

The Secret Heartbeat of America: A New Look at the Mena Story

by Daniel Hopsicker

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Introduction

Everybody wants to be wanted, even television producers. So even though the little production company of which I am a part already has a business magazine television show up and modestly successful (Global Business 2000; don't tell us you haven't seen it) we wanted more. We had seen with our own eyes, for example, the sickening spectacle of what passes for entertainment these days: Tammy Faye Bakker at NATPE (television production convention) last year, peddling some talk show in syndication. And with one of the major studios distributing, yet!

We asked ourselves: have they no shame? In today's America that is what is known as a rhetorical question. What is this woman famous for? And the answer (Her husband embezzled hundreds of millions from little old ladies who couldn't afford it) was so depressing, we decided one day to offer up something of our own to add to America's no-longer-all-that-rich cultural stew.

Then one night while eating Mexican down on Melrose we came up with it: "conspiracy: the secret history." Remember "In Search Of" with Leonard Nimoy? Back in those more innocent times, nobody was running around in camouflage uniforms talking wildly about The New World Order. We wanted to do an "In Search of" for the paranoid '90s.

This is the story of the filming of the lead segment on that show.

Mena, Arkansas. If you haven't heard of it, don't worry: either you will, in which case the whole sordid mess has finally found the audience it so richly deserves, or you won't, in which case you were probably better off not knowing anyway. Because after months of research, the one thing we can say with certainty about US Government drug policy is, "If you have to ask, you're not allowed to know."

The Mena story reeks of government hypocrisy on the subject of drugs. It's the place mentioned when talk of Oliver North's contra-guns-and-cocaine operation comes up (not often, in polite conversation, and we still wonder, wazzup wit that?) It's where drug smuggler Barry Seal based planes that flew guns down to Central America, then drugs back, then guns down again, etc., with impunity, literally right under the noses of local law enforcement. If there is, in Bill Moyers' legendary phrase, a "Secret Government," a government that runs the other, more official one, Mena is a good place to look for it.

For Mena is what the 'Clintongate' scandals are all about, really; the commodities money was and is small potatoes, the Whitewater real estate deal simply par for the course in American political life. But around Mena swirls the smoke of real scandal: allegations of massive drug-smuggling with government complicity, whiffs of Oliver North's illegal, unconstitutional and national soul-corroding Iran/contra/cocaine connection. And all flavored with spicy rumors of secret Swiss bank accounts, hastening murder by death.

That's what makes Mena so important. If there's to be a real Watergate-type Sam Ervin at-the-gavel scandal in the next four years, Mena is where it will be focused. So Mena is where we headed.

Mena

The market in opium, heroin, cocaine and marijuana in the United States of America generates a gross volume of business in excess of US \$130 billion a year, making the importation, sale and distribution of drugs an enterprise that generates more revenue than any of the largest multinational corporations in the world. It makes the gross volume of illegal drugs in the United States greater than the gross national product of all but a dozen nations in the world.

It takes longer to get to Mena than it should; the map shows none of the slow winding curves that crawl back and forth through mountainous western Arkansas. From Little Rock to Hot Springs is a snap, then, just as you begin planning on lunch near the fabled Intermountain Regional Airport located in Mena, the road west recedes in front of you in torturous twists and turns, and before you're there it's late afternoon, and deep shadows are turning the landscape into a black and white picture with some sepia tinges where the setting sun hits the tops of bare white trees. It's pretty, almost picture-perfect country; the question is: does it hide a secret that could bring down a government?

Because it's here, in this town nestled below the dark emerald ridgeline of the Ouchita range, that the netherworld of crime intersects with that of our nation's secret intelligence operations in a way that is perhaps more visible, if still indistinct, than at any time since the Kennedy 'hits' of the 60's.

Once in Mena itself, you're rewarded, first, with a feeling of being as far away from the rest of the world as, say, Nepal. There's an almost eerie sense of being outside of the ordinary scope of everyday existence, a feeling that must have been felt by the renegades, bandits, moonshiners and civil war irregulars who have called these densely forested hillsides home. When we pull our dusty crew van piled to the top with video gear into the asphalt parking lot outside the Sun Country Motel (the biggest of three in town) its empty of cars. And there's not much traffic on the main drag either.

We're a typical electronic news-gathering crew: a writer/producer (me), a cameraman who'd really rather be a cinematographer, and a sound engineer, who's already missing his girlfriend back in San Jose. And, as I check us in at the front desk (the gracious small town desk clerk showing no surprise at all at one more film crew pulling in) fatigue from the long travel day makes me wonder about our seemingly quixotic quest, our perhaps deluded, because self-funded, effort to shoot a pilot for a television show. (True story: the first producer I ever worked for in Hollywood had said to me, "Kid, anything worth making is worth making with other peoples' money.") But we were passionate about this project, as all creative people have to be, or pretend to be, and besides, as one waggish agent put it, we were shooting "The X-Files, for real."

And so we've driven this icy road to see for ourselves this place, without which Bill Clinton might be able to serve out his second term in peace. And also to meet The Man.

That's because you can't talk about "Mena" without mentioning Russell Welch, the legendary big-boned lawman who has been compared favorably with John Wayne in more than one retelling of this tale. Assigned to investigate drug smuggler Barry Seal in 1982, an assignment he never wanted and for which he felt himself outgunned, Welch had single-handedly fought the Dark Side forces

(so well-hidden he was never even sure who they really were) to a standstill. He may not have stopped drug-smuggling through this airport, that may have been built expressly for "Special Ops," but he sure slowed it down a tad. Or ... did he?

