

TESTIMONY OF PHILLIP L. WILLIS

The testimony of Phillip L. Willis was taken at 2:30 p.m., on July 22, 1964, in the office of the U.S. attorney, 301 Post Office Building, Bryan and Ervay Streets, Dallas, Tex., by Mr. Wesley J. Liebeler, assistant counsel of the President's Commission.

Mr. LIEBELER. Would you raise your right hand [standing]? Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Mr. WILLIS. I do.

Mr. LIEBELER. Please sit down. My name is Wesley J. Liebeler. I am an attorney on the staff of the President's Commission investigating the assassination of President Kennedy. I have been authorized to take your testimony by the Commission pursuant to authority granted to it by Executive Order No. 11130, dated November 29, 1963, and joint resolution of Congress No. 137. Under the rules of the Commission's procedure, you are entitled to have an attorney present if you wish to have him here. You are entitled to 3 days' notice for the hearing, and you are entitled to exercise whatever privileges there are available to you as far as not answering questions are concerned. I assume that you are prepared to go ahead with your testimony without an attorney present, because you are here without one?

Mr. WILLIS. Absolutely.

Mr. LIEBELER. Would you state your full name for the record, please?

Mr. WILLIS. Phillip L. Willis.

Mr. LIEBELER. What is your address, sir?

Mr. WILLIS. 2824 Ava Lane, Dallas 27, Tex.

Mr. LIEBELER. When were you born?

Mr. WILLIS. August 2, 1918.

Mr. LIEBELER. Where?

Mr. WILLIS. Kaufman County, Tex.

Mr. LIEBELER. Have you lived in Texas throughout most of your life?

Mr. WILLIS. All my life, with the exception of my military service.

Mr. LIEBELER. How long have you lived here in Dallas?

Mr. WILLIS. Since April 1, 1960.

Mr. LIEBELER. What business are you engaged in, or by whom are you employed?

Mr. WILLIS. I am a retired major, Air Force, disabled World War II, and I am on disability retirement from the Air Force. I am an independent real estate broker.

Mr. LIEBELER. It is my understanding that you were in the vicinity of the Texas School Book Depository Building on November 22, 1963, at the time of the assassination; is that correct?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir.

Mr. LIEBELER. Can you tell me where you were and what you saw happen, and what you did at that time?

Mr. WILLIS. I had a driver drop my family and I in the parkway so that we could have a chance to get a good view of the President's party, having taken my children out of school for the occasion. We were told by the policeman that they were coming down from Main Street approaching the area on Main, and I stood at the corner of Main and Houston and watched them approach. I am an amateur photographer, a poor one, but we wanted to get some good colored pictures of the President. So I photographed the President coming in front of the courthouse and making the turn onto Houston Street.

Mr. LIEBELER. Where did you station yourself at first? Were you at the corner, you say?

Mr. WILLIS. At the corner of Houston and Main.

Mr. LIEBELER. So that you saw him—

Mr. WILLIS. Across from the county jail on the parkway there near the esplanade.

Mr. LIEBELER. So you saw the motorcade coming down Main Street, did you?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes; we could see it for a block or two.

Mr. LIEBELER. Then the motorcade turned onto Houston and you took some pictures at that time?

Mr. WILLIS. I remained there until I got the shot of the President approaching the turn onto Houston Street, and being a personal friend of then Vice President Lyndon Johnson, we were anxious to get him in one, and did. Then I took a picture as they turned onto Houston Street. Then another one from the rear after they proceeded down Houston approaching the turn they were to make onto Elm. Then I immediately ran across the plaza, raced over to Elm Street and stationed myself on the curb in front of the Texas School Book Depository.

Mr. LIEBELER. You were there when the motorcade made a left turn on Houston and went down Elm Street; is that correct?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes; and I photographed the President. I was standing in front of the curb, as is shown in Life magazine, on the edge of the street, and I photographed the presidential car at not more than 10 feet because I didn't get the front or the rear of the car. I just got the occupants in the center. I was that close.

