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Audie Murphy Struggled to Free Hoffa

By **EARL GOLZ**

Up to the time he died, Audie Murphy's attempts to free Teamster President James R. Hoffa from prison were kept secret from even his closest friends in Dallas.

Murphy, a World War II hero who turned movie actor, used his popularity and contacts to play a key role in seeking Hoffa's release.

James O. Cherry, a longtime friend of Murphy's who retired as manager of Interstate Theaters in Dallas, said Murphy never told him about his efforts in behalf of Hoffa.

"I WAS with Audie a couple of weeks before he got killed," said Cherry, a pallbearer at the funeral. "And nothing like that ever came up. I would be surprised at him being involved in anything like that."

Neither did Will Wilson, a fellow Texan and chief of the U.S. Justice Department's criminal division at the time, know of Murphy's involvement. Wilson recalled he was "bombarded" with documents purporting to show Hoffa was framed, but not from Murphy.

Wilson acknowledged that Hoffa's lawyer son, James R. Hoffa, Jr., "came by to present their case to me a couple of times in connection with their getting a parole. But the parole thing was still pending when I left (October of 1971) and it was denied after that."

MURPHY, once a poor farm boy from Kingston, Hunt County, made obtaining Hoffa's freedom in 1971 a full-time job. His baby face was seen from coast to coast hawking any hope to spring from prison the man who once headed the richest union in the world.

Friends say Murphy's financial sources in 1971 dried up. He needed more than \$100,000 after going in debt to make a motion picture. And a fund to free Hoffa reportedly guaranteed a handsome bundle for the parties who could do it.

Murphy visited the San Clemente, Calif., White House in April, 1971, to deliver a document that Hoffa's friends had hoped would persuade President Nixon to intervene in the union leader's behalf.

The actor died, however, in a fiery plane crash May 28, 1971, seven months before Nixon signed an executive grant of clemency releasing Hoffa. Four others, including the pilot, also were killed.

One of Murphy's cohorts in the Hoffa venture, Arthur Egan, told The Dallas News he does not think the plane crash was an accident. Egan said he last saw Murphy as he boarded the private plane at the airport in Atlanta, Ga.

AUDIE PLAYED a very prominent role in trying to free Hoffa," Egan said. "And I think it cost him his life. That's my firm opinion and I got to know Audie pretty well."

The National Transportation Safety Board found that the pilot of the plane was flying too low in a story to clear the mountain near Martinsville, Va. He also tried "to continue flight into instrument weather conditions which were beyond his operational capabilities," the NTSB said.

Egan, a reporter for the Manchester, N.H., Union Leader was called before the Senate Watergate committee last month to testify about efforts to persuade the Nixon administration to release Hoffa. His testimony in executive session lasted more than six hours.

Egan was one of several intriguing characters involved in a bizarre tug-of-war to either free Hoffa or keep him locked up. His newspaper was indebted to Hoffa's union for loans totaling about \$2 million in Teamsters pension funds.

HIS CHIEF antagonist was Walter Sheridan, who deserves much responsibility for putting Hoffa behind bars. Sheridan had been Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy's chief investigator for Kennedy's so-called "get Hoffa" squad.

Neither Egan nor Sheridan trusts each other. Each accuses the other of being unreliable in relating what happened in 1971.

the man in the middle was Edward Grady Partin, a tough-hided Teamsters leader from Baton Rouge, La., whose testimony during Hoffa's jury tampering trial did most to get a government conviction.

Partin was convicted last February on a federal extortion charge and was sentenced to seven years in prison. The case is now on appeal.

Murphy's main assignment was to get an affidavit from Partin recanting his testimony. Hoffa's forces thought such a confession could

cause Nixon to intervene in Hoffa's behalf. Murphy got his chance in April, 1971, when he was given a 31-page deposition reportedly taken from Partin. the deposition states that representatives of the Justice Department had coerced Partin into informing on Hoffa by threatening to send him to a federal penitentiary on charges pending against him.

"NOW THIS, I don't doubt at all," Egan said. "This is the only ---- I believed Edward Grady Partin."

Partin was "luring these (Hoffa) people towards him by ----- "drop the possibility that he might change his testimony," said a New Orleans investigator who did an in-depth study of Partin's activities. "Word would reach people in the Teamsters that Partin was about to change.

