

The Motorcade

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A Fast 'Pop, Pop, Pop' Ended an Era in Dallas

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EVERYBODY REMEMBERS where he was the day President Kennedy was shot. I have a special reason. Ten years ago next Thursday I was in the Kennedy motorcade, close enough to hear the shots and see the Presidential limousine leap forward on its frantic dash to Parkland Hospital.

What happened to me and the other pursuing newsmen in Dallas still seems, a decade later, like a daytime nightmare.

That "Black Friday" which was to end an era began in Fort Worth in the rain. The day before the President and First Lady had flown to San Antonio on the first leg of a political fence-mending trip to Texas.

The presence of a smiling Jacqueline Kennedy, who had previously disdained campaigning, lent glamor to the all-star surface of the entourage. Brought together with Kennedy in the interest of democratic unity were Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Texas Gov. John B. Connally, and Sen. Ralph W. Yarborough, who was feuding with Johnson and Connally.

Early on Friday morning at Fort Worth, where the party had over-nighted, another large and enthusiastic crowd had jammed a parking lot near Kennedy's hotel to hear him deliver a short, euphoric talk from a flatbed truck in a drizzle, coatless and hatless. From there he proceeded to the hotel ballroom for a Chamber of Commerce breakfast.

Jackie joined him at the breakfast, 20 minutes late, but the 2,000 massed diners went wild at her appearance and the President beamed. Actually (as executive assistant Kenneth P. O'Donnell revealed later) his mood was not all that ebullient. He had seen an ugly, black-bordered advertisement in the Dallas Morning News.

THE INFLAMMATORY AD, which was the talk of the press entourage, accused Kennedy of being pro-Communist and demanded to know why "You have scrapped the Monroe Doctrine in favor of the 'Spirit

of Moscow?'" (Kennedy's "Spirit of Moscow" had roughly the same objectives as Nixon's detente has with the Soviet Union today.)

Showing the ad to his wife in their hotel room, the President had said, "We're heading into nut country today. But, Jackie, if somebody wants to shoot me from a window with a rifle, nobody can stop it, so why worry?"

Dallas, a citadel of hard-core conservatives, was the next stop. It was only 30 miles from Fort Worth but the Presidential party flew there in a 13-minute hop in order to have the advantage of a welcoming crowd at the airport. The sun was shining brilliantly when the silver, blue and white Air Force One jet touched down at Dallas' Love Field and a noisy mob of Texans was pressing against a chain-link fence to get a glimpse.

This crowd had a good share of the youthful "leapers and jumpers" who usually turned out for the 46-year-old President and he happily "worked the fence," shaking outstretched hands. As Jackie, radiant in a pink wool suit with matching pillbox hat walked alongside, a reporter asked her how she liked campaigning. "It's wonderful," she replied.

Now the motorcade formed for the winding procession through downtown Dallas, timed to catch the noon hour crowds before rolling on to the Trade Mart for a luncheon address by the President.

There were some 50 correspondents who had accompanied the party from Washington and most of us made it into what was optimistically labelled "Press Bus No. 1." However, the No. 2 bus somehow got into the motorcade ahead of us. What's more to our disgust, there were 10 or 11 other vehicles between us and the big Presidential limousine. We were thus separated from the President by loads of politicians and VIPs.

We had already noticed, though, that the Kennedys were riding in the open air, without the car's bullet-resistant plastic bubbletop. O'Donnell had ordered the bubbletop taken off if the weather was good. He knew that the



An instant after the shooting, Mrs. Kennedy bends to assist the President, who has slumped in his seat, and an aide jumps onto the car bumper.

President wanted maximum exposure for himself and Jackie.

THE KENNEDYS were waving and smiling from the back seat while the Governor and Mrs. Connally occupied the jump seats. Next came the Secret Service follow-up car, then, an open convertible carrying Johnson and Yarborough, next another Secret Service backup car, and then the "pool car," containing four reporters representing the press contingent, plus Malcolm Kilduff, acting White House press secretary on the Texas trip.

The crowds lining the streets for mile after mile were deep and friendly, though occasional Confederate flags or hate-Kennedy signs were flaunted by grim-looking bystanders. To us it seemed that the Dallas police were being overly cautious in keeping the crowds back on the curbs, but two local newsmen on the bus explained that the cops had learned their lesson when Adlai Stevenson had been man-handled by pickets a month before.

"They won't let any nuts get within 10 feet of the President today," they assured us.

A few minutes later, after the lead cars in the procession had turned sharply left off Houston into Elm st., we heard what sounded like a hard "pop, pop, pop." One reporter

muttered in alarm, "That sounds like gunfire."

We had an unobstructed view of the Presidential car at this point, since our bus was still on Houston while the car was proceeding left on Elm. Suddenly it accelerated and was speeding away.

"The President's car has left the motorcade!" exclaimed my seatmate, Robert J. Donovan of the Los Angeles Times, author of "The Assassins," a book about Presidential assassinations in America.

The cars immediately behind the limousine also took off at high speed, leaving us behind. Our bus ground to an uncertain halt, while most of us screamed at the bus driver, "Go, dammit, go!" One reporter, Robert MacNeil of NBC-TV, insisted the driver let him out.

MacNeil ran into the nearest building, the "Texas School Book Depository," in search of a telephone. A man casually emerging from the entrance referred him to a building employe nearby, and the latter directed MacNeil to a phone. Some investigators have concluded that the first man was Lee Harvey Oswald. To this day, MacNeil, now with British Broadcasting Corp., says he cannot be sure whether or not the help he got in reporting the assassination was from the assassin himself.

A LONG WITH the other cars left behind, our bus picked up speed and rumbled around into Elm and headed for the now famous triple underpass adjacent to where the shooting took place. After we passed under it, I saw a bit of action through the window: A motorcycle cop peeled away from the convoy and went riding straight across an open field, left his machine at the top of a grassy knoll and ran off with drawn pistol. What sort of suspect he was chasing I never learned.

Maddeningly, while the limousine and lead cars were heading over the Freeway to Parkland Hospital four miles away, the bus turned off at the Trade Mart, conforming with the original itinerary. Bug-eyed with suspense, we jammed out of the bus and into the five-story modernistic Mart.

Clutching our typewriters, we raced directly across the building's main dining area, dumbfounding 3,000 diners—some of them gazing down from tiered balconies—who were ending lunch and waiting to be addressed by Kennedy. It was a mass chase scene right out of Alfred Hitchcock—with the Mart's pipe organ incongruously blaring pop tunes.

In the press room we confirmed from radios and telephones that Kennedy had indeed been shot.

A SPECIAL REPORT

*commemorating the 10th anniversary of
the assassination of President John F.
Kennedy, Pages 1 through 5.*

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The Kennedy Legacy



*'The Last Time America
Had a Sense of Well-Being'*

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many books about the 1960s.