

KENT STATE:
A Retrospective 50 Years After
by Kenneth Levy

Costley Court.

When I returned to Kent State University for Fall Semester in 1970, about three months had passed since the university was closed after the shootings on May 4th that resulted in the deaths of four students and the wounding of nine more. With that semester, I began my second year in the School of Architecture at Kent. Some weeks before that fateful day in May, two friends and I had made arrangements to share a house near downtown Kent at the end of a dead end street called Costley Court.

As students began to arrive back on campus, I noticed that longer hair, beards, and colorful attire had been adopted by many more of them. I also sensed a palpable shift in their attitudes; they seemed more interested in being part of the so-called “Counterculture,” and they had a heightened political consciousness, being acutely aware of what had happened there on May 4th. The unpretentious, little known university town of Kent Ohio had been catapulted into the national awareness, and in a sad way, had become a part of American History.



The Crew of Costley Court and Friends
(author and photographer on ground)

My housemates were known affectionately as Duck and Mole. I was simply known as Ken most of the time. We had met the previous year in the large dorm complex on campus known as Tri-Towers, where our rooms were near each other. We were already participants in the shift in attitude and culture that was sweeping across the country that included “consciousness raising activities,” a lot of rock music, and a motivation to be part of a generation eager to experiment with new social and cultural ideas. It also involved questioning the values of “The Establishment” and for some, an involvement in political activism.

When we moved into the house, our main project was to build a “Universe” in the attic that was accessed by a ladder in a closet on the second floor. We painted the walls and ceiling black, added planets and stars in fluorescent paint, hung starship toys and structure models that I built in architecture class, and we illuminated the whole thing with black light. Our Universe also featured a hand-crafted motorized light show, designed and built by Duck and Mole that noisily turned on and off dozens of bulbs in succession around the room, as if to power us through space. We spent many hours up there watching slide shows and listening to rock bands on Duck’s quadraphonic sound system “Eight Miles High,” and cruising among the celestial spheres, as the noise of the light show was drowned out by the music.

Duck was our troop leader. He kept up with housekeeping responsibilities, was our main cook, and was the recreational activities coordinator, always planning adventures for us to

embark upon in his red VW bus. He was influential in our music selections up in The Universe, because he kept up with the latest bands, and owned the sound system. Mole was our spiritual guru and had a keen interest in meditation and “out of body” mind travel. He was something of a genius and could figure out, fix, or put together almost anything, but often got frustrated with the limitations imposed by pursuing β constrained academic goals. He was more of an activist than Duck and me, having been at the '68 Democratic Convention in Chicago where violent outbreaks between protesters and police occurred. I was along for the wild ride, hanging on as I was trying to be a good architecture student. The three of us loved to have philosophical conversations exploring concepts involving space, time, cosmology, evolution, human spirituality, cooperative social systems and new technologies. Often Mole would end our conversations with the enigmatic statement “Nothing really matters anyway, only sometimes.”

The day we all showed up to move into the house, a surprise addition to our new family was a “Fun Bunny,” the name I gave to a young woman I had briefly met the year before. Fun Bunny was a free-spirited firebrand, and her three cats Flagstaff, Sugarloaf and Circe that she brought from Colorado that summer added a peculiar dynamic in the house. She was politically tuned into the activist elements of the time, and was a force to be reckoned with. We hardly knew each other but there was a strong attraction, and within a day or two after moving in, we found ourselves in a relationship that was predictably short lived, after which she branded me as a “Male Chauvinist Pig.” While I have always championed women’s equality, it is also true I may have acquired a bit of chauvinism from the world I grew up in. As for the “Pig” part, if you were an activist in the counterculture at the time, most people in the institutions of the “Establishment” including politics, business, police and military were referred to as “Pigs” so I figured I had plenty of company.

Despite the tension between us, the spirit of the communal environment in the house enabled Fun Bunny and I to find common ground for the rest of the year, and we eventually became friends. At Costley Court, she organized various meetings and get-togethers with political activist groups including “Students for a Democratic Society” (SDS), and we heard rumors that the FBI was watching the house and all of us in it. But the activist thing was not something I was all that interested in, or comfortable being involved with. I was sympathetic to the movement and considered myself to be a rebel, always ready to buck the powers that be, but I was much more of what was known as a “culture freak.” The type of thing that got my interest was when two local high school guys appeared at our house one evening, claiming to be alien beings from a planet in another star system. They told us they had temporarily transmuted into human form while they were repairing the “Ribasonic Ribosome” on their starship, and sought worthy humans to communicate with. Duck, Mole and I, half wanting to believe their well rehearsed story were intrigued, and played their straight man with verve and enthusiasm, being honored that they chose to bring their performance to us.

