

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Woodstock, 1969

Personal Experience

O H 1698

TRIBBEY NELSON

Interviewed

by

Chris Helm

on

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## TRIBBEY NELSON

Tribbey Nelson, the youngest Woodstock attendee interviewed for this project, characterized her childhood as a “boringly typical” venture. Experiencing the upheaval of the era as a teenager, issues such as civil rights and the Vietnam War became powerful influences during some of her most formative years. Due to her parent’s intervention on her behalf, she was able to attend Woodstock with her older brother.

Tribbey attended Woodstock just when her eyes began to open to the importance of current events. In contrast to many parents at the time, Tribbey’s father brought home some of the new, exciting music for the family to listen to. Her father encouraged her to always experience new things. And, as long as her older brother agreed to watch over her and her sister, they could attend the Woodstock concert.

Tribbey described her feelings and aspirations as a teenager in the 1960s as compared to those of her children today, including a daughter of fourteen. Many of her early experiences included a clouded and confused view of the war in south-east Asia (particularly since she had an older brother in the Armed Forces). Still marveling at boys, Tribbey naturally had a difficult time comprehending all that was occurring during the time period.

Much of her time at the concert was spent simply taking in the thousands of sights and sounds of Woodstock. At only fourteen years of age in the summer of 1969, Tribbey Nelson came away with a broadening and enriching experience.

H. This is an interview with Tribbey Nelson for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Woodstock, 1969, by Chris Helm, at 11848 Unity Road, on November 22, 1994, at 10 15 a m.

In general, what were the late 1960s like for you? What was a typical day?

N: A typical day in the 1960s, I want to relate to you that I was pretty young. I was fourteen at the time That was like going to dances You went to school every day. You would go to dances and you would look forward to it. I remember being very disappointed that they canceled a dance because the president died; things like that I thought, "What do you mean!" I got up late in the morning, ran to school, got to school, did that When we were done with school, I would walk home from school with my friends and play I was pretty young at the time. I really do not know I cannot say it was anything exciting It was just your basic childhood That is where I was at that time

H. Imagine yourself at home in 1969. Recall what a typical day was like, how your life was

N: You mean from morning until night?

H. Sure.

N: I would get up in the morning School started at 8.00 I would arise about 7:30 and wash down, get myself dressed in my outfit I had laid out from the night before so I could sleep as long as I possibly could. I would head out to school with a piece of toast with bacon rolled up in it, or whatever my mother could hand to me before I ran out the door I would get to school and I would typically put myself in class. I would put my makeup on and comb my hair in homeroom. I always seemed to sneak in, somehow, if I was late for class. I would always get in there right at the bell, or crawl in on my hands and knees to get into the classroom It sounds kind of boring when I think back on it now. It was kind of the way I did things then; go through the classes and hang in the hall with my friends. I never sat at lunch I always walked and went outside and took walks because it was just nicer out there This was just during school. That is all I could relate to now I could relate to you a summer day, but this is more of a regimented type day

We would walk outside for lunch, my girlfriends and I, and hike down to the Poland woods and walked back up. We would hang out. I did not smoke cigarettes back then, but my girlfriends did I would kind of walk with them We would get back in class and we had a couple good afternoon classes together with my friends We always walked home from school It was kind of fun because we walked. It was about a quarter of a mile and you walked through the woods, down a hill, over a little bridge over a creek That was kind of neat We would all hang out on the bridge and meet there You are falling asleep as I am

telling you this [laughter] I was like the only girl in the neighborhood, but my girlfriends lived on the other side of the street. They would walk home with me rather than take the bus home because there was always a gang of us that would walk together home from school.

So, basically, I thought it was a good childhood. It was a good community. Everything was very open. If there was any problem we would always knock on people's door and never think about it. Now I would not knock on anybody's door without calling them first. I would not ask my children to either. I would walk home through the woods and get home. I would flop down on the couch after school with a snack and watch whatever was on television at the time. I would always get hollered at because I did not pick up my stuff.

