

## **Chauncey Holt and the three 'tramps' on Dealey Plaza**

**Robin Ramsay**

**T**he Kennedy assassination is now a vast field of subjects and I recently wandered into one: the three 'tramps' photographed being taken into custody on Dealey Plaza after the shooting. This is a classic JFK assassination quagmire:<sup>1</sup> disputed photographic IDs; testimony from unreliable or self-interested sources; third-hand reports about second-hand reports, and a great backlog of attempts by other people to sort the shit from the shinola.

Why bother? Well, I revisited the 'tramps' because I was thinking about Billie Sol Estes, who, in his memoir, stated that Mob bosses Marcello and Trafficante had arranged for some of their people to be in Dallas on the day of the shooting to muddy the investigative waters for the legal authorities. Two other putative fringe participants in the assassination, Roderick Mackenzie and Chauncey Holt, have written or said things supportive of this; and as Holt claimed to have been one of the 'tramps' arrested on Dealey Plaza, his credibility as a source hinges on that. So: back to the 'tramps'.

By his own account variously a circus performer, a pilot, a painter, an accountant for the Mob, a fraudster, a supplier and modifier of weapons and a maker of documents for the Mob and the CIA, Chauncey Holt said in 1991:

'Dallas that day was flooded with all kinds of people who ended up there for some reason. It's always been my theory that whoever was the architect of this thing – and no one will ever know who was behind it, manipulating all these people – I believe that they flooded this area with so many characters with nefarious reputations

---

<sup>1</sup> Try <<http://www.maryferrell.org/mffweb/archive/viewer/showDoc.do?docId=48682&relPageId=3>> to see how deep the quagmire is.

because they thought, "Well, if all these people get scooped up it'll muddy the waters so much that they'll never straighten it out." 2

Holt made that statement after announcing that he was the shortest of the three 'tramps', the one wearing the hat, and identifying the other two. This did not make great waves among the Kennedy researchers; for not only had there been a number of false confessions in the case, a number of other people had been proposed as candidates for the 'tramps', notably the CIA officer E. Howard Hunt, who does look like the 'tramp' in the hat in some pictures.<sup>3</sup>

The next year someone spotted that among some declassified Dallas Police files were reports of the arrest of three 'tramps' on 22 November 1963 in Dallas. Journalists traced the two still alive and they confirmed that yes, they had been arrested by the police in Dallas on a train close to Dealey Plaza and taken to the police station. And these 'tramps' were real train-riding hoboes. Consequently many people – me included – assumed that the 'tramps' mystery had been solved and, if they were aware of Holt's claim, dismissed it.

## **Enter Lois Taylor**

**B**ut the photographs of the 'tramps' and those of Holt and the other two men he named, were given to a police forensic artist named Lois Taylor and she confirmed Holt's claims: the 'tramps' were Holt and two other criminals he had named, Charles Harrelson and Charles Rogers and definitely not the three hoboes, Doyle, Gedney and Abrams.<sup>4</sup> Charles Rogers hasn't been seen or heard of since 1963 and Harrelson is now dead but while alive did not confirm Holt's claim about his presence in the photographs, though he did once claim to

---

2 'Bottom Line: How Crazy Is It?', *Newsweek*, 23 December 1991 at <<http://www.newsweek.com/bottom-line-how-crazy-it-201178>>. Holt is something of a student of the assassination. See his long review of Posner's *Case Closed* at <<http://www.assassinationresearch.com/v3n2/v3n2holt.pdf>>.

3 See <<http://666ismoney.com/JFKWEB.html>>.

4 Her presentation on this is at <<http://www.jfkmurdersolved.com/lois1.htm>>.

have been one of the shooters – a claim he later withdrew.<sup>5</sup>

Taylor is a very successful police ID artist<sup>6</sup> and her presentation on this subject seems plausible to me; but her work had little impact among the JFK researchers. On the 'anti' side: Holt was a crook and a professional deceiver who'd forged documents for the CIA (or so he claimed), he was only forty years-old in 1963 and the 'tramp' whom he claimed to be looks older than that. As an example of the 'antis' here's Frank Cassano in a book review on the CTKA site.

'On November 22, 1963, Chauncey Holt would have been 40 years old and was sporting a prominent pile of very dark hair..... The old tramp in the photos is very clearly and significantly older than that. And Charles Rogers looks nothing whatsoever like either of the tramps! .....Only Harrelson comes remotely close to

---

5 Looking for information on Harrelson I found a 2011 story that a Canadian company, Imagis, which produced facial recognition technology, had run a photograph of Harrelson and the 'tramp' supposedly him and got a positive. The company spokesman is quoted as saying: 'We at Imagis scanned photos of both the tramp and Harrelson and the persons in the two photos are 99.99 percent identical. It's a match. Period.'

But the spokesman quoted is named Dr. Reeder G. Peepers, which sounds like an invention, and he is not on Google. And the company, which did exist, no longer seems to: my e-mails to it bounced and it does not have a Website.

