

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Kent State Shootings

Personal Experience

O H 1266

RICHARD HUGHES

Interviewed

by

Douglas Senseman

on

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RICHARD HUGHES

Richard Hughes was born on April 4, 1951 in Evanston, Illinois. He attended Kent State University graduating in 1973 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Education. Richard was a student on campus in the spring of 1970. His interview gives us a glimpse as to what was happening on campus on that fatal weekend in early May.

Richard has been employed by the Ravenna City Schools since his graduation in 1973. He is a special education and reading teacher. The Hughes family still lives in Kent and consists of Rick, his wife Sandra and three boys.

S This is an interview with Rick Hughes for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Kent State Shootings, by Doug Senseman, on May 9, 1989, at Brown Middle School in Ravenna, Ohio, in the a m

Rick, I would like to take you back in time, nineteen years to be exact What were you doing in the spring of 1970?

H I was a student at Kent State

S Were you living in Kent State?

H Yes.

S What kind of degree were you going for at Kent State?

H Special Education Teacher

S In May of 1970, how long had you been at Kent State?

H That was my first quarter there I had attended Ohio University prior to that

S What made you decide to go to Kent State?

H My wife to be was up here.

S Knowing that you just arrived there, you did not know a lot about the city of Kent and the nearby city of Ravenna, but what were some of your impressions you had of Kent when you first arrived there?

H Kent was a very friendly town There was a lot to do We had a good time

S Now, of course, this was during the Vietnam War What impressions had you formed about the Vietnam War in the spring of 1970?

H We were against the war and could not support it at all

S Who do you mean by "we"?

H My wife and I

S What was the overall feeling among the students at Kent?

H The people that we ran with had the same feelings. Overall, most of the kids were against it

S Did you have any friends or relatives who were in Vietnam?

H A next door neighbor in my hometown

S Did you know anyone who at that time was openly resisting the war?

H No

S Anyone who was preparing to be drafted?

H No

S Were you following the political events closely at that time?

H As closely as a college freshman can, or will

S Back in April 1970, President Nixon announced that the United States had entered Cambodia and this was kind of the prelude to some of the trouble at Kent. Do you remember anything about that?

H Yes. There was a group of us who went out on the hill right after that and just sat and talked. We thought probably there would be problems.

S. When you said a group of you, how many was that?

H There were about ten of us.

S What kind of problems did they believe would occur?

H That people would not put up with it, and maybe he was asking for trouble.

S Between Thursday night and Friday morning, I have read that a lot of signs were painted around Kent urging the United States to get out of Cambodia. Do you remember any of that?

H No, none of that.

S. Do you remember anything from the day after the announcement that Friday?

H During the day?

S Yes.

H No

S There was a symbolic bearing of the Constitution on Friday Do you remember That?

H No

S Did you go to classes that Friday?

H Yes It was a typical, normal day for us

S What about the professors at Kent? I know some of them were politically active and talked about the events of the war

H Education professors typically did not

S On weekends in the spring, did you ever go downtown?

H Oh yes All the time

S Now one of the supposed hot spots in Kent was Water Street Can you tell us a little bit about Water Street?

H It was a fun place That night?

S In general

H In general it was a fun place with lots of kids and lots of fun

S Now you mentioned that night, which would be Friday, May 14 Do you recall anything about that night?

H Yes

S What was going on at Water Street, May 1st?

H It started out like a typical weekend night I think things just got out of hand All the bars closed and if I recall, they closed early That got the people angry

S Why had they decided to close early?

H We had heard that there might be, as we were sitting there, a rumor going around that there was going to be problems All of a sudden, all the bars were closed and the kids had no place to go

S One of the things I have read is that there were a lot of outsiders on the campus that weekend. What was your impression of that?

H I did not hear of any.

S Now going back to Friday, it seemed from my research that most of the trouble began around 11.00 or 11.30 Friday night. Were you out Friday night at that time?

H Yes. We were there.

S Do you remember any of the incidents that occurred?

