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Caption: The Feb. 7, 1969, New Orleans Times-Picayune talks about Lee Oswald, Clay Shaw and David Ferrie being seen in Clinton, La. (Jeff Meek photo)

The other official JFK assassination investigation

In this column I’ve written about the Warren Commission and their 1964 conclusion that there was no conspiracy in the death of President Kennedy and also about the House Select Committee on Assassination’s 1979 conclusion that there was a conspiracy to kill the president. Here in this edition of “The JFK Files” I’m writing about the only other official investigation into Nov. 22, 1963, that being New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison’s probe into the murder.

It began just as a rumor that Garrison was making inquiries about the murder, but the cat was out of the bag on March 1, 1967, when Garrison announced that he had arrested New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw for conspiring to kill Kennedy. It was a bold move and attracted a lot of attention, including from the CIA. Two years later the 3-week trial began, and the case went to the jury on Feb. 28, 1969. Hours later on March 1, Shaw was acquitted.

In 1991, Oliver Stone’s blockbuster movie “JFK” captured the attention of millions. I remember after watching it I was disappointed that Stone had focused on such a discredited investigation, but I was happy that the movie brought attention to the case which in short order resulted in the 1992 JFK Records Collection Act and in 1994 the Assassination Records Review Board that successfully forced agencies and departments to release millions of pages of documents.

For this column I sought out Joan Mellen, a recognized expert on the Garrison – Shaw case. What she shared with me about certain aspects and people involved in the case were a real eye opener. Mellon is a former professor of English at Temple University and author of 2 dozen books. In the JFK research community, she is seen as one of a very few who have dug deep into the Garrison – Shaw case.

She first met Garrison shortly after the trial. Her husband had previously sent him clippings from Italian newspapers about an entity called Permindex which was based in Switzerland, founded by the CIA, and had Clay Shaw on its board of directors. None of this information could be used at the trial because it was considered hearsay. In gratitude, Garrison invited Mellen and her husband to come to New Orleans, which they did and sat down together for dinner one evening.

I asked Mellen what she saw as the biggest surprise of the Garrison – Shaw trial. “The fact that Shaw lied many times. And Garrison was right about everything. He saw Oswald’s movements as those of a CIA operative. Everyone that Oswald saw was CIA.”

It is now well documented that Shaw was a CIA “active contact” for the CIA’s Domestic Contact Service. Shaw’s CIA contact in New Orleans was case officer Hunter Leake, who reported to Bill Weiss. Another CIA document shows that the CIA was worried about being connected to Shaw. From a CIA document: “We are somewhat more concerned about how we should respond to any direct questions concerning the Agency’s relationship with Clay Shaw.” Still another document refers to Shaw as being highly paid by the CIA. Thus, when Garrison began digging into all this the CIA began sabotaging the case. Mellen believes that Shaw was an Oswald caretaker in New Orleans.

One example of how Garrison’s case against Shaw was sabotaged relates to a man by the name of Thomas Bethell who came to New Orleans to volunteer in Garrison’s office. Bethell was Oxford University educated and was brought on to Garrison’s staff. But Bethell turned out to be anything but helpful because he turned over a list of trial witnesses, which was not required, to Shaw’s lawyer Salvatore Panzeca. Garrison filed charges against Bethell, but nothing came of it and there was no punishment.

Mellen also mentioned James Kirkwood who wrote a book, “American Grotesque.” Mellon said Kirkwood was a CIA plant. His job was to write favorably about Shaw. “The book was the idea of CIA,” Mellon told me. Later, Kirkwood’s editor said that had he known of the Kirkwood – Shaw relationship, he would never have signed on to do the book.

There were many other plants as well. House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) Deputy Legal Counsel Robert Tannenbaum was shown a document that listed CIA plants inside Garrison’s office. Nine names were on that list. Ask yourself this question. If there was no Shaw – CIA connection, why plant people in Garrison’s office? Answering that Mellen said, “because Shaw was their guy.” Tannenbaum also found a memo from CIA Deputy Director Richard Helms that revealed how the CIA followed, harassed, and attempted to intimidate Garrison’s witnesses.