H Typical

N. It was being a typical teenager. I would take care of that. We would ride our bikes after school after a while. We always did our homework late in the evening. I guess one of my favorite shows back then -- even now I would like to see it back on T V -- was a Wonderful World of Disney on Sunday nights. It was fun. It was kind of like a wonderful ritual to sit and watch that. Your homework had to be all done on Sunday night and you would be able to sit and watch that with the whole family.

I had a pretty good family life growing up when I was a kid. I cannot complain about any of it. My parents were very open. They were always very loving and permissive as far as with the loving hand they would discipline. Me being the youngest of five, I guess I got away with a lot more. How I found myself going to Woodstock was because my brother came home and explained to my mom and dad that a really neat concert was going to happen. It is going to be three days of music and fun. It is going to be a really good time. We really wanted to go. "What is this? Who is going to be there?" They started talking. I thought, "That sounds really good." [I was] just becoming aware of music. I remember the first time my father had come home. He was so excited. He brought home the Beatles album. They were going to be on, or had been on Ed Sullivan, and he brought the album home. It was like, "Listen to this guys." Like, "Yes, this is really cool." My father brought it home. He was always very open to new experiences in life. He was 55 and still water skiing and taking his kids water skiing. He was pretty neat.

I got to go to Woodstock, I believe, because at that time he had come home and mentioned things to me, saying something about Woodstock and the concert. I thought, "That sounds kind of fun. Can I go?" The only way he got to go was because he would take his younger sisters with him. The only reason we got to go was because he was going to watch over us, so we kind of went as a family unit. Of course, once we got there, it was not quite like that. We were all there together and we all kind of stayed in our own little group, but we were also there to enjoy the peace and the harmony that was due at the time. That was all we could ask for. It was kind of a turmoil in all of our lives, I think. Fourteen was

tough for me, and the world was kind of chaotic at the same time

I guess I did not answer your question on what I did on a typical day. We curled up in bed at 8:00 at night. I would sneak over to my grandfather's room and watch TV, and lay underneath his bed because he had a real high bed and we could watch TV right under his bed until about 9:00 when we could hear my dad's knee creek when it hit the top step. We would run back into our room and hide out.

H How were you affected by much of the political and social moods going on at the time? You said you watched some television -- for example the Vietnam war.

N I could honestly say that it was not a large factor in my life until more like the 1970s, when Kent State happened. When that happened I became extremely aware. When President Kennedy in 1969 had been shot, that was more of a disappointment in my life. It was like, "Who is he? Why do we have to stop anything? Why does the world have to stop?" At the time, I was not that much aware as a teenager, and politics really did not affect me. We were still living in an extremely sheltered youth. We had a youth. I do not think adolescents now have adolescence anymore. My daughter comes home and says she wants to go to college. She is looking at college books and sending away for information and she is the same age I was. I had no concept at fourteen that is what I was to be doing, or that I even wanted to. I was still riding bikes and having a good time being a kid. I do not think that is the way it is now. What was the question?

H Just the social and political image at the time.

N I personally was not affected by it until my brother went to Vietnam. Even then it was like he was just going away. He was doing what he felt was the right thing to do. Whether he felt that afterwards or not, I was not really even sure then. I maybe wrote him one letter while he was gone, whereas I know the rest of my family wrote more letters. I was fourteen and pretty selfish. I was the baby. I know now how I felt about it. You had a whole life that I could not even imagine what it was like. Politically, I do not believe I became aware until I was fifteen. I cannot say that going into sixteen. I was kind of numb by that. Boys were still really exciting when I was that age.

H How old were you as the summer of 1969 approached?

N I was fourteen.

H So you were quite young.

N Yes.

H And you say you first heard of Woodstock from your brother?

N Yes.

H How did you get there?

