

**University of Illinois Archives**  
**Voices of Illinois Oral History Project**  
**Interviewee: Vern Fein**  
**Interviewer: Alicia Hopkins, Student Life and Culture Archives**  
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**Alicia Hopkins: Today is Wednesday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018, and I'm Alicia Hopkins from the University of Illinois Archives, and I am here today at the Urbana Free Library with Vern Fein to talk with him about his experience as a student at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign during the 1960s.**

**First of all, thank you for talking with me today. So first, what years did you attend UIUC?**

Vern Fein: I was here from 1963 to 1970.

**AH: Alright, and how did you decide to attend U of I?**

VF: Well, long story short, I was in school in Florida, and I wanted to do my senior year at Rollins College in Florida, and then I was actually offered a scholarship at Emory University in Atlanta. But my dad wanted me back up here, so he told me I could go to any school I wanted to, but when the U of I accepted me, he changed his mind and said [unintelligible] pay that money so I came to the U of I for my master's degree.

**AH: Yeah, okay. And did you have any family members who also attended the University?**

VF: I have a brother who came here in, a couple of years after me, out of the Army. He was here for a few years. And I have a son, two sons and a daughter who both attended, and my wife. They all spent various parts of their education here, not all. [unintelligible]

**AH: Okay. What departments were you active in when you were a student here?**

VF: I was in the English, I came here with the intention of being, get a master's in American literature with the intention of getting a PhD in American literature, and then stuff happened. The riots happened, whatever you want to call it, and it derailed me.

**AH: Yes, [Laughs], where did you live on campus?**

VF: There were so many places, I can't tell you. In the counterculture, one of the earmarks was certainly not very much money, living hand to mouth, and also moving from place to place to

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<sup>1</sup> Transcriber's Note: Some "filler" words – "Um," "Mm hm," and others – were not included in this transcription. I endeavored to write a transcription as faithful as possible to the conversation between interviewer and interviewee. That said, there may be some errors, so anyone considering citing any part of this interview is encouraged to listen to the relevant part of the conversation and make their own determination of what was said.

place, depending on the circumstances. I probably was in [unintelligible] that period of time probably 15 different places.

**AH: Okay, yeah. What did a normal day look like for you on campus?**

VF: Well, of course, there's changes. When I first got here, I was a graduate student, a very scared graduate student. I remember I had by my first semester I had read every single book and assignment I was supposed to by Thanksgiving.

**AH: Oh wow.**

VF: In order to, including *The Marble Faun* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the worst books ever written. So I was a scared fanatic, but then, and I lived initially with an elderly woman over on Oak Street, just rented a room and boarded out with food. And then my brother came down, and that's when the apartment thing started happening, moved from place to place, never in dorms, always houses or rooms. Eventually, in the middle of, I'd say, about [19]67 to [19]69 we has a big commune over on Lincoln Avenue, which had about 13 rooms, and that was what actually became one of the centers of activity, because most, many of the people who were super active lived in that commune.

**AH: Oh, okay. Alright, and, so you were involved with *Walrus*, what positions did you hold within the newspaper?**

VF: I don't think that we had positions, I don't know, I might have been an editor. I wrote a lot of the copy for it.

**AH: Yeah. So to talk a little bit about the creation of the *Walrus*, where was it located and printed?**

VF: Okay, I think the *Geek* came first.

**AH: Okay.**

VF: I should say that. And my history's a little fuzzy here, I do need to ask you this question – are we going to go back into the involvement in the counterculture, anti-war, we're going to do that?

**AH: Yeah, yeah.**

VF: So, okay, this is a little bit of cart before the horse, but that's okay, because you can work it out. Actually, the *Geek* and the *Walrus* were the underground newspapers, our versions, which were all over the country, all the campuses had versions of them. And the *Geek* was named after the Bob Dylan song, do you know what a geek is? Yeah, and then the *Walrus* was from the Beatles song.

**AH: Okay.**

VF: So one [unintelligible] the other. Well we decided we needed to have an outlet for our point of view. And so we had our own little print shop, different writers, I was one of them, and photographers too. We just made a standard underground newspaper, and we sold it for a dime or a nickel, and I'd say they probably were distributed in the thousands at their height. And so they covered mostly political, there were some counterculture things, but political was the first phase. Counterculture was underneath that, the long hair, the dope, all the different values of the counterculture that were pretty antithetical to standard American values. And then when the political movement, the anti-war movement kind of petered out around 70, 71, then a lot of us shifted to more of an emphasis on the counterculture and building alternative communities, businesses, things like that. And so, but the time that the *Geek* and *Walrus* were there was a more political time. So we did a lot of political reporting on war research, demonstrations, racism, just all the topics, not so much the counterculture as it was the political stuff.

**AH: Right, so how did you become involved with political discourse and counterculture?**

VF: Well, I came here as a graduate student, I had no concept of it because it didn't exist. And I met a young woman, who I liked, who had gone on a peace caravan the summer before, and started talking to me about the Vietnam War. And because I liked her I listened. I remember I think I wasn't radically patriotic, but I remember thinking, well, I don't have any time for that. It's the government, like most people think, the war's gotta be right, they know what they're doing. Communism, I mean the communism thing, which we were brainwashed with the Cold War stuff. So then, I remember I was in a Old English class, and there was this very impressive couple named the Alexanders, who were vociferous about the war. And they started talking to me and challenging me and I was coming back with the standard communism stuff, and they said, "Well, will you read a book if we give it to you?" So, a combination of, the young woman's name was Paula, the combination of her kind of pushing me, going to some meetings, and then reading this book by a guy named Marvin Gettleman, which was a documentation of the U.S. involvement in the war, including, pretty much convincingly, that the Bay of Tonkin incident that happened in North Korea, where we claimed that a North Korean boat had fired on us as a pretext for Johnson opening the war. Which turned out to be false, and it still is false, it was a falsification. Just like the WMD with Bush with the Iraq things, it didn't exist. Same parallels. Anyways, I began to really be convinced, and then there's a little bit of a shift here. I'll try to make this not too long, but there was a young man who came here from California named Vic Burkey [sp?] and he was a biology student. He had been at Berkeley when Mario Savio, I don't know if you know who that is?

**AH: Yeah!**

VF: He jumped up on the car to stop them from arresting the communist speaker. And that was the first big student power protest, so Vic had been through that. He came out here and we found out through research, I don't know who, that there was a thing called the Clabaugh Act, Charles Clabaugh? And he had, like many, many of the very conservative senators after World War II, with what Russia did in Germany, enacted this act, no communist speakers on campus, no diversive, no communists. And so we found that out, it was a 1947 act, so we said, "This is

against free speech,” just like they did at Berkley, and we said we’re going to bring a Communist. No you can’t, blah blah blah. Long story short, we did. They wouldn’t give us [unintelligible] to the Union, they wouldn’t give us any power for microphones, so we just rented a generator and had our own microphone. Anyway, this guy from Chicago named Louis Dishkin came down as a member of the CP and he spoke to about 2000 people, illegally, on the Quad. It was a pretty big deal back then, I was with SDS then, and we co-sponsored. Anyway, he got up and just said, “I’m Communist, but I like the Cubs and I drink beer, I’m a regular guy. They should let me speak.” [unintelligible] ideas.

**AH: Yeah.**

VF: So, I’m jumping back again, kind of parallel with that, so that free speech movement got going, and we really had no place. So we started the Red Herring coffeehouse, it was just the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I spoke there. We started that, because it gave us a place, and they allowed us to use a room there besides the coffeehouse, to throw a mimeograph machine, do you know what that is?

