Where Have All the Flower Children Gone?

Sandra Gurvis
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University Press of Mississippi  •  Jackson
To all the brave young men and women caught in the maelstrom of Iraq and the Middle East, and to all the people who have died there. And to those Americans who served in Vietnam and to all those who perished there and in Cambodia.
I do not know how the third world war will be fought, but I can tell you what they will use in the fourth: Rocks.

—Albert Einstein, The New Quotable Einstein
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Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the following people whose contributions are too numerous to enumerate here:

Gwynelle Dismukes and the people at the Farm
Alex and Rian Gurvis
Amy Gurvis
Craig Gill
Ellen Greene
Alan Haig-Brown
Carole Harwood
Matthew Kiernan
Sherry Paprocki
Howard Ruffner
Eileen and Bobby Tarsky
Wayne Thorburn
Russ Wild

Many thanks to the following organizations that provided financial assistance as well as the opportunity to write and do research in a supportive atmosphere:

The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, Austin, Texas
Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, Vermont
Introduction

A Guide to This Book

It was November 2, 2004, the day of the presidential election. I was in Madison, Wisconsin, doing some follow-up research for this book. Although I’ve been to many universities during the course of my career, be it to talk about the Vietnam protests or for unrelated reasons, it seemed as if University of Wisconsin most embodied the spirit of the 1960s, at least as I remembered them.

The dress was contemporary—the wide range of styles found in most colleges today—and many students walked around with cell phones or MP3 players attached to their ears. Most everybody was courteous and respectful, unlike my era, when anyone older than thirty might be treated with suspicion or at least a soupcon of mistrust.

But the same air of political activism and enthusiasm prevailed, a sense of optimism that, indeed, we could make the world a better place. Young people zoomed back and forth in golf carts, offering rides to potential voters and encouraging all to vote. Over a walkway on University Avenue, the main drag, a group of party supporters waved their placards. Most of the larger ones were for John Kerry, although George W. Bush was represented as well. Cars honked and passers-by shouted out their approval. It was infectious, and for the first time since Gore allegedly lost the election four years prior, I felt
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that things might finally change for the better; that is, for the 48 to 51 percent of us now defined as “blue” by the media.

How well that color reflected our mood on the next day, when Kerry conceded. In fact, my little corner of the universe was infused with a funereal miasma that seemed to linger for weeks. My daughter, Amy, stayed up all night watching the election returns and mourning. Among the exceptions were my son, Alex, and his wife, Rian, the few Bush supporters in my extended network of family and friends. Another friend, who was in Canada at the time, was terribly hurt that our neighbors to the north were furious at Americans for re-electing Bush. “They don’t understand how we feel in this country,” she said mournfully. “How can they be so judgmental?”

Why “Flower Children?”

The 2004 presidential election was the latest (as of this writing) defeat in a long and seemingly ceaseless battle that began in the 1960s over the proliferation of nuclear weapons (the atom bomb), the Cold War, and the escalation of Vietnam, among other issues. Of course, political factions have always argued over what they consider to be right or wrong, but during the past several decades, the liberal-versus-conservative mindset has taken center stage in the United States.

I was a child of the 1960s. The assassination of John F. Kennedy and later his brother Robert and then Martin Luther King and the struggle for civil rights were part of my growing-up years. My parents, while Democrats, were conservative, country-club types, which resulted in many shouting matches over the dinner table. In high school I remember watching the 1968 Chicago riots on TV and my father disparaging one disheveled, blue-jean-clad young woman as she was being dragged away by police. Little did he know that I’d attended a coffeehouse with her in our hometown of Dayton, Ohio, the week before.
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But what really fueled my passion to explain and understand this era was the shootings at Kent State on May 4, 1970. Along with killing four students and wounding nine others, the incident resulted in the closure of some 728 college campuses. I was a freshman at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, at the time; and it felt as if it had happened in my back yard, especially as the campus emptied of its students.

Yet, like former presidential candidate John Kerry, I did a considerable amount of “waffling.” I could relate to the arguments of my contemporaries yet also felt the pain and disappointment of my parents and their peers. It was impossible to please both, and even more difficult to grasp what was going on in Vietnam, and why. So much of my writing attempted to get a handle on these issues and took the form of a novel, *The Pipe Dreamers* (Olmstead, 2001), as well as several nonfiction magazine articles for various publications.
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In spite of all the research I’d done, I still felt that many aspects of the “war at home” still needed to be uncovered. There were so many questions: How did former denizens of the Age of Aquarius reconcile the rebellions of their student days with their present lives? What happened to them since then, and why? Were they ashamed or proud of their pasts? Did they believe they’d made the world a better place, and were they continuing in those efforts? Or did they just not care and concentrate on their own creature comforts? Where had all the flower children gone?

And what about the offspring and the parents of Baby Boomers? How did they view the Vietnam years? What were their thoughts on Boomers’ impact on society today? The vastly different presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush speak volumes about the continuing polarization of our culture. And 9/11 and the war in the Middle East—which hadn’t occurred when I began this book in 1999—will continue to affect all generations long after its publication.

Like many writers, I feel a strong need to recapture the past before it slips into oblivion. Like the assassination of John F. Kennedy and September 11, 2001, Kent State was a defining moment, serving as both a catalyst and a microcosm of the times. It gave us pause, both individually and as a society.

