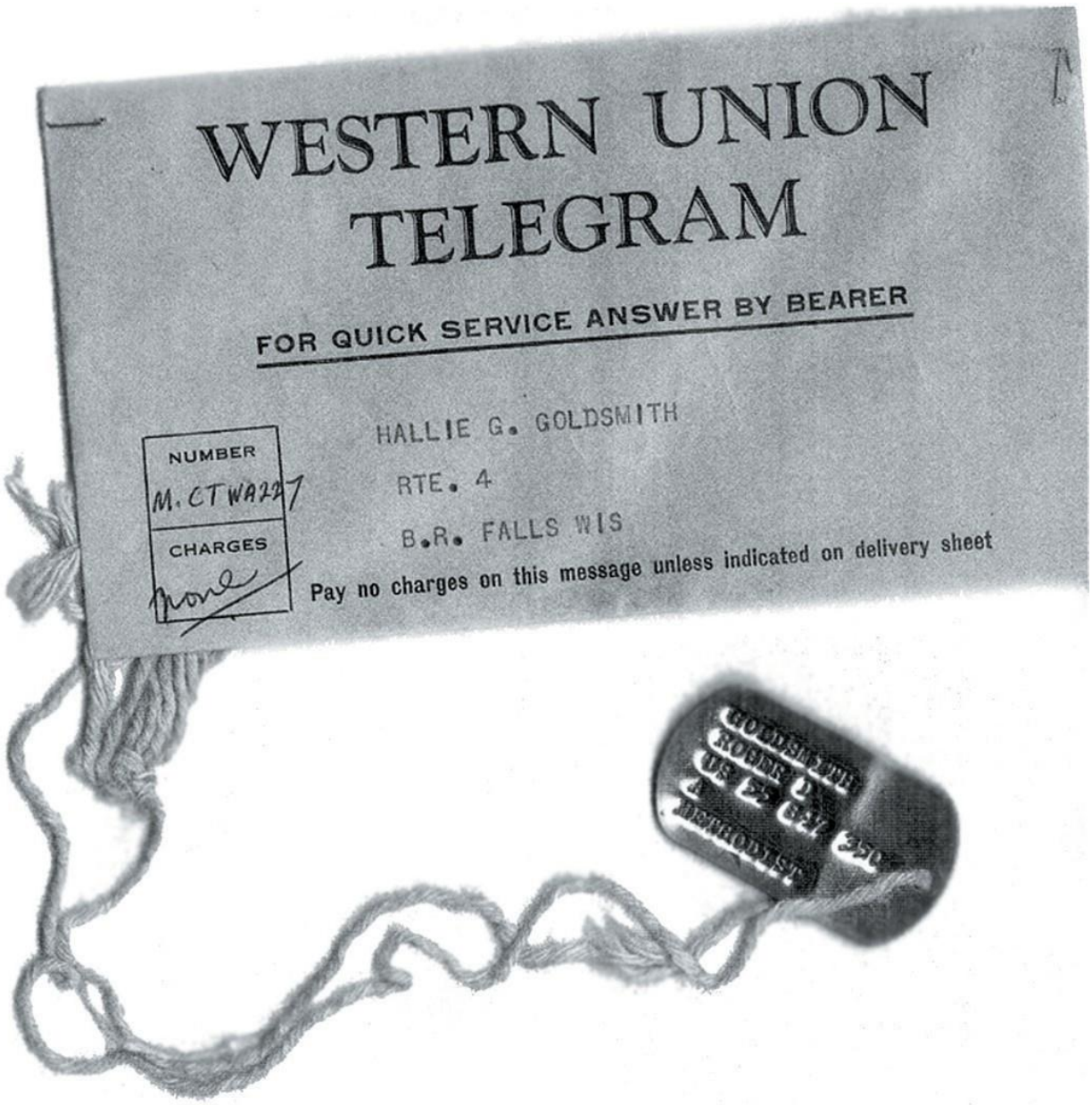


Black River Falls, 1968
Politics and Perspective

Falls History Project

2006

THE FALLS HISTORY PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

How do we actively engage students in the study of history? This is the ongoing challenge that history teachers must face at the secondary level. Historian David Blight of Amherst College suggests that "all historical experience . . . must be imagined before it can be understood." One way to engage students and their imaginations more fully is to connect them to the actual process of "doing" history and relate that process to an increased understanding of their local environment. Indeed, the story of Black River Falls and the surrounding area provides a rich and diverse landscape for historical research.

OVERVIEW

As a symbolic beginning for this project in 2000, we established a permanent display at BRFHS related to Corporal Mitchell RedCloud, Jr., a graduate who posthumously received the Medal of Honor for heroism in the Korean War. His life story offers a compelling example of the power of memory in our community. The Falls History Project research was initiated during the 2001-02 school year with the intention of connecting our students more authentically to the history of our region. From the start our hope has been that the project would involve a number of teachers and students. We introduce our students to the project through various classes within our department and much of the work involves the gathering of oral history.

COMPONENTS OF THE PROJECT

ORAL HISTORY WORK

Students who are enrolled in any of our history courses will have the opportunity to become involved in oral history work. The focus of the interviews will depend on the particular aspect of local history that we are dealing with at the time. Our first efforts will be aimed at compiling research related to veterans of the Second World War and the Korean Conflict. We will be working with students on skills related to interviewing, including videotaping and transcribing.

RESEARCHING LOCAL DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

Students will be introduced to the sources of history available at the "History Room" of the BRF Public Library, particularly the microfilm archives of local newspapers. In addition, students with a special interest in HoChunk history will be introduced to the archives of the Historic Preservation and Cultural Resources of the HoChunk Nation located at the Executive Building of the tribe.

INDEPENDENT STUDY OFFERING FOR SENIORS

Since 2001-02 we have had several interns who work exclusively on the project during their senior year. Interns are advanced history students who design a project related to local history and carry it out under the guidance of the FHP advisor.

INTERNSHIPS/VOLUNTEER WORK

We have spoken with Mary Lent and Mary Woods at the Public Library concerning the possibility

of summer internships or volunteer work for students at the History Room. We envision this as a possibility for students who may be contemplating studying history beyond high school and have a special interest in learning more about the actual work of historians. We will also be exploring the possibility of working with the Jackson County Historical Society as we proceed with the project.

DEVELOPING A PERMANENT ARCHIVE AT BRFHS

Beginning in 2002-03, we established a permanent archive at BRFHS related to the Falls History Project. It is located in the LMC and houses the various research that is compiled through the project.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Falls History Project offers great potential for furthering history education in our school. We believe that it provides an excellent opportunity for developing connections between the community and the school related to local history.

Paul S Rykken/ Falls History Project Advisor

FALLS HISTORY PROJECT 2006

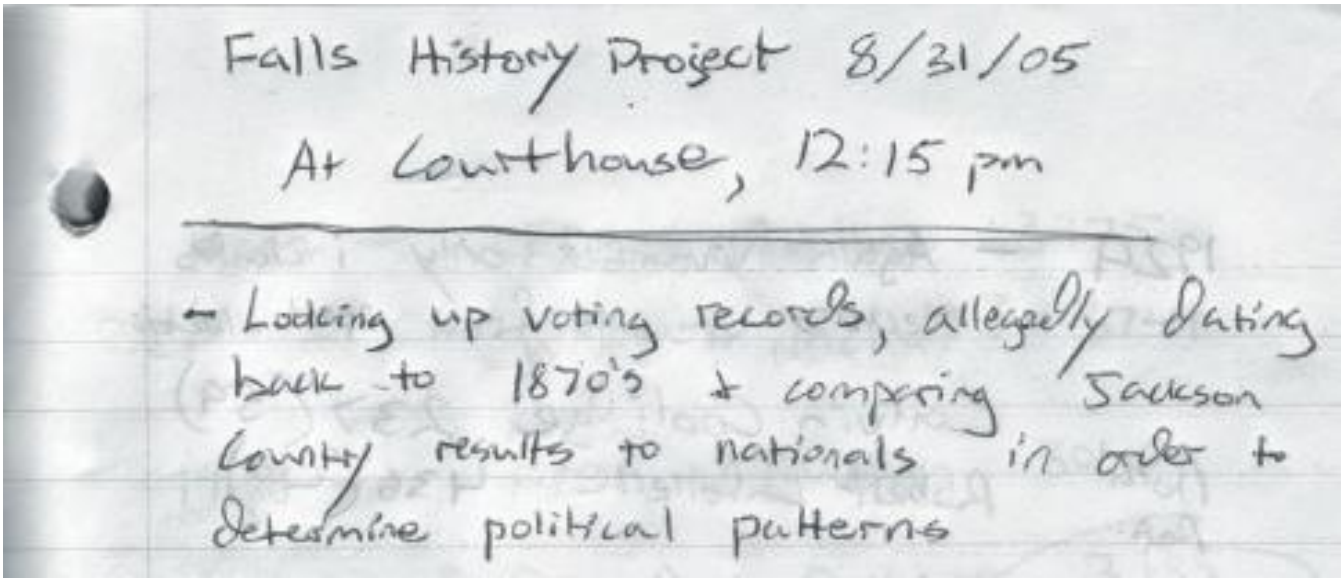
IN OUR 2006 PROJECT WE ARE EXPLORING A SLICE OF THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF JACKSON COUNTY. BEYOND GETTING A SENSE OF THE PARTY DIVISIONS IN THE COUNTY, WE ARE ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF THE 1968 ELECTION IN OUR REGION.

Cory Schultz is our 2005-06 intern. He is pictured here. Cory has established himself as an outstanding social studies student throughout his four years at BRFHS. He completed AP US History in his junior year and has been involved in our full range of electives since his sophomore year. He will be attending UW-Madison in the fall of 2006.

THIS YEAR'S INTERVIEWEES

MR. WILLIAM WILCOX: INTERVIEWED DECEMBER 1, 2005
DR. AL LAHMAYER: INTERVIEWED DECEMBER 5, 2005
JUDGE GERALD LAABS: INTERVIEWED DECEMBER 6, 2005
MR. CHRIS GOLDSMITH: INTERVIEWED DECEMBER 8, 2005

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO OUR PROJECT!



Notes on the Project

and Voter History Research

About half-way into this project, after the interviews had been conducted and the voting research had been recorded, I had to ask myself "what is the underlying theme of this thing?" What do two politically active and ideologically opposed men, a former University of Wisconsin--Madison graduate student, a BRF High School 1968 senior with one deceased brother in Vietnam, and 104 years of county voting records have in common? Was it poor planning on my part that what was intended to be a general analysis of BRF in one year came to encompass so many uncoordinated directions? This was my conflict.

First of all, what was the point of researching voter history, anyway? The answer is complicated. The initial idea was that the project would be politically centered. By investigating how the county voted for US presidents in the past 100 years (before 1968), it might be possible to recognize trends among its voters that tend to surface from election to election, thereby developing a greater understanding of the local outcome in our year of focus. Luckily, surviving record books at the Jackson County Courthouse and Blue Books dating back to 1864 in the History Room at the public library made that possible.

My findings were not spectacular, certainly not as spectacular as the hours of fun researching them, but a number of interesting things did show up. For instance, from the years of 1864 to 1968, 19 of the 27 presidential elections featured Republicans as the victors. And of the six times* that the county result differed from the national result, four county winners were Republican, including Thomas Dewey in 1944 during FDR's last election, which he won nationally but did not live to serve. Moreover, of the two times when county preference favored non-Republicans over national Republican winners, one was Robert Lafollette, an independent progressive most undoubtedly supported by most of the citizens of Wisconsin.

Naturally, it can be assumed that Jackson County, until 1968, believed heavily in Republican presidents. Both Bill Wilcox and Al Lahmayer reported Republican dominance in the thinking of at least county board members during the '50s and early '60s (pp. 9, 19). It is important to note, however, that the Republican party, which originated in Wisconsin, began with the ideology of Federal Supremacy, particularly in the case of slavery and the free soil issue, and then evolved into a number of progressive approaches to society in the early 1900s. Republicans dominated the executive branch from 1860 to 1912, with the exception of Democrat Grover Cleveland in 1892, who

was in fact originally a Republican. During this time, it was Democrats who favored states' rights and opposed attempts at abolishing slavery, and coincidentally were not chosen by citizens of Jackson County in most elections.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Democrat influenced by the likes of Teddy Roosevelt, whose ideas were embodied also by "progressive Republican" Robert Lafollette (very popular in Jackson County), is an apparent exception to this rule. But looking closely you will find that Roosevelt adopted the federally-oriented approach of earlier Republicans to solve the problems of the Great Depression. It is, therefore, not surprising that Roosevelt had Jackson County so behind him, not taking into consideration the country's desire for change during that turbulent time. And it is also not surprising that both Republicans and Democrats of today hold claim to origins in Wisconsin, considering the, albeit, generalized party after which both groups are loosely based.

In 1968, Richard Nixon received 3,127 votes in Jackson County, 879 more than Hubert Humphrey. Nixon also triumphed over John F. Kennedy, in Jackson County, in 1960. If you take a look at the year of 1968 in the microfilm of the Banner Journal, you will find a number of articles and announcements related to Nixon and his campaign, but nothing in report of the other candidates aside from election results in November. The goal of the interviews that I conducted, aside from ge□ing a social sense of life in the late '60s, was simply to figure out why. Obviously from the sample of men I interviewed, interpretations differed. The answer, it seems, to the conflict I was facing earlier was front of me all along. If American politics requires many sides, arguments, and multiple viewpoints, then it is necessary to attack the year of 1968 through the perspectives of (in my case) four completely different personalities. And that is ultimately the underlying theme of this project: perspective.

* 1884, 1912, 1916, 1924, 1944, 1960

- Cory Schultz

Bill Wilcox

Interviewed Dec. 1, 2005

Schultz: Alright. First I just have a little intro. I'd like to thank you for participating in the project and, as you might know, this year we are focusing on the election year of '68 and just the years surrounding that as well, the atmosphere, and I'm also doing work related to presidential voting history in the county, and we have records that go back to 1864, I believe, so about a hundred years before this…around this one, and I'd also like to just ask you to be comfortable and don't be afraid to elaborate on just experiences and memories and don't think about information but just your own life. That will give us the best idea of the county in this time. So, to begin with, were you born in Black River Falls?

Wilcox: No.

Schultz: No?

Wilcox: River Falls is my home.

Schultz: River Falls? When did you move to Black River Falls?

Wilcox: In 1951, been here a long time.

Schultz: What were your first impressions?

Wilcox: Of Black River Falls? Well, I suppose, the first time I told my wife we were gonna move there I said 'Oh, not in that God forsaken country are you?' because about all we knew was on highway 12, coming and going, in the [inaudible] stands, and not prosperous looking on highway 12. However, moving here and living here, I find it to be somewhat different.

Schultz: Has it changed since then?

Wilcox: Oh, unbelievable change since then.

Schultz: Around what age do you think you started becoming aware of politics and your own political ideology?

Wilcox: Well, uh, I presume family has a lot to do with it, and I would suggest—I've probably been a Republican from the day I was born.

Schultz: Oh wow!

Wilcox: [laughs] But ideally I was a junior or senior in high school before we got into debate and that sort of thing.

Schultz: What, around what year was that?

Wilcox: In, oh, '40 or '41.

Schultz: Okay, around WWII.

Wilcox: Yes.

Schultz: Okay, and you already kind of answered that a little bit but what do you think influenced your political ideas? Family…

Wilcox: Well I think family has a lot to do with it, at least political philosophy. Now politics of today isn't politics of that period at all. It's quite different.

Schultz: What issues at the time concerned you in the country? What were you most concerned with…

Wilcox: In high school?

Schultz: Yeah, well, yeah, in the time that you started becoming politically aware.

