“WE WILL COME BACK”

SENATOR JOHN F. KENNEDY’S OCTOBER 3, 1960 CAMPAIGN TOUR IN SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

BY

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FOREWARD

The story of John F. Kennedy’s visit to southern Illinois on October 3, 1960 has largely been forgotten over the last fifty years. However, for many who attended one of his speeches that day or saw him in the motorcade their memories are still profound and the experience a most treasured one.

In telling the story of events that unfolded that day, I have relied heavily on contemporary newspapers and transcripts of Kennedy’s speeches available at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. I literally rolled dozens of local newspapers from Marion and Harrisburg, to Cairo and Murphysboro. There is a considerable amount of information, observations, and reflections that I simply could not use in this paper—although, they definitely deserve to be recorded at a later date.

One thing that puzzled me in my investigations and has been a source of irritation is the complete lack of a paper trail about events leading up to that day and after. There is literally no correspondence between Kennedy and, say for instance, Ken Gray or Paul Powell. I searched aimlessly through Paul Powell’s papers, Paul Simon’s papers, and Ken Gray’s papers all housed in the Morris Library Special Collections to no avail. There are also no internal memos or correspondences between SIU President Delyte Morris and others who undoubtedly had to be involved in organizing the day’s long itinerary.

There are also no police archives or files that I have been able to find to date. As a consequence I have had to rely, as I said above, on accounts reported in dozens of local
and national papers. I have been informed that tapes do exist from 2 of the local
television stations that covered the event that day, but have been unable to access them at
this juncture. My call through local media for “oral histories” of people who attended that
day has been fruitful, but not near the response I know is still waiting to be tapped out
there. I plan to release another battery of inquiries in the next weeks and hopefully unearth
more people like the incredible story of Diann Pollack.

One of the things that most puzzles me, and I need to meet Mr. Gray in person, is why
they took Kennedy to Harrisburg and not Kenny’s home stronghold of West Frankfort? I
speculate that there was a bit of a power struggle happening that day between the older
and more powerful Paul Powell and the younger Mr. Gray, but I cannot prove it so I have
left any such reference out, except here.

I also do not do much of a “political” analysis of the possible affects the visit had on the
outcome of this most closely contested political battle in Illinois. However, in my
PostScript I attempt to lay out an abbreviated description of voting returns in the region
and utilizing interviews I conducted with two local political experts Dr. Vince Lacey,
Emeritus Department of History, and Dr. John Jackson, Emeritus Political Science and
Paul Simon Institute, articulate their observations and analysis as best I could. Although,
I tried to ground my comments in the statistical facts, the overall interpretation is strictly
my own, and unless I use a quote, my responsibility.
I hope over the course of the next 60 days to continue developing this story, because I am
determined to publish a work, myself if necessary, by the Fiftieth Anniversary of
Kennedy’s visit to southern Illinois. Therefore, the research is far from over and like the
layers of an onion will continue to offer up subsequent layers of information for years to
come.

I have also used a Narrative style for the first time in my academic career and I hope I
have done the genre some justice. I hope the reader gets a real sense of what happened
that day--The evident excitement about the campaign and the man Kennedy. I hope
readers will be able to visualize these events the next time they walk by McAndrew
Stadium or down Illinois Avenue. I hope they will think about some of the things he said.

Finally, this has been a project I have wanted to investigate further, since I heard of it
back in the mid 1970’s. Thank you Dr. Wheeler for giving me this opportunity and for all
your support and encouragement. It has definitely made a difference. Thank You!

CARBONDALE
A large crowd gathered at the Jackson County Airport, located just a few miles west of Carbondale, that October 3rd afternoon. Many of the more than three hundred gathered there had been waiting patiently since early that morning and as the time ticked by the excitement and anticipation became palpable. ¹ Entire families were crowded near the tarmac with children hoisted on father’s shoulders, housewives holding homemade signs, teenagers listening for news on their transistor radios, and grandparents holding their infant grandchildren. Many in attendance were showing off their new Polaroid cameras and a few even had a new contraption that took moving pictures.²

Mingled throughout the crowd was a cadre of state and local police officers themselves anxious for the impending arrival of the special guest and at some point they cloistered together to plan what crowd control measures might be necessary in case more spectators were to arrive. Also in the crowd that afternoon were scores of local Democratic Party officials, from precinct committeemen to County Chair members, from all over southern Illinois, not to mention a who’s who of leading Jackson County citizens. Rounding out the entourage were over 80 newspaper, radio, and television reporters—many who had just arrived by a special chartered plane and several others in specially reserved Greyhound buses.³

¹ Southern Illinoisan. October 4, 1960 (Nearly the entire paper is dedicated to the Kennedy visit)
² I used photo archives to arrive at this observation. Many in the crowds had their cameras.
³ “Bomb Scare” Article appears in the Kennedy Collection located in SIU Special Collections, Morris Library. Unfortunately the newspaper clipping is in the file of the student paper The Egyptian but the type face is of a different pica. I still do not know the source and the event was not written of by any other source. I have recently begun an FIA Request at the FBI in Washington, D.C.
For many in the crowd the sight of these “press men”, with their name badges and press passes representing news agencies from New York, Washington, D.C., Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, Indianapolis and numerous other urban metropolis’, only added to the carnival like atmosphere and was a sight many would never forget. One local reporter/photographer Ben Gelman, who years later would write his last column for the Southern Illinoisan chronicling the high points in his newspaper career, remembered that he was as excited as a school boy that afternoon. Throughout the day Gelman followed the Kennedy campaign and he took most of the photographs that appear in the Southern Illinoisan.  

Although the weather was quite balmy and light rain was intermittently falling, many eye witnesses would later remember that it “was a beautiful early Autumn day” and that some people sang songs, released balloons into the air, and even had brought gifts and flowers for the man who was about to arrive. Several of the young people had their autograph books in hand and wore new shinny campaign buttons adorning the young man’s face.  

