

XIV

Confusion, Prosecution Miscues, and Resolution

Freedom, Inc. rallied in the wake of Leon Jordan's murder.

Orchid was quickly persuaded to run for her husband's seat as state representative. In the primary she overwhelmed Lee Bohannon by a vote of 1961 to 157. She was easily elected in the November



elections and would go on to serve with quiet distinction and little opposition in that role for the next sixteen years before deciding to retire.

Bruce Watkins was named President of Freedom, Inc. Describing himself as Jordan's pupil, he publicly acknowledged that he was discarding his personal plans for the next ten years to accept a master plan for Freedom that Jordan had laid out for him the previous fall. He took notes during conversations he had with Jordan even though he had no foreboding of Jordan's tragic death. Now he used those notes to outline for the public Leon Jordan's Master Plan and dedicated himself to fulfilling it:

1. I [Jordan] plan to retire from the legislature in 2 years, hoping to give way to a young man, young enough in age that, should he choose, he would stay there for 20 years, possibly to become Speaker of the House someday by the seniority rule.

2. I have hope of unifying other black political wards to assure at least 4 black representatives on the City Council next year.
3. We must work harder that we may elect more free blacks to committee posts so we can gain a greater share of the Democratic policy-making in which blacks have supported for years.
4. If larger areas could be organized, there would be a great chance for a black western judge, or even a black candidate running for the U. S. Congress.
5. More blacks exercising voting power would change the employment practices of not only the government, but private enterprise and unions as well.
6. We must increase black representation in our Legislature by electing Sterling Bryant from the 15th district, and John Preciphs from the 2nd. This must be done this year. Of course, this strength will be combined with the re-election of the four representatives we now have. Such increased power should be followed by the election of one or two more representatives in the next two years, including a State Senator. You know, political influence helps change boundary lines.
7. We must begin to join hands with black groups in St. Louis and other larger size Missouri cities, to assure the support of state-wide candidates who are more concerned about Black problems.

Watkins closed with the challenging statement, “I will not deserve to be president of Freedom, Inc., which he founded, unless we have a victory just as he planned it to be.”¹¹⁶

Watkins would have a distinguished career in local politics culminating in an unsuccessful bid for mayor in 1979. He was suffering from cancer during his final campaign,

¹¹⁶ *Kansas City Call*, July 31-August 6, 1970.

and it took his life the following year. Freedom's ambition to have a black mayor in Kansas City would have to wait for Emanuel Cleaver's election in 1991. Alan Wheat became the first black representative of the 5th Congressional District in 1983. Watkins' tribute to Leon Jordan's master plan makes clear that while he was alive Jordan was the major architect of Freedom's extraordinary rise to political power. Leading Freedom, he not only freed the black community from its political servitude to white political bosses, but he created the political opportunity for future black Kansas Citians to be seen as leaders of the larger community. Freedom would go on to chalk up years of significant political victories, but as the intense involvement of the Civil Rights Era slowly faded, it became clear that Leon Jordan, presiding from the backroom office of the Green Duck, had played a role in Kansas City politics that would not be recreated.

Meanwhile Jordan's murder initiated a flurry of police activity to find his killers. Ironically Joe Teasdale, whom Freedom had been challenging as Prosecuting Attorney, was in charge. Two fourteen year old boys, Bobby Ramsey and Ronald Winstead, told police the day after the murder that they were riding their bikes in the area and had witnessed the crime. Although it later became clear that their story was not true, they did appear on the crime scene shortly after Jordan's murder and were able to describe details of the scene that were not generally known to the public. Ramsey said he recognized all three men who carried out the ambush. Ramsey identified Carlton Edward Miller and Reginald M. Watson in a police lineup, and the two were arrested. Teasdale, claiming the killing had all the earmarks of a professional gangland slaying and concerned for the safety of his two juvenile witnesses, kept a tight lid on what the police revealed to the public. He moved rapidly to convene a grand jury to indict Miller and Watson claiming that "the 20 Hour Rule prevented further investigation prior to filing

charges without releasing the suspects.” He placed Ramsey and Winstead in protective custody, keeping their identity secret.