That's one of the questions we've come to ask him. His voice on the phone is gruff but friendly. He'll be over to meet us at our motel in an hour. And so I rustle through my notes for the fifth time, trying to be as prepared as possible with the acknowledged facts, and knowing, at the same time, that except for the few Mena scholars out there, full knowledge of the case in all its frequently political perambulations is well nigh impossible.

The facts of the Mena story, already much reported in venues from CBS to the Wall Street Journal, have somehow failed to catch the nation's attention. The reason, some analysts feel, is that the playing field on which the Mena story takes place has been incredibly muddied by political operatives of both the left and right, attempting to use the case for partisan advantage. Welch and the other players and eye-witnesses are chary, wary, and, in some cases, downright scared for their lives when microphones begin poking in their faces. And not, according to the story we're about to hear, without good cause.

So we're not holding out much hope of prying any new revelations from Mr. Welch. We just want to ask him some simple questions: "If drugs are the biggest industry in the world today, who's the industry's General Motors? And, who did he think had the bigger airline distribution system: Federal Express or Cocaine Unlimited?"

We've decided not to go for the minutiae connected with Welch's years-long thwarted probe into government complicity in drug-smuggling. Instead we'll try to tell the story from a different angle, so as to not get bogged down in the already-cited recitals of things like the value of drugs imported by Mena figure Barry Seal, for example (\$3-5 billion, according to one governmental body with some knack with figures, the IRS). Besides, the "Just-the-facts-ma'am" trap always ends in dry recitals of charges and counter-charges. Like the Robert McNamara-esque 'body counts' from the Vietnam war, it masks a bloody reality in statistics. And when in doubt, we turn to Mark Twain, who said, "There's three kinds of liars: Liars, damn liars, and people that quote statistics."

A tactic we think 'might could work,' as some say in this part of heaven, to tell the story of gun and drug-running in Arkansas in the 80's, might be this: if you want to find the truth about possible US Government involvement in drug-smuggling in the '80's, you'll have to look around the periphery, out of the corners of your eyes. Because, face it, these boys are pros. Give the devil his due. Trade craft is what they DO. And Plausible Deniability is their middle name(s).

So we've decided to look not for the smoking gun, but for the bent twigs. The

local people, citizens, lawmen, and honest public officials, whose lives have been changed, in some cases lost, whose careers have been ruined, because of the invisible elephant of drug smuggling that came to squat over the Arkansas of the 1980's. We would look for the casualties of friendly fire. What the Pentagon calls "collateral damage." And we didn't have to look far, to find a story with an extraordinary human dimension.

The Train Deaths: Don Henry and Kevin Ives

The Train Deaths, they're called in Arkansas, and our first stop on our 'conspiracy' shoot in Arkansas had been right outside Little Rock, to visit the site of the murders of Kevin Ives and Don Henry, two high school students who were murdered in 1987.

Avenging their deaths has been a *cause celebre* for local citizens and news people for nine years. It's one of those small town cases where every one in town — except the people with the handcuffs — seem to know who was responsible for the murder of two youths whose presence complicated or compromised a drug and/or money drop. It took place in Saline County, in the bedroom suburbs of Little Rock, in an area where nearby neighbors had often registered complaints to police about low-flying aircraft — presumably on drug and money drops — that would buzz their homes at night with their lights off.

We had first learned of the story, as one finds out about so many non-establishment-sanctioned things these days, on the World Wide Web. (For a complete telling, check out <http://www.idmedia.com/>, and, by all means, order the compelling documentary available from the site.)

Some people will tell you that, today, the Internet is the only free press in America. These same folks, probably, think that ever-growing press conglomerate Time Warner's corporate slogan should be: "Bringing You the Finest in Cradle-to-Grave Thought Management."

We don't know about that. We confess to having less lofty ambitions when we first got online. Our first big project was to download some dirty pictures before the advent of the Communications Decency Act. A juvenile ambition, sure, but we found it to be a lot harder than we'd thought it would, and devoted what felt like several man-years to the attempt. It was our own mini-Manhattan Project, and it taught us more about computers than everything we'd learned before. (Never underestimate sex as a motive force; Freud was right.)

But juvenilia soon loses its excitement. The Internet, for us, had not. We had

discovered a whole new world. Information was loose on Planet Three! And the story we discovered online, and soon became fascinated with, concerned two high school seniors, Don Henry and Kevin Ives, who were run over in the middle of the night by a Union Pacific train on August 23, 1987. All of the engineers on the train reported that the boys were lying motionless beneath a tarp, bodies laid out identically across the tracks, with almost military precision.

Despite this, the Arkansas State Medical Examiner ruled the deaths accidental. The mother of one of the two boys, Linda Ives, sensed foul play. So did others in the community. Almost immediately suspicions among the local citizenry focused on speculation that the boys' deaths might have resulted from their stumbling upon a drug drop. Just what — in 1987 — would have made the local population spring to such a conclusion?

This speculation leaped out at us as being more than slightly curious. "Death by Drug Drop" is not a common cause of death, at least not where we live. And the citizens of Saline County, where the deaths took place, seem anything but a conspiracy-mongering bunch. They live and work in mostly bedroom communities 30 minutes outside the State Capital of Little Rock, with all the anonymity of middle class people everywhere. They go to church. They pay their taxes. They mow their lawns. They sew.

Linda Ives

Linda Ives is the mother of one of the slain boys. She graciously allows us to invade her well-kept suburban home with all the detritus — lights, camera, cables, donuts — a video crew brings along.

