeated in detail what he had reported to government investigators. It added nothing new to what has been written.

Slams D.A.

Of Garrison's investigation, he said the district attorney, in his personal sessions with him, "changes quite a bit. One time he says Communists did it; another time, the refugees did it." He gave the names of people he knew involved there, just as he has to Garrison, and includes the name of a young American who has left town.

At the end of a long conversation, which began in his house and included a tour of the places the Cubans had met in town after the Bay of Pigs, he commented:

"I'll tell you about how this investigation is conducted. It's the craziest damn thing in the world."

That remains to be proved conclusively.

The 6 foot 6 district attorney, with an undeniable flair about him, is correct when he indirectly uses the quotation "through the looking glass" to summarize the case. It is, after all, very much like Alice in Wonderland.