N Kind of like I said earlier. He was not allowed to go unless he took his younger sisters. We were not allowed to go unless he was going to be there to watch. He swore he would take care of us. Our cousin was going, both of our cousins. They were close to our age, so we were all right within the same age group. I believe there was about eleven of us that went. I thought I did not want to go unless I had a girlfriend that would go, someone I could hang with while we were there. I talked to my girlfriend and got her to go, who was a year younger than I was. She was thirteen when she went, but her older brother was going and that was how she got to go. It was my girlfriend, thirteen, myself, fourteen; my cousin, fifteen, my sister, I think she was just seventeen because she had an early birthday. My brothers being six years older than myself, so he was just turning twenty. My cousin was twenty. My girlfriend's brother was seventeen. We all just grouped up and decided what we were going to take and what we wanted to take. We got ourselves a trailer, just a little camper-type trailer. We took the old family wagon and caravanned four vehicles: cousins, friends, and family. We caravanned up and we were cooking bacon. I remember one of my distinct memories of traveling up there is just the hours and hours of waiting in line to get there. The trip to New York seemed like nothing. It was the hours and hours sitting in the long lines of traffic. Finally we decided to cook some food. We pulled out some bacon out of the back. My brother did not trust me to drive his vehicle, but he trusted my thirteen year old girlfriend. She got behind the wheel while he was cooking the bacon. She slammed the breaks on because we started to move forward. She slammed the brakes and the grease splashed on his foot. He came out and started hollering, but the bacon was good.

The trip getting there was a lot of fun, and watching everybody. We would pull into the camp ground. We were some of the more fortunate because we were more prepared. We were camping. We knew we were camping. It was going to be going for music, and kind of a peaceful weekend of music, friends, and love because that was the time. It was kind of full with a lot of harmony. I believe most of the people that were there that I was near were very aesthetic. They were very art minded. They all loved the arts in some way, whether it was music, painting, or something to that effect, I kind of felt that from the ones I stayed near, anyway. My girlfriend played the banjo and the guitar. She was a good artist and she still is. She does that in Utah. When we got there it was kind of like, "Wow! We are here! Let us unload and get out of here as quick as we can. We will find the best spot." I still do not believe at the time we arrived there that I had the concept of how large it was until we started getting in there and walking around.

Once I got there, I do not believe I left for three days. I remember getting out of the camper and everybody going, "We will meet back here at 6:00." We

will do this and that We were kind of unaware of how the schedule was. We thought the music would go for so many hours, then it would stop and you would have a dinner break and you would be able to get back to your camper We did not know our camper was going to be two miles away from where we actually sat down Once you got there you took everything in with you that you could handle taking in

H: You finally get through the lines and are finally able to settle down somewhere what were your expectations? What did you think ahead of time that this would be like? Did you have any preconceived notions or ideas in terms of music or people in numbers?

N No I am kind of one of those people that prefer going through life being surprised It was like I never thought about it prior to I was going to experience it when I was there I guess I kind of thought everyone at that time being that young would be like myself, full of love, full of being the innocent, naive, open ended type of people I believe that I only ran in to one person there that was what I would call ugly That was only because he was on drugs, and he was way out in left field somewhere I thought, "Get off of me." He came through and he was naked and fell on us It was like, "Oh, go away " We kind of pushed him on to the next group and they pushed him on to the next group. I suppose when I got there I was naive on everyone should be full of harmony and everyone should be full of love. We were all just coming to listen to some really good music and to have a good time Then when we found out how large it was and how incredible it was, that is a whole new question.

H You had expectations of harmony and everyone getting together Were your expectations met? Did you find that to be the case?

