

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PHOTO?



photograph by Charles Tanner

From high atop the Texas School Book Depository Building comes Larry Schiller, the man who gave you Gary Gilmore's execution, Lenny Bruce's overdose and the My Lai massacre, with his latest triumph, a heart-rending, mirror-image assassoflick—The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald.

BY LLOYD GROVE

Just west of the intersection of Houston and Elm streets in the big bucks boomtown of Dallas, Texas, something really awful happened:

Bang, bang, and bang.

Actually it happened twice: first on November 22, 1963, at 12:30 Central Standard Time, when Jack Kennedy's intelligent, witty head evulsed in the viewfinder of Abe Zapruder's 8mm camera and sprayed shimmering red mist over Dealey Plaza. And then on July 3,

Lloyd Grove, an ace reporter at the Corpus Christi Caller, is a regular contributor to Crawdaddy.

1977, a motorcade survived for the second time after a dusky rifle barrel popped out of a sixth floor window and a handsome chap in the head limo twitched and writhed to the *bang-bang-bang* of the gunshot.

This time the event was recorded repeatedly and at great expense by an industrial-strength multi-lensed mechanism that purred atop the grassy knoll. It and several boom mikes were attended by sweat-drenched, joke-cracking members of the nation's entertainment unions who were getting richer by the minute. At 12:30 p.m. Central Standard Time, a caterer set up on a grassy knoll with sand-

wiches and lemonade. A group of electricians smoked cigars and played poker under a tree and spellbound parents and children, their faces flushed and giddy, hurried to the obliging man who was signing candy wrappers, post cards, or anything else handy: "Best wishes, JFK."

After all, we Americans—"born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage"—nearly always have made the best of even our worst difficulties, the worse the better. Jolly as we are, we can even see the bright side of something really awful.

Take, for instance, Marguerite Claverie

Oswald, who happens to be Lee Harvey Oswald's mother.

"I'm unique, one of a kind," robust, lively Marguerite proclaimed in her immaculate Fort Worth dining room this July, a week before her 70th birthday.

"I'm the only one in the whole world who's the mother of the man accused of killing a President. A *President!* Why else would you come to see me?"

"Let me ask you this," she continued. "They replaced the President, didn't they?"

"So I understand."

"There, you see? *I cannot be replaced.*"

* * *

This summer was a busy one for Mother Oswald's telephone. I, and several others, apparently, coveted her ruminations about a TV movie then being filmed in Dallas for ABC, a four-hour what-if? called *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald*, which will be aired on two nights sometime soon. Charles Fries, an independent producer out of Hollywood, spent more than \$2 million of the network's money (twice the usual amount) before he delivered the final print. He conscripted such behemoths of tubebiz as Lorne Greene, Ben Gazzara and David Greene (the director of *Roots* and *Rich Man, Poor Man*), and convinced two young actors, John Pleshette and Mo Malone, to play Mr. and Mrs. Lee Harvey Oswald.

Both John and Mo had immersed themselves quite nicely into their characters last summer. Mo, a newcomer to television, claimed to be having nightmares in which she'd look into mirrors and see only Marina Oswald. John—in make-up a dead ringer for Oswald—said of Lee: "It's not a question of liking him, and saying, 'Oh, I admire his courage, I admire his this, I admire his that.' But there are things about him that I admire. It's impossible to play any character that you can't find a way to like."

Don't be thrown by the film's title. Although much of the movie dramatizes the trial Oswald never had, we aren't talking here about Perry Mason courtroom *schtick*. According to informed sources, *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald* won't even try to establish his guilt or innocence.

Instead, the film is, according to Saul Kahn, the production's choleric publicist, "the first . . . to deal with Lee Harvey Oswald as a person." Lounging in his muggy, paper-strewn room at Dallas' Holiday Inn Central, Kahn says, "I feel like my whole career has built up to this."

"It is a film," he says, "based on historical fact, not speculation or rumor. However, Dallas *Times Herald* reporter Hugh Aynesworth, a recognized assassination expert, found nearly 60 inaccuracies in the first half of the script alone.

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But that's not important.

What is important is that those of you who tune in on the appointed nights will see—in Kahn's words—"an authentic recreation of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. . . . filmed on the actual assassination site in Dealey Plaza."

* * *

Marguerite has been skittish over the phone, talking vaguely of "compensation," abruptly ringing off whenever pressed on the subject. She has hung up on me five times, twice on my editor.

