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## Twenty-Six Seconds That Changed the World

The most important historical film ever made is 6 feet of 8mm film on a plastic reel shot by a 58-year-old dress manufacturer named Abraham Zapruder.



PHOTO: ZAPRUDER FILM © 1967 (RENEWED 1995) THE SIXTH FLOOR MUSEUM AT DEALEY PLAZA

By Edward Kosner

Updated Nov. 12, 2016 10:38 pm ET

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Along with George Washington's ivory dentures, John Wilkes Booth's derringer, FDR's wheelchair and the cross of twisted girders from the collapsed World Trade Center towers, Abraham Zapruder's home movie of the assassination of John F. Kennedy is one of American history's most macabre relics.

The 8mm film begins with Kennedy's motorcade rounding a corner on that bright November afternoon in Dallas in 1963. It ends 26 seconds—486 frames—later with the blood- and brain-stained open car speeding toward Parkland Hospital. In between—at frame 313—the president's head explodes.

The next year, Zapruder told an interviewer: "I am not a great man. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time." In fact, he was in the right place—standing atop a 4-foot-high concrete ledge near Elm Street along the motorcade's scheduled route with his trusty Bell & Howell 414PD camera—to capture the best single piece of evidence of the murder of the president, a crime that still haunts the unpersuaded more than 50 years after those two, three or four shots reverberated around Dealey Plaza.

Zapruder was destined to be at the crime scene of the century. An unassuming 58-year-old dress manufacturer and compulsive home-movie maker who had immigrated from Russia as a boy in 1920, he revered John Kennedy. On the morning of Nov. 22, 1963, he went to his office near the plaza only to discover that he'd left his camera at home. He rushed back to retrieve it, then scouted for the best vantage point. He started filming at the first glimpse of JFK's big Lincoln convertible and kept his finger on the button even as he watched the president's murder through his viewfinder.

He had a nightmare that night about a sharply dressed man hawking tickets to a movie of the assassination. And forever after, Zapruder, who died in 1970, and his family have borne the legacy of those few seconds of hobbyist photography as an honor, a responsibility, a windfall and a bane. Now his granddaughter Alexandra, a historian of the Holocaust, has written the entwined story of the Zapruder film and the Zapruders themselves with scrupulous care and attention to all the civic and familial sensitivities involved. It turns out to be a fascinating and cautionary tale.

The Zapruder film, she writes, "contains its own irreconcilable contradictions: It is visual evidence that refuses to solve the mystery of who murdered the president, why, and how. It is a single strip of film in which we all see different things. It shows the entire course of history changing under the influence of a single bullet. It is quite possibly the most important historical film ever made and yet it is an amateur home movie. It is six feet of 8mm film on a plastic reel that turned out to be worth sixteen million dollars. It is the most private and the most public of records. It is gruesome and terrible but we cannot stop looking at it."

### TWENTY-SIX SECONDS

By Alexandra Zapruder

Twelve, 472 pages, \$27



### WHAT TO READ THIS WEEK

The Zapruder film, Robbie Robertson and the Band, Zadie Smith's new novel, Marina Abramović, Kenneth Clark and more.

Inevitably, Ms. Zapruder must work her way through all the issues and controversies spawned by the assassination. So once again, we're introduced to the 1963-4 Warren Commission and its 1976 congressional reprise; to Jim Garrison, the rogue New Orleans district attorney whose evidence-free theory of multiple shooters was sanctified in Oliver Stone's hysterical movie "JFK"; to Mark Lane, the loopy left-wing New York pol and author of "Rush to Judgment"; and the rest of the conspiracy gang, sincere and opportunistic. We're back on that grassy knoll, from which the second shooter was supposed to have fired the kill shot, and there's even a cameo from the inscrutable "Umbrella Man," whose presence on the scene must have meant something. The pristine "magic bullet" that passed through both Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally makes a reappearance. Then there are those ear-witnesses and the police-radio recording on which four shots were heard that turned out to

be backfires.

