

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

Marilyn Monroe, the blonde "sex-goddess" died a tragic death on August 5, 1962 in Los Angeles. The coroner ruled the actress' death at age 36 a suicide, albeit under mysterious circumstances.



There were many connections to Nevada during her short life, beginning with the divorce in Las Vegas in September 1946 from first husband James Dougherty at the tender age of 20, to her last visit in July 1962 to Frank Sinatra's Cal-Neva Lodge at Crystal Bay, Lake Tahoe, with actor Peter Lawford, a member of Sinatra's colorful "Rat Pack" and John F. Kennedy's brother-in-law.

The biggest mystery...more likely myth...associated with her Nevada connection is that Marilyn Monroe's now well-known affair with President Kennedy included a tryst at the Cal-Neva Lodge.

Local reporters tried to determine the last sitting president to visit Lake Tahoe prior to Bill Clinton and focused on John Kennedy. "The juiciest piece of the Kennedy rumors," wrote the *Tahoe Daily Tribune/North Lake Tahoe Bonanza* (July 27, 1997), "stems from an alleged secret rendezvous with actress Marilyn Monroe on the North Shore." The story has been resurrected again with the proposed destruction of the vintage cabins at the Cal-Neva Lodge by its current owner.

The one documented account of John Kennedy visiting Lake Tahoe was as a Massachusetts U.S. Senator seeking the Democratic nomination for the presidency of the United States. Governor Grant Sawyer had arranged for Kennedy to address a joint session of the state legislature in Carson City on Monday, February 1, 1960. A reception was scheduled for Sunday evening at the Governor's Mansion followed by a talk at the civic auditorium. "When Kennedy and Pierre Salinger and their party got to Reno," according to Governor Sawyer in his oral history *Hang Tough* (1993), "they eluded the press and sneaked off in a car and went up to Lake Tahoe and looked it over before coming to Carson City."

According to Richard Ham, a Sawyer aide and senior adviser, Kennedy was staying at the Riverside Hotel. The Senator asked Ham to provide him with a car that he could drive alone to Lake Tahoe before going to Carson City. Kennedy apparently visited the Cal-Neva Lodge after a stop at Squaw Valley, the site of the 1960 Winter Olympics.

However, it was virtually impossible that Marilyn Monroe was there at Lake Tahoe to greet the aspiring presidential candidate. Monroe, by all accounts, was in Hollywood at the time rehearsing scenes for the movie "Let's Make Love". Her marriage to third husband, playwright Arthur Miller, was clearly troubled and would soon end in divorce. At the time, she pursued a short-lived affair with co-star Yves Montand.

Some writers conjecture that Monroe was also having an affair with Senator Kennedy while he was campaigning in the Los Angeles area. Donald Spoto, the most rigorous and careful of Marilyn's biographers, wrote in 1993 that the so-called "love affair" between Kennedy and Monroe was fleeting and did not begin until after the first documented meeting in October 1961 at Peter and Patricia Kennedy Lawford's Santa Monica beach house. In fact, Spoto claimed Monroe was intimate only once with Kennedy on March 24, 1962, when both the president and Marilyn were Bing Crosby's house guests in Palm Springs.

If Spoto is right that any other claims to the contrary cannot be substantiated, then Marilyn

Monroe's getaways to Lake Tahoe during and after the filming of Arthur Miller's "The Misfits" had nothing to do with John Kennedy, and more to do with her attraction to Frank Sinatra. Filming in Nevada began in July 1960 in Reno, and concluded in October after scenes had been shot in and around Dayton and Pyramid Lake. At long last, Monroe worked with her childhood film idol Clark Gable, who from an early age growing up in Los Angeles represented the father she never knew. Ironically, both Monroe and Gable had experienced Las Vegas divorces, Gable from his second wife Ria Langham in 1939, and Monroe from James Dougherty in 1946. Meanwhile, in the summer and fall of 1960, John Kennedy was busy campaigning for the presidency of the United States after winning the Democratic nomination at the Los Angeles convention in July.

There is nothing on record at the JFK Presidential Library in Boston that identifies President Kennedy, officially or unofficially, visiting Lake Tahoe or northern Nevada prior to his assassination in Dallas in November 1963. Marilyn Monroe is known to have made her last visit to Lake Tahoe at the invitation of the Lawfords during the weekend of July 27-29, 1962 just prior to her apparent suicide. The events surrounding Marilyn's short stay at Sinatra's Cal-Neva Lodge are controversial, confusing, and contested, making it very hard to separate fact from fiction. We know that she met Dean Martin briefly to discuss a movie project. Joe DiMaggio, her second husband was there, and according to one account there was a reconciliation and talk of marriage. Still other accounts have Peter Lawford telling Monroe that all communication with John and Bobby Kennedy was cut off. There have even been unsubstantiated claims that Monroe tried to commit suicide or was drugged while staying at the Cal-Neva.

The truth in its entirety will likely never be known about the JFK-Monroe affair. However, the stories about a liaison between John Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe at Lake Tahoe are unsupported, and may well represent a titillating, modern-day presidential version of the "George Washington slept here" myth.

(Photo of Marilyn Monroe and Frank Sinatra with Cal-Neva Lodge club manager Bert "Wingy" Grober, August 13, 1960, courtesy of the book *Dateline: Reno, Photography* by Don Dondero, 1991)

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