



Holland McCombs

Courtesy of the University of Tennessee-Martin Archives



Robert G. Cowser

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A FEW DEGREES OF SEPARATION FROM JOHN F. KENNEDY'S DEATH

By Robert G. Cowser

Fifty years after John Kennedy's assassination it is time to reflect on the impact of that event on almost everyone living at the time. Several times over the years I have mentioned to the college classes I taught that I saw President Kennedy from a distance of two hundred yards or so approximately twelve hours before he was shot. It is amazing to the twenty-year-old students that anyone who was living when the assassination occurred.

A few days after the President announced his plans to visit Texas, my mother kept a medical appointment in Mt. Vernon, Texas. While she was

waiting to see the doctor, she heard startling remarks from a salesman from a pharmaceutical company. He told another salesman that Kennedy had better "watch his back." "He'll get what's coming to him," the speaker said. My mother, who was an admirer of Kennedy, was shocked by what she overheard.

The year of Kennedy's visit came at a time when I was studying at Texas Christian University. Kennedy and his entourage stopped over at the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth before continuing to Dallas the following morning. The group was scheduled to arrive at the hotel in downtown Fort Worth at approximately 10 P.M. Shortly before that time a classmate stopped by my apartment to ask whether I would like to accompany him on his way to get a glimpse of President and Mrs. Kennedy. At first I was hesitant, but my second thought was that I should go. I rode with my classmate to join a group of four or five hundred standing behind the cordons in front of the hotel.

After having waited five or ten minutes, I saw the Kennedys exit a limousine and walk toward the hotel's entrance. At one point Kennedy left the direct route and walked over to shake hands with a few of the relatively large group of Latinos who had gathered as near the entrance as they could. At the time, the incident hardly seemed memorable. But later I realized that Kennedy was quite popular among Hispanics.

Shortly before one o'clock the next day I was walking to class when a student carrying a transistor radio called out, "Kennedy's been shot!" The class I was planning to attend was cancelled as were the

classes for the rest of the day and those scheduled for the following Monday. A memorial service was conducted at a football stadium near the TCU campus.

The next week when I visited my parents, they told me that J. D. Tippit, the officer whom Lee Harvey Oswald shot in the Texas Theater, grew up in Clarksville, just thirty miles from my parents' home.

The events in Dallas following the assassination were covered by Holland McCombs and his staff at the Time-Life Bureau in Dallas. I met McCombs, a native of Martin, Tennessee, shortly after my wife and I moved to Martin in 1970. He felt a strong attachment to the Martin community and visited the city and The University of Tennessee at Martin campus several times in the '70s and '80s. The Holland McCombs Collection in the Paul Meek Library at the University contains notes, clippings of newspaper and magazine articles, and letters McCombs wrote, many of which he wrote in the weeks following the assassination.

Many of those who objected to the conservative leadership of the establishment in Dallas blamed the city for Kennedy's death. When I was teaching at Quinnipiac College (now Quinnipiac University) during the late '60s, I experienced how flagrantly the prejudice against the city of Dallas was sometimes expressed. I moved to Connecticut from Durant, Oklahoma. Sitting with a group of other professors at a snack bar on the Quinnipiac campus, I mentioned that, since I was living just across the Red River from Texas, the nearest airport where I could get a flight to New York on my way to Connecticut was Dallas' Love

Field. One of the professors at the table picked up his coffee cup and walked away, calling out that he did not care to sit at the table with anyone from Dallas. One of the other professors said that the professor who made the remark worshipped Kennedy.

Numerous reports show that many people over the world blamed Dallas for Kennedy's death. Proof of this pervasive attitude is present in certain documents from the Holland McCombs Collection. John Rosenfield, erstwhile columnist for the Dallas Morning News, reported in the December 4, 1963, issue of that paper one example. While visiting in New York City, Rosenfield heard a well-dressed young man refer to the Cowboys as assassins when reporting a score of a game between the Dallas team and the Giants. In the Dallas Times-Herald for December 4, 1963, Dick Hitt reported that an out-of-state clothing buyer cancelled an order previously submitted to a Dallas garment factory. The buyer did not want Dallas labels on the merchandise he planned to sell.

Vilification of Dallas by some continued well into the '70s. In 1973 I attended a meeting of the Texas State Historical Society in Waco. Holland McCombs attended one of the sessions I also attended. A scholar who read a paper entitled "Is Dallas Burning?" lambasted the political views of those Dallasites. In the scholar's view, Dallas might as well have been called Gomorah. As I observed McCombs, who was sitting next to me, I saw several times during the scholar's verbal assault there were tears in his eyes. It was difficult for him to hear such condemnation of a city he loved.

During my tenure at a professor at The University of Tennessee at Martin, I taught an extension class at a high school approximately thirty miles from the campus. Gerald McElvain, a professor in the Psychology Department, taught a class there the same evening my class met. One evening on the ride back to Martin McElvain mentioned that he was a student at Texas Wesleyan in Fort Worth in the '60s. He said that he took his two sons to the plaza near the Texas Hotel on the evening President and Mrs. Kennedy arrived. I quickly told him that a classmate and I went to the same spot that evening.

Only recently did I learn that a former high school classmate witnessed the assassination of Kennedy. Welcome Eugene Barnett, a retired Dallas police officer, and two other officers were assigned duties at the corner of Elm and Houston Streets in downtown Dallas on the morning Kennedy's motorcade drove down Elm Street. In a transcript from the Warren Commission, Barnett testified that he saw the President collapse after the first shot was fired. He testified that he heard a total of three shots. Barnett and the other two officers ran to the entrance of the Texas School Book Depository. Barnett said he never saw Oswald or anyone else leave the building.

In 1964 I left Fort Worth in order to begin teaching at Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant. I lived in a second-floor apartment. In the apartment beneath me lived a medical technician who was employed at the local hospital. One evening as I was returning to my apartment, my neighbor called out, "You'll never believe whose

blood I just drew so that it could be tested," he said. "Marina Oswald and the Dallas cop she plans to marry drove over from Dallas in order to get their blood tested." The couple married the following morning in Sherman, Texas.

These incidents, all governed by circumstance, are reminders that history can touch any of us when we least expect it.

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