

Vivid memories remain 50 years after JFK assassination

Written by Kyle Arnoldy

Nov. 22, 1963—an infamous day in American history that 50 years later still captures the attention of the American public. Five decades removed from the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, those who were old enough at the time of the incident still have the images of the aftermath burnt into their memory.

While not every child was able to fully grasp the severity of the situation, half a century later, almost everyone can remember exactly what they were doing when they found out the president of the United States had been assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

Kathy Cook, who was 11 at the time and living in the Lamar, Neb., area, said the entire situation was scary as she sat watching the television. With coverage showing people running and the horror of what had unfolded, Cook, like much of America, was glued to the news coverage. She said she was too young to realize what was going on but remembers the fear on the television and the subject being the talk of the town for the following weeks.

With little time to comprehend what had happened on that fall afternoon, the world was thrown into a whirlwind as the accused shooter, Lee Harvey Oswald, was murdered just two days later as he was being transferred to jail. Kennedy's funeral was held the day following Oswald's death.

Even the youngest of viewers still holds on to clear memories of the events. Perry Skinner, who was just 4 years old at the time, said he can still very clearly picture the lasting image of 3-year-old John F. Kennedy Jr. saluting his father's casket.

Michael Gracey, who was a 13-year-old student in Holyoke at the time, said he remembers getting the news over the school intercom. He added that he remembers people around him feeling sad while he struggled to grasp the idea of why someone would do that.

With information being spread quickly by the news coverage and word of mouth, at 14 years old, John Schneider remembers someone yelling to him that Kennedy had died as he walked to the industrial arts building at school in Peru, Neb.

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Without any context, Schneider said he was confused and thought a classmate named Kennedy had passed. Once the situation was made clear to him, he said it was shocking.

“We were just all stunned,” Schneider said. “I remember thinking, ‘Is all of this really going on?’”

When he arrived at home, he noted that his parents responded in disbelief like there had been a death in the family. With all of the extended news coverage, he said he really felt for the Kennedy family, especially in the aftermath, as much more attention was focused on them.

A young 8-year-old, Jerry Williamson in Chanute, Kan., said he remembers the exact moment he found out as clearly as if it happened yesterday.

In the middle of class, the school principal came in and spoke in a hushed voice to his teacher at the time. Without saying a word, she threw her arms up in the air and ran out of the classroom screaming. The principal then made the announcement to the class and school was called for the day.

As he waited on the curb for a ride home, he remembers not really knowing what the announcement meant. In the following hours and days, he recalls an emerging quietness as people grieved and dealt with the loss. He noted it was a strange situation he will never forget.

Cathy Sullivan had the misfortune of her 10th birthday sharing the same date as the assassination. What started off as a happy day turned to a dark, gloomy afternoon. While she wasn't sure what her school announcement meant, she remembers her teacher looking extremely white and shocked without saying much.

“Back then, everyone respected who was in office,” Sullivan said. “Most people were upset, sad and emotional.”

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Looking back, she said most kids took on whatever feelings their parents displayed as an all-encompassing somber mood set in following the news.

New information related to the life and death of Kennedy continues to emerge and conspiracy theorists try to fill in gaps of knowledge with various assertions about possible scenarios. While never too far from public discussion and debate, the assassination of JFK remains a perplexing event in world history as thousands of books, movies and articles have tried to make sense of the Nov. 22, 1963, tragedy.

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