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By FRANK ROSSI



The question of Jonestown

It's a wonder John Judge's brain has not turned to oatmeal. He is in his mid-30s and already he has spent half his life reading government documents.

John Judge may be the only person in the world to have read the entire Warren Commission Report — 27 volumes, 26,000 pages. He has concluded the report isn't worth a crock.

For subjecting their minds to an incessant tangle of bureaucratic prose, Judge and his associate, Sandy Meredith, are paid nothing. Indeed, Judge works as a draft counselor, for which he is paid next to nothing, and Meredith is a librarian, and they spend most of their earnings looking for government corruption.

Mostly, they go after the CIA. They are like two woodpeckers trying to sink a battleship, but they do it anyway. Maybe they figure they'll get lucky.

The hair

John Judge's boyish face is covered by a beard. His hair is '60s-style long, and he keeps it tied back. He's wearing a heavy green work shirt, buff corduroys and the kind of boots lumberjacks favor. Sandy Meredith wears a flannel dress and sweater.

"You know," Judge smiles, "I don't buy stereos and cars, or go chasing up and down the street after a bunch of nonsense. I try to spend it on what's happening."

"What's happening" right now for John Judge is embodied in the three fat notebooks of newspaper clippings resting to his right on a mohair sofa that looks as if it's going to fall apart within 30 seconds. The notebooks — there are two more, just as fat, in the bedroom — contain thousands of stories on Jim Jones and the deaths of 900 cultists at the People's Temple in Guyana.

Judge says he believes that Jonestown was part of a 30-year, CIA mind-control experiment called MK Ultra.

"I came to the conclusion myself when I studied various assassinations and the patterns in history of the various intelligence operations. I smelled a rat in Jonestown within the first few days," Judge says.

The questions

Judge and Meredith base their CIA theory on circumstantial evidence, but it's obvious to them that there still are too many unanswered questions about Jonestown.

Right after the deaths occurred, Hoag Levins of the Daily News reported that the Guyanese government, with the help of the U.S. Embassy, had kept reporters out of Jonestown, lied about certain aspects of the deaths, and destroyed documents pertaining to Jones. Those records, Levins' articles say, linked Jones to Guyanese Prime Minister Forbes Burnham in a couple of shady deals.

"The first thing that tipped me," Judge says, "was the change in body count. The original article said 408. Then they said 712. Sandy tracked down six different explanations for the change in the body count." The final figure was 912.

The dumbest explanation of all, according to Sandy Meredith, was that bodies were found underneath other bodies. According to Inquirer files, the bodies-on-top-of-bodies statement was made by U.S. Air Force Capt. John Moscatelli. The question Judge and Meredith ask is how 400 bodies — 100 of which were children — could cover 512 other bodies.

'Rounded up'

"I think people were literally searched out and rounded up over a period of days and either killed at the camp or killed in the woods and dragged back dead to the camp," Judge says.

Judge and Meredith also point out:

- That Jim Jones was a close friend of a government agent, now dead, and that Jones' "religious" empire blossomed in the early '60s after he returned from a stay in a region of Brazil where the agent happened to be stationed.

- That Dr. Leslie Mootoo, Guyanese chief medical examiner, testified that 80 to 90 percent of the Jonestown victims did not commit suicide but were murdered. Stanley Clayton, a Jonestown cult member who escaped the carnage, told the Chicago Tribune the same thing in a copyrighted Nov. 24, 1978, article.

- That Laurence L. Layton, the father of Jim Jones' gun-toting lieutenant, Larry Layton, had worked with various government intelligence agencies on chemical-warfare projects and possibly worked directly with the CIA on mind-control experiments.

All of which shows, Judge and Meredith say, that the full story of Jonestown has not yet been told. It does not prove, however, that Jonestown was a CIA mind-control experiment. Judge and Meredith persevere, nevertheless, always searching for the one link that will put it all together. If their claims are accurate, their work is nearly impossible. Woodpeckers never sink battleships.