

JFK COMES TO TOWN

By John S. Halbert

May, 1963:

"Who are all the 'stuffed-shirts' down in the boss's office?" My high school friend Jerry Hargett sauntered into the WVNA radio studio with a quizzical look on his cherubic face.

I shrugged. Our FM show was just getting underway on this Saturday afternoon, and we had almost three hours ahead of us, playing lots of records and (hopefully) keeping the audience entertained with our patter and chatter. All this would keep us busy enough---never mind about the downstairs strangers. Still, there was the intriguing long, black car parked out front and the impressive-looking men gathered in the lobby.

Jerry peeked over the staircase railing at the men below, then came back into the control room. "People are all over the place," he said, "come see for yourself."

I cued-up the next record and walked out to the stairwell landing. Below, on the first floor, mysterious-looking men with shiny leather briefcases were standing around, looking important.

At that moment, the manager, Jimmy Hall, (we called him, of course, "Mister Hall"---"Jimmy" would come later) stepped out of his office and happened to glance up. Spotting the two of us gaping at the ground-floor gathering, he waved his cigar. "Boys," he called to us, "I want you to meet these men . . . put a long record on the turntable and come on down."

Well, I thought, maybe the strangers are okay, after all.

When Jerry and I stepped back into the control room, an engineer in the meantime had come in and was taking down meter-readings on one of the electrical panels. "What's going on?" Jerry asked the fellow. "All these guys around here---what's up?"

"The President's coming to town! Kennedy'll be here for the TVA anniversary!" My friend's and my eyes got wide. "He's going to give a speech, and we'll be there!" The technician went on. "These 'CBS Radio' men are here to get things organized . . . we'll feed the whole network from our station."

Jerry and I looked at each other; the same thought was crossing our minds: Maybe we could meet the President! My friend handed me an album of music---it could play on and on by itself while we were out of the studio. Disc jockey cheating, perhaps, but it was the only sure way we could keep the show on the air and at the same time mix with the Very Important People who were in the building.

With a half-hour's worth of music on the turntable, we clattered downstairs, to where the meeting was already underway.

"Jerry and John---our two weekend high school announcers!" Mr. Hall smiled as he introduced us to four men in pin-striped suits. "These gentlemen are from the network." The well-dressed men nodded and shook hands with us.

I wondered what they thought of two *high-schoolers* working at a primary CBS Radio Network affiliate. Most people at such stations had years of experience. We knew that CBS was the most influential operation in all of broadcasting.

"We're going to cover the President's speech," the boss went on, "you two boys want to come along with us?"

Jerry and I looked at each other and grinned. "Of course!"

The network men seemed amused at our little-concealed excitement.

"We'll be in the Press section alongside the speaker's platform," Mr. Hall went on, "the engineers will run all the lines and set up the equipment."

One of the network men drew out some sheets of instructions and handed them to us.

Mr. Hall leaned forward in his chair. "We're coordinating with Pierre Salinger, the President's Press Secretary---we can arrange for you to be in the Press area. All the networks will be there." He waved his cigar. "Your job will be to test the microphones before the President arrives. That'll be your 'official duty' to get you Press passes. Then, you can sit back and enjoy the show---you'll be only a few feet from Kennedy!"

Jerry and I could hardly believe our ears. Not only would we be able to *see* the President, *but we would be practically alongside him!* Wait'll they hear about *THIS* in speech class!

It was hard to keep straight faces when we went to class on Monday. Our Speech teacher nearly fell out of his chair when we told the group that we would be in the Press section for the presidential address

For the next few days after school, as soon as the final bell rang, Jerry and I hopped into his brand-new 'Ford Futura' and sped over to the studios, where everyone at the station was getting ready for the upcoming presidential visit. We had several briefings and rehearsed our duties as the big day drew nearer.

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Saturday, May 18, 1963:

Saturday arrived as a clear, warm---soon to be hot---day. As the President was due to arrive promptly at the noon hour, our radio crew drove in the station's van to the 'National Fertilizer Development Center' on the TVA Reservation a couple of hours before Kennedy would get there.

Clean-cut, no-nonsense-looking Secret Service men---whom we easily recognized by their binoculars and walkie-talkies, searching faces, metal-rimmed, green-tinted sunglasses, dark suits and starched white shirts with the popular string ties of the day---were stationed all around the broad open area and atop nearby buildings. Just about every local police officer was also on the scene. (It occurred to me that it might be the perfect time for someone to try to rob a bank.)

We showed the agents our Press passes and they waved us through.

In front of the administration building was a large wooden stage festooned with red, white and blue bunting. The up-sloping grassy knoll of several acres made a perfect amphitheater for the ten-thousand or so spectators who would soon be in attendance on this Saturday. A carnival atmosphere was breaking out as lines of vehicles were already streaming onto the reservation and citizens began filling the grassy space. I spotted several classmates in the burgeoning crowd.