However, to the generations behind us, Kent State in particular and the student protest movement in general are just another event in history. Like the pre-Boomer 1929 stock market crash, Pearl Harbor, or bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, such happenings retain the dusty, dry patina of names, places, and statistics unless brought to life through movies, novels, and television, or, as is a goal of this book, through individual recounts and prose.

Hence, my decision to go ahead with Flower Children. Its publication seems particularly timely, especially considering what’s happening in the Middle East. Although things change daily, Bush’s reelection will undoubtedly ensure that we will be there for several
more years. And there will be a continuation of the turmoil, tension, and divisiveness that now seems to be a driving force in this country, just like in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Rich mining, indeed, for a book chronicling the tumult caused by a controversial war with a culture we can’t begin to understand.

Chapter Organization and Choice of Subject Matter

During the Vietnam conflict, approximately 3 to 4 million Vietnamese on both sides were killed, in addition to another 1.5 to 2 million Laotians and Cambodians who were drawn into the war. More than 58,000 Americans lost their lives. Vietnam itself has been the recipient of most of the examination in the media, literature, and nonfiction. Where Have All the Flower Children Gone? is part of the growing body of information about the participants of the “war at home.”

There is a vast amount of information to sift through; many of the chapters could be entire books in themselves. So the task at hand was to pare down which aspects were essential, while providing a voice to the individuals who were the most deeply involved. Hence, much of Flower Children consists of interviews prefaced by brief narratives.

I also tried to include topics that have not gotten much “play.” Although some subjects, such as the development of the student protest movement and shootings at Kent State, have received exhaustive attention elsewhere, certain facets have not. Chapter 1, for example, contains an account of a little-known uprising at Colorado State that was in many ways more typical of protests than what occurred at, say, Columbia in 1968. Chapter 4 describes coffeehouses held near military bases that were instrumental in changing soldiers’ opinions about the rightness of the war in Vietnam.
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The book starts in a linear manner, beginning with the development of the Vietnam protests on campuses. Along with briefly tracing the history of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Chapter 1 goes on to cover the violently radical Weathermen and their archenemies, the FBI and other government surveillance entities. Along with a detailed description of the events at Kent and Jackson State, there are interviews with, among others, witnesses to various aspects of both tragedies. Jackson State has often been overlooked: Ten days after the Kent shootings, two men were killed and fifteen others wounded at a protest at this primarily African American college in Mississippi.

Providing a counterpoint to the protesters were the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF). Chapter 2 discusses the parallels between the modern conservative movement and antiwar activists. Surprisingly, their motives were more alike than one might initially expect, especially when looked at in the context of Vietnam. Like the SDS, the YAF had internal dissent and developed splinter groups, such as Libertarians, which continue to exist. However, unlike some student radicals who simply took up the cause because it was “cool,” many learned about and in some cases actually visited Vietnam to try to understand what was going on there. This chapter describes their initial support of the war in Vietnam and their eventual decision that it should be ended. Also interviewed are the many former YAF leaders who are presently key policymakers in Washington, D.C.

The pendulum swings back in Chapter 3, which covers communes and former radicals. A few communes (or intentional communities as they’re now known) continue to thrive and are profiled here. Chief among them is the Farm, located in Summerville, Tennessee. Although members cater to the Establishment by selling consumer items, they mostly remain true to their ideals. Other communes, such as Twin Oaks, continue to struggle to recruit and retain members. And for hippie types who look upon their lifestyle as a vacation instead of a vocation, there is the Rainbow Family of Living Light, in which
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anyone with a navel can participate. The Rainbow Tribe, as it is also called, celebrates their humanity and various alternative lifestyles at parks around the United States and the world, much to the dismay of the local villagers and gendarmes.

Chapter 4, on draft evaders, expatriates, and conscientious objectors, chronicles a vastly different reaction to the war in Vietnam. This chapter discusses the types of civilians and soldiers who evaded military service through methods other than college or medical deferments. Their decision to confront the issue of Vietnam directly, rather than taking more subtle outs, made a major impact on their lives. Many went to Canada and, even though they were pardoned, decided to remain. The interviews in this chapter highlight the dramatically different stories of those who chose to desert and/or evade, to leave the country before they could be drafted or because they objected to the war in general, or to face the consequences of being a conscientious objector. Veterans who turned war protesters also share their experiences.

Chapter 5 brings the discussion up to the present, in terms of Vietnam and Iraq and older and younger generations. Along with describing the genesis and development of the Vietnam conflict, the chapter also provides parallels with the situation in Iraq. How and why Vietnam became so unpopular, the differences between the two wars, and an overview of today’s military are also included. Also mentioned is how generations older and younger than Baby Boomers view not only the Boomers but the two conflicts as well. Social scientists quantify them into Generation X, Generation Y, and so forth, and these will be described along with events that helped shape their generational identity.

The book concludes on a more personal note, with Chapter 6 being on friends and peers. The chapter also at least partially answers the question posed by the title, Where Have All the Flower Children Gone? The story of Myra Aronson, a woman with whom I went to college, is included. Myra exemplifies many people of my generation,