A chaotic time

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MANKATO— It began the way a lot of great projects begin — with great minds wondering why the heck it hasn’t already been done.
The “it” in this case, is a written history of the turbulent times on campus during the Vietnam War. The “great minds” would be a collection of men who were on campus during the days when students marched, walked out of class, held vigils and blocked highways, all in an effort to get the grown-ups to listen. The key figure in all of it — and one of the first “grown-ups” to truly listen — was James Nickerson, who reigned as president of Mankato State College from 1966 to 1973. And it is Nickerson who led the effort to publish a history of what went on at one of the hottest spots of political unrest in Minnesota and the entire Midwest.

“It was just a group of us oldies meeting one day,” says Nickerson, who will turn 96 in December. “We decided somebody had to do something.”
The group quickly decided who should take the lead on the project. And Nickerson got right to work.

“Out of Chaos,” a collection of personal remembrances from about 50 people who lived through it, as well as section of Nickerson’s personal thoughts, is set to be published in September.

Campus climate, circa 1971
By the late 1960s and early 1970s, opposition to the war was well established across the country. But nowhere was the intensity as high as it was on college campuses. Some of that fervor resulted in violence, and at Kent State University in Ohio, four students were killed when the National Guard was called in to counter the mass of protesters.

Campuses across Minnesota saw turmoil as well, but Mankato State College was the regional hotbed of anti-war activism.

Students engaged in silent marches and candlelight vigils. They took over Old Main (the campus had yet to move uphill). They blocked Highway 169 and the Veterans Memorial Bridge. There were bomb threats, canceled classes, and days when there were more students protesting than sitting in lecture halls. They started up a group called Vets Against the War, which would eventually go national.
The upheaval reached a point when Nickerson had a choice to make. Just like Kent State, he could have called in the National Guard. The governor, he said, was ready to send troops. But Nickerson examined the situation. He realized there was tension, especially between the college kids and the local kids. So far, though, no one had been hurt. No one had been arrested. He wanted to keep it that way.

“These were our kids. They were not criminals,” he said. “They just wanted to talk. They wanted to talk to the town.”

Talking about revolution
Today, Nickerson lives just a few blocks away from the MSU campus, and about a mile from where all that action took place 30 years ago. Many who were around back in those days still live in town as well. And Nickerson gets together with old buddies regularly.

Guys such as Dave Boyce, Paul Hadley and Mark Halverson. H. Roger Smith, Don Strasser, John Hodowanic and Charlie Mundale. They get together and swap stories. And of course, they talk about the days when so much changed at MSU.
The group decided something should be done to document what it was like on campus back in the day. So they got together regularly and talked about the issues and what a possible book might look like. Eventually, they decided to solicit contributions from the people who lived through it.

Contributions
Nickerson and Co. contacted about 100 people and asked them to contribute to the book. Some submitted writings of personal recollection. Others contributed pages from diaries kept during the days when all the action was taking place. Others made long journeys to Mankato to conduct audio recordings of their
thoughts.
The result, Nickerson says, is an honest, wide-ranging look at how people viewed the events of those days. The contributions will show that some people agreed with the protesting students, while others were angry with their behavior and views on the war.
Dave Boyce’s contribution recalls a day of a student march that blocked traffic — traffic his family business needed.
“The young people succeeded in ‘shutting down’ the city,” Boyce’s essay reads. “Our place of business needed $300 income per day to break. Every other store had a like problem. We looked at the receipts for the day, found $26 there — a long way from breaking even. This brought action from the city merchants to enter into conversation with young people, and we shortly experienced a series of town meetings that persons from all sides of the issue attended to speak their thoughts and concerns. While there was still disagreement, people heard and considered other points of view and came to know one another.”
Faculty member Jerome Zuckerman’s contribution also recalled student behavior.
“At one time the students disrupted a Faculty Senate meeting marching in masks and carrying a black coffin that symbolized something like the death of education. Disruption seemed to be the order of the day; faculty members could never be certain that their classes wouldn’t be disrupted.”

Nickerson not done
He’s done with the book. The galleys are ready, facts have been checked, dedication (to his wife, Nita, who died several months ago,) has been decided ... Everything’s pretty much done. All that remains is to produce the actual bound versions and stack them up in the campus bookstore for purchase. He’ll also do a book signing when it comes out — “It’ll be a little surprising to see a man who it 96 trying to sign a book,” he says.
The book was written during a time of great political turmoil. And while Nickerson says he’s not trying to make a point about any current military conflicts, a clip from his introduction suggests he’s in full support of giving everyone their say.
“Parades, bands, flag wavers, protest marches and political rallies are here to stay,” he writes. “Let’s enjoy them, or at least hear what the opposition has to say. Violence and anger have no place in the demonstration. Both block any orderly progression toward accommodation of the difficulty.”
Nickerson is now busy completing his memoirs.

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Photos

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