

JFK, Chauncey Holt and the three 'tramps' redux

Robin Ramsay

The identity of the three 'tramps', photographed under police escort in Dallas after the assassination of JFK, is one of the many puzzles in the case. Over the years people have put forward various candidates. For example, the 'old tramp' looks rather like the CIA officer Howard Hunt. But only one person ever claimed to have been one of 'tramps': the late Chauncey Holt.

I got interested in this because it seemed to me, just from reading the material on the Net, that the late Mr Holt is important. Since then I have read his memoir, which contains a number of striking claims, almost none of which can be checked easily and many of which are simply uncheckable because the people concerned are dead. (I discuss his book at the end of this piece.) The one claim he made that seems checkable – perhaps the reason he initially focused on it – is that he was one of the three 'tramps'. And I did not do enough work, and did not do the subject justice in my first attempt at it.¹ So I am back at the 'tramps'.

Looking back at the Holt event, he created some initial interest, but that faded.² As far as I can tell, he failed to convince a group of JFK researchers when he met them at one of the annual conferences;³ and researchers by then had dealt with other 'confessions' which had turned out to be bogus. Then the Dallas police arrest records of three 'tramps' picked up near Dealey Plaza after the assassination were discovered in 1992, and none of the names on those sheets was Holt's.⁴ Two of those named were tracked down (the third was dead) and confirmed that they had been tramps, hobos; and had indeed been

¹ The first attempt is at <http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster69/lob69-chauncey-holt.pdf>. In that I concluded that it was difficult to be sure but Occam's razor said that Holt was lying and had inserted himself into the JFK story.

² See, for example, William E Kelly, 'Meet Chauncey Holt' in *Third Decade*, vol. 9, issue 1, November 1992, at <https://shorturl.at/w8ekd> or <http://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=48769&search=Chauncey#relPageId=31&tab=page>.

³ See <http://dperry1943.com/holt.html>.

⁴ It is striking that these records were discovered less than a year after Holt's initial exposure in *Newsweek* magazine. That may simply be a coincidence but there has been so much hanky-panky (and worse) as the US state has tried to hold the 'lone assassin' line on the assassination, it is possible that the records were 'surfaced' deliberately to (successfully) discredit Holt.

arrested in Dallas after the assassination. At this point most of the researchers gave up on Holt.

So what do we have? Centrally we have the famous photographs, the arrest records, and statements by some of the Dallas policemen who were involved. They were interviewed twice, in 1977 for the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) and by the FBI when the Dallas arrest records were found in 1992. The result of their combined testimony is a muddle.⁵ But some things are clear.

According to those arrest records, Doyle, Gedney and Abrams were arrested 'right after the shooting of President Kennedy'.⁶ During the 1977 HSCA inquiry Harold Rose interviewed Marvin Wise, one of the policemen in the photographs, and wrote this:

'Wise, in company with Bill Bass, Roy Vaughn and Middleton....took the men off the boxcar. Wise stated the men acted scared and he could smell wine on the breath of one of them....Wise took the men over to the Sheriff's office....He heard over the police radio that a patrolman had been shot, and a little later heard that it was J D Tippit'.⁷

Another of the Dallas policemen, Billy Bass, photographed with the 'tramps', was also interviewed by the HSCA in 1977 and said the same thing. He described delivering the prisoners to a deputy sheriff:

'....and shortly thereafter heard a call come over police radio that an officer had been shot in Oak Cliff'.⁸

So: both the Dallas officers photographed escorting the 'tramps' said in 1977 that they had done so *before* news of the murder of Tippit reached Dallas police HQ at 1.15 pm.⁹

⁵ The muddle is described at <<http://educationforum.ipbhost.com/index.php?showtopic=18721>>.

⁶ Doyle's arrest sheet is at <<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/hobo1.gif>>. The others are the same.

⁷ <http://jfkassassinationfiles.com/hasca_180-10112-10156>

⁸ <http://jfkassassinationfiles.com/hasca_180-10112-10154>

⁹ At <<http://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=1139#relPageId=889&tab=page>> is a transcript of the Dallas police radio traffic that day which shows them receiving the first call about Tippit's shooting at 1.15.

