

Interview: Robert L. Weir, President/CEO, Metro 34 Video Systems, Inc. and San Diego State College (now University) alumnus

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Special Collections and University Archives, San Diego State University

Date: Friday, May 9, 2003

Robert L. Weir (RW); Kathryn M. Neal (KN); Jennifer L. Martinez (JM)

TAPE 1, SIDE A

Kathryn M. Neal (KN): This is Kathryn Neal with Jennifer Martinez in Special Collections and University Archives at San Diego State University. The date is Friday, May 9, 2003, and we are interviewing Robert Weir—Bob Weir—who was the San Diego State College class president in 1963. Mr. Weir will be sharing with us his memories of coordinating the visit (to the San Diego State campus) of President John F. Kennedy in 1963.

Robert L. Weir (RL): Hello, my name is Robert L. Weir, a graduate of San Diego State College (now San Diego State University). In 1962, as I entered my senior year, I ran for office, and I became the senior class president of San Diego State College. In searching for a speaker, I—that was my, that was one of my tasks. And in January of 1963, I had not come up with anyone, and so therefore, I just thought that we would have a normal speaker. I read an article in the *San Diego Evening Tribune* that John F. Kennedy was coming to visit San Diego on June 6. And I knew that our commencement was going to be June 7. And I thought, how in the world are they going to change this if he would come? So after correspondence and meeting with Dr. Love, who was the president of San Diego State College at that particular time, we were able to receive positive response from the White House that the President [President Kennedy] would welcome our invitation. So this was after I'd sent two letters, one to the White House, to the President, and then I was told to send a letter of invitation to [Pierre] Salinger, who was the press secretary. And he responded back—that was in January—he responded back, and that was in late February or March of '63. And in April, the announcement was reported in *The Daily Aztec*. From that month and just prior to graduation, we were meeting with the Secret Service personnel. Incidentally, the agent that covered Kennedy and Jackie [First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy] in Dallas was the person I met with. Background information—some information that I'm sure that you'd be interested in—they flew out a special chair that was on the dais, a special water for him, and I did not realize at that time the critical situation behind the scenes. The big challenge was: who was going to be on the dais? Politicians, chair people, dignitaries—Armistead Carter from San Diego's Democratic Party....In other words, they made a real scramble to be on stage.

Now let's talk about the day. June 6, 1963. I arrived on campus *real* early that morning—and instructed to do so—and met with dignitary Secret Service and was informed on the events of the day, the lineup for the presidential parade and where and when the President was going to arrive. He arrived at *old* Lindbergh Field—that's close

to Laurel [Street] and Pacific Coast Highway. How was it and why? Well, he landed. His limousine was there. Incidentally, this is the same limousine that he was assassinated in. He came up Washington [Street], Washington to Park Boulevard, and then he headed down El Cajon Boulevard.

They say that there was 200,000 people. So seeing some of the photographs of that, I believe 'em. We were—we monitored the President through two-way radio, the huge radios they had at that time. And they would let me listen. And they would say, “The President is *stopped*, stopped at 54th [Street] and El Cajon. He’s out of his car.” And both sides [of the crowd] moved in on him. The Secret Service had to break that up. He comes to College Avenue. Identically, the same thing happens. So, he was supposed to be here [on campus] around 11 or 11:30. They got here very, very late because of it. He turned on College Avenue from El Cajon Boulevard. He went down College, and at that time, the college, College Avenue came right into the campus and went around the back side of the campus, just north. The first time that I saw the President coming up, he was coming up the road—this was the maintenance road where they delivered goods and so on to the university—and there was a, we called it a “cattle car” in those days, it was a state truck. And in front of the limousine, and the state truck was the first thing I saw because it obscured the limousine, was all these recorders, like old Movietone movies, you know, where they just cranked the tape through. Those were on there. And then photographers and so on. The limousine pulls up on the north side of the stadium, and there’s a large parking lot there. And then out stepped *Kennedy*. And to my amazement, I was—I *knew* good and well I’d done the right thing of persuading them that since he was going to be here anyway, to come into San Diego, come into a real hotbed of right wing people and just to do this? People just went *crazy*. [chuckle] There was a line of dignitaries to meet him, and he first met Dr. Love. And then Love introduced him to each one of us, as he went down the line. And I was the *first* one. Governor [Edmund G. “Pat”] Brown was the next one, and [Glen] Dumke, which [sic] was the Chancellor of the [California] State Colleges, and then some other dignitaries. Who they were, I don’t know. Then *quickly*, within a matter of just minutes, after he shook our hand[s] and he explained that he was very happy that we had invited him, we went on the dais, in secrecy. Where all the big dignitaries were jockeying for seats, I had a front-row seat, and I was third from the right side, looking at the dais. Dr. Love—Dr. Love, upon being seated, the Marine Corps band played “Hail to the Chief,” the National Anthem, and “A Prayer for Our Country.” Dr. Love went to the rostrum, welcomed the audience, and he welcomed the families, the wives, the husbands, students, and graduating students. Then I was introduced to the graduate class of '63. John F. Kennedy came to the rostrum, and we presented him with the honorary degree of laws.

Then I *noticed* Kennedy. He took off his mortarboard because he didn’t like to wear anything on his head—that’s what I understand. [sniffs] The speech [topic] was social problems and education in America. [It] took about forty minutes. [He] never had notes. Yeah. ‘Cause I *watched* him carefully. Never had notes. Never referred to, to *anything*, just—other than the speech. He said, “We must move on with vigor [pronounces it *vig-AH*].” [And] the crowd just absolutely went—must have—five minutes, you know, clapping. He said that three times. And when it ended, Secret Service escorted the

President from the dais. And at that time, I noticed the crowd to start to emerge towards the President. Then I noticed, coming off from the dais, and following Kennedy, the three helicopters, which was all presidential room in the parking lot. At that—at that particular time, a gentleman named Armstead Carter [clears throat] took me by my arm and asked me if I would take him to be introduced to the President. I—I had no idea what he was talking about, but I thought, “Well, why not give it a chance?” At that time, I made a quick dash to the President, with Armstead in tow. Went to the President and spoke to him. He looked at us rather strange since we were not part of his entourage, the Secret Service. He *left* us. He went to the helicopters. He took—I don’t know which one he took at this particular moment. He bumped his head on the helicopter door and waved with a flurry in dust and headed to MCRD [Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego] for a visitation there what we called the recruit depot and then off to North Island to board the aircraft carrier Oriskany for a cruise to Vandenburg Air Force Base to view a missile shot.

Well, that was the day. It was very—people just, just wanted to get close to him in any way they could. And these are some of the things of trivia that I noticed again. He had the biggest smile and teeth [chuckles] of any human being I ever met. Well-tanned. His hair was, was uh, a reddish brown. He had long hair in those particular days, ah, you know, and he was known for that. In fact, the whole Kennedy family (was known for that?/I noticed that?). Um, he looked friendly, just relaxed – uh, I noticed his shoes, uh, tie, suit, white shirt – everything. Uh-uh, handshake, firm. Uh, he made a big impact, and uh, to San Diego, and obviously, the college, which we call now the University, and I’ll remember that, I’ll start (coming out to San Diego State University?). He was the only president, to visit a, uh, California state college. Now, I think he’s the only president that ever visited a state college in the United States - I could be wrong. I know he went to the University of, ah, California; I know that he’s - he made presentations and got honorary doctorate degrees, (at?) major universities throughout the United States. Uh, he was on national news, news around the world, and that was the day that San Diego State made history.