

CONTACT PROFILE**Document's Author:** Douglas Home/ARRB**Date Created:** 09/26/96**Contact Description**

Contact Name: John VanHoesen
Company:
Title: Former Gawler's Employee
Category: Witnesses/Consultants
Street Address:

Phone Number:
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E-mail Address:
HSCA Letter Sent:

Additional Information

Mr. VanHoesen was a member of the Gawler's funeral home embalming team of Hagan, Stroble, Robinson and VanHoesen which embalmed President Kennedy's body and prepared it for burial at Bethesda Naval Hospital.

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MEETING REPORT



Document's Author: Douglas Horne/ARRB Date Created: 09/26/96

Meeting Logistics

Date: 09/25/96
Agecny Name: Witnesses/Consultants
Attendees: Jeremy Gunn, Doug Horne, John VanHoesen
Topic: Interview of John VanHoesen

Summary of the Meeting

Jeremy Gunn and Doug Horne traveled to Cobb Island, Maryland on 9/25/96 to interview John VanHoesen at his home. Although Mr. VanHoesen was most cordial, his memory of the events of November, 1963 was generally not sharp and was perhaps the least firm, and least detailed, of any of the medical witnesses ARRB has interviewed.

Mr. VanHoesen (who pronounces his own name "VanHeusen") stated that he worked for Gawler's Funeral Home from June 1950-1987, when he retired at the age of 62 to care for his ailing wife. He described his duties at Gawler's in 1963 as those of a "service man," meaning that although he would assist with embalming when required, his primary duties were to ensure that the bodies of the deceased were properly dressed prior to funerals, and that details of each funeral service were arranged as desired by the customer.

He first heard about the assassination of President Kennedy on television, and went home to eat his dinner. At the time he went home to eat he suspected he would be involved with the President's funeral preparations, but he was not sure. He said that only when he came back to work at about 6 P.M. on November 22, 1963, did he realize that Gawler's had been officially tasked to prepare President Kennedy for burial. He said that he went to Bethesda Naval Hospital in a vehicle with Joe Gawler, and that they carried part of the portable embalming equipment with them in their vehicle. When asked whether Tom Robinson was in his vehicle, he said he did not think so. He verified that part of the portable equipment was in another vehicle. He said that he would estimate he and Joe Gawler arrived at Bethesda about 7:30 P.M. on November 22nd. He described a scene of confusion in and around the morgue with many people running around, and likened it to a "Chinese fire drill." He said that there were too many people in the morgue during the autopsy, and that access to the morgue seemed to him to be virtually unrestricted; he repeated this observation twice more during the interview, and each time stated that in this respect (overcrowding, and easy access) it was unlike any other autopsy he ever attended. Initially, upon arrival, he said that he and Mr. Gawler waited in the anteroom where the cold boxes were, but that after a wait they were admitted into the morgue proper. He assumed that the reason he and Mr. Gawler had to wait in the anteroom (where the chill boxes were) was because initially, no one knew who they were, or why they were there. He said that there were three tiers of benches in the morgue gallery, and that he sat on the back bench in the gallery. When asked whether he sat with Tom Robinson, he said that he did not think so.

Mr. VanHoesen said that he and Joe Gawler went into the morgue proper around 8:00, before any of the normal autopsy procedures had begun. When specifically asked whether any incisions had been made yet, he said "no." He said that initially, several people were crowded around the autopsy table examining the body, and in this connection he vaguely recalled discussions regarding whether or not a full autopsy was really necessary. He said he could not recall the appearance of President Kennedy's head wounds at the beginning of the autopsy, and had a hard time seeing what was happening during the course of the autopsy, because of the number of people crowded around the table directly involved in the autopsy procedures, but that he was present when the autopsy proper (incisions) actually began.

Mr. VanHoesen independently recalled that the President's body had arrived in a black, zippered,

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"plastic pouch" inside a casket. Initially, when he recounted this memory, he said he actually saw the President's body removed from this black, plastic pouch and placed on the autopsy table. During subsequent questioning about this recollection, he confirmed that what he saw was a body bag, and that it was made of plastic, not cloth. Upon further discussion, he said he was not sure whether he actually saw the body removed from the body bag, or saw the body on the table immediately after it had been removed; in any case, he was firm about his recollection of seeing a black, zippered body bag inside the President's casket, and was of the definite opinion that President Kennedy's body had been inside the body bag. When asked whether the body was nude when removed, or wrapped in sheets, he said he thought it was wrapped in sheets, or partially wrapped in sheets, but was much less sure of this recollection than he was of the presence of a black body bag, which he seemed to confidently recall.

