

Guide to
the Microfilm Edition
of the

FBI File on the
KKK Murder of
Viola Liuzzo

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Introduction

On the afternoon of March 25, 1965, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo of Detroit, Michigan, was shot to death while driving her car along Highway 80 in Lowndes County, Alabama. Earlier in the day she had participated in the final leg of the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ralph Bunche, to dramatize voter-registration restrictions in Alabama and to present a petition of grievances to Governor George Wallace. Liuzzo, who volunteered for shuttle service during the week-long march, was in the process of driving a participant back to Selma when a car occupied by four men, all members of the Ku Klux Klan from Bessemer, Alabama, gave chase at high speed and drove up alongside her car. The Klansmen sprayed her green Oldsmobile with bullets; one hit Liuzzo in the head and killed her instantly. Her passenger, Leroy Moton, was unharmed. The Bureau solved the crime within eight hours, mostly owing to the fact that one of the men in the Klansmen's car, Gary Thomas Rowe, was a paid FBI informant. This policy of using paid informants had begun the previous year under William C. Sullivan's Domestic Intelligence Division and was part of the Bureau's "White Hate" counter-intelligence program, better known as COINTELPRO. By the time of the shooting the Bureau had approximately 2,000 paid informants, nearly twenty percent of the total Klan membership.

President Lyndon B. Johnson was particularly interested in gaining a conviction, as he had introduced the Voting Rights Act of 1965 before Congress only two weeks before, on March 15. Johnson appeared with Director J. Edgar Hoover on national television on the 26th to commend the Bureau for the speedy capture of the murderers. Despite this support, two trials against the men for first-degree murder resulted in a mistrial and, later in the year, a verdict of not guilty. Following the acquittal in state court of one of the men, Collie Leroy Wilkins, Jr., all three — Wilkins, William Orville Eaton, and Eugene Thomas — were arraigned in Federal Court for violations of the Civil Rights Act (Rowe was not charged). They were found guilty and sentenced to serve ten years each in prison. Their sentences were upheld upon appeal, although none was found guilty of murder.

Rowe's status as a paid Bureau informant raised questions of whether or not he could have prevented the murder, and even whether he pulled the trigger (he claimed that he had tried to dissuade the others and had only pretended to fire his gun). Liuzzo, moreover, had left her husband and five children in Detroit to participate in the march, and needle marks were found on her arms during the autopsy. For the week of the march she had used her car very conspicuously, stopping at white-owned gas stations along Highway 80 and speeding, which were both against the rules that march organizers had given to their volunteer drivers.

The suspects to the murder of Viola Liuzzo were among the first to be prosecuted under the new Civil Rights Act. Because it occurred directly after the well-publicized march, both Johnson and Hoover viewed the crime as a direct challenge to federal authority in the South. Johnson wanted to see the enforcement of the new law, and Hoover was interested in breaking the power grip the Klan had on the South. Perhaps the best example of the strength of the Klan can be seen in this file's reports on the first murder trial, which resulted in a mistrial after two of the jurors refused to accept informant Rowe's testimony because he was a Klansman who violated his oath of secrecy.

This file contains Bureau letters, memorandums, teletypes, and prosecutive reports of investigation. The documents reproduced here were drawn from the Washington files of the FBI and have been released under the Freedom of Information Act; certain documents or portions of documents have been deleted by the FBI pursuant to provisions of that legislation. The material has been filmed in the exact order and condition in which it was released. Every effort has been made to publish the most legible copies available.

ROLL NOTES

Ku Klux Klan Murder of Viola Liuzzo

Bureau File Number 44-28601

Section 1: **Roll 1, 0007-0147**

March 1965

Memo dated 3/26/65 to Bureau Director J. Edgar Hoover from Attorney General Lee White regarding background information on the murder

Report regarding march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, 3/21-25/65

Memo regarding Leroy Moton, a passenger in Liuzzo's car

Background report on Liuzzo as furnished to President Johnson

Teletype reporting arrests of Eugene Thomas, William Orville Eaton, and Collie Leroy Wilkins

Memo regarding additional background information on Liuzzo

Memo from Hoover to the attorney general regarding the president's call to Mr. Liuzzo

Teletype dated 3/29/65 detailing Liuzzo's funeral

Photographs of suspects Eaton, Thomas, and Wilkins

Report on investigation, 3/25-30/65

Prosecutive report of investigation, 3/30/65

Section 2: **Roll 1, 0148-0194**

March 1965

Memo dated 3/29/65 regarding Bureau press releases

Memo to attorney general from Hoover regarding investigation update, 4/1/65

Memo to Hoover regarding the flow of information out of Alabama

Memo regarding Bureau informant Gary Thomas Rowe

Memo regarding search of suspects' residences on 3/26/65

Section 3: **Roll 1, 0195-0285**

March 1965

Memo dated 3/26/65 regarding Anthony Liuzzo's attempt to call the White House

Report dated 3/27/65 regarding the Liuzzo family
Report regarding the funeral
Incoming and outgoing mail abstracts regarding progress of the
investigation
Teletype regarding the release of Wilkins on bail
Report regarding Bureau informants
Report on Viola Liuzzo's prior arrest, as well as the report from the
autopsy and the report from a search of the crime scene

Section 4: Roll 1, 0286-0395

March - April 1965

Memo regarding subpoenas of witnesses
Teletype regarding Leroy Moton's activities in Selma
Teletype regarding background information on Circuit Solicitor
Arthur E. Gamble, Jr.
Memo to the attorney general from Hoover regarding Rowe's
relationship with Matt Murphy, Jr., Klan attorney
Memo from John Doar, acting assistant attorney general, Civil Rights
Division, to Hoover requesting information on Klan activities
Memo regarding Liuzzo's psychiatric treatment and additional in-
formation from Detroit files
Report on the Dixie Klans, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Inc.
Memo regarding complaints and warrants
Report regarding threatening phone calls concerning Martin Luther
King, Jr.

