Bill Tilton
Narrator

Rob Hahn
Interviewer

December 14, 2018

Office of Bill Tilton Law, St. Paul, MN

RH: Please introduce yourself.

BT: Well, hi. I'm Bill Tilton. I'm a lifelong resident of St. Paul, and I'm happy to be here to share whatever I can.

RH: And I'm Rob Hahn. We're in St. Paul today. The date is December 14 and we are talking about Dinkytown.

BT: 2018.

RH: Thank you. Yes. Let's start generically. Give me your memories of your first impressions of Dinkytown.

BT: My first impressions of Dinkytown were almost primordial, because my father had gone to the university and he talked about hanging out in Dinkytown. That would have been in the 1920s. For myself, I started school in 1965, and a fraternity brother's family owned a restaurant in the Dinkytown Dome Building on 14th and University. I was having meals there in 1965. This was long before Dinkytown became synonymous with the vital countercultural era.

But as a countercultural location and phenomenon, in shorthand, Dinkytown then and in '67, '68, '69, I remember going to The Scholar Coffeehouse. We did not realize at the time that it would become such a legendary place, because it housed Bob Dylan once or three times or whatever. Was Vescio's Pizza there at the time? Or some predecessor to it? I remember eating pizza there and going to Grey's drug store.

RH: We interviewed Shel Danielsen, otherwise known as Alan Stone.

BT: I love him.

RH: We'll talk more about him and what he had to say regarding your days at KQ toward the end of the interview. But he said coming from Edina, pizza was still kind of a new thing. Did you find it to be a new thing, or was it just something cool and fashionable?

BT: Relatively new. I mean, we didn't cook pizza at home. Carbone's Pizza in St. Paul was a regular high school hangout for St. Paulites from Cretin High School in that era. So it was not a new thing in that regard.

RH: Dinkytown. What is it, do you think, that made it such an intellectual center, a center of activism, a countercultural center?

BT: Well, inherently, because it's a community of Bohemian sorts on the edge of a major university. My old friend Marv Davidov, a sainted man who has now died, who was a freedom rider in 1961, founder of the Honeywell Project, et cetera. He started out in the late '50s as a Life model. He was a nude model working in Dinkytown. It's always been a Bohemian era. Bob Dylan played in The Scholar Coffeehouse. What years would that have been? '66? '67?

RH: Maybe a little earlier than that. In the '60s.

BT: Even earlier.

RH: '61 and '62, I think. Before he went to New York.

BT: Oh, that's a surprise. I didn't realize it was that early. I like to believe I was there in the later years, but I certainly wasn't there then.

RH: Let's throw out some other names. We talked about Marv. Diane Wiley. You've had association with her.

BT: I love Diane Wiley.

RH: What are your memories and the stories?

BT: Well, I first met her after she had just come back from six months in Greece, and she was tan and in great shape, and always full of life. She's one of the most brilliant people that I know. She's a very verbal, talkative, outgoing, stimulating, and fun person. I'm proud to say that I have been her friend for a long time. We'd actually gotten to know each other just as co-activists. In 1970 is really my first memory of Diane.

I was very involved on campus in the antiwar and student power sorts of stuff, and she was, of course, sympathetic and part of that movement, but got very involved in the Red Barn stuff in Dinkytown. I'm sure you're covering that by people who were much more involved than me. It was very funny because we all supported each other. Of course the community effort around the Red Barn was totally the same crowd of people and the same mindset of people that was involved in the antiwar movement and things.

But once or twice, there was a little bit of competition for, who's going to have their demonstration on such and such a time. And there were a couple times there were sort of competing events. There were occasionally discussions, if not arguments, about what are you doing, you can't do that, we got this going on.

But in general, so I'm free associating with Diane Wiley. She was always just a stalwart activist. A happy person. A dedicated person. A wonderful person. She's still at it. She got involved in jury work during the Wounded Knee Leadership trials, when those got moved up here in '73 and '74. I can take a little credit for getting her into jury work, and she's still doing it now all these decades later. She's still a core person for something called the National Jury Project.

