



Shreveport advertising executive Jim Leslie was gunned down in the parking lot of the Prince Murat Inn in Baton Rouge. (Courtesy LSUS Archives—Noel Memorial Library)

CHAPTER ONE

A Killing in Louisiana

It was just a nothing kind of day. It was not Pres. Gerald Ford's birthday, Independence Day, or Fat Tuesday. None of my friends was going to Natchez, Mississippi, to Cock of the Walk restaurant to eat catfish or to the coast to hang out on the beach.

A few minutes before seven in the morning, I was drinking my first cup of coffee, trying to wake up and get a grip on the new day. Since I worked late nights as a reporter for the *Shreveport Times* newspaper five and sometimes six nights a week, my early morning ritual generally included a cup of coffee or two and maybe even three.

Each morning I listened to the seven o'clock news program from KEEL Radio in Shreveport to get some idea of what was going on in our city on the banks of the Red River. I could almost predict the news: the scorching temperature in the one hundreds, the farmers' concern over the lack of rain on their cotton and soybean crops on the fertile Red River delta north of the city, a few arrests from the police blotter, and an occasional fire.

We lived in a white frame house near a grove of giant pine trees on a hill overlooking the south shore of Caddo Lake. The lake was located about seventeen miles north of Shreveport near the picturesque little town of Mooringsport. As I waited to hear the news, I poured another cup of coffee and glanced out the kitchen window at the Drift In Landing Marina down by the lake. I saw several fishermen already backing their expensive bass boats into the water. They were going after the elusive trophy bass to stuff, hang in the dens of their homes, and brag about the rest of their lives. And they were getting an early start to try to dodge the heat wave that hit us each summer.

Suddenly that nothing kind of day turned into a day I will never forget. The KEEL reporter had just received a news bulletin out of Baton Rouge alleging that an assassin had killed Shreveport advertising man Jim Leslie.

“Jim Leslie has been murdered!” I yelled to my wife Lowayne who was still in bed. “He was shot in a motel parking lot in Baton Rouge!”

“Surely not,” she said, as she joined me in the kitchen.

“Yes, it’s true.”

We huddled around the radio and listened to the rest of the alarming story. The reporter said that the early indications were that a hit man with ties to organized labor had killed him. Leslie was the architect of the public relations and advertising campaign for the Louisiana Right-to-Work Law—which was strongly opposed by labor forces in the state—that cleared the Louisiana Senate just a few hours before he was killed.

By the time the report ended, I was trembling and could hardly dial the telephone to call the *Times*’ newsroom to see if anyone had more information. When I finally collected my thoughts and dialed the number, there was no one at the city desk, but the switchboard operator told me that details were still sketchy.

Although I tried to control my emotions, I wanted to cry out, “What devil from hell would do something like that to a good man like Jim Leslie?”

I was well aware that life is fragile. I learned that one Christmas night when I was covering the police beat for the newspaper and, around midnight, we heard a report over the police scanner that there was a jumper on Twelve Mile Bayou just north of downtown Shreveport.

It was bitter cold with a temperature near zero, and a brisk wind was blowing in from the north when I drove up to Twelve Mile to do a story on the apparent suicide. When I slid out of my car, the snow flurries hit me in the face and the freezing north wind cut through my trench coat and chilled me to the bone. I pulled the coat tighter around my neck, but it didn’t help much.

The bayou was an eerie place at night with its murky waters and nearby trees covered with snow and a few saber-toothed icicles. I was amazed by something I saw there that night and didn't know what to think about it. There was a pair of woman's shoes, a purse, and a coat laid out in perfect order there on the bridge over the bayou. Was the jumper trying to leave some message to her family or friends? I wondered. Or perhaps for the police who would investigate her disappearance? Or the divers from the fire department who would search for her body in the icy waters?

My mind was racing at warp speed, but I couldn't comprehend the mental anguish and pain that would cause a woman to jump into the bayou waters to end her life on Christmas night. Neither could I understand the cold-blooded murder of Jim Leslie in the heat of the night in a motel parking lot in Baton Rouge. It was as though evil dropped right down into the middle of the history of our state the night he was killed.

For some time those two events, like a nightmare in slow motion, haunted me like a dirge at midnight and tolled through my soul.

I remembered when I was a war correspondent and first arrived at the Tan Son Nhat Airport in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1967. One of the first things I saw when I left the plane was a sign over the base chapel that read, "Life Is Fragile, Handle with Prayer." When I heard that Leslie was dead and remembered the jumper on Christmas night, I thought once again of that gentle reminder from Vietnam.

