

Nov. 22, 1963: He was there

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Knight-Ridder News Service

BEATTVILLE, Ky. — "What would John Kennedy have done, if he'd lived? A lot of us have done a lot of wondering about that.

"The only thing Kennedy ever mentioned that he'd like to do after he left the White House was to teach political science at Harvard Law School."

Talking with Malcolm Kilduff is cavesdropping on history.

And that's understandable: Kilduff, 50, and now of Beattyville in eastern Kentucky, has spent his life in and around power centers of American politics, most notably as assistant press secretary — and personal friend — to Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

In fact, it was Kilduff who had "the unfortunate duty or distinction or whatever you want to call it" of announcing to a roomful of stunned reporters in Dallas that John F. Kennedy had died by an assassin's hand.

The scene is a classroom in Parkland Hospital, Dallas. The day: Nov. 22, 1963.

The room is swelled with reporters and photographers, many of them covering the biggest story of their lives — the attempted assassination of President Kennedy. They stand around bewildered, stunned, as they wait for someone to tell them something about the President, something about Jackie, something . . .

Then Kilduff, who was acting press secretary that day because Pierre Salinger was out of town, enters the room.

Tape recorders go on and cameras roll recording the scene of Kilduff trying to make a statement.

Kilduff: "Could I have your attention? President John F. Kennedy (the statement preface is slightly muffled) died at approximately 1:31 p.m. Central Standard Time. He died of a gunshot wound to the brain. I have no other details of the assassination of the President."

Questions come pouring out of the crowd, Kilduff seems to be answering the most serious queries:

Q: "What about Jackie?"

A: "Mrs. Kennedy was not hit."

Q: "What about Gov. Connally?"



Associated Press



Johnson takes oath (Kilduff is bottom left)

A: "Gov. Connally was hit."
(Several muffled questions come at once).

A: "Vice President Johnson was not hit."

Q: "Can we see the President?"

A: "He is lifeless. I'm sorry."

Nearly 14 years since that terrible day, it might seem strange to find Malcolm Kilduff — his wife calls him 'Mac' — in this mountain town, managing a Radio Shack franchise worlds away from the volatile, rough-and-tumble life of the political arena.

You imagine him suffering a bad case of the psychic bends from the abrupt depressurization.

That's not the case.

"I love it here. I've never been so comfortable in my life.

"It's so nice compared to Washington," he chuckles. "Nobody has an ax to grind."

Kilduff moved here last January shortly after marrying his present wife Rosemary, herself a Washington career person. Beattyville is Rosemary's hometown and, Kilduff says, "She's always talked about coming home."

They're renovating the 100-year-old house she grew up in and living a comparatively quiet life.

But Kilduff remembers more turbulent times — and is happy to rattle off stories about them.

Some of his fondest — and most

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tragic — memories are of Kennedy, whom he describes as "a very, very human being . . . a compassionate man, an understanding man, who had a great, great sense of humor."

On the fateful trip to Dallas, Kilduff was riding in the third car of the presidential motorcade as it passed beneath the Texas Book Depository. He recalls the moment the shots were fired:

"The shots came over my right shoulder. There's absolutely no question they came from the Depository. I was riding in the right front seat — that put the Depository directly over my right shoulder.

"My first thought was that someone had thrown a firecracker. We immediately sped off. We couldn't tell what was happening. I think the last thing in the world anybody thought of was that the President had been shot."

After the race to Parkland Hospital (during which two reporters for the AP and UPI fought furiously over the

single phone in Kilduff's car) he saw what had happened.

"His head was just a mass of blood," Kilduff says. "It looked like hamburger meat. The moment I saw him I thought he was already dead, but then the orderlies came out and took his pulse. So I figured, well, it's just a mess, it's not that bad . . . The horrible reality that the President of the United States has been killed is not in your mind; it takes a while to get there."

Meanwhile, as acting press secretary Kilduff had a job to do: find phones and set up a press room for the dozens of clamoring reporters.

And it was he who finally told them the President had died.

Looking back, he says he was probably in a state of shock at that point:

"I left out the 'F' in Kennedy's name when I made that announcement; I don't know why. And they say I kept twirling a cigaret in my hand. I don't remember that. After the announcement, I had a question-and-answer session with the reporters, and I drew a diagram on the board. But it took a viewing of the BBC film of the press conference to bring that memory back to me."

Considering his closeness to the scene of the assassination, what does

he think of the Warren Report's controversial conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, fired three shots from the Texas Book Depository and killed the president?

"Well, it's strange, because I was never called to testify before the Warren Commission and I can't understand why," he says. "But my feeling on the ultimate conclusion of the Warren Report is that it is correct. So far as where the shots came from, the direction in which they came, and the number of shots, there is no question in my mind."

"And as far as a conspiracy goes, I totally discount it. Oswald just went quietly about his business, and got off two of the luckiest shots in history."

"If you talk to the Secret Service, they'll tell you one of the things they've always feared and still fear is the determination of a single man who sets out on a single purpose — to kill the President of the United States. A man like that can do it any day of the week he wants to."

After the assassination, Kilduff returned to Washington with Lyndon Johnson in Air Force One — and, in fact, you may see him in the corner of the famous photograph showing the new president taking the oath of office. He is holding the handset of a dictaphone — the only recording device on the plane at that time — taping Johnson's words.

"I suddenly realized that here's history being made that we have no record of," he says. "So I grabbed a dictaphone and held it up there."

Kilduff left the Johnson administra-

tion in 1965 to go into public relations work in Washington. Later, he went to Las Vegas to take a job as a news director of a TV station there. The trip west proved to be a mistake: he became an alcoholic.

"In a 24-hour town like Vegas, a guy like me can't help but get in trouble," he says.

Determined to straighten himself out, he dried out at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Washington (he's been sober for three years now, and highly recommends the VA program) and took a "therapeutic" job as a night manager of a drugstore.

But even in those years of personal chaos he couldn't resist the lure of politics. He worked in several campaigns, including both of Hubert Humphrey's presidential bids — and, surprisingly, did some advance work for President Gerald R. Ford's campaign last fall.

Why Ford? "Well, I don't like Carter . . . and I think Ford is a good man, knowledgeable in government. But I hasten to add that I'm still a registered Democrat, and still think of myself as a strong supporter of the party."

While he says his life in Beattyville is pleasant and rewarding (he does volunteer counseling work with alcoholics one night a week, a trace of wistfulness creeps into his voice when he talks about the campaigns he's worked on. And you get the feeling he wouldn't mind a fling in the national political arena every now and then.

"Yea, I'm an old firehorse," he laughs. "Just ring the bell. Politics is fascinating. It's like a cobra to me. I'm terrible — a campaign-aholic. I can turn away from booze, but show me a campaign and I start smacking my lips."

He concedes that his attitude toward politics is not widely shared in this post-Watergate era of disillusionment; and he says it's a "damn shame" that "the brightest young people this nation has ever seen" are turned off to politics.

Then he quotes John F. Kennedy with the fervor of a true believer:

"Kennedy said that politics should be a profession of the highest calling. And I firmly believe that. It should be."