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NH man was accused of 1960 JFK plot blow up JFK

Lee Harvey Oswald will be remembered forever as the man who killed an American President and changed a nation.

But only a dwindling number of folks recall the name of Richard Paul Pavlick, even in his adopted hometown of Belmont.

Still, by all official accounts, if Pavlick had had his way, John F. Kennedy never would have become President — and it wouldn't have been Oswald who killed him.

Pavlick was arrested in Florida in December 1960, a month before Kennedy's inauguration. Authorities said Pavlick drove his 1950 Buick from Belmont to Palm Beach with dynamite in the trunk, planning to crash it into Kennedy's car and detonate the explosives.

The way history tells the tale, Pavlick was waiting outside the Kennedys' home in Palm Beach on Dec. 11, 1960, ready to carry out his plan when Kennedy departed for Sunday Mass. But when the President-elect emerged, he was not alone; his wife, daughter and baby son were with him.

So Pavlick postponed his plot, unwilling to "harm innocent children," he reportedly told authorities later.

He never got another chance; he was arrested four days later by police and federal agents who discovered the explosives in his trunk.

Earl Sweeney, the state's assistant commissioner of safety, is among the few who still remember the Pavlick affair firsthand.

In 1960, Sweeney was deputy police chief in Belmont, where his path crossed Pavlick's on many occasions.

Sweeney's account

Sweeney recently wrote an account of that time, both from his own memories and published accounts. He recalls Pavlick as a retired postal worker from Boston with "a perpetually dour expression" and "a large shock of white hair."
Pavlick was 73 years old in 1960. He lived in a small "ramshackle" house. Known for his "volatile and argumentative nature," he would often speak at Belmont's town meeting and was a "vocal critic" of local government, Sweeney wrote.

Convinced that the water company was poisoning the water supply, Pavlick refused to pay his water bill and threatened a company supervisor. Sweeney also was called to intervene when Pavlick threatened to shoot an electric lineman if he shut off the electricity because of nonpayment.

Pavlick had few friends, Sweeney recalled, but one man whose friendship he cultivated was Thomas Murphy, Belmont's postmaster.

Sweeney said local folks noticed a change in Pavlick's demeanor after Kennedy was elected. "He seemed obsessed with the fact that Kennedy, if elected, would be the first Catholic President of the U.S. and complained that if this happened, 'the Pope would be running the United States from Rome.'"

Pavlick also resented the Kennedy family's wealth. And during one of his daily chats with Murphy, Sweeney said, Pavlick "remarked that someone should shoot Kennedy before he could take office."

In late November 1960, Pavlick suddenly deeded his property over to the Spaulding Youth Center and "left town, bag and baggage," Sweeney wrote. Then postcards from him started arriving in Belmont from cities around the U.S.

It was Murphy who noticed they came from places where Kennedy had been appearing, Sweeney said. "The messages on the cards that Postmaster Murphy received seemed to him to become more bizarre and disjointed, and on one of them he wrote that people would soon be hearing from him 'in a big way.'"

Murphy shared his suspicions with Sweeney and then-Police Chief Donald "Bucky" Leith. They began investigating and learned that Pavlick had recently purchased dynamite, wire and blasting caps at a local hardware store, telling the owner he planned to blast some stumps in his yard.

"I drove up to Pavlick's now-deserted house and examined his lot. I could find no signs of any stumps being blasted," Sweeney said.

The local officials called the Secret Service and U.S. postal inspectors, and authorities put out a nationwide "stop and hold" for Pavlick's vehicle.
After Pavlick was arrested in Florida, Sweeney wrote, he made self-incriminating statements about his intent to harm the President. "The police also found a letter on Pavlick's person that said ... it was Pavlick's intention to 'remove him in any way possible.'"

**Pavlick's version**

Richard Pavlick published his own 77-page memoir, "Six Years in Hell," which is available on the Belmont town website. He insisted he was innocent.

He was never out of New Hampshire during the period he was accused of sending those postcards to Belmont, he wrote. And the dynamite, he said, was to get rid of stumps on his land.

Pavlick said he was heading to Mexico that December, but couldn't sell his home, so he transferred his property to a local couple "to give them a chance to own their own home." They gave a mortgage to Spaulding Youth Center, which took the property when the couple couldn't pay the $25 a month, he wrote.

After his arrest, Pavlick was sent to psychiatric hospitals in Washington, D.C., and Springfield, Mo. He never stood trial, and the federal charges were later dropped.

Pavlick then spent 2½ years at the state hospital in Concord.

**Publisher intervenes**

In 1966, after the Manchester Union Leader started looking into his case, publisher William Loeb began an editorial campaign to free Pavlick.

Sweeney, who by then was police chief in Belmont, opposed those efforts.

Pavlick had been writing letters from the hospital to Postmaster Murphy, "making veiled threats that the Postal Service may have made a hero out of Murphy, but someday Pavlick would be released and would be coming to see Murphy and 'congratulate him in person for the award he had received' for turning Pavlick in," Sweeney wrote.

"The postmaster kept sharing these letters with me and was obviously very shaken by them and concerned for the safety of himself and his family," he wrote. "The federal government had lost interest in Pavlick, and I felt that I was on my own as the lone full-time police officer in town to protect this family."

Sweeney wrote Loeb a personal letter, warning him that Pavlick was "still dangerous despite his age."
Released on parole

On Dec. 13, 1966, a judge ordered Pavlick, then 79, released on parole.

Pavlick rented an apartment in Manchester, renewed his driver's license and registered a car. And "almost immediately," Sweeney began getting worried calls from the Murphy family. "Pavlick would show up at various hours of the day, park just down the road from the Murphy residence and stare at the house."

Back then, there were no laws against "stalking," Sweeney said, so he just tried to keep an eye on the old man.

Pavlick, a World War I veteran, died on Veterans Day in 1975 at the V.A. Medical Center in Manchester. He was 88.

In the dedication of his memoir, Pavlick wrote: "To William Loeb of the Manchester Union Leader, I owe my life for he believed in me and had his reporter dig out the truth."

That reporter, Arthur Egan, wrote one last piece about the controversial figure, published on Nov. 14, 1975.

Egan wrote that he was ashamed he hadn't continued to help Pavlick clear his name after his release. The man, he said, had a caring side that few outsiders saw.

Whenever Pavlick could — especially on his birthday — he would bring ice cream and cake to patients at the state hospital. And he once asked Egan for help to bring them an old piano he had bought for $25. "Those poor people in my old ward have nothing to do, so I thought they could bang on the piano," he told him.

Sweeney left his position as Belmont chief in 1975 to take a job with the state Division of Motor Vehicles. He's had decades to consider what happened back then, and he finds lessons that resonate in this new age.

Unlike Richard Pavlick, Sweeney wrote, "Today's terrorist does not have a second's hesitancy about killing women and children — the more victims, the merrier.

"I know from personal experience how even a small town in the peaceful State of New Hampshire could harbor a terrorist or sleeper cell," he said. "And that the most effective way to root one out is for citizens just like the late Postmaster Thomas M. Murphy to contact the authorities and report suspicious activity, and for the authorities they report it to, to take it seriously and investigate."