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Lingering doubters

400 share a JFK obsession –

By Linda Wallace
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DALLAS — For 28 years, they sat in their homes, poring over books for clues, arguing among themselves and suffering in silence. But now they say they will wait no more.

Hundreds of amateur sleuths met in Dallas last week to trade in their questions for answers and work at solving what they see as the greatest unsolved mystery of our day: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

No other common seam bonded these people. They came from the dusty farms of Iowa, the rocky hills of Tennessee, the trendy towns along the California shore and the tiny, industrial towns of Pennsylvania, paying a $100 fee to be part of the Assassination Symposium on John F. Kennedy, or, as it was called, "ASK."

They say they want to stir up enough interest in the assassination to force the government to conduct another investigation. Failing that, they are directing a message to the people in power that while the issue is aging, it has not grown old.

"For 28 years, there has been no real investigation of what happened here in Texas," J. Gary Shaw, the symposium coordinator, said in a rousing speech to the 400 participants. "For 28 years, the true facts have been hidden. And for 28 years, the crime remains unresolved. That is a sad, sad indictment of the people who lead this country.

"Why are we here? I think for one thing it is to let those individuals know, the individuals whose agenda is to suppress and ignore the true facts of this case and to tell them we are still here. And we ain't quitting."

Organizers say the symposium was the largest meeting of conspiracy buffs since Kennedy's death, on Nov. 22, 1963. It comes as interest in the assassination is re-emerging nationally, spurred partly by the expected Christmas release of director Oliver Stone's new movie, *JFK*.

But some people in Dallas argue that interest was peaking even before Stone and his film crew hit town earlier this year.

By and large, the people at the symposium — half of whom were under the age of 40 — reject the Warren Commission's conclusion that a lone gunman named Lee Harvey Oswald fatally shot America's popular young president as his motorcade rolled through the downtown streets of Dallas in 1963.

They are convinced that the four government investigations into Kennedy's death raised more questions than they answered. They say numerous witnesses to the shooting have reported hearing shots coming from the Texas School Book Depository and the grassy knoll adjacent to it, indicating the presence of more than one gunman.

They say that Oswald was a poor marksman and that the shot that hit Kennedy and wounded former Texas Gov. John Connally could only have been made by an expert. And they say that there likely was not one bullet, but two.

There was at least one person here last week who was skeptical of the conspiracy theories. Author Jim Moore was invited to argue his viewpoint: that Oswald, acting alone, killed Kennedy.

Moore, author of *Conspiracy of One*, said the time had come to move on and forget about further inquiries.

"I have to ask, 'What was wrong with the last four?'" he said.

The would-be detectives, who came from 30 states and five countries, disagree on who is to blame for the assassination. Some believe it was a conspiracy orchestrated by a radical fringe element of the American intelligence community. Others suspect that foreign governments were involved. Still others blame organized crime.

The dissension over blame does not worry them; in fact, they welcome it.

"It is just like any family. You have some disagreements, you have some people who don't get along," said Robert Johnson, a research associate at the JFK Assassination Information Center in Dallas, a nonprofit group cosponsoring the symposium. "And, believe it or not, this is a competitive business. Sometimes one person finds something out and it might be very good information, but another person might not accept it for no other reason than they didn't find it."

For many in this group, getting to meet others whose lives and spare time are similarly consumed was an uplifting experience, said Jo Rae Di Menno, a publicist for the meeting.

"There is an indescribable feeling that comes when people connect," she said.

The symposium also drew authors, who came to push their books and defend them. *High Treason* was the name of one book. *On the Trail of the Assassins* was written by former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who is portrayed by actor Kevin Costner in the Oliver Stone movie.

Some books were less mainstream. One, in fact, asked the question: *Is Dan Rather the JFK Conspiracy's San Andreas Fault.* For $16, you can presumably find the answer, in the book written by Monte Evans.

Name tags of the participants answered the age-old question, "Where were you when Kennedy got shot?" The tags listed exactly where each person was on that day.

Andrew Winiarczyk was only 10 years old then, but the bookstore owner, now a young 38 with a firm

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jaw, gentle eyes and blond hair parted to the side, has long been nagged by loose ends and missing pieces.

As a boy, he gathered books on the assassination as a hobby. It grew into a full-time occupation, and Last Hurrah, the bookstore that he and his wife own in Williamsport, Pa., specializes in assassination books, which are often hard to find. It has been a profitable vein: The shop has a list of more than 700 book titles and 600 people on an international mailing list of those who want to be kept current on conspiracy reading material.

"The Kennedy assassination is a type of endless wound in American society," said Winiarczyk, who with his wife, Linda, packed the car and drove three days from Williamsport to Dallas to sell books and attend the conference. "If some people are living in the past, it is because the past is unresolved."

While in Dallas, the amateur sleuths can take in Bob Kintzle's tour of residences and streets tied to the assassination, including Oswald's rooming house, the theater where Oswald was arrested and the apartment where Jack Ruby lived. Patrons can see actual footage of the assassination and videos with key witnesses, including the Dallas cabdriver who gave Oswald a lift from his job at the book depository after the shooting.

While in Dallas, Andrew Winiarczyk ventured out to Elm Street, to the scene of Kennedy's slaying, which Winiarczyk has seen on tape over and over again. He was overwhelmed.

"Today I am an absolute child," he said, beaming. Winiarczyk is so immersed in the subject that "the first time I heard that there was a film coming out called *Nightmare on Elm Street*, I was sure it had to do with the Kennedy assassination."