

The Unsinkable Marguerite Oswald

by Harold Feldman

"It's kind of fun being part of history-being-made here on television tonight...."

—Les Crane, on the occasion of Marguerite Oswald's guest appearance on his new television program

If the cocksure rogues who planned to condemn Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone assassin of President Kennedy had known his mother better, things would have been different. Certainly they would have taken pause and, perhaps, looked around for another "patsy."

Now they have her on their trail, and they snarl at her from all sides with malice and menace. Their literary agents cannot write three lines about her without suggesting that the only proper place for this aging Antigone who cries for justice for her murdered son is an asylum or a grave.

Yes, there is a touch of the prima donna about Marguerite Oswald as she garners some egoistic comfort from her isolation. Here and there she responds to the icy deafness of the dominations and powers with extravagant suspicion and speculation. But if Ibsen is right and the strongest is the one who stands alone for integrity and honor, then Marguerite Oswald is the strongest woman in America. One thing is sure for anyone who knows about her life and knows her—she is a brave, bold and good woman.

I first saw her in action on Saturday morning, June 27. I arrived in Dallas with two friends the day before to review the historical landmarks of the Kennedy assassination, and a brief telephone call to Lee Harvey Oswald's mother in Fort Worth brought an invitation to guide us on a tour of Oak Cliff. That is the section of Dallas where her son is said to have killed Patrolman J. D. Tippit, where he was captured three quarters of an hour after the policeman's death, an hour and a half after sniper bullets had blasted the President.

The first surprise was her voice. Even I, who was skeptical of the government reports about the Dallas mayhem from the start, was led by newspaper accounts to expect a gruff paranoid harridan. What I heard instead was a pleasant ladylike welcome—not a trace of cautious ambiguity, not a second of hesitation in the warm courtesy that carried within in it only a faint suggestion of loneliness.

Marguerite Oswald is 56 years old but there is hardly a wrinkle on her round pink-cheeked face. Short, plump, even dumpy, her avoirdupois only indicates what Norman Mailer calls "happy fat." Her face and figure are lively souvenirs of what must have been a

pretty vivacious girlhood, and the added weight, horn-rimmed bifocals, and salt-and-pepper hair pulled back into a knot have only turned it into an agreeable matronliness.

Mrs. Oswald was a \$10-a-day practical nurse when the President's murder turned her into the fighting defender of the Oswald family honor (she was fired a few days later); it is easy to imagine her busy about a sick room, cajoling, comforting, chatting, and standing for no nonsense about taking one's nux vomica.

The part of Oak Cliff where Lee Oswald lived and J. D. Tippit died is a deteriorating neighborhood whose large houses have turned into so many rooms for low rent. Our tour came several days after the newspapers reported how Oswald was prevented from starting a homicidal career with Richard Nixon only by his wife locking him in his room.

□ We went to the rooming house near 8th and Neely where Lee and Marina lived at the time. Marguerite was admitted with sympathetic deference and she went form room to room, pointing out that none of the doors had ever had locks on them.

Life Goes to a Darkroom

Before we left, she photographed the fence against which Lee was supposed to be standing when he had his picture taken for future reference, holding a rifle, a gun, and a Bolshevik newspaper. "Look here," she said, and pointed to the bottom of the fence, obviously very different from what appeared on the dubious cover of *Life*. □

After we located the spot on E. 10th St. where Tippit was found dead, we walked about a block and a half to the home of Helen Louise Markham. She is the one who, the reports say, was the lone witness to that shooting. Oak Cliff almost becomes a slum there. Mrs. Markham lives in a small apartment above a barber shop and she was pacing back and forth, her infant granddaughter in her arms, when we arrived.

No, she could not talk to us now, she had to mind the baby. We offered to pay for a baby-sitter. No again, but could we return at 2:15 when her husband would be home and we could talk freely. Helen Markham is still young—but shabby, beaten, and spiritless. Mrs. Oswald spontaneously reached for the baby and held her for a moment.

At 2:15 we plowed through the Turkish-bath afternoon Texas heat, carrying six-packs of Coke against the anxious hour we foresaw in the hot stale air of the Markham apartment. As we approached 328½ E. 9th where the Markhams live, we noticed two Dallas police station wagons parked outside, and just as we turned the corner of 9th and Patton we saw them pull away.

Mrs. Oswald guessed what the police were there for. Up the stairs she charged, and there we met the most pitiful spectacle in our experience. Mr. Markham stood in the doorway, and behind him the alleged witness to the Tippit murder cowered to one side. The man was a quivering wreck. Every muscle in his lean frame was a-tremble, his mouth twitched uncontrollably, and his teeth were actually chattering from fright.

"Please go away," he groaned like a whipped puppy. "Please go away and don't come back."