**AH: It’s like a copy machine?**

VF: Yeah, a copy machine, that’s all we had. I mean we mimeographed, I’m not kidding you, eight to ten thousand a week, and we had an army of students who’d crank that thing till their arm fell off. Probably steal the paper, I don’t know, and staple it and then we would put it under the dorm rooms all over campus and fraternities and sororities. Eventually, we built it so we had more and more people coming and saying, you know this is wrong, free speech, how student movements go. So then, that ran its course, after we had the Communist guy speak. The same time, the war in Vietnam escalated, in 66 and 67, that’s when it became, our president began to send more troops, Johnson did, and it became more serious. Around the country, we were not a leader university, we were, we did some very big things, but we were more of followers [unintelligible] bigger places like Madison, Columbia, Berkeley, places like that. Anyway, so we went after that Communist speaker, I think that was in the spring, I don’t know, that summer, in the fall of 67, a group of us lead by Vic, Vic Berkey and myself and some others, we went to a SDS – Students for a Democratic Society – which, oh, okay, until that point it was a small group committed to ending the war in Vietnam, and I became president of that. And that went for a little while, but it was supplanted by SDS, because that was more radical. So we went to this really incredible conference in East Lansing, Michigan State, of the SDS. And it was like, I can’t tell you, here we were in school and our education was all happening outside of school. We went there and we had women’s liberation, ecology, and abortion rights, just a whole anti-war research. People from the galvanization of the New Left leadership – Tom Hayden, all those people, Carl Davidson, people like that, came in, Bernadine Dohrn, brilliant women and men, and they just educated us on this whole American history reality, the Native Americans, all the stuff that nobody had ever told us. I remember reading a book called... - am I going on too long?

**AH: No, you’re fine.**

VF: A book by a man named, a Newsweek reporter named John Gerassi called *The Great Fear in Latin America*. And it was just, it's like *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, you know that book? That was written by a UI professor, did you know that?

**AH: No, I didn't know that.**

VF: His name was, believe it or not, Dee Brown. Same as that famous basketball player. Anyway, his son Mitch was here, and he did a movie later. Anyway, so Dee Brown did *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, we started reading this stuff, we didn't know about Wounded Knee, we didn't know about them giving Native Americans smallpox blankets and wiping them out. So the same thing happened, I lost my train of thought but I'll get it back. Oh, Latin America, we found out what the CIA did, you know how they went and killed a lot of people, to fight Communism, they just took over. And what they really were doing was fronting for the United Fruit Company, all the American corporations, to make sure capitalism stayed and spread in those areas. Which is really been the main reason why our foreign policy always has been and always will be, unless we get some people in there that are better. [Chuckles.]

**AH: Yeah.**

VF: So anyway, I got into SDS and then SDS supplanted [unintelligible] the war. And that's when we began to do a lot of education, demonstrations, leading up to the Dow Chemical in 68, which was the first big action. So I'll stop there and let you ask.

**AH: So, with all of that, many people talk about a defining cultural moment in the 60s. Some that I've seen most commonly cited include the assassination of JFK in 1963 and when Bob Dylan went electric at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965. Do you think there was a defining moment for you?**

VF: I think the Kennedy assassination, in 63 when that happened, I was disturbed, but I wasn't political at all. I didn't see it as a political thing, all the rumors about Oswald, it was extremely disturbing. By the time that King was assassinated, and Bobby Kennedy in 68, then I was fully involved. So those were. I think the big defining moment for me was the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War. As the Civil Rights Movement, the Freedom Riders, I didn't go South but I did stuff locally, I was in marches and everything. We were, basically the right word is that we were being radicalized by the events that were happening, ok? And by the people that were associated and the material that began to come out, that explained things from a totally different point of view and called into account the falsification of history and called American foreign policy the imperialism that it was, Cuba was a huge thing. Castro took over because, of course, the one story was Communist terrible, and then what we found out was, history – Chairman Mao said a great thing in his Little Red Book, he said “Revolutions do not happen in a velvet box.” Things were messy. Castro was no great hero, and Che, they did a lot of bad stuff. But, what they did for the Cuban people, they were no more monsters than what we were doing to our own poor. You know what I'm saying? In fact, they did a huge amount of reform that really lifted the common people of Cuba to a much higher standard. What they didn't do that we liked, that they threw out the rich people that owned the sugar companies and the hotels and all that, they threw them out. That's the anti-Cuban faction in Florida, so hateful,

all based on the people that Castro threw out, because he was going to take the island for his people and not for the rich. So anyway, so all this stuff, all those events, the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, Cuba, Kennedy and King assassinations, Bobby Kennedy assassination, those were probably the pivotal events.

**AH: So while you were here Jack Peltason was serving as chancellor, what was your experience interacting with him and did you interact with any other notable administrators during your time?**

VF: Yes, I did react with Jack. I was not his most popular person. I confess now, as a changed person who has more of a spiritual view of life, that I probably wasn't very kind to him. We were arrogant, we thought we were right, and in many ways we were. But, I realized later that Jack Peltason, who just died, was a pretty liberal guy. But of course he was in charge of keeping the lid on us, and so I treated him with a great deal of disrespect. We had a huge, we went to him one time, I was in his office, we proposed that the University sanction the strike that we were going to call. And of course they wouldn't. I was, we said different words back then, I probably cussed him out, and I did, and we marched out and went to the back of the Auditorium before 10,000 people and declared the strike anyway. Which went on for about 3 months, or two months, and that was out of their control. So that was that. And then there was a man named Dean Miller, who was actually really a very honoring man to me, I did really well on my Master's thesis, he made a special, he went out of his way to tell me that and really tell me how well I did and thanked me. I really liked him, but when the movement started, he became an apologist, and I was in meetings with him and it was very hard for him that I attacked him and was being a bad guy and stuff like that. I got along with quite a few of them to a degree, because I always tried to keep the door open somewhat, but they were the enemy.

**AH: Did you have any involvement with Project 500, or the....?**

VF: Well, there was a fellow, I can't remember his name now, David Eisenman, who did that. There was a Black Student Alliance, parallel to the Vietnam movement was the Civil Rights Movement. The Black Student Union didn't want the white radicals too much involved, because they were fighting their own way, they didn't want a bunch of whites in there telling them what to do. They had a lot of mistrust for white society, hmm, I wonder why? Anyway, the point of the matter is that they were pushing [unintelligible] because the minority percentages were horrible. So David, with the administration, and it was really a heartfelt thing, they decided to just move heavily and bring 500 kids here, many of whom were not ready to go to the University. And so what they did was they brought them down in mass, and they brought them in, they brought them in a little late when school started. Quite a number of them, it was just logistics, it wasn't intentional, but they didn't have rooms for them. They put them in hallways in the Union, and some of the young black kids, "You're treating us second class, again," and they had some leaders that blew up and started demanding things. They took over the South Lounge of the Union, I was there and I spoke, I was one of the people that spoke against the University, what they did. And the response of the University, it was interesting, because I saw a number of articles about it, around this 1968 forum, and they missed this, because the thing that happened, it was kind of reconciled eventually, but the University's response after a couple days, was to literally back up trucks and put all the black kids in the trucks, take them to the football

stadium and fingerprint them, which was terrible. It was an idealistic, well-conceived thing that was handled very poorly. So, yeah, I was basically involved in everything. If it was around, we did it.

