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Oswald's murder snapped a hair too soon

Six-tenths of a second, 2 lives forever changed

'He was a victim of timing and circumstance, and it's something he never got over'

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By MICHAEL GRANBERRY / The Dallas Morning News

From the moment he lunged out of the shadows and pulled the trigger on his .38-caliber Colt Cobra, Jack Ruby did more than blast his way into history.

Lee Harvey Oswald, the man suspected of killing President John F. Kennedy two days earlier, suffered a single, fatal shot from Ruby's gun.

But other men standing in the basement of the Dallas police station on Sunday morning, Nov. 24, 1963, saw their own lives change, none more so than a pair of photojournalists who captured the moment in black and white.

For Robert H. "Bob" Jackson, then a 29-year-old photographer for the *Dallas Times Herald*, taking a picture of Oswald's murder meant winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1964.

But for Ira Jefferson "Jack" Beers Jr., who worked for *The Dallas Morning News* – and who took an almost equally vivid picture – the basement events left an entirely different legacy.

Those who knew him say he never recovered from missing the Pulitzer by six-tenths of a second – the time between his photograph and Mr. Jackson's.

"I know this sounds stupid, but for years, I wouldn't even talk to people about it. It hurt a lot," says Darlene Beers Williams, 50, the second of Mr. Beers' three children, whose father died of a heart attack in 1975. He was 51.



Morning News photographer Jack Beers showed up early for the shot, "but I didn't get it."

Mr. Beers was "industrious, careful, experienced, knowledgeable and dedicated," said Tom Dillard, who in 1963 was the *Morning News*' chief photographer. (Mr. Dillard was interviewed shortly before his death in late May.) "But on that day, he was a victim of timing and circumstance, and it's something he never got over."

His daughter attributes the difference in the photos to an accident of timing, a twist of fate.

"It really hurt my dad when Bob won the Pulitzer Prize," says Ms. Williams, a manager at a Garland retirement home.

Her father "always said, 'I was there. I was prepared. But I didn't get it.' "

Photography a passion

Born at Parkland Hospital in 1923, Jack Beers was an only child. Raised by a single mother, he was 7 when his parents divorced, at the height of the Great Depression. His family was poor.

He graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School and joined the Army Air Forces, where photography became a passion. Upon his discharge, he was hired by the *Times Herald*, where he worked for two years, then moved to the *Morning News*.

He was, his daughter says, a perfectionist, enslaved to details and committed to showing up for assignments an hour early. He often told his little girl, "Luck is a product of being prepared."

Through the years, he parlayed that luck into a showroom of memorable photographs – a woman in tears, lying on a stretcher, clutching her Bible; football great Kyle Rote, grinning en route to a game-winning touchdown; and a terrifying stream of hurricanes and tornadoes.

He loved crime stories, she says, and went on ride-alongs with the Dallas police. He also came to know a strange little man who often hung out at police headquarters, a strip-club operator named Jack Ruby.



Jack Beers' picture of Oswald's murder was taken six-tenths of a second before Bob Jackson's Pulitzer Prize-winning photo.

To fatten his pocketbook, Mr. Beers even photographed some of Ruby's "girls," whose pictures are part of the family collection.

He scoffed at what colleagues called "feature" photography, believing news was where the action was. So on the day President Kennedy came to town, he was thrilled, his daughter says, having drawn the assignment of photographing the president's arrival at Love Field.

After the assassination, he spent hours at police headquarters and on Sunday drew the assignment of photographing what was supposed to be a routine transfer of Oswald from the city jail to the county jail. As always, Mr. Beers showed up early.

On-the-job training

Like Jack Beers, Bob Jackson was an only child born in Dallas. His birth was traumatic – he barely survived complications during delivery that killed his twin sister when she was 4 days old.

He grew up in University Park as the son of the secretary-treasurer of Dallas Federal Savings and Loan. He attended Southern Methodist University but left early to join the Army National Guard, which gave him on-the-job training in photography.

He left the service in 1959 and got a job with the *Times Herald* a year later. He developed a fascination with hard news, whose speed and action he likened to auto racing, a sport he followed with almost-slavish devotion.



Bob Jackson says of his historic photo: 'I had a better position because I wasn't distracted by Ruby as much. I was still looking at Oswald's face, and I knew I was going to shoot before whoever that was blocked my view.'

He got to know racing pioneers Carroll Shelby and Jim Hall and revealed in owning a 1958 AC Ace Bristol, the forerunner to Mr. Shelby's famous Cobra. "There were six in all of Dallas," says Mr. Jackson, "and I had one of 'em."

