Interview Transcript

Interviewee: William McSheehy
Interviewers: Brian Dusek and Michael Allen
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Abstract: William McSheehy was born and raised in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. He went to Saint Bernard's High School and graduated in 1966. From there he went to Fitchburg State College and graduated class of 1970. Bill’s family had a background of teaching so he pursued that career path as well. Bill describes how Fitchburg State College changed over the four years he was there. During the first two years, students were into the fraternity scene, but by the last two years had become more interested in protesting. He mentions an unpopular, “Love it or leave it” motto about all the protesting around America. Like most of the country’s youth, the Vietnam War and Kent State shooting affected Bill. He reflects on how music of the time period shaped and helped to stir the rebelliousness. More directly related to Fitchburg State College, he talks about his family’s relationship with then President James Hammond, and how it affected his protesting and behavior on campus. He also describes students’ day-to-day life and how strict the rules were regulating student behavior, as well as how the Free Speech case started and the students’ and President Hammond's reaction.

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BD: Could you describe a typical day of classes and social life?

WM: Do you want from the beginning? Because Fitchburg State was very different in 1966. From 1966 in the fall to 1967, the school was not the same as it was in ’68, ’69, and ’70. They were totally changed. When we started here in ’66 we wore chinos, oxford shirts, button down shirts, loafers. Everybody had that preppy kind of look. There was a lot of sorority and fraternity type of stuff going on, winter carnivals, ice sculptures. It was sort of that typical 50’s college thing. The sororities were having teas, little teas with the faculty. It was sort of parochial, I guess. And everybody here knew you, especially if you were a resident. If you were a commuter from Fitchburg, if they knew your parents or knew you, you really had to be on. They would tell your parents. And our grades would be sent home to our parents, we didn’t get them. You know, everything got mailed home. It was really like going to high school from high school for that first couple of years. And then the classes were, you know, you signed up you did arena scheduling. You’d go table to table and sign up for your classes. You could arrange your schedule so it wasn’t quite so restrictive as high school. You didn’t come at eight and leave at three. Sort of, but it was a little bit more regimented than it is today. And then, like I was telling you earlier, we had a commuter’s café and a commuter’s lounge. And everybody spent all their time in the lounge smoking cigarettes and playing whisk, because everybody smoked. Everybody smoked. Especially, well not everybody, I shouldn’t say that, but an awful lot of people smoked. You got out of high school and the first thing you did was buy a pack of cigarettes, and drink. And also it
was, you know, the first time a lot of us had ever drank anything. Because at that time a lot of high school kids didn’t drink a lot.

Then sophomore year the social piece would be that the sororities and fraternities would invite you to their parties and figure out who they wanted as members of their fraternities or sororities. That was a big thing on campus my freshman and sophomore year. And so a lot of the commuters went Mohawk, and the Fenwicks were fairly new, then there was the Cavaliers and the SO’s. Then the girls—the Flyers (?), the Neopsylons (?) were brand new. They weren’t national chapters. They were only at Fitchburg State, only on the Fitchburg State campus. And that became sort of how you had a social life. Dorm kids and commuters started to mingle during sophomore year. If you got asked to be part of a fraternity you went through pledging, which was two weeks of hell. Which would not be allowed anymore if it were going on today. It was hell, it really was. And all the paddling and all that stuff were tolerated. Down in the cellar some very strange stuff was going on. And then you had all these brothers who were sort of your social life. Every weekend you had parties, and it was fun. You had bands, but you still dressed up, you still wore a suit coat and tie, especially sophomore year. Then you’d have Halloween and everyone would dress up. It was still that innocent, and then junior year things started to change, not right away.

Things drastically changed in the spring of ’69 because of Kent State. (Note: Bill corrected himself after the interview and said that Kent State was in 1970.) When the kids got killed at Kent State that really resonated pretty much nationally. The big schools had already begun to become more radical, um, Harvard. You know, big schools. Then it started hitting here, started hitting home. More and more kids were becoming aware of what was going on in the world. We were pretty isolated. We didn’t talk about the Vietnam War, it wasn’t really on the radar even though people knew what was going on, and people were dying. It wasn’t really something that a lot of kids talked about freshman and sophomore year. We were too into college and drinking beer and having a good time. And all of a sudden it changed, it was a fast change. The way people dressed changed. It sort of moved fast into the whole hippy kind of thing. And a lot of people at school wouldn’t let us dress like that. They’d say, ‘I don’t want you in my class dressing like that.’ And it just became more and more militant, and we were like, we don’t care if you don’t want us to dress like that. And then the staff started to change. A lot of the old guard started to retire as they were hiring new people. They were becoming more identifiable. Especially English and history teachers, and there were some that were here for a long time too. They sort of were able to articulate a lot of things that the kids were having a hard time saying. Sometimes, even out in the apartments, the teachers would go out and talk with the kids about what was going on.

