

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

KENT STATE SHOOTINGS PROJECT

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O.H.1693

Wilson J. Hoffman

Interviewed

By

Mickey S. Huff

On

June 27, 1995

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INTERVIEWEE: Wilson J. Hoffman

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SUBJECT: The Kent State Shootings

DATE: June 27, 1995

Hu: This is an interview with Professor Wilson

Hoffman for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Kent State shootings and the aftermath by Mickey Huff at Hiram College on June 27, 1995 at 1:45pm in the afternoon.

Can you talk a little about your background, where you grew up, and what it was like to live there?

Ho: I grew up in Western Pennsylvania.

Hu: What town?

Ho: East Brady. It's a very small town and a good place to get out of.

Hu: Your parents? You grew up in a working class home? Were they very political or anything like that?

Ho: Middle class home, not particularly political.

Hu: What did your parents do?

Ho: My father was a doctor.

Hu: Medical doctor?

Ho: Yes. My mother had been a teacher.

Hu: Any brothers or sisters?

Ho: One brother.

Hu: What high school did you go to? What was your high school life like?

Ho: It was a local high school. It doesn't exist anymore. It was closed a year or so ago. It was very small and actually a fairly good high school. There were some very good teachers there.

Hu: You went off to college after high school.

Ho: Yes, Grove City.

Hu: What was your degree in?

Ho: History.

Hu: You went to graduate school eventually?

Ho: Yes, straight out of college I went to graduate school. I went to Western Reserve University in Cleveland and got an MA and PhD there.

Hu: You finished that when?

Ho: I got the PhD in 1963.

Hu: You've been at Hiram College ever since then?

Ho: Yes, I've been there since 1960.

Hu: What was it like when you first came to Hiram as far as teaching and student activism?

Ho: Very little of it as far as student political activism. It was Kent State that precipitated a great deal of it.

Hu: This place was pretty laid back up until the shootings?

Ho: Yes.

Hu: What happened around that time, the beginning of May 1970 up until the fourth when the shootings happened?

Ho: It was very quiet until the shootings. Kent State is so close to here that there was bound to be repercussions here.

Hu: How far away is Kent?

Ho: About fifteen miles.

Hu: What do remember about May fourth or fifth?

Ho: I just remember when the news hit here that the shootings occurred. It was probably late afternoon I gather. Everyone was stunned by it. Particularly me perhaps because it was my old National Guard Unit that did it.

Hu: You were in the National Guard?

Ho: Yes I was. That was my unit. I was out of it by that time by about six or seven years.

Hu: How long were you in there?

Ho: As little as possible which was six years.

Hu: It was like the reserves?

Ho: Yes same type of thing.

Hu: Was that in the fifties?

Ho: Yes very late fifties. I spent six months in active duty and five and a half years in the National Guard. I was in the Cleveland unit the 107th.

Hu: What do you remember specifically about that day? Student reactions? Did you cancel classes or anything like that?

Ho: Classes were basically over for the day. Nothing immediately sunk in but by Monday the students were extremely upset. Eventually it ended up in cancelled classes for a week to become actively involved in protests and so on. It's a shame our archives is closed because we have a lot of documentation from that period as to what went on here. A lot of faculty conducted classes on Vietnam, Kent violence. My contribution was to collect all the documents that were cranked out here and elsewhere that came on campus. It wasn't my job but my students' job that did this. We ended up with a huge collection of materials which is in the archives. Unfortunately we're moving libraries right now so that's why the libraries are closed and we can't get into them.

Hu: What kind of documents did you collect? Were they printed here or other places?

Ho: Both type of places. There was a daily type paper here and great deal of stuff coming in primarily from Kent State. We collected stuff out of the local community papers.

Hu: Did you go to Kent any time around this time?

Ho: I did not myself no.

Hu: Did you have any kind of contact with your old guard unit?

Ho: No.

Hu: Anybody that you knew that was in it?

Ho: Probably most of the people I would have known would not have been in it by that time. Some of the officer class might have still been in it but no I have had no contact since my last meeting with them and quite deliberately.

Hu: You all had involvement in the weeks following the shootings during the seminars and public discussions and what not. Did things pretty much die down after that ?

Ho: No it didn't. It was a very warm May for one thing, that doesn't help matters. I was helping to run a required freshman class at the time. All of the freshman were part of the class and we met in mass in the auditorium and it totally fell apart. It might have anyway.

Hu: What happened?

Ho: Many students didn't bother coming anymore.

Hu: Did you shift the topic of discussion or anything?

