

**James Gremmels**  
**Narrator**

**Joseph Hart**  
**Interviewer**

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JH: 00:02 Okay.

JG: 00:04 My name is James Gremmels. I'm an Associate Professor in English at the University of Minnesota, Morris. I'm 59 years old, or will be on May 20.

JH: 00:15 Okay. How many years have been at UMM?

JG: 00:19 I've been here since it began in 1960, so, 26 years.

JH: 00:25 You were working here during the Vietnam War?

JG: 00:30 I was teaching, yes.

JH: 00:31 Okay. What were your feelings about the war and how did that form?

JG: 00:38 I think most of us were, at least in the English faculty, I think almost from the beginning, opposed to the war. We thought the Bay of Tonkin resolution was a mistake. We felt as though that we were just being pushed into a civil war that we didn't have any business being in.

00:59 I think there were meetings long before the Kent State climax, if you want to call that, to the protests on our campus, where the issues were brought out and many of the faculty served on panels. I think your father probably served on one of the panels. I know your father and I both became involved in DFL politics when really the impetus for me to get in was the war. I was very much anti-war, and I was supporting Eugene McCarthy, trying to do anything I could politically to bring the war to a close.

- JH: 01:40 What about before the war, were your political beliefs and values of a liberal bent?
- JG: 01:46 Oh, yes. Yeah. I think from—all from my days in graduate school in the '50s, I've been a liberal democrat, I suppose you would say. Leaning more towards socialist. I guess my sympathies are with the socialists, but I'm realistic enough to say you have to be in one of the traditional parties to get something done.
- JH: 02:11 Uh-huh. Okay. What was the general attitude of the campus toward the war? Was it mostly, faculty and students both, was it mostly anti-war?
- JG: 02:26 I think there was a mixture. I think in those years, of course, many students could get deferments coming to college. So we had students in college probably that weren't here really for a degree so much as to escape the war, although the students in those days I think were a little bit more interested and more active about political issues.
- 03:02 And probably, it's hard to know, unless you would survey the students at that time, how many were supporting the war, how many weren't. But I would say the quiet ones, many of the ones that didn't speak out probably were in favor of the war, and probably it was less than half perhaps who were really actively involved in opposing the war. I'm guessing, but I would say that.
- JH: 03:25 Um-hum. Was there a visible anti-war movement—or pro-war movement, I'm sorry?
- JG: 03:34 Not really, although, whenever you would have meetings, there would always be students who would ask belligerent questions. I think when the Kent State affair took place, that day, when the news hit the campus that students had been shot by guardsmen on the—the students were aroused. That probably propelled more students into the anti-war camp.
- 04:09 I'll always remember that day, it was, I remember, I had a class over in the social science building, and I was going to class, it was about 11:00, I would guess, in the morning, and there was kind of an eerie feeling on campus. Students were sort of in groups out in the mall and they were sort of quiet groups. So it just was an eerie atmosphere.

- 04:34 Then after class, I heard that the classes were cancelled for that afternoon and there was going to be a special assembly meeting with students and faculty. It was rather strange because Edson Auditorium was packed. The faculty sat up on the stage. The Provost at that time was not on campus, so the Assistant Provost, who was Stephen Granger, so he was in charge of the meeting. He did a remarkable job because it was tense. There's a lot of tension in the air.
- 05:14 One of the faculty members, I think it was Professor Gray, had a resolution that he wanted passed by the assembly condemning the murder of the Kent State students. We must have debated that issue for about two hours. While that debate was going on, some of the townspeople came out, American Legion people came out. The students had lowered the flag to half-mast. The American Legionnaire said, "No, we want that flag back up where it belongs." And there were some students that supported the Legionnaires. Not a large number of students, but there were some students that were supporting that.
- 06:06 Of course, what was going—that was going on sort of outside as the meeting was going inside, so, some students were going out there to try to stop what the Legionnaires were doing. It was explosive enough so I think we could have had some, if not somebody killed, somebody hurt out there. Fortunately, we had some wise heads inside. I said Granger did a remarkable job controlling the students, letting that everyone had their say, and that let off quite a bit of tension and steam, letting them talk.
- 06:44 Then one of the faculty members, an English instructor by the name of John Nachbar said, "Well, I'll tell you what we'll do." He said, "I'll propose a motion that we will let the flag go back to full mast, but it will be in protest to the Vietnam War." It was a clever enough motion that everyone bought it and both sides said, okay, we're flying it in protest and we're going to put a sign out there to say this flag is being flown at full mast in protest to the Vietnam War. So that took the air out of that little bad incident.
- 07:17 But it was curious, I know I agonized over that meeting because I felt I couldn't in good conscience vote for a resolution without seeing the information. I was fairly well-convinced that the students had been shot without real proper cause. I was fairly convinced of that. But on the

