YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Anti-War Movement at YSU During the 1960's

Personal Experience

O. H. 1364

SIDNEY I. ROBERTS

Interviewed

by

Matthew T. Butts

on

October 17, 1990

DR. SIDNEY I. ROBERTS

Dr. Sidney I. Roberts was born on November 24, 1929 in the small rural town of Mineola, New York. He moved to Boston, Massachusetts to live with an aunt following the death of his parents in 1938. He began his education in Boston, but completed his secondary education at Stuyvesant High School in New York City in 1948. Dr. Roberts attended the City College of New York City, receiving a B.S. degree in History. He immediately began his graduate studies at Columbia University, achieving his M.S. degree in American History. He went to graduate school at Northwestern University, receiving his Ph.D. degree in 1960.

Dr. Roberts has been employed as a professor since his graduation from Northwestern. He served as a Fellow at Northwestern University from 1952 until 1954. Professor Roberts then took a job on the faculty at Texas A&M, which he served on for six years. He arrived at Youngstown University in September of 1961 and has been an integral part of the History department ever since.

Dr. Roberts served as Assistant Dean of the University during the mid-1960's, an administrative position which no longer exists. It was during this period that professor Roberts became active in the anti-war movement at Youngstown University. He was among those faculty who were instrumental in helping to organize the Peace Moratorium of 1969 and other important events on campus.

Dr. Roberts and his wife, Patricia, reside at 612 Northlawn Drive, in Youngstown, Ohio. He remains active within the History department at Youngstown State, and the Ohio Education Association.

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INTERVIEWEE: SIDNEY I. ROBERTS

INTERVIEWER: Matthew T. Butts

SUBJECT: Anti-War movement at YSU, effect of Kent State shootings in 1970

DATE: October 17, 1990

B: This is an interview with Dr. Sidney I. Roberts for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Anti-War Movement at YSU during the 1960's, by Matthew T. Butts, at DeBartolo Hall, on October 17, 1990, at approximately 9:00 a.m.

Can you tell me a little bit about where you're from and a little bit about your childhood?

R: I was born in a small, rural community in New York State. That saw me starting school there, but both of my parents died when I was very young, so then, as a youngster of about nine years old, I moved to Boston and lived with an aunt and went to school in Boston. I finished school in New York City. I went to New York City, where I went to City University of New York with an undergraduate degree in education and a major in History. Then immediately I went to Columbia University and got a Master's degree in American History. From there, I went to Northwestern University, pursued and obtained a Doctoral degree in History. Subsequent to that Ph.D program at Northwestern, I went to Texas A&M to teach American History. I taught there for six years, came to Youngstown University in 1960, with every intention of spending one year here, but was convinced that I should stay and I'm still here.

B: What was Youngstown State like in the 1960's. I guess it would still be Youngstown College at that period.

R: It would be Youngstown University. Remember we were Youngstown College, well, Youngstown Law School, Youngstown College, then Youngstown University, and then Youngstown State University. What was it like? In the 1960's, when I first got here, this was a comparatively small institution. Very, very few buildings. It was typical of an urban institution in that we didn't have any grass or greenery to speak of. Wherever there was an open area, it was made into a parking lot. The institution was largely run by one individual, the president of the university, Howard Jones, who had been president for a goodly number of years. He probably was the perfect president for the institution in its early years, but did not keep up with the innovations and changes that had taken place in the field of higher education. So that at the time of his retirement, and replacement, we were ripe for a change. Youngstown State University was peculiar in a number of ways. At the same time, it was typical of many universities. For example, just by way of illustration of that last comment, when I first came to Youngstown State University, faculty members were required to chaperone student dances and student activities, which of course, today, is totally unheard of. When I first came to Youngstown State University, black students could not attend dances given by white students, which today, is totally unheard of. When I first came to Youngstown State University, I discovered this was the only university in the United States, to my knowledge, where the president gave faculty members Christmas bonuses. The basis on which bonuses were given out was seemingly a haphazard basis. If he liked you or thought he knew you, then you got a larger bonus than somebody else got. That was a rather erratic procedure. What Howard Jones would do, apparently, would be to go out to the business community and in effect, say to them, "Look, you're going to give your people Christmas bonuses, why don't you make a contribution to the University so that I can give my people a Christmas bonus." He would gather in a fund and then distribute it to the faculty. The university was then, as it is now, a drive-in educational institution. People would drive in and get six credits, or ten credits, or twelve credits and then go on off, or go to work, or go home, It was not a residential campus. It certainly isn't now. The university was very parochial and very limited in the sense that most of the students who attended the university were first generation college students. Their parents had not gone to college and as a result, they were focused primarily upon getting their grades, taking their courses, acquiring a

degree so that they could then find a better job than their parents had. Education was a very serious, very practical, object oriented process.

