

The Skeptic's Lot



Penn Jones has paid a price for his conspiracy theories about the JFK assassination.

By Kathryn Jones

It's Nov. 22, 1991. The scene at Dealey Plaza looks like a sideshow. Hundreds of people have flocked to the site of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. Street vendors hawk hot dogs, soft drinks and JFK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
MARC PISCOTTY

memorabilia. Assassination buffs argue about What Really Happened. Tourists pose for pictures on the grassy knoll where director Oliver Stone recently filmed part of his controversial movie *JFK*.

At 12:30 p.m., a hush falls over the crowd. A short, wiry man in a gimme cap and glasses calls for a moment of silence. People bow their heads. Some pray. Others weep.

Penn Jones Jr. looks solemnly down Elm Street through sad, hollow eyes. Mr. Jones has carried out this annual rite of remembrance for almost three decades. The 78-year-old "grandfather" of assassination researchers, he's a hero to the large group of disbelievers that still doesn't accept the Warren Commission's official version of JFK's murder.

Mr. Jones is a legend, not only for what he has found but also for what he has lost. His obsessive crusade rerouted his life. It alienated him from his family and his community. His former job as the muckraking editor of the *Midlothian Mirror*, his personal life, his income — everything changed after the assassination.

"Hey, there's Penn Jones," says one assassination buff, nudging his friend as Mr. Jones walks by. "This guy knows, man."

They join the throng following Mr. Jones, asking for his autograph, taking his picture, pressing him for answers.

"Penn, have you told everybody what you think happened down here?" asks one man, zooming in with his home video camera.

"It was a complete *coup d'etat*, an assassination made-to-order," Mr. Jones responds in a raspy voice. "I believe the fatal shot came from the manhole over here."

With help, he lifts the manhole cover leading into a storm drain along Elm Street. Mr. Jones believes one of nine gunmen was hiding in the manhole, shooting with a .45 through the curb opening into the street. The gunman escaped through the drain, which used to lead to the basement of the old jail, Mr. Jones tells the crowd.

"One year I crawled all the way up to the jail," he says. "It wore out the knees of my britches. You have to be a little bitty fellow to turn around down there."

Now, although the jail access has been sealed with concrete, assassination buffs climb in one at a time to get a feel for Mr. Jones' idea, which has come to be known as "the Storm Drain Theory." Many Warren Commission critics share Mr. Jones' belief that President Kennedy was caught in a crossfire at Dealey Plaza, and many agree that his death was plotted by members of



Mr. Jones with his dogs, Isa (front) and Baltazar, at his home in Waxabachie; he and his wife also have 10 cats.

the military and the CIA. The Storm Drain Theory, however, has not been so widely embraced. In this crowd, some accept it, some don't.

"Well, I've got a photo of two cops picking up a .45 slug on the other side of the street," he tells the doubters. Their eyebrows shoot up.

"Penn, did Oswald fire a shot?" another assassination buff shouts.

"Hell, no."

"Then who did it?"

"It was ordered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with the CIA's cooperation," Mr. Jones says.

"Penn, did LBJ have anything to do with it?"

"Penn, what do you think about the three tramps that were behind the grassy knoll?"

"Penn, what about the umbrella man?"

A few hours later, an exhausted Mr. Jones and his wife, Elaine Kavanaugh Jones, are back at their small white frame farmhouse in Waxabachie. But they never really leave Dealey Plaza behind.

The house is a Kennedy shrine. Portraits and photographs of JFK hang on the walls. In the study, floor-to-ceiling shelves hold hundreds of Kennedy books and videotapes. Mr. Jones even



has a replica of Kennedy's favorite rocking chair. Another room is full of dog-eared files, yellowed newspapers and stacks of old black-and-white photographs.

"This day is always so draining for him," says Mrs. Jones, 39. "He relives everything." A tall, muscular woman with reddish-blond hair, she first met Mr. Jones in 1978, during a tour of the grassy knoll.

Mr. Jones' voice is still tinged with anger and grief when he talks about

what happened there in 1963: "My life was never the same after that day. The country was never the same. Democracy died that day in Dealey Plaza."