I honestly can’t remember if it was the spring of ’69 or the fall of ’69 that we had our first big demonstration here on the steps at Thompson Hall, and pretty much shut down the school. We planned this thing where everyone would walk out at a certain time, and surprisingly it worked. A majority of the kids did leave their classes. A lot of the professors left as well and came. At the time it was sort of this split between “love it or leave it” in America, which was if you didn’t love it, maybe you should just leave it. Then there was this other thing that was pretty much “just stop the Vietnam War, just stop this thing.” So then I remember we marched from Thompson Hall, I don’t remember if that was the first one, but that was huge. And of course, the Hammond building wasn’t there so you had Miller Hall and Thompson on one side, and I think a girl’s dormitory, then it was open to Pearl Street. And it was all full, totally, totally full with kids and staff. Then we had another meeting, another demonstration shortly after that where we had a
coffin and stuff, and I remember we marched all the way up to the upper common in Fitchburg. And we were told all this stuff, like put bandanas around our face in case we got gassed. You know, tear gas and stuff. We had people from UMASS and Harvard who showed up and got things even more organized with an activist group on campus.

So that was when people started to get more involved, more aware of what was going on in the country. Not so isolated on campus here anymore. Then when we came back in the fall of ’69 [1970], totally different school, just wasn’t even the same school at all. The fraternity life was over for most of us. We weren’t interested in that any longer, it was too isolating. I don’t remember doing anything my senior year with my fraternity. I was a Fenwick. Right at the beginning, I had to student teach at Edgerly, which is right behind Thompson Hall. And I remember that even there, there was a big demonstration right away. Even student teaching, we walked right out of the building. We left the building and came out. It became much more militant. We weren’t really being quite as polite any longer. We were all angry. They changed the draft to a lottery system. I forget when that was too, that might’ve been ’69. That was another big issue, because people recognized what was happening was the political powers to be were setting up a system where you got a high number you sort of lost interest and sort of were apathetic about what was going on because you didn’t have anything to worry about. But if you were a low number you were still in danger. Whereas before if you just signed up for the draft you didn’t know whether you were to be drafted or not, so everybody was militant. They thought by doing this the upper end would stop being quite so verbal about going into the military.

**BD:** Did you know anybody who got drafted?

**WM:** Oh, God, yeah. Actually, Celuzza, the owner of Slattery’s got drafted. One of the guys who was here, Jim Craigan got drafted. Yeah, quite a few. I personally didn’t know anyone who got drafted and went to Vietnam. One of my friends, Jim, actually, was on his way to Vietnam, got to California. He had finished basic training, did everything, they were sending him to Vietnam, and he got to California. And he was a blonde, blue-eyed, kind of good looking guy, and so they actually stopped him from getting on the plane, and said “no, not you. You’re going to be part of the honor guard in Heidelberg, Germany.” So he just went and was part of the honor guard, so he didn’t go. And there were a couple people surprisingly that quit school and joined the marines, and went off to Vietnam. That was surprising, we were all pretty shocked, why would you do that? But the people that got drafted that I knew, got drafted, but they never went to Vietnam. I’m sure some did, even some of my fraternity brothers could’ve, but I sort of lost touch with a lot of them. One guy was a conscientious objector and he really had to prove it. He had to go to court, and he did win. But he had to serve two years in a military hospital, that’s what I think, at least I think it was two years. He had to work in a military hospital because you can’t just be a CO, you still have to serve the country, so he went and worked in a hospital. John Antonelli left the country, he evaded the draft. He went to Europe, and the FBI went looking for him. Then he came back and the FBI showed up at his house out in San Francisco, and they said, “We’ll be back on this day and you’ll be arrested if you’re not here.” They’ll take you in, but he had no intentions of staying, he was going to leave and go, but they never showed up, they never came. (Laughs) Then the draft ended and the war ended.