Space doesn’t allow me to give more examples of CIA infiltration into the matter, but I want to share one very interesting aspect of the case that was unknown to the Warren Commission and well researched by Mellen. I’m talking about an Oswald sighting in Clinton, Louisiana in the summer of 1963. In the late 1970’s the HSCA investigated this lead and found 6 witnesses “credible, significant and truthful.” Clinton is about 130 miles from New Orleans, is the county seat for East Feliciana Parish and was being targeted by the Congress of Racial Equality for a voting rights campaign.

Oswald first showed up in nearby Jackson, Louisiana, seeking employment at East Louisiana State Mental Hospital. Oswald was told a job there would require him to be a register voter, so he went to Clinton for that purpose. The Clinton witnesses gave physical descriptions that matched Oswald, along with other observations, like Oswald showing his Marine Corps discharge papers as a form of identification. Some witnesses added that Oswald was with 2 older men who were identified as Shaw and David Ferrie.

The front page of the New Orleans Times-Picayune, Feb. 7, 1969, (see caption) shows that a trial witness, Corri C. Collins, testified that he saw a black Cadillac pull up with 3 men in it. He identified Oswald as the man who stepped from the rear seat, pointed to Shaw as the driver and identified Ferrie as the man sitting next to Shaw in the car.

Mellen learned that the HSCA refused to authorize investigation of Oswald’s appearance at the hospital. HSCA Investigator Robert Buras was permitted to talk only to Clinton witnesses already identified. Buras was also barred from going to Clinton or Jackson. Mellen points out that this is disturbing seeing as others had more information to share. From Mellen: “An example is Ronald Johnston, the Baton Rouge private investigator who telephoned the committee saying he knew 2 witnesses who had seen Oswald and Shaw together at the Clinton courthouse, as well as at the hospital.”

Mellen got to know Dr. Frank Silva, the medical director at the hospital. Silva told Mellen that Oswald was ranting about being a Marine and killing Castro.

So why was Oswald asking about jobs at the mental hospital, I asked Mellen. “He wasn’t interested. He was under orders. He went there with 2 CIA guys (Shaw and Ferrie). Oswald asked what jobs were there.” She explained that Garrison thought that if Oswald was working at this mental asylum and later shows up in Dallas, after the killing, Oswald would be looked at as being crazy.

Getting back to Ferrie, he was a suspect within days of the assassination, but nothing came of it. I have in my possession the audio recording of a November 1963 Secret Service interrogation of Oswald’s wife Marina and near the end of the recording an agent asked Marina if she knew the name Ferrie. She said she did not. The point is that in 1963, investigators were aware of a possible involvement by Ferrie and a link to Oswald. In 1993 a photo tuned up that showed Ferrie and Oswald together at a Civil Air Patrol function, thus there’s photographic proof the 2 men knew each other.

Ferrie, well known in some circles as a pilot, used a New Orleans attorney named G. Wray Gill in 1963 in litigation concerning his (Ferrie) dismissal by Eastern Airlines. Another client of Gill’s was Carlos Marcello, head of organized crime in Louisiana. Ferrie is alleged to be a pilot used in anti-Castro operations and was associated with former FBI agent Guy Banister, who is also linked to Oswald.

In the summer of 1963 Oswald was seen and filmed handing out pro-Castro leaflets. On those leaflets was stamped the address of 544 Camp Street, which was the location of Banister’s office. Several witnesses stated they saw Oswald at that Camp Street address. Ferrie was a crucial witness in the Garrison case, but just as he was about to be brought in for questioning, he was found dead in his apartment on Feb. 22, 1967. Apparent cause of death – a brain hemorrhage.

In summary the point is that Garrison was on to something, found Oswald – Shaw – CIA links and had the CIA very worried about where his investigation might lead. But in many respects his case was sabotaged and, in the end, made to look foolish. Within just a few hours, Shaw was acquitted of all charges.

One has to wonder how history would have changed had D.A. Jim Garrison been allowed to investigate without interference. It would be another 10 years before the case came to light again when, in 1976 the HSCA began their 2-year JFK assassination probe which also suffered from CIA lies and interference, just like in the Garrison case.

This article barely scratches the surface of Mellen’s research. For more, pick up a copy of her 2013 edition of “A Farewell to Justice.” You can find it on eBay and Amazon.