

I, THE PEOPLE

*How Marvin Zindler Busted
the Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*

By Gary Taylor

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Other books by Gary Taylor:
Luggage By Kroger: A True Crime Memoir

Dedication

This is a work of nonfiction. As such, I have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the events recreated here. I dedicate that effort to the readers who seek to learn the real stories behind our legends.

“To the hooker I’m a customer without a face.”

—Leon Russell

“Beat it—We’re closed!”

—Sign on the door of an abandoned brothel

“Grown men should not be having sex with prostitutes unless they are married to them.”

—comments from Reverend Jerry Falwell on a *Crossfire* program in 1997

“My choice early in life was either to be a piano-player in a whorehouse or a politician. And to tell the truth, there's hardly any difference.”

—Harry Truman

“Put on your old gray bustle and get out and hustle, 'cause the mortgage on the farm is comin' due.”

—Edna Milton

PROLOGUE:

I can hear Marvin screaming: “It’s about damned time!”

Although this book has never before been published, it essentially was written in 1981. Why wait thirty years to share it with the world? Let me explain.

In August of 1980, I had just concluded a ten-year career as a reporter at *The Houston Post* in Houston, Texas, and was in the process of launching what would be a seventeen-year stint as a freelance journalist there. In the beginning I was scrambling for work. Besides landing a gig as the backup in Houston for the *Time* magazine correspondent and a couple of other part-time writing jobs, I scanned the

newspapers daily for anything that might fit my talents for research, interviewing, and presentation. One day I spotted a small but intriguing classified ad: “Experienced writer needed for major book project.” I mailed my resume and within a day got a call with instructions for a meeting in a small photocopying and office supply shop in South Houston. While this location did not resemble the offices of a major publisher, I kept an open mind. After all, as my old high school girlfriend reminded me often, “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

So, I listened with interest as a short Jewish fellow pitched his deal, his wife sitting nearby. He had larger ambitions beyond the office supply and photocopying shop. He wanted to be a publisher. He had been considering his options, searching the city for a book idea. And he decided he had found it in a local television personality named Marvin Zindler.

I was well acquainted with Marvin from my years at *The Post*. Marvin had been many things in his life, from deputy sheriff when I first had met him in 1971 to the flamboyant TV personality who had single-handedly taken his station to the top of the ratings in the local market. But he was best known for his role seven years earlier in closing the world’s oldest continually operating whorehouse—the legendary Chicken Ranch in La Grange, Texas.

Zindler’s showdown with the town’s country sheriff and his comical crusade against the Chicken Ranch had garnered national attention and served as template for an award-winning Broadway musical entitled *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. At the time, I knew a movie version of the musical was in the works, set to star Burt Reynolds

as the sheriff, Dolly Parton as the whorehouse madam, and Dom DeLuise as the party-pooing Zindler character who shuts them down.

Indeed, it was the scheduled movie release that had prompted my potential new benefactor to place his ad.

“We have Marvin under contract,” he said. “We want to produce this book about him and use the release of the movie to help sell it. But we need a writer. He has agreed to cooperate fully. And your background looks like a perfect fit. He’s already approved you to do it. Are you interested?”

“Is that a trick question?” I almost asked. Then my blossoming business instincts took control and convinced me to play it cool. So, instead, I warned him: “I would have to put aside some other work and concentrate on this full time, so I need to consider it.”

“We also have access to the Channel 13 archives,” he continued. “You can watch all the old tapes and have the scripts, anything you want.”

He already had an outline prepared with a working title: *I, the People*. It sounded a bit like Mickey Spillane, and I liked it. That was Marvin in a nutshell. I knew Zindler had already been the subject of one book published four years earlier by an old acquaintance of mine named Kent Demaret. Called *The Many Faces of Marvin Zindler*, it had been an interesting project. But I recalled that Demaret, as a former reporter and journalism professor, had focused more on Marvin’s contribution to journalism while relegating the inside story of the Chicken Ranch investigation to the back pages. He had proved it was possible to write about whores and iconic Texas lawmen

and still make it academic, or even a little boring. I realized that *I, the People* might represent an opportunity to have some fun revisiting the Chicken Ranch saga with Burt Reynolds and Dolly Parton harnessed to pull the story into the commercial realm.

“I want to interview more participants than Marvin,” I said.

“Of course, we want you to do all of that,” said my new publisher. “I can write you a check right now for \$1,000 as an advance and get a contract together for tomorrow.”

After making sure that check didn’t bounce, I started work on *I, the People* right away. I tracked down a couple of attorneys who had worked with the Texas Attorney General’s office on their 1973 investigation of the Chicken Ranch. I found Marvin’s former TV colleague, Larry Connors working for a TV station in St. Louis, Missouri, and interviewed him. I spent evenings at the station reviewing old tapes and reading typewritten transcripts from the 1970s. And I spent hours interviewing Zindler himself about everything from his life story, to the Chicken Ranch and his further escapades as a legend-in-the-making for “Action 13”—his consumer reporting moniker for Houston’s ABC-network affiliate, KTRK-TV 13.

