

Anniversary of Kennedy's death brings back memories

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: Ben Plastino, recently retired executive editor and political writer of The Post-Register, will continue to author a column to appear periodically on this page.)

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The assassination of President John F. Kennedy 20 years ago this month brings to memory two personal interviews.

The first was in the summer of 1960 while Kennedy was campaigning for the presidency, the second on Sept. 26, 1963, at Jackson, Wyo., less than two months before he was killed.

Perhaps the most sparkling recollection of the boyish-looking Kennedy with his mop of dark hair was his charisma and bubbling personality.

Kennedy always had a fondness for newspaper people and went out of his way to answer questions and acknowledge their presence.

Kennedy never came to Idaho Falls, but he did visit this region.

It was in the summer of 1960, while he was a senator, that he came to Pocatello as part of a nationwide campaign seeking the Democratic nomination. He was in a close contest with Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson. He had flown from Michigan and stopped over in Pocatello while enroute to Seattle.

Kennedy appeared tired and haggard from the intensive campaigning, but still stopped over at the Bannock Hotel for a press conference before delivering a talk at Pocatello High School.

I remembered he appeared flustered when I asked him about the proposed Burns Creek Dam on the South Fork of the Snake River. Then he confessed he was not acquainted with it.

In his main talk later, he explained he had known of the project as Lynn Crandall Dam, which actually was a proposal for a larger dam than Burns Creek but near the same site downriver from Palisades Dam.

He said then he had always voted for funding for Burns Creek and would do so anytime it was introduced.

Kennedy came to Pocatello, particularly at the urging of U.S. Sen. Frank Church, who was then a power in the Senate. Church was

an influential member of what was then known as the "Palace Guard," an elite, close group which advised Kennedy on national issues.

At the Pocatello conference, it was reported he had privately chastised Church for not better acquainting him with Burns Creek, then a major project proposal. But the dam building still hasn't materialized and seems even farther away now from realization.

An observation worth noting is that after Kennedy was assassinated and Johnson became president, Church lost favor with the White House. Church strongly opposed the Vietnam War, a pet issue with Johnson, but which eventually led to his downfall. Johnson was particularly angered at Church for his opposition, pointing out he had appointed Church to the coveted Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Church chaired this committee in his last term 1978-80.

Johnson will be known for his failure in Vietnam, yet he was responsible for enacting some of the most far-reaching social legislation in the nation's history. It was Johnson who was able to pass legislation that Kennedy never could.

At Jackson

At Jackson on Sept. 27, Kennedy was in an especially jovial mood during his vacation. His DC3 plane had landed at Billings, Mont., and he was flown to the Jackson airport by helicopter.

Two helicopters with motors roaring to keep them warmed up virtually drowned out his remarks, then he ignored his Secret Service escorts to walk some 100 feet to greet a crowd of about 2,000 lined up near the airport terminal.

He especially was anxious to meet newsmen. I remembered shaking hands with him, impressed by his firm grip and perennial wide grin.

He was especially fond of greeting those in western attire and the children.

One representative from the Pink Garter Theatre tossed him a pink garter, but he laughingly dropped it like it was a hot potato.

I remember asking Bert DePress, head of the Secret Service in Washington, how he could protect the president. He wearyingly replied, "we try to do the best we can but what can you tell the president of the

United States? We do what we can in existing conditions."

It obviously was this latter condition that brought him death from an assassin's bullet, less than two months later in Dallas.

I remember myself and Post-Register photographer Reed Rasmussen snapping innumerable pictures of Kennedy, some of which were carried over the Associated Press network.

Kennedy at that time was interested in enhancing the park system. That was the reason for his first-hand view of the breath-taking splendors of Grand Teton and adjacent Yellowstone National Parks.

The Jackson affair was supervised by Fred Fagergren, then Grand Teton National Park superintendent.

Ted Kennedy here

John's brother, Ted, now a U.S. senator, came to Idaho Falls early in 1960 in behalf of his brother's impending candidacy. He came himself to The Post-Register for an interview, remarking how he had just graduated from Harvard University and was looking for a place to locate.

I remember suggesting he hang out a shingle in Idaho Falls, but he laughingly replied he would locate in the East, likely his home state of Massachusetts. He did and later was elected to Congress to become one of the most influential senators in the nation. He still is perennially mentioned as a future presidential possibility.

U.S. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy also visited in this area, stopping at Pocatello and touring the Fort Hall Indian Reservations in January, 1968. At that time he also was campaigning for the presidency before his assassination in Los Angeles June 5, 1968.

Senator Kennedy remarked at that time the American Indians had been ignored and expressed repeatedly his warm support for them and other minority groups, the blacks, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.

Sen. Church welcomed Kennedy to Idaho at that time and the two visited several homes in Blackfoot and Fort Hall during the day-long tour, stopping at Blackfoot High School for a noon luncheon.