FINAL AGONY

Jonestown Inquest—a New Glimpse

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GEORGETOWN, Guyana—There were some people who thought Stanley Clayton was slow-witted. He spoke, when he spoke at all, with deliberation and the contracted idiom of the black backstreets of urban America. It was a language that was incomprehensible and unacceptable to the two East Indian officials who saw it as their responsibility to recast his words in a kind of bureaucratic clay.

In the process, they made it clear what they thought of Stanley Clayton. When he was in the witness box at the inquest, they sometimes talked about him in the third person, as if he were a child with only a dim awareness of what was happening or even what he was telling them.

"I think he's trying to say . . ." Haroon Bacchus, the magistrate, would interrupt, thrusting his short neck to its full length and blinking as if someone had shined a bright light in his eyes.

"Umm, yes," Mannie Ramao, the prosecutor, would reply, and, between a series of rapid nods and nervous flutterings of his hands, he would reword the answers while Clayton, stoic and unperturbed, waited in silence.

It was, perhaps, one of the most excruciating hours in the five days of testimony in the Guyanese government's official inquest into the mass death at Jonestown, the Peoples Temple outpost hacked out of the remote jungle 150 miles west of here. But Stanley Clayton, in his way, prevailed, for his testimony, haltingly given and painfully recorded, provided a point of focus for all the rest.

It was a small point, to be sure, but it seemed an unwavering landmark in the middle of what might as well have been a mirage or a nightmare. Other testimony and other evidence helped to fill in the picture—which is by no means complete, and may never be—but what little Clayton knew, he seemed to know for sure.

He was very certain indeed about the gunshots.

There were six of them, and he was precise about the intervals between them, and when they came. It was late, well after the mysterious cheers. And from those gunshots, certain avenues of speculation were possible. Nothing was conclusive, but the outlines were there.

What had emerged after all the testimony was the picture of a community whose leaders—that is, those key people in Jonestown who sur-

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Glimpse of Jonestown Final Day

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group of reporters and the participants themselves.

It was an inquiry held largely at the insistence of the U.S. government, so that death certificates required for burial could be issued for the bodies removed from Jonestown. Initially, there was strong indication that the Guyanese government was less than delighted at the trouble it was being forced to take. The magistrate put in charge of it, Haroon Bacchus, had heretofore been known in Georgetown legal circles chiefly for the fact that 48 members of his family voted for the ruling party in the last election.

The pace of the proceedings ranged from merely sluggish to virtually imperceptible. No court reporter was present; instead, Bacchus kept the record himself in laborious longhand. He muttered the testimony aloud as he wrote it down, providing a surreal Caribbean echo to the words coming from the witness stand. At times he would fall behind and then stare at the ceiling, shaking his head in apparent exasperation at a witness who had dared to utter more than 15 words without pausing.

But although it was easy, even for the Guyanese present, to fit Bacchus into the role of buffoon, he did his job, and in the end, in the words of an observer from the U.S. Embassy, it was "brought home like the last movement of the 9th Symphony."

Perhaps the clearest way to describe it is to point out that some of the notions of what happened at the end in Jonestown come from speculation and small bits of circumstantial evidence, and from the tatters of information provided in the inquest by the five men who survived the last hours in the settlement.

These survivors are to be distinguished from others who were generally referred to as Jonestown survivors, because they were present in the settlement when the final ritual there was under way. All five of the men testified at the inquest.

Michael Prokes and Timothy and Michael Carter are all white, and all young men who were said to occupy key positions in the Peoples Temple. In broad terms, they survived, they said, because they were sent off to deliver a packet of messages and a suitcase full of money to the Soviet Embassy in Georgetown.

Odell Rhodes and Stanley Clayton, both black, had been in Jonestown about a year and a half. Their roles are not clear. They survived, they said, because they both managed, separately, to hide after the deaths had begun.

The activities of three other people also figured strongly in the inquest. All of them are dead. One of them, of course, was Jones. In fact, not a lot was said about him; he seemed, rather, to be the eye of the storm of activity.

