

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Kent State University Shootings

Personal Experience

O. H. 1261

KAREN BECK

Interviewed

by

Douglas Sensemen

on

November 13, 1986

KAREN BECK

Karen Beck is a science teacher with the Ravenna City Schools. She has been a teacher for the past twenty-seven years, eight of them at her current post at Brown Middle School. Before teaching seventh grade science at Brown Middle, Mrs. Beck also worked with the Field and Streetsboro schools. Educated at Kent State University, Mrs. Beck has earned both a B.S. and an M.Ed degree. A lifelong resident of the Kent/Ravenna area, Mrs. Beck likes to travel, read, and play tennis. She is a member of the United States Tennis Association and President of Kent City Board of Health. Mrs. Beck is married and has three children; Scott, Todd, and Carrie.

The interview with Mrs. Beck was conducted in her room on the second floor of Brown Middle School in Ravenna, Ohio. The date of the interview was November 13, 1986. Mrs. Beck is a seventh grade science teacher and we sat in her plant-filled room with two of the student desks facing each other and the tape recorder in the middle. Our discussion was made during her lunch hour.

Mrs. Beck and her family were residents of Kent in the spring of 1970. Their house was located quite close to where a number of students had protested during the weekend before the Kent State shootings. Mrs. Beck discusses the weekend of May 4th from the perspective of a resident of the Kent, Ohio area.

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INTERVIEWEE: KAREN BECK  
INTERVIEWER: Douglas Sensemen  
SUBJECT: Kent State University Shootings  
DATE: November 13, 1986

S: This is an interview with Mrs. Karen Beck for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Kent State University Shootings in May, 1970 by Douglas Senseman at Brown Middle School in Ravenna, Ohio on November 13, 1986.

Mrs. Beck, could you tell me what your occupation was in the spring of 1970?

B: I was a teacher. A third grade teacher at Rausch Elementary School in Ravenna.

S: Could you tell us a little bit about your family at the time?

B: My husband was a student at Kent State. I had two sons that were at home with the babysitter and I was pregnant.

S: Had you been following the events, what was going on in Vietnam at the time?

B: To some degree.

S: Did you have any family members there or friends or anybody you knew in the service.

B: I really didn't have anyone real close to me which was probably part of the reason I was not following as closely as some people.

S: Would you say you formed any opinions about the war?

B: Yes. I'd say I didn't think we belonged there.

S: Where were you living in the Spring of 1970?

B: I lived on North Willow Street in Kent right off the main street.

S: And that would be near the University?

B: About a block from the main gate of the University. Right up the street from Crazy Horse, which is a bar where the University kids hang out.

S: Do you remember at all in April 1970, when President Nixon announced that the war was being enlarged and American troops were moving into Cambodia?

B: Yes, but not much.

S: And had you noticed any anti-war activity or going's on the campus of Kent State prior to when the shootings developed?

B: Spray-painting of messages, defacing of university and public property. SDS, the militant group, seemed to infiltrate the student anti-war groups. I felt they were infiltrating because some of them were not students. They were showing up in Kent a lot for rallies.

S: How did your friends or any of the people in Kent...Had they said anything to you about these outsiders in the area or...

B: Yes. Actually, I knew, I suppose...My husband was an older student and a Vet and I suppose in some ways I didn't share the same opinion that all of the veterans at Kent State shared. But I think that they were really uncomfortable about a group coming in and stirring up our campus and town. If our students have these feelings and they wish to generate a rally, that's fine, but when an outside group is coming in to do it I think that was really uncomfortable. So I was aware of it because the Vets were really getting together at that time to react to the visitors to our campus that were stirring up trouble.

S: On the weekend before the Kent State shootings, starting on that Thursday night, there was some unrest on the campus. Do you remember what your earliest recollections would have been of when the unrest started since you were so close?

- B: I don't want to put things in the wrong order. I know I was very uncomfortable when the ROTC buildings were burned. I'm a great believer if you don't like something, work to get it changed, but don't break laws. I really respect laws. And arson is breaking the law. I was very upset that the kids wouldn't let the fire department go up to fight that fire. That's my school and I was really upset. And you have to wonder if that would have happened without the outsiders exciting our students. I understand that ROTC was a big problem at the time, but obviously burning down a building wasn't going to change President Nixon's mind.
- S: Now the ROTC building was burned on that Friday night and do you recall what you were doing when the building was burning, were you aware of it?
- B: I was just aware of the sirens. I really wasn't up there, nor was my husband.
- S: Then, the next morning, the Saturday...
- B: Wait, if that was Friday night though, I was aware of a lot of...Did the breaking of windows and everything downtown, was that before the building was burned?
- S: Yes.
- B: I was real aware of the stirring up of the students from downtown when they were trying to peel everyone out of the bars and move them out of downtown because they were setting fires downtown, breaking windows of any merchants. They weren't choosing any certain merchant because he supported Nixon, it was really out of hand and I am certain that any police department at that time would have tried to clear the downtown. And when I woke up I heard bullhorns telling all these students...I don't remember if it was..."You have twenty minutes to get off the streets. There is a curfew in effect." I'm hearing helicopters buzzing over my house. That was real scary. You just heard sirens and the bullhorns and a lot of noise from the students moving back up on campus and I imagine them...I don't remember the time frame but then the ROTC building was burned after that. I was just aware of sirens, not aware of the fire.
- S: Then on the Saturday morning, you woke up and I'm sure that must have been...
- B: On the news, right. And I think the troops were beginning to move in. I know they were on Sunday morning because I remember how awful it was, taking my boys to church and down at the corner, at the gate to campus, seeing army tanks. And of course I had two little

