

On the trail of the filmmakers

Mysterious Oswald screen test is the ‘reel’ thing, but will anyone take the credit?

BY PETER JONES

“It’s the window that a Louisiana sniper with a Chicago-bought Italian rifle killed a president of the United States – a man from Massachusetts.”

That may sound like some cheesy intro to a half-baked docudrama about the assassination of President Kennedy – and that is what it would have been if an Englewood oilman and a Colorado Springs filmmaker had gotten their way.

At least, that is one theory emerging from the labyrinth surrounding an odd screenplay titled *Countdown in Dallas* and a recently rediscovered 1965 screen test of Marina Oswald, the widow of the accused Kennedy assassin who had reportedly been slotted to play herself in the ill-fated movie.

The would-be film’s backstory could, itself, be the stuff of B-Hollywood fiction. The web of mystery and bad taste – replete with a cast of colorful real-life characters and bizarre unconfirmed factoids – raises more questions than answers and might even rival the JFK assassination in its enigmatic intrigue.

Too bad the movie was never made – though the strange story behind *Countdown in Dallas* would most likely be infinitely more watchable.

“I’m thinking this would be such a great comedy and it’s all true,” said Robert David, a sometime filmmaker whose Englewood-based CinemaLab has preserved what is believed to be the only copy of the forgotten Marina Oswald screen test.

The twisting – if not twisted – plot behind the movie project travels from Englewood to Colorado Springs to Dallas – and, oddly enough, back to Englewood again some 50 years later.

Retired 85-year-old soundman Horace Dyer of Woodland Park went to Dallas to work on the project in 1967 and was present for the Oswald screen test in Colorado Springs two years earlier.



In a photo purportedly taken by Marina, Lee Harvey Oswald holds the rifle that an Englewood oilman later tried to purchase. The failed deal with Marina may have led to the ill-fated *Countdown in Dallas* movie. *Courtesy photo*

“I didn’t think it was a crazy idea at all,” he said. “I thought it was going to happen.”

The Colorado connection

What a difference a half century makes.

Like a lot of deteriorated nitrate films, the only known footage associated with *Countdown in Dallas* could have been lost to history. Except for

name and began posting on blogs and assassination-oriented websites, asking questions about a rumored Oswald movie, never letting on that a screen test had been discovered.

“We sent email to the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the Kennedy Presidential Library and the Sixth Floor Museum,” David recalled. “Surprisingly, the people we sent it to did the research and said they’d never heard of anything like that. So we set it aside. But then, I started to look at Marina’s historical images – and I thought, I think this woman in the film is her.”

Not that the screen test was anything America’s most infamous widow would have clamored to take credit for. (The remarried Marina Oswald Porter, who still lives in the Dallas area, did not return *The Villager’s* repeated requests for comment.)

David describes Oswald’s acting as, well, terrible, much like the cliché-ridden dialogue she utters while clumsily interacting with an unidentified leading man.

“It’s ‘Dah-ling, dah-ling, why don’t you marry me?’ ‘Oh, dah-ling, you know why I can’t.’ It’s stuff like that. It’s generic,” David said. “It has nothing to do with Dallas.”

David was almost ready to close the case, but then he read a news report that said the Dallas District Attorney’s Office had recently opened a treasure trove of items related to the 1963 assassination. Among them were Lee Harvey Oswald’s clothing and a leather gun holster once used by Oswald’s assassin Jack Ruby.

Most curious, perhaps, was an apparent movie contract signed by then-District Attorney Henry Wade, the late prosecutor who secured Ruby’s guilty verdict and coincidentally went on to notoriety as the “Wade” in the historic Roe vs. Wade U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion.

Along the way, Wade had quietly inked a deal with Robert Larsen, a Colorado Springs-based filmmaker, whose claims to “fame”

brief moments when the mystery film can was passed around as a novelty among friends in Colorado, the footage sat dormant, literally gathering dust.

But in 2008 as the 50th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination approached, Denver marketing maven Gail Harvey finally walked into CinemaLab. The full-service laboratory, a virtual museum on film preservation, is tucked away in an industrial area of north Englewood.