H Well, once everybody was out on the street, it was kind of like you know how we were told as teachers that if we expect the worst it is going to happen. If we expect the best, everything will be fine. My impression was that the people, physically downtown, the bar owners expected something to happen, and so it did. These kids, we, had nothing to do. The thing was that with Nixon going into Cambodia had flared things. You know, just like if we do not have stuff prepared and we do not have something planned, something is going to happen.

S What was most of the damage that night? Do you remember?

H There were windows broken and bonfires in the street. There were just a lot of angry people, kids and adults.

S How would you have characterized the relationship between the adults, the people of Kent and the students?

H I think the people of Kent were the ones who were expecting something to go wrong. So not matter what the students would do, they were wrong. It looked as though they were going to do something that would get everybody in trouble.

S So between 11.00 and 1.00 that night, they had the windows broken and, as you said, the bonfires. Around 1.00 is when a state of emergency was declared. Do you remember that?

H We went home.

S What time did you go home that night?

H We probably stayed for about an hour like around midnight or a quarter after.

S And you were living in Kent?

H We lived on campus

S When you woke up Saturday morning, was there a lot of excitement because of what happened the previous night?

H At first, no, because not a whole lot of people knew what had gone on and once the people who were downtown woke up and started talking about it then everybody went downtown to see what had gone on

S Now some people believe that there was a lot of damage That is, of course, a subjective term, and the other people believe that the amount of damage was totally exaggerated What would have been your impression about what had actually occurred in Kent that night?

H I think, money wise, there was not a whole lot of damage but to the outsiders, you know how the media and everything blows things way out of proportion, that is what hurt

S Did you hear any rumors going about on Saturday?

H. No It was tense You knew something was brewing but we did not hear anything

S You heard nothing about the National Guard possibly being called out?

H No

S Had you heard that the National Guard was in Akron?

H: Yes

S What had they been saying about the National Guard?

H I do not think anybody expected the National Guard to be there because things were so flared in Akron

S: They were policing

H Youngstown

S: Right

H Yes

S They were based in Akron Could you tell me a little bit about Saturday? You said things were tense

H: It was just a feeling in the air that things were tense You knew that it was not over and that something else was going to happen

S Could you tell me what you did that Saturday?

H It was a typical Saturday I did laundry and we went downtown to see what was going on We probably watched a baseball game or whatever was on It was a typical day

S When you went downtown to see what was going on, what was happening?

H We saw that the windows were boarded up It was not very crowded There were not very many townspeople there There were a lot of students around gawking Boy, that was a negative term

S So that night, we get into some of the same problems Did they try and enforce an 8:00 p.m. curfew downtown, for example? Do you recall that?

H Yes

S Was that obeyed by the students?

H We did not go downtown that night We were just on campus I remember being in front of the campus and crowds of kids being herded back to campus Then I think on the corner of Lincoln and Fifty-nine, there was a bunch of kids sitting They were kids that had been herded back to campus

S Now who had herded them back?

H The police

S What do you think the relations between the police and the kids were at that time?

H Neither side was listening to each other So it was just two sides against each other and there was no communication at all other than anger.

S This Saturday is the night, of course, that the R.O.T.C. Building was burned Do you remember anything about that?

H Yes We heard that it was going to happen We decided that we had just about enough So we went back to the dorms My wife lived in Corb on the fourth floor, but she was

not my wife at the time We could see the flames It was scary That is when we felt it was really scary

S It is interesting because a lot of what I have read has been from what the students were doing outside I really have not heard too much about what was going on inside the dorms What was the reaction of the kids inside and what were they saying and how frightened were they?

H At first, people did not believe that the stuff was happening. You will never forget that eeriness of that sky when you knew that a building was being burned down I think it was just fear from that point on People who ran the dorms, like the dorm mother in Corb, who found out that night that kids were being tear-gassed if they were in groups of three or more, broke all the rules and let the guys stay in the girl's dorm

S So you stayed in that dorm that night?

H Yes

S Did you sleep well?

H No, the helicopters were outside and you could hear them all of the time. You could see the lights beaming down on the windows It was not a party atmosphere Everybody was down in the lounge, and it was not a happy place It was like we were being held hostage.