Although I was not scheduled to go to work until after lunch, I told my wife, "I'm going on to the newspaper. McDaniel may want me to write the story." Raymond McDaniel was the tough-as-nails, no-nonsense editor of the *Shreveport Times*.

"Just be careful," she said with a hint of sadness in her voice.

I hugged and kissed our children good-bye and departed for Shreveport in my patriotic red, white, and blue Chevrolet Vega with American flags painted on both rear fenders. The Vega needed a ring job and continually puffed smoke, sometimes black and sometimes white, out of the tail pipe. That car was a joke among

some of my friends at the newspaper who never understood why the smoke changed colors.

Driving down Louisiana Highway 1 through the pine-covered hills of Northwest Louisiana and past an occasional oil well, there were a number of questions racing through my mind but no answers. Why was Leslie killed? Did it really have anything to do with the right-to-work legislation as reported on KEEL Radio? Later there was some speculation that *Mafia don* Carlos Marcello, who ran the organized crime syndicate in New Orleans, was behind the murder.

When I walked into the newsroom, the atmosphere was like a mortuary during a wake. Everyone was just hanging out in clusters here and there, some around the city desk or in front of McDaniel's office waiting to hear something, anything that would explain the tragic death of Jim Leslie. They had grief and sadness written all over their faces and some of the women were weeping. Others were speaking in hushed tones or saying nothing at all.

Several of the reporters and other staff remembered when Leslie was one of them and worked there in the newsroom as a reporter for the *Times*. They glanced at the desk where he once sat and the typewriter he used to write hundreds of stories. They could almost see the happy-go-lucky Leslie with his gentle smile walking into the newsroom and greeting his friends or rushing out of the newsroom to cover a story for the next morning's edition.

John Hill and Marsha Shuler, our capital correspondents in Baton Rouge, kept us informed during the early hours of the investigation as Baton Rouge detectives began their probe into the execution-style killing. This would become one of the highest profile murder cases in Louisiana history, second only to the assassination of former governor Huey Pierce Long who had been killed in a hallway at the state capitol in 1935, forty-one years earlier.

Hill later told me a friend called him during the predawn hours, arousing him from a deep sleep, to inform him Leslie had been killed. "Of course I was shocked to hear the bad news; it was five

o'clock in the morning," Hill said during an interview with me years later. "I had spent a half hour talking to him on a sofa near the senate chambers during the right-to-work debate [on Thursday afternoon]."

Hill and Shuler arrived at the scene of the crime early that morning and saw Leslie's body lying on the asphalt parking lot behind the motel. Both of them had worked with Leslie at the *Shreveport Times* before he resigned from the newspaper to enter the fast-paced world of public relations and advertising. It was difficult for them to deal with seeing their former colleague there on the asphalt lifeless in a pool of blood.

They examined the old wooden fence in the back of the parking lot, with the strands of barbed wire around the top, and saw the opening in the fence through which the detectives believed the fatal shot was fired. It was apparent to both reporters that someone had removed a board to get a clear view of Leslie when he arrived back at the Prince Murat where they killed him.

Through my own personal interviews and various newspaper reports, and in consultation with Hill and Shuler, I have pieced together a sequence of the events that led up to Leslie's murder and the long and difficult investigation that followed.

Although the thirty-eight-year-old advertising executive was dog-tired and fighting to stay awake as he returned to the Prince Murat in the early morning hours, he felt a deep sense of fulfillment as he pondered the events of the day. He had been on pins and needles all day and into the night as he paced back and forth in the senate chambers and listened to the nerve-jangling rhetoric as the senators debated the right-to-work bill with deep passion and old-fashioned southern oratory. However, throughout the intense debate, he had a gut feeling the lawmakers would pass the legislation. But whatever the outcome, he had done his best and had been paid a huge fee for his statewide public relations and advertising campaign on behalf of the bill.

When the president of the senate pounded the gavel and

announced that the bill had been approved on final passage by a majority of the lawmakers, the supporters in the galleries whistled, cheered, and applauded the decision. Leslie breathed a sigh of relief. It had been a long and grueling campaign.

That night the victors held a party at the Camelot Club on the top floor of the Louisiana National Bank building in downtown Baton Rouge for the friendly legislators and the hundreds of businessmen from throughout the state who had come to Baton Rouge to support right to work. It was the kind of party the legislators looked forward to after a hard day's work with plenty of Cajun food and free booze.