boys, they were three and five. No-- four and six, then, seeing soldiers on our streets; that was just incredible and my kids, they had to come in early at night. There were early curfews and just helicopters buzzing up and down my street above, that whole weekend was just very uncomfortable, really scary.

S: Now I'd heard that in some cases, the helicopters had spotlights on searching for radicals, whoever. Is that what they were doing when they were up there?

B: Oh, yes. It seemed like they would go right up and down the streets. Just buzzing up one street and down the other and yes, the spotlights, I had forgotten, but yes. Absolutely. And my kids of course, were just...They were really into Army and wars and you know little kids and shooting guns and this was...They were scared. I was scared.

S: So the curfew did effect the citizens of Kent...

B: Yes it did.

S: Do you recall what that curfew was?

B: Yes. You know for some...Why do I think seven o'clock? Which seems so early. It was something early. It wasn't quite dark yet and it was like the whole town was dead.

S: So as far as you recall, most of the people were honoring the curfew.

B: Yes, of course. I was one block away from campus so...And I stayed away. I didn't go back up to see what was going on. I mean I went to church and passed the campus and it was pretty quiet Sunday morning.

S: Now with all this uproar around you and the National Guard there, were you worried about the fact that some harm could come to you or your family or...

B: Probably more to friends who were students or faculty. I don't think I felt endangered.

S: How did you feel about the fact that the National Guard had arrived, had come to Kent?

B: I really felt sorry for them...For being there. I know that we had a lot of really angry students at that time and I know the National Guard, they were tired too from the truck strike that they had just come off (which was probably real nasty) and they were probably really edgy and the National Guard is...These are not people that do this all the time. They are called out for emergen-

cies. And they were probably very tired and very uptight and a lot of them had relatives, students right there in Kent. I'm sure a lot of them didn't like being there at all and were really antagonized by a small percentage of students who would actually spit on them. Now I understand also that not all of the Guardsmen were able to, at all times, maintain their poise and there was probably a little bit of agitation. Although I would have to say that to the best of my recollection, any aggravation or aggressive behavior by the Guard, like just maybe pointing the bayonet at someone, would have been justifiable at least understandable, in that they were really getting a lot of harassment. A phenomenal amount of harassment after all they stood for the Military, which was the whole problem.

S: Did you know any of the Guardsmen personally?

B: No. I was so glad.

S: So that takes us through Saturday. And then Sunday, again, there was some daytime demonstrations on the campus. Do you recall anything about the Sunday before the shooting? The day before the shooting.

B: For some reason, there was...I'm misleading myself to think that they had gotten everything back under control, and had had enough of the professors that the kids respected had gotten the kids to calm down. I was foolish enough to think that maybe everything would just be okay. I probably wasn't the only one who thought that. And I did have a friend that was a policeman and a liaison between the University and the town, Bob DeFluiter, so I'd get updates from him. I kept abreast of what was going on through him. His wife, Ann, babysat for my kids.

S: Okay and then on the Monday, you got up and went to work as normal?

B: Yes, yes, and I was out at recess duty. The front playground. And the ambulances went by and the girl that taught in the room next to me had a husband in ROTC and the first thing that we heard was that four Guardsmen were shot. That was the first start of it. And I knew my husband was in classes there and it didn't take long the rumor mill here to go crazy and then no, no it wasn't guardsmen it was students. But anyway, I can't remember if it was 1:00 or 1:30 but I wasn't allowed to go home to my family that night. I was not allowed to enter Kent.