It was a whole series of things. It was being more independent on campus, being allowed to be more of an adult rather than being treated like a child all the time. So there was that, there
was pushing to be independent on campus. Then there was the whole anti-war movement, then there was sort of this whole hippy, free thing that was going on too. And then Woodstock happened and the whole country was kind of on the same page when I was your age, when we were in that age group. Everyone was connected, and you could go anywhere, like you could go to any college and get into these groups that would take you in. Then there was the big demonstration in Washington, a lot of kids from Fitchburg State went to that, and that had to do with civil rights. And that was another thing, civil rights was part of it, and then there were things that would happen on campus, like Nixon getting elected, and that just fueled the fire big time. It was just a different time. But our college years, our first two years, and our last two years, you wouldn’t even have known this was the same school.

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BD: So you mentioned before we started that you had a relationship with President Hammond.

WM: Yes.

BD: So how did that affect your protesting?

WM: Yeah it really impacted on it big time. The only time my father ever hit me was my senior year in college. The only time. I was sitting at the dining room table, and he belted me good. Well, first of all, he [Hammond] lived within 4 or 5 houses of me. His kids were very good friends of mine. His daughter is still a friend to this day, very close, very close. He sang in the choir at St. Bernard’s Church with my grandmother. He was an extremely close friend of my father. So my freshman year I told you I didn’t do very well. I worked at Baroni’s (?) Drugstore, which was at the bottom of South Street. There’s a cleaners there now. CVS bought them all in Fitchburg, but there were all these Baroni’s Drugstores. Best place to work in college, because they sold beer there. Even when I was 18 my friends would just drive up the backdoor and I would just fill their trunk with beer. So I worked at the bottom of South Street. Hammond lived at the top of South Street, and I lived at the top of South Street. My freshman year, I told you, they mailed your grades home. I look out my window, my father’s pulling in, and I remember thinking, this isn’t good. This is not a good thing. He comes in and he said I need to talk to you, and he says to my boss can I take him for a minute, he says yeah. He takes me outside. He says you got a 0.8 freshman year. 0.8? He says what did you do? I said I didn’t do anything. (Laughs) I told you I wasn’t going to go there. So he took me up the hill to President Hammond’s house, and we had to sit there and go over all the stuff that I had to do to be able to stay as a student. I had to do this one humanities thing, like an interim course, and if I didn’t get an A in it then I wouldn’t be able to return for second semester. But if I got an A I could stay. So, anyway, I did and I stayed. And then the protesting came.

So the first two years were easy because I was well behaved and I didn’t have any choice. So that was easy. The second two years--senior year was the most active year for me, for everybody here. One time we actually marched to his [Hammond’s] house, and it was like this candlelight thing, and I just couldn’t go. I thought there’s no way I’m going to this, because if he walked out and saw me there I would be dead. And I sort of tried to avoid that, but when we did the march on Main Street I was one of the people carrying the coffin, and he saw me. My father had already told me, my father was a veteran, he was a Purple Heart veteran, he didn’t like that I
was anti-war. Now he changed his views about a year and a half after that. He said, I can’t believe I used to fight with you about that, you guys were so right, but at the time he was ‘love it or leave it’. So he didn’t like me talking anti-war in the house, and when Jim called him and told him I was one of the guys carrying the coffin I was sitting at the dinner table that night and he said didn’t I tell you no, and you humiliated Jim Hammond and you humiliated me. (Laughs) And he wacked me. And he just like gave me this backhand, not real hard or anything. And I was like, oh my god, he had never hit me in my entire life. I was like, holy mackerel, I can’t believe you just hit me. He said don’t you ever embarrass me or Jim Hammond again. So I was still 22, still living at home, and I just thought well I’m not doing that again. So I was still active, but I just couldn’t get into the whole anti-president of the college thing. I just couldn’t do that. They were just personal friends. There were a couple of us, actually Mark Rice who was one of the people involved in that case, his mother and father too, we all lived in the same neighborhood too, they were very close. And then he did go to the house and Jim Hammond walked outside and said Mark Rice what are you doing here? But he was a very nice man; he really was a good guy.

MA: It’s kind of what we’re learning with the whole event and especially with the whole censorship case and freedom of speech thing. It is kind of set up like with Antonelli on one side and Hammond on the other. So you knew both of them personally so could you maybe speak about-?