Ms. Zapruder treats all this material judiciously, although she is plainly sympathetic to the conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone killed Kennedy. She is more emotionally involved but fair-minded when dealing with the fraught question of how well her grandfather and later her father, Henry, handled the ethical and financial quandries created by the family's ownership of the film. Assimilated Jewish transplants in an overwhelmingly conservative Christian city, they were acutely sensitive to the risk of seeming to profiteer from a unique and tragic American artifact.

In the hours after the shooting, most Americans thought Kennedy was still being treated at Parkland Hospital, but Abraham Zapruder knew what he'd seen through his camera. JFK had to be dead. Zapruder's first instinct was to get his evidence into the government's hands. So, even as Air Force One—with President Lyndon Johnson, Jacqueline Kennedy and her husband's coffin aboard—was taking off for Washington, he drove his precious film to a local Kodak lab to be developed and copied. In the midst of it all, he was shrewd enough to consult a lawyer and have authenticating affidavits signed by his wife and the film. The Secret Service took the copies but left the original film and the camera with Zapruder.

When he got home that night, he showed his film to his family. But before he finally dropped off to sleep, he took one of the most fateful phone calls in the history of American journalism. On the other end of the line was Dick Stolley, a poised young reporter for Life magazine, who persuaded Zapruder to meet him the next morning.

Stolley arrived at Zapruder's office early. Soon there was a frantic mob of reporters and photographers outside the door baying to see the film and make offers to buy it. Zapruder showed it to everyone who asked and listened to their bids. But only Stolley's manner and Life's stature offered what he wanted most—confidence that his film would never be sensationalized. The money was secondary but substantial—the final offer was \$150,000 for print and other rights, the equivalent of nearly \$1.2 million today.

Life proved to be a generally worthy steward of the movie. Its sold-out assassination issue reprinted many frames from the film but fastidiously omitted frame 313 (although the image was used in later editions.) The Zapruders lent copies of the film to academics and researchers but kept it away from others that they suspected of wanting to exploit it.

Inevitably, there were complications. One of the thorniest was the "head snap." Critics of the Warren Commission noticed that in the film Kennedy's head and the torso came from the front, not from Oswald's rifle in the Texas School Book Depository behind. This argument went on for years, despite contrary research from physicists and the simple explanation that the Secret Service driver hit the accelerator at the crack of the shot, forcing JFK backward.

Another problem was Jim Garrison, the New Orleans DA, who subpoenaed the Zapruder film for his show trial of Clay Shaw for allegedly conspiring with Oswald. Soon after Garrison got his hands on the film, a brisk market in bootleg copies developed, resulting in the very sensationalizing of the images that the Zapruders so long tried to prevent.

The final indignity—or bonanza, depending your point of view—took place in the 1990s. The Zapruders had long before deposited the original film and authenticated copies in the National Archives for safekeeping. Over the years, pressure built to make all the assassination files available to the public. The result was the 1992 JFK Records Act and eventually a move by the government to seize the original film from the family. Legally, this was a "taking" under the doctrine of eminent domain, which allows the appropriation of private property for public purposes for fair value. The seizure led to a bizarre arbitration process that wound up paying the Zapruders \$16 million—\$23 million today—for Abe's 26 seconds of film. The Dallas Morning News called it "blood money," confirming Abraham Zapruder's long-held fear that the family would be damned as profiteers.

In the end, the author writes, the Zapruders were relieved to be free of the burden of the notorious artifact. Alexandra Zapruder's father, a prominent Washington tax lawyer, died of brain cancer in 2006, leaving her alone to tell the tale. On YouTube these days, there are 47,000 entries for the search term "Zapruder film." Time and history march on, but Abe Zapruder's home movie endures, a tantalizing enigma.

—Mr. Kosner wrote about the Kennedy assassination for Newsweek in 1963 and later edited that magazine, as well as New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

Appeared in the November 12, 2016, print edition as "The Curse of the Zapruders."

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