

The Man in the Dark Sports Coat

by William Weston

A man in a dark sportcoat and light colored pants dashed out of the back door of the TSBD about three minutes after the shots had been fired at the motorcade. He was in his late 20's or early 30's, about 5'8" tall, and had dark brown hair. As he ran south on Houston Street, his coat was flapping backward in the breeze.

Who was this man and why was he running away? Was he a conspirator escaping from the scene of the crime, or was he just an excited TSBD employee? Finding an answer to that question is not an easy undertaking, as there is much conflicting testimony. Nevertheless, a proper analysis of these eyewitness accounts will demonstrate that the apparent conflicts are really non-existent ones. In this article, I shall compare and combine the details of what was seen and heard in order to obtain a unified picture of what was happening behind the TSBD.

Let us first examine the matter through the eyes of Jams Worrell, a senior in high school living with his mother and sister in Farmers Branch, a Dallas suburb.¹ On November 22, he decided to skip school to see the President, and hitched a ride to Love Field, arriving at 9 am and then wait-ing for the President's arrival.

When the Presidential party arrived and disembarked, the large airport crowds prevented Worrell from getting a good view. He considered alternatives for seeing JFK, and hit upon a bus ride to Dealey Plaza, the final "slow" point of the motorcade, which would be direct, while the motorcade itself would take an indirect route at reduced speed to enhance the President's visibility. Worrell caught his bus and wound up awaiting the motorcade underneath the "sniper's window" in the TSBD.

At 12:30 he could see the presidential limousine as it made its successive slow turns onto Houston and Elm Streets. He could not see the President well, how-ever, as the press of the crowd again defeated his purpose. When the limousine had gone 50 to 75 feet past him, he heard a shot that sounded like it came from above. He looked up and saw about six inches of a rifle projecting from either the fifth or sixth floor window--four inches of barrel extending from two inches of stock. [The Mannlicher-Carcano barrel extends five and one half inches from the stock.] Worrell looked down the street to see where the rifle was aiming. A second shot was fired and the President slumped down into his seat. Worrell again looked up and saw a small discharge of flash and smoke as the rifle fired again. At that instant he heard people screaming and others were yelling, "Duck." He sought cover by going around the corner of the TSBD. Just as he was rounding the corner, he heard a fourth shot.² Continuing on towards the rear corner of the building, he turned right and crossed the street. Stopping to catch his breath at the s.e. corner of Houston and Pacific, he waited for perhaps two to three minutes, and then saw the man in the dark sportcoat come bustling out the back door, and run toward Houston and Elm, where he disappeared among other bystanders. Worrell watched him as long as he could, but after losing sight of him, he turned eastward and walked along Pacific St. Reaching his mother's office at Ross and Ervay, he took a bus from there to school, and then hitchhiked home.

The next morning as he watched the ongoing television coverage, he saw Jesse Curry make a plea to anyone who had seen the shooting to notify the police. Worrell did so and was soon taken to City Hall to make a statement. Three and a half months later, he testified before the Warren Commission and his account of the mysterious man running from the back door of the TSBD was reported in the local papers. One man who read this story was outraged, for he knew very well that no one had come out that way.

James Romack, a truck driver for Coordinated Transportation³ had been watching the back door from the very moment the shots were fired. He did not cease watching it until after the police had arrived to seal off the building. He was angry that some fool could get away with putting forth such nonsense. To set the record straight, Romack contacted the authorities and told them exactly what happened.

On the morning of Nov. 22, Romack had been working at the railroad yard. He had been conversing with co- worker George Rackley at a spot 100-125 yards from the rear side of the TSBD.⁴ The sirens of approaching motorcycles drew their attention to the crowds gathered at Houston and Elm. Shortly thereafter, Romack heard three rifle shots. Rackley,

curiously enough, did not hear the shooting, as he was 60 at the time and it is possible that his hearing might have been somewhat impaired. He did, however, notice a large flock of pigeons that rose up from the roof of the TSBD.⁵

The pedestrians near the TSBD were either falling to the ground or scattering. Conspicuous among them was the distinctive blue uniform of a policeman running along the sidewalk. He was headed towards the back area of the building. Romack told the FBI that he saw the policeman "within a minute" after the shooting.⁶ When he testified before the WC, he used the words "just immediately after."⁷ Since the meaning of the word "immediately" has some elasticity, we can thus conclude that the policeman was seen during a time period of not more than 60 seconds after the shooting.

