

THE LONG DISTANCE PHONE CALL

by
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In the course of researching the assassination of President Kennedy for his 1967 book Six Seconds in Dallas (New York: Random House), Josiah Thompson assembled a "master list of assassination witnesses" that was included in the appendix of his book. Amongst the 268 individuals who had allegedly been in the vicinity of the Texas School Book Depository and the grassy knoll on November 22, 1963 was a tourist from Victoria, British Columbia, Canada by the name of Ralph Simpson. He had previously been referred to by authors Sylvia Meagher¹ and Mark Lane² and had come to the attention of the Warren Commission in the course of three interviews with Sgt. Patrick Dean of the Dallas police.³ And yet today, Ralph Simpson's allegations, like many others, still remain an unresolved mystery even to members of his own family.

On March 24, 1964, shortly after the conclusion of the Ruby trial, the Warren Commission and its staff were now able to begin interviewing individuals who had been previously unavailable such as Sgt. Dean, who had been in charge of "securing" the basement of the Dallas police station prior to the ill-fated transfer of Lee Harvey Oswald. In the course of being questioned by Burt Griffin in the U.S. Attorney's office in Dallas,⁴ an "off the record" conversation took place for "15 or 20 minutes" according to Griffin, at which time Dean mentioned having "obtained some information that apparently had not been previously made available to the Commission..."⁵, which Griffin asked Sgt. Dean to describe.

According to Dean, he received a long distance phone call⁶ at 2 a.m. on the morning of March 24, 1964, handled by a Victoria, B.C. operator⁶ in that it was a "collect" call. The operator had been told by the caller that it related to the assassination, and the City Hall operator in Dallas who had contacted Dean for authorization indicated that she had "heard this man talk enough that she believed he was serious and had something that possibly could be used by the Warren Commission. Dean himself indicated that the man "sounded rational" and, having also been

convinced by the B.C. telephone company's night supervisor that the man "probably had something," he accepted the call.

The caller identified himself as Ralph Simpson, whose phone number in Victoria was 384-3780. He informed Sgt. Dean that he had been a witness to the assassination, having photographed the motorcade with a "wide scope movie camera that he believed would have taken in the building and the motorcade at the time the shots were fired," filmed from the "southwestern part of the plaza, towards the railroad tracks." He had spoken to his lawyer, identified as Mr. Batter, who "advised him to call someone here, but not the Warren Commission." The name "Batter" also appears on a piece of paper which also listed the caller's name, his phone number, the B.C. telephone operator and the first name of the City Hall operator in Dallas. This form also included the name "R.H.W. Smele" of "1141 Caledonia," the source of the phone call, which the B.C. supervisor had obtained at the request of the Dallas police. Dean indicated to Griffin that this address was in Victoria, B.C.

In the course of the four minute conversation with Simpson, Dean learned, undoubtedly to his amazement, that Simpson had not processed his film but was willing to mail the negative to him when he learned that Dean would be testifying that very day in a deposition for the Warren Commission. Simpson appeared to recognize Dean's name, possibly having seen Dean mentioned in a Time article the previous week.⁸

After discussing the phone call with Griffin and being told that the Commission would "certainly look into that right away," they again talked "off the record" for an indeterminate length of time, but returned to the same topic, at which point Dean basically summarized his previous remarks; he also suggested that Simpson had been apprehensive as to whether he should keep the film footage or throw it out, unlike Zapruder, who seemed more interested in selling his film to the highest bidder. Dean assured Griffin that he would gladly turn over the film when it arrived in the mail.

A week later, on April 1, 1964, Sgt. Dean was asked to continue his deposition, this time handled by Leon Hubert, but unlike his previous interview, he was now accompanied by an assistant city attorney named Ted MacMasters (which actually should have been spelled "MacMaster.") Sgt. Dean indicated to Hubert that he agreed to provide documents related to the call which he initially described as "pertaining to the film from the fellow in Alaska-or-correction, in Canada."¹⁰ The two documents presented were labelled as Dean Exhibit No. 5136 and 5136A.¹¹ Dean identified the first of the two documents as being a record of the call from Victoria which had been handled by Patsy Pair, from Ralph Simpson, whom Dean first identified as "Jack Simpson," possibly still preoccupied with another "Jack" in Dallas. He also stated that the call had been made at "4 o'clock in the morning," although the City of Dallas form for recording long distance calls did not clearly indicate the time.

