

Son Recalls Mother's Life-Long Fascination with JFK Assassination

Doubters of Oswald's guilt draw on legacy of Shirley Martin's research.

By PAUL FECTEAU

In February of 1964, Oklahoma housewife Shirley Martin took her four children to Dallas. The kids were homeschooled, and son Steven, nine at the time, recalls his mother saying, "This trip is part of your education." They went to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy which had taken place on November 22, 1963. They arrived in Dealey Plaza and retraced Oswald's alleged escape route. They located witnesses and recorded interviews. Shirley's investigation would lead F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover to refer to her in an official memo as "a mental case," but for Steven it would be a lesson in civics, a lesson in history, and ultimately an incomparable lesson in life.

The killing of J.F.K. had left many Americans shattered, and Shirley Martin was among them. In 1960, she had rented a storefront and opened a Kennedy campaign headquarters in the family's hometown of Hominy, Oklahoma. Of course, in the conservative farming community of 2,000, "All the way with J.F.K." buttons were not in high demand. Nevertheless, she saw in the young, progressive President a leader who reflected both her ideals and work ethic. It would not, however, be the loss of that leader that brought her to Dallas in the winter of '64 so much as the murder of his alleged assassin.

Steven is quick to point out, "For my mother, it wasn't so much 'Who killed Kennedy?' as it was 'Who *didn't* kill Kennedy?'" Shirley had been struck by the footage of Lee Harvey Oswald in the custody Dallas police, struck in particular by his flustered look when he was told he had been charged with murdering the President. It seemed all too ironic that, in a city overflowing with right-wingers who proclaimed their hatred for J.F.K., it would be a supposed leftist who assassinated him. Her suspicions deepened when nightclub owner Jack Ruby gunned down Oswald on November 24. Shirley subscribed to *The New York Times* and *The Dallas Morning News* but found no coverage that addressed her doubts, so a couple months after the assassination, before the Warren

Commission had even begun taking testimony, she went to Dallas to ask the questions no one was asking.

The family would actually take many trips to Dallas that winter and in the years to follow. Vickie, 18 at the time, played an active role in her mother's research as did her sister Teresa who was 15. Michael also went along for many of the visits. He was a year younger than Steven and a full-blooded Choctaw Indian who had come to live with the Martins. He remained with them until he was in his twenties, though never officially adopted. Steven usually accompanied the rest, but he also chose to stay home several times because he could not stand missing new episodes of his favorite television show, *Daniel Boone*. On at least one occasion, the Martins were accompanied by Poochie, the family dog.

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Their father also tagged along occasionally, though Mark Martin remained a bit chagrined at how much of the family's funds went toward assassination research. He played a key role, nevertheless, holding a stop watch as they drove Oswald's supposed path of escape from the Texas School Book Depository.

Steven got to use technology too. One assignment had him and Teresa hanging out at the loading dock behind the Book Depository with a camera and instructions to "get a picture of the man who looks like Lee." The impetus for this plan was controversy over a picture taken during the assassination by A.P. photographer Ike Altgens. It showed a man in the doorway of the Depository who looked like Oswald, and if Oswald was standing in the doorway, he wasn't up on the sixth floor shooting the president. The F.B.I. stated, however, the man in the doorway had been identified as Oswald co-worker Billy



Shirley Martin and her intrepid team of researchers: Shirley and Poochie, at center, flanked by Vickie on her left and Teresa on her right; in foreground, left to right, Michael and Steven.

Nolan Lovelady. Shirley wanted to see how much the two men had resembled one another, but no picture of Lovelady was released. Book Depository Superintendent Roy Truly did not allow access to the building and was liable to chase her off, but he probably wouldn't notice a couple of kids with a camera. The plan worked--to some extent. The workers just laughed at Steven and Teresa, and they snapped a photo of a man whom Steven is pretty sure was Lovelady. Unfortunately, the kids didn't know how to work the camera so well, and the photo didn't turn out.

Steven was next assigned to wear a tape recorder sewn into the lining of his jacket in order to surreptitiously record Shirley's interview with Dallas Police Officer Nick McDonald who had apprehended Oswald at the Texas Theatre. A similar method was in use when Shirley spoke with Father Oscar Huber, but it was Vickie who had the recorder in her purse. Huber, who had administered the last rites to J.F.K. in the emergency room at Parkland

Memorial Hospital, making him a witness of the President's wounds, would later claim that he had never even met Shirley. The recording settled that dispute.

The Martins visited the home of Ruth Paine where Oswald's wife Marina and his two children had been staying and where Oswald spent the night prior to the assassination. Paine has been characterized by some as an altruistic Quaker woman whose kindness to Oswald yielded her only an infamous place in history while others have pegged her as a C.I.A. handler involved in a vast conspiracy. To nine-year-old Steven, she was just scary. Paine was a towering woman who regarded the Martins with a forced kindness that only came across to Steven as stern. It was Paine who would inform the F.B.I. of Shirley's research, and her comment that Shirley was "a bright nut" would be parroted by J. Edgar Hoover. Aside from being an icon of the F.B.I., Hoover was also an alleged closet cross-

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dresser, so one assumes he spoke with authority when identifying nuts.