Wilcox: Well, I remember—the only president I'd ever seen was Herbert Hoover [laughs], saw him in the back of train in Hudson, Wisconsin. Schultz: I've never seen any president!

Wilcox: [laughs] Uh, that was followed of course by Roosevelt, who was president for ten or twelve years, didn't cover the whole twelve years, but that period, and during WWII. And at that time politically, I don't remember significantly a lot of problems of the war, everybody was fighting the war. And nobody was asking to leave after a year or anything like that, that was the effort…mobilize.

Schultz: This is a very general question: would you consider yourself to be, plainly, liberal or conservative?

Wilcox: What a foolish question! [laughs] It would be of anybody who knows me, especially a modern-day liberal. I wouldn't be that.

Schultz: So basically conservative?

Wilcox: Yes.

Schultz: Did you consider yourself so in the 1960s?

Wilcox: Yes.

Schultz: What were your impressions of John F. Kennedy?

Wilcox: Well he and his wife were a handsome young couple, they did a good job of campaigning. Was that the first contest between he and Nixon that we're talking about?

Schultz: Yeah we're talking about 1960, so…

Jackson County Voting Results

* indicates where National result differs from County result.

1864
Abraham Lincoln (R) 679

George McClellan (D) 207

1868
Ulysses Grant (R) 1,055

Horatio Seymour (D) 376

1872
Ulysses Grant (R) 956

Horace Greeley (D) 358

1876
Rutherford Hayes (R) 1,507

Samuel Tilden (D) 718

1880
James Garfield (R) 1,841

Winfield Hancock (D) 673

1884 *
James Blaine (D) 2,060

Grover Cleveland (R) 965

1888
Benjamin Harrison (R) 2,090

Grover Cleveland (D) 986

1892
Grover Cleveland (D) 4,661

Benjamin Harrison (R) 2,679

1896
William McKinley (R) 2,710

William Bryan (D) 778

1900
William McKinley (R) 2,639

William Bryan (D) 651

Wilcox: Okay, he was…he was killed, and then Johnson was in for a period of time. Did Nixon come after that?

Schultz: It was the very first…Nixon was elected to the United States as president in 1968, yes. But…

Wilcox: Preceded him.

Schultz: Yeah. Before we start getting into 1968.

Wilcox: Okay, no he was alright, I recall, the Bay of Pigs conflict, the Cold War, all that sort of thing.

Schultz: Were there any aspects of John F. Kennedy, as a conservative, that you had a problem with…that concerned you?

Wilcox: Well, you're talking about being a conservative democrat now or what?

Schultz: I mean,

Wilcox: You said as a conservative?

Schultz: As you being a conservative.

Wilcox: Oh!

Schultz: Did you have any issues with him?

Wilcox: I would say not any more than usual, differences that we have. I mean the parties are different, and the thoughts philosophically we should be very different, and that too was changed a great deal.

Schultz: A lot of overlapping. Voting records, this is interesting, voting records that I looked at, just for presidential elections show that the majority of Jackson County voted for Nixon in 1960, even though Kennedy won that election. And they also voted for Johnson in 1964. Do you think that sounds accurate considering Black River Falls in those years?

Wilcox: I think so. When I came to town, I think the county was all, I'm talking about the county officers, were mostly republican at that time. That's changed so you can't get in unless you're a democrat now.

Schultz: Do you have any explanations for why Johnson may have been elected in 1964, even though they voted for Nixon in 1960?

Wilcox: In Jackson County, you're talking about?

Schultz: Yeah, Jackson County.

Wilcox: No, I don't off hand. Something happened, I can't recall what it would be.

1904
Theodore Roosevelt (R) 2,716

Alton Parker (D) 479

1908
William Taft (R) 2,603

William Bryan (D) 631

1912 * (sig. third party)
William Taft (R) 1,398

Woodrow Wilson (D) 606

Theodore Roosevelt (P) 477

1916 *
Charles Hughes (R) 1,866

Woodrow Wilson (D) 963

1920
Warren Harding (R) 3,652

James Cox (D) 410

1924 * (independent winner)
Robert LaFollette (I) 3,167

Calvin Coolidge (R) 1,662

1928
Herbert Hoover (R) 4,353

Al Smith (D) 1,364

1932
Franklin Roosevelt (D) 3,813

Herbert Hoover (R) 1,983

1936
Franklin Roosevelt (D) 4,537

Alfred Landon (R) 2,235

1940
Franklin Roosevelt (D) 3,975

Wendell Willkie (R) 3,741

Schultz: Maybe it was just…

Wilcox: But Johnson and his Great Society program, and it sold, he was probably the biggest politician of our time, actually.

Schultz: Before the election of '68, did you feel that the political atmosphere of Black River Falls was liberal, conservative, or mixed.

Wilcox: I think it was conservative, I think it's still conservative.

Schultz: Do you have any examples? Any…

Wilcox: No, I don't. I…I can't give you my explanation for that. It has to do with taxes, with local development economics, a lot of things it has to do with.

Schultz: You, yourself, have been described as an active member of the Republican Party. How active were you particularly in the 1960s?

Wilcox: Um, I was active. I don't recall whether I was an officer of the party or not, but I've generally been supportive and active…an office holder from time to time.

Schultz: Did you participate in any activities, like meetings, or rallies, or protests or…

Wilcox: No, we didn't know about protests. And most conservatives or Republicans don't protest, that's the liberal view of things and probably too bad that that's the way it is. Uh, no I think, I presume the greatest participation I had in politics was I was on a committee for Steve Gunderson when he was running for congress and state legislature and so forth for several years that he was in there. That's the most active that I've been I think.

Schultz: This is kind of an activity that Mr. Rykken suggested, but basically I'm just gonna throw a few terms at you, there's only five of them, and I just would like you to simply react to them with any personal thoughts or experiences, and the first one is kind of a big name, and that's Barry Goldwater. What do you have to say about Barry Goldwater?

Wilcox: Well Barry was certainly representing the conservative viewpoint, and I was for Barry. He had good ideas, he would have got us out of Vietnam earlier. And, no, Barry Goldwater was okay. He didn't win of course…

Schultz: No. I believe that Barry Goldwater became a prominent name mostly in '64. Were you really excited about that in '64?

Wilcox: Well I think he had a good record in the Senate, you know he was a senator, he had a good record there, something

1944 * (FDR's 4th run)
Thomas Dewey (R) 3,182

Franklin Roosevelt (D) 3,040

1948
Harry Truman (D) 2,921

Thomas Dewey (R) 2,553

1952
Dwight Eisenhower (R) 4,235

Adlai Stevenson (D) 2,819

1956
Dwight Eisenhower (R) 3,614

Adlai Stevenson (D) 2,755

1960 *
Richard Nixon (R) 3,172

John Kennedy (D) 2,849

1964
Lyndon Johnson (D) 3,818

Barry Goldwater (R) 2,532

1968
Richard Nixon (R) 3,172

Hubert Humphrey (D) 2,293

to build on. And again, he was conservative. You know there's a difference, a philosophical difference, with what the old time philosophical Democrat or Republican thought. And I say that's distorted quite a bit right now.

Schultz: Another one, this is obviously, had to throw this in there somewhere, but Vietnam. What do you have to say about Vietnam?

Wilcox: It was a—It was an unfortunate disaster for the United States…for the veterans, for the people who served. We weren't behind it. There was…I suppose treaties were supposed to be abided by but that was the only reason that we were there, and…the treaty probably could have had a little better planning at the beginning.

Schultz: Did the war affect you personally in any way…did you have family members involved?

Wilcox: [mumbles no]

Schultz: No? Do you think during…throughout the course of Vietnam until its end that it was ever dealt with effectively at any time?

Wilcox: Uh…no it was not. They put more troops in, they had few troops. If they had stuck with the instruction part of it early on and not got any more involved…that might have been alright but Johnson kept pushing troops in there and it got to be a thing we weren't ready to deal with, militarily or economically or philosophically.

Schultz: War protesters…what were your impressions of war protesters?

Wilcox: Well I'm conservative, conservatives don't protest usually.

Schultz: But, of those that did protest at the time what were your impressions of them?

Wilcox: I am very much of a patriot as well, and I think there are other methods of demonstrating to the world what's going on.

Schultz: Do you believe that war protesters…do you believe that war protesters basically aided in the breakdown of our success in Vietnam?

Wilcox: Sure.

Schultz: Can you explain that?

Wilcox: Well you get more and more protesters, I suppose the real turning point was the Kent State thing, when all those kids were killed down there. That sort of made, to anybody that was in favor of the war or what we were doing, to take a new look. So protesting works in that regard, it was a very disastrous thing.

Schultz: Speaking of war protests, what did you think of, what was your reaction to the Chicago Democratic National Convention of 1968?

Wilcox: It was very interesting…fun to watch, we all sat around and watched the conventions when I was a boy and when I was growing up, and it was very interesting.

Schultz: Did you have negative views toward the riots at the convention?

Wilcox: Sure.

Schultz: And the last term I guess I would mention is Lyndon Johnson, I know you talked about him before already, but just your own reactions to Lyndon Johnson.

Wilcox: Well, Lyndon Johnson's probably the best politician I've ever known. He was very good in the Senate and Congress on his own. He had the Great Society program which I think has gotten us in a lot of trouble since. And if I were to analyze that from one viewpoint, instead of having services available to people who needed services, at that point you went out and looked for more people to have those services, and I don't believe that was a very good approach. And so we're into a lot of programs we probably will never get out of.

Schultz: Do you…can you think of any services in particular that were unnecessary in the Great Society program?

Wilcox: Well I wish I knew them all! I can't remember, there were a number of them. But the whole welfare program…was mental health, was food products, whatever it was…he established through [inaudible] or other areas for agencies to go out and look for people who needed help, and I don't think that's particularly good, for them or for the government either way. People have to have their own personal responsibility for things.

Schultz: Lyndon Johnson is somebody who obviously gets a lot of…strikes a lot of negative feelings in people, he's kind of controversial, at least in the 60s…do you think that he was underrated? I mean you described him as an excellent politician, do you believe that he was unfairly judged during those times?

Wilcox: No, I don't think so, I don't think so. He was a rather crude individual in some ways, and you don't find that out until later of course, about a lot of things.

Schultz: Colorful language!

Wilcox: But at that time, there were indications of that at that time. But he was a forceful, dominant person, he became wealthy being a politician too incidentally, don't forget that!

Schultz: Are your impressions of Johnson now different from what they were—

Wilcox: No. Not changed a bit.

Schultz: 1968 is sometimes referred to as a boiling point in America's tolerance of the war and the social turmoil in the country at the time. How would you describe your attitude toward the country in that year? I mean it was the year of the convention, there was the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, everything was becoming very intense.

Wilcox: Yeah, yeah, it's hard to recall how you felt at that particular time, but it sort of was a tense period for everybody in America, what[ever] side of the fence they were on. And of course it was something America was not used to: the press and the news and everybody was right there, as they're doing today incidentally and telling all the bad stuff. So that had a great effect on American people. We didn't have that in WWI or WWII or Korea even. I'm not judging it to be good or bad but certainly it was a very effective tool.

Schultz: Do you believe that the atmosphere we have in the country today is in anyway similar to that in 1968?

Wilcox: No.

Schultz: It's not as intense or not as divided?

Wilcox: Well it's getting very nasty in Washington, but up until now, we've all been behind the troops and what they're doing and up to now the troops we've talked to, coming home and so forth, believe and report to us that they're doing great things there. And there's no question that the Middle

East is a hot point in the world, whether there's terrorists or not it's still a very unsettled part of the world. They've had monarchies and they've had crooked leaders, and they've had dictatorial leaders for so long that it's gonna be hard to overcome that. But no I don't think the situation is the same. It's an area we have to deal with. I don't think we had to deal with Vietnam at that time, it was an alliance we got into that we probably didn't have to.

Schultz: You mentioned that most of the country now supports our troops. What were your feelings at the time of the way that people were viewing particularly the soldiers—

Wilcox: In Vietnam?

Schultz: Yeah.

Wilcox: Well of course, I hadn't…I would never have any problem with a soldier, I've been one and they do their duty. They have to do their duty and that's the way it is. But, there was some, I think there was some unfairness in recruiting and going overseas quickly. It was a war we certainly were not prepared for, we didn't understand it, and I'm amazed at what they're doing now with the military, which they would have been more successful doing in Vietnam, probably. But I don't think anybody can feel badly about soldiers. No. No matter what the circumstances, you gotta be with 'em.

Schultz: You mentioned being a soldier yourself. Do you want to tell me a little bit about that?

Wilcox: Well, now this is WWII, that's a long time ago, I was not in a combatant situation I don't think. I started out of all things in the military police, and I went to Iran at the time and there was the shipping lines going up to Russia, there for that purpose. And then I ended up in Air Transport Command and doing similar thing, delivering supplies to China and over to Hong Kong and all that. And so my experience generally was not as dangerous as an infantryman on the front lines and that sort of thing.

Schultz: Has that led you to have a greater appreciation for soldiers?

Wilcox: Oh yeah, do you mean my experience? Absolutely. I joined the military in WWII because I was afraid I wasn't gonna be able to be a veteran, you know [laughs], but I had uncles and people in WWI, wasn't a very long time between those two wars.

Schultz: It was actually an impressively short amount of time.

Wilcox: Yeah.

Schultz: Do you believe your experience in the military affected your political feelings, or was that pretty much set beforehand?

Wilcox: I think that's set. It's something, a philosophy, learn to live with…

Schultz: Concerning the election, were you concerned with all of the debating among the Democrats at the time, because there was a lot of shifting of candidates, and Johnson repealing his name from nominations…were you concerned with any of that? Or were you pretty much…you didn't plan on voting for a democratic—

Wilcox: No, not at that time, not after Johnson's term was over.

Schultz: What did you think…what was your reaction to Johnson deciding that he wasn't going to run in 1968?

Wilcox: Well I think it was a wise decision because he wouldn't have won anyway. There was just too much going on right at that time.

Schultz: What was your opinion of either Humphrey or McCarthy as opposed to Johnson as possible presidents?

Wilcox: They were even more liberal. [laughs]

Schultz: Do you wanna give some examples? Like any particular things you had against them…

Wilcox: No I didn't have anything…I thought they had a lot of courage. Humphrey or, no, McCarthy said he was gonna increase taxes or something like that, one of the ways to get out of things, that doesn't satisfy conservatives very much, but it didn't satisfy democrats very much either [laughs]. No they were too really super liberal guys and, uh, that's it!

Schultz: What were your, this is kind of a big name, what were your impressions of Robert Kennedy?

Wilcox: You know, you learn so much, and hear so much, and read so much about him after he was Attorney General that you kind of lose track of the eminent news, because we didn't, you don't understand it at that time.

Schultz: Did you just have any feelings that you can remember or was he just kind of someone that you didn't really think about very much or…

Wilcox: Well…he was going to run for president when Jack was gone, that's what he was building up to, and those are just political things you think about.

Schultz: Were your feelings toward Robert Kennedy any different than those from John?

Wilcox: Oh I don't think so, it was Eastern money interests and stuff.

Schultz: How did you react to his assassination?

Wilcox: It was tragedy for all of us, probably more of a tragedy because Johnson went in, than had he stayed alive, it would have been better. He was a charismatic president and got along well in the world. I can't find too much fault with Kennedy's administration, and his demise was just tragic for everybody.

Schultz: What was your reaction to Robert…to his assassination in 1968?

Wilcox: Well, assassinations are not good for anybody, I don't care who it is. I didn't like it when Reagan got shot either. You know, that's not the way for a civilized country to operate. And of course we're up against that today in the Middle East.

Schultz: When Robert was killed, what do you think was the first thought that went through your head?

Wilcox: I can't tell you, I don't know.

Schultz: That's fine!

