

"The following interview was conducted on behalf of the Oral History Program of the Washington Country Museum and Century High School. The interviewee is Ken Skipper. The interviewers are Stacie Elkins and Erika Newton."

Question (Stacie): "Can you tell me about your experiences in Hillsboro during the Vietnam War?"

Response (Mr. Skipper): "Well, let's see, I came to Hillsboro as a first year teacher at Poynter Jr. High in late August 1968, and I taught that full year which is in 1968-69'. Then in August 1969 I received my draft notice and so basically on September 23rd of that year I was drafted, and I went to Ft. Louis for basic training, and was transferred to Denver, Colorado for 21 months, because I had 3 months off to finish my master's degree. And so that's the basics of it."

Question: "What years were you teaching during the war?"

Response: "Well, 1968-69 was my first year teaching, so I was in college for those four years previous to that, and I don't remember when they say the Vietnam War started..."

Stacie: "It was in 1964."

Response: "I graduated from high school in 1964 and graduated from college in 1968, so that would have been my first year teaching, so then I got out in the summer of 1970, and I went back to Poynter, and taught a few more years there, so I guess I was teaching for about 3 years during the war."

Question: "At what point did the students become away of the war, if at all?"

Response: "What happened was, was there was a growing awareness as people became more concerned about the war, because it wasn't ending, and it wasn't getting anywhere, and about the time that my last couple years of college which would be around 1967 and 1968 it became more and more of an issue I think, at least for college students. So by the time I came to Hillsboro to teach, there was quite a bit of awareness, even at the junior high, which was 7th, 8th, and 9th graders, and even among those who were well aware of the war, they didn't have anywhere near the concern about it that I did, because it so personally impacted me at that time, so my feelings of awareness were a lot higher than their were."

Question: "Were there student feelings of pro-war or anti-war?"

Response: "Yes... but remember this was a junior high so it wasn't anything big. I don't remember any sort of protests, not like at the colleges and that sort of thing, you know, there might have been some. I'd say the thing that I noticed the most is more the impact of the fashions and also the beginnings to question authority. The 50's was not a time of questioning much and that sort of thing, and this is true for me personally as well, that I just did what I was told, and did the right thing, and that sort of thing, but when this all came about there was a lot of skepticism about authority and government, and I'm sure you guys have about that. I don't even know if I answered your question, but..."

Question: "What types of fashion changes were there?"

Response: "Well... you know the real obvious one was the long hair became the big issue at the time, you know, you ought to get an old photo of me and see what I looked like at that time, I had a full beard, and big long hair, and that sort of thing. When I was there in my first year, that was when I got back from being in the service, was when that got to Hillsboro. That was a time when schools were fighting those issues and the clothes you wore, and I can remember getting into trouble for wearing sandals without socks and that sort of thing. So it was an interesting time, kind of like now except its just different issues, like they're trying to keep you from wearing certain things that are, whatever, around here where it's stricter at Jesuit, you know we have certain dress codes."

Question: "Did you have any other family members or close friends actually going to Vietnam?"

Response: "Um, well yeah, I had friends, but none of my immediate family, both my parents were in World War II, I was really the only one of my immediate family that was drafted. That was very difficult situation, my wife and I had just gotten married in April 1968, and she was pregnant with our first child when this notice came. And I don't know if you know that background of this whole thing, but it was right at that time when they started going to the lottery. I had a college deferment, and I had a marriage deferment. They gave deferments to keep out of the draft and that sort of thing, so you had to go through this process to get out of the draft. So what happened was and probably rightly so, they started removing those deferments, because they found that they were discriminatory and that the rich people, the people who could go to college and that sort of thing were getting all the deferments, and the poor people were all getting sent to Vietnam, and getting killed essentially. So they started taking those deferments away. Then they decided that they needed some fair way to do things, so they went to the numbers and you've read about that. They got a big lottery and that started two months after I got drafted. We thought all about those issues. We also actually went to Canada, you've heard about people going up to Canada, we went to Canada in about August or September, before the time I had to report, and actually it was in September, to check out whether I could get a job there. In September, as a teacher, they had filled are their teaching positions at that time, so there was just no jobs. I remember there was a French/Home Economics combination up in some Podunk place, neither of which I was nearly qualified to teach. I tell you that because it was real traumatic, my families were against us not going, and so then giving up the family and so it was real tough personally, the subject being a traumatic time in my life that I have trouble remembering what was going on in school with regard to the war. So it's hard to remember. I think we started talking about fashion. You asked about fashion, bell-bottoms were big, wire rimmed glasses, or glasses with no lens, like a John Lennon kind of a look. There was probably more, as we talk I may remember more."

