

Did Carl Weiss shoot Huey Long?



If you are adult living in Louisiana, no doubt you are familiar with who Dr. Carl Austin Weiss is. He is the person who allegedly shot Huey P. Long in the Louisiana State Capitol on the night of September 8, 1935. This event has received more publicity than probably in other event in Louisiana history. Many books, television documentaries and articles have been written and produced related to this subject. I became involved with this matter in the early 1980's when I did research for Ed Reed for the book he was writing about Huey Long which he titled "Requiem for a Kingfish". The book was published and contained two revelations that both Reed and I felt would significantly change the public perception of who actually shot Huey Long. These items are the first and second items of the evidentiary summary I have prepared over the years which, I feel, presents overwhelming evidence that Weiss did not shoot Huey Long. The summary is as follows:

1. Merle Welsh interview As the mortician at Rabenhorst Funeral Home where Long's body was brought, he described in detail how Dr. Clarence Lorio removed a large caliber bullet from Long's body at the funeral home. He was given the bullet by Lorio and he, in turn, gave it to his assistant, Jack Umbehagen. Umbehagen's relatives confirmed that he had a

large caliber spent bullet on his watch chain for years describing it as the bullet that killed Huey Long. Weiss's gun was a rather small 32 caliber.

2. Coleman Vidrine Jr interview He explained how his father told him that Dr Arthur Vidrine, his uncle, had given his father, Coleman Sr. a 38 caliber spent bullet for safekeeping, telling him that this was the bullet removed from Long's body during surgery. Arthur's instructions to Coleman Sr. were to keep the bullet in a safe place and tell no one about it, obviously because it was a different caliber than Weiss' gun. This was corroborated by J. C. Broussard a south Louisiana restaurant owner and friend of Arthur Vidrine. Broussard told T. Harry Williams during his research for his Pulitzer Prize winning book "Huey Long" that Vidrine confirmed to him that Long had two bullets in him, one being a 38 cal. Dr Vidrine also confirmed the same story to Col Francis Grevemberg's father.

3. The recollection of Tom Ed Weiss, Carl's brother about the events he experienced the night of the Long shooting. His explanation was that after he heard about the shooting, he went to the State Capitol and located Carl's automobile which was locked. He went to his home to find the spare key and when he returned to the capitol, the automobile was moved, unlocked and ransacked. The glove compartment where Weiss kept his pistol was open and the pistol was gone.

4. The true details on the Long shooting from some of the state police officers who were at the shooting that were inadvertently disclosed to Francis Grevemberg during a long automobile trip after a raid. Grevemberg was Superintendent of state police at that time. These details included the accidental shooting of Long by his bodyguards, introducing a throw down gun which was later replaced by Weiss's own gun, and a gathering of all of witnesses by Superintendent L. F. Guerre later to admonish them to close ranks in support of a Weiss shooting. This version was corroborated by Morris Soileau a barber, whose shop was close the state police headquarters and who heard this same story for those state police troopers who were present at the Long shooting.

5. The testimony of the two emergency room nurses at the hospital, who said that Long explained that the cut on his lip was caused by Weiss hitting him. They also related that Long asked his bodyguards "who was that 'sob' who hit me?" Not who shot him but who hit him which is highly probative that Long knew that Weiss did not shoot him. It would be inconceivable to believe that Weiss struck Long and five bodyguards standing very close would allow Weiss time to draw a gun and shoot Long after he hit him.

6. Weiss confronted Long on three separate occasions. The shooting incident occurring on the third occasion. If Weiss had gone to the Capitol intending to shoot Long, it makes no sense that he would have passed up two earlier occasions to shoot him, not knowing if he would have been presented with additional occasions later.

7. Judge Fournet's testimony that he saw Weiss shoot Long. This has been heavily relied on for many years as the key evidence supportive of Weiss shooting Long. His declaration took place several days after the shooting and according to the Grevemberg statement, after General L. F. Guerre brought all of those present at the shooting into a gathering and directed them under extreme repercussions not to break ranks against the version of Weiss shooting Long that Guerre orchestrated. Fournet recanted to at least five different individuals that he lied about what he said he saw but refused to go public with his recantation.