Shortly before the plane arrived a new black Cadillac chauffeured by Carbondale automobile dealer Dick Hunter and his father Sam arrived, as well as other cars to carry the other dignitaries expected to be on the plane. Dick and his father also provided the white open convertible that would be used later throughout the day. Police cars quickly

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4 For a list of several of the newspapers represented that day see Bibliography  
6 Interview with Diann Pollack, in the West Frankfort Daily American  
7 Photo Collection/Archives Kennedy Collection Special Collections, Morris Library. SIU-Carbondale.
formed a parade corridor in front of and behind the civilian automobiles in preparation for the motorcade. 8

Three miles to the east at the new Murdale Shopping Center on the west side of Carbondale a similar scene was developing. A new restaurant had just opened up on Route 13 boasting nearly 100 franchise stores called Mc Donald’s, advertising hamburgers for 15 cents, and a large crowd had gathered in the new parking lot in hopes of getting a glimpse of the man coming in the motorcade. 9 Downtown Main Street in Carbondale was also the scene of bustling, excited crowds of spectators gathering to join in the festivities. School children had been let out of classes and escorted by their teachers to form a parade line all along Illinois Avenue. From the Carbondale train station (the old one) as far south as the University campus thousands of people had gathered carrying signs and cameras, all hoping to catch a glimpse of the man they expected to be riding in an open limousine

Back at the north end of Illinois Avenue a high school band was warming up and getting ready to get into parade formation. From photographs we can see that many along the parade route held small American flags and Democratic campaign signs for several local politicians running for seats in the upcoming November elections. Paul Powell for State representative, Re-elect Congressman Ken Gray, and Otto Kerner for Governor, were just a few examples.

8 Southern Illinoisan. October 4, 1960
9 Ibid.
On the Campus of Southern Illinois University at the college’s main athletic facility, McAndrew Stadium, a podium had been constructed facing the east side of the football field. This was perhaps an oversight on the part of planners who may have been expecting a smaller crowd, but by noon the stadium and the infield had been filled to capacity. An estimated crowd of over 10,000 people, being entertained by the Marching Saluki Band, anxiously waited in the seats and hundreds stood for hours on the infield all waiting to hear a speech from the man expected to arrive by 1:30 p.m. that afternoon. Although classes had not been cancelled that day at the university, students who chose to attend the events were dismissed from classes and would be given permission to make up any work at a later date. Literally thousands of students took advantage of this dictum and joined the overflowing crowds in McAndrew Stadium.  

On the podium SIU President Delyte Morris and a group of the University’s top ranking faculty and administrators anxiously waited to greet the coming dignitary. Most of the Universities Board of Trustees was also in attendance. 

Across southern Illinois, along US Route 13 to Marion, in downtown Marion, and further to the east in Harrisburg, county seat of Saline County, similar activities and crowds were assembling. This was by far the largest political happening in the region's history. Even far overshadowing Harry Truman’s 1948 visit to Saline County and other presidential visits and campaign swings through the region in years past.

Crowd size was reported by several sources including the SI, The Egyptian, New York Times, A.P. Wire Service, and several local papers. For stories about class absence policy and the Marching Band see The Egyptian October 3, 1960.  

Photo Archive, Special Collections, Morris Library. Several photos of Morris on podium and greeting the Senator.
What was the cause of all of this excitement and enthusiasm bubbling across southern Illinois that October Day? What could cause literally thousands of people to take off work, —some employers even released their workers so they could participate—schools to dismiss classes, stores and businesses to close, women to wear their best dresses and hats, and families to drive for several miles to attend one of the scheduled events? In a region fairly evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats what or better yet who could spark so much interest across party lines that representatives of both political parties were turning out for these events?

Back at the Jackson County Airport there was a flutter of activity amongst the various law enforcement agencies gathered near the tarmac. At Mc Andrew stadium a similar scene was playing out and police officers and possibly some undercover FBI agents began asking the crowd on the infield to disperse either into the stands or leave the stadium and gather outside. What was all of this commotion? Apparently it was handled in such a manner that no panic ensued or was ever documented. As a matter of fact there are only a few references to this incident at all in the archival sources.

What had apparently happened was someone had called in a bomb threat and said that the soon to arrive special guest was the target.  

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12 “Bomb Scare Article” see above. (*Also, I was told by the Librarian at Special Collections that bomb scares were a common prank on campuses across America at this time and at SIU. Earlier a bomb scare had disrupted Homecoming festivities. As far as it being a national “pass time” amongst students, I have not been able to confirm this.)
Back at the Airport the sound of an airplane could be heard in the distance. The
anticipation amongst the gathered throngs was overwhelming. One eyewitness
remembered years later that it was “the most exciting thing” they had ever participated in.
When the plane, interestingly named the Caroline, finally landed it did not immediately
taxi to the arrival gate. Unfortunately, there is no information about how long the plane
waited on the runway or what was taking place on the airplane, but it is safe to guess that
they were waiting for the all clear signal on the “bomb scare” unfolding at Mc Andrew
Stadium. However long it was it must have seemed an eternity for those who had been
gathered at the airport since early that morning.13

Finally, the all clear was given and the plane made its way toward the crowd. The doors
opened and out came the man that everyone had been waiting for. The young, sun tanned,
handsome, and energetic Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy, from Massachusetts, the
Democratic Nominee for President of the United States had finally made his long
anticipated appearance. According to reports the crowd went wild and pushed forward to
try to shake his hand and get a photograph. For many of the teenagers holding their
autograph books the young presidential candidate obliged and signed several autographs
as he moved along the fence line shaking hands and kissing babies. Also exiting the plane
was a who’s who of Illinois political dignitaries and Democratic candidates for several
top Illinois seats. Among them was the young Congressman Kenny Gray, veteran Senator
Paul Douglas, local State Representative and the most powerful man in the Illinois
legislature Speaker of the House Paul Powell, State Democratic Party Chairman Jim
Roman, State Vice-Chair and East St. Louis mayor Alvin J. Fields and Democratic

