

Kevin Johnson: The following interview was conducted on behalf of the Oral History program of the Washington County Museum and Century High School. The interviewee is Jack Kirkwood the interviewer is Kevin Johnson and Andrew Spiering. The interview took place at Century High School, on Wednesday May 23, at 3:18 PM.

KJ: So Mr. Kirkwood can we get your name, your occupation, your age, and your residence during the period of the Vietnam War?

Jack Kirkwood: During the Period of the Vietnam War I was a young man. I was teaching at Poynter Junior High, and at Hillsboro Mid High.

KJ: Is there anything that you can remember about Hillsboro during the period of the Vietnam War?

JK: Well it was a much smaller place than it is today. Many of the roads that are five lane arterials today were two lane roads, and it has just been exploding in the last few years. Our home at the time we lived on Baseline road between Beaverton and Hillsboro, and that area has been exploding into housing now too. In fact our own place that we farmed for quite a few years has been developed into housing.

KJ :So you actually farmed for a little while?

JK: I was doing some farming during the time that I was teaching. We had about 17 acres and then we sold some off and eventually in 1972 I decided to give up teaching and reduce our tax liability for one, and our first child was born in 1972. That was actually during the time the war was going on; at that time we were hopeful that the war would come to an end but we were not sure of that. It was difficult being a teacher and an activist against the war. Sometimes if I would participate in a demonstration or I would make a speech that was on television or radio, people would call in to the superintendent and say, "What is that -- some kind of Commie on your staff there?" and stuff like that, and I would have to go in and defend my position. I was quite happy to do so; I had looked into the background of the war. I really ought to go into my background before the war which caused me to have...

Andrew Spiering: Actually that is one of our questions. What was the cause of your activities of the war?

JK: This didn't just come out of the blue. I finished college at Lewis and Clark College in 1950. I spent two years on a Navajo Indian Reservation teaching in a school for, well most of them were Indians, and most of them were Navajo and some Hopi and a scattering of others. It was a boarding school at Ganado Arizona under the auspices of the Presbyterian Board of Missions, and that was my first job. I had that about the time of the Korean War was starting, and I got a deferral from that but the more I decided to discard my obligation to the draft. I did not study the Korean situation thoroughly and was not objecting to what the government was trying to do in that situation, maybe I would have if I had known more about it, but having been on the Navajo Indian

reservation and not receiving a lot of input from the press and everything, I did not know a great deal about the things going on in that day. Anyway I decided to enlist in the army and perhaps, I applied for Officer's Candidate School. I thought that maybe I could do that and do my duty to the country. I went to basic training in Camp San Luis Obispo in California and stayed there as Cadbury waiting for a call to officer's training school, and after about a year of that kind of work they decided that the war was winding down. The Korean War was winding down so they weren't going to need officers. So they decided to ship me to Japan to the Camp Drake free displacement depot and from there they would make assignments to various places in Asia including Korea. I was there for a while before I was assigned to a signal corps group. They decided that I was misassigned. I was in an adjacent message center and I went to a signal corps message center that was at Perjing heights which at that time was the United Nations Far East head quarters. The war in Korea was over at that time. The armistice had been signed. There was still activity as there is today; we still have troops in Korea today. I was working a night shift and we were monitoring propaganda broadcasts coming from China. None of those were encrypted. Most of the messages we got that went to headquarters were encrypted and we couldn't read the stuff. We just sent it to the encryption department and that was it, but these were all in English. Through these propaganda we had a general idea of what the people of China were hearing from there. This was after the Chinese Communist Revolution which occurred in 1948 or 49, and so they were trying to convince their people that they were making progress and they were doing a lot of things for improving the living conditions of people, and improving education, and improving medical. All of this came through in the propoganda, and there was the same attitude we've often had in congress. There were three senators trying to convince the country that we ought to back Chiang Kaishek who had escaped to Taiwan. That was his place of operation and these three senators, including Senator Nolan of California. . . I don't remember the other two . . . they wanted the United States to give air cover to return to the main land and take over communist China. This was rolling back communism, but reading what the communists were telling their people for so long I had little thought that any such operation would have any success at all and it would be a terrible disaster. So I kind of lost my faith in the government's ability and of course we didn't do that. The government didn't follow their suggestion, but the government has not been really terribly honest about the things they have been doing from time to time and that was true about Vietnam. Now Vietnam was not something . . . when it hit the news in the US, a lot of people wondered where it was. They don't remember studying it or anything, but when I was in Japan, I had gone on a trip to southeast Asia. I wanted to visit the Philippines and Vietnam and Thailand. Those were the three places my friend and I had decided to go, and we had another friend in Thailand who had spent some time visiting his missionary parents in Thailand. So we kind of consulted him to find out how he was able to do this, and we were able to do it too. And we were not given permission to visit Vietnam. That was 1955. The Geneva Accords were 1954 and there was supposed to be free travel across the border between north and south. That was to be a temporary military demarcation line. It was not designed to be a national boundary. We were not permitted to visit Saigon because of the fact that there were so many refugees from the South and the hotels were full. There was danger at that time and there was