Wilcox: There's been so much since then, what do you call 'em, speculations and so forth for why Kennedy was killed, and Bobby's connection, or not connection, he was working on the unions and the crookedness and so forth in the country there. Mafia, mafia type stuff. So, that's probably more known now than it was at the time.

Schultz: The majority of Jackson county voted for Nixon in 1968, and Nixon obviously won. Did you vote for Nixon?

Wilcox: Yes. Both times.

Schultz: Both times? Can you just explain why?

Wilcox: Well, Nixon did some things that you don't hear a great deal about, I think, and I think it has to do with why he got in trouble. He shouldn't have done what he did, which is not admit to what he did. I don't know what it was yet, we don't know that. But Nixon did two things: he freed the dollar so the world currency wasn't placed with the dollar anymore and he got off the gold standard. Those two things did not make him very happy with Eastern banking interests, I'm sure of that. Then oil became the thing, and didn't we have an oil shortage then too or something like that?

Schultz: Oil shortages…or at least the Energy Crisis, I believe, was really more a product of the '70s.

Wilcox: Okay, but anyway it developed there. Eastern bankers lose their power. [inaudible] because oil was a commodity, and oil was world money, okay, so I think that's why it got him into trouble and [Mitchell?], who was the Attorney General, was a banking interest person from the East and I think he had something to do with wrong advice or something like that. Now Nixon wasn't a sweetheart either, but he went into China and the war ended during Nixon's administration…so those are the things I remember about…these are part of those theories which you get into…but he did big things and I think that affected his support after that.

Schultz: Do you think that there was a change in Nixon between when he was running in 1960 and when he ran in 1968? Because they describe it in the textbooks as—

Wilcox: Now wait, he was defeated in '60, is that what you're saying? Then he was out, four years or eight years, and then he ran again?

Schultz: Yeah.

Wilcox: Okay, now ask your question. I was getting myself…

Schultz: Do you think there was a change in Nixon's, I don't want to say ideology but more political presence or his intentions or actions, his plans, from 1960 to 1968? Do you think that they changed?

Wilcox: I don't think so, a great deal. I don't think it changed during his whole administration. Whether you think it was good or bad I don't think it changed very much.

Schultz: Do you think there was a change between Nixon when he was President and when he was Vice President under Eisenhower?

Wilcox: That's hard to know. Eisenhower's so popular, so good. He did give Nixon a lot of responsibility which some presidents don't do. Nixon made some good speeches in those days. But as Vice President I don't know whether that changed much or not. In my mind I can't tell you.

Schultz: Did you believe that the Eisenhower administration…what was your view of that? Because sometimes it's described as being kind of a mixture between conservative and moderate. Did you believe that at the time?

Wilcox: I think so. He was a general, a good general. He ran the government, I think, with a lot of help and lot of advice, letting a lot of other people do things. He, I suppose, handled the Cold War properly. Probably the interstate system was a big thing in his term, which we're now living with and so forth. That's about it.

Schultz: Do you think that the outcome, at least in Black River, would have been different if Robert Kennedy had lived? If he had run in the election?

Wilcox: You mean the voting in Jackson County?

Schultz: Yeah, in 1968.

Wilcox: If Robert Kennedy was the candidate against Nixon?

Schultz: Yes.

Wilcox: I don't think there'd be any difference.

Schultz: Do you think it would have made a difference in the country?

Wilcox: Well you're talking about speculations right there [laughs], very hard to determine.

Rykken: Hard to know. He was killed in June, and the election was in November. Hard to say, it was a close election.

[group conversing]

Wilcox: Did Robert Kennedy run?

Rykken: He did. He just had won the California primary and then got shot.

Wilcox: Oh I don't remember that.

Rykken: Yeah, and he probably would have gone on and been the candidate—

Wilcox: Candidate against Nixon. He probably would have beaten Nixon at the time.

Rykken: You know, it was a close election, very divided. Were the Jackson County results close in '68?

Schultz: In '68 I believe they weren't particularly close. I think Nixon did beat Humphrey by close to a thousand votes, and I think Nixon particularly got somewhere over 3,000 so it was almost a third that he beat him by.

Rykken: So, wider spread than the country for sure, I mean in the country it was very tight—

Schultz: Yes. More of a margin. So Jackson County was obviously more inclined toward Nixon, at least that's what the records say. In hindsight, do you believe that Nixon being elected was beneficial to the country?

Wilcox: Yeah.

Schultz: Can you give some—

Wilcox: Well I mentioned the freedom of the dollar and his noted position on Russia and, well, he went over there as Vice President, and he gave that kitchen speech over there.

Schultz: In Russia…it was when he was President that he went to China.

Wilcox: Yeah. But he carried the message pretty well. He didn't interfere, and he would not have bothered Eisenhower very much. Eisenhower was a pretty powerful individual.

Schultz: Do you think that Nixon should have or would have been able to end Vietnam any sooner than he did?

Wilcox: No. That just had to wear itself out.

Schultz: Back to you. How would you describe your political activities after the 1960s? Were you getting older at that time or were you still pretty active?

Wilcox: No. I'm still a member of the party, I wouldn't give that up for anything…for philosophical reasons, I don't really care what's going on now. But, philosophically there's still a difference between the two parties. And the last election noted that rural people ought to be aware that they're not very strong in the country any more, when you get to the cities basically, urban areas running the country. The voting patterns of precincts, you've seen that red and blue thing and so forth...the idea that 5% of the area controls the vote and 95% of the territory doesn't. Between you and I, I can't imagine a rural person electing a Democrat to the Senate [laughs], because the Senate's probably the more steady of the two houses. We find that in Wisconsin our rural money is now being used in urban areas where it used to be we were subsidized by the urban areas…and it's just that shift of population vs. territory.

Schultz: About what time do you think that…I mean there was obviously a lot of stigma attached to the turmoil of the '60s…when do you think that started to soften a little? Was that not until maybe even after the '70s?

[misunderstanding]

Wilcox: Turmoil? Oh yeah, it's softened, I think Eisenhower has a lot to do with that, he came in there as a hero and had a pretty steady hand on things. I mean even the integration, he got involved in that too, probably as much as anybody. So he came in with a pretty steady hand and went on from there. That's about all I can say from that. Reagan came along after that, and of course that was a pretty exciting period too for republicans.

Schultz: Do you think there was a period after 1968, and possibly before the eighties, that the rift between Republicans and Democrats was not as strong as it was?

Wilcox: The rift right now is stronger than it's ever been in my knowledge, and that's disastrous. The names that they're calling and calling presidents liars and stuff like is just not appropriate, and that started in the Clinton administration too, it got kind of nasty. Not much is accomplished.

Schultz: And that wasn't as present in the '60s?

Wilcox: I don't think so. In spite of all the problems, their ability to negotiate and to compromise was certainly a lot stronger than it is today.

Schultz: You were the first interview of this project and you were chosen as a conservative voice for the era. How would you react to the ideas and the experiences, well we haven't interviewed them yet, but of our other interviews, which may be quite different?

Wilcox: Well, you know we're all Americans, and we all live with each other, and I understand you're going to interview Al, and Al and I have been the best of friends and have remained that way since 1951. So it's just a difference in approach. I'm a great believer that American people can be moral and can work without being regulated from Washington D.C. I believe, and this a Republican philosophy, that you don't have to take money away from other people and give to someone else to be fair. I think we have an opportunity, they all have an opportunity, they'd be rich or somewhere along the line. Those are kind of basic philosophical differences. In regulations, [inaudible] I don't you think you can run a business without cheating nowadays, which encourages cheating, which you hear a lot about. But there's so many things that you violate walking down the street that, [to] the self made independent man, is a little bit hard.

Schultz: I guess finally, as if trying to convince me or anyone listening to this interview, explain to me in a way that you please why your party and your ideas now, and even in the 1960s, is the right one.

Wilcox: Well, I talked to you about party philosophy and we had that in the '60s even then. A lot of…there's just so much to do with money now, it's all money, and it's both sides, that the way to get elected is to raise a lot of money, and you have to do a lot of favors to raise a lot of money. I mean the guy on the street, which I used to do, deliver handbills and all that stuff, doesn't mean very much anymore. And it's both parties, one just as bad as the other. And I think it's too bad, I think we need participation in the political process. I think it's your obligation as an American to be in the political process, and it's so easy to solve in my opinion. I've had resolutions several times passed here in the county to go to the state to straighten out this whole thing. For one thing have the congress just meet a month in the spring and a month in the fall, just stay home the rest of the time, you wouldn't have the lobby issue, you wouldn't have money, you wouldn't have anything. And they'd represent the people, which is what they're supposed to do. They get to Washington and they get bought up by one or another or a hundred agencies and they don't represent straight thinking from Wisconsin rural people. So I'm sorry for that, but it's the way it's gotta be.

Schultz: Even if you don't agree with liberal points of view, do you think it's important to have two sides of the spectrum?

Wilcox: Oh yeah! I believe in a two party system…a lot of people want to start a third, fourth, fifth party. Europe has been a mess with that sort of thing. I think we all have to compromise, and you can either compromise to the liberal view or the conservative view, you're not gonna move very much, things don't change very much. But I think we do have to have two parties so when you get to Congress something can be done. Now nothing's getting done with one party, now, and I'm very sorry about that, I don't know why that is, they don't compromise anymore. Everybody's angry out there at one another. And that's not good for politics. And, this isn't going to be nationally televised I don't imagine [laughs]?

Schultz: No, maybe on Channel 4 or something.

Wilcox: [laughs] Well, I was gonna say if the Democrats don't quit being angry at whatever's going on, particularly George Bush, I think they're gonna lose the election again. Anger does not help. You gotta take you knocks and get on with it and do it the next time.

Schultz: I know it's been said that one of the weaknesses of the Democratic party during the election of 2004 as that they didn't back their candidate enough. I mean Republicans obviously were very excited with George Bush, at least most of them, and that you can say maybe only 20% of democrats were excited about John Kerry. Do you think that any particular examples from '60s were true of that as well. That one party wasn't excited about their candidate as much as the other.

Wilcox: I don't know, I think there was as much excitement there. The problem with the democrats is that they have too many strong viewpoints to please, and you can't please them all and make the conservatives happy. You know, you got the environment, and you got schools, you got all kinds of things that they're gonna do for you. And when they're gonna do something for you, they're gonna take it away from me, right? They don't understand that. They've got to appease, sometimes, these various dozen or fifteen groups that try to run the Democratic party. Republicans have the same thing, the only problem Republicans have is the abortion thing. Otherwise they're pretty straightforward. Pretty unified. But that abortion thing has been in it for too long, and isn't going to change. Maybe some change will occur…they're not gonna change *Wade* at all. It's not going to be

changed…there are some right and wrong things about abortion and somebody's got to recognize that.

Schultz: Do you remember ever hearing debate or discussions about abortions in the '60s or did that not really show up until the '70s.?

Wilcox: What is that…something versus Wade?

Schultz: It was '72 or '73…

Wilcox: That's when that started. It all started over the value of human life. Now are we going to euthanasia or where are we going? It's hard to say, but there are a lot of conservatives that think we shouldn't be going in that direction.

Schultz: I think one of the biggest battles between conservatives and liberals is on the grounds of what's called the moral…I can't remember the term, kind of blanked from my mind…the culture war. Do you think that most of the topics that we discuss from the culture war, such as abortion, or censorship or the media…do you think these things stem from the '60s?

Wilcox: That isn't so much the problem. The problem is a tremendous amount of secularism and anti-religious, particularly Christian, feeling amongst the super-liberals, and that keeps coming through just as badly to most people as abortion does to the conservatives. And that's too bad. I think we need…I don't care what they say [laughs]…everybody needs a god of some kind because they're not infallible. We're not infallible, I'm not infallible, Democrats aren't infallible and neither are the Republicans [laughs].

Schultz: Was God or religion a big subject in the '60s?

Wilcox: No. That didn't come 'till…I don't recall any instance, there was probably a little religious fervor with Kennedy because he was a Catholic, that's over with. But there was a little of that during that period, and we elected him and that's over. But this anti-, pro-Christian, religious thing, it's much bigger because we need our individuality and we need to express ourselves. Our churches have to express themselves. They don't very much. Mainline churches, though, fundamentalist groups. I'm glad they're doing something.

Schultz: If there's any other comment you'd like to make about…maybe straying away from politics, just overall life in the '60s, later '60s…

Wilcox: Life in the '60s—you mean you're gonna take off to Colorado and 'find myself'? 'I gotta go off and find myself'…that was a big deal in the '60s.

Schultz: Is that something that you did [laughs]?

Wilcox: No! no, no, my kids didn't quite fit totally in the '60s, that was a period…well, the '60s people are running the country right now.

Schultz: Baby boomers…

Wilcox: Yeah, they're all in administrative management positions in the whole country right now, and they were an interesting group of people. I sometimes don't think they understood human nature, most of us have a human nature, and we do certain things. But in the '60s, everybody's gonna 'do their own thing'…'I'm gonna do my own thing.' Can you do your own thing in a society with people that you have to work with? Teach? Supervise? Work for? You can't do that, doesn't work.

Al Lahmayer

Interviewed Dec. 5, 2005

Schultz: I'll read you an introduction. First I'd like to thank you for participating in the project. As you might know, this year we are focusing on the election year of 1968, and my questions will also be related to work I'm doing on presidential voting history in Jackson County. And I would just like to ask you to be comfortable and to rely on your experiences and your memories during the time period, and that will probably give us the best idea of life in this period of time. My first question to begin with: were you born in Black River Falls?

Lahmayer: No I wasn't, I was born in Milwaukee.

Schultz: Milwaukee?

Lahmayer: In 1927.

Schultz: When did you move here?

Lahmayer: 19—when I finished my training in Chicago, 1951.

Schultz: What were you training for?

Lahmayer: I was a doctor of optometry.

Schultz: What were your first impressions of Black River?

Lahmayer: I had always wanted to live in a small town in Wisconsin, I had thought about Waupaca, really. But my impressions were fine, but my wife after shopping at Marshall Fields during her noon hour was a little disappointed with Black River Falls to begin with.

Schultz: Okay. Did you have any political impressions of Black River?

Lahmayer: No.

Schultz: How did Black River compare with your previous residence?

Lahmayer: Well, it was really our first home where we got married while I was going to school, so we didn't have anything previous to compare it to.

Schultz: Around what age did you start becoming aware of politics and aware of political ideology?

Lahmayer: My family was mixed. I had relatives who were progressive, and those who were Republican, but my father was pretty much apolitical. To this day I don't know who he voted for;

politics wasn't very interesting for him. My mother was quite political, she was a big Roosevelt supporter. So that was the early…but I personally wasn't involved or very active in politics until even after the period you're interested in. In 1968, all I did politically was vote. I wasn't involved in anything, in a supportive way, in politics.

Lahmayer running for State Senate, 19

Schultz: What do you think influenced the ideology you had, was that mostly family? I mean you said it was mixed…

Lahmayer: Well, I was kind of a nerdy kid when I was young, and I was interested in, at an early age, things like history, which most people find really…most people would say "that's boring!" I found it just the opposite; I still am fascinated by history. The main thing I find fascinating about history is nothing had to turn out the way it did. You take any subject, including the beginning of this country, it didn't have to turn out the way it did, we were just extremely lucky it all turned out the way it did. And that's the thing that always fascinated about me about history. And politics is history in motion, history being formed for good or bad is being done politically every day.

Schultz: Do you want to just tell me about any specific issues that concerned you? I suppose you really weren't concerned with politics until after the period we're studying but—

Lahmayer: I should probably have said active in any way. See I grew up in the Depression, and when I was going to high school, the immediate future for all high school students was the military, so as soon as I graduated I went right in the army, so that experience was pretty important to me. Like Brokaw says, "I'm a full-fledged member of the greatest generation."