One of the others was Maria Katsaris, 25, who was said to be Jones' mistress and was clearly the temple's principal financial officer.

The last was Ann Elizabeth Moore, 24, who seemed to be working closely with Miss Katsaris on the last day, and who apparently had been serving as nurse to Jones for an undetermined period of time. It is likely that she was the last person to die at Jonestown.

The storm is a good place to begin the final hours of Jonestown. At least it was for Michael Prokes. He did not describe it at the inquest itself, but talked of it late one night sitting in the lobby of a government guesthouse in Matthew's Ridge, where some of the inquest party spent the night.

Prokes is not normally an animated person—certainly not lately. Pale and taciturn, he watches things around him through narrow eyes that seem, by turns, wary or sleepless. He sat forward in his chair.

"I've seen a lot of storms here before," he said. "But never one like this one. It came out of nowhere. Congressman Ryan and his party had left a little while before. Suddenly it got very, very dark. And the wind came up like I've never seen it here. It blew so hard that dust and stuff blew up in the pavilion so thick you couldn't see. It rained

very hard. And then it was just over."

It was probably about then, or maybe a little later, that Ryan and his party were ambushed at the airstrip. Prokes and the Carters say they knew nothing about it. But Tim Carter, sitting next to Prokes in the guesthouse, described the immediate effect of the Ryan visit on the settlement.

"It was devastating," Carter said. "Families were broken up on the spot. One man went off and left his wife working in the kitchen and didn't even tell her he was going. Children were split up from their parents. It was horrible. In a matter of hours everything had disintegrated. People were stunned. They didn't know what to do."

In the aftermath, Prokes said, "The thing that was most noticeable "was the quiet. Usually, Jonestown was a busy, noisy place. You walked around and you heard people doing things. Music playing. People laughing or talking. Kids playing. Now there was nothing. People were walking around whispering to each other. There was a hush everywhere."

Time sequences are not clearly established, but judging from the testimony of Prokes and the Carter brothers, it was sometime later, about 5 p.m. that Prokes met Maria Katsaris on one of the pathways of the settlement. "She came running up to me," Prokes said, "and told me that a bunch had gone to get Ryan. 'It's out of control,' " she said. Miss Katsaris told Prokes to go to her cabin, which was also Jones' cabin, and wait.

Tim and Mike Carter met Katsaris near the cage where the community's pet chimpanzee was kept. She told Tim Carter that Prokes was going to need some help carrying a heavy suitcase, and asked him to lend a hand. She told him to change his clothes and to take the suitcase to West House, the name that had been given to Jones' quarters.

When Tim Carter got to the house, he found Annie Moore. She was taking care of two children and was looking for further instructions from Miss Katsaris about what to do with them.

"I became frightened and apprehensive and I went back to the pavilion to see what was going on."

What Tim Carter found when he got there, he said, was his wife and child dying.

"I saw some bodies on the ground, maybe 10 or 15. I saw what looked like two undefined lines of people extending out towards the radio room. I saw mothers kneeling down holding their children. I saw my wife kneeling down. She had tears rolling down her cheeks."

Carter said he hugged her and told her that he loved her. "She was cold," he said. "She wasn't responding. She had convulsed. She had taken the poison."

Carter left the pavilion. "The only thing that ran through my mind was that I had a way to get out of Jonestown, and if I stayed there, I would die."

It is probably then that Miss Katsaris was at her most frantic. She was taking care of Jonestown's last will and testament. She typed—or had someone else type—four letters: One to the Soviet consul in Georgetown, two to Swiss banks located in Panama City, one to a bank in Caracas.

The banks were instructed to send more than $7 million to the Soviet Embassy in Georgetown. The accounts were held in the name of Annie McGowan, a 70-year-old black woman known in the community for her homemade sweet rolls and her devotion to Jones. The letters all carried that day's date, Nov. 18, but it is unclear when Miss Katsaris asked Miss McGowan to sign the letters.