One day, Fun Bunny came home and told us that Abbie Hoffman of Chicago Seven notoriety was in town, and “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.” We went to the supermarket, liberated some chop meat, got some tomato sauce and buns, and loaded the shopping cart with our three ingredients into Duck’s VW bus. When we got back to Costley Court, we rolled and shoved the cart up the porch steps and into the house. We then got busy making Sloppy Joe’s, and that was what we dined on with Abbie and his associate. After supper, we all sat down to talk; Abbie expected us to discuss “The Revolution” I guess. At that time, I was

unfamiliar with his book “Revolution for the Hell of It” and couldn’t think of much to say. Neither could Duck, Mole, or Fun Bunny for that matter. We had our instruments set up in the living room, so I suggested we do an honorary jam session for Abbie. We got going, with me on my drums, Duck on rhythm, and Mole on bass, knocking out a cacophony of noise; we were pretty bad, not having ever seriously practiced. The next day, Fun Bunny reported to us that “Abbie didn’t think any of us was worth talking to.”

Another set of visitors to our house was a group of four people who occasionally dropped in to hang out. They were a bit of a motley crew, but in the aftermath of the May 4th shootings we enjoyed a camaraderie with them as “Brothers and Sisters in Arms,” so to speak. I don’t think any of us knew where they were from or what they were up to, but we knew they were not active students. We dubbed them “The Revolution,” and when we left town for Christmas or Spring Break, they would commandeer the house in our absence, but were sure to be gone when we got back. On one occasion when I returned, I was dismayed to find that my prized old-fashioned metal sign with the bellhop guy of Philip Morris Cigarettes was missing.

It is commonly accepted that the individuals primarily responsible for causing the National Guard to be called in to Kent on May 2nd 1970 after President Nixon began bombing Cambodia, were “Outside Radicals.” It is said they were the instigators of vandalism in downtown Kent on the night of May 1st, and made threats to businesses and property the next day, ending with the burning of the campus ROTC Building. The year after Costley Court, while I was driving through downtown Kent, I noticed one of the guys from The Revolution having an animated conversation with someone on the sidewalk. It struck me then like a slap in the face. They never talked about it, but I realized in that moment that if anyone was “fighting in the streets” in early May, it was The Revolution.

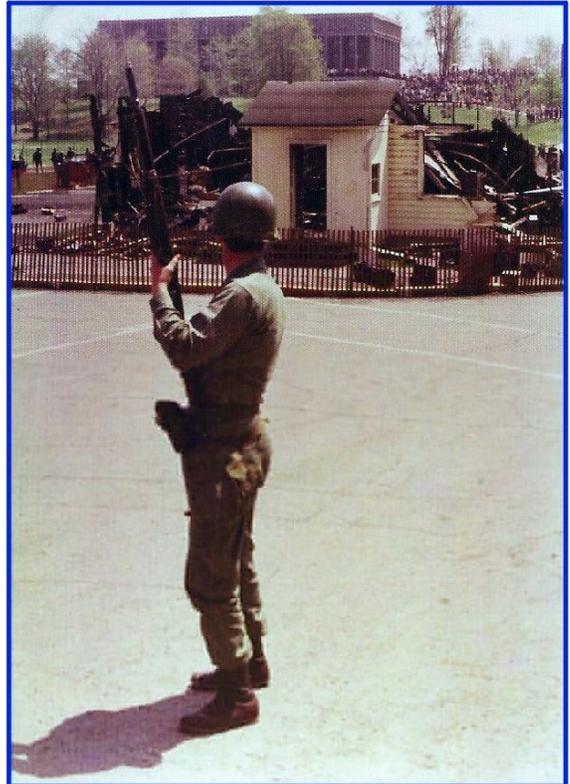
One afternoon, when we had a bunch of people visiting with us at the house, I thought it was a good opportunity to memorialize the unique times we were living in. Some of them were from “The Ozone,” another counterculture house in Kent that later was mentioned in James Michener’s book about the May 4th shootings. I got my camera and asked everyone to pile up on Duck’s VW bus for a “Hippie Family” photo. I set a ten second delay, and after everyone was in place, I framed the picture on a garbage can, pushed the shutter, and ran back into the open hatch at the back of the bus. After many years, and having given a copy of the photo to Duck, it made its way with my consent to someone who was helping to put together the May 4th Visitor’s Center at Kent. It is now on permanent display in the exhibit as an example of the so-called counterculture that existed in Kent the year after the tragedy.