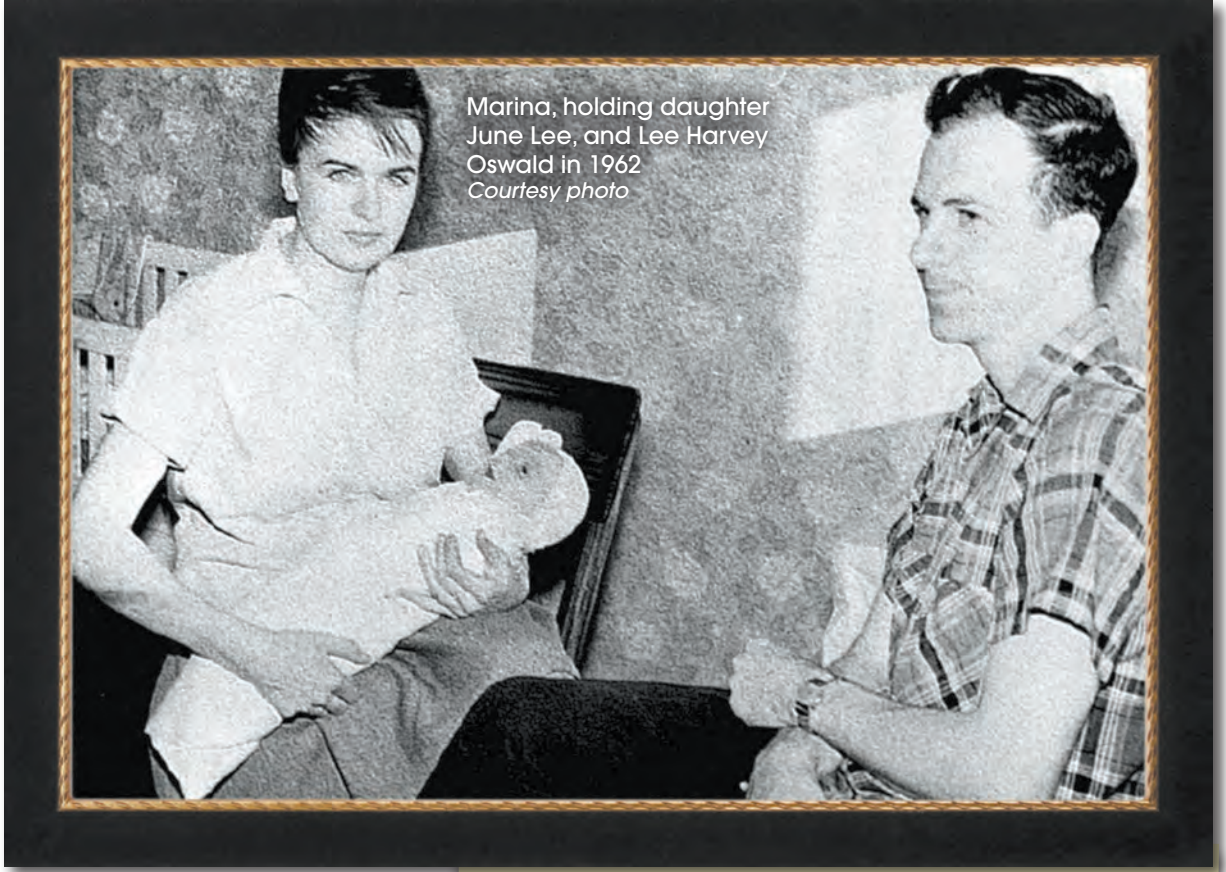
Harvey had gotten the can from the late restaurateur Leo Goto, who had received it from a friend as a souvenir some years earlier after the closing of the Alexander Film Company in Colorado Springs, where the screen test was made.

The can landed on the desk of Robert David, CinemaLab’s vice president. Over the years, the cinematic sleuth had preserved a wide range of movies and gotten to the bottom of mysteries about everything from lost silent treasures to a strange Nazi parade film inexplicably discovered in a Centennial man’s basement.

But even the well-versed David did not know what to make of an apparent screen test by a principal figure in the sordid lore of the Kennedy assassination.

“We hung onto it for a while. We didn’t know if it was real,” he said. When Web searches proved fruitless, David sent his intern on the trail of the assassins ... err, filmmakers. The intern set up a fictitious screen

Dallas District Attorney Henry Wade holds a press conference shortly after the JFK assassination in 1963. Wade later inked a deal with a Colorado filmmaker to shoot a docudrama about the assassination. *Courtesy photo*



had included industrial films, a car commercial and 1958’s *The Narcotic Story*, a campy anti-drug vehicle starring real-life policemen playing drug dealers and long-in-the-tooth teenagers.

“This is where the story gets weird,” David said.

Contract on good taste

Details on the movie project are as muddled as a New Orleans branch of Fair Play for Cuba, but David believes the roots of *Countdown in Dallas* can be tied to John King, an Englewood-based oilman and avid gun collector who in 1965 reportedly paid Marina Oswald \$10,000 in hopes of eventually securing her husband’s rifle.

“It gets a little murky, but somehow that deal allowed Robert Larsen to connect with Marina,” David said.

Although the federal government got its hands on the rifle before King got a chance,

“If I would have [talked to Marina Oswald], I would have said, ‘What did you see in Lee Harvey Oswald?’ She was a very attractive woman.”
- Horace Dyer, soundman for *Countdown in Dallas*

Mrs. Oswald did come to Alexander Film Company in Colorado Springs in July 1965. At the time, not even the crew had any

idea why the widow of JFK’s alleged assassin was shooting a love scene in their midst. The best guess of soundman Horace Dyer was the simple fact that the 24-year-old Russian-born beauty was easy on the eyes.