The blog on which this story appeared, <<http://winsipcuster.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/dealy-plazas-blonde-tramp-is-definitely.html>>, five years worth of slightly wacky American leftism, is run by someone calling him or herself Winsip Custer – Winsip? – and many of the stories appear under the by-line CPW News Service, which is not on Google. Neither is there anyone called Winsip on Google – although there is a technology company with that name. I haven't been through much of the rest of the many blog entries but those I skimmed through look real to me.

So the report is a spoof? If so, a very elaborate spoof, and by someone who knows this subject. For the second half of the article describes another Imagis comparison of people in a photograph of some of the CIA's Operation 40 members, in a restaurant, which identified among the men at the table a young Porter Goss, who later became director of the CIA.

6 These days she's a celebrity in the field. See <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2178040/Picture-perfect-The-amazing-police-artist-sketches-criminals-shes-seen-look-EXACTLY-like-real-suspects.html>>.

resembling one of the tramps – but again, he would have been a mere 25 years old at the time the photos were taken. The tramps in the photos are clearly Harold Doyle, Gus Abrams, and John Gedney.’<sup>7</sup>

I could reproduce the photographs but they’re all on the Net.

Are the ‘tramps’ ‘clearly Harold Doyle, Gus Abrams, and John Gedney’? No, they are not.<sup>8</sup> Lois Taylor’s analysis (see note 4) makes a pretty convincing case that ‘Frenchy’, as the leading ‘tramp’ was nicknamed, does closely resemble the pictures of Rogers when he was in his teens; Holt resembles the small ‘tramp’ in some pictures and Harrelson is a dead ringer for the ‘tramp’ in the middle.

Further, there are very long shadows in the pictures of the hoboes on Dealey Plaza and relatively few people on the streets, suggesting that the photographs were taken quite some time after the shooting at 12.30. When were the hoboes arrested? Their arrest sheets are on-line and the reports, by officer Chambers, all use the same phrase: the men were arrested ‘*right after President Kennedy was shot*’.<sup>9</sup>

To complicate things further, a Dallas police officer David Harkness, involved in the arrest of the hoboes, interviewed by the FBI in 1992, said: ‘On the day of the assassination there were several individuals removed from the train other than the three individuals previously identified’.<sup>10</sup>

Did the Dallas police arrest two trios of ‘tramps’?<sup>11</sup>

Against which, the sister of Abrams is reported to have recognised him in the 1963 photographs.<sup>12</sup> Could she have been wrong about the 28 year-old picture of her brother? And former neighbours of Harold Doyle – the ‘tramp’ nicknamed

---

<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.ctka.net/reviews/ventura.html>>

<sup>8</sup> Pictures of the ‘tramps’ next to pictures of Abrams, Gedney and Doyle are at <<http://forum.jfkmurdersolved.com/viewtopic.php?p=2885>>

<sup>9</sup> <<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/hobo1small.gif>>

<sup>10</sup> <[http://jfkassassinationfiles.com/fbi\\_124-10273-10402](http://jfkassassinationfiles.com/fbi_124-10273-10402)>

<sup>11</sup> We already have two ‘Oswalds’ (if John Armstrong’s evidence is believed), two autopsies and (if we believe Billie Sol Estes) two bodies. Why not two sets of ‘tramps’?

<sup>12</sup> I cannot access the original report.

'Frenchy' – eventually recognised him in those photographs.<sup>13</sup>

## **Holt's story**

If Holt is lying about this, the rest of his tale has to be treated with great caution. And it is a striking story. Holt tells us that he was (unwittingly) involved in this conspiracy at four points. He was actually with Lee Harvey Oswald in the incident when Oswald handed out pro-Castro leaflets in New Orleans; he'd been sent down by his CIA contact to give the reluctant Oswald a hand. He claims he is in one of the photographs of that incident. Some say he is; the picture's too indistinct for me to tell. (If this is true, the framing of Oswald *for something* goes back a long way.) Holt claims he made phoney IDs for a large number of people, including some for Oswald and Oswald's alias, Hiddel, in the months before the assassination; and doctored some ammunition for the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle to enable the bullets to be fired from another rifle without leaving that rifle's marks on it. Finally, he claims he drove to Dallas to deliver some of these IDs and handguns. In effect, Holt is claiming that unwittingly he was central to the framing of Oswald.

Holt is not saying that he or his two companions shot Kennedy. In his memoir<sup>14</sup> he says that he believed that some kind of stunt was being staged in Dallas by the CIA, which would embarrass Cuba and nobble JFK's attempts at *détente* with Castro. Either he was duped, or it was need-to-know as is usual in such operations and he didn't need to know. Holt is unclear how far the knowledge of the assassination went. The CIA people he names as involved in this may have also thought they were creating an anti-Cuba incident.

In Holt's version he and his two companions sat in the railway boxcar for a couple of hours after the shooting, listening to events on a radio Holt had, before the police opened the door and arrested them. Holt said that he and the

---

<sup>13</sup> See Ray and Mary La Fontaine, *Oswald Talked* (Gretna [USA], Pelican Books, 1996) pp. 234-6. At first they didn't recognise him but then someone recognised his chin.....

