

Erik Fraser Storlie
Narrator

Rob Hahn
Interviewer

March 4, 2019

RH: All right, let's go ahead and why don't you just start by introducing yourself and maybe a little bit about your, you know, a sentence or two about your connection to the U and Dinkytown.

ES: Sure. Well, I was born and raised in Minnesota, Minneapolis. Actually, not quite born here. I came at the age of two, lived in the Bryn Mawr area, graduated from high school, and went to the U in 58, and graduated from the U in 62 and then went to Berkeley, but between 58 and 62, I was a regular at the Scholar, at the various Seven Corners and Dinkytown parties.

RH: And most importantly, your name is Erik Storlie.

ES: Oh, excuse me.

RH: We want to get that in there, too.

ES: Erik Storlie, yep. Erik F. Storlie. There is a physician by that name.

RH: And I'm Ron Hahn. