

# Winner of the 2014 Living History Essay Contest

## *“It Was Like a Christmas Tree:” Inside Civil Defense during the Kennedy Assassination*

by Carlos Sebastian Lopez

I first had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Peggy Kelley almost a year ago, right after I graduated. She was one of the many people I have to thank for giving me a scholarship last year. Being from an older generation and one of the wisest people I know, I put her at the top of my list of possible interviewees. I had no idea how much she truly had to offer. I simply asked her where she was during the Kennedy assassination and she nonchalantly responded, “well...I couldn’t tell you much...I was just working for the Office of Civil Defense back then.” When she first told me that in such a calm manner, I thought maybe I did not know the definition of civil defense, or maybe there was some sort of miscommunication between us.

It turns out my ears didn’t deceive me and I heard her correctly. It was November 1963, she was thirty years old, married, and had a two year old daughter. She was putting her husband through college at North Texas State College, now known as UNT, where he was studying business. As I have grown up in the post-9/11 world with TSA pat checks, NSA surveillance, new security fears coming out every day, I immediately had to ask, “How did you get a job with the Office of Civil Defense?” She told me, “It was one of the bigger employers in town, and they had come here to establish an office. And you know the office of civil of defense, it was protection of...you know...the country.” She worked there as a stenographer, which she described was, “like a secretary.” Her job was in the office that was mainly focused on handling applications for funds to rebuild areas and buildings destroyed or damaged by natural disasters. “After they got the money and they built their road, or they built their building, or they did this then that; when they would submit an invoice, showing how they

spent that money...and my job was back then, was to figure concrete, steel, brick, and be sure that the invoices they submitted were true," she explained.

One of her smaller duties was taking over the switchboards when the switchboard operator went to lunch. "There was this big board you know with all these little holes on it, and down here (gesturing beneath the table), it would ring and you'd answer it. You'd have this little cord and you would plug it in and answer that person, and they would say, 'I wanna speak to Mr.Doodady' and so then you would take the other cord and plug it in up there and then you would pull this little thing and it would ring," she explained. The calls she would connect included those from senators and congressman to Washington, but because this was at the height of the Cold War, mostly local people called her office about what "food we should store," and "what was a safe place to go" if there was ever an atomic bomb explosion. She said, "There was excitement about (JFK) coming to Dallas and everything, but at the same time, he was not well liked in Dallas." She herself did not know that Kennedy got shot until, "somebody came in from lunch and they said they had just heard on the radio that Kennedy had been shot, and just about that time, that switchboard lit up like a Christmas tree. Everybody calling, local people, people from the state, Washington, wanting to know the particulars, but we didn't know anything, but I referred them to our regional director or somebody they could talk too."

The lack of information became apparent when one of the men she worked with, described as "a swaggering ooze" when notified of the president being shot, simply responded "aaahh, he just got grazed." It did not become apparent that the president was killed until over hour later when it was announced. Peggy said, "I was just devastated, because I thought he was such a good president and you know it was so tragic that he should be killed and everybody was crying and terribly upset."

The following days were filled with a certain type of fear according to Peggy, as she had a wedding to attend in Dallas and she felt uneasy going to it, as Lee Harvey Oswald was never convicted, giving her a feeling of "it not being finished, that no one was truly punished, it felt unfinished." This fear also stemmed from the feeling that there was no real confirmation that Lee Harvey Oswald worked alone, as he was killed before any trial took place, according to Peggy. Overall, I thought Peggy's account of what happened that day was interesting, and it gave me insight that I hope I can give someday regarding my experiences that intersect with history. I hope when I am seventy I can paint the picture of the past as well as Mrs. Peggy

Kelley painted it for me. I just hope that I won't have to explain Twitter as Peggy had to explain the switchboard to me.