

# Penn State student protests rare in 1960s

by Arthur Goldschmidt

What comes to mind when someone talks about "the sixties?" Probably a bearded youth or a long-haired girl carrying a protest sign or strumming a guitar and singing folk songs. For those of you who teach or study at Penn State or other institutions of higher learning in central Pennsylvania, do you ever wonder what your campus was like 40 years ago?

Normally Voices no longer accepts first-person memoirs, but I can better answer this question as a historian who is old enough to recall teaching-not just studying-in those mythic years. In fact, when I retired in June 2000, I asked my teaching assistants from my early years to come and tell their successors what they remembered about Penn State in that storied era of student activism.

Believe it or not, Penn State in the 1960s was even more conservative than it is today. Black students were rare. Almost no faculty or staff members were African-American. Penn State did welcome international students, including some Blacks from Africa and the Caribbean. Some of them spoke out vigorously from various nationalist, socialist, or religious perspectives. Most Penn State students were white, middle class, focused on getting their degrees, and indifferent to world politics or foreign cultures.

We did have local chapters of both the radical Students for a Democratic Society and the conservative Young Americans for Freedom. I taught Penn Staters from both groups in my history classes. They were articulate and fond of getting into debates about the Middle East, or the Vietnam War, or Castro's Cuba, or African liberation. Only occasionally did these debates reflect wide reading, and in class they were usually polite to one another, if not to the instructor.

Once the leader of Yachad, our pro-Israel student group, was studying late in Roy Rogers (then the counterpart of Irving's

## Commentary

Bagels now) and got locked in when the staff closed the restaurant at 2 AM. At another table, also locked in, was the president of the Penn State Students for Palestine. The two young men had often crossed swords at public meetings and in my class. They ruefully remarked to each other that "Dr. Goldschmidt would love to see us now" and buried the hatchet until they found a cop who could secure their

Two weeks later the vice president for student affairs announced that a short-lived radical newspaper, the Water Tunnel, could not be sold on the Penn State campus. This ban galvanized the students, and an estimated three thousand crowded into the HUB Ballroom one night to condemn campus paternalism and the Vietnam War. On another night a group occupied Old Main for several hours until the police evicted them at 10 PM.

Compared with the student uprisings in Berkeley, Columbia, and Harvard, though,

course I encouraged some of the Black students to help bring in lecturers who could speak on current African issues. But student interest in Africa waned quickly. I told the class I would give final grades to all students who submitted papers recounting any of their activities in lieu of my course that contributed to their intellectual growth. Those who did not submit papers got Fs, a policy that led the unwary later to protest. In the Middle East course, most students wanted to complete their work, but it attracted so many students, especially Jews and Arabs who wanted to argue the Palestine-Israel question, that our "workshop" had to gather around the obelisk instead of our small Willard Building room.

Spring 1970 was a period of intellectual ferment but also of great danger to Penn State. I must defer to others who can describe how troops encamped in Beaver Stadium, while rioters broke the windows at Eric Walker's house (now the Hintz Alumni Center). I proposed then that we should be trying out new educational methods in order to ward off a disruptive revolution and enhance the campus intellectual atmosphere. In reality, summer 1970 became a cooling off period, and by fall most students had reverted to their degree-seeking ways. Few of our experiments endured.

Presidents Jack Oswald, Bryce Jordan, Joab Thomas, and Graham Spanier have all claimed to listen to student concerns more than Eric Walker. Administrators and faculty seem more attuned to students now, but appearances hide a reality of indifference. Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness, largely unknown in 1970, could have improved our learning environment if faculty and students had taken them seriously. But I doubt that either our legislators or our corporate sponsors want universities to promote free thought and expression, or that today's students will achieve what those of 1970 could not.

## The climax of Penn State student radicalism came in May 1970, after four antiwar demonstrators were shot and killed by National Guardsmen at Kent State University.

release from captivity.


I recall "Walker Town," the tent village erected in fall 1968 at the foot of the mall, a protest against what the students claimed was inadequate provision of residence halls on campus. Indeed, many of us thought that President Eric Walker preferred having private interests put up new student apartments off campus over building more residence halls. Yet during his presidency North, South, Pollock, and East Halls went up, and by the late 1960s women as well as men were allowed to live in apartments off campus. There were still remnants of paternalism toward students of the late sixties, but the doctrine of "in loco parentis" was vanishing. By the way, Walker Town powered its lights and its public address system with electricity imported from Sackett Building!

One cloudy Saturday in January I wandered through the HUB with my three-year-old son. The SDS used to gather in the Music Room, and that day a group of despondent young people were complaining that apathy was so widespread that no one could radicalize Penn State students.

these demonstrations were mild.

The climax of Penn State student radicalism came in May 1970, after four antiwar demonstrators were shot and killed by National Guardsmen at Kent State University. By then young Americans nationwide were opposing the Vietnam War and Nixon's administration was invading Cambodia. Military conscription was a grim reality for most men once they graduated from college, and cynics scoffed that student demonstrators were mainly motivated by fear of the draft. Penn State students did not want to miss out on what was happening on other campuses, and protest meetings of both students and faculty proliferated. At an emergency meeting of the Faculty Senate, a majority voted to allow students to take either their seventh week course grades, as the spring term then lasted until early June, or to replace their regular courses with special workshops run by faculty or students and dealing with "relevant" topics.

I was then teaching courses on Africa and the modern Middle East. In the African



**CELEBRATE**  
**Diggin' in the Dirt**  
*Inspiration for Gardeners*

annuals 🌻 perennials 🌻 herbs 🌻 natives  
 vegetable seedlings 🌻 heirloom tomatoes  
 alpiners 🌻 hardy roses 🌻 backyard fruits  
 succulents 🌻 garden pots 🌻 statuary

**Open Daily**

7 Miles East of State College on Rt 322 ~ 466-3411 ~ [www.taitfarmfoods.com](http://www.taitfarmfoods.com)

THE WILLIAMSPORT

# GUARDIAN

North-central PA's newest alternative newspaper  
salutes the staff of Voices of Central PA  
for their inspiration and encouragement  
in our new endeavour.

Subscribe for just  
\$20 by mailing to:  
Williamsport Guardian  
P.O. Box 342,  
Williamsport, PA 17703

- Or -



Look for us in  
your favorite  
restaurant  
or store.

570-323-1917  
[williamsportguardian@yahoo.com](mailto:williamsportguardian@yahoo.com)  
[www.williamsportguardian.com](http://www.williamsportguardian.com)