B: What was a typical day like for you during the Vietnam War, here at the university?

R: To answer that question, I need to make several observations about this particular interview. What you need to recognize is that those people who were opposed to the Vietnam War did not constitute a monolithic group; that those who opposed the war were of different persuasions, different emotional commitments. So then, when you say to me, "What was it like during the Vietnam War for me?" You've got to recognize that in no sense of the word was I a leader of the anti-war movement. I certainly was a member of the group and a supporter of it. So the question, then, that you posed, addressed to me, gets a different response than it would if you posed the question to a leader. The Vietnam War was a very, very important part of one's everyday life. But politics always takes a back seat to the necessity of performing your daily duties and requirements. In my case, one needs to add the additional caveat which is that I do not believe that professors should use their classrooms and or their title to proselytize their believes. So I'd never wear, for example, campaign buttons. I never put political bumper stickers on my car. I always try to avoid, whenever possible, telling students my personal political opinions. One of the horrors of our existence is that students tend to believe what authority figures tell them and university professors tend to be authority figures. That is a very dangerous position. So when you ask me what my life was like, my life, then, was pretty much what my life is like today. I had certain professional responsibilities that consumed the bulk of my attention at that time. For a period of time, I was an administrator at this university and so I focused a good deal of my attention on administrative responsibilities. In the classroom, I was primarily a history teacher.

B: When did you first become opposed to the United States' involvement in Vietnam?

R: From the very, very outset, because my opposition to Vietnam was nurtured by the Korean War. From the very outset, also, because as an historian, I am, perhaps, more sensitive to the fact that under our form of government of checks and balances, the president of the United States as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, can sometimes act in a fashion that is not reflective of the will of either the legislative body, Congress, or the will of the people.

B: Would you have been opposed to the war, say, as early as the Eisenhower Administration in the first U. S....

R: When Eisenhower initially sent military advisors, I was opposed. When Jack Kennedy increased the number of advisors, I was opposed. When Kennedy sent Lyndon Johnson on an investigation tour and Johnson came back and urged continuous support, I was opposed because I did not want to support, nor did I think the United States government should support a dictatorship, nor did I ever give any credence, whatsoever, to the Eisenhower Domino Theory. I was opposed at the outset.

B: Dr. Slavin made reference that the basic reason that he opposed the war was over the issue of a nationalization fight, or more of an issue of trying to protect their own country in the issue of their own culture, the Vietnamese Conflict. That is why he was opposed to the war and the United States involvement. Did you come to the same conclusions?

R: I need to refer you back to what I had said earlier. The opposition to the Vietnam War was not a monolithic opposition. It would be difficult for me to pinpoint a specific reason why I was opposed to it. There were a number of reasons. Certainly, one of the reasons of my opposition was the fact that historically speaking, the United States had repeatedly put itself on the side of governments that were opposing rising nationalism. As a result of that position, where the nationalist movements were successful, and you've got to remember, we're talking about post-World War II and in area after area after area, nationalism, self determination, are being more and more important, and more significantly, are being successful. That the United States repeatedly had supported the established government and put itself in opposition to a rising popular nationalist movement, and by so doing, had made it possible for the Communists and Communist government to go in and pose as friends and supporters of nationalism and portray the United States as the opponent of nationalism. The most notable illustration of that is what had happened in China. The United States diplomatically had made a terrible, terrible blunder in not supporting the Chinese nationalist movement and we drove China into the hands of the Communists. So I saw another example, another instance of "Here's a nationalist movement." The United States, instead of supporting it, the United States is opposing it. Remember, before Vietnam the French had been the chief opponents of rising nationalism. There were many people in the United States who wanted the French out. Indeed, the French did get out because the French were opposing a nationalist movement. So I think that one of the reasons why there

were number of us, and only one reason among many reasons, there were a number of us who opposed the war, was because the United States was once again, opposing a nationalist movement that had a good, sound basis for the movement. The government was autocratic, the government was totalitarian, the government was backward, it was feudal, and the United States had seemed to me, was supporting the wrong movement and opposing it.

B: As a faculty member at Youngstown State University, when did you first realize students were beginning to become aware of the United States' involvement in Vietnam?

