

Interview Date: August 1985
Interviewer: James Wohn

JW: This is for the class

(Noise)

JW: This is for the class History of Ripon College and the community

Interview specifically on student movements, student actions at Ripon College. I am talking here with Jerry Thompson. And I am going to ask him his views on Ripon College and the students here at the college. (Noise) I would like to first ask Jerry if he would give me his perception of the Ripon College students of the 1960s, during Bernie's term, were students active with campus concerns or national concerns?

JT: Well the students of the sixties, there were all kinds they were just like today I suppose and I think there were probably a number of them that were more socially conscious than today and probably more perceptive on student movements, throughout the United States they learned about it in high school, the concept of it came here and they brought the same concerns with them. So I did notice that, I did believe that they seemed to be, much more concerned about their classes, their own future, their own desire in classes, they seemed to pursue a little bit more that they did not want to be just a pawn in society. They wanted to make part of that society. They wanted to be makers rather than absorbers of a society. We did find that there were a number if socially reactive students but that was

not the whole campus, (noise) their concerns about not only about what was happening here in Ripon and they were also concerned with their influence and what was happening at Berkeley, at University of Wisconsin and at Chicago and Columbia and places like that . So yes, I do feel they were much more a part of the administrative processes themselves, they were doers as well as receivers (2:50)

JW: How about did the administration take that actions at the time?

JT: At that time I thought that Bernie handled it very well. He did come from Oberlin that was more socially active that we were, and probably thought that Ripon was a bit conservative, comparatively and not nearly as involved as the students at Oberlin. He had been in student affairs in Oberlin, Dean of Students or something like that. So he did seem to have his pulse on students and what they were doing and their concerns and spent and he seemed to me spent many hours talking with them, meeting with them, communicating with them on some of these problems, not all of them but some of them right away. [As an English minor, the collaborative effort with the term with is evident.] (3:50)

JW: Did faculty play any part in the role with the students?

JT: Oh yea there was faculty involvement

JW: With the demonstrations?

JT: Always. There was always a combination of faculty and students.

(noise) (cough) I can give you a little bit of the history even before Bernie.

The biggest event was the Selma demonstration. In Selma, the number of students who went along with Dr. James Bowditch, and Pat Hunt, the Assistant Dean of Students and I who went to Selma. That was really a student initiated project in the beginning, what happened is the students had heard about what was going on in Selma. They came over to see me and said well uh, we thought a few of them said, and one of them was the student body president, one of them David Schwartz, talked to me about it, that we should go to Selma, well I was in no financial position to go myself, and they said, well we will finance it through the Student Senate. Well that uh, if that is part of the government, I will contribute some of my personal money, but that would be fine. And so what they did was they held a special Senate meeting and got money to go to Selma, about a dozen of us to go to Selma, including the two faculty members and this young man who was an assistant to Harris.

Well when the student body heard about this, they just went bananas, here they were spending their money to go to Selma, and they didn't and there was a great deal of opposition to this by a number of students.

JW: Do you mean it had passed?

JT: It had passed, but when it did pass then the student body got really upset. They said well this is a special meeting, and they shouldn't be using our money for this and the whole business. They started a real furor around the campus, they were demonstrations. They were against our going to

Selma. That was a pretty conservative group of students. That was some of them see. They were two wings you see. The Student Senate approved of it and the leaders today are young men who have graduated from Harvard Law School and places like that but on the side of going to Selma. So it got down to such a point, where President Pinkham, this was just before President Pinkham left, this was in 1965, Pinkham left in 1966, and I was called before President Pinkham and Dean Ashley was there too at that time, and some of the young men that were going to go down to Selma, and David Schwarz the President of the Student Body was there. President Pinkham said to me Jerry can I get some money for you out my own personal **disgeshionary** fund, we will use that to finance the trip. And I turned to David Schwarz and I said what does this mean as far as the Student Senate is concerned? And he said, it makes a farce of the Student Senate. So I turned to President Pinkham, and I said well, I will the money from the Student Senate that has been already allocated. Well that didn't endure me with President Pinkham, I am sure. But it was legal, the money was Student Senate money, and what happened was, when we were about to leave, there were a group of students that were going to lie out in front of the car (noise), there were big speeches, I gave a speech as to why we were going and students were giving speeches as why we shouldn't be going. They were going to lie down in front of the car and everything else. It was wild. There were programs on WRPN, and

