



Caught Between Light and Shadow

Picture it: 1960's Leon County Texas. We were a backwoods sort of Mayberry with our very own Andy Griffith, but our sheriff's name was Ben Lee and then Buddy Bell. They were good men and the community trusted them. Neighbors helped neighbors and the community stood as a whole. We looked out for one another and helped those in need. Clearly Leon County and its neighbor Madison County have both changed through the decades, but back then it was a Norman Rockwell painting. I had a childhood friend named Jean Lacey, later most knew her by Jean Maness. So many fond memories flood my mind of when her father and uncle ran Lacey's Grocery store on the corner. Now back then Lacey's was in the old building on the square and it was just a tiny thing compared to what it has grown into today after Danny quit teaching and took over the store full time.

Jean had an insurance agency in Madisonville and the Wakefield's were tied in with her business. I remember I was shocked when I first learned of their business relationship. Julian Wakefield was still alive back then and wielded a lot of power, but a mile-long trail of controversy followed him. He had been a road commissioner in Leon County since the early 1970s, but he also maintained a kind of construction company that did culverts and road work. It was called "Buddy's Road Service" and he used county equipment and underbid on jobs abroad the area. He evidently had a very low overhead. When his wife took over the insurance agency

they bought in Centerville a lot of people switched from that agency. I remember my parents did immediately. So, I was surprised when Jean got involved with them in business.

The last time I saw Jean was in the mid-1990s. She confided to me that she was way over her head and had made some serious mistakes in judgment. She was too scared to tell me much, but she did tell me her business associates had been running some kind of scam or money laundering and she was afraid of being the scapegoat. She was also very afraid of Sonny Knight and insinuated that she had gotten involved with something he was a part of.

When I learned she shot herself in 1996 I knew immediately they killed her. I cannot explain how I knew, but I did, call it woman's intuition. Her family initially was suspicious but eventually went along with the death. After her brother shot himself it seemed to be more accepted in the community so no one questioned her death. The last time I saw her father he told me that Jean was so far over her head with her business dealings he accepted her death as suicide because he didn't want to stir up trouble.

Now the people who knew her in Madisonville have a slightly different perspective. First of all the rumors were she was shot twice. One time in one room and another in her bedroom. Who does that?

People who refuse to come forward told me that more than one Madisonville policeman had told them a video existed in the Madisonville PD property room that documented an officer taking a 9mm casing and placing it in a plastic bag and a .45 caliber casing into a plastic bag. Two policeman who both no longer work in Madisonville verified this to me personally. They both said Sonny Knight was behind the cover up of her death but knew nothing about who actually caused it. Everyone agrees that its very unlikely someone would shoot themselves with one caliber weapon and then crawl into another room to shoot themselves with another.

One former policeman and an elected official at the time both have told me that a grand jury had indicted Sonny Knight on child molestation charges at this time and Jean was a witness. I never knew this and no one in Centerville seemed to know about this. I have talked to numerous people in Madisonville over the years about it and all say the final weeks before her death she was talking about Sonny Knight molesting a child. I wasn't surprised about child molestation charges on Sonny Knight since everyone knew about the prior child molestation case with his second wife's family. They ended up settling out of court amidst some very bad feelings.

So, what happened with the charges? None to this day appear in any criminal background check. One former policeman and one former Madisonville employee told me they were on the county system for a few years and then dropped off. Expunged I am told.

I want to make something clear. I have no desire to open any old wounds, but her death has bothered me deeply. It just didn't sound right, and I just wanted proof of what really happened. I know when a woman makes up her mind, she can do almost anything but shooting herself twice probably doesn't qualify. I needed closure for myself, so I could let my childhood friend rest such as a police report, an autopsy or a detective convincing me the death was not a homicide. I have never managed to find any of this. The people I know either disbelieve it was a suicide or accept it at the word of another without any proof. So, I looked to Google. I actually Googled how to obtain an autopsy and followed the directions but after I sent in my request I was told that Madison County had a constructive hold on Jeans autopsy. Why would you have a hold on someone's autopsy that died 20 years ago and was ruled a suicide? Was an investigation taking place?

I contacted someone at the newspaper who gave me a contact at a larger newspaper who contacted me many months later giving me yet another person's contact information. Evidently unknown to most a journalist had requested Jeans autopsy in the past. Madison County had placed what is called a "constructive hold" on her autopsy thus no one could obtain and see it. I have to ask why? Was there some kind of an investigation? The police say no it's a clear suicide. Then they will tell you off the record about how she was shot twice with different caliber weapons and the evidence vanished. Why does no police report exist?

Almost 2 years later a journalist contacted Madison JP Lew Plotts Jr inquiring about the "constructive hold" of Jean's autopsy and requesting to know if an investigation was taking place into her death. No. No such investigation ever took place and JP Plotts withdrew the hold and released Jeans autopsy. Lew Plotts is a good man.