Schultz: Would you consider yourself, plainly, to be liberal or conservative?

Lahmayer: I consider myself to be a Progressive. Wisconsin was the home of the Progressive Party and the Lafollettes and the progressive movement is mostly kin to the Democrat Party than to the Republican…it bothers me that they've been able to take the word liberal and make it into almost an epithet. Saying someone's liberal, it's like condemning them. But anyhow, liberal, I wish the Democratic Party could be called the Progressive Party because I think my experience tells me that many of the good things that have happened in this country happened under the Progressive Party, the Democratic Party. For instance, Social Security, and Medicare, tree planting, all kinds of things had their origin in the progressive, liberal tradition. And, on the other hand, the opponents of these kinds of things…I remember specifically when I was very young, I was only like 10 or 12 years old and we used to go to family in the country, and the thing I didn't like about the country was they had no electricity. And the Republican people that control the energy industry didn't want to run wires out in the country. There weren't enough customers to justify electrification, and there was only through government action, like the Co-ops, that the country was provided electricity in the rural areas. That was a big thing in my mind, and I saw how that was handled and who was proposing it and who was opposing it. And that was pretty interesting to me. You can tell that was a long time back.

Schultz: About your progressive views, did you consider yourself so in the 1960s?

Lahmayer: Yes.

Schultz: How would you describe your personality in the ‘60s? How would you relate it to the way you are today?

Lahmayer: I’m not sure I understand the question…

Schultz: How much have you grown since the ‘60s? Was your personality different?

Lahmayer: Well, I don’t know about change in personality. I’m sure we all could use a personality transplant, but I think I’ve gotten a lot of experience with all this time that’s passed, you gain a lot of experience, your personality doesn’t change. I think I’ve become more able to see other viewpoints than my own.

Schultz: This is kind of an introductory to the subject matter…what your first impressions of John F. Kennedy?

Lahmayer: Very high. I was disappointed later on when I started to learn some of his personality defects. It seemed to me he was able to energize the country, especially young people. They found his viewpoints really stimulating.

Schultz: What about his…did you have any particular viewpoints of his that you found quite agreeable?

Lahmayer: Well, I think his ability, his inaugural address was really inspiring. He had a heck of a good speech writer…the name escapes me right at the moment…but when you ask “what you can do for your country, not what your country can do for you,” I thought that was pretty inspiring. And lots of young people found Kennedy to be [inaudible], and he was about the same age I was.

Schultz: Voting records show that the majority of Jackson County voted for Nixon in 1960, but Johnson in 1964. Does that sound accurate?

Lahmayer: Well, yeah I think that’s very accurate, because Nixon had the big Watergate scandal…

Schultz: I’m thinking before Watergate, does it sound accurate that Jackson County would have voted for Nixon instead of Kennedy in 1960?

Lahmayer: I’m sure the voting records might be accurate. His religious background was controversial in some respects. So, from a big Lutheran, Protestant area of the country…I don’t know.

Schultz: That’s a good explanation actually, I didn’t think of that. Who did you vote for in ’60 and ’64, can you remember?

Lahmayer: Oh sure, I voted for Kennedy and then for Johnson. I voted for Democrat generally. I haven’t always voted for Democrats, but most of the time I suppose I have.

Schultz: Before the election of 1968, did you feel that the political atmosphere of Black River Falls was liberal, conservative, or mixed?

Lahmayer: I don’t know if I had a feeling about the political atmosphere. First of all, when I came here, this was a very strong Republican area and I had nothing to do with that. The Congressman was Merlin Hull and the county voted pretty strong Republican up through Eisenhower, and then a local, Lester Johnson, was elected to Congress and the same year he was elected, all the people in the courthouse that were elected were Democrats, so it’s been like that a lot since then.

Schultz: That's really interesting that you mentioned Merlin Hull. He was originally supposed to be one of our focal points for the research, because he supposedly wrote letters to the community from Congress detailing what was going on in Congress at the time…did you ever read any of those?

Lahmayer: No.

Schultz: What were your impressions of Merlin Hull?

Lahmayer: I met him once, because he was still a congressman when we came here and my impression…you see, Merlin Hull was in Congress for 30-some years I think it was, and he lost all his seniority. He went there as a progressive, but when the Progressive Party broke up and he switched to the republicans, the one thing they did was they cut all his seniority, and the fact that…when I met him, just as a casual acquaintance at a dinner or something here in Black River Falls, I thought "My God, this man could have been the chairman of some big important committee in Congress" and he was walking around, looking like he was right next to being senile to me. And the fact that the…I was glad he wasn't in charge, that was the feeling I had about him.

Schultz: Have you ever considered yourself active…I guess I've already had this question answered for me…active in any political party, I guess the Democratic Party?

Lahmayer: Oh, I was active in the party. I was a county chairman of the Democratic Party, I ran for office one time.

Schultz: Can you list any activities you participated in?

Lahmayer: About in the period you're interested in, I was pretty much a voter, but I wasn't active doing any party work or anything.

Schultz: I'm just going to throw some terms at you, and I'd just like you to simply react to them with personal thoughts or experiences from the time, not really questions, just reactions. The first one's a big, and it's Vietnam.

Lahmayer: …I think Vietnam, in my mind, it was a big mistake. It was a mistake that we were ever there, and my…this is why history is so interesting. At that time there was a theory called the John Foster Dulles, who was the head of the State Department early on before the area you're talking about, he had what he called the domino theory. He was so worried that all these countries were gonna become communist…and that if one country fell, and the communists got control of it, then the next one would go, just like a bunch of dominoes tipping over. And he sold the president and everybody on this domino theory, so when the Vietnamese were using communism…basically they were nationalists, they wanted to reunite that country and they were using communism as a tool. I think the fact is now, we don't look at Vietnam as being a big communist country…so I think that we were sold a bad theory by the Dulles brothers, called the domino theory, and that caused us to get in there. Now, I don't know if there's a lot of conjecture about whether John Kennedy would have done the things that Lyndon Johnson did and I think he was responsible for that escalation. And it was all a big tragic mistake, like so many things in history are.

Schultz: Do you remember how Vietnam affected the community at the time, do you remember any particular families?

Lahmayer: Oh, I was always…Vietnam was so unfair on so many different levels. If you were in college you could avoid going, so it always the poorer that couldn't go to college…you could get deferments. I was always grateful that my son, he drew a high number so he didn't get called. But there was that aspect, too, the draft…and because I know so many people whose lives, even though they weren't killed in Vietnam, there lives were ruined by their experience. Still today, I have friends

who have suffered post-traumatic syndrome and just in the recent past, because of the time they spent in Vietnam. So, it was all a great error done by poor policy. And another part of history that was so fascinating, it didn't have to turn out that way, and it turned out badly because the wrong mistakes were made.

Schultz: Do you think that Vietnam was ever dealt with effectively?

Lahmayer: No. With all the power and all the money and all the machines we had, we couldn't beat the Vietnamese who were nationalists, they didn't want us in their country.

Schultz: I guess the next term is war protestors.

Lahmayer: War protesters. Yes, I knew Vietnam was seriously in trouble when we had war protestors. When people in Black River Falls were down on the corner of the bridge, doctors and people like that in our community, were protesting Vietnam, you know the government's got problems.

Schultz: There were protestors in Black River?

Lahmayer: Well, I mean people took signs and stood down there at the end of the bridge protesting Vietnam. I especially remember Dr. Eugene Krohn was one of them. Absolutely.

Schultz: Oh, I had no idea.

Lahmayer: Oh, yeah, it happened.

Schultz: This is one particular protest, the Chicago Democratic National Convention.

Lahmayer: The Weathermen. Yeah, it was badly handled by Mayor Daley, and the Weathermen were a lunatic fringe. They weren't really politically active, responsible people. They were just rabble-rousers, a lunatic fringe, and that caused a real problem. A of course the police handled it down there, and Mayor Daley was outraged that they were destroying the image of his city and so the whole thing was a great big breakdown.

Schultz: Did you ever consider protest, or did any of your children?

Lahmayer: I, no I never did. I kind of admired…if someone had come to me and said, I might have gone with 'em, but no one ever came and asked me to go down there with 'em.

Schultz: The last term would be Lyndon B. Johnson.

Lahmayer: I think Lyndon B. Johnson was…there were a couple things that happened. Lyndon Johnson was able to enact a lot of John F. Kennedy's programs, because there was a great deal of sympathy with John F. Kennedy's assassination. Civil Rights programs and things like that. And I think that was a big plus, but Johnson's insistence on continually escalating the war in Vietnam and…I think the big mistake he made was trying to get a military resolution of the Vietnam problem, instead of a political problem. So Lyndon Johnson's term as president was split along those lines, in my mind.

Schultz: Do you think that you would have a different opinion of Lyndon Johnson had we not entered Vietnam?

Lahmayer: Well, he inherited, of course we were already there, he escalated it so fast. It was kind of an ego thing for him or something, like he was the leader of the most powerful country in the world and who could challenge him? I think he had a problem. I don't think he had the political finesse that Kennedy had; Kennedy had earned his place in history when he finessed the Cuban

Missile Crisis. And that's the thing about politician's that I find disturbing sometimes. I tell people this all the time…I say let's compare Kennedy and George W. Bush, it seems to me that in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy was advised by all his military leaders to invade Cuba immediately, tomorrow! They had a military solution and they had all the troops in Florida, but Kennedy was smart enough to say 'just a minute, maybe we to think about all this'. And he went against the advice of his Chief of Staff and military chiefs and all of this sort of thing. Whereas I think my feeling about our president now is that if all the military was unanimous, he would rely on them and their authority and say 'well, if you're the experts and that's what you think, then I think we should do it'. That's kind of the way I feel about it. And as we find out later on, that was truly a crisis that could have had terrible results, and they were able to, in 12 or 13 days or whatever it was, keep that from happening, and I'm not sure that the others would have had that ability to finesse that the way they did. Schultz: 1968 is sometimes referred to as a boiling point in America's tolerance of the war and social turmoil. How would you describe your attitude in 1968?

Lahmayer: Well, I was so pre-occupied with so many things at that time, I was trying to build a practice. I built a new office building. I was so busy in my own affairs I just didn't sit around and dwell on things like that. It's hard for me to answer a question…I don't think that was—

Schultz: It just didn't phase you?

Lahmayer: No.

Schultz: Concerning the election, were you concerned with all of the debating among the Democrats and the changing candidates?

Lahmayer: In what election?

Schultz: In '68.

Lahmayer: Well, you're going back a long time. I have to think about who that candidates were, you'll have to tell me again…

Schultz: We started with, for instance Robert F. Kennedy winning a primary. He became somebody that was going to run before the assassination, and then there was the whole Humphrey/McCarthy controversy, and Lyndon Johnson deciding not to run.

Lahmayer: Well, I thought a great deal of Hubert Humphrey. First of all, he was a small town pharmacist guy, became mayor of Minneapolis, and was a great civil rights leader on a mayoral basis in the Twin Cities, he built a reputation that way. And he'd talk your arm off if you'd let him, and I've been where he made few speeches, but his problem was when he was Vice President, Lyndon Johnson kept him under his thumb so much and I don't think he was very much in support of the way things were being done in Vietnam and yet he couldn't deny it, because he couldn't deny what the president was doing, he was the vice president. And then as a candidate, he couldn't just turn around and say he didn't approve all his policies, so he was locked in to Vietnam with what Lyndon Johnson did, and I think people were so upset about Vietnam that being part of that administration doomed his candidacy. And he ran against Nixon, right? And Nixon said 'I'm gonna take care of it, I'm gonna get us out of Vietnam,' which is what he promised to do.

Schultz: Do you think that you were ultimately satisfied when you heard that Johnson wasn't going to run?

Lahmayer: Didn't break my heart.

Schultz: Your opinion of Humphrey, as opposed to Johnson, do you think that he would have been a much better president?

Lahmayer: Humphrey? As opposed to Johnson? If he had succeeded Johnson?

Schultz: Yeah.

Lahmayer: Oh, there isn't a doubt in my mind that Humphrey would have been a good president. I don't know how he would have done things…it's pretty hard to make that kind of conjecture. I think Lyndon…the high point is when he started and then he gradually decreased in…he was a victim of Vietnam like a lot of other people. If it hadn't been for Vietnam I think he would have had another four years.

Schultz: What were your impressions of Robert F. Kennedy?

Lahmayer: I could see where he wanted to carry on for where his brother was assassinated. It's hard to take somebody and think them of being president of the United States and they've never been elected dog-catcher. He was Attorney General but his brother appointed him and I think he did basically a pretty good job. I think he was hard on organized crime and that sort of thing. He was not…I think he did a good job as Attorney General and I think he was a good adviser to his brother, like in the Cuban Missile Crisis. He was a very smart man I'm sure…I don't know.

Schultz: Would you have preferred Humphrey over Robert?

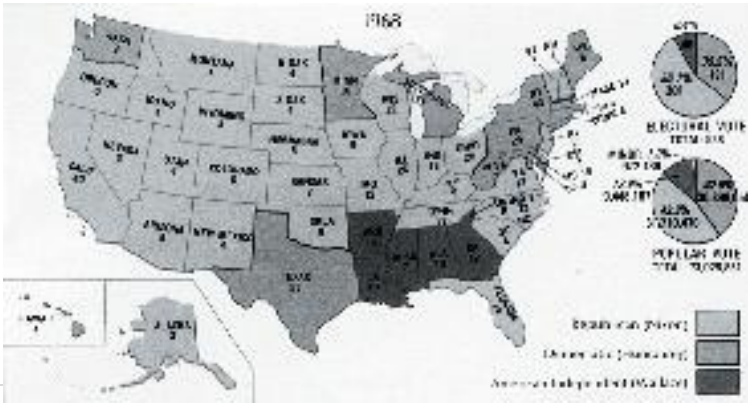
Lahmayer: I would have been happy with either one of them…instead of what we got. I never liked Nixon, I knew about Nixon's career from the time he was a congressman, and he ran a fraudulent campaign to beat Helen Gahagan Douglas in California and he did it on what I thought was a phony basis then, accusing her of being a communist. That was how you got elected, calling someone a communist. So, I figured he was illegitimate from the beginning, that was my opinion of Nixon. I never liked Nixon, because of that.

Schultz: What was your first reaction to the assassination of Robert Kennedy before the election?

Lahmayer: The assassination of Robert? I just thought that whole Kennedy thing was like a Greek tragedy, the oldest brother was supposed to be the one they had really being groomed for political activity was killed in the war, there was one sister who was mentally retarded and lived in Wisconsin, I was interested in that. And then John F. Kennedy being assassinated. I mean how much grief could one family have? It's such a prominent politically active family. I think my main thought with Kennedy was 'this can't happen again.' I'm surprised Ted Kennedy lived all his life without somebody shooting him.

Schultz: The majority of Jackson County voted for Nixon in 1968. Do you think you could explain that, why most of them picked Nixon this time again I suppose?

Lahmayer: No I can't. I don't remember that much about the issues and why it might have been. I think Humphrey's problem was that he was seen as part of the administration that pushed the war. He was locked in with Johnson…so I think he was doomed from that standpoint.



Schultz: I guess this would kind of be a question that you probably already answered

before but do you believe that Nixon being elected was beneficial to the country?

Lahmayer: I think most of the time a president has pluses and minuses. I think Nixon certainly had some pluses. I think his strong suit was his foreign policy and his overture to open up international relationships with China, which is probably what he's most famous for. I think that was a very positive thing for him to do. Those kinds of things I think he did were very good.

Schultz: Can you think of any examples after 1968 that troubled you about Nixon?

Lahmayer: Well, I never voted for him—

Rykken: Excuse me, just keep going [laughs].