S In the Michner book, one of the witnesses said that they had a feeling like it was the George Orwell, 1984

H Yes

S With the police and the helicopters

H Yes You had no control You are finally away from home and you feel like you are in charge of your life and things are going It was totally taken away

S Did any of the kids try and leave the dorm?

H Do you mean to go out? No I think the people who were out were going to stay out The ones who were in were the ones that decided they did not want anything to do with it that night

S When did you actually find out that the National Guard had rolled onto the campus?

H I do not remember There were a lot of rumors going around that they were there I do not remember actually finding out when

S Where did your parents live at this time?

H Columbus

S And were you in communication with them?

H Yes I called home to let them know we were okay

S Right

H My wife's family, this was so weird, her father had a massive heart attack in Detroit and said there was no contact at all We had no idea what was going on there because it was hard to get a line out So we had that tension on top of this

S Did any of the parents attempt to come and get their kids?

H Not that night Not that I am aware of

S Anything else about Saturday that stands out?

H. Just fear

S Now we are into Sunday morning From what I have read, Sunday was a nice day Quoting again in the Michner book, they referred to Sunday as a carnival atmosphere Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

H It was just the opposite extreme of Saturday night I think it was the actual shock of seeing the National Guard, of seeing a tank on campus At first it was a real shock and what is that doing there, but then it was funny to see tanks rolling around on campus. It became funny We walked downtown that day and talked to them and I mean they were not any older than we were and they were fighting against the same thing that the kids were fighting against Yet, they were pitted against students

S What were the National Guardsmen telling you when you talked to them?

H That they were tired and that they were afraid Some of the kids knew some of the Guardsmen so they caught up on families and so on

S Interesting Were there any rumors floating around on Sunday?

H: No

S: Now, the day seems to be pretty easy going, almost a carnival atmosphere. Were there a lot of outsiders, people coming in to see what was going on?

H: There were lots of people driving in. It was not like when people say "outsiders" and they think of like SDS and things like that. It was families. You saw thousands of cars with kids driving all around campus looking at what was going on, which I thought was weird. Maybe that is what added to the carnival type thing because there were so many. It was not scary like it was the night before.

S: Now you mentioned the SDS. Were there a lot of people trying to agitate on campus?

H: Not that I know of, at least not the group that we were in with.

S: Now let us go into Sunday night. What did you do that night?

H: We had exams that week so I stayed over in the other dorm again.

S: Okay.

H: I stayed in the lounge and studied.

S: You were in the dorm the whole night?

H: Yes.

S: Now that Sunday night, again, there are things going on in downtown Kent. There were sit ins, things like that. Did you hear anything about those things going on?

H: No, we tried to block the whole thing out that night, kind of like the ostrich.

S: Did you watch any of the news or listen to the radio to see what they were saying?

H: We were aware, but not of a whole lot.

S: One thing I was going to ask you about, I had read a lot of mental abuse of the Ohio National Guard on Sunday, that some people were taunting them. You talked about the opposite, where people were chatting friendly with them. Did you see any of the kids who were actually taunting them?

H: No. But then again, maybe it was just the group that we ran with.

S Let us go into Monday Monday morning you woke up and what were you expecting?

H Expect maybe, another Sunday where it is relaxed but a little bit tense It is the beginning of the week, it was exam week Most of us, I think, expected it to be over

S Had you heard any rumors of classes to be canceled?

H No, in fact, we called

S Now Monday, a lot of the people are coming back to campus who had not been there over the weekend Were there people you talked to who did not know anything about what had gone on?

H No, most of the people we knew had been there

S What was the situation with the National Guard going to your classes Monday?

H They were there Now this is Monday morning You walked around them and they got out of your way. Monday morning, nobody was interfering with anybody

S So, what time were your first classes then on Monday?

H: 7 45

S. That class goes normally?

H Yes

S Then what happened after your first classes?