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13 Conversation with Ben Gelman, circa 1990?
candidate for Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, Samuel H. Shapiro, Lieutenant Governor candidate, and James R. McLaughlin Illinois Secretary of State. Further rounding out the delegation was former Governor John Stelle and candidates for State Auditor and Attorney General Michael J. Howlett and William G. Clark. Also accompanying Kennedy was his sister Eunice Shriver, wife of Sargent Schriver then Chicago residents, Mrs. Margaret Clark from Michigan, National Director of Women’s Activities and vice Chair of the National Democratic Party, Missouri Senator Steward Symington, and one of his press secretaries Pierre Salinger. Unfortunately, no list exists of other Kennedy men accompanying the candidate.\textsuperscript{14} However, it is probably safe to speculate that FBI and possibly Secret Service Agents, which had been a practice in American national political campaigns, also escorted the candidate.\textsuperscript{15}

Because the first of a series of Presidential debates, four were planned in all, had just been aired for the first time on National television Kennedy was now in a dead even heat with his Republican rival Vice President Richard M. Nixon. His message of a “New Frontier” and his eloquent speaking style, complete with his Boston accent, had captivated the nation and propelled him to, what we would later refer to as, “Rock Star” status.\textsuperscript{16} This was evidenced earlier that morning where in appearances in Granite City, East St. Louis, and Belleville, Illinois his motorcade was mobbed by adoring crowds of fans hoping to touch or shake the young Senator’s hand. At one point in East St. Louis,

\textsuperscript{14}To compile this list I used several newspaper sources all published on Oct. 4, 1960. Southern Illinoisan, Marion Daily Republican, Chicago Tribune, New York Times, and others.


\textsuperscript{16}Kraus, Sidney. The Great Debates, Background-Perspectives-Affects. Bloomington, Indiana University Press. 1962.
that morning, Kennedy was nearly pulled from the open limousine and was hastily scurried away to avoid the estimated 8,000 gathered to hear him speak. The speech did go on, but not without the aid of extra police escorts.\textsuperscript{17} A similar event would occur later that day in Harrisburg, as Kennedy attempted to depart for the airport at Williamson County.

This phenomenon was something new in American politics and numerous reporters made such observations across the country where Kennedy went to speak. The situation was no different in southern Illinois where most all reporters covering the campaign swing chronicled the massive crowds and intense enthusiasm.

How long Kennedy stayed greeting the assembled crowd or if Kennedy made any remarks there, any member of the press did not record it. We know that after a short walk along the receiving line of assembled dignitaries he boarded the Cadillac and the motorcade headed off for its next stop at the Murdale Shopping Center.

Because a schedule of events of the day had been advertised throughout southern Illinois’ various media outlets, most notably the Southern Illinoisan newspaper, people knew where the candidate was to be and how the itinerary would proceed.\textsuperscript{18} As a consequence several hundred had gathered at the Murdale Center to witness the future president change from the enclosed Cadillac to an open white convertible for the drive down Illinois Avenue to his destination at Mc Andrew Stadium. The parade down the

\textsuperscript{17} St. Louis Post Dispatch, October 4, 1960.
\textsuperscript{18} Southern Illinoisan, October 2, 1960.
“Carbondale Strip” was documented in several news accounts, which noted that scores of people ran up to the open car trying to touch Kennedy or offer him gifts. As he passed the Varsity Theatre did he notice that the feature that night was *From the Terrace* starring his friends and supporters Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward? The second featured motion picture also starred another strong Kennedy supporter Yul Brynner in *Soloman and Sheba*.19

There was an apparent traffic jam at the intersection of College and Illinois Avenue due to the surge of the crowd. Apparently, no news of the “bomb scare” had filtered through the crowds although there was acknowledgement of a few other death threats against his life that had been reported in earlier papers. These threats did not deter Senator Kennedy from proceeding with the advertised agenda and no major precautions were implemented that appear in any of the source material. According to references in later books about the 1960 campaign such threats were common against both candidates Kennedy and Nixon and probably dealt with behind the scenes by federal law enforcement agencies.

Finally, the motorcade entered McAndrew stadium and drove around the track arriving at the podium erected just for the event. The crowd apparently did not mind that already the campaign was far behind schedule, a situation that continued throughout the day, as evidenced by an overwhelming standing ovation and applause that lasted several minutes until Kennedy started to speak.

19 Ibid. Oct. 3, 1960
The southern Illinois region that Kennedy had arrived in was a microcosm of the issues and realities facing both the nation and the candidates. Unemployment was increasing rapidly across the country. The steel industry was experiencing a serious depression, with resulting slow downs in the automotive and other manufacturing sectors. Coalmines across the country and in southern Illinois had been laying off workers. There was a major fear about Communism spreading across the globe and Cuba’s Fidel Castro’s meddling in other Latin American countries. Farmers were also experiencing low prices because of massive surpluses and the failure of the Eisenhower administration to enact a new farm bill.\(^\text{20}\) For the candidate John F. Kennedy his personal religious affiliation with the Catholic Church was also of considerable concern to working class Protestants across the country deeply connected to “historic” nativist principles and xenophobic religious bigotry.\(^\text{21}\)

Reporter Austin C. Wherwein in a Special to the New York Times observed the following about southern Illinois. He wrote, “Physically and psychologically, the district is a hundred miles closer to Louisville than it is to Chicago. The tempo and the accent here are border state. Its people are largely the descendants of migrants from Tennessee and Kentucky who came here at about the same time that Abraham Lincoln moved to Illinois.” Wherwein tells his New York readers that the region is 95% Protestant, with most being Methodists and Southern Baptists. As for the economy he says that the region

\(^{20}\) These observations were made from reading several contemporary newspapers in the week preceding Kennedy’s trip to southern Illinois. Also, many of these issues are discussed in David Pretrusza 2008 book, *1960 LBJ vs. JFK vs. Nixon: The Epic Campaign that Forged 3 Presidencies*. New York, Sterling Publishing Co.