And part of Penn Jones died, too, friends say. He revered President Kennedy as a leader who shared his liberal ideals, and loved him as a brother. But another part of him came to life: The determination to find out for himself what happened in those six seconds in Dallas, and why.

"I expected to work on the assassi-

nation for the rest of my life — not expecting that any action would be taken, but in the hope that historians might be able to point a more accurate finger," Mr. Jones says.

Others felt the same way. Mr. Jones was among a small group of dissidents who early on raised questions about the president's murder. The group included Mark Lane, Harold Weisberg, Sylvia Meagher, Mary Ferrell, Josiah Thompson and Gary Shaw. As they learned they were not alone, they began talking to — and disagreeing with — each other.

These so-called "first-generation researchers" dug up facts, tracked down witnesses, chased leads across the country and read roomfuls of documents and newspaper clippings. They challenged authority and cried "conspiracy."

"Back in those days you didn't question that sort of thing," says Mr. Shaw, a Cleburne architect. "If you did, they called you a nut."

Some of the early researchers went on to write best-selling books, but Mr. Jones was not one of them. And he didn't get paid a lot of money to be a consultant on Oliver Stone's *JFK* movie. But Mr. Shaw thinks his colleague's work may become more appreciated as time passes. "Most prophets are not recognized in their day," Mr. Shaw says.

Mr. Jones and the rest of the group have plenty of admirers — and plenty of detractors, too. They often were — and sometimes still are — ridiculed for their ideas. Among their most prominent critics is former president Gerald Ford, who now lives in Rancho Mirage, Calif. As the last surviving member of the Warren Commission, he insists: "Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman who killed President Kennedy. I say this with emphasis — no new, cred-

ible evidence has been produced by the numerous authors of various books or other publications."

But popular movies such as *JFK* and best-selling books are no less forceful in insisting a conspiracy is fact. And since the first attacks on the Warren Commission report in 1966, polls by the Gallup and Harris organizations and others show a majority of Americans believe some kind of conspiracy was behind the assassination.

The House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations in 1979 concluded that Mr. Kennedy probably was the victim of a conspiracy. In 1988 the Justice Department formally closed its investigation of the assassination, saying there was no persuasive evidence of conspiracy.

The historical marker on the old Texas School Book Depository, where, the official inquiry concluded, the fatal shots were fired from a sixth-floor window, refers to Lee Harvey Oswald as the "alleged assassin."

Mr. Jones says he didn't mind stirring up trouble. He wears the label of muckraker proudly as a badge of honor. "People thought I was a liberal troublemaker — and I was," he says with a laugh. "Not enough of them around anymore. People are afraid to speak freely these days."

Mary Ferrell, a 70-year-old Dallas researcher who has become nationally known for her assassination archives, says, "Penn just had a persistence and a fearlessness. I have not always agreed with him. But he's kept at it and he's been such a fighter."

Mr. Jones' work has inspired a new, younger generation of assassination researchers who attempt to study the facts in a logical, meaningful way. Although the line isn't always clear, they are not the same as less serious-minded



The Joneses keep a large supply of wood on hand to heat their home. They met at the grassy knoll in 1978; she was touring the assassination site and he was the guide.



Mr. Jones (right) and an unidentified man sweep the Midlothian Mirror after the newspaper was firebombed in 1962. The newspaper had published some unpopular editorials supporting civil rights. Mr. Jones won the Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award for courage in journalism a year later.

assassination buffs.

Some of the younger researchers were babies when President Kennedy died. One of them, Jay Pitman, says he became interested in the assassination after reading one of Mr. Jones' books.

"He's the grandfather of it all," says Mr. Pitman, a 31-year-old aviation technician in Kansas City, Mo. "The reason the assassination is still being brought up is because of people like him. We'll never let it die."

In the early 1960s, Penn Jones was living a small-town version of the Kennedys' Camelot. After growing up poor in Red River County and picking cotton as a kid, Mr. Jones became one of the leading — and most controversial — citizens of Midlothian, then a tiny, conservative farm town south of Dallas.

