

Interview with Thomas Conley
July 7, 1997

Ernst - July 7, 1997 Lex.

Ernst - What was it like to graduate in 1969 with the Vietnam War raging?

Conley - Well, you either had to go to college or be drafted, so we all went to college. In fact, I bet over half my senior class was at U.K. that fall. You had to get a 2-5 deferment, which was an education deferment, or you could look forward to going in the draft. We all had to register with the selective service, and when we turned 18, we were all packing the draft card. It was a little bit tense.

Ernst - Were you really aware of Vietnam as you approached your senior year?

Conley - I was because my brother was four years older, he had to make adjustments, and eventually got an extra year's time, and then he got to go in as a reserve officer in a training camp in the Air Force. Everybody played the game to stay out of the army. Most of the services were full except for the army, so unless you had some great connections..... But he was four years older so and in the mid 60's I thought I was not going to have to worry about this when I turned 18. But sure enough 1969 rolled up, and Vietnam was still there. We were real aware of it, in fact, we had high school chapters protesting. So, we were really starting to be real aware.

Ernst - So you protested a little at West Port High? Did you all protest at the same time?

Conley - I can't remember us doing anything at school except lunch time victuals, things like that. But when we were gathering at Cherokee Pk. or downtown at (unknown word). We were a small group, but small groups became large ones in a small time. Even here at U.K. there were just a small number of people, a year later, a large number of people.

Ernst - Was there any problem with you and your brother because he had to go to Vietnam?

Conley - No, he didn't go, and he had no problem with not going.

Ernst - So he didn't have any problems with you being a protester?

Conley - Oh no no, absolutely not.

Ernst - How did you feel about the draft and the lottery system?

Conley - Well, I have mixed feeling about the lottery system. To me, it was better than having the 2-5 deferment because the 2-5 deferment made it a class thing. The rich kids could stay out of the war and the poor kids and the blacks in the city could not. So to me, it made it a little more equitable, but when someone is playing bingo, basically drawing ping pong balls out of a tank, and your life was at stake over such a thing, then you've got to wonder. At the time my deferments had ran out and I was either going to have to file. I was in the midst of filing as a conscientious objector, I was going to do that before I would do anything like flee, but I was just not into killing people, or learning how to do it. But I drew a high draft number, 320, and at that time, which was a good two years after college, the second year of the lottery, first yr. I drew 360, the second yr. I drew 320. But what you did is that you knew they didn't draft above, I think at that time it was 116. But once you got a relatively high number you would go to the selective service and declare yourself eligible. If they didn't call you in one year, you went to a 4-f, I

think it was called that, which meant you could only be called in national emergency, basically you were off the hook in one year, that is what happened.

Ernst - What was U.K. like in the fall of 1969?

Conley - The fall of 69, you know this is where we called it redneck farm school. You know (unknown word) farm town, it was really different then Turfland Mall. None of his kids had cars then, so basically everyone was just around campus, there was not near the social life out about in town, there was just the central part of town. We had long hair back then which was how us protestors expressed themselves. You honked at regularly by-passing pick-up trucks that was part of going to town. People definitely took part of going to town. If you had hair over your ears, you stood out. So, it was pushy. It was not comfortable going by fraternity houses either, if you had long hair, you would risk your personal health by walking there by yourself. So, it was a strange scene back then. Two years later, all these fraternities were playing "Engaged Devils" over and over again, so things changed quick on that.

Ernst - How did you become interested in the anti-war movement?

Conley - Well, I was always politically aware. I grew up in a real republican household and was even a young teenage republican in the 60's and worked for Nixon in 68 and Goldwater in 64. He, Barry Goldwater, I still was right, he would take care of Vietnam one way or another in 64. In 68, we were all thinking that Nixon was the answer. I mean after you had a big student protest at the '68 Democratic convention in Chicago. At the time, it looked like Lyndon Johnson and democrats was the bad guy, in retrospect Robert McNamara was the bad guy. Course then Nixon came along with a secret plan to end the war, so I supported Nixon. I wasn't quite old enough to vote. I was a year short of my 18th birthday, but we all thought, yes, he has a secret plan to end the war. It took us about a year for us to realize that we had gotten snookered, and that 'Tricky Dick' had pulled one over on us, and by that time, it was our lives on the line, and as you get more and more serious about it, do I want to learn how to kill people and clean toilets. No, I wasn't so interested in that just yet. I was 18, too young, I became more and more interested. I think most people were even smoking pot or growing their hair long, most kids I knew were concerned about it.

Ernst - Did they have local chapters of SDS?