R: My feeling about that is that students were not as aware of the Vietnamese situation as were the faculty and as were the people in the community; that they were slower to realize the significance of it. Students initially became aware of it when they considered being drafted and they thought that their grades and their GP would determine whether they were drafted or not drafted. They were sensitive to it when term papers were assigned and students did not know whether they would still be here at the end of the quarter, and so they delayed working on their papers. Student involvement, then, as today, is minimal. I would say that student involvement in the Vietnam protest at Youngstown State University was about the same level as student attendance at Youngstown State University football games and we all know that that's minimal. For example, the number of students who turn out for the artist lectures series speakers who come to campus, is minimal. Students in general, and especially students at YSU, are more narrowly focused than any other group and so their awareness is a minimal awareness. Obviously among students, you've got a handful who are political activists on the right and political activists on the left, and they're aware of every nuance that takes place in politics. The students at Youngstown State University were not sensitive to the Vietnam War, pro or anti, as were students on other campuses. Again, the explanation is that Youngstown is a community that is essentially, a non-political community. Youngstown is an area that focuses primarily on local issues, rather than national. The Youngstown population is not a sophisticated one and the Youngstown community is best described as a "hot bed of rest". So when you have students coming from this background, going to a commuter school, there is little wonder that students' sensitivities to political issues such as the Vietnam War, would be, comparatively speaking, minimal.

B: When did you decide to become active in the Anti-War Movement at the University?

R: I never decided. It was just something that occurred. There was never a point of deciding, am I or am I not. It was a process.

B: Do you remember the approximate year when the Anti-War Movement became more organized on this campus?

R: No, I don't know that it was ever more organized or less organized. I know that there were periods when the war protest was greater than at other periods. It, often time coincided with what was happening in the war, and at other times, it coincided with what was happening here, on campus. So, for example, we had two faculty members here on campus, one in the History department and one in the English department, who were married to each other and who were incredibly ideologically oriented and who had a much, much higher developed sense of morality than certainly, I (not to suggest that I am immoral but my morality is not at the high level of theirs) and who had a religious commitment. (My religious commitment is barely visible) These two faculty members were constantly leading the protest against the war in Vietnam. From time to time, they would say things or allegedly say things in their classrooms about the war and some students would object and complain to the administration about it, then I was more sensitive to the protest movement than other times. I am pleased to say to you that at one point, when I was part and parcel of the administration of this institution, the president of the university was a guy by the name of Albert Pugsley, who himself, was conservative; who, himself, was personally, pro the war; who, himself, was pro-the-administration in Washington, D.C. Pugsley, on many, many occasions, rose up and defended the right of these two faculty members and therefore, obviously the right of all faculty members in their classrooms and in their professional activities, defended their freedom of speech and defended academic freedom of speech. I was very pleased, that, such indeed, was the case. That was a point of greater sensitivity. When the students demonstrated and marched when there was going to be a speak-in or a teach-in, I was more aware of that. When, for example, I found out that the chief of campus security, a guy by the name of Paul Cress, was secretly photographing faculty members and students who were in candlelight parades and marching and protesting, and attending demonstrations, I was more aware of it. When I found out, for example, that the chief of police of Youngstown, Chief Terlesky, was sending up one of his younger policemen, a guy by the name of Lynch, in plain clothes, carrying a brief case, and attending meeting and secretly recording everything that was being said, I was more sensitive to what was going on. When two of

our students were arrested and I was able to play a role in talking to a judge and getting them released from jail for disorderly conduct, I was more aware. Again, in my case, I need to remind you that my position on the war was not a daily, all consuming, nor was it a leadership position. So my responses and reactions depended on what was going on. In almost daily conversations with colleagues, when the war came up, my position was clearly stated by me. Again, we were not all consumed by it. I suspect my commitment was not the commitment of a religious or of a moral or ideologically oriented individual.

B: Could you tell me the names of the two individuals, the one from History? Was that Chap Morrison?

R: Yes, and his wife, Claudia.

B: Do you remember the students' names that you helped?

R: No, I could find them out for you if it's significant.

B: What events stand out as major and significant during the period of the Anti-War Movement here at Youngstown State University?

R: The event that disturbs me more than any other event is not a specific, one time event, but rather is a whole series of events and an attitude and that is the whole general area of a repressiveness. I felt that there was an unwarranted hostility on the part of authority figures toward those people who were protesting against the war. The right of protest is inherent in democracy. It is part and parcel of our political system. We have had protest since the very inception of government. I believe that people should exercise that right, whether their political belief are the same as mine or different than mine, I still believe they should exercise that right. So what stands out in my mind more than any other single thing, was the oppression against the protesters, need I give any better illustration than the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University. The oppression of protesters and the courage that was required of many people to openly stand up and say that they were against the war. My position as never a threatened position. I'm fully tenured, fully secured, fully professored, full promoted faculty member at Youngstown State uNiversity so there was never any problem in terms of my job security. But there were business people in the community who stood up at great risk to their businesses. There were faculty members who were new to campus who were untenured and the lowest faculty ranks not yet promoted who stood up. That took courage.