He had worked his way through college in Arkansas and, later, the University of Texas at Austin, where he met and married his first wife. During World War II, as an Army officer, he

was present for the 1943 invasion of Italy at Salerno, participated in D-Day and served in North Africa. He saw and photographed piles of bodies at Nazi concentration camps.

In the military, "We had a saying that I've remembered throughout my life," Mr. Jones says. "It's Latin: *Non Illegitim Carborundum.*' It means 'Don't let the bastards grind you down.'"

Louise Jones and her husband shared a hankering to write. So when the weekly *Midlothian Mirror* came up for sale in 1945, they bought it for \$4,000.

He joined the Chamber of Commerce and the Lions Club, and she became active in community affairs. They had two sons,

Penn III and Michael, and lived in a two-story house with fruit trees and roses in the yard. Mr. Jones studied economics and invested Louise's family inheritance in real estate. By Midlothian standards, they were wealthy. Their idyllic life prompted *Redbook* magazine in 1950 to write about the handsome young couple in an article called "This Is the Life!" It included color photographs of the Joneses at work and at home and described them as living the American dream after World War II.

Mr. Jones had come out of the war with a devotion to liberal democratic ideals. He thought he and Sen. Kennedy had a lot in common and he decided to try to meet him.

When presidential candidate Kennedy stopped at Dallas' Love Field during his campaign, Mr. Jones got him to sign a copy of *Profiles in Courage*, the Kennedy book about Americans who made hard choices that defied public opinion.

Defying public opinion was something Mr. Jones didn't shrink from, either. In fact, he enjoyed ruffling feath-

ers in Midlothian. "I decided I was going to tell my story my way, and I did," Mr. Jones says. "It got me into a good many fights."

Mr. Jones once referred to a demagoguing politician in the paper as a "performing seal." His belief in racial equality got him into fistfights. When the leader of the local John Birch Society spoke at the high school, Mr. Jones wanted to tell the students the other side of the story. The school superintendent refused; an argument ensued and a fight broke out, although at 5 feet 2 inches, Mr. Jones was a foot shorter than his opponent. When streets in the neighborhoods where blacks lived were surfaced with gravel that included rusty nails, Mr. Jones ran a story on the front page. He refused to print the Ku Klux Klan's regional newsletter on his presses.

His liberal friends included the late John Howard Griffin of Mansfield, the author of *Black Like Me*, the journal of a white man who disguised himself as a black to see how he would be treated in the South. "One night we were afraid some people were going to lynch some people were going to lynch some people," Mr. Jones says. "They had hung him in effigy out in the baseball field." Mr. Jones went to get Mr. Griffin and found him a safe place to stay for three weeks.

None of this went over well in Midlothian. The Joneses got harassing telephone calls and nasty letters. One night in 1962, someone threw a firebomb into the newspaper office. "The linotype had to be completely torn down and fixed," Mr. Jones recalls. "Then we kept on doing what we'd been doing."

"It was all too far to the left for that town," Mr. Jones says. "The fellow I bought the paper from never had (printed) an editorial. Unfortunately, I had a lot of editorials."

A year after the firebombing, Mr. Jones won the Elijah Parish Lovejoy Award for courage in journalism from

Southern Illinois University. The award is named for a newspaper publisher who was murdered during the Civil War for his anti-slavery editorials.

"Dad had this ideal of democracy which wasn't unreasonable," his son Michael says. "But this small town seemed to prefer their little oligarchy. He liked to fight and to make people mad. Sometimes it built walls of resentment."

Other walls of resentment were building in the United States, especially in the South. Extremists who opposed the charismatic John Kennedy and his liberalism organized protests that sometimes turned ugly.

Penn Jones saw it all firsthand. He was present in 1960 when then-vice-presidential candidate Lyndon B. Johnson and his wife were jeered and spat upon in Dallas, and in 1963 when United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson was hit in the head with an anti-United Nations placard carried by a Dallas woman.

"Dad was trying to hold people back," his son recalls of the Stevenson incident. "You could see him in the picture in the first editions of the Dallas

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PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT W. HART



Mr. Jones' desk at the *Midlothian Mirror* in 1974



Mr. Jones snapped this controversial photo outside Parkland Memorial Hospital after the assassination of President Kennedy. Jack Ruby's sister identified Mr. Ruby as the man in the baggy suit and hat walking away from the camera (far right). Mr. Ruby denied that he was at the hospital, and the Warren Commission concluded that he was not there.

