

## Memories of 1963 - Hundreds gather in Dallas to honor JFK

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Several hundred gathered yesterday to remember that fateful day 35 years ago when a presidential motorcade drove down Elm Street and the nation's future was forever changed.

Some went to Dealey Plaza to commemorate the anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination with wreaths, photographs, candles and personal notes for the former president, who officials contend was shot and killed by Lee Harvey Oswald from the sixth floor of the old Texas School Book Depository.

Others went to discuss conspiracy theories and possible government cover-up of an assassination that a variety of theorists have linked to Cuban terrorists, the Mafia and former President Lyndon Baines Johnson, among others.

Still others went to profit from the anniversary by selling newspapers, videotapes, audio tapes, books and other paraphernalia related to the assassination and the Kennedy family.

Fresh flowers surrounded the newly created memorial at the foot of the grassy knoll, where well-wishers left photographs, dozens of roses and candles. One floral wreath read, "In memory of JFK, our last president of the people." Another message stuck to the ground with a small British flag read, "The U.K. still grieves."

Many people took advantage of the calm weather to sit on the grass and people-watch as the crowd thickened around Dealey Plaza and the grassy knoll.

Arlington resident Judy Ballard, 55, sat on a picnic blanket with her family to enjoy the mild, sunny day and remember the former president and a bygone era. Ballard recalled the bleak days after Kennedy's assassination when a stunned nation tried to cope with the unlikely loss of its popular president.

"It was the weirdest weekend," she recalled. "TV just played music with news breaks in between. I finally went with a girlfriend to see some friends, and that's when we heard Oswald was shot. We all thought, 'When will this stop?' " It wasn't until days later that Ballard remembered she had met Jack Ruby, who was convicted of killing Oswald. The manager of Ruby's club, The Carousel, was stabbed in a bar fight and ended up at St. Paul Hospital, where Ballard worked as a nursing student.

"He seemed like a nice guy," she said. "It was the first time I had ever seen a cashmere coat."

The memorial provided a place for conspiracy theorists to swap stories - especially convenient, as the Coalition on Political Assassinations was holding its annual conference nearby.

Theorists took turns at the lectern to offer opinions of what happened and how they thought the government was motivated to cover it up.

"Most people have no confidence in the government and no confidence in the media," said Art Pineda, 49, who attended the conference from Los Angeles. "It relates to what happened here. It started things in the wrong direction. Why is there an elite group that can't be held accountable? Now we spend \$40 million on what amounts to an affair with an intern."

Witnesses of the assassination were treated like celebrities when word got out that they were there the day the motorcade drove past.

People hounded them for autographs, photographs and interviews.

Dallas resident Ernest Brandt, 72, was wearing a hat yesterday, the same hat he wore on the day he stood under a

tree and saw Kennedy shot, he said.

Although many conspiracy supporters asked Brandt questions, he said that he only heard three shots and that all of them came from Oswald.

"They haven't proved with any credibility that anyone else was involved," he said. "Oswald was a very unhappy, disagreeable, maladjusted, crazy, mixed-up kid. He wanted to be big and important and didn't know how to do it."

Fairview resident John Templin, 60, who was with Brandt the day Kennedy was shot, said that remembering had been so painful he hadn't returned to the scene in almost 30 years.

"After it happened, I had a hard time sleeping for about two or three weeks," he said.

Dallas resident Malcolm Summers, 74, said he got down on the ground after he heard the shots ring out.

"When that cop came off that bike, I hit the ground," he said. "I thought he was going to start shooting, not at me, but my direction."

Vendors took advantage of the fair weather and a crowd interested in the Kennedy assassination. Authors of conspiracy books were on hand to sign autographs and sell books, and vendors sold autopsy photographs and copies of Kennedy's death certificate.

Standing behind the wooden fence atop the grassy knoll, Brian Vacval, 33, of Toronto, read some of the messages that have been written on the fence since Nov. 22, 1963. Some of the older messages are starting to fade, and others, written more recently, are bold and bright. "The murders of JFK will not escape God's justice," read one, and another read, "God bless the life that was taken away at this spot."

"These are people who want to be part of it," Vacval said. "It seems like a never-ending search for people to want to be part of every nook and cranny, whether it was a stone on the road - just something that was here at that time."

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