concertina wire around. We were able to wander around the airport there, but beyond that all we saw of Vietnam was the rice paddies. Taking off on the aircraft, we could see the people and a very common scene in southeast Asia. However in Thailand we had a very nice visit. We were most of the time in Bangkok, but we went north some and we took a train trip to the north to see some of the ancient ruins there. So I have some familiarity there. We spent a little time in the Philippines too, only a couple of days in the Philippines, but we were able to travel around Manila and see some of the destruction of the war because that was still not too far from the war about ten years after and anyway that is my background of experience

AS: So you were actually over in that area during that time.

JK: When I came back to the United States, I should say first there were these reenlistment appeals that came as my enlistment expired, and I was being processed to return to the US. But because of this thing with Senator Noland and proposals for what we should do, I thought well, you know, if that should actually happen I wouldn't be in the service. I would be a conscientious objector on any kind of project at that time.

AS: It doesn't even seem reasonable . .

JK: No it doesn't. Of course it never happened, and that's I must say that I was a little leery. Whenever the government would get involved in something, I would take a second look. That was true when I was teaching social studies and English at Poynter Junior High and we would discuss news events. It was part of the news. We were watching the war on our televisions and so I looked into some of the background of the war, how we got into what our role in the Geneva Accords ending the war between the French and so on. So I knew I had to make a statement against it, and I wrote a letter to the *Oregonian* which was published and I got a call from somebody who was on the staff at the Portland Council of Churches. They were working on this project. They gone to Washington DC to try to stop the war and things like that, and they wanted me to join Clergy and Laity Concerned and about Vietnam. So I did that. I served as chairman of the group for a while, for several year. That is how I got involved in the certain coalition activities like speaking at demonstrations and debating people on the opposite side of the issue and things like that went on. And that's how I got called into the office.

AS: You had made a comment about teaching it in social studies. What were their reactions to it? Did they really understand it when you were teaching it to them, or did you understand it more than they did?

JK: Let me say this. I didn't try to use the classroom as a platform for my opinion about the war. I didn't try to propagandize the students against the war. I didn't think that was my role. What I tried to do is to encourage them to read what was happening and read it in a critical way and to ask questions about what were happening and things like that. So that part is not difficult to me. I was professionally committed to that position so I really didn't ever get in trouble with the administration for what I was doing in the classroom and I wouldn't say I got into trouble with the administration for my writing letters to the

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editor or my speaking at different events. They understood that as my right as an American citizen to do, and this is part of what the military are supposed to be defending is our rights to be able to speak out against issues that are a concern to us.

AS: After you had left your teaching, do you feel that Vietnam affected your decision in leaving to go off and do the farm thing? I mean do you feel as though that was a big dent that that was a reason why that you possibly left teaching?