Miller and Watson were charged with murder by a grand jury on July 17. Then the stories of the two young witnesses and the defendants began to be tested. The boys were brought to the scene for a reenactment of the murder. They were given lie detector tests. Witnesses for Miller and Watson appeared to refute the possibility of their being present at the murder scene. Discrepancies in the young boys’ stories became obvious. Ramsey ran away from protective custody and could not be found. After holding Miller and Watson in jail for ten days, on July 27 Teasdale was forced to drop the charges against them.

On the day Teasdale dropped the charges, Orchid Jordan voiced her regret and anger at a press conference held at Harold Holliday’s office. “I am heartsick at the actions of Prosecutor Teasdale in the handling of the investigation of State Representative Leon Jordan’s assassination. I never dreamed that anyone would seek to make political capital out of this tragedy but the prosecutor has attempted to do just that. Despite warnings from the police department to go slow while they continued their investigation, the prosecutor insisted that two men be charged with the murder on the unsupported testimony of a 14 year old boy. That witness failed to pass a lie detector examination when questioned. . . .Early in the campaign, Leon Jordan warned that the prosecutor would attempt to use his office for his own political gain. No one could have expected that he would do it in such a flagrant and despicable manner.”

Both Watkins and Holliday praised the police department and the metro squad for the way in which they investigated the murder, but they echoed Orchid Jordan’s indignation at Teasdale’s actions. Holliday commented, “Teasdale just loves those television cameras.”

In an editorial the *Call* pointed particularly to the injustice Miller and Watson suffered: “Ten days after their arrest and after ten days of notoriety, scorn and bitterness from a community which believed that the law-enforcement officials had done their job, the two men were found to be innocent and released but they will suffer to some degree for the rest of their lives for this act of false accusation. . . .Much time has been lost in the investigation and search for the real killers through the falsehood of a boy. How seasoned law-enforcement officials could be out-witted by a lying teen-ager is hard to understand.”

The editorial acknowledged proper steps were taken after charges had been brought against Miller and Watson that eventually led to the discrediting of the evidence against them, but went on to point out, “all this could have and should have been done prior to putting two innocent men through the torture that they have undergone by false charges that they killed Leon Jordan.”

Teasdale answered Freedom’s charges saying, “I had the facts in the Leon Jordan case. They didn’t. It’s as simple as that.” More convincingly in answer to the charge of political opportunism, he suggested it would have been politically to his advantage to hold Miller and Watson in custody until after the August primary. “Is letting them go, political opportunism?”¹¹⁷

A 1967 light brown Pontiac Bonneville was discovered late the day after Jordan’s murder in a weed-covered lot near 23rd and Highland. The car belonged to Verlin E. Kiblinger, who worked in the Kansas City postoffice and lived in Holt, Missouri. It was stolen from where he parked it the night of Jordan’s slaying. The shotgun used in the killing was found days later in a field at 24th Terrace and Garfield. Firing tests confirmed it was the murder weapon. That

¹¹⁷ *Kansas City Call*, July 31-August 6, 1970; *Kansas City Times*, July 28, 1970.

weapon had a bizarre history which would eventually prove crucial to the reinvestigation of Jordan's murder and the resolution of the crime.¹¹⁸

By early August following the murder, Bert C. Hurn, U. S. Prosecuting Attorney, announced that his office was investigating the possibility that federal laws were violated in Jordan's murder. While cooperating with the police investigation, he stressed that his office had no jurisdiction over the murder itself, but only with civil violations. However, FBI agents were soon on the scene. Freedom, Inc. collected a \$10,000 reward fund for information leading to the identification of the killers. Despite these robust efforts no charges would be filed again until 1973.

A year after Jordan's murder, Sgt. Lloyd DeGraffenreid, Sr., a former colleague of Jordan's on the police force and a good friend, who was then heading the investigation, said, "This is the most complex murder case I have ever worked on. In 23 years with the police department, I can't remember a case with less information, more blind alleys, more possible motives and more suspects. It's totally baffling."