After once again describing the content of the call, Dean recalled that Simpson's lawyer (whose name was an apparent phonetic spelling, since there was no such attorney named "Batter" listed with the B.C. Law Society in 1964; the word "phonetic" had been printed after his name in Dean's testimony¹²) urged him to send the film directly to someone in Dallas rather than to the Warren Commission in Washington. Dean also stated that he had not yet received the film, although even today mail between the United States and Canada takes at least a week to arrive. Dean agreed that the only reason it had been mailed to him personally was because he happened to have been on duty at the time, and also because Simpson appeared to recognize his name.

Other than identifying the reverse side of the long distance phone slip as Dean Exhibit No. 5136A, no discussion of its content was made. It appeared to be in the handwriting of Patsy Pair, listing the source of the call--the home of R.H.W. Smele on Caledonia---as well as "their attorney General Batter,"¹³ which would suggest the possibility that Ralph Simpson had previously contacted the Attorney-General's Department of the B.C. government in Victoria, which is the capital of the province. At that time, the Attorney-General was Robert Bonner, who was also a member of the

Legislative Assembly. It could very well be that the operator, Patsy Pair, wrote the name down incorrectly in the first place, which was then repeated as spelled by Dean.

In the course of Dean's initial deposition handled by Griffin, it turned out that Dean had been accused "off the record" of lying in testimony related to what Ruby had allegedly told him shortly after his arrest (which Dean had stated to the press, part of the reason that Ruby's conviction was overturned by a higher court). As a result, the sergeant was flown to Washington to testify before the Warren Commission itself on June 8, 1964, at which time he once again described the mysterious phone call from Victoria, having been assured by Earl Warren that he had no need for an attorney and that he would "get along all right."¹⁴ Sgt. Dean cited the information about the call that he had initially provided to Griffin as an example of his desire to be as helpful to the Commission as possible, which J. Lee Rankin didn't seem particularly interested in hearing about. It is interesting to note that, although Dean could no longer remember the man's name, he did indicate that the FBI had been informed. Presumably the Dallas office of the FBI investigated the allegations through the RCMP, and provided a report to the Warren Commission.

In fact, the day after Dean's first appearance before Burt Griffin, a U.S. Government Memorandum¹⁵ was sent to Hubert from Barefoot Sanders, "the ranking Justice Department official" in Dallas, outlining four areas of concern (partially based on a conversation with Howard Willens), one of which dealt with Ralph Simpson: "With respect to the films which Sgt. P.T. Dean is expected to receive from Canada, Howard says that he and the Commission will be very interested but will await further developments and recommendations from you."¹⁶ (Willens, it should be pointed out, was an assistant to the Warren Commission and liaison between the Commission and the Justice Department.) In the same memo, Sanders made reference to a postal employee by the name of John Martin, Jr., who had "...the films as reported to us by Postal Inspector Harry Holmes." Presumably this was in reference to a different film than Simpson's, unless it had been mailed by the fastest means possible the day before.

Although nothing more was stated in regard to the Victoria film footage by the Warren Commission or others until a brief reference made by Sylvia Meagher in Accessories After the Fact,¹⁷ Sgt. Dean certainly did not forget about the phone call entirely. In 1978, he was interviewed by Earl Golz of the Dallas Morning News, who later donated his notes to the Assassination Archives and Research Center. In regard to Simpson, Dean recalled that he had been phoned "the night after the verdict in Ruby trial" by a "man from out of the country-Canada," who had filmed the assassination "from South of Grass Knoll" and was "sending film to Dean." According to Dean, while he was in Washington to testify in June, 1964, "he was with Murphy Martin and told him of the film." (Martin was an ABC correspondent stationed in Dallas who also hosted a talk show on which Garrison appeared in 1967.) Unlike Sylvia Meagher, who indicated to me in 1987 that she had not phoned the number listed in the Dean deposition, Martin "called (the) man from (their) motel room with Dean and (his) wife present. (The) man told Martin that he had been advised by (the) RCMP, his government and this government not to talk about film."¹⁸

I spoke to Murphy Martin on September 7, 1990 about this phone call, having written to him about Simpson's allegations back in 1987 without success, but he only vaguely recalled the incident as described by Dean to Golz. Earl also admitted to me that he could not be of any assistance "in regards to the call that Patrick Dean got from Victoria, B.C. I never picked up on the incident, though Dean mentioned it during the conversation."¹⁹

I was fortunately able to contact Sgt. Dean during the summer of 1987 prior to his death (of cancer), learning of his whereabouts in Tyler, Texas from Kent Biffle of the Dallas Morning News. Kent warned me that Dean's memory might be limited since he had suffered some brain damage in a 1970 auto accident that prematurely ended his career. Despite the likelihood of receiving numerous phone calls from "assassination buffs," Sgt. Dean's number was listed. Contrary to Biffle's description, he was extremely clear-headed and immediately recalled the phone call, when I brought up the

subject. He was quite insistent that it was not a hoax, stating that he would have hung up otherwise. Dean was particularly impressed with the man's knowledge of the area where he allegedly filmed the motorcade, and the fact that he seemed quite concerned about the film not getting into the wrong hands. In regard to whether or not the film ever arrived, Dean suggested to me that it had likely been "intercepted by the authorities," although he did not spell out who that could be (the FBI?).

