

Kent State in Flux but Still Attuned to Mid-America

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KENT, Ohio, May 7 — A white bulletin board stands alone on the silent campus of Kent State University not far from the grassy slope where four students were killed and nine wounded Monday by a volley of shots from National Guardsmen.

In neat black letters, the board lists the schedule of events for the now-cancelled Campus Day, the major annual happening of the spring quarter.

The coronation of a campus queen. A luncheon under a tent for hundreds of returning alumni, with balloons for their children. A float parade down Main Street of this quiet city of 29,000 middle Americans, who dwell, for the most part, in the boxy frame houses that line the shady side streets.

A song fest on the front campus for competing fraternities, sororities, independent housing groups and others. A concert featuring David Frye, the comedian; B. J. Thomas, the singer, and Gary Puckett and the Union Gap.

Nearby, a Burned Building

This is Kent State University. Frolicking on the lush lawns under the greening elms and maples. Basking in the spring sun beside the forsythia and tulips.

But it won't happen this year.

Not 100 feet from the bulletin board are the charred remains of the R.O.T.C. building burned Saturday night by students protesting the sending of American troops into Cambodia. Bits of paper debris still blow through the snow fence strung around the ruins. A scrap from a Reserve Officers Training Corps manual, "105-mm. howitzer firing at extreme elevation..."

This, too, is Kent State University. And it did happen this year.

Which is the real Kent State? Nobody seems to be sure any more. But both, perhaps.

"I got a letter this morning," said Donald D. Shook, the balding director of alumni rela-

tions, "from a man who wrote that he had marched for four years by that R.O.T.C. building and that if it were burned down he didn't want to ever come back to the campus."

Shaking his head, his face tight with the strain of the last few days, Mr. Shook, a 1936 Kent graduate, went on:

"Alumni are always saying, 'It's not the same university I went to,' and I'm always telling them, 'It's not the same university it was a month ago or a week ago.' There's rapid change."

"I'm not so sure Kent is much different from a lot of campuses that have had trouble and a lot that have not had trouble. The only difference is that we had four students shot here. I don't see what happened here as being much different from 100 other colleges."

While he might have agreed in the past, James Minard, a 22-year-old theater major with long, reddish brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard, is not so sure about the future.

"If they open it up," he said while waiting in an administration office to file a deposition on the shootings, "I don't think they'll keep this school open more than a couple of days. There's going to be bombings, there's going to be burnings..."

Similar to Other Schools

Until the four students died here this week, there was little to set Kent State apart from dozens of other state institutions among the nation's troubled campuses. A small school, little noted, caught in the rip tide of the postwar baby boom, watching its student population almost quadruple from about 5,000 in the mid-nineteen-fifties to 19,000 today.

It might have been Southern Illinois, it might have been Buffalo, it might have been... almost anywhere.

Since the first classes were held by 20 teachers and 47 students at Kent Normal School 57 years ago next Sunday, Kent State has consistently grown, sometimes slowly but in the last few years explosively.

And Kent Staters have

been proud of it. Almost any one you meet will volunteer with what appears to be a touch of that peculiar faith Americans seem to have in the essential goodness of growth, that Kent ranks 24th in enrollment among the country's public universities.

Outstanding Divisions

Some will tell you, too, that the college of business administration and the departments of architecture, aerospace, history, and speech and hearing are outstanding. And a few can recite the names of the three men holding distinguished rank as University Professors — Dr. Harold M. Maver in geography, Dr. August Meier in history and Dr. Howard P. Vincent in English.

"Nobody says that this is a Harvard or a Yale yet — or a Michigan or Wisconsin," James J. Bruss, director of the university news service, said proudly, "but we've come a long way in the last 10 years."

As for the rapidly expanding physical plant on the carefully groomed, 800-acre rolling campus, a college official, who asked not to be identified, described the light brick buildings that predominate as "picky-tacky, all in a row."

"We had an administrator here — and I won't say who," he said, "who said we're not going to have any monuments to architecture. And we sure don't."

Role of the School

Kent Normal School started with a two-year program in 1913 and became a four-year normal college in 1915. In 1929 it was granted permission to drop the "Normal" and become a full-fledged college rather than an institution just for training teachers. In 1935 it was upgraded to the rank of university.

But, through all this metamorphosis, Kent's primary role has been much the same — to provide an education for the sons and daughters of the blue-collar and white-collar middle-class in this crowded, industrialized corner of northeast Ohio. From Cleveland, 33 miles to the north, and from Akron, 11 miles to the west, they come to Kent. And from the steel towns of Lorain and Youngtown and from the small nearby farming communities.

Under state law, Kent must accept any graduate of an accredited high school in Ohio. Only 20 per cent of its students may be from outside the state,

and those must be in the top half of their graduating class. But with recent heavy pressure for places from within the state, only 15 per cent of the current undergraduate students are from outside Ohio.

Remain in Ohio

And most of Kent's graduates stay within the state. About 30,000 of the 43,000 alumni, according to Mr. Shook, are still in Ohio, filling teaching posts and middle management jobs in the state's industries.

"I would think that the bulk of our student body is still fairly career-oriented," said Dr. William W. Converse, executive assistant to the president, Robert I. White, in charge of university planning and analysis. "But like most students today, they

are concerned with what is going around them. People in the social sciences seem to be more involved, of course, than those in business.

"There are some that are absolutely alienated, but it would be a small percentage here — surely under 2 per cent."

Most students and college officials seem to agree with his estimate.

"For the most part, the student body is apathetic and anyone who wants to lead can lead," said James Minard, the bearded theater major. "For freaks — out of 20,000 — perhaps there are 500 real freaks; which isn't bad for a place like this."

And in 1968 and 1969, when the Kent chapter of Students for a Democratic Society was considered one of the more militant in the country and was the subject of a hearing by the House Committee on Internal Security, university officials estimated the number of "hard core" members at 15 to 25, with perhaps 150 to 200 others who would support some S.D.S. activities.

Student Group Banned

When S.D.S. was banned from campus after a demonstration in which 58 persons were arrested last year, Kent became relatively quiet until the protest over Cambodia last week. Most observers say that with S.D.S. absent there seemed to be no focal point for activist demonstrations.

"In this last one there didn't seem to be any particular group or any particular leader we could sit down at the conference table with," Mr. Shook, the alumni director, said, "It was just 'get out of Vietnam

and Cambodia.”

But even in the events of last weekend that led to the indefinite closing of the school after the shootings. Officials estimate that no more than 5 or 10 per cent of the students were in any way involved.

Paul Bossman, a 22-year-old senior in public relations with medium-length brown hair, is perhaps more typical of the student body than those who participate in or watch demonstrations.

Paying for Education

Sitting in his shorts in a modern apartment in a new seven-story complex just off campus, his Yamaha motorcycle broken down for repairs on the green wall-to-wall carpeting, he said:

“Most of us here were pretty embarrassed and ashamed at what happened. The thing was kicked off by a handful of people and in a community of 20,000 people, you’re going to have so many widows.”

Mr. Bossman, who is from Cleveland and is paying his way through college by working as a shipping clerk in an electronics plant and as a part-time bartender in one of the nearly 40 bars that line Kent’s quiet streets, is against the war in Vietnam.

“The war—I feel like many other people do,” he said. “I don’t think we belong there. I personally don’t think we should be in Cambodia. I don’t think we should be there, but all these riots and stuff—I can’t understand that at all.”

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