

Coppell residents re-open memories of JFK assassination

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News Editor

The rainy morning of Nov. 22, 1963 began like any other. Paul Lorrain was driving to work, Judy Conger was sitting in her homeroom class and Cathy Rohloff was walking around the streets of downtown Dallas. What appeared to be seemingly ordinary day soon turned into one nobody would ever forget.

At 12:30 p.m. on Nov. 22, President John F. Kennedy was shot, as his motorcade traveled down Elm Street on a visit to Dallas.

On that unforgettable afternoon, the world watched as America's history would forever be changed. While the assassination occurred 50 years ago, memories of Kennedy's death still haunt America today.

During the fall of 1963, Kennedy was preparing for the next presidential election. Kennedy knew the importance of winning Texas, the home state of Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Along with his wife Jacqueline, Kennedy made the trip to Dallas.

To this day, Lorrain, now a Coppell resident, still has vivid memories of the Kennedys' visit to Dallas.

"I was working at 6000 Lemon Ave, which is basically next door to Love Field, the airport where they landed," Lorrain said. "It was about lunch time, so as the limos drove down Lemon we all went out on the sidewalk to see them. They waved of course. Hard to believe but I distinctly remember the pill box [hat Jackie was wearing]. Mrs. Kennedy was thought to be the epitome of class."

Clad in her iconic pink Chanel suit, first lady Jackie Kennedy and the president were accompanied in an open convertible by Texas Governor John Connally and his wife, Nellie. With the Vietnam War looming and his recent decision to send troops overseas under scrutiny, Kennedy was facing a divided nation.

"I recall an atmosphere of tenseness," Lorrain said. "America had a number of incidents. I don't think Kennedy or any Democrat was viewed all that favorably. Someone is reputed to have remarked to Kennedy during the motorcade that now he couldn't say Texas didn't love him after viewing of all the crowds."

While the Kennedy era may have appeared glamorous, there were many issues beneath the glitz and glamour in Washington.

"This notion of Camelot is kind of like the roaring twenties and the Gilded Age," Coppell High School AP United States History teacher Kevin Casey said. "Everything looked good on the surface, but as time has gone along, we have learned there were a lot of things below the surface like the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement that was becoming more and more violent. Kennedy was in a tough spot, especially in Texas. He had just won the election of 1960 by a very close margin. From that standpoint, Kennedy was facing a pretty split nation."

Despite the opposition, Kennedy was still greeted by large crowds in Dallas. After the arrival at the airport, the first lady was handed a large bouquet of red roses and families shook hands with the president. Due to the president's visit, students in Dallas were allowed to miss school to witness his arrival.

Beginning at Love Field, Kennedy began his route through out Dallas. As he turned onto Elm Street, it was only a matter of minutes until the unthinkable would happen.

Rohloff, longtime Coppell resident and mother of Coppell High School world history teacher Brian Rohloff, decided to take a trip to downtown Dallas with her siblings to see the president.

"We were standing on Akard Street. It wasn't on the grassy knoll, but the president drove right by us," Rohloff said. "The thing that really sticks out more to me was Jackie's suit. I can still picture its bright pink color. After they went by, we started to walk back to our car. We then hear all of these sirens, and I initially didn't think anything of it. My brother was concerned. As soon as we got back to the car and turned on the radio, we heard the news, 'The president has been shot'."

Chaos erupted in Dallas and America. No one knew what or who could be the cause of such a tragedy.

"After the assassination, some people, or at least me, thought the [Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles] might be on the way," Lorrain said. "I left work and went to the school to get my children thinking by golly we were going out together. I was glued to the radio for the rest of the day. I didn't know what to think.

The youth of America was shocked as well.

"The news came when I was a senior high school at a school in Indiana, and I heard of the assassination when the principal came over the loudspeaker," Coppell resident Conger said. "The whole room went to total silence, and many of us were crying quietly. School was closed Nov. 25, 1963 so that everyone could see a TV. This was several years before there was a TV in every classroom."

Like Conger, Pete Wilson Jr., who was a sophomore at CHS during 1963, recalls hearing the news over the intercom.

"All I remember was being in the school building when the principal put the radio on the intercom and we listened," Wilson said. "I sort of remember seeing the newscasts and funeral on TV, but even that is foggy. I know people were taking note, but like myself, people sort of went on with their daily lives."

Following the shots, Kennedy was rushed to Parkland Hospital, just 10 minutes away from Dealey Plaza. After giving his last rites, Kennedy was pronounced dead at 1:00 p.m.

"Then we went to a little deli, and the radio was on," Rohloff said. "The entire deli was silent, and then the announcement came. The president is dead. It was totally unbelievable. Everyone was glued to their TVs and radio following the assassination just waiting for new news to come out."

Following Kennedy's death, a whirlwind of events continued. Hours later, Johnson was inaugurated on Air Force One, alongside Jackie Kennedy, still wearing her pink suit.

"I still think about the blood stains on Jackie's skirt," Rohloff said. "To have all this horror going on and we still had to swear in a new president. Unfortunately, it had to be done. It was all so crazy and surreal."

Hours after the attack, news of who the assassin was became known. Former U.S. Marine Lee Harvey Oswald fired three bullets from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository killing the president and injuring the governor. Oswald was arrested at the Texas Theatre around 1:50 p.m.

Following the events of Nov. 22, Dallas was considered the villain of America.

"Dallas was devastated after the attack," Casey said. "At the time, Dallas was a part of the New South which included cities like New Orleans and Atlanta. Dallas came away as a despised city. Interestingly enough, one of the turning points in the late 60s were the Dallas Cowboys. By the 70s, people knew Dallas as the city where Kennedy was shot and the city that had the Cowboys. For years and years it was terrible. Other cities that had assassinations occur such as Dr. King in Memphis and Bobby Kennedy in Los Angeles did not undergo such a 'PR nightmare' that Dallas experienced. Part of the fact, I think, has to do with Lyndon Johnson being vice president."



President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963 in Dealey Plaza in Dallas. The X in the road marks the spot where he was shot. Photo by Regan Sullivan.

For residents of Dallas, just living in the city where it the attacks occurred was something to be greatly ashamed of.

“For the longest time, if you were travelling, you would not tell anyone you were from Dallas,” Rohloff said. “Just the fact you were from Dallas you were treated terrible as if the city was the one who pulled the gun. It kind of made me angry because people were bad mouthing Dallas. [Lee Harvey Oswald] wasn’t even from Dallas and had only moved here in the early 1960s. Then the policeman was shot. Then Ruby shooting Oswald was totally unexpected. That really frustrated me since I had wanted Oswald to pay his dues.”

Though the Warren Commission ruled that Oswald had acted alone in the assassination, much of America still thinks differently.

“I am a big conspiracy theorist,” Casey said. “I have read a ton about different conspiracies, and the Kennedy assassination was what got me started. There is more to the story than what America was presented. I’m not sure if I fully understand it or have it figured out all the way. I would be very shocked to find out Lee Harvey Oswald did it by himself. Having read about it and studied it, I would be shocked if he was alone. There are tons of people around Dallas who know way too much about the assassination. You’ll get to talking with them and you’ll start to get nervous.”

Despite various conspiracies, the anniversary of President Kennedy’s assassination has been a time of reflection for Coppell, Dallas and America.

“Things you have seen after are still shocking,” Rohloff said. “The images of Jackie climbing over the back and the secret service men coming after her are all horrifying. When his son saluted at the funeral in his little suit just broke my heart. It was such an unreal time. I won’t ever be able to forget that time in my life.”

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