

Sixth Floor Museum conjures up emotions surrounding JFK assassination

November 13, 2007

DALLAS, Texas - The visitor from Alberta was overcome with emotion.

"I felt the pain and anguish that most Americans may have felt that dreadful day," wrote Daniel Balfour in the guest book of the Sixth Floor Museum.

"I cannot express in words how I felt once I came on the enclosed 'sniper's ledge.' "

Forty-four years after the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, the event is recalled by a generation of people with stark clarity and sadness, and the place where it happened in downtown Dallas is on many visitors' must-see lists. They stand on Elm Street overlooking Dealey Plaza with the controversial grassy knoll to the left, and the imposing seven-storey red brick building that was once the home of the Texas School Book Depository on the right.

Their eyes rise to the window on the far right side of the sixth floor where, on Nov. 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald fired the shots that - according to the version of events generally accepted by historians - ended Kennedy's life. That infamous structure is now called the Dallas County Administration Building and is the home of the Sixth Floor Museum, the most visited historic site in North Texas. Since it opened in 1989, more than five million visitors have taken the elevator to the sixth floor where the Dallas County Historical Foundation, which resisted local attempts to erase the memory and tear down the building, has turned the whole floor into a historic perspective and memorial to the 35th U.S. president.

Museum spokesperson Deborah Marine says visitors usually have a personal connection to the story.

"Whether they were five years old or 45 when it happened, it still resonates with them at a deep emotional level," she says. Bonnie Siegfried of Mildmay, Ont., wrote in the guest book: "I still have the Montreal Star with the headline President Kennedy Shot ... Seriously Wounded."

"I often wonder what would have happened if he had lived," she said in a telephone interview. "How long would Camelot have lasted?"

The sixth floor is divided into several sections, all of which have historic photographs, documentary films and interpretative displays. There are 22,000 items available for viewing, including the old amateur film cameras that became such a key part of the investigations. Visitors can first learn about the social movements, political events and lifestyles of the early 1960s, then move into an area outlining the reasons for the president's trip to Texas and the rousing welcome he received in Dallas.

The next section is the most compelling. It's called "The Corner Window" and is an accurate re-creation (organizers used police photographs of the scene) of the south-facing window - the sniper's ledge - as it looked in 1963 when Oswald hid behind boxes of schoolbooks while getting a clear view toward Dealey Plaza and the presidential motorcade along Elm Street. Floor-to-ceiling glass walls protect the immediate corner and its cartons of books, but it's easy to see the window and imagine Oswald crouching there. A webcam allows anyone to have a live view from the ledge (www.earthcam.com/jfk/).

Adjacent to the window are a teletype machine and radio/TV reports with actual coverage of the first moments after the assassination. All other windows on the south side of the museum, facing Dealey Plaza, are unobstructed. The remainder of the sixth floor includes two theatres where visitors can view a film about the aftermath of the assassination and Kennedy's legacy narrated by Walter Cronkite, as well as footage of world reaction and the funeral. Sections also document the various official investigations over a 25-year period, including speculation about alleged conspirators and their motives. Visitors can make up their own minds as they view forensic and ballistic tests, photographs and acoustical evidence.

Marine has seen the positive effects of visits to the museum.

"President Kennedy was always eager to learn, and people definitely learn something while they're here about the event, the country or perhaps about themselves," she said.

"People seem to leave the exhibits somewhat changed and eager to go back to their own communities to make a difference in their block or school or company. President Kennedy's words and legacy continue to have a major impact."

Starting this month, the Dallas County Historical Foundation is opening a new gallery on the seventh floor of the building. Eleven historic amateur films of the Kennedy motorcade and assassination will be on continuous display, including the two most important ones by Abraham Zapruder and Orville Nix. The exhibit is called "Filming Kennedy: Home Movies From Dallas" and includes profiles of the men and women behind the home movie cameras. It's scheduled to run through October 2008.