("They (Partin's people) would entrap them, really, in a sort of bribery attempt and then run immediately to Sheridan in Washington. And Sheridan would crow and say, 'There you are. They are trying to bribe my boy down there in Baton Rouge and the Hoffa conspiracy is still going on.' That was the game that Partin was playing.")

Egan maintains that Murphy "knew President Nixon" and took the Partin deposition to the San Clemente White House.

"I don't know whether it was ever given to the President himself," Egan said. "I think Murphy left it with an aide. But Murphy did have an entree to the White House.

SHERIDAN SAID, "you can't believe" Egan. He admitted, however, that "it turns out a lot of things he was saying were true. But, you know, it's always a mixed bag.

"He (Egan) has been trying for years to try to show that Hoffa was maligned,"

Sheridan told The News. "Of course, his news got \$2 million from Hoffa..."

"I think they were all in it for the money, except Egan. Egan was in to try and pay out the money that had been set up in this fund to get Partin prepared to change his testimony."

Sheridan confirmed the authenticity of a transcript of a recorded telephone conversation between Egan and Partin in spring of 1961. The News obtained that transcript and a copy of the tape from a source who said it was taken in 1972 from the Washington, D.C., presidential campaign headquarters of Sen. George McGovern, where Sheridan worked.

"It was one of a series of recordings that Partin made of conversations with Egan and other people (including Murphy) who were trying to get him to change his testimony, Sheridan said. "I had possession of this because I, I was writing a book ... and that particular tape was quoted in the book, along with others."

Egan said the transcript appears to be a composite of three telephone conversations he had with Partin in the spring of 1971.

After learning of transcripts in the possession of the Watergate committee last month, he said he knows anti-Hoffa forces had bugged his home phone, his ex-wife's phone, his newspaper phone, of the hotel phones he used while working for Hoffa's release.

Partin told The News he "recognized" some of the conversation on the transcript Egan identified, "but I have never had it translated nor has anyone ever got it. I do have the tapes."

AN UNIDENTIFIED party in Washington recently contacted Partin to try to get his original tapes and turn the over, he assumes, "to someone for an investigation."

"Frankly, it's something that I understand they are trying to lie with some more tapes in regard to Audie Murphy and a meeting in Apple Valley, Calif.," Partin said. "That was my gist of it -- that they have several other tapes that were incriminating on certain people that they want to verify before they proceed with the matter."

Partin asserted he has original tapes of about 20 telephone conversations in connection with his Hoffa problems, including some with Audie Murphy, former Sen. George Murphy of California and Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona.

Former Sen. Murphy, Egan claims, "hand-delivered" a second-copy of the 31-page deposition of Partin's to then Atty. Gen. John Mitchell in Washington after Partin "beat it out" of the Los Angeles area without signing it. This was the same document that Egan said Audie Murphy deposited at the San Clemente White House" in April, 1971.

EGAN TELLS Partin in the recorded telephone conversation that his publisher, William Loeb, also sent a letter applying "pressure" on Mitchell.

Loeb's letter, Egan says in the transcript, told Mitchell in 1971 "that Nixon politically is in trouble and he needs support. And he says I own the biggest newspaper in the state (New Hampshire) and we have the first presidential primary."

Egan also paraphrased Loeb's purported letter to Mitchell, who subsequently was named Nixon's campaign chief, that if Mitchell expected Loeb's newspaper "to support Nixon, by God ... I expect something in return."

Neither Mitchell nor former Sen. Murphy could be reached for comment about

the 31-page deposition. But Mitchell's attorney, William Hundley, said Mitchell never mentioned that to me-- "that it ever happened that way." He added that "it was never any secret around Washington that there were a lot of unsigned affidavits by Grady Partin floating around."

IN THE transcript of the Partin-Egan telephone conversation, Egan said Audie Murphy wanted to know when the three were to meet in Dallas. he said they were to get a signed affidavit from Partin with the help of Lester May, a former U.S. assistant attorney in Dallas."

May confirmed the meeting had been planned, but he said, "Partin failed to show up. He said he had met Murphy through May's brother-in-law, Dallas movie theater and radio station mogul Gordon McClendon.

Egan said he and Murphy waited for three days at the Sheridan Dallas hotel here but Partin failed to show up.

"Now apparently they had the (hotel) room bugged," Egan said, "because a couple of calls that Murphy made turned up later on."