

Cases Closed

With 5 photos

PHOTO INFO:

Cases Morris – A period photo of Frank Morris, center, in front of his Ferriday, La., shoe shop that was firebombed Dec. 10, 1964, when Morris in it. **Credit:** Concordia Sentinel

Cases Leonard – Leonard Spencer is shown being interviewed by Concordia Sentinel Editor Stanley Nelson in 2010 at the former's home near Rayville, La. Spencer's son implicated him in the Frank Morris homicide 46 years earlier. **Credit:** Concordia Sentinel.

Cases DeLaughter – Former Concordia Parish Deputy Sheriff Frank DeLaughter, who is believed to have been involved in the Morris murder. **Credit:** Concordia Sentinel

Cases Death Site – All that is left today of Frank Morris' Ferriday shoe shop is the concrete slab upon which it rest. It was burned down by Klan members, taking Morris with it, in 1964. **Credit:** LSU Unsolved Murders Project

Cases Edwards – Joseph Edwards was abducted and thought killed in Vidalia, La., in 1964, by the Klan and law officers for having a relationship with a white woman. **Credit:** Concordia Sentinel

By Kevin Thibodeaux

The FBI's second investigation into the hate-crime death of Frank Morris, a black shoe store owner from Ferriday, La., who died of burns after two men firebombed his shoe repair shop nearly 50 years ago officially has been closed, the U.S. Department of Justice privately informed his granddaughter.

Morris' death was reopened as part of federal legislation authorizing the FBI to take a second look into more than a hundred cold case homicides from 1950 to 1969 believed to be racially motivated. In a letter sent to Rosa Morris-Williams of Las Vegas, the DOJ said it was forced to close the case because the men likely responsible for Morris' death are dead.

Morris' case is one of two high-profile Louisiana investigations the DOJ has closed. The murder of 25-year-old Joseph Edwards, the African-American porter of a Vidalia, La., motel in 1964, also was reopened despite his body having never been found, It was long-suspected Edwards was killed by local law enforcement officers because of a relationship with a white woman.

The Morris and Edwards cases, among other similar Klan murders in the region, were investigated thoroughly by Concordia Sentinel Editor Stanley Nelson for five years. He was a

Pulitzer Prize finalist for his work in 2011. The Unsolved Civil Rights-Era Murders project at the Manship School of Mass Communication assisted Nelson in his efforts. Since 2011, the team has obtained some 150,000 pages of original FBI investigative reports on the case through the Freedom of Information Act.

On Dec. 10, 1964, Morris awoke in the middle of the night to the sounds of glass breaking. Morris, who was sleeping in his store that night, walked to the front of the building, opened the door and was greeted by two men – one holding a shotgun, the other a can of flammable liquid.

The men forced Morris back inside and set the place ablaze in a fiery explosion that quickly enveloped Morris, as well. (Whether the original intent was to kill Morris, whose presence in the store late at night may have been unknown to the assailants, or simply an act to intimidate him remains uncertain.)

Morris was able to escape from the back of the shop but not before he was severely burned. As he crossed the street, headed for a nearby gas station for help, his skin began to melt – a result of the third degree burns that covered 100 percent of his body.

Morris, in shock, was taken to a hospital where he died four days later. At the time, the FBI investigated Morris' death but was never able to prosecute the crime. Agents interviewed Morris before he died, but he told them he didn't know the identity of his two assailants. A hospital maid, who was a friend of Morris, told FBI agents later that Morris told her privately that Concordia Parish Deputy Sheriff Frank DeLaughter was behind the assault. DeLaughter later went to prison on an unrelated civil rights matter and died nearly 20 years ago.

The Morris and Edwards investigations were reopened as a part of the Emmett Till Act of 2007, along with 112 other cases, involving more than 120 murders whose original investigations had gone cold.

But nearly seven years after Congress authorized the FBI to re-examine these racially motivated cases, two federal and three state convictions have resulted (the department will not comment on ongoing state criminal proceedings). Fewer than 20 cases remain open.

And in January 2014, in spite of three Concordia Parish grand jury sessions, the Morris case once again went cold.

In early 2011, Cynthia Deitle, then supervising agent for the FBI's Cold Case Initiative investigations, called the Morris murder "one of the most horrific and troubling of all the FBI's Civil Rights era Cold Cases. . . . We will solve this crime. The FBI will not rest until we uncover the truth"

Three years later, the outlook was less optimistic. Wrote Paige Fitzgerald, deputy chief in charge of the Justice Department's Cold Case Initiative:

“In the course of its current investigation, the FBI received allegations from three witnesses identifying two new suspects – Arthur Leonard Spencer and O.C. ‘Cooney’ Poissot – as being responsible for the murder of your grandfather. Cold Case prosecutors and FBI agents thoroughly investigated these allegations, which were extensively reported in the *Concordia Sentinel*, a local newspaper. However, there was insufficient evidence to support these allegations.”

The Morris case was one of only a handful of these investigations that yielded any new suspects or evidence. The FBI is quick to acknowledge that despite the renewed efforts, results are difficult to come by as suspects have died or the memories of those alive are often murky at best.

In 2011, the FBI was provided the name of a Rayville, La., man, Spencer, who was still living and had been implicated in the murder by three people as part of a five-year investigation by The *Concordia Sentinel* and its editor Nelson. Spencer was believed to have been one of the two at Morris’ shop on Dec. 10, according to *Sentinel* stories. (The FBI ultimately ruled him out.)

