

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Woodstock, 1969

Personal Experience

O.H. 1705

ALEXANDRA VANSUCH

Interviewed

by

Chris Helm

on

February 7, 1995

ALEXANDRA VANSUCH

Sandy Vansuch remembers the 1960's as a very exciting time. Fully active in anti-war politics, she immersed herself in the social, political, and cultural atmosphere of the era. This included marching in Washington, D C or handing out flyers in the Youngstown area. She attended the concert with Marlene Aron, a previous interviewee.

Sandy willingly admits to the incredible importance of music in her life. She fondly remembers such artists as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez as particularly important to her development as a young adult. At age 46, she still enjoys the same music as she did then.

Going to New York represented several important meanings. She sought to differentiate herself from those who were not going, as well as enjoy a good time with some close friends. They hitch-hiked all the way to rural New York. One of the few attendees who had tickets, Sandy thought her chances of getting in were slim. Fortunately, she lucked out when she found a local woman who took her a back way into the concert. She was able to sit relatively close to the stage.

Although a "big city" kid, the size and variation of the crowd amazed Sandy. Yet despite the initial shock, the melting pot of people eventually became an ordinary sight. According to Sandy, alcohol played an important role early on in her life, as well as at the concert itself. Currently sober for ten years, Sandy looks back on the masses of people using drugs and alcohol with mixed feelings.

As with her companion, Marlene Aron, Sandy describes the event as one of harmony, community, and empowerment. The event told the parents of America that

this group of youth was serious in their intents. The crowd did a decent job of helping each other out in terms of sleeping arrangements, food, water, and protection from the rain. Although she got sick from exposure to the elements -- particularly the rain -- Sandy Vansuch stuck it out and still remains happy she attended Woodstock in the summer of 1969.

H This is an interview with Alexandra Vansuch for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Woodstock, 1969, by Chris Helm, on February 2, 1995, at 215 Lincoln Avenue, at 1 00 p m

Let us start out broad Tell me who your parents are and where you are from.

V. My name is Sandy Vansuch Alexandra Vansuch is my given name My father's name was Nicholas Vansuch My mother's is Augavanslagi Vansuch. I spent from my high school years to the present in Youngstown Before that I moved all over the country because my father's job took us everywhere.

H: When were you born?

V February 29, 1948

H: Let us continue with the broad theme Tell me, in general, what the late 1960's were like for you

V: The 1960's for me were a period of a lot of activism I was very involved, politically. That is where I met your father I was involved in politics in the anti-war movement I was in and out of college From a personal standpoint, it was a very exciting period of time to be alive It was exciting because people were doing things and people had strong feeling about what they were doing on either side of any issue It felt like people were really living their lives I participated in the anti-war movement here on the Youngstown State campus There was a large anti-war contingent We had a peace center and I was very involved in that

H At the height of your activity, describe a typical day

V. It would depend on whether or not I was in school. If I was in school, I would go to classes. I worked part time Sometimes I worked in the library for a while Then I was involved with a lot of political stuff I was involved in formulation marches, talking to people on the phone, that kind of thing I spent a lot of time with people like me, doing things that young people do We hung out in bars and talked a lot about changing the world

H How did you originally hear of Woodstock?

V I had a very good friend, who still is a very good friend, who lived in New York City I was living in Cleveland at the time My parents had just moved there and I moved there shortly after they did in 1968 My friend in New York, I would go and visit periodically She lived a rather Bohemian life in a loft on the Bowrey She talked about going and I had read about it some magazines. There was a lot of hype about it, so I decided to go I decided to fly to New York, then we

would go up from the city together

H Your first impressions, what did you expect?

V That is interesting I do not know how much I remember of what I expected, pretty much what I saw I expected to see a lot of people who looked like me, probably Everybody had long hair and wore baggy bell-bottomed jeans and walked around giving each other the peace sign, that sort of thing. The idea was to go hear good music and be around this large contingent of people who felt the same way about things We make jokes about it now, but at the time it was very important to be involved in the peace movement It was a very important thing to stride for in our young lives That was the excitement of going. There would be a lot of people who would be just like us

H. In terms of the peace movement and your activities in Woodstock, what roll did music play?

V Music was really important I think if you talked to people my age -- I am 46 right now -- if you talked to people my age, that is the music we still all remember First of all, when you are in your late teens, early twenties, your life is being formed at that point I think that you have very strong emotions about everything Music fits right in with that Certainly, music reflects its times. There was a lot of protest music My heroes were Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, people like that There they were. Bob Dylan was not there, but Joan Baez I got to see at Woodstock It was pretty exciting

H I am sure it would be nice Other than the reasons you already elaborated on, does anything else come to your mind as to why you went, your motivation?