other hand, I wasn't going to give my vote to the resolution because I didn't have enough information.

07:54 There were other faculty members that debated the resolution on other grounds, but I felt it wasn't due process, and I felt, as a person that believed in a certain sense of order, that at least you have to go through the due process. But as it turned out, when the vote was finally taken, there were only probably 16, maybe 14, 16 of us that voted against it. The rest of the faculty and all of the students voted for the proposition, so, and it passed.

08:21 But I've always remembered, the day after that meeting, I was teaching American lit, and I happened to be doing Dos Passos, *The Big Money*. There's one of the *Camera Eyes*, and *The Big Money* has to do with Sacco/Vanzetti case where the people, Dos Passos particularly, felt a great injustice had been done with the execution of these two supposed bank robbers. But the case really was a case against migrant—or immigrants, Italian immigrants that had come to this country, and many felt the case was framed against the Sacco and Vanzetti. So there was a huge protest at that time. It sort of, to my mind, sort of paralleled the Vietnam protests.

09:26 When I got to class that morning, and it was a large class, I think in those days there weren't that many general ed courses on campus, so I think there must have been about 120 students in that class.

09:41 So I started reading to them that *Camera Eye 50* that starts out, "they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich they hire and fire the politicians the newspaper editors the old judges the small men with reputations the college presidents the ward heelers (Listen businessmen college presidents judges America will not forget her betrayers) they hire the men with guns the uniforms the policecars the patrolwagons. all right you have won you will kill the brave men our friends tonight. there is nothing left to do we are beaten we are the beaten crowd."

10:16 As I started to read that, I just started to choke up. I couldn't help myself. I was emotional the day before and everything. I just couldn't—my eyes just clouded over, I couldn't go on. So I just took my book and I walked up the aisle. And the class just sat there sort of stunned. They didn't know what the hell was happening.

- 10:40 Then it was odd, the next day, one of the students came up to me. It was an older student, his name was Nelson Chatfield, I'll never forget him. He said, "Gee," he said, "you know, the students thought you really put on a great act." But he knew me well, he said it. But I told him, that's no act, that's for real. And he said, of course, like most students, he said, "I hadn't read it before I came to class, but I sure as hell went back and read the novel carefully."
- 11:08 So it was kind of emotional times in some ways, but exciting times, I suppose. But—
- JH: 11:18 Um-hum. Do you remember—
- JG: 11:23 —I'm not nostalgic enough to want to go back there. I think it's painful too, some painful moments.
- JH: 11:30 Do you remember any other of the events or the protests or various marches—
- JG: 11:35 Oh, I remember one march, we had an evening march with torches, where we assembled on the campus and we marched down, I think we ended up in Willie's Red Owl. We were trying to get the townspeople involved, and there we had a confrontation because there were some veterans back from the war. Of course, they had kind of mixed feelings too, but one veteran was trying to defend his war efforts. So that was a rather tense situation.
- 12:10 But I think most of us that were involved said, "No, we're not condemning you people who went over there to fight, we understand why—that you had a patriotic reason to going over there. We're not condemning you exactly, we're condemning the political leaders that forced you to get yourself involved in the situation." There's no doubt in our minds that most of the men that went over there conducted themselves as honorably as they could. We tried to argue and say, "You're not the enemy. It's the government that is putting us in that position where you people are sacrificing your lives unnecessarily."
- 12:47 So, some of those debates were kind of interesting debates too, and many of the important issues, moral issues, came out in those rather tense, emotional moments.
- JH: 13:05 What were the—okay, as a faculty member, this is something, most of the people I've interviewed had been students during this time, and how did you visualize the

relations between students, between pro-war and anti-war, and the counterculture? Was there a lot of turmoil there or was it like any college campus now?