Mr. LIEBELER. Now you have indicated that you are depicted in a picture which is in the John F. Kennedy Memorial Edition of Life magazine in a picture that you said you were in the upper left-hand corner of page 4; is that correct?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir.

Mr. LIEBELER. You are the individual who stands almost directly behind the first motorcycle policeman in that picture, and you are shown with a camera?

Mr. WILLIS. With my camera raised; yes, sir. The little girl in the red dress and white scarf and coat is my daughter.

Mr. LIEBELER. The farthest person in the right in the back of that picture?

Mr. WILLIS. The farthest person in that picture.

Mr. LIEBELER. Now did you stand at that particular spot the entire time, or did you move down Elm Street?

Mr. WILLIS. No, sir; I took that picture just seconds before the first shot was fired, to get back close up. Then I started down the street, and the regular weekly edition of Life magazine came out and shows me in about three different pictures going down the street. Then my next shot was taken at the very—in fact, the shot caused me to squeeze the camera shutter, and I got a picture of the President as he was hit with the first shot. So instantaneous, in fact, that the crowd hadn't had time to react.

Mr. LIEBELER. Now you have, as I understand it, a series of 12 slides, which apparently have been prepared by something called Phil Willis Enterprises, and which I understand is being marketed, at least in the Dallas area?

Mr. WILLIS. We haven't done anything with them as yet, but I am the only one, I am told, who has a complete set of the prints covering the last 25 seconds of the President's life and the assassination and the tragedy following.

I was so shocked I didn't sell any, like everyone did at the moment. And the same people who bought those said they would have been invaluable had I brought them to them, but it didn't dawn on me to do that. And later there has been so many requests because of the historical nature, that we felt compelled to make them available to the public.

Mr. LIEBELER. I have here a picture that has been marked Hudson Exhibit No. 1, which I now show you and I suggest to you that it is one of the pictures that is a picture made from one of the slides.

Mr. WILLIS. I made that picture.

Mr. LIEBELER. You made that picture yourself?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir.

Mr. LIEBELER. That is the same as slide No. 5? In your series of slides?

Mr. WILLIS. That is correct.

Mr. LIEBELER. Can you tell us when that picture was made?

Mr. WILLIS. That picture was made at the very instant that the first shot was fired. As a matter of fact, the fellow standing on the ledge under the right-hand corner of the Stemmons Highway sign is a gentleman who took the last pictures

that appeared in Life, and his pictures showed that this instant with this sign in between the photographer and the President, shows that at this instant he had already grabbed his throat.

This was pointed out to the Secret Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Picture No. 2 will verify that, in Life magazine. You see the highway sign that he has the rear of, is the one I have the front of. And as he approached this same sign in this film, he has already grabbed his throat. That is verified by that fact.

Mr. LIEBELER. Referring to the pictures on page 4 of the memorial edition of Life magazine. Picture No. 1 shows you standing, as we have already indicated, standing back with your camera?

Mr. WILLIS. Picture 2 shows the President just as the car comes from behind this sign, and it shows that he has already reached for his throat at that time.

Mr. LIEBELER. The sign in question is one that reads "Stemmons Freeway Keep Right", and the front of that sign appears in the picture that you took which is marked Hudson Exhibit No. 1?

Mr. WILLIS. The only one in that vicinity. It has to be the same one. You will also note in my first picture, he is facing the outside of the street and smiling and waving, and he had already turned his head the other way when I have the picture in question here from the rear.

That same picture from the other side of the street in Life shows he has grabbed his throat when they proceeded to that point of the sign in question.

Mr. LIEBELER. Go through that again. I didn't understand it. Let me remind you of this. When you mention a picture, let's try and refer to them by numbers, because if you do that, I won't have to repeat it again, because we have to get the numbers down on the record. You were making a point just a minute ago about something that I didn't understand. You were referring to some of the pictures in Life magazine, and also to Hudson Exhibit No. 1, which is the picture you took.

