An Intersection of History
JFK in Fort Worth
Dear Fellow Member:

The Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring a breakfast for the President of the United States, and Mrs. Kennedy, in the Grand Ballroom of Hotel Texas at 8 a.m. Friday, November 22.

The capacity of the ballroom is limited. The Presidential party, including those who will be traveling here with it, further restricts the tickets that can be supplied to our members.

Applications for tickets will be filled at the price of $3.00 per ticket in the order received at the Chamber of Commerce offices, 700 Throckmorton Street, with a limitation of two tickets per member.

Telephone orders cannot be handled.

Please mail or deliver your order and check immediately so that you can participate in this extraordinary occasion.

Sincerely,

Raymond E. Bueck
President
You know the story of JFK in Dallas, but you may not know about JFK in Fort Worth.

By Andra Bennett House

**IMAGES** of John F. Kennedy’s last day typically begin with the President and his wife Jacqueline deplaning Air Force One at Love Field in Dallas, ostensibly after a two-hour flight from Washington, D.C.

But it was actually only a 14-minute hop to Dallas from Carswell AFB in Fort Worth, where the President began his day speaking to an audience of more than 2,000 at a breakfast organized by the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce.

It would be President Kennedy’s final public speech. ☞
The Kennedys spent their last night together in Fort Worth’s Hotel Texas, where Suite 850 was specially decorated with sculpture and paintings loaned from the finest private collections in Fort Worth.

Morning dawned rainy and chilly in Fort Worth that day in 1963, but it didn’t matter. Camelot was in Cowtown. A few weeks earlier, the chamber had been contacted by Kennedy’s advance team and asked to host the event, one of several in major Texas cities.

Kennedy, accompanied by Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Texas Governor John Connally and Congressman Jim Wright, gave extemporaneous remarks to a crowd of thousands in the rain before heading to breakfast at the Hotel Texas. Later, Jacqueline Kennedy was greeted with thunderous adulation from attendees charmed by the charismatic young First Lady as she entered the ballroom and made her way to the head table in a striking pink wool suit with matching pillbox hat, led by Secret Service Agent Clint Hill.

But Fort Worth’s warm welcome would be eclipsed by tragedy a few hours later.

**An Intersection of History**

In 2012, anticipating worldwide observances of the 50th anniversary of Kennedy’s assassination, Marilyn Gilbert, the Fort Worth Chamber’s EVP of marketing, began her preparations for the chamber’s annual High Impact Breakfast for 2013, which would take place on Nov. 22. She booked former Secret Service Agent Clint Hill, now 82, as a speaker for the event a year in advance.

Hill, assigned to protect the First Lady, is the agent photographed climbing onto the trunk of the mortally wounded president’s limousine as it sped to Parkland Hospital, pushing Jackie back into the rear seat and trying to shield her.

The Fort Worth Chamber was proud of its part in this rare presidential visit, but had downplayed its historic role for decades in the aftermath of the assassination. In 2012, the JFK Tribute—an open-air, illuminated exhibit with an eight-foot bronze sculpture of Kennedy—had been dedicated in downtown Fort Worth just across from the historic Hilton Fort Worth Hotel (formerly the Hotel Texas).

Gilbert wanted to commemorate the historic visit as the community continued to search for ways to understand and remember the 50th anniversary.

“Fort Worth’s role was sealed when President Kennedy spoke his last public words at the chamber breakfast,” she said. “There was a huge crush of people in the streets around the hotel hoping to see him, shake his hand, be near him. When he went out into the crowd to embrace them, that was special. That was Fort Worth’s intimate moment with President Kennedy.”

In booking Hill for the commemorative breakfast, Gilbert knew he would provide a “unique, behind-the-scenes” perspective of a well-known story in Fort Worth. To ensure exclusivity, Gilbert included in Hill’s contract a clause stipulating he would not book another speaking engagement in the Dallas-Fort Worth area for 60 days prior to the anniversary breakfast, although we knew he would be called upon for other brief visual appearances near the anniversary date.

**Event Planning and Design**

The 2013 event was booked at the historic Hilton, in the same ballroom as the original breakfast. The chamber would also honor former Speaker of the U.S. House Jim Wright with its High Impact Legacy Award during this event.

