

The Day JFK Was Here

By DAN DWYER

The helicopter landed exactly on time. It was 1 p.m.

The door opened and became a ramp and this man came out.

It was the start of a hectic 70-minute visit by Pres. John F. Kennedy to Grey Towers in Milford yesterday afternoon.

The blue and white copter carrying the president was the fourth to land in a space about the size of Orange Square in Port Jervis. Before him came two jammed with the White House press corps. The third carried secret service men and officials in the Kennedy party.

The area was roped off to the public but some 40 or 50 photographers formed a greeting committee which could be called the beginning of the battle of the lenses as the president was immediately surrounded and cameras and flash guns went into operation.

Mr. Kennedy, dressed in a neat blue suit with a faint pin stripe, white shirt and matching tie, moved towards a waiting convertible with the inevitable secret service men providing a way through the press of the crowd. The familiar shock of brown hair looked lighter than it does in most pictures and the white teeth shone in a constant smile. He is deeply tanned.

The president entered the third car in the six car entourage that moved slowly through a field to the road leading to Grey Towers. The road was lined with state police, foresters and Milford fire police.

The landing field was some 200 yards from the amphitheater where a crowd estimated at over 12,000 waited. Some had been there since early morning, coming to get a good place to stand in front of the 20-foot stage where the ceremonies were scheduled to be held.

It was a carnival-like atmosphere on the grounds in the hours before 1 o'clock. Families and couples sat around and ate lunches or just gossiped. Kids ran about, adults walked around impressed by the multitudes of polite state police and forest service men or the elaborate set up for the press facilities.

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At the press booths, the conservation people took good care of the more than 100 representatives of newspapers, radio and television. Coffee and doughnuts were served all morning while full facilities for news dispatches were available with a battery of telephone booths and teletype outlets.

The Union-Gazette representatives, especially Les Crine and Denis Govern, drank coffee like it was going out of style. First because they were cold and later because they were missing lunch.

But as the hour neared 1 p.m., the expectation grew and then the great mass of people suddenly knew the president had arrived for the audible noise of the copter blades sounded across the valley even though the Delaware Valley high school band was providing musical entertainment. There was a tingle of anticipation that rolled through the sea of humanity even though it would be another 15 minutes before the president would be seen by most of them.

It was a perfect day. Pennsylvania's Gov. Scranton said later in his speech that it was typical weather for the state and who could dispute it. It was warm. A heavy frost had covered the area in the morning but the sun warmed the earth and by noon it was anything but cool. There was not a cloud in the blueness of the sky.

The president stopped off at Grey Towers and for some ten minutes was greeted by area officials and conservation men from all over the country. He met with them on the terrace and the crowd was enlarged by the stream of reporters and camera men who surged in for information and the hundreds and hundreds of photos that were being taken along almost every stop of the way.

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Secret service men, always aware of the role they play in protecting the president, allowed him some space to move about but the magnetic attraction of such a figure draws even the most callous person.

The president slowly made his way down the row of individuals who were there to be met with the handshake and "hello, happy to meet you."

When he finally shook the last hand, he entered Grey Towers for a guided tour of the downstairs interior of the great castle-like structure and emerged from another door to get into his car and be speeded down to the dedication scene.

Already on the platform in the tree-encircled dell were the speakers and special invited guests, headed by Gov. Scranton, and including Dr. Gifford Pinchot, son of the man being honored yesterday; two U.S. cabinet members -- Stewart Udall, sec. of the interior, and Orville Freeman, sec. of agriculture.

Edward Cliff, U.S. Forest Service chief, had already begun his greetings over the banks of microphones fed radio and television plus the public address system.

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Then, as the big cars came up behind a clump of foliage, a small murmur began from the people in that area that could see. The president got out and moved down a path parallel to the crowd and maybe 30 feet away but still partially hidden.

The cry went up "there he is!" It ended Mr. Cliff's speech. The area was filled with the nose of applauding adults, cheering boys and girls and excited people.

The president went up onto the platform and the band began to play the traditional "Hail To The Chief." There was a feeling that swept across the great masses. I could sense it sitting near the front. It was a feeling of proudness and a feeling of drama and a feeling that this was a great moment in many lives. . . lives that could go through an entire lifetime and never again be in the presence of a president of the United States.

