

KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION: THE KEY WEST CONNECTION



● In Friday's story, Tim Gratz and Mark Howell take a new look at the goings-on at the Interpen Mercenary Camp on No Name Key, just before the Kennedy assassination.

● On Saturday, a Key West customs agent and alleged CIA operative travels to Miami to interview a man who claimed he saw his CIA case officer with Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas.

● On Sunday, the story of Oswald and Jack Ruby being seen together at Key West Airport, and the investigation of this report by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

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a Cubana airline flight to Havana, Cuba. He was the only passenger on the flight, which had a crew of nine.

According to the CIA, six days before the assassination Gilberto Lopez had attended a meeting of the Tampa chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. This was the chapter that Lee Harvey Oswald approached for permission to start a new chapter in New Orleans.

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said she believed the epilepsy was brought on by concern for his family in Cuba.

She said she received a letter from Lopez in about November 1963, saying he had returned to Cuba once more. She said she had been surprised, although he had mentioned returning to Cuba before he left for Tampa.

Lopez said in a later letter that he had received financial assistance for his trip to Cuba from an organization in Tampa, and his wife explained that he would not have been able to pay for it otherwise.

With the help of historian Tom Hambright at the Monroe County Library, The Citizen has unearthed the marriage license and marriage certificate of Gilberto Policarpo Lopez, dated Aug. 10 and 11, 1962 respectively.

The documents reveal that the "American wife" was Andrea Leon Blanche.

Blanche is listed in the 1962

The strange flight of Gilbert Lopez

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Special to The Citizen

AND MARK HOWELL

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In 1979, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that President John F. Kennedy was "probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy."

In coming to its conclusion, the committee criticized the Warren Commission for not pursuing certain crucial leads in 1963 and 1964.

One of the most intriguing leads concerned a 22-year-old Cuban-American named Gilberto Policarpo Lopez.

According to information given to the Warren Commission, Lopez married an American woman in Key West in August 1962. The couple lived here until June 1963, when they moved to Tampa. In August 1963, the wife returned to Key West because of marital problems.

On the day of the assassination, Lopez was in Texas.

The next day, Nov. 23, 1963, he crossed into Mexico at Nuevo Laredo. He arrived in Mexico City on Nov. 25. He stayed at the Roosevelt Hotel until the evening of Nov. 27, when he left on

Lopez

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The CIA had opened a file on Lopez when, just days after the assassination, it received a classified message from a source requesting "urgent traces on U.S. citizen Gilberto P. Lopez." The source added that "the timing and circumstances surrounding subject's travel through Mexico and departure for Cuba are suspicious."

In August 1964, the FBI interviewed Lopez' cousin, Guillermo Serpa Rodriguez, in Key West. The cousin said that Lopez had come to the United States soon after Castro came to power, stayed about a year and returned to Cuba because he was homesick. He returned to the United States in 1960 or 1961, fearing he would be drafted into the Cuban militia.

The FBI also interviewed the "American woman," unnamed by both the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the later House Select Committee on Assassinations, whom Lopez had married in Key West.

She told the FBI that her husband began suffering from epileptic attacks, was confined for a time at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami in early 1963, and was treated by doctors in Coral Gables and Key West. She

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City Directory as a saleswoman at Neisners, a variety store where Smart & Final is located today. Her address was given as "Village Apts."

The whereabouts today of either Blanche or Lopez are unknown. By the time the Warren Commission was published, Gilbert Lopez was in Cuba, beyond U.S. jurisdiction.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations argued that Lopez's connection with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, coupled with the dates of his travel to Mexico via Texas, coinciding with the assassination, plus the reports in Mexico that his activities were "suspicious," all amounted to "a troublesome circumstance that the committee was unable to resolve with confidence." The committee slammed the CIA's "failure to report what information it did have to the Warren Commission."

The CIA never told the Warren Commission about its use of the Mafia to try to kill Castro, either. Earl Warren first learned of the CIA/Mafia plots in January 1967, through Washington political columnist Drew Pearson.

Pearson had been told by Edward Morgan, a prominent Washington attorney, that one of his clients, Johnny Roselli, was involved in efforts to kill Castro.

Roselli, who researchers claim was "training exiles in the hot, mosquito-infested marshes of the Florida Keys," told Morgan that the actual hit team was part of the Santos Trafficante Jr. crime organization from Tampa, where Lopez had moved from Key West.

Trafficante had been the Mafia's man in Cuba until the Castro revolution, though a 1961 report of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics indicated that Trafficante might be, in fact, working with Castro.

Warren passed the Roselli information to the FBI, but the FBI, for reasons never explained, declined to investigate the story.

The CIA plots to kill Castro were publicly revealed by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in 1976, but the House Select Committee on Assassinations never had the opportunity to question Roselli, for he disappeared in July 1976, two months before the committee was established.

In August, a 55-gallon steel drum surfaced in the Intercoastal Waterway in North Miami. The barrel contained the remains of Roselli. One month after that, Chicago Mafia boss Sam Giancana, who had been linked by Roselli with the CIA-sponsored efforts to kill Castro, was shot to death in his home in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park.

The only Mafia chief involved in the CIA plots who escaped a violent death was Trafficante.

His organization apparently made a number of attempts on Castro's life, but it continually failed. After the third failed attempt was reported, the CIA began to suspect that Trafficante was a double agent, believing he had diluted some poison the agency sent to be placed in Castro's drinking water.

In 1965, it became apparent that Trafficante was working both sides when a comrade in arms mentioned under oath that, in 1962, the mobster had told him, "Kennedy's gonna get hit [before the 1964 election]." The man had reported this threat to the FBI in 1962, immediately after it was made.

Questioned about this in Congress, Trafficante indicated that the remark was about Kennedy being hit by ballots, i.e. defeated, in the 1964 election.

Gilbert Policarpo Lopez, former Key West resident, worked in the construction industry in Tampa — which has had a long-established organized crime connection with Key West — before traveling to Texas at the time of the assassination.

His movements and activities suggest that he was a possible participant in Trafficante's activities. That would mean, ultimately, that he was ready to hit either Castro or Kennedy.

The Gilbert Policarpo Lopez case continues to perplex.

The CIA had not reported to the Warren Commission that at the very moment of the Kennedy assassination, it was organizing another attempt on Castro's life. More on this and its relationship to the Lopez story on Sunday.

Tim Gratz and Mark Howell have iron-clad alibis for where they were on Nov. 22, 1963. In Friday's story, they investigate events at No Name Key at the time of the Kennedy assassination.

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