"You've been threatened, haven't you?" Mrs. Oswald asked.

"Yes. Please go away."

Outside, Mrs. Oswald's eyes grew red fighting back the tears that welled up. "That poor man!" she kept repeating. She wanted to go to Washington at once to report the incident to the Warren Commission. "Did you see him?" she said. "He was frightened to death. What right do they have to threaten him? This is still America, by God," she cried. "We're going to see if they can get away with this."

□ Bill Markham, the 20-year-old son of Helen Markham, followed us outside. His mother and stepfather, he said, were too scared of the police and Secret Service to talk to us but he wasn't. He would meet us outside the public library some three blocks away.

He spoke to us in Mrs. Oswald's car, and unutterable contempt for his parents showed in every word. Also clear was his desperate need of money. Would we pay for information about the Tippit killing?

It only takes an hour of independent work on the Oswald case to make one circumspect and guarded. We might be charged later with bribing a witness, and then how did we know that the boy was not every bit of the liar he said his mother was. The sullen boy with the handsome tanned face topped with black curls admitted he had a police record, that the police had gotten him fired from several jobs by so-called parole check-ups. He was not working and what he wanted more than anything else right now was money.

"I need it, ma'am," he said slowly, "and I'm going to get myself some." Yes, the Secret Service had told his parents that "there would be trouble" if they talked to outsiders. "But I'm not afraid, ma'am. I need money and if I don't get some one way, I'll get it another."

Why not go away to another state and start again clean, Mrs. Oswald pleaded with him.

"The police'll be after me anyway, ma'am, and I can't afford a lawyer. I can't afford anything."

"Please take care," she told him. "Oh Lord, poor people are so helpless. If you were middle-class, you wouldn't have these problems. And don't be so sure you can win against the police. My Lee was so sure."

As he was leaving the car, she took his hand. "Take care of yourself," she said, "and if you get into trouble and need help, please get in touch with me. I'll find some way to help you."

Two days later Marguerite called us to come over fast. She greeted us, holding up a newspaper in her hand. The Markham boy had been picked up for burglary and parole violation.

It recalled the similar arrest a few weeks before of Abraham Bolden, the first Negro Secret Service man assigned to the Presidential bodyguard, on charges of cooperating with counterfeiters. There, too, the arrest was made after Bolden announced he had information relevant to the assassination of the President. There, too, the charge was entirely based on the testimony of two witnesses who themselves were under police charges.

"I keep thinking, maybe talking to us got the boy arrested," Mrs. Oswald said. "We've got to help him. We gave him our word."

And for seven hours Marguerite Oswald was on the phone trying to get young Markham a lawyer. She called Mark Lane in New York, called Greg Olds of the Dallas Civil Liberties Union (who made vague, unfulfilled pledges), called the Lawyers Referral Service, called six attorneys in Fort Worth who all begged off.

Over and over she asked for a lawyer to visit the boy in jail to make sure he was represented by counsel. Shadow images crossed her mind of the boy being killed in jail as her son was. She offered to pay the legal expenses but it was no go. She got promises, recommendations, apologies, but no lawyer.

Mark Lane finally managed to persuade a reluctant colleague in Dallas to see young Markham.

Mrs. Oswald is unemployed. No job has materialized for her since the assassination. Her income now is based almost solely on the sale of documents to the press.

Life bought a picture of her and Marina for a thousand dollars and *Esquire* paid \$4000 for sixteen letters Lee had written her during his stay in Russia. Some foreign reporters paid her for interviews.

She lives in a one-floor three-room house (rent: \$30 a month), she spends little for food, her wardrobe is rather bare, and air-conditioning is beyond her budget. What other money she has, she spends on the defense of Lee Oswald.

What a sharp contrast the neglect of this mother makes to the fantastic concern that government and church have shown for the alleged assassin's wife, Marina. The Russian girl, whom Lee married after he had already decided to return to America, has received some \$75,000 in contributions and compensation. She is the object of every tender solicitude, public and domestic, from the Secret Service.

When the Fort Worth Council of Churches started a fund for the Oswalds, they soon made it clear that none of their charity was meant for the mother who was so unmotherly as to defend her son. Checks donated for the relief of Marguerite were returned to the senders.

The reason for this discrimination, the lavish acceptance of Marina, the hostile ostracism of Marguerite, is obvious enough.

Marina cooperates.

She makes the proper noises for the Secret Service and the FBI.

After first protesting his innocence, she now hardly lets a week go by without adding to the monstrous list of her husband's intended victims.

Marguerite Oswald, on the other hand, is inflexible in defense of her son's innocence, at least until he is proven guilty. "The money is running out," she says, "but I've learned not to worry." Like Micawber, she is sure something will turn up.