V Part of it was to do something that other people were not doing People I knew were not going, so it was kind of exciting to be hip I always read the New York times on Sunday I still do It is something that I grew up with No matter where we lived, we always had the New York Times on Sunday There was a big deal going on in that paper. They were advertisements every day in the New York times Those little birds on the guitar, that add was there for a long time. It was something that I felt was part of being a part of a bigger thing that my life, wanting to be part of a national thing. That is why we would go on the buses to Washington to march in the anti-war stuff. I still do that. I just went to a gay pride march last year For me, I think it was looking at the larger world, wanting to be part of that I like to go places where people do not know me

H Marlene called it a sense of empowerment, a sense of inner connection and the ability to make a difference

V. I think that is very true I think that there is strength in numbers To come from a

place, I was living with my parents on the west side of Cleveland in a new suburb. It was sterile and uninteresting. I am sure there were other people in Cleveland like me, but I had not found them yet. Going to New York to this big thing where all these names were of people I listened to for years, the music was certainly an enticement. It was not just that. I think Marlene is right when she talks about the sense of empowerment. That is what all of these big marches are about, to show the world there are more than just a few of us, no matter what your cause is.

H How did you get there? Describe the trip for me

V· Interestingly, I did not go alone. I have two younger sisters and one of them had a boyfriend at the time. I was 21. My sister's boyfriend was about sixteen or seventeen. I do not know why he went with me, but he did. I was not real happy about that. It was one of those things where I sort of got coerced in to. The two of us flew out of Cleveland and flew to Newark and took the bus into the city to my friend Marlene's house. We then hitchhiked up to Woodstock, up the New York freeway. Marlene used to hitchhike all over New York City. She never paid for a cab, never paid for a subway. She always hitchhiked. I had visited her enough times that I kind of got used to that. It did not seem any big deal to me to hitchhike. We hitchhiked up until we got to the exit near the farm.

Traffic was dead stopped. We did not think we were going to be able to get in. I wish I had that ticket today. People were going up without tickets. There was no entry way. I was expecting to see a gate where people drive in, they check your tickets. There was nothing like that. I cannot quite remember the details of this, but I know that we were going to try some other means of getting in, even if we had to walk. We had sleeping bags and knapsacks with us. We got a ride with some young woman who lived in the area who was a total fluke. She said, "Oh, I can take you another way." She took us around some back roads and suddenly, there we were, right in the middle of everything. I do not know how we did that. As a result, we were in there and all those people that were standing out on the freeway were probably waiting for a very long time to get in.

We got in and walked. We managed to walk right up to the stage area and sat down, sort of plunked ourselves down. I believe we got there in the early afternoon. The concert started late afternoon, early evening. We were right in front. I would guess if I had to put it in rows, I would say we were 50 or 60 rows back from the stage. If we are talking rows of people, we are talking hundreds. We were very close.

H Easily, if not thousands

V· We were right in the center. We had a great position. We were in hog heaven. We were until it started to rain.

H Describe some of your first impressions. Did anything surprise, or not surprise you? Did anything take you back when you first got there?

V: The size of it was pretty amazing to me. There is no way to describe the vastness of this hillside where they had plunked the stage down in the middle. It looked like a Greek amphitheater, but twenty times the size of anyone you would ever see in Greece. The number of people was astounding. I was not a small town kid. I had been around to a number of concerts and different places in my life. Probably the biggest place I have ever been was Cleveland Stadium where they seat 80,000 people. Already, that afternoon, there had to be two or three times that. By the nighttime when that thing was full and they do that little trick by lighting a match or a lighter, the sky glowed, it was so bright. It was an amazing size phenomenon. That was the thing that was most impressive, I think.

Then there was so many different kinds of people. I have been to New York City, so I have been in the village and have seen everything the world had to offer in the way of people. These were people that were really there to have a good time. I had never been in a situation where I saw people walking around without any clothes on, men and women. I was, of course, stunned. That is not the sort of thing you see all the time. Then it became sort of run of the mill. You see one naked body you have seen them all. There was a feeling about it that was very open and very free. There were things that was negative. There were people throwing up, there were people that were sick, there were people who were too drunk for words or too wacked out on drugs to be able to stand up. That is always hard to watch and be around, people doing crazy things, just being silly.

