

Senator Kennedy's Tragic Weekend Retraced Step by Step

Edmund J. Rooney is an experienced investigative reporter who has been at Edgartown, Mass., since Monday. In this story he assembles and puts into focus all that is known about the events surrounding the death of Mary Jo Kopechne.

By Edmund J. Rooney

EDGARTOWN (Mass.)—(CDN)—It was supposed to be such a festive weekend. Sailing and sun and parties, a great way to take his mind off the rough week coming up.

On Monday, he thought, he would be back in Washington to open the critical Senate floor fight against the Anti-Ballistic Missile System.

So Sen. Edward Moore Kennedy had planned a weekend a world away from high-pressure Washington at the ruggedly beautiful island called Martha's Vineyard and its offshoot islet, Chappaquiddick.

It's a spot on the edge of civilization, where sophisticated tourists strip down to old slacks and tee shirts, and every long-time local can rattle off stories of skilled swimmers dragged to death in the fierce undertow of whales lost in the wild sea.

The houses are gray or white clapboard boxes, not sleek brick and glass. The harbor is filled with trim-rigged sailboats; engine-powered yachts would be horribly bad taste.

And most roads are rough, rutted sand paths — not smooth asphalt.

Friday afternoon he would race his brother John's old boat Victura in the Edgartown Yacht Club Regatta, an event the sailing Kennedys rarely missed.

Friday evening he would join some pals for a cookout and party in one of the gray clapboard cottages on Chappaquiddick.

A Cookout

Six of the girls who worked so hard in his brother Robert's campaign would be there; they had been disappointed when he missed their dinner reunion two weeks ago in Washington, so this cottage party would make up for it.

And Saturday morning his wife Joan would arrive and there would be more sailing, maybe some clam-diving in the fast-flowing salt water tidal ponds on Chappaquiddick, and another party that night.

("Only reasons of health prevented my wife from accompanying me" on Friday, Kennedy said later.)

But Teddy Kennedy spent only 22 hours on those lovely, lonely islands — 2 p.m. Friday to noon Saturday.

His weekend, and perhaps his high-flying career, ended abruptly, tragically.

This, as far as is known, is what happened during those fateful 22 hours. There were contradictions and unanswered questions before his dramatic televised statement Friday night to Massachusetts voters — and some of them remain unanswered.

The senator's weekend began when he arrived at Lgan International Airport in Boston about noon Friday and flew by private charter plane to the Kennedy compound at Hyannis Port.

He changed to sailing togs — white sneakers, khaki pants, white tee shirt — and crossed Nantucket Sound by motor launch Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard.

About 2 p.m. he checked into Room 7 on the second floor of Mayberry House, a restored 18th Century frame building that is part of Shiretown Inn in Edgartown.

Finished Ninth

Less than an hour later the race began. Teddy and his brother's son Joseph, 17, glided into the sound on the blue-hulled Victura for the 11 mile course. They sailed back into Edgartown Harbor about 5:30 p.m., placing ninth of 31. Not too good, but the little group of Kennedy campaign girls waiting at the harbor cheered anyway — among them a slim 28 year old blonde in tee sedate white shirt and black slacks, Mary Jo Kopechne.

About 6 p.m. Kennedy, seated in his 4-door black 1966 Oldsmobile, boarded the little 2-car ferry that shuttles the 150 yards between Edgartown and Chappaquiddick.

Ted, Gene Now Out In '72--Mansfield

WASHINGTON — (UPI) — Senate Democratic leader Mike Mansfield predicted yesterday that neither Sen. Edward Kennedy nor Sen. Eugene McCarthy would contend for the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination.

"It's an open field," Mansfield said in an interview. He said likely prospects included former Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Sens. Edmund Muskie of Maine, Fred Harris of Oklahoma and George McGovern of South Dakota.

Mansfield said that as a result of Kennedy's car accident, pressures pushing the Massachusetts Democrat toward a presidential bid "undoubtedly have subsided."

"I never thought he'd run in 1972 unless he bowed to the pressures that built up," he added.

"Now I feel more certain than ever that he won't run in 1972."

Mansfield said, "McCarthy loses a base" from which to campaign in declining to run for the Senate in 1970.

"Secondly, it looks like he's forsaking politics for poetry," Mansfield said of the Minnesota Democrat. "I hate like the deuce to see Gene leave the Senate."