The Texas Boys Choir, which entertained at the original breakfast, was booked to sing some of the same selections prior to the breakfast as attendees registered, and then performed a moving rendition of the National Anthem at the beginning of the program. Colors were presented by the Junior Cadet Corps of J.P. Elder Middle School, one of the Chamber’s adopted public schools.

The original breakfast seated 2,000 because the Hotel Texas ballroom was much larger in 1963. Now, with round tables, a smaller ballroom and floor space needed for 12-foot projection screens, lighting, and an A/V control booth, the Hilton could accommodate only 650.

The chamber could have held the event at the Fort Worth Convention Center and accommodated thousands. But the historic nature of the event made the hotel venue non-negotiable.

The chamber, not wanting to have to disappoint the public by turning them away from the breakfast, delayed publicity and marketed it internally to the membership first. Sponsorship sales for members began in the spring of 2013. In August, email invitations
were sent to the membership with upper tier members having a first chance at table sales.

As we were thinking of how to adequately honor Speaker Wright with a photo presentation, local filmmaker Parker Vandergriff contacted us and volunteered to produce a video tribute to Wright. Vandergriff, whose grandfather was a Tarrant County Judge, possessed the talent and the contacts with high-profile politicians such as Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, U.S. Ambassador Tom Scheiffer, Vice President Walter Mondale and Congresswoman Kay Granger. He produced a stirring video tribute that prompted a standing ovation as the 91-year-old Wright made his way to the stage, 50 years to the day after his beaming introduction of President Kennedy in Fort Worth.

Presenting sponsor Pinnacle Bank purchased more than 700 freshly minted Kennedy half-dollar coins, which were placed at each attendee’s setting. Media sponsor Fort Worth Texas magazine carried an article mentioning both breakfasts and provided copies of the magazine and a DVD with news footage of the JFK Fort Worth visit for each attendee. Congressman Wright provided a transcript of Kennedy’s 1963 breakfast speech. Car collector Farris Rookstool also brought the 1963 Lincoln Continental convertible that carried the President and First Lady from the breakfast to Carswell AFB for their trip to Dallas; it was parked at the entrance of the Hilton Hotel.

The chamber also arranged for Half Price Books to provide copies of Hill’s new book, while he and co-author Lisa McCubbin remained afterward to sign for attendees.

Print Program and Design
An event of this historic significance deserved a commemorative program with professional design. The chamber reached out to long-time member The Balcom Agency for assistance.

Knowing our budget constraints and wanting to be part of history, Balcom agreed to a combination trade/cash proposal. The program they produced was a square 8.5” x 8.5” keepsake with black-and-white photos from the original breakfast. The two-color logo intertwined the letters JFK and FW, graphically illustrating the theme, “An Intersection of History.” The font used was a popular graphic design font used during the ‘60s. A timeline spread reminded readers of how the 1963 event unfolded in Fort Worth.

Misperceptions
Because we had delayed publicity and details about the 2013 event, the misperception arose that the Chamber was “recreating” the 1963 breakfast. We were even asked if we would have JFK and Jackie impersonators.

Attendees at the 2013 breakfast found newly-minted Kennedy half-dollars at each place setting, thanks to sponsor Pinnacle Bank.
Photo: Minh Phan, Fort Worth Chamber
In July, my counterpart at the Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau and I discussed a number of JFK-related exhibits and events going on in Fort Worth. No one organization was coordinating the publicity for these. We pulled together a meeting of community partners—museums, theatres, the city, Downtown Fort Worth, Inc.—to share plans and discuss messaging and tone of the various community observances.

The group agreed that our goal was not to try to celebrate what was certain to be a somber remembrance, nor create a redundant observance in light of Dallas’s city-wide plans. Talk of broadcasting the chamber breakfast via closed circuit TV in the street and in surrounding restaurants gave way to an understated dawn wreath-laying by Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price and Clint Hill at the JFK Tribute, prior to the breakfast, with no remarks by either.