Finally, though, she agreed to a meeting. "Go past the Texas School Book Depository and turn onto the Fort Worth Tollway." When I arrive at the handsome brick house on Byers Street, she requests identification, and searches me for a hidden tape recorder.

"This is a nice house."

"I don't own this house," Marguerite says, "and I had to sell most of Lee's personal belongings and letters for the down payment."

Marguerite, chic in an apple-green housedress, her stout beehive unyielding against the blasts of the air conditioner, steps briskly to the dining room table.

"Everybody wants to know about the assassination," she says. "Books and more books come out every week. And some of them have even used my research without giving me the credit." She sighs.

"You say you want to know my views.

Marguerite is one of a kind. "Let me ask you this: They replaced a President didn't they? There. You see? I cannot be replaced."

Well, I don't just talk off the top of my head. I read every book that comes out. Sometimes I'll stay up until three or four in the morning doing research. Here, I want you to see my library."

She leads me into a shelf-lined alcove, containing what indeed seems to be every tome ever written on the subject, including the 26 volumes of the Warren Commission Report. Each book, paperback and hardcover, is individually wrapped in plastic.

"Okay, that's enough," Marguerite says after 15 seconds, and I follow her back to the dining room.

"I live in America," she says. "Whad-dya think, this isn't some kind of com-

munic country. This isn't Russia."

Bang-bang-bang. She's pounding the tabletop. "This is free enterprise. It's profit-sharing. And if you're making money, and your magazine is making money—here, look at this ad: a magazine charges millions of dollars for an ad like this!—if everybody's making money, well I'm not about to go penniless."

"Why did you keep hanging up on me?"

"Really now," says Marguerite, peering incredulously through butterfly glasses. "In my subtle way, I left you an opening. But you insulted me. You asked me what I meant by 'compensation.' What kind of businessman do you think you are?"

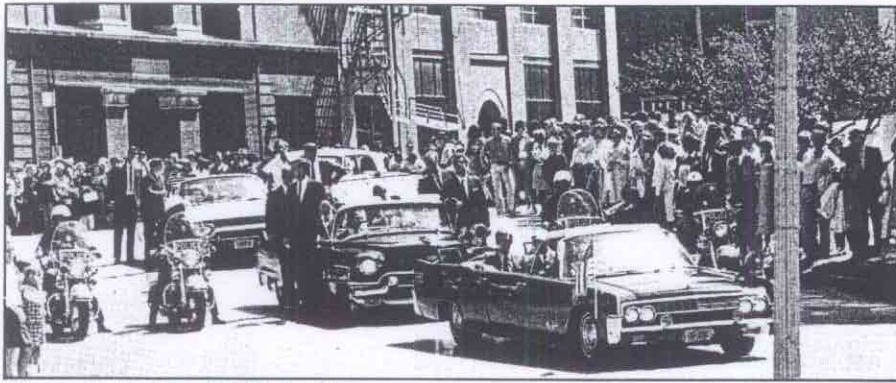
* * *

OK. There are businessmen, and there are *businessmen*. There are assasso- agents who merchandise specialists like Mark Lane & Co. rolling and yawing around the college lecture circuit. There are small-time entrepreneurs who market commemorative ashtrays, dinner plates and bathmats (fur tableaux of John-John poised and saluting) at cigarette stands and curio shops across the country.

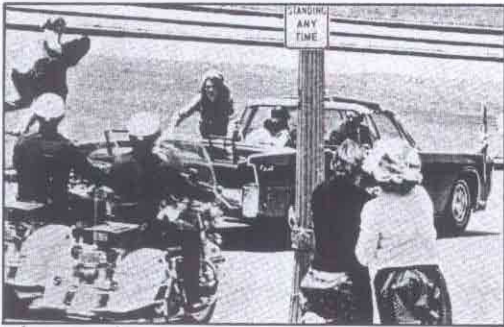
In Dallas, there's the slick-haired director of the John F. Kennedy Museum, John Sissom, who, for \$6, will permit a family of four from Toledo to experience "The Incredible Hours," a 22-minute slide show. There is the All-Tom Corp. of Arlington, Texas, which supplies a steady stream of assassination postcards to concessionaires at the Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport. There's Fred Wirtz, a songsheet publisher in West Bend, Iowa, owner of the international copyright to a tune in the key of B-flat called "Remembrance." There's plain-spoken Langdon "Zip" Viracola, mad as hell because he and several pro football players hold \$1,503,000 in distribution bookings for a 1964-vintage black-and-white film, planned for a December release, entitled *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald*.

