

The Artifacts of Camelot: 1,000 Days in 1,902 Boxes

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WALTHAM, Mass., Aug. 1— There are no clocks visible in the huge windowless green room where 14-tiered bookcases stretch almost to the high steel rafters, and storage bins hold 159 busts of John F. Kennedy.

There need be no clocks. For here, in a long, low brick building out where Trapelo Road winds through sedate suburbs, time has been stopped, catalogued and packaged into gray cardboard boxes.

This, for the time, is the Kennedy Presidential library, where the spirit and world of the New Frontier is now reduced to its artifacts; the Thousand Days in 1,902 boxes; Camelot encased in cardboard.

The spirit and passions are hard to find here. For one thing, the pages of documents that are now open are the least interesting, the most bureaucratic.

There is not much life in files labeled: Commodities—Aquarium, Chair, Elevator, Food and Grain.

Much Being Withheld

More important items such as classified defense papers and the frank recollections of Cabinet officers will remain sealed, some for 75, even 100 years.

But even at best archives inescapably mute life. How does one catalog "tragedy"? Does one look for "vigor" under "V"?

And so here, the file, "Kennedy, John F., funeral" produces little more than a well-worn memorandum on military protocol. "Disasters, Texas," in box DI 002 G, yields only accounts of storms and droughts.

Nor is there gaiety here, or humor—other than the occasional witless joke of the computer that wrote the blue-bound index and, under the listing, "Anonymous and Illegible Communications," provided 192 precise subcategories.

"It's kind of hard to accept," says Carl Brauer, a graduate student from Harvard, looking up from a stack of files. "There are fourth- and fifth-grade kids who come in here without any recollection of the Kennedy years. For them, this is it."

Big cumbersome bureaucracies cannot easily be gentle or sensitive. But here it is evident that, like a truck driver trying to console a lost little girl, the General Services Administration has done its best.

In time, there will be a finer setting for the Kennedy library, in a building to be constructed with contributions from the public, on the banks of the Charles near Harvard Square. But that site is still occupied by subway yards and the move to Cambridge is still probably six years away.

To say that the interim location looks like a warehouse is no injustice. It is a warehouse. A visitor escorted through its other sections feels dwarfed by the unpainted, unending rows of cabinets stuffed with tax and veterans' records.

Yet it is an attractive building of modern brick with broad lawns, where two perspiring men in undershirts carefully pack peat moss around the full shrubs.

And inside, in the Kennedy library section, the concrete walls have been painted in pastels. Red rugs soften the harsh sweep of concrete floors. Fading mementoes brighten the huge open space. One is an early Congressional campaign sign proclaiming, in ambulance red and white: "The Remedy is Kennedy."

The mood, however, is still softly sad. Visitors are invited to take prayer cards from the funerals of both John and Robert F. Kennedy. One huge area of the files is occupied entirely by two million condolence letters.

To John F. Stewart, there is another kind of sadness here, a professional sadness. Mr. Stewart, a genial, precise man of 38, acts as director of the library for the National Archives and Records Service.

"A big thing that hits you," he says, "is that three years wasn't long to begin with—and now they get shorter and shorter. When Federal troops had to be sent to the University of Mississippi in 1962, it was a shocking event. But now, after Detroit, after Newark, it looks pretty small."

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