‘... A Little Dignity’

Checking members of the press for concealed weapons, cameras, or tape recorders, an hour and a half later, a Dallas County deputy sheriff briskly ran his hands down the length of a well-dressed nouveau's suit. At the man's calves, the deputy stopped abruptly—and stared.

"Is that a garter?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Yeah," replied Bob Condoline of the Hearst Headline Service.

"Well, I'll be damned," said the deputy, shaking his head and permitting Condoline to enter the courtroom where Jack Ruby was on trial. "I didn't know anyone wore garters any more."

It was an amusing moment but, for Condoline and 150 other newsmen from eleven countries in Dallas to cover the murder trial, the deputy's reaction was not at all surprising. It was to keep with the carnival atmosphere that surrounded the solemn task of administering justice to the man accused of killing Lee Oswald, President Kennedy's alleged assassin. To the visiting newsmen (from Homer Bigart of The New York Times and Dorothy Kilgallen of Hearst and Chicago Tribune), the initial encounter with Texas-style legal procedure was downright unsettling.

Inside, three green spattered decoro decorated the walls (and were used regularly by Judge Joe B. Brown and prosecuting attorney, Henry Wade).

"I'm presiding judge himself gazed at the salon-art wall portraits of Miss Justice and Miss Liberty," reported Stan Gospodarow in The New York Post, "and could only comment: Miss Justice is better built than Miss Liberty."

"Then ...? "I've got nothing against informality itself," sighed matronly British attorney Sybil Bedford, part of a platoon covering the trial for Life magazine. "It's splendid, but ..."

To get inside the courtroom, a newsmen must first be accredited (150 have been, and 75 more are expected once the trial actually starts), wear two identical press badges at all times, and then be searched every time he enters. Once inside, it's every man for himself. The deputy on duty (and he wasn't getting a good view of Ruby, first persuaded the sheriff to ask the defendant to keep his way (which he did) and then, before a morning session started, wandered over to Ruby's table. As Ruby's attorneys chatted with the press, he talked with the defendant and completed his drawing. "He wanted to know if the double chin showed very much and asked that I give him more hair," said the artist. "And finally he said, 'Give me a break will you? Give me a little dignity.' It was pathetic."

Twice each day, when the judge announced a recess, some 50 reporters sprang from their hard-back benches, some even leaping the rails of the dock, and raced to surround the attorneys. Moments later, the courtroom was dark as the doors were opened and the TV cameramen and photographers, who are not allowed inside during court proceedings, battled each other for the view. "What happened to poor Jack Ruby?" said Murray Kempton of The New Republic, looking at the chaos all around him. "He keeps getting smaller and smaller and smaller. Doesn't anybody remember that he is on trial?"

Despite the diversions in the courtroom, newsmen were hard-pressed to develop fresh angles about a case that has been discussed at length in the world's press for three months. To make life easier for the reporters, a public relations firm set up a press room with 34 phones and sixteen Western Union machines.

"No News!" Although the biggest hard news so far has been the naming of the jurors, visiting newsmen last week were still fielding some 40,000 words a day by wire and a great deal more by phone. By the weekend, newsmen were almost reduced to interviewing each other to meet the demand for copy that their editors were requesting. Yet they all realized that once the jury was picked, they would have more than enough to keep themselves busy.

"Although this is exciting, there must be something about the assassination that hasn't been told," said Maurice Adams of The Sydney (Australia) Morning Herald. "And this is the place it must come out." Months of legwork have convinced almost all U.S. newsmen that the conspiracy theory was simply impossible. But, after the carnival antics last week, just about anything else seemed possible in Dallas.

A Big Sale

Dallas was the dateline for another brand of journalism last week—checkbook journalism. Everybody—from accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald's mother to the ticket seller at the movie theater where he was arrested—had something to sell. Yet, mostly for reasons of taste, the giants of the bought by-line and the exclusive picture-Life, The Saturday Evening Post, McCall's, and Paris Match—managed to keep their pens in their pockets.

Then three weeks ago a Life photographer received an anonymous phone call, offering him exclusive rights to Oswald (including one of him holding a rifle). The photo apparently had been collected by police officials during the investigation, and the best guess was that some official source had passed them on to the seller. Life's lawyers negotiated against loss, & were used regularly by Judge Joe B. Brown and prosecuting attorney, Henry Wade.

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