Vets

Question: "How did people react to veterans coming back to Hillsboro?"

Response: "I don't remember specific instances in Hillsboro, I know that's where your search is kind of headed. I think Hillsboro has always been pretty darn supportive of military efforts and that sort of thing. I remember going the Fourth of July parade, and I remember there was always a military presence there. They would go and shoot machine gun blanks, and people would cheer, they'd bring a tank through. So I think there was basically pretty good support, you know, especially at that time, it was a conservative place. So I think, I don't think veterans were attacked in any way, shape, or form. Being a Vietnam vet wasn't like being a World War II vet as you well know. When I was in the service and when I got out, criticism became so high for that war that you sure weren't a hero in any way, shape, or form. I worked in a psychiatric hospital in Denver, so soldiers were coming back, and they were drug affected or war affected, or whether they were just trying to fake and get out, a lot of that going on. So as far as coming back to the question of Hillsboro, you know, Vietnam vets did not get a hero's welcome by any means there, but I think because it was a pretty conservative place, none of the veterans were discriminated against or anything like that. Personally, I, you know, the more the war went on, and my experience getting drafted into it, so I was just critical of the war as anybody, by the time I got out. So I didn't expect to be a hero or anything like that."

opinion

Vets

Question: "When you were drafted, was there a fear of actually having to go to Vietnam?"

Response: "Definitely, once I decided to let them draft me. There are all kinds of strategies at that time to stay out of the war, from trying to get conscientious objector status, to having some kind of physical ailment. I actually went to the doctor to have some tests done, to try to get physically out of it, and that didn't work. Joining the National Guard, or something that don't go to Vietnam was another strategy. To go to Canada was another strategy. So we were all working hard, first to get out of the military so you didn't have to go to Vietnam. Then once you got drafted, which was my situation, then you tried no to get sent to Vietnam. There were people who were, gung-ho, you know, that wanted to go serve and that sort of thing, but I guess I'm focusing on the way I was feeling, and I didn't want to go in, and I didn't want to go to Vietnam, and I didn't agree with the war. So my choices were Canada, jail, or the service, with really good potential of going to Vietnam, I mean, that was why they were drafting people, was to go to Vietnam. I lucked out, because I had just about finished my master's degree in counseling at that point. I was able to fool the military into thinking that I was qualified to work in a psychiatric hospital. I actually applied to be

a work therapist, because I thought that was a counselor and I knew they didn't go to Vietnam, or I figured they didn't do work therapy in Vietnam. So I applied to be an occupational therapist, and I didn't know what an occupational therapist was, but they do arts and crafts stuff in hospitals for people that are sick, and I thought that that meant helping with their careers, but I thought they wouldn't do that in Vietnam, and I've almost got my master's in counseling, so I'll apply to be an occupation therapist in the army. I did, and they awarded me that job, they didn't send me to the training, they made me an occupational therapist in the army, and sent me to Denver. So my strategy worked, except when I got to the hospital, I didn't know a thing about occupational therapy, I was actually assigned to a hospital to do arts and crafts for the patients, and I'm not very arts and craftsy. But anyways, I got out of the military, so it's a long way to answer the question, yeah we tried hard to keep from going to Vietnam, and I was successful, but 99% of the people who got drafted went right into infantry and artillery, and got sent over there, and went to do basic training, they call it AIT, which is Advanced Individual Training, I think, or something like that."

Question: "When the veterans came back from Vietnam, did you notice an immediate change in their personality or mental health, or was it after a long period of time?"

Response: "Well, my experience with it was real immediate, because I worked in that psychiatric hospital, so what happened when they saw that I wasn't an occupational therapist, they assigned me to do what I had some training in, which was working with mental disorders and drug affected people, and that sort of thing, and they had tons of those people coming back from Vietnam, where I was at the army hospital in Denver. So my experience was very immediate drug issues, and very immediate psychological crisis issues. Plus like I mentioned before, people who were faking those issues. That was part of my job, to try and determine whether they were faking or not. So my experience was more immediate, and I know what you're talking about, the veterans that things came back to haunt them and that sort of thing. I wasn't in Vietnam, so I didn't experience that personally, I've read about it on paper. I really haven't known anybody personally that; it's real evident you see they've been struggling all their lives since the Vietnam War because of the trauma. Personally I've never seen that, other than the direct experience in the hospital."