The final subject I wish to address is the man who allegedly murdered Jean. I have been told by more than one source that a few years ago a man from Midway who I have known of for many years has confessed to many people he was one of the ones who shot her. I am not going to write out his full name but will give out his nickname, "Little Bill." I was informed he once bragged about this to a group of men in Crockett Texas on one occasion. I have also been informed that

another was present at Jean's death who also fired a bullet into her. Gerald Willhelm. He was suspected of poisoning and giving his first wife a heart attack and then robbing her of over 200 thousand dollars. She had worked at the Coral Café in Madisonville for years. Many people were upset about this and it happened a year after Jean's death. He later married Morris Robeson's daughter and they suddenly had family members shooting themselves right and left.

Needless to say Leon County isn't the picturesque Mayberry I remember from the 1960's. Folks lock your doors, or better yet move. It's too dangerous to stay. You could ask my childhood friend Jean how dangerous it is but she apparently shot herself twice with two different weapons and isn't here to tell her story. I am so happy we moved away. I have a community I love and a police department that protects its citizens and I thank God for it every single day.

Here is an excerpt from the Autopsy that was only recently released

EVIDENCE OF INJURY:

The body exhibits evidence of injury in the form of two contact or near contact gunshot wounds of the anterior left chest, with associated exit wounds. The wounds are given a numerical designation for ease of description only. The number is not intended to represent the sequence of occurrence.

Gunshot Wound #1 is a contact or near-contact wound which exhibits a dense surrounding soot and stippling pattern. The defect is oval in nature, and measures 1 cm in its greatest dimension. The surrounding stippling pattern measures 4 cm in diameter. The defect is centered 13 cm below the sternal notch, 7 cm to the left of midline in the upper inner quadrant of the left breast.

Gunshot Wound #2 is also a contact or near-contact gunshot wound with a somewhat less dense stippling pattern. This defect measures 1 cm in its greatest dimension. The surrounding stippling and soot pattern measures 4 cm. The wound is centered 16 cm below the sternal notch, 9 cm to the left of the midline. It also is located in the upper inner quadrant of the left breast, just medial to the nipple.

Gunshot Wound #3 is a shored exit wound. This exit wound is located in the left posterolateral chest wall. It measures 1 cm in its greatest dimension. It is centered 20 cm below the posterior base of the neck, 11 cm to the left of the posterior midline surrounding abrasion due to shoring.

Gunshot Wound #4 is an exit wound that is located in the posterior lower chest wall. The defect measures 1 cm in its greatest dimension, has typically lacerated margins, and is centered 25 cm below the posterior base of the neck, 8 cm to the left of the posterior midline.

A small 2 cm area of abrasion is noted on the ulna (little finger) side of the right forearm. Considerable blood is present over the surface of the body, including the panties, the anterior chest wall, the abdominal wall of the legs, and even involves to some degree the soles of the feet, indicating that the deceased ambulated after sustaining injury.

**Note the report indicates the victim was walking or running after being shot*

The projectile that exits the body at the site wound #3 fractures the eighth rib, and then exits at the site previously described.

The projectile that exits the body at the site of exit wound #4 perforates the tenth rib, and then exits at the site previously described. The overall direction of travel of these gunshot wounds which are nearly parallel is from front to back, above-downward, and from midline to left.

**Some people said the victim was on drugs before she died*

Charles B. Odom, M.D.
Medical Examiner, 10/29/96
TOXICOLOGY:

Blood: Alcohols Acetone - negative.
Drug Screen - negative.

Vitreous: Alcohols Acetone negative.

Urine: Cannabinoid Screen negative.

TOXICOLOGY: No drugs or alcohols are present.

FINDINGS:

1. Adult female found deceased in her place of residence. Apparent gunshot wounds to the chest. Weapon present at scene.

2. Gunshot wound of chest.

a. Entry: left anterior chest.

b. Range: contact or near contact.

c. Track: through left breast, through anterior chest wall, through lower lobe of left lung.

d. Exit: posterior left chest through 8th rib.

e. Associated injuries: 200 cc blood in left chest cavity.

Gunshot wound of left chest.

a. Entry: anterior left chest.

Range: contact or near contact.

Track: through left breast, through left chest wall, through lower lobe of left lung.

d. Exit: posterior left chest, through 10th rib.

e. Associated injuries: 1200 cc of left hemothorax.

4. Status-post augmentation mammoplasties, past.

5. Post laparotomy and hysterectomy, past.

CAUSE OF DEATH: Gunshot wounds (2) of chest.

CONCLUSION:

Based on these autopsy findings, and the investigative and historical information available to me, in my opinion this 40-year-old female died as the result of two gunshot wounds to her chest. Both bullets went through the lower

lobe of her left lung and exited her chest. The entrances were contact or near contact range.

To see the entire autopsy

<https://www.muckrock.com/foi/dallas-county-2596/jean-1-maness-57363/#file-220257>



"Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants" - Justice Louis Brandeis

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