Humphrey, the 1968 Democratic presidential candidate, is favored to win McCarthy's Senate seat in 1970.

Presumably, he drove along the asphalt road leading from the ferry slip, the road that turns right about a mile from the slip and leads to the little gray two-bedroom cottage rented by Kennedy's Boston cousin, Joseph E. Gargan. It is the only paved road on the islet.

Seven Men

The six girls arrived at the cottage for the cookout about 8:30 p.m., or more than two hours after Kennedy and some of the men got there.

There were seven men — Kennedy, Gargan, Paul Markham, a former U.S. attorney for New England, Charles Tretter, a lawyer with the New England Regional Commission, David Hackett, a political associate of Robert Kennedy, Ray Larosa, a sailing companion, and John Crimmins, Ted Kennedy's driver.

The six girls were the bright, devoted "boiler room" group who kept delegate counts for Robert Kennedy in his Washington campaign headquarters, a few steps from Ted Kennedy's office.

The six were Miss Kopechne, Esther Newberg, 26; Nance Lyons, 26; her sister,

May Ellen, 27; Rosemary Keough, 23, and Susan Tannebaum, 24.

A party of six single girls and seven men, some of them married, may look odd. But Miss Newberg later explained that it was a "very casual" gathering.

"These were girls who knew the senator, who knew

the other people in the house and had partied together before," she said.

The earlier parties, according to another Kennedy associate, were casual and innocent, with folk singing, guitar playing and lots of political talk.

"The Kennedys treated the girls like sisters and daughters," he said.

This particular party started with an outdoor barbecue and "got kind of loud," according to John Silva, a next-door neighbor.

Miss Newberg said that, "at most, there were one or two drinks apiece." Later, a post-mortem by local medical authorities found what they called a "moderate level" of alcohol in Miss Kopechne's blood—the amount that would result, they said, "from two drinks before dinner and one after."

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How Much Liquor?

A key question has been how much Kennedy drank.

In his TV statement, Kennedy said emphatically, "nor was I driving under the influence of liquor."

Edgartown Police Chief Dominick J. Arena says he never asked the senator about drinking.

Sidney Lawrence, the Scarsdale (N. Y.) lawyer who owns the cottage, said his tenants left it neat as a pin—no empty beer or liquor containers. The garbage cans had been emptied...

In the refrigerator were four cans of frozen crabmeat, butter, milk and a number of "party packs of ice."

Some time after the group finished eating, the senator and Miss Kopechne left "to get the ferry back to Edgartown," Kennedy said in his original statement. The last crossing is scheduled at midnight, but usually is late.

'Hit the Floor'

The others, apparently, decided to spend the night in the cottage. As Miss Newberg later explained, she shared one bedroom with Nance and Mary Ellen Lyons and Miss Keough and Miss Tannenbaum slept on the living room couch-daybed.

Crimmins and Larosa had the other bedroom, she said, and the rest of the men "hit the floor."