Shortly after Tim Carter returned to West House, Miss Katsaris emerged from the cabin with a suitcase and two pistols. She told them to leave, to take the suitcase, which was filled with $550,000 in U.S. currency, to "the embassy" and instructed the three men to shoot themselves if they were caught.

According to Tim Carter's testimony, he had just seen his wife and child die. But Mike Carter and Prokes claim

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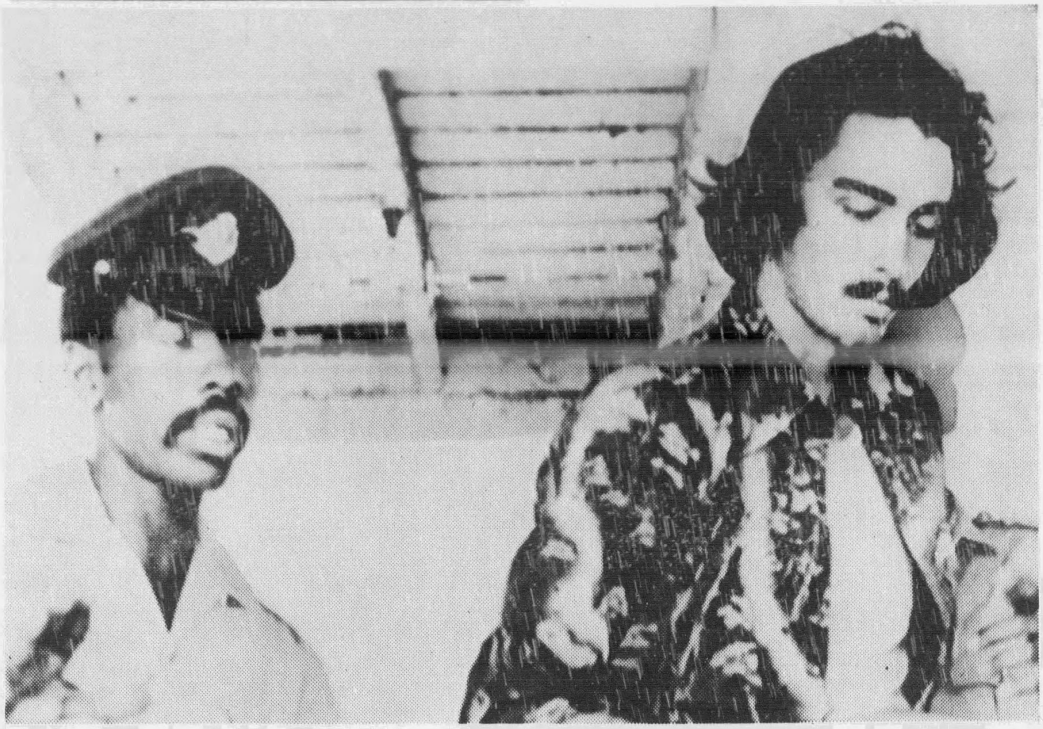

CULT LEADER'S SON—Stephan Jones is led from a court in Georgetown, Guyana. The 19-year-old has been charged with murder in the deaths of Sharon Amos and her three children.

AP Wirephoto

Inquest Paints Portrait of Jonestown Leaders in Near-Panic on Fateful Day

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they did not know what was unfolding in Jonestown. Thus, they set off for the six-mile walk to Port Kaituma. After a mile, they opened the suitcase, removed and buried part of the money and continued again. Later, they hid the suitcase and more money in a chicken coop, taking with them the envelope addressed to the Soviet Union. They claimed they did not open it. They also carried two extra passports (which, it turned out, belonged to Miss McGowan and Miss Katsaris), and two pistols.

Unlike the trio headed toward Port Kaituma, Stanley Clayton saw quickly what was going on, although at first, he said, when he saw people getting the tub out of the kitchen, "I thought it was a drill again. But it wasn't." One of the security guards went to the kitchen where he was working and told him to go to the pavilion.