I quickly realized that Marvin wanted this book to proceed. He clearly still harbored anger about the way he felt the general public had ignored the significance of his Chicken Ranch stories. He remained convinced that he had dealt organized crime a deadly blow back in 1973 when he forced the place to close. And he considered the popularity of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* the ultimate blow to his image with its depiction of his fictional alter ego, TV

reporter Melvin P. Thorpe, as a vainglorious clown rather than a journalism hero saving the Lone Star State from organized crime.

“Can you imagine?” he railed one day. “Burt Reynolds is playing old Sheriff Jim Fournoy and Dom DeLuise is me?”

“Could be worse,” I said, trying to soften his rage. “It could be Don Knotts.”

But Marvin had already unleashed his savage fury. He roared on for a solid five minutes about the indignation, fussing and fuming and vowing to straighten the record with our book.

“Read the reports from the AG’s office, talk to the investigators, tell everybody that place was a den of corruption and a threat to Texas government,” Marvin fumed.

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that we could reprint reports from Interpol, Scotland Yard, the FBI, and the Canadian Mounted Police, and people would still be laughing about that little country whorehouse that once traded sex for chickens when farmers were hard-pressed during the Great Depression. But, that was Marvin. So, I soldiered onward.

Eventually in 1981 I finished a solid draft of *I, the People*. Back then, I relished the opportunity to do the writing on a new type of word processing device my publisher had in his little office supply shop. Rewriting was a cinch, compared with the option of using the electric typewriter back at my apartment. Of course, the book’s manuscript sat parked in those electronic archives inside that big computer, but I had access to the shop whenever I

needed.

Then, one day I showed up and found the doors locked. I peeked in the window. Everything was gone. The office supply sat vacant. And I assumed the word processor with *I, the People* locked inside had been repossessed. Little did I know that this episode would be just the first of many similar but unrelated adventures awaiting me in the next seventeen years of freelancing and dealing with well-meaning but insolvent erstwhile publishing entrepreneurs. At least I got \$1,000 out of him. And I still had the other work I had been doing for legitimate publishers. But then I had to get busy.

Marvin was crestfallen. Whenever our paths crossed in the years ahead, Marvin would chat and always remind me, “Taylor, we need to get that manuscript out and publish it somewhere.” I would always agree and then move to something else with a more immediate payday on the horizon. We both got busy, and *I, the People* became a distant memory from the past.

Zindler died in 2007, after adding twenty-six more years of interesting Action 13 stories to his legacy. Before his death, he had authorized the creation of another biography in 2002 called *White Knight in Blue Shades*. Written by his old friend Dr. Joe Agris, the book faithfully catalogued all Marvin’s many contributions to Texas culture with most of the proceeds to charity. Between the books from Demaret and Agris, I figured Marvin’s legacy finally had been fully served.

After publishing my own memoir in 2008, however, I grew nostalgic about the work I had done in 1981 on *I, the People*. Friends asked me if I had any ideas for other books

to follow my memoir, entitled *Luggage by Kroger* and recounting an unrelated adventure I had experienced in 1979-80 while working as a courthouse reporter for *The Houston Post*.

“I actually did write another pretty good book one time back in 1981,” I said one night during a drinking session with some pals in 2010. “It was going to be the definitive story about how Marvin Zindler busted the best little whorehouse in Texas. As I recall, it was a pretty good yarn.”

My drinking buddies just started laughing.

But, realizing that publishing had entered a new era where I was no longer dependent on financing from an office supply proprietor and publisher wanna-be, I checked the status of the two other Zindler books and found limited availability. Most importantly, neither had been digitized for access by the e-reader devices revolutionizing the industry.

So, I started rooting around in my Zindler files to see if I had anything to salvage. And what did I find? I had been smarter than I remembered. At some point, I had actually had the foresight to find the print button on that primitive word processing device and produce a manuscript of *I, the People*. There it was in my Zindler file, under “Z” in the last cabinet, yellowed and crusty, produced on the back pages of some half-baked telephone directory my former benefactor had apparently been trying to peddle in another entrepreneurial venture gone sour. I even found most of the old cassette tapes with recorded interviews of all the key participants.

After reading that old manuscript, I realized it still

represented an authentic piece of Texas history and stood the test of time as a pretty amusing tale as well. So, I've decided to dust it off, polish it up, and toss it out into the modern book marketplace for a new generation of readers to sample. Anyone interested in pictures can actually find some of the original newscasts archived now on YouTube. So, I'm just providing the story.

Return with me now to those thrilling days of yesteryear, where Marvin Zindler rides again.