JG: 13:41 I guess I don't recall exactly if there was any more unusual tension between students than there is nowadays. I think whether you were a member of the counterculture, whether you were somebody here escaping the draft, or whether you're more of a straight student, I think they probably still got along fairly well together.

14:05 I think of our English majors, for instance, I don't recall that there was any great turmoil or fighting among English majors over the war issue as such, would certainly argue with one another in the dorm, but I don't think it was ever put on a personal level, that I could see. I don't know, maybe there were things going on that I wasn't aware of. But certainly, in my classes, in the halls or on the campus, I didn't sense that there was any great friction.

JH: 14:41 How about the counterculture? How intertwined do you think that the counterculture was with the anti-war movement?

JG: 14:55 I'm not certain what you mean exactly by counterculture. If you mean people living a little different lifestyles or, I don't know exactly, you'd have to explain to me what you mean by that.

JH: 15:08 Yeah, the alternative lifestyle or the hippies with the long hair and, you know.

JG: 15:18 I don't know what that group, to my mind, I don't know if they had a—there were that many of them around. I know there were students who lived off campus perhaps and on the farms around that might have been involved with a different lifestyle. I suppose in those days too, marijuana was something that was being used more, I suppose.

15:51 I don't know if sexual mores had changed that much really on college campuses. I think there was more probably exposure than there had been in the past. But I don't recall being struck by any dramatic conflicts between people who were, again, who were out there doing what they were doing and people that were living on campus, if you want to call them more of the straight people. I don't recall any great disparities there.

- 16:35 I'm certainly, you know, I think I can be invited to some parties and I think there seemed to always be a mixture of people at those parties.
- JH: 16:50 Okay. Do you think that being on the UMM campus changed your perspective on the war at all, or do you think it was—let me phrase this another way. How did the UMM campus compared to other campuses, the main campus in the Cities, or other college campuses that—
- JG: 17:16 Well, I think we're a little more isolated, and I certainly think the violence that took place in the main campus, of course, when they blocked off Washington Avenue, that didn't occur here. There wasn't that much civil disobedience out here as you found on the larger campuses. I don't think there was that much thrashing of buildings or vandalizing or painting war slogans and everything. I don't think we saw any of that out here.
- 17:45 I think, of course, being a faculty member and being closely associated with students, I think it pulled you in more than if you were, say, a parent of a student or somebody that weren't quite as aware of how they were so emotionally shaken by the affairs that were, national affairs, that were taking place at the time.
- 18:11 But I think eventually the students going back home and talking to their parents, I think finally they brought their parents around too. I think that helped to swing the whole sentiment of the country against the war. The campus is sort of where the seed was planted, and then I think it grew out from that. I don't think there's any doubt that the anti-war movement was—the impulse for it came from the college campuses, in Morris as well as other campuses on the state. Of course, they had networks who involved in politics, campus, the students were pretty well-represented at those political meetings, exerting pressure on the politicians to do something.
- JH: 18:58 Um-hum. Did you have children in college at this time?
- JG: 19:02 No, no. My three boys were, thank God, too young.
- JH: 19:08 Um-hum. Okay. Was the war something that you could forget about, or did it loom over every meal? Was it always—

- JG: 19:27 No, you couldn't forget about it, because if you turn on the news, you'd be listening to the body count or you'd be listening to what we were doing over there. You couldn't shut it down, unless you wanted to live in a cocoon, which is impossible. And, I say, on campus the students would be a constant reminder. They'd be wearing peace buttons or there were posters up the hallways to remind you that there was an anti-war effort going on. You couldn't have escaped it.
- JH: 19:58 Um-hum. Okay. Just one more. What do you think it would take to stir people up as much as they were stirred up in the '60s? Do you think Libya or some other crisis today would do that?
- JG: 20:22 I rather think it would. I'm not certain Libya would stir us up. But I rather suspect that if the administration tried to make some massive move that would involve large numbers of American young soldiers in Nicaragua, I think there would be quite a bit of resistance to a move like that. I don't think that that would generate a great deal of support, and I think if it happened, I think there would be some strong protests again.
- JH: 20:59 Okay. All right.