There was a spirit of euphoria throughout the club as the men and women stood in line to shake hands with the young advertising executive from Shreveport who had helped them win the important legislative victory.

Sometime after one o'clock in the morning, he said good night to his friends. He hoped to get a few hours sleep at the Prince Murat before returning to Shreveport later in the morning. As he drove through the deserted streets of the capital city, events of the day flashed through his mind like a silent movie. A faint grin creased his face as he thought about the chaotic and unruly atmosphere in the Louisiana Senate chambers earlier in the evening. He could still hear the shouts and catcalls from the packed galleries as the colorful senators debated right to work. For weeks, he had watched from the sidelines as right to work made its way through the laborious process of committee hearings, floor debates, smoke-filled conference rooms and back-room deals.

Now a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders and he was anxious to leave the unreal world of Baton Rouge with its thousands of political stargazers, bureaucrats, and hangers-on. People who worked at the capitol and other buildings connected to the boring, bloated government bureaucracy for fat paychecks and a couple of beers before returning home in the evening to get ready for the same routine the next day.

But most of all Leslie was lonesome for his wife Carolyn and his sons Scott and Mickey. He would see them later that morning, he thought, as he drove into the hotel parking lot.

John A. Curtis, the Prince Murat's night manager, had been struggling to stay awake during the early hours of the morning and was looking forward to the end of the long night shift. About 1:30 A.M., he went outside to break the monotony of the night, get some fresh air, and make sure everything was all right in the parking lots. He was standing in the driveway and waved at Leslie when he passed by.

Curtis said that a few minutes later he walked around the corner of the motel and was shocked when he saw Leslie lying face down in a pool of blood a short distance away from the back entrance. He ran across the parking lot and into the motel where he found a night security guard and yelled, "Call the police!"

Minutes later, at 1:57 A.M., three patrol cars, an unmarked detective car, and a K-9 corps officer arrived. The officers with their police dogs carefully checked the crime scene, but there was no one in the area. Within just a few minutes after the shooting, the assassins had vanished.

Curtis, who was visibly shaken by the killing, said he was standing in front of the motel when he heard the shotgun blast but thought it was the sound of fireworks from patrons of the Cahoots Night Club nearby who often became somewhat rowdy during the early morning hours. He added there was no one in the parking lot before Leslie arrived.

In a very bizarre twist, Leslie parked and locked his car right in front of the crack in the fence where the assassins were hiding in the shadows, and detectives said they were probably only four or five feet away from him at that time. There was a tree near the crack, and the officers said the assailant might have rested the weapon on the tree when he fired the fatal shot.

The crime scene investigators said Leslie was walking toward the motel entrance with his car keys in his right hand and his coat

slung over his shoulder when the hidden assassins shot and killed him from a distance of about twenty feet. Detectives questioned all the residents in the wing of the Prince Murat where Leslie's room was located. One woman reported hearing the blast some time around 1:30 A.M.

After examining the crime scene, Detective Chris Schroeder said, "It was a well-planned homicide with very little physical evidence and no solid leads that would indicate who killed Leslie."

Another detective called it "a real professional hit."

Hill talked to medical examiner Hypolite Landry who said death came instantaneously from buckshot wounds to Leslie's heart and both lungs. According to his report, all sixteen of the OO buckshot pellets from the twelve-gauge shotgun—each with the killing capacity of a .32-caliber pistol—struck Leslie in the upper body.

Two of the individuals who attended the victory party at the Camelot Club informed the detectives they saw a mysterious stranger who seemed to be watching every move Leslie made during the party. The detectives believed he may have been serving as a lookout to alert the killers when Leslie left the party to return to his hotel. This really wasn't much of a lead but it was about all they had, so the detectives asked a police artist to work up a composite drawing of the stranger based on the description given to the investigators by the two guests at the Camelot.

Baton Rouge authorities later asked Shreveport police chief T. P. Kelley for pictures and information concerning certain individuals from North Louisiana who had criminal records. They apparently wanted to compare the pictures with the composite drawing. The chief had a grim look on his face when I walked into his office later that day and inquired about the pictures.

"Chief, I understand the Baton Rouge authorities sent you a composite drawing of a suspect in the Leslie murder and asked you to send them some pictures," I said. "Could you tell me whose pictures you sent to them?"

Kelley—ever the professional—shook his head and replied, "No."

He was a man of very few words and responded with "yes"

and “no” most of the time during my previous and subsequent interviews with him.

Anyway, I thought it was worth a try.