Mr. WILLIS. All right, sir, Hudson Exhibit No. 1, which is a copy of the picture I took, shows the President's car had proceeded almost past the "Stemmons Freeway Keep Right" sign. Referring back to panel No. 2 of the Life Memorial Edition of Life magazine on page 4, it shows that Mrs. Kennedy has her hand over her mouth, and the President has already grabbed his throat. That picture shows that his car has not passed the Stemmons sign completely.

Mr. LIEBELER. Yes.

Mr. WILLIS. Referring back to Hudson Exhibit No. 1, which I took, the President's car in fact has passed the Stemmons sign, and he has turned the opposite direction from the previous picture that I took close up, and it proves without question that at this instant the President had been hit.

Mr. LIEBELER. Now, you mentioned the picture that you took, the other picture that you took close up. Is that included in your set of slides here?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir; it is slide No. 4, which you see doesn't include the front or the rear of the President's car, but the center. That is proving how close it was.

Mr. LIEBELER. Picture No. 4 in your group of slides was taken shortly before picture No. 5 was taken, is that right?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir; not more than 3 seconds.

Mr. LIEBELER. Do you know which picture you were taking or you took at the time that is shown here in panel No. 1 of this memorial edition of Life magazine?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir; the number just mentioned, slide No. 4, the closeup of the President directly in front of the Texas School Book Depository.

Mr. LIEBELER. Now from the time that you took No. 4, and when you took No. 4, you were standing as shown in picture No. 1 in Life magazine?

Mr. WILLIS. Correct.

Mr. LIEBELER. What did you do before you took No. 5, which we have marked here as Hudson Exhibit No. 1? Did you move down the street, or were you standing in the same place, or do you remember?

Mr. WILLIS. No, sir; as human nature would guide in an instance of this importance, I moved down the street slightly to try to get another view, and, of

course, I had the camera looking through the viewfinder to try to get another picture of him before he went out of range. I moved as far as I could within that 3 seconds.

Mr. LIEBELER. So you are not able to tell us exactly where you were when you took the picture that we have here as Hudson Exhibit No. 1, but it was a little bit farther on down Elm Street, still on the grassy area described by Elm and Main Street; is that correct?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir; I can verify that where I was going back to Life magazine again, because this picture No. 2 on page 4 of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Edition of Life, there is a tree in the background. The only tree in that immediate vicinity on that side of the street. And the shadow of that tree is shown in slide No. 5 that I took, which would show my position.

Mr. LIEBELER. Yes. I see you would have to study just from where the sun was coming, but it could be determined where you were standing, and we could also apparently determine it by lining it up with across the street?

Mr. WILLIS. Off the record. Let me say this. You see in No. 1 shot where I am shown, you can see this shadow on the ground from this tree. This little bush—there is the shadow from the tree. This tree is on the ground, so if you look in my picture here, you can see the shadow in that picture. So you see that I did move down approximately this far.

Mr. LIEBELER. All right. Now, you are certain that the first shot was fired at approximately the time or shortly at approximately the time you took the picture that has been marked Hudson Exhibit No. 1; is that right?

Mr. WILLIS. I am positive.

Mr. LIEBELER. Do you remember hearing the shot?

Mr. WILLIS. Absolutely. I, having been in World War II, and being a deer hunter hobbyist, I would recognize a high-powered rifle immediately.

Mr. LIEBELER. Did you recognize this as a high-powered rifle?

Mr. WILLIS. Absolutely.

Mr. LIEBELER. And you heard it just about the time you took the picture that has been marked?

Mr. WILLIS. That's right.

Mr. LIEBELER. Prior to the time you took the picture, which is marked Hudson Exhibit No. 1?

Mr. WILLIS. Absolutely.

