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p. 28 - Hoffa's plot to kill
Robert F. Kennedy
Clark R. Mollenhoff
Jimmy Hoffa wasn’t an easy man to nail down, but the Federal Government finally did it in 1963. Perhaps the most incredible characteristic of that case was this: In order to get a conviction, the prosecution had to keep the jury from learning that Hoffa had plotted to assassinate the Attorney General of the United States, Robert F. Kennedy. Now the story can be told.

In May, 1963, a Federal grand jury in Nashville returned an indictment charging that James R. Hoffa and six others had attempted to bribe members of the jury that had tried Hoffa a few months earlier.

Hoffa’s lawyers had reason to be optimistic, for Jimmy had a record of demonstrating that he could be extremely effective in talking a jury into acquittal or a “hung-jury” verdict. The defense lawyers did not expect that substantial evidence could be obtained from informants, nor did they believe it would be possible to corroborate an informant if one were obtained.

If Hoffa was now worried about an informant, it was not about Edward Grady Partin of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. If there was one Teamsters official who seemed to have more problems than Hoffa, it was Partin. Ed Partin had led a rough life that included a burglary conviction, a number of jail terms, and the general rough stuff that goes with running a rough union. Even as he attended the Nashville trial, Partin still was under indictment on a state charge and a federal charge involving alleged mishandling of Teamsters union funds.

It appeared that Partin was thoroughly loyal to Hoffa. He had been selected by Hoffa to serve as a guard outside Hoffa’s door at the Andrew Jackson Hotel in Nashville when important conferences were in progress. When the grand jury started the jury-tampering inquiry, Partin told Hoffa that he had been subpoenaed, and, following advice from one of Hoffa’s lawyers, Partin took the Fifth Amendment before that grand jury.

Hoffa and his lawyers were unaware that Ed Partin had been in almost daily contact with Walter Sheridan throughout the earlier Nashville trial. Walter Sheridan, a thirty-five-year-old former FBI agent and an investigator on the McClellan Committee staff, was a special consultant to the Attorney General and in charge of a Special Justice Department “Hoffa Unit.” It was on Sheridan’s advice that Partin went along with the suggestion that he use the Fifth Amendment when questioned.

“Something has to be done about that little S.O.B., Bobby Kennedy,” a government witness quotes Hoffa as saying. “He’ll be an easy target, always driving around Washington in that convertible with that big black dog. All we need are some plastic explosives tossed in with him and that will finish him off.”
HOFFA/KENNEDY continued

The jury-tampering trial started on January 20, 1964, in United States District Judge Frank W. Wilson's court in Chattanooga. There was the same bitterness that had permeated the Nashville trial, but more major changes. The government had hired John J. Hooker, Sr., one of the great trial lawyers in Tennessee, to team with James Neal of Nashville and United States Attorney John Reddy. It was a given by all that it was a team the jury would want to talk about. The government had hired an informant in any but the most careful manner, it could result in statements that might be regarded as highly prejudicial to Hoffa.

The story Ed Partin told of why he became an informant was more chilling than the tale of Teamsters jury-tampering. It started on a morning in late September, 1962.

Captain Thomas T. Edwards, warden in Louisiana's East Baton Rouge parish jail, had heard much of criminal conspiracy in his sixteen years in the sheriff's office, but nothing had been more astounding to him than the story Ed Partin told him the morning of September 29, 1962. Partin told him of a plot to assassinate Attorney General Robert Kennedy with "plastic explosives." It was a story that seemed too fantastic for belief, but Partin insisted that it was true. Partin had been a prisoner in the Baton Rouge jail, held on a kidnapping charge that had grown out of a friend's domestic squabble. Captain Edwards called the home of William H. (Billy) Daniels, an assistant to District Attorney Sargent Pitcher. Within an hour, Daniels arrived at the courthouse and took the elevator to the fourth-floor jail.