There are Valium-gulping network vice presidents, quick to embrace some demographically-established national mood, thus saving actors, actresses, producers, press agents—and perhaps themselves—from the dole. CBS, in the true spirit of Entebbe, reportedly was preparing last summer for its own film called *Oswald and Ruby*. There are publishers like Harper & Row, in hot pursuit of the reasonable risk, eager to pay the former Mrs. L.H. Oswald (now Mrs. Marina Nikolaevna Prussakova Oswald Porter) \$50,000 plus a percentage for her memoirs. There are magazine editors, less eager maybe, but willing to listen—and there are sensitive young writers like myself.

Fourteen years later, we are that "new generation of Americans" Jack Kennedy liked to talk about. With the proper incentive, we're still ready to carry the torch.



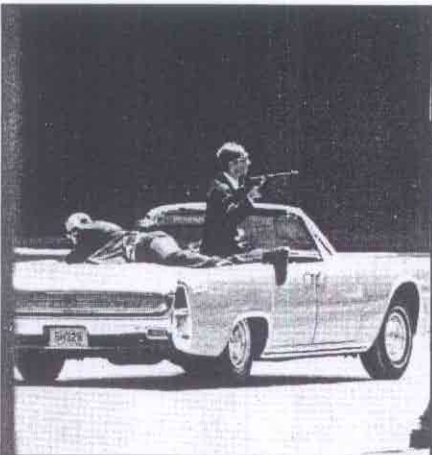
The cavalcade of stars hits Dealey Plaza . . .



takes a couple . . .



and breaks for lunch.



They've rearranged the faces, but the names remain the same.



photographs by Charles Tanner



There is Marguerite Oswald: "I've gone without eating. I've been destitute. I've been taken advantage of. Why should I give interviews for free? For three years, I did it for free. I've done my duty. I don't need the publicity. I have no control over what they write about me. But at least if I'm taken advantage of, I know I've been paid. That's my solace."

And then, there is roly-poly, gap-toothed Lawrence Schiller—photo journalist, media entrepreneur, the man who watched Gary Gilmore die, and who owns exclusive rights to the convicted murderer's life-and-death story.

The Brooklyn-born Schiller appears to have been worldly wise at an early age and streetwise in the womb. As a fast-talking Speech and Drama major at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, he grabbed up a scholarship from the Hearst Corporation. After this auspicious beginning, he rarely missed an opportunity and went on to work for, as he says, "every major publication in the world."

Over a career spanning two decades of death and violence, Schiller has fastened himself onto enterprises ranging from a coffee-table book about Japanese victims of mercury poisoning to a bestselling Lenny Bruce biography. Ubiquitous, if anything, he even testified at the Manson trial. But he achieved true national celebrity only last January when he befriended suicidal Gary Gilmore. He won Gary's confidence with \$125,000 (\$60,000 for Gary and his relatives, \$25,000 for Gary's girlfriend and \$40,000 for his victims' survivors). So far, he has parlayed the relatives into a widely syndicated interview.

Meanwhile, Schiller has continued to nurture in his heart of hearts the story of the century.

He was a 26-year-old freelance photographer when he observed at close range Jack Ruby shoving a pistol into Oswald's belly. Almost as Oswald moaned, Schiller was dickering (successfully) with a Dallas *Times-Herald* photographer for the worldwide rights to the prize-winning picture he'd just snapped in the basement of Dallas police headquarters. Later, Schiller collaborated on an assassination book and took a tape recorder to the hospital bed where Ruby lay dying of cancer.

"Schiller's pretty good," Marguerite says. "He knows his stuff."

His job title on the set of *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald* is Supervising Producer: "Making sure the scenes look right, are right, smell right."

One afternoon, the bearded Schiller is napping in a musty third floor office in the old Dallas Federal Building where filming is underway. Lying face up on the vinyl sofa, eyes tightly shut, his breathing labored, Schiller resembles, through the half-opened office door, some monstrous-

ly gross chipmunk in hibernation, cumbersome but somehow cute.

In an adjacent conference room filled with red-eyed technicians, Ben Gazzara, as prosecutor Anson Roberts, maps out strategy with his staff. Downstairs and out of earshot of Gazzara's mumbling and Schiller's respirations, Lorne Greene—a/k/a Oswald's defense attorney, an Edward Bennett Williams type named James Matthew Weldon—studies his lines.