N Yes, I did I found it to be above and beyond any expectation I might have Everyone that I met was helpful Everybody that was around us; if they had food they shared If I had food I shared because it was becoming difficult and scarce Most people did not plan for what we had because no one ever expected that many people to be in one place at one time I would say that it did meet up with my expectations There was so much harmony. Anything that you needed, they would give it to you, shirt off their back if you were wet and cold, plastic bag if you needed one If you got hurt, they would help you to the hospital, their make-shift hospital I suppose among the confusion-- I was fourteen, so I was already confused -- it always seemed to be relatively organized, as far as I was concerned I think that I found the announcer played a key part in that, keeping you posted in what was happening between bands and what to avoid, what to do

I remember wandering around and up to the water trucks when they came in because my canteen was empty I went up and went to get it filled and found that I worked there for about two and a half hours filling up water jugs I got into

the truck and thought it was kind of neat, helping people. Even then it was not a push shove kind of a thing. Everybody was waiting their turn to do it. I said, "Okay, I am done. I do not want to do this anymore. It is somebody else's turn." It would be like, "Okay." I got down and they got up. Now I think of the teenagers, the people I know, "I am not doing that." I think, "Where is the harmony here?" I want it back. I want people to be a little bit more loving towards one another. Hopefully it will change, but I believe my expectations were above and beyond. I had cut my foot towards the very last day because everyone had cleared out and Jimmy Hendrix was on. I had gone down very close to the front stage and left my group, but we always knew we would meet back there or back at the camper. My girlfriend and I walked down to the front so we could be up close and personal with him.

H How far do you think you were?

N We were within twenty feet of the stage. It was really cleared out. There was so much rain and so much mud. It was after the mud slides. I supposed I kind of jumped through to the very end, but it was exciting to be that close to watch him. Just getting into the music, enjoying, relaxing, dancing in the mud, I did not even care. I slipped and cut my foot. I left my girlfriend and told her I was going up to the hospital and I would meet her back at the blanket or here if I did not see her. Even then I did not realize how big it was. "Wow, there is a hospital here. Get over there." And the people were really caring. They cleaned my foot, took care of it, put a band-aid on it. I put my shoes back on, but I left the socks. You have got to realize you got there after driving in the car for ten hours, a day and a half later sitting in a hot car and you get there and there is no water. It was like you do not bathe. We were thankful for the rain because it cleaned us all. That is why you saw in many of the pictures people standing holding their arms up saying, "Thanks." I personally did not even wander down to where the water in the lakes were, and know that people were taking baths cleaning themselves.

H You said you were a couple miles from where you actually watched and where you camped?

N. Yes, we camped approximately two miles from where we sat. We sat, I remember it was two humps up, one hump down from the stage.

H Imagine yourself walking a couple miles to get to the stage. Describe for me what the sights and the sounds were like. What was typical, what was not typical? What was going on? What did you see, smell? How were people dressed?

N Everyone was dressed as they did back then, loose garments. We walked along in our small herd of eleven. I do not remember all of us being there or all of us staying there, but I remember walking along and going to a farm house because



we thought if we were going in there, we had to get some water. We might have been some of the first people, but the farmer had given us without question, "There is the spigot." From his spigot we filled our canteens so that we all had water in case we needed it. It was a farm near cows, you know. I remember distinctly walking down the road towards the path. It was like a dirt path. We were watching people coming and going. It was already a little city. It was already a civilization, but like I said, everybody was wearing their loose fitting garments.

I remember someone real strange coming up towards me, "Want some drugs?" "No, I do not think so." There was another one that had a stand there. He had t-shirts. They were not relevant, but they were tie died t-shirts-- enterprising people that set up stands for whatever they had. Always there was the underlying availability of drugs everywhere you went. Like I said, it was very green, we are talking countryside. Walk over the hills and see the farm house and to see the cows. It was not like a real crowded road, as I recall. It was just like filing into any concert, I suppose, now. Maybe, not quite because it never seemed to get crowded there. I never felt crowded like I do when I go to a concert now. As a matter of fact it took me years to go to concerts after this because there was never any that could compare to this one--maybe Janis [Joplin].

H What other artists, other than Hendrix, do you recall?