H: I went back to the dorm because I had heard that there was going to be a group of people on the commons around 11:30, 12 00 noon I think that is when people got afraid again This was to be the largest from what we had heard It was the largest group of people since the weekend

S Did you have another class then after the 7 45 class?

H No Not until I had an exam at noon

S So you go from your class What time is it over?

H 8 50

S Then what do you do?

H Go back to the dorm Then what did we do? It was nothing big time

S. So you have an exam at 12 00 and what is happening as that time is approaching?

H You could hear the group of kids You could hear kids on the commons So we decided that more than likely things would be canceled This is something we just decided We had not heard anything We decided, "Yes, maybe we should see what is going on " So probably around 11 00, we trucked over to the commons.

S. When you got to the commons, what was your first reaction?

H We were amazed. That is when you could see tanks moving, guardsmen lined up, and kids lined up Have you been to campus?

S Yes

H The commons is down Do you know where Eastway and Tritonweirs are? That is the direction we were coming from We were going up the hill, kind of where the pagoda was looking down at everything when that was going on It was kind of apart, but not apart of what was going on There were a lot of people You see pictures in the paper and pictures in magazines of thousands of kids and there were a lot of those kids I would say the majority of those kids were kids like us who were just watching

S Was it an aggressive atmosphere between the kids and the National Guard?

H At first, no I think once the kids were being herded again, or being told to move and to get out of there, then yes. It got angry Kids started throwing things and the National Guard started throwing canisters of the tear gas

S What do you think if the National Guard had turned around and left the students alone, just totally retreated back?

H That might have stopped it

S Did you have the impression that the National Guardsmen were in danger?

H At that point, no

S. So when do things really turn?

H As the kids are being herded up the hill toward the pagoda and all the people that were there looking were there, they were not moving. They wanted to see what was going on. So you have got that wall of spectators and you have the people who are actively involved in the middle and the Guardsmen are coming this way. So until the group of us moved, I think that is when things got out of hand. They had no place to go.

S Who seemed to be the kids who were in the middle? Did you know any of those kids?

H No. I can look at pictures and say, "Yes, I saw him," or "I knew she was there," things like that. I did not know those people.

S On the commons area, did you see any of the professors around?

H Yes. I did not know they were professors at that time.

S What kind of roll were they playing in that whole chain of events there?

H Mediator between the two sides. A group of students would do something and I remember Glen Frank. He would try to calm down the students and then the National Guards would retaliate and he would talk to them. At that point it was very calm. They found that that did not work. He got angry, too. I do not know if anger is the right word. Frustrated. Emotional.

S Had the student thought that the National Guard would be carrying live bullets?

H I do not think anybody believed that. No. I mean college kids being shot? No.

S So the National Guard is approaching these kids and they have nowhere to go because of the wall spectators. What happens next?

H We left or backed up. We were down in the parking lot and the kids started to disperse and they were coming toward us. The Guard at that point was on the practice field.

S Then when, in relation to that, did you hear the shots if you heard them?

H Oh yes. I remember the Guard on the practice field and then there were some, many of them up by the pagoda and this group had turned, were walking away in a formation which was weird and that is what we were watching. They had turned and came back and then this group up here just turned real quick and that was when the shots came.

S So the shots rang out and what is happening at that point?

H Mass confusion. People were running, kids running, kids falling.

S Falling from bullet wounds or just falling?

H Both.

S What are you doing at this point? Are you running away or what?

H We just ran We did not even wait to see what was going on

S What were the people in your group saying at that point?

H It was not a group anymore We were all dispersed We all went different ways, hiding behind cars, and once everything stopped we just got up and keep going

S Going where?

H Back to the dorm

S So you knew at that point that the fun was over?

H Oh, yes

S But did you know at that point that they had fired live bullets?

H We saw a lot of blood Yes

S How many people did you actually see who had been hit?

H I do not remember

S More than a couple?

H Oh, yes

S It is hard to imagine the situation What are the people doing for the students who had been shot? Are a lot of people gathering around them?

H Students are There was a lot of screaming. There was a lot of, "I cannot believe this actually happened They really did have live bullets "

S What is the National Guard doing?