**AH: Were you also involved in draft protests on campus?**

VF: Yeah, but not, there was a fellow named Steve Schmidt and a guy named Ron Lucas, they eventually went to jail for that. I helped actually get Steve out of jail by doing some sleuthing for his lawyer. I was older, and because of that the draft ran out on me, but I burned my draft card. I went to the Pentagon march in 68, it was one of the most amazing things, it was so big, that it took five hours for the end of the line to move out into the Pentagon area. We went out in that field, and the soldiers were on the walls, we started bonfires and everybody, a lot of people burned their draft cards, it was insane. We're seeing some of that with the Florida demonstrations and Occupy, some of that is happening now, but that was almost brand new, it had never been done on that scale. Anything there was, we brought people to speak, David Harris, who was married to Joan Baez, just putting out her last album a couple days ago, she's a year older than me, that blows my mind. When there we military, ROTC, we had ROTC demonstrations, when there was military enlistment we protested there, we passed out leaflets to tell people, "Don't sign up for this horrible war." Every level that we could protest, the big area was the military research, I don't know if you know, but Agent Orange was developed on this campus?

**AH: Yes, yes, I do know that.**

VF: And although I felt bad because I wrote a big article for the *Geek* about it, and exposed that professor, he was an anti-war guy, and I felt terrible about it, he was really upset because he sold it to the DOD. They turned it, they used, it was just a defoliant – he didn't make it for Vietnam. Our point was, "Hey, you do this research and you [unintelligible] the DOD they'll take it like they did with napalm, [unintelligible] bombs and all that other stuff."

**AH: So, this question comes towards the end of your time at the University, as students across the country planned a strike for May of 1970, it was the same month as the deadly protest at Kent State University and Jackson State College, did you or do you now feel that the environment on campus changed following the student deaths at both of those universities?**

VF: Actually, on March 2<sup>nd</sup> of that year, was a demonstration against the General Electric company at the Engineering Building, and that was really violent. That's what [unintelligible] to do the strike, so it was actually after that in April, that I met with Peltason, we did, and called a strike. So we had a strike going from April all the way up until and after Kent State. And what happened was, we did it, we just asked teachers in classes not to do their regular stuff. Because it was spring, there were dozens of classes that met on the Quad, and I remember I did one on Cuba, other people, we just didn't do business as usual. Quite a few professors joined us. I would say there were probably 1,000 kids, there were several thousand that protested in that way, and of course the University was freaking out because the right-wingers in the state legislature were saying, "Get rid of [unintelligible], cut their heads off," and they just couldn't do that.

Anyway, that whole strike atmosphere, milling around, happened from the first week of April through the Jackson State, Kent State. Truth to tell, when the Jackson State black kids got killed, there wasn't riots. It was when the white kids got killed. That happened. When Kent State happened, it blew. That's when two things happened. One was, of course, that triggered enormous emotion, and the second thing was when SDS had been taken over by the Weathermen faction, they were the very radical faction. I was there when that happened, when they literally went on stage with the Black Panthers with guns and relieved the leadership of SDS, the more liberal leadership, the more peace-oriented leadership of their duties and put in Bernadine Dohrn and those people into power. What their slogan became was, "Bring the war home." And what they said was if Nixon is going to bomb, these terrible people, the damage to Vietnam, you could go on for years about that, it's terrible. But we said if he's going to do that kind of stuff, then we're going to destroy property, then stuff like that. America's going to pay for this war too, we're going to feel the pain. So what they did, [unintelligible] a big rally in the Assembly Hall, in the Auditorium, actually the sister of the guy that started Garcia's Pizza was very radical. He wasn't, Ralph was [unintelligible.] She was on the stage and we were all meeting, and she ran to the front, she was a little bitty thing, she put her fist in the air and she says, "To the streets!" And then everybody poured out of there, we just started rioting. Night after night we were wandering, breaking windows, trashed the telephone company building, went down Green Street, broke all the windows, stole books. A lot of things that I was not happy about, they were not politically motivated. But when you got a riot, you got a riot. And people, said, "Oh that's terrible, you took all the bikes out of Austin's Bicycle Shop, that's terrible." I said, yeah, "And today, Nixon bombed six villages and killed a bunch of children, which is bad." You know?

**AH: Right. Yes.**

VF: That was their mentality. It's a mob mentality that cannot sustain, but it made a huge impact. And of course, it just kept going on. Columbia graduation was cancelled, there were just, I mean, literally hundreds. The National Guard came in, we played a game with them, we did this on purpose, where they would come in and they would set up and everything and we would be doing all this stuff. As soon as they came in and got all set up, we would go quiet on purpose. And then they would pull out, and then the day after they were out, we would start doing it again and bring them back. And it was costing the state all kinds of money. That was just, that kind of a protest guerilla tactic. And it was just great chaos, and I remember, I brought the film, somebody made a hasty film about Kent State and I brought it to the Union. One of the things I did was I brought a lot of movies to raise money, and had bands, I was the first one to ever to give REO Speedwagon a gig, which was great. Anyway.

**AH: Yeah! [laughs] It worked out well for both of you then.**

VF: Better for them, anyway, they're rich. We raised money to pay for a lot of these things that we did, anyway, so we brought this film on Kent State, and it was in the Union, the line was, it was the ABC rooms, the line was out the door and practically around the Union. And then in the fall we brought it back, and there were like maybe 20 people, most of them were Chinese kids. Because the war, Nixon did Vietnamization, and the draft thing changed the lottery. The kids went home and their parents said it's one thing to mess around, now they're shooting people,



you'd better stop. And I think it scared people. The great majority, always in a movement there's way more followers than leaders. It kind of, I guess I answered that.

**AH: If we look a little more closely at the *Walrus*, or *Geek* first, correct?**

VF: The *Geek* first, then the *Walrus*.

**AH: How did both of those underground newspapers come about within?**

VF: I have no, I did not start them, I worked on them prominently. I don't know who actually did them. I know this Joe Hardin [sp?] guy was one of the leaders. He said that we used, we laid out the *Walrus*, it may have been the *Geek* too, he laid it out in the Red Herring. We were able to do the layout and the printing. We got our own printing press in a little building over on Main Street, and we just printed, we were able to print pretty high-quality stuff and we funded that with the money from the movies and people would just contribute. It started probably because someone got the idea from another campus, because underground newspapers were everywhere. Every campus in this country that had any kind of political counterculture movement started an underground paper. Right before I kind of moved out of this whole thing I went to a conference at Cornell University in New York, and met with some people about trying to start a national co-op newspaper. But then things kind of fell apart pretty quickly with that, people just kind of went on their way, and there really wasn't, the base kind of disappeared, kind of went back in society. There's millions and millions of people who were in the counterculture, smoked dope or had long hair, had different attitudes, basically the people who elected Obama. That's what happened. The people from the 60s came together and elected Obama. And then that surprise, the scourge from wherever he's from, came out of the woodwork, I don't think anyone believed that that could happen. Many of us did not believe that someone that far away from Obama, I mean you talk about the pendulum swinging, you couldn't have two human beings on this Earth that far apart in values, intelligence, values, and morals, on every level. It was just like a, sea change is too small of a word. And now it's going to be interesting to see, historically, to what degree the pendulum, it will swing back, how far it swings.

**AH: Right, yeah, and how soon.**

VF: So when we did that, we just wanted to get our word out. When I look [unintelligible], I'll probably remember more, but I think there was initially a great more emphasis on the political things than the counterculture things, so the counterculture thing was kind of [unintelligible] underneath the political stuff, the Civil Rights, and the anti-war. Until, from 66,67 till 70, those three years, it was virtually, mostly political, with the counterculture thing just, I mean, you grew your hair, you smoked dope, or whatever.