N Canned Heat was one of my favorites. We had cans and all walked around with sticks, beating our cans and dancing. I remember distinctly my cousin Kate, she is a very successful artist, and my sister and myself. Those were the three I can really remember distinctly, we were all in a huge circle. There was probably 40 or 50 people. We were all dancing to the rhythm of Canned Heat. It was fun and muddy shortly after, and it was still pouring down rain. Nobody cared because we were all having such a good time being happy and being together; just being there. I remember Crosby, Stills, and Nash. There was a lot of them, Country Joe and the Fish. That was kind of wild. The music just seemed to play on and on forever. It never seemed to be over. Even when I was sleeping I could hear music.

When I got there, it was all of our intentions to go back to the camper. I never went back. I came, I stayed, then I left at the end. I never went back to the camper throughout the whole time. I stayed there both nights, and I know the first night I am sure I worried my sister. I do not know about my brother, but I know I worried my sister because that was her first thing when she came back. I said, "When you come back, if I do not make it back to the trailer make sure you bring me some provisions back, please." She was pretty good about that. We had kind of a nice freedom in our area with the people that we were around. Even though my sister left, my girlfriend and I stayed there. We had plastic covering which we had in our little back packs. We had our little canteens. It just always seemed to be pretty easy. I was never worried about staying there over

night I never had a fear. Perhaps innocence had a lot to do with it, never thinking there was any harm that would come to me. Maybe that had something to do with it, or maybe it did not. I think everybody at that time was pretty innocent themselves about such an event.

H. What roll, if any, in the whole scene do you think drugs played?

N It was pretty prevalent. It was obvious that it was around. I think more than anything that most people were there for the event, for the peace, the love that went on. That sounds so corny to say, but that is what I think. In retrospect it is, but in time it was not. At the time it was such a revelation that so many people could get along so easily. It was kind of nice. Drugs were there, everywhere. On a one to ten scale, they probably played a five. It was right about in the middle. There was a lot of people that did not do drugs. Most of the people that stayed, I imagine, through the rain were the real campers, the real troopers that came to listen to good music and came to experience the whole show, the whole feeling. It is like you go anywhere--this is something my dad taught us a long time ago--you have to be there for three days in order to relax and enjoy yourself. It is not like it can be enjoyed after the first day. Even tomorrow I will probably say, "Gee, I could have said this, I should have said that." If I would have had three days to spend with you, you would probably have found more out. If I am cramming things and skipping over stories that is probably why. I want to let you know how wonderful it was.

It was such a good experience. I do not think that it could be repeated because it was so unexpected. It was such a spontaneous thing. No one ever anticipated that it was going to be like what it was. I do not believe that anyone anticipated how successful it would turn out. As far as I was concerned, it was. They handled things very well there. If they would have handled the riots in Los Angeles like they handled Woodstock, it might have ended differently. They handled the crowd at Woodstock by throwing them food and flowers. The police would come over with the helicopters and throw you flowers down. It was like, "Wow, this is incredible."

H. That was something.

N It was something.

H It is Sunday and you are home. You get cleaned up and you are sitting back in your living room. Did you have any thoughts at the time of the significance or importance that it might have? Even as you grew older a couple years later?

N At the time I would say, in retrospect, it changed my life in that I did not come home and flop on the couch in front of the T V anymore. I was more in to keeping myself open to new experiences, which is what my father had been trying to teach me all along. I suppose it was a learning experience in that. In

retrospect, I was amazed to hear how many people were there because even though they announced it there to hear that the outside world was amazed and scared--my mom started saying things like, "There was people dying and babies being born " It was like a regular little village I thought, "Yes " I was amazed that the outside world knew that because I was in my own world in Woodstock. I thought it was our own little place and no one would ever know about it I was innocent It seemed like that was the way it should be. It is like when you see a movie and somebody already told you what is going to happen. It is just not as good That is what I think was wrong with the second Woodstock when they tried to do it again Everybody had expectations of other things I believe that the only expectation that we had was to go and have a good time, listen to music and be in a group of people who were fun and loving.

