

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: The day JFK visited Mansfield High

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Mansfield High School buzzed with excitement on the morning of Monday, Oct. 6, 1958. The Commonwealth's junior US Senator, John F. Kennedy, was coming for a visit.

The 41-year-old senator was running for re-election when he made a "non-political" tour through the area. His day began with a breakfast speech at Stonehill College in Easton. The next stop was Mansfield High School, which is now Harold L. Qualters Middle School.

The students assembled in the auditorium and awaited the senator. Kennedy and a small entourage arrived at 10:10 a.m., slightly behind schedule. Nugent Chilli, chairman of the Mansfield Democratic Town Committee, was among those on hand to greet JFK outside the school. Upon his entrance to the lobby Kennedy met MHS Principal Harold L. Qualters.



When he was the state's junior US senator, John F. Kennedy, spoke to Mansfield High School students the morning of Monday, Oct. 6, 1958.

Qualters led JFK into the auditorium, where the student body greeted the senator with a standing ovation. As Kennedy took the stage the Mansfield High School Band, led by long-time director Jim Gallo, played "When the Saints Go Marching In." Kennedy drew a laugh when he asked, "Is that your school song?"

Principal Qualters tried to open the proceedings on a formal note, saying "Members of the faculty..." Just then a band member dropped his snare drum, creating a loud crash. Qualters added drolly, "...and students."

Soon it was Kennedy's turn to speak. He delivered a brief speech encouraging students to get involved.

"You have both an obligation and a responsibility to contribute to the betterment of your town, state and nation by taking an active, effective role in their affairs," he said.

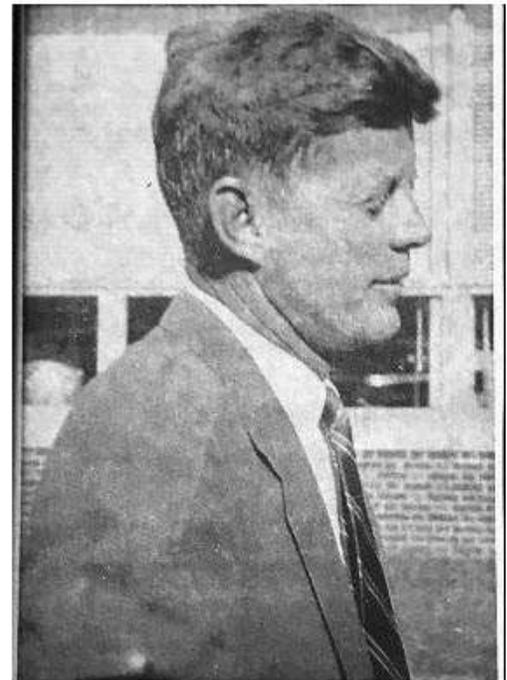
He specifically encouraged the young women present to make a difference, saying "you can play just as effective a role as men. You represent over 50 percent of your nation's population."

Kennedy was asked, “Where’s Jackie?” He replied that she was “too done in to make the trip,” but promised to deliver a corsage the students had hoped to present her. JFK left the school grounds at 10:30 a.m., just 20 minutes after his arrival. His next stop was Attleboro.

Not everyone in town was pleased by Kennedy’s visit. An unnamed prominent local Republican complained to the Mansfield News about the “non-political” visit.



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Here in '58 ... Tomorrow He's President

Looking younger than he appears in photographs of his arduous 1960 campaign for election as the 35th President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, then a Senator, came to Mansfield to address a High School student assembly in October, 1958. In this photo he is about to greet Spanish War veteran David Cody whose welcoming hand was barely visible in the color negative loaned to THE NEWS by Mrs. Winifred Jackson Ball.

John F. Kennedy's 1958 visit to Mansfield High School was fondly recalled when he narrowly defeated Richard Nixon for the presidency in 1960.

“Non-political, my eye,” griped the GOP supporter.

“Do you mean to say that a Democratic candidate can address a gathering of 600 persons, kindergarten or what have you, 30 days before an election and label it ‘non-partisan’?”

Kennedy won the largest victory in Massachusetts senatorial history that year, by a margin of nearly 900,000 votes. He even carried the traditional Republican stronghold of Mansfield.

JFK’s visit to MHS was fondly recalled when he narrowly defeated Richard Nixon for the presidency in 1960, and seemed more bittersweet upon the shocking news of his assassination in 1963.



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A signed portrait of John F. Kennedy still hangs in the main office of “new” Mansfield High, a reminder of his brief but memorable visit of 1958.

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