Today she speaks of the death of her son, and the crusade which has transpired, with a detachment borne of regular retelling of the tragedy. Still, her composure breaks at almost regular intervals, as the import of what she has to say sinks home. At those places her narrative loses its third person feel, and become a simple story of a mother losing a son.



"To be the mother of a boy killed in one of the most vicious and notorious murders in Arkansas was, and is, not something easy," she begins slowly. "When this happened, in August of 1987, I was a teller at a

local credit union. The very first thing we heard was that the boys had been shot, and then tied to the train tracks. Then we're being told, no, the coroner is saying the boys consumed massive amounts of marijuana, then fell asleep on the tracks."

The evidence pointing towards murder, and away from accidental death, was almost immediately apparent. "There were suspicions immediately in the community," she continues. "We were hearing things from Kevin's friends, and then from people who'd been at the scene. Everyone was saying that the ruling of 'accidental' death was just ridiculous. We got word from one of the paramedics at the scene that the boys blood wasn't right, that it was dark and tar-like, that it indicated the boys had been dead for some time when the train arrived."

And then there was the matter of the tarp.

"The engineer and crew on the train all said the boys had been under a tarp on the tracks. But the sheriff's office said there had been no tarp, that it had been an optical illusion. They even went so far as to tell us they had conducted tests on the boys clothes, and had found no fibers that would indicate they had been under a tarp."

The deceit began to unravel, said Mrs. Ives, partly owing to the fact that her husband, Larry Ives, has been a Union Pacific engineer for 31 years. He knew the crew that had manned the death train well. "They (the crew) told Larry that they had even taken the sheriffs deputies back to where the tarp had landed," she says grimly. "They pointed it out to them."

"Later we found out that the sheriffs had done no tests on the boys' clothes; it was just another in a long string of lies."

Thus the political education of a grieving mother began.

"At first we were just very confused, and frustrated with local law enforcement. We discovered that the first deputy on the scene immediately ordered it worked as an accident. When other officers showed up, they argued strongly that it should be treated as a crime scene. They were overruled by higher authorities. So, we learned that it had then been worked as an accident. Learned that the scene was never even roped off, and that the supposedly thorough investigation they told me had been done had left my son's foot in a sneaker lying in plain sight for over two days."

So Linda Ives began a struggle — still ongoing — to bring the boys' killers to justice. For killers there are, or at least appear to be, in this story. And like so many of the monstrous sociopaths that have heavily sprinkled American society for the past thirty years (I'm thinking, now, just of the ones who conveniently kept diaries) these killers are still on the loose. They have never been brought to

answer for their crimes, despite seven separate local, state, and federal investigations into the case.

"As a parent, when I would hear about the "drug problem," I thought about local kids," states Mrs. Ives. "You never think the "drug problem" concerns local law enforcement, and public officials. But slowly, over time, that's what I came to believe."

First there were the uncooperative state officials.

"We held a press conference, and laid out everything. The media was very supportive, and that, along with public outrage, helped get the case to a grand jury. But from state officials, we got absolutely no cooperation. We ran into brick walls everywhere."

The stonewalling even included refusals to obey court orders to turn over documents and test results on the part of the Arkansas State Crime Lab.

"The Little Rock Crime Lab defied a court order to supply the things we were requesting in order to have a second autopsy done. So we called the State Attorney General's Office. They said it was illegal for the crime lab to defy our court order, but that they would not intervene in any way. When I asked — given that they wouldn't help enforce the court order — what recourse I had, they said, 'none.' "

But 'murder will out,' as the Bard said. The parents' crusade resulted in a grand jury investigation, which ruled the deaths criminal. The second autopsy, done by a noted Atlanta forensic pathologist, showed that the face of one of the boys had been smashed in before death, and that his cheek still bore the imprint of a rifle butt. The other boy had been stabbed in the back.

All of which the State Medical Examiner, Dr. Fahmy Malak, had failed somehow to ascertain.

"There have been now a total of seven local, state, and federal investigations into the murders on those train tracks. And over the course of those seven investigations I've learned some amazing things," Linda Ives states.

"We've learned the sheriffs lied about testing for fibers on the boys clothes. We've learned that Don Henry was stabbed, that Kevin's face was crushed with a rifle butt, that the weight of their lungs, filled with blood, was clear proof from the beginning that they didn't die from the impact of that train.

"But the most amazing thing we learned was that Kevin and Don were killed because of a very large drug smuggling operation that involved public officials

and public corruption, even in the murders themselves.

"There were witnesses to my son's murder; witnesses who have passed FBI polygraphs, placing government officials on the train tracks with those boys before they were murdered. And this information is also corroborated by other witnesses."

Mrs. Ives pauses, and we call a halt to shooting. My crew and I sit in stunned silence at what we have been hearing. Linda sees this, and smiles, almost for the first time. When we had arrived, we'd made much of the 'small-town-y' nature of the directions she had given us to her home, directions a little in the old 'Turn left where the old Ben Franklin used to be' school. Now the tables have been turned. Linda looks bemused at our cityboy naiveté.

"Its all true," she states matter-of-factly. "Just ask Jean."

Jean Duffey

The "Jean" she is referring to is Jean Duffey. Today Jean Duffey is a high school algebra teacher in a suburb of Houston Texas, a handsome woman with short-cropped brown hair, a woman who looks just like the soccer moms we heard so much about before the recent election. But six years ago she was the prosecuting attorney of a federally funded Drug Task Force in Saline County Arkansas, whose undercover agents began to come to her with revelations about the murders of the two boys.

And no soccer mom encounters I'd ever had prepared me for what she told us right at the beginning of our interview.



