



R.F.K., R.I.P., Revisited

What America looked like, 40 years ago, from a slain candidate's funeral train.

Photographs by Paul Fusco

Text by James Stevenson



Procession After Kennedy's funeral in New York the morning of June 8, 1968, his body was transported to Washington. Mourners, about a million by some estimates, lined the tracks, and the trip, usually about four hours, took twice that long.



June 8, 1968

Earlier in the day, the vast St. Patrick's Cathedral, all chandeliers and gold, was jammed with mourners. Senator Edward Kennedy spoke, his voice cracking as he struggled to say, "My brother need not be idealized or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life, to be remembered as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it."

Now the long train carrying Robert F. Kennedy's coffin rumbled south, passing miles and miles of people who had come to the railroad track to honor him, to say goodbye.

March 23, 1968

San Francisco International Airport. Robert F. Kennedy, on a campaign swing after announcing his candidacy, got off the plane from New York and was met by a crowd of cheering, screaming people who surged around him, trying to shake his hand, touch him or simply grab at him.

8 p.m. San Jose. St. James Park was so packed nobody could move. The police, arms linked, had carved a narrow alley along a chain-link fence leading up to the speakers' platform. Only one person at a time, edging sideways, could get through. As Kennedy came along the path, it closed behind him. He was swamped, shoved and hugged; Kennedy would vanish, then reappear, grimacing.

10 p.m. Los Angeles. The day is finally over. Kennedy is in good spirits, joking with reporters and photographers. He would rather ask questions than answer them; near Griffith Park today three black children climbed onto the trunk of his car during a pause in the motorcade. "What are your names? ... Where do you go to school?" Kennedy said. "Are you smart? Do you read books? What's your favorite book?" One of them — a girl — showed him her report card. Kennedy studied it carefully. "That's very good," he said. It was a quiet moment, perhaps the only one in a hectic day, and Kennedy seemed to enjoy prolonging it. The children climbed down, then the little girl called: "Kennedy! Will you turn around so my father can take your picture?" He did.

Later in the evening, in the course of a conversation with Kennedy, I asked him what he would do if he lost

Paul Fusco is the photographer of "R.F.K. Funeral Train — Rediscovered," an exhibition appearing at Danziger Projects in New York from June 6 to July 31. His book, "R.F.K.," will be published by Aperture in September. James Stevenson is the author of "Lost and Found New York: Oddballs, Heroes, Heartbreakers, Scoundrels, Thugs, Mayors and Mysteries," which is based on a continuing series for the New York Times Op-Ed page. He covered Robert F. Kennedy's presidential campaign for The New Yorker.





the election. After a moment, he said, "I think I would make this one effort, and, if it fails, I would go back to my children. ... If you bring children into the world, you should stay with them, see them through."

I noticed he had scratches on his hands, wrists and neck.

April 8, 1968

Yesterday, Senator and Mrs. Kennedy went to a memorial service for the Rev. Martin Luther King at the New Bethel Baptist Church in Washington. Then they walked 22 blocks through the streets where the previous night's looting and burning took place.

This afternoon they will fly to Atlanta to attend King's funeral, but at the moment Kennedy is sitting in the dining room of Hickory Hill, the family house in McLean, Va., listening to an expert on the farm problems of Indiana, where there will be a primary soon. Under the table, a dog — one of several in the house — is chewing on something. One of Kennedy's sons, Christopher, age 4, his head barely above the table, watches his father discuss hog prices. The other Kennedy children wander in and out of the room, and Kennedy, never taking his eyes off the expert, reaches out and holds each one's hand for a moment as they pass by.

June 8, 1968

In Paul Fusco's photographs (here and at the gallery) of the people along the tracks, as the Kennedy funeral train passes, it is not only the faces and the clothes that catch the eye, it is the hands.

Three women are seated at the edge of a crowded platform, two of them holding small babies in their arms (Page 35). Behind them two others reach out toward the train.

A black woman kneels on the dirt, a white purse hanging from her arm, her hands locked in prayer.

A small boy holds his hands flat against the pockets of his shorts.

A woman in dark glasses bites her fingers.

A man on crutches waves one crutch high in the air.

An older woman holds a handkerchief over her mouth.

A mother holds the hands of two children; one of them holds the hand of a third.

Three teenagers salute.

A white-haired man waves his straw hat in farewell.

Some hands hold American flags; others hold wildflowers.

An old man clutches his throat, and some people fold their arms, hiding their hands as if for protection.

A man and a woman wave a big hand-lettered sign: SO-LONG BOBBY.

The train moves on, along the worn silver rails.

So long. So long. So long. ■