De Graffenreid said they had looked at four possible motives: (1) Political reasons, (2) Business or personal animosity, (3) Jealousy (4) Criminal Activity. "So far, we have not uncovered one iota of evidence that Leon was involved in anything criminal. As for the other motives . . . I just can't say which one seems stronger than another. And then he might have been killed for a reason we haven't even thought of, something so trivial or unusual or simple that we've overlooked it."¹¹⁹

By mid 1972, Walter Ireland Froniamburger, who was involved in narcotics trafficking with Eugene Richardson, Eddie Cox and Doc Dearborn and who was imprisoned at the Federal

¹¹⁸ *Kansas City Times*, July 16, 1970; *Kansas City Star*, July 15, 1971; *Kansas City Star*, November 24, 2010; Captain James F. Connelly's report, pp. 41-45, 2nd KCPD Investigation of Jordan's murder, LJC.

¹¹⁹ *Kansas City Times*, July 16, 1970; *Kansas City Star*, July 15, 1971.

penitentiary at Leavenworth, got word to the authorities that he had information on the Jordan murder and he was ready to deal. After some reassurance that his cooperation might lead to a reduction in his sentence, he claimed to have been in the presence of James Willis in 1969, when the latter announced that he had received money for making a hit on Leon Jordan.

Froniaburger's story led to the indictment of James Willis, Maynard Cooper, and Doc Dearborn for the murder of Jordan.

The police long suspected that Kenneth Irvin had seen more of the crime than he had admitted to. They suspected he was fearful for his own safety. They finally persuaded Irvin that by putting him under protective custody he would be safe. He then said that he saw Jimmy Willis standing with the shotgun next to Jordan's body. Willis was brought before a jury in early December, 1973. The jury quickly found Willis not guilty. After that the Prosecuting Attorney saw no use bringing Cooper and Dearborn to trial.

The prosecution's two main witnesses, Froniaburger and Irvin, were very vulnerable to the attack of defense attorneys. In addition to being present when Willis claimed to receive money for a hit on Jordan, Froniaburger claimed to have been near the crime scene on the night of the slaying and to have seen Willis, Cooper, and Dearborn together in a car nearby just before the murder. Although he didn't witness the crime, he was parked near the scene and just after the crime claimed to have a clear view of Maynard Cooper standing over Jordan's body. The defense attorney not only dwelled on the admitted fact that Froniaburger had made a bargain for his testimony, but also got him to admit that at the time of the crime he was living with four women and profiting from their prostitution, and that he had been involved in the original burglary of the shotgun that was eventually used in Jordan's murder. He had also originally

suggested to police that it was Robert Willis, James's brother, who had said he received the hit money.

Kenneth Irvin probably had a more convincing reason for changing his story three times before identifying James Willis as Jordan's killer. He had originally been too afraid for his own life to tell anyone what he had seen. But clearly the inconsistent stories he told of that night's events were damaging. Irvin added a very suggestive detail in his testimony before the court. He said that as he returned to the front of the Green Duck after hearing the first shot, he heard Jordan say, "Oh, no," before the second shot went off. Jordan probably recognized at least one of his assailants, Doc Dearborn, a man whom he had befriended and believed was protecting him.

The key, however, to Willis's defense was his claim to have been on the road to Los Angeles at the time of Jordan's murder. Two men and a woman testified that they were with Willis on the road to Los Angeles to sell two Cadillacs he owned. The defense produced receipts for travelers checks that he cashed on the way, evidence of his registration at a motel, and testimony from a car dealer with whom he put his two cars up for sale.

The police were well aware of Willis's claims to be out of town and were suspicious that he had prearranged his alibi. Sgt. DeGraffenreid voiced his incredulity to me when he questioned how many people carefully save their gas and travelers checks receipts for such a long time after such an auto trip. Another fact that was not brought up in the trial that makes Willis's alibi suspicious is that Maynard Cooper also claimed to be driving to Los Angeles at the time of Jordan's murder. He was driving with Robert Willis, Jimmy's brother, and yet their trip was supposed to be completely independent of Jimmy's.