There were clergymen who stood up and opposed the war. Father DiBlasio, by way of example, and he's only one example of a number of clergymen. Father DiBlasio, who at that time was advisor to the Newman Student Organization, repeatedly stood up in opposition to the war and even had enough courage to debate several members of the local Catholic Church leadership. I remember one such debate at Ursuline High School, where he opposed those people who were above him and could determine his future within the ranks of Catholicism. These people exercised a good deal of courage. I admire that. That increased my horror and recollection of the oppression that took place.

You are probably aware or heard, I suspect, of Chief Cress, Paul Cress's Enemies List, here on campus and you've heard the story of Cress keeping track of certain faculty members and keeping a dossier on them. When it was discovered that he was keeping this dossier at the time, I was, I recall chairperson or an executive member of the local Civil Liberties Union. We threatened a suit against the university because it kept this secret file against people who were exercising their political rights. We made such an issue of it that it was decided that the files would be gathered away from the campus Chief of police and put in the safe of the vice president for financial affairs, Joe Rook. Those of us who were in the files could individually go look at those files. Well, obviously, my name was published as being on the "Enemies List' and it was published in the Jambar. Incidentally, for many people, it was status to be listed on the Campus Enemies List. When I went to see my file, I had a good deal of fear and trepidation as to what the file might contain. When I saw it, I could not help but break out into laughter because it contained actually nothing of any consequence except for one photograph, 8 x 12 glossy, that showed me leading this wild mass hoard of demonstrators. When I finally saw that picture it appeared that yes, I was in the leadership, that is, I was up front. Right next to me was a black faculty member who was viewed as a radical faculty member and behind us were hundred, thousands of people. But we all had academic regalia either on, or on our arms and we were just emerging from an Honors Ceremony, and that was the picture that was taken. Obviously the administration had to do a double take and destroy my file because it was so incredibly stupid that had we actually gone to court, they would have appeared to have been...What is the academic term? Assholes.

B: You made reference to the Kent State Shootings. What was your emotional and I guess, intellectual response to the shootings at Kent State?

R: My response there is not any different than my general attitude and that general attitude is, you do not shoot your own children. My general attitude is, everybody has the right to demonstrate and protest. That if there is any place where freedom of speech should be protected, it's on a university campus. If there is any place where you should not use live ammunition, it is on a university campus. So my response was one of horror, and it was one of moral indignation, and it was one of political protest. I subsequently spent hundreds of hours at Kent State University going through the documents that have been gathered on that Kent State event and my research has convinced me that tit was totally, totally a disaster. It never, never should have taken place. Governor Rhodes and the National Guard and the entire attitude of the American people towards people who were protesting, is responsible for the death and injury of students.

B: What impact did the Kent shootings have on the student body here at Youngstown State?

R: The Kent State University episode had a national impact on all universities. It's impact here, I suspect, was less than it's impact on other universities. But it, nonetheless, created a situation where the president of the university devoted and dedicated an entire day to having the faculty members discuss with the students in their classes what had happened and the significance of what had happened. There was a mass memorial, here on campus. It seems to me, but here, I'm speculating. I have not basis, in fact, for saying this. It seems to me that the result and reaction here on campus amongst our students, was that students who previously had not been active in the protest, were now made active by that. Students who previously had not been anti-war, were now, anti-war.

B: If you had to pick a year, what year would you say was the peak of the peace movement at Youngstown State?

R: I couldn't. I could not pick any one year.

B: As far as the Moratorium of 1969, the Peace Moratorium of 1969, do you recall that event and organization that led up to it?

R: I recall one, the event. I do not remember the steps that led up to it. I may or may not even had been a participant. I don't remember.

B: What was the general feeling of the Youngstown community towards the Peace Movement and the Vietnam War?

