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.fonzi

-rough notes--Robert McKeown interview -- 8/27/76

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-a mechanical engineer by profession; had a large machine shop in Houston; heard of a guy named Van Zeivander who had designed a new coffee cleaning machine; they traveled through latin America and introduced machine with help of U.S. Experimental Station in Guatemala in the mid-50s. Went into business and started manufacturing machine, became very successful with it, was making a lot of money.-- ~~he~~ decided to open manufacturing plant, warehouse and office in Santiago, Cuba -- after about a year, representatives of Batista came around and said the dictator wanted a cut of the business, wanted a cut of \$5000 a month personally -- RM refused; about six months later, militia came around, arrested him, put him on airplane and told him to get out of country; Batista took over business..

...RM came to Miami where his daughter was living; shortly afterwards was contacted by representatives of Carlos Prio who asked him how he would like to get his business back... fellow contacted him was named Mario (doesn't remember last name) [records: Mario Silverio Villamia, aks Frank Guzman, Frank George, John Jordan, P. Castillo] ~~and~~ and fellow named Manny [Manuel Arques]...

Prio asked him if he would go to Mexico and meet a man down there.. then he explained that he was trying to overthrow Batista...so he went to Mexico and got some arms down there...that's where he met Castro... in Tampico...~~xxxxxxx~~(Houston, Texas and they checked in the Shamrock Hotel there;~~and~~ he met Prio there and that's when Prio told him ~~how~~ how to find Castro in Mexico and RM went and stayed with Castro....that's when Castro made his famous 26th of July raid against Cuba ("I was there the day he took off for Cuba.")

--initially Prio was smuggling arms to Cuba even before Castro; RM says Castro betrayed Prio who was supposed to take over the government after Castro won the revolution...

"Prio was the money man. He got out of Cuba with a helluva lot of money and he didn't give a damn how he spent it either. I carried \$100,000 in cash in my goddamn inside coat pocket a lotta times."

--Prio told him he needed RM as the middleman in the arms deal because he needed an American; everybody who was working for him was Cuba. [RM says he heard that Frank Sturgis was working for Prio also at that time but he never met him.] Also Prio liked the way he got things done quickly.

(How did Prio know you had been kicked out of Cuba and were in Miami?) "I don't know. I don't know how he knew it." [There were no news articles about it or any notoriety.] "But I don't want to get Prio in any trouble because I believe he is one of the finest men I ever met. He's a real fine man." Heard he lost a bundle of money in building condominiums in Puerto Rico..

[Shown picture of Fiorini; recognized it as Sturgis, said he might have "a few dealings with him" at the time, but not positive; the name of Fiorini was familiar]

--worked with more than a hundred guys here and in Texas, who were working for Prio... remembers a former Cuban actress named Maria Sol,

who worked with Prio and thinks she's the one who eventually turned them in to the Feds...later her car was blown up but she escaped injury..

--Eventually we transferred our base of operation from Miami and Tampa because it got too hot here, they were watching us too closely...so we changed it down to Houston, and we'd have the arms sent to Houston by truck, by commercial lines like Mayflower and that, and then we bought a lot of supplies, like ropes and blankets and stuff, down in Houston...

(Were you getting arms mostly from the Mob?) "Mostly, yeah. From the mob and from... well, I'm gonna tell you something but I'm not gonna name no names until I have to. I got them from Senators, United States Senators. (Here in Florida?) No. (Was he the link to the Mob?) He was the link to the Redstone Arsenal in Arkansas.

(didn't want to talk about it anymore)

(he hasn't worked in five years, since he had an operation for his lungs; was working for API company, head of quality control; was in hospital for 73 days; now in need of money.)

"That shows you how goddamn dumb I was. Hell, I was in control of a lot of money, I could have gone South with ~~it~~ it but I always brought it back. Like when I bought this big ship, I paid \$78,000 for it. He told me I could have gone as high as \$200,000. At least I could have told him I paid \$150,000 or \$100,000 for it, but I didn't. I was just too damn honest."

(All CBS paid was his expenses to Houston; he stayed down there for about two weeks with Dan Rather and this girl Harriet Rubin.)

