HISTORICAL NOTES

Into the Archives

At the request of the Justice Department, 65 carefully guarded X rays, color slides and black-and-white negatives of pictures taken during an exhaustive autopsy on the body of John Kennedy at Bethesda Naval Hospital were turned over to the National Archives last week by the Kennedy family.

At the time that the Warren Commission was making its inquiry into the assassination, the X rays and photographs—but none of the doctors' testimony of the three autopsy surgeons. The doctors themselves had never seen the photographs either, though they had worked from the X rays during the post-mortem surgery.

Unwitting Support. Thus the commission unwittingly lent support to those who would later insist that Lee Harvey Oswald must have had an accomplice. Their suspicions were based primarily on the commission's controversial "single-bullet theory." This is its conclusion that a bullet hit the back of Kennedy's neck and emerged through his lower throat before it struck Texas Governor John Connally in the back, smashed across a rib, shattered his right wrist, and punctured his left thigh. Commission members accepted this explanation after they saw a tourist's film of the assassination, which indicated that the interval between Kennedy's reaction to being hit and Connally's first visible reaction to his wounds was—at the most—1.8 sec. Because of the time it took to operate the bolt action on his rifle, Oswald could not possibly have fired more than once every 2.3 sec.

Ultimately, the conspiracy theorists claimed that the doctors' entire autopsy report had been tailor-made to bolster the commission's single-bullet theory. The doubters argued that 1) the wound was probably lower on Kennedy's back, and 2) the first bullet had actually lodged in his body. They insisted that only the X rays and photographs could offer incontrovertible proof of how Kennedy was really wounded. In fact, an X ray does not indicate a bullet's path through soft flesh.

Corroborating Evidence. If the commission had really set out to present a fake autopsy, nothing would have been more logical than to retouch the photographs to support synthetic medical reports. The photos were examined last week by two of the autopsy doctors (the third is on duty in Viêt Nam); they agreed that the evidence fully corroborates their testimony before the Warren Commission.

Even though the X rays and photographs are now in the archives, the controversy will undoubtedly continue. One enigma is how the Kennedys—who consistently denied to the press that they had possession of the films—ever got hold of them: presumably, the Secret Service handed them over at the request of the then-Attorney General, Robert Kennedy. In any case, the family has stipulated that the pictures be sequestered from public inspection during the lives of J.F.K.'s immediate family, including those of his children, who are now eight and five years old.

The Mythmakers

For many who believe that there was a conspiracy to assassinate John Kennedy in Dallas, the most mesmerizing argument of all is that an extraordinary number of people involved in the case—however remotely—have since lost their lives under mysterious circumstances. As of last week, the toll had, in fact, reached 14. To conspiracy theorists, the clear implication is that the victims knew too much and were systematically liquidated.

Chief mythologist and drumbeater for this theory is Penn Jones Jr., 52, the diminutive (5 ft. 2½ in.) editor of a Texas weekly newspaper, the Midlothian Mirror (circ. 765). In 1965, Jones began a seemingly inexhaustible Mirror series, which intended, as he put it, to "bring into some intelligible whole all the events surrounding the assassination."

This month, San Francisco's slick Ramparts magazine, a onetime Catholic quarterly turned New Left monthly, also carried several of the Jones reports, along with the outcome of what the magazine breathlessly describes as an eight-month probe by "a team of Ramparts editors, aided by researchers and trained investigators," who "traveled to Dallas a dozen times and interviewed nearly 100 people throughout the country knowledgeable about the assassina-