"The FBI has eyewitnesses to the slayings," she tells us in that matter-of-fact tone affected by those who, for professional reasons, are forced to cultivate as much detachment as they can. "One witness at the scene even passed a polygraph. But still, to this date, nothing has been done. It's been this way from day one, with seven separate investigations, each one stopped."

The initial hue and cry by local citizens and the media, Duffey explains, was directed at the unbelievable verdict of the State Medical Examiner, who ruled the boys' deaths accidental. This forced the second examination we'd heard about

from Linda Ives. Remember? The one showing that one boy had been stabbed in the back, while the other's face had been smashed in, bearing the imprint of a rifle butt?

Hearing this stomach-wrenching information related to us on camera for a second time in two days, I had a curious reaction. I felt slightly giddy. There was a disconnect between the events being related, and my reaction. I was tempted to ask: "What could Dr. Malak have been thinking about, that day those boys' lifeless bodies crossed his examining room table? Lunch?"

Later I was to feel that my feelings were not as inappropriate as they appeared at first blush. How can one react in the face of what feels like sheer malignant evil? As I listened further, the threads of — dare I say it? — conspiracy — began to weave tighter, and I began thinking of Dr. Malak not as of someone merely incompetent, but as of someone both incompetent and sinister, sort of a backwoods Joseph Mengele.

"Fahmy Malak was bulletproof in Arkansas; he was completely protected," states Duffey. "And that was true, even in the face of incredible adverse publicity from the media after the second examination showed how clearly ridiculous his ruling of accidental death was. We are way beyond the bounds of incompetence here; we are into criminal intent."

So, I asked, was Dr. Malek an accessory to murder? Ever the prosecutor, Duffy considered her words carefully. "Accessory to murder," she said slowly, "is different from conspiracy to cover up, which is what I believe Dr. Malak was involved in."

But we are getting slightly ahead of ourselves. I ask how Ms. Duffey's Drug Task Force came to be involved in the Train Deaths murder investigation.

"I had hired seven undercover investigators," she explains. "Their job was to make drug buys, and work their way up the ladder to drug suppliers. That's who we were after. But the connections began to lead almost immediately to public officials, who were either protecting the drug trade or actively involved in the drug trade themselves."

"And the person whose name came up most often was also the person who had been the special prosecutor in the initial grand jury investigation into the Train Deaths, a nearly year-long proceeding that did nothing but establish that the cause of death was not accidental, but was indeed homicide."

"His name is Dan Harmon. It became apparent almost immediately that Dan Harmon was a key player in the drug trafficking activity taking place in Saline county."

Duffey pauses, remembering. "About three months after we were up and running, one of my undercover investigators asked if he could open the Trains Deaths case, which was, at that point, two-and-a-half years old, and perhaps Arkansas's most famous unsolved mystery. It had been featured twice on the TV program, and people who were possible witnesses were turning up dead."

"I asked him why he thought that we should get involved. 'Two reasons,' he told me. 'First, because it's drug-related. And second, because we can solve it.'

"Why, I asked him, did he think we could solve a crime that other investigations had been unable to? Because, he said, the other investigations were cover-ups. No real investigation had yet been conducted thoroughly and forthrightly."

Duffey's Drug Task Force investigators proceeded to develop startling evidence that had previously been ignored. First, on the drug-related aspect of the crimes.

"One of the first things my investigator did was to interview people living in the vicinity of where Kevin and Don were murdered. He discovered that drug drops had been rumored in that area over the six months before the boys murders, that citizens had filed reports of low-flying aircraft buzzing over in the middle of the night with their lights turned off.

"When a citizen made one of these complaints, an officer would go out and take a report, and then do nothing. No investigation was done. These reports were sitting in the sheriff's office when Kevin and Don were murdered. But the connection between the planes and the deaths was not made."

Duffey allows herself a wry smile. "I found it very hard to believe that my undercover officer could see the obvious, while no one else could."

Duffey continues speaking in her prosecutorial monotone, telling how a confessed drug dealer had testified that she had, as part of her participation in an "officially" sanctioned drug ring, picked up cocaine that had been 'dropped' on the train tracks in the same vicinity.

Apparently, cocaine was raining from the darkened night skies over Arkansas.

"The system kept me from prosecuting," she continues. "Our Drug Task Force was actually doomed from the beginning. On the very day I was appointed to head the drug task force, Gary Arnold, my boss, walked into my office, stared at me hard, and instructed me not to use the Drug Task Force to investigate any public officials."

There was a massive cover-up, Duffey states in an even tone. "My drug task force was shut down cold. Because we were getting too close. We were not allowed to

get there."

What happened next? "I got smeared," says Duffey. "There was a massive smear campaign against me, led by Dan Harmon, who fed misleading and untrue information to the local papers."

So Jean Duffey's career began to follow a familiar trajectory, one often seen in those who refuse to look the other way. Doug Thompson, a local reporter on the main Little Rock paper, the Arkansas Democrat, led a campaign against her, while being fed information by the man who would later become the focal point of suspicions.

And, at that point, Duffey says, she realized she could do no more, and took the case to the US Attorney.

And the smear campaign? The one that ran courageous and crusading prosecuting attorney Jean Duffey right out of state? What about it?

Duffey almost smiles. "Today I realize, after working with the FBI for eighteen months beginning in March of 1995, what the basis was for Dan Harmon's viciousness. I now know that Dan Harmon was on the tracks with the boys the night that they were murdered."