Not long after speaking to Dean, I received the Golz notes from AARC which I wrote to him about, suggesting in my letter that possibly the film had been turned over to Canadian authorities and forwarded by them. Meanwhile I had been able to speak with the sister-in-law of R.H.W. Smele (where the phone call had originated.) Mrs. Smele, also a Victoria resident, knew absolutely nothing about the incident, nor the fact that Mr. Smele's name, address and phone number appeared in the twelfth volume of the Warren Commission's published work. I learned from her that Mr. Smele's first name was Ralph and that his mother's maiden name had been Simpson, so it was likely that the call to Dean had been made by Smele (or possibly a relative named Ralph Simpson.) I also learned that Simpson, who was in the Canadian Navy for many years and who had died in 1982, was somewhat of an alcoholic, and had been known for playing practical jokes in the past.

With this revealing information provided by Smele/Simpson's sister-in-law, I phoned Sgt. Dean a second time and mentioned what I had learned, especially the fact that he was quite a drinker. Dean was unbending in his conviction, however, that the caller was completely sober and earnest and spoke clearly, with no suggestion that he was perpetuating a hoax. Again, Dean stated that had he suspected a hoax, he would never have accepted the call or continued listening to the man. It should be noted that Smele/Simpson had already spoken at length to a B.C. telephone supervisor who was equally convinced of his sincerity.

I also was able to speak to a nephew of Ralph Smele, who lives in suburban Vancouver, and who seemed to know his uncle quite well. He also did not have a high opinion of the man, particularly because of his alcoholic problems. Again, he had no idea that such a phone call had been made, nor the fact that his uncle's phone number and address were in the Warren Commission's volumes (his name is also listed in the index.) I learned that he had inherited his uncle's possessions when he died in 1982 which did not include a movie camera. Smele's wife had died in the mid-seventies and in 1980 Smele sold the house on Caledonia, where they had lived for many years, with the same phone number listed all that time. They also had regular boarders living with them, including a man named Harry Holness and his wife from 1972-74, but in reply to a letter he indicated he had little to do with Mr. Smele and knew nothing about such a phone call.²⁰ It should be pointed out that Smele's home was located in central Victoria, not too far from the Legislative buildings and the Attorney-General's offices.

Today, the Smele/Simpson phone call, like the Richard Giesbrecht allegations and the Oswald call to John Hurt in Raleigh, North Carolina, remains a mysterious aspect of the JFK assassination investigation, never completely resolved one way or another.

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Notes

1. Sylvia Meagher, Accessories After the Fact (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), pp. 23-24.
2. Mark Lane, Rush to Judgment (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 401.
3. Warren Commission Hearings and Exhibits, vol. 12, pp. 443-446; vol. 5, pp. 256-257. References to this source cited hereafter in format: 12H443-446.
4. 12H443-445.
5. 12H443.
6. According to Dean, her name was Bernice Williamson, who was the night

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- supervisor for B.C. Tel.
7. Dean Exhibit No. 5012.
 8. "Another Day in Dallas," Time, March 13, 1964, p. 25.
 9. 12H445.
 10. 12H446
 11. 19H446-447.
 12. 12H446.
 13. 19H447.
 14. 5H256.
 15. William Manchester, The Death of a President (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 40.
 16. U.S. Government Memorandum from Barefoot Sanders to Mr. Hubert, dated March 25, 1964, sent to me by the Assassination Archives and Research Center, Washington, D.C.
 17. According to the late Mrs. Meagher (Accessories After the Fact, p. 24):
"...this is the first and last that is heard of the film: the Commission has told us nothing beyond what is contained in Dean's testimony. Was the film received? Was it viewed? What did it show?"
 18. Notes by Earl Golz in interview of Dean in 1978, also sent me by AARC.
 19. Golz to Whitmey, June 4, 1989.
 20. Holness to Whitmey, October 5, 1987.

On reviewing my article from 1991, it's obvious that the caller was trying to perpetuate a great, big hoax. He was a known alcoholic and prankster, and his nephew, who inherited his uncle's possessions, didn't receive a camera. But I enjoyed researching a B.C. connection anyway. - Peter Whitmey