In the House Select Committee on Assassination files from 1977/8 there is a copy of an FBI report concerning one of the 'tramps' photographs. In 1974 Michael Canfield, co-author with A. J. Weberman of *Coup D'Etat in America: The CIA and the Assassination of John F. Kennedy*, had contacted journalist Sam Jaffee about it, suggesting – as he and Weberman did in their *This note continues at the foot of the next page.*

But the photographs of the 'tramps' being marched through the centre of Dallas show very long shadows which, even allowing for it being late November, suggest it was later than 1.15 pm. Have the researchers established when the photographs were taken? Yes, they have. In an essay, 'Texas Archives', Gary Mack wrote:

'Researcher Richard Trask located an original negative strip containing two of the Tramp photos. The strip also included a view of the old Texas School Book Depository building showing its rooftop clock, which read 2.19. Since the Tramp photos appeared next in sequence, that established the earliest time for their arrest. But the exact time had to be ascertained another way.

Researcher Greg Jaynes.....realized that the sun's shadows on the building would fall in the same place on every anniversary. So on November 22, 1997, he rigged up a video camera and set his clock timer to record the shadows' travel across the wall of the building. Jaynes' tape confirmed that the pictures were all made immediately after 2.19 pm – nearly two hours after the assassination....' ¹⁰

Another researcher, Don Bailey, in Texas, reported:

'On November 22, 1993 during the afternoon hours, I took photos of myself to test the shadow length at 12:30, 1:30, 2:30 and 3:30. The 2:30 picture is the closest match of shadow length in the 3 Tramps photos.' ¹¹

2.19 pm is about an hour after the news about Tippit's shooting reached Dallas Police HQ. So officers Bass and Wise either both misremembered the event in 1977 or they were lying. I think they were lying on instruction; because A. J. Weberman has worked through the two sets of interviews (1997 and 1992) and other official documentation and shows that there were *two* train searches

Note 9 continued

book – that two of the 'tramps' were Howard Hunt and Frank Sturgis. Jaffee contacted Richard Perle, then working for Senator Henry Jackson, who was told to take it to the FBI. In the FBI's report of this, Sam Jaffee is quoted as saying that he contacted Dallas Police officer Harkness who 'recalled finding the three bums [sic] behind the Depository about *ten minutes after Kennedy was shot.*' (emphasis added)

<<http://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=9915#relPageId=121&tab=page>>

Thanks to Garrick Alder for this reference.

¹⁰ *Heritage*, Volume 17, Number 3, Summer 1999

<<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph45392/m1/27/sizes/>>.

¹¹ <<http://educationforum.ipbhost.com/index.php?showtopic=766&page=2>>

that afternoon and two sets of 'tramps' were taken into custody.¹²

But didn't Doyle and Gedney confirm that it was them in the 'tramps' photographs? This is certainly widely reported but the situation appears to be more complex. In the FBI reports of their interviews with Gedney and Doyle neither man is asked 'Is that you in the photographs?': the FBI were interested in the arrest reports, not the photographs. With John Gedney all I can find is a report by researcher Mark Bridger that he had a letter from Gedney saying he was the 'tall tramp'.¹³

In the case of Harold Doyle, who was said to be the 'tramp' dubbed 'Frenchy', there is apparently no direct confirmation, even though he was interviewed on television when the records turned up (this interview is on YouTube). Ray and Mary La Fontaine traced Doyle but got no closer than a group of people who knew him. One of them agreed that the 'tramp' pictures



Doyle in 1992 left and 'Frenchy' right.

¹² <<http://theoswaldcode.com/index2.htm>> Unfortunately Weberman has laid this material out really badly and it is hard work following what he is saying. But crucially he reproduces an extract from the Dallas police radio traffic showing that at 1.56 the police were told that there was another person on another train and they should check it out. It was this second search – an hour and a half after the assassination – which found the second set of 'tramps' who were photographed.

¹³ Mark Bridger, 'A rough guide to Oswald lookalikes' in *Dealey Plaza Echo*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2003 at <<https://shorturl.at/xdIDS>> or <<http://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=16250&search=gedney#relPageId=25&tab=page>>.