\(^{21}\) Carty, Thomas J. *A Catholic in the Whithouse; Religion, Politics, and JFK’s Presidential Campaign*. New York, Palgrave McMillian. 2004. The issue of Kennedy’s Catholicism is mentioned in many of the comments made to reporters throughout the day.
is largely devoid of natural resources, except coal, which he asserts, is a “dying industry here” and that farming is at best “marginal.” Describing the economic realities facing the region he states that “unemployment is chronic running as high as 17%” and in some areas the number is considerably higher.\textsuperscript{22}

The day the Kennedy campaign arrived in “Little Egypt” the Southern Illinoisan’s FrontPage news articles reflected these national trends and reinforced Wherwein’s analysis. One Banner headline screamed 1,700 Jobs lost across the region, Candidate Nixon and the GOP Blast Kennedy on Cuba, and the local utility CIPS wanted another rate increase. A Baptist publication printed in Harrisburg, documented by reporters from the New York Times attending Kennedy’s visit, authorized by the Illinois State Baptist Association editorialized against Baptists who chided their fellow parishioners who “think it wrong to be anti-Catholic \{and\} to question the intolerance of the official Catholic position.” The article pointed out that Senator Kennedy was a Catholic.

As Kennedy began to give his ten-minute address to those gathered at McAndrew Stadium one can imagine that these issues were weighing heavily on his mind. After introducing his accompanying Democratic entourage, especially candidate Otto Kerner, Paul Powell, Paul Douglas, Ken Gray, and the Trustees of Southern Illinois University, Kennedy launched right into these timely issues. He recognized in his early remarks all the students in the audience and applauded their involvement in the political process. He said, “I am confident I am talking to the future rulers of America in the sense that all

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{New York Times}, October 4, 1960,
future men and women have an opportunity and an obligation to participate in the discipline of self government.”

He went on the attack against the Eisenhower administration’s refusal to sign Senator Douglas’ Area Redevelopment Bill, co-sponsored in the House by Ken Gray, and chided Nixon’s refusal to endorse the legislation. He claimed that America will have to develop 25,000 new jobs a week over the next ten years if the country was going to meet its obligation of full employment. He talked at length about America’s future challenges with the Soviet Union and its satellite state Cuba, noting that it was too late for the Eisenhower administration to be offering Latin American’s aide when they were now staring down the “barrel of Castro’s gun.” He promised that in his administration no such lax measures would be taken against the Communists allowing them a toe hold in emerging countries around the world.

He quoted a recent Gallop poll that said a majority of people in ten countries believed the Soviet Union would be well ahead of the United States by 1970 in areas of science and military power. “You cannot stand still to an adversary who is devoting all of his energies to a movement forward,” Kennedy proclaimed. He continued that America must be the leader of the free world and that under his leadership these set backs would be reversed. In closing he used Thomas Paine’s words, “The cause of America is the cause of all mankind.” “I believe,” he ended, “the Democratic Party, which stretches back in history
longer than any other party,” will be called on “to great public service, and start this
country moving again.” 23

The applause and standing ovation literally lasted until the Senator and those traveling
with him had driven away from the stadium on the next leg of the campaign swing to the
Veterans Hospital in Marion. Paul Kircher, a gas station operator from Marion who was
in the crowd, told a New York Times reporter that “there’s a lot of talk about
Khrushchev, but you hardly ever hear of foreign affairs.” Another unidentified spectator
said, “Regardless of what the Republicans say, this region is in a hell of a mess.” As the
band continued to play, many in the crowd of 10,000 lingered for several hours
exchanging stories and observations. Others rushed to their automobiles to try and catch
the motorcade at its next public venue in the downtown square at Marion.

There is an interesting contradiction about statements Kennedy made at McAndrew
Stadium that appeared in a side bar article in the Southern Illinoisan the next day. Most
probably written by longtime SI journalist John Gardner, the article under a headline that
reads “Kennedy Backs Area Aid Plan” quotes several remarks the Senator made that do
not appear in the official transcript of the speech housed at the Kennedy Presidential
Library. The statements reported in the SI were released sometime earlier to the press as
an “advance copy” of the speech. In other words the article was written from a “press
release” and not transcribed at McAndrew Stadium.

23 Transcript of Kennedy Speech at McAndrew Stadium Oct. 3, 1960 is available on-line and is also
located at The Kennedy Presidential Library
They are worth noting because they are “specific” remarks made about southern Illinois. The article claims that Kennedy said, “Southern Illinois is a rich land {and} we must make it serve the people. We must develop its natural resources to the fullest.” Kennedy continues, the article claims, “Crab Orchard Lake was created in the 1930’s by the vision of a Democratic Congressman Ken Keller. The Republicans ridiculed it, then they called it Keller’s frog pond. But, today Carbondale draws its water from Crab Orchard Lake and Crab Orchard Lake has drawn industries with an 11 million dollar payroll in Southern Illinois.” Kennedy continued that if he was elected he would sign the area development bill and “by next summer we’ll be back in business here in Southern Illinois.”

It is too bad however, that Kennedy did not make these statements in Carbondale because they would have definitely struck a chord with spectators there. This issue also points out that “official speech” transcripts might often be suspect and require further scrutiny.  

MARION

According to 86 year old former Congressman Ken

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24 For a copy of this speech see “Kennedy, Carbondale, Ill. McAndrew Stadium (advance text) Kennedy Presidential Library. This speech is considerably longer that the one he wound up giving and covers many more topics. I wonder if he changed it because they were already running so far behind schedule? Another incident happened somewhere in Carbondale that day, but I do not have all of the details. In the SI Oct4, there is a story that Kennedy or someone acting on his behalf made a donation to the Carbondale United Fund. Dean Isbell, drive chairman, denied to disclose the sum but said it would definitely help in their efforts. At Kennedy’s direction the funds were to be used for the Lion’s Club and the Attuck’s Center on Carbondale’s north east side. (KENNEDY’S DONATION WAS FOR THE ATTUCK’S CENTER!)
Gray, who accompanied the Senator throughout that day, he remembered that Kennedy’s next scheduled stop for a “private” audience with veterans and staff at the Marion Veteran’s Hospital was “important” to “the President.” He said that Kennedy tried to visit hospitals whenever he had the opportunity and that his years of service on the Senate Veterans Committee made him extra sensitive to the plight faced by American veterans.