Whenever there is a major political trial or trials, for example the Sacred Stone Camp Oceti Sakowin, a native activity that's opposed to the DAPL pipeline, Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota, the Jury Project was there doing survey work, talking about who can get a fair trial where and things like that. I won't go to a major jury trial without her at my elbow helping me pick a jury.

RH: Tell me about your memories and interactions with Father Harry Bury of the Newman Center at the time.

BT: Harry Bury I got to know, not in an activist way. I came out of the Irish Catholic ghetto of St. Paul, and the University of Minnesota's a commuter campus. So all of us Cretin kids were, Cretin and Lady of Peace and Derham Hall kids were commuting together to campus. What was the meeting place for Catholics in St. Paul but the Newman Center, which is actually right across 17th Street from my fraternity at University Avenue. So Harry Bury ran the Newman Center. He was a university community center guy.

Before he was a political activist, he was a campus organizer and counselor and confessor and things. We knew Harry Bury just as the stalwart guy who ran the Catholic center. It was a coincidence, or I'm proud of the fact that I can claim to have known him before he was an activist, or on non-activist terms. Just because we were Catholic kids hanging out in the basement of the Newman Center between classes.

RH: He said he became an activist and really aware of the Vietnam War when a lot of Catholics would come to him and want a Letter of Conscientious Objection. Did you know people like that? Students who were seeking CO status?

BT: Well, of course. I did not know that. The Vietnam War radicalized so many people, and Harry became quite the leader, and a very respected fellow. I'm not surprised that that's what brought him into the fold of antiwar activist.

RH: He told us a story, and I'm wondering if you were part of this demonstration at all. It was a protest after the Kent State murders, killings, and there were students protesting outside the ROTC building. You had police on one side, students on the other, and Father Bury and others walked right between them and kind of kept the peace over a number of hours. Maybe even over a couple of days. Were you involved in that at all?

BT: Oh, I certainly would have been there. Yes. In fact, I might have photographs of it in one of my drawers here, or in a box in my basement. I have a dozen boxes left over from that area of materials in my basement. Including photographs from those demonstrations. Anyway, there were times when it was very helpful to have people like Harry Bury and Burnham Terrell, and I can think of any number of older, more level-headed activists at the time.

Because there were students who were young and dumb and vigorous and crazier than they maybe should have been. The University Police Department, that I had a lot of respect for, that didn't want to have confrontations with people, and we had a Minneapolis Police Force that wanted an excuse to come on campus and thump heads. Which they ultimately did in 1972. Do I specifically remember Harry Bury doing that? No. But I remember that occurring and being very grateful for sensible people who acted as—

RH: You know, the spirit of activism, whether it was civil rights or Vietnam War protest, were those topics that were discussed almost on a daily basis when you would get together at a place like The Scholar or The V?

BT: The question is whether these issues were discussed on a daily basis. First of all, I have to admit, I can't say I went to The Scholar very often. When I was at The Varsity, The V, they were never discussed. That was the early years of being in a fraternity and on campus, and politics wasn't part of the discussion. Politics became our life after 1968, certainly, but that doesn't mean that we always talked politics, even among activists. Sometimes we just got together and listened to the stereo and smoked dope. Okay?

So you ask the wrong question by focusing in on The Scholar of on The V. When people got together, if it was folks that were organizing, then that's why we were together and that is what we talked about. But if you got together with your high school friends, it was sometimes just understood you were against the war and going to the demonstration, and you'd talk about other things. It was part of our soul that we believed in these things and we were going to be active about it, so there were times when that's all we talked about.

And I chaired many a meeting doing that. I became the co-chairman of the new mobilization committee to End the War in Vietnam, and spent hours chairing meetings. But socializing, sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes we just wanted to go and hear rock 'n' roll music and talk about who we were going to see this weekend.

RH: You mentioned when we talked on the phone that you obviously were a McCarthy supporter.

BT: Of course. Yes.

RH: In 1968. Was there any conflict among your friends with having two Minnesotans in the race, Humphrey versus McCarthy? Or was it pretty much all McCarthy?

BT: Interesting question. Humphrey folk versus McCarthy folk. I have to say, I really didn't know Humphrey folk. In my social group, those who paid attention to politics were peaceniks, were antiwar folk, and were McCarthy supporters. Certainly I knew people that weren't McCarthy supporters. I was in a fraternity that had a whole lot of conservative folk who went into the Army and became very strong supporters of the Vietnam War.