H As far as you feel comfortable, discuss the roll of drugs in terms of the festival and the movement.

V Drugs played a big part in what a lot of people were doing. I was no different. Drugs were not as big a part of my life as alcohol was. I quit drinking and quit doing any drugs. I have been sober for ten years. A lot of people I know from that era did not make it because of drugs and alcohol. It is hard to look back on it with a positive look, except that it was fun. We had a good time. I partied as much as anybody else, probably more than a lot of people. It was not unusual at all. It was not like it was a bad thing not to do it, but people were curious about it. "Why do not you do this?" You did it to be part of the crowd. I did it because I was destined to do it. I knew the first time that I got drunk that this is the way I am going to spend a lot of my life. That is a part of my own history that I have been dealing with for a long time.

There, there was no accessibility to alcohol. People did bring in stuff. I brought in a bottle of wine with me. It was gone the first night because you share it with people and that was it. I did not bring any drugs in, but we met people who had drugs. There was always somebody that has a joint or something to

share There were a lot of people who were really strung out on acid That was probably the big drug at that point, LSD. My experience with it was not terrifically good, so I did not do it It was not anything I was particularly interested in at that point There were a lot of people there who were "tripping" as we used to say

H You have arrived and you have settled down Even though you have touched on this a little bit, what did you smell, see, hear? What was very common?

V: One of the common smells was marijuana It was everywhere It was a cloud that kind of ascended on top of that group. It was there all the time Until it rained, it was like being out in the country. By the end of this thing you smelled people a lot As I close my eyes I think about what it was like. People were very excited. You talked to anybody, everybody, "Where are you from? What are you doing?" Running into people at home was weird. There were a lot of people there.

H What were people doing? How were they dressed? What did they bring? What did they drive?

V. I do not remember much about vehicles, except there were a lot of trucks on the road, like Ryder trucks and U-haul trucks That was the first time I ever saw a Ryder truck. It was a fairly new company Smart people had gotten together and rented these big trucks; then they would sleep in them Those became very popular people when it rained. You would see vans, the hippy vans with the psychedelic painting all over them I am sure I had bell bottomed jeans of some sort on. The guy that came with us, my sister's friend Mike, had on a typical uniform-an army fatigued jacket with the sleeves cut off He had little round wire-rimmed glass So did I; granny glasses, we used to call them. I had long, straight hair, so did he He was desperately trying to grow a beard, but that was not working A lot of long hair on men and women. Men with a lot of facial hair, beards, mustaches, and side burns We looked like typical hippies of the period A lot of women were wearing long dresses, long granny dresses

H Many people describe a sense of community, not just from who attended and attitudes of the time, but also because of the necessity; gridlock and weather.

V People were pretty good to each other There were the immediate problems of water, bathrooms, and food That does not even cover the weather. As I recall, people were pretty good to each other. We would see somebody with water and we would go, "Where did you get that?" "Oh, you just go down here. Here, I have an extra container Take this " That is what that wine bottle ended up being, a water bottle, which becomes a whole lot more important than wine ever did. I never felt any hostility just from myself because I got sick and I really wanted to get out of there I really felt no negative stuff from everybody. It was kind of an interesting place to be It was a little scary, too. I felt particularly

vulnerable because I was not feeling well I needed to lie down and be dry I was not getting any of that It was part of my memories from Woodstock that were not very positive from that point of view Once I did get dry and got some sleep, had some food, I was okay It was all right

That fear is just not knowing the people. I never feared for my existence I had been in places where I thought, "You may not get out of here " Being in a big city that I do not know or being in the wrong neighborhood, something like that. In fact, I experienced that with Marlene that same trip. We got mugged in New York City It was not the same kind of fear at all. It was you kind of felt like a little kid Part of it is because you have nothing to compare it to How many outdoor festivals where at least 500,000 people are have you been to? You have no context to put it in. It was exciting and fearful at the same time, but that was typical of the times.

You go back to the business of taking drugs and that sort of thing People took a lot of risks that I think people are less likely of today Today we have things like Aids to think about We did not think about those things Like all the young people, we thought we were invincible, nothing would ever happen to us. It was a strange place to be, but an exciting place at the same time

H Let us say it was the evening of the second day. The concert is going on and you look behind you and see 500,000 people What statement do you think that made to the nation, to the parents of that generation?