As the “World War II” hero of the PT 109 August 1, 1943 incident in the South Pacific, for which he won the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for heroics and the Purple Cross for injuries he sustained, Kennedy not only suffered from the lifelong injury, but also intimately understood veterans concerns and issues as a consequence. Earlier that morning, one of his fellow PT 109 comrades Edgar Maurer, who lived south of East St. Louis, and the parents of one of his PT 109 crewmen Mr. and Mrs. Zinser joined him at various stops in Belleville, and at Augustine’s restaurant where he stopped for lunch, Kennedy proudly introduced them to the audience. Kennedy recalled to the assembled crowd and restaurant staff that Maurer was on a merchant ship that got sunk “in the Soloman Islands and then had the bad fortune to then come on my boat which got sunk.” The crowd erupted in laughter and Kennedy acknowledged that he hadn’t seen him in 17 years.

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25 This story about the visit to the V.A. Center is reported in The Marion Daily Republican and The Harrisburg Daily Register Oct. 4, 1960.
As Kennedy prepared to address the 200 assembled veterans, nurses, and doctors at the VA Hospital in Marion, it is very possible that he was remembering these events that happened those many years before. In his very brief speech, he applauded the veterans services, “those from World War I, the Spanish American conflict, and World War II”, declaring that the nation owed them an obligation and he intended to see Veterans services expanded. He noted that he hoped to see the Hospital continue to grow and encouraged those in attendance that their services to the nation were still needed now, “in times of peace” and that “the United States must make those hard decisions which go with being secure, with maintaining our freedom, with maintaining our strength, {and} with maintaining our position in the world.” Several reporters chronicled that Kennedy spent several minutes shaking the hands of veterans in wheel chairs and some on gurneys, as well as members of the VA staff. Perhaps this is the reason that his remarks were so brief and direct—maybe he actually wanted to spend as much time meeting the men and women as speaking to them?²⁷

Now, over two hours behind schedule the entourage prepared to leave for the platform in the City center square. Kennedy re-boarded the open white convertible and the motorcade proceeded slowly up Main Street. Crowds estimated at several thousand lined the thru fare and surged towards the open vehicle in an effort to shake the candidates hand or touch his person. According to one witness several women in the crowd were in tears, near totally overcome with excitement, at seeing the young Senator. When the procession

²⁷ This speech and his actions are reported in The Marion Daily Republican, The Southern Illinoisan, The New York Times, and several other papers Oct. 4, 1960. For a transcript of his brief remarks at this stop see: “Kennedy Speech at Marion, Illinois Veterans Hospital Oct. 3, 1960” Kennedy Presidential Library.
finally reached the speaking platform in the heart of the city the entire venue was packed to capacity. The Marion Daily Republican, a paper that did not endorse Kennedy, estimated the crowd at over 4,000. It was all local law enforcement could do to open up a gap so the convertible could reach the speaking platform. Thousands of Kennedy for President signs, and other campaign banners supporting Otto Kerner for Governor, Ken Gray for Congress, and Paul Powell for Representative were frantically waved at the passing motorcade. In his remarks Kennedy was evidently deeply “moved” by the enormous outpouring of support for his candidacy and that of the Democratic ticket traveling with him. Before he started his speech or introduced the other candidates, he courteously thanked the crowd for their welcome.

Then Kennedy got right to the point. In one of the strongest deliveries he made that day he told the crowd that he had heard there were a lot of Republicans in Marion. He asked those Republicans in the crowd to raise their hands. He said to those of you who raised your hands, “we want to convince you between now and November 8th, that the Democratic Party can be of service to this state and this district, and to the country.” He told them that he knew Americans were tired of waste in their government, but he challenged the crowd to consider, “that over 35% of the brightest high school students in the country do not go on to college.” “What happens?” he questioned the crowd. “How is their talent wasted?” He pointed out that this southern Illinois district “had lost 60,000 residents in the last ten years. Why is that?” He claimed that technological changes had left many in “this district” behind, and asked why the Eisenhower administration had continued to veto Paul Douglas’ Redevelopment Bill, that would put thousands of people
back to work, enable them to go to college, and create thousands of new jobs. He asked the audience if Government waste was the 9 billion dollars of surplus food the “administration” was holding on to at a time when over 4 million American families were surviving on surplus rations—“which amounts to 5 cents a day per person”?

He continued to hammer away at the failing economy under Eisenhower and Nixon. Over 100,000 steel workers had recently lost their jobs, areas of West Virginia were experiencing unemployment at near 50% and in an impassioned voice, recorded by one reporter, he asked the crowd again, “Is this waste?” He also ventured into dangerous territory, especially considering the region’s racist past and still in 1960 experiencing Ku Klux Klan activity, when he said to the crowd, “There are people born in this country who because of their color do not get as good a job, do not go to as good a school, do not have as good teachers, do not get to go to college, do not get to be professional men, do not get to own their home. I consider that waste, too!” One can only wonder if the African American community living in the “Gents subdivision” virtually a stone throw away from the downtown square were listening. In all of the photographs this author has seen taken at this stop there is not a single African American face in the crowd. Neither did any commentator write anything about this statement’s reception. Fifty years later it is still a mystery if anyone in the crowd heard Kennedy’s pleas for decency and fairness in America. However, this statement was a clear indication to the crowd of changes they could expect under a Kennedy administration.28

28 This speech is also available under “Kennedy Speech, Marion Illinois Courthouse, Oct.3, 1960” Kennedy Presidential Library. My references to Ku Klux Klan activity in southern Illinois during this time is based on years of experience working in southern Illinois’ African American communities, as a Community Organizer (1981-86), in South Marion, aka “Gents” subdivision AND Colp/#9. Over the
After thanking the crowd again for their support Kennedy, with the assistance of law enforcement, made his way to a waiting enclosed Cadillac to continue the journey to Harrisburg. By now the entourage was running nearly three hours behind schedule. For people in Saline County the motorcade would not arrive until nearly 7 o’clock. For many anxiously waiting in downtown Harrisburg the cool autumn evening had prompted some to walk home and get an extra jacket. But the size of the crowd was not affected. In fact, the delay may have enabled many more to attend who arrived home late from jobs in the mines or farmers finishing the evening chores.

