

'Umbrella Man' Comes In From the Cold as Slayings Panel Witness

By Jeremiah O'Leary
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The Dallas "umbrella man" came in from the cold yesterday to explain to the House Assassinations Committee why he raised his open umbrella in Dealey Plaza on the sunny day that President John F. Kennedy was killed 15 years ago.

Louie Steven Witt, 53, is a small, gray man who works for the Rio Grande National Life Insurance Co. in Dallas. Before he appeared before the committee, he was a mystery man and the darling of the assassination buffs. Now he is likely to go down as the source of the only belly laughs yet heard during the hearings on Kennedy's death.

Four pictures of the "umbrella man," have puzzled investigators since Nov. 22, 1963.

Conspiracy buffs have suggested that he raised his umbrella as the Kennedy motorcade passed his vantage point either as a signal to a marksman or that actually the umbrella was a disguised weapon right out of James Bond.

BUT WITT testified that he only went to the president's parade route to heckle the Kennedy family with the umbrella.

He said he intended to raise the umbrella because he hoped to irritate the Kennedys with memories of old Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy's isolationist views at the start of World War II.

That, Witt explained was because it signified a Kennedy connection with the late umbrella-carrying Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's deal with the Nazis 40 years ago that became a symbol for appeasement.

Witt was never located by the FBI or the Dallas police in 1963 but the House committee found him after his picture was circulated in Dallas newspapers recently.

"If the Guinness Book of Records has a category for being at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong thing, I'd be in first place," Witt told the panel ruefully.

"I wish I could remember who put the idea in my head that this would bother them. I'd probably clout him over the head with it after all that has happened to me in the past few weeks." Witt said.

"I HEARD THE shots while I was opening that stupid umbrella so it blocked my view of what had happened," Witt testified. Delegate Walter Fauntroy, D-D.C., observed that the movie film taken by an amateur photographer in Dealey Plaza that day made him look like a "cool cat."

He reminded committee Chairman Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, that he specifically requested that he not be asked to demonstrate how he opened the umbrella just as Kennedy's car passed his vantage point by the grassy knoll. "I would just be more fodder for an over-eager press in Dallas to embarrass me and my family."

Stokes asked a young committee aide, Cynthia Cooper, to open it. Cooper, somewhat flustered, picked up the umbrella and Stokes said laughingly, "don't point it this way."

When Cooper opened the umbrella, it promptly turned inside out and the hearing room erupted in wild laughter as she tried to get it back into shape.

Stokes said with the entire committee laughing along with the spectators, "well, I guess there's no gun in it."

YESTERDAY WAS "knock down the conspiracy theories" day at the committee.

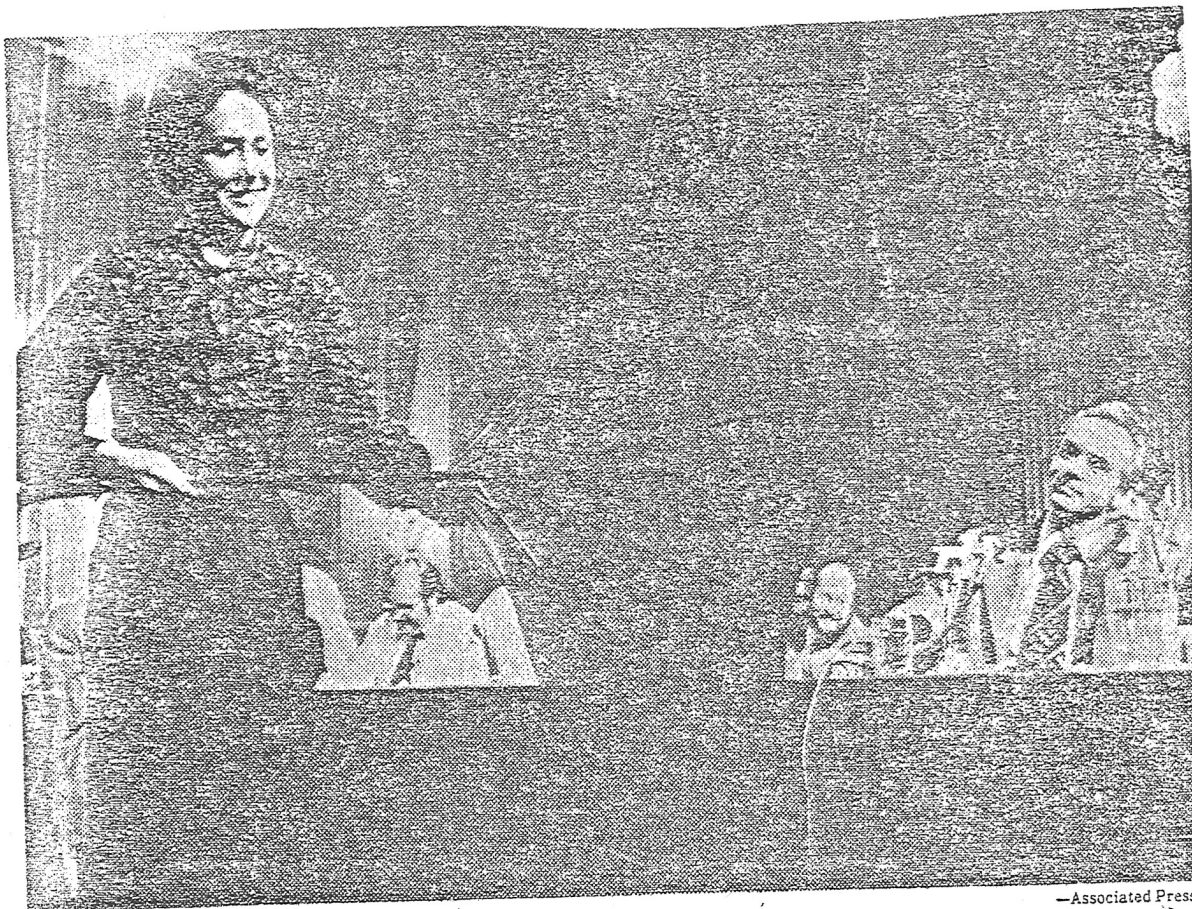
The first conspiracy theory the committee tackled was the question of resolving the issue of whether there were two Lee Harvey Oswalds, as some critics have insisted. The committee produced handwriting expert Joseph McNally to testify that all five exhibits of Oswald's handwriting were written by the same man over the years 1956 to 1963 without any sign of forgery or alteration.

Then the committee proceeded to destroy with scientific testimony the critics' concept that Oswald's Marine enlistment photo was not an accurate photo.

The committee then proceeded to knock down the contentions that the

man in the doorway of the Texas Schoolbook Depository was really Oswald. Committee counsel G. Robert Blakey said that man was actually another employee, Dilly Lovelady.

THE COMMITTEE also considered the so-called three tramps who were grabbed by Dallas police near the grassy knoll, demonstrating through anthropological studies that neither E. Howard Hunt nor Frank Sturgis, the Watergate figures, were two of the three tramps. The committee does not know who the three tramps were because they were never booked but Dr. Clyde Snow, an anthropologist said they were neither of the two men who later were involved in the Watergate scandal, and proved it with giant enlargements.



—Associated Press

Dallas insurance salesman Louie Witt (right) watches as staff aide Cyndi Cooper demonstrates Witt's umbrella which supposedly was used as a signal in President Kennedy's assassination. Witt used the umbrella that day but told House panelists he was only there to heckle the President.