Almost every day she visits Lee's grave in Rosehill Cemetery, just outside of Fort Worth. She replaces the flowers taken by souvenir hunters, weeds the grass and tends the sapling that rises over his grave. In her car she carries a garden hose which she attaches to the spigot at the graveside and waters the grave.

A Star Is Born

The area around the grave has been trodden into a hard brown walk by the daily visitors, and the need to keep face before hundreds of curious watchers every day has made her a bit of a showoff. Every inch of her bearing is a polite defiance of her isolation and an awareness of history. She is proud, if not of her son, certainly of herself.

Mrs. Oswald is a Lutheran and a white Southerner. Like Madame Dreyfus 70 years ago, nothing but her position as the victim of an official frame-up (Madame Dreyfus always called it a "judicial error") would have ever put her in contact with the handful of radicals who take up her cause.

A parochial Texan, Mrs. Oswald is not altogether comfortable with the voluminous sympathy she receives from Europe. She is a bit uneasy about Mark Lane's crusade for justice for Lee in Paris, Rome, Budapest and London. She would like the case fought out in America by Americans—but sometimes despair grips her heart, and she wonders whether she herself will not wind up in European exile.

She was born and grew up in New Orleans. She raised her family in Fort Worth. The word "nigger" comes naturally to her lips (just as it did to her son's even after he was supposed to be a Communist in Russia), but the least injustice against Negroes, Mexicans or Indians starts her indignation tank boiling again.

Whenever we expressed doubt about her prospects, she would reply, "This is America" or "This is Texas"—something we cosmopolitans from Philadelphia could not be expected to comprehend. Because "this is America," Mrs. Oswald waved aside our opinion that the Warren Commission would not vindicate her son and herself. She glories in the fact that all of her sons served in the Marines, and Lee, she says over and over, was acting for the United States government from the

day he joined the Marines in 1956 to the day he was handcuffed and shot in a Dallas jail.

Her oldest son, John Edward Pic, born of her first marriage, has passed 4 years in uniform and is now an Air Force sergeant. Robert E. Lee Oswald Jr., her second boy, was Lee Harvey's "big brother." She remembers Lee in his early teens studying the print off of Robert's Marine manual.

One day she found Lee puzzling over the manual and beside it was a paper-bound Communist pamphlet. It was this brochure which was padded and inflated in the post-assassination press until it could be passed off as *Das Kapital*, no less, always mentioned with the German title, mind you. Probably it was the pamphlet about the Rosenbergs which Lee told Aline Mosby about in Moscow.

He quit Arlington Heights High School in the 10th grade to join the Marines, and his mother believes that even then Lee was contemplating undercover work for Uncle Sam among the Reds.

Dogpatch Dogmatism

Lee Harvey Oswald never became a Communist and his mother is certainly not one. But, coexisting with a conventional patriotism in both of them, is a spontaneously radical point of view burgeoning out of a lifelong war with deprivation and poverty. Marguerite Oswald knows in her bones that the poor are a beaten and harassed flock and that the polite equality of the law is usually a boon for the rich and a rawhide whip for the poor.

"If my son had been wealthy, he might be alive today," she says. "Lee was denied the right to have a lawyer because he didn't have any money." In one part of her heart she is a stalwart who believes, like Li'l Abner, in the flag, the FBI and the Capitol in Washington. In the other, she understands that this is a land where money and prestige rule the roost.

And if Marguerite Oswald is poor and keenly aware of the meaning of poverty, her poverty is nevertheless self-consciously genteel. "We were down and out many times," she says, "but we were never trash."

When they were newcomers in New York and Lee, age 14, was placed in a reformatory for being absent without leave from school for 17 days, he cried out, "You've got to get me out of here, mother. They have real criminals here, kids who have stabbed people and killed people with guns!"

She kept her children clean and neat, they ate their pork and beans, napkin in hand, and her home, however bare, always manifested a middle-class taste. She was plainly elated when Lee's landlady in Dallas told her that Lee was the only tenant in the place who washed the tub out after he took a bath.

The Oswalds were frugal, paid their debts, lived on sandwiches when they had to, and saved their scrapings. One day she saw her nursing home employer browbeat and abuse an old patient and she quit her job in a helpless rage. "I didn't know where my next meal was coming from," she told Jack Langguth of the *N.Y. Times*, "but I have principles and I've learned not to worry."

Lee was secretive, she notes, "but he never lied to me." She recalled the day in New York, 1952, when he volunteered that he had not been going to school but was spending the time riding the subways and visiting the zoo. When Lee returned from Russia and was having a hard time of it keeping a wife and child on \$1.25-an-hour jobs or unemployment compensation, Mrs. Oswald asked him why he left Russia, where his job was easy and the pay regular, to come home to life as a virtual derelict.

"Not even Marina knows that," was his answer.