This time estimate was confirmed by the officer, W.E. Barnett.⁸ As he stood near the front of the Depository, he heard what sounded like three shots that came from up high. Barnett looked up and scanned the roof line for a gunman. If he was up there, he might try to make a getaway down a fire escape, of which there was one on the building's east side. Was there another one on the rear side? To find out, he made a dash for the back end of the building.⁹ No fire escape was on that side, but there was a back door that no one was guarding. He decided to position himself at a spot where he could keep an eye on both the fire escape and the back door. While he stood there, two young women opened the door and came out.

Victoria Adams and Sandra Styles had been on the fourth floor, watching the parade from one of the windows.¹⁰ They heard gunfire as JFK's car disappeared behind a tree. To learn what happened, they ran down the back stairs and went out the back door. Adams estimated that she and her friend were going outside about a minute after the shooting. They were stopped by a policeman. "Get back into the building," he said.

"But I work here," Adams pleaded.

"That is tough, get back."

"Well, was the president shot?"

"I don't know. Go back."

The two women obeyed, yet they complied not by returning the way they came, but rather by going all the way around the west side to reenter the TSBD through the front entrance--talking to people along the way. Technically, they were disregarding the instructions of a police officer, and Barnett should have stopped them, but he must have had too many other things on his mind than to chase two young ladies determined to satisfy their curiosity. His main worry was the front entrance. As he looked in that direction, he saw police officers and sheriff's deputies all running towards the Triple Underpass. No one seemed to realize that shots came from the building itself, putting Barnett in a quandary. Should he stay in place and hope that another officer would do likewise at the front door? Or should he, Barnett, go to the front door and alert someone to take his vacated back door spot? He decided on the latter and ran toward the front of the building.

Before he reached the front entrance, he was stopped by Howard Brennan in his construction hat, who told him that he had seen a gunman on one of the upper floors. Then a police sergeant came and ordered him to find a sign on the building by which it could be identified. He had to go out into the street to see the words near the rooftop ledge. It was the Texas School Book Depository. When he finally got to the front door, he estimated that about 2 1/2 to 3 minutes had passed since he had heard the final shot.¹¹

When Romack saw the back door being guarded by an officer, he assumed a suspect might be coming out. (Neither he nor Barnett mentioned the exit of the two women, apparently attaching little significance to them.) After the officer left the rear door, Romack decided to take up the task of guarding the rear door himself. He continued the approach to the TSBD he began at the time of the shots, reaching a sawhorse barrier that crossed Houston St., located approximately 25 yards from the TSBD to block northbound traffic into a road construction zone.¹² This barrier, as we shall see, is crucial to this study, for it is the means by which a reconciliation can be made between Romack's testimony and Worrell's.

According to his statement to the FBI, Romack heard from somewhere behind him the sound of a car bouncing erratically over large chunks of asphalt. He turned and watched in amazement and disbelief as a shiny red 1963 Pontiac Catalina station wagon bumped and banged laboriously over the broken-up street. It followed the curve that joined Ross to Houston and stopped at the barrier on the other side of the railroad tracks.¹³ Painted on the side of the car was "KBOX Radio News." Two occupants were in the front seat. To give the news-men a helping hand, Romack walked in front of the barrier, and helped remove it to aid the car's access. In performing this task, Romack had turned his back to the Depository.¹⁴ The car passed the barrier and parked about 15 yards from the n.e. corner of the building. (See map showing positions at 12:34 pm.)

Romack said that the news vehicle arrived on the scene about 3 minutes after the shooting.¹⁵ His time estimate was confirmed by Sam Pate, one of the car's occupants. He said that the car came to a stop near the Depository about 4 minutes after the shooting.¹⁶ We can thus pinpoint its arrival between 12:33 and 12:34. The importance of this cannot

