

Welcome to the Neighborhood

By Mel Lavine

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On my recent trip back East, friends wanted to see the house where I grew up in Brookline, a Boston suburb. I could hardly blame them. I'd regaled people for years about the fact that I grew up in the house next door to where John Kennedy was born, although not at the same time.

Kennedy was born at 83 Beals Street in 1917. I didn't come into the world for another ten years. By the time my family moved to 85 Beals Street the Kennedys had long since gone to New York, Palm Beach and other exotic locations.

In my day, working and middle class people made up the neighborhood. Houses were single with some duplexes. Today most of the houses are divided up into apartments.

The Kennedy house has been a national historic site run by the government since 1967 when the president's mother restored the comfortable single-family to the way it was when her son was growing up. One of the postcards for sale at the site shows a bit of the house next door – my house at 85; in particular a second floor window where I had my room.

I recognized very little of the old neighborhood when our friend who lives in nearby Andover drove us to Brookline. For all I could recognize at first I might have been looking at the far side of the moon.

“This is impossible,” I said. “I don't remember anything.”

“Keep your eyes peeled,” said Kathy, a professor of history, who was driving. “It'll come back to you. You'll spot something.”

At length I spotted the old synagogue on Harvard Street; Edward Devotion, my old grammar school; and the movie theatre at Coolidge Corner where the price of a Saturday thriller was fifteen cents. And we found Beals Street, and number 85, upstairs, as it was when I lived there.

“Should we knock?” we asked ourselves. “Ask for a look around?” We took a moment to think about it, then shrugged. To be honest, number 85 didn’t look terribly inviting. Not hostile but unkempt.

Next door at 83 a couple were sitting on the front porch. Probably people from the national parks. The Kennedy house looked good. But so did other houses on the street.

I was ready to move on. But Kathy wanted her pictures. And so the Lady Friend and I obliged as she directed us at angles where she could get the Kennedy house and my second floor window in the same shots. Meantime a woman who lived in the neighborhood was walking rapidly towards us.

“You’ve got the wrong house,” she shouted. “The one you want is right there, number 83. That’s the house where President Kennedy was born.”

“We know all that,” Kathy waved. “But we have the right house.” And pointing to me said, “Number 85 is where this gentleman grew up.”

The woman clapped. “Oh, how nice. How wonderful. Welcome to the neighborhood!”

This column originally appeared on October 29, 2009. Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.