Ho: It wasn't possible given the format that we had. Students were very restless the rest of that month and a great deal of activism did continue. The classes were back in session by the end of that first week.

Hu: Did anything out of the ordinary happen here? Was there any violence or vandalism?

Ho: Nothing that I recall.

Hu: Was this area closed down at all?

Ho: No this area was not.

Hu: You said you knew students that were coming from Kent to here and vice versa?

Ho: I didn't know them. I just heard of Kent students talking to our students and vice versa.

Hu: What do you remember about follow up investigations of the shootings and that?
Was everybody closely watching what was going on?

Ho: Yes.

Hu: What did you remember of the FBI investigations? Did anyone come here and do any investigating?

Ho: Not that I'm aware of. I might not have known it then anyway.

Hu: What do you recall of the aftermath of the following years. Particularly when the gym controversy happened at Kent in 1977?

Ho: I don't think there was any reaction that I remember here.

Hu: How about in terms of the commemorations, did this college have any connection with that?

Ho: I think they did for a year or two after on the anniversary but it didn't last very long.

Hu: Were you involved at all in that?

Ho: No.

Hu: Nothing you recall about the George Segal Sculpture controversy that followed the gymnasium?

Ho: No by that time I think many of the students lost interest here.

Hu: How about recently with the twenty-fifth anniversary? Did Hiram do anything?

Ho: No.

Hu: I know at Youngstown we had a few speakers and things.

Ho: No I'm totally unaware if they did and I'm sure they didn't.

Hu: So most of your activity involving the shootings was the month after the shootings.

Ho: Yes.

Hu: Can you be any more specific about anything you had going on or anything you remember about that time?

Ho: There were a lot of us that did those types of things. They did start the week that term and we finished up the term normally. There was a great deal of stuff in the local newspaper and campus newspaper about it, and some of the teaching type things did continue

Hu: Were you fairly well informed about what was going on? Did you actively pursue what was going on there? Reading?

Ho: Reading yes.

Hu: What was your take on the whole thing?

Ho: I thought what happened was stupid.

Hu: Having National Guard experience what could you say from that perspective?

Ho: If you arm a bunch of men and send them into a provocative situation then something is going to happen. It's pretty predictable.

Hu: So you feel that someone should have known better, the governor perhaps?

Ho: Yes he should have known better. When it happened in Lexington, Concord... you know. They should not have been armed with ammunition.

Hu: From what you recall being a guard did you ever have that going on? Were you ever called into duty for strike protection or anything? I believe it was your old unit that was in Akron in a teamsters strike is that correct?

Ho: That could well have been. I got out of the guard probably in 1962 or 1963 just at the point that the Hough riots were about to begin in Cleveland. In fact the last meeting that I had to attend they were actively practicing riot control. In anticipation of being called into Hough and they were called into Hough. I was not involved since I was not a part of it anymore. I think they were called out a number of times in the sixties with the riots in Cleveland possibly in Akron. I wasn't aware of that one.

Hu: That was just prior to the Kent shootings.

Ho: I was just damn glad to be out of it.

Hu: Yeah. What do you recall about your training period? Were you trained to deal with any kind of activity that going on at Kent like that?

Ho: Theoretically.

Hu: Was that a riot or a protest or a combination of the two?

Ho: I would say a combination of the two. I happened to be in charge of some of the training that was going on and generally speaking up to the early sixties that last meeting I attended it was all films. I had to go watch a film on riot control once a year. The last meeting I attended when Hough was about to go up and obviously so they were out on the floor practicing at that stage.

Hu: What was discussed in terms of ammunition or weapons?

Ho: Nothing that I know of. I did not participate in that last meeting they assigned me a bunch of recruits and said disappear go do something with them.

Hu: So when you were in charge of instructing did you ever instruct anybody on any type of arms procedures?

Ho: Not really, just what they saw in the films.

Hu: Was it standard procedure for the guard to have loaded weapons at any kind of riot?

Ho: Nothing was ever said about it. Normally I don't think they would have. Normally I don't think they should have. A rifle is a weapon unto itself you don't have to have the ammunition.

Hu: Would they load it with something else?

Ho: Nowadays they would but in those days no. There was no alternative.

Hu: They didn't have any alternate ammunition, salt or anything?

Ho: No.

Hu: So you really haven't spoken to anybody from your unit then?

Ho: No, I haven't seen anybody.

Hu: What was your reaction when you found out it was your old unit?

Ho: Relief that I wasn't in it and a great deal of sorrow for them. I think they were victims also. Victims of politicians, the governor....

Hu: What do you think the governor's role was?

Ho: Stupid.

