



Famous JFK Visit Re-enacted at West Liberty University

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Fifty years ago a young senator from Massachusetts visited a college outside of Wheeling.

Story by D.K. Wright

WEST LIBERTY -- It was a re-enactment in every way possible.

The man portraying John F. Kennedy arrived in a sparkling red and white vintage sedan.

"Almost identical car," said Larry Williams, who was there for the first Kennedy visit and still works at the University. "The car came in, he got out, but he was supposed to be at College Hall."

That's why, 50 years later at the re-enactment, the re-enactor hopped up on a chair.

Because that's really what happened in 1960.

They say Sen. John Kennedy got out at the wrong place, students streamed out, so did faculty and citizens, and there he was, with no stage or podium.

"So they went into Rogers Hall cafeteria and got a yellow chair," recalls Williams.

So Brian Hilton, JFK scholar who portrays the late president, did it all just like Kennedy did.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted to have a chance to be here today to address you concerning my thoughts about being here in West Virginia," Hilton announced with a Massachusetts accent, after climbing onto a chair on the college lawn.

But the truth is, the speech was never taped or kept in archives.

It no longer exists.

There was a newspaper account, and he gave other speeches nearby that were recorded.

So this one was pieced together and recreated.

"All off the cuff, unrehearsed," admits Brian Hilton. "I only had five talking points and nothing developed until I got up there on the chair, so yes, there was no script for all of this."

But those who were there for the real thing say he got it just right.

"I couldn't see Senator Kennedy until he stood on the chair," recalled Sharon Rinderer of Martins Ferry, who attended the Kennedy speech at the college when she was 13 because her parents both worked there. "And that man today--it brought back so many memories. It was very very much like it was 50 years ago."

"Incredibly similar," agreed Norman Moyes, Professor Emeritus of Boston University. Moyes was there that day.

"The day was perfect, just like this," he said, referring to the sunshine and bright blue skies. "This speaker was terrific. You know, Kennedy had this charisma that just dazzled everybody, not only the women but also the men."

Moyes taught journalism at West Liberty at the time.

He says the senator from Massachusetts took questions afterward.

"And that's where he really came off as being sincere, intelligent, straight from the shoulder, trustworthy, all the things that helped him get elected," Moyes noted.

For those who were on campus that day and again now, it was a little surreal, like a dream relived.

"I'm standing in the back now, I'm almost in tears," admits Williams. "I'm looking at this guy, saying, wow. This is incredible."

"I'm so lucky to be able to do this again today," Sharon Rinderer concurred.

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