This was the point during the shooting of this story at which I began to feel like the Greek Chorus at an outdoor play. I was thinking of a writer from the heartland of America. I was thinking of Kurt Vonnegut, who gave us a refrain so constantly-repeated that it seemed to have become a mantra in the 60's. 'So it goes,' his characters would say. 'So it goes.'

But I started this tale in Mena, and the alert reader may be forgiven for asking, how does Mena connect with two unfortunate murders which, let's grant for the sake of argument, may well have been committed in the course of drug smuggling activities in Arkansas, and may well have involved corrupt officials?

What does Mena have to do with the Train Deaths, events that occurred half a state away?

Well, this, for starters: if the drug smuggling in Mena, Arkansas was widespread and pervasive, it would still just be the tip of the iceberg, albeit a very big tip. What Russell Welch, acknowledged as the expert in Arkansas drug smuggling, even by his drug-smuggling foes in those times, such as Barry Seal's brother-in-law

Bill Bottoms, (who has lately discovered a highly vocal mission to portray Mena as a myth) could tell us, was simple: was Mena an anomaly, an isolated incidence in an isolated place?

Or did what happened there bespeak a larger corruption of the Arkansas bodily public in those heady years of the 80's, years before the American public at large began to wonder whether the drug policy of its government was Just Say NO ... or Just Fly Low.

After all, cocaine had never been known to rain from the skies anywhere I lived during the 80's. And I lived in Los Angeles.

We were on a journey, we now realized, to see the Wizard. But we had two brief stops first.

Our first stop was to visit with the reporter whose fingerprints are all over the case, Doug Thompson of the Arkansas Democrat, the state's main paper, since it bought its competition. It's located in a handsome gray stone building near the heart of Little Rock.

Thompson seemed happy to see us, and agreed to talk, but not on-camera. "Of all the TV people who have been down here to cover Mena," he told me. "You're the first one to stop by to see me. And my name's on all the clips."

Indeed it was. Thompson is a burly affable man, easy to like. He had covered the Train Deaths through most of its permutations, over almost a seven year span. But his easy manner seemed at odds with what Jean Duffey had told us about him, that she had been hounded out of state at least partly by his coverage of her. We asked about his role.

"Driving that woman out of state is the thing I'm proudest about in my years at this paper," he stated. "Did you know, while she ran the task force, her 18-year old daughter used her mother's position to obtain a drivers' license stating she was 21?"

I did my best to look shocked. Shocked! And I was. As soon as he retailed this innocuous-enough but still faintly scurrilous piece of information, I became uneasily aware of being in the presence of someone who might not turn out to be a disinterested information broker to the out-of-state truth-seeker.

An 18-year old girl procuring fake ID did not seem like a capital crime to me. Maybe it is to you. But it did strike me as just the sort

of thing someone attempting to prove a point might dredge up. Suddenly it seemed an agenda had reared its ugly head.

"She's crazy, Jean is," he continues. "Jean Duffey and Dan Harmon are both crazy, they both belong in a lunatic asylum, just in separate wings."

Ah-Hah! The plague-on-both-your-houses defense. We smiled. Doug smiled. Later, when we did stand-up on our story, on the sidewalk just outside the paper's offices, security guards stood uneasily just inside the main door.

The Art Of Disinformation

That left just one stone left unturned. Billy Bob "Bear" Bottoms is a genuine Louisiana piece of work, as anyone with two nicknames can be safely assumed to be. He is also the former brother-in-law of Barry Seal, and one of his drug pilots during the 80's, as well as a former US Navy pilot.

Lately Bob Bottoms seems to have discovered a new vocation: destroyer of what he calls the "Mena Myth," first in a Penthouse article, widely quoted by debunkers of the San Jose Mercury News "[Dark Alliance](#)" series on the CIA, the Contras, and Cocaine. And then he has surfaced suddenly to become a highly visible presence at those meeting grounds on the Internet where topics like these are bandied about, inspiring heated discussion in forums and information lists like CIA/Drugs and alt.current.events.clinton.whitewater. (Yes, there really is such a 'place.' Isn't cyberspace grand?)

The clear consensus about Bottoms was that he was, at some third party's behest, supplying disinformation to lead investigators seeking an intelligence agency hand in drug smuggling in Arkansas off the scent. He admitted smuggling massive amounts of drugs (and had the newspaper clippings to prove it). And he also admitted to working for the DEA for six years (more clippings). What he didn't admit to was ever having gotten caught smuggling drugs, a fact which normally precedes contrition in drug smugglers. On this point most knowledgeable observers see a hole in the bottom of Mr. Bottoms curriculum vitae.

We were also warned about the dangers of meeting with him. A dispatch reached us alleging that Bottoms has been known to plant drugs on innocent people and then turn them in.

So when we arrived for our meeting, at a hotel in Baton Rouge, we eyed him a bit nervously. But he has a disarming smile, and intelligent blue eyes to go with a brown bomber jacket, jeans and a heavily-weathered if handsome face.

The thrust of Bottoms' argument is that Mena was a small airfield from which a small drug operation took place over a small period of time during the 1980's. Period. During our conversation over breakfast, we took no notes, but gauged, as best we could, the man.

And to our chagrin, we found we liked him. He seemed more a swashbuckling type than the kind of sleazeball we've all seen in movies like "Scarface."

He made much of the fact that several of the principals in the Mena story, including, most notably, Terry Reed, were liars, people for whom he shared, along with Russell Welch, a fine contempt. He had even posted to the Internet his correspondence with Welch, from which one could glean a wary mutual respect.