Hu: You think it was hapless wandering into an event ill prepared for it?

Ho: Yes.

Hu: You don't view any of the actions as deliberate?

Ho: No.

Hu: Just a lot of people making stupid mistakes.

Ho: That's right. Overreacting, acting possibly in political ways, situations that shouldn't have been that way.

Hu: So perhaps your take on it is that the governor sent troops there to appear stronger?

Ho: I suspect so.

Hu: What do you think the administration at Kent had to do with anything? Do you see and complicity between them and the state of Ohio?

Ho: I don't know of any. I doubt that it was in their hands at that point. It was viewed as being out of control and I suspect if there was any complicity it was on the part of the city. But I don't know that.

Hu: You say that because of certain attitudes?

Ho: Yes. Somebody had to have ordered the National Guard in. I don't know who did that. I'm aware that there are some books out on Kent State. I have not read the books. Somebody had to call them in. I suspect it was the city not the university.

Hu: So you were relieved that it was over there and not over here?

Ho: Very much, that's right. I think the guard was in an impossible situation.

Hu: Did you know anything about the 76' 77' gym annex?

Ho: I remember very little about it.

Hu: Were you aware that the gymnasium was built right next the place where the guard shot them and that that was what all the protest was about because it gave the illusion that the guard was hemmed in. What would your take on something

like that be, on historically preserving the site? Do you feel that physical structure would alter the site and alter interpretation of later generations?

Ho: Well it probably would but I wouldn't say I wouldn't put a building there either for that reason. They could go back and look at pictures and see what the site was like.

Hu: Have you been to Kent to see the memorial or anything?

Ho: No. I've been to Kent but I haven't seen the memorial. I've been there for a movie this type of thing but I haven't gone to see the memorial.

Hu: Did you recall anything going on when the memorial was being built in 1989, 1990?

Ho: Yes there was a great controversy I think over the nature of it.

Hu: What do you remember about it specifically?

Ho: Very little frankly because I didn't care about it. The controversy was more aesthetic than anything else wasn't it?

Hu: Yes, well they had some problems disqualifying the original winner because he was not an American citizen. Then the university sort of botched the fundraising and the memorial was significantly scaled down.

Ho: Yes I remember that. I didn't follow that any.

Hu: Have you brought up Kent or your participation in the National Guard in any of your classes?

Ho: Rarely when I teach do I have the opportunity to do that.

Hu: Not even in the East Asia part? You don't do Vietnam too much you said?

Ho: No. I could have mentioned it but it's not a big thing. If I was teaching American History than it might be more pertinent. One of the things that did appall me at the time that it happened, the first week or so, was the staff. Not the faculty or administration but the secretarial types who defended the National Guard and said they should have shot all the students. I find that an appalling attitude.

Hu: That seemed to be common in Kent, in the community as well. These were younger people, the secretaries?

Ho: Older people.

Hu: Did you get that kind of reaction from the community of Hiram in general?

Ho: I would say that it was a minority reaction but it was definitely there.

Hu: Did they have much press? Were they in the media at all?

Ho: No this is just what I was overhearing on campus. I didn't see any press on it.

Hu: You didn't see much of that in your colleagues or administrators?

Ho: No. It was pretty much townspeople and employees at the college but nonacademic ones.

Hu: Were you married or did you have any kids?

Ho: No.

Hu: Was there anything else that you wanted to add to that or anything else that you might remember specifically? Any comments?

Ho: No I don't think there is anything else. I haven't really thought about it in a long time. It's a fairly upsetting thing that never should have happened. In my own case I have a great deal of empathy for the students that were shot and also with the National Guard.

Hu: So that kind of puts you in a rough spot personally.

Ho: Yes. I could have been there. I have to live with that for the rest of my life.

Hu: It's kind of ironic that you ended up on the other side?

Ho: Yes, good timing as a matter of fact. I don't think I have anything else to say about it. It's too bad you can't get into the archives because I think you might find some valuable stuff there.

Hu: I'll have to come up some time.

Ho: Yes. They'll be available in the fall even if you're finished with your MA at that point. They give you a tone of what was going on better than I could do at this stage.

Hu: Well I think you gave me a general idea of what was happening here. You don't remember anything specific about the itinerary of any of the meetings or anything?

Ho: No I don't.

Hu: You do have written records of it though?

Ho: I'm sure there are in the archives.

Hu: Good.

Ho: It's fairly well documented.

Hu: I'll have to check it out. Well thanks for your time.

Ho: You're certainly welcome. I'm not sure it was worth your drive down here.

Hu: That's all right.