Question: "Going back to the whole drug thing, did you notice drug use in the schools, or at the high schools?"

Response: "Yeah, drug use grew, you know, smoking pot especially, at least in my lifetime, I think that was the beginning of pot smoking, that was the big thing that came on in that period of time. From that obviously the San Francisco stuff you've read about or heard about, and that graduated into LSD and all the other things that are still with us to some extent. But drug use in the military was, I would say, out of control, during the time that I was in there, and drug use in schools, when I got back in the early 70's, I was able to see that, and I was a counselor at Poynter, and we had a drug issues that pushed through that and continued through the 70's especially, they became a real problem, and today they still are. That was a real high, uh, interesting word, that was the a time when it peaked."

Schools,
Vets

Question: "Do you know anything about a one-day moratorium?"

Response: "I taught at Poynter a few years in the early 70's when I got back, and then I transferred to Hilhi, I was there for a long time, and to be honest with you, we could have had something like that, even when I was there, and I might not remember. My guess is it might have happened between 1968 and 1975, somewhere in that range, because that was the highest protest points of the time. When I was there, because of the grade, and this whole idea of challenging authority, being skeptical of authority, started mainly in the 70's, they say 60's, but by the time it got to Hillsboro, it was the 70's. Even when I taught in the late 70's at Hilhi, we had many courses where we taught a 6 week long course and switched classes all the time. That was all a part of students saying they wanted new usable information."

Question: "Did you notice any religious changes? Like practicing more or less?"

Response: "Well, I'll try to speak of that in ways. Generally speaking, and like I told you before, I have a tendency to forget the general stuff, it was so long ago. I think it goes back to the skepticism of authority,

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and church and government fell right into that. So you people, especially, a larger part of the population, began to just question everything that had anything to do with authority, and God and country fit right in there, so yes I think young people especially became less religious and were questioning things more than ever before, at least in my lifetime. I know from a personal religious situation, it impacted me, I had been raised in a real strict catholic upbringing, and then this happened, when I got drafted, it had tremendous impact on me all the way around. I don't know if it's right to feel this way, but it's the way I felt, that I had done the right thing through all my life, behaved the way I was supposed to, went to college, and got married and got a job. All of a sudden, it was kind of like I had committed a crime, it was go to Vietnam or you go to jail. I guess even though it was hanging over my head, I never believed that would happen, but it did, and then it brought on all kinds of questions, just like I'm sitting here, I really was one of those people who began to question religion, government and everything else, it's remained with me to this day, it's been a part of my life, I've matured, and seen things, but it was a major impact on my life personally. It's easier for me to tell you that than to tell you about the general feeling at the time, because I kind of lost that. What I remember, I used to teach some history, so I remember teaching what was going on during tht time, you know the same stuff you already know."

Question: "Well, is there anything else you wanted to tell us that we didn't talk about?"

Response: "Your research is really focused on what was going on in Hillsboro at the time? You said you looked through the Argus? I was trying to think of where else to look, the Argus is really conservative. They might not put something like that in there; I can't remember to be honest with you. If you look at it today, they don't put things that don't have a certain light on it. I only remember the personal stuff during that time. I'm reading a new book right now, that doesn't have to do with Hillsboro, but you might want to look at it, 'Desertion in the Time of Vietnam' and I'm just about finished with it. This is about a guy that, at the exact same time that I did, went to Canada. He went to Fort Louis, just like I did for basic training. He left Fort Louis during basic training, during Christmas break, and he went to Canada, he deserted essentially, and when you do that you can't come back into this country ever, or you'll get arrested and go to jail. Anyway, at the time he was a writer for the Herald in Miami or something like that, he was only 24 years old. Anyways, he's gone to Canada and he became a writer up in Canada for a major newspaper, and he just wrote this memoir on his life and deserting and that sort of thing. I found it interesting because it was exactly what I was doing in that time. I think it just came out like in the last month or two. But, I don't know what else to tell you. I know that the whole Vietnam thing, for me, has been one of the major turning points in my life, it had a tremendous impact on molding who I am, even though I hardly ever talk about Vietnam now, it was part of me going from being a kid to being to starting to question everything and to wonder, and not just take it because someone said so. During that time in the 70's some people took real pride in questioning everything, we've gotten a little away from that I think, it's not as much, but I think some."