Mr. LIEBELER. How many shots were fired altogether, Mr. Willis?

Mr. WILLIS. Three shots.

Mr. LIEBELER. Do you have any question about that at all?

Mr. WILLIS. No, sir.

Mr. LIEBELER. Did you follow the car down Elm Street after you took the picture, which we have marked Hudson Exhibit No. 1?

Mr. WILLIS. I proceeded down the street and didn't take any other pictures instantly, because the three shots were fired approximately about 2 seconds apart, and I knew my little daughters were running along beside the Presidential car, and I was immediately concerned about them, and I was screaming for them to come back, and they didn't hear me. But I was concerned about them immediately, because I knew something tragic had happened, and the shots didn't ring out long like a rifle shot that is fired into midair in a distance. I knew it hit something, and it couldn't have been a firecracker or anything like that; so it impressed me, I remember, and after I found my daughters, I saw they were heading back toward their mother.

Mr. LIEBELER. Where was she?

Mr. WILLIS. She was back in the crowd looking through this concrete structure. How do you refer to that?

Mr. LIEBELER. Well, your wife was back closer toward the intersection of Main Street and Houston Street?

Mr. WILLIS. No; it is a very short distance when you stand in here. No; that is the one across the street—no; here she was. She was in between Main and Elm Streets, but real near Elm Street. In fact, she was only a few feet back from my daughters. She wasn't more than 40 feet from where the President was hit.

Mr. LIEBELER. So she was toward the triple underpass from the concrete structure on Dealey Plaza?

Mr. WILLIS. She was inside the concrete structure looking through an opening.

Mr. LIEBELER. Looking toward the triple underpass?

Mr. WILLIS. Toward the Texas School Book Depository where she had a clear view, and there were surprisingly few people there at that time—at that moment—and none in between her and the street to block her vision.

Mr. LIEBELER. Did you actually observe the President when he was hit in the head?

Mr. WILLIS. No, sir; I did not. I couldn't see that well, and I was more concerned about the shots coming from that building. The minute the third shot was fired, I screamed, hoping the policeman would hear me, to ring that building because it had to come from there. Being directly across the street from the building, made it much more clear to those standing there than the people who were on the side of the street where the building was.

Mr. LIEBELER. So you thought you had picked out a particular building at the time when you heard the shots?

Mr. WILLIS. Absolutely.

Mr. LIEBELER. What building was that?

Mr. WILLIS. The Texas School Book Depository Building.

Mr. LIEBELER. You were pretty sure?

Mr. WILLIS. I felt certain. I even looked for smoke, and I knew it came from high up.

Mr. LIEBELER. How did you know that?

Mr. WILLIS. I even observed the clock on top of the building, it was 12:33 when I looked up there.

Mr. LIEBELER. The clock on top of the School Book Depository?

Mr. WILLIS. There is a Hertz sign on top of the building, and it alternates the time of day and the temperature, and when I looked up, it was 12:33, and the temperature was 68 degrees, as shown in my slide on No. 12.

Mr. LIEBELER. So you did not actually observe the President at the time he was hit in the head?

Mr. WILLIS. No, sir; I was just taking a picture of him, and the presidential party in the car come through my viewfinder and my camera. But my little daughter ran back and said, "Oh, Daddy, they have shot our President. His whole head blew up, and it looked like a red halo."

Mr. LIEBELER. Which one? Is this the girl that is here today?

Mr. WILLIS. The little one was the one that made that remark. My youngest daughter, Rosemary. The one that is with me today also saw it, and she went back and told her mother the same thing. And her mother said, "Yes; I saw it."

Mr. LIEBELER. Now, did you see anything hitting in the street along the President's car as it went down Elm Street?

Mr. WILLIS. No, sir; I did not.

Mr. LIEBELER. You say there were three shots fired? You heard three shots fired?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes.

Mr. LIEBELER. Did you think that the President had been hit by the first shot?