Out of all the people that we went with, which was eleven, I keep in touch with them once or twice a year, send Christmas cards, that kind of thing, other than my immediate family of course. I talk to them regularly We always know that we have Woodstock in bond It is too hard to explain to anybody else what it was like, or at least for them to understand the experience is difficult.

H It does have a historical significance.

N When I came home I was affected I was affected to be a little bit more open in life because you were in difficult situations When my mother was overloaded, I kind of pitched in a little It was pretty amazing to have your eyes opened up to people, total strangers helping you out. It is still even relevant to me. The people that I was in contact with, you would slip in the mud and they would grab you, help you. When I was on my way to the hospital, people were helping me get there. "Are you sure you could walk?" I stayed and help clean up for a while afterwards; even had irritated everybody that was waiting in the camper for me, "Why were you not back yet?" "I was cleaning up some of the garbage that was there " They still had days and days to do it afterwards It was different In retrospect, I had no clue that it was going to have people be so aware of those times like they are now It was a learning experience. Everyone presently, even the military, can learn something from it. Instead of going with violence, like they say, you get more flies with honey

H Honey or horses? You get quite a few with horses, too

N: Horses are pretty loving in a sense They never mean to hurt you

H: The intentions are always good What do you think it said to the previous generations, the people that grew up in the 1950s as opposed to the 1960s, or the parents of the 1950s and the 1960s? What do you think it said to them?

N. In a lot of ways I think it was an envious time I think those that came from the 1950s were envious that they were not able to participate in such a fantastic

situation where you were thrown together with hundreds of thousands of people and there was no violence, no crimes committed, other than that of over indulgence. At least I know my older brother that was in Vietnam. There are five of us. I have two older brothers that did not make it to the concert. One was in Vietnam at the time and the other one was in boot camp. They were like, "What was it like?" They were as curious about it as I was about Vietnam after. My oldest brother came back from Vietnam, I was curious to know what it was like. Of course, he told me all the positive things. He told me how he drove helicopters and things like that. I thought, "Helicopters were at Woodstock." I suppose I was still pretty innocent and young at heart too, then. I do not think that will ever change. I suppose I have a little bit of my dad in me. He was a pretty neat guy.

H. If you could narrow it down to one or two words, what the most important aspect of Woodstock was, what would they be, the most important things that came out?

N. The love was so relevant, the peace, the harmony. That sounds so corny. The most relevant aspect, I would say, is so many people learned, or were able to get along.

H. That is a pretty common description. That is basically what everyone is saying. You are glad you went?

N. Yes, I was really glad I went. Like I said, there were a lot of concerts afterwards that seemed a little disappointing because there was not the love. It was like, "Yes, I want to get close to the stage." That was irrelevant, too. Wherever you were there was such good sound set up that it did not matter. As long as you had your binoculars you could see anything. I am glad I went. It was an experience to end all experiences. It was pretty neat. It was something I would hope that could some day happen again because it was so enlightening. I thought it was enlightening. It is hard to explain to other people. One of my daughters say she wants to go do this. The times have changed. "I cannot let you go to a concert. I will take you to one, maybe [laughter]." It is difficult to explain how I look at them and think I want them to experience such things, but hopefully it will be as loving. I do not imagine that most concerts are anymore. We went to one this summer at Starlake Amphitheater thinking that was going to be nice and easy. There was still not quite the feeling of harmony there that I would expect or that I wanted. I guess when you have seen the best, done the best, it is difficult to go back to something else.

H. It was tough at your age, when that happened.

N. I was very young.

H Many people speak of the fact that it cannot be duplicated It was not duplicated in 1970 There was concerts in 1971 with 700,000, and 1973 with 600,000, but still they said nothing That is why we are talking about it in 1994, 25 years later I thank you for your time I think everything went well

End Of Interview