

Chapter 27

Three Gunshots at *Life*?

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Do three gunshots in a 1967 retirement film of a *Life* Magazine executive hold a clue to the J.F.K. assassination? Do these shots indicate executives at *Life* magazine engaged in cover-up activities in the assassination of J.F.K. in the weeks and months following his murder? What were some of the other events in the record that would lead one to consider collusion by *Life* executives in the cover-up?

In previous articles dealing with the possible connection of Oswald to North Dakota, it has been suggested that the possibility existed of an attempt on JFK's life during the Conservation Tour of 1963. [1] This scenario was explained by Richard Case Nagell, the double agent described in Dick Russell's book, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Nagell had uncovered a plot in New Orleans that included a September 24-29, 1963, attempt on JFK's life. Nagell didn't seem to know this was the time frame for the JFK Conservation Tour which included stops in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana on the 24th and 25th of September 1963. Nagell had himself arrested on September 20, 1963, in El Paso, Texas, in a fake bank robbery. He believed this arrest would not only protect him from the conspirators, but would derail the planned September 24-29 assassination attempt. [2]

In July 2000, I interviewed Lee Eitongon Thompson, widow and second wife of Edward K. Thompson. Edward K. Thompson was the managing editor of *Life* magazine from 1949 to 1961. He was promoted to editor in 1961 and served in that position until 1967 when he retired and became, as he put it, the inventor of the *Smithsonian* magazine. Thompson said he didn't invent *Life* magazine; that was Henry Luce. But he did invent the *Smithsonian* and the confidential W.W.II U.S. Air Force intelligence journal *Impact*. As head of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) air force intelligence division he was in charge of *Impact* from 1942-44 while on leave from *Life* where he had been employed since 1939. During 1944-45 Thompson was reassigned to the War Department's G-2 Special Branch where he worked with the British Ultra intelligence unit interpreting decoded messages intercepted from the German Enigma coding machine.

Edward T. Thompson owned a dry goods business in St. Thomas, North Dakota and became the local banker in 1888. [3] Edward K. Thompson, his son, was born in St. Thomas in 1907. Acquaintances noticed the unusual ability of four-year old Edward to identify great artists and paintings in books his mother spent hours viewing with him. [4] His childhood was spent in this village 60 miles north of Grand Forks, North Dakota. The passenger train that traveled between Grand Forks and Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

brought the Minneapolis and Grand Forks newspapers to this village of 300 people each day. This provided a window on the world for young Thompson. His father was also able to take the family to Europe and around the U.S. So even though he lived in a very isolated spot in America, Edward had experiences that were fairly exotic for someone growing up in the first two decades of the 20th century. [5]

Thompson finished high school at age 15 in 1923 and moved to Grand Forks, North Dakota, with his mother at 16 to begin college at the University of North Dakota. At the time, Grand Forks was a city of only about 15,000 people, but Thompson later remarked in his autobiography that he was more impressed by his first experiences in Grand Forks than when he moved on to Milwaukee and New York City. [6] Thompson became the editor of the *Dakota Student* newspaper his senior year at The University of North Dakota. The student paper was a daily in those days. Thompson had to ride a trolley a few miles each day from the campus to downtown Grand Forks, then cross the river to East Grand Forks, Minnesota, to deliver the newspaper copy to be printed and then, catch the last nighttime trolley back to campus. [7] East Grand Forks (EGF) in the 1920s was the center of area nightlife because the North Dakota side of the Red River had been under liquor prohibition since 1895 and Minnesota wasn't. EGF was considered "sin city" and was actually called "Little Chicago." [8]

Before his editorship of the student newspaper was over, he had gotten in hot water with the local Ku Klux Klan. The Klan had won electoral control over the Grand Forks school board and city council from 1924-1928. Thompson was called on the carpet by UND's president because a writer on the *Dakota Student* had insulted the local Presbyterian minister, a Reverend Wesley Ambrose, the Klan leader. Of course, the Klan's bias was directed against the fairly large Catholic and Jewish communities in Grand Forks. Rev. Ambrose and the Klan were instrumental in the defeat of a local politician and candidate for governor, J.F.T. O'Conner. O'Conner went on to become Controller of the Currency under F.D.R. In any case, a young writer under Thompson's editorship "fessed" up to the inflammatory comments in the student newspaper and got young Thompson off the hook. [9] Thompson graduated from UND with a degree in journalism in 1927. Thompson married Marguerite Maxam from Montana in 1928. His first of two sons, Edward T. was born that year. This son later went on to become the editor of *Reader's Digest* and was instrumental, according to author Henry Hurt, in getting *Reasonable Doubt* published in 1985. Hurt's book about the Kennedy assassination in fact is dedicated to Thompson's son, Edward T. Thompson. [10]

