

Miss Bouvier's Telling Questions

By Susan Gregory Thomas
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Cap in lap, James Saunders, a sixtyish lifelong resident of the District, squints at the screen as he scrolls through the microfilm at the Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library. "I've been here for two days looking," he says softly. "But I haven't found it yet."

Saunders is searching for a small, important memory: the article for which Jacqueline Bouvier interviewed him 42 years ago. "She was so beautiful, you couldn't help but notice anything but her," he smiles. In her year as a daily journalist for the old Washington Times-Herald—from early 1952 until the spring of 1953, when she became engaged to Sen. John F. Kennedy—the 23-year-old Bouvier made her living as the "Inquiring Camera Girl." Of course, in later days her questions all but vanished from the minds of her interviewees. They savored the breezy voice, the swiny skirt—the moment when, in a flash, the future First Lady smiled and snapped *their* picture.

But now that she is gone, those inquiries seem like clues into her mind, some harbingers of what she would become.

For one, she did have a wonderful way with children. Young interviewees seemed to trust her with responses they wouldn't tell their parents. Bouvier approached a 6-year-old Pat Nixon—later "Tricia"—just after her father had been



Jacqueline Bouvier as "Inquiring Camera Girl" for the Washington Times-Herald in the early '50s.

elected vice president: "What do you think of Senator Nixon now?" she asked delicately. "He's always away. If he's famous, why can't he stay home?" pleaded the child. "See this picture? That's a coming-home present I made for Daddy." Bouvier's big story—the only news piece of hers that ever made the front page—was an exclusive interview with Mamie Moore, the niece of President-elect Eisenhower and namesake of the First Lady. Moore, 10 years old, told Bouvier that her uncle would "have to stay there four terms for me to get married [at the White House] because I don't want to marry anyone for years."

There were questions about men

and matrimony that now seem poignant or bubbly. During her courtship with the newly elected Sen. Kennedy, Bouvier asked of male passersby, "What advice would you give girls to find a husband before the leap year is over?" Then, the "Inquiring Camera Girl" wanted to know: "Can you give any reasons why a contented bachelor should get married?" and "What's your worst fault as a husband?"

Other questions were posed to a mixed audience: "Should engaged couples reveal their past?" she asked of men and women, and "Should a candidate's wife campaign with him?" Just before she became engaged: "What's your candid opinion of marriage?" And a darkly resonant inquiry: "Would you rather be an old man's darling or a young man's slave?"

Saunders is getting ready to leave for the day. He has almost finished the April 1952 roll of microfilm ("I'm thinking it might have been spring because it was warm out"). He hasn't found the article yet, but he'll be back tomorrow.

Why is this so important? "Well, when the Kennedys came to Washington, there was change," he reflects. "Segregation began falling, there were jobs . . ." His voice drifts off as he scrolls through the last of the tape. "They brought everything that is beautiful," he smiles. Then, he looks at the screen. "You can tell that she was a wonderful woman," he says, pointing. "Just look at the questions she asked."