

'JFK' is no hit with the Archives

Film fuels a surge in requests to see evidence there

By Michael Isikoff

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WASHINGTON — Is President John F. Kennedy's brain really missing from the National Archives? And what about those "secret" assassination files that cannot be opened for an additional 37 years?

If you've seen JFK, Oliver Stone's three-hour docudrama about a sinister conspiracy to kill Kennedy, you might be wondering the same thing.

Such questions have caused more than a few headaches at the National Archives, staff members said last week. The movie has generated a surge in public requests to inspect evidence related to the assassination.

"There's always been interest in this from day one, but in the last few months we've been very busy," said Michael McReynolds, who as director of the Textual Reference Division, oversees the records of the Warren Commission, which in 1964 investigated the assassination. "We're getting a lot of letters from people asking for information and to see documents. Almost of them want to see autopsy photographs."

As official custodian of the nation's records, the Archives retains hundreds of thousands of pages of Warren Commission records — more than 360 cubic feet of material: from the Italian-made Mannlicher-Carcano rifle used by Lee Harvey Oswald to pictures of the strippers who worked at Jack Ruby's Dallas nightclub, the Carousel.

While 98 percent of this material is

theoretically open to the public, the businesslike McReynolds explained that you could not just wander in off the street and take a peek.

Under an agreement with the Kennedy family, for example, the autopsy material has been restricted to "serious" researchers; the Archives applies the same standard to material evidence.

"We have a lot of people who walk in and say, 'Can I see the rifle?'" said McReynolds, leading a reporter on a tour through the dimly lit rooms where the records are kept. "We say, 'No... It's not a serious request.'"

The Archives has accelerated its review of the remaining 2 percent of classified Warren Commission evidence — segregated in 20 boxes in a secure vault. McReynolds and other Archives officials indicated last week that at least some of that material would never be made public.

There are, for example, Oswald's tax returns. "That's protected by statute," said Jill D. Brett, an Archives spokeswoman.

Much of the interest generated by Stone's movie centers on another set of documents stored at the Archives: the unpublished records of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, turned over to the Clerk of the House in 1979 and sealed until 2029. Conspiracy theorists have long contended that these "secret" records — not subject to the Freedom of Information Act — hold critical clues to the assassination.

Under a House rule, all unpub-

lished records of House committees are sealed from the public for 30 years, and certain categories — such as minutes of executive session meetings — are sealed for 50 years, said Bob Corren, who oversees committee records at the Archives.

Critics say that Rep. Louis Stokes (D, Ohio) and the panel's chief counsel, J. Robert Blakey, have consistently opposed calls to release the files. But now, momentum to do so is mounting. Stokes last week said he was "exploring the possibility" of supporting a House resolution that would unlock the files.

At the Archives, staffers are more concerned about another assertion in Stone's movie — in the epilogue — suggesting that the Archives somehow lost Kennedy's brain.

"It's important to us that we clear this up," said spokeswoman Brett.

The claim was first made by Cyril Wecht, a prominent Pittsburgh pathologist and long-standing Warren Commission critic, after he was permitted to examine Kennedy autopsy records at the Archives in 1972. An inventory of materials that had been turned over to Kennedy's former secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, at the Archives by Kennedy's personal physician, George G. Burkley, in April

1965 had listed nine categories of autopsy-related items, including a "stainless steel container — 7 inches in diameter — containing gross material" and microscopic tissue slides.

Wecht said that, seven years later when he opened the material, which had been locked in a footlocker, the stainless steel container and slides were gone.

"There's something very sinister about this," Wecht said Monday. "It's

the most important piece of physical evidence in the case. At the very least, they [the Archives] were inept and negligent."

But Brett said the accusation was unfair. In fact, she said, the material turned over by Burkley belonged to the Kennedy family. She said that a few days after Burkley gave the material to Lincoln in 1965, a secretary to Sen. Robert F. Kennedy retrieved it. Not until Oct. 29, 1966, did Burke

Marshall, an attorney for the Kennedy family, return the material in a footlocker to the Archives and officially deed its contents to the government.

"We have no idea what happened to the gross material and tissue slides," Brett said. "But the point is, they were never in the custody of the National Archives. . . . The movie implies they were part of the [Archives] records, and that's not accurate."