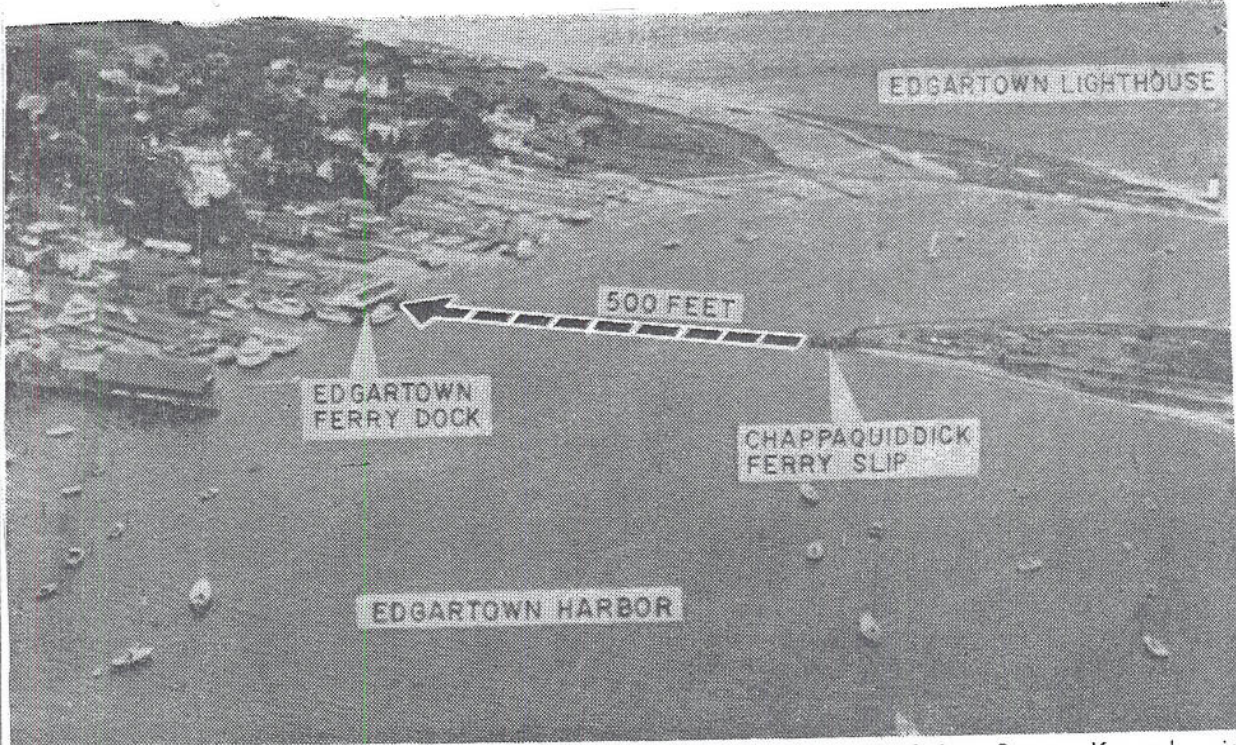
From the point where Kennedy and Miss Kopechne left, the contradictions and question marks begin.

In his original statement prepared last Saturday morning and in his address Friday night, Kennedy said they drove off at 11:15 p.m. This would be ample time for the mile and a half drive to the ferry.

As they left the cottage they took Chappaquiddick road, a two-lane asphalt street and the only paved road on the islet. Half a mile north of the cottage, it turns west, to the left, and runs for a mile to the ferry slip. It was the road Kennedy must have taken earlier in the evening to get to the cottage.

The Time

A white line runs down the center of the road. About a block before it turns left to the ferry, there is a sign with an arrow pointing left. It is reflectorized for night driving.



Airview diagram shows channel between the Edgartown ferry dock and the Chappaquiddick ferry slip, a distance of 500 feet. Senator Kennedy said he swam channel, almost drowning in attempt. UPI Photo

To the right of the intersection is Dike Road, not much more than a packed-down sand trail. It leads across a wooden bridge to a wildlife sanctuary for seabirds. Beyond the sandy bird sanctuary is the ocean and a mile of beach.

There is evidence that Kennedy may have erred in his statement on the time.

Charles (Huck) Look, 41, a muscular deputy sheriff, said he was returning from the ferry about 12:40 a.m. when he recognized the Kennedy car parked at the intersection. He was not able to recognize

the man and woman in the car.

He said he stopped his car, shouted an offer of help to the Oldsmobile, and started to get out.

But he heard no response from the occupants, he said, and saw the car turn right—leaving the asphalt road with its white center line. It headed down the bumpy sand road.

In his original statement of last Saturday, Kennedy said he was "unfamiliar" with the road and "turned right instead of bearing hard left."

The "unfamiliarity" could be questioned. It is the only paved road on tiny Chappaquiddick, and the Kennedys had been in and out of Ed-

gartown Yacht Club and Chappaquiddick Beach Club for years. The beach club is only about a block from the ferry slip.

Several summer residents of the islet said they saw Kennedy driving on the paved road before the Friday sailing race.

The Bridge

It may be difficult to understand how Kennedy could have accidentally turned off the main road, but it is not difficult to understand how the tragic accident happened—once he made that wrong turn.

The sand trail called Dike

Road passes lonely, desolate dunes for seven-tenths of a mile, and then the trail becomes a wooden bridge 10 feet 6 inches wide.

There are no lights. There is no railing. The edge is marked only by the tops of the upright logs that support the bridge.