8. Stories about the Long shooting told to others by Vernon McGee a reporter at the scene who witnessed a bodyguard accidentally shoot Long. He and all the other reporters were later subjected to extreme intimidation by General Guerre not to report the facts but only that Weiss shot Long. Philip Maranto also told his story of being at the shooting to a Port Allen newspaper. His story was that a bodyguard accidentally shot Long in the back. Federal Judge Lansing Mitchell who was General Guerre's attorney acknowledged that Guerre admitted to him that the Weiss gun was removed from his car after the shooting.

Physical Evidence

The official version of the shooting describing the two wounds in Long's body as wounds of entry and exit from a single shot from Weiss's gun. Although there were many law enforcement officers who investigated the scene for some time, no .32 caliber bullet was ever found even though the scene was a closed, pristine, marble hallway. There is no record of anyone even looking for a .32 caliber bullet because it is obvious that no one at the scene saw anything that would have caused them to look for one. Had that been the case, there is little doubt that the order would have come down from the top that no one was to leave the building until that bullet was found. Additionally, the .32 caliber pistol round at about 70 grains projectile weight and approximately 900 feet per second muzzle velocity is the slowest least penetrating of all the handgun rounds and very unlikely to cause a pass-through penetration in the upper torso of a large adult male.

I've seen narratives defending the state's position that assert that the state employees involved at the time would not be so calloused as to frame Carl Weiss for shooting Long after Weiss's death. Apparently, these same employees were sufficiently calloused to shoot Weiss at close range over seventy times which required them to reload their weapons multiple times and continue shooting into Weiss's lifeless body. The number of shots to Weiss's body was confirmed by Dr James Starrs when he performed an autopsy on Weiss's body in the late 1980's.

In my opinion, any one of these items standing alone would be enough to convince an objective person that Carl Austin Weiss did not shoot Huey Long and all taken in total would produce that conclusion beyond any reasonable doubt. The only state investigation made since the shooting was after the fiftieth anniversary of the shooting where many of the factors presented above had been revealed and received extensive publicity. Ironically the Louisiana State Police conducted its own one-man investigation which concluded that Carl Austin Weiss was indeed the shooter and Long's bodyguards simply responded by shooting the man who shot Long. This investigator was aware at the time of his investigation of each and every one the factors listed above but chose not to even consider any one of them. I seemed to be the only one to notice that the Louisiana State Police saw no conflict of interest in deciding to investigate the Long shooting and the criminal conspiracy cover up of its own former employees.

Additional analogies and conclusions about the Long shooting can be made as follows:

Grevemberg's attempt to publicly disclose the explanation of the shooting he overheard from those involved. His statement details that after he confronted the bodyguards about going public with their inadvertent admissions to him, they reminded him that they were sworn to secrecy years ago by General Guerre and if forced to would deny they ever made those statements. He ultimately dropped his attempt to go public after his legal advisor convinced him that it would not be successful, and he would probably lose his job if he proceeded with it.

T Harry Williams' book about Huey Long was somewhat of an enigma when it came to the Long shooting. Although it mostly ignored the shooting itself, Williams remained adamant that Weiss shot Long. I've explored that scenario and have come to the same conclusions about it. It is fairly common knowledge that the Long family sought out Williams to write the "defining book" about Huey Long. Williams had the right credentials to do the necessary research and pen the type of work that the Long family wanted. It is also common knowledge that the Long family held fast to the

