Lost and Found
Oswald Interrogation
Notes

by Larry Haapanen

At the time that the Assassination Records Re-
view Board was formed in April 1994, no notes were
known to exist of the approximately twelve hours that
Lee Harvey Oswald spent under interrogation on No-
vember 22-24, 1963. Although the official record es-

tablished that several of his interrogators made some
notes during or after the interrogations, these notes
had either been destroyed or allowed to slip into the
dustbin of history. But by the end of 1997, the ARRB
had managed to acquire two sets of interrogation notes.
The purpose of this article is to address the question of
why these notes were not made public immediately after
the assassination, and also to reveal the existence of a
third set of notes that was “hidden in plain sight” by
the Warren Commission.

Oswald’s interrogation on the afternoon of No-
vember 22, 1963, was attended by two FBI special
agents, James Hosty and James Bookhout, both of
whom recorded handwritten notes. Bookhout told the
Warren Commission that he destroyed his notes later,
after writing a formal report, as was the FBI’s cus-
tom. Hosty told the Warren Commission much the
same story, adding that he specifically recalled placing
his notes in a wastebasket.

Thirty-two years later, however, Hosty’s book
Assignment Oswald appeared with a photographic re-
production of the notes, which turned out to have not
been destroyed after all. Hosty explained that he had
truthfully testified to the Warren Commission, in that
at the time of his testimony he sincerely believed that
he had destroyed the notes but subsequently he had dis-
covered them in papers on his desk. Since it was stan-
dard FBI procedure to destroy such notes, it seems rea-
sonable that Hosty felt no obligation to step forward
with them after he came across them—if retaining the
notes was not required, neither was producing them.
Moreover, there is nothing in the notes to suggest any
ulterior motive for suppressing them. While there are
a few items of information in his formal report that
are not in the notes, he explained in his Warren Commissi-
on testimony that the notes would not be as fully written out as the report. The informa-
tion supplied in the report but not covered in the notes
seems unremarkable, amounting mostly to Oswald’s
date of employment at the TSBD and the account Os-
wald gave of his activities on the day of the assassina-
tion. On the whole, there seems to be no reason to doubt
Hosty’s explanation for the belated appearance of the
notes, which he turned over to the ARRB in 1997.

A different story is presented by the second set of
notes acquired by the ARRB. The Warren Commissi-
on observed that during Oswald’s various interroga-
tions, “Captain [Will. Fritz of the homicide and rob-
bery bureau did most of the questioning, but he kept no
notes and there were no stenographic or tape record-
ings.” On the other hand, it was clear that Fritz pos-
sessed some sort of notes, for he told the Warren Com-
mission, while recounting the interrogations, that “...I
kept no notes at the time, and these notes and things I
have made I would have to make several days later...”.
Whether these notes, or any part of them, were actu-
ally taken down by Fritz during the interrogations, rather
than written several days later, has been the subject of
speculation. Perhaps the best evidence that they were
taken down contemporaneously is found in a comment
attributed to Lee Harvey Oswald. Harry Holmes, the
U.S. postal inspector who participated in the last inter-
rogation of Oswald before the aborted jail transfer on
November 24th, wrote a report in which he stated that
Fritz asked Oswald about the Hidell I.D. card, and Os-
wald “flared up and stated ‘I’ve told you all I’m going
to about that card. You took notes, just read them for
yourself, if you want to refresh your memory’.”

In a news release dated November 20, 1997, the
ARRB announced that an anonymous donor had do-
nated Captain Fritz’s handwritten interrogation notes to the board. Left unanswered was the question of why Fritz’s notes had not been made public much sooner. As in Hosty’s case, answering that question may rest on a comparison of Fritz’s notes to the contents of his report to see if they differ in any important respect. But unlike in Hosty’s case, they do indeed differ in a remarkable way. In Assignment Oswald, Hosty recalls that during the first Oswald interrogation, Oswald thanked Fritz for allowing his handcuffs to be moved from back to front, and then turned to Hosty and said he was sorry for blowing up at him and “for writing that letter to you.” This was a surprising admission to Hosty, as he had not previously connected Oswald to the anonymous note left for him at the Dallas FBI office. But it also caught the attention of Captain Fritz, and can be found recorded in Fritz’s interrogation notes as released by the ARRB: “Admitted writing [sic] Russian Embassy & to Hosty.” By the time Fritz wrote his formal report of the interrogation, Oswald’s latter admission was gone, and all the reader was told was that “Mr. Hosty asked Oswald if he had been to Russia. He told him, ‘Yes, he had been in Russia three years.’ He asked him if he had written to the Russian Embassy, and he said he had.”

With Oswald’s admission of writing the note omitted from Fritz’s report, and the interrogation notes absent from the record, the FBI did not have to contend with what would have been a much earlier, and likely more embarrassing, exposure of the Oswald note than turned out to be the case. When news of the note finally surfaced in 1975, it was a big enough bombshell to bring on Congressional hearings, but it finally blew over. It is hard to imagine what repercussions could have occurred in 1964, but it might have shaken the Warren Commission’s confidence in the FBI and perhaps prompted the establishment of a commission investigatory staff independent of the FBI and other federal agencies.

