

Winner of the 2015 Living History Essay Contest

The Day the World Mourned

by Danielle Hammond

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963 while visiting Dallas, Texas. Barbara Collins, now 67, was a student at Washington High School and like so many Americans remembers that day vividly. "I remember that day like yesterday. I was wearing a pretty off pink blowy dress my granny, Maw Wee, had made for me two Saturdays before. It was cool that day but warm, like the sun was trying to cool off with us. I remember the smell of the laundry soap I had to sneak and use to wash my hands in the school washroom. I normally didn't smell anything, but that day, I smelled that soap like fresh pies baking on a window sill. I also remember walking home from school crying like my daddy just died." Collins' memories of the day President Kennedy died are typical of the loss many Americans felt.

During his inauguration on January 20, 1961, Kennedy spoke the famous words that would resonate with people of all races throughout the nation, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." When Kennedy, the former Massachusetts Senator and World War II Navy Lieutenant, took office he showed the American people that he cared about their well-being. Early in his administration Kennedy started the Peace Corps to help youths around the world. As the Civil Rights Movement gained traction with political parties, Kennedy noticed the unequal treatment of minorities across the country, and even stated that discrimination had stained America. Collins remembers, "He was about peace, like Dr. King, no matter your color he just wanted everyone to be happy and together."

On the day of Kennedy's assassination, he rode through downtown Dallas, Texas accompanied by his wife of ten years, Jacqueline, and the Governor of Texas, John Connally. Thousands of adoring fans lined the streets; many of whom had left work early just to catch a glimpse of the man who had promised change and equality for all American people. However, a sinister presence would corrupt the innocence amidst the crowd, with a rifle in hand, lurking from the 6th floor of the Texas School Book

Depository. As the rifle was placed into position, shot after shot was heard as sounds and then screams pierced the crowd. Lee Harvey Oswald had murdered the President. Collins recalls thinking "Who was he? How could he have done this to this man, whose family helped the black people, his brother loved us, he was loving us, it showed. He killed our President." As Collins reminisced a confused look swept across her face.

As the chaos simmered with people wondering what had taken place, the nation would learn that President Kennedy had been murdered. Collins recalls, "I was at school and it had come on the loud speaker and I felt awful. I did, it was awful, I cried. I didn't believe it at first. I thought maybe I had heard wrong or it was a joke but it was real and our president was dead. I was sad, like my dad, a man who had never raised me died and I cried. Boy did I ever, I left school and cried all the way home and for weeks after." Similarly, this was the feeling a lot of Americans had after learning of Kennedy's passing. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson would go on television to tell the nation of the tragedy. "I remember we were standing around crying and pitiful looking and this little boy, who was a little slow, come through crying saying Abraham Lincoln got killed. Lord we laughed and that just broke us up," Collins related with a light laugh.

On November 24, 1963, while thousands of people mourned, the short body of President Kennedy was led by a horse-drawn carriage from the White House to the Rotunda of the Capital and laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery. Collins didn't watch the funeral. With the sadness and regret of not witnessing his last moments, coming over her, she reflected "It took me some time to get over the loss."

To this day, John F. Kennedy's murder remains a mournful event in United States history. Kennedy's legacy continues as Americans, like Barbara Collins, remember the captivating and charismatic leader that led the United States as the nation faced many struggles and changes during the 1960s.