The bridge curves upward and veers left. At night a car's headlights would reflect up as it moves along the incline. A driver couldn't see the leftward veer.

And, if the driver headed forward, he would fly off the bridge into the tidal pond below.

This, apparently, is what happened to Teddy Kennedy and Mary Jo Kopechne.

The Window

Kennedy's car flipped over

as it went off the bridge. The upturned rear wheel and rear bumper rose out of the water.

Kennedy said he remembers "water entered my lungs, and I actually felt the sensation of drowning."

He did not say how he got out of the car, but it was found with all doors closed and only the window on the

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driver's side open. Presumably, he crawled out this window.

He said he dived repeatedly into the pond to get Mary Jo, but failed because the water flow was so powerful.

Long-time island residents agree this is probable.

In his televised statement, Kennedy's account of his actions after he failed to rescue Mary Jo differs markedly from his original account of last Saturday.

A Variation

In his original statement, he said he walked the mile and a half back to the party cottage, climbed in the back seat of a car, and "asked for someone to bring me to Edgartown." He said he was "exhausted and in a state of shock."

In his later televised statement, he said he "lay in the grass for an undetermined length of time" before he walked back to the cottage, told his friends of the tragedy.

dy and brought two of them back to the pond.

In neither statement did he explain why he failed to ask for help at the five cottages and the fire station he passed on the walk back.

The first house, belonging to Mrs. Pierre Malm, is only 120 yards from the bridge. A 60-watt light bulb glowed at the back door, and is visible at night from the road. The Malm house has a telephone.

A Fire Station

Further along the road to the cottage Kennedy must have passed a volunteer fire station. A red light over the garage door burns all night.

The door is kept unlocked. Inside is a switch that turns on a siren atop the station house to summon volunteer firemen and volunteer scuba divers. It can be heard all over the island, according to residents.

John Silva, his father Foster, and other neighbors near the party cottage say the laughter and talk ceased somewhat abruptly about 1:30 a.m.

That may have been the time the Senator returned to the cottage and told of the accident.

In his televised statement, he said Markham and Gargan returned to the pond with him and tried unsuccessfully to get Mary Jo out of the car.

"Fear, Panic"

Then, he said, "overcome by a jumble of emotions — grief, fear, doubt, exhaustion, panic, confusion, shock" — he had his friends take him to the ferry crossing. No ferry was around, so "impulsively" he jumped in and "nearly drowning once again" swam the 500 feet to Edgartown.

He said he "collapsed" in his room, which can be reached by outside steps to a second-floor porch, about 2 a.m. Island residents say this would be an extremely difficult swim.

It was two boys on their way back from an early morning fishing trip — not Kennedy or his friends — who first reported the accident.

Bob Samuel, 21, and Jose Cappavella, 15, saw the up-turned wheels and bumper. They went to Mrs. Malm's house and called Police Chief Arena.

He arrived soon afterward, changed to bathing trunks and dived to explore the car.

He read the license plate upside down and asked for a radio check of the car's owner. It was registered to Edward M. Kennedy of 2400

John F. Kennedy Building, Government Center, Boston.

"My God, I thought, another tragedy," Arena said later.

He is 6-foot-2, about 220 pounds, and athletic — but he couldn't cope with the pond's rushing tide. He called the volunteer fire department's scuba diving team.

John Farrar, one of the divers, told of finding the body.

"Rigor mortis had set in," he said. "There was not one muscle that was mobile."

Mary Jo's head was in the rear foot space, "which is where the last air could be with the car in that position," Farrar said.

He estimated it may have taken anywhere from five to 30 minutes for the water to seep in and displace the last air.

She was fully clothed, still in the white shirt and black

slacks she wore to watch Teddy Kennedy race.

When Arena got back to the police station about 10 a.m., Kennedy, Gargan and Markham were waiting for him. They had come to report the accident that had occurred about nine hours earlier.

Arena recalls that Kennedy told him, "I was the driver ... I want to do this right." He then dictated his brief statement, omitting Mary Jo's last name because he didn't know how to spell it.

He left by a rear door, got into his car and drove off about 11:30 a.m. A private plane waiting at the tiny Martha's Vineyard Airport flew him back to Hyannis Port. The weekend was over.

Whether the political life has also ended will depend, as Kennedy said last night, will depend on the voters of Massachusetts.