This photo is part of the exhibit in the May 4th Visitor’s Center in Kent with the following caption: “Residents of Costley Court in Kent, Ohio come together in their own counterculture community” (author and photographer seated in back of bus)

Tri-Towers

The year before Costley Court, in the fall of 1969, I started my studies at Kent which in the spring would become the time of the shootings. I lived on campus in Tri-Towers, a large new dorm complex consisting of three eleven story buildings connected by long glass breezeways like spokes, to a central two story "hub" that housed the common areas. Often you would see ROTC students (Reserve Officer Training Corps) walking about in their military uniforms, and occasionally marching in a color guard duty for various university functions. The hub also had a place at its very center called "The Pit," which was a thirty foot diameter gathering area with three or four concentric steps down from the perimeter. It was a good venue to take a break, and get involved in what seemed like a never-ending game of "Duck-Duck-Narc," "Narc" for Narcotics Agent being substituted for "Goose." With a bunch of your fellow students, you would sit on the first step around the circle. As "It" walked the circle, they would tap each person as a "Duck," until they tapped you and yelled "Narc!" Now a "Narc," you would jump up, and chase "It" around the circle and try to tag him or her before they got back to your spot. The game must have had some additional rules, but I never knew what they were.



A National Guard soldier at the burned ROTC Building (photo taken by author)

As the year progressed, I was occupied with the discipline and work of a first year architecture student, pledging a fraternity, and the shenanigans going on in and around my dorm room at Tri-Towers on the seventh floor of Wright Hall. The anti-war protests had been going on around the country as they had been for months, if not years, and it seemed like the war might be winding down. But when Nixon authorized an expansion of the war by bombing Cambodia on April 30th, it became a catalyst that energized activists on college campuses nationwide. The next day, the anti-war movement arrived on the Kent State campus. A protest rally was held on the Commons that included history students burying a copy of the US Constitution, scheduling another rally for noon on May 4th, and protesters posting a sign on a tree asking "Why is the ROTC building still standing?" Late that evening outside the bars in downtown Kent there were bonfires, storefronts were vandalized, beer bottles were thrown at police, and more officers were called in from nearby counties until the crowd was dispersed with tear gas. The next day, Saturday May 2nd, "radical revolutionaries" made threats of further destruction to property, and after meeting with officials at 5pm, the Kent mayor LeRoy Satrom asked Governor James Rhodes to deploy the Ohio National Guard to Kent. When The Guard force of about one thousand troops and associated military equipment arrived on campus that evening at about 10pm, the wood-framed ROTC building was on fire, and mostly in ashes.

Governor Rhodes gave an emotional speech at the Kent firehouse on Sunday, May 3rd. He said “they are not going to take over the campus. I think that we're up against the strongest, well-trained, militant, revolutionary group that has ever assembled in America.” Also that day, President Nixon was overheard saying that the protesters were “bums blowing up campuses.” Overnight, it seemed like the university had been transformed into an Orwellian dream. Hundreds of the National Guard troops and their equipment were now everywhere; jeeps led columns of marching troops, semi-tanks were on streets, and helicopters flew about with no apparent destination or purpose.

I had a bizarre experience with the helicopters I will never forget. A few days before the National Guard was called in, I had met a young woman, and we made arrangements to get together that Sunday. She came to visit me at a small restaurant called “The Dog House” where I worked as a short order cook for a half day on weekends, and after work, we walked to her room on an upper floor of a woman’s dorm on campus. We were lying on her bed making out, when we heard a loud, droning noise coming from outside. We went to look out the window and saw a helicopter hovering alarmingly in the narrow area between dorm buildings. The chopper was so close, I could see the face of the young pilot through the glass bubble canopy, and he continued to hover there for a few long minutes. Over the years, I have often wondered why he was there. Maybe it was part of a show of force, or maybe, the guardsmen being about the same age as the students, he was just trying to get a peek into the girl’s dorm. That experience put a damper on our get-together, and I left her room soon after, never knowing her full name or getting a phone number, and it was the last time we saw each other. Within twenty-four hours, students would be killed and wounded, the university would be shut down, and everyone would be ordered to leave the campus.