Since the right-to-work debate between the businessmen in the state and organized labor had been so acrimonious and there had been an earlier killing in Lake Charles, Louisiana, which was attributed to labor violence, Baton Rouge detectives at first thought Leslie’s murder was related to labor unrest.

Organized labor had quite a history of violence in the state. I had read newspaper reports of Lester “Red” Lacour, business agent for the Carpenters Union Local 953 in Lake Charles, who had been arrested for his part in a mob attack at the Jupiter Chemical Company construction site only a few months earlier. During the attack, Lacour’s mob killed a member of an independent union, and four others were injured when Lacour’s men overran the construction site.¹ Authorities charged Lacour with criminal conspiracy and damage to property in the Jupiter case.

The Associated Press also reported, and our newspaper carried the story, that Lacour was linked to the so-called Ellender Bridge violence in which a mob attacked another labor site in the Lake Charles area and beat up a Mexican American crew. “Lacour was charged with conspiracy to commit aggravated assault and aggravated damage to property in connection with the bridge incident,” the AP reported.

An assassin murdered Lacour in his home before his case ever went to trial. The killer found a way to get into his house late at night and shot him in the back of the head while he was asleep in bed.²

I don’t believe Lake Charles authorities ever solved the Lacour murder.

Ken Grissom of the *Shreveport Journal* capital bureau raised several questions about Leslie’s murder in an analysis entitled “Murderer Lurked Near Only Empty Parking Space.” I read his article with great interest.³ The *Journal* was our major competition

in news coverage in Shreveport. Because the *Journal* was much smaller than the *Times* their reporters were quite aggressive—like the Avis Car Rental Company with the motto “We Try Harder.” We had to fight them for every major news story we wrote.

Grissom thought it quite mysterious that the gunman was hiding in the shadows directly behind the only empty parking space in the 314-room hotel complex. “How could the gunman be sure the space would remain vacant and that Leslie would park there?” he asked.⁴ According to Grissom, there were two questions the investigators were trying to answer: how did the assassin or assassins manage to hide behind the fence near the only vacant parking space and how did they escape unseen?⁵ Since Leslie parked almost directly in front of the crack in the fence, the killer had a direct line of fire, he pointed out.⁶

Coincidence? Not likely.

According to Curtis, the night manager, conventioners staying at the hotel had kept the parking lot full all week. Therefore, Grissom reasoned that the particular spot where Leslie parked would not have remained vacant unless an accomplice parked a car there and drove off just before Leslie arrived. So it was beginning to appear that the shooter or shooters had an accomplice.

I agreed with him.

“He could have been tipped off by a third person, acting as a spotter—stationed on a rooftop or following Leslie in a vehicle equipped with a CB radio—or he could have simply driven off as he saw Leslie’s car enter the rear parking lot,” Grissom stated.⁷

Shuler said the murder sent shock waves through the halls of the state capitol. The thought that some labor hit man may have killed Leslie made the legislators nervous. The representatives and senators and their aides and lobbyists walked quietly through the hallways of the beautiful building that Huey Long had built—its walls covered with marble imported from Italy—and spoke quietly to one another like a group of undertakers. Some wiped tears from their eyes.

Buddy Roemer, son of state commissioner of administration Charles Roemer and who later would become governor of the state, said that Leslie was like a member of his family.

“I went to get a sandwich with him at 8:00 P.M. last night,” the younger Roemer said the day of the murder, “and he asked me to go to a party [at the Camelot], but I didn’t go.”

Early the next morning, he heard the terrible news that his good friend had been killed and it was a gut-wrenching experience for him. He knew he would miss his friend.

The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) Louisiana union leader Victor Bussie, who had been portrayed by Leslie’s right-to-work television ads as a Svengali of the labor movement in Louisiana, said that his union members had nothing to do with Leslie’s murder. (Svengali was the fictional hypnotist in George du Maurier’s 1894 novel *Trilby*.)

Bussie was a tall, balding man who stood straight as an arrow. When he spoke, everyone listened. In a prepared statement, Bussie said:

I was not acquainted with Mr. Leslie. . . . I know that I speak for the entire membership of the Louisiana AFL-CIO when I say that I am extremely dismayed by his death. I do not believe that his death had any connection with the issues before the legislature. Actually, few people knew that he had any part in the right-to-work fight. . . . Whatever was behind the tragic death, I hope and pray will be revealed soon and the person or persons responsible will be brought to justice. While we know nothing about these events, nevertheless, we offer our complete cooperation to all law enforcement people to help solve this case. All of us express our sincere condolences to the family.⁸

Law enforcement officers and those of us at the newspaper who knew Bussie came to the swift conclusion that it would have served no purpose for labor union officials, or some freelance union malcontent, to kill Leslie. That would have made it a vengeance

killing and would have done more harm than good to the labor movement.