“She was a very attractive woman,” he recalled. “I didn’t talk to her. I never did talk to cast. I didn’t feel it was my place. If I would have, I would have said, ‘What did you see in Lee Harvey Oswald?’ She was a very attractive woman.”

Although Marina was not destined for an Academy Award, her acting was evidently close enough for B movies.

In 1967, according to the recently discovered documents, Larsen offered District Attorney Wade \$20,000 for use of his private files and for his “influence” in making *Countdown in Dallas*, a film that would star as many as 80 principals playing themselves – including Wade, himself, and the widows of Oswald and J.D. Tippit, the policeman Oswald allegedly shot in the hours after Kennedy’s murder.

Wade even partnered with former Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry and Bob Denson, chief investigator in the Ruby trial, on a new company to facilitate the project.

Although Larsen had pitched the \$250,000 movie to Wade as a sure-fire way to rehabilitate Dallas’s image in the years after the assassination, the director was more quietly quoted to say the film would make money, even if it were bad.

In September 1967, Larsen and his crew traveled to Dallas to shoot footage in what was most likely an effort to

generate funding and advance press for the project. The crew stopped traffic in Dealey Plaza, purportedly shooting background footage that was to emulate the fall weather of Nov. 22, 1963.

But much to Larsen’s dismay, Wade’s “influence” did little to quell massive skepticism about what was increasingly viewed as an unseemly project.

The Dallas City Council nixed Larsen’s proposal to recreate Ruby’s murder of Oswald in the police station basement. Parkland Memorial Hospital, where Kennedy was taken after the shooting, also nixed a proposal from the director. An executive at the Texas School Book Depository was quoted in the *Dallas Times Herald* as saying the movie had “left a bad taste in [his] mouth.”

Word was traveling quickly that Dallas’s image would be better left to chance than in the hands of a B-movie director from Colorado.

“The next morning, I got a call from Joan Carson, the script girl, who said we were going home, we’re not going to do the movie,” Dyer recalled. “So we went home.”

Ruby and Oswald

Perhaps the most interesting footnote tangentially connected to *Countdown in Dallas* was a transcript of an alleged conversation between Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby. The page of mysterious dialogue was discovered amidst other items when Wade’s safe of JFK artifacts was unearthed in 2008 by the current Dallas District Attorney Craig Watkins.

The discussion supposedly took place in Ruby’s Carousel Club on Oct. 4, 1963, less than two months before the assassination. In the dialogue, the two discuss plans to kill the president as Mafia retaliation against Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who had pointedly prosecuted organized-crime figures.

The transcript – found without notes or explanation – takes an odd place at the crossroads of fact and fiction. Because the text was discovered in Wade’s safe with a mix of real-life



Film preservationist Robert David sorts through the only known copy of a screen test by Marina Oswald. Nearly 50 years ago, an Englewood oilman may have helped spur the idea of filming a bizarre docudrama that would have starred Oswald as herself. *Photo by Peter Jones*

assassination-related artifacts and documents related to *Countdown in Dallas*, no one is quite sure what to make of the alleged Ruby-Oswald conversation.

For years, Wade, who died in 2001, kept quiet about his involvement with the failed movie project and is not known to have mentioned the transcript to anyone. The dialogue does not appear in any known version of the screenplay.

“Some people think it’s part of the movie and others are saying this is proof that it’s a conspiracy,” David said. “If the scene is not in the script, then what is it?”

The origins of the dialogue are one of many mysteries still swirling around this generally unsolved movie mystery – one that may rival *The Day the Clown Cried*, Jerry Lewis’s infamously tasteless, unfinished 1972 “dramedy” about a circus entertainer who led Jewish children into the Nazi gas chambers.

Many of the mysteries surrounding *Countdown in Dallas* may never be solved. Larsen, who now lives in northern California, has no interest in discussing the movie, according to his son, who is also a filmmaker.

For David’s part, he says the tackiness of Larsen’s unfinished opus is remarkable, especially when one con-



A mysterious 1965 screen test by Marina Oswald, widow of President Kennedy’s alleged assassin, has been restored by CinemaLab, an Englewood-based film-preservation company. *Photo courtesy of CinemaLab*

siders the ethics of a sitting district attorney profiting from an assassination docudrama. He likens the screenplay’s craftsmanship to that of Edward Wood, the infamous director of *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, a movie often touted as the worst film of all time.

“The ethics were wrong. The idea was bad,” David said of *Countdown in Dallas*. “Nobody wants to see Marina Oswald. Did they really think they were going to make her a movie star at the height of the Cold War? The level of bad taste is astounding.”

“The ethics were wrong. The idea was bad. ... The level of bad taste is astounding.”
- Film preservationist Robert David on *Countdown in Dallas*

For nearly a half century the film can containing the screen test was passed around among an assortment of friends and associates, including longtime Denver restaurateur Leo Goto. *Photo by Peter Jones*



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