

TV show to tell story of Belmont man who planned to blow up JFK in 1960 & the observant postmaster who stopped him

BELMONT — For the past few months, Polly Murphy has been remembering one of the defining moments of her life — when her late husband Postmaster Thomas Murphy thwarted a 1960 attempted assassination on then President-Elect John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

In the aftermath of his heroism and, in part, as the result of a media campaign by former Union Leader newspaper owner and publisher William Loeb, her family ended up being stalked by Richard Paul Pavlick — the man who had intended to kill JFK.

"Tom's name was never supposed to be released, but it was," she said while attending a media event Wednesday night at the Belmont Public Library that was called to promote attention to a November 17 (8 p.m.) television show about Murphy and Pavlick that will run on the Smithsonian Channel. The documentary was filmed in July in Belmont and much of the footage was shot at the library. Another production about the episode will be featured on the Travel Channel this fall.

"It was kind of a scary time," she said. "We never told the kids too much about it because we didn't want to scare them."

N.H. Dept. Public Safety Commissioner Earl Sweeney, a former Belmont police chief and a volunteer sergeant in the town's police department recounted the 1960 story and it's aftermath.

The way Sweeney remembers it, Pavlick was an older man who had relocated to Belmont after he retired as a U.S. Postal Service employee in South Boston.

Sweeny said if he were to use today's lingo to describe him, he would describe Pavlick as "sour" and kind of a "nut-job." He lived on Dearborn Street in a rundown old house.

Sweeney said he was the kind of guy who was "very vocal" at annual town meetings and at selectmen's meetings. For example, at one point, he said, Pavlick got the idea that the water commissioners were poisoning his water with chlorine and the state police confiscated his guns for a while after he threatened them.

"He was a character," said Sweeney. "More vocal than dangerous."

Or so he thought in 1960.

In early 1960, Pavlick focused his wrath toward then Sen. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who was running as the Democratic nominee for president. Sweeney said Pavlick's greatest concern was Kennedy's Catholicism and the fear that should he be elected president, the country would be run by the Pope and the Catholic Church.

"Pavlick hated Catholics," Sweeney said, adding that the man would go around and tell anyone who would listen that if Kennedy was elected "someone should shoot him."

After Kennedy was elected, according to Sweeney and press clippings from the time, Pavlick either sold or gave away his house to charity, packed all his worthy belongings into an "old Buick" and left town.

But Sweeney said he would send "disjointed" postcards to a few of the residents back in Belmont, all of them from the various places he visited.

Tom Murphy, at the time, was a brand new postmaster with a wife (Polly) and six daughters. As Pavlick's postcards would come into the Belmont Post Office, Murphy would sort them into people's boxes and he noticed the postmarks always came from the same places that Kennedy was visiting while campaigning. One day he mentioned it to the police.

Sweeney said he and the chief did a "little investigating" and learned Pavlick had purchased some sticks of dynamite from the local hardware store. He apparently told the hardware store owner that he needed to remove some tree stumps from his property.

Sweeney said the chief (he was one of only two officers in Belmont in 1960) went to Pavlick's old property and didn't see any signs of blasted tree stumps.

Concerned, Murphy notified the U.S. Postmaster General who in turn notified the FBI and the U.S. Secret Service.

Sweeney explained that the FBI had just started using the earliest form of the N.C.I.C. or National Crime Information Center — the system still used by law enforcement.

The information about Pavlick's car and his description were entered into the N.C.I.C. system.

According to Sweeney, Kennedy had wanted some rest before he took office so in December of 1960 he took his family to the family's West Palm Beach compound.

Pavlick had followed. He rigged his car with the dynamite and looked for an opportunity to blow up both himself and Kennedy. Sweeney said Pavlick realized he couldn't get into the Kennedy compound so he waited until Kennedy went to Sunday Mass.

He followed the limousine to the church but changed his mind when he saw that Kennedy's wife Jacqueline and daughter Caroline were also in the limo.

As he followed Kennedy to his next stop, a Florida motorcycle officer recognized the plate and description of Pavlick's car and stopped him.

Local and federal police said the car was rigged to explode and Pavlick admitted to his plans to kill him. He told police he didn't blow it up at the Catholic Church because he didn't want to kill innocent women and children.

Pavlick was charged with attempting to kill Kennedy and was committed to a federal mental facility in St. Louis, Missouri.

In due course, Postmaster Murphy's name came to light and he was given a "Beyond the Call of Duty" pin in April of 1961 — one of two ever issued in New England according to Union Leader reporter Earl Anderson.

Sweeney recalled that it was the Boston Globe that originally reported the Murphy-Pavlick story.

After Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas on November 22, 1963, the federal government apparently lost interest in Pavlick and all the charges were dropped. A Missouri federal judge ruled he was insane so he was not released.

He spent the next six years being shuffled from state hospital to state hospital ultimately landing in the N.H. State Hospital around 1966.

Pavlick began a letter-writing campaign. He sent hundreds of letters to influential people all over the county including the Union Leader, eventually capturing Loeb's attention.

He also wrote to Murphy. In one instance he included a picture of Murphy sitting at his desk and called him "Stinking rat! Blasted ignorant immoral shanty Irish" as was reported by a local newspaper at the time.

In 1966, Loeb began to call attention to Pavlick because he had never been indicted by a grand jury nor had he been tried in a court of law, yet was still incarcerated.

Loeb, in one of his now-legendary front-page editorials, demanded that Pavlick should either be recharged with something or released. People throughout New Hampshire, except in Belmont, rallied to his cause.

Postmaster Murphy became the whipping boy of many who interpreted his actions as being akin to being a rat. In one newspaper article written in 1966, Murphy had told the reporter that if he had to do it all over again he might not.

"Now six years later,' Murphy claims, "'The press have made me out to be an idiot by printing only one side of the story.'"

He said six years earlier, the same press had made him into a hero and now that some had begun to champion Pavlick's cause, they made him feel like he had done something wrong. Sweeney recalled writing a letter defending Murphy that ran in the Union Leader and one selectman in Belmont later tried to get him fired for writing it.

Under pressure from Loeb, the N.H. State Attorney's Office petitioned for Pavlick's release and in due course, he was freed.

Polly Murphy and Sweeney remembered Pavlick would drive his car to the street in Belmont where they lived and watch her family.

Sweeney recalled that he would sometimes sit outside the Murphy home but since he was the only cop in town he would often get called to a crime and have to leave the Murphy's unattended.

On Wednesday, Polly Murphy remembered her husband saying that if Pavlick or one of his supporters wanted to come gunning for him they should know he "wasn't a bad shot himself."

Pavlick continued to harass the Murphys until he aged to the point where he was taken in by the N.H. Veterans Home. In 1975 he died at the age of 88.