Presuming that vengeance was the motive for the killing, it seemed to me that Ed Steimel of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI) or former state representative Jimmy Wilson of the Louisiana Right-to-Work Committee would have been more likely targets. Steimel for several years had fought against organized labor, which had strong and loyal support in both houses of the legislature, and certainly had become their nemesis.

Shuler told us that the chambers of the House of Representatives were quiet as Rep. George Holstead remembered Leslie and led the House of Representatives in prayer for his family.

“As the legislators said their own private prayers, the house chamber was hushed. Although not a word had been said before, there was a feeling of quiet tension and uncertainty running throughout the house,” Shuler wrote.⁹

“I don’t come here to eulogize Jim Leslie, although it is tragic that a young man striving to do a professional job had to have his life so sadly and suddenly terminated,” Representative Holstead said as he wiped tears from underneath his glasses. “I want to express my condolences and I believe the condolences of this legislature to the family and loved ones of Jim Leslie.”¹⁰

Representative Holstead also spoke in defense of the character and integrity of the leaders of the AFL-CIO.

“I have known Mr. Victor Bussie for many years and know him to be a kind and compassionate man,” the representative said. “I respect him very sincerely, yet I very rarely agree with him philosophically. I feel very sad for Mr. Leslie’s family and the leadership of the AFL-CIO.”¹¹

It was apparent to all of us that for Steimel and the members of LABI the right-to-work victory was bittersweet after Leslie was gunned down.

He also issued a statement:

It is indeed shocking to learn of Jim Leslie’s assassination last

night. He was a real artist and the most effective and creative media specialist I know. He was also a man who demonstrated the highest form of integrity. His death is a great loss to all of us and indeed a great loss to his profession.

We wish to express our most sincere condolences and sympathy to his family whose loss is far greater than ours.¹²

I was surprised when Steimel disclosed for the first time that during the right-to-work debate he had asked for police protection to escort him in and out of the senate chambers. He also said after the Leslie murder, state police officers had suggested that he not move about the chambers until things quieted down.

"I did that," he commented.

Steimel, living in the shadow of the Leslie murder, told our reporters that as a precautionary measure he had asked his family to leave home and stay with friends until more information on the murder came to light. Although he said he was not concerned for his own safety, some veiled threats by his opponents caused him concern for his family members. He did not elaborate on exactly what was said.

Governor Edwin Edwards, during a news conference where he signed the right-to-work legislation into law, called the killing a "terrible, brutal, unnecessary and senseless murder."¹³ Edwards was the silver-haired "*Cajun* Fox" who, during his long political career, would serve four terms as governor of Louisiana, more than any other governor in the state's history.

The governor said Baton Rouge police officials awakened him at four o'clock in the morning and gave him the bad news about Leslie. He added that after the initial call, the officials continued to brief him every few hours.

Carl Liberto, the managing editor of the *Journal*, worked for Leslie in advertising and public relations prior to joining the newspaper and said that he was an all-around nice guy.

"Leslie was fun to work with and kidded around a lot," Liberto remarked. "He could get serious but otherwise he was the cop-on-the-corner type of guy."

According to Liberto, Leslie was “the man” in public relations and advertising in Shreveport.

“Jim was one of the smartest, nicest guys I ever dealt with in the PR business,” Liberto said. “He was a real genius at conducting political campaigns, and if you had Jim backing you for any office, you were going to get elected.”

Caddo Parish (County) sheriff Harold Terry, another Leslie client and close personal friend, was charged with the unhappy task of informing Leslie’s wife, Carolyn, and his sons, Scott and Mickey, of the cold-blooded killing.

J. L. Wilson, a veteran *Times* reporter, told us that deputies said the sheriff was deeply moved by the loss of his friend and that his eyes were red from weeping as he left his office to go to the Leslie home on South Lakeshore Drive to give the family the bad news. Although we knew it was a terrible shock to the family, Sheriff Terry never commented on the personal way the Leslies handled the news of the tragedy as he tried to protect their privacy during the time of sadness.

McDaniel told all of us working on the Leslie story that no one, under any circumstances, was to call his widow for an interview during her time of bereavement. And we never did.

Leslie’s body was returned to Shreveport on Friday night.