**AH: Was there a particular event that led you to want to become active in underground newspapers, or was that just a culmination?**

VF: What basically happened was that it became my job. I was a graduate student, I finished all of my coursework, my language and all of my prelims when I was 25 years old, no, 24, I could have finished my thesis when I was 25. I got so involved, I lost interest. So I literally went from

having everything done to never picking the thesis topic till 1970 when they demanded it, and then that's when I left. And then I got hired by Parkland College, and then I got let go by them, and I had to [unintelligible] lawsuit against them, but that's another story. Anyway, so the point is, for five years, I think a lot of us in graduate school, just like the GEO strike, they're doing their job, but you have time when you're a student, and I think we were pretty experienced in leading this kind of stuff, we learned more and more about the tricks of dealing with the administration how to do your thing. So basically what I did was teach, I was a teaching assistant in rhetoric, I had rhetoric classes for five years, that's how I made my money, ok? All the rest of the time I was organizing. What I mean by organizing, whether it was a protest, doing the underground newspaper, one of the things I got laughed at was, if you were in the Union between 67 and 70, almost every single week you would see these colored folders, 8.5x11. Which by the way it's sad I don't have them, some of the greatest original psychedelic art you'd ever see. Were put on the tables, and I was one of the people, and I'd get other of the students to pass them around, those were movies, everything from Flash Gordon to Charlie Chaplin to political stuff and underground films, we brought in. And then we'd raise, we'd have the ABC rooms, or McKinley over here, or the Red Herring, and people would bring us money. And that's how the movement financed itself, it was like fulltime.

**AH: You might be in luck, I think the Archives actually has some of the artwork, and advertisements and things and that kind of stuff, in different record series.**

VF: Good, good, cool.

**AH: Can you talk a little bit about your various roles at the newspaper, and how you went about writing and that kind of stuff?**

VF: I really didn't have a role, I can't remember, but I'm sure we had quasi-editorial [unintelligible], we were probably like seat of our pants at the deadlines, stuff like that. And so if something popped up, I'd say, "I'll write a story." A couple times I remember writing almost all the stories, because I was a writer, I was an English major, and other people at different times. If someone, a young woman or a young man, said, "You know, I'll research this or write about this," maybe about the Thimble and Threads co-op store starting, or the record store, or maybe about military research. I can actually remember, it was pretty much seat of the pants, but for a couple years, we got em out pretty regularly. We sold or gave thousands of them, they were very popular, everybody who was cool, whatever that means, read them. So again, just like what was happening was a movement was starting, with, I'll say this. The first anti-war demonstration I ever, there were 12 of us, and we had some posterboard with some magic marker on it, and it all dripped. And we were walking around and there were fraternity guys spitting on us. And then within a year and half we had over 9,000 marching in the moratorium on the Quad. All these activities, the *Walrus*, the *Geek*, the demonstrations, the meetings, the speaking – I spoke in probably 200 classes, fraternities, sororities. That's how I met my wife. Anyway, the truth of the matter is, is that it was just a constant building of a movement, getting information out and winning people over. You know, sorority girls began to buy army clothes, it was all, the minimal cultural level all through the hard line, [unintelligible] people who wanted to blow things up. I won't talk too much about that. We had meetings where people wanted to blow up power plants, things like that in the area. We had people, and then of course, the right wing, we

all of us got letters from the right wing saying, “The crosshairs are on your neck.” Then the demonstrations, the big trials that we had here, I went to two of those and didn’t get thrown out, I’ll never know why. And the police people, arrested some people, beaten and hurt, I had friends that were hurt really badly. I went to the Democratic National Convention, that was huge, Mayor Daley. It was just crazy. When I looked back, later on when I was older I thought about it, it was only like three or four years. It seemed like your whole life was compacted in three or four years, it’s like, it seemed like your whole life was compacted into three or four years, compared to the rest of your life. It was so intense.

**AH: Did you guys have, not necessarily assigned regular writers, could anyone come in and write?**

VF: I will say this, without a doubt, from the deciding the articles to writing them to the layout to the printing, it was pretty much seat of the pants. There were key people, like this Joe Hardin, he knew how to do layouts. There was a guy named Frank Houston, we called him “Crazy Frank,” he loved, he would sleep by his printer. He’d stay up all night and print them out. There were people that just had different roles that they took themselves and felt comfortable with.

**AH: You talked a little bit about artwork, and I noticed as I was looking through various issues of the *Walrus*, just how much artwork is within all of them and a lot of it seems hand-done and drawn. What was the selection process like for the artwork?**

VF: There was a guy named Bill Shepard [sp?] who did a lot of the artwork for the posters. Here’s what the thing was, like anything else. If you had a particular talent and you were in it, and people said, “We need this,” people would do it. It wasn’t formally organized, we worked out of the Union offices sometimes, we worked out of the Red Herring, in many ways it was youthful energy that made things happen at an incredible scale like this. Smile Politely, way more organized than anything we ever did.

**AH: Yeah, yeah. What were some of your favorite articles if you remember any that were published?**

VF: I can’t remember. I know the one I had the most angst about was the one that I wrote about the war research with the Agent Orange, because the professor was so hurt, he was so upset at me. Because I exposed him, and people came down on him, and I tried to say that this guy is cool, he’s anti-war, it’s not his fault, but all people read was that he started something, so that was, there was, it was an ugly time, in the sense that people were at each other’s, families were fighting all over the country at the dinner table. It was basically a youth rebellion, as part of this, but it was not so much the cultural stuff, it was also the political stuff.

**AH: And then, I saw in a volume from 1968 that you were listed as a contact for dorm organizing. Could you talk a little bit about what dorm organizing is or was?**

VF: Very simply. When we did those newsletters, all it means is that we distributed newsletters and we would speak in the dorms, wherever we were invited. So it wasn’t real formal, there was a lot of seat of your pants, as I keep saying, but it was high energy, and there was a zillion

invitations. I couldn't almost keep up with how many classes I spoke to, and sororities and fraternities. Not only me, other people too. I became, I had about a 45-minute anti-Vietnam War rap that I thought was really good [chuckles]. And when I was done with the talk, there wasn't anybody left in the room that was for the war. I know that, I could feel it.

**AH: Yeah, yeah. Something that I noticed as I was going through the editions of *Walrus* is that a lot of them have a space, a blank space that had a sentence or two in them about how that space was purposefully left blank for the administration if they were interested in...**

VF: No, I don't remember that.

**AH: ... in, putting in something that was deemed rational or...?**

VF: Probably there were some egalitarian people, I don't, they probably never did it.

**AH: [Laughs] Not that I could see.**

VF: It sounds like just trying to be fair, I don't remember that actually.

**AH: Were you also involved with any other newspapers aside from *Geek* and *Walrus*?**

VF: No, they're pretty much it. Well, no, actually I wrote a column for the *DI*, for a long time, until I got thrown out of it because I wrote an article on, did you ever hear of Frances Moore Lappe's book *The Diet for a Small Planet*? You know? About the way [unintelligible] attacked the use of beef? I wrote a review of that book, and I had an [unintelligible] professor at the University demand a column, just go crazy, go crazy. Cause he said "Now you've let the Communists that are attacking beef, beef is American, you know, all this." I may have just stopped [unintelligible], I wrote a column, there are probably back archives somewhere, I wrote columns for about a year. Interestingly, my son Seth, he wrote a column for the *Buzz* for a long time. So yeah, that was, I did that.

**AH: So in a similar vein, many editions of *Walrus* featured movie and music reviews.**

VF: Yeah, I wrote some of those.

**AH: Some of them that I saw included *Easy Rider* and Janis Joplin and Big Brother and the Holding Company's *Cheap Thrills*, are there any films or albums that were particularly notable for you at the time?**

VF: There were two, I'm going to name two films, well, *The Graduate* was a big deal in terms of counterculture. There was a film called *Z*, do you remember that?