I took two things from our inconclusive encounter. First I realized what true 'babes in the woods' most of us would-be truth-detectors must appear to people schooled in the arts of dissemination, as Bottoms has been. And, second, I wanted, despite the chill temperature, to crawl under our crew van to check for packages that weren't there before.

Russell Welch

Russell Welch arrived unannounced and without ceremony at our motel in Mena. He looked every inch the undercover investigator he no longer is: alert green eyes, slightly slouched, nondescript clothing. The man seems born to skulk.

What he agreed to do with us was this: go to dinner, but not eat dinner, at a local place called the Cutting Board, which served hamburgers the size of small flying saucers. Or of small fedoras, if you're one of the few who has not yet seen (or been aboard) a saucer. He would talk to us, he said, but not with cameras present.

At this point, perhaps a word or two about Russell Welch for those of you tuning in late might be in order. Although hundreds of thousands of words have already been written about him, his story is not yet a well-known one.



Trooper Russell Welch of the Arkansas State Police was assigned to investigate drug smuggler Barry Seal in the early '80's. Seal had made the small Interregional Mountain Airport in Mena his home field. Thinking this not an entirely peachy idea, the State Police put Welch on the case.

Seal had been in Special Forces in the 60's. In 1972, as a TWA pilot, he had been arrested for smuggling explosives for anti-Castro Cubans. Seal's C-123K cargo plane, "The Fat Lady," was procured by Seal from Air America, the known CIA subsidiary.

After Seal 'sold' the plane, it crashed in 1986, with Eugene Hasenfus on board. This marked the first public exposure of Oliver North's secret contra war, set up in contravention of a Congressional Act, the Boland Amendment, which made such activity illegal.

There has been much talk about interference in Welch's investigation, and about prosecutions which were subverted. Welch himself has been quoted to this effect. He had his career ruined by his seemingly quixotic quest to bring drug smuggling to a halt at the Mena airport. He is either a pitiful Dudley Do-Right, or an American hero of the first order.

After spending the briefest possible amount of time with him, I'm clear about where I come down on that question. I'd name my kid after him, had I one to name.

From this brief outline, several things should be clear to any meathead with the slightest hint of gray matter beneath his cap. A secret government operation was run out of this remotest possible outpost of the Empire. A "Bamboozle in the Boondocks." Some of it involved drugs.

And nobody bothered to let Trooper Welch in on the joke.

The punch line was not too funny for Russell Welch. He 'contracted' anthrax, the military warfare biological agent variety. His doctor told him someone had sprayed it in his face. Then an FBI agent was about to arrest him for illegal wiretapping, but a local sheriff dissuaded him, on the grounds that Welch had been in the hospital dying of anthrax at the time. (If you're not Welch, some of this seems funny.)

Finally, Welsh retired from the Arkansas State Police. Alive. But not through lack of trying.

Today Welch is an understandably wary man. At dinner he outlined for us the way things went at Mena.

"The whole method of smuggling was an excellent system that Seal's men had been carefully instructed in. Flying back, they would 'kick drugs' at a previously unknown spot. After the drugs were 'kicked,' the coordinates of the spot were given to a ground or a helicopter crew and they would then go to a remote area and pick them up. Then the planes would land back in Mena, and they would be clean."

Welch pointedly mentions that Barry Seal was neither the first nor the last drug smuggler to call Mena home. We coaxed him, "So you're saying there were smugglers here before ... "

"Sure. Oh yeah. Before Seal and after Seal. And I assume there are smugglers here right now."

Be still my beating heart ... This is the first reference I've heard to current drug smuggling out of Mena Arkansas. Russell grins. He's got a good sense of humor. "It's legal here."

He goes on to relate a story about a local radio station with a Howard Stern wanna-be who had announced one morning that the big news that day was that the local prosecuting attorney had legalized cocaine out at Mena airport. You could tell Welsh was trying to be funny, but his heart wasn't in it.

"Did it come as a surprise to you," we asked him, "when the CIA finally admitted that they had conducted training at Mena?"

"Oh, no."

"That was something you knew?"

"Yeah, that was commonplace. But long long ago."

"Are they telling everything?"

"No they're not," Welsh answers slowly. "They just mentioned this one two-week operation they had here, which I suspect was testing of an airplane. They had some top-secret spy plane out there, and the deputies caught them, and everyone at the airport knew what was going on, word got around, and so they eventually went to the local sheriff and gave him one of those little coins that they give to people who discover them."

Here's news! Coins! Ferret out a black op somewhere, and you'll get a commemorative medallion.

"When the deputies drove up on them at the airport one of them swept the area

with his flashlight and saw people standing around wearing those lab suits that look like spacesuits. It caused a bit of fear."

Welsh is grinning again. "Part of that operation's still here."

But that's it. Nothing more is clearly forthcoming. We change our tack. "The FBI tried to frame you for an illegal wiretap?"

"Yeah. Fortunately I was in the hospital dying at the time and muffed their case up a bit."

"You were dying of anthrax, correct?"

"Yeah. That's what I was diagnosed and treated for."

"How did you find that out?"

Welsh doesn't grin this time. "Doctor says, 'you're dying,' or words to that effect ... "

We ask him about Bill Bottoms, and get another taste of reality, covert-style.

"Old Billy Bottoms is a liar. But Billy tells a lot of truth. Billy Bottoms is who he says he is."

Ah. The art of disinformation.

"One of the biggest things Billy Bob is doing wrong is not saying in posts that he's limited, that he doesn't know everything. This operation with Barry Seal isn't the limit of what took place here. Barry Seal was very limited. Barry is a cocaine smuggler, he got busted, he rolled over, he got burned and then he got killed. Barry Seal wasn't in charge of nuthin.'

