

Mary Jo -- At the Threshold

Washington

In many ways, Mary Jo Kopechne's life was just beginning at the time of her death.

She was, at 28, a late bloomer. When she came to Washington six years ago, she was like thousands of small-town girls who come to make their way on Capitol Hill—unsure of herself in a world of glamor but irresistibly drawn to it.

She pursued the idea of working for the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy with a single-mindedness. It was her days as a "boiler room" girl, working for Kennedy on the 1968 campaign that helped bring about an unfinished metamorphosis — halted abruptly with her death in the car driven by Senator Edward M. Kennedy off that deserted Beach Road Bridge on Massachusetts' Chappaquiddick Island.

Co-workers, room mates, dates, former bosses universally use adjectives like "unsophisticated," "gentle," "naive," "quiet," "nice" to describe Mary Jo. But they also say things that showed a girl emerging — gaining in confidence, becoming aware of many things in life, eager and gay and friendly, dressing more and more stylishly, lancing so well that a group of foreign service friends nicknamed her "Salome."

She apparently had no enemies and her numerous friends are adamant in their desire to clear her name of any scandal or the inevitable whisperings that surrounded the accident.

Wendell Pigman, a former boss while Mary Jo worked in Kennedy's office, said, "She was modest to the point of being prim. She was like Ethel (Kennedy) in that she would grimace if anyone said anything that was dirty or tasteless. You can spot people who are swingers and she was not one of them."

Reynold Riemer, a 31-year-old foreign service financial economist who knew her well in a circle of friends — foreign service officers and foreigners completely re-

moved from the Capitol Hill crowd — said, "She wasn't the kind of girl at all to get mixed up in anything. I'm sure in her travels she had all kinds of opportunities — she's just not that kind of girl."

She was a curious combination — the girl who didn't smoke and drank very little (Riemer said she "would have one or two drinks at parties where most of the people would be pretty far gone") but wasn't unctuous or prudish.

Nancy Lyons, a 26-year-old roommate and secretary in Senator Edward Kennedy's office, who was on the Massachusetts' weekend party, said in fond jest, "If I had to say anything bad about Mary Jo, the only thing I could say was she was neat. I'm not. I smoke and she was always after me to stop. Some mornings she'd line up full ashtrays on the stairs so I couldn't get by until I picked them up and emptied them."

Mary Jo was an only child and her life way from her Pennsylvania Catholic home began in 1962 when she graduated from Caldwell College, a Catholic school and went to Alabama to teach at Catholic schools there.

A roommate in those days, who kept in touch through the Washington years, Donna MacNeil, said that all the Catholic girls were "amazed and shocked" over the civil rights situation in the South — "especially Mary Jo. She is like many girls who come out of Catholic schools. She had a total unawareness that there was a bigger world than the one she had grown up in."

Miss MacNeil said Mary Jo's awe for the Kennedy clan was not surprising. "Even in Alabama there was some singer she was crazy about and she talked about him all the time. She had that hero-worshipper quality."

Miss MacNeil said that during the first six months Mary Jo was in Washington she was still "shy and reticent and unsure of herself," and had few dates . . . what happened was that she just left no impression at all."

This image is in marked contrast to those given by people who knew Mary Jo most recently. Matthew Reese, her last boss and president of a political consulting firm, picked her for her job as a field representative not only for her "quiet competence" but because

tion that she work for Ted and, she said she wouldn't consider it. She said, "I'm just too tired. Two Kennedys' killed is enough."

Margaret Carroll, one of her Georgetown roommates for six years until Mary Jo's death said, "She was working for (Florida Senator George) Smathers and was just fascinated with the Kennedys. As soon as Bob Kennedy was elected she said she'd just love to work in his office. She sent in a resume. She'd even report back to me things like members of his staff 'smiled at me in the cafeteria today.' Then one day she called and said, 'You're talking to a secretary in Senator Kennedy's office.'