JK: Well it certainly did have an affect partly. I left in 1972. It is hard to explain in simple terms about a thing like that. Our first child had been born and my wife is a professional person too. She was a teacher as well and she had been substituting even in these times. But she needed help in looking after the children and we could simply change our operation a little bit start importing some horses and raising some cattle and doing some things like that on the farm and eventually I was making hay on neighboring fields around . A lot of this was subsistence type stuff. I wasn't really able to make it on that income. Eventually I took a *Oregonian* route an automobile route of about 400 daily and Sunday costumer. Anyway we got along OK and I was still an activist during that time. I made a trip to Washington DC, a national conference of Clergy and Laity Concerned, one to Cincinnati Ohio, for a meeting. And I continued to work. There were lots of issues that were not solved. The war was a symptom of what was going wrong in the country, a problem of misappropriation of funds and bad analysis, bad intelligence. If we look back at history, nearly every one of these difficulties we've been in has resulted as mistakes of the CIA and other government officials. A lot this is affected by politics even today. Right now we are in a very difficult time in the United States. The serious choice is trying to be influenced. There are two sides to the issue. It's not entirely partisan, partly partisan, but part of the country is wanting to emphasize American sovereignty over American participation in the world community. We do things based things on our own sovereign decisions and we don't join treaties where our people come subject to the judgment of international bodies or something like this, so we find one after another. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was not approved by the Senate of the United States. The International Criminal Court which was supposed to be a way to process war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity. We were very much in the process of helping to set that up and it is a very good document that it honors the due process that we have in the American court system. They won't have juries as we have in our country, but it is not unconstitutional for us to participate in some kind of and all of covered by legal counsel. . . There are those in this country who would like to move the country in the direction of an interdependent world with eventually a some type of world governance in which the solution the problems that can't be solved by any one nation alone would be handled by an international body. Of course we have the United Nations. It doesn't have that authority at this time it doesn't have any military forces but right now we are attempting to give the United Nations some authority. [He discussed the modern situation in Africa.]

KJ: You've been talking about some of the activities that you did to protest the war. What exactly were the activities? You've talked about some . . . what were all of them that you did?

JK: It is hard to remember precisely of course writing letters to the editor was one thing that I did.

AS: Did you find that effective? Did they seem to jar any minds or boggle any people?

JK: I found both the *Argus* and the *Oregonian* which was the two papers would write to both of them were mostly in disagreement with my position.

AS: I think we've found that out with the Arguses that we have . . .

JK: Of course that is still going on. I have a letter right here that I wrote a week or two ago in response to an editorial on national missile defense highly supportive of it and yet I have studied it carefully and I have come to the exact opposite position that they have. They haven't published my letter yet. I don't know if they will but I think they might.

KJ: Did anyone oppose the activities you were doing, and if so who?

JK: There were people. There was one person who was quite upset that the *Oregonian* published my letters to the editor and not theirs which were opposite of mine. The *Oregonian* did not agree with theirs anyway. I was pleased that I had as many published as I did. I also sent letters to Congress. I was very pleased with both Wayne Morse and Senator Hatfield who were both strongly opposed to war activities. Other things that I did . . . I participated in demonstration marches and helped to organize them in those days. We always had good relations with the police. We'd get our parade permits and there was usually a motorcycle cop along with us, and they were friendly. You didn't know whether the motorcycle policemen was opposed to what you were doing or very much in support of it. He was just doing what he was supposed to do. Then we would have meetings in churches. Sometimes that would gather together some of the people from both sides of issues and then we'd debate them and I participated in some of those debates.

AS: And all of these things took place locally here.

JK: Well a lot of this was in the Portland area you know, rather than in Hillsboro, not so much right here in Hillsboro, but we would have a monthly meeting at Clergy and Laity Concerned and we'd work on the planning some of those things. And we did have an executive director who was paid staff and there were people who would contribute to the group to pay his salary. I never received anything

KJ: Did you remember anything specifically that happened in Hillsboro like demonstration wise -- any anti-war protest?