When he got there, Clayton said, he saw a woman named Christine Miller, who was saying she thought she had a right to live. A man named Jim McElvane shouted back and told her that "if it wasn't for Jim Jones, you wouldn't be alive right now."

Clayton said he watched it for awhile, standing in the rear, while Jones told the mothers to quiet down, told them not to scare the babies.

"After most of the babies were gone," Clayton said, "people began to realize this was the real thing. Jones got off the platform with his microphone and assisted people to stand up. Jones was telling them I love you. He was telling them it was just like closing your eyes and going to sleep."

Clayton stayed at the back of the pavilion.

"I begin to move around," Clayton said.

The magistrate and the prosecutor did not quite understand what Clayton meant by the phrase "move around." It took several minutes to work out. Finally Bacchus wrote into the record, "I began to move backwards and forwards and side to side." At one point, in an aside to the prosecutor, Bacchus rolled his eyes toward Clayton and tapped his head with his finger.

But whatever Bacchus thought, Clayton was clever enough to bolt from the pavilion in Jonestown. He got outside the ring of "security guards" surrounding the pavilion, looked back and saw that no one was watching, and ran for the bush.

For a long time, Clayton said, it was quiet in the jungle. Then, "What I heard, I would say, was three cheers. I just heard a lot of people yelling. A lot of people. A lot of voices."

It became very dark. There was no moon out that night. Another hour passed. He started to venture out. Then he heard the shots.

It went like this, he said. "One shot. Then another one. Then a double one. Then another one." Clayton ducked back into the bush.

He stayed there hidden another hour, maybe two, he testified. Then he emerged and made his way toward the building of the compound. He went to the building where he knew the passports were kept, he said. On the way he saw some lights in one or two structures, but he saw nothing moving. He found the office, went in and turned on the lights. It took him only a few seconds, he said, to find his passport. They were kept in alphabetical order.

Then he heard another shot. Clayton turned out the light and froze. He could hear nothing more, no human movement. He opened the door then and left, hurrying toward the road out of Jonestown.

'I am 24 . . . and I don't expect to live to the end of this book.'

There are a few select people around Georgetown who have heard the tape recording made of the Peoples Temple's last rites, and those who have heard it say they were emotionally drained by the experience.

For awhile, it was assumed that the tape, or transcript of it, might be presented at the inquest, but it was not, and access to it remains carefully guarded. People who have heard it—people often referred to as informed sources—usually describe it in hushed tones, as if someone might overhear. The descriptions go like this:

Jones' voice sounds somewhat slurred. It would almost seem to be a defect in the tape, except that other voices are clear. He can be heard saying "Don't frighten the children." The argument between one lone woman, her voice quivering with emotion, and a chorus of opposition, is also there.

The woman asks, "What about Russia?" And she is shouted down. Her insistent objections continue and the crowd, seemingly without any single leading voice in response, overwhelms her.

Jones says that he is tired, and finally he will rest. There are babies crying and sometimes there are screams—not, however, screams of pain, but screams that seem to signify fright or anguish.

And, as the noise, the human racket in the background, begins to subside, something that seemed only a hint before begins to become more clear: There is music. It is odd music —a defect of the tape?—high-pitched, ethereal, "almost like Mahler, anyway, but not—just very odd." The quiet periods in the tape increase. There are indistinguishable noises.

There is Jones' voice, near the end, saying "Mother. Mother. Mother." But the voice carries none of the primal energy that might suggest Jones is calling for his own dead mother, but rather that he is calling his wife, Marcelline, whom he sometimes addressed as "mother." It sounds as if he is simply trying to get her attention, calling her perhaps to conduct some errand. And then the tape simply runs out.

On the fifth day of the inquest, instead of the tape, Cecil A. (Skip) Roberts, Guyana's chief criminal investigator, strode into the proceedings with the letters to the banks and the Soviet Embassy. He read them through on the witness stand one by one. Altogether, it made a dramatic presentation, since up to that point the letter to the embassy had been kept secret and no one knew of the existence of the letters to the banks.