Section 5: Roll 1, 0396-0538

March - April 1965

Memo dated 4/5/65 regarding testimony of Rowe before the grand jury
Memo regarding problems with the arraignment of Rowe
Memo dated 3/26/65 regarding President Johnson's interest in solving
the case
Memo regarding Rowe's information
Newspaper clippings
Memo regarding Sheriff James Clark's statements critical of the
Bureau
Telegram from Martin Luther King, Jr.
Memo regarding handling of United Press International items

Memo regarding additional information about Rowe
Teletype dated 4/9/65 regarding dissemination of Bureau information
to state prosecutors
Copy of indictment returned on 4/6/65
Memo regarding Fulton Lewis, Jr., radio program, on which allega-
tions were made that a Bureau informant was close to the case
Newspaper clippings on Klan statements
Copy of arrest warrant
Memo dated 4/14/65 regarding United Klans of America
Teletype dated 4/20/65 regarding appearance of Rowe before the
grand jury
Memo dated 4/22/65 regarding the return of secret indictments

Section 6: **Roll 1, 0539-0612**

April 1965

Teletype dated 4/26/65 regarding preliminary hearing for murder
Memo regarding the return of indictments
Newspaper clippings
Memo regarding subpoena served to Bureau special agent in charge of
the Birmingham field office
Teletype regarding Klan-wide hunt for Rowe
Report consisting of witness statements and interviews of Alabama
Klan members and former members

Section 7: **Roll 1, 0613-0793**

April 1965

Report dated 4/12/65 regarding the results of the investigation
(19 sections and index)

Section 8: **Roll 1, 0794-0945**

May 1965

Memo dated 5/3/65 regarding subpoena of Hoover
Memo regarding request of Circuit Solicitor Arthur Gamble for
documentation of Rowe's payment
Memo from Mobile office regarding summary of investigation
Teletype dated 5/7/65 regarding jury questions about procedure
Memo dated 5/7/65 regarding the declaration of a mistrial
Teletype regarding Matt Murphy's statements to the press

Newspaper clippings

Memo dated 5/11/65 regarding William Bradford Huie, and his request to interview Rowe

Copy of the National Firearms Act and Federal Firearms Act

Memo dated 5/13/65 regarding leak of Bureau report on Liuzzo to the Klan

Copies of state and federal bonds on Wilkins, Thomas, and Eaton

Memo regarding Inez Robb's column about Rowe

Section 9: **Roll 1, 0946-1047**

May - June 1965

Memo regarding Rowe's return to Alabama

Newspaper clippings

Report on the investigation from 4/20 - 5/19/65

Memo regarding summons of Rowe for the nonpayment of Murphy

Memo regarding return of personal effects to Anthony Liuzzo

Memos regarding possible book deal with Rowe

Section 10: **Roll 1, 1048-1129**

August - October 1965

Newspaper clippings

Memo dated 8/20/65 regarding death of Murphy in an auto accident

Memo reporting Arthur Hanes's assumption of the case for the defense after Murphy's death

Memo dated 10/13/65 regarding the scheduling of a retrial

Teletype regarding the beginning of a new trial

News wire items

Memo dated 10/22/65 regarding anonymous death threat made to Wilkins

Teletype dated 10/22/65 regarding closing arguments

Section 11: **Roll 1, 1130-1202**

October - November 1965

Memos regarding trial of Wilkins for murder

Memo from Alabama Attorney General Richmond Flowers to the Bureau suggesting that constitutional problems exist regarding a fair trial

Teletype regarding indictments of Thomas, Eaton, and Wilkins

Teletype regarding Assistant Attorney General John Doar's request
for background check of jury members
Memo regarding Eaton's filing for bankruptcy

Section 12: Roll 1, 1203-1307

November 1965 - January 1966

Teletype dated 11/30/65 regarding the resumption of trial

Memo regarding the trial

Teletype regarding the convictions

Memo from Hoover

Memo dated 12/6/65 regarding sentencing

Memo regarding the response of Johnson

Report of investigation, dated 11/24/65

Teletype dated 1/16/66 regarding advertisement for the Liuzzo car in
the *Birmingham News*

Section 13: Roll 1, 1308-1415

January - June 1966

Memo regarding the newspaper ad for the car

Copy of appeal dated 4/21/66

Teletype dated 5/13/66 reporting Rowe to be "fed up" with testifying;
trial delayed to fall term

Copy of Brief of Appellants, dated 6/20/66

Memos regarding the death of William Eaton

Section 14: Roll 1, 1416-END

November 1966 - March 1972

Memo regarding the State of Alabama's request for all evidence

Memo regarding verdict of not guilty

Teletype regarding arrest of Wilkins for intoxication and disorderly
conduct

Memo dated 11/3/66 to the assistant attorney general regarding
evidence obtained by wiretapping

Copy of decision affirming previous decision, dated 5/2/67

Surrender of Wilkins and Thomas

Synopsis of case

Memo regarding U.S. Supreme Court's denial of certiorari

Letter dated 3/27/72 regarding Anthony Liuzzo's attempts to regain
his wife's personal effects