The *Sentinel* reported that Spencer’s son, William “Boo” Spencer, and his ex-brother-in-law, Bill Frasier, said that Spencer had informed them of his participation in Morris’ death. Spencer died of cancer last May.

Additionally, the *Sentinel* was able to connect another suspect, Poissot, an FBI informant, to the crime. Poissot was implicated by a Minden, La., woman, Brenda Rhodes, who said he had told her in the 1970s of his involvement as the second arsonist.

FBI documents, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by the LSU student team, show that Poissot, who had a lengthy rap sheet of petty crimes in Louisiana. He later became an FBI informant, implicated a third suspect, the notoriously corrupt DeLaughter, with whom Poissot was well acquainted.

Multiple motives for the murder have arisen, but the most likely, says Nelson, is that DeLaughter, a 6-foot-4-inch brute nicknamed “Big Frank,” who was a member of the Klan, targeted Morris after he refused to continue repairing DeLaughter’s shoes for free, insisting the lawman pay like everyone else.

Although not named in the FBI’s official letter describing the circumstances of Morris’ death – an omission that baffles Nelson – most FBI agents on the ground during the original investigation, whom Nelson extensively interviewed, believed DeLaughter engineered the arson.

The day before the arson, the late Poissot told the FBI he heard DeLaughter say he didn't know "what he was going to do about that n----- at the shoe shop."

The letter, which describes the suspects in Morris’ murder, the details of the FBI’s investigation and conclusions based off the evidence, named four suspects that had been implicated during the FBI’s original investigation. The letter states other than the testimony from informants, evidence

never arose to implicate these men – suspected Klan members James Scarborough, Thor Torgersen, Tommie Lee Jones and E.D. Morace – in the death of Morris. Additionally, three of the four men had died by the time the DOJ opened its second investigation. Jones died in 2007.

In addition to these four, all fingered by confidential FBI informants (who Nelson is quick to point out were paid for their information and would never have testified in court), the Justice Department letter also acknowledges the allegations against Spencer and Poissot, although it goes to great length discrediting the three accusers who came forward during the FBI's second investigation.

The DOJ letter to the granddaughter stated: “Ultimately, the exhaustive investigations conducted in the 1960's and over the last few years did not definitively determine who was responsible for the murder of your grandfather. The investigation has produced no credible evidence implicating anyone who could currently be prosecuted. Accordingly, we have no choice but to close our investigation.”

The sister of Joseph Edwards, Julia Dobbins, received a similar letter to that of Morris' granddaughter. The letter stated the likely scenario that led to Edwards' death.

In July 1964, Edwards, the porter of the Shamrock Motel in Vidalia, La., was accused of grabbing a white woman and attempting to kiss her. The woman, a clerk at the Shamrock, told a Louisiana parole officer, with whom she had a relationship, about the incident.

The parole officer relayed the incident to several local law enforcement officers. Several days later, witnesses reported to the FBI seeing two cars with multiple men pursuing Edwards' vehicle. Although the witness saw a man driving Edwards' car, he could not confirm if the driver was Edwards.

Edwards' car was discovered following these incidents, but his body was never found. LSU Faces Laboratory Director Mary Manheim has been involved over the years in a futile attempt to establish if human remains found in the area were that of Edwards. Reports say he was either dismembered and tossed into a lake or was buried under an earthen dam that was being constructed at the time.

The Edwards letter from Fitzgerald states that the Klan offshoot group, the Silver Dollar Group, was involved in Edwards' death. The letter lists seven suspects: the woman's boyfriend, James Buford Goss; Vidalia police chief Bud Spinks; Silver Dollar Group members Raleigh “Red” Glover, Kenneth Norman Head, Homer Thomas “Buck” Horton; and Concordia Parish Sheriff's deputies William Howard “Bill” Ogden and Delaughter. All are deceased.

“We regret that we cannot be of further assistance to you. Again, please accept our sincere condolences on the loss of your brother,” Fitzgerald concluded.

The task facing the FBI when it reopened these cases was daunting. Many of the suspects in the crimes had died and those that had not often were evasive. New evidence in the cases has been hard to come by and memories from people living at the time may have faded, with FBI agents acknowledging they are wary about re-interviewing a witness.

However, both the DOJ and Nelson agree that even with convictions sparse, the initiative has provided some good. The DOJ is required by law to submit a report to Congress each year, detailing the progress it has made in each of these cases. The last report, released in late 2012, shows 20 cases remained open involving 27 victims. Two of those cases, Morris and Edwards, have since been closed. The 2013 annual report has thus far never been released, but it is suspected that few, if any, cases will remain when the report is released.

Whenever the DOJ closes a case, an FBI agent hand delivers a letter from the department, the same as those in the Morris and Edwards cases, to the victims' next of kin, if they can be identified and located. Many of the delivered letters were obtained by the LSU Cold Case team and became the basis of a story in The New York Times last March.

“Any time we can sit down with a family member, provide a next of kin letter and try to tell them what happened,” Heath Janke, who followed Deitle as supervisor of the DOJ’s Cold Case Initiative, told LSU student investigators. “I hope that brings them some closure.”

Although Nelson has been openly critical of the way in which the federal government has handled its investigation, he said reopening these cases ultimately brought some justice to these families.

“Sometimes a little bit of justice is better than nothing,” Nelson said. “And I think that a little bit of justice may be nothing more than identifying the main suspects in a case, even if they’re not convicted, even if they’re dead by the time their names are revealed.

“It was definitely the moral thing to do to take another look at these cases. It would have been immoral not to. It had to be done.”

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