Thompson and his new family moved to Milwaukee where one of his UND journalism professors had connections at the *Milwaukee Journal*. Thompson worked at the *Journal* from 1929 to 1937 and also was a stringer for *Time* magazine during that period. He was very ambitious and always was looking for advancement in his profession. He became the picture page editor at the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1933. He was the first journalist to start using pictures on a large scale in newspapers. Thompson came to the attention of Henry Luce at *Time* magazine who was thinking of starting a national picture magazine, which in fact became *Life* magazine. Thompson developed the

procedure for creating seamless composite photos. He would bevel the edges of pictures with sandpaper to achieve this seamlessness. [11]

The first issue of *Life* was, according to Thompson, a fairly crude example of photo journalism, and he knew he could do just what the new *Life* magazine needed in the way of photo editing. Henry Luce hired this ex-North Dakotan away from the *Milwaukee Journal* for a hefty pay raise in 1937. Thompson became assistant picture editor under Wilson Hicks at *Life*. Coincidentally, Henry Luce's father, a missionary in China, had raised the young Luce with tales of Teddy Roosevelt and his adventures on his ranch in western North Dakota around the turn of the century. Obviously, Luce would have been impressed by someone from North Dakota, especially someone who could do magic with pictures. [12]

Thompson's boyhood fascination with photos of great artworks finally paid off. His second wife, Lee Thompson, told this author it was truly amazing to watch him choose just the right picture for an issue of *Life* magazine. He personally managed the production of approximately 600 issues of *Life* between 1949 and 1961. Mrs. Thompson worked as his assistant in the photo section of *Life* according to David Cort. Most of her career was spent as a reporter with *Time* magazine, who at one time was stationed in the Paris bureau. [13]

Thompson had divorced his first wife Marguerite Maxam, in May of 1963. He then married Lee Fitogon. Her father had been an "international-capitalist imprisoned by the Bolsheviks in 1917. He bought his way out of a Moscow prison and emigrated to the U.S." where Lee was born in 1921. [14] Interestingly, David Cort, a disgruntled *Life* journalist, referred to her as a communist fellow traveler in his book, *The Sin of Henry R Luce*. [15] According to Thompson, Henry Luce did tolerate a communist cell within the employee group at *Life*. Thompson said Luce didn't care what your ideology was as long as you didn't vote communist. [16]

During Thompson's absence from *Life* from 1941-45, he worked as the head of SHAEF air force intelligence division where General Eisenhower was presiding. At the same time C.D. Jackson, the publisher of *Life* under Luce, was involved in intelligence operations in the European theater. It seems likely that Jackson and Thompson would have crossed paths in Europe. They did, of course, cross paths as colleagues at *Life*. [17]

During my six-hour interview with Lee Thompson in July 2000, she said that the one thing she and Ed disagreed most about was the Vietnam War. "You know he worked for Dean Rusk and was a hawk," [18] she said to me. Ed Thompson was a registered Democrat during his time as *Life* managing editor. One would surmise he might, in essence, have been a conservative Democrat considering his wife's reference to his hawkishness on the question of American involvement in Vietnam.

Thompson's office was next door to Henry Luce's office from 1949-67. Lee Thompson said her husband and Luce had a very good relationship. In a memorandum to Luce, Thompson told Luce how much he admired him and how he believed the world

should resemble Luce's vision. In 1964, although Henry Luce, along with his wife Clare Booth Luce, supported Barry Goldwater's presidential candidacy, Thompson convinced Luce to abandon support of Goldwater, though Clare Booth Luce continued being an active supporter of Goldwater. Henry did not, however, start supporting Thompson's man, Lyndon Johnson. Even though Lee Thompson characterized her husband as apolitical in comparison to her own political activity, he seemed in fact to be quite political, i.e. a hawk on Vietnam, an outspoken supporter of Lyndon Johnson, an almost advisor to the Greek Junta, and a member of Air Force intelligence in World War II. [19]