The police investigated Jimmy Willis's claims and were unable to come up with sufficient evidence to discredit them. Thus the prosecution decided not to contest these claims, but to suggest that it was possible for Jimmy to have flown back from Los Angeles in time to commit the murder and return in time to meet the car dealer as he claimed. However, the prosecution could not come up with any flight reservation evidence that would substantiate that Willis had indeed made such a journey. It remained only a possibility.

The jury quickly recognized how weak the case against Willis was. The first vote was 11 to 1. It took only a little more than an hour to reach a unanimous verdict of not guilty. Jimmy Willis cried with relief and jubilation before returning to his jail cell where he was doing time for a conspiracy to evade the purchase of a liquor license. For a long time that court decision took all the wind out of the investigation of Leon Jordan's murder.

A letter addressed to Jordan and published in the *Call* after the court trial expresses the weary public exasperation that followed:

Dear Leon,

We're trying, but whoever did the job is still doing it, according to the Jackson County Prosecutor's office. Ralph Martin, Jackson County Prosecutor, has dismissed the charges against Maynard Cooper and James "Doc" Dearborn, in connection with your murder case.

Why were they dropped? It seems as if the prosecutors didn't have much of a case to begin with. The case of James Willis, also accused of killing you, was supposed to be the "best" case they had. There were two witnesses who claimed they either saw Willis standing beside you with a gun, or heard Willis say there was a "hit" out for you. Both were discredited in pretty short order. So short, in fact that it took the all-white jury just 75 minutes to return a not-guilty verdict in favor of Willis.

Dearborn is now in the U. S. Penitentiary in Atlanta serving 25 years for narcotics convictions. Cooper is out walking the streets somewhere.

I haven't heard too much about those first two fellas they accused, Reginald Watson and Carleton Miller, since they were released a little while after you were killed. Three years, umph, time sure flies.

Anyway, Leon, I just thought I would bring you up to date on what is happening (&) about your death. Maybe I'll have more news for you in a year or so.

Sincerely yours

A. "B.Z." Boddy

(Elton Alexander)¹²⁰

The rumors about who killed Jordan and why continued to circulate with occasional vehement differences of opinion, but inevitably Jordan's murder began to fade from public memory as people focused on ordinary matters of more immediate concern. Then thirty-seven years after that plaintive letter the *Kansas City Star* commemorated the fortieth anniversary of Jordan's murder with a lengthy review. Alvin Sykes, a local activist, who won international recognition for getting the FBI to reinvestigate the notorious murder of Emmett Till, then decided the Leon Jordan murder needed and deserved public resolution.

Sykes encouraged other civil rights leaders to advocate a new investigation, but these efforts first met resistance. The police department, however, began reviewing the evidence it held from the first investigation and were dismayed to find that the shotgun used to kill Jordan was missing. The weapon had earlier been traced to a burglary of the Coast to Coast Hardware

¹²⁰ *Kansas City Call*, December 7, 14, 1973; *Kansas City Times*, December 5, 6, 1970; *Kansas City Star*, December 5, 6, 7, 1970; Depositions of Lloyd Allen DeGraffenreid, October 9, 1973, and Sylvester Young, September 17, 1973; and Reporter's Transcript of the case of *The People of the State of California vs. Maynard L. Cooper*, June 15, 1973, LJC.

Store in Independence. That prompted an internal search that revealed the gun was acquired by an unknown person outside the department in 1976. It was then purchased from a local dealer the following year to be used in a patrol car. In 1997 the gun was used by an officer in the shooting of a suspect. Consequently it was sent to the police laboratory. It was then returned to a patrol car assigned to Special Operations Division in 1998 until it was recovered while the department was deciding whether or not to reinvestigate Jordan's murder.