But that was a different discussion. It wasn't a matter of Humphrey versus McCarthy. That's a question for people who were much more involved in the DFL than I was. We sort of scorned electoral politics at the time. Especially after the '68 convention when the McCarthy delegation was so roundly rejected and thumped upon by Daily's cops in Chicago. I started out activism, at least antiwar activism, by sitting at McCarthy tables, and so believing in electoral politics. But it quickly segued into different sorts of efforts on my personal part.

RH: Tell me about the inception, if you will, of the Minnesota Eight.

BT: Well, the Minnesota Eight, as you know, is a group of eight people arrested in three different draft boards around the state of Minnesota as we were caught inside by the FBI intending to remove and destroy Selective Service records. We were going to feed the records of draft-age men to the Mississippi River. The FBI was waiting for us, so we were better burglars than we were on security.

The genesis of it came out of a groundswell of things beyond me. It just started happening that the highest visibility folk in the Midwest were certainly the Berrigan brothers. In Milwaukee, they removed, destroyed records in public by pouring homemade napalm on them and waiting around to be arrested. I was at that time giving speeches on a regular basis, almost a daily basis. Sometimes multiple times a day.

Because I ended up in a leadership role in the state antiwar committee, I'd go to high schools and speak to half a dozen social studies classes. I'd go to churches to speak to their community involvement group. I'd get asked questions like, do you support flag burning. And I said I don't support flag burning. I would explain why I thought somebody might do it and why it ought to be legal, but I didn't support it.

But they'd ask, do you support draft board raids. I had to think about it, and I decided I do support it. That the war is bad enough that we need to throw some gravel in the war machine. The typical political efforts at turning the ship of state weren't working, and so citizens had to take things into their own hands. Well, in that time of our lives, I can't just verbally support it. You are what you do, right?

So once I was confronted with the question do you support it, and had to say that I did support it, after thinking about it, and then I said, well, I have to do it. I was connected enough within the community locally and nationally that I sort of knew who was doing it. I just said the next time it happens, I want in. In other regards, 99 percent of my life was above ground organizing and I was a convener and a speaker and ran meetings with microphones and stuff. I was simply a soldier for the draft board raids.

I just said, "You are what you do. I support this, therefore I must do it." So I got into a network of folk that I took leadership from. I even went to Detroit once for a draft board raid that didn't occur. That's an interesting sidebar story. That's geographically nowhere near close to Dinkytown.

RH: This is a bit of a stretch, but I at least want to have your thoughts on it. When we were talking to Shel Danielsen, he said that you and Clyde Bellecourt and maybe others each had your own show from time to time on KQ. How'd that come about and what was the topic, what was it like doing your own show on KQ?

BT: I got on KQ through hubris or stupidity or a combination of the two. I'd just gotten out of prison and I loved KQRS and they had no news. So I went to the station, knocked on their door, and said you need a news department and you should hire me to do it. Well, Dick Poe was the station manager, and very good guy. Not at all political. Very nice guy. Just sort of politely laughed. He gave me a half hour. We sat and chatted. We had a good time. We liked each other right from the beginning, but he politely showed me the door.

Well, at that time, radio stations had a public affairs broadcasting requirement. They had to promise the FCC they would do a certain number of hours per year on topics important to the community. They'd give a list of 10, and they were the kinds of topics that you'd normally do shows on anyway. Elections and health and whatever. I think they'd had somebody else planned to do this program who dropped out of the running, and all the sudden I got a cold call saying, Bill, you want to host a radio call-in talk show? This would have been 1974.

All of a sudden, I had a weekly call-in talk show on KQRS on Sunday nights. KQ Scope. This is KQ Scope. I did it for a couple of years. Simultaneously, I was working at Minnesota Public Radio as an engineer. I had no social life. Every Friday night and Saturday night and Sunday afternoon, I was at public radio, and then I'd drive out to Golden Valley to KQRS on Sunday nights. I quit them both in 1976 to go study a term of law school at the University of Ghana in West Africa.

