

Interview with Dr. Robert McClellan

November 16, 1989

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Interviewer (I): Ok, can I get your name and your position?

Robert McClellan (RM): Robert McClellan, professor of history at Northern Michigan University.

I: In 1969-70 you were - ?

RM: I was teaching at Northern as an assistant professor in the history department.

I: What racial events stick out in your mind from that era?

RM: Well, events that have racial connotations, there are quite a few. The most prominent one that sticks out, and I guess other people's memories that were here then was the sit-in at Kaye Hall, which was a racially motivated incident, it was based on an event in one of the dormitories, I've forgotten the names of the people, I could look them up, but a black student –

I: I believe that was Charles Griffith.

RM: That's the Griffith thing, that's right. Griffith had been dating the girlfriend of an RA, the girlfriend was white. The RA got sore, and for a very minor infraction had Griffith suspended. Griffith protested, there was a student judiciary trial or what have you at which one of the white administrators on the campus threatened quote "To punch Griffith out if he ever showed his face here again" unquote. Black students at that point decided they had had enough. There had been other racial incidents, there had been, a shot had been taken at a guy on campus, a black man that I knew, his name was Pat Williams. Guns had been displayed prominently in dormitory windows. The event at Jackson State was in people's minds, there had been racial incidents, and

with the guns and the macho attitude up here and so on, a number of black students really did fear for their lives. And so they decided that they would pull together, so what they did was, to send a signal to the administration, they went over to the old Kaye Hall, which had a large vestibule area, and a grand staircase that went up to a second floor balcony, it was a very wide open kind of public area, and they sat in there. But with 100 people they couldn't really obstruct everything, so what they decided to do as the building was closed down, as 5 o'clock approached, they concentrated on the offices of the, I think it was Dean of Students, pretty sure about that, Al Niemi, and they went into his office, he had an inner office and an outer office and, you know, his secretary's office, typical Dean of Students setup. And that's where they sat, and they refused to come out. Jamrich was the president at that point. There had been a riot in Detroit, people began to get very excited, it was alleged by the administration that a person, allegedly black person, had thrown a bomb through the window of Pierce Hall, turned out to be, well, we're not sure whether it ever happened, but the allegation was that it was a Molotov cocktail type bomb, which is thrown through the window unlit, or maybe it went out or whatever, that was the story. The administration got rather anxious about the whole thing, and was trying to negotiate with the black students, but without a great deal of success, because they kept demanding that the black students do one thing or another and the black students were unwilling to leave, about two or three in the morning Jamrich had a confrontation with a guy by the name of Dave Williams, a great big black guy, who was a street guy from Detroit, and very intelligent, later went on to law school, anyway, he was a big man, and Jamrich was a little man, and I can remember very clearly Jamrich standing in front of Dave, cursing him for tearing down the reputation of the institution, at which point Dave said something to the effect of, called Jamrich a little man, which infuriated Jamrich, he left, and proceeded to call, put out a call to the

state police to come in and quote, "Get these f----- n----- out of here, et cetera." This was privately, not publicly. There is a severe misunderstanding, even today in Marquette, of the attitude towards black people. The pretense is that we're all good friends and there aren't very many of them so we don't have a problem. If you talk to black people, you get a very different version. Anyway, one thing led to another, and with, there were a couple of us negotiating, myself and a friend of mine David Menekel [spelled phonetically], who's no longer on the faculty, we tried to get Jamrich to come to some kind of an agreement with these black people, and finally that did happen, and the black kids signed some kind of statement that admitted that they shouldn't have been there, and then they left. Later on the next morning there was then another student judiciary hearing with regard to these black students, and I think there were either 101 or 110, I can't remember for sure, but it was over 100, and they had all signed this statement, the intent was made to single out the ringleaders, but that didn't work because everybody signed the statement saying "We were there", so the student judiciary, I've forgotten what the verdict was, but in effect they exonerated the kids, said that they had had good cause, and that no real damage had been done. One window was broken, it was a transom window above the doors, it was an old building so it had the old fashioned transom, one window was broken, it was broken because the kid was standing up on the desk looking through it, and, I don't know, grabbed it or fell against it or something, anyway. That's all the damage that was done, other than messing around the office with all those people and the desks were messed around some, but no furniture was broken or anything like that, in spite of allegations to the contrary. I know, because I went in and out a number of times, I was, I had been invited to the black fraternity on campus, and I had pretty much free entrance and exit to the room because I knew most of the kids. So anyway, the student judiciary exonerated the blacks, maybe some