A trim, athletic-looking man, one of the Secret Service men, motioned for Jerry and me to step up to the platform. "I understand you two are the 'microphone men,'" he said, in a crisp, authoritative voice. We nodded, and he pointed to the steps leading up to the stage. "Go up there and take turns reading the short script . . . the technicians will be setting audio levels." First Jerry and then I stood at the speaker's platform and read some rather stilted phrases aloud into a bank of microphones. In front of the podium, the Presidential Seal framed us as we delivered our lines. We were at the very spot where the President himself would soon be standing! From the growing crowd, we could hear murmurs from townspeople who knew us. When "job" was completed, the

agent hustled us off the stage; Now---bring on Kennedy

Off to one side, a local "swing" band ran through the musical scales as they awaited the President's arrival. By now, the swelling, festive crowd had spread to the outer edges of the manicured, amphitheater-like lawn.

While all this was going on, Jerry and I circulated in the roped-off Press area. Rounding a corner of the platform, I bumped into a portly, dark-haired man in a rumpled suit who was puffing on a thick cigar. With a start, I recognized him as Pierre Salinger, the White House Press Secretary. Down in front, in the Press section, print reporters fingered pad and pencil and broadcast network correspondents stood by holding microphones.

Technical crews were making last-minute adjustments to their tripod-mounted film cameras. Jerry nudged me---standing nearby was the NBC White House Correspondent I had seen many times on television. A make-up girl dabbed his face with powder. It was becoming a hot day. For the hundredth time I looked at my watch---when would the President be here? A body could soon wilt out here in this heat.

The thought was hardly concluded when there came the sound of thumping rotors that became louder. There was a shout from the crowd: the President's helicopters were arriving! Behind the administration building three large, olive-drab choppers came into sight, orbited the field, hovered stationary for some seconds, then settled to the ground out of sight behind the building, throwing up a big cloud of dust. As the whining engine noises and the swish of rotors ceased, an expectant hush settled over the crowd.

All at once, there was furious activity with the Secret Service agents. On top of the main building, the men whipped their binoculars to their eyes and scanned the huge gathering. A commotion broke out at the front of the structure and all at once a plalanx of serious-looking men burst through the main doorway. The agent who was situated next to the band leader nodded, and the musicians crashed into the familiar "Hail to the Chief."

The crowd noise swelled to a thunder and then, there he was: President John F. Kennedy stepped onto the stage only a few feet from where I was situated in the Press area! My first impression was that he looked much bigger in real-life than I had imagined he would be. His perfectly-combed hair and broad face made his head appear extraordinarily large. I would have to say he was far better-looking in person than as he appeared in pictures and on television. Several young women nearby looked to be about to swoon. He had his left hand in his outsidesuit-coat pocket with his thumb extended in his familiar trademark pose, as he flashed his world-famous smile. The President looked around, and for a full second his eyes locked onto mine! I knew I would never forget this moment---when I, an ordinary citizen---had looked straight into the eyes of the President of the United States!

The crowd of ten-thousand or more was roaring and I believed the President was impressed by the outpouring of enthusiasm in this Deep South town as if all the recent issues that had so divided the Federal Government and Southerners were swept aside, if only for these moments.

At length, the applause subsided and the smiling President moved to his special seat on the stage. (As he sat down, there was an audible collective sigh from many of the females in the crowd.) The chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority introduced the dignitaries on the stage and then the President of the United States.

John F. Kennedy stood amid a new round of applause and whistles as the news-reel cameras panned over the enthusiastic crowd. I suspected the national news had not expected such a euphoric demonstration from Alabamians. Finally, the noise died down and the President gave a short speech. He paid tribute to TVA on its thirtieth anniversary and recognized Muscle Shoals,

Alabama as the birthplace of the giant Federal agency, the largest producer of electrical power in the country, and the centerpiece of the harnessed Tennessee River's flood-control operation. "The Leader of the Free World" who had successfully stood down the Russians a few months before during the *Cuban Missile Crisis* was speaking only about twenty feet from where I was sitting

In an official time of fourteen minutes, the President finished his speech to another roaring round of acclaim. Nodding among themselves as if by a pre-arranged signal (which it probably was), the Secret Service men escorted him off the platform and made for the administration building. I bolted from my position and elbowed toward where he would have to go through the doorway. Surprisingly, no one stopped me or blocked my way, although agents were all over the place. I pushed toward where the President was shaking hands with a crowd of people as he was hustled along by the security detail. For a quick second President Kennedy's hand shook mine!

The President disappeared through the doorway into the administration building. It was then that I bumped into Jerry, who was staring in rapturous wonderment at his right hand. "I shook hands with the President!" My friend was delirious. "I told him I sure liked his house---I meant the White House!"

From behind the big building there came a rising whine that became a shrieking roar. People pointed upward as the trio of dark-green-and-gold U.S. Marine helicopters bearing the President and his *'entourage'* arose above the back of the building, their pounding propellers raising clouds of dust. The three aircraft hesitated for a few seconds, then gathered into formation and flew off in a hurry. In a minute they disappeared into the east toward Huntsville, where *'Air Force One'* was standing by at the Redstone Arsenal military airfield to take the President back to the Nation's Capital.

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Later that afternoon, we stopped off at Jerry's house and laughed and talked about everything that had happened that day. My friend insisted he wouldn't for a month wash his hand that had shaken the President's. (I didn't believe him.) It had been a magical experience for both of us---on this day we two small-town teenagers had seen, heard, and had actually shook hands with the President of the United States!

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(It was almost exactly six months to the day later that President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.)