

Zapruder Film Set for August Video Release

Footage of JFK Assassination Likely to Restart Debate

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For Abraham Zapruder, who made the movie, Frame 313 became a recurring nightmare. The film would play out in his dreams until the horrific head shot that killed the president snapped him awake.

"I have seen it so many times," Zapruder, the Dallas dress manufacturer and accidental chronicler of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, said in a tearful deposition for the Warren Commission in 1964. "The thing would come every night—I wake up and see this."

Soon, anyone with a VCR will be able to see it and freeze-frame it again and again. Zapruder's silent 26-second film of Kennedy's murder, long tightly held by the Zapruder family, is coming in August to a video store near you in shattering color, with footage and details never shown before. The price: \$19.98 for a VHS cassette, \$24.98 for a digital video disc.

Effectively upstaging the government, which resolved last year to seize the historic 1963 film on Aug. 1, 1998, and make it "available to the public at the lowest possible cost," Zapruder's heirs have teamed up with a leading video production company to put together a digitally enhanced version of the in-camera original that experts say is far clearer than any of the

See ZAPRUDER, B2, Col. 1

ZAPRUDER, From B1

copies shown over the years.

At the same time, lawyers for the Zapruder family have been asking the government for \$18.5 million as the price for making the 8mm original itself a publicly owned "assassination record." Ticking away at 18.3 frames a second, it is the clock to Kennedy's murder and the best evidence of it. Some appraisers say it could bring much more at private auction. Some researchers think the Zapruders have made more than enough money from it already.

"The first time I saw it, I literally gasped—because it's so shocking," said Waleed Ali, president of MPI Home Video of Orland Park, Ill., which is producing the video. "It makes the one Oliver Stone used [for the movie "JFK"] look like a pale ghost. The clarity is breathtaking. This is literally as crisp and clear as the original in the vault."

At some other crucial moments, though, the video seems just as blurred and puzzling as the original, especially when Zapruder jiggled his Bell & Howell camera in apparent reaction to the gunshots and perhaps other distractions. Zapruder had the best vantage point in Dealey Plaza, standing on a concrete abutment at the crest of a grassy knoll, but he also had vertigo, which made him hesitant to climb up on the ledge.

Luckily for history, one of his assistants, Marilyn Sitzman, climbed up with him and held him steady as the fateful motorcade turned onto Elm Street.

Titled "Image of an Assassination: A New Look at the Zapruder Film," the 45-minute production is part of a trend of embellishing box-office successes with historical narrative, insider interviews and insights into the filmmaking process. It offers compelling interviews of Sitzman and others, courtesy of the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, as well as a documentary showing the Zapruder original being photographed at the National Archives, frame by frame, and turned back into a movie.

Longtime students of the JFK assassination predict there will be charges of doctoring nonetheless, not to mention a new rush of hypothesizers seeing what they want to see.

"This is going to be a can of worms," says Harold Weisberg, a longstanding critic of the Warren

Commission's conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, killed Kennedy from behind, firing from a sniper's nest on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository.

"There are people who think the film was doctored, that it was flown to the Soviet Union," Weisberg says. "The crazy people are going to get crazier, on both sides of the fence. Some people will look at the film and see things that aren't there. Others will look at it and not see what is there."

Even so, he welcomes the public debut: "Let the people see it. Let them reach their own conclusions. I'm just sorry it's taken 35 years."

One reason for that, as historian Richard B. Trask points out, was the revulsion Life magazine Publisher C.D. Jackson expressed on seeing the film after Life had bought the print rights from Zapruder for \$50,000. Shocked by the thought of its morbid scenes being shown to the public before emotions had subsided, and determined to keep it from his competitors, he ordered purchase of all rights for another \$100,000.

Under the arrangement, made final on Nov. 25, 1963, the day of Kennedy's funeral, Zapruder was also to receive half of all gross receipts after Life had recouped its investment. Time Inc., in turn, agreed to treat the unique slice of history "with good taste and dignity."

The first public showing of the film, as a result, took place in a New Orleans courtroom on Feb. 13, 1969, subpoenaed as part of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's wildly unsuccessful prosecution of businessman Clay Shaw. But it eluded television until March 6, 1975, when Geraldo Rivera showed a bootleg copy on his ABC talk show, "Good Night America."

Apparently unwilling to police its use, Time Inc. announced the next month that it would return the film and all commercial rights to it to the Zapruder family for \$1.