"Bob was a rich kid who had never worked," says fellow photographer Andy Hanson. "His dad was a friend of [co-publisher and editor] Felix McKnight, who got John Mazziotta [the

paper's chief photographer] to hire Bob."

Despite the circumstances under which he was hired, "He was pretty darn good," says Mr. Hanson, who remembers Mr. Jackson's talent for hard news as putting him at the forefront of the paper's assassination coverage.

On Nov. 22, 1963, he was riding in the motorcade, eight cars behind the president. His assignment was to photograph crowd scenes along the route and then hand his film to a *Times Herald* reporter waiting at the corner of Main and Houston.

Shots fired, shots missed

Heading west on Main, nearing Houston, Mr. Jackson hurled his film to Jim Featherston, a heavyset reporter who had trouble catching it and – comically – ended up having to chase it. They were both still chuckling over the fumbled film when Mr. Jackson's car veered sharply onto Houston. By this time, the president's car was cruising down Elm.

And then came the first shot.

Instinctively, Mr. Jackson says he looked to where the shot was coming from – and saw a rifle protruding from a window in the east end of the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository. The Warren Commission concluded that Oswald fired three shots from a sniper's perch he had constructed in that window.

Mr. Jackson had two cameras, one with a wide-angle lens, the other a telephoto. Cursing his bad luck, he realized he had snapped his last picture just before turning onto Houston Street.

He had no time to reload. There would be no picture of the assassin. So, two days later, as he headed to the basement, he felt "like an idiot" for having missed the shot of the century.

On Sunday morning, photographers began arriving at the police station shortly before 9. They milled around for a while, sharing their stunned disbelief about the president's murder. Eventually, they were told to stake out positions in the basement and stay put until the suspect emerged.

"Beers liked to be up high," says Mr. Jackson, who positioned himself near an incline but not *on* it, as Mr. Beers had. Mr. Beers was, in fact, standing on a railing on top of the incline, giving him a height advantage of several feet.

To Mr. Jackson's right were Frank Johnston, a photographer for United Press International, and Mr. Beers. Standing in front of Mr. Beers but below his camera were television reporter Bob Huffaker, an unidentified Asian man and Dallas police Detective William J. "Blackie" Harrison.

Before Oswald appeared, a *Times Herald* reporter walked over to tell Mr. Jackson that the transfer was taking too long and that the city desk wanted him to leave the basement and head straight to Nellie Connally's press conference at Parkland Hospital. The wife of Texas Gov. John B. Connally was scheduled to appear in public for the first time since her husband was critically hurt in the shooting that killed the president.

"He came back and said, 'We can't miss that press conference – that's the most important thing,' " Mr. Jackson recalls the reporter saying.

But Mr. Jackson refused to leave.

Photo finish

Flanked by two detectives, Oswald entered the basement at 11:21. They appeared to be heading to an unmarked car that was still backing into place, its bumper actually touching Mr. Jackson's left knee.

Less than a minute before Oswald appeared, Ruby had entered the basement and positioned himself behind and to the left of Detective Harrison.

In a letter written to Ruby's attorney in 1967, Mr. Beers describes what happened next:

"Out of the corner of my right eye, I saw a sudden movement ... My first impression was, it was a photographer out of position or with a very short lens trying to improve his position, then the curse, 'You son of a bitch,' punctuated by the shot. The curse was in such an unnatural and excited voice, before it concluded I knew someone had gone berserk and was attacking Oswald."

The sudden movement provoked Mr. Jackson, six-tenths of a second later, to snap the shutter.



Bob Jackson claimed the 1964 Pulitzer Prize for the *Dallas Times Herald* with his incredible shot of a grimacing Oswald.

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"The reason Beers shot too soon, in comparison to me," says Mr. Jackson, "is that he saw it easier and quicker than I did. Ruby was more in his vision. I had a better position because I wasn't distracted by Ruby as much. I was still looking at Oswald's face, and I knew I was going to shoot before whoever that was blocked my view."

Mr. Jackson was using a Nikon S3 with a wide-angle 35 mm lens. Mr. Beers was using a Mamiyaflex camera with a 65 mm lens.

More than anything, Mr. Jackson says, timing was paramount: 1963 technology required the use of strobe lights, which took up to five seconds to recycle each time the shutter snapped. Motor-driven cameras, which advance the frames rapidly, existed in 1963, says Mr. Jackson, but no one in the basement was using one. Amid the bedlam, Mr. Jackson had no idea what he had.