V I can remember my parents did not want me to go on one hand Then I explained that I thought it was a historical occasion, because I really did think it was important to be part of this great big thing I was not quite sure what it was, but I knew I wanted to be there. When I got home people talked to me about it and I was really proud I went If you had asked me the night of the second day, I was sick as a dog, no statements coming out of this mouth I think people were surprised that it worked, that it happened People did not just die People did not fight. That was a big thing You get that many people together; you can be in a bar on Saturday night when there are only ten people in there and a fight might break out. People in groups when there are that many people around you kind of assume that is going to happen. I do not really recall seeing that at all I never had a sense that was a problem

When you look at the films that people took there was a real sense of a whole group of people who felt like it would be okay in the world and not fight with each other. That is what it was about We all knew people who were not in Vietnam We did not know anybody who did not know someone that was there who died We did not want that to happen anymore It is simplistic, but it was the first time we really felt a war that hit so closely that we did not believe in I was born in 1948. Neither of my parents were in the war, but I had a lot of relatives that were in World War II. That was a war you could believe in because you had a definite enemy and a definite cause Vietnam did not have that feel to it I think that is what it was all about. I think it sent a message to politicians, that

this was a force to be reckon with, and it was. It was not just a bunch of kids getting naked and having a good time in a field. I think it represented a sense of commitment that I do not see people having today.

H: What do you think the experience of Woodstock in 1969 says to people today? We see an attempt of a resurgence of something that happened in the late 1960's or the 1970's.

V: There is nothing to rally around. We do not have a bad war here. Our last military involvement involved the evil empire of Sadaam Hussain who was easy to hate. We lived in a very simple world right now. I teach in college and I see young people who would not read a book if you paid them; who have no sense of history what so ever. We live in a very anti-intellectual world. Everything is spoon fed to people. You can turn on the television and get whatever you need. Now, with all this networking stuff you can do your banking, probably be able to do your grocery shopping and pay somebody to deliver it. It is so impersonal. I think what the 1960's were about was a very personal feeling. You felt like you were involved in what was going on, even if it was on a little level. I think that is what Woodstock sort of represented, symbolic of that. We were going to make a difference.

I do not think people today think they have any power at all. They pay too much tax. They have nothing to say about their government. Today you see the gay movement has some sense of old time protest mentality. Maybe abortion rights and abortion on both sides has some of that. You do not see much involvement. I cannot imagine a young republican march on Washington. That is the group that is certainly in vogue right now. It is a very different time. I think it is very hard to be a young person today. You do not have a clue whether you are going to go to college for all these years and then get a job. To the students I have, I always ask at the beginning of class, "How many of you are sure that when you get a degree you are going to get a job?" Very few hands go up. It was not always that way.

H: I frequently say I would love to be in graduate school in 1974 working on a masters in history, twenty years ago. It is much different.

V: You might have a job when you are done.

H: Right.

V: Maybe not, though.

H: Unlike today, when you are up against hundreds for a position anywhere. You were ill and you were probably glad you were able to go home. As you were leaving, what were you thinking?

V Well, we left twice We did leave because I was sick We left I sort of insisted. I remember fighting with Marlene about it and saying that I would go anyway We were all pretty miserable We had spent the night in front of the stage to keep our spot. Then it started to rain People were sliding into us and we just decided to go I was not feeling well and it was raining and raining. Marlene wanted to stay I cannot remember exactly what the details were, but we did leave

We got out on the freeway and we started to hitch and, this car picked us up. It was a man and a woman who wanted to get into the festival By then we were feeling a little bit better I was feeling better and it was not quite so messy Here we were in this nice dry car This guy said, "Why do you not come with us? Can you get us back in?" So we found that way that we got in before. We took them around the back and we got back in with these people who turned out to be these people from the music industry in New York City. We parked the car near a truck and a port-a-potty which was a big deal This guy had food and a very clever way of hiding his marijuana-in a jar of relish That is one of those things that sticks out in my memory They were very good to us We stayed then for a little while longer.

I do not remember how long we stayed, a couple more days maybe We slept one night underneath the truck where it was dry. We did go back. By the time we left we were exhausted; everybody was. When you are 21 and you are exhausted, it is different now I was really glad we went back, even though I was not feeling well the first time around when we left. We did not, of course, get into the concert the way we did the first time We were way out on the periphery. You could hear things They had big speakers so you could hear what was going on Mostly we kind of split up and went our separate ways and talked to people I remember spending one whole afternoon sort of by myself watching, sitting and leaning up against the truck tire watching people go by It was real interesting.