Schultz: I guess I'll just go to a new one. Do you think your views now, after the 1960s, or actually pretty every decade up until this point, have they changed?

Lahmayer: I don't think a whole lot. I think there's people that say 'government's the problem, not the solution.' And I've always kind of leaned toward the side that said 'government's an organization that can do things that benefit us all.' I don't think that viewpoint's changed.

Schultz: Have your viewpoints changed toward certain people that you once liked or disliked given new information?

Lahmayer: Well, I think sometimes we find these people we elect…they wind up having feet of clay. That happens, it certainly happened with Kennedy and Johnson and Nixon. I think it happens quite often. But my wife takes a stronger view about personal peccadilloes with some of these presidents and I say 'well, it's been shown that Franklin Roosevelt had a girlfriend but you know he saved the country twice so if he had to have a girlfriend, it's alright with me.' [laughs] I'm more willing to overlook those things in the big scale and she isn't. Some people, that's there main consideration is personal behavior sometimes. Schultz: You're the second interview for this project, the first was Bill Wilcox. Having known him in the '60s, what kind of responses...how do you think that you would react to him and his views?

Lahmayer: Well, we've been tossing this back and forth for 50 years you have to understand.

Schultz: He said that he met you in 1951 when he moved here. Have you guys been sort of dueling it out since then?

Lahmayer: Oh we don't do this on a real strong basis. We've been friends a long time, we play golf and we get together and all that sort of thing…I'm the truth squad, I go around behind him.

Rykken: I want to interject on that. I think one other thing, if you don't mind, Bill talked about the other day is the fact that in our own political environment the big disagreements between people have become almost borderline personal, to the point where the politicians won't deal with each other. And I think a lot of people comment on this, and yet you're telling us that you would have major disagreements with this person—

Lahmayer: It's only with Bill, it hasn't happened with a lot other people. In fact, I try to avoid talking about any political—

Rykken: Okay. The point being that you can still get along with this person enough…

Lahmayer: I think it's probably a little unique. It's a general feeling I have that politics a lot times was the opposite of, say, religion. Religion, it seems to me that the higher you go in the chain of command the more conflict it was, at the bishop level and so on.

Rykken: Sure, sure.

Lahmayer: But at the grassroots level I have many friends, I don't even know what church they go to and their good friends. So at the grassroots everybody's getting along, but as you go up the chain then they start the bickering and fighting and arguing. And I know that, politics I thought was just the opposite, because a lot of the politicians whatever their brand was, whether they were Republican or Democrat, for example, first of all it might have determined who was in office when they wanted to run. Our former congressman Gunderson is an example of that. So it seemed to me that the politicians, they argue and throw out all this rhetoric during the day, and night they go and have a party and have cocktails and drink together. And all the flag waving and all the bickering is at the grassroots level, so its just the opposite.

Rykken: And I think you're right on that, although I think today people are saying at the top level—

Lahmayer: It's become very, very partisan. And it's bad for the country when that happens. We were better off when they would get together at night and have a martini or a sociable. They made it just intolerable, and I don't know why that is. One party has total control over everything and we're just in chaos.

Rykken: I want to ask you just one other thing, if I could throw this in there. Did you have an opportunity to ever see in person or meet John Kennedy?

Lahmayer: No, but when he was campaigning, his wife was across the street in Lloyd's restaurant. I went over for that in 1960, '62 or somewhere in there…

Rykken: How about Hubert Humphrey?

Lahmayer: I've been at political meetings where he spoke. I was invited to Wisconsin Day at the White House when Jimmy Carter was President, and it was a very interesting experience.

Rykken: How about Lyndon Johnson?

Lahmayer: No.

Rykken: Or Nixon?

Lahmayer: No.

Rykken: I'm just interested in those personalities because they're kind of central to our period, and then the whole thing with George Wallace 1968, you know he pulled some big numbers in Wisconsin. Can you explain that at all?

Lahmayer: Well you know where he pulled the biggest numbers? In the Republican areas of Milwaukee…Whitefish Bay on the north shore, Wisconsin's open primary law had something to do with that.

Rykken: It's just kind of interesting because he was sort of the backlash candidate.

Lahmayer: He got a lot of votes everywhere, he got a lot of votes here too I'm sure, because he had the rhetoric, he could appeal to a certain group of voters.

Rykken: That's my interjection, I need to go back to my class, but keep going, it sounds interesting!

Schultz: You mentioned you had children in the '60s, can you tell me about them? How old were they?

Lahmayer: Well, in the Vietnam War, my son had registered for the draft, my oldest son.

Schultz: What year was that? Was it before ’68?

Lahmayer: He was born in ’52, so it would have been around 1970 when they had the draft.

Schultz: Did that trouble you?

Lahmayer: I didn’t want him to go to Vietnam and of course had to go and register. He got a number when they had the draft and drew the numbers. He was one of those fortunate ones that they never drew that number, his number was high number.

Schultz: Okay. I guess we’ve already talked about politicians and how they relate from now to that time. How do you think that the environment of the country or the environment of the county relates to how is now and how it was in the ‘60s?

Lahmayer: Well I think we’re probably still regarded as an economically depressed area in the average values of real estate and income levels and all that sort of thing. But I’ll tell, it’s so much better now than it was back in the ‘50s when things were extremely poor. Land values and all that sort of thing, it seems like this area has become much more affluent than it was back then. Politically, as I said when we first came here, it was a strongly Republican county, and I think since then it’s been kind of strong Democrat local offices, but many times voting for Republican on larger offices, president and government.

Schultz: Do you remember any point in time after the ‘60s, or even after the ‘70s, where the rift between Democrats and Republicans started to soften, considering how high it was in the ‘60s?

Lahmayer: No I don’t remember that ever happening. There was always a certain disagreement, but as you said before, it’s gotten much, much worse. I mean I like the idea of agreeing that we can disagree without being disagreeable. You could have that kind of attitude, but people get really rabid about political things, so in my everyday coffee conversations I try to avoid the subject because you never change anybody’s mind about it anyhow so why bother?

Schultz: The last major question I have is: as if trying to convince me and anyone listening to this interview, explain to me, in anyway you please, why you believe that your party and your ideas were the right ones in the 1960s, or even the right ones now.

Lahmayer: Well, I think that one of the things that government can do for it’s citizens is organize the things that can improve the conditions for most of its people. Before Roosevelt was president, no one ever did anything like that, he was the one that kind of changed that, that working together we could do something that would be in the common interest and that’s what I consider to be progressive. It doesn’t always work, some of these programs should be abandoned immediately if they find that they don’t work, there’s a great number of things that the government has done, and particularly the state of Wisconsin—Wisconsin is a state that began the unemployment compensation law…Wisconsin has been a model for a lot of issues, unemployment compensation, workmen’s compensation we’ve also started here, we had an early beginning in those kinds of issues—and where would this country be now if we didn’t have Social Security for so many people who depend on it to seek out an existence in their old age and things like that. That’s the sort of thing that government should rightfully consider doing. And I think that over my lifetime, which is getting to be quite a few years now, it seems to me that progressive people, whether it’s the Progressive Party or the Democratic Party, propose all these different solutions and programs, and sometimes we’re able to get them enacted politically an into law, and when the pendulum swung the other way and the more conservative people were in charge, they never ever rejected or canceled…the republican reactionaries fought and complained against the state of Wisconsin having tree nurseries to rural electrification, social security and everything else. But once they gained

control, those programs were never eliminated. So it just always seemed to me that the progressive people did a better job of government than the reactionary people did so.

Schultz: That's all I've got.

Lahmayer: That's enough!

Gerald Laabs

Interviewed Dec. 6, 2005

Schultz: First I'd just like to thank you for participating in the project. As you might know, this year we are focusing on the election year of '68, but Mr. Rykken and I chose you in particular because of your experiences in Madison during that year, and I'm also going to be asking you questions related to research I'm doing about county history and stuff like that. I'd just like to ask you to be comfortable and rely on your memories and experiences from the time, and don't be afraid to elaborate…just to start off, tell me a little bit about yourself before attending Madison.

Laabs: I was raised in a small little town in the northern part of Clark County, Curtis, and I went to a rural school, and I went to two years of high school at Abbotsford and two years at Tomah. I graduated at Tomah High School. Then I went to La Crosse, received a degree in history and business administration at La Crosse, and right after that I attended the University of Wisconsin. I had one brother who was…who died real young when he was in his 30s, so that was the only sibling. My parents...my dad was a cheese-maker, the family goes back in the cheese-making business forever I think, so…and my mother was a school teacher and later an administrator.

Schultz: When did you first move to Madison?

Laabs: '69, no, 1966 in the fall, I graduated in '69.

Schultz: How old were you?

Laabs: I would have been 18.

Schultz: What attracted you most to the city?

Laabs: What am I talking about? I'm getting college mixed up, let's step back. I would have been 21. I graduated from college…I started college when I was 18, graduated when I was 22, so I would have been just turning 22 when I started law school.

Schultz: Okay, so what attracted you to Madison?

Laabs: Well, you know that was one of the top law schools in the country, and we were very fortunate to have it here in the state. I wanted to stay in Wisconsin so it made sense to pick on the two Wisconsin schools…I was admitted to both Marquette and Wisconsin and I chose Wisconsin.

Schultz: Had you visited Madison before moving there?

Laabs: Oh yeah I had been there quite a few times.

Schultz: Did you find Madison was different when you actually started living there?

Laabs: No, I knew what to expect. I'll tell you something…law school is so hard, and you had no money, and you know you didn't worry about things back then I guess, you were just fortunate to be in school, the war was going on, you know I was just content with my station in life, I felt I was pretty fortunate to be able to attend a fine institution like Madison. I wasn't concerned with the living conditions.

Schultz: How would you have described the atmosphere when you arrived…especially politically?

Laabs: I think it was like two different worlds. The law school was relatively conservative…if I remember we had about a 150 students in our class, and I think we had about 70 different universities or colleges represented, so they came from all over the United States. But generally the classmates were pretty conservative. We were there to receive our educations and go on into our professions. I guess we weren't the idealistic people that were in probably the history department or the sociology department or one of those departments.

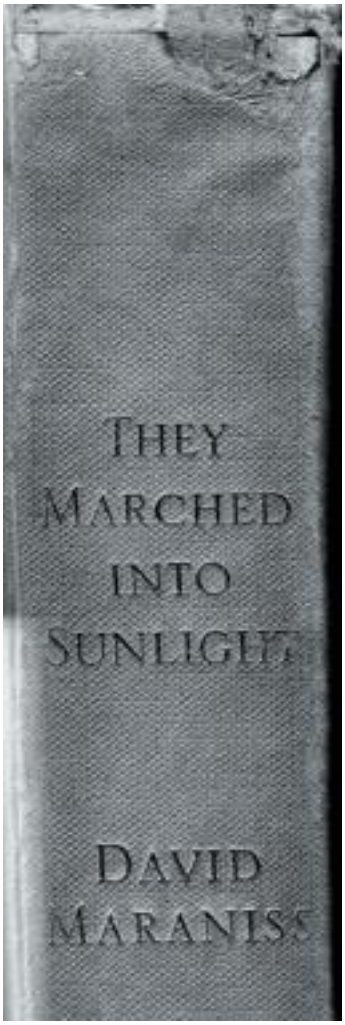
Schultz: Did you identify with most of the other law school students…or did you find yourself clashing?

Laabs: Oh no, all my friends were in the law school. I hadn't attended Madison as an undergraduate and there was a group of us that got together…my best friend was from Eau Claire, he still is in Eau Claire practicing law. We ended up being roommates. Another roommate was from a small town in Illinois, he was an Ivy League, he was from Brown. And another one was from Whitewater. We all had…none of us were radicals, and there were very few in the law school, very, very few.

Schultz: Were you living in Madison long enough to witness its political and cultural changes or did you just kind of find yourself caught in the middle of it?Laabs: No I think I saw changes from 1966 through 1969. the War had been lingering on and the atmosphere was getting to be more anti-war and when I was there, there were three basic demonstrations or riots, whatever you want to call them, the first one probably wasn't that popular amongst the entire student body. I would guess by the hand it had created a lot more popularity amongst the student body that the change was being made.

Schultz: Okay. Have you ever heard or read the book that was recently published called They Marched Into Sunlight?

Laabs: I've read parts of it.



""Down with Dow! Down with Dow!" the marchers chanted...the mime troupe marching band stayed outside, leading the line of a hundred or so supportive picketers in a thrumming, blaring, rhythmic procession along the wide sidewalk on the east side of the building and over to the cement plaza on the northeast front... at 10:50 the protesters who had decided to obstruct filtered inside and took their places...soon the gray-speckled granite floor virtually disappeared from view as the hallways brimmed with demonstrators sitting cross-legged side by side against the walls. This was no place for a claustrophobic." -They Marched Into Sunlight

Schultz: Do you want to tell me a little bit about that?

Laabs: I can remember what happened, I was there.

Schultz: Okay I guess what would be a better question is do you think that that was an accurate portrayal of—

Laabs: When I read, it was.

Schultz: [Do you remember] the Dow protests?

Laabs: Yes I do…big!

Schultz: Tell me as much about that as you can remember!

Laabs: I tell you…I can vividly remember, I was with Dave Anderson, and we were going to contracts class, and I believe contracts started at one in the afternoon, either twelve or one, and so we were roommates and we had to drive into town and I believe we were living out on Fish Hatcher (Street) at the time, and somebody said 'they're having a demonstration, let's go look at it.' And all of a sudden you know 'oh my God' here were all these students…we were on a little hill looking down at the building, I think it was the Commerce building, and it was flat there in front of the building, and the students were demonstrating. And the police were just coming, a big group of police, and I can remember they were off to my right, the students were down in front and I could see that was something I didn't want to stay around for [laughs]. The police were really…they had clubs and they were getting the goggles on if I remember right, and it was scary, it was scary. And I remember we went back to class and during the class you could just hear it, you know it was just like it was a Black River football game, it was just screaming and hollering!

Schultz: Like a war zone…outside your classroom?

Laabs: Right, right. And then I remember after class, classes were an hour, after class we went down into…we had a commons area that we could have a coke and talk after class and get ready for the next class, and I can remember some of the students, I would say half the students were involved with the demonstrations, and they were coming in and they were bloody. You know they were pretty mad. And they were telling us about it and everybody just sort of sat around and listened to them as they told what had happened. They were blaming the police at that time for overreacting to the demonstration.

Schultz: I guess there were 74 people injured in that protest and national guardsman lined Bascom Hill…did you find that it interfered with your studies or was it just more extracurricular excitement?

Laabs: I can remember the things that interfered with the studying. If you've ever been in the law school, have you ever been there?

Schultz: I haven't been in that building.

Laabs: Okay. If I recall, the library—that's where we studied—part of it was sunken into the ground and so you were at the level…it had a high ceiling, but the windows were up pretty

high and that was street level…and so one of the nights you could just hear the students screaming and they were telling us about it and everybody just sort of sat around and listened to them as they told what had happened. They were blaming the police at that time for overreacting to the demonstration.

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Schultz: That's intimidating!

Laabs: 'Good lord, I hope they don't have any idea that they're gonna use that.' That would have been awful. I don't know why they would have even had it there. If some of the students had rushed up and taken the machine gun it would have been just as bad, because it was just wild. Over the years, what I observe, is that the Dane County Sheriff's Department and the Madison Police Department got more used to it, and, at the subsequent demonstrations that they had, handled them much better. The first one was probably real overreaction. If they saw a crowd they probably had a whole bunch of policemen or a whole bunch of guardsmen go and try to break it up. You know, at the end they would send one policeman and he'd say "come one now, let's move on, we don't want any—" and that seemed to work out because the students didn't want to get arrested. They were there to get an education; they didn't like the confrontation. I remember a friend of mine, who is a real staunch conservative, anti-hippy, pro-war, we went down to…they had a demonstration, well this was more like a riot in the student housing section down—what was the name of that street? The one off of the capitol—but it was known as kind of where all the hippies lived.