"From 1984 on, Barry Seal is trying to stay out of prison. Struggling to keep his importance, struggling with Billy Bottoms' buddy Jake Jacobson that he (Bottoms) stayed with after Seal was dead, begging him for something to keep him important. Something that will keep him important in the DEA's eyes, and then they dumped him in July of '84, and that's when he really started struggling — he's trying to help them find Pablo Escobar.

And when Duncan and I interviewed him in December of '85, he was a scared desperate man. He wasn't in charge of nothing. He is trying to stay alive. He knew a contract was out on him then. He talked about it. He's trying to stay out of prison. And he's scared to death of Arkansas. Because he wasn't protected; he was protected everywhere, except at the state level in Arkansas."

"Was that because of you?"

"Because of me. He talks about it in the transcription of my and Duncan's interview with him. It was almost a defeatist attitude. Like, I'm a dead man anyway. And two months later, he was a dead man."

Welsh was passionate now, and he went on to talk about the numerous congressional subcommittees, "every subcommittee that's been through here — four or five of them — are independent hotshot investigations to expose everything — and all they end up exposing is witnesses."

He mentioned the name of one, relating how she had been exposed to peril after being assured of something he referred to as "a congressional umbrella." He snorted derisively. "I'm not sure that there is such a thing. They dumped her, they forgot about her, but she was exposed for what she did."

Welch stands angrily. We're uncertain what comes next. It's getting late. Maybe we've had our interview. "C'mon," Welch says. "I'll give you a tour of the airport."

Midnight Ride to Mena

We have no tape recording of what follows, so paraphrases are inexact. Even if we had been carrying a recorder, Welch pulled the old trick of cranking the radio up in his car as he drove us around the outside of the Interregional Mountain Airport.

But we caught, clearly, the gist of what he had to say. Mena is not about just things that went on in the early 80's. Mena is about things that are going on right now.

"See that hangar?" he would say, pointing out this, or that building looming in the darkness. "That's owned by ... " And then there would be an anecdote.

"That's owned by _____, who today owns almost half the airport," he said at one stop on our tour. "He doesn't exist in history back past a safe house in Baltimore in 1972."

Or: "That hangar's owned by _____. He smuggled heroin through Laos back in the Seventies."

Or: "That hangar's owned by a guy who just went bankrupt. So what's he do?"

Flies to Europe for more money. Don't tell me crime don't pay!"

He shows us a half dozen lumbering Fokker aircraft parked on an apron. "The DEA's been tracking those planes back and forth to Columbia for a while now."

It goes on like this for a while. At the end, he seems spent, but satisfied. He looks over across the car seat at me. "You know how many nights I spent out here in the dark, watching planes take off and land?" he asks softly.

Then he tells me one of his secrets. He illustrates by getting out of the car, and walking over to a parked plane. As he exits, I notice a revolver lying on the drivers' seat he's just vacated. It seems that one of Trooper Welch's few pleasures, back in those days when he was attempting to bring drug smugglers to heel, was, when the call of nature overcame him on his lonely night vigils, to relieve himself on the side of a plane that flew drugs in and out of American airspace with impunity.

It seems a perfect gesture. They may get you in the end, but, fuck it — piss on 'em. A rebel gesture, purely American. As American as — well, lets save that for the big close. Trooper Welch's eyes grow solemn, even in the dark.

"I could tell you what's going on, but when you leave here, I'm still here with my family. And just the fact that you're going to do a television show, that may not even mention me or anything you got from me ... just the fact that you're going to do it is gonna cause me a bunch of shit. It always has, and it always will. Its gonna cause me problems that you can't even define."

The Missing Drug Drop

We had made our pilgrimage to Mena. And we felt duly chastened by what we think we learned. But the tale we set out to tell, after all, was a little story that should belong to its two main protagonists, Linda Ives and Jean Duffy.

Linda Ives, mother of one of the slain boys, has made a crusade out of finding his killers and bringing them to justice. She thinks she's fulfilled the first of those two objectives. Its the second one she wonders about.

"This is not just a case of local corruption," she says with quiet determination. "We knew that early on because the state police just weren't doing their job. Then there were Federal investigations, and we were promised indictments would come out of them. But they were shut down too.

"Who has the power to shut down a federal investigation?" she demanded.

"We too had heard about Barry Seal's operation dropping drugs and cash around the state. We made contact with a pilot who claimed to have many times flown the drop at the place where my son died. Local law enforcement was in charge of securing those drops, he told us.

"And just prior to Kevin and Don's deaths a drop at that location had gone missing ... so local law enforcement was on Red Alert. They were waiting for somebody to try to steal their next drop. And Kevin and Don happened by. Several witnesses place two police officers beating up two boys at a little grocery store right by where they found the boys' bodies ...

"I believe that Kevin and Don were grabbed by these two officers, interrogated, and subsequently killed."

"These two officers, whom I believe to be Kirk Lane and Jay Campbell, are Pulaski County narcotics officers. They are good friends with (former Clinton friend and convicted drug distributor) Dan Lasater, and have flown in his jet many times.

"I believe the reason these investigations have gone nowhere is because of the connections of the two officers seen beating and kicking those boys, Kirk Lane and Jay Campbell, to Dan Lasater, and on up to Bill Clinton, and I also believe these connections filter down to the criminals and thugs that are public officials to this day here in Saline county.

A handwritten diagram in blue ink showing four names: Lane, Campbell, Lasater, and Clinton. Arrows point from Lane to Campbell, from Campbell to Lasater, and from Lasater to Clinton, indicating a chain of connections.

