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'CONFUSED'

Why Witness To 'JFK Plot' Kept Silent

From UPI, Los Angeles Times

NEW ORLEANS—Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison's star witness testified Wednesday he kept knowledge of an alleged plot to assassinate President Kennedy to himself for more than three years because he was "confused" about whether Lee Harvey Oswald was the man he knew as "Leon Oswald."

He said he had since become "absolutely sure" they were the same—but only after one of Garrison's men drew whiskers on a picture of Oswald to make him look like the unshaven man he knew.

Perry R. Russo, 25, a Baton Rouge, La., insurance salesman, testified Tuesday he witnessed business leader Clay Shaw, 54, Oswald, and David Ferrie plotting Kennedy's death in New Orleans in September of 1963.

Under a slashing cross-examination by Shaw's attorney's Wednesday, he said that when he saw Oswald in news pictures and on television after the assassination, he "could not be sure" he was Leon Oswald, the man he knew as one of the conspirators.

He had identified the President's assassin from photographs Tuesday as Leon Oswald. He failed to do so Wednesday with a picture of Oswald at the moment he was shot by Jack Ruby in Dallas two days after the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination.

Russo was on the stand the entire second day of Shaw's preliminary hearing on accusations that the former director of the New Orleans International Trade Mart conspired to kill Kennedy.

Defense attorneys introduced in evidence a recording of an interview Russo had with New Orleans station WDSU two weeks ago, in which he denied

he had "ever heard" of Oswald before the assassination.

They tried—and failed—to introduce the complete record of the Warren Commission investigation and its report despite a

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Louisiana law requiring the introduction of proceedings of federal courts and commissions as "prima facie" evidence in state courts.

Defense attorney F. Irvin Dymond also got Russo to say he thought he saw Oswald in New Orleans in October of 1963. Then Dymond quoted the Warren Report's conclusions that Oswald went to Mexico Sept. 25 and never returned to New Orleans.

Russo also said he had not come to the Warren Commission because the conspirators "did not say anything about Dallas" and he thought his information would have no significance.

Defense attorneys also played in court Wednesday the tape of an interview Russo had with New Orleans station WDSU two weeks ago, in which he said he had "never heard" of Oswald before the assassination.

Dymond was questioning him about the tape when the hearing recessed until this morning.

"I knew Leon Oswald, who had whiskers," Russo said. "He was dirty. His hair was ruffled up."

Russo said he was now able to make the identification of an Oswald picture because a district attorney's investigator drew whiskers on it.

Dymond bore down on Russo's credibility throughout the second day of the preliminary hearing and questioned him repeatedly on why he delayed nearly three years before coming forward with his information about the 1963 meeting.

Police tightened security at the New Orleans Criminal Court building after it was revealed a pistol was found nearby Tuesday and a man had been arrested for disturbance inside.

Officers said there was no apparent connection between the arrest and the discovery of the German-made pistol in a truck at a service station where Shaw and his attorney parked their car Tuesday.

The man arrested was identified as James R. Liscombe, 30. Police said he was seen pushing newsmen and threatening to "make national headlines in New Orleans."

A 20-man force of deputies searched everyone entering the courtroom Wednesday. City police were added to the security force.

Garrison has booked Shaw on a charge of "conspiracy to commit murder" and accused him in an affidavit of plotting Kennedy's assassination with Ferrie and Oswald.

Shaw is the former managing director of the New Orleans International Trade Mart.

Shaw's attorney Dymond, spent most of the morning and much of the afternoon session trying to discredit Russo's testimony.

He began by questioning his religious background.

"Do you believe in God?" Russo was asked.

He replied: "That would depend on the definition."

Dymond attempted to show that Russo had only a superficial belief in God, if any, and that while he had sworn an oath to tell the truth in court, the oath might not mean much to him. But the tactic failed.

The attorney asked Russo: "In other words, your oath would have very little relation to your belief in any God at all?"

Russo replied quickly: "I don't understand the question," and presiding Judge Bernard Bagert added loudly, "I don't understand it either. This is not a catechism class. Let's get on with it..."

Russo also testified in the

opening phases of the cross-examination that his mother and father did not get along well and that he underwent psychiatric treatment in 1959 and 1960 and had discussed problems with psychiatrists at times since then.

Bagert and Judge Matthew Braniff frequently broke in before the noon recess to tell Dymond to "get on with it."

Dymond replied he was trying to shake the credibility of the witness but Braniff said, "you have not contradicted him on any major point of his testimony."

Russo, in addition to the interview on WDSU, told the Baton Rouge, La., State Times Feb. 24 that he got in touch with Garrison after noticing Ferrie's picture in the paper as a result of Dist. Atty. Jim Garrison's investigation of the Kennedy assassination.

This was two days after Ferrie, the former airline pilot and mystery man Garrison called the "major figure" in the probe, was found dead in his New Orleans apartment of a brain hemorrhage.

At that time, Garrison had been saying for some time that he had uncovered important new information on the assassination.

In the newspaper interview, Russo said Ferrie told him once "we're going to get" Kennedy. But he did not mention anything about the plot in mid-September of 1963.

In an affidavit filed in New Orleans for a warrant to search Shaw's apartment, Garrison's office said a "confidential informant" witnessed the September meeting and his story was verified by "truth serum."

Steve Derby, Russo's roommate at Baton Rouge, said Russo told him he took truth serum during questioning by Garrison.