Capt. Rich Lockhart admitted the department's lack of care for a significant piece of evidence as he announced to the public that the department had successfully located the weapon in one of its own cars. He also reported that earlier reviews may also have been inadequate. This persuaded Chief Corwin, when he next met with Alvin Sykes, to take another look at the Jordan murder case. The result was a very lengthy and fruitful investigation that established that Doc Dearborn was chiefly responsible for Jordan's murder.¹²¹

The second police investigation focused much more clearly on the activities of the Black Mafia and featured lengthy interviews of those still alive who might know anything about the Jordan murder. The witnesses often contradicted each other and even themselves. They described sordid pandering and brutal intimidation resulting in murder, arson, and bizarre sexual behavior. There are also many self-serving stories of clearly questionable happenings. All in all it is a vivid view of underground crime during those years that is challenging to summarize. But as the questioning bore relentlessly on what was known about the Jordan murder, the role of Dearborn became obviously central.

Dearborn was a leading suspect in the first police investigation. He was charged with murder along with Maynard Cooper and Jimmy Willis when Willis was tried in 1972 and found not guilty. In the second investigation, the relations between Jimmy Willis, his brother Robert,

¹²¹ *Kansas City Star*, July 11 & 29, 2010.

Maynard Cooper, and Walter Froniaburger, who was a prosecuting witness in the Willis trial and the leaders of the Black Mafia, Eugene Richardson, Eddie Cox, and Doc Dearborn were all explored in much greater detail. The close relationships between these men may explain why Jimmy Willis and Maynard Cooper had such carefully prepared defenses indicating they were on the road at the time of the Jordan murder. They may well have heard that the contract had been issued, but they probably were not Dearborn's two companions in the murder. The wives, girlfriends, and other associates of all these figures were questioned with varying results of cooperation. The role of Joe Centimano was much more thoroughly explored.

The investigation summarizes the evidence it found compelling about Dearborn's role: "A present day witness reported being aware in 1970 of James P. Dearborn, BM, 9-5-32, intention to kill Mr. Leon Jordan. The witness stated Dearborn asked him (witness) to assist him (Dearborn) kill Jordan in the spring of 1970. The witness stated him and Dearborn surveyed Jordan's movement numerous times and conspired to kill Jordan with a 12 Gauge shotgun loaded with 00-Buck upon Jordan closing the Green Duck Tavern at 2546 Prospect. The witness stated he and Dearborn determined the aforementioned weapon and ammunition would give them an advantage over Jordan because it was known Jordan often carried a handgun on his person when closing his business. The witness stated he did not participate in Jordan's murder only because of being incarcerated when the murder was carried out. The witness reported Dearborn admitted his involvement in Mr. Jordan's murder to him (witness) years after the murder occurred.

"Another witness reported visiting Dearborn in his residence and the latter claiming responsibility for Jordan's murder. Dearborn told him the murder was "business" and a "hit" he had to carry out regardless of his being friends with Mr. Jordan.

“Another witness said that Dearborn came to his residence the evening Mr. Jordan was killed and asked him to participate. But he refused and disagreed with Dearborn’s intention to kill Mr. Jordan.

“Yet another witness reported that Dearborn asked him to assist him in killing Mr. Jordan. The witness refused and they argued over his refusal. He escorted Dearborn out of his residence and observed two of Dearborn’s companions sitting inside the car Dearborn arrived in. Two days later Dearborn told him he was the driver and those two companions were the shooter and the look-out.”

Doc Dearborn was part of the team that burglarized the Coast to Coast Hardware Store in Independence. That shotgun used in Jordan’s murder, along with other stolen goods then came into possession of Joseph Centimano. Thus the missing shotgun and its history lighted the way to the combination of men responsible for Leon Jordan’s death.