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papers; then in the later editions, they airbrushed him out."

On the day John Kennedy was assassinated, Mr. Jones was among hundreds of business people waiting for the president to arrive at the Dallas Trade Mart for a lunch address.

"I was eating my salad early because when he got there, I was going to be taking pictures," Mr. Jones recalls. "When we heard the news (that the president had been shot), we left immediately and went to the site. Then I went to Parkland Hospital."

President Kennedy was pronounced dead at Parkland. Mourners had gathered, and Mr. Jones took some photographs of the presidential limousine and the crowd scene. In one of them, a dumpy man with a baggy suit and Dick Tracy hat is striding away from the camera. Mr. Jones says the man is Jack Ruby, based on positive identification by Mr. Ruby's sister.

The photo became controversial; Mr. Jones wrote in a 1966 editorial that Mr. Ruby's presence at Parkland could have "dark connotations" of participation in a conspiracy. But the Warren Commission concluded Mr. Ruby wasn't at Parkland.

The Monday after the assassination, and after Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald, Mr. Jones shook up Midlothian with a special edition of the *Mirror*.

"The Disgrace of Dallas," the huge front page headline read. In the story, Mr. Jones blasted Dallas for creating a hate campaign against Kennedy that he felt contributed to the violence.

Michael Jones says the events of that day visibly changed his father's direction. He began to devote most of his time to the assassination and what he believed was a concerted effort to purge the country of liberal leaders by whatever means necessary. Not only JFK, but also Robert Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and others.

"His work was a total giving of himself," Michael says. Mr. Jones devoted so much time to the assassination that his relationship with his sons suffered, Michael says. "It could be difficult (on the family) at times."

Mr. Jones wrote a series of editorials that became a kind of bible for other assassination researchers. Later, using the newspaper's presses and financial backing from friends and family, he published them as a small paperback book, *Forgive My Grief*. The title is from a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam: Forgive my grief for one removed, Thy creature, whom I found so fair. I trust he lives in thee, and there I find him worthier to be loved.*

Mr. Jones eventually published four volumes of Kennedy material and a newsletter, *The Continuing Inquiry*, that ran for 12 years. It con-

sistently lost money, but he kept it going.

In the books and newsletter, Mr. Jones played the bulldog detective. He interviewed witnesses, badgered reluctant officials for information and followed trails that sometimes led to dead ends.

He was the first to chronicle the deaths, sometimes under strange circumstances, of people connected with the assassination. He began numbering them; by 1969, he was up to No. 68.

Mr. Jones wrote numerous articles supporting the late Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney who was condemned for prosecuting businessman Clay Shaw for Kennedy's murder — the only person ever prosecuted — and acquitted — in the assassination. And Mr. Jones published photographs that other newspapers wouldn't.

"He kept after every damn thing he could find," says R.B. Cutler, editor of *Grassy Knoll Gazette*, a newsletter published in Manchester, Mass. "He was bird-dogging everything. And then he had the gall to put it in the Midlothian paper! He was great."

Later, after the Warren Commission released its voluminous report on the assassination, Mr. Jones read all 15,000 pages and wrote highly critical editorials pointing out inaccuracies, al-

legedly altered testimony and witnesses that the commission didn't interview.

The crusade cost him more than the \$350 a month that came out of his own pocket to publish the newsletter. He also was getting phone threats that frightened his family. A friend even fashioned an elaborate plan for Louise and the children to get out of town if necessary.

"They basically thought I was a liberal troublemaker," Mr. Jones says. "They tried to scare me with phone threats, tried to run me off the road. I made a lot of enemies.

"It could be dangerous in those early days," he says. "But I had to do what I had to do."

If anything, the threats made him more determined to continue his work. "Penn's a gritty little guy," Mr. Shaw says.

