

When you didn't trust anyone over thirty

Camelot to Kent State
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Camelot to Kent State: The Sixties Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It

Author - Joan Morrison and Robert K. Morrison
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The best oral history has the best qualities of a Robert Rauschenberg "combine" painting. It distrusts ideas organised into a logical thesis and derived from controlled source materials, and trusts in disparate voices that give us intimations of what is otherwise unknown in human experience. It is perfect for heterogeneous American culture because it can capture how people from widely different socioeconomic, educational or other backgrounds think, feel and live through history - or at least how they represent themselves as living or having lived. When oral history is good, it is very, very good. Think of how well Studs Terkel's *The Good War* and *Working* convey how Americans feel about what the second world war did to them and how their jobs affect their lives. But, like a Rauschenberg combine, the quality of oral history depends ultimately on the genius of the artists at work and how creatively they make something out of their "real world" materials.

The updated paperback edition of Joan and Robert K. Morrison's *From Camelot to Kent State* is Rauschenberg-quality. The Morrisons interviewed 122 people who lived through the 1960s in the United States, some well known like William Sloan Coffin, Eldridge Cleaver, Philip Berrigan and Abbie Hoffman; others obscure like Irma and Harold Moore, who lost their oldest son Robert in Vietnam, and Jason Zapator, whose 15 minutes of fame is his account of three days at the Woodstock music festival. Several choices are inspired. Nancy Gorrell tells us what it was like to enter the pre-feminist 1960s as a teenage girl "encased in plastic". Craig McNamara, son of the "architect of the Vietnam war", reveals that his father would "come home in the evening anywhere from 7.30 to nine, or something like that. He'd

go around the house and adjust the paintings on the walls, and the photographs, because they were a little out of line." Fifty-six individuals tell us here about the Peace Corps, the civil rights and women's movements, fighting in Vietnam, evading the draft, protesting against the war, joining or rejecting the counterculture - or doing both in sequence, demonstrating on campus or working in radical political groups such as SDS, Weathermen and Black Panthers. Three additional framing voices talk about the people who enthusiastically shaped and started implementing the Camelot vision of the Kennedy administration and about the effects of the National Guard shooting of four students at [Kent State University](#). The tapes and transcripts of all 122 interviewees reside in the Smithsonian Museum.

The Morrisons' interviewees make us feel what it was like to live through events that were terrifying, confusing, serious and ludicrous, occasionally all at the same time. They also work together like the subjects of the films *7 Up*, *14 Up*, *21 Up* and so on. We can deduce - we are never told - that the interviews were conducted in the early to mid-1980s. Most of the interviewees came of age in the 1960s. All of them are looking back on the lives they lived a decade or two earlier: "40s Up". The results are poignant, but the influence of hindsight must be kept in mind when interpreting how they present what they did. The interviews of the 1987 edition are reprinted without change. The brief personal profiles of the interviewees were updated whenever possible to note deaths or new directions taken in their lives.

The book takes us in rough chronological sequence from the Kennedy inauguration to the Kent State killings and traces personal and general shifts in attitudes about political and cultural issues. Therefore, it would have been helpful to have precise dates of specific events, such as the "country-club" takeover of the administration building by students at the [University of Chicago](#). A chronology of major events and a brief glossary of 1960s terms are given.

The banality of evil in human life is as commonplace now as it was in the 1960s. For the latest proof just read Philip Gourevitch's *A Cold Case* (2001), about a double murder in New York City six months after Woodstock and three months before Kent State. What surprises in *From Camelot to Kent State* is the cumulative impression of the banality of motivations towards goodness and the inability of most of the participants in significant social or political events to stay focused on what is good for very long.

There are exceptions. The personal courage of Clark Olsen, Bob Zellner and Jackie Bolden facing guns, water hoses, attack dogs, police batons and lead pipes during civil-rights demonstrations in Alabama, Mississippi and Virginia is awe inspiring. Walk back at night from Walker's Cafe in the black section of Selma, Alabama, with three Unitarian ministers, Olsen, James Reeb and Orloff Miller, who answered Martin Luther King's call for support after the earlier brutal police attack on civil-rights marchers. Stroll further along a wide sidewalked, tree-lined street in the white section of town. Hear three southern citizens call

out: "Hey, niggers." Wince at the sound of some kind of club striking Reeb's skull just above his ear. Witness a martyrdom.

Likewise exceptional is Jack Weinberg's long commitment to pragmatic social activism, from campus free-speech issues at Berkeley to union organising in Detroit - and his apparent return to it now after a period of disenchantment. Weinberg extemporaneously coined the phrase "don't trust anyone over 30", and he was a prime mover of the freedom-of-speech rights that now prevail at most American colleges and universities. Nonetheless, when directly questioned about this legacy, he remarked: "Yeah, that and ten cents will get me a cup of coffee - or maybe 35 cents now."

There are good reasons for his retrospective cynicism. Many of the once-young Americans who tell their stories in this book appear self-indulgent as they take up and discard causes and other human beings like the flotsam and jetsam Rauschenberg used in his combines. Many undertook seemingly courageous actions out of naive innocence about consequences, or because, for individuals of their social class, there were no meaningful personal consequences.

There are few voices here of those who were destroyed by events in the 1960s: draft dodgers who could never get their lives back together; Vietnam vets who still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder; African-Americans who saw civil-rights legislation enacted with no real change in the quality of their lives; kids who moved from taking trips to shooting speed and heroin. Readers would never know that Steven Parent, a recent high-school graduate, was killed by the followers of Charles Manson and buried on Wednesday, August 13 1969, two days before the Woodstock festival.

On the epigraph page, the Morrisons quote from Bob Dylan's "The times they are a-changin'" and include this song as a significant item in their chronology. When Joan Baez asked Dylan, then her lover, how he had come to write a similar masterpiece of folk-protest music, "Masters of war", he replied that he knew it would sell.

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