

History Comes *Alive!*

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



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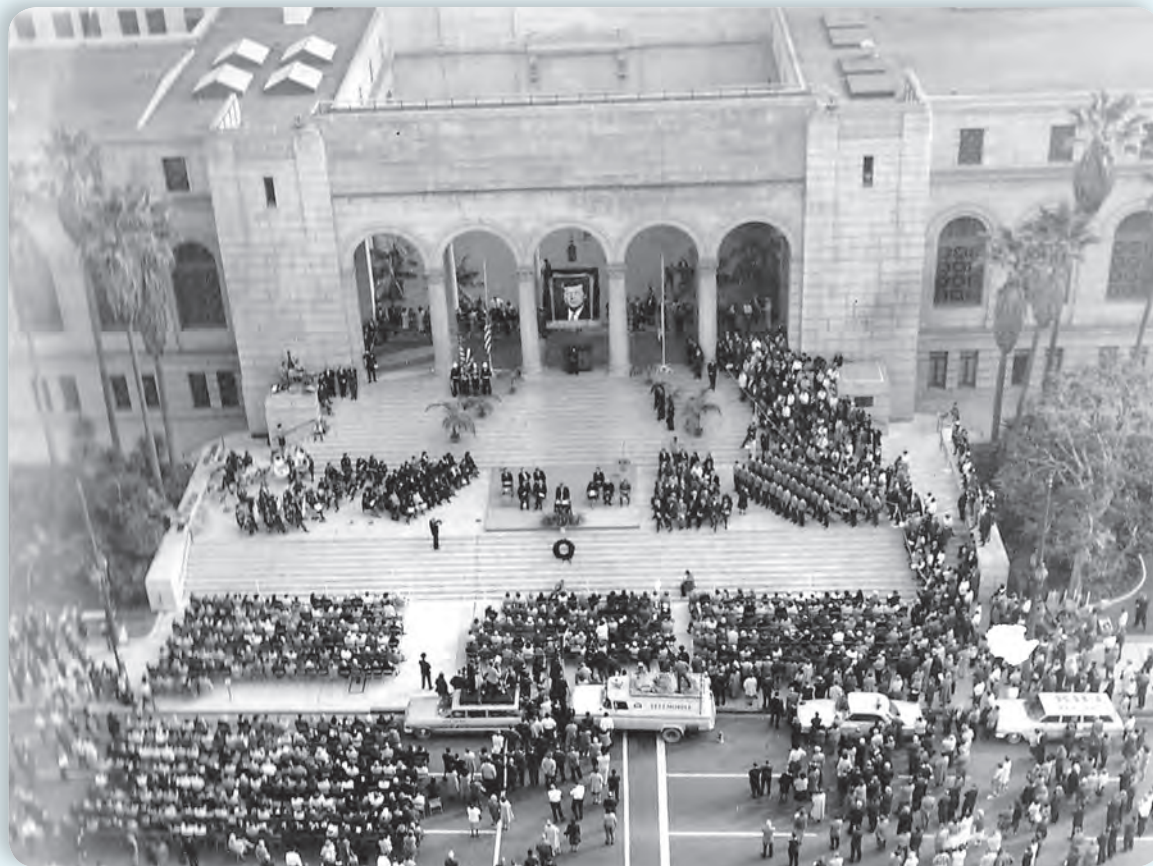
By Michael E. Holland;
Photos courtesy L.A. Archives

This has been a year of looking back at the events of 1963, including the March on Washington, D.C., or the City Council elections here in Los Angeles. But 1963 also produced one of those life-altering moments that each generation can call their proof of being of that time in history. All of us probably remember where we were on Sept. 11, 2001. That was a day that still affects us in 2013. Dec. 7, 1941 belonged to my parents and grandparents as one of rites of passage they lived through as Americans. But between those two dates is another date, which is coming up for a major review again this year. There are no less than four major television specials coming to a TV screen near you dealing with the end of the Kennedy years. So, let's get the question out of the way: Where were you when you heard about the shooting of the president in Dallas?

Were you alive then? I was just two years old and have no memory of the events. But I wondered how the City of Los Angeles handled and processed the shock and sadness of the rapid series of events that November weekend. I found a few answers in some of the holdings here at the Los Angeles City Archives through the official City Council files and minutes, along with several council collections. They will be telling us our story today.