minor chastisement, but nobody was expelled, and the Griffith expulsion was rescinded, and so everything was sort of back to normal, we thought it was over. Came to find out very quickly, Jamrich wrote a letter to Ed Quinnell, Ed was, at that time he was either the full-time or the part-time prosecuting attorney, Ed is now a judge in the county. Ed was a good old Marquette guy and a very decent man, and Jamrich wrote to Ed, and said, "Look, this is a crime which was committed, trespass and kidnapping" that was the charge, holding a man against his will, that was me, and claimed that he was held in the office against his will, he got very excited and began to shout, and I think he was nervous having so many black people around him all at once, or whatever his reason, he got very upset. So charges were leveled against these black kids in the county, off the campus, it had nothing to do with the campus, and Jamrich was the primary instigator, he filed a complaint against these kids. Well then an attempt was made, it really seemed impossible to bring charges against 100-odd individuals, so six people were selected out as the ringleaders. I remember some of them, Griffith was not one of them, but Dave Williams and Pat Williams, I remember those guys quite well. Particularly Pat Williams because Pat was going to go to law school and he did not want a felony charge against him. So I took to calling the case the Case of the Marquette Six. We had trouble finding defense council. There was kind of a crazy guy in town who was a lawyer, sort of a militant radical, Ken Boorland [spelled phonetically], and Ken Boorland was associated with Andrew Whisty [spelled phonetically] firm in Houghton. Ken was kind of the stringer for Andrew Whisty, and so Whisty, also a good guy, gave Boorland permission to go fulltime on this case, because we didn't have any, nobody had any money, we raised a few thousand, but nothing to pay the full expense, so Ken Boorland began to take depositions and put the case together, and the thing went along, and pretty soon we found ourselves in the courthouse down here, in the city, the old courthouse. We, the prosecution

presented their case, Jamrich was on the stand quite a lot. There had been a tape made of the student judiciary hearing about Griffith, and that tape had somehow gotten destroyed, it's a tape which showed the threatened punch and some statements from it. Jamrich never satisfactorily explained why the tape was destroyed. Anyway, the evidence was presented, some witnesses were brought about, Niemi being frightened for his life, destruction of property in the office, that kind of thing. Anything to build his case, which was very, very flimsy. What we had here was a sit-in. We did not have trespass to any substantial degree, although technically we did, of course, and we certainly did not have kidnapping, that was an absurd charge. I think that was later dropped. Anyway, I recall this very clearly, the prosecution closed on Friday, Saturday morning the case was to be continued, and I can remember sitting in a little anteroom outside of Quinnell's chambers with the six black guys and Ken Boorland. We were ready to go, we were going to put our case on. This would be the defense. At that point, a clerk came in from Quinnell's office and said, "The prosecution would like to drop the charges." And we said, "We're not interested." And I was the only witness incidentally, I was the only witness they had, because I was the only person that was inside, I was the only eyewitness they had, there were other people who were going to witness to the character of these black people, but I was the only person who had been inside and outside, and could testify to the actual condition as an impartial observer, though I don't know, most people didn't think I was very impartial, because they figured I was with the blacks. Anyway, we refused, we refused to back off, we were all set to do our case, then find out about 11 o'clock the judge declared a mistrial. I don't know on what grounds, exactly, I never did find out. Charges were never then reinstigated. As far as I know, they were either dropped, or simply buried, or there must be some judicial way just to ignore them, because nothing ever came on to us further, and this one guy was worried about a felony

charge, because that's what it was, kidnapping, was concerned about that charge because he wanted to go to law school. So, the end of the whole matter, the so-called Kaye Hall sit-in and the trial of the six black guys, you know, in Marquette, was that all charges were dropped. And as far as the guts of the issue, that's, there were a lot of sidebars but that's basically what I recall.

I: Ok. What rumors can you remember that would show attitudes?

