

Entries from my diary for the last two days.

Sunday, 3 May 2020 –

Tomorrow is May 4th – so many memories. So many emotions: anger, resentment, incredulity, sadness, loss. Hard to separate them all. I still believe that if the frightened President White had not outlawed the Mud Fights, I don't think May 4th would have happened. Some people believed the SDS and other militant anti-war and anarchy groups were stirring up students – people who were not students – sent to inflame the anti-war students at Kent and other universities. They were there. I know. Because when we moved into our duplex at 1604 E. Main Street there was a 50-gallon drum in the basement full of posters and stencils to spray-paint posters in that drum. There were places in the basement and in the kitchen where they had placed placards to be spray painted and the shapes of the placards were evident from the paint that they sprayed still on the walls. I wish now that I had kept that drum.

I had finished my undergrad in '69, was 8 ½ months pregnant and was working at the University Library, which was then in the building now housing the Fashion School. My husband was finishing his student teaching in Aurora.

Just a couple of years before I was living in dorms on campus, working on my degree. Every spring when our elders would have staged Panty Raids in the exuberance of springtime and youth, we had the Mud Fights. The Commons always had standing water on it and was a sea of mud. At some point some guy would grab a coed and drag her into the mud, laughing and screaming. Then another would see it and do the same – laughing and celebrating that the winter was over and Spring had come. If you did not want to be dragged in – most young men would respect that and some would act as escorts to get the women safely to their dorms. Those who were dragged into the Mud Fight would go back to their dorms, laughing, dripping and tracking water and mud to their rooms and the bathroom showers. We did not consider how much extra work we made for the housekeepers. We were blowing off steam and having fun.

Then in 1970, President White outlawed the Mud Fights. The students were angry. There was no replacement activity suggested or planned – just a warning that expulsion was the penalty for participation. Students were looking for a Spring Fling – and outlet – and the War in Vietnam was as good as any. I sincerely believe if there had been a choice between a Mud Fight and the burning of the ROTC (as we called it, “rot cee”) building, most of the students would have chosen the Mud Fight and the “outside agitators” would have been alone trying to burn down the already condemned ROTC building and it would not have happened. But it did.

The presence of a TANK on the Front Campus inflamed my rage. I had to walk past that tank every day to get to work. It was bad enough having the National Guard on campus. But a TANK? – to control protesting college students? It was way over the top and inflaming student protesters rage. President White, instead of calling for a conversation between students and professors who would be willing to mediate (Glen Frank would have been the first one to volunteer), just used his 1945 military mentality and called in men with guns and live ammunition. I think he was scared and did not know what to do and his inability to conjure or mediate a solution instead caused death and life-long injury to his students, his faculty and staff, his university, his community and his country.

Monday, May 4th 2020

Fifty years ago today – and I just realized ...today is Monday. Monday, May 4th, 1970 was a typical warm spring day. I walked to work from our duplex. We only had one car and my husband had to go to Aurora for student teaching. I walked past the National Guardsman, many just out of high school, some who were Kent State students. I hated seeing that tank parked where I had to look at it every time I looked up from my desk in the Library. We were on High Alert in the Library. The Library brass were afraid the protesters would storm the Library so we were on shut-down alert. But, the students in the library that day were the same as always, studying in carrels, and at tables, talking softly to each other.

Sometime after noon, I was at my desk where I worked as a junior cataloger when I saw people running past my window, screaming, “They’re shooting students! They’re shooting students!”

The word came from the head office that the Director of the Library had closed and locked the doors and no one was to leave or enter the building. We were incredulous. Surely no one on OUR campus would shoot a gun, much less AT students. Time passed. We waited for someone to tell us what was going on. We listened to the radio but mostly it was speculation.

My husband called. They had heard at the school where he was student teaching that shots were fired on campus but nothing else was known. He said he was leaving school and coming home. There were no cell phones in those days so I did not know until much later that he was stopped by the National Guard at the city limits. They explained that they were stopping everyone trying to enter the city and were only allowed to admit Kent residents. Because he was still a student at Kent he was, in those days, considered a resident of his home county even though he was married, living and paying taxes in Kent so his driver’s license contained his parent’s address. He explained that he needed to get to his wife who was 8 ½ months pregnant and on campus waiting to be taken home. They finally let him pass.

We drove home, numb. Not believing that this could have happened. Not in Kent. Not at Kent State. I lived less than a mile from the Library at the eastern edge of campus. There were constant sirens. All day and night helicopters with searchlights strafed our duplex, blinding us and reminding us of the horror. This went on for days. Rumors abounded. The Library was closed. The campus was closed. The city was shut down.

I alternated between tears and rage. When an educated community of thinkers could not think of a peaceful solution to the problems on campus – what hope was there for The World? The students left the campus as parents could free themselves to come to get them. The university closed for the remainder of the term. Parents would re-think allowing their children to return to this violent place.

The events surrounding May 4th have caused me to believe that negotiation and peaceful dialog must come long before the anger becomes so strident that military force is the only answer. I became a peace marcher and ultimately a mental health therapist. The sadness never ends. May 4th reminds me every year, especially this year as Kent State remembers it’s darkest days and my baby, born June 16th that year, celebrates her 50th birthday.