**AH: I've heard of it.**

VF: It's about the Greek Revolution. We showed that, and that was really a radicalizing thing. In fact, the ambassador to Greece during that time was a U of I Alum, and his picture on the Union wall, and somehow it disappeared. I won't say, I won't say what happened to it.

**AH: [Laughs] It went missing.**

VF: It went missing. Anyway, the other thing was, one of the most significant, and it's really, really ironic, boy I'll tell you, you talk about layers of your life where you think back and realize how much you can change. But, on the night of March 1<sup>st</sup>, in 1970, which is the night before the GE demonstration, we showed, they showed a film called *The Battle of Algiers*, and in it, it's just an incredibly powerful, moving movie, about the Algerian people who were basically crushed by the French imperialists, and they rebelled against them. The first thing it shows in the beginning were how the French were jailing them and killing them, just doing all this horrible stuff. Well, the retaliation from the Algerians, like Vietnam, was guerilla warfare – women would put bombs in shopping bags and go in and blow [unintelligible] up in restaurants, terrorism, well, what we call terrorism now. But we identified and sided with that. Because the treatment of the, it was war, and the treatment of the Algerians by the French was so horrific, that this was the only way they had of fighting back. Just like in Vietnam, the Vietnamese, Viet Cong was known to be so vicious in their booby traps and all that stuff. They were fighting for their country and their life. I'm not, I'm not completely a pacifist, but I'm certainly not for torturing, and I hate war, and I've written a million poems about being anti-war. But I'm just saying, in the context of that historical reality, you understand, that's why, for example, even though ISIS and them are terrible, and the terrorist [unintelligible], I could never endorse that. I understand why they do that, basically, I don't want to go too long into this. If you study the involvement of the United States with Iraq and the Middle East, you understand that we had a great deal to do with the rise of terrorism. Because what we did to their people was awful, we supported the Shah of Iran who was a horrible person, and who the people of Iran hated until they threw him out. And the Khomeini came in, and we said "He's Muslim, Khomeini, he's horrible, terrible." But we never said that the Shah was terrible, what he was doing. I was with a young man [unintelligible], whose brother was hanged by the Shah, and he was weeping and telling me the story. So the point is, there's two sides, not ever affirming or endorsing that kind of terrorism, to blow innocent people up, because it could be me. But, understanding that history doesn't come out of a vacuum, these people aren't just evil people, [unintelligible], no, their families were destroyed, unbelievable oppression was done to them by governments that we supported, and they attacked back, and then we wonder why. But, you know, that is the level of history that most American people can't even begin to understand. Then you have the things like 9/11, and then it's so horrible that they can't see that, four million people killed in Vietnam, Vietnamese people, vs. the Twin Towers, which is worse? We would say, "The only thing that's bad is what they did to the Twin Towers," no!, but we can't say that.

**AH: No, you're fine, you're fine, this is what we want. So, a little bit in the same culture, in the vein as pop culture, a variety of artists and groups and things came to campus. Jefferson Airplane, Judy Collins, Richie Havens, a number of larger and smaller groups.**

VF: REO Speedwagon.

**AH: Yeah! [Laughs] Did you have any, what concerts did you attend if you have any memories [unintelligible].**

VF: I loved to listen to music, but concerts cost money and we didn't have any money. I didn't get to go to those too much. I didn't go to Woodstock. I was a little bit different than some of the people who [unintelligible] of us that were the radical political leadership. I was in that, I wanted to do the political stuff. Counterculture, to me, in fact, we had some internal battles, there was a period of time when the counterculture actually, for the political people, became counterproductive. We said, "You people just want to sleep with each other and smoke dope and wear beads and you won't come to protests. You won't risk anything. We're trying to change this country to be a more just country, we're not interested in just you getting your chance to eat vegetarian or whatever." It was kind of a split, and there were some bad feelings, personal bad feelings that happened, especially as the political movement began to wane and the counterculture began to rise. Here's the thing. I went to an incredible seminar, so much history, in D.C., with Berkeley, we went there and we had, it was a debate between Dick Gregory, who was this incredibly radical Black comedian, he's dead now. Not only was he funny, but just radical to the core. And he was debating Timothy O'Leary [Timothy Leary], you know, trip, tune in, drop out. And Gregory was saying, "Hey man, this country, racism, horrible things are happening to people, and we have to, what you're saying is smoke dope and forget about it." And that's what he was saying. There was a real split there, and people started dropping acid. Then it was groovy, cool, you know? So there was a thing. So for me, although I like the music, and I listen to it, we listened to a lot of it, to me, but mostly it was like, to me, background stuff and underpinned the fun part of our life. But it took away, to a degree, from some of the radical activities. Whereas other people would say, "The music, man, that's cool, the Beatles are cool." The Beatles came out with their, they had one song called "Revolution," where they kind of were, they said something against revolution, a lot of the political people said, "We don't like the Beatles." But it didn't work.

**AH: [Laughs] They seem to have staying power.**

VF: So then I think that's a good answer.

**AH: Do you remember the first protest or sit-in that you participated in?**

VF: Yeah. That was the little one I told, where there were 12 of us behind the union, we were just walking. Although, no, no, actually, no, that was the first anti-war one. It's fuzzy, now, early on I went on some marches through the community about civil rights, I did that. And then, of course, bringing the Communist speaker, that was, for the white movement, that was the first big event was that Communist speaker who came and 2,000 people. All suddenly realized we can actually get students to come to our stuff. And then we were just relentless. And that transformed into, then the big one was the Dow Chemical, the first big one was the Dow Chemical where we sat-in and blocked the doorway and the police came and all that. And that was happening all over the country. And then the next big one was the General Electric, I told you, in the engineering building, club swinging. I got sprayed in the face by a graduate student with a fire extinguisher, I thought it wrecked my lungs, it was, nothing happened but it was really scary. And then, of course, the strike and all the riots in May of that year. So, the Dow

Chemical, the General Electric, and the Communist speaker, those three things were the main ones.

**AH: Yeah, yeah. Can you talk about...**

VF: And the moratorium. Now, the moratorium was the last gasp of the peaceniks. They said, you know, "Give peace a chance, let's not do any damage, let's not sit-in," a real schism there too. So there was this huge moratorium, 9000 people, millions across the country, businesses closed. And Nixon's response was to invade Cambodia, and drop bombs on Hanoi. And that's when the Weathermen took over and said, "Bring the war home, no more peace stuff, they're not peaceful, they're not going to listen to this, they don't care. We have to make it painful for them." So that was a real change of tactics.

**AH: Yeah. Can you talk about the Dow Chemical sit-in and the story behind it?**

VF: Yeah, well, you know, I was one of the organizers. What we found out, in our research, was that Dow was making napalm, if you know what napalm is...

**AH: Yes.**

VF: And that picture of that little girl, the poster, running down the, that naked girl running down the highway, the little girl, was terrible. So anyway, we knew that was bad, just like with General Electric, I think, oh, and Honeywell was doing the guava bombs. You know what the guava bombs are?

**AH: I don't think so.**

VF: Guava bombs, napalm, it would be a race between napalm and guava bombs for being [unintelligible]. Guava bombs were anti-personnel bombs, they could not do much damage to buildings, only to people. They would be dropped, and they would explode, and they would send shards of shrapnel into civilians, and, I mean, little kids would have their whole bodies cut up. Doctors would have to get them out. And then, if that weren't bad enough, they changed to make the shrapnel white plastic, so they couldn't find it with X-rays. So these children would get the shrapnel in their bodies and they would just die.