"All I was trying to do was show them how I believe that Oswald couldn't have acted alone. But I can prove everything I say. Like they say that Ruby just came to me once. He came to me three times. But they didn't put that in that Warren Commission. And I told them, that he came to me three times. And they say that I say I thought he was Jack Ruby, but, hell, he told me he was Jack Ruby. He told me his name was Rubinstein. He didn't say Jack Ruby, he said, 'My name is Rubinstein from Dallas.' And he kept saying he was gonna give me this money for a letter, a letter ~~of~~ of introduction to Castro. But he never did come up with the money. He wanted me to give him this letter and tell him in the letter what a responsible man he was and all this bullshit, and all that time I believe he was just finding out about me so he could go on over there and tell him that he knew me. I don't believe he was ever gonna give me money...." †

(To go back to gun-running operation: Ever deal with Trafficante?) Didn't think so, couldn't recall the name. Said he did have a call from George Raft who wanted to get back in the gambling operation with Castro. -- Also mentioned a Jack Porter (?), a "Mr. Republican," campaign manager for Eisenhower (?) who contacted him for something but didn't say what. After Castro took over he got numerous calls from people who wanted him to contact Castro on their behalf... ..only did one thing, for friends of his brother, who ran a oil tool rental business in Houston, when they were caught fishing too close to Cuba; he did contact Castro and get them out of prison..

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(Julio Lobo?) Says he did meet him but not too clear, says he thinks maybe in Houston but could not remember details...thinks he came with Che Gueverra (?)

(You were actually getting your arms from a U.S. Senator?) He was the one who would tell us where to go to get them. (Did you actually buy them from Senators?) No, from the Government. Ammunition, everything. I was caught with over \$2 million worth. They were in a house in Houston. I bought this house to put them all in, had them piled way up, it was the damndest thing you ever saw..

(The way they got caught was that he had this Costa Rican boy come up from Costa Rica, he was a ~~xx~~ radio technician, and he was going to Houston from Miami, but it was a cold winter and he went to Maria Sol to borrow her husband's overcoat and she dug it out of him where he was going; and she had fallen in love with a lawyer who was Bastista counsel here and ~~xx~~ she told him and he took her to the FBI. Prio's people later tried to kill her, blew her car up, but they didn't.)

-says he never dealt with Roselli... his own opinion that Giancanna and Hoffa were all linked and that Hoffa hated Kennedy with a passion and maybe he did it...

(Were you dealing with the Teamsters when shipping arms?) Remembers only dealing with a guy named Rocky up in Gainesville (now dead), he was a pilot..he mentioned he was with Hoffa and guy before Hoffa, Beck; "He done a few things for me with the airplanes."

-Details of Oswald visit: "It was either ~~xxxx~~ August or ~~xxxxxx~~ September. Lee Harvey Oswald came to my house. He came to my house. Right down in Bay Cliff, Texas. I was married to a school teacher. I had divorced my wife after all that trouble. A little town called Bay Cliff, Texas. That's right between Houston and Dallas. And he came down there. He came to my house one Saturday morning. A boy by the name of Sam Neal was there. As a matter of fact, he lived there with me. I married this woman, she was a real rich woman, she had this ~~xx~~ big house, but I don't want to get her mixed up in this, she didn't have nothing to do with it, she didn't even know I'd been in all that trouble. As a matter of fact, I was on probation then, when I married her. But me and Sam were sitting there, this was Saturday morning, I guess it was ~~xxxx~~ about 11 o'clock. This is what was so astounding about this Harvey Oswald business, now I want you to listen to this good. Somebody knock on the ~~xxx~~ door. We was living right down on the water. And I heard this fella..we had these big draw-string drapes in the front, a whole big picture window all the way across the building. I heard this car stop out there, it was a station wagon. So I seen ~~xxxx~~ these two guys get out~~xxxx~~ there and then I went to sit down. (Who was driving it?) This here other guy. I think he said his name was Hernandez. He was driving it. (Recall the color of the station wagon?) I think it was kinda pinkish. I don't know, it was a real light color. But anyway, they knocked on the door and this guy, ~~xxx~~ ~~xxx~~ I opened the