Before long a secretary shuts the door, thereby curtailing my view of Schiller's slumber. When it opens again, he's miraculously bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

"I like taking a half-hour nap," Schiller explains, "like Winston Churchill used to do."

Downstairs, devouring a lunch of roast beef and potato salad, he says, "I'm a journalist. I express myself in the media of motion pictures and books, since *Life* magazine and *The Saturday Evening Post* aren't around any more. I publish and write books, I collaborate with people, and I produce films to express my ideas and concepts.

"Money is not very important at all, because I don't have any. I don't know why. You'd have to ask my accountants. I don't get paid very much."

"What are you getting for this?" I wonder.

"For this, I get about \$400 a week."

"Really? No percentage?"

"Listen," Lawrence Schiller says, his keen eyes narrowing, "I don't do things for money."

"How do you live?"

Schiller shrugs. "I guess \$400, \$500 a week's pretty good money to live. And you get royalties from books and so on, things like that. I've been on this project two-and-a-half years, and they pay me \$400, \$450 a week. It averages out to the amount of money I get."

"But you have the rights to a lot of stuff, don't you?"

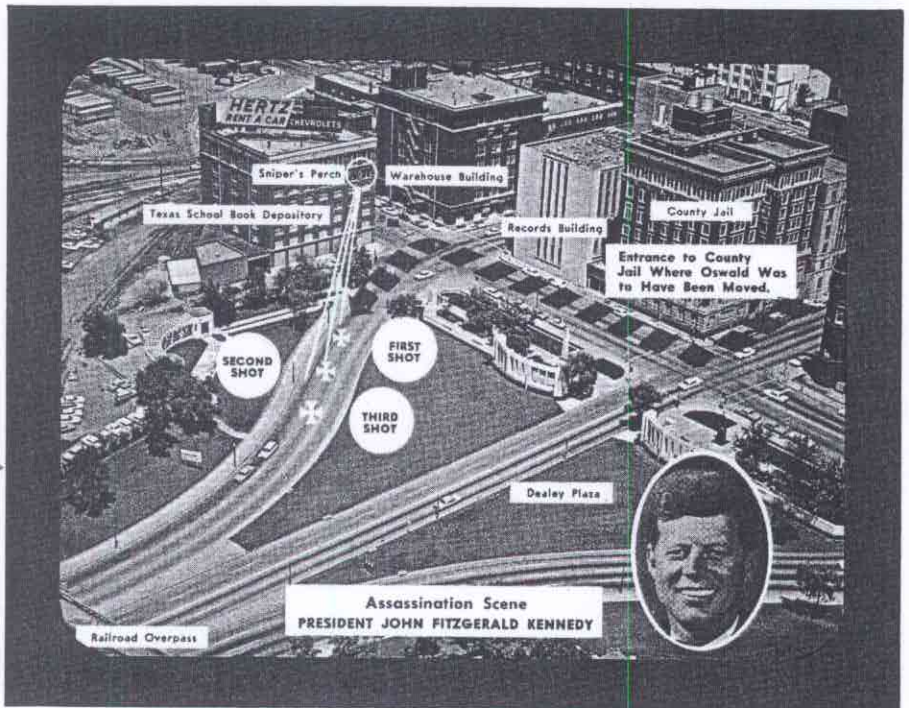
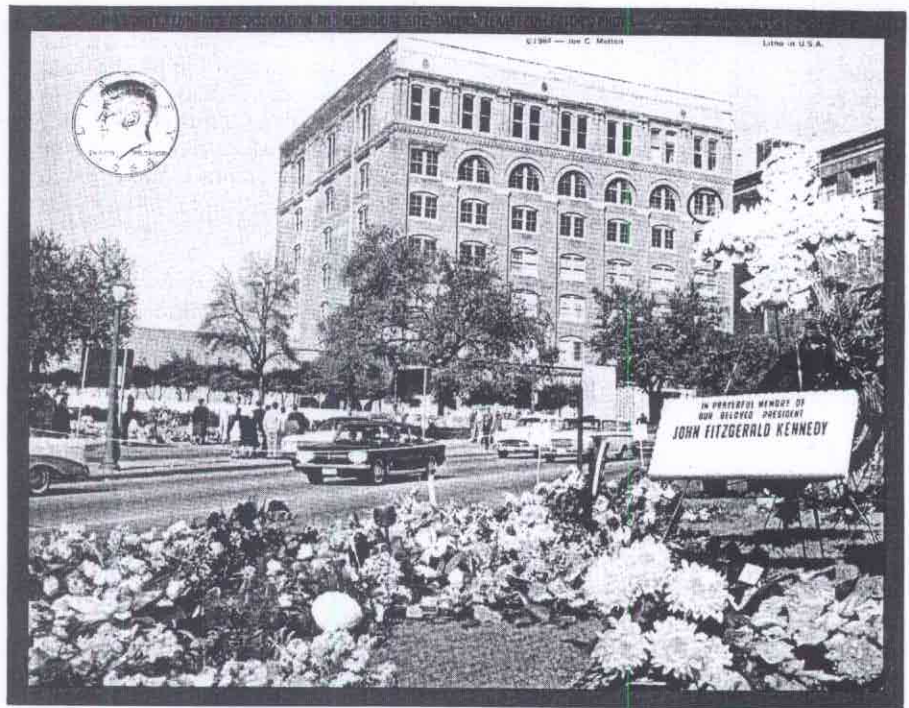
"I don't know what stuff you're talking about," Schiller says. "You're fishing for stuff which doesn't exist. You know, you're not fishing very well. Okay? It doesn't exist. I mean, you know. It doesn't. I get paid about \$400 a week."