In my morning class on Monday, May 4th, there was an elephant in the room, as I’m sure was the case in every class that day. As students and professors discussed recent events and the presence of an occupying army outside, I remained silent, as I sensed we were in the middle of a story that was still largely untold. Sitting there, I decided to take photos at the scheduled noon rally, and after class I went to the bookstore for film. As I walked back to my room at Tri-Towers to get my camera, I averted The Commons and Taylor Hall, the area where the rally was to take place. Noon was fast approaching, and something told me not to be there when armed troops and protesting students confronted each other when the rally started.

Months later, I learned that by the time I got back to my dorm room, university officials had handed out thousands of leaflets in an effort to cancel the rally, but the crowd of about twenty-five hundred on The Commons remained, most just observing the spectacle of an occupying army in the midst of a student protest rally. At the same time, miscommunication by Governor Rhodes caused confusion about whether martial law had been declared, and inadvertently gave the National Guard control of the campus. At that point, the effort to stop the rally with bullhorn directives and tear gas in effect ended the rally, but initiated a confrontational engagement between the students and the Guard.

Two companies of the Guard were ordered to lock and load their rifles, and advance on the crowd to disperse them. Many remained however, and as they chanted “Pigs Off Campus!” they were forced to move, and a group of them were followed by the troops up Blanket Hill from The Commons. The group of protesters went around Taylor Hall and gathered near its

front entrance steps, and for about ten minutes the troops took a position at the end of a football practice field about 100 yards away from the protesters.

Taylor Hall was the building that housed the School of Architecture where I had most of my classes. It is a proud “modern” building, with a strong and clean columned facade. It just so happened that I had a bird’s eye view of it about three or four hundred yards away from the picture window of my seventh floor dorm room. After I loaded film into my camera, I looked out to see what was happening. I was unaware of it at the time, but later came to realize, I witnessed the actual moments of the shootings from this perspective.

Looking out from the seventh floor across the open practice field between me and Taylor Hall, the building was the backdrop of a scene that contained a mass of students in front of its main entrance steps, and a line of National Guard troops to the left, at the end of the practice field. I saw a lone individual out on the field who picked up a smoking tear gas canister and throw it back toward the troops, and another who defiantly waved a flag on a pole in the same area. For a minute or two, I watched the drama unfold, and suddenly I heard what sounded like a flurry of firecrackers in the distance, and an instant later, I saw the large group of protesters bolt en masse away from the troops into an adjacent parking lot. Eyewitness accounts on the scene have stated that during the time they were on the practice field, several guardsmen had knelt into a firing position with their rifles pointed toward the protesters, but then got back up. A group of them then huddled together, and soon the Guard unit began to retreat back toward Blanket Hill. Some of the protesters slowly followed, a few throwing rocks and yelling at them, and as they were retreating, several guardsmen half turned to keep an eye on the protesters. At that time, one of the guardsmen, a sergeant, turned and fired his 45 caliber pistol at the protesters, and then a number of guardsmen also turned, and fired their rifles. The fusillade lasted approximately 13 seconds during which 28 guardsmen fired 67 rounds. I quickly left my dorm room, went to the elevators, and then back down to ground level.



After the shootings, troops move down Blanket Hill to The Commons, which was followed by students gathering on Blanket hill. Taylor Hall is seen in the background. (photos taken by author)

On my way to the scene, I noticed a female student outside of the practice field fence who was accompanied by a young guardsmen at his post on the inside. Getting closer, I realized the student was putting the stem end of a flower into the muzzle of the guardsman’s rifle that he had protruded through the fence to accommodate this act. I had a short conversation with her, during which she informed me that students had been shot, and possibly killed. When I got to Taylor Hall, ambulances had arrived and bodies on stretchers were being loaded into

them. Around the building, students were assembling on Blanket Hill; all were sitting and huddled together, facing the open Commons where Guard troops had taken a position at the opposite side. I joined several hundred of my fellow students, as professors and others implored us not to move toward the troops. One of them, Glen Frank, was my professor in an introductory geology course I had taken that semester, and many believe he was instrumental in preventing another confrontation between students and the guardsmen. I took some photos, and after a while, the crowd dispersed.