RM: Well, you have to remember, it's hard to get back into that social, social attitudes at that time, there was a lot of fear of black people. For example, we had had a job corps on campus, these were mostly, it was a female job corps, and it was the only one located on a college campus that I'm aware, and Edgar Harden, who was the guy who had brought this in, this is '65-66 somewhere in there. That job corps on campus had a lot of poor women, a great proportion of them from the south, and a good percentage of them were black. This brought a lot of interest from the black males on the air base, who have apparently zero opportunity for dating black females, because there weren't any around here. So when the job corps came in, the black guys would come over to Carey Hall on Friday night and so on to pick up their dates. This was a spectacle which bothered a lot of people, they were seeing too many black people, they hadn't seen black people driving cars and black people getting in and out of cars, what was just normal dating procedure, since the black guys weren't on campus you couldn't just sort of go to a local student place, they had to come with their cars, the women would come out of the dormitory, get in the cars, I mean, it was quite normal considering that there was no way for these black guys to be on campus, they had to drive on. Anyway, it apparently bothered white people a lot, because I heard a lot of comments about the job corps being Harden's, that's Edgar Harden's, Harden's whorehouse. The idea was that black guys were coming off the base, picking up black females, and that this was the way that Harden contributed to the community. Obviously this didn't reflect

very well on the guys from the base, and it certainly didn't reflect very well on the women in the job corps. The job corps was eventually disbanded here, but not until we had taken a busload of kids to Washington to testify before the senate hearing on the poverty, to discontinue the poverty program. But that wasn't so much black as it was poor. I started an advisory committee to help sort of relate the campus to the job corps, so had pretty, I was pretty closely involved with the job corps, and I got a lot of feedback from the black kids about black dating and so on. There was an incident over on Ridge Street, which wasn't very far from where we lived at the time, a black basketball player, I can't remember the guy's name, I want to say Rose but I could be wrong because there could be another black guy, so I'm not sure about that. Anyway, he was shot at. Some altercation, I'm not sure whether he, I think he pulled into the guy's driveway to turn around, he pulled up quite a ways in the driveway, and apparently, and I'm not absolutely certain because I wasn't there, but apparently the guy ran out of the house and said something to him, and the black guy said something back, and then the guy went back and got a gun, and ran out of the house, and meanwhile the guy in the car was frantically backing out of there and this fellow was running out with this gun, and it seems humorous, you know, when you're in retrospect, because it really amounted to nothing. But at the time black people were quite alarmed by these things, they did not feel safe going into the older parts of Marquette, they would never feel safe driving around some of the better subdivisions and on the east side and so on, because there weren't any black people over there, so they stuck out like a sore thumb. And on campus they had to be very careful, I know they used to tell me they never understood the guns, and we understand it as hunting, but they didn't, they didn't understand all these rifles which guys were bringing to campus, and then they didn't have the check-in system that we had now, so I'm not sure whether they could keep them in their rooms unloaded, or they could keep

them in a central room locked up, but they were in the dormitory, they weren't over held in the security, that came later. So the black guys saw a lot of guns and a lot of white guys and, as I said, there were some shots fired. So there was a mood of considerable tension.

I: With the job corps, do you think that if the Nixon administration hadn't cancelled the program would we have gotten rid of it?

RM: I think so, because my understanding of the job corps was that well, I don't want to say that Ed Harden didn't want to do any good for these women, because I think he did, but the great advantage of these government job corps programs was the overhead money, tremendous money came in here. We redid the whole damn hall, they put in some other stuff, and there was a lot of money came in with this that didn't have to go directly to the students, it could go to the support of facilities. Well, you can redecorate a hall, and of course if the kids left you'd still have the hall, so there was a great spinoff there. The enthusiasm for it was definitely pretty well for want, for about two years there was a lot of trouble. This whorehouse appellation which was applied to the job corps I think hurt Harden quite a lot, and that wasn't his fault, he didn't do that. I don't think it would've lasted, the community was not happy. "All these black people," you kept hearing, "All these black people, what are they doing here anyway," people were really nervous about it, so we didn't have quite the strong athletic thing now, and it wasn't so automatic, obviously there were a lot of black guys in athletics, but it wasn't virtually automatic the way it is today, see a black guy on campus, and most people, "He's tall, he's a basketball player, he's big, he plays football," I mean this is the typical white student reaction, they just don't know any better. So I don't think things have changed very much, I teach classes in minority studies, and peace _____ and _____ history, black history, and I don't see pronounced changes, the same kids in my classes that were there 20 years ago, same parents, same lack of experience, I

could show you some essays from kids who grew up in these little towns, never saw a black person, they're not prejudiced because they really have no thoughts about black people until you press a little harder, and you find they have a lot of feelings, it's just that they don't identify them, they don't have them up front, so, yeah, it's a pretty racist community in Marquette.

I: Were shots actually fired, do you –

RM: Well, that's a good question. Now, I didn't witness it and I don't like to be, I don't like to exaggerate because I think it weakens the truth of what I know to be true, so as far as the shots fired against Pat Williams, the guys alleged it. The police investigated and said that was not true, but the black guys said it was true. And the fellow who was supposedly shot at, Pat Williams, was a very, he was an older guy, very serious, and not a person to cause a lot of commotion for nothing. But factually I have no way to tell one way or the other, I can't testify to it one way or the other.