Back in Marion the reporters were busy gathering comments from the dispersing crowd. New York Times reporter Wehrwein cornered Ken Gray’s Republican challenger for the 25th Congressional District seat State Representative Gordon Kerr who said, “Economic conditions had improved.” He referred to religion as “the other thing” and added, “I don’t talk about it.” However, a more candid individual who refused to give his name said, “that the theory to elect a Roman Catholic President would be to scrap the Constitution.” Mrs. Wanda Blake, a Marion housewife, said that while she liked Senator Kennedy, religion was the most important issue in the campaign. As a Methodist, she said, “She cannot vote for the Senator.” However, another housewife said, “He is a forceful speaker.” Wehrwein observed, she blushed and said, “He has a compelling voice. I am going to reconsider.” I guess Kennedy is all right said an unidentified Marion doctor,

years I heard countless stories about Klan activity during the Civil Rights movement. Physical violence was common, and other forms of intimidation. Many schools, especially in Marion and Carterville, were still fundamentally segregated. Black children were often placed in “special classes” by themselves, away from white students and even had a different lunch hour and playground time.
“but religion has nothing to do with it. I am going to support Nixon because I feel like he’s better qualified.”

A Chicago Tribune reporter Joseph Hearst in his summary of the day’s events written later that evening in Springfield, the last stop on Kennedy’s busy daylong schedule, couldn’t help but comment on the number of teenagers who lined the streets in every southern Illinois community. He also noted that a very large percentage of the crowd at the Carbondale McAndrew Stadium, which he estimated at 7,000 participants, were SIU students. Associated Press reporter Arthur Edson, reported over the AP wire service, about the activities of the “Republican truth squad” that followed shortly behind Kennedy at every stop and held impromptu press conferences challenging Kennedy’s assertions. The “truth squad” composed of Pennsylvania Senator Hugh Scott, New York Senator Kenneth B. Keating, Senator Roman Hruska of Nebraska—known as one of the most vocal conservatives in the entire Senate—Congressman Donald L. Jackson of California and Congressman Charles E. Goodell of New York arrived by plane at the Jackson County airport a matter of minutes behind Kennedy and held their first press conference at the Carbondale Elks Club shortly after Kennedy’s first address in Carbondale.

Besides a brief mention of their activities by Edson over AP, the Southern Illinoisan was the only other newspaper that appears paid any attention to the “vehement” attacks levied against the Democratic platform by the “Republican truth squad.” However, undeterred the group proceeded on Kennedy’s trail throughout the afternoon and evening and flew back to Springfield to monitor his comments there later that night. According to AP
sources two days later the same Republican group followed Kennedy, after a days rest in Chicago, to his daylong campaign swing through southern Indiana on Oct. 5th.

HARRISBURG

In 1960 the thirty-mile trip from Marion to Harrisburg on Route 13 would have taken even fast moving automobiles at least forty-five minutes to an hour to traverse. As darkness fell, the winding road meandering back and forth and around numerous strip mines would have been especially treacherous for a long column of police cars, Cadillac’s, and Grey Hound buses, carrying the eighty plus journalists, extending to well over one hundred vehicles. I wonder if Congressman Gray pointed out to Kennedy the site of Charlie Burger’s notorious hang out the Shady Rest, still dilapidated on the side of the road near the small community of Pittsburg?

For Kerner and Powell who would both face potential ruin in the years to come did they reflect at all on the fate of Burger and the Shelton gang? One can only guess, but the story of “Bloody Williamson” was supposedly well known amongst politicians on Capitol Hill.

Finally, nearly three hours behind the targeted timeline, the Kennedy entourage arrived just outside of Harrisburg around 6:30 pm. The motorcade stopped for a few short seconds as Kennedy changed cars back into the open aired white convertible, still driven by Dick Hunter, for the short ride into the downtown area. Regardless of Kennedy’s
tardiness he was greeted by one of the most energetic and lively crowds of the day. Estimates range from 4-6,000 attendees who like crowd goers at earlier stops displayed campaign signs, snapped photographs, and pressed the convertible to try and shake the Senator’s hand. In the commotion the aerial antennae was ripped from the car and the future President nearly knocked out of the vehicle. The crowd hooped and hollered and chanted Kennedy until he literally had to motion to them to “simmer down” so he could speak.

On a light hearted note he started by thanking Paul Powell for taking him on the same journey to Harrisburg that then President and candidate Harry S. Truman followed in the 1948 upset victory over Republican challenger Thomas E. Dewey. The previous evening, Sunday Oct. 2nd, former President Truman had attended a gala dinner with Kennedy in St. Louis. Kennedy joked with the crowd “Mr. Nixon, the other night, in my own town of Boston, speaking to his party, said I was another Truman. I regard it as a compliment. And, I said he was another Dewey, which he does not regard as a compliment.” The crowd erupted with applause and laughter.

Then Kennedy continued on several of the themes he had spoken of earlier in the day. He criticized the Eisenhower administration and Nixon again for vetoing the Douglas Redevelopment Bill. He changed his strategy somewhat in focusing much more specifically on the current administration’s failure to achieve a workable agriculture policy. “Corn was selling for nearly $1.50 under the support price of 1952” he told the crowd. “In Minnesota, on Friday, in Sanborn it sold for 85 cents.” Kennedy claimed that
under Nixon’s proposed program support prices would be tied to the 85-cent marker. “If the market price drops, the support price will drop until finally there won’t be any farmers in the United States in 1961, 1962 and 1963,” he forecast. The crowd broke into a cacophony of boos and hisses.

