

Lens error caught images

By KENT BIFFLE

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ADA, Okla. — Charles L. Bronson, a 64-year-old metallurgist, has been a photographer for as long as he can remember.

But it was a mistake he made with a movie camera on Nov. 22, 1963, that may make him famous.

The chief engineer for Gault Tool Co., a rock drilling bit manufacturing company in Ada, recalls that he had equipped himself with a 35 millimeter Leica Model 3-B still camera and an 8 millimeter Keystone movie camera.

"I thought I was using the telephoto lens on the movie camera. But that camera had both a wide-angle lens and a telephoto lens. They were both long lenses. I hadn't had the camera very long and I wasn't too familiar with the two lenses. So I used the wide-angle lens rather than the telephoto lens I'd intended to use."

Because he used the wide-angle lens, his 6-second footage of an ambulance picking up an epileptic victim an estimated five minutes before the presidential ambush included the top of the frame of the window from which a sniper would fire on President John F. Kennedy. Had he used the telephoto lens, he says, the window wouldn't have been included in the frame.

Bronson says he used to print and enlarge pictures by the hour back in his hometown of Centralia, Ill.

"My mother (the late Mrs. Edith Bronson) worked in a photographic studio. She had an old Eastman Brownie and I used to help out around the studio."

The son of a coal miner, the late Albert Bronson, the young Bronson attended Greenville College (where he was photographer for the yearbook), and Bradley University in Peoria, Ill.

Graduating with a double major in chemistry and math, Bronson, a 135-pound, 5-foot-7 man whose blond hair is turning gray, began a series of metallurgical jobs that included work for the LeTourneau Co. in Longview before

he moved to Dallas in 1956 and took a position with Varel Manufacturing Co., a rock bit maker, where he rose to vice president of research and development. He moved to Ada in 1970.

Bronson wasn't a JFK fan ("I didn't vote for him") but he recalls seeing the motorcade route published in the newspaper before the president's visit.

"I told Frances (his 55-year-old wife) at the breakfast table that day: 'You know, I've never seen a president. This would be a good opportunity. How about meeting me at noon and we'll go see him.'"

"We met in the parking lot behind the train station about 12:15 p.m. and walked toward Elm and Houston. I stood on an abutment of the colonnade to get a better view. It was an elevation of 55 or 60 inches."

"When I shot the ambulance picking up the patient, I had no idea that I even had the window in the school book depository building."

Bronson switched from movie camera to still camera in recording the motorcade. All his Leica shots are crisp and clear with the exception of one that is blurred because he jumped when the first shot was fired.

Bronson almost immediately resumed filming with his movie camera and caught six or seven seconds of the assassination, including the second shot striking the president's head.

"Sunday I got to thinking that I might have some pictures that would show something. So I just wrote a little note with the film and dropped it all in that slot at Eastman's . . . you know, where you drop it in beside the Eastman processing plant on Manor Way. It wasn't too far from where I worked."

"So, I just dropped the film in the slot to save postage and included a note telling them that I had some pictures of the assassination and thought I might have something. I asked if it might be possible for them to expedite the processing."

"About 5 p.m. Monday, I got a call from FBI Special Agent Walter Bent. He

told me he had received the note and the film. He said they'd do everything they could to speed up the processing."

Before the week ended, Bronson was viewing the results at the Eastman processing plant with two FBI agents who studied the pictures.

Bronson's movie film appears a bit jerky because, in an attempt to conserve film, he had reduced the camera's speed from 16 frames to 12 frames per second. He caught about six or seven seconds of the assassination.

Bronson recalls that the FBI agents who sat in on the projection were primarily interested in the assassination sequence and not the earlier sequence on the ambulance call.

"I didn't even notice that window the first time I saw it," he said.

In fact, Bronson thought nothing more about the window in that sequence until he was approached a couple of weeks ago by Earl Golz, reporter for *The News*.

Even after Golz succeeded in having the movie film enlarged and enhanced, Bronson said he's not sure what he's seeing. "I'm not real sure."

Did he see movement in the window in the enlarged version?

"It was pointed out to me."

Bronson has since given the 1938 Leica to a daughter as "a sort of heirloom." The movie camera, new in 1963, was given to a brother.

Bronson was so moved by the events of that day that he wrote a letter and copied it for all seven of his sisters. The letter describes the horror of the day's events and his emotional reaction.

Bronson and his wife are deeply religious. In a growth of carefully trimmed shrubs in front of their roomy brick house on a quiet street in Ada is a small sign:

"The kiss of the sun for pardon; the song of the birds for mirth; one is nearer God's heart in a garden — than anywhere else on earth."

Of his shot of the window, Bronson said, "It was providential."