

10.14.21

Re: Donation of my true crime research files—notes for researchers

Dear Molly,

This note is for you and my other friends at AHC. I wanted to just provide you with a few details that might help evaluate and eventually sort through and make available these materials. I am not the most careful keeper of files. I'm messy. I just keep working and throwing stuff together until it starts to find its own way.

It will help to have some familiarity with the books. I know you have a copy of 1960s Austin Gangsters, and I'm donating MS drafts of Last Gangster in Austin, which will be issued by UT Press 4.19.21. The former relates broadly to the Overton Gang and the Austin underworld of the 1950s-1960s; while the latter focuses on Frank Hughey Smith, Sr., and Ronnie Earle, who, as Travis Co. DA began his term in 1977 with the indictment and prosecution of Smith for aggravated robbery in the Ike Rabb Austin Salvage Yard robbery (12.3.76). Smith was from Waco, son of a Baptist preacher, convicted of car theft and armed robbery at age 19, paroled to Travis Co. in 1956, after which he entered the auto salvage business and rose to become top dog by the 1970s. In 1967 he was convicted for auto theft conspiracy and while still on parole in 1974 was granted a bail bonds license, and he quickly rose to the top of the market doing that. He was a crime kingpin and media darling until his conviction. So the Frank Smith/Ronnie Earle files cover all that stuff, and also serve as a sort of sequel to the saga of Timmy Overton and his family and his many associates in Austin and throughout the state and the South.

Going back to the Overtons for a second: Timmy graduated Austin High in 1958 with a football scholarship to UT, where he played for 2 years. A number of other members of the class of '58 ended up in Timmy's circle of thugs; therefore you will find a yearbook or two, research on the football teams of the era, etc.

The transcripts of interviews in these boxes will probably be sketchy, so I will have to include those as digital files in a separate donation which I hope to do soon.

There are a great many newspaper clippings in these boxes—not only from the Statesman but many other Texas newspapers. The Odessa American & Lubbock Avalanche-Journal were great sources on the Overtons. For Frank Smith, the Statesman was awesome; it was supplemented by Waco sources and, because of the involvement of thugs from Fort Worth, the Star-Telegram was a great source as well.

A major source for the Overton saga was the federal conspiracy trial of 20 members of the Overton Gang; the trial began in Del Rio in early 1968 and was moved to El Paso later that year, ending with six convictions in June 1968. I obtained a great deal of papers from the NARA archive in Fort Worth concerning the trial and the investigations by FBI and Austin PD/DPS task force. So if you see box labels or references that read "El Paso Trial '68," it will help to have a basic familiarity with that. The trial was the climax and downfall of the Overton Gang era.

You'll also find research from the 1970s. Timmy Overton was assassinated in Dallas in 1972; his pal Jerry Ray James continued his criminal career in the 1970s and was a key figure in the trial



of Jimmy Chagra in the 1980s. James and a few other Overton Gang/Dixie Mafia characters also figured in the assassination of Judge John Wood in 1979.

The Dixie Mafia became much better known in the 1980s. There is not a single origin story for the Dixie Mafia, but there's ample reason to claim that it began in Austin with Timmy Overton, Jerry Ray James and the very corrupt attorney/fixer John Webster Flanagan in the 1960s.

I just remembered that there are files relating to the Veterans Land Board Scandal of the 1950s. At one time, I was planning to write a book about that and related scandals involving government officials, insurance executives and other reprobate grifters. I queried some NYC publishing people and, this being during various scandals relating to corruption in the George Bush administration, received a pithy reply in the negative. The context was that there was so much crazy stuff going on at that time that, No, this agent said, he was of the opinion that "people outside of Texas would not be interested in a scandal in Texas that happened in the 1950s." He had a point – What would he say now? Worse timing or better? Whatever; I did not really have a great grip on the story at the time so it's just as well. In the years since then, I've learned a great deal more about the other scandals and the context of the times. Maybe someday some writer will return to the topic and produce a great history of that period's rottenness.

While loading the boxes into my car, I also realized that there are clippings from Jim Langdon's column that ran in the Statesman in the 1960s, plus more research culled by writer Richard Zelade. These clippings and notes help document the evolution of the Austin music scene, and related underground art scene, from the early 1960s, featuring mentions of Roky Erickson &

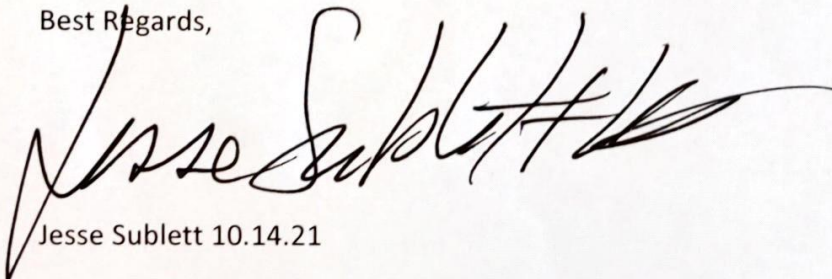
13th Floor Elevators, Janis Joplin, Mance Lipscomb, and the emergence of the "Armadillo Aesthetic," or whatever.

There is also a flat box containing the original art for the first LP by my band The Skunks. It's not in great condition, though its deterioration helps underscore its importance as a historical relic--maybe. Anyway, that's what it is. Priest did the artwork for Joe Gracey and Bobby Earle Smith, who put out the record on their Rude Records label in 1980 or '81.

You will also find research on sinkholes. Around 2015 I was researching sinkholes for a planned novel, which did not work out.

I hope these notes are helpful. If you have any questions don't hesitate to contact me and ask.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse Sublett", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jesse Sublett 10.14.21