During the campaign she was definitely a dedicated, hard worker. Miss Lyons, another boiler room girl said,

"You had to get girls who didn't mind their job interfering with their social life — and believe me these jobs interterred with social life."

Jeannie Main, another former office secretary now with the Kennedy Institute said, "Mary Jo put herself out for others. One of the part time guys in the office learned that his father had died. She spent over an hour with an atlas looking up the little town in Maine on the map where it had happened, made reservations for the guy to get there, drove him home so he could pack and took him to the station."

Many mention that Mary Jo was the type of girl people felt like protecting. Frank Mankiewicz, Bob Kennedy's press secretary said, "She was the kind of girl you want to be a father to. The guys were always looking out for her and protecting her." Miss Lyons said, "One of my friends called her 'the Little One.' She was 28 — but she looked 16." Mary Jo was 5'2" and so slim that she was called Twiggy and sometimes bought clothes in the children's department, Miss Main said.

All the boiler room girls said that they drew close after the assassination and that it was not uncommon for staff parties to be given for them.



MARY JO KOPECHNE
From shyness to style

"she got along so well with people."

Miss MacNeil and other friends mention one serious boy friend in Mary Jo's life, named James Slowinski, who was stationed in Vietnam. The romance ended two years ago and Miss MacNeil said at the time she met him three years ago. "He was even more naive than she was."

Miss Lyons and others felt Mary Jo wasn't ready to get married and that the time they spent apart split up the romance. Still another factor, according to another friend, was "she was a bright girl with a very limited background. She came in contact with men like the Senator (Robert Kennedy) and by comparison the solid guy next door that she would have dated seemed unexciting."

Miss MacNeil said that Mary Jo knew Senator Edward Kennedy only as the brother who felt a sense of responsibility for the girls who had worked for Robert Kennedy. "She had no specific feeling for him except that he was a Kennedy. I suggested to her after the assassina-

Miss Lyons said: "We were all invited up to Nantucket by Joey Gargan and Joan Kennedy last summer. We all taught Mary Jo how to dive out at Hickory Hill last summer — the staff would use the pool after the family went to the Cape. Last winter, some of the men on the staff threw a party to introduce us to all the bachelors they knew. They think all of us should get married. That was hysterical — none of us even remembered the fellows' names. We put names on our back as a gag. Mary Jo was Pat Nixon — she got very mad about that in a joking way," said Miss Lyons.

Mary Jo's friends all said she had a sense of humor. Most recall the same anecdote — about how Bob Kennedy got a globe and he said "Just what I always wanted" and Mary Jo said, "Yes, the world."

Much of her humor was self-deprecating. Miss Main said that when she got a Valentine one February from her father, "she made a lot of jokes about how that was the only one she got."

Mankiewicz said when people asked her about her social life "she would always joke about some swinging Georgetown wife-swapping party she was going to and then work all night in the office."

One of her latest jobs was helping run a campaign for

Thomas Whelan when he ran for mayor of Jersey City. Miss Carroll said, "She came home and I was very impressed with what she knew about Jersey City — everything from the water front to the rat population."

Reese said, "She was an extremely competent secretary and she didn't want to be only a secretary. She wanted something more challenging."

With her new job challenge, Mary Jo also began to dress with more flair. "She was looking better all the time," said one friend. She let her hair grow mid-length, she started wearing mini skirts (last year she took a dress back that was one inch above the knee; she thought it too short). She was still a strong Catholic but she began to "go through a religious questioning period" one friend said.

Through her foreign service friends — whom she met through a house guest who was in the foreign service — she made friends with foreign students and other foreigners working in Washington and widened her interests through them.

And her interest in dancing turned to an interest in rock music. In the last days before her death, this girl — who eight years ago was so shy that a roommate said "she would just clam-up and not say anything" at parties — had a favorite record. She played it the first thing when she got up and it was the last thing she played before going to bed. It was the record album of "Hair" — the anti-Establishment, anti-war, anti-puritan tribal rock musical.

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