The letters also diverted some attention from Prokes and the Carter brothers and the suggestion by the prosecutor that the three men might have been heading to Port Kaituma to rendezvous with the Peoples Temple boat there. As it turned out, the boat, called the Cudjoe, had left Port Kaituma earlier that day, apparently on orders from someone in Jonestown.

The prosecutor's questions nudged toward the suspicion that signals might have been crossed, and a means of transportation to the Venezuelan border, 50 miles away, inadvertently lost. Prokes and the Carters had stuck to their story that they were going to Port Kaituma to talk to the police.

But with Roberts' appearance, the prosecutor's avenue of inquiry seemed overwhelmed. Roberts is an impressive figure in Guyana, tall and muscular and confident, generally easy-going, but to the point, and he has a reputation of being a talented and incorruptible cop. His detractors here also point out that he was the officer who announced the first, and grossly wrong, body count at Jonestown.

In an event, the letters Roberts introduced at the inquest were, in effect, the suicide notes for the Peoples Temple.

But Roberts also had one other suicide note. It was personal and angry. It was written in ballpoint pen in a red-covered stenographer's notebook by Ann Elizabeth Moore.

"I am 24 years of age right now," it began, "and I don't expect to live to the end of this book. I thought I should make some attempt to let the world know what Jim Jones and Peoples Temple is—or was all about.

"It seems that some people—and perhaps the majority of people would like to destroy the best thing that ever happened to the 1,200 or so of us who have followed Jim. I am at a point right now so embittered against the world that I don't know why I am writing this."

The note goes on to defend Jonestown and to praise it, arguing that, "It seems that everything good that happens in the world is under constant attack. Of Jones, she says, "His love for humans was insurmountable and it was many whom he put his love and trust in and they left him and spit in his face."

And she says, "I have spent the last few months taking care of Jim's health."

The note takes up three pages. There is a last line, added with a different color pen and written at a slightly different angle on the page. It says:

"We died because you would not let us live."

Miss Moore's body was found in West House. She was lying on the floor. The stenopad with the suicide note was nearby. Next to her head, covered with blood, was a pistol, a .357 magnum, an extremely powerful handgun. It was said to be Jones' personal firearm.

This is what Skip Roberts thinks happened at the end:

Miss Moore went to the pavilion when nearly everyone except Jones was dead. Jones' body was found in a cleared space on the ground between other bodies. His head was on a pillow. He was in an attitude of rest. In Miss Moore's last ministering to her leader, she made him comfortable and then, at his bidding, fired a bullet through his head. One shot.

She killed one of the community's dogs. One shot.

She killed J. Fred Mugs, the chimpanzee. It took two shots.

Another dog. One shot.

She then went back to Jones' cabin. There, she either composed her note (in which Jones is referred to in the past tense), set things in order or added the last line. Then, with Jones' own weapon, she killed herself.

In a way, it all fits. Two days ago, Skip Roberts said that he thought that was the end of it. He was willing, he said, to include Prokes and the Carter brothers on the list of Jonestown survivors to be allowed to leave the country, and he said he intended to put them on it. But he conferred later that day with prosecutor Mannie Ramao, and when the list came out, Prokes and the Carters were not on it.

And the medical examiner, it should be noted, had disagreed with the suicide conclusion for some time. He said that the nature of Miss Moore's massive head wound made it seem to him that she was shot "from a distance with a high-powered weapon."

Roberts would not say so in so many words, but he indicated that he felt the medical examiner might not have appreciated the massive damage a .357 magnum can do to the human head. Unfortunately, Guyana's crime lab facilities are meager and investigators could not perform tests to conclude firmly that Miss Moore fired the weapon herself.

As for the prosecutor, he made it clear that he was less than satisfied with the testimony of some of his witnesses. But he also said that he thought it unlikely that the inquest would lead to further charges.

The magistrate, Haroon Bacchus, kept his own counsel and delayed the continuation of the hearings for two days so he can polish his final argument.

And Stanley Clayton was getting ready to go home. His name was on the list.