Schultz: Would that be Willy Street?

Laabs: I'll remember as soon as I leave, but we walked down there and two police officers…or he walked ahead of us, then a couple police officers walked up and hit him with club. He was no longer anti-demonstration [laughs], he was pretty mad about that. I remember him getting hit, I saw it.

Schultz: Did you ever participate in the demonstrations?

Laabs: No. I watched them, you know, as I said before, law school is a real serious thing for me, I didn't have any extra time.

Schultz: You didn't want to let anything get in the way…

Laabs: No and I didn't want to get arrested. Back then, too, that first year, in '66, you really didn't know. You came from La Crosse, and you had some pretty strong views, I guess you thought you

had some strong views and, you know, those views are being challenged. And I guess it was more like 'I have to decide myself what I believe, instead of just jumping into something.'

Schultz: Did you ever notice, while you were there, any changes in university structure or did you ever notice anything about the university that was different from others you'd been to, other than the atmosphere of the city?

Laabs: I think the administration was changing during that period of time, that they were listening to the students more. Faculty back then were very anti-war. I saw that change. I felt there was a change. Now in the law school that didn't exist. They were pretty much…of course our courses weren't like history courses, they were like contracts and torts and procedure, not very political courses. Our constitutional law professor was pretty conservative. A few radical teachers but not many, not many at all.

Schultz: Did you ever notice declining influence in fraternities and sororities, or did that stay the same while you were there?

Laabs: I think I saw that at La Crosse also, that there was a decline. You know, back then they put a real premium on thinkers, that it was good to be thinker, good to be independent, good to try to figure things out, and being able to discuss world issues. Everybody came with their fraternity jackets on and all acted the same, you know they were kind of…not cool [laughs]. They thought they were and they probably were in the '50s but I think the '60s changed all that.

Schultz: Did you consider yourself cool in the '60s?

Laabs: Me? No [laughs].

Schultz: I know that's kind of an off-the-topic question [laughs]. But…how did the demonstrations or political activism on campus compare with that throughout the city or off of the campus?

Laabs: No. The city really didn't have any that I could recall. It was chiefly on campus, as I said, I think when I was there they had three major demonstrations. I can remember…If you want some other instances that I can remember?

Schultz: Sure.

Laabs: When the street in the back of Bascom Hall, are you acquainted with Bascom Hall?

Schultz: Yes. I'm going there next year.

Laabs: There's a street right in back…and the National Guard did some really foolish thing, they marched soldier to soldier with their guns, you know in a line, a straight line, down this street to clear the street. And of course, when they did, the students were all in that street, and the students all just dispersed and let 'em march by, and then they went behind them, and marched behind them giving the "Heil Hitler" sign and they marched down the street like that with a whole group of students following them. That was one of the instances that I could recall, I remember watching that from Bascom Hill.

Schultz: Did that make them just a little bit angry?

Laabs: No. I don't think so. It was a confusing thing. I can remember at night…one night we were walking on State Street when they drove down State Street in a Jeep, you know, National Guard, throwing tear gas.

Schultz: Wow! They usually only do that during three in the morning on Halloween [laughs]!

Laabs: I don't know, but they did it that night…and if I recall there wasn't that much going on.

Schultz: State Street, supposedly, underwent considerable turmoil, like broken windows and tear gas. Did you particularly enjoy State Street in the '60s? Was there anything you found enjoyable about State Street aside from that?

Laabs: Well, you have to remember that, when I'm talking about these demonstrations, it was just a few days, they didn't linger on and on. You know, if it lingered on…three or four days was quite a few. State Street's part of Madison, their cafeterias and their bars, and they were places where students met. We didn't spend very much time there, not very much time at all but when I did there was activities going on. And I remember the one night we were down there, when the tear gas was being thrown, you learned to pretty much stay away from it, it wasn't really a laughing matter. You're outside, and your eyes start burning because of the tear gas, I mean, and then you're not even near where they're throwing it, that stuff's pretty powerful. You know, you didn't know how radical some of the students were. I think after I left, you know they blew up the one building…

Schultz: I'm gonna talk about that later, actually. I've read about this place on State Street, that was supposedly really popular, called 'The Pad'. Did you ever go there or had you ever heard of it?

Laabs: No.

Schultz: It's just something I read about, I didn't know if you had something to say about it. What did you think about all booming culture in Madison during the '60s? For instance, the beginning of the Madison Play Circle or the Broom Street Theater, did you ever pay any attention to that?

Laabs: No.

Schultz: Oh, had you ever heard of the name Stuart Gordon?

Laabs: No.

Schultz: That's just kind of connected to the question I just asked, I didn't know if it would trigger anything.

Laabs: You know the people I traveled around with, we weren't into that…the plays. I would go to them at La Crosse, when La Crosse had it. But Madison was a little harder, you had to go longer…no.

Schultz: Okay that's fine! Back to the campus…what were your impressions of the university media, particularly the—

Laabs: Daily Cardinal?

Schultz: [laughs]

Laabs: Oh, we read it all the time. They were very liberal, they were very anti-war and pro-demonstration. You know, you had to be skeptical of the some of the things they had in there, we were. Schultz: Did it ever get a little overly-radical at times?

Laabs: Yeah I think so.

Schultz: The Vietnam War…is that what most of its articles were concerned with or—

Laabs: I think what you have to remember, what happened was that in the '50s and '60s you had the Civil Rights movement. I think before I was at Madison, someone in La Crosse was having meetings and demonstrations in regard to civil rights. So that group really kind of joined into the anti-war group and there was a lot of the same people. But I can recall…we had a straw poll in the law

school before the ’68 election, and I was really shocked when they gave the results and the republican side, if I recall, Humphrey didn’t really have much opposition…but that Nixon was just making his comeback during those years, and that they had the popular governors, who I thought were going to be the presidents for years to come, George Romney or Nelson Rockefeller, very capable people that just…there’s was no support there for them in the republican party outside their own state. Nixon was there, too. I remember he spoke on campus.

Schultz: Did any of the other candidates speak on campus?

Laabs: He’s the only one I can remember. He was there, and I remember being really disappointed in him. In fact, I got really close to him, I think I was by myself that night. And…not at all impressed. We had…I don’t know if you’re too young to remember Tom Hayden?

Schultz: I’m not sure—

Laabs: Okay he was married to Jane Fonda. He was a head of one of the radical student groups in the country…the SDS? Students for Democratic Society? I think that was the one he was head of. And they were really vocal during those years.

Schultz: Were you surprised when students began the Badger Herald as kind of a response?

Laabs: I don’t think I remember the Badger Herald.

Schultz: It’s Madison’s second publication, and that’s not common for universities even today. It was started by the students as a response to the liberalism of the Daily Cardinal, I’m not sure if you remembered it.

Laabs: No, I don’t remember it, but it doesn’t surprise me because the campus itself was not overwhelmingly liberal. I would guess if they would have had a vote just on campus on Nixon vs. Humphrey, Humphrey would have won but it wouldn’t have been a huge landslide like you would have thought or heard from that era.

Schultz: I’ve asked this question to the two interviewees before you, because I was focusing more on politics for them, but do you think that if RFK had lived, had not been assassinated, that would have created a different outcome on the election…at least on the campus?

Laabs: My guess is yes. He was real popular…real popular on campus if I recall. When he got shot, they closed the school down in his honor.

Schultz: How would you describe the atmosphere of Madison particularly surrounding the election in 1968?

Laabs: From what I can recall, is that you had an extreme left wing that would have been democratic, but there was a substantial conservative, or probably more moderate, base at that time. I know during the election period I don’t think it was really that heated.

Schultz: Really?

Laabs: ’68…the Dow Chemical, that was in ’67. But that was early in the year, wasn’t it?

Schultz: I think so, it was certainly earlier than the election.

Laabs: See then it would calm down for a while and then some other issue came up that would cause…one I couldn’t believe. There was this small demonstration by the students, and [the governor] called the National Guard out. It just invited a huge demonstration the next day, it was just like an invitation, too, “let’s have a riot.”

Schultz: It sounds like a past-time in Madison, or something!

Laabs: There were a lot of radical students. They enjoyed it I'm sure.

Schultz: Did you vote in '68?

Laabs: Yeah, I voted, voted every time.

Schultz: Who did you vote for and why?

Laabs: I probably voted for Nixon, I don't remember why. My politics was, you know I came from a real conservative Republican family but I had an uncle on my mother's side who was a very liberal democrat. And I spent a lot of time with him. And so I saw both sides of it or heard both sides of it.

Schultz: Kind of like a conscience on both shoulders…

Laabs: Right. And Henry, my uncle and I, would talk issues for hours and hours. He was an interesting man, he ran for state office in Indiana. He was a personal friend of Birch Bayh's and the other senator, Hartke, and the governor, the were all friends of his.

Schultz: How long did you stay in Madison? I mean I know you graduated in '69, but did you stay there any longer after graduation?

Laabs: I went to work in Black River Falls a week after graduation.

Schultz: Wow! Was it just the job that attracted you hear or was there any particular reason that you came to Black River?

Laabs: My parents or my mother lived in Tomah at the time, and I had gone to Tomah High School and I knew Judge Radcliff, who was Bob Radcliff at the time, not a judge, he wanted to come back to the Tomah area, which I did, and so then I talked to Bob and I started working for him right out of law school…in fact in the summer of 1968 I worked for him here.

Schultz: Was that kind of an internship?

Laabs: Right.

Schultz: Did you feel that you pretty much had to get out of Madison, is that why you left so quickly?

Laabs: Well, that, and I don't know if this is still true, but the jobs in Madison were really hard to get, and just a few…I guess the number one students would get jobs in Madison, and they were not always the best jobs! So I didn't want to stay there, I had no desire to, most of the students didn't. Back then, the people that I traveled around with really wanted to get back to their home areas.

Schultz: Did you stay long enough to witness the first Mifflin Street Block Party?

Laabs: Mifflin Street was it…I couldn't remember the—

Schultz: Could you tell me anything about the Mifflin Street Block Party?

Laabs: No, but that's when my friend got hit in the stomach by the policeman. We couldn't get right down there, but we got pretty close, you could just here them screaming and hollering.

Schultz: From what I heard, it didn't start as a riot, it just kind of became one, and that it spread into State Street. I was just wondering if that would be the one that you recollected I suppose.

Laabs: Yeah, we were three of four blocks from Mifflin, that's as close as they would let us go. I can't remember what started that. But a lot of the hippies lived down there. They had terrible housing and they had to pay twice what it was worth. You could say that you lived down Mifflin Street…I remember we went to a party one of the law school students had, and it was just a terrible place. He told us what he paid, and we were living in a pretty nice place, and he was paying more than we were because he wanted to live on Mifflin Street in that atmosphere.

Schultz: Were all of your friends from law school or did you have friends, say on Mifflin Street or that were considered hippies?

Laabs: No, I don't think I had any friends that were considered hippies. I had my friends from law school, and we had a pretty good-sized group of guys, there were maybe two or three females in the class.

Schultz: Of 150? [laughs]

Laabs: Yeah, and we had one African-American, and he quit right away, and it was just unbelievable that we didn't have more. The enrollment was just chiefly white, middle-class students.

Schultz: Did you find the Civil Rights Movement ever creep into Madison protests?

Laabs: Yeah, one of the demonstrations I remember, black students wanted an African-American studies program and of course the faculty or the administration denied it. And the law school was really in the middle of that one because they had a cement porch that was huge and extended out not too far from Bascom Hall, and it was an excellent place to give speeches off of. And so I remember during that time they used that to speak…you know, a thousand students could come around there. I remember, you'd go to class and be 15 minutes early, you know always stood around and waited for class to start, and during that 15 minutes you could just walked out the door and hear the speakers. We had a famous, a very famous, law professor, Nathan Feinsinger, he was a labor law professor and he had Parkinson's Disease, I remember he challenged one of the young gentleman, he was so mad, and he was a real liberal, but he was so mad at the demonstrators that I didn't know what was gonna happen. The young man just backed off, which was great, because it would have been really unfortunate if something would have happened. But I can remember during that demonstration that they came into the classrooms and spoke, teachers let 'em do it, no problem, just one of the classes got taken over and the person spoke and it wasn't disorderly and they left. That didn't happen on the anti-war demonstrations, but they did use the front of the law school for speaking. So we did hear a lot of it, see a lot of it when we weren't really involved in it.

Sterling Hall bombed, 1970

Schultz: Okay. You've already mentioned this, but with 1970 came the February fire at the ROTC headquarters and of course the bombing of the Army Math Research Center in August, and that killed one post-doctoral student. What do you remember about that emotionally?

Laabs: Well, you know, those are places you walk by all the time. The previous three years, I knew were it was and had walked by it many times. You just think, 'maybe that could have happened when I would have been there.' Also, I think the two young men that participated in that had ties to Tomah.

Schultz: Really?

Laabs: Yeah, there grandmother or grandparents lived near Camp McCoy, and so they spent some time there and some people were acquainted with them. And I know I had a friend, who was an Assistant Attorney General, that was probably one of the best prosecutors in the state, and he prosecuted a couple of the guys, and he knew 'em, we talked about them one time, about the two Armstrongs…

Schultz: Did you think that the bombing and the fire…did you ever suspect that anything like that would have happened while you were living there?

Laabs: I guess I never thought about a bomb. But the Molotov cocktails, those were spooky, and those were easy to make.

Schultz: Did you think, when you were hearing about it, that it was Madison's last straw with—

Laabs: No, I think you have to remember back then is different than it is now. Back then, people were really mad. They were mad at the government, and you didn't know what they would do. They would argue, basically, that they wanted to see the Viet Kong win, you know, and it was really hard to hear. It just wasn't a few people, they were really, really upset. The draft did it. We had people that were pulled out of law school that were drafted, one is a local judge.

Schultz: Do you ever remember Vietnam veterans being on campus, did they ever appear and make statements?

Laabs: The ones that were on campus were generally sympathetic with the students.

Schultz: Really?

Laabs: Yeah.

Schultz: How often do you visit Madison today?

Laabs: Not often. Three or four times a year, probably.

Schultz: Today it's still described as kind of a politically hot or typically liberal city. Do you think, in your memory after those years, that it ever reached the point that it was in the sixties or that it ever will again?

Laabs: I don't know if it ever will again. I think it depends a lot on what happens in the next few years with the war in Iraq. You know, the war made people mad. I think the Civil Rights movement organized them and gave them a platform, and when the war came, it escalated into something more.

Schultz: That's an interesting way of thinking of it, it ties the two together.

Laabs: Oh yeah, I think they have to be, it was the same people.

Schultz: How do you think the events in Madison at the time…do you think they affected Black River in any way even after they happened, or was Black River pretty sheltered from it?

Laabs: Well, there were quite a few people in Black River that were anti-war, and I saw one that was consistent of maybe six or seven people, you know, on the street corner—

Schultz: Yeah [laughs].

Laabs: But you didn't have the, you know, you didn't have the radical…as I said, the youth were really mad, they were mad about the draft. Those people were taken out of their educations and sent to Vietnam and they were upset about that…their friends, some wouldn't return.

Schultz: Can you think of any in particular that didn't return? Do you know any students—

Laabs: Yes I do.

Schultz: Was that pretty painful?

Laabs: Yes.

Schultz: I guess the last question I have is how has the law school experience, the Madison experience, how has that affected you in the last...almost 40 years?