be overstated, for this was also the same moment when Worrell saw the man in the dark sportcoat coming out the back door. The time span when Romack had turned his back to the building could not have been more than a couple of minutes, yet it only takes a few seconds for someone to dash out of a building and run down the street. What about other witnesses in the area, who had the door within their field of view? One man who said that no one came out was George Rackley.¹⁷ He did not close in as Romack had, but remained in his original location, over 100 yards from the TSBD. Although he would indicate he saw no one emerge, that does not necessarily prove that he had the rear door in focus the entire time. An indication of his distractibility is that fact that he missed the arrival, at a distance of 25 yards, of the KBOX news vehicle, according to his WC testimony. If his awareness of his surroundings was so limited that he failed to notice a wild feat of rugged-terrain driving only 25 yards away, how could his testimony be used to settle a controversy involving a relatively inconspicuous event over 100 yards away? No doubt the awesome panorama of crowds surging into the railroad yards was an overwhelming spectacle to Rackley, and it would be understandable if he did not notice such peripheral circumstances as the arrival of a news vehicle or the brief appearance of a solitary figure coming out of a building.

Another witness who had the back door within his view was news reporter Sam Pate.¹⁸ From his vantage point inside the station wagon, he would have had an unobstructed view of the TSBD during that crucial moment when Romack had dropped his guard. Yet Pate did not have the same awareness of the TSBD as the source of the shots that Romack had. Pate's main concern then was finding out where the action was, and at 12:33 his attention would have been riveted on the onslaught of humanity into the parking lot and the railroad yards. Any latecomer to the scene would naturally assume that whoever fired the shots was *not* inside the building. (This consideration would also apply to the other occupant in the car, Josh Dowdell, who apparently made no statement about his observations.)

The sum total of these considerations leads to the conclusion that there is no testimony strong enough which could effectively refute Worrell's contention that a suspect ran out the back door.

The evident existence of this man is corroborated by the statements made by Carolyn Walther.¹⁹ She had been standing on Houston in front of the County Records Building. Less than a minute before she saw the motorcade, she happened to look up at the Depository and said she saw two men at a fifth floor window in the far east corner. One of them was kneeling at the lower open half of the window and he had a short gun or rifle in his hands. Standing beside him was a man wearing a brown suit coat. His clothing could be seen through the open window, but his face was obscured by the glass. This was the extent of her observations, for at that instant she turned her attention to the approaching motorcade. Going by the detail of the suit coat, we can suspect that the man whom Walther saw could be the same one that Worrell saw a little over three minutes later. It is relevant to mention here that this interval of time correlates exactly with the three minute passage of time between the firing of the shots at 12:30 to the use of an elevator by someone on the fifth floor going down to the ground floor at 12:33.²⁰

Still another sighting of this man was made by an unemployed steel worker, Richard R. Carr.²¹ Shortly after noon, he was looking for work at the site of the new courthouse on Houston St. He was seeking out the foreman on the ninth floor, and as he ascended, he stopped at the sixth floor, from which he could view the top floor of the Depository. He noted a heavy-set man looking out a window next to the one on the far east end. This man was wearing a hat, glasses, and, according to Carr, a tan sportcoat.²² For a short time, Carr studied the man, and then he continued his ascent.

About a minute or two later, he heard a loud noise that sounded like a firecracker. There was a slight pause and then he heard two more reports in rapid succession. He turned his eyes toward the triple under-pass, which was where he thought the shots came from. In the grassy area between Elm and Main he could see several individuals falling to the ground. To learn more, he immediately began to descend the stairs.

After Carr reached the ground, he again saw the man whom he had previously seen on the seventh floor of the Book Depository. He was rapidly approaching Carr at a very fast walking pace. When he got to the corner of Commerce, he turned left. On the next street over was a 1961 or 1962 Nash Rambler station wagon, parked facing north. It had a luggage rack on top and Texas plates. In the driver's seat was a young Black. The heavy-set man opened the rear door and got in. The car was last seen heading north on Record Street. This momentary sighting dovetails with the observation of sheriff's deputy Roger Craig, who also saw a Nash Rambler station wagon, also driven by a dark-complected man, about fifteen minutes after the shooting, heading west on Elm. It stopped in front of the TSBD and a man later identified by Craig as Lee Harvey Oswald got inside. The car was last seen going under the triple under-pass in a direction that could have taken it toward Oak Cliff.

In the course of this study, we have looked at a good number of incidents that occurred within a very short period of time -- about fifteen to twenty minutes. To show how these wide-ranging circumstances can be combined into a logical sequence, the following chronology is presented:

12:28 A man in a tan sportcoat is seen by Carr on the seventh floor of the TSBD.