However, we did want the public to know about the many 50th anniversary-related events happening in the Fort Worth area. The CVB surveyed its partners about events, and the chamber relayed information to the CVB to coordinate a comprehensive webpage and news release of Fort Worth “JFK activities.” The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza coordinated a list of all the Dallas activities and we submitted ours to them as well.

Media and Public Relations

Before any media plan was drawn up, a Star-Telegram columnist was contacted by National Geographic TV in April 2013 through Texas Gov. John Connally’s former press aide, Julian Read. National Geographic was looking for people who were either in the street crowd or at the chamber breakfast Nov. 22, 1963.

The chamber linked to National Geographic’s Facebook JFK page, placed advertisements in the local business journal, ran a blurb in our newsletter and began collecting dozens of names and stories, which we forwarded to the producer. He interviewed numerous Fort Worthians who had been in the crowd or at the chamber breakfast. The documentary aired Nov. 8, and the chamber’s role was made known to millions of viewers. As there were a number of retired community leaders, people who participated in the National Geographic special, and other non-members for which we did not have email addresses, we began collecting snail mail addresses for a limited number of print invitations.

The chamber did not need nor want publicity to drive registration for the breakfast; we knew it would be a sellout. We continued to focus on media coverage surrounding the event itself.

Our goal was to place Agent Hill on as many local, regional and national morning talk shows as possible, with the location headlines reading Fort Worth, and Fort Worth images in the background. As part of our collaboration, the CVB provided their list of national and some international media contacts. The general news release about the breakfast and JFK activities in Fort Worth went out locally and to the CVB’s list in September.

In October, we learned that Agent Hill was releasing a new book, Five Days in November, days before the breakfast event. Hill’s publisher, Simon & Schuster, had already begun scheduling national interviews in November for the book release. In fact, they had scheduled the first interview as an exclusive with NBC’s Today Show.

This development required us to readjust our expectations as to the media we could obtain for Hill and for Fort Worth, as he was already being exposed and booked nationally through his publisher. We decided to move ahead with our own media plans, with Hill being interviewed that morning in front of the JFK Tribute, which serves as a stunning visual for media opportunities.
Hill had only one hour for media interviews, from 6:30-7:30 a.m. on the morning of our breakfast. His contract did not allow live streaming of his presentation at the breakfast.

Due to our relationship and prior meetings with city representatives, the City of Fort Worth Public Events Department waived their extensive permitting process to block off one block of Main Street in front of the JFK Tribute for the chamber's media interviews and in anticipation of increased pedestrian traffic around the tribute that day. Fort Worth police officers were dispatched to keep crowds away during the wreath-laying and during Agent Hill's interviews.

Although I had coordinated interviews for local media for years on location, doing so for a national broadcast with a studio on either coast was not in my recent realm of experience. We reached out to a former TV news producer and asked if he would run the show. This was not in the budget, but we knew we needed him on site to coordinate national media.

With Dallas as the main subject, we knew media would want to have their cameras positioned there early in the morning, although their event began closer to noon. We also knew many would want to interview Hill. How would we decide who gets an interview at what time slot? Our producer had the answer.

We had a “lottery” in which we called for the interested TV/radio stations to put in their bid; we then randomly drew for the time slots. The time slots were in 5-minute increments, with 3 minutes interview time, and 2 minutes to call the next network or affiliate and establish audio and video feeds.

Also, telephone lines would need to be run down the street to the media tent switchboard for us to dial in to the stations. You don’t want to risk a cell phone dropping the call during a once-in-a-lifetime PR opportunity. We reached out to an executive board member at long-time investor AT&T, and the phone lines were installed the night before the breakfast.

After diligent cold calling and emailing New York media contacts, we were succeeding at scheduling interviews with MSNBC’s Morning Joe, CNN, and Fox & Friends—until they asked for our satellite coordinates. We didn’t have satellite coordinates. We had planned to use a live van or two from the local TV affiliates for feeds to the East Coast.

When the national morning shows learned this, they withdrew from the line-up, because the local producers could not guarantee that their live van would stay onsite for the entire hour should breaking news occur. One week before the event we needed a satellite truck!

A chamber member referred me to a satellite truck rental company. Price tag for truck, labor and satellite time: $2,800. After calling the national shows back, at this point, I only had certain time slots remaining. The only national show where the time slot would now work was CNN New Day.