Conley - Yes, they did and I'm sorry I didn't bring the card with me, but I just went out of my house and forgot it. But in fact, I do. If you want to hang around a while, I'll get that, but it is a 1969 colonel with my picture on the front carrying a sign up here in front of Bellman Hall, the ROTC building. That was usually the general place of protest, that, or the administration building. But yeah, they had a local chapter. I was there to support.

Ernst - So you just show up at rallies and support?

Conley - I would definitely join in those. It doesn't hurt to march. The more you have the more noticed you become. The media noticed more than the campus administration notices. That is what you want, you want some attention. We just wanted the institution of education to make a statement. At the time, our ROTC was pretty (unknown word). It still exists here. Most of us came to U.K. because it wasn't a requirement our freshman year.

Ernst - What was the Nov. 1969 rally like in Washington, D.C.?

Conley - That was an event. It was an incredible event. You had to get swept into that.

Ernst - Would you describe it?

Conley - Well, we organized three vans, I think. It was a long haul. When we got there, we realized we were part of a huge, huge rally. We didn't have a clue. We knew it was going to be a huge rally. This is still considered the largest gathering. It was just, I had never seen so many people packed, but then certain events followed in the evening. It was just a sea of people.

Ernst - Do you remember anything particular that stands out?

Conley - Well, I remember I think they were going to march on. We made a march to the embassy on Dupont Circle. I think it was Connecticut Ave. But anyway, it was just a whole lot of Washington, D.C. troops with their chest protectors. Taunting led to pushing and shoving, and that led to tear gas. That's one major thing I remember.

Ernst - Had Nixon barricaded the White House?

Conley - Oh yeah, they were buses around it. They claimed to be watching the football game. He was like I'm not going to pay attention to them. I'm going to watch the football game.

Ernst - How did the U.K. students react to the Kent St. incident?

Conley - Well, that is basically the thing that touched off that week. Of course, that is when it really hit the fan. The Cambodia thing, then the Kent State thing, and UK was pretty solemn. We had the candlelight protest. We had a silent protest here. Probably about 10 p.m. to midnight. There wasn't anything wild up until that point. Of course, that was the night of the fire but really, we didn't have thousands of people. We may have had hundreds. There were some rowdy people, but we were all docile.

Ernst - What lead to the fire?

Conley - What lead to the fire of the Gold Building? Well, it was docile. In fact, the fire was the only notorious event of that week. Nothing else really happened. We went from small numbers at the beginning of the week to big numbers at the end.

Ernst - This was all in the end of the week?

Conley - Yeah, it all happened at the end of the week.

Ernst - What do you think of Singletary's handling of the situation? Why did the guards come on campus?

Conley - Well I don't know if Singletary requested the guards or Louis Nunn. I tell you right now I think it was Nunn. He was running for Senate in 72, so he wanted to look like a tough guy. I think he orchestrated the fire. It wasn't anything a person did, it was something from inside, because I was the only one around that could have done anything. After I ran up there and saw it, all I could do was to yell "fire." This was where it is interesting to me. I was yelling fire, look through down the Alley, into this parking lot on Harrison and Martin Luther King and Lexington Avenue and there were 4 or 5 troopers sitting over there on the top of their car watching this. Finally, someone runs over, but it's not a trooper, it was a fireman. What is interesting to me is here I am.

Ernst - They pick this girl off the ground and arrested her. I found out who her lawyer was. It was John Y. Brown Sr., the father of the governor. I called him and said I think you need to know I was the only one at the scene, and I can guarantee you there was no one around, much unless a short girl carrying a pop bottle, and I am glad to be a defense witness if you need me. Brown replied to me" Well, we don't really need this, they just picked her up for someone to pick up. We will have her released in no time. This stuff happens." I asked him if he could relay anything to me about the fire. He said something to me I always found interesting. He told me that the arson people, the investigators, had decided that the inside of the building was coated with NAPSA, which was a petroleum product which was lined with a low grade octane. So, that's why the building went up real slow. I always thought that was interesting that he relayed that piece of information to me. We heard that the University was planning to tear down this building anyway. It was insured for, I think \$77,000. Rumor says that Louis Nunn was already on his way to campus at this time, at midnight. We were told that he awakened after the fire started, but he was there much too early for that to be the case. Like I said there was already a fireman already at the scene before it started.

Ernst -You said the two of you all checked the doors together?

Conley - Well, it was a side door and a front door. In my personal opinion, I think that before Nixon had the Watergate burglars in '72, I think that Louis Nunn had the Arson Team. This was a major explosion, this building blew out with such force that I came off the ground and I was thirty-five, thirty feet, or so from it. No one was ever arrested for this of course, except for the girl they picked up as a scapegoat. This was not a small-time act. It was a professional, a professional hit.

About 5-10 minutes' worth of tape was scrambled