It took a while for everyone to realize the full extent and gravity of what happened. I did not know what to do, and found myself walking over to the fraternity house where I had recently been inducted as a member, and a brother was crying. In part I felt lucky I was not one of the wounded or dead. I found out weeks later that John Cleary, one of my fellow architecture classmates had been one of the nine wounded, and lost a lung. Jeffrey Miller, one of the four students killed grew up on the North Shore of Long Island, as I had.



After moving down the hill, troops take a position at the opposite side of The Commons, as officials implore the gathered students to remain on Blanket Hill. (photos taken by author)

The Wave

The watershed moment of the Kent State shootings occurred at the beginning of an ongoing transformational epoch. The youth rebellion of the late 60's that became known as the "Counterculture" involved a "New Age" consciousness, experimentation with new social and cultural ideas, and incorporated the movement against the Vietnam War. It occurred in the midst of an on-going revolution in science and technology to create a virtual tsunami, the wave of which continues to wash over America and the world. As Baby Boomers were growing up, we entered the "Information Age" with the advent of television, ventured beyond the cocoon of our home planet with manned moon landings, and created the means to cause our own mass extinction with the recently acquired power of the atom.

By the mid 70's, the Counterculture began to disintegrate when its participants realized they had to make a living in an imperfect and non-utopian world. But most of the parts and pieces of it have induced positive change and provided enlightenment, as they have been absorbed into the mainstream, irrespective of individual ideologic orientation, and it gave everyone the license to "do your own thing," whether you were a hippie, a hillbilly, a redneck, or "something completely different." It was a unique expression of the same pioneer American spirit that

motivated many to journey into new territory. This time the journey took place in the mind, as the “New Generation” began to process a revolutionary perspective about the scope and fabric of our Universe that had very recently, and was still being, discovered. We all knew what someone meant when they said “far out, man!”

Events leading up to Kent State began at the end of March 1968, when, Lyndon Johnson announced he would not run for re-election. This was followed on April 4th and June 5th with the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, causing race riots to break out in major cities, and demonstrations against the Vietnam War increased. In August, at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, the effort to get an anti-war presidential candidate nominated involved violent confrontations between demonstrators and police. This was the point when the anti-war movement went from civil disobedience to violent confrontation, and when President Nixon expanded the war by bombing Cambodia, almost two years had passed since the '68 Convention, and factions of the movement had become militant. It was in this charged atmosphere that the Kent State shootings occurred.

Although Kent State is not exactly an example of history repeating itself, in 1770 British soldier Thomas Preston wrote a statement about the Boston Massacre that killed five, and wounded six colonists, leading to the American Revolution that shares a common thread. He said “None of them was a hero. The victims were troublemakers who got more than they deserved. The soldiers were professionals who shouldn’t have panicked. The whole thing shouldn’t have happened.” In today’s world, we have become desensitized to indiscriminate mass shootings, but Kent State is still the only instance of our military firing on our citizens.

The tragedy was the result of an internal quandary we are still grappling with. It was a generational questioning, if not an outright rejection of the 19th Century doctrine of “Manifest Destiny,” the belief that the juggernaut of the westward expansion of the United States was a mission of divine providence, whose purpose was to bring the superior qualities of the American Experiment to the world at large. Along with rugged individualism, free enterprise, and a tendency toward imperialism, the gist of this philosophy still exists. Its main pitfall is what many consider to be a lack of discretion and focus in our projection of power in the world, in addition to the expense of blood and treasure that often goes with it.

The legacy of the Kent State tragedy should not be to focus on the past or judge it by the enlightened values of the day, which continue to progress, hopefully making us better human beings. Rather, it should act as a reminder, prodding us to explore new ways of avoiding conflict, divisiveness, intolerance and confrontation, cause us to regard diversity as a strength, and help us to create new methods of envisioning, planning and creating the future.

The summer before the Kent State shootings, two seminal events occurred. In July 1969, we first landed on the Moon, the achievement magnified by how it changed our point of view, and the way we see ourselves. It also demonstrated the faith and resolve of our young nation to do things that are great and good. A few weeks after the moon landing, we had “Three Days of Peace and Music” at Woodstock, which was the culmination of the Counterculture. At that event, Jimi Hendrix played a solo electric guitar rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner” that provided a revealing and poignant moment. It was clear, but mesmerizing, at times chaotic, and both familiar and foreign; without words, it communicated that our nation’s ethos is not static, but continues to evolve, and is a work in progress.