Why did John Gedney claim to be one of the photographed 'tramps'? Perhaps he was leaned on; that would hardly be a surprise. Perhaps he was simply seeking to be a part of the story.

showed Doyle – ‘Look at that chin. That’s Harold all right.’ – and dug out a picture she had of Doyle. The Fontaines commented:

‘It was him! Jowly, thirty years older, but with the same scar on his forehead, the same glowering eyes’.¹⁴

At first glance this is quite plausible but Jack White pointed out:

‘All Frenchy tramp candidates must pass the vertical wrinkle test. All photos of him show a deep VERTICAL “squint” wrinkle of the supraorbital ridge between the eyebrows. I notice such wrinkles because I have one, caused by “squinting” in bright sunlight.’¹⁵

Doyle has no such wrinkle, as can be seen in the picture above and the others of him from teenage years through to old age which are on-line;¹⁶ and, I would add, nor is that quite the same chin, jaw, nose, mouth (and gap between nose and mouth). But this photographic comparison is done in much greater detail by police artist Lois Taylor.¹⁷ Doyle is *not* ‘Frenchy’.

Conclusion: Doyle, Gedney and Abrams were arrested soon after the shooting and taken to Dallas Police HQ where they remained, eventually spending three days in jail. An hour or so later, the search of another train – documented by Weberman – turned up the second trio of ‘tramps’ who were photographed *en route* to Dallas Police HQ just after 2.19 pm.¹⁸

Holt’s claim to be one of this second set of ‘tramps’ has *not* been refuted; and, if he’s telling the truth about this, his account of his role in the assassination should at least be considered.

The memoir

Holt’s *Self-portrait of a Scoundrel* (Waterville, Oregon: Trine Day, 2013) begins with an introduction by Wim Dankbar who has been promoting Holt’s claims (and those of James Files). This is followed by a 37 page section by Holt and one Ted Schwartz, a kind of mini-memoir; after which, 40 pages in, we get a table of contents. This is followed by an anonymous interview with Holt and

¹⁴ Ray and Mary La Fontaine, *Oswald Talked: the new evidence in the JFK Assassination* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican, 1996) pp. 323-325.

In the versions of the photographs on-line I cannot see this scar.

¹⁵ <<http://educationforum.ipbhost.com/index.php?showtopic=13123&page=1>>

¹⁶ At <<http://www.whokilledjfk.net/tramps.htm>>.

¹⁷ At <<http://www.jfkmurdersolved.com/lois1.htm>>.

¹⁸ In his 1992 interview with the FBI, Dallas police officer David Harkness told them: ‘On the day of the assassination there were several individuals removed from the train other than the three individuals previously identified.’ <http://jfkassassinationfiles.com/fbi_124-10273-1040>

then the memoir proper of 361 pages, which has been very poorly proof-read. Finally we have the script of the film made by Dankbar about Holt, 'Spooks, Hoods and the Hidden Elite', followed by photographs and copies of letters. In effect we have a memoir plus three abbreviated versions of the same material.

Holt says he went to work for Mob boss Meyer Lansky after WW2, referred to Lansky by a criminal he met while in prison (there is a hint that Holt shot Ben 'Bugsy' Siegel). In 1953 Lansky arranged for him to work as a kind of bagman for the CIA front, the International Rescue Committee. In the 1950s Holt was working for IRC, supporting CIA activities in the Caribbean and Central and South America (and helping himself to the barely supervised funds). A pilot as well as a kind of accountant, with expertise in stock fraud and money-laundering, Holt ended up in California in the early 1960s, running a CIA unit making fake documentation and an engineering shop which produced modified weaponry for the Agency. He names various Californians – lawyers, politicians, businessmen – who were working for the CIA, notably one of the main lawyers on the Warren Commission, Joseph Ball.

Holt shows the Mob and the CIA working together in the post-WW2 years, long before their well-documented alliance against Castro. Holt moved in a world of CIA contract agents – all deniable, if necessary – some of them career criminals like him, loosely managed, working within and without the United States, entirely free of political control. It is within this context that he locates the two chapters about his unwitting support role in the JFK assassination which is recounted in 'The View from the Bridge' in this issue. For Holt that was just one episode in a life of crime.