Penn Jones: One editor’s crusade

Mary Ferrell: A quiet pursuit

Michael Eddowes: Spies and intrigue

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Penn Jones lives in a small, run-down house in the countryside near Waco, Texas. The floors are bare and the only heat comes from a woodburning stove. It is a typical old farmhouse — except for the 6,000 books and the movie projector. The house is Jones’ headquarters for his crusade to prove the JFK assassination was a conspiracy.

Central to Jones’ theory is that Kennedy was shot from the front by a second person. His primary evidence is the Zapruder film, which Jones readily threads into his projector to show visitors. The film clearly shows the president’s body lurch backward, and Jones is unimpressed with the various explanations of the reaction. “Unless they repealed the laws of physics that day, Kennedy was shot from the front,” says Jones.

Until Nov. 22, 1963, Jones was known only as the scrappy editor of the Midlothian Mirror in Ellis County. After that date, the assassination became his passion. His little weekly became a worldwide forum for assassination buffs, but local advertising dwindled. He neglected the more profitable printing side of his business and began publishing a conspiracy newsletter, Continuing Inquiry, which has about 300 subscribers.

Before his retirement, Jones occasionally would disappear from the newspaper for weeks to chase wineries and track rumors. He once crawled on his hands and knees through a storm sewer to prove that a gunman could have fired at Kennedy from a gutter opening.

His conspiracy theory grows ever wider — now encompassing Lyndon Johnson, John Connally, the FBI, the CIA, Dallas Police and the news media. But only once did he meet a suspected conspirator face-to-face. “I was in Oak Cliff, heading out of Dallas, and I noticed a car following me. I whipped into a 7-Eleven, and he whipped in behind me, pulled out his FBI badge, and said that he had just wanted to meet me,” Jones remembers.

Jones recognizes that some regard his conspiracy theory as lunacy, and sometimes he hopes they are right. “I hope I’m just as crazy as hell,” he says. “If I’m crazy, it would be wonderful.”

Mary Ferrell cheerfully confesses that she "might have a few minor screws loose." Mrs. Ferrell is a wife, a mother, a grandmother, a Republican, and a successful executive secretary in a Dallas law firm. And she is obsessed by the Kennedy assassination.

"I would say we all have a screw loose somewhere," she says of her fellow assassination buffs. "You don't spend your life chasing assassins without something being a little bit wrong with you."

Mrs. Ferrell didn't particularly like Kennedy as a president or as a fellow Catholic. She was downtown on that Nov. 22, but didn't bother interrupting her lunch to watch the motorcade.

So she has a hard time explaining the fireproof library building in her Oak Lawn backyard with floor-to-ceiling shelves containing virtually every document ever published on the assassination. Nor can she easily explain the additional 25,000 pages of FBI documents spread across her living room floor or the clippings and papers that fill another room.

"I have every book and every magazine ever printed with articles on the assassination," Mrs. Ferrell says. "I have every document ever released from the National Archives, the Warren documents, and every document that has been released on the subject by the CIA."

She maintains an index of 36,000 cards referencing every name in the major assassination books. "Some of the books are so far-fetched there is no need in trying to index all the obscure Russian names. And the books about Martians and Venuseans being responsible, well, I haven't indexed those. But I have the books," she says.

Her compulsion has been agonizing at times. When her mother was on her deathbed, she asked Mrs. Ferrell to promise to give up her Kennedy investigation. Mrs. Ferrell sorrowfully said no.

"I certainly have sympathy for family and friends who wish I would just forget it," she says. Mrs. Ferrell has read every document in her collection, but she has given up hope of deciding what really happened that day in Dallas. "We have now had about four major investigations, and I consider that the truth is still hidden from us."

Mrs. Ferrell hopes a university or library will preserve her collection after her death.

Michael H.B. Eddowes may have had the greatest impact of any assassination theorist. He also remains among the most inscrutable.

At Eddowes' instigation, Lee Harvey Oswald was exhumed from Fort Worth's Rose Hill Cemetery in 1981 as the world watched with macabre fascination. Despite tests confirming that it was Oswald's body in the grave, Eddowes remains convinced there was a second person who looked like Oswald involved in a Soviet plot to kill Kennedy.

The 79-year-old British restaurateur backed into his obsession when he learned that his doctor was a Soviet agent. That led him to a fascination with Britain's Profumo Affair in 1963 — in which a British cabinet member and a Soviet intelligence officer were having sexual relations with the same woman. From there, Eddowes delved into other espionage matters, ultimately becoming involved in the Kennedy assassination.

A conversation with Eddowes is an exercise in confusion for those not already steeped in Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories.

Eddowes' answers to even the most mundane questions are full of obscure names, double agents, intelligence and counterintelligence.

An example is Eddowes' explanation of his interest in the Kennedy assassination:

"It arose out of the Profumo Affair. I discovered and told the FBI in June 1963 that Maria Novomy, the cousin of the Iron Communist premier of Czechoslovakia, was dispatched from London immediately after Kennedy's election in 1960 to destroy his character by sexual compromise and for espionage. She was arrested in April 1961 by the New York Police and held incommunicado by the FBI for two months. "The answer goes on and on."

In Eddowes' mind, the Kennedy assassination is just one of many events linked by a complex worldwide conspiracy.

"It is the importance of this case that got my attention," Eddowes said in a telephone interview from his London office.

"If the truth had been told about the Kennedy assassination, there wouldn't have been the subsequent assassinations — Robert Kennedy, the pope. That is why I'm interested."