<sup>14</sup> Chauncey Holt, *Self-Portrait of a Scoundrel* (Waterville [Oregon]: Trineday, 2013), available in the UK from the Book Depository.

other two were released when the Dallas Police bought their cover story of working for the Federal government.

Lois Taylor was certain that it was Holt, Harrelson and Rogers; and it is possible that the identification of Doyle and Abrams in the photographs by family and friends was unwittingly encouraged or cued by the journalists asking the questions: there is a difference between 'Do you recognise anyone in these pictures?' and 'Is this man your brother?'. We do not know how this was handled. But if it isn't Doyle and Abrams in the 'tramps' photographs, no matter how clumsily it was handled by the journalists, it is a bizarre coincidence that they look like them enough to fool a family member and former neighbours. Common sense, let alone Occam's razor, says that it is probable that Holt was simply lying, that he used the 'tramp' picture to insert himself into the story at a time when, thanks to Oliver Stone's movie *JFK*, there was major media interest in it again. But we will never know for sure.

## **Torbitt resurfaces**

The second man who claimed to have been an (unwitting) fringe member of the conspiracy is Roderick Mackenzie III in his strange memoir, *The Men That Don't Fit In*.<sup>15</sup> I wrote about this in *Lobster* 61<sup>16</sup> and after rereading the chapters about the assassination I am no clearer about how much of it is true. My guess is that most of it up to the evening of 21 November 1963 is: specifically, his story of running a safe-house in Dallas for the Mob and the CIA may well be true. But he appears to have incorporated bits and pieces from one of the more obscure pieces of assassination literature. Mackenzie's tale includes the Defense Industrial Security Command, the American Council of Christian Churches (ACCC) and Permindex – organisations which featured in the so-called Torbitt Memorandum in the early 1970s, which no researchers have taken seriously, because there is no evidence for its central

---

15 Text at <<http://paranoiamagazine.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/the-men-that-dont-fit-in-roderick-a-mackenzie-iii-2.pdf>>.

16 <<http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster61/lobster61.pdf>>

propositions.<sup>17</sup> If you wanted to make sure that almost all JFK researchers would dismiss your claims, putting Torbitt into the story would do it.

Mackenzie wrote on page 59 of the days in Dallas preceding the assassination:

'It seems that someone somewhere had called a convention other than the Pepsi one and invited every gypsy, tramp[,] mobster and politician available to come.'

Between them Mackenzie and Holt name a couple of dozen figures from crime, the anti-Castro groups and CIA contract agents – many of them familiar to students of the assassination – as being in Dallas that day.

Mackenzie's story is probably partly a fabrication. He says somewhere that originally his memoir was going to be chiefly about his life in circuses and – like Chauncey Holt – as a printer of documents for the Mob and the spooks.<sup>18</sup> He then found an old notebook from the sixties and decided to add material from that. Well, maybe.

If most of the post 21 November 1963 material is a fake, I cannot see the point of it. Mackenzie isn't selling anything – there's no book or DVD attached to his tale; and I can think of no obvious assassination research developments upon which this might impact, unless his advocacy of the LBJ's people-dunnit thesis is meant to discredit it. He tells us that after the assassination a drunk Malcolm Wallace – LBJ's personal hitman in the LBJ's people thesis – named the shooter teams and that he scribbled them down in the toilet of the bar they were in. (Many of the names are new.) Well, maybe.

If it is a fabrication it is an odd mixture of gaffes – e.g. naming Roger Craig as a shooter; obviously false assertions –

---

<sup>17</sup> There is still no evidence that the Defense Industrial Security Command (DISC) ever existed and no evidence that the ACCC was, as Torbitt and Mackenzie tell us, a front for a group of assassins based in Mexico, delicious though the idea is.

<sup>18</sup> The single most striking element in his story is his account of being asked by his intelligence handlers (he says DIA but I'm sure it was CIA) to run a safe house in the circus he was working in, on the road – a brilliant idea.

referring throughout to the DIA when from the context it must have been the CIA; and subtlety – e.g. claiming he was paid for some jobs with Permindex *vouchers*, which makes the organisation feel more real than merely stating its existence.

How true the accounts of Holt and Mackenzie are we will never know; there are few assertions within them that are checkable. But if we assume for the moment that only some of their stories are true, the bits prior to the assassination, they show the integration of the Mob and the CIA in domestic operations in America way beyond anything hitherto published.<sup>19</sup>

As for their stories providing support for Estes' assertion of Mob figures being in Dallas muddying the waters, which is where I came in, fascinating though both accounts are, all I can say is, 'Well, maybe'.

---

<sup>19</sup> There is a 1997 interview with Holt, just before his death, at <<http://www.maryferrell.org/mffweb/archive/viewer/showDoc.do?mode=searchResult&absPageId=388498>>. In this he makes many of the central claims which appear in his book, notably that his movements and actions before the assassination, printing fake IDs (including some for Oswald and Hiddel) and modifying some cartridges to take Mannlicher-Carcano bullets, were done at the behest of CIA personnel.