What Mrs. Oswald insists on in the case as much as his innocence is her conviction that Lee was an American secret agent. Day after day she studies the photographs and reports of the assassination. "Analyzing," she calls it, and her interpretations evidence a sharp intelligence.

I saw her drive around Fort Worth and Dallas to find and question potential witnesses. I watched her on the phone tormenting Liebler, Redlich and Rankin of the Warren Commission with a calm dignity.

When Lee's Russian "diary" was leaked to the *Dallas Morning News*, I watched Ed Barker of KRLD-TV inter-

view her about the break. She held forth like a dowager queen in court. Expressing gratitude for the publication of her son's notes, she serenely proceeded to quote and analyze. "They prove, you see, what I have always maintained," she said—"that Lee was an American agent."

Before we left, she pointed out how Federal agents had repeatedly violated the laws of Texas by doing away with evidence that may have proved her son's innocence:

"First, they took the President's body out of Texas. The Dallas doctors thought the bullets came from the front, but the Federal men had a secret autopsy in Bethesda, Maryland, when it should have been done here and become part of the court record. Then they took the President's limousine out of the state, rushed it off. This was a most important item of evidence but they dismantled it and rebuilt it before anyone here could examine it for bullet holes."

Establishment Ethics

The journalists who earn their daily bourbon on assignment from *Life*, *Time*, and the news networks have never stopped portraying Marguerite Oswald as a self-centered, domineering, paranoiac showoff with frequent de-

lusions of persecution. It reminds me of Freud's remark that there would be no such thing as a persecution complex if there were not real persecution.

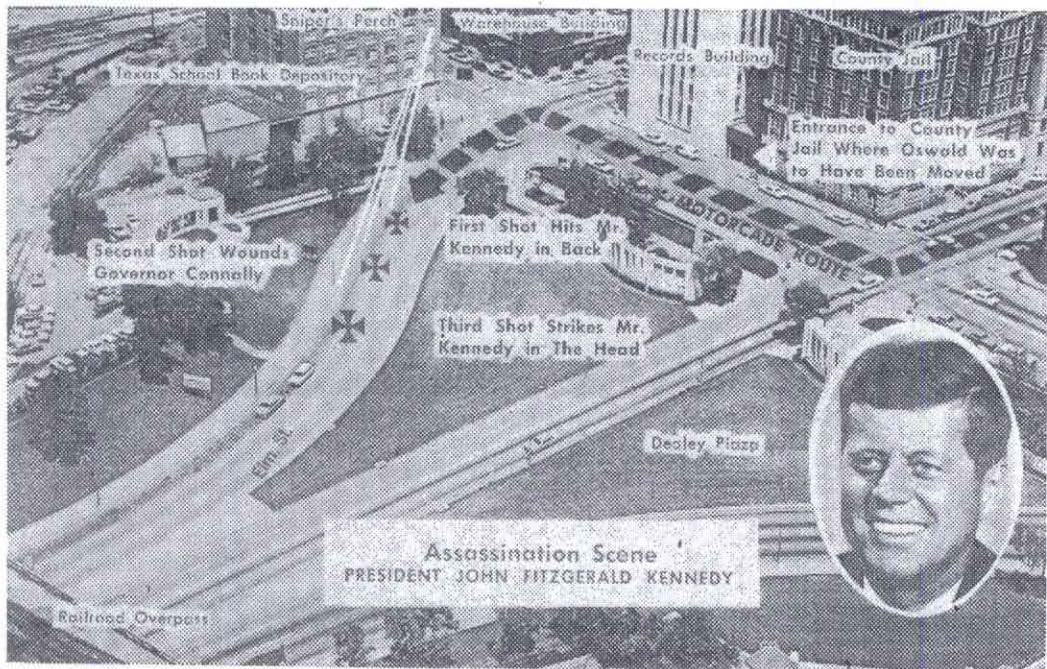
Mrs. Oswald does not play ball with the authorities. She is therefore authoritarian. She insists on all her rights and is deeply concerned about the place of her family in the historical record. She is consequently an exhibitionist.

She has devoted every day since November 22, 1963, to uncovering what she believes and millions believe is a real conspiracy in which her youngest son was the fall guy. As a result, she is held up to scorn as a bitter old woman who sees snares and plots everywhere.

After her son was arrested and she faced her lone uphill way, she said, "They turned their backs on me before and they will turn their backs on me again, but my faith will see me through." Marguerite Oswald is unbreakable.

That is why the powers are offended.

Is Marguerite Oswald "emotional" and "unstable," as the *Maedchen fuer Alle* of the press say? We spent 5 days in her house and watched her under high pressure. If she is emotional, then Molly Pitcher was a hysteric. If she is unstable, then Mount Rushmore is putty.



Picture Postcard from Texas

September 1964