In 1958, Thompson received an honorary degree from his alma mater, the University of North Dakota. He continued to maintain contact with his home state, renting out his family's farmland around St. Thomas where he was born. [20] He attended the University of North Dakota alumni reunions in New York City in the 1950's and, according to correspondence in North Dakota Senator Quentin Burdick's archival papers, was invited to stop by the North Dakota congressional office any time Thompson happened to be in Washington, D.C. [21, 22]

In 1961 Thompson was promoted from managing editor of *Life* to editor. He considered it a demotion in actuality because he would no longer be in charge of micro-managing each weekly edition of the magazine. The fact that he was highly respected by his staff of photographers meant giving up a sort of support group in exchange for more isolated work as editor (As previously mentioned, he held this title from 1961-67.). His wife said he could be extremely tough on those who worked for him and if he didn't respect someone, that person was in trouble. [23]

After retiring from *Life* in 1967, he was given an opportunity to work for the Greek Junta but his wife convinced him he didn't belong in that role. I found it interesting that when he was writing his autobiography, his wife said he did it from memory because when I asked if he had any other papers in any archives, she said his secretary at the Smithsonian Museum had thrown everything away. Lee said she was extremely upset with the secretary but that Ed didn't seem to care. She seemed to think he wasn't upset because he had a great memory and wasn't worried about not being able to complete the autobiography. [24]

Ed Thompson's career at *Life* also included negotiating with Gen. Douglas MacArthur and Ernest Hemmingway for their memoirs. The memoirs were published in their entirety in many installments, which was unusual for a picture magazine like *Life*. He also became acquainted with Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy. He tells the story about the time JFK was showing him around the White House and pointed out the golf shoe spike marks left on the wooden floor by Eisenhower in front of the door to the Lincoln bedroom. [25]

In 1928 Henry Luce was writing essays indicating that he (Luce) was flirting with fascism. He stated that he believed the U. S. Constitution was obsolete and needed to be scrapped. Mussolini was a leader that he believed had what it took to run a country. He said he thought that the real leaders and important people politically were not the men

who became congressmen, but the men who rose to the top of the various business and industrial sectors. The masses needed a strong leader since they were incapable of really making a country function without one. [26] In 1928 Edward K. Thompson was just finishing college, but 20 years later, just before he was promoted to managing editor, he told Luce in a memo that he believed that the model Luce envisioned for the world was his model too. On occasion, Clare Luce also said that she guessed that at heart she was a fascist. She did in fact become the ambassador to Italy. It would seem that working as a managing editor and editor for Luce for 18 years, Thompson needed to be ideologically compatible with Luce and his wife to survive in his position as editor.

Dan Rather, in his 1977 book, *The Camera Never Blinks*, [27] said that security at *Life* was so weak immediately after the assassination that any executive could have made his own copy of the Zapruder film. I asked Mrs. Thompson if she happened to have any film around the house, thinking she might have a copy of the original Z-film. Apparently she didn't, but she did give me a copy of her husband's 1967 retirement film, which was made up of various segments, including interviews with people in his boyhood home in North Dakota. There is one unusual scene at about 11 minutes into the film when the narrator says that, "Ed liked to hob-knob with presidents". This comment is super-imposed over a photo of Thompson walking down a street with Harry Truman. The next photo shows Thompson leaning over a light table with two colleagues examining strips of film. At this point the narrator says, "But Ed much preferred hob-nailing willing subordinates." Then one hears three gunshots which are super-imposed aurally over the light table photo just after the hob-nailing comment. When I asked Mrs. Thompson what the gun shot sounds were, she didn't seem to have any idea and proceeded to give me a duplicate of the film. Is this a cryptic memorial to *Life* magazine's involvement concerning knowledge of the assassination of JFK inserted into the film by Thompson's colleagues at *Life*? The three shots, of course, are a reference to the official number of shots fired in Dealey Plaza on Nov. 22, 1963. [28]

The film Thompson and his colleagues are seen examining consists of 24 frames in eight vertical strips of three each. They seem to be larger than 35mm., perhaps about 55 mm., according to one expert. Detail cannot be seen clearly. Of course even if these frames are not actually significant in themselves, they could be symbolic of the altering of the Z-film that may have begun the night of Nov. 22 at the *Life* offices in New York City. [29]

