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Kennedy's charisma still endures

The assassination of President John Kennedy 25 years ago at Dallas brings to memory the two times he came to this area that I had the opportunity of interviewing him.

The charismatic Kennedy was a delightful person. He was always embued with enthusiam, congeniality and keen wit. He was one of the presidents I interviewed in my 50 years as a newsman, all of those since President Franklin D. Roosevelt, except Eisenhower.

I remember that day of Nov. 22, 1963, a quarter of century ago. The teletype at The Post-Register, where I was working, flashed the news of the shooting. About an hour later the teletype notified us of Kennedy's death. After the first shock, it galvanized the staff to publish the story, using national wire services, pictures and local reactions.

Kennedy visited Idaho on at least two occasions. As a new U.S. senator, he addressed the Democratic Jefferson-Jackson Day Banquet in 1954 at the old historic Crystal Ballrooms at what was then the Boise Hotel. He was accompanied by his attractive and then demure wife, Jacqueline, who was understandably a great hit with the crowd.

In 1960, Kennedy won the Democratic presidential nomination after a bitter fight with Lyndon B. Johnson, the Senate majority leader. Idaho's new U. S. senator, Frank Church, was one of Kennedy's stalwart backers. Church, then only 40 and the youngest to ever hold such a position, delivered the convention keynote talk.

Church later became a member of what was known as the Palace Guard, made up of close confidantes of Kennedy and who exerted tremendous national influence with the president.

Kennedy campaigned in Idaho in 1960, coming to Pocatello Sept.7. He held a news conference at the Bannock Hotel, then spoke to the public that evening at the Pocatello High School Auditorium.

Kennedy stressed his favorite theme, "The New Frontier", and applied the term frequently to Idaho. He mentioned the hydro and nuclear development blossoming in the Gem State. What is now known as the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory had been selected as the nuclear station only the year before.

At that time, I asked Kennedy about the Burns Creek Dam, then a burning political topic. It brought consternation and he admitted he was unfamiliar with the project. It also highly upset Church. In the evening talk, however, Kennedy noted that as a U.S. senator from Massachusettes he had voted for the project twice. He explained he had known it as the Lynn Crandall Dam.

Idaho Republicans made the faux pas a prime campaign issues that fall, stressing the point that Kennedy was unfamiliar with a key Idaho water project.

The proposed Burns Creek Dam is actually a smaller version of the Lynn Crandall project. It was proposed some dozen miles downstream from Conant Valley, just below Swan Valley. It was named after a tributary of the Snake River's South Fork. It would have backed reservoir waters over Conant Valley and to the edge of Swan Valley.

The much larger Lynn Crandall Dam is named after the longtime Idaho Falls watermaster of Water District 36, now renamed Water District 1 and embracing most of east Idaho. If built, it would create a reservoir to inundate both Conant Valley and Swan Valley, backing waters to the edge of Palisades Dam.

This project is still on hold with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Some farm members of the Idaho Legislature revived discussion about the dam this year as a possible future project. This is a separate story to be told later.

Coming to Idaho Falls that same summer was Edward Kennedy, who had just finished his law study at the University of Virginia and before that at Harvard University. He came to The Post-Register to help boost his brother's political aspiration. I remember jokingly suggesting that he hang out his shingle in Idaho Falls. As it developed, after his brother was elected president, Edward was appointed to the Senate vacancy and has been there ever since.

In September of 1963, Kennedy and his entourage were in a plane that landed at the Jackson Airport. He was greeted by an enthusiastic but small crowd of some 200 people. He held an impromptu conference with just a few reporters on hand. But it turned out badly as there were two presidential helicopters nearby with engines roaring. It was virtually impossible to hear what was said.

He explained he was in the area for an aerial overview of the scenic Yellowstone and Teton country with a goal for recreation planning and proper environmental protection. The term "environment" was a new one at that time and not well understood.

With his infectious smile, Kennedy strolled among the crowd, shook hands and frequently waved his hands. An employee from the Pink Garter Theatre tossed him a pink garter. He caught it but hurriedly dropped it with a grin after he saw what it was.

Leaving his presidential plane in Jackson, he then boarded one of the helicopters to spend the night at what was then the new Jackson Lake Lodge built by the Rockefeller family.

He was a bubbling figure as he boarded the helicopter and waved to the crowd. But it was his last visit here. Six weeks later an assassin's bullet snuffed out his life.

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