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HEADLINE: Filming ' JFK' replays a painful moment in history

BYLINE: By Paul Weingarten, Chicago Tribune

DATELINE: DALLAS

BODY:

The presidential motorcade, led by the midnight blue 1963 Lincoln Continental convertible, stood motionless and empty on Main near Houston Street, seconds away from the Texas School Book Depository and the site where John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

A crowd gathered on the sidewalk to gawk. It was a surreal scene, a moment plucked out of time and deposited on the streets of Dallas again by movie director Oliver Stone.

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This week Stone began filming his latest motion picture, tentatively titled " JFK. " A four-square-block section of downtown Dallas has been transformed into a movie set, barricaded against traffic and tourists so the film crew and hundreds of extras could re-enact the events of Nov. 22, 1963, the most infamous day in Dallas history.

As cameras and extras were positioned, hundreds of onlookers clustered at several blockaded locations on surrounding streets, snapping pictures, wielding video cameras and admiring the details of Stone's recreation of Dallas in 1963.

Here were the vivid black-and-white images scorched into the nation's collective memory: the stolid Texas School Book Depository; the squat, white-trimmed police motorcycles; the shiny black Cadillac Fleetwood convertible bristling with Secret Service agents. There was even a fresh spattering of ersatz mud on cars parked near the School Book Depository because it had rained the day of the assassination.

"It's really eerie, isn't it?" said Thomas Bryden, a hospital social work director from New York who skipped a convention meeting to visit the set. "It's sort of like a bereavement process; people have feelings to work through."

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The filming has once again stirred memories some in Dallas would rather forget, but it has also shown that Dallas today is a far different place than "The City of Hate," as it was dubbed after the assassination. In those days, critics charged that right-wing extremists had created an atmosphere of hate and

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violence that led to the assassination.

Now the city has begun to cope with the trauma. Two years ago, after a decadelong battle, a museum was opened on the sixth floor of the former School Book Depository, now a Dallas County office building. It was from a window on that floor that Lee Harvey Oswald, identified by a presidential commission as the lone assassin, fired the shots that killed Kennedy.

Some would still prefer to forget. When director Stone asked for permission to film at the sixth-floor sniper's perch, he was rebuffed twice by county commissioners. One who opposed Stone was Dallas film producer Martin Jurow. He called Stone a "provocateur" and worried that Dallas would once again "be accused" in the film. But after some behind-the-scenes lobbying, Stone finally prevailed.

Back on the set, shots erupted in the distance. The engineers were testing their sound effects.

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A block away, in a parking lot, special-effects technicians had rigged an artificial head to explode in two places at the touch of a button. The head stood upright on the ground, hydraulic tubes protruding from the neck. They tested the hydraulics repeatedly, blood spurting from two wounds at the back of the head, timed precisely to match the famous Zapruder film of the assassination.

Two young women stopped to watch the head explode.

"Look! Ewwwww!" one said.

"Is Kevin Costner around?" the other asked a few seconds later.

The movie stars Costner as embattled New Orleans District Atty. Jim Garrison, who believed the CIA, FBI and anti-Castro Cubans had conspired to kill Kennedy. The script is secret, but Stone has said the film will examine various assassination theories.

Hundreds of extras, all sworn to secrecy about the plot, crowded the streets. They wore dark fedoras and skinny ties, white short-sleeved shirts and short raincoats, beehive hairdos and A-line dresses.

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"It brings back memories," said Pamela Farrell, dressed in a bronze-colored three-piece suit, pearls and a matching velvet pillbox hat. She was playing the then-mayor's wife, Dearie Cabell.

On the day of the assassination, Farrell, then 14, had screamed, "Mr. President!" to attract Kennedy's attention from the second-floor window of her father's shoe store. The president smiled and waved to her, she recalled, just moments before he was shot.

TERMS: TEXAS; CITY; MOVIE; HISTORY; BIOGRAPHY

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