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door and this guy said, 'My name is Oswald.' Now he told me that right off. He said, 'Just call me Lee.' He didn't say Lee Harvey, he just said Lee. So he says, "I can see I got the right man." That's what he said. I said, "Whataya mean?" He says, 'Well, you're name is McKeown, isn't it?' and I says, "Yeah." My wife is upstairs, she was still upstairs and Sam is sitting downstairs, I think he was drinking a highball or something, I don't know. But anyway, that was along about August or September, I'm not sure, maybe ~~x~~ before, I don't know what month it was, but it wasn't cold. So I invited him ~~xx~~ in, so he came in and he had this Spanish man with him. I can't say he was a Cuban, I can't say he was a Mexican, I can't say he was a Costa Rican, I don't know what he was, I just know he was Latin. I know he was Latin. And very few words. He introduced him to me, I never will forget that, his name was Hernandez. And he was well dressed. He was a well-dressed ~~xx~~ fella, but Harvey, I mean Oswald, he was in shirtsleeves, but this Latin was with a tie and everything. And he commenced telling me, after he sit down, he said, "Might as well get to the ~~x~~ point. I want to know if you'd be interested in furnishing some arms. We're gonna try to take over Salvador. (Salvador?) Down in Central America. San Salvador. (Oswald said this?) Oswald said this. And I told him, I said, now listen, man, lemme tell you something. I'm on five years probation, and I said I don't have about maybe a year to go on that damn thing and I don't want no part of no kind of arms, no kind of nothing, nothing to do, I don't want to get mixed up in it, I don't want to even talk of it. And ~~xxx~~ Sam is sittin' there. And he say, 'Well, you could make a lot of money out of it.' And I says, "I guess you could make a lot of money out of it and you'd have to serve a lot of time in the goddamn jail, too! I can remember that, I don't want to ever go back to that place. So he kept talking, kept talking. He says, Well, I know, I know I got the right man and I know you can get me anything I want, can't you?" And I says, "I guess I could if I put my mind to something like that," I says, "but I don't want to even discuss it." And in the meantime I was trying to get him out of there because my wife was upstairs and I didn't want her to know all this stuff, you know. So I finally got him out and he says, "Well, we'll talk to you later." (How long were they there?) They was there about 20 minutes, 30 maybe, I don't know. So they went to the car, and they come back. And I seen 'em, I watched them through the curtains. And they come back and they after I went to the door and I stepped back outside and he said to me, he said, "Now, McKeown, can you do me something that can get this done pretty quick and I'll give you quite a bit of money if you can get me four -- listen now -- four high powered automatic rifles with telescope sights on them. He said, I'll be willing to pay as much as you want for those ~~xxx xxx~~ guns. ~~xxx~~ There's ~~xxx~~ just fo of them, now you can do that pretty quick now, can't you?" He says, "I'd be willing to go up to \$10,000 for the four." And he specifically mentioned 300 Savage automatics with telescope sights.

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d tape one---

And I told him, 'I told you I don't want no part of this kind of business!' (When they came back, did both of them come back?) Both of them came back, but this Latin, he stood back. I stepped outside and like he was standing here and the other guy was standing there. (And where was your friend Sam Neal at that time?) He was still back in the house. But the door was open, I left the door open, he was still sittin' on the divan, you know, in the living room. But he was sitting there while we discussed this while they were both inside. He was there. And that was the big thing, you see, because Dan Rather, he went to Houston to talk to Sam, and Sam told him it was definitely Lee Harvey Oswald that came, definitely \* he was the man who came and he says, 'I'll swear to it, that Lee Harvey Oswald was the man who came to talk to Mac.' So he left, him and this guy, that's the reason I know this other guy drove the car because I seen them, you know, when they left, they pulled up in my driveway and turned \* around. I lived \*\* right on the water. (Do you recall whether they had Texas plates?) No, I don't. In them days you didn't think nothing about a person was gonna kill the President. All I wanted to do was to get them the hell away. (Wasn't it Rambler that used to make a pinkish color car?) I couldn't tell you for sure what kind of car it was. I knew it was a station wagon, a light colored station wagon. I don't think it was a brand new car, but I don't know. (Have a roof rack on it?) I think it did. That's one of them things that goes around the top for the luggage? I think it did, but I'm not sure. (When they got back in the car, did Hernandez get back in to drive?) That's right. (And Oswald got in the front seat?) He got in the front seat. (How was this Hernandez built. Taller than Oswald?) Well, I won't say he was taller. I think they was both about the same size, about 5'10" or 5'11". (Was he wearing a hat?) No. (Neither of them?) Neither of them. Oswald was in his shirt sleeves. (But the other guy had a tie and suit on?) That's right. Very dignified looking guy. (Was he older than Oswald?) Well, it seemed like he was. I imagine he was in his 40s. I don't know. A nice looking \* guy. And he was well dressed. He had a dark suit on. ....(repetitious questions here).... (didn't mention Prio) He did mention Castro. He said, 'You're the man \*\* that run all the guns to Castro and got caught with ~~the cache~~ the cache here in Houston, weren't you? Yeah, I says, but that's all in the past... (More specific on the date? Was it before Labor Day?) Might have been before Labor Day. Because my wife was a school teacher and she was preparing to \* go back to school. So it might have been around the last of August or the first of September when he came to my house. I can recall that she was in the process of getting ready to go back to school. (Did he say why he mentioned San Salvador?) No, he just said his contacts had a big opportunity to take over the country of San Salvador. But you know, from the way he talked I think the only reason he come there to see me was to get those four guns, because he emphasized that's what he really did want. He begged me almost to get them guns. And he told me, he says, 'Hell, you don't have any guts!' I says, 'Well, I just don't want to get in any more of this kind of business....' (Did Oswald give you any indication that he knew Ruby?) No, he didn't. (Where he was from?) No, but he said he lived in Texas, I can remember that, he