What other indicators are there of persons at *Life* magazine having involvement in events surrounding the assassination, in so far as the evidence exists in the record? One is the testimony to Warren Commission staff by Isaac Don Levine, *Life* magazine's representative in Dallas. [30] Ed Thompson and C.D. Jackson channeled \$25,000 to Marina Oswald via Levine to her business manager James Herbert Martin (CD 470.24). This money was ostensibly for her life story to be done by Meredith Press, which in fact was never published. C.D. Jackson had been Eisenhower's special assistant for psychological warfare in W.W. II and had worked regularly with Isaac Don Levine on anti-Communist propaganda for Eastern Europe. Jackson was president of the CIA's Free Europe Committee in the 1950's. Levine headed the CIA Liberation Committee. He

spoke Russian and spent an intensive week with Marina Oswald just prior to her first session of testimony before the Warren Commission on February 3, 1964. [31] Also remember Edward K. Thompson was SHAEF's air force intelligence director in W.W.II. Obviously these three had the connections to be involved in the machinations at *Life* magazine concerning the control of information in the weeks following the assassination of JFK.

The combination of the above information with the events described in three previous *Fourth Decade* articles about the possible connection of Lee Harvey Oswald to witnesses in the Stanley, North Dakota, events in the 1950's seems to strengthen the original hypothesis of John D. Williams and myself. The likelihood of an Oswald legend building process at work in North Dakota seems more plausible than ever before. The function of this LHO legend could have been to serve as a cover leading up to an assassination attempt on JFK during his visit to the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks on Wednesday morning, September 25th 1963.

In 1995 the Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB) requested the trip planning documents for the Conservation Tour of 1963. Shortly after the request was made the Secret Service had those documents destroyed. [32] On September 25, 1963, upon the arrival of the JFK entourage in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, for an overnight stay, the decision was made to extend the upcoming Texas trip to two days. [33] Could this decision have been a reaction to the fact that the window of opportunity for killing JFK had passed in the previous 24 hours? Were other arrangements now needed? Only the September 20 arrest in El Paso, Texas, of CIA double agent Richard Case Nagell may have prevented the killing of JFK at UND, the alma mater of *Life* magazine executive Edward K. Thompson. Two months later the plotters succeeded in Dallas.

Edward K. Thompson passed away in 1996 at the age of 89.

Notes:

1. Severson, Gary (2000) Oswald in North Dakota, Part III. *Fourth Decade*, 7, 4, 3-7.
2. Russell, Dick, (1992). *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. New York: Carol & Graf, Preface, 21.
3. Thompson, Edward K. (1995). *A Love Affair with Life & Smithsonian*. Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri Press.
4. Thompson, Edward K., retirement film 1967
5. Thompson, Edward K., *A Love Affair with Life & Smithsonian*.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Interview with Leonard Zimmer, Aug. 2000 East Grand Forks, Mn.

9. Thompson, Edward K., *A Love Affair with Life & Smithsonian*.
10. Hurt, Henry (1985). *Reasonable Doubt*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, p. xi.
11. Thompson, Edward K., *A Love Affair with Life & Smithsonian*.
12. Ibid.
13. Thompson, Lee, interview July 2000.
14. Ibid.
15. Cort, David (1974). *The Sin of Henry R. Luce*. Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart.
16. Thompson, Edward K. *A Love Affair with Life & Smithsonian*.
17. Scott, Peter Dale (1993). *Crime and Cover-up: The C.I.A, the Mafia and the Dallas-Watergate Connection*. Santa Barbara, CA: Open Archives Press, 35-36.
18. Thompson, Lee, interview, July 2000.
19. Ibid; Thompson, Edward K., *A Love Affair with Life & Smithsonian*.
20. Ibid.
21. *Alumni Review*, Univ. of North Dakota, Jan./Feb. 2000, p.6-7
22. Burdick, Quentin, Senator, papers, Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND.
23. Thompson, Edward K., *A Love Affair with Life & Smithsonian*.
24. Thompson, Lee, interview July 2000.
25. Thompson, Edward K., *A Love Affair with Life & Smithsonian*.
26. Swanberg, W.A. (1972). *Luce and His Empire*. Scribner & Sons.
27. Rather, Dan (1977). *The Camera Never Blinks*. New York: Ballentine Books.
28. Thompson, Edward K., retirement film, 1967.
29. Ibid.
30. Scott, Peter Dale, *Crime & Cover-up*, 36,
31. Rose, Jerry D. (1995). Plain Talk about Isaac Don Levine. *The Fourth Decade* 2, 2, 35-41.
32. Palamara, Vince, email to author, Sept. 2000
33. Palamara, Vince, Texas trip plan posted on *JFKresearch.com*, Sept. 2000.