

VOICES OF 1968

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

University of Delaware Library, Museums & Press

TIMESTAMP DOCUMENTATION

Notes from Lewis (“Lew”) Bennett interview

Interview Date: Friday, June 1, 2018, 2:30 pm

Interview Location: One-Button Studio, Morris Library, University of Delaware

Interviewer: L. Rebecca Johnson Melvin

Note taker: John Caldwell

Time (H/M/S) Topic/Notes

- 00:00:00 Introduction with names and location of interviewers and interviewees
- 00:00:35 **Personal background:** Bennett is a native of upstate New York. Moved to Delaware when he started the ninth grade (father was a doctor). First impressions of Delaware were not positive, would frequently hitchhike back to New York. Started as a student at the University of Delaware in the fall of 1965.
- 0:01:35 **First memory of protesting:** Newark Country Club, early fall of 1965. There were about 12 people present, and there was an alumni dinner happening at the club. Protesting because of club’s “closed” membership policies. Was called a “bearded communist” by the Newark Post. Through this event, he made connections with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Much of the organizing of this and similar events was by word-of-mouth. Knew a number of people in SDS, occasionally went to the Phoenix House.
- 00:03:00 **Where were you in 1968:** Bennett was a third year psychology student. Most vivid memory was hitchhiking to California and back during the summer of 1968. Went through Chicago during the protests in August. Met up with George Wolkind in Chicago. Asked about George by FBI.
- 00:04:30 **Trip to California:** Was taken by the idea of traveling. Went to San Francisco first, then Los Angeles. Bennett was very impressed by the “heartland,” was a very different place than where he had lived. Ease of finding rides, even in the middle of the country. One story of old Montana truck driver (gentleman had never been outside Montana) who gave him a ride, helped fill the truck from a 55 gallon drum. A lot of travel was solo, but

part of the time he traveled with a female UD student (met at April 1968 teach-in). They went their separate ways when they arrived on the West Coast.

- 00:07:10 War, civil rights, drugs and politics were all topics of conversation during his travels. Bennett would usually wait to find out the driver's political position before he stated his beliefs. Most of the conversations were about drugs—seemed to be what he and others most had in common (pot and LDS).
- 00:08:45 Went west on \$100. Was fined in Ohio for hitchhiking. Would pick up hitchhikers himself back home. Hitchhikers would give back to fellow hitchhikers on the road.
- 00:10:15 **Chicago:** Hitchhiked back, his return trip timed to be in Chicago during the convention. Stayed in an apartment belonging to a number of jazz musicians (found out about the opportunity from chance meeting in Lincoln Park). Other people coming and going during his stay. Would go to demonstrations daily.
- 00:11:00 Many of the protesters were around his age, out day and night. Chicago protests were about more than politicians, but it was about protesting the entire system, "the way things [were]." There were a lot of beatings and negative interaction with the police. Ended up getting arrested with Richard (Dick) Gregory while he was in Chicago, did not have money for bail. Paul O'Dwyer {New York politician} ended up bailing him out around daybreak. Originally 12 charges, when he returned for court date, charge was "disobeying a police officer's orders."
- 00:15:10 **Family:** Had two younger brothers. His father died in March of 1968, would not have been a fan of his going to Chicago. His mother did not fight his going west; he called her once a week. Shared his experiences with his brothers. The youngest, nine years younger than him, was sad he "missed the revolution."
- 00:16:35 **Back at UD in the fall:** When he came back, he realized that most people were not doing what he was doing. There was a core group of people who were the student activists, a mix of drugs and politics. Since they were all "countercultural," they supported each other.
- 00:17:45 Story from Chicago: Riding public transit with a sixteen year old. Bennett was approached by an aggressive person who wanted him to buy a book of poetry, which he did (Bennett picked up a lot of literature and pamphlets on his trip and especially in Chicago). When he got off the train, he was approached by two officers, one African American and one white. Had to empty his backpack, the white officer started reading the book of poetry in a mocking tone. Much of the poetry was about race and equality, and the white officer's attitude annoyed the African American officer.
- 00:21:40 **April 1968 and Wilmington:** Family from north Wilmington, which was very quiet. Was on campus at the time without access to a car. Bennett avoided the city in the immediate aftermath of the riots in Wilmington. Knew some of the people later in life who were active in Wilmington, including: one person who blew off hands building a bomb in Wilmington; knew an officer who had to patrol during the Occupation, getting hit by debris from rooftops; knew a person throwing bricks from rooftops at police.

- 00:24:50 Joined SDS in the fall of 1965 after attending a few demonstrations/protests with members. Bennett was not an organizer, did not write for *The Heterodoxical Voice*, was more interested in the “spiritual track” of the 1960s with drugs (especially LSD), not the Marxist track. Last SDS event was a meeting at the student center. A speaker was quoting Trotsky and that was the end, because there was “too much talking.”
- 00:27:15 **Importance of civil rights:** Very important to Bennett and his family. His mother was active in civil rights in Dutchess County (New York). Protested South African lobster tails because of apartheid. Hosted a group from Nigeria.
- 00:28:50 Bennett had some awareness of issues of race in Delaware. Bennett’s fraternity president was African American. His high school (Mount Pleasant) did not have a large African American population, but had a lot of friends at P.S. Du Pont (many Jewish families had children attending Du Pont), so spent a lot of time with African Americans growing up. Not a political statement.
- 00:31:05 **Campus activism:** Race and gender were heading in the right direction, but Bennett thought social issues would have improved more than they have between 1968 and 2018.
- 00:32:30 Concerned about the draft. Bennett decided that he would not go if he had been drafted. Knew both draft dodgers and some who wanted to serve in the Army, including those who wanted to join and subsequently organize service members through the American Servicemen’s Union.
- 00:34:30 **Effect of 1968 on life:** The years 1967-1969 run together. Delaware before 1968 was a much quieter place. Discussion of the confederate flag and its symbolism then versus 2018.
- 00:36:45 **Most important influence from 1968:** The spiritual questing set off by LSD. Led to meditation practice and how he sees the world.
- 00:37:50 **Closing thoughts:** 1) many of the social problems being discussed in 1968 have not been resolved in 2018; 2) there is still tension between democracy and oligarchy.
- 00:39:05 End of interview