Laabs: Well, it changed my thinking. You know, after all those years with the war and the demonstrations, I feel that I was probably on the wrong side back then and that…well, the wrong thinking, not the wrong side…yeah, it's changed me a lot. It may be hard to explain if you haven't gone through it. I talked over with one person that I was in high school with, he was two or three years younger than me so his age group was more vulnerable to the draft, and he told me seven or eight students were killed from the high school from the draft. And you know 'em all. Eighteen, nineteen. Never had chance to go to college, never had a chance to get married, never had a profession, never had an occupation. The whole thing was just taken from them. Like when my wife and I toured Pearl Harbor, that was one of the comments they said of all the navy men that went down with the ships. In that attack, their lives were taken away at a real young age, and I think the two wars were very, very different, but the results were the same when you talk about the individual person. They were robbed of their adulthood, and they sacrificed for their country, and times require that, but, you know, you sure feel sorry for the people…it was a tough time, it was the one time when students made a difference. No matter what anybody wants to say, they really did.

Chris Goldsmith

Interviewed Dec. 8, 2005

Schultz: First I'd just like to thank you for participating in the project. As you might know, this year we are focusing on the election year of 1968 and sort of the surrounding years. We chose you because you were a senior in 1968 in high school, and that gives us a really interesting perspective, different from the ones we had in the other interviews. I'd just like to ask you relax and rely on your memories and experiences, and that will probably give us the best idea of life in this period of time. My first question is have you always lived in Black River Falls?

Goldsmith: Yeah.

Schultz: Always?

Goldsmith: Always.

Schultz: Were you born in the Black River Falls Hospital?

Goldsmith: Yeah, when the Krohn Clinic was downtown.

Schultz: Can you describe what school was like in the early sixties?

Goldsmith: Well, for me school was fun. I enjoyed school, the academics as well as the athletics. I wasn't too involved in the athletics but…

Schultz: Do you have any particular stories to tell?

Goldsmith: About school?

Schultz: Yeah.

Goldsmith: None of the old [inaudible] are around are they [laughs]? No I don't think I do remember particular stories from high school.

Schultz: Or even stories from middle school or elementary school.

Goldsmith: Yeah, well, normally…we got in trouble! [laughs] I know one story I remember…there were four or five of us down in the locker room and, of course, we weren't supposed to smoke but we were. And I was in the bathroom and five or six kids were outside, and all of a sudden I was bombarded by cigarettes coming over.

Schultz: Can you tell me a little about your family in those earlier years?

Goldsmith: Well I come from a family of twelve. There was five girls and seven boys.

Schultz: Where do you fit in there?

Goldsmith: I'm number 11.

Schultz: Okay!

Goldsmith: Yeah. So I had six older brothers ahead of me in high school, and my dad was kind of a jack-of-all-trades, odd-jobs here and there. He logged and he farmed, a little bit of everything. The family did okay, we lived down on the farm. It was a good life, yeah.

Schultz: Do you remember there ever being a political atmosphere in your home?

Goldsmith: No, not really. Not a political atmosphere. I don't think there was a big division between Democrat or Republican in my family.

Schultz: Did you ever a notice a political atmosphere in school?

Goldsmith: I didn't notice a political atmosphere during that time but I know there were often discussions about people we knew that went to Vietnam, that was in the war. And they didn't, or I didn't, really understand what the war was all about.

Schultz: What can you tell me about the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated?

Goldsmith: The day John F. Kennedy was assassinated…well, I was in the seventh grade and I think they shut school down early after that. I believe they did, because it was, like, two or three o'clock in the afternoon. It was a shock to everybody, teachers were upset *. I was at the middle school at that time.

Schultz: Was middle school still on Third Street or…was that where it was?

Goldsmith: Yep. It was on Third Street, I think seventh and eighth grade went there and then freshman through seniors went up here.

Schultz: In 1964 the US began war or combat in Vietnam. Did this have any impact on you at the time?

Goldsmith: Well at that time, probably not right away because it was in '66 when my brother got drafted and went to Vietnam. It was October of '66, so in the beginning of '66 is when he got drafted, and July of '67 was when he got killed.

Schultz: What did you know about Vietnam before the war began…had you even heard of it?

Goldsmith: No. Didn't have a clue.

Schultz: When do you think you started becoming more aware of it as the war went on?

Goldsmith: Well, I became quite aware of it of course when my brother moved over there, you know, you're writing letters to him. But then after he got killed, well you become even more concerned about 'what is this all about'? How many Americans are dying over there and why?

Schultz: Did education of the country of Vietnam…did you see more of that in school while the war was going on? I mean, if it had never been mentioned before the war, had it become sort of a topic of curriculum in school while the war was being waged?

Goldsmith: No to my [knowledge], no.

Schultz: Sort of stayed along with regular coursework?

Goldsmith: Yeah, yeah, I don't think it changed anything within the school while I was going.

Schultz: How was the reaction in the school at the very beginning of the war, like say the day the war was declared?

Goldsmith: Not that I noticed, nobody reacted at that time.

Schultz: Were people optimistic about it? Was there a lot of support, I mean compared to the later years when it was greatly opposed?

Goldsmith: Well first off they never really declared war, it was never a declaration of war. It was a police action. So…to my knowledge I don't remember ever talking to somebody that's in support of war. No I don't think there was…not in support.

Schultz: You started high school around the mid-sixties. What kind of changes did you notice?

Goldsmith: I don't think I ever paid much attention to changes within the community or the school. I was too busy worrying about my own changes going on going through school, I didn't really concentrate on that. But then…you know, after you graduate, after I graduated, I then became interested until I got drafted…

Schultz: You got drafted?

Goldsmith: I got called up for…I had to go for a medical exam all of that, but I didn't end up going because my brother got killed and I had two brothers over there at the time, in Vietnam at that time.

Schultz: Were other students beginning to become aware of the country's problems at this time?

Goldsmith: I imagine there were students that were aware of it, I mean some of them were going into the military on their own right after school, and sure they were aware of that. I wasn't myself, personally.

Schultz: Did you have any friends closer to you that enlisted?

Goldsmith: Yep, one of my friends enlisted. He went into the army and went to Vietnam.

Schultz: Did he?

Goldsmith: Yep.

Schultz: Did he come back?

Goldsmith: Yep, he came back, yeah.

Schultz: What did he have to say about it?

Goldsmith: Well it wasn't really anything nice! [laughs] I mean it wasn't a sportive thing. A lot of times he would talk about…that it was such a mess and unorganized.

Schultz: When did he come back?

Goldsmith: I would say October of ’69 he went…and he came back August of ’70.

Schultz: So he wasn’t really there very long?

Goldsmith: No. You only had to be there a year. About like what they’re doing in Iraq now.

Schultz: So it was only one year and…

Goldsmith: He was back.

Schultz: …and he didn’t have very nice things to say!

Goldsmith: No! I mean…nothing supportive.

Schultz: Were Civil Rights an issue in Black River Falls, ever?

Goldsmith: I don’t think so.

Schultz: What was your impression of Civil Rights leaders at the time that you were hearing about?

Goldsmith: Well I think Civil Rights was a good thing, I think all people should have the same rights we have. And so when Martin Luther King got killed, you know I thought that was…unhappy! There are some pretty narrow-minded people in the world.

Schultz: Had the schools been integrated by that time? And when I say that, I mean integrated with Native American and white students?

Goldsmith: Yeah, they were. Some of my friends were Native Americans.

Schultz: Was there any hostility between those two groups back then?

Goldsmith: Not that I know of. That doesn’t mean there wasn’t some. I think there’ll always be some of that…culture shock or culture differences, whatever you want to call it.

Schultz: So it wasn’t influenced in any way by the Civil Rights Movement at the time or made any more severe?

Goldsmith: Prevalent? Not that I had seen.

Schultz: When do you first remember the effects of the draft? I mean you said you brother was drafted in 1966. Do you remember instances of it before that, other students getting drafted?

Goldsmith: No I don’t so. I don’t remember that. Well, I believe he’s probably one of the first ones ever drafted. They had soldiers over there, but they didn’t have enough. Then they started the draft, it was probably early ’66 when they started it.

Schultz: What effect did the draft have in school? Did it make students angry?

Men were drafted into the armed services from 1948 until 1973, even during peace time. However, from 1964 to 1966, troop levels in Vietnam
increased from 23,300 to 385,300, suggesting a sharp increase in drafted
soldiers throughout 1966. By 1972, an estimated 70,000 people had evaded the draft.

-Landscaper.net

Goldsmith: Well I think, some students, I know my older brother, he enlisted in the navy to avoid the draft. And I did have a brother that joined the army afterwards too.

Schultz: About your brother, can you tell me more about him…the one that was killed?

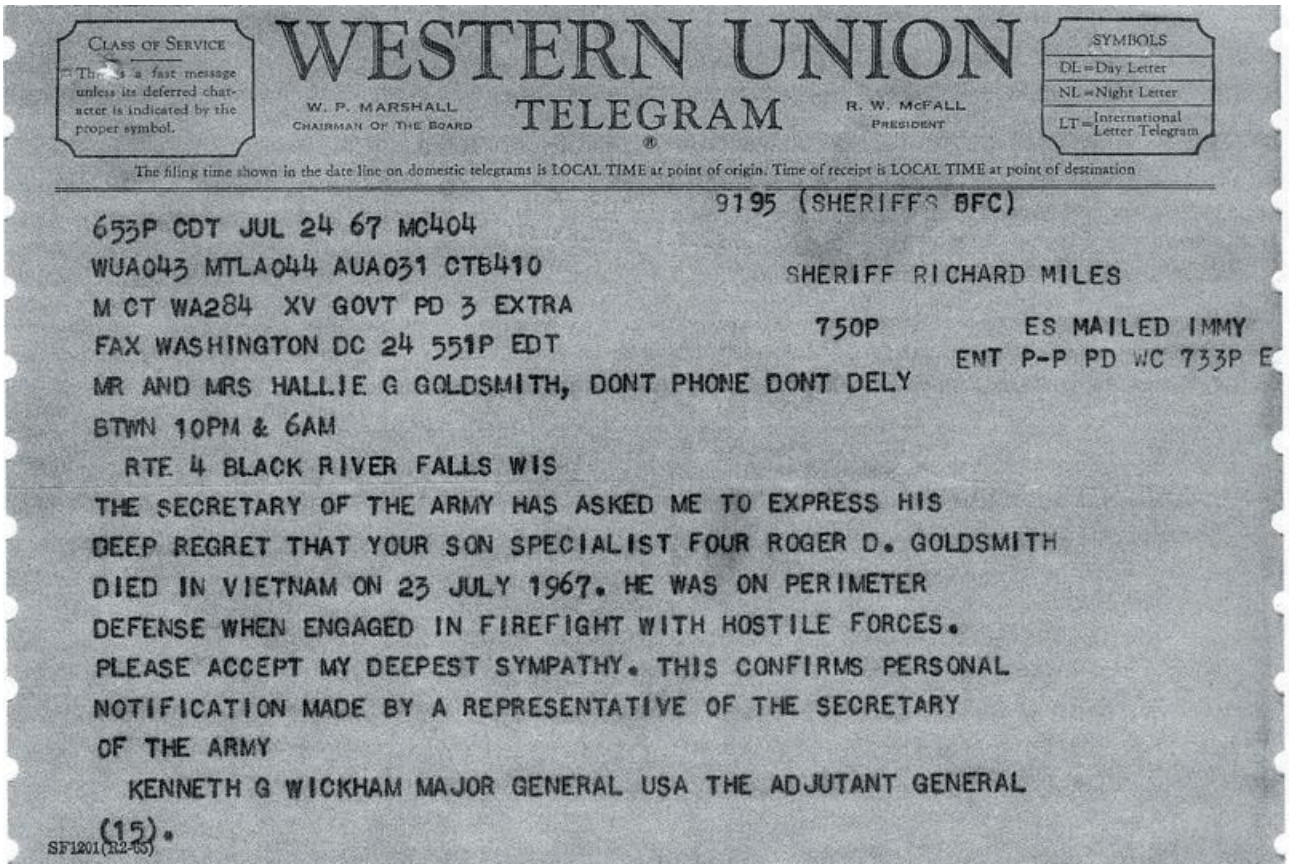
Goldsmith: Well he went to school here, you know and he had plans for the future, too, ahead, but he never got that far because he got drafted. As soon as he got of school he went into the service. And after he got out of basic he went to Vietnam.

Schultz: What was his name?

Goldsmith: Roger.

Schultz: Do you remember the specific day when you got the letter?

Goldsmith: I remember when they got the letter, yeah. There was officers that came to the house and gave that to Mom and Dad, and told them what had happened.



CLASS OF SERVICE
This is a fast message unless its deferred character is indicated by the proper symbol.

WESTERN UNION
TELEGRAM

W. P. MARSHALL, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD
R. W. McFALL, PRESIDENT

SYMBOLS
DL = Day Letter
NL = Night Letter
LT = International Letter Telegram

The filing time shown in the date line on domestic telegrams is LOCAL TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is LOCAL TIME at point of destination

9195 (SHERIFFS BFC)

653P CDT JUL 24 67 MC404
WUA043 MTLA044 AUA031 CTB410
M CT WA284 XV GOVT PD 3 EXTRA
FAX WASHINGTON DC 24 551P EDT
MR AND MRS HALLIE G GOLDSMITH, DONT PHONE DONT DELY
BTWN 10PM & 6AM
RTE 4 BLACK RIVER FALLS WIS
THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY HAS ASKED ME TO EXPRESS HIS
DEEP REGRET THAT YOUR SON SPECIALIST FOUR ROGER D. GOLDSMITH
DIED IN VIETNAM ON 23 JULY 1967. HE WAS ON PERIMETER
DEFENSE WHEN ENGAGED IN FIREFIGHT WITH HOSTILE FORCES.
PLEASE ACCEPT MY DEEPEST SYMPATHY. THIS CONFIRMS PERSONAL
NOTIFICATION MADE BY A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY
OF THE ARMY
KENNETH G WICKHAM MAJOR GENERAL USA THE ADJUTANT GENERAL
(15).

SHERIFF RICHARD MILES
750P
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SF1201(R2-65)

Schultz: How did he take it?

Goldsmith: It didn't go well…no.

Schultz: Did you have any communication with him after he left and before he died? Did he ever come back?

Goldsmith: He left, yeah, and when he left to go to Vietnam, that was the last we'd seen of him, he never came home for R&R. If he went to R&R it was probably to Australia or New Zealand, I don't know quite where they went for that, but they did go for R&R.

Rykken: I'm sorry to interject, but was his funeral in Black River?

Goldsmith: *mm-hmm* [nods yes]

Rykken: So now where is he buried?

Goldsmith: Hixton. Hixton Cemetery.

Rykken: One other quick one. When they came to the home, was there clergymen with?

Goldsmith: I don't remember that specifically but there could have been.

Rykken: I just remember, I was a little kid in Black River in the '60s, and my dad was a clergyman, and he did that on occasion. I remember him having to do that and he always told me that one of the worst moments of anything he did. It was just so traumatic for everybody.

Goldsmith: Well I have the original paper in that book so they'd say…

Rykken: Were you actually there…that day?

Goldsmith: I was there. I'd seen uniforms and I got out of there! [laughs] You knew something was going on.

Schultz: Did the death of your brother cause any sort of emotional problems in your family?

Goldsmith: Well, I think it caused a lot of sadness, a lot of anger and bitterness about the war.

Schultz: Did that affect the other brothers of yours that entered the military?

Goldsmith: Well, I'm not sure about that. I don't know if Barry enlisted because Roger got killed or why he enlisted, I don't know that.

Schultz: How did…how did your brother's death affect *your* view of the war after that?

Goldsmith: Well, certainly I couldn't see…I couldn't see before and I couldn't see afterwards why or what was the purpose of the war. What was our strategy. I didn't know the strategy behind it.

Schultz: Did you start developing really negative feelings?

