

## Belton-Jackson1

**Editor's Note:** The following story is one of an occasional series based on investigative research by the unsolved civil rights murders project team at LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication. The information was obtained from FBI files through the Freedom of Information Act and through interviews with FBI agents and other investigators and sources.

By Ryan Buxton

Exactly one month after the fatal bombing of Wharlest Jackson on Feb. 27, 1967, Natchez resident Cleaveland Belton was charged with leaving the scene of an accident and booked in the Natchez Police Department Jail.

It was there, Belton told FBI agents investigating Jackson's murder, that he overheard a rowdy group of men listening to Yellow Cab driver Tom Smith regale them with the story of three sticks of dynamite hidden in a truck to kill a black man.

Also present, Belton said, was Natchez Police Department Capt. Leslie Cowart, who Belton claimed listened to Smith's story and told the group "we got four more of these SOBs to get."

Belton was initially arrested March 19, 1967, following a car accident. He pled guilty March 27 to leaving the scene and was sent to the Natchez city jail, where he remained until the morning of March 31.

These details are contained in old FBI records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act as part of the civil rights era murders project at LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication. A short time before his death, Jackson had accepted a promotion to a supervisory position at Armstrong Tire Company that had never been held by an African American, and he had allegedly been warned not to accept by members of the Ku Klux Klan. To date, no arrests have been made in the case, but the FBI continues to work the case.

Smith's revelations about the dynamite came on March 29, 1967, according to Belton. He told the FBI that around 1:30 a.m. on that date, he heard a group of men nearby, recognizing the voices of Smith and Cowart and getting a brief glimpse of Cowart.

"Did you see what we did to that n-----'s ass at the tire plant?" Smith said to the group, according to Belton as quoted in the FBI report. "We done put [sic] three sticks of dynamite under his truck seat."

Belton claimed Smith said he and three other men got the dynamite from a man he remembered only as "Tom," a foreman at the tire plant, who went home to McComb, Miss., on weekends and brought the dynamite back with him. Smith said the black man who was bombed (Jackson) and the three other men who placed the dynamite all worked under this same foreman.

Smith told the group he and the three other men brought the dynamite to the black man's truck where Smith left them briefly and picked them up when they were done placing the explosives.

"[The sticks of dynamite] were placed between the gas tank and the frame," Smith said, according to Belton. "The first rut the n----- hit, the springs ought to hit the caps and explode them. He didn't hit any bumps till he hit Minor [Street], where the blacktop was raised."

Jackson's truck exploded on Minor Street on his way home from work.

It was after overhearing Smith's story that Belton claims Police Capt. Cowart listed Willie Ross, Daddy Minor, James Union and Ed O'Gwinn as "the four SOBs who are going to be next."

Belton said he knew these four men, who were black, and he believed they were all members of the NAACP, but he didn't think they had been involved in civil rights in Natchez.

Belton told FBI agents that a closed door between his cell and where the group of men stood prevented him from hearing the entire conversation, but he was certain of what he heard even if he couldn't repeat their words verbatim.

When interviewed by FBI investigators, Smith said he drank a lot and often brought himself to the police station to sleep it off because he didn't have anywhere else to go, which was confirmed to the FBI by Cowart and Chief of Police J.T. Robinson.

Smith, who investigators noted was sober during the interview, said he specifically could not recall being in jail on March 29, 1967, but he knew he had been there around that time, next to a cell containing three white AWOL soldiers. Smith also said Cowart was present at the jail when Smith turned himself in between 1 a.m. and 2 a.m.

Cowart told the FBI he was at the station before dark on March 29, but he was sure he wasn't there later because he had stopped working nights after a detached retina operation on his eye. He said anyone who claimed he was there was wrong or lying, and that Smith wouldn't remember things properly because he was a drunk.

Cowart denied any recollection of or participation in the conversation described by Belton. He said he did know Ross, Minor, Union and O'Gwinn, all of whom he called "wineheads," but reiterated that he hadn't spoken about them on March 29.

Police Chief Robinson gave records to the FBI confirming that Smith and Belton were both in the jail March 29, though Smith had not been booked officially as he had turned himself in to sleep off his intoxication.

Robinson said he "would not discount the fact that Smith could be involved in the Wharlest Jackson bombing," according to FBI records.

Smith told investigators that even though he was drinking when he turned himself in at the police station, he recalled everything he did that night, which did not include any conversation about the bombing of Wharlest Jackson.

Smith denied any knowledge of the Jackson bombing or of a foreman at the Armstrong Tire Company named Tom. He also denied driving three men to the Armstrong plant in February 1967, though he couldn't specifically recall where he was on that date.

When FBI agents asked if Smith knew Raleigh "Red" Glover, the leader of the violent Silver Dollar Group, Smith said he thought he knew someone by that name who he would pick up in his cab following Glover's midnight to 8 a.m. shift at the Armstrong Tire Company, where Glover, who lived in Vidalia, La., worked with Wharlest Jackson.

FBI records show that Glover was once asked by acquaintance Sonny Taylor about how the bomb that killed Jackson could work. Glover described a method different than the one Smith allegedly detailed at the Natchez jail, saying the bomb could be connected to the truck's turn signals. As the signal was engaged, the bomb would explode.

Smith told the FBI he knew nothing about Wharlest Jackson's murder but would tell them if he did, and that he had spoken recently with Police Chief Robinson about trying to find information. Robinson confirmed this, saying he didn't push the issue with Smith, who told him he would relay any information he heard.

Before speaking to the FBI about the jail cell conversation, Belton said he had only told the story to two men — NAACP leader Charles Evers, who said he was too busy to listen at the time, and R.L. Clay, a "negro leader in Natchez."

Clay, also a member of the NAACP, told the FBI he recalled all the details Belton relayed to him about Smith and Cowart's conversation in the jail. Clay said Belton was of sound mind and the effects of a stroke Belton had recently suffered were physical only. Belton wasn't known to tell "wild stories," Clay said, and he had no reason to believe Belton's recollections from his jail cell were anything but the truth.

Upon being contacted by the FBI a second and third time, Belton maintained the accuracy of his story and insisted he would take a polygraph test to verify his claims.