Mr. WILLIS. I didn't really know, sir.

Mr. LIEBELER. You couldn't tell whether he was hit by the first shot? You couldn't tell whether he had been hit by the first shot or the second shot or the third shot, or by how many shots he had been hit?

Mr. WILLIS. No, sir; except this one thing might be worthy of mention. When I took slide No. 4, the President was smiling and waving and looking straight ahead, and Mrs. Kennedy was likewise smiling and facing more to my side of the street. When the first shot was fired, her head seemed to just snap in that direction, and he more or less faced the other side of the street and leaned forward, which caused me to wonder, although I could not see anything positively. It did cause me to wonder.

Mr. LIEBELER. You say that the President looked toward his left; is that correct? Toward the side of Elm Street that you are standing on, or which way?

Mr. WILLIS. In slide No. 4 he was looking pretty much toward—straight ahead, and she was looking more to the left, which would be my side of the street. Then when the first shot was fired, she turned to the right toward him and he more or less slumped forward, and it caused me to wonder if he were hit, although I couldn't say.

(Discussion off the record.)

Mr. LIEBELER. In order to clarify some of the discussion we have had about the various number of slides, I want to mark a set of your slides as Willis Exhibit No. 1 and I have initialed a set of these, Mr. Willis, with my own initials, and I will ask you to do the same thing for the purpose of identification so we know what we are talking about when we refer to this exhibit.

(Mr. Willis marks initials.)

Mr. LIEBELER. We have already established that the picture that has been marked as Hudson's Exhibit No. 1 is a print made from the negative or from slide No. 5 on Willis' Exhibit No. 1; is that correct?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir.

Mr. LIEBELER. Did you have occasion to look up toward the railroad tracks that go across the triple underpass at any time, at about the time the President was shot?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes; I did, after the third shot was fired.

Mr. LIEBELER. Was there anybody up there? Did you see anybody up there on those railroad tracks?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir; I had noticed before the President's arrival that there were spectators up there, but there were also policemen up there.

Mr. LIEBELER. You did see policemen up there?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes, sir; there were definitely policemen up there among the spectators.

Mr. LIEBELER. About how many spectators would you say were up there? Was there a big crowd?

Mr. WILLIS. No, sir; there was no big crowd in the area, actually. But I would say, and this is strictly a wild guess, maybe 2 dozen.

Mr. LIEBELER. Did you see any evidence of any shots having been fired from that direction?

Mr. WILLIS. No, sir; there was no doubt in my mind. I saw people falling on the ground and police officers racing over toward a concrete wall.

Mr. LIEBELER. Across the street from Elm Street?

Mr. WILLIS. Across the street from Elm Street on the same side as the School Book Depository, which goes down the hill toward the underpass, and the policemen started going over there, called to see if someone, evidently thinking it came from that direction, and then is when I started to ring this building. I knew it came from high above directly across the street from me, and that is the one thing I was absolutely positive about.

Mr. LIEBELER. You made that judgment from the sound of the shots?

Mr. WILLIS. From the sound, absolutely. And this may be verified by the fact that I took several pictures of the crowd immediately around that building.

Mr. LIEBELER. Yes; I notice.

Mr. WILLIS. I had no doubt about that, because I was that certain in my own mind.

Mr. LIEBELER. I don't think I have any other questions about these pictures, unless you can think of something else that you think I should have asked you about, that I have forgotten about.

Mr. WILLIS. In slide No. 6, people were still on the ground and I took that picture, knowing that the party had come to a temporary halt before proceeding on to the underpass, and I have an arrow there which shows the back of the Secret Service agent climbing onto the back of the presidential car.

Mr. LIEBELER. That is that far in the background, way in the back of the picture, or down toward the underpass of the street?

Mr. WILLIS. Yes; that would be the background.

Mr. LIEBELER. I think I would like to ask your daughter about three or four questions about what she saw of it. We might just bring her in while you are still here.