say, 'I'm an old Texan like you are, you can do me that favor, we're both Texans.' (Did Hernandez speak English?) I did, but he didn't do much talking. When he was introduced he said, 'Glad to know you. ~~xx~~ I heard a lot about you.' (Did Oswald ever call back?) Oh yeah! There was a call come there, and I wasn't there and my wife was there, and this party asked, and she told me, she said, 'Who in the hell was it calling you wanting to know if you changed your mind yet?' And I says, I don't know who it is.

[He says at this point he was trying to keep his wife from finding out about his past. He was pretty despondent around that time, having lost his first wife, to divorce, and a few jobs as a result of his arrest and its aftermath. He had had a good job with Houston Slush Pump, chief sales rep, when Kennedy was shot because FBI came around to question him...He denied he knew Oswald when they asked.] Hell, I was scared.

\*\*\*? [Telephone number of his house according to K CE 1689 was Bay Cliff 966-1492; his wife's name was Pauline Daley; it may have been in her name at the time because he had been married to her only six months and she had lived in that house]

(On CBS interview, you mentioned Oswald had blondish hair?) Not what you call a real blond; kind of a dirty blonde or brownish. It wasn't real light...

[Had a picture of him and Castro when Castro visited him in Houston after the Revolution; ~~xxxxxxx~~ (also had newspaper clips of his arrest and finding of ~~xxx~~ cache) (never ~~x~~ caught him; he turned himself in after they raided the house) He had purchased a 104-foot converted Navy ship - the Buddy Dee; also purchased a boat called the Cugat, a 120-foot trawler, twin diesel...

At time of his arrest, he was a vice president of the Texas Western Drilling Co. of Oklahoma City... James Gwinn, was president; partners weren't aware of what he was doing...

A women named Evelyn Archer was living in house with mother as a front...all the rest arrested were guys who Prio had sent down to help ~~xx~~ him; he was in charge of the whole operation...

(Were you ever contacted by the CIA when you were ~~x~~ in Cuba?) Well, I was contacted by so many people, I don't know whether it was CIA or not. There was one guy named Vance I think, here in Miami.

\*\*\* He remembers he used to get the money for buying arms from an office building on Flagler, the office of an attorney who was a counsel for Haiti. That's where he would meet his Cuban contacts and get the money. In the attorney's conference room. The money came from Prio's contacts. (Was it Pan American Bank Bldg?) "No, no, but that's where Prio kept his money" Because all the money I got always had that bank's wrappers around it."  
--The attorney's first name was Walter (doesn't remember last name); white building on corner of Flagler and ? (entrance not on Flagler)

Re: Contact with Jack Ruby:

Shortly after Castro took over in Cuba, RM had just opened a new lounge, J & M Drive-In, in Harris County, Texas, when one day a deputy sheriff came over and said some guy in Dallas was trying to reach him by telephone, said it was a case "of life and death." Asked if it was all right to give the caller RM's phone number. Within about 30 minutes a call came from Dallas from a guy who said his name was Rubinstein. [Some confusion here about when the Ruby contact was, his memory appears jumbled, but later he ~~xxx~~ corroborates initial FBI contact report, CE 1689, that it took place in January, 1959, after he was arrested for gun running but before Castro visited him in Houston, which he says ~~x~~ was in the middle of '59.] When Ruby first contacted him, Ruby said he thought his name was Davis. Doesn't know why. (asked him about Rudolph Davis?) I think he was the one who told me where I could get about a thousand blankets in Beaumont, Texas. This was when we were shipping stuff to Castro.