I: Do you, well then, you believe the white community did have prejudices?

RM: Well I think there was and there is extensive prejudice and/or uncertainty. I just assigned my class a book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is not your nice, safe Dr. Martin Luther King, who I also admire greatly and I'm not making _____ comparisons between the two, Malcom X was considered to be a pretty angry, pretty aggressive, pretty anti-white black person, and he was for much of his life, but not at the end, before he was assassinated he was beginning to mellow out quite a little bit. But anyway, in giving kids this book to read the reaction was very interesting, one of them told me that they took it home and their husband looked at it and was absolutely furious, totally enraged that they should be required to read a book by a black _____ gangster, the man that calls white people devils and all this kind of stuff. So, the reason I have the kids read the book is I usually get that kind of reaction,

here's a guy who did drugs, who was imprisoned, and who ran a prostitute ring for a while, he's not exactly your Mr. Clean, and so kids read this book and they say, well, and here's a man who talks about white people as the devil, it's going to be irritating to someone who hasn't really had much historical experience, so that usually taps into a broad range of prejudice, the typical response is, "There weren't any blacks in our town when I was growing up so I don't have many thoughts about black people," but when you push in a little harder you find that it's not really true. People here use the word "colored" quite a lot, I hear that in the classroom, not so much the kids from downstate, but the locals, the ones from the U.P. use the word colored a lot, they don't understand, you know, how offensive that is today. While it may have been acceptable a hundred years ago, it's definitely not acceptable now. The word "black" comes with difficulty to most students. "Negro" they can handle, that's mostly the way they deal with black people, but the term "black", even today, even though I use it as a, I really don't know what other word to use, for a lot of white students today it comes very hard. Two weeks ago there was a fight at the, over here at the local watering hole, over next to Wright Place, what do they call it, Alibi. A lot of yelling, a lot of n----- this and n----- that, and I got this from a lot of black kids who were there, including the females. I've been told that black, that some of the local bars try to avoid playing music which they think would be attractive to black people so that blacks will not come in. I don't know if this is true or not, but I had a piano player swear to me that it really was true, he'd been told not to play that kind of music. I don't know what all that means, with all the rock concerts here and songs, I can't dole that out [?], but I know there's significant prejudice here, I'm quite well aware of that. I could cite lots of examples but I think you get the drift.

I: In light of the fact that there were no blacks here at the time, do you think that black students who came gave the white community a chance?

RM: Well, you see, it's tricky because you're asking me the question which was asked of Dr. King, should we really have been so hard on the people of Montgomery to boycott, should we really have been so hard on _____? It depends of your view, you know, if you believe that you are a full-fledged human being, a member of a nation and culture which supposedly says that all people are worthy of being treated with dignity and so on, if you believe that, then there's no reason why black people owe white people any kind of special treatment. Now from our point of view, from the white point of view in this community, we would say, "Yeah, we're not used to black people, so go easy on us, I mean, give us a break, don't come in here with your big city ways and your street talk and s_____, we don't, we're not familiar with this, so be gentle with us." Yeah, that's point of view, I can't say that's invalid, but from the black point of view, blacks saw no reason why they should have to educate this white community, it wasn't their problem. And so they, generally speaking they tried to keep things cool as best they could, but they were black. They came, many of them came from a different culture, and they looked differently and they talked differently and they behaved differently, and, as the white kids would say, they grouped together a lot, and I just had a student tell me this in one of the papers I was reading last night, said, "Black kids come into the lunchroom and cafeteria and they hang together and they sit together, isn't this reverse discrimination?" I try to explain what's going on here, but it turned out this was when the black fraternity guys were getting together. But that's an attitude that white people have, I don't share it, I don't see any reason why black people need to be especially mindful of white prejudice, I think maybe the white people should reflect on their prejudice, though I don't think that's very likely.

I: So the white community never really gave blacks a chance either?

RM: Well, I don't think they knew how. I mean, I can't, I'm not trying to exonerate them, I'm dead set against prejudice, and we live in a white world and white people have established a white world, black people haven't established it, white people established this as a white world, and so there are consequences, one of the consequences is white people are very uneasy around black people, another consequence is that black people usually don't get the same kind of fair treatment as a white person, those are the consequences of racism, so it's unfortunate, but I don't think it's the black people's fault particularly.

I: Well, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]