Weather Issues

There’s a saying in Texas: “If you don’t like the weather, stick around for a few hours. It will change.” What had been forecast as a mild day was now expected to be a winter blast. Rain and cold seemed a certainty, but we had no idea what time it would blow through. To ensure the cameras, phones, A/V equipment and Agent Hill were kept dry, the chamber decided to rent a 20x20x10 tent for $500 rather than move our interviews inside the hotel, where the satellite truck and live vans might not have been able to establish a good signal.

On the morning of the event, the vans and satellite truck began arriving at 3:30 a.m. The A/V company, our producer, cameraman and volunteers on the media team arrived around that time for set-up and test runs. I had provided the satellite coordinates for the wreath-laying to the national and international media distribution list, for use as a bumper live or taped for later broadcasts. I pitched
it as, “We hope your viewers will begin their observances of this historic anniversary in Fort Worth, where President Kennedy’s last day began optimistically 50 years ago.”

Hill and Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price were joined in the wreath-laying—carried by satellite worldwide—by Congressman Roger Williams, who shook Kennedy’s hand as a boy at the 1963 breakfast. Hill then stepped under the tent and was interviewed live with five DFW network affiliate morning shows, CNN, and YNN of Austin, before entering the hotel ballroom for the chamber breakfast, as he did on that rainy morning long ago.

The Breakfast
Breakfast guests included many who were there in 1963, as well as business leaders, lifelong Fort Worthians, history buffs and a doctor who had come from Padova, Italy to attend. With Mr. Hill, their emotions ran the gamut as they viewed familiar black-and-white images, heard the angelic voices of the Texas Boys Choir, honored Congressman Wright’s storied career and contributions to our city, and then hung on every word of Hill’s recollections.

Even after unexpected expenses and a reduction in the number of tickets due to the venue, we exceeded the event budget with $21,000 in revenue, primarily from sponsorships. From a media standpoint, combined local and national broadcasts featuring Fort Worth, the Fort Worth Chamber, and/or Clint Hill in Fort Worth for Nov. 22-23 reached 5.2 million viewers, with market media value estimated at $421,000.

That figure does not include international coverage and the many print publications that carried mention of our 2013 breakfast, including the Associated Press and the Times UK as well as several features in our regional dailies. During the year, we received dozens of Google alerts from blogs, websites and print publications referencing the Fort Worth Chamber 1963 breakfast.

The overarching challenge? In a large regional media market, we were tasked with handling the delicate balance of commemorating Fort Worth’s exuberant moment in time with Kennedy while respecting Dallas’s plans to observe a long-overdue day of healing. We believe the chamber accomplished that.

“'The satisfaction of producing an event that created such positive media coverage and strengthened brand equity for the chamber overcame any disappointments about weather or media goals we didn’t reach,” Gilbert said. “The moral of the story? All the best planning can be wrecked by unexpected circumstances, but long-nurtured community partnerships prevail. The flow of the program, the JFK coins, the video, the youth involvement, the care that was taken with every detail—that is what our community and our investors will remember.'

From One Leader to Another

Congratulatory note from a former Chairman of the Fort Worth Chamber, Brian Barnard, to Bill Thornton, chamber president and CEO:

Bill, this morning’s breakfast could not have been better. The Chamber should be extremely pleased and proud of how we observed this anniversary. The honoring of Speaker Wright was appropriate and his comments were meaningful. Clint Hill was captivating with his remarks, but respectful of the participants and events of that day. I never heard a cough, a sneeze, a ring or anything else other than those speaking. The crowd was completely at attention, involved and caught up with their own thoughts of what transpired 50 years ago. Everyone present always will remember not only where they were on this day in 1963, they will remember the same morning in 2013.

Well done, my friend.

Brian

Even members of the skeptical media were complimentary, as Star-Telegram Bud Kennedy columnist wrote: “When you throw a breakfast only once every 50 years, you ought to do it right. Fort Worth did it right Friday, remembering Jackie and President John F. Kennedy’s 1963 stopover with a nod to history, a sense of reverence and a burst of pride.”

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