

FACULTY

# Remember when?

Presidential museums stir collective memories *By Rhea Hirshman*

**M**ost Americans over 50 vividly recall the image of a riderless black horse accompanying the flag-draped casket of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963. A younger generation witnessed the horrifying footage of the Challenger disaster in January 1986 and the collapse of the Twin Towers in September 2001. These events and others like them are engrained in our memories.

Whatever our individual recollections of such events, they are part of what Lisa Burns, associate professor of media studies, refers to as our “collective memory”—which includes recollections “not only of the events themselves but our experiences of living through events with others.”

Burns points out that the media is a central player in the development of a community’s collective memory. Her interest in media representation of 20th-century first

ladies—the subject of her doctoral dissertation—drew her to presidential museums.

“While working on my dissertation, I went to the Johnson Library and Museum in Austin, Texas. What struck me was how much I learned, not just about Lady Bird and LBJ but about the times. I expected a bias toward the president, but was moved by the honesty, the material showing how critical the public was and how troubled Johnson was over the Vietnam War.” She learned that Johnson received numerous letters from parents of dead soldiers, which he read and kept with him.

Burns, a former broadcast journalist, is exploring the relationship between presidential museums and collective memory. “I want to see how these institutions construct the presidencies, what visitors learn not only about the presidents but about their families and the context of their lives and work.”

The 12 presidential libraries and museums

scattered across the country house presidential papers in their formal libraries, while the museums generally contain personal and public memorabilia including photos, clothing, household items, automobiles and campaign mementos. Burns has visited eight of the museums and plans to visit the others for her research, which she hopes to turn into a book. The presidential library system originated in 1939 with President Franklin Roosevelt. The 12 libraries and museums cover the presidencies from Herbert Hoover through Bill Clinton.

“Each one has a personality,” she says, noting also that after a president and his immediate family die, updates may alter the original configuration and emphasis. “The original Truman museum was not about him at all. He thought it should focus on the presidency in general,” she says. Recently updated, it now portrays both Truman’s presidency and his era, with items such as a period kitchen, music and TV shows from the ‘40s and ‘50s.

The Eisenhower museum is in the process of being modernized, “but you can recognize the original museum,” Burns says. “Ike was proud of his military career and his wife, Mamie, who loved being a fashion icon, donated her dresses and jewelry.”

Burns calls the Carter museum “rather reserved” and notes the degree to which the Kennedy museum “tells its story through media artifacts”—appropriate for the man dubbed the first television president.

Visitors see not only newspapers and magazines, but replicas of a 1960 election-night studio and of the Kennedy Oval Office set up for live televised addresses, with accompanying videos playing on period televisions.

Lyndon Johnson, too, was highly attuned to media; his museum features footage of Vietnam on replicas of the three Oval Office televisions that allowed him to watch all the networks at once. The LBJ museum remains Burns’ favorite.

“Although Johnson accomplished a lot, his presidency was defined by Vietnam,” she says. “I teach about Vietnam, but left the museum feeling a connection to the Johnsons that I did not have before.”

The problem with collective memory, as with our individual memories is that, in one way or another, we put aside what we don’t have room for. “But the museums offer a broader perspective,” Burns says. “These museums have a lot to teach us.”



Lisa Burns' office is very presidential.