Doc Dearborn became himself a murder victim in Kansas City in 1985.¹²²

The investigation asks many questions about the political scene as well as the criminal activity that may have been related to Jordan’s murder, but it refrains from drawing any conclusions other than pointing to Dearborn’s guilt. It seems worthwhile to try to put together the story all this information implies. Jordan was well aware that it was time for him to pass the leadership of Freedom on to a younger generation. Jordan had high hopes for Richard Tolbert eventually becoming the leader of Freedom. He gave Tolbert much material and political support. However, Tolbert was not in Kansas City during these crucial events. Tom Neely, was another young leader, whom Jordan trusted and believed in. Neely was a candidate for Constable of the third district. He was running against Sylvester Norris, an oldline faction candidate. Jordan was now an accepted political leader who could deal on an equal footing with

¹²² 2nd KCPD Investigation, pp. 3 & 4, LJC.

the political leaders in the North end who still had an overlapping interest in the black community. Bruce Watkins described the agreement Jordan had reached to share funds with many of these leaders just before his death. Watkins saw this as a reason to dampen any suspicion that Jordan was murdered for political reasons.

But Neely's candidacy became a sore point in that agreement. According to Orchid Jordan, Lt. Governor Morris advised Jordan that the two oldtime faction candidates, Norris and Ross, would be removed from the ballot before the primary, but they were not. Morris then told Jordan the matter was out of his control, but Orchid heard Leon tell Morris on the phone that these candidates would have removed themselves if Morris had withheld financial support. She stated that "she feels that this opposition by JORDAN may have resulted in his death." This was in many ways a minor political quarrel, hardly grounds for issuing a contract on Jordan's life. But Jordan was trying to build new young leadership, and Neely's future was important enough to fight for at this time.

Joe Centimano long resented Jordan's success as a black political leader. He considered Jordan's physical confrontation with his friend John Mazucca in the state legislature an offense that merited immediate retaliation to teach any aspiring black leader his proper place. But at the time the mafia leadership did not agree. The close relation between the Mayor of Vine Street and Doc Dearborn is clearly established in the second murder investigation. When Doc Dearborn realized that he could no longer count on his close friend, Leon Jordan's support, that instead he must confront Jordan because of the latter's well known opposition to narcotics trafficking, Dearborn became available and attractive to Centimano as a hit man.

While the mafia leadership may have been willing to deal with Jordan, whose political strength could no longer be denied, there is little question that it tasted like bad medicine to do

so. As Jordan himself publicly noted when the *Star* began to question whether Freedom was beginning to work with the factions, Freedom had built its trust in the black community on its commitment to replacing the plantation bosses that so destructively dominated black politics. Thus a contract on Jordan with an experienced killer, who had inside knowledge of Jordan's habits, might well have now seemed an attractive and cheap opportunity. Jordan's insistence that Morris keep their original deal and remove Norris and Ross from the ballot may well have been only the most recent reminder of how irritating Jordan as a political leader had become.¹²³

Jordan's life was full of many surprising ups and downs, but despite his faults and miscues, he made it into a life of singular achievement. He rose through the ranks as a Kansas City policeman with notable recognition. He learned discipline and leadership. He took his policing talents abroad to build a reputable police force in Liberia. When those achievements did not win him appropriate promotion in the Kansas City Police force on his return, he resigned and plotted a midlife career change. Carrying a haloed memory of his father's public career, reinforced by knowledge of his grandfather's substantial public prominence, he returned to Kansas City intending to make a difference in the political arena. He wanted to have the family name Jordan recognized again as an agent of racial progress. He bought the Green Duck Tavern, apprenticed himself to Tim Moran to learn the ropes, and then joined forces with Bruce Watkins to found Freedom, Inc., a black political organization that he led to extraordinary political power and benefit to the Kansas City community. He applied the transformative political lessons of a momentous national civil rights struggle to the particular racial problems of Kansas City, freeing the black community from the political control of the northeast bosses, and winning the respect

¹²³ Interview of Orchid Jordan, August 7, 1970, FBI file, LJC.

of the larger Kansas City community for black leadership. It is almost impossible to be deeply involved in American politics without getting your hands dirty, but he stayed steady to the struggle with his big heart. He thus paved the way for the entire community to benefit from black leaders for generations to come.