“If we can make our economy move ahead, if we can bring a balance between supply and demand in the field of agriculture, if we can provide affective education for our children, if we can put medical care for the aged under social security, which will equalize the burden on us all, then I think we will have met some of the problems facing this country in the 1960’s,” Kennedy asserted. Once again the crowd erupted in applause and began to chant Kennedy, Kennedy. In closing he asked all those in attendance for their support and thanked them for the overwhelming welcome they had offered him. 29

As Kennedy tried to leave the podium for the enclosed Cadillac the crowd surged forward blocking his way to the vehicle. The open aired white convertible happened to be closer by so Kennedy headed toward that automobile. As he began to jump inside he was practically knocked to the ground, save a reporter standing besides him quick action to right the shaken Senator. The car sped away as quickly as possible having to rendezvous west of town with the enclosed car Kennedy was blocked from entering by the over anxious crowd. Once secured back in the Cadillac sedan the motorcade hurried out of town for the long winding trip back to the Williamson County airport located between Marion and Herrin. Kennedy’s southern Illinois visit was about to be coming to its finale, 29

but the evening was far from over for the campaigning Senator. After his next stop at Herrin he still had to fly to Venice, Illinois and then attend a dinner and rally at the armory in Springfield. Some how or another Kennedy also managed to make a 9o’clock appointment in Springfield to do a television interview that broadcast statewide. By the time Kennedy would finally get to bed early the next morning he would have made 16 stops, traveled over 500 miles, and spoken to an estimated total Illinois crowd of nearly 75,000 people living south of Springfield and this is not considering the number of people who watched him on television.\footnote{Kennedy mentions at the Williamson County Airport that they will have to get going to make a 9o’clock appointment of a Springfield television station. However, I have yet to find a transcript of this or been able to confirm that it happened.}

**FAREWELL: WILLIAMSON COUNTY AIRPORT**

As Kennedy’s motorcade finally approached the Williamson County Airport he might well have been overwhelmed by the size of the crowd still waiting, many hours after the scheduled time, to greet him. According to one source, an article printed years later in the *Southern Illinoisan*, the crowd swelled to nearly 10,000. However, I can find no other period confirmation of this size of audience in any of the other primary source material. This leads me to believe that the *Southern Illinoisan* writer used the numbers at McAndrew Stadium by accident as the number in the crowd at the airport.

Regardless, there is little doubt that the crowd was substantial as reflected by Kennedy’s final remarks. First, Kennedy repeated his story about Nixon’s comparison of him to Truman that he spoke of in Harrisburg. He expounded though saying, “In 1948, Paul
Powell carried Truman by the hand and led him into southern Illinois, the promised land, because this is the place in this state, at the same time of year, that Harry Truman’s campaign began to catch fire, and it was in these days that he led to blaze the trail that would carry him to victory in November.” He continued, “I come here today singing the same song that Woodrow Wilson sang in 1912, and that Franklin Roosevelt sang in 1932, and that Harry Truman sang in 1948 and that is that I have confidence in this country.”

In the crowd that evening, hoisted high on the shoulders of her father was a young West Frankfort girl named Diann whose experience there that night was so profound that fifty years later she acknowledges that it was the most pivotal moment in her young life. “The day that President John F. Kennedy made a campaign appearance in southern Illinois changed my life in so many ways,” now Diann Pollack, asserts all these years later. With great clarity she remembers that when her father heard about Kennedy’s “whistle stop” tour through southern Illinois that he was determined to be there. She remembers that her family had watched the first debate between Kennedy and Nixon a few evenings before and that the entire family was deeply moved and impressed by his “eloquence and charisma.” She recalls, “My parents, my older sister, and I drove to the airport in our Ford station wagon very excited to see the man that had impressed them on television.”

Although she cannot remember his exact speech she knows that he spoke of “progress for America and its citizens.” Like many others she remembers that it was a “beautiful autumn day” even though by now it was already dark and it had been overcast most of

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31 This brief speech can be found at “Kennedy Speech Williamson County Airport, Herrin, Illinois, Oct. 3, 1960” Kennedy Presidential Library.
the afternoon. For her however, the impact of the experience, rain or shine, caused her to begin to follow the remaining political campaign and intricately follow the man’s future presidency.

She was so impressed by what she had heard that evening that when she got home she immediately penned a letter to him telling the Senator that she wished she could vote for him. To her amazement less than a few weeks later, before the election, she received a response on Kennedy’s Senatorial stationary dated November 4th. Pollack declares, “That till this day it is my most cherished memento. It is a tangible reminder of my passion for politics and for my pride in America for electing a man of such brilliance and character.” She says that the letter will be passed on to her son Nathaniel when she is gone.

Like most Americans alive at the time, perhaps for her even to a greater extant, Kennedy’s assassination in Dallas was the most traumatizing day of her life. Fifty years later she still asserts, “how profoundly different this country would be, if he hadn’t been murdered.”

Whether or not Kennedy’s visit affected anyone else so fundamentally, I have yet to discover. But, I will posit that the young Diann was not alone in the crowds that gathered all over southern Illinois that day— the countless thousands who waited hours to get a

32 This story was reported recently in the West Frankfort Daily American as a result of my query to the public for information.
glimpse of the man who would be President, to try and shake his hand, to hear him speak, and to turn out on November 8th to vote in record numbers.

Democratic leaders in southern Illinois, from U.S. Congressman Mel Price in Bellville to Congressman Ken Gray from southern Illinois’ 25th congressional district, were overwhelmed by the turn out in the region and sure that it would have a major impact on the close race in Illinois and the nation. For several weeks “letters to the editor” by many southern Illinoisans reflected these sentiments. Most responses indicate that people were quite impressed by the young Senator Kennedy and hopeful for changes, especially economic ones in southern Illinois.33

Kennedy too, was impressed by the turnouts across the region. In an emotional farewell at Williamson County airport he again thanked everyone who had attended. He said, “You have treated me as well as I have ever been treated in my life today, and I hope that Mr. Nixon is able to get his airplane into this airport and others, because I want him to come down here and see some real Democrats.”

As Kennedy prepared to get on the Caroline, named for his infant daughter, to finish the remaining leg of the tour he told the crowd something that many would never forget, including SI photographer Ben Gelman,”We will see you again. We will come back.