"I believe that the evidence is overwhelming that Bill Clinton knew what was going on in Mena Arkansas and made no effort to investigate or eradicate it."

In a more measured but no less impassioned way Jean Duffey largely concurs.

"Did you ever in your wildest dreams while you were in law school," we asked her, "entertain the idea that the U.S. Government condoned smuggling drugs?"

"No," she responds. " I did not."

"Who is responsible, ultimately, for those boys' deaths? Where did the chain of command end?"

She hesitates. "In my opinion, I believe it began with the CIA smuggling drugs, so whoever was giving the command might be who is ultimately responsible."

"Is there any explanation you can think of for seven thwarted investigations into the Train Deaths other than government complicity in drug smuggling in Arkansas?"

"Absolutely no other explanation."

"Was Barry Seal a big enough drug smuggler to conduct a drug smuggling operation that involved drug drops near those train tracks with the regularity to provoke citizen complaints about low flying aircraft?"

"Probably not."

"But you clearly believe the people responsible for those two boys' deaths were working for someone else?"

"Yes."

"And that they were involved in a criminal enterprise of surprising scope and sweep?"

"Yes."

"Where does that lead you to speculate?"

"As a prosecuting attorney I had to stick to the facts. But prior to getting to a jury I'm allowed to speculate, and process all the information I have from whatever direction it comes. What in my opinion has been involved is a CIA or rogue CIA operation, conducted by the CIA or CIA operatives. To smuggle drugs into the United States from South America, using Barry Seal's drug smuggling operation in Mena.

Duffey stopped a moment, surprised, I believe, at the thoughts she was voicing. Then she continued. "I believe there is a possibility that Oliver North was involved with the National Security Council; that Oliver North was working for ...

A noise startled her. She stopped. I called for the cameraman, in some exasperation, to stop tape. Jean looked at me, and although we had been having a conversation for over an hour now, it was as if she saw me for the first time.

"I have not talked about this before," she protested.

"But everyone else has," I answered.

"I'm not the one to answer questions about Oliver North smuggling drugs in the Iran/Contra affair," she stated tentatively.

Then, I witnessed something that felt extraordinary. I watched as she let herself go ... Her voice grew stronger as she continued: "Again, sticking to the facts, I

know that when North was before Congress in the Congressional Hearings about the Iran/Contra affair, two questions came up about Mena Arkansas. And both times, the investigation went into closed door session ...

"Now, if Oliver North had not been involved in Mena, wouldn't he have simply said, 'No, I don't know anything about Mena?'"

"Why did the committee go behind closed doors? That's a fact that can't be ignored."

"This is an opinion now I'm asking for," I told her. "If Oliver North, or someone on Oliver North's level, had not been involved in Mena, there would not have been a Mena, would there?"

"That's a reasonable assumption that I would have to agree with."

"And if there had been no Mena, there would have been no train track deaths either, would there?"

She blinked. I wasn't sure if she knew where I was leading with these questions, but she sensed it was somewhere she wanted to think very closely about first.

"That's not as clear cut," she said slowly. "There could still have been the murders."

"Let me try it this way," I said. "Was even a powerful drug smuggler like Barry Seal big enough to have conducted a drug smuggling operation with the regularity to provoke citizen complaints about low flying aircraft?"

"Probably not. And in fact, it wasn't until the time frame after Oliver North got involved in Mena that there was so much drug activity, low flying planes, over those train tracks."

I took a deep breath. "So, does it seem at all possible to you, that if Oliver North had not been charged with flying guns to the contras and bringing back cocaine that could be then sold to finance the contra war, that those two boys might still be alive today?"

There was a long silence. Then, almost in a whisper, she replied. "It seems apparent that they would be."

The Secret History

So, we'd stared into the Heart of Darkness. The Heart of Darkness had stared right back.

Allegations and speculation are not proof. The truth, indeed, is still out there.

But, for what little they're worth, here are my speculations about our journey into the secret history of our life and times.

I don't believe that the 'drug smuggler' Billy Bob Bottoms is any more a drug smuggler than you or I. I believe him to be a paid representative of the government of the United States of America acting under the doctrines of plausible deniability. Why? Just a hunch. I liked him too much. He was a Navy pilot. His brother-in-law Barry Seal was a Special Op guy. These were our best and our bravest men.

Here's what I would like to know. Who convinced men like Bear Bottoms that what they were doing was in the best interests of our country? What valid reasons might there be for our country's national security apparatus to be involved in the drug industry? Unless someone steps forward to make the argument for why this might be in our national interest, I'll wonder.

Coup d'etat? And here's what I've learned. Some things we'll never know for sure. The opposition's way too good for that. For example, I'm convinced, to the depths of my heart, that there was a *coup d'etat* in the United States of America in 1963. That the bad guys never got caught. And that, chances are, they still run things.

I will never, as long as I live, forget our 'Midnight ride to Mena,' seated beside tour guide and American hero Russell Welch. I'm convinced that what I saw there that night was a fully functional and operational secret government installation.

By that, I do not mean a secret installation of the government of the United States of America. Unh-uh. What I believe I saw, and what I believe exists in Mena, Arkansas today ... is an installation of the secret government that runs the government of the United States of America.

And here's what I suspect: that today, long after Oliver North has become nothing but a minor league radio DJ ... and long after the contra war is just a fading memory of yet another minor league war, our government — yours and mine — is going about the lucrative worldwide business of drug production and distribution.

It's the secret heartbeat of America. And it's as American as apple pie.

Daniel Hopsicker

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