It was not a part of politics nor did it involve like or dislike for a
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man for other reasons. It was probably most of all a sense of pride in that this is our president, not the man himself, but the office that he represents. It was a combination of all those feelings as he went up on the stage with the music playing in the background.

The cheering and clapping continued for several moments and actually, for most of that time, the huge sea of faces saw only the president's back as he moved along the line of people on the stage. Then he turned around with the familiar smile and wave and it all began again.

There was, of course, a note of politics in the air for the president and Gov. Scranton greeting each other courteously and friendly but each knowing full well they could easily be opposing candidates next year in the presidential election.

The president sat down next to Sec. Freeman. He looked out over the audience that stretched from some 20 feet in front of him far back up the terraced slopes to the walls that border Grey Towers. He looked interested and he listened attentively as the speakers eased up to the microphones to speak. None spoke too long.

Gov. Scranton spoke of conservation and the state's pride in Gifford Pinchot, the first conservationist; Dr. Pinchot expressed the appreciation of the Pinchot family for the honors being bestowed on his father and noted that both his famed father and mother would have been pleased to know that the ancestral home was going to be used for conservation studies; Samuel H. Ordway, president of The Conservation Foundation which is financing the new Institute at Milford, said the Institute was a great advancement for conservation.

But it was obviously the president for whom the people waited. He was introduced by the Sec. of Agriculture and he spoke for some ten minutes.

What he said was important but for many it was enough that they were watching and listening to the president of the U.S. on a little stage in a field on the outskirts of Milford in Pike County.

Security police ringed the platform and the seal of the president, placed just before he appeared and removed when he left, provided a front piece for the stage.

When he finished, he pulled a rope and unveiled a plaque and even that action brought the flood of camera men around again for the photos.

When the president left the stage, he walked through to the edge of the clearing in front of the stand and stood to wave and smile. The band played as he left by the roped off enclosure at the rear but he again plagued his security guards by leaving them suddenly to move up to the ropes straining to hold the heaving crowds and he walked along shaking hands.

Women whom he shook hands with squealed and screamed and men unabashedly pushed forward to try to reach the outstretched hand so they could go home to say "I shook hands with JFK today. C'mere and shake the hand that shook the hand."

Finally the president, in a mob of photographers, security guards who sought to make room amid the rolling mass, and members of his official party, went slowly up a short slope to get back into the convertible and go back to the landing field.

The president was gone -- as quick as he had come. It was 65 minutes later and then five minutes after that the helicopters lifted up and sloped sideways into the sky and were out of sight over the trees that ring the area.

Back to the amphitheater, the crowds still lingered. Thousands began to file back to Milford, blocking the roads and keeping hundreds of cars trapped in nearby parking lots.

There was now an air of finale to the scene although hundreds took up the invitation of Chief Cliff to visit Grey Towers. Others waited and sat or stood around and talked over the past hour of swiftly moving events.

Jean Schultz, 76 Orange St., Port Jervis, said "he looked just like I thought he'd look." She was thrilled about the whole affair.

Mrs. Edward Fisher, of Matamoras, who had two children in the band, said "it was all very nice. I enjoyed the whole thing."

She was with Mrs. Jack Campbell Sr., also of Matamoras, who noted that "it was a great honor to have the president here."

Allen Cummings, of Branchville, a student in Newton High School where pupils were allowed to stay out to attend the dedication, had a different observation. He said "he had more lines in his face than I expected. He looked a lot different than he does on TV."

Mrs. Charles Godshall came all the way from Scranton to see the president. An elderly lady, she brought along a chair and sat under a tree. She had one word for the whole thing, "wonderful."

Said Mrs. Betty Halpin, of Sparta, N.J., "I was thrilled." She brought her daughter and a half dozen neighbors' children. "It was worth coming all the way," she said.

Most of the others felt the same way. It was quite an event, the president coming to Milford.

It was 70 minutes that would be hard to account for if you had to list every minute but it was, for most of the people there, a highlight in their lives that grandchildren not yet born are destined to hear about.

That's how it was.

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