special editions of the newspaper, all of a sudden maybe you have seen some of them back in the archives you will see them, but we went. We used that money and that was Student Senate involvement in a very historic movement. Now I suppose we were about the only school in the United States who was represented at Selma with Martin Luther King that was demonstrated against before we left. But we were still there and we were there with the students from Harvard, and the University of Wisconsin and Oberlin and the rest. So that was certainly one instance, there were other instances, on a local level Ripon never did erupt violently over all those years and I think part of it was that Bernie allowed students to talk and he got in there and talked with him and the rest of us were always listening to students, and sometimes students would see that something that they were doing was making a difference, making some changes along the way, when they saw that, when they saw what was happening, it kept the place from blowing up in many instances. But as the sixties went along, the freshman classes became more and more socially sensitive I thought because they had gone to high school say from sixty-three to sixty-seven of sixty-four to sixty-eight. They were much more attuned to these things and when they came here, they were concerned about national issues, they were concerned about their own life. I think one thing that I might point to fact that there were a number of young men who came as freshman I think it was in sixty-eight, and they saw that

there was required ROTC, you know, and that just shook them, they didn't want to take ROTC, they didn't want to be part of the military establishment in any way, shape, or form whether it had been tradition, or part of the curriculum, that you took ROTC for two years, every male except if he had some special dispensation, I am not sure. So there was a number of students who were not going to take it, they came in as freshman and they refused to go to ROTC classes and what we did then was we held overnight classes in Great Hall, just awareness classes, the faculty would lead the discussions and this sort of thing and then the young men.

(Change of tape) (11:57) (stopped at 12 minutes)

JT: I see (laughing), you need to erase that

JW: I think so

JT: Anyway, there were about nineteen students who said, [we absolutely won't come that day, I think he said that] we will take the F. But there about 60 freshmen, freshman males, that were, that had the same feelings, but they didn't dare take the F, however, these nineteen said they would and they went over to the faculty meetings, and they had signs and peaceful demonstrations before each faculty meeting, asking that something be done, so they finally came to the point where at the end of that semester, where we did get it through the faculty, that ROTC should no longer be mandatory to the college. That was a student led

movement all the way. I think a number of students said if you continue this, we are going to withdraw from Ripon College and it made some impact at that time and the faculty changed. The faculty went along with it. There was a real student involvement, another time, another instant with the ROTC, while we are talking about it. The ROTC was having demonstration. What do you call it? The ROTC was having reviews on Sadoff, and there were a number of students who didn't like these military reviews. They were out there on Sadoff, with all the uniforms and all the marching and this sort of thing. They had a counter demonstration out by Bovay, they were playing their own music, and making **moss** music and a few things like this and they had some signs you know and there was one student who was taking pictures of it and as he was taking pictures of it he saw the major of military science pointing to it, to the signs, and some of the cadets came up over the hill and tore up their signs and they took pictures of this. Well, those students came roaring up to me and said what should we do to them? Certainly we have the right to redress and there were meetings with President Adams and the Colonel of the ROTC and everything like this. And before, I don't know if it was the next semester, that major was no longer a requirement for graduating. He laughed at it was definitely and flagrantly of a violation of their rights expression. And they had it on camera, which was something else. So Bernie had to handle that event, and he seemed to handle it without getting into a

great deal of rebellion. And he did settle it somewhat to the satisfaction of those students at that time. So the students were involved, you know, in a lot of different things around campus and in my own department for example, it was students that urged me and helped me to set up a couple of courses. They were in one of my courses in the Old Testament and New Testament and they said well, and I would be talking about sin and theologians along they way. (16:16 minutes) And they said Jerry, we would like to know more about these theologians and so I said, we should probably have a course and so the students and I worked up the course and it was approved by the faculty to be a part of the curriculum. After a while, some students said well the noticed that I seemed to be moving more and more towards a pacifist Christian stance. During the sixties, they said well we would like to know more about pacifism and **non violence**. And so I spent a lot of time with students and we developed a syllabus and a course goal. . . and I am sure they were other courses around the campus [camp],but I can only speak for my own, that these were student inspired courses because they felt a need and they were always well attended.

