

# A Killer's Last Steps

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A tour of Lee Harvey Oswald's bizarre path after killing JFK.

By [James Reston Jr.](#)



Lee Harvey Oswald holds a rifle in this famous photo taken at 214 W. Neely St. in the Oak Cliff neighborhood of Dallas in 1963.

Courtesy of the Warren Commission

A couple months ago I began the tour for my book about President John F. Kennedy's assassination with a lecture at Southern Methodist University in Dallas—a talk I was told would be attended by four members of the Oswald family. Also at the lecture were three men who knew a lot about Nov. 22, 1963: Darwin Payne, an amiable, retired reporter for the *Dallas Times Herald* who covered the tragedy 50 years ago; Sam Childers, a historian who had worked for five years at the [Sixth Floor Museum](#) in the old Texas School Book Depository on Dealey Plaza; and Michael Hazel, another historian who taught for many years at SMU and is a Dallas native.

At a dinner after the talk, they offered to take me on a tour of Lee Harvey Oswald sites in Dallas. I leapt at the chance.

Our first stop was 1026 N. Beckley Ave. in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas, where Oswald was living alone on Nov. 22, one of 17 boarders in the house. To his fellow roomers, the reclusive Oswald was dubbed the “butt twister” for the strange way he walked as he came into the living room to watch TV or talked on the communal telephone to someone in Russian. The current owner, the granddaughter of the 1963 owner, is trying to sell the place, a low-slung ramshackle of a house in what is still a fairly rough neighborhood. Darwin and Sam thought the place might fetch about \$200,000, but the owner is asking \$400,000. She suggests that the house should become a public museum where you could see the closet of a room where Oswald slept or the downstairs dining room where he ate his meals. So far, no one is biting.

Oswald had slipped out of the book depository unchallenged after the shooting, walked several blocks, caught a city bus, and then hailed a taxi that took him to his boarding house. There he picked up a pistol and a coat and began to walk aimlessly. Did he expect to be apprehended soon? Did he have an escape plan? Or was he in some sort of daze that prompted the aimless walk? If he was trying to escape, how would he do it with no money for a train or airline ticket? Or was he pondering what he would tell the police once they caught him? Darwin thought this question was relevant to the assassin’s interrogations at the police station after the arrest. His interrogators were amazed at how tough and unfazed Oswald had been during his grilling as if he had steeled himself mentally for the confrontation.

From Oswald’s rooming house, we proceeded to 214 W. Neely St., still in Oak Cliff. It was there that Oswald and his wife, Marina, had lived with their small child after they returned from Russia, and where in the garden Marina Oswald had taken the famous photograph of the assassin with his new mail-order rifle on his hip. The current owners of the house might ask you for several dollars to see their upstairs apartment. (We saved our money.)

Oswald apparently was quite proud of that photograph, for he would later send a copy of it to his political confidante, an elegant dandy of Polish extraction named George de Mohrenschildt. On the back of the photograph, Oswald has inscribed it to his friend and added the line in Russian, “Hunter of Fascists. Ha. Ha. Ha.” When de Mohrenschildt discovered the photograph in his papers years later, he would call it Oswald’s gift from the grave. De Mohrenschildt committed suicide on the day before he was to be interviewed by an investigator from the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1977.

From there we proceeded to the neighborhood of W.H. Adamson High School. (Oswald had dropped out of high school in the 10th grade to volunteer for the Marine Corps.) As the crow flies, the school is about a mile from 1026 N. Beckley Ave. Oswald had wandered there, for reasons no one can know. And no one can know why a Dallas policeman named J.D. Tippit had come to this spot and parked his car, for he was out of his assigned district. Of course, the Dallas police were on their highest alert for the president’s assassin. Police radios crackled with the news and deployments.

But we can know what happened on the corner of 10th Street and Patton Avenue. As the loner walked by the police car, Tippit hailed him down, angry words were exchanged, and as Tippit

got out of his car, Oswald shot him dead. At least a dozen people witnessed Tippit's murder. By the evening of Nov. 22, five of them had identified Oswald in police lineups.

As Darwin, Mike, Sam, and I stood by the historical plaque marking the spot of Tippit's murder, we pondered yet another of these strange twists of history. Had Oswald had the presence of mind to be polite rather than cantankerous in his encounter with Tippit, he might have moved on, free of suspicion for some time.

From the corner where Tippit was murdered, we drove a few blocks to the nearby commercial street of Jefferson Boulevard. Oswald ran there, discarding his coat and ducking in and out of the recessed doorways of storefronts as police cars whizzed by with their sirens wailing. The neighborhood is largely Hispanic now, but its basic configuration remains the same. Johnny Calvin Brewer, the manager of a modest shoe store, had noticed Oswald's suspicious behavior and began following him for several blocks. He saw Oswald duck into a vintage movie theater called the Texas Theatre, built in the 1930s and owned for a time by Howard Hughes. Oswald slipped by a distracted ticket taker who was listening to the radio and disappeared into the darkness.

Brewer hailed a police officer, Nick McDonald, who entered the theater accompanied by another officer. The black-and-white movie *War Is Hell*, set in the Korean War and narrated by Audie Murphy, was playing. Soon enough the movie was stopped, and the lights came up. As McDonald came up the aisle, the manager of theater pointed out Oswald from the stage.

When the officers approached him, Oswald stood up and shouted, "This is it!" and pulled out his revolver. But McDonald leapt on him, getting his finger between the pistol's hammer and the bullet, and the gun did not go off. A scuffle ensued. Oswald punched one of the officers, and the officer punched him back, giving Oswald a black eye and a cut. (Later in the Dallas police headquarters, Oswald would allege police brutality.) Outside the theater, word of Oswald's arrest had spread through the neighborhood, and a crowd gathered. When Oswald was brought out, people shouted, "Kill him! Kill him!"

