

Tragedy Chokes the Cheers Here

By BILL BOLDENWECK

The party would have gone on all night.

Though Senator Robert Kennedy was leading and his brother had walked away from California Hall after a triumphant statement, the victory party wouldn't have closed down.

But tragedy closed it.

Forty-five minutes after the shooting at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, local Kennedy officials chased their candidate's workers away from the three television sets on the stage and shut down the hall.

There was nothing else they could do.

The victory party had been a huge success. The television predictions showed it

was Kennedy all the way and the wire service "hard count" of votes was beginning to bear it out.

Senator Edward Kennedy, the candidate's brother, had been on hand and torn his way through a phalanx of admiratory campaign workers to head back to the Fairmont Hotel.

The young people — most of them under 25 — were still on hand to cheer when the candidate made his victory statement over the air.

The cheers were still dying when an anguished television announcer announced the shooting of Robert Kennedy.

And all the young people, and the few old "pros" who were still there halted in disbelief.

First reactions were in the "it isn't true," or "it's someone else," vein. But as the reports continued to come through, the victory mood turned into the awful suspense of unknowing.

Smiles very swiftly turned into tears or clenched jaws, and the faces of happy, pretty, girls and happy, handsome men turned into agony.

Nancy Gallett, a San Bruno schoolteacher who had been happily laughing moments before, was helped to a theater chair bolted against the wall to sob out her reaction.

Across the street, the professional staff of the RFK campaign, who had walked into the Embassy Lounge for a quiet victory drink, held their heads and clutched

transistor radios to their heads.

And no one had anything to say.

The victory party had begun modestly enough at 8:30 p.m. when the workers began to filter in to the barn-like California Hall.

Built for dances and vaudeville performances the Hall easily accommodated the 200, then 350, then 700 workers who came in after the polls closed to watch the three television sets on the stage and listen to the local leaders who shouted periodic and more than hopeful progress reports into the microphone.

They were the door pounders, the telephone ringers, and the headquarters work-

ers who had carried the campaign for their man and they had to have the badge that went with their workers kit to get in.

And they were being rewarded with a \$2000 party.

It was a good party and more than one of the workers overcelebrated. There would have been happy hangovers in the morning.

But suddenly their hero was wounded, and whether the campaign was a going thing or no more was an open question.

And the youngsters, and the professionals, who had felt themselves standing on the rim of history felt it crumbling under them — and then went home to see what was to happen.



Aghast on learning of assassination attempt, Kennedy supporters watch TV at RFK's headquarters.

Photo by Don Lorenzo