**AH: Oh, my.**

VF: Infections and pain. It's like something out of Mengele from the Nazis, and we knew that, ok? So we decided, Dow's coming here, they're doing their interviews as usual, we're saying no, as you make napalm, General Electric, we're saying no, because you make guava bombs. What we did is we didn't tell anybody. It was in Noyes Lab over there, we just walked in, I think it was about 200 of us. We just blocked the doorway. Well, they came around, threatened us, did all the stuff. We said, "You know, arrest us, do whatever you want." Because this was happening everywhere. Madison had had one about two weeks before that got really violent with a lot of police hitting kids, huge arrests. So the U of I decided to go low and just, finally, they gave in to [unintelligible] demands to do no discipline if we would leave. But we stopped

Dow from coming here, and they knew, because we had the schedule, they stopped bringing [unintelligible]. So there was some rumors that they did them late at night in secret ways, and maybe they did. But the point is, whenever we knew that, we'd say, "If you bring them, we're going to take the building again so you might as well not." So in that case, what happened was me and some of the leaders were called in on trial, you know, and I went to the trial and spoke and nothing happened. And then the second one they did, I don't know, I guess that was after General Electric, this guy named Jenner, who was the guy that lead the impeachment of Nixon, he was the head, the big deal guy, who came in and I refused to go. I just said, "I'm not going to dignify this with my presence, because you're going to throw me out anyway, and I'm not, to me, this is a kangaroo court, so forget it." And they didn't throw me out [unintelligible]. Tell me that question again?

**AH: Yeah, just the history of the Dow Chemical protest.**

VF: So that was the Dow, we got the Dow, yeah.

**AH: And then, with GE, with the Dow protest, it was that they were coming to campus and doing interviews. What movement from GE prompted the protest response on campus?**

VF: It was the fact that they were heavily tied-in to making all kinds of military weapons. The whole idea of military research, military making weapons, whatever company that we identified, the ones – Dow, General Electric, Texas Instruments, and Honeywell – were, I think, four, there were others, but those are four I remember. We also had – a little side, this is a good thing for you to know about – they were going to bring ILLIAC IV here, it was a giant computer, the computer people were crazy about it. We wrote a pamphlet, actually, I don't know, I think Vic Berkey, he was a scientist, he wrote the pamphlet, we passed that over campus, saying "Don't bring it here, because they're going to use it for the military," the computer people were so mad at us. So what happened was the people, the Army people came into to U of I and said, "We're putting it in Stone Mountain, Georgia, because we are afraid that they'll try and destroy it here." And we might have! [Laughs] But the truth is, that was a huge, and boy, there are, over the years I've run into people who are still angry because they said, "You screwed up a major educational opportunity," and I said, "Yeah, I'm sure they used it for the war in Stone Mountain, Georgia, but it didn't have to be in my backyard." We were having no truck with that at all. So you know, again, was it completely rational, was it exactly the right thing, you know, it depends on your values.

**AH: Yeah, yeah.**

VF: Was, did GE have a direct tie with their research that was being done on campus? No, I think GE, I'd have to look, I think GE more just made military weapons and made weaponry. They were one of the ones that were identified as heavy into helping the military.

**AH: And something else I saw as I was going through the *Walrus*...**

VF: You've done a very good job of getting this organized.



**AH: Well, thank you! ... was on the back of one of the issues a list of, were there seven names, maybe nine names, of people who had signed up for interviews with Dow Chemical just before the protest, on just the whole back of the newspaper, which I thought was an interesting and strategic placing and protest.**

VF: Yeah, yeah, so people know who they, yeah. I mean, we did, like I said, it was a lot of seat-of-your-pants. We were really energetic, and we're not dumb, we learned from other places, this is happening. We went to SDS conventions, I went to two or three, we were taught how to do propaganda and do your thing. There was just tons of material, so, one thing, you expose people and stuff like that.

**AH: And what student groups were you involved in outside of, you said, SDS and then also Students for Free Speech...**

VF: It would be the free speech movement, that would be first, and then I became president of the Committee to End the War in Vietnam, then I became the president of SDS. Mostly I became the president because I was a good, I ran meetings well, and people liked me in that position. It wasn't because I was doing significantly more. I just, you know. And there were some people who wouldn't do the SDS because they were afraid, they were afraid of what would happen. I was [unintelligible], if I really thought about it, I probably wouldn't have [unintelligible]. We were just so into it, I don't know how to explain it, it was like, it took over our life. I put my life on hold. I was going to be a literature professor, and I thought I would have been a good one, I still love literature, I write a lot of poetry and stuff. But, you know, for a while, we thought there was going to be, this sounds really naïve, we thought there was going to be a revolution, we thought in the revolution we would have different jobs. I've always made a joke, my friends, they always laugh, I said, "I was going to be the Commissar of the Midwest but we lost." [Laughs]

**AH: [Laughs] After SDS, were you involved in any other organizations?**

VF: Well, the SDS was the end.

**AH: Was the end, okay.**

VF: Then, well, when the anti-war movement went out, this is where I give you my brother, he'll tell you a great deal more about the formation of the counterculture. As this coterie of people began to form, that were the movement, I would say at our strongest, 400, with maybe less than 100 core. Those were the people that, you know, really began to identify with the [unintelligible] culture. And what we began to do, is start businesses in ways to continue our culture. I don't know if you've heard of Earthworks or Metamorphosis, which my brother started?

**AH: Mm hm!**

VF: And that was the food store where my wife worked in, my brother and sister-in-law did Metamorphosis, we did the print shop, we did the record service, just a lot of what they called co-op businesses and we worked in them, and we made minimum money so we could live. I

remember working in the restaurant and sorority girls would come [unintelligible] order this big-ass chef's salad, they'd eat like that much of it, and then go in the kitchen we'd scoop some on our hand and eat the rest, that's how we ate. We didn't care about that. So, the point of the matter is that we created a network of self-sustaining businesses so that we could continue to live our lifestyle. And so when the anti, when I became involved, they had a community council, that met monthly, and what we did, completely illegal, we put cans, canisters, by all the registers in the businesses, and we asked for community tax. It was voluntary. So, in other words, if you went and bought seven dollars worth of cheese and vegetables, and you had, like they do the round-up at the co-op, we didn't do it formally on the machine, you know, it just said, "Hey, throw your spare change for the council," so, you know, all the people that shopped there did that. We, I think we raised at least \$1000.00 a month, and then we would have the meetings – is your time OK?

**AH: Yeah, I just wrote on myself, that's all. [Laughs]**

VF: We would have the meetings, I coordinated it, I was the chair, whatever, of that, and then we would make decisions about how to spend the money. Do we want to, people want to start, Thimble and Threads was a clothing store, they need two months rent to get started, we'd give the rent, ok? Or, we went to buy, we need to buy a potbelly stove for, I don't know, whatever. So probably over the, that lasted from about 70 to 73, I was involved, it went a little beyond that. We probably raised \$15,000 on that tax, to spend, to invest back in our community.

**AH: Right, yeah. And there was also a garage, right?**

VF: There was a garage, still actually, it's called People's Garage now, it's still over there, on, you know where the Fiesta is?

**AH: Yeah!**

VF: Right across the street, a little bit down, there's the People's Garage, it's not a radical garage. There was everything, there was a fish store, a tropical fish store, there was a bike shop that my other, my younger brother ran. You know, again, everybody took their skills and they opened up something that they could work in, so that they could make enough money to live a very low lifestyle. At the restaurant, we used to have a deal where we had brown rice and vegetables, always, always cooked, and if you came in and sit [unintelligible], "Brown Rice and Vegetables, 35 cents, but if you can't pay, you can eat anyway," so a lot of people ate rice and vegetables, and that was a meal.