Darwin did not witness Oswald's arrest. He was still downtown, working another angle. He had learned about a businessman from the building that adjoined the book depository, a dress manufacturer by the name of Abraham Zapruder who had apparently filmed the presidential motorcade coming down Elm Street with his home movie camera. Zapruder, it turned out, had a diligent secretary who berated him that morning for not bringing in his little Super 8 camera, a Bell & Howell Zoomatic Director Series. She made him go home to get it.

"How many times does the president drive by your office?" she had asked.

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Zapruder had taken his place at the pergola above the grassy knoll and climbed onto a cement pillar, about 3 feet high, to watch JFK drive by. But he swayed with vertigo, and his secretary stayed on the ground, holding his legs to stabilize him as he filmed.

Darwin remembers going to Zapruder's office in the hours after the murder to find out whether the story of the 8 mm film was true. He remembers his conversation with the modest businessman as his camera lay on the desk, its historic cargo still undeveloped. It would not be long, however, before the Secret Service turned up and seized the film. But Darwin had his story as the first reporter to track down the man who had what would become the central piece of evidence of the Kennedy assassination.

At Dealey Plaza we stood next to Zapruder's cement pillar and only a few yards from the picket fence that shields the grassy knoll that is so central to the mythology of a possible second shooter. Only a few hawkers of conspiracy theories ambled along the sidewalk that morning, handing out their flashy pamphlets and touting their sensational fantasies. Usually, there are more, Darwin said.

At first glance the grassy knoll appeared more compact than I remembered it, especially as I looked down the slope of Elm Street from beneath Oswald's sniper nest. The sidewalk alongside the street bears two opaque cement squares that mark the spots where the first shot hit both Kennedy and Gov. John Connally and the second shot killed the president. The Zapruder film does not capture the first shot of the so-called magic bullet because a billboard blocked the perspective of Zapruder's lens. But that sign has since been removed.

As we made our way back to the car, Sam, the former historian at the book depository, drew our attention to the plaque on the side of the building. With its black background and embossed metal lettering, it describes the events of Nov. 22, 1963. In its last few lines the citation states that Oswald "allegedly" shot the president. Over the years, Sam said, the employees of the Sixth Floor Museum were always having to repair the damage to that word, for it was continually defaced, scratched, or had its paint removed.

There was a footnote to our tour. We had tarried at the old Beaux-Arts police headquarters on Main Street, built in 1914, where Oswald was interrogated after his arrest and where Jack Ruby

shot Oswald. Why *did* Ruby shoot Oswald? It was a question I was getting at every turn on my book tour. Sam eased the car into a parking space across the street from the old headquarters, which now houses municipal courtrooms.

According to Darwin, Ruby loved two things—his dog, Sheba, and the strippers at his Carousel Club, which was no more than a few blocks away. The club was a favorite of police officers, and Ruby often passed out cards inviting them to stop by after work. Popular and seedy, the club was considered the second-best strip club in Dallas, after the Colony Club, where the famous stripper Candy Barr was the main attraction.

Spontaneity, randomness, and cruel fate are at the center of the entire assassination story.

On the morning of Nov. 24, 1963, Ruby parked his car, with Sheba inside, and strolled to the Western Union office, where he proceeded to send money to one of his hard-pressed performers. He then ambled down Main Street a very short distance, perhaps no more than 50 yards, to the police headquarters and proceeded, unchallenged, down a narrow automobile ramp into the basement. As he arrived at the bottom of the ramp, he found himself in a throng of reporters clamoring for a glimpse of the assassin, who was at that very moment to be transferred from the city to the county jail. Just as Ruby reached the edge of the crowd, Oswald emerged from a far door, escorted by police Chief Jesse Curry and other officers. Ruby pushed his way forward, pulled his pistol, and shot Oswald.

Ruby would say at his trial that he had two reasons to shoot Oswald. This was four years before the Israeli victory during the Six-Day War, and the debate over the supposed complacency of Jews in the Holocaust still raged. Ruby's first motive for his action, he testified, was to show that Jews could be bold and brave and aggressive. (His real name was Jacob Leon Rubenstein.) His second motive was meant to sound even nobler. He wanted to relieve Jackie Kennedy the suffering of witnessing the trial of her husband's assassin and of possibly being called as a witness herself.

These explanations feel like transparent rationalizations, concocted by his lawyers afterward to impart sympathy from the public. I discounted them both entirely, as did my guides. Darwin had attended Ruby's first press conference a month or so after the assassination and described Ruby as totally incoherent and hallucinatory. The assassin's assassin lived out his life in a jail cell overlooking Dealey Plaza until his death 3½ years later in January 1967.

To hear the details of this story—the cherished dog left in the car, the money wired to the stripper, the short stroll to the police headquarters, the walk unhindered down the ramp, the arrival just as Oswald emerged—confirmed my long-held suspicion about the spontaneity of Ruby's violent action. If Ruby had been part of a wider conspiracy, how could all of these random acts have been orchestrated to get him to the right place at the exact instant when Oswald emerged?

Indeed, spontaneity, randomness, and cruel fate are at the center of the entire assassination story. What if Ruby's stripper had not needed money on that day? What if Oswald had not encountered Tippit? What if the motorcade route had been different, or, as Connally had argued, there should be no motorcade at all in Dallas? What if the FBI had followed up on their leads about Oswald,

or Oswald hadn't gotten the job at the book depository only a month before Nov. 22? And the cruelest of all, what if President Kennedy hadn't been wearing a back brace that held him upright as the sole remaining target for Oswald's second fatal shot?

*To order the e-book of James Reston Jr.'s Accidental Victim, go to the website for [Zola Books](#).*

***Read more in Slate on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the JFK assassination.***