R: Hostile. Hostile towards the Peace Movement. Pro-Vietnam War. The community is a conservative community and they accept, without question, presidential leadership. Further, when you have a war, conservative people tend to view those people who were opposed to the war as disloyal to the country. I don't know any individual in the anti-war movement who was disloyal to the United States, who was opposed to the United States. The people who were opposed to the war were opposed to the policy of the United States. But that's a distinction that the local community was incapable of understanding. They viewed protesters in the most unfavorable light. This should come as no surprise because after all, the administration did everything it could, and almost by definition it had to convince the masses of people that the protesters were not only wrong, but that the protesters were deviant, drug mad, sex fiends, who were in favor of overthrowing the country while dancing to rock music and strumming on guitars. So the general attitude here, was a very, very conservative attitude. And that is not atypical. It is typical of what happened throughout the entire United States. It was only towards the end of the war, it was only after Lyndon Johnson announced he would not be a candidate, it was only after the Cambodian bombing, it was only after the release of the Pentagon papers, that people began to recognize several things. That they began to recognize that Vietnam was not of vital national interest. That they began to recognize that for the first time in our history we were losing a war. They began to recognize that our government and our military leaders had misrepresented what was taking place. They lost faith in their leadership, and it was only then that the tide turned.

B: Do you recall any members of the YSU faculty or administration that were hostile to the anti-war movement/

R: Well, I've already mentioned several names and of course, the name I've mentioned and will repeat again and again and again is Chief Paul Cress of Campus Security. If there were administrators who were opposed to the protest movement and I know that there were, I do not recall them using their positions in an overt way against the faculty or against the students.

B: Do you remember any names of any faculty members who were pro-war?

R: No, I don't recall any, but I'm sure there were. No, I'd have to go back and look at my records of debates that were had and who appeared on one side and who appeared on the other side. I don't recall their names. I think the other day, when you and I were

talking, informally, you asked me that, and I said I couldn't recall any specific individuals.

B: As far as actions on this campus, the Moratorium of 1969, that we've already discussed a little bit, in support of the Moratorium, Dr. Jones, who was in charge of the library at that time, closed the library. Do you recall what the administration's response to that or as the only university building, how the university community reacted to that?

R: My reaction, which is not necessarily the reaction of the pro-war people, my reaction was that it was a courageous move on Jones' part. That is was perfectly acceptable and that more of it should have been done. Further, I do not recall any steps were taken, certainly none were taken against me personally. I do not recall that any steps were taken against any faculty member who participated in the Moratorium.

B: Do you recall the names of the faculty members who were the primary movers of the Peace Movement at Youngstown State University?

R: I'd like to leave the names of the leadership to those that I've mentioned and that you've already mentioned. The Morrison's in History and in English, Fr. DiBlasio, Newman Student Organization, Burt Cantrell, Protestant Student Leader, Professor Morris Slavin, I believe you mentioned his name. Let's leave it at those names. I don't mean to slight anybody, it's just at present, I don't recall.

B: Do you recall any students' names that were particularly active in the anti-war movement?

R: No.

B: What was the general feeling of the student body towards the Peace Movement?

R: One, our students here, tend to be less political than other students, that their reaction is not the same as the reaction on other college campuses and that our student body tends, because of their background, to be more conservative. Now, given all of that, I think we've already spoken about this. Militancy is not a characteristic of this campus.

B: As the war progressed though, did the student body become more sympathetic to the anti-war movement?

R: Oh, yes. But again, I've spoken about this evolution, this changed attitude on the part of students. Remember that there were many, many, many people who were

anti-war and who would express anti-war sentiment in private conversations, but who never marched or demonstrated, or picketed, or engaged in moratoriums.

B: Looking back to the period of the 1960's, what would you have liked to have seen instituted in your role as an anti-war activist that you didn't accomplish? Is there anything that you would have liked to have seen or done differently?

R: No, no.

B: Is there anything else that you think is important to add that we did not cover?

R: Give me a moment to think. I would like to tell you that one of the really very, very important things that was accomplished, so far as I'm concerned, is that the anti-Vietnam War protest ultimately turned out to be a case in point where the people were able to ultimately shape and determine American foreign policy. To me, that is a great, fantastic, incredible achievement. I don't know whether I'm saying that to you because of my personal involvement in the war or I'm saying it to you because of my professional commitment toward enlightened citizenship and increasing the role of citizens in their government. Obviously, participatory democracy is a key item in my teaching. So, I perceive the end result as being a very, very positive one. Here, clearly, is a case in point, where the American people, eventually shaped and determined our foreign policy. That was very, very positive. The most negative feature of the entire decade is that I am still alarmed, not only with what you and I have previously talked about here, and that is the hostility towards people exercising their right to protest, but I think there is a larger item here and that is the protest had been identified as a youth movement. I too frequently have found in the history of the United States that there is an incredible hostility to young people, regardless of the historical period or the historical events that are taking place. I don't understand, I never did understand the attitude toward young people demonstrated by the American majority. You know, the references to "flaming youth" and other such references. There is a distrust and that concerns me, that upsets me. So that's the up and the down.

B: Well, thank you very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW