

■ 35 YEARS AGO TODAY

Canadian

Visiting reporter took photo of Texas depository seconds after JFK killed

BY PETER SPOHN
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Friday, Nov. 22, 1963.

A bottling convention brought Norman Similas, a Canadian trade reporter, to Dallas. He'd heard Vice-President Lyndon Johnson speak, and was planning to catch another talk by a director of Pepsi-Cola — former vice-president Richard Nixon.

And he'd had drinks with a local nightclub owner named Jack Ruby.

On Friday, his last day, Similas walked through Dealey Plaza just before lunch to catch a glimpse of President John F. Kennedy drive through in a motorcade — and witnessed the assassination that still haunts America after 35 years.

Similas, now 69 and a Richmond Hill businessman, worked his way through the throngs of people that crowded the Dallas streets to make sure he got a good

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spot.

He walked three blocks to where the crowds were thinner, and stood across from the Texas School Book Depository.

As the president's motorcade passed, he heard three shots.

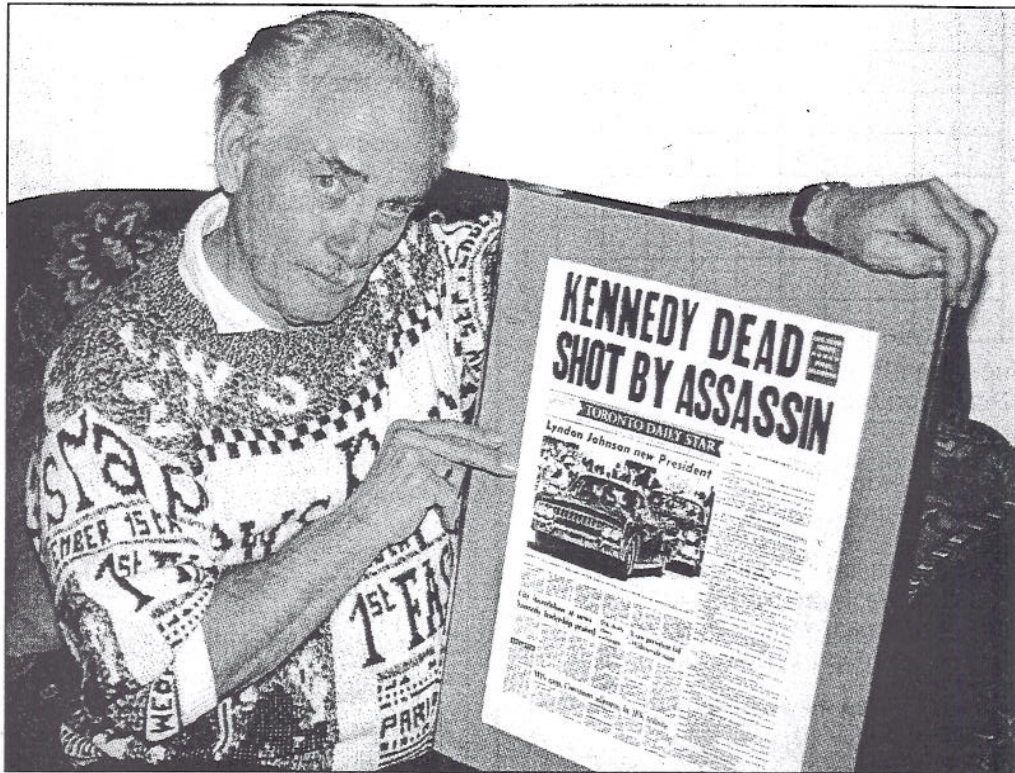
"I was as ready as any photographer could be," Similas said. "I was seeing the assassination of the most powerful man in the world — and he's dead. . . . His head literally exploded."

"Most vivid was the pinkish dress Jackie (Kennedy) was wearing and her hat was sort of pushed aside. That caught my eye more than anything," he said.

"She looked so distraught, in complete shock. Looking at her you wanted to cry."

And then Similas, the only Canadian to witness Kennedy's murder, looked up and

was accidental witness



HISTORIC MOMENT: Norman Similas of Richmond Hill snapped photos of book depository when John Kennedy was assassinated. The negatives were “lost”.

snapped a picture of the depository.

For Similas, it had been a busy week. He had interviewed and photographed Johnson, the convention’s keynote speaker. Similas was also hoping to see Nixon, who was addressing the convention on behalf of Pepsi-Cola.

It was Jack Ruby — a familiar figure at the convention, where he worked the floor handing out passes for his bar — who told Similas he should stay in town long enough to see Kennedy’s motorcade.

Several nights in a row, Similas and members of his party had drinks at the club near his hotel. Ruby would join them at their table for small talk.

It was Ruby who told Similas that Kennedy’s motorcade would be in the area.

“Ruby said something about Kennedy going by (near the night club) — ‘if he gets that

far,’ and that really stuck in my craw,” Similas recalled.

In the moments after the shooting, Similas panned his camera on the depository building, though he “was not sure that’s where the shots came from,” he said.

Then he hotfooted it back to his hotel room and dialed Gerry Barker, a friend and an editor at The Star, where news of the assassination was coming over the wire.

“I said, ‘He’s dead, his skull is all over everybody in the car,’” Similas said. He remembered hearing clicks on the line as the newsroom staff realized an eyewitness was reporting Kennedy dead and picked up extension phones.

The Dallas airport was sealed off, so Similas caught a bus to St. Louis, then a flight to Toronto — via Chicago — to get home.

Word was spreading fast that Similas had

to history

film of the assassination, and that earned him a motorcycle escort to downtown Chicago, where the film was developed.

In Toronto, Similas showed his negatives of the depository to a man claiming to be a Toronto Telegram reporter camped outside his Willowdale home.

"He held my negative up to the light, and said, 'Jesus, there's two guys in the window,'" Similas said.

That window was the same one from which Lee Harvey Oswald — the lone gunman, according to the Warren Commission — fired at Kennedy with his high-powered rifle.

The negative that showed the two figures handling a gun-shaped object was shot "immediately after" the shooting, Similas said. He let the reporter leave with six negatives, all of which were subsequently "lost," he said.

"I think (the one showing two figures) was one of the most important negatives taken in this century," Similas said. He was reimbursed \$50 for the film, but said he "knew negatives of that importance wouldn't be lost."

According to Similas, the Telegram reporter, during an interview with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, would later deny he saw the two figures or that they were significant.

But Similas said he didn't recognize the man from the gang that hung out at the city's press club, and claimed the "Tely guy" was outside the room during one of his two interviews with the RCMP before the Warren Commission's 1964 report.

Asked where he believes the negative is now, Similas replies: "I think it's in Washington locked away."

Similas doesn't believe a conspiracy was at play in Kennedy's death.

"It may have been a conspiracy of two nuts," he said. "If it keeps writers happy and in the money so be it."

A few days after his return from the United States, Similas was watching Oswald — who he believes was "a party to the shooting" — being transferred in the basement of the Dallas jail. When Ruby stepped out and shot him, Similas knew instantly who the triggerman was.

"Oh my God!" he remembers his wife saying then. "What has my husband gotten himself into?"