JW: They still are well attended.

JT: Oh yea, these were student courses and they talked about the way they'd like to see the course taught. They talked about the things, they'd

like to learn in the course. Those things are kinda important and certainly pertinent to what you are asking. (17:53)

JW: We were talking about the students and now I'd like to go to the groups and special groups of students like the Greek groups? Were the sororities and fraternities influential during Bernie's term?

JT: Well um I think they were stronger before Bernie came. I seem to, there was a point where in the sixties, the late sixties, certainly they were always there, they were already part of the campus. But I saw what I thought was a weakening of the sororities. Even as there was a weakening of the ROTC. There was a time when the ROTC was almost ready to be taken away from the campus, in the middle of the seventies because of the lack of interest and that sort of thing. And I think those things sorta go hand in hand, but I don't think there was a point where they were certainly going to be displaced all together. I think that there because of, for example the leadership of David Harris, who was very influential in making sure that any colonizing didn't blossom on campus and I think the Deans of Men and Deans of Women favors something and choose to maintain something on campus, it is going to be maintained. (I didn't get what he said, but the gist is that mens and women's dean did not favor Greek life and did not maintain it that much.) (19:38)

But I think there was a weakening especially at the national aspects became more localized. That is a very easy generalization, but I think it is appealing

JW: Well I think the transition, was when I looked and did some research on it and even the research showed the Greek groups holding the parties and that is even diminishing now too as far as having alcohol around and just being an influence on campus. It is not a bad movement towards something; it is just that there are other concerns. (20:32)

JT: Students have a lot of outside interests outside activities; they are probably not as dependent on the Greek structure. But certainly there are values towards it. I saw some things in the Greek structure that in the earlier sixties that really bothered me. The Greek organizations were racist in their exclusivity and it was very difficult for minorities to get on a national charters would not allow them in. There was only one fraternity for while that allowed black men to reside and that was in the local Merriman house I guess [Phi Kappa Pi]. That changed too as the conscience of the country changed, these national sororities and fraternities changed their policies too. They were really quite an exclusive institute [I think] and that was a quarrel I had with them. (21:40)

JW: With the Student Senate, do any student leaders pop into your head?

(21:45)

JT: Oh, yeah

JW: How responsible were they too the students? Do you remember any leaders that sort of use their power to get their own group and ways?

(21:59)

JT: I can't tell you that, but there are some students whose names pop into my mind immediately. David Schwarz for example, very brilliant young man whose contributions [can't understand] who was president during the time of the Selma business, very responsible young man and leader. Then I remember Noel Coroda who was president just after David Schwarz.

JW: Was he the hard working one?

JT: He was the one who worked very hard, in fact he worked so hard in the Student Senate that he failed all of his courses and was a full body student president that's good in my term. But he too since that time has got a degree and a PHD and I don't know he teaches philosophy and religion someplace in the United States. I remember him as being full time student senator. (can't understand) Then there were others along the way, (can't understand)

JW: Gerry Sanderson (23:39)

JT: Gerry Sanderson, he was a roommate of my son at one time. Gerry was very active at his year at the college. It seems a little, when they got to be Student Senate President, some of them got to be a little more

radicalized or something. Gerry was going to be. I think Gerry, was a little bit. Didn't he run for legalizing beer in the commons or something?