belief that Carl Austin Weiss, and not the bodyguards, shot Long. I am not certain if the Long family or Williams ever acknowledged it, but it is also a common belief that they paid Williams a handsome sum to undertake this endeavor. That would make perfect sense since there was no guarantee such a book would be the financial success it ultimately proved to be and the amount of time Williams spent on this project was staggering. This being the case, it came as no surprise that Williams toed the Long family line about Weiss shooting Long. This is particularly interesting because of the acknowledgement that J. C. Broussard made to Williams that never was included in the book. Because this information came from such a reliable source and was in stark contrast to what had been published and accepted about the shooting, it should have given Williams considerable pause to reconsider his position, which he never did. I found this information buried in Williams' research material he had accumulated and donated to the LSU library. This material covered numerous boxes and had originally been designated by Williams not to be made available for inspection until years after his death. When I reviewed this material in the early 1980's, I was informed by the curator that I was the only person who had ever examined it and I mean all of it which took over two weeks. The Broussard memo was only a partial page and I suspect probably either forgotten by Williams or was so insignificant in volume to the total research package that he felt no one would come across it or make an issue of it.

The question of truths versus untruths in the shooting of Huey Long can be postulated as follows: If Weiss shot Long all of the following lied: Merle Welsh, Jack Umbehagen, Coleman Vidrine, Tom Ed Weiss, two emergency room nurses, Francis Grevemberg, Francis Grevemberg's father, J. C. Broussard, Morris Solieau, Vernon McGee, Phillip Maranto, and Judge Lansing Mitchell. If Weiss did not shoot Long, Judge Fournet, General Guerre, and the bodyguards lied. Fournet acknowledged to five separate individuals that he lied, General Guerre told his attorney Judge Mitchell he lied and the bodyguards acknowledged to Francis Grevemberg and Morris Solieau that they lied.

The orderly way that these nine factors dove tail and corroborate each other. Some of the facts coming from different sources agree with each other in amazing detail, even though the sources never knew or had occasion to discuss these events together. Examples of this are the story from the bodyguards told both to Francis Grevemberg and Morris Solieau and what Guerre told to his attorney and the bodyguards telling Grevemberg the same story about Weiss's gun which was also corroborated to some extent by Tom Ed Weiss. Additionally, Merle Welsh revealing the removal of the large caliber bullet and Coleman Vidrine acknowledging the 38 caliber bullet which were disclosed to T Harry Williams by J. C. Broussard and by

Francis Grevemberg's father. And finally, the same story about Long being accidentally shot by his bodyguards which was told by both Vernon McGee, a reporter present at the shooting and Phillip Maranto, a Long groupie who was also present.

Since my first involvement with the research for Ed Reed's book, I have made quite a few attempts to get public official recognition by the State of Louisiana acknowledging that Carl Weiss did not shoot Huey Long. In a letter to the editor published by the Baton Rouge Advocate, I stated "it seems that the perpetuation of the Long shooting as a mystery is a myth that the press and to some extent, even our elected officials seem to want to hang on to as a mystery because it is more interesting to keep the mystery going than to accept closure by applying the existing facts of the case. These facts, I submit, conclusively prove that Carl Austin Weiss did not shoot Huey Long. Hanging on to the mystery may have some merit in promoting the mystique of Louisiana but does not overcome the agony suffered by the Weiss family for this injustice." Where I have been able to have any dialog with state officials on this matter. I have generally been met with the posture of "that's our story and we're sticking to it and we have the last word." None of my efforts, thus far, have been successful.

Ernest A. Gremillion
retired criminal investigator
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

ADDENDUM: STATEMENT BY COL. FRANCIS C. GREVEMBERG

I served as Superintendent of State Police under the late Gov, Robert F. Kennon during the years 1952-1955.

As a native Louisianian, I have always had a deep interest in the late Gov. and U.S. Sen. Huey P. Long. During my tour of duty I had occasion to meet and work with many state troopers who had served during Gov. Long's statewide political career from 1928, when he was elected governor until 1935, when he died of gunshot wounds.

During my tour of duty, the principal priority of the State Police was a massive crackdown on vice in Louisiana. This included gambling, prostitution and the narcotics traffic, which was then beginning to gain a foothold in our state.

In Oct. 1952 I decided to raid a small casino in north Louisiana. I selected four troopers to accompany me in my car. About 40 minutes into the drive, two of the three troopers seated in the back seat began reminiscing about their years on the force. Two of the men said they were hoping to make 30 years before retiring.