Along with Daniels, Partin poured out his story. A few weeks earlier, he said, he had driven to Washington at the International Teamsters headquarters, he had been called into an office there and asked about obtaining plastic explosives for the assassination of the Attorney General. "Something has to be done about that little S.O.B., Bobby Kennedy," Partin quoted Jimmy Hoffa as saying. "He'll be an easy target, always driving around Washington in that convertible with that big black dog. All we need are some plastic explosives tossed in with him, and that will finish him off."

Partin said he had been told that day that some thought had been given to using the plastic explosives on the Robert Kennedy home at McLean, Virginia.

The muscular Louisiana Teamster said he had been approached because those involved in the plot believed he was in so much trouble over federal criminal indictments that he would find the plan acceptable. He explained to his Baton Rouge listeners that some of the top Teamsters also knew he was a gun fancier, with a private collection, who might have convenient access to sources of misuse of union funds. Partin's name and background were well known in Baton Rouge as quickly as possible. Whatever Ed Partin told Daniels he had tried to contact Attorney General Kennedy and another top official. He had been brushed aside by subordinates. He emphasized that he didn't want to tell his story unless it was to go to the top people. He didn't want to take a chance that word might leak out of the Justice Department to the International Teamsters headquarters. He didn't want to jeopardize his job as a Teamster official or his safety by being tagged as a "squealer."

Billy Daniels told Partin he thought he could arrange a talk with top Justice Department people, but that it would be necessary to discuss this with District Attorney Pitcher first. Daniels said he would try to return later with Pitcher.

That evening, Daniels and Pitcher returned to the East Baton Rouge Parish Building. Partin repeated his story of the assassination plot. Pitcher called New Orleans, where he reached Assistant United States Attorney Peter Duffy. Pitcher told Duffy only that Partin had related a story of a "grave matter involving national security."

Duffy made an immediate call to A. Frank Grimsley, a Justice Department lawyer from Atlanta, who had been working with the United States Attorney's office on several Teamsters matters, including the investigation that resulted in the indictment of Partin a few months earlier on a charge of misuse of union funds. Partin's name and background were familiar to Grimsley. Certainly, the subject matter was vague, but Grimsley had learned that all possibilities should be covered on the theory that only a small percentage might check through.

Grimsley called Walter Sheridan's home in Bethesda, Maryland, and without hesitation Sheridan told him to leave for Baton Rouge as quickly as possible. Whatever Ed Partin wanted to talk about would be worth the trip, for Partin had been close to Hoffa and several other key officials in the Southern Conference of Teamsters. Sheridan's unit had already cultivated a half-dozen informants among the men
trusted by Hoffa, but another informant could always be helpful.

On Monday, October first, at the FBI office in the Baton Rouge Post Office Building, Pitcher and Daniels outlined the alleged assassination plot to Grimsley and Assistant U.S. Attorney Duffy. Daniels explained that it would be best not to talk to Partin during the day. Too many people might know things that had to be done. He notified Assistant Attorney General Herbert J. (Jack) Miller, head of the Criminal Division, Attorney General Kennedy, and the FBI. Some basic security measures were urged with regard to the Attorney General's family, including temporary abandonment of the convertible Robert Kennedy often used. The FBI was to arrange for a lie-detector test for Partin. If this indicated that Partin was truthful, then a number of additional measures would be taken.

The FBI report on the lie-detector test confirmed Grimsley's view that Partin was telling the truth.

On October twenty-third, Partin left Nashville, but before he left he called Sheridan again. Hoffa, he reported, had "called me into his room and told me when I came back he may want me to pass something for him."

"(Hoffa) says they were going to get one juror, or try to get a few scattered jurors, and take their chances," Partin told Sheridan.

Partin said he had met Ewing King, president of the Nashville Teamsters local, and King then told him "they had a meeting set up on the jury that night."

On Tuesday, October twenty-third, Partin left Nashville, but before he left he called Sheridan again. Hoffa, he reported had "called me into his room and told me when I came back he may want me to pass something for him."

"(Hoffa) put his hand behind his pocket like that and hit his rear pocket," Partin told Sheridan.