Just fortuitously, when I came back, I ended up working back at both places. KQ had hired two women to replace me, and Dick just put me into the rotation. I did every third Sunday instead of every Sunday. And Minnesota Public Radio hired me to do legal documentaries, so I was with both stations then until the '80s. Until the early '80s.

RH: When you look back on your time in and around Dinkytown, what impact did that have on your life?

BT: Oh, it totally defined my life. It totally set the tone for, you were confronted with the need to react to important historical, current events, and I think it forced people to decide, I want to act in a moral way. I want to act in an progressive way. I want to act in a community-oriented way. But for those movements, but for the Civil Rights Movement and the Antiwar Movement, and we had the first Earth Day, of course, in 1970, I might have just become another corporate lawyer.

You know, I went to college on a Great Northern Railway scholarship, and I promised I would seek employment there. So I was headed towards corporate law. But for that era, but for those movements, that's what I would have been. Or I could have been a politician. I could have been running for election. I've told more than one politician, "There but for a felony conviction go I."

RH: Tell us about Purple Haze and your role in it.

BT: Purple Haze is a wonderful movie made by old friends David Burton Morris and Vickie Wozniak. It follows somebody not unlike me insofar as middle class kid from a middle family in a mid-size town, St. Paul, who went to a military high school and who was confronted by questions about the war and the counterculture and drugs and music and sex and rock 'n' roll and all that.

I had recently gotten out of prison when they were making the movie, and they asked me to sort of be typecast to play somebody giving an antiwar speech. I had fun with it. It was great. I just said tell me what year and month your setting is, and I went and researched the facts of the war at that time and just assembled the facts that I would have used and the speech I would have made at that time about the war.

It was sort of funny because David and Vickie let me write my own copy, such as it was, and so I'm giving my speech and David stopped, of course, because they had to do something, shuffle around or move a camera. I can't remember what it was. He said, well, pick it up from whatever line I'd used when he interrupted me, and I had to tell him, I said, David, I don't have any copy written. I'm just making this up as I go along.

He laughed and shrugged, so I just kept making it up as I went along. Whatever made it into the movie was just me adlibbing with a few notes about what the circumstances were of the war at the time. But it's a great movie. It's an important movie, and very well done.

RH: I'm going to ask you a question about music a bit, here, and what role it played in your life. Particularly around Dinkytown performances. Koerner, Ray & Glover.

BT: Well, I'm proud to call Dave Ray a dear friend and I would regularly—Dave Ray was a good friend. Tommy Ray, his brother, and Max Ray, they provided some magic music. The Paisleys was a great group at the time. I don't know if you ever heard of The Paisleys. I tended bar at a hot, young, singles bar at the time in 1969. The Red Baron, it was called, and The Paisleys would play there.

They were the classic stoners, sort of stoners band. A Grateful Dead type band at the time. Music was a very important part of things. I'm privileged that I went to Woodstock. I was at Woodstock. I have two programs from Woodstock, and great memories. Music was an important part of our consciousness, of our revolution, and it continues. This morning, I made reservations to take my daughter to Neil Young, who's coming here next month.

As you asked that question, I can hear Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young and four dead in "Ohio" and things like that. Jefferson Airplane "Up Against the Wall Mother Whatever," and those were

part of our soul. It wasn't all political. We'd sometimes just drop LSD and go up and down the Jefferson Airplane. We'd stack up all of the Jefferson Airplane records, and then all of our Stones records, our Beatles records, and just listen. And community theater also was something that's part of that era that's been forgotten.

But music and grooming were an important part of that era. We were lucky to be alive at that time. It was such a vital time. There were bad things going on. The war was bad. Racial discrimination was bad. These were fights that were necessary, but it was still a time of cultural renaissance, of a musical renaissance. I think of philosophical discussions that occurred just on a common basis that didn't then occur. There was sort of a void for a decade or three, where people weren't dealing with important issues.

This publication was made possible in part by the people of Minnesota through a grant funded by an appropriation to the Minnesota Historical Society from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund. Any views, findings, opinions, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are throse of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the State of Minnesota, the Minnesota Historical Society, or the Minnestoa Historic Resources Advisory Committee.