I asked them when they first joined the force. One said the year the State Police was organized as a highway patrol. The other said he had joined a year later. I said, "You are both more than half-way. You don't have much longer to wait."

They agreed and then resumed reminiscing.

They told a number of anecdotes about Gov. Long when he served from 1928 to 1932. They recalled how he used the State Police. For example, when he decided to fire a department head, he would send in a squad of troopers the night before. The department would be sealed off until the troopers had searched every file to make sure there was no piece of evidence in the files that would tend to incriminate him. After the search, Long proceeded to fire the department head.

I said nothing while they were talking. I just listened.

They continued to talk and turned to the subject of the events of Sept. 8, 1935, when Gov. Long was shot in the state capitol. The following is my recollection of what they said. I have combined the comments of both troopers into one narrative.

The troopers were walking behind Sen. Long and two of his bodyguards, Joe Messina and Murphy Roden. They were walking on either side of him. The group was well into the hallway when a man who was standing against the side of the wall opposite the governor's office started shouting at the senator and tried to punch him in the face.

Murphy Roden grabbed the man and threw him to the floor. Almost immediately, Roden began firing at the man.

As the first bullets entered the fallen man's body, he shuddered and stretched out into a prone position against the junction of the marble floor and the marble wall. The bullets were piercing his body, striking the marble floor and ricocheting after passing through the corpse. The bullets would bounce all around the hall until, all their energy spent, they would fall to the floor.

Murphy had fired about four shots when Joe Messina opened fire.

Joe Messina's last two shots hit the marble wall, then ricocheted down through the man's body, struck the marble floor and then ricocheted up from the floor, hitting the senator in the groin. Other bodyguards opened fire.

Both Messina and Roden emptied their 38 caliber Smith and Wesson pistols.

Soon, Pandemonium broke out in the hall. Everyone was trying to escape the ricocheting bullets and there was a lot of pushing and shoving taking place as people tried to get out of the way. It is possible that all 12 bullets didn't go through the fallen man's body because the bodyguards might have been pushed while firing. This could be why Joe Messina's last two shots hit the wall and ricocheted off the floor, striking Sen. Long.

After the firing stopped, the body was searched. Papers on the body indicated that it was Carl Austin Weiss, a Baton Rouge ear, nose and throat physician. They continued searching the body for a weapon.

They found nothing.

One of the troopers in the car with me said the night before, he was in a State Police group which had raided a barroom in Baton Rouge frequented by Negroes. When the lawmen entered, a large dice game was in progress. As soon as the raiding party shouted out that they were the State Police and it was a raid, the lights went out.

When the lights came back on, there were several switchblade knives and several revolvers on the floor. The trooper telling the story said he liked one of the revolvers because it was a .25 caliber that he thought would be nice for his wife. He explained that it was in fairly good condition but it lacked a firing pin and thus it couldn't be fired. Also, there was no ammunition in the revolver.

He planned to take the revolver to a gunsmith to have it repaired and he was still carrying it on his person Sunday night, after the altercation in the state capitol. When it was determined that Dr. Weiss had no weapon on him, he offered the revolver as a "plant" or a "throwdown" to prove that the doctor actually was armed. The gun was placed in Weiss' hand.

All this happened in the corridor outside the governor's office. Sen. Long had been taken to the hospital. The trooper said that Joe Messina was very distraught and kept repeating, over and over, "I think my last two rounds hit him." The trooper telling the story said he helped pick up the spent cartridges and empty casings found.

I interrupted his narrative to ask, "Are you sure there were no other bullets or casings that somebody other than you might have found?"

He told me "no," adding that the items picked up from the floor constituted positive proof that the bodyguards killed both Dr. Weiss and Sen. Long.

According to the trooper, when Gen. Louis Guerre, head of the Criminal Bureau of Identification and Investigation, found out that Sen. Long had been shot with .38 caliber bullets, he returned the .25 caliber pistol that had been placed in Weiss' hand, saying that the gun was too small. He replaced the smaller pistol with a .32 caliber.

