

JFK film has weighed on family

8-4-99
Zapruder told
son to avoid
ever seeing it

By Tom Squitieri
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Abraham Zapruder was working in his dress manufacturing warehouse on Nov. 22, 1963, when he decided to take his new 8mm Bell and Howell camera, loaded with just-introduced Kodak color film, to watch President Kennedy's motorcade passing nearby.

The film Zapruder shot that day became a key piece of evidence in the investigation of Kennedy's assassination and spawned several never-proved conspiracy theories.

On Tuesday, Zapruder's heirs were awarded \$16 million by an arbitration panel as payment for the government's seizure of their father's film. It is the first payment ordered for a private item seized for its historical importance.

Henry Zapruder, Abraham's son, said the panel's decision provides "an element of acceptance" that the family's long association with the controversial film is ending.

"Even though this particular connection is a happenstance, it is something that has loomed large in our family life," he said in an interview.

The 26.3-second color film graphically shows the president being struck by assassin's bullets. Abraham Zapruder, who before the shooting was an avid photographer, rarely looked through a lens again. He died in 1970. At the time of the assassination, Henry Zapruder was a Justice Department lawyer in Washington. He still gets somber today when describing the call from his father just hours after Kennedy was shot.

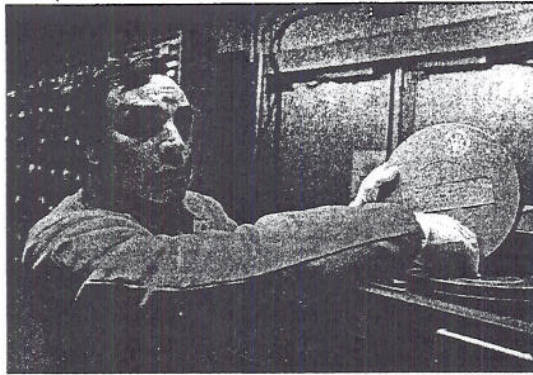
"I said, 'No Dad, he is alive. I heard on the radio that they had taken him to Parkland Hospital (in Dallas). But my father said, 'I've seen it in the camera and his head is blown off.'"

The film sat undeveloped for hours that afternoon, since no commercial facility in Dallas had the equipment to develop the advanced color film. Finally, the FBI called Kodak officials, who ordered their Dallas lab to open up and do a rush processing job.

The night of Nov. 22, 1963, was the only night the film spent in the Zapruder home. After that it was always in the possession of some U.S. government entity.

Henry Zapruder said he has never viewed the original film, seeing only copies in the movie JFK and when it appeared on television.

"The truth of the matter is, my father saw the film immediately. He



Government property: Alan Lewis of the National Archives holds a canister believed to contain the original Zapruder film showing Kennedy's assassination.

said to me two or three days later, 'Son, you never want to see this.' And I have honored that," Zapruder said.

The original 8mm film is 494 frames and is 5 feet, 11½ inches long. It has been stored since 1978 at the National Archives in a special film-preservation room chilled to 25

degrees. The payment dispute was triggered by a 1992 law making assassination-related material public property. Sparring over payment began in 1996, with family appraisers saying the film was worth \$70 million or more as a historical document. Government appraisers came in with

an initial value estimated at \$750,000. Negotiations collapsed in October 1998. The arbitration panel heard arguments on May 25 and 26.

One government witness, John Staszyn, argued the film is not "fine art" and cannot compare to works of art that have been auctioned for millions. He said the bloody nature of the film also reduces its worth.

Appraisers working for the Zapruders argued that the film is a piece of history that should be valued like works of art. The film is "a cultural icon, a historic document and a unique object that has itself become the embodiment of one of the most significant and well-remembered events of the 20th century," appraiser Beth Gates Warren said.

Conspiracy theorists insist the jerkiness in the film correlates to Abraham Zapruder's reaction to rifle shots he heard. By counting the jerks, conspiracy advocates insist many more shots were fired.

Henry Zapruder dismisses such theories. "You see the same movements in pictures of me taking my first steps on Rockaway (Beach)," he said. "You would think that I grew up being shot at."

► Panel's ruling, 1A

Zapruders get \$16M for JFK film

By Tom Squitieri
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WASHINGTON — The federal government will pay \$16 million for the original 26.3-second color film of President Kennedy's 1963 assassination after an arbitration panel ruled Tuesday that it is "a unique historical item of unprecedented worth."

The panel's 2-1 decision is binding on the government and the family of the late Abraham Zapruder, who made the film.

The settlement ends a sometimes contentious skirmish that pitted historic and emotional memories of Kennedy's assassination against the cold reality of today's skyrocketing auction

values of historical objects.

"The only issue was how much," said Leslie Batchelor, one of the Justice Department lawyers involved in the negotiations over how much the family should receive under a 1992 law making assassination-related material public property.

The amount, halfway between the government's offer of \$1 million and the family's demand for \$30 million, is millions higher than the purchase price for other historical items.

Henry Zapruder, Abraham Zapruder's son, said accusations that the family is greedy are "a bum rap."

"We ended up owning that (private) property. Our Constitution provides for just com-

pensation for the government action in taking something, and that's what we're doing, that's what we're getting," Zapruder, 61, said in an interview.

The family retains the copyright on the film but is taking steps to transfer the ownership to a public institution. Family members already have collected \$879,000 in royalties.

The panel delayed release of its decision so it would not occur immediately after the death of John F. Kennedy Jr.

The film will remain at the National Archives, where it has been stored since 1978 in a special film-preservation room chilled to 25 degrees.

► Film's history, 5A