33 These observations by politicians are reported in several contemporary newspapers including, St. Louis Post Dispatch, Southern Illinoisan, Marion Daily Republican, Harrisburg Daily Register, Oct. 4, 1960.
Senator or President, we will come back.” An assassin’s bullet denied him the opportunity to keep his promise.

POSTSCRIPT

Twenty-five days after Kennedy visited southern Illinois, by his private plane and open aired motorcade, Vice President Richard M. Nixon the Republican candidate for President, made a whistle stop tour on a private train in downtown Carbondale. From the platform on the Caboose Nixon spoke to an estimated crowd of nearly 25,000 supporters. His speech was directed primarily at Kennedy’s weaknesses in Foreign Policy experience and his overstating the problems in the American economy. The Vice-President who had been suffering from a knee injury did not leave the train. The event was reported as widely as was Kennedy’s tour not only in local papers, but the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, and Washington Post.34

All these years later looking at election returns, particularly in the southern Illinois counties of Alexander, Franklin, Gallatin, Hardin, Jackson, Johnson, Massac, Pope, Pulaski, Saline, Union, and Williamson—counties the Kennedy visit would have been

closely followed in, it is difficult to speculate on whether the trip paid any dividends at the polls on November 8, 1960 or not. Studying in some detail Howard Allen and Vincent Lacey’s compendious cataloging of Illinois Federal election returns from 1818-1990, with particular analysis of 1948-1964 I was left with the impression that southern Illinois voters exhibit no clear cut patterns of voting and by and large avoid casting straight tickets for either Party.  

For example in 1960, one of the closest elections in National Political history, Kennedy only carried 2 counties in southern Illinois and he did not visit either one. In Alexander County, probably because of a large African-American vote he defeated Nixon with 51.8% of the vote to Nixon’s 48%. In Gallatin County his margin was a bit larger 52.2% to Nixon’s 47.7%. However, they were slim to say the least. In the counties where he did speak, hand shake, kiss babies, and campaign hard –Jackson, Williamson, and Saline he lost by considerably larger margins. In Jackson County, the site of his largest rally, he lost to Nixon by nearly 2,000 votes or nearly nine points. The situation was about the same in Saline and Williamson. In Congressman Gray’s hometown of West Frankfort in Franklin County, where Kennedy did not campaign, he almost squeaked by his Republican challenger losing by less than 500 votes. In Pope County and the historic Republican County of Johnson, Kennedy was slaughtered loosing by nearly 40 points.

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If we look back a few years to 1948 Harry Truman in another very close National race whom also visited southern Illinois and spoke in Harrisburg fared someone better winning 5 counties, including Franklin and Saline, but Dewey won in the remaining areas handily beating Truman in Johnson, Jackson, and Pope. In 1956 southern Illinois voters turned out in force to vote against their own native son Adali Stevenson, handily giving the election to War Hero, General turned politician, and he was an incumbent, Dwight D. Eisenhower. State wide Eisenhower defeated Stevenson by nearly 1,000,000 votes.

Then we move the clock forward to 1964 and Lyndon B. Johnson handily trounces his Republican challenger Barry Goldwater in every southern Illinois County except the Republican strong holds of Johnson and Pope Counties. Statewide Johnson defeated Goldwater by nearly 800,000 votes. It is an anomaly of our regions politics that Congressman Paul Powell and later Illinois Secretary of State, though a Democrat, always won his native Johnson County home for nearly fifty years.

In interviews I conducted with both political experts on Illinois politics, Dr. John Jackson and Dr. Vince Lacey, they both declared that Kennedy did not hurt his self by spending the day here and it very well helped energize the Democratic base and prevent a complete disaster like the one Eisenhower dealt Stevenson. Both professors said that the “Catholic” issue played well for the Republicans and conservative Baptist and Methodist ministers preaching an anti-Catholic message from many southern Illinois pulpits did not help Kennedy’s chances either.

In the end Kennedy would trounce Nixon in St.Clair County, home of East St. Louis and a large African-American population by over 25,000 votes. Kennedy made 3 stops there
that October 3rd morning and it paid off. Like in elections of our recent past, 1960, especially in Illinois proved that every vote counted and mattered. In the end it came down to Chicago for the Kennedy campaign and when the state wide total was in the Democratic nominee was the victor by less than 9,000 popular votes. Looking at these statistics one realizes that if Kennedy would have lost in southern Illinois the way Stevenson had, he no doubt would have lost the state.

Whether or not his day long, hard driving, energetic Oct. 3, 1960 campaign swing was the determining factor is for you to judge. I will posit however, that it was a sharp move on the part of the young Senator. And whoever is responsible for putting it all together, be it Paul Powell, Ken Gray, or Otto Kerner their actions may well have determined the outcome of the election of 1960.

LEGACY

If you visit the web-site of Marion or Harrisburg and for that matter even Herrin, where technically Kennedy did not visit, their official town histories all mention John F. Kennedy’s visit on Oct. 3, 1960. Periodically, over the years the Southern Illinoisan will run a special historical section of notable events in the region’s history and mention the campaign of October 1960 and show a few of Ben Gelman’s original photographs. At the campus of Southern Illinois University there is not a single memento or photo of say Delyte Morris and John F. Kennedy anywhere to be seen. Except for the few documents in the Special Collections there is not much else. On the Carbondale official Wikipedia site there is also no mention of this historic visit.
I am still looking for supposed radio recordings by several local stations of the Kennedy speeches and possibly interviews along with tape from television station WSIL and KFVS. If these sources can be found perhaps they could be re-aired and spark some new interest in this visit and what it might mean fifty years later. Perhaps through future scholarly analysis a case could be made that Kennedy’s showing in the region, even though he lost, it might well be reinterpreted as victory?

I hope this paper can become a catalyst for further investigations and serious analysis of these political questions. In developing a regional history, I believe that issues like these are fundamental to such an enterprise and should be fostered and encouraged. Perhaps, Carbondale might add the story to their web site once they read the book?
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