H I do now know We did not even look

S: Okay, so you pass these kids. There is a mass confusion and you are by yourself. Where do you go?

H: Back to the dorm.

S: Once you got to the dorm what happened?

H: People do not believe what we have told them. "This cannot happen." Yet, the group of us that finally ended up, they could see that physically we were a wreck.

S: So this is approximately 12:30. What goes on for that afternoon?

H: The rest of the afternoon was mass confusion as people tried to get out of there. You cannot get the lines on the phone. You cannot get through to people. Kids are piling into cars just to get out of there, and that is when we heard outsiders were coming in to finish everything.

S: What does that mean, finish everything?

H: The campus will be leveled, basically. That added to fears. You have got people on campus who have already killed people, and supposedly there are people who are coming in who are going to do more.

S: Are you one of the persons who piles in the car?

H: No, we did not get out of there until about six. We were one of the last to get out of there.

S: Were you ever able to get through to your parents?

H: No, never. One girl that lived in Columbus that we did not even know, her father came and there were about eight of us who just piled into her dad's car.

S: How was she able to get through at that point?

H: It was so late in the day. He had a hard time getting into the city and getting out of campus because barricades were erected all over the place. But the hardest part was getting out of the city. Once we were all in the car, I guess we all looked pretty suspicious, a car load of eight kids and an adult and one of the kids had made arrangement to fly out of the Kent State Airport. When we pulled into the airport, somebody met us at the car with a gun. That added to the fears. The girl's father, who had come to get us, handled it really well. It was just like, "Hey, these kids are afraid and you have just made them more afraid."

S Who was the man with the gun? A police officer?

H It was a National Guardsman who was probably just as afraid as we were

S So other than that, were you stopped on the way out of the city?

H No There was one barricade that they had to move so we could go through and we were questioned as to where we were going.

S Had you talked to any of the towns people who were from Kent between the times of the shootings and the time you left?

H We had friends who lived in Cuyohoga falls and we talked to them a couple times, but campus was closed. Nobody knew anything.

S How did you find out the campus was closed?

H We were told

S By whom?

H The dorm mother, I guess We were all in front of the television when the news media said it was closed That is strange We were sitting there and they are saying the campus is closed What do you mean, we are here

S So you leave the campus and this is during a crucial part of the quarter because it is final week

H Oh yes

S So you go home and then how do you finish up the quarter?

H Everything was done by mail. We all got assignments from the professors we had whether it was a test or some kind of project or whatever. We had a certain date which was about half way into summer, which I though was strange, but we had a certain date where we had to have everything back

S You just mailed it back?

H Yes

S After the shootings, when was the next time you returned to Kent?

H I do not remember the exact date. There were certain times that either going by the year in school you were, or the area of campus you lived in or alphabetically. I do not remember how, but we were called back at different times to come and pick up stuff. It was not a mass exit. Everybody came back and got their stuff and left.

S Had you heard the story from the media reporters that the police had searched all the dorm rooms looking for weapons?

H: Yes

S Had you noticed that they searched your room?

H No

S Did anybody tell you they did?

H No, those were just rumors as far as I knew. If they did, I could see why they would.

S A lesson could be learned from this. How could Kent State apply this and learn something valuable from it?

H I think the basic thing is just to remember that it happened. I think just remembering that something like that actually did happen on a college campus is enough. It was really weird. My girlfriend at that time, who is now my wife, called me up one afternoon. We both lived in the same town, and she said that the FBI had just been to her house to question her about the events that had happened. As soon as I hung up the phone, there they were, at my door. That was scary. To think that us, the ones that hid under the beds, were being questioned.

S What kind of questions?

H They basically wanted to know our role and what we had heard and things that had gone on.

S How long did they question you?

H About a half an hour. It was the typical two men in dark suits, flashing the badge and all of that. My mother was a basket case.

S After that point, they never bothered you again?

H No

S They did not start a file on you or anything?

H. I do not know They probably did I have not heard anything since

S Interesting Okay, Rick Thank you

End of Interview