- S: Now, you were talking about the rumor mill. How were people getting their information? Was it from the radio?
- B: Yes. And then I know I tried to call the babysitter to find out...I don't know why I thought anything would happen to my kids but just mother instinct and my husband...And he had already gotten there so I knew they were okay but rumor mill just probably...The principals probably would have...The junior high was here and our elementary school was there and just that many people or maybe someone from the warehouse just having heard, you know CB's or whatever. Plus, the rumor mill wouldn't take long with the ambulance's speeding right at the time it was the old hospital... I don't think the new hospital was built in 1970...Yes it was, yes it was...No it wasn't. No, it was the old hospital. So they just shot right down here. Four ambulances...People are just going to be finding out what happened so that was by rumor mill I guess I just mean by whatever information our principals and teachers could muster up from whatever sources. They probably called the cops here. You know the principals were friends of the police. So my friend was very concerned about her husband since he was a ROTC student.
- S: And what seemed to be the reaction that the teachers, the principals or even the students...How did they react when they knew that there was some kind of confrontation on the campus?
- B: I taught third grade then. They kind of liked the excitement. Teachers. Sandy McWhinney, I was real close with her. She still reminds me of where her husband was. So that was...We were really uptight. And there was another one...Another teacher who taught here who's husband was extremely liberal and quite vocal on campus. She was pretty nervous too. She didn't know where he was. (He definitely would have been right there at the demonstrations. No doubt.) And then, to find out we couldn't go home.
- S: How did that come about? School's over and you go thinking that you were going to make it back to Kent?
- B: No. Well my husband called. And Sandy's husband called and said "Don't. Dont come." But I know we would have met roadblocks anyway. We wouldn't have been allowed. Just that simple. At 3:30 in the afternoon, they would have not permitted us to drive into Kent unless we had found some way to sneak in a back road that wasn't being watched. And I just thought, they've got enough problems. A teacher here invited all the Kent teachers over to her house and we went there and waited and listened to the radio, and called



a lot. The friend I had whose husband was the liaison, that was a really nice hot line to have. And then, I don't know between 6:30 and 7:00 that night, they had already gotten rid of all of the students, bussed them here there and everywhere, Cincinnati. I mean, they'd say, "Okay, we've got four busses leaving for Cincinnati, get on them." They got all those students off that campus and then we were permitted to go back.

S: About what time of night was that?

B: I have a feeling it was like 6:30 or 7:00 that...I think they had most of the students out of there by 5:30 or 6:00.

S: And then when you went to go back in to Kent, they...How did they still let you back in?

B: I just told them that I lived there and I was a teacher and that I had just stayed out of the way for a while and I was going home and I promised them that that was where I was going. Home. Like I said, I didn't look too threatening. This was May and I was due that Summer. I was pretty pregnant. I looked like a low risk, I guess, to enter Kent.

S: So then the National Guard were there of course, Monday, and How was the week after the shootings? What was going on the first few days after?

B: That was the time of great tension. Friends that didn't feel the same way you did about what happened. That was, I guess, not terribly unlike the strike. People had their opinions and that was obviously just on everyone's mind.

S: What seemed to be the consensus. Was there one?

B: I don't think there was a consensus at that time at all. I think there were two camps. Those that felt the guard...At that time, I really think there were those that thought the Guard really had to do it and there were those that thought, 'How could they.' And there was that group that really believed that they really would have sent the Guard on campus. But I don't think there was a consensus yet. I feel a lot of people first supported the Guard, maybe more than that of the reverse with the people that I know.

S: What about how this whole affair was played up by the press and the media. How do you think they handled it? Did they inflame it or did they keep it calm or...

B: Did they inflame it? I guess that's a reporter's heyday isn't it. A tragedy. However, I don't think it

was too far out of line. When you are right there and right in it, I don't think... it was like the National Enquirer. It was real and so I guess the fact that it was headlines that it should have been. It was headlines in everyone's hearts too.

S: All this time has elapsed since then. It's been sixteen years. Does it still come up in conversation ever?

B: Yes. Especially since there was just the voting on the Kent State Memorial and that will trigger other conversations that center around it more. And I suppose that is what I mean when I just said I really believe more people who had total support for the Guard had mellowed a bit. They feel like maybe that the Guard wasn't in the jeopardy that they first felt they were.

S: Had you seen or read any of those books about Kent State or the movie Kent State?

B: I saw the movie Kent State and I just read parts of the Kent State book.

S: Did you feel the movie was accurate?

B: No, now I've got to think for a minute about that movie. Talk about bad memories. I had some feeling about that movie, darn it, I can't put my finger on it now. I felt that the movie was maybe too sympathetic. It went a little overboard, in my opinion.

S: What do you think the lessons are to be learned from Kent State? Any?

B: Well I suppose that there are different lessons for different people. For example, I think that many law enforcement agencies have addressed training people for these "sometimes" events. They might not happen often but it's a time when we really need people that are well trained. So that's a lesson probably that not just National Guard but I know a lot of policemen and I just happen to know a lot of people in those...Firemen, Policemen, and they are now trained for those unusual type circumstance that can develop. So that's something that they learned.

B: I don't know if students...Yes. I think they have...I think there's maybe been a little...I think that's a lesson that there's got to be a different way to demonstrate displeasure. Those are the lessons that I think should have been learned. That doesn't mean that all students are going to demonstrate in a more peaceful way.

END OF INTERVIEW