H Do you recall any of those impressions at that point?

V I do not recall any of the conversations I had with any of the people I did talk to a lot of people There were trucks that would come by with water jugs and trucks that came by with sandwiches We ate a lot of peanut butter sandwiches. You would see these huge bags of sandwiches There were not helicopters, but there were big trucks full of necessities that would come over and drop you something to eat. Again, everybody kind of took what they needed and gave away the rest Nobody hoarded stuff and was awful about that. I do not remember specific conversations with people I mostly watched.

H. When you left the second time, did you think, "Wow, people are going to be interested in this in 1995."

V. I did not necessarily think of it that far I was just thinking about what it was

going to be like to go home to Cleveland at that point. To have them say, "You went to Woodstock? Wow! We saw that on T V " Even my parents said they watched it on T V , and they were dumbstruck That was pretty cool, to have my parents validate what I was doing was really important. Even people in New York City; we would go back to the city We hitchhiked back into the city. That was really hard because we had left so late We had waited until the last minute and we were hitching when it was dark, which is really hard to do Especially on a freeway or something like that One of the bad things that happened, happened then A group of kids slowed down in a van, "Great, there is a van coming," all painted up They slowed down just enough to get a good aim and throw eggs at us That really felt crummy It is one of those stories I was telling somebody this morning It was a real creepy thing

We ended up getting a ride into Spanish Harlem. It is not a place you probably want to be, just like we did. I think we ended up with a subway ride into Manhattan, into the lower end of Manhattan where Marlene lived It was hard I was very glad to go home and to be in my own house and get clean Even to get to Marlene's We each took an hour long shower You get pretty crummy in the mud and all of that stuff There was no place to wash If there were places, I never saw them. You would have a little bit of water so that you could wash your teeth and try to wash your face. The rest of your body you just lived with. That is what I meant earlier when I said eventually you start to smell people

H It is inevitable.

V Yes. It is kind of a humbling thing, being in a society where people do not wash like we do, are not concerned about how they smell

H Once again, you get that sense of communal, "We all stink so I guess that is okay."

V That is the way people smell when they do not wash. You are no different from anybody else

H That is right You mentioned Joan Baez Are there any other particular artist that you remember?

V I remember Richie Havens really well Crosby, Stills, and Nash I was so amazed that I was so close to her I was not really terrifically close If I had been in a concert hall I would have thought it was far away

H At Woodstock, row 50 is pretty good

V I remember Richie Havens really well

H I think Marlene mentioned Janis Joplin

- V. Yes, Janis Joplin The interesting thing was I had just seen Janis Joplin in Cleveland right before that I saw her there three different times, which was the extent of my concerts I did not see too many people, but I love Janis Joplin She was pretty exciting. If Marlene was here and we were sitting doing this together she would say, "Do you not remember?" Then I would remember When I think back, it is Richie Havens and Joan Baez that stick out in my mind
- V I think even Sha Na Na was there, The Grateful Dead were there. I did not see either one of them, I know that I heard Jimi Hendrix, but I did not see him.
- H Joe Cocker
- V I saw Joe Cocker Actually, I saw Joe Cocker in concert once. I was not a big fan of his
- H Any final thoughts, anything that was on your mind you would like to mention?
- V No, it is kind of history Time paints a different picture on things I am really glad I went At the time, I was really glad not to be there, when I finally got home I wish I paid more attention. I do not think I knew as it was happening. I say now that I thought it was important, but it never occurred to me that what I thought of it would be important. I never had a sense of my own worth, in terms of what my own opinion is, how valuable that might be to somebody else I never thought of that I do now, but I did not then That is probably my biggest regret that I did not have a camera, that I did not take some notes.
- H Part of it was the spontaneity of it all that made it so unique Even the participants had no idea
- V Right
- H It was part of the wonder of why it was such a unique time and that it could never really be repeated
- V No. When they had the 25th anniversary last year I said, "No." First of all, I am too old I do not want to wrestle with the mud and sleep outside I am also pretty happy remembering just what I do.
- H. Are you glad you went?
- V. Sure I was even glad I went back when I was sick In my heart, I wanted to be a part of it. I was not happy with the timing of being sick, but some things you do not count on.

1
2

H Well, that is all I have Thank you

V Thank you

End of Interview