It has been kept at the National Archives in "courtesy storage" for the Zapruder family since 1978, following a tour of duty at the House Assassinations Committee. The family has charged fees for commercial use of the film. One researcher, Gerard Selby Jr., said he was quoted a price of \$30,000 when he was a graduate student trying to make a documentary. Informed sources say

revenues for the Zapruders since 1963 have totaled about \$650,000. Zapruder family lawyer James Silverberg says high prices may sometimes have been set to discourage certain uses, such as on book and magazine covers.

"We just wanted the film treated in a dignified manner," says Henry Zapruder, Abraham's son. "The money issue has always been secondary. We were never disappointed when people who expressed an interest in showing the film ended up not showing it."

Congress set the stage for a public "taking" of the film in 1992 when it passed the JFK Assassination Records Collection Act calling for disclosure of virtually all of the government's files on the assassination and setting up a review board to track them down and make them public. Officials contend the broad terms of the law automatically made the Zapruder original U.S. property since it had been "made available for use" by the Warren Commission in 1964.

In April 1997, the review board formally declared the film "an assassination record" and resolved to "do all in its power to ensure that the best available copy . . . shall become available to the public at the lowest reasonable price." But board members were vague on how that could be done so long as the Zapruder family retained the copyright in the name of its LMH Co.

Executive director T. Jeremy Gumm said the board's action pertained only to "physical possession of the original." Anticipating complicated negotiations, the board postponed the actual takeover date until Aug. 1, 1998.

The Zapruders had already decided to make a video of it. A specially commissioned photographic expert hired by LMH spent five days at the National Archives in mid-March 1997, making magnified 4-by-5-inch transparencies of each frame from the original, including images between the sprocket holes that no copy has ever captured.

"This [inter-sprocket material] constitutes about 20 percent of the information recorded on the film," says historian David R. Wrone, author of a brief history of the Zapruder movie. Because the Warren

Commission used a Secret Service copy for its investigation—the original could not be stopped to inspect individual frames because of possible damage to the film—"it necessarily eliminated the 20 percent marginal matter."

Now that these images can be viewed, fresh debate is likely. Weisberg points, for instance, to the still photo of Frame 202, where another photographer, Philip L. Willis, can be seen, leg lifted, about to step into the street after Kennedy's open limousine has passed. Weisberg contends Willis is lowering his camera, having just taken a picture at the moment the first shot was fired, hitting Kennedy. That would be too soon for the Warren Commission, which concluded that Oswald couldn't have had a good bead on Kennedy until about Frame 210, when the limousine emerged from the cover of a large live oak tree.

Unfortunately, it isn't easy to tell from the video whether Willis is lifting his camera or lowering it at

Frame 202. Frame 203 is blurred. Willis told the Warren Commission he took one picture of the president "smiling and waving" to the crowd. He said he then "started down the street" when a gunshot "caused me to squeeze the camera shutter, and I got a picture of the president as he was hit with the first shot."

A deer hunter and World War II veteran, Willis also said he "felt certain" that the three shots he heard came from the Book Depository.

Those watching the frames starting with 313, when the fatal shot explodes, will be struck by the forceful, backward movement of Kennedy's head—seemingly indicating a shot from the front and to the right of the motorcade.

"I watched it the other night with 12 other people. Not one of us thought the shot came from behind," said Ali. "Not only does the head recoil. You can see the head open up from the front."

Look again, says G. Robert Blak-



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The video "Image of an Assassination: A New Look at the Zapruder Film" features an enhanced version of the famous footage. In Frame 256, Kennedy clutches at his throat in reaction to the first shot

that hit him

some two seconds

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ey, former chief counsel for the House Assassinations Committee. "If you look carefully, the first thing you see is the head moving forward, very briefly. That is the bullet hitting the head from the rear. Then there is the snap back, after the head explodes. The X-rays of the skull and the fragments we have all indicate he was not hit from the front right."

Come Aug. 25, the video's projected release date, viewers can judge for themselves. To guard against charges of doctoring, a crew

from MPI Home Video went to the Archives to film the filming of the individual frames, before they were digitized and put back into motion picture format.

"We're partners," Ali said of his company's arrangement with LMH. "We both own it together."

Henry Zapruder said he did not "anticipate a large amount of income" from the video release. But Ali seemed more optimistic. MPI is planning an initial production of 100,000 VHS cassettes and 20,000 DVDs.