**AH: Right, yeah. And there was a lot of advertising for that community within *Walrus* and I assume *Geek* as well.**

VF: Absolutely.

**AH: Backtracking a little bit, there were interviews with a variety of people within *Walrus* and *Geek* like Abbie Hoffman, did you ever interview anyone [unintelligible] like that?**

VF: I didn't myself, but I know he was around, we had. And some of those would be reprints, too, probably from other, we borrowed, we didn't worry about copyrights, if the Madison paper had an interview with Abbie Hoffman, we would just clip it out and paste it down and use it. So that's probably how that happened.

**AH: Okay, yeah.**

VF: We didn't have a whole, I once sat and drank beer with the Grateful Dead, you know, that was cool. And, you know, so yeah. I think probably those kinds of interviews we borrowed from other papers, and they borrowed from us.

**AH: Right, right. Yeah. And a little bit about the Red Herring, which recently celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Aside from the newspapers and organizations, what was your other experience with the Red Herring?**

VF: I was one of the founders, but I was not the main person. I helped paint it, and build it, and stuff like that, but my main interest in that. The University wouldn't let us use any facilities for our radicalism, especially when we started the free speech movement. So Channing-Murray, which was always... are we okay?

**AH: Yeah, just making sure it's still running.**

VF: Channing-Murray, which was always a very liberal form of Christianity, was very open to, as they still are, and they have been for years, Unitarian, so they allowed us to use their downstairs space, which was just a basement. And they allowed us to start the Red Herring coffeehouse, so we had a place, and the room just north of that was what we called the war room, where we had the mimeograph machine, that's where we pumped out all of those newsletters. But, you know, I remember there was a young woman named Laurie McCarthy, she's still around time, she painted the left wing of a butterfly on the wall. And I held the paint for her, you know, left wing. And then we had a big quote from I think Lenin on the back wall, and then we had a coffeehouse, so we had a place to hang out. That's where I, actually I introduced my brother to his wife, and then I was dating a young lady at that time, who, through her, I got an invitation to speak at her Jewish sorority, and in the audience was this young woman who's been my wife for 43 years. So, that's the way it [unintelligible].

**AH: Lots of connections!**

VF: So Red Herring, you know. So it was always over the years, it was a place where bands could play, people could speak, radical people could have meetings, so the Red Herring was basically the place. The guy who started it, his name is Phil [unintelligible], he's in Switzerland now, it was just a place to hang out. Until we, as we grew, then we took over the Union, we had so many people at the Union, that it was just almost like our headquarters, because we were able to commandeer a lot of stuff.

**AH: Are you still involved with the Red Herring at all?**

VF: No, no. They invited me, and I spoke, they brought me back to speak, and I read some poetry there, and then I spoke, I gave one of the keynote speeches about the anniversary, basically going over some of the history and how it got there. But anyway, with this Laurie McCarthy, her brother was a Secret Service agent, and he was guarding Reagan when he got shot, got shot at, her brother was shot in the arm, he lived. So [unintelligible], one family had a guy who was Secret Service for Reagan and the other one, Laurie, was painting left wing [unintelligible], same family.

**AH: Very different! So, could you talk a little bit about your careers after graduating, and how all of this impacted the rest of your life?**

VF: Okay, yeah, it had a huge impact. Like I say, it was a complete life-changing, not only for me, but for many people. Like I said, I could have finished my thesis, my PhD, at 25, which is very young. I moved through it very fast. But then I got involved in this, and I basically taught my TA classes, in fact, I was offered, after three years I was offered an honors seminar, and I called it Modern Revolutionary Thought. And I taught movement, and stuff, literature and political stuff in my rhetoric class. So anyway, I did that until 1970, and they said, "You need a thesis topic, and a first chapter this spring," and I said, "No, not doing it." I didn't know what I was doing, but, I had a friend whose mother was head of the English department at Parkland. So he talked to her, she was very liberal, I think you'll find this interesting, just the way things worked then. And she got me a job to teach two night classes in the fall, so I dropped out of school, I finished teaching that semester, and I thought, well, I got a job, again, it was all hand-to-mouth, I mean, two classes salary for, I don't know what their paid, but it was enough to live on, that's all I cared about. So the summer went by, and I went there in the fall when I was supposed to for the orientation. I walked in, and this guy came to me and he said, "Gee, I'm sorry, we tried to get a hold of you," [unintelligible] before cell phones, and he said, "But you know those classes, we didn't get enough signups, so they don't exist." Well, no job, you know, it was just terrible, I went home, that night I got a phone call from, I think the guy just retired, his name was Bill Aull [sp], he was [unintelligible] the English department, he called me up, he says, "I don't know why I'm calling you, I'm scared to death, but I feel I have to do this, I just can't rest without..." and I said, "What?" he said, "They lied to you. They offered me those classes," he said they had a, the Starkel Planetarium, he's dead now, he went to this [unintelligible] Louise, this liberal [unintelligible], "Get rid of him, he's not teaching here, he's coming here to disrupt Parkland College," ...

**AH: Oh my!**

VF: ... "and the war," which was the last thing on my mind. I mean, I would have done political stuff, but I wouldn't, the movement had waned. But anyway, he got rid of me. So, I went to a University law professor, and he hooked me up with the ACLU, and he got me a young ACLU lawyer for free, and we took them to court. And it was a three-day trial, in which I lost, this guy just painted me as the worst guy, the jury were all farmers, I didn't have a chance. But, I wound up with a hung, what is it called, a hung jury, because on the jury, they just select whoever, was the wife of a German professor here, and it went three days, for three days they tried to convince her to go against me, and she said, [unintelligible], she came in, I worked in a local Christian bookstore, and she came in an introduced herself, she said, "I want you to know, young man, I

didn't not vote against you because I believed in what you were doing, but my parents were leave Germany for the Nazis, and I told them, I told these people, never vote against someone for their politics, never going to discriminate because of what happened to my parents," and these farmers, they could not get her, and she [unintelligible], they hung the jury. And it was great.

**AH: [Laughs]. Yeah.**

VF: So then they came back to me, and they said, "Do you want a retrial," and I said, "No," and they gave me 75 dollars and that was it. So then I had other things to do, but so then I became a person of faith, and I worked at a Christian bookstore, and I began to work for churches, and I got a job at Cunningham Children's Home, where I taught, actually I taught 34 years before retirement and I still sub there, so I've been there for 40 years, and it was a great job. In the church, I don't know how much more you want of this, but...

**AH: No, go ahead.**

VF: I did a lot, when I got in the church, I helped start a church called New Covenant, which my brother goes to, and I'm not there now, but anyway they were very committed to the biblical call for mercy and justice, so they allowed me, on the staff, to do that kind of stuff. So I did a number of fundraising for famine, jobs programs, mental programs, all kinds of stuff. The biggest thing I did was I was the trigger person to start the Eastern Illinois Food Bank.

**AH: Okay!**

VF: So, that's still going, I just was over there the other day, because they still have me around, I think they're feeding like 12 million people, so that was ...

