

Cousin Says Johnson Told Of Job With Italian League

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By BARBARA CAMPBELL

A cousin of Jerome A. Johnson, who was shot to death at the site of a rally in Columbus Circle after allegedly firing three bullets into Joseph A. Colombo Sr., said yesterday that Johnson told him "several months ago" he was working for the Italian-American Civil Rights League as a photographer.

This was corroborated by a close friend of Johnson's, who said the 24-year-old slain man had also told him on a May 15 visit to California that he was working for the league.

A check by The New York Times of a telephone number Johnson had given to his cousin disclosed yesterday that the

number had been recently changed. The operator said the number had been switched to a new number, which is the number of the Italian-American League.

This latest development raised a series of questions for key investigators, who were not immediately available to comment last night. If he was working for the league, was he known there? Was he an employe or a hanger-on, perhaps a temporary called in on occasions?

The league spokesman, Thomas Nastro, denied that Johnson worked for the organ-

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ization, but added that "we have many volunteers and it's possible that he might have done work for one of our chapters."

Mr. Nastro said that the first time he had seen the alleged assailant had been when Johnson requested press credentials at Columbus Circle on Monday at the Unity Day rally sponsored by the league.

Colombo, founder of the league, was shot three times in the head at the rally, and witnesses and the police say Johnson shot him. Johnson was in turn shot and killed by an unknown assailant.

The police are still trying to learn what motives Johnson might have had to shoot Colombo, but they have ruled out one widely held speculation: that Johnson was associated with a black militant organization.

There also has been speculation that Johnson was a "hit" man for a rival underworld faction or that he was deranged and working alone.

Richard Garvin, director of the Department of Community Services at Rutgers University, is the cousin who said Johnson had given him a phone number about three months ago that Johnson said was the league office.

Mr. Garvin said that he called the number a month ago and left a message with an apparent answering service and that his cousin had returned the call.

Number Is Changed

After hearing about the shooting, Mr. Garvin said that he called the number again and that an operator said it had been changed. The new number was that of the league office.

The number Johnson gave his cousin was 242-8938, which, according to the New York Telephone Company's Manhattan directory, was assigned to the Walker & Williams Exterminating Company in Manhattan.

However, the manager of the building said there never had been such an exterminating company at that address. Johnson was reported to have lived in the same building for several months this year.

On April 28, he called the telephone company's business office and asked that the number be suspended and that calls be transferred to the Qualified Answering Service, 924-4111.

Several days later, he called

again and asked that the calls be transferred to the Gramercy Telephone Answering Service, 924-7500.

Some time between June 15 and June 25 a request was made of the telephone company to transfer calls from 242-8938 to 486-9415, the number of the Italian-American Civil Rights League at 635 Madison Avenue.

Mr. Garvin and Joseph Tuotti, a playwright and a close friend of Johnson's for six years, presented a different picture of Johnson than had been known earlier.

In an interview, Mr. Garvin said his cousin had visited his office in New Brunswick at Rutgers and told him he "made a score in New York working for the Italian-American Civil Rights League."

Mr. Garvin said he had told Johnson to concentrate on black civil rights rather than on Italian rights, but Johnson had told him, "Italians are discriminated against, too, you know."

Mr. Garvin said Johnson believed that the job would be his big break into motion pictures. Johnson planned to "get in on the movement while it was young" and make a documentary of photographs, tape recordings and films trips of the Italian-American movement while he was working for the league.

Johnson then borrowed a Sony tape recorder, Mr. Garvin said, and some money and went back to New York. Mr. Garvin said that Johnson had moved from the New Brunswick home of his mother six months ago to New York.

Johnson, Mr. Garvin said, was almost never without a camera, and his overriding ambition was to be a filmmaker. The cousin said that Johnson had attempted to set up his own company, Johnson Publications, which never got off the ground. He often visited his office, Mr. Garvin said, before he moved to New York, to make local phone calls or use the duplicating machine.

Camera Is Missing

Mr. Garvin said he had never known Johnson to carry a gun or any other weapon. "The only thing that Jerome ever pointed to my knowledge was a camera," he said. The police speculate that an accomplice took Johnson's camera immediately after the shooting.

Mr. Tuotti, the author of the Broadway play "Big Time Buck White," said he first met John-

son in 1965 in Hollywood and they became close friends.

Johnson, Mr. Tuotti said, often had conversations with him exploring reactions to racism against Italian-Americans and blacks. The playwright said that he considered his relationship with Johnson almost a mystical one, going much further than friendship.

After Johnson left California in the spring of 1968, Mr. Tuotti said they often visited each other. The last time Johnson visited him in California, he said, was May 15 in Torrance. Mr. Tuotti's father who lives in Westchester, had bought Johnson's airplane ticket, the playwright said.

Mr. Tuotti described the slain man as one who "could never be used." But, he also was, he said, a perennial optimist who always lived on a "survival level," working through schemes for his big break in Hollywood.

"He was always at the right place where the action was occurring," he said. "He wouldn't think Mafia at Columbus Circle, something was happening and he would be there."