The City Council was in regular Friday session. A height-limit district for high-rise construction had been approved for a section of Los Feliz Boulevard. According to the Council minutes, "[Gilbert] Lindsay, being recognized by the Chair, advised that was being reported that the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, had been shot, whereupon the Council proceeded to adjourn." It is not clear where everyone went after the close of the meeting, but one can assume that any office in City Hall with a radio or television would have been a likely gathering place.

Council File #116338 fills in some of the details of what happened over the next few days. Council president John Gibson ordered City Clerk Walter Peterson to send a telegram to every councilmember to attend a special session to declare a local day of mourning to coincide with the



An aerial shot above the City's JFK memorial on the steps of City Hall Monday, Nov. 25, 1963.

L.A. and JFK

This month marks the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's death. Here's a look back at how Los Angeles mourned the president after his assassination in Dallas.

national Day of Mourning called by the new President Lyndon B. Johnson for Monday, Nov. 25. A letter to the council from Mayor Sam Yorty pointed out that he, the mayor, didn't have the authority to declare a legal holiday or a day of mourning without council concurrence. The surviving telegram served notice of the special meeting to take place in Council Chamber, Room 140, City Hall at 10 a.m. on Sunday, Nov. 24. This was the first Sunday meeting anyone could remember.

It goes without saying that an emergency forces people to rearrange their schedules. Gilbert Lindsay's 1963 Daily Reminder had a 2:30 p.m. meeting in Room M-42 and a 7 p.m. event at the Ambassador Hotel

with the Mexican Chamber of Commerce. Both events are crossed out with the notation "Pres. Kennedy killed," and the next three days' schedules are crossed out with "cancel a/c Kennedy".

Rosalind Wyman, who had been deeply involved with the Kennedys during the 1960 Democratic convention in Los Angeles, now went about coordinating a memorial observance to take place on the steps of City Hall.

The special session lasted only ten minutes. An official resolution was read and approved by the entire council. Councilman Billy Mills read an invocation into the record that included the following: "Jesus Christ, Gandhi, Medgar Evers and

John Fitzgerald Kennedy have given us a standard ... freedom, justice, equality, righteousness, godliness, moral emancipation for all men...

"A *Los Angeles Times* clipping in the file recounted this event on that Sunday: "The session had barely gotten under way when news of the fatal shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald was flashed. Councilmen greeted it somberly."

The public observances began Sunday afternoon at the Los Angeles Sports Arena. It was there that Kennedy was nominated as the party's candidate. Local television station KNBC broadcast "A Tribute to John F. Kennedy". The *LA Times* reported the attendance surpassing 7,000 citizens. The size of the television audience was unknown.

That evening, by order of the mayor, lighted windows on all four sides of City Hall formed a cross that was kept lit all night. The symbolism may seem heavy-handed compared to the downplayed religious displays of today, but such public shows of faith were quite common in civic life all over America during the Cold War. In addition, Kennedy's faith had been a bone of contention to some people during the presidential campaign. It was ironic that Yorty, who refused to accept Kennedy as a viable candidate over Johnson, now asked the city to pay its homage "to the memory of a great and good man."

Although he was not a fixture in Los Angeles, Kennedy visited several times as President – the last time in June 1963. The scrapbooks of Gilbert Lindsay and John Ferraro have several photos of his visits. There are also several images of the memorial on the steps of City Hall on Monday, Nov. 25. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that buses and trains stopped for one minute at 9 a.m. to coincide with the beginning of the requiem Mass in Washington, D.C. People gathered at the City Hall steps and commiserated.

The next day saw the city return to business as usual.

Every community finds a way to observe those events, whether local or national. I'm sure there were thousands of public memorials that weekend 50 years ago. This was only one of them. Do you remember others?



In an undated photo are John Ferraro, John F. Kennedy and LAPD Chief William Parker.



At the City Hall memorial for JFK were, from left: Mayoral Aide Joe Quinn and LA Councilmen Tom Bradley, John Cassidy, John Gibson, John Holland, Billy Mills and Gilbert Lindsay.



Pictured in 1960: John F. Kennedy and John Ferraro. Ferraro was on the LA Police Commission at that time and would begin his record-breaking stint on the City Council in 1966.