JW: The pub

JT: Or the Pub. It was during his time that that was a big issue, that wasn't a very socially sensitive issue, but as far as the students were concerned it was socially sensitive. Gerry went on to Harvard Law School, graduated and is a lawyer today. (24:30)

I knew them better in the sixties and early seventies, than I did later on which is possible because the Student Senate was sort of the ire of the social consciousness of the community and a lot of the expressions of the social conscious. So those are some of the leaders pop into my mind. Any others you can remind me of that I might know something about? I am not sure. (24:57)

JW: What I am really curious about is this is my second term as president, and there seems to be quite a difference in the role of what the Student Senate President play. I don't know if it was the issues that were pressing at the time or it was something else, like the personality of the Student Senate President or just the consciousness of the student body of the time. Can you sort of?

JT: I think the student body president is sort of a reflection of the social consciousness of the time, they make him. They made Gerry Sanderson more active than he probably would have been. And they really

representation of the student concerns of the students at that time. I think you are a microcosm of the whole Ripon College community in a sense, what you feel as your concerns as I think they have changed, you know, I think they have changed over the years. (26:17)

I really don't feel that, I saw it in my classes to that, I don't have the numbers of students that were socially concerned that there were in the late sixties and early seventies at Ripon College. Another thing that certainly made a difference too was the fact we had more minority students on campus, we had blacks on campus. That kept people alive, you know, they had their own house, they had their own concerns and the student body president had to be cognizant of their concerns too. (Noise). And you don't have that sort of thing, that isn't quite the situation that you have and find yourself in today. They would always worry about accents too. (27:00)

It seemed as though, you represent a group, you know, you represent a time, times change. (noise)

JW: I think a my focus is on the renovation right now, and academic policies and educational leads.(I'd just like to point out, while he was saying this, there was construction or road noise by him and it made him very hard to hear.) And students are telling me not to look at national issues meaning that they just like to keep it in the news paper and keep it on the television set. (JT: That is true) And they said concentrate on

campus because they are a lot of things on campus that needs to be done. Socially, well we can take care of it ourselves. I think that is the attitude around.

JT: Sure, sure. That is the attitude, I am sure that, but it is the same attitude here in Wisconsin, but in places like that. (27:56)

Its changed, you know. It is kinda interesting in that in the seventies we were also concerned with a document called Students Rights and Responsibilities. Have you seen that? Do you recall ever seeing that document (28:11)

JW: No, I don't think so. (28:15)

JT: That was something that was put out before us.

JW: I think it is in the handbook now. (28:23)

JT: It is in the handbook, yeah student's rights and responsibilities that came out of the seventies. That came out of our student life committee. Dr. Breihup(misspelled the name) and I were on the committee and some students, kinda worked that thing through and got it into the handbook of the college. But that was a concern, and if you read it carefully, you do have some rights, that some students don't even realize that they have. That was certainly an important document. Maybe I should just mention that I did spend one semester at Madison, in the seventies too, in 1970 it was. You see the difference was, I was taking some courses down there, rather than a sebatical. My goodness, in that

spring semester in the seventies, they were spending more time in Madison in demonstrations, and boycotts of classes, nobody was going to class part of the time you know. (29:41)

Then of course, it became more intensely intended and everything went alive, but Ripon was never in that state [I don't know maybe stage] of that state of chaos, and I don't know, the national guards were in town in Madison, and all that trashing that was going on and a lot of things. It was a difference between Ripon and Madison is just night and day. But I did spend some time going to a lot a lot of the rallies. I did end up seeing what was going on. It was an education, but it was not the education of the classroom. You'd come to school not knowing if there were classes or not. Maybe, we did go to some that semester and we got some credit but boy it was a very volatile situation. There were times when the police would come in and somebody would be tear gassing part of the streets and you'd be running away from them. I'd be running too. (31:00)

But we were never in that situation here. It was different. (31:13)

JW: Well that is all the questions I have right now. But thanks a lot Jerry.

JT: Your welcome, I hope it helps you.

Last 10 seconds was hard to distinguish what was said. (31:25)