That was Partin's story of how he decided to co-operate with the government and how he relayed to Sheridan the first information of jury-tampering that was later to be corrobated by FBI agents and other witnesses. It was a story unknown to Hoffa and the defense lawyers in the first two weeks of the trial, when it seemed that a circumstantial case was being constructed and it appeared that Hoffa was adequately insulated against direct involvement.

For the first two weeks of this second trial, Hoffa was his usual cocky self and his attorneys were highly optimistic. Then, on the fourth day, Ed Partin, who had been hidden on the outskirts of Chattanooga for three days, stepped through the rear door of the courtroom as the principal prosecution witness.

Hoffa was shocked and rage. Partin was one of the last Teamsters he had expected to talk. With Hoffa prodding them, the nine defense lawyers made a frantic effort to suppress Partin's testimony.

Judge Wilson overruled the defense motions to bar testimony from Partin, and Special U.S. Prosecutor John L. Hooker brought Partin's story of his talks with Hoffa and others and the passing of information to Sheridan. It was this testimony that linked Hoffa to the jury-tampering that had been explained earlier by other witnesses.

The prosecuting attorney avoided questioning Partin about the assassination-plot conversations that had been a part of Partin's first contact with the Justice Department. Hooker and Neal argued that details of the assassination plot were immaterial to a trial involving jury-tampering. They wanted to bar information that might be considered as simply inflammatory and prejudicial to the rights of Hoffa and other defendants.

The prosecution's efforts to avoid those first conversations between Partin and Federal Attorney Grimsley only made the defense lawyers more eager to explore those talks. The FBI gave him one, yes," Grimsley replied.

"It doesn't pertain to this case," Grimsley replied.

Hoffa—," Grimsley started to say but was cut off by Judge Wilson, who said, "Don't go into the details of it."

Well, Mr. Partin stated that in a conference with Mr. Hoffa—," Grimsley started to say but was cut off by Judge Wilson, who said, "Don't go into the details of it."

"Tell us what that was?" Silets coaxed him.

"It doesn't pertain to this case," Grimsley replied.

Judge Wilson ruled that the talk of the plot was immaterial to the jury-fix trial and not to be explored. However, the defense persisted a few more minutes. Grimsley called to testify as defense lawyers sought evidence of inconsistency or grounds for a mistrial.

"Don't go into the details of it."

Silets then tried to characterize the assassination plot as a "contrived circumstance" and "unsubstantiated wild charges" to hide improper schemes of wiretapping involving the Justice Department.

On cross-examination, Prosecutor James Neal tried to refute comments by Silets that tended to discredit Ed Partin and his story of an assassination plot.

"Mr. Silets talked about a wild rumor and so forth respectively to an assassination plot—Neal started his question. Then he asked, "Did you or someone give Mr. Partin a lie-detector test on that?"

"The FBI gave him one, yes," Grimsley replied.

An assassination plot?"

"That he was telling the (continued on page 69)
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telling the truth," Grimskie said.

"Mr. Grimskie, you stated that one of the recordings had to do with an assassination plot," Prosecutor John Hooker began. "Did it have anything to do with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy?" Hooker inquired.

"No sir, it did not," Grimskie answered.

Walker Southall, who then was called by the defense, testified: "I was furnished a report concerning this specific (assassination) matter. I believe it was turned over to the court."

Sheridan said, "Instructions were given to the FBI to pursue the matter further. They conducted an investigation to corroborate the information -did corroborate it; then action was taken."

There was a defense effort later in this trial to use testimony of convicted criminals and disreputable women to discredit Partin as a "wanton alcoholic," but such testimony was contradicted by medical experts.

Hoffa, usually a smooth, suave witness on his own behalf, was now a snarling and argumenative witness under the cross-examination by stentorian-toned Prosecutor Hooker.

"You have just been convicted of having struck at the very foundation upon which everything else in the administration of justice.".

In the prosecution's argument to the jury in answering a defense claim of privilege, Judge Frank Wilson sentenced Hoffa to eight years in the Federal prison and a $10,000 fine.

Judge Wilson declared that the evidence clearly sustained the guilty verdict.

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