Elsewhere—in *Newsweek*, for example—Schiller has suggested that he clears no more than \$80,000 a year on his several ventures. These include a book on Gary Gilmore, a film on artificial kidneys, another about a love affair between a circus clown and a tightrope walker, and yet another about a pack of vicious, man-eating dogs.

"Do you consider yourself a showman?" I ask.

"No," Schiller says. "*Time* Magazine said it once. I don't know of anybody else that's called me a showman. They've also called me a photo journalist. They've also called me a motion-picture producer.

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They've also called me a publisher. They've also called me an entrepreneur. It just depends on who's writing the article that week. I don't think *Time* Magazine has any one policy on me. It's just who's writing the article.

"I mean, *Esquire's* doing a big article on me, and they don't call me a showman. They call me one of the best investigative journalists that they've ever met."

Twelve years ago, Richard Freed, then a Los Angeles publisher, became thoroughly engrossed in a project that would, he hoped, "for the first time ever,

show the American public the evidence surrounding the Kennedy assassination in an adversary context."

"It occurred to us," says Freed, a wiry man in an open-neck shirt, "that if there was a reasonable and dramatic defense for Oswald, we laymen might be able to find out what it was. So we sat down and started examining the Warren Report. After four to six months of intensive work, we determined that we could mount an aggressive defense for Oswald."

So, in 1965, Freed began developing a proposal for the hypothetical Trial of the Century. Over the next few years, Freed,

who sold his business to go Hollywood, pitched his idea before 20th Century Fox, United Artists and Paramount. They all turned him away. "I guess it was a hot potato."

In 1971, Freed became convinced that his dream should appear on television instead. So he joined forces with Charles Fries and took the project, which was by then called *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald* (after an off-Broadway play that opened and closed during three days in 1967) to the networks.

Schiller, meanwhile, had been developing his own script called *The Life and Death of Lee Harvey Oswald*—"a human drama behind the headlines," he called it.

In 1975, the two concepts were submitted almost simultaneously to ABC, and the network went gaga. Fries became Executive Producer, Schiller Supervising Producer and Freed Producer. Before long, they were happily engaging high-priced writers for a teleplay, finally choosing the work of Emmy contender Robert E. Thompson.

Somehow, though, ABC overlooked the fact that *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald* already had been written and produced. Indeed, *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald* briefly played a Milwaukee movie theater in April, 1964.

Zip Viracola of Dallas, who bought the 13-year-old low-budget movie in 1976 from its original owner, Harold Hoffman, started legal action this July to prevent ABC from using what he considers to be his title.

"I'm not gonna play second fiddle," says Viracola, who was worried about his football-playing investors. "The people at ABC are about to learn a valuable lesson: Don't get into a pissing contest with a skunk."

Harold Hoffman, who now heads a small advertising agency in Dallas, was rooting for Viracola in July. Emotionally attached to the film he produced and directed, he wanted to see it succeed. The film was test-marketed in Milwaukee on April 22, 1964. "It did fair," Hoffman said. "Not nearly as good as we had hoped."