WM: Yep. The amendment case, the constitutional case really wasn’t anything big on campus. If you really asked most people, even now, oh you remember the Antonelli case? Most of them would have no clue what you’re talking about. They did not know what was going on. John was the editor of the paper, I think, along with Tony Mack, I think they were co-editors. And they changed the name of the paper and I honestly can’t remember the name of what it used to be, but it was that for years and years and years, and they changed it to The Cycle. They really just wanted to put in this kind of liberal story, and there were a lot of F-bombs in the story. And the goal of it was to put this particular article in because of the F-bombs. It wasn’t that they were trying to push the envelope or anything, but they were really just being brats. (Laughs) We were all being sort of wise guys. And what happened was the printer called and said he was offended by it, so he called the president of the college and he [Hammond] was extremely--even at that time all of our philosophy classes here were Catholic. All of our philosophy teachers were Catholic. All we got was Catholic philosophy. It was a public institution but it was Catholic philosophy. He was very religious. Jim Hammond went to mass every single day. Every day. So he was really offended by this and he said, “No, you can’t put this in the paper.” And then one thing led to another, and none of us, none of them knew we had a freedom of speech thing going on. (Laughs) We just thought he was stopping us from putting the F-bomb in the paper.

The story got out. The United Press picked it up, and I think it ran in The Globe or something. This young lawyer picked up the case, called, and told them I’d really like to take this case to federal court and fight for the first amendment, they’re restricting your first amendment. Honestly, at the beginning, John and Tony were like what are you talking about? And then it was really Tony Mack who said, let’s do it. This sounds like fun. So they did, this lawyer took over the case. There were only three people involved, there were the two editors and another, Mark Rice, because he just happened to be in the apartment when it happened. He was a freshman. John was a senior, no John was a junior. Tony was a senior. Tony was the president of student
government too. So this guy took the case, the three of them had to go to court. It lasted one day
in court, in federal court, sometime in, I think, October, and they won. The guy who took them to
court, this very young guy, he was only like five or six years older than us. There were trustees
of Fitchburg State who were at the court that day, and they saw the court case. One of them
called a friend of his and said we just got killed by this young lawyer in Boston, your firm needs
to hire him, and they did. That was his whole career. His entire career was constitutional law he
became famous, extremely famous and died in his fifties in a cycling accident in Italy. He was a
wonderful guy. But the whole thing lasted a day.

No one knew about it. If you went around campus and asked everyone what do you
think? We just won this huge constitutional case, they’d all just look at you like what’re you
talking about. I would say five percent of the school knew anything about it. And then John quit.
John quit school, because he was like I just brought the president of the school to his knees now I
have to go back and be a student there. So he quit school and left, he never went back, he never
graduated. Until he got the honorary doctorate last year. So he left, went to California, went to
Europe, because like I said he was evading the draft actually and he went to Europe for a while, a
year and a half or so. Tony stayed as president of the student government, no I think it was
president of our senior class. But then he didn’t graduate. He was one credit short, and they
didn’t tell him until the day we graduated. So he called another guy, another guy who was
interviewed, Jim Craigan, because he was the Vice President and he said you’re going to have to
lead the class, I can’t graduate. But he stood at the door and gave us all black armbands to wear.
So even the day we walked out we were still being troublemakers. (Laughs) And everybody put
on a black armband, and it was just, it was the time. You know, we were feeling our oats and
being independent. And it was a very unifying cause, I mean there were very few students who
were pro-Vietnam. Just about every student was anti-Vietnam because it was going to impact on
us. Then that case sort of became a bigger thing later in our lives. And it’s great because it
reunited that group. I’ve stayed in touch with quite a few of them over the years, but quite a few
of them have gone their separate ways. I wasn’t on the board, I wasn’t on The Cycle, I just sort of
hung around with that group of guys. They taught me a lot. They were a very bright group, they
were smart. They were a good time, it was a good time.

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MA: You said pretty much everybody was against the draft. Was there anybody who sided with
President Hammond or on the draft side of things that were love it or leave it type of people that
you knew?

WM: No. I think by senior year I would say probably not. Most ROTC’s were thrown off
college campuses by then. They just weren’t allowed. They were thrown out. Some ROTC
buildings were burned at BU. Some people were breaking in and burning ROTC records.
Breaking into draft boards, burning things. There were real militant things where people were
killed, you know like the Chicago Seven. It wasn’t a joke by senior year, it was very serious. The
younger population across this country said no, absolutely no, you’re going to stop this, and
we’re going to make you stop this. It was just such a united force. Then the clergy came on board,
and it was really the clergy and all the churches were really saying this is just an immoral war.
There’s just no reason for us to be doing what we were doing. Then you even have John Kerry
coming back from the service who was a vet from Vietnam who led Vietnam vets against the
war. It was a huge movement. John Kerry came to Fitchburg State. He met us at the Black Horse. We’d all go down to the Black Horse, it’s On The Rocks now, down at the lakefront. So we’d all go down to On The Rocks, I mean The Black Horse, which was kind of a bizarre bar. It was a biker bar, gay bar, college bar. And everybody would just be there when John Kerry and Michael Dukakis came and recruited us to do some more national stuff. Like, get more involved nationally and statewide. So it became, really, a serious movement, it sort of left the realm of Fitchburg State. It became part of the bigger scene, the university college scene, the national scene. Because at first it was just a small group of Fitchburg State students. John Antonelli, he was always a radical, so it was that group that sort of instigated Fitchburg, and connected with UMass and connected with Harvard. And got ideas.