12:29 A man in a brown suit coat is seen by Walther on the fifth floor of the TSBD, standing next to a gunman.

12:30 Worrell sees a gun firing at the President from a window on the fifth or sixth floor. Romack starts walking toward TSBD, keeping back door within his view.

12:31 Barnett runs to the back area of the TSBD. He encounters Adams and Styles coming out the back door.

12:32 Barnett returns to the front of TSBD

12:33 The KBOX news car arrives on the scene. Romack removes a portion of a barrier, allowing the vehicle to pass. Meanwhile, the man in the dark sportcoat dashes out the back door.

12:34 The KBOX car is parked near TSBD. The man in the tan sportcoat is seen by Carr walking south on Houston. He gets into a Nash Rambler driven by a Black man.

12:45 Deputy Roger Craig sees "Oswald" escaping in a Nash Rambler driven by a dark-complected man.

The chronology shows that there is a common thread of truth that ties widely disparate points of view into a unified whole. Each person on the scene corroborates the others and demonstrates the value and trustworthiness of the eye-witness testimony. While it is equally true that the best evidence in a homicide would be tangible items such as documents, photographs, bullet fragments, and autopsy specimens, in the case of the Kennedy assassination, where so much of that evidence has been grossly mishandled or falsified, the best source of data often turns out to be the inter-connecting memories of ordinary people.

NOTES

1. 2H 191-201 (Worrell)
2. Worrell had estimated that about four to six seconds had elapsed during the shooting. When he was told later that all the firing came from one bolt-action rifle, he could not understand how it could have been fired so rapidly.
3. 6H 279-283 (Romack)
4. 6H 280 (Romack)
5. 6H 275 (Rackley)
6. FBI report, March 13, 1964, p.2.
7. 6H 281 (Romack)
8. 7H 539-544 (Barnett)
9. It should be noted here that Barnett was running exactly the same way along the east side of the building as Worrell. Worrell had a head start, however, for he began running before the shot sequence ended, whereas Barnett did not start until it was over. By the time Barnett was on the move, Worrell must have already been crossing the street.
10. 6H 388-393 (Adams)
11. 7H 543 (Barnett)
12. FBI report, March 13, 1964, p. 5
13. Dennis Ford, "North of Elm on Houston," *Fourth Decade*, July, 1995, p. 41.
14. 6H 281 (Romack)
15. FBI report, March 13, 1964, p. 2
16. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
17. 6H 274-277 (Rackley)
18. FBI report, March 13, 1964, p.6
19. 24H 522 (FBI report, Carolyn Walther)
20. For more information on the circumstances inside the TSBD, see "The Fifth Floor Sniper," *The Third Decade*, May, 1993.
21. Commission Document 385. Reprinted in Josiah Thompson, *Six Seconds in Dallas*, (NY: B. Geis, 1976), pp. 308-309.
22. The time when Carr saw the man in a tan sportcoat on the seventh floor was within a minute or two when Carolyn Walther saw a man in a brown suit coat on the fifth floor. What probably happened was that the man whom Carr had seen had immediately gone down to the fifth floor where he was seen by Walther, just before the appearance of the motorcade.
23. This statement was given to the FBI on Feb. 4, 1964. Five years later, he gave a different story at the Clay Shaw trial. The Nash Rambler was not parked on Record Street, as stated in 1964, but rather it was parked on Houston, next to the TSBD, facing north. After the shooting, two or three men came out of the Depository and got into the Rambler. The car was last seen speeding north on Houston. With some variations, this story was repeated to J. Gary Shaw in 1975 in *Cover Up*, (p. 13.). unfortunately for Carr's credibility, the second version contains one significant difficulty: it is impossible to see this part of Houston Street from the new courthouse building, as the old structure would have completely blocked the view. This consideration leads us to the troubling conclusion that Carr had given a partially fictitious story at the trial. While arguably this assessment of his testimony is serious enough to warrant a complete rejection of everything he has said on the matter, I think that before we take this step, it is only fair to consider the severity of assassination-related persecution that he was suffering at the time of the trial, including at least two demonstrable attempts on his life (see *Cover Up*, pp. 13-14.) Given these circumstances, Carr's self-destructive credibility becomes more easily understandable as a matter of survival. When seen in this light, his early statements in 1964 actually gain in value--an account so important that the plotters of the assassination could not afford to leave it unsuppressed.

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