For Hoffman, the reception for his Oswald movie marred a film-making career that began, long ago, with great promise. In 1962, he formed Falcon International Corp. with a partner, and made a courtroom drama for American International Pictures called *Free, White and 21*. Based on the true story of a lovely English Freedom Rider who accused a Dallas black man of raping her, *Free, White and 21* was one of AIP's top ten grossers that year. ("We followed the trial transcript very closely, but of course we dramatized it a little bit," Hoffman recalled. "We got this Swedish actress to play the Freedom Rider, so we threw in one scene where we

made her dance in a cabaret.")

Riding the crest, Hoffman next made another courtroom drama, *Underaged*—also a smash for AIP. It was about a mother who raped her daughter. ("I thought it kind of clarified the mother-daughter relationship, exploring the possibilities of what a mother could do to her daughter.")

"At the time, Perry Mason was very big. And courtroom dramas were cheap to make. So when Oswald was killed, we said, 'That's too bad. We could have made another courtroom drama.'"

At the time of Oswald's death, Hoffman and his colleagues were working on "a different kind of picture—a sci-fi thing based on Arthur C. Clarke's *A Fall of Moondust*. But AIP cooled on the sci-fi thing, so we decided to go with the Oswald thing," Hoffman explained. "The sci-fi thing was later done by Stanley Kubrick."

Just another typical Dallas afternoon: "Bang! Now you go down. Bang! The motorcade's moving now..." A high-powered rifle appears in a sixth-floor window.

So in early 1964, Hoffman raised about \$100,000 to make *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald*. Written with the help of a Dallas attorney and filmed in six weeks, the screenplay left Oswald's guilt or innocence up to the audience.

But unlike ABC's assassin, Hoffman's Oswald never takes the stand, and his lawyer pleads him not guilty by virtue of insanity—the only possible defense, Hoffman contends.

"We made arrangements with a guy in New York who was Fellini's representative," he continued, "and we sold the Oswald film to Seven Arts. But then they backed out of the deal, because they checked with Washington, and Washington frowned on the selling of the picture."

The Oswald film seems to have been a turning point in Hoffman's career. From then on, moments of triumph were fleeting, leaving Hoffman to wonder precisely who in Washington had quashed his deal with Seven Arts. Dusting himself off, Hoffman started work on another film called *McCabe*. That, too, never saw the light of day.

"We had an option on the book, but then we dropped it. It was done later as

McCabe and Mrs. Miller by Robert Altman."

Soon after, Hoffman and his partner split up, with Hoffman retaining the Oswald movie and the corporation. Undaunted, Hoffman made Edgar Allen Poe's *The Black Cat*, but not the one with Vincent Price.

Hoffman's version "was a contemporary treatment with sports cars." It too, failed.

"It was very frustrating for me," Hoffman said of the Oswald movie that seems to have cursed him. "It takes such courage to go out and write a script. An artist needs to see things finalized. I felt our picture was kept off the market by someone, but I was never sure why."

The Dallas County Commissioners Court, which has domain over the Texas School Book Depository, and the Dallas Police Department, which has domain over the city streets, have been only too happy to cooperate.

"Time cures all things," County Judge John Whittington says.

So on Sunday of an unbearably hot Fourth of July weekend, Lawrence Schiller stands in the center of Elm Street and roars into a handbike.

"I'm going to make you all famous," Schiller tells about 100 extras, all Dallasites in skinny ties and bobby socks. Onlookers strain against the barricades.

Breathing hard, Schiller lumbers quickly down the street, giving directions.

"Bang," Schiller cries. "You hear it, but you don't have time to react."

"Bang! Now you go down, running that way. You realize now it's not a backfire."

"Bang! The motorcade's moving now and you run as if to catch it."

Moments later, a high-powered rifle appears in a sixth-floor window of the depository building.

For six hours, the limousines turn from Houston onto Elm, the shots ring out across Dealey Plaza, and men and women fall over each other and scream.

Don Gazzaway, a librarian with flashing white teeth and reddish-brown hair, sits in back of the jet-black Lincoln, now waving, now clutching his throat, now jerking his head, now slumping into the seat.

"It was a bit eerie, certainly," Gazzaway says later. "But it seemed like an honor. My first feeling was to do this thing with as much dignity as possible."

Houston actress Christine Rose, wild-eyed, repeatedly throws herself over the trunk of the limo, grabbing out into space.

"You folks are fantastic," Schiller tells the crowd. "This is better than *Spartacus*. Just one thing. Even though you're running, the camera is still catching some of you grinning."