Fortunately for Steven, Paine was the only one his mother interviewed who frightened him. He reacted quite the opposite, in fact, to Lee's mother, Marguerite Oswald, whom the family befriended. The Martin kids took to calling her Mamma O. Steven fondly recalls a time when he became ill while visiting Marguerite's home, and she nursed him with 7-Up and soda crackers. Steven was spared the harsher side of Marguerite's personality. She had lived a rough life, capped off by watching her son murdered on live television, and as the years went on she grew angry and unbalanced. Marguerite would ultimately tell Shirley and her daughters that she believed that the President's true assassin had been Jacqueline Kennedy, who while riding next the J.F.K. had produced a small derringer from her purse and shot him in the head. In later years, Shirley kept her distance from Marguerite who ultimately died rather forlorn--something Shirley would then lament, castigating herself for not mustering up more sympathy for the woman.

The recordings and documents Shirley accumulated would never be relegated to a box in her study--she shared them. Her research had put her in touch with others who shared her pursuits. A network, of sorts, began to emerge of researchers who doubted the official explanation of J.F.K.'s murder. They formed a cross-section of society, including a lawyer from Philadelphia, a research analyst from Greenwich Village, a sign manufacturer from L.A., and a wealthy housewife from Beverly Hills. These people, who have come to be referred to as first-generation researchers, laid the groundwork for the study of the assassination that continues today. Their dissent has grown into an industry, producing thousands of books about the assassination and spawning conferences and consortiums whose attendees and contributors have not forgotten Shirley and her circle.

Walt Brown, who edits *J.F.K./Deep Politics Quarterly*, a journal dedicated to study of the assassination, and who has authored a string of books arguing a conspiracy took place, acknowledges, "I saw what many of the early researchers were able to accomplish while they were still working full-time jobs and with limited access to the Archives, and I tailored my work accordingly." Last year, John Kelin published a book-length study of the

first generation researchers. Steven and his sister Teresa served as sources for *Praise from a Future Generation: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy and the First Generation Critics of the Warren Report* which devotes considerable space to Shirley's story. Kelin argues that Shirley's research set the bar for those who followed, and Brown echoes that note, saying, "I hope that I have been able to live up to the high standards that she set."

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Shirley's active period in the research community came to an end in 1967 due to a family tragedy. Vickie, 22 years old, died in an auto accident. Vickie was well known by her mother's fellow researchers because she had, among other contributions, made transcripts of her mother's interviews. Shortly after her death, Mark Lane, probably the most famous of the first-generation writers, dedicated his second book to Vickie. Vickie had been such a partner in her mother's pursuit of the truth that without her it was not the same. The regular trips to Dallas and the interviews with key figures ceased, though Shirley never lost interest in the assassination.

Steven remembers one Christmas in the 80s when he found the perfect present for his mother. He visited every gun shop in Tulsa until he located a Mannlicher-Carcano, the Italian-made rifle Oswald had purchased through the mail and allegedly used to kill J.F.K. Shirley immediately disassembled it. She did so to test the statements of Buell Wesley Frazier who gave Oswald a ride to work on the day of the assassination. Frazier had testified that the package Oswald carried that day, which Oswald said contained curtain rods, was too small to have been the disassembled rifle as the Warren Commission would claim. Shirley used her Christmas present to confirm that Frazier's account had been accurate.

In 1998, Steven took Shirley to Dallas to visit the Sixth Floor Museum. Shirley had spent so much time studying the building, she felt intimately familiar with it. Though she was entering it for the first time, she shook her head and said, "I can't even recognize this place."

Shirley passed away in September of 2006. Though she had been a skilled writer, she never wrote a book about

the J.F.K. assassination. She never wanted to. She enjoyed researching and sharing her work with the others, like Mark Lane, who wrote the books. Her interest had remained focused on the question of Lee Harvey Oswald's guilt or innocence. Much later discourse on the assassination dealt with broader questions of what entity might have been behind a conspiracy to kill the president--Oswald's involvement or lack of involvement becoming beside the point. For Shirley, it was clear that one tragedy had taken place in Dallas, but if Oswald had been innocent, that made two tragedies.

After her decades of study of the assassination, Shirley had become a walking encyclopedia of facts regarding Oswald's life and the events surrounding him. She never completely made up her mind but leaned toward the conclusion that Oswald had been innocent. If a conspiracy had been behind the crime, she suspected, it was likely local, fostered by the right-wing hate groups that had a foothold in Dallas.

Steven continues to be proud of his mother's legacy. In many ways, he is like any other son in this respect. He is probably, however, the only son who ever gave his mother a Mannlicher-Carcano for Christmas.



tmi exclusive - never before published photo. . .

Dallas housewife Margaret Morgan snapped this never-before-published photo of J.F.K.'s motorcade as it went down Cedar Springs Road, several miles before reaching Dealey Plaze where the assassination took place. The President is leaning rightward out of the limousine, his wife Jackie at left. Governor John Connally and his wife Nellie ride in front of them. Secret Service agents fill the car immediately following the Presidential limo. The significance of the proximity of the two cars has been noted in the October 2008 issue of *J.F.K. / Deep Politics Quarterly* in a piece titled "A Tale of Two Limos" written by editor Walt Brown. In the article, Brown addresses, among several topics, the validity of the claims of some witnesses that the President's car stopped at the time of the shooting. As illustrated in this image and many others, if that limo had stopped, it would probably have been hit by the follow-up car.