Did the reference to Oswald’s note to the FBI cause the suppression of the Fritz notes? Or was it merely a fortuitous development for the FBI that the notes remained hidden from view? Without additional evidence, that question is impossible to answer. However, we do know that there was a conscious effort on someone’s part to obscure the truth surrounding the note. Ruth Paine testified to the Warren Commission that she had originally thought that Oswald was telling her the truth when he said that he’d visited the Dallas FBI office and left a note, but, prior to her Warren Commission appearance, some unnamed person had told her that Oswald “never did go into the FBI office,” and, whoever that person was, she had taken their word for it and concluded that Oswald was telling his usual lies. Assuming that her informant was an FBI agent, whoever it was that misled Mrs. Paine could have seen to it, perhaps with a simple off-the-record request, that Captain Fritz’s interrogation notes remained out of sight. Of course, even if the notes were suppressed to save the FBI from the embarrassment of an early disclosure of the Oswald note, the threat of embarrassment may have been the only motive, and, if so, such suppression does not imply that something truly sinister was going on. Embarrassment is something that all government agencies, and indeed all humans, find unpleasant, and sometimes their efforts to avoid it can go beyond what the public interest would dictate.

In its news release on the Fritz notes, the ARRB described them as “only the second set of original handwritten notes taken on the Oswald interrogations that have surfaced in the 34 years since the assassination,” the Hosty notes being the first. I wrote to the board soon afterwards, pointing out that their statement was incorrect, as the first set of Oswald interrogation notes to surface had done so in 1964 with the publication of the Warren Commission’s 26 volumes. It so happened, however, that they were published in such a way as to hide them “in plain sight.” These were notes written by the Secret Service’s Special-Agent-in-Charge in Dallas, Forrest Sorrels, who was present during interrogations of Oswald on all three days of his incarceration. Oddly, Sorrels does not seem to have written a report of his own on the interrogations, although Inspector Tom Kelley of the Secret Service did so on the final interrogation of November 24th. The Warren Report contains an Appendix XI entitled “Reports Relating to the Interrogation of Lee Harvey Oswald at the Dallas Police Department,” and reproduces “the most important of these reports”—including those of Fritz, Hosty, Bookhout, Holmes, Kelley, and FBI Special Agent Manning Clements—but NOT one from Sorrels. Had Sorrels written such a report, it is hard to imagine it not being considered worthy of inclusion in

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the appendix.

Sorrels also participated in two interrogations of Jack Ruby on November 24, 1963, and he did write a report on those, which the Warren Commission published as Sorrels Exhibit No. 1. Along with it were printed copies of his handwritten notes on the two interrogations, which were designated Sorrels Exhibits 2-A through 2-D and 3-A through 3-C. As I wrote to the ARRB on November 24, 1997:

Comparing the contents of the notes to Sorrels’ account of the two interrogations contained in his typed report dated February 3, 1964 (Sorrels Exhibit No. 1), one must conclude that the notes in Sorrels Exhibit No. 3-A cover the beginning of his first interrogation of Ruby. However, the top half of Sorrels Exhibit No. 3-A (above a squiggly line) obviously pertains to Lee Harvey Oswald.[]

To see how clearly the notes on the top half of the page pertain to Oswald and not to Ruby, one only has to read them:

- since 15 - read Marxism
- Went to Soviet Union to see it in practice
- Says is a Marxist
- Not a Marxist-Lenin
- Residence =
- Denies ord[er]ing gun by mail
- Fam/his from Ft Worth-South

These notes are modest in extent, but they do stand out as the first notes of an Oswald interrogation to become part of the public record. The interrogation appears to be the one attended by Sorrels on Saturday, November 23rd, when Oswald was asked about the mail order rifle (its origin had not been traced yet on Friday).

I told the ARRB that it was likely that the half-page of Oswald notes in Sorrels Exhibit No. 3-A was only part of Sorrels’ notes on Oswald, as they do not contain any identifying information as is the case in the Ruby notes that begin on the bottom half of the page. As the notes that are reproduced take up seven sides of notebook paper, it is obvious that there is at least one side we do not see, and Sorrels’ notebook may have contained other sheets of paper as well. When Sorrels told the Warren Commission that his notebook contained notes on “other stuff” besides the Ruby interrogations, the Warren Commission counsel (Leon D. Hubert, Jr.) responded by saying, “Well, we are interested of course only in the Ruby ones.”

One interesting aspect of Sorrels’ notes is that the half-page referring to Oswald appears in the middle of the Ruby notes, even though the lower half-page obviously marks the beginning of the Ruby interrogations. In other words, the notes are given exhibit numbers and reproduced out of chronological order, thus artificially placing the Oswald half-page in the middle and not at the beginning of the pages from Sorrels’ notebook. It would be interesting to know if this was done intentionally to make the inclusion of the Oswald notes less obvious.

In response to my inquiry, the ARRB conducted a search for Sorrels’ notebook, but reported that the Sorrels exhibits in the National Archives are only photocopies of pages from the notebook and no additional information on the fate of the original notebook could be found. It is troubling that neither a written report by Sorrels on the Oswald interrogations, nor more than a half-page of his Oswald interrogation notes, are to be found in evidence. Everything in public life has its secret side. The goal of research on the JFK assassination is to retrieve as much as possible from that secret side and use it to assemble a picture of what happened that is as historically accurate as possible. The discovery of Oswald interrogation notes contributes to that slow and incremental process, but seems to raise as many questions as it answers.

ENDNOTES:
1. Hearings Before the President’s Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, Volume VII, p. 313.
7. Report, p. 636. Holmes told the Warren Commission (Hearings, Volume VII, p. 297) that he “had a few notes” to go on when writing his interrogation report, but there is no indication of what happened to those notes. Interestingly, the Warren Report omits Oswald’s reference to Fritz’s notes when it quotes his response to Fritz on the I.D. card (Report, p. 181), and Holmes’ testimony to the Warren Commission omits it as well (Hearings, Volume VII, p. 299).
8. Assignment Oswald, p. 22.
• since 15 - read Marxism
• Went to Soviet Union to see it in practice

• Says is a Marxist
• Not a Marxist-Lenin

• Residence =
• Denies ord[er]ing gun by mail
• Fam/his from Ft Worth-South