**AH: That's incredible.**

VF: I mean, getting meals for 12 million people a year, so, no, they distribute 12 million pounds, that's what it was. Anyway, the point is, I was active in the churches and a lot of environmental [unintelligible] working with black and white churches to do racial reconciliation. There's a little place, I was at the vineyard for a few years, there's a little ministry over there called the Hope Center, that I helped start and still volunteer in. I was one of the original board members of Salt and Light, you know, in fact, like I said, I left volunteer work there to come here. So that's how I sustained my activism, even though to make this short, the Christian faith, for a lot of good reasons, was not very popular among the counterculture and political people at all, because most of the churches came out conservatively for the war, although the initial anti-war movement came out of the more liberal churches. So there was a split like there was now, and, so you know, my involvement in the faith, my own belief in Christ, is based in my own view of the Bible, and then I took very seriously, when I read the Bible for the first time its got so much in it about helping the poor, it's just loaded, so I thought, you know, why, I mean, a lot of churches do, churches are very good at mercy stuff, they're not very good at justice. Some are, but most of them, when it gets justice, "Oh, that's political," which I think is wrong, but anyway, my wife and I, we, through the churches, we did a lot of outreach to people in need, and I'm still doing that. So that was kind of the carry-through of my beliefs.

**AH: Yeah, so you've also mentioned a couple of times that you write poetry. Is that something that was, you mentioned anti-war poetry specifically, is that something that was born out of your time as a student or did that come later?**

VF: I decided, that when I retired, I'd always wanted to write, and I did a lot of writing, but I never did any real fiction or formal, so I decided I was going to write some short stories, and I was going to write this book, that I told you I just finished about the counterculture and [unintelligible] Christians, and so I've done that now. So I wrote a couple short stories, but then I have a friend, who was, a long time friend, who got together, I don't know, I wrote this poem about my daughter, and then I wrote a two-line poem about fishing, and then, anyway, long story short, Frank said, "Well, send them in," so I remember, I'll just tell you this one thing, there was this one magazine, he says, "Well, send your poems in," and I had five poems, and they would take five poems, so I said, "Okay, I'm not sending a two-line poem in, man, they won't even thing I'm a real poet," no one writes two-line poetry, it was called "Fishing," a ridiculous little poem. He said, "No, send it in, send it in," so I sent it in, and a couple days later, and I get back from this lady, thrill of my life, she rejected the four poems, she said, "I love 'Fishing,'" she printed my two-line poem in a book, and I got bit. Now I published over 50 poems...

**AH: Oh, wow!**

VF: and I have a poetry group that I'm in, and some of my poetry is anti-war, some of my poetry is political, some of it. That is definitely influenced, some of it, I wrote a poem about a young woman, I won't go too long on this, who I found out, do you remember *Writer's Almanac*? Garrison Keillor, really sad, I'm glad that they busted him for what he did, he was sexually harassing, but it was a great site, I would read it every day, I got a lot of poem ideas, there was this young lady in 1938, when Roosevelt, two Roosevelts were at a whistle stop, the issue at the time was minimum wage, there was no minimum wage, and this young women, who has never been identified, came forward and gave him a letter saying, "I'm making four dollars a week, I'm dying, I can't make it," we girls, there's a lot of women, young women, that're just being used, terrible sweatshop, all this, please have minimum wage, and then evidently that influenced **him to kick in the minimum wage, so I wrote a poem about her. You know, stuff like that, I wanted to honor people, [unintelligible], loving poetry.**

**AH: So how often do you get to return to campus, cause you're still in town?**

VF: Not too much, I'll go to Strawberry Fields, which of course is a spinoff of my brother's restaurant, I'll go to the Courier, I [unintelligible] and his first wife, mostly hang out in Urbana, Campustown's hard to park, I got invited to this commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the South Lounge in the Union, this guy, named Mike [unintelligible] and I, were the ones that actually took that over, and started the forums there, out of the blue, as a place to speak out on the issues. It was nice to go back there, and history, you know.

**AH: Yeah. Have you stayed in the Champaign-Urbana area since you left U of I?**

VF: I've been in Urbana since, my wife and I got married in '74, and we've always lived in Urbana, and had a couple of houses now, we've been on Grange Drive since '82, probably die there.

**AH: Ok. [Laughs] How has campus changed since you were a student here?**

VF: Oh, it's, you know, it's not as political as it was, but that's not fair to say, because it was such a short time that it was political, it's built up, they've re-done it as far as restaurants. The biggest change has been, and I think it's petered out a little bit, but the biggest change was the downtown Champaign area, becoming a thing. My son, Seth, with the Smile Politely and the Pygmalion, had a lot of influence on that, a lot of the young people, they [unintelligible] others. Restaurants in this town used to completely suck, now tonight my friend and I are going to go over to that Creative Core, you know about that, that's opening, it's a new place that's opening. It's real healthy, Asian stuff, and they're doing a fundraiser for the Daily Bread soup kitchen, so we're going to go over there about 6:30 tonight. So there's just a lot of creative food, and the Krannert. I sat in the middle of Krannert when it was just a field, and read Elizabeth Barrett Browning poems to some young lady that I don't remember [unintelligible] [both laugh] a piece of broken brick and now it's Krannert. So that's been a marvelous thing, so culturally, this town has really grown, although it is still a Southern town, I coached Urbana girls' softball for nine years, and I loved it, and I actually started a girls' summer softball league that's still going, which I feel very proud of.

**AH: That's great!**

VF: Even though the teams were [unintelligible], nonetheless, but I got in with the local guys that were the fathers, and some of them are good friends, and I love em, and I really have great feelings for them, and we worked together and have a good time. But you know, they probably voted for Trump, and they're probably racist, I know they're racist, I had to actually confront them one time, say hey, "I know you guys love me, and everything, but you've got to understand I was a crazy radical, everybody knows I was a Communist," I said, "I'm a little sensitive about the race issue," so they respected me. But nonetheless, we're surrounded by [unintelligible].

**AH: It is a little bit of a blue bubble, but not, a very fragile bubble.**

VF: When you go to St. Joe and all of these places, they're really, definitely, Rodney Davis, anyway.

**AH: Alright, well, are there any other topics or questions or anything else I could have asked you?**

VF: Can you believe an old man like that could rattle on that much?

**AH: As you said, how much life did you fit into such a short time span?**

VF: Well, I've got a lot of energy, I'm 76 and I'm still going pretty strong and I feel very grateful because not everybody at my age, I've lost very good friends to cancer and to early

death, and other people are really sick, and we're getting older, and I don't know how long ago, my brother just had triple bypass, the one [unintelligible] interviewed, he's ok now, thankfully, so we're getting older, so I know my time on Earth isn't going to be that long, you can't do much about it, just try to live the best you can. I've seen, I think the statement I just want to make is I've seen, since the '60s, that what the '60s birthed was a new value system and a new political understanding, like I said it resulted in the election of Obama, it resulted in liberalization of abortion law, marijuana, the whole thing of lifestyle that part of our country has embraced, the role of women, everything. And then, but then, you are surprised, I have to say, I think all of us were stunned and still are, that, there was an underbelly of this country that was completely opposite, racist, anti-women, pro-gun, militaristic, capitalistic values, that were in spades and they came out of the woodwork and took the Presidency and the Congress, and so we are indeed in a Civil War and my hope is that there is enough influence from the '60s, and enough [unintelligible] the young people, to make it so when the next elections come, it'll be a rising up of that element and throw these people out, which, to use Trump's term, "Drain the swamp," as it now really is a swamp. And so, that's my hope, I hope to see that in my lifetime, I hope if he is reelected in 20, I don't know how long I'll live, but I'm not happy, I'm really, really unhappy with the terrible things they're doing to people and ironically, many of the people who are suffering the worst are the people that voted for him, because they [unintelligible]. They don't have a clue what he's doing to their healthcare, to their environment, to their jobs, to everything. And he's letting them have their guns. So anyway, I think I wore you out there.

**AH: No, you're fine, you're fine. So thank you very much for willing to meet with me today, I really appreciate it.**

VF: My brother will not be as long-winded.

**END**