The basement events had left him sickened, adding to the horror of the president being murdered in Mr. Jackson's hometown. "But I had a job to do," he says. And so did his crosstown rival.

As soon as he could, Mr. Beers returned to the *News'* darkroom. Seeing the negative for the first time, Mr. Beers' supervisor was ecstatic.

"My God!" Mr. Dillard said. "You've just won us the Pulitzer Prize!"

But Mr. Jackson's darkroom discovery was even more dramatic.

Felix McKnight, co-publisher and editor of the *Times Herald*, says Mr. Jackson's negative was overwhelming. "I had been a Pulitzer juror three times," says Mr. McKnight, now 91. He shouted to the troops: "We've got a winner here! We're gonna win one!"

When *The News* began hitting porches at dawn the next day, Mr. Beers' photograph ate up most of the front page.

It was and is a great picture, showing Ruby emerging from the shadows with gun fully extended. But the look on Oswald's face – sullen, indifferent, even bored – and that of the officers leading him in handcuffs indicates none of them has even seen Ruby, much less sensed the impending chaos.

"Seeing Jack's picture made me a little sad," says Mr. McKnight, who had once worked at *The News* and supervised Mr. Beers. "Jack was a fine young man and a very good photographer, and I knew that would be a bitter defeat. It was like losing a horse race by a nose. I understood the pangs of his disappointment, and it was damn narrow."

But in the *Times Herald* newsroom, no one else felt even a twinge of sadness. *News* columnist Blackie Sherrod, who in 1963 was lead sports columnist and sports editor at the *Times Herald*, was helping out the city desk in the assassination's aftermath. It was Mr. Sherrod who made the decision to run Mr. Jackson's photograph the full eight columns.

Taken six-tenths of a second later, Mr. Jackson's is similar to Mr. Beers' but with a far more arresting image: It shows Ruby aiming the gun at Oswald, whose body has just been invaded by the bullet, as smoke rings rise from his abdomen to his eyes. As Oswald grimaces in pain, the police detectives' faces are etched in sheer terror.

Now a 61-year-old photographer for the *Washington Post*, Frank Johnston reflects on his own moment in the basement by trumpeting Mr. Jackson's photograph as a classic for the ages. More than any other image, he says, it captures the shock and horror of Dallas' darkest weekend.

"The facial expressions, the body language of everyone in that photograph is just incredible," says Mr. Johnston. "I looked at that photograph the first time and was startled by it, it had so much impact."

Mystery unraveled

Nearly 40 years later, the impact is still being felt, with the how and why of what happened in the basement still being examined. Why did Mr. Beers shoot first? Was Mr. Jackson responding only to Mr. Beers' flash, as *Morning News* rivals still insist? Videotape and news footage from six other cameras have unraveled the mystery.

By measuring the time between flashes of the strobes, Gary Mack, curator of The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, has undertaken a frame-by-frame analysis that shows Mr. Johnston of UPI taking the first picture. In his, Oswald is being escorted by police, with Ruby not yet in the frame. Nine-tenths of a second later, Mr. Beers took his picture, followed by Mr. Jackson, six-tenths of a second after that.

"The footage shows that Bob and everyone else appear to be reacting only to Ruby's movement," says Mr. Mack. "Had he reacted to Beers' flash, [Mr. Jackson] would have taken his picture even later. At the same time, he isn't reacting to gunfire either. He's reacting only to movement, as everyone else was."

Mr. Johnston remembers that, right after the shooting, "Bob said, 'I didn't get it – I think I got blocked.' " But later that day, he called Mr. Jackson, who had just gotten out of the darkroom.

"When he told me he had it, I said, 'Bob, that's fantastic!' I was happy for him. I'm *still* happy for him," says Mr. Johnston. "My gosh, it's an elbow away sometimes. I felt really good for him. And don't let anyone tell you Bob wasn't a good shooter. He was a very good shooter."

Never quite the same

From that moment on, Mr. Beers "never had as much confidence in himself," says his daughter, who describes him as "feeling let down. Not by anybody in particular. More by fate, I guess. He always felt like, 'Why have I had to struggle so hard to finally get *the* picture and then not get it?' "

Eamon Kennedy, who worked at the *Times Herald* in 1963, remembers Mr. Beers as being "bitterly disappointed ... that he didn't get more recognition. But Bob's is clearly the better picture. Things like that happen in our business, and you've got to deal with them."

Mr. Jackson, he says, picked a "perfect" position, "and you have to give him credit for that."

But *News* rivals insist otherwise, saying Mr. Jackson's was 99 percent blessing, Mr. Beers' 99 percent curse.

