

## Davis Beating

**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 Chelsea Brasted

Recently released FBI documents implicate two additional suspects in the Civil Rights-era beating that sent Concordia Parish chief deputy Frank DeLaughter to prison.

DeLaughter is also linked to the 1964 murders of Ferriday shoe shop owner Frank Morris and of Joseph Edwards, a porter at the Shamrock Motel in Vidalia, both black. What sent DeLaughter to prison on June 18, 1970, for 18 months, however, was the Oct. 20, 1965, beating of a white man named William Davis.

These latest FBI documents were obtained recently under the Freedom of Information Act by the cold case civil rights-era murder investigative team at LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication.

Long-time law enforcement informant O.C. "Coonie" Poissot gave details of the assault during an interview with the FBI on April 6, 1967. Both DeLaughter and Poissot are dead and both have been implicated in the 1964 death of Ferriday businessman Frank Morris. Poissot, as it turns out, also was an occasional informant for the FBI.

Poissot told officials DeLaughter joined casino operator and lounge owner Judsen Lee "Blackie" Drane and Ed Fuller, Drane's employee and former exalted cyclops of the Sligo unit of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Adams County, Miss. Together, the three men picked up "an old man about age 55-60 by the name of [William] Davis ... for stealing a motor from a pinball machine," according to FBI documents.

In the documents, Poissot recalled Davis' first name as "Cliff," but told investigators he may not have remembered the name correctly.

Poissot said DeLaughter, Drane and Fuller brought Davis to the King Hotel in Ferriday where Drane went inside to fetch another man, Preston Conway. The hotel was used as an informal headquarters for Ferriday-area Klansmen during the 1960s.

The group then picked up a sixth man — Charles Huffman — at Huffman's Used Car Agency in Ferriday, according to the documents.

Poissot, who reported he had been working on his truck near the back of the hotel, said the group took Davis into a back alley "and started hitting the old man," according to

the documents. Fuller reportedly beat Davis for some time until DeLaughter suggested the group take Davis “down to the jail,” according to Poissot’s account.

Poissot said they had left the door open, according to the FBI report, adding that “he observed the group beating the old man through the door of the jail. A cattle prod was taken and the prongs pushed into the neck of the old man and twisted, causing flesh to be injured.”

The documents also say Poissot indicated a black woman was inside the jail at the time, who may have been able to serve as an additional witness. Poissot said he believed the woman was named Beatrice Washington, but gave no other details. The FBI files gave no indications the agents followed up on that tip.

“Following the beating, the old man was taken to the hospital for the criminally insane in Jackson, and left there to die,” according to Poissot’s account. The man, however, did not die.

The documents say Poissot reported the beating to E.D. Morace, Klan investigator for the Ferriday-Clayton unit of the Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, as well as William and Jerry Blaney and King Hotel operator Douglas Nugent because the incident had upset him.

Poissot spoke to the men “about the Klan taking care of the individuals responsible ... there was talk of burning the Avalon and Blackie’s (Drane lounge, located on the Vidalia-Ferriday highway) in revenge for the beating,” according to the documents.

The following morning, Ferriday Mayor L.W. “Woody” Davis was informed of the incident, according to Poissot.

A parish grand jury eventually indicted three of the men — DeLaughter, Drane and Fuller — all of whom pled not guilty in late 1966, according to the Concordia Sentinel. A trial was set for January 1966 but the case never went to a court.

The Sentinel reported that now retired FBI agent John Pfeifer, who had been assigned to Concordia Parish at the time of the incident, made his superiors aware of the federal implications of the case when local officials let it remain dormant. Pfeifer and FBI major case inspector Joseph Sullivan convinced the Justice Department to file federal charges, which it did. DeLaughter was tried in federal court in Lake Charles and Shreveport.

DeLaughter was sentenced to 18 months in prison and four years of supervised probation for violation of a federal law that prevents government officials from violating citizens’ constitutional rights while on duty.