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When Ruby first contacted him by telephone, he told he "had some people over in Cuba. Knew Ruby was ~~g~~ calling from Dallas because operator said so. He remembers him as kind of an arrogant guy... and when he met him later he distinctly remembers Ruby had a little round Band-Aid patch on his nose... ..Ruby told him he had some jeeps and slot machines he wanted to get over to Cuba...he wanted to get in touch with Castro.. ...he said he had some jeeps in Shreveport, La. "And he said he had access to a whole lot of slot machines that were in a mountain in New Mexico, in a cave over there..!" No, didn't say that during his first telephone call; just said he had some people over there and he would like to know if I could help him get them out of there. Then he said he would come down to see me and we'd go over the details. He did come down and that's ~~xxx~~ when he talked ~~xxx~~ about the jeeps and slot machines. Ruby did mention that he knew a few people in Cuba, members of the Mafia. "That's what he called it, the Mafia, but he never did mention no names." I asked him if he had ever been to Cuba, He said "Yeah, he'd been over ~~x~~ there for pleasure. Didn't stay for a couple days and come back. I asked where he stayed at over there and he said he stayed at the Nacional Hotel." Ruby gave no indication he ~~x~~ had been in Cuba more than once...

[long discussion here about date when Ruby visited him; there was a newspaper clip dated January 3, 1959 headlined: "Gunrunner Hails Castro Victory" which may have been the impetus for the initial Ruby call. Hubert Memo says it was April, 1959, probably a mistake.] Ruby didn't mention when he called who the five "friends of his" were he wanted to get out of Cuba who were being "held" there...

..during conversation with him on visit talked about Maimi with Ruby; "He asked me about the Clover Club, I think, at least mentioned it. He asked me if I knew that place, used to be over on Biscayne, a big nightclub. He said, well, you know it's got a back room in there, it's called the Ponce Room, that's where Latin's used to hang out, do a little gambling..

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(This former Senator you mentioned as being involved in supplying arms, is he ~~xxxx~~ dead or alive?) "I don't know if he's dead or alive. (A former Senator?) "One of them is still living." (There was more than one?) Yeah. If you didn't know them you couldn't get no arms. But I'm not going to name them. It's all behind them.

Ruby wanted a letter of introduction from him for Castro. He told Ruby he wanted \$5000~~x~~ up front. "Hell, he never did give me no money, all he wanted to do was pick me."

He mentioned two or three Jewish names. He mentioned a Zoroff or Zochoff or something like that...and he ~~xxxx~~ mentioned a Goldberg who was supposed to be the one who had all the jeeps over ~~x~~ in Shreveport, La. Mentioned a guy in Las Vegas on his telephone call who wanted those people out of Cuba... but no special name mentioned...

Ruby suggested that he ~~xxxxxxx~~ open a gambling place in the back room of the new lounge that RM had just opened...told him he'd make a lot of money out of it... RM turned down idea because he was afraid, he was still on probation... later he did run a little ~~xx~~ blackjack some time...

[Shown a bunch of photos and picked out two who "kinda looked like" the guy who was with Oswald; did not pick out any of those whose name was Hernandez, nor was either very "Latin looking"; picked out Paulino Rodriquez Barrios and Abelardo Montes De Oca Lopez from group of photos supplied by Dick Russell, gotten from Robert Morrow who described them as Bastistaites connected to the Mob. Questionable.]

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Sam Neal called him immediately after the assassination and told he he had recognized Oswald as the guy who had come to his house.

Talked about all the bad luck he's had since his arrest, his marriages gone bad, his lost jobs, his hidden stock of cash burned up when the cache house burned up...

Talked about the money that Batista had gotten out of Cuba, money ~~x~~ that Batista was selling before Castro changed the size and made it worthless... says the guy who had the farm next to Eisenhower's (??) came to him to get \$3-1/2 million of that money, promised him he'd give him half percent...deal was going through ~~xx~~ when Castro changed money... guy's name was Greenspahn?? -not sure...Wanted RM to contact Castro and not change the money...

--[Shown Bishop sketch, says he's sure he knows the guy; but he goes all over place ~~xx~~ and says nothing definite or credible...]

Says he may have been contacted by the CIA in Miami when two guys called him and met him in the Mayflower Hotel restaurant, told him they were with "U.S. Government Intelligence" and wanted him to go to work for them. Thinks one guy's name was Gracie [Grayson?]. Said they would get him off probation, give him a \$1000 to go to Houston and check out a Mexican guy there. He checked with his Probation officer who told him they couldn't get him off probation, don't believe what they say.

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Said the intelligence guys also said they would want him to go to Cuba...

? Says he was also approached in Houston, after he got out of jail by someone from Mexican Intelligence... doesn't remember details of \* it.

Later he was also approached in Miami ~~xxx~~ by two other guys who also said they were from "Intelligence" and they wanted him to work with the Cubans, something to do with cocaine... but he was still on probation and didn't want to do anything.

His CBS contact was Harriet Rubin.