

# JFK files: Could Knoxville man have been mystery caller?

Rachel Ohm, USA TODAY NETWORK - Tennessee Published 10:55 p.m. ET Oct. 27, 2017 | Updated 12:24 a.m. ET Oct. 28, 2017



(Photo: News Sentinel)

The release this week of 2,800 classified documents related to the assassination of John F. Kennedy is raising questions about what really happened - and whether a former Knoxville man by the name of John Howard Bowen was in any way connected to the infamous murder.

Bowen was the alias used by British-born Albert Alexander Osborne, who visited and lived in Knoxville in between "missionary" work in Mexico in the years leading up to Kennedy's assassination on Nov. 22, 1963.

He was the subject of an FBI investigation that revolved around a bus trip to Mexico City that Osborne took with Lee Harvey Oswald in September 1963, just months before Oswald fatally shot Kennedy in Dallas, according to archives.

Now questions have also arisen as to whether Osborne was the mystery caller who tipped off a British newspaper just minutes before the assassination.

Details of the bus trip and the FBI's investigation were described in a 1993 Knoxville News Sentinel article that raised questions about possible connections between Osborne and Oswald and any possible involvement Osborne may have had in the assassination.

Authorities have previously said that Oswald acted alone in killing Kennedy and scholars and experts have said recently that it is unlikely there will be any bombshell revelations that come out of the release of the documents.

## Is Osborne the mystery caller?

Yet one of the most tantalizing details to come out of the new release so far is a memo detailing a mystery phone call to the British newspaper the Cambridge News instructing a reporter to call the American embassy in London for "some big news" just 25 minutes before Kennedy was shot.

The newspaper reported Friday that the memo had previously been discovered by a lawyer, Michael Eddowes, who believed the anonymous caller was a British-born Soviet agent named Albert Osborne. [USA Today reported \(/story/news/world/2017/10/27/british-newspaper-got-anonymous-call-25-minutes-before-jfk-assassination/805893001/\).](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/10/27/british-newspaper-got-anonymous-call-25-minutes-before-jfk-assassination/805893001/)

**Read more:** [British newspaper got anonymous call 25 minutes before JFK assassination \(/story/news/world/2017/10/27/british-newspaper-got-anonymous-call-25-minutes-before-jfk-assassination/805893001/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/10/27/british-newspaper-got-anonymous-call-25-minutes-before-jfk-assassination/805893001/)

Jim Balloch, who wrote the 1993 News Sentinel article and has since retired from the paper, said that in his research of Osborne he never came across any suggestion that he was a Soviet agent or that he had made such a phone call.

Inspired by the anniversary of Kennedy's death in 1993, Balloch said he called the [Assassination Archives and Research Center \(http://aarclibrary.org/about-the-aarc/\)](http://aarclibrary.org/about-the-aarc/), a Maryland-based organization dedicated to preservation of information on presidential assassinations, to ask if there were any Knoxville connections to JFK's death.



John H. Bowen snapshot in News Sentinel files identifying him as former Boy's Club director in 1955. (Photo: News Sentinel)

"They knew right away (about Osborne)," Balloch said. "I just spent time digging and researching. At the time there were still a few people left in Knoxville that remembered him, but there's probably nobody now."

The story raised more questions than it answered, Balloch said, but he said he never came across anything firmly tying Osborne to the assassination.

"I've always been interested in this case," he said. "I just think it's a fascinating story and one of the great mysteries of our time. I think there's still a lot of unanswered questions, even if Oswald did act alone."

## Osborne was on the run from FBI in 1964

According to Balloch's research, Osborne spent months eluding the FBI following Kennedy's death, telling friends in Knoxville that the agency was "following, hounding and harassing" him all over the country.

At the time of his death in 1966, Osborne told the director of a San Antonio mission center, Rev. Lyman Erickson, that he traveled with Oswald and was later questioned about it by the FBI.



**Albert Osborne, alias John Howard Bowen, in 1964 FBI photo. (Photo: News Sentinel files)**

"His words to me were, 'I traveled to Mexico with Lee Harvey Oswald, and I was called in and questioned about it,' " Erickson told Balloch in 1993. "Not, 'I just happened to sit next to Oswald,' but 'I traveled with Oswald.' I remember that very clearly because those words caused me to start to wonder a little about who he really was. But I didn't press him on it, and he never said anything more about it."

Osborne had previously lived in Knoxville on and off from the 1930s through the 1950s, serving as the executive director of a youth activities group before being accused of making sexual advances on young boys.

He also spent time preaching and lecturing about missionary work he had done in Mexico, though the FBI deemed him to be a con man who was "obtaining funds for pretended use on missionary work in Mexico."

Balloch's article said there was no known connection between Osborne and the JFK murder, but it also raised questions about the FBI's investigation and attempts the agency made to keep silent the news of Osborne's death in 1966.



**Albert Osborne, alias John Howard Bowen, in 1963 passport photo. (Photo: News Sentinel files)**

The agency blocked public notice of his death and told Erickson, the mission center director, to never reveal that he had accidentally discovered Osborne's dual identities via a set of false identification papers.

## The bus trip and subsequent investigation

In September 1963, Osborne and Oswald sat side-by-side in the front row of a bus from Laredo, Texas, to Mexico City.

Efforts by the FBI to investigate Osborne in the months following the assassination were thwarted by the dual identities, the origin of which remained unclear, according to the News Sentinel article.

It took the FBI until March 1964 to finally track Osborne down for questioning at the Nashville YMCA.

They got him to admit to the dual identities, but he was resilient in his claim that he did not know and had never seen Oswald in his life.

Subsequent reports dismissed him as "senile" and a "mental case," though Balloch said he always wondered why more wasn't documented on Osborne after initial instructions to FBI agents in Tennessee encouraged them to interrogate him vigorously and send only experienced agents to do the interviewing.

## Bowen barely mentioned in Warren report

The Warren Commission, established by President Lyndon B. Johnson to look into the assassination, concluded in a final report in September 1964 that Oswald acted as one gunman and no conspiracy was involved in Kennedy's death.

The report barely mentioned Osborne, according to the News Sentinel story, and states that there was "no basis" for suspecting him of being involved in the assassination.

However, a staff lawyer, W. David Slawson, on the commission wrote in a "top secret" memo of an escape Osborne made from Mexican police and called for the FBI to address the escape and why there was never a manhunt for Osborne.



**FBI photo identified as Albert Osborne, aka John Howard Bowen, from 1964 (Photo: News Sentinel files)**

As of 1993, portions of the memo in the National Archive remained blacked out.

Balloch said he didn't know if the entirety of the memo would be among the new documents to be released and if it were, what information it might contain.

His story also makes reference to other documents on Bowen that were not available and several Freedom of Information Act requests by the News Sentinel that were pending at the time of the story.

Some of those documents - if they're available now - might shed more light on Osborne and the assassination, though Balloch said he's skeptical that everything surrounding the case will ever be answered.

"He may have been just a minor character that coincidentally rode the bus, but you have to wonder," he said.

"There's a lot of questions. An unanswered question doesn't necessarily mean the answer will be sinister, it just

means it's unanswered."

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