

Dellah Smith

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 Xerxes A. Wilson

In the months following the brutal, fatal burning of Ferriday's Frank Morris, the Federal Bureau of Investigation desperately sought a motive for whoever killed the affable black business owner.

While rumors swirled in the cauldron of racial angst that was Concordia Parish in the 1960s, one man rose to rise to the top of the furor: Concordia Parish sheriff's deputy Frank DeLaughter.

Legend of DeLaughter's merciless brutality and racial hatred grew as tall as the 6-4, lawman and in the black community the paralyzing fear of "Big Frank" carried infinitely more weight than his 270 pound frame.

Multiple sources, including 45-year-old FBI files obtained by members of the unsolved civil rights murder project at LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication, implicated DeLaughter as the catalyst behind the Morris' murder. The exact motive, however, remains unclear.

Informants and others interviewed at the time mentioned DeLaughter's racism and the fact he couldn't stand to see a black man be successful or that Morris finally refused to repair DeLaughter's boots on a gratis basis, but there was one motive the FBI investigated that was more personal.

This was the possibility that DeLaughter's wife, Lulu, had flirted with or been rebuffed by Morris at his shoe repair shop, which served white and black customers of both genders – something that was a flash point with the Klan in those days.

FBI agents and clergy failed get Morris, who lay dying in the Ferriday hospital with first-degree burns over his entire body, to name the culprits. One person, however, claims he told her what happened the day after his shop was torched by Klan members.

Dellah Mae Smith was a maid working at the hospital and had been close with Morris for years. She told investigators as Morris was taking his final breaths before slipping into a coma from which he would never return, he told her details of what happened.

Though Smith at first declined to speak to the FBI, she later provided a detailed account of what Morris said as he lay dying.

Smith quoted Morris as saying he heard glass break in the front of his store (Morris had sleeping quarters in the back of his shop) and he went to investigate. There he found two men: one with a

shotgun, the other with a five-gallon gas can.

He said while one man held a shotgun to him, Smith told federal investigators and one or two other people, the other poured gas from the can around the store and on Morris, saying, "I want you to see yourself die." One of them then threw a lighted match at Morris before fleeing into the darkness, she said.

Who and why? Smith asked.

Smith claims Morris told her the name of the two men and she shared them with the FBI. But the were redacted in the FBI files, apparently under exemptions in the Freedom of Information Act.

Smith went on to tell investigators that Morris said the attack was conducted at the order of DeLaughter as payback for alleged interactions with DeLaughter's wife.

Morris made Smith promise not to recount any of these details. Though Morris had been warned his condition was fatal, Smith said he was convinced he would live and didn't want to cause any trouble by naming his accusers.

But Smith told agents that there was a corroborating story Morris had told her before his shop was burned.

About three years before the attack, she said, Morris had related that Lulu DeLaughter, DeLaughter's on-again, off-again wife, was conducting business in Morris' shop as she had done countless times before. As DeLaughter was paying, said Smith, she made a sexually suggestive gesture in the palm of his hand and asked him to call her later that night.

Smith said Morris told DeLaughter he wanted no trouble but would call her later. He said he never did, which apparently angered DeLaughter who later informed her husband that Morris made a pass at her. Smith said Morris recalled DeLaughter came to Morris' shop to confront him on what he said was an obscene phone call. Morris denied this and they argued for a time before DeLaughter left, related Smith.

Investigators had heard many stories of DeLaughter disliking Morris for various reasons, including that he had flirted with white women, but Smith claims Morris said it was specifically because of interaction and lies tied to DeLaughter's wife.

The Rev. August Thompson of St. Charles Church in Ferriday advised the FBI of the same situation. He told investigators that prior to the burning, Morris said he would call Ms. DeLaughter, but never did. This, he said, angered Ms. DeLaughter so she went to her husband and told him that Morris had made a pass at her. Whether Fr. Thompson got that information from Della Smith is not recorded.

Smith told investigators she wouldn't testify this information because she feared violent repercussions for her family, though she did discuss the information with various members of the black community in Concordia Parish.

Though her claims were never substantiated, it fit with other rumors for possible motives implicated DeLaughter.

Investigators also had reason to question Smith's credibility as she was known to be a "wino" and unreliable to segments of her own community.

DeLaughter's wife denied to FBI agents any relationship other than business with Morris and said her husband had a good relationship with Morris and the rest of the black community in Ferriday.