"Just dumb-ass luck," says Joe Laird, a retired *News* photographer.

The newspaper war was so intense in those days that "if Beers' picture had come out crappy and Jackson's had hit page one, our editors would have cut their wrists in the city room," says Mr. Laird. "They wouldn't have ever survived that. Obviously, Jackson's is judged to be better by all standards, and that was a shame, because we didn't strike out."

Felix McKnight agrees. Had he been a Pulitzer juror, "I would have been tempted to give a double award," he says. "Both are once-in-a-lifetime photographs."

But Mr. Beers never felt redeemed. He died with a "depression that went untreated," says Ms. Williams, who lost her mother, Mr. Beers' widow, in late 2000.

And why was he depressed? "In my mind," she says, "it's all due to that picture."

The once-eager competitor became a man with "no drive," she says. Instead of photography being the passion it always was, it quickly became "just a job." A tendency toward heart problems grew worse by the year.

"He wanted to hunt and fish a lot more than he wanted to do his job," she says, "and it was never that way before."

Mr. Laird puts it more bluntly: "Jack somehow felt that God had cheated him."

Whatever the cause, in the years after that November, "He always had a little inferiority complex," says Mr. Laird. "He lived high. He ate the wrong things, and he chain-smoked."

Clint Grant, another former co-worker, says Mr. Beers' temper got worse. Mr. Jackson's picture was sought after by "*Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, all the big magazines. And he made an awful lot of money."

"Poor old Jack just had to sit back and take it, never fully comprehending, I suppose, that it was merely the difference in six-tenths of a second, and there was nothing he could do about it."

Mr. Beers "deserves more credit than was ever given to him for a picture many forgot long ago," says Shelly Katz, former contributing photographer to *Time* magazine. "Jack Beers was this great craftsman who took his job so seriously. This was his way of life. He truly was a photojournalist."

Proof's in the Pulitzer

But Mr. Jackson's is the name on the Pulitzer, "and regardless of what anyone says about Bob being lucky, the fact of the matter is, he deserves the credit," says Mr. Katz. "He made the shot, period, and you can't take it away from him. The proof is in the picture."

For a while, Bob Jackson got to revel in his newfound celebrity. But after his picture was published, he found himself being judged by a harsher standard. Every picture he took was measured against journalism's ultimate prize.

"I try not to let it bother me," he says with a shrug.

He left the *Times Herald* for *The Denver Post* in 1968 but returned a year later. He was divorced in 1972 and soon became a full-time society photographer. He moved to Colorado in 1980 and continues to work 10 hours a week for *The Gazette* in Colorado Springs.

Smooth, socially graceful and looking younger than his 68 years, he lives with his second wife in a mountain hideaway in Manitou Springs, Colo., in the shadow of Pike's Peak. Snow-capped hills are as close as the window, as are the deer feasting on the lawn. His fascination with cars has continued. In addition to the Ace, he has owned three Jaguars, five Porsches and a Lotus.

In his living room, he can peer over one shoulder and see a blow-up of Oswald's murder, then go to the basement and see one more – plus a parody of his prize-winning picture, orchestrated by *Times Herald* staffers when he left the paper in 1974.

He estimates having made "tens of thousands of dollars" off the reprint rights, which the *Times Herald* gave him almost immediately. He charges publications anywhere from \$250 to \$2,500 to print the picture, processed from the original negative. He has a deal with the Fahey/Klein Gallery in Los Angeles, which charges \$1,500 for individual numbered prints. Mr. Jackson notes that No. 7 was bought by rock star Elton John.

There's even a doctored Internet version, which shows Ruby playing an electric guitar,

Oswald holding a microphone and the police detective cuffed to his wrist playing a keyboard. Mr. Jackson and the graphic artist who designed it "share the profits, and that's been going on four to five years," says Mr. Jackson, \$3,000 richer from that version.

He's unaware of any bad feelings that linger in the Beers family.

"I feel pretty bad if that's true," he says.

He came to Dallas in February for the opening night of a new exhibit at The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza.

His photograph, along with 122 other Pulitzer Prize-winning images, is on display through November.

"I was looking forward to meeting the daughter at the exhibit opening," he says. "But she never showed."

Ms. Williams had been invited. In the end, she says, she had to say no.

"I saw Mr. Jackson on the news," says Ms. Williams, as the tears start to fall, "and I just lost it. All I could think about was Dad, how hard he worked ... what might have been. I wish it could have been the two of 'em side by side, sharing the glory together.

"But that's the history of a picture. And only one usually counts."

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