Mr. VanHoesen independently recalled that some lugs were broken on one of the handles of the President's casket.

When asked what he recalled about the autopsy beyond the President's wrappings and the condition of the casket, he could recall very little. When asked, he had a vague recollection of photography during the autopsy, but could not recall why he remembered photography, nor any details such as how many photographers, types of photos taken, types of cameras, or number of photos taken. He could not remember anything about use of probes during the autopsy, or about the condition of the President's head, or size and location of the head wounds prior to the commencement of autopsy incisions or procedures, nor could he remember anything about statements made or conclusions reached by the autopsy pathologists. He could remember no details about autopsy procedures.

He recalled that the Gawler's team (Mr. Hagan, Mr. Stroble, Mr. Robinson, and himself) began its work about midnight. He could not remember anything about the condition of the President's head at the beginning of the embalming process, nor could he remember anything, one way or another, about any wounds on the back (posterior) of the President's body; in response to this question, he said, "I'm not sure we ever turned the body over." He could not remember, one way or another, whether photographs were taken during the embalming and reconstruction process. When asked what his role was during the embalming process, Mr. VanHoesen said that he worked on the body cavity, and on the legs, and that he did not work on anything above the neck. He said that work on the body cavity included removal of all organs from the thoracic and abdominal cavity, preserving them in a bucket of formaldehyde, placing them in a plastic bag, and returning them to the body cavity inside plastic. He said that he stitched up the body cavity following completion of this process. He said that Mr. Stroble (who is now deceased) performed the reconstruction of the President's head, not him. Mr. VanHoesen described Mr. Hagan as the Services Manager, described himself as the assistant Services Manager, described Tom Robinson as an Arrangements Man, and described Mr. Ed Stroble as a full-time embalmer. The persons who directly participated in embalming, reconstruction, and preparation for burial ("hands on" participation) were Stroble, Robinson and himself.

When asked to recall the condition of the President's head at the completion of the embalming and reconstruction process, Mr. VanHoesen recalled that there was a section of material missing from the skull--either scalp, or bone, but he was not sure which was missing (i.e., scalp or bone) this many years later. He described the size and location of the missing skull material as follows: it was roughly the size of a small orange (estimated by gesturing with his hands) in the centerline of the back of the head, and its location was in the upper posterior part of the skull (demonstrated by placing his right hand on the upper back portion of his head, just at, or perhaps just below, the cowlick area). He independently recalled one of the doctors at Bethesda bringing back what he described as a sheet of plastic for the Gawler's team to use in covering the area of missing material to prevent leakage.

At the conclusion of the embalming process, the President's body was wrapped in plastic, and then dressed in clothes which had been brought to the morgue from elsewhere. He said that the damaged area in the back of the President's head was not visible as the President lay supine in the casket, and that it was covered by the pillow which the President's head was resting on.

As the entourage left Bethesda, he said he and Joe Gawler were in the lead car, and the hearse which the President's (new) casket (provided by Gawler's) was in followed his car all the way to the White House. He said the pace was very slow and stately (the speed of a walking horse, he was told), and that there were policemen on every corner.

Mr. VanHoesen's most vivid recollections seemed to be of opening the casket in the East Room of the

White House so that Jacqueline Kennedy could briefly view the body. He said he recalled that she came back down the stairs after the casket was in place on the bier in the East Room, and that he was quite surprised that she was still wearing the same pink suit she had worn during the assassination. He said he personally opened the casket, and it was quickly closed after a brief viewing. Persons he recalled as present during this viewing included Mrs. Kennedy, Joe Gawler, himself, "some artist (meaning commercial artist--he said he was told by someone else that this person was Andy Warhol)," and possibly a priest. When asked whether Robert Kennedy was present during this viewing, he said "no." When asked whether there was any bandage present on President Kennedy's head during embalming, or during this viewing, he said "no." When asked whether there was any locking device on the casket, he said there was not.

Mr. VanHoesen's final recollection was that Gawler's loaned Mrs. Kennedy the veil which she wore during the funeral.

The Gawler's business documents previously provided by Joe Hagan were reviewed. Mr. VanHoesen was asked what the meaning was of the term "shipping casket," which appears on the so-called "first call" sheet, and he said that that simply meant whatever casket the body was transported from Dallas in.

Mr. VanHoesen did not have any documents to turn over to the Review Board. END