JK: I don't remember in Hillsboro war protests but there were a number of them in Portland, some on the Portland State campus that I can recall. I wasn't there for those and some of those got a little nasty. All of the ones that I participated in were peaceful demonstrations. That's during the days of Martin Luther King and he was the one that

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we would look to for leadership on how you deal with these things. He was an advocate for the non-violent position. There were other organizations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation which dates from World War I which we worked with and eventually when Clergy and Laity dissolved, some its activities were taken over by Fellowship of Reconciliation.

AS: Lots of involvement. Since you have written and done these things, have your opinions changed or have they always stayed the same? Now knowing some of the information that you did not know then, have your thoughts or views changed? Maybe you would go back and change some of the things that you said or did

JK: I appreciate that question. When I got the call yesterday about the interview I dug out this old pamphlet that I had written years ago, actually a Citizen's View of the Vietnam War which I wrote in 1967. It was partly to defend my professional position as teacher in school because I thought I should be able to put something in the hands of the superintendent, the school board and the principal or any of the teachers that might question what I was doing to understand the background of my thinking and why I had come to the positions that I had come to. It says "moral, philosophical, and practical reasons why one man opposes the Vietnam War" so I did not find very much. I think there was some of the things that I learned about it afterwards after I wrote the essay my knowledge is perhaps a little more complete now than it was at that time, but it is basically the same. There is a very good film in fact I had the film and used to use it and I gave it to the Washington County library and apparently there were not enough calls for it and it has disappeared. David Sinbran (sp?) was addressing a meeting of business men who had mobilized against the Vietnam War and he was giving his opinions and of course he was a journalist and he had considerable background dating to World War II days and I have the soundtrack of that and I could provide that for you.

KJ: Now did you show any of your students this movie or anything?

JK: Oh yes.

KJ: How did they react to the anti war type stuff?

JK: I didn't use it as a regular . . . if it fit in to a unit that we were doing, I would use it. We would use it for discussion purposes and trying to understand the opinions. This was one of the things that I tried to help the students understand the opinions of those who opposed the war. I thought they should know those things because there was much anti-war activity and that was on the news too, so they needed to have that background. But we always tried to balance that with things on the other side as well. It wasn't like we were trying to push this point of view, but I wasn't trying to hide it either.

KJ: Were most of these students pro war or anti war

JK: We never did take a vote. Most of them were noncommittal. Some were obviously anti-war. These were junior high age students so they hadn't matured as much as high

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school students. They would not have developed in their thinking perhaps as much, but I think that they were good in accepting in the various views. They would participate in presenting news that they would clip from the newspapers and sometimes it was news of anti-war activity.

KJ: So they kept an open mind about the war?

JK: I think so and if they didn't they didn't tell me about it and I realized that some of them may not have because they knew where I stood on that. They may not have wanted and I was sensitive to that possible feelings.

KJ So is there anything that we didn't ask you that you would like to recall to us or mention right now?

JK: One thing that I didn't mention I don't think it is in the pamphlet but the Vietnam war, you may know this already, but the Geneva Accords of 1954 were the treaty that ended the war between the French and the Vietnamese. We had people attending that treaty discussion and we were not signatories to the treaty, but we did sign protocol agreements that we would not upset the treaty by force, and then we proceeded to do that. So that's one objection that I had against the war and I didn't really include that point in here.

AS: I guess one final question. We are using the *Argus* as sense of reference. Was the Price of Peace . . . I think was the name of some article in there that you had written

JK: I did have a series of articles under the name Price of Peace

AS: There was a response to your article by Robin Cady and we just want to know your take of where he was coming from and what your response was to that article. I think he wrote that in February of 72 is when he printed that out.

JK: You know I can't really remember that response to it. There was some response to these special articles in addition to letter to the editor. I did that series one time because they don't like to print lettersto the editor constantly from one person. They like to pass that around the community and I felt that at that time particularly regular . . . I forget how often that came out, every couple months or so. I don't remember how often it was. I should have all of these things catalogued. I'm afraid that I have not spent enough time cataloging the past.