

Michigan Every Day

By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly

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President Kennedy proposes the Peace Corps

Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy harkened back to an earlier and almost extinct era in American Politics in the campaign of 1960. While his opponent Richard M. Nixon hopped from one place to the next in a jet, Kennedy led a one-day whistle-stop tour of Michigan by train. Kennedy was after the state's 20 electoral votes, then the seventh most of any state. His stop in Michigan began in Ann Arbor, where he arrived after his plane landed at Willow Run Airport. A few hours earlier the candidates had tangled in their third nationally televised debate in New York City. When Kennedy arrived in Ann Arbor at 2 a.m. on Oct. 14, 1960, he expected to get some sleep in a room at the Michigan Union. But When Kennedy arrived, he found throngs of students waiting for him at the entrance. Kennedy did not have a speech prepared but he decided to address the crowd nonetheless. He could have resorted to a standard stump speech or merely asked for their votes, but instead he spoke extemporaneously, asking the students if they were willing to make a sacrifice for their country. While Kennedy did not name or describe the Peace Corps, Kennedy's improvised talk about the need for young people to give something to their country through work in the Foreign Service is credited with giving life to the notion of the organization he would go on to create. Kennedy said: "How many of you who are going to be doctors, are willing to spend your days in Ghana? Technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world? On your willingness to do that, not merely to serve one year or two years in the service, but on your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country, I think will depend the answer whether a free society can compete."

While history marks the moment as significant and the university memorializes it with a marker at the spot where Kennedy spoke, Kennedy's words generated little buzz at the time. In fact, in its article on Kennedy's tour of Michigan, the *New York Times* does not even mention the proposal. Rather, that newspaper's report on what happened in Ann

Arbor focused on whether Kennedy had said “hell” into a microphone while speaking to an aid about technical difficulties during a speech made the next morning.

Such an utterance could have been scandalous because Nixon had recently singled out such language as dangerous to children. Kennedy’s train later made stops in Jackson, Albion, Marshall, Battle Creek, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, Lansing and Saginaw.

Kennedy carried Michigan on his way to victory that November.