Goldsmith: I mean, you've got a brother killed and you got two brothers over there and you don't know why they're there, or what's the purpose or the ultimate goal. And I was not in favor of the war.

Schultz: Two of the men I've interviewed so far had children in these years, Bill Wilcox and Al Lahmayer. You, however, were still living with your parents. Did you ever find yourself at odds with your parents about any of the country's issues?

Goldsmith: Well, I don't think so. I had no problem getting drafted and going to the war. I would've went. I was drafted and had to go take the exam. But when I was drafted, my mother thought it was particularly wrong that one gets killed, there's two there and now this…and so she talked to the county board about that and I ended up staying and taking care of the farm.

Schultz: Were you grateful for her—?

The War of the Innocents is a an on-site portrayal of the Battle of the Three Trees involving much of the C Company, 3rd Battalion, 8th Infantry in Vietnam on July 23, 1967. Roger D. Goldsmith was killed in this battle.

Goldsmith: Very much! Especially when they come back and tell you the horror stories that go on in battle.

Schultz: What kind of stories did your other brothers have to tell about the war after they came back?

Goldsmith: Well, my brother that was in the navy, he would be in a small boat going up the river. He ended up getting in fire fights from getting attacked from both sides, you know, with the bullets going over your head, and he would talk about that. Barry was a foot soldier, and he would talk about snipers sitting in trees shooting at him when they were going through the forest.

Schultz: Did Roger ever write to you or your family while he was there?

Goldsmith: mm-hmm, yeah.

Schultz: Did he write…well I suppose he couldn't have written about it. The battle that you mentioned in the book here, what kind of description does it have of it?

Goldsmith: It's pretty detailed. The author went to get a soldier's perspective of the war. And he ended up going into the 4th infantry division Company B and Roger was in Company C. And it's pretty descriptive about that war and that battle.

Schultz: In the letters that Roger wrote, did he ever describe other battles that he had seen, or had he not seen too many battles up to that point?

Goldsmith: Yeah. He'd seen 'em. He didn't get into detail, but he was trying, towards the end there, in May…in June of '67, he was trying to avoid going out in the bush because August 1st he was supposed to come home. And he'd write about that and how scared he was, because his platoon should be 45 people and there was only 27 of 'em. And that 27 ran into two battalions, which is a thousand [*inaudible*].

Schultz: Do you still have the letters that he wrote?

Goldsmith: mm-hmm.

Schultz: In 1968 you were a senior in high school, what can you tell me about that year in particular for you, not even related to the country, just that year in your memory?

Goldsmith: Senior year? Well, I was relieved, 'I'm a senior!', you know? There can't be anything greater than getting out of school! And getting a job and getting married and going on with my life. My goal was that I was gonna get out of high school and party for two years, then get married and get a job.

Schultz: That was the plan!

Goldsmith: That was the plan. Well, it worked out pretty good! Two years after I graduated I got married, in two years and three months. After that, I was working here in Black River, I've always worked in Black River. It's where I raised my family, my kids went here, my grandkids are starting to go to school, in Black River.

Schultz: 18 years old. That was the age at which people could be drafted…when you turned 18, were you afraid of getting a draft notice before you actually got one?

Goldsmith: Yeah. We expected that, I expected it. All my friends were getting them. And the year prior to that, when I was a junior, I knew kids that were going…yeah that was a fear.

Schultz: Did you know any other friends that were as lucky as you were, as far as not having to go even after getting drafted?

Goldsmith: No. I don't. I mean, maybe they went to Canada or they had reasons for not having to go, like they were in college or they didn't have to go.

Schultz: 1968 is sometimes described as a boiling point in America's tolerance for everything that was going on…the assassinations, and the election, Vietnam…did you feel that it was that intense in Black River?

Goldsmith: I don't think that the intensity was here like it was in the country. You would see it on the news, but I didn't really feel it right in Black River, no.

Schultz: Had, at any point during the war, did the community become angry or were they pretty content with it?

Goldsmith: Well, I don't think they were content with it, no!

Schultz: Complacent…

Goldsmith: I know like with my family, we were already angry about, Roger had gotten killed in '67. So, there was already some anger and resentment about the war, in my immediate family anyway. But I just don't remember being anywhere within the community or within the school where it was an issue.

Schultz: Did you ever witness protests in Black River? I'd heard there were some staged around the bridge area, had you ever seen those?

Goldsmith: I don't believe I've seen those. Protests against war? At that time? No I don't remember.

Schultz: What was your opinion of war protestors in the country at that time?

Goldsmith: Well, I didn't have anything against those people either, you know, they have a right to speak their mind. I thought that was okay. And I didn't really agree with the war anyway because I had no understanding of what it was all about.

Schultz: Do you think that was the viewpoint largely of everybody against the war that they didn't know what it was about, that there was a lack of information?

Goldsmith: Well, right, I think the administration didn't really inform the country of what that was all about. And it was really more of the president's idea, 'we're gonna help Vietnam'. I don't think it was well advertised why he was doing what he was doing.

Schultz: Had you watched protests on TV...such as the Chicago Democratic National Convention?

Goldsmith: I'd seen protests on TV.

Schultz: What was your opinion of the ones that got pretty crazy, like that?

Goldsmith: I think it's alright to protest, but of course when it gets out of hand like that, a lot of times their emotions override them and they get in trouble. I thought, if that's what they want to do it's up to them.

Schultz: About the election. Most all of the first years of the Vietnam War were under Lyndon B.

Johnson…what was your opinion of Johnson?

Goldsmith: I didn't think he had a clue what he was doing. [laughs] That was my idea.

Schultz: Were you relieved when he said that he wasn't going to run in '68?

Goldsmith: I thought that was a wise decision, yeah, I didn't think he had a chance to win anyway. He knew he didn't have a chance.

Schultz: What was your opinion of Robert F. Kennedy?

Goldsmith: Well, if he hadn't been killed I think it would be a whole different world now.

Schultz: Really?

Goldsmith: Yeah.

Schultz: Does that mean you were sort of behind him all the way?

Goldsmith: Oh yeah, I thought he was a great, intelligent man.

Schultz: How did you react to his assassination?

Goldsmith: Oh, well I thought it was a terrible thing. It was just absolutely…the only way people could beat him was to kill him.

Schultz: Was there a similar response when RFK was killed as compared to JFK?

Goldsmith: I think we were as shocked about that as we were about JFK.

Schultz: At this point, 18 year olds were not yet able to vote. Considering that, were you still concerned with the candidates of the election?

Goldsmith: Yeah, I was. Depending on who won the election, it would change the war.

Schultz: Were you upset that you couldn't vote…did you want to vote that year?

Goldsmith: Well, I think I had a right to. I don't know if I was upset about it or not. It had been 21 for so long I really didn't…I was disappointed.

Schultz: Our high school right now holds what's called 'mock elections' just for high school students participate in usually presidential elections. Did they hold mock elections in schools back then?

Goldsmith: I don't believe that happened, no.

Schultz: Did you ever vote later on, like say, 1972, the next election?

Goldsmith: Whenever I could start voting, I've voted ever since.

Schultz: Who did you vote for in '72?

Goldsmith: I think I would've voted Nixon at that time.

Schultz: Was that because the war was still going on or did the war have any impact on your decision?

Goldsmith: No, it's just that I always liked Nixon the talks that he gave, and his floor plans. It seemed to make sense to me at the time.

Schultz: Did you find yourself more politically motivated after school, or were in more of a state of disillusionment with politics altogether?

Goldsmith: Well, I think I became interested after my brother got killed. I think it was important for me to vote for the right person that was going to do something about the war.

Schultz: Did you have other friends that had siblings die during the war?

Goldsmith: I know there was a young man that was killed [from] Melrose. And then there was another man in Black River that got killed about the same time my brother did.

Schultz: Do you think the Vietnam war could have been ended sooner than it did?

Goldsmith: Well, I think it should have been looked at a lot closer. It may not ever have been started. You know? When we went in there, the French had already been in there, then we went in. So, I think it should have been looked at a lot closer than it was.

Schultz: Looking at schools today, what can you see about schools today that are different from what they were in the 1960s?

Goldsmith: I really haven't noticed much different. My kids all went through school here and I didn't see where it was that much different. The things that are different…of course, you have a lot more electronic equipment, a lot more computers, that kind of thing. But as far as…kids are kids, you know, you still have the same sports, and the curriculum in school is basically the same, it's just taught differently like with computers. But when my kids went through it, I thought it stayed pretty much the same.

Schultz: Do you think the war today is any way comparable to Vietnam?

Goldsmith: Same thing.

Schultz: Really?

Goldsmith: Yeah. I think it's the same thing…we don't have any business being there. There was no reason to go there.

Schultz: Overall, how has high school or adolescent life in the 1960s affected your life today?

Goldsmith: Well, the things that I learned in high school are the things I carried with me all through life. Hopefully they were good things, I mean I didn't go very far, my home is only a quarter mile away from my old house where I was born and raised. Yeah, it was a good thing.

Roger D. Goldsmith
1946 – 1967

According to a Banner Journal article released July 26, 1967, Roger Goldsmith was "the first Jackson County resident to be killed in action in Vietnam." His memorial service was held at the Jensen funeral home in Hixton. He was serving his eleventh month in Vietnam at the time and wrote that he would be home in a few short weeks.

the BANNER-JOURNAL
the newspaper about Black River Country
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COUNTY'S FIRST VIETNAM FATALITY

BLACK RIVER YOUTH KILLED IN VIETNAM

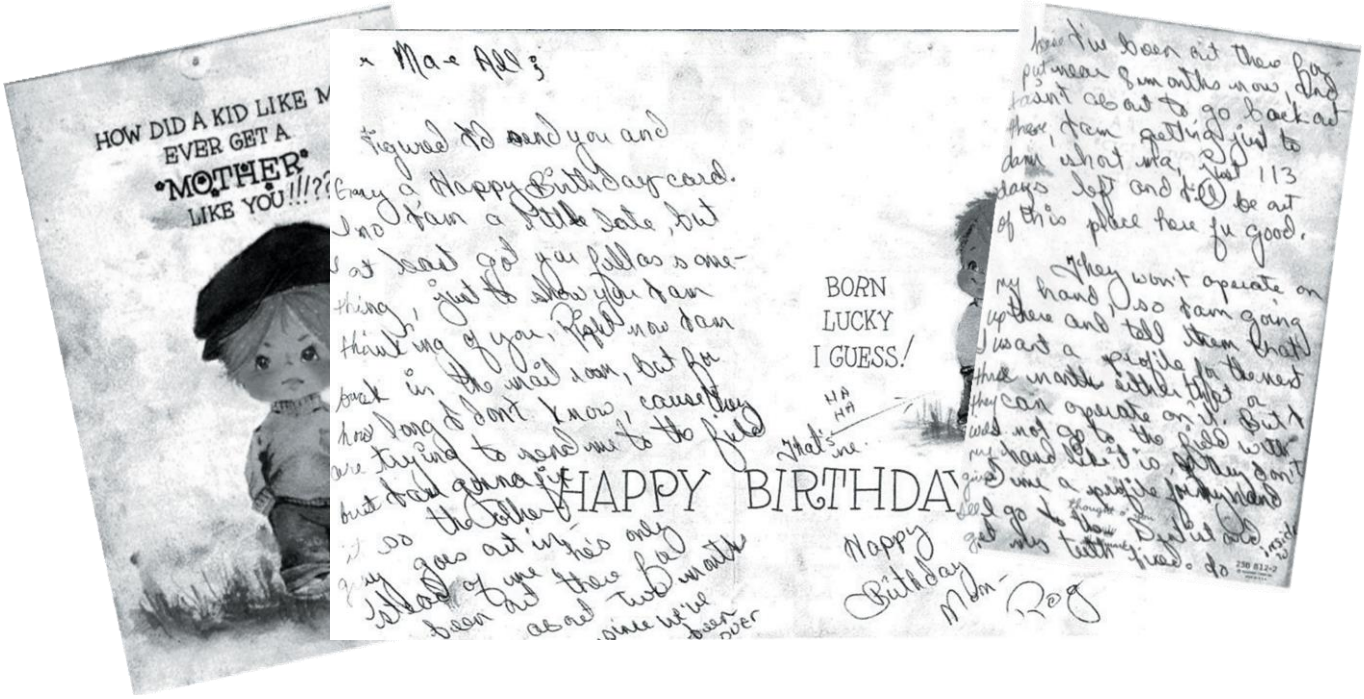
Funeral arrangements are pending at the Jensen Funeral Home at Hixton for Army Specialist 4 Roger Dwight Goldsmith, 20, of rural Black River Falls. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hallie Goldsmith of Route 4, Black River Falls, were notified Monday afternoon by the War Department their son had been killed Sunday noon in Vietnam. They were informed by Army men from Camp McCoy the youth was felled by enemy fire while on patrol with his Army infantry unit. He is the first Jackson county resident to be killed in action in Vietnam.

An Army representative is to arrive today to assist the family with arrangements for the funeral service. When the casket arrives it will be taken to the Jensen Funeral Home, according to a member of the family.

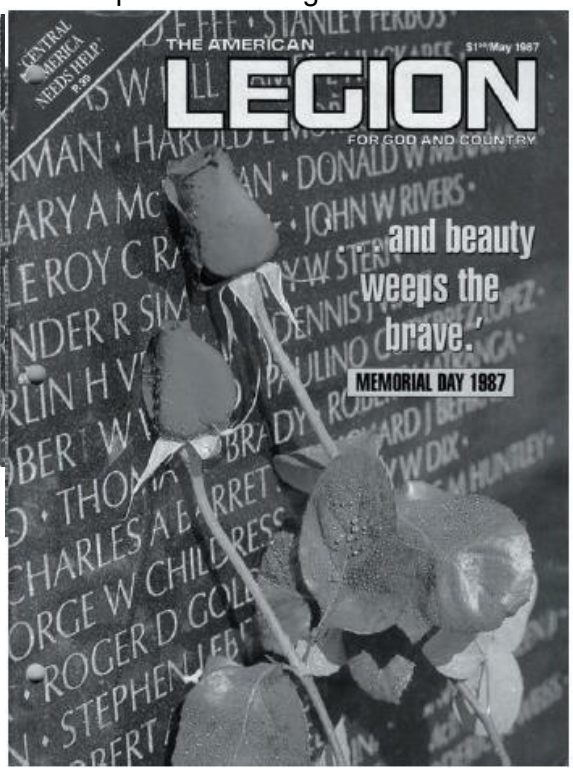
Roger was in his eleventh month in Vietnam and would have left the war zone within a few weeks. He was born at Black River Falls September 8, 1946.

He entered the service in November of 1965 and the last time he was home was in August of last year when the picture shown of him above was taken.

In addition to being survived by his parents he is also survived by six brothers, Gary, Randy, Barry and Christy, each of Black River Falls, Allen of Janesville and Danny with the armed forces in England (he is to arrive here today); five sisters, Opal, Mrs. Ross Arneson, Janet, Mrs. Robert Eddy and Luann, each of Black River Falls; Mrs. Mavis Shoemaker of Rockford, Ill., and Bonnie, Mrs. Howard Shoemaker of Janesville; his maternal grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. George Gee of Alma Center.



Like most soldiers in Vietnam, Roger sent home letters and cards regularly like this one. The most striking lines from this birthday card sent to his mother include “Right now I am back in the mail room, but for how long I don’t know, cause they are trying to send me to the field, but I am gonna try and fix it so the other guy goes out instead of me. He’s only been out there for about two months since we’ve been over...just 113 days left and I’ll be out of this place here for good.”



Interestingly enough, a May 1987 issue of *The American Legion* featured a picture of “The Wall” of fallen Vietnam veterans. If you look closely to the left of the rose, toward the bottom, you will find the name ROGER D GOLDSMITH.