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The Southeast Valley recalls the day JFK was assassinated

By Gary Nelson
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"Cleopatra" and "McLintock" were playing in the theaters. "Route 66" and "Yogi Bear" were on the tube.

Gasoline was 24.9 cents a gallon, ground beef 30 cents a pound.

Driving from Tempe to Chandler, or Gilbert to Mesa, meant taking country roads through cotton fields. Ahwatukee as we know it didn't exist.

An early winter storm had pummeled Arizona the day before. The small towns that dotted the desert southeast of Phoenix were chilly, with a smattering of leftover rain. Folks were hoping it wouldn't put too much of a damper on that weekend's Gilbert Days celebration.

As to whether it was an innocent time, that is a matter of memory.

It still made headlines in the local paper when someone was arrested for shoplifting, and upcoming Boy Scouts events were front-page stuff.

The headlines also spoke of larger, darker things: U.S. troops in Vietnam, the Russians shooting down a civilian plane over Iran, the president heading to Dallas to mend a nasty political rift.

But it's easy as a kid to ignore that stuff, to focus on your own private Eden. That had pretty much been Roc Arnett's approach as Nov. 22, 1963, arrived.

He was out of high school, back from a two-year Mormon mission in New York and serving as the first student-body president of the newly minted Mesa Community College.

"The world was pretty good here in Mesa back in the '60s," Arnett said as he reflected on a town with maybe 35,000 residents.

Phil Austin saw things differently.

"Mesa wasn't all halcyon days," Austin said.

In his early childhood, his Hispanic family lived in the Washington-Escobedo Park neighborhood north of University Drive — figuratively and by design, the other side of the tracks from Mesa's Anglo areas.

His father, Austin said, once walked out of the downtown Nile Theater rather than sit in the balcony, the only area where Blacks and Mexicans were allowed.

Which is not to say that even then Austin thought Mesa was the worst of towns, race-wise. He had learned otherwise during a trip through the Deep South with his parents in summer 1963, a trip that introduced him to segregated drinking fountains and restrooms, and that had him wondering whether, because of his dark complexion, he should use the ones marked "colored."

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Joanie Flatt likewise had inklings of danger during her childhood. They came by way of atomic-bomb drills in grade school and talk of people building fallout shelters.

But, Flatt said: "That was Russia. That was bad people very far away."

Her immediate world, in the various Phoenix neighborhoods where she grew up, seemed safe enough.

Arnett, Austin and Flatt all would make major contributions to the Southeast Valley in future decades, Arnett as president of the East Valley Partnership; Austin as a civil-rights advocate and attorney; Flatt as a community activist and a driving force behind construction of Mesa's acclaimed arts center.

Their stories are pretty much the stories of anyone who remembers the day John F. Kennedy was shot, 50 years ago today.

Flatt was in class at Washington High School.

"The school announced it over the PA system. I cried. I was in tears. Everybody was," Flatt said.

Austin was a 12-year-old who had pedaled from Queen of Peace school to his dad's grocery store, six blocks away at University Drive and Surrine, for lunch.

"When I got to my dad's store, people were hovered around the radio, saying that Kennedy had been shot," Austin said. "I got on my bike, rushed back to school and thought I would break the news to everyone. They had put an announcement on the school speaker. We all went into the church and started to pray."

Arnett, newly immersed in Young Republican politics, came out of class at MCC and met a friend who told him that Kennedy was dead. He admits now that his disdain for Kennedy's politics colored his initial reaction, but maturity brought to Arnett an appreciation for "the great loss we had of a leader and a family that's given their all to American political life and America."

Normal life crashed to a halt that afternoon, a Friday, just as Nov. 22 is today.

Southeast Valley telephone switchboards were overwhelmed as people shared the news. Schools, businesses, governments let out early. Football games — including the weekend joust between Frank Kush's Arizona State University Sun Devils and Idaho — were canceled.

On Saturday, Gilbert Days went on, but it became a memorial to the fallen president.

On Sunday, people watched on live black-and-white TV as Jack Ruby murdered Lee Harvey Oswald, the man accused of killing Kennedy.

On Monday, a slow caisson bore the dead president through Washington, D.C., as Jackie, wearing a black veil, walked behind and her 3-year-old saluted his fallen father. A photo of downtown Phoenix taken during the funeral shows not a single car or pedestrian on the streets.

A half-century brings recollections not just of the moment, but what it meant.

For Flatt, it was a personal blow.

"Never again did I feel the same sense of being safe," she said. "I don't think it occurred to any of us that something like that could happen in the United States."

More academically, she remembers that weekend as the true beginning of the television age.

"It all played out on television," she said. "It was happening in our living rooms. That was a new thing, to have that kind of tragedy. And then to see Oswald gunned down live on television was just mind-boggling."

The rest of the '60s played out on TV, too — the Vietnam War, the protests, the race riots, the subsequent assassinations.

"That whole era — the world in your living room — started with the Kennedy assassination," Flatt said.

Austin, too, sees Nov. 22, 1963, as a turning point.

His brother, he said, went to the University of California in Berkeley in the early '60s, experiencing school as a traditional fraternity member and baseball player.

Six years later, Austin said, he went to the same school.

"We took over the president's office."

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Kennedy personally was responsible for some of the change that swept the country that decade, Austin said.

On the idealistic side, he launched the Peace Corps and embodied a new generation of leadership.

On the dark side, he planted seeds of the Vietnam War, which all but tore the country in half.

Arnett said the assassination was his first major wake-up call.

"I came to realize that there are ugly things in this world going on. ... It seemed like security and terrorism and shootings and all that stuff have just gotten progressively worse, exponentially, since that time."

Neither the shock of that day nor all of the subsequent ones steered the three leaders from lifetimes of building their community.

"This whole thing (from Kennedy's inaugural address) about 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country' inspired people to think," Austin said.

And while that sometimes produced chaotic results, Austin does not believe that all of the fallout was negative, especially with regard to civil rights.

"I think," Austin said, "we have moved forward, to everyone's benefit."

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Our Little Valley



The Southeast Valley in 1963 was a series of small- and medium-size towns, seemingly innocent, but on the cusp of explosive growth that in the subsequent half century would meld into a metro sub-area with more than a million residents.

Here, President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy smile at the crowds in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. Minutes later the President was assassinated.

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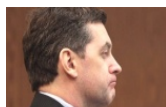
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