

## Don Walton: 1968 in Nebraska

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A year to remember.

Or forget.

War, riots in the streets, a country divided by Vietnam and split by race.

The assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

America burning.

1968.

It was a momentous and tragic year.

Historic and horrendous.

And Nebraska stepped into the national spotlight that spring before everything spun out of control.

That moment, comparatively gentle and uplifting, throbbing with tension, but full of hope, came in advance of the full gales of the storm.

And it is captured in rich archival film and video on a new documentary that will air on NET Television Wednesday night at 8 p.m.

“68: The Year Nebraska Mattered.”

Here they are, campaigning for votes in Nebraska’s presidential primary election during the midst of national political upheaval: Bobby Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Eugene McCarthy, George Wallace, Hubert Humphrey, Nelson Rockefeller.

Even Ronald Reagan shows up in absentia as a write-in candidate.

NET has captured it and enriched the drama with the commentary of Nebraskans who were there.

In the hourlong program, you’ll see Kennedy challenging, McCarthy lecturing, Wallace agitating.

Humphrey rattling like a machine gun.

Nixon alternately forceful and whining.

A youthful Ernie Chambers warning that Omaha riot cops would need “shotguns and gas” to close his barber shop.

Nobby Tiemann at his feisty best, dismissing Wallace and “his racist bigot views.”

Some of the celebrities who showed up: Marlo Thomas, Paul Newman. John Glenn, then an astronaut hero.

Wallace is a dark figure in the video, standing in Omaha’s city auditorium flanked by beefy security guards, stirring a witch’s brew of racism as black spectators hoot and

interrupt him.

That evening would end with folding chairs flying through the air and violence in the streets.

Bobby Kennedy and Jim Green emerge as stars of the show.

Kennedy dominated the Nebraska stage, campaigning in 29 communities.

Not only Omaha and Lincoln, but Crete, Tecumseh and Wahoo.

When he came to the University of Nebraska campus in Lincoln, an overflow crowd of 12,000 waited for a couple hours in the hot and sweaty Coliseum to cheer his anti-war message.

Footage of Kennedy's appearance in the African American center of Omaha — known then as the Near North Side — on the day before the election is electric.

Addressing a large outdoor crowd in a driving rain, Kennedy promised he would "work for those who are deprived and poor" if he was elected president. But he also challenged his listeners to turn their backs on rioting and violence.

The film of Kennedy's whistle stop train tour across the state is a startling reminder of the huge crowds he attracted everywhere.

Green emerges as a captivating figure.

The Omaha Democrat with the sonorous voice was co-chairman of Kennedy's Nebraska campaign. He was once his party's Senate nominee and almost was elected mayor of Omaha in 1961.

Bobby Kennedy's assassination three weeks after he won Nebraska devastated Green. He rode the funeral train on its long and emotional journey to Kennedy's burial and returned to Nebraska a weary man. Days later, he headed to Hastings for a Nebraska Democratic convention.

Green had just finished chairing a caucus of Nebraska's dispirited national convention delegation at the Clarke Hotel when he sat down to talk with newsmen.

After answering a number of questions, he slumped forward on the table, suddenly struck by a fatal heart attack.

"In the family, we always said there were two bullets in that gun," his son, John, says in the NET production.

One personal anecdote from that 1968 campaign.

On a mild spring day, Kennedy swept across southeastern Nebraska, drawing big crowds in downtown squares, holding rallies in public parks.

As his campaign caravan, including the press bus, set out from Beatrice for the next town on the schedule, Kennedy's car veered off.

Driving my own car that day in order to have more freedom of movement than riding the press bus, I followed the Kennedy car, not knowing where it was going.

Kennedy's vehicle came to an unscheduled stop at the state institution that housed severely handicapped people described at the time as "mentally retarded."

I parked and went inside with him.

Ignoring a staff member's declaration at the door that dogs were not allowed inside the institution, Kennedy brought his dog, Freckles, with him.

Inside, Kennedy was hugged by people who had no idea who he was.

And the children who lived there were overjoyed to see the dog.

Kennedy walked through the entire building, asking about various residents he saw.

He reached out, touched hands, patted heads.

And for a long minute or two he held a hydrocephalic baby in his arms.

It was a personal and private act, all the more revealing and meaningful because it was out of sight of the press and cameras who had been sent ahead to the next stop.

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