

The Dallas Morning News

Marking a somber anniversary



The Dallas Morning News: Lisa LeVrier

Alexis Bilitch (left) of Los Angeles and Alexandra Dobbs of London pay tribute to John F.

Kennedy at a memorial at Dealey Plaza on Saturday, the 34th anniversary of his assassination.

JFK experts honor quintessential collector

By Aline McKenzie

Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

She has a photographic memory and what may be the world's largest private collection of Kennedy assassination information.

She knows every name ever connected with the case and can call it up in seconds on her custom-designed computer database. Government investigators, movie directors and researchers have consulted with her.

But to the world at large, Mary Ferrell is invisible.

"She's very much in the background, but she is the hub of the JFK research community," said Debra Conway of JFK Lancer, a Grand Prairie

■ Keeping the debate alive. 39A

research firm. "No one writes a paper without Mary. No one publishes a book without Mary."

"It's often said about people like us that we're just doing it to get attention, and that is absolutely not true of Mary. . . . She just helps everybody," said Peter Dale Scott, an English professor at the University of California at Berkeley who has known Ms. Ferrell for almost 20 years.

"She's a researcher's researcher," Mr. Scott said.

Now in her 70s and in frail health, Ms. Ferrell received a prolonged standing ovation from her colleagues Satur-

day as she presented the keynote speech at a conference of assassination researchers at the Dallas Grand Hotel.

After undergoing several surgeries this year, "I want to assure you that my X-rays were not forged, my brain was not removed," she joked.

Ms. Ferrell said she was standing on Elm Street, a few blocks from Dealey Plaza, when President John F. Kennedy was shot, 34 years ago Saturday. Listening to a radio, she heard a suspect described as a white male, around 30, 6 feet tall and 165 pounds, wearing a white shirt and khaki pants.

So she was surprised when a 5-foot-9 man, 23, wearing a red-brown shirt and

Please see WOMAN'S on Page 39A.

Woman's JFK database, disposition earn praise from fellow researchers

Continued from Page 33A.

brown pants was arrested.

"I didn't go out and measure him," she said. "I'm surprised I didn't."

She got every edition of every newspaper and began compiling every name ever mentioned. After that compilation grew to more than 40,000 cards, she got her first computer. She's now on her seventh.

A time line of every move Lee Harvey Oswald is known to have made is now available to researchers, thanks to her efforts.

Hundreds have come to stay with her, sometimes for weeks, she said.

"I've never had occasion to tell one of those people goodbye that I couldn't say sincerely, 'I'm sure I learned more about the assassination from you than you did from me,'" she said.

She has so many materials — magazines, newspaper articles, copies of government documents, books, videotapes, photos and so on — that her husband built a room onto their Dallas house to accommodate her library.

"If it can't be found elsewhere, Mary has it. . . . She's embarrassed to say she has all the X-rated girlie magazines that featured JFK," said Jack White, a Fort Worth researcher.

She shares photocopies and computer disks freely, never asking any money in return, her colleagues said.

"She will not even let you buy her dinner," Ms. Conway said. "She's an iron butterfly."

And she does not, absolutely not, give interviews. A reporter did her wrong once, and that's it for reporters.

Mr. White said Ms. Ferrell is the only person he's ever met who had a photographic memory. She told him that once, someone with the government showed her a secret one-page document, on the condition that she just look at it and not copy it.

"She said, 'That's very interesting, thank you,' and then she went home, sat down at her typewriter and re-created the entire thing," Mr. White said.

Paul Hoch, a researcher in Berkeley who has known Ms. Ferrell since the late 1970s, said he sometimes avoids phoning her for help because she's so interesting. A simple question can digress into a long, fascinating — and expensive — conversation, he said.

Mr. Scott said her very existence is a boon to researchers, not only because of her scholarship but also because of her warm personality.

"We haven't solved the case and we're not likely to, but you get to meet some wonderful people and she's one of them," Mr. Scott said.

Mr. White said that after he'd compiled a slide show



The Dallas Morning News: Milton Hinnant

Mary Ferrell, shown speaking Saturday at a conference of assassination researchers in Dallas, has been a consultant to Oliver Stone and Norman Mailer.

on Lee Harvey Oswald in the 1970s, Ms. Ferrell had enough pull with the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations that on her recommendation, Mr. White was invited to testify before them and later became a paid consultant.

Oliver Stone, creator of the movie *JFK*, and author Norman Mailer also consulted extensively with her.

"She deserves to be honored by the city," Ms. Conway said. "Such a small group of people are aware of what she's contributed to the world."

However, Kennedy conspiracy researchers are a notoriously prickly bunch, and Ms. Ferrell has not escaped attack, Mr. White and Ms. Conway said.

Some researchers can't accept her at face value as someone who's fascinated by the assassination and disseminates information for free, Ms. Conway said.

Part of that has come because of her connections with Dallas power structure, Ms. Conway said. Ms. Ferrell was secretary to a powerful Dallas law firm and on the staff of former Gov. Dolph Briscoe.

Author Harrison Livingstone, in his 1993 book *Killing the Truth*, devotes a subchapter to Ms. Ferrell, accusing her and other old-guard researchers of wanting to keep control of material and implying that she is either a dupe or an agent of the FBI.

"Even when offended, she has not lost her temper," Mr. Scott said in introducing her Saturday before her speech.

In her keynote address, Ms. Ferrell spoke of the end of her research, which is now winding down as her health falters. But she praised the younger generation of researchers who have become interested in the assassination and what she called the "official charade" that followed.

Her database will go to JFK Lancer, which she trusts to keep it open, she said. "The answers to the questions that remain," Ms. Ferrell said, "lie in the strength of our resolve to continue demanding the truth."