Although Mr. Jones' obsession with the assassination could be rough at times on Louise Jones, friends say she was engrossed with the investigation, too. She frequently accompanied her husband out of town to follow up on leads. She edited his articles, read books and newspaper clippings and opened the Jones home to a procession of visitors. Assassination witness Roger Craig, a Dallas deputy sheriff at (continued on page 27)

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the time Kennedy was killed, even lived with the Joneses for more than two years.

The Joneses' 38-year marriage broke up in the late 1970s after Penn and Elaine Kavanaugh met. Elaine was touring the assassination site; Penn was the guide. The tour group went back to Mr. Jones' house and saw some of his assassination films. "I got hooked," Elaine says. She became his admiring researcher. They fell in love and married 13 years ago.

Louise Jones, who still lives in Midlothian, declined to discuss the reasons she filed for divorce. But friends and other family members say it wasn't because of her husband's obsession with the JFK assassination. They say it was because Mr. Jones had been unfaithful.

Michael Jones thinks his father became so obsessed with the Kennedy assassination because the two men were so similar in their political views.

"I don't think even he was aware how similar they were at the time," the younger Mr. Jones says. "I think it became even more personal because of whom he felt was responsible (the government). He felt betrayed, personally,

by the country and the ideals he had fought for. He never got over it."

Penn and Elaine Jones live spartan, almost reclusive lives these days.

Their house in the country doesn't have a phone. Except for showing up at Elm and Houston streets almost every Nov. 22, they rarely venture outside Waxahachie.

For company they have dogs, Balt-hazar and Isa, and 10 cats, most of them adopted strays.

It's hard to find the Joneses' house even with a map, but every year, dozens of assassination researchers and buffs track down the Joneses, especially around the anniversary of JFK's death. They show up unannounced on the front porch, wanting to see Mr. Jones' copy of the Abraham Zapruder assassination film footage or to look through his files.

The Joneses end up spending an afternoon with some of them, digging out scrapbooks and poring over newspaper clippings. Some, though, are just "weirdos," Mrs. Jones says.

She's very protective of her husband and once even wielded a hickory stick at some visitors who showed up in the middle of the night.

On a late summer day, Mr. Jones is

wearing his trademark denim coveralls when a visitor drives up. He looks tired; he's battled skin cancer in recent years, and his memory fades sometimes. Often, though, his recollections and wit are sharp, and his conviction just as fiery as ever.

Mrs. Jones has been working outside in the vegetable garden, where she grows okra, squash, onions, potatoes and lettuce. She's wearing shorts, clogs and a hat to protect her fair skin; she complains that chopping wood has ruined her hands.

Escaping to the country was more of a necessity than a choice. When he was divorced, Mr. Jones got the farmhouse, which was a wreck, Mrs. Jones says. They whitewashed the walls, painted the bare pine floors and installed an antique wood-burning stove for heat.

The Joneses live off less than \$2,000 a month from his military pension. Money occasionally dribbles in from book sales; he recently got \$150 from the sale of some of his newsletters. Mrs. Jones is bitter that others have profited off her husband's assassination work while they have suffered financially.

Although Mrs. Jones says her role now is more of a caregiver to her husband and a caretaker of the farm and less a traditional wife, friends say the

May-December relationship seems to work.

In a book inscription to his wife Mr. Jones wrote: "To my lovely Elaine — I love you, little girl."

"Penn has been my Spencer Tracy," Mrs. Jones says. "He is a real man. He's lived life to the fullest and has no regrets."

Mrs. Jones was only 9 when John Kennedy died, but she appears to share her husband's commitment and his pain. "That is the bond that holds Penn and me together," she says.

The night before, she had watched a PBS documentary on the Kennedys. Her nose turns red and her eyes water as she recounts part of the program and recalls that Mr. Jones visited Robert Kennedy after JFK's death.

"I told Bobby what I thought had happened to his brother," Mr. Jones says. "He listened very intently. Then he asked his limousine driver to take me to the grave site (at Arlington National Cemetery). I'll never forget that."

Mr. Jones hopes to someday be buried in that same cemetery, resting not far from his fallen hero.

Kathryn Jones is a Fort Worth writer and a regular contributor to The Dallas Morning News. ■