There probably were [people who supported the war], but they were quiet. I didn’t personally know anybody at school who would’ve supported the war or supported the draft. That’s why we were so surprised when this one particular guy, very close friend, left to join the marines, we were like, what’re you doing? And now he’ll look back and think, what was I thinking? But it was just so anti-military, and I can’t speak for everybody, there may have been a quiet minority on campus. They certainly were quiet. There was nobody demonstrating. There were no anti-demonstrations to the anti-war demonstrations. We didn’t have any voice saying go home, or if you don’t like it then leave it. But there was, there was that nationally for a while. Pretty much by 1970-71 this whole country was pretty much anti-war. Even my father, like I told you, he changed. But I never heard it here. I think a lot of kids were a little apathetic, they didn’t get involved with anything. I think you could talk to kids from my class, the 1970 graduating class, and ask, what were the rallies like, what were the protests like? They’d probably be, like, I don’t know, what’re you talking about? They just weren’t involved. But they weren’t anti-anti-war, they just weren’t involved. And there were a lot of kids out, off campus student teaching. Those kids wouldn’t be involved that fall if they weren’t on campus. With the fraternities you could tell it sort of quieted down, and they were never organized, they never organized anything. The Fenwick’s didn’t go as a group of Fenwick’s, and the Mohawk’s didn’t go as a group of Mohawk’s to protest against the war, you did it as an individual not as a social group.

**BD**: Going back to trial, I just wanted to ask, what was President Hammond’s reaction to losing?

**WM**: President Hammond was a total, total, consistent gentleman all the time. He just always was. And when he lost he actually wrote a letter to John, or maybe it was the other way around, but there was a conversation respecting what they did do and respecting the decision. He still didn’t approve of that word being used. But he made it clear that the federal courts actually said that it was impeding the first amendment rights of students, and that he would live by that decision. They were the experts, and that was not his intent. His intent was he just didn’t want us using the F-word. (Laughs) If we had blacked out the F-word he would have printed it. He was very ethical. He was who he was. We liked him, you know, we liked him. He wasn’t an enemy or anything like that. He was just a man of his time, and times were changing really fast. It was tough for some people. Like I said, we came in wearing Oxford shirts, and we left wearing bellbottoms. Everyone was wearing headbands and our hair was down here and everyone was smoking pot. It was like night and day. And then when I came back for graduate school ten years later, totally different again. It was very different. I think now because I live
here, I actually still work here, I supervise student teachers. It’s a lot more academic. Honestly the kids are brighter, more focused. You know, it’s a really good school. Not that it wasn’t. It was a good school, now it’s an excellent school.

**BD:** Is there anything that you missed that you’d like to touch on?

**WM:** I don’t think so, nope, I don’t think so. Hope I gave you a flavor of it. It was an experience. I think back on it and I always think I’m glad I went to school when I went to school. I’m glad I was there. I’m glad I wasn’t apathetic. I’m glad I was part of a movement that was as important as it was. And my whole life I’ve stayed actively involved in politics. I’m still someone who thinks, stay vigilant, watch, don’t take things for granted. I was actually at a funeral yesterday. The priest said something about kids: the reason why kids are really good kids is because they have a good mother and a good father. And I said, no. He said for a child to be a really good child, for them to be really good in school it takes one good mother and one good father. I couldn’t shut my mouth. I was walking out the church and I said, Father, you’re wrong. It takes two good parents, that’s all. It doesn’t have to be a mother and father. Well, he goes, but the Catholic view… And I said, well, okay. (Laughs) But I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. Oh boy, I’m right back to 1970. (Laughs) It was great, it was a great time to come here. I wouldn’t give up a day of my last two years. My first year, yeah. (Laughs) Thanks. Thank you very much.

**BD:** Thanks.

**MA:** Thanks. Thank you very much.