The trooper said that Gen. Guerre was emphatic that none of the bodyguards say anything about what had happened because the two bodyguards in question, Messina and Roden, could be charged with gross misconduct and even murder.

I asked the storyteller if perhaps Gen. Guerre was trying to establish Huey Long as a martyr, in the event he should die?

He told me no. He said it was simply a case of trying to protect the bodyguards who were, in turn, simply trying to protect the senator.

And then I made a mistake. I said, "It appears to me that all of the actions following the shooting were a conspiracy to cover-up the accidental death of Sen. Long and the killing of Dr. Weiss."

After I made that unfortunate statement, the bodyguards became very quiet.

The following day, I had the State Police lawyer on hand and I asked several of the troopers to repeat the story they had told me the previous day. They denied that they had ever told me such a story. I called in the other troopers and they backed up what the others had said.

Later, my bodyguard and driver told me that he was sorry but he had to deny that he had heard these troopers tell that story about how Sen. Long was killed. He said it has been an unwritten law among the troopers that the Long and Weiss killings were never to be discussed. During my tenure as Supt. of State Police I had occasion to talk with troopers who were on the force at the time of the incident. To a man, they maintained that, while they had no personal knowledge of what took place, the stories that went around the State Police were the same as I had described.

My father was Supt. of Buildings and Grounds for the State of Louisiana. Part of his responsibility was the maintenance of the state capitol. He had been friends since World War I with Dr. Arthur Vidrine, the surgeon who operated on Sen. Long. Dr. Vidrine told my father that he removed two .38 caliber bullets from the senator's body. He was of the opinion that Sen. Long was killed by his own bodyguards, since he understood that Dr. Weiss was carrying a .32 caliber pistol.

Actually, Dr. Weiss carried no firearm.

After the troopers refused to admit that they had told me the story or that they had heard it told to me, I called Wilburn Lunn. Wilburn was executive counsel to Gov. Kennon and was a friend of long standing. He and I had met in North Africa during World War II. He was a full colonel and I was a lieutenant colonel. Col. Lunn was instrumental in having Gov. Kennon appoint me to the position of Supt. of State Police.

Col. Lunn asked me to meet him in the governor's office as soon as possible. I immediately left my office to see him.

I told him the complete story of my encounter with the bodyguards.

He said it didn't surprise him because he had heard the same story told by different individuals. I told Col. Lunn that I needed his help to get the legislature to create a committee with full powers of subpoenas to investigate the death of Sen. Long. I told him that I wanted to question, under oath, the troopers who had told me the story, as well as anyone who was in the state capitol corridor when Sen. Long was shot.

I told him that I wanted to have Dr. Vidrine and ask him about the story that he told my father, namely that he removed two .38 caliber bullets from Sen. Long's body. I also told him I would like to have my father testify about the conversation he had with Dr. Vidrine.

I told him that, in my judgment, this was the only way we could get these people to testify truthfully--if they were under oath and subject to the state's perjury laws.

Col. Lunn told me, "Francis, you're on the right track but your train is pulling into the wrong station."

He proceeded to tell me the uphill battle I was facing.

First, he explained, I would be facing a legislature whose membership was dominated by Long sympathizers. He continued, saying that the number of gambling raids I had conducted throughout the state had alienated local officials. Despite the prohibition against gambling in the state constitution, this vice was rampant and local officials in the state were taking bribes to allow it to continue. Col. Lunn said that legislators from these parishes would be influenced by local officials who would never be in favor of anything I proposed.

I tried to explain to Col. Lunn that I was only following the mandate of the constitution and that I always contacted local officials before conducting any raids so that they could clean up their own house by closing down illegal activities.

He interrupted me, saying, "I know all this, Francis but you don't have a chance of accomplishing what you want to do. My advice to you is to forget it because I don't believe you have a prayer."

Reluctantly, I followed his advice. I dropped the matter, considering it something that was beyond my capability to do anything about.

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