

JFK assassination: a nation faces tragedy with President's death

Written by Darci Tomky

Nov. 9, 1960—A young 43-year-old Democrat, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, narrowly edged out Republican Richard Milhous Nixon to become the 35th President of the United States.

Just three years and 13 days later, tragedy gripped the nation when Kennedy was assassinated Nov. 22, 1963.

Almost everyone can remember exactly what they were doing when they heard the news that the President was shot while riding in a motorcade with his wife Jacqueline in Dallas, Texas. Whether hearing it over the intercom in a grade school classroom or watching it on television at home, it would become a lasting memory.

The Nov. 28, 1963 edition of The Holyoke Enterprise records the events, with one headline reading, "Phillips County mourns with nation in President's death."

Although a majority of Phillips County citizens did not vote for Kennedy in the 1960 election, they were "gripped by shock and sadness since the assassination of President Kennedy on Friday." Charlene Kropp, a Republican, said she had much empathy and sympathy for the family even though Kennedy was a Democrat. "It didn't make any difference, he was still our President."

In the Enterprise's Clark's Corner column by Ted Clark, he writes "All loyal Americans, regardless of political or religious beliefs, were joined together by their hearts and their patriotism as one President died and another took his place."

Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as president shortly after the fatal shooting.

Holyoke and the rest of the country were turned upside down between the assassination on Friday and the funeral on Monday, Nov. 25, 1963. Clark said, "The shocking events of the last several days have left little room for ordinary things."

As a sixth grader in 1963, Steve Cogburn remembers that while kids at school were stunned, a lot of the children didn't really understand what had happened. The kids just knew that there

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wasn't anything else on television the next few days except coverage of the assassination.

Annie Bahler also remembers watching all the events on television. "Reporters kept people informed of all phases of the tragic news," said the Enterprise. "It sure made you want to watch TV a lot," said Glenn Michael.

The world watched on television and listened to the radio as Kennedy was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. The heartbreaking part, according to Charlene Kropp, was watching Kennedy's family, especially his 3-year-old son John when he watched the funeral procession and saluted his father's coffin.

In Holyoke, the Post Office, public buildings, banks, schools and many businesses were closed on Monday to pay tribute to the President and his funeral. A "very impressive service" was held at the high school gym, according to the Enterprise.

At the memorial service, there was posting of the colors by members of Holyoke American Legion and VFW posts, an invocation by Rev. Roland Reed of the Baptist Church and the National Anthem led by Lee C. McMillen.

The Date Line—HHS section of that Enterprise reported "Those who attended were appreciated and certainly were challenged by the guest speaker, James Dobyns." He was the minister of the Christian Church and delivered an address entitled "The Worth of Individual."

Audience members sang "America," and the service closed with E. James Faubel reading the famous poem "Captain, My Captain."

In addition to this memorial service, Bahler remembered a service hosted by the Lutheran Church in Holyoke.

Just as millions of people watched television coverage of JFK's death, they also witnessed

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another murder just 72 hours after the President died. Cogburn recalled watching live television when 24-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald was shot and killed.

Oswald had been arrested and charged with the murder of the President. The alleged assassin was shot at point blank range by Jack Ruby, a Dallas night club owner, in the basement garage of a Dallas police station as Oswald was about to be transferred to the nearby county jail in Dallas. Controversial theories as to why Ruby killed Oswald are still speculated today.

Even in the midst of tragedy, Clark's Corner pointed out that although Americans were grieving, at the same time they were thankful for the American way of things. "Thanksgiving should be a time for looking back, and being thankful for manifold blessings, but it should also be a time for looking forward," said Clark. "Though Thanksgiving this year comes soon after a national tragedy, we can take pride in our nation and again be thankful for the wisdom and the courage of those who conceived it."

JFK tragedy compared to Pearl Harbor

In the Nov. 28, 1963 Enterprise, "Yet mourning, we look ahead" is an article that looks at two "days of infamy," comparing the events of Kennedy's assassination in 1963 to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

"Twenty-two years, less 15 days, after that Day of Infamy was born at Pearl Harbor, another day of infamy dawned across America. The tragic events of both black days are seared across the conscience.

"On Dec. 7, 1941, we were attacked by a foreign power, and this great land fought back with all the vast might that was in it. Aroused, inflamed, outraged, the American people conquered that foe with steel and sacrifice and physical power.

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“On Nov. 22, 1963, we were again attacked. And this attack, though different in scope, was the same in concept, as black and as bitter. Not conceived by admirals and generals, but like an uncontrolled malignancy, growing rampant in the mind of one individual, this blow against us erupted in a short blast of gunfire within our own borders. A short time later, our President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy—brilliant, vibrant, in the full bloom of life, our chief executive—lay dead.

“Both terrible acts were directed against democratic ideals, the very touchstone of our society.

“Our great land mourned then, and mourns again. But just as our grief then gave birth to gigantic, concerted, victorious action, so should our grief this time not lead to despair, but should again spur us to a greater awareness of our potentials, our ideals, our direction, our bright heritage.

“As the bows of that Dec. 7 welded us in the crucible of war, so should this Nov. 22 arouse in us a desire to forge forward in brotherhood and understanding; should rekindle in us an awareness of need we have for each other, a reawakened comprehension of love, respect, responsibility, honor.

“May we come to realize that it is our duty to conduct ourselves, as individuals and as a nation, so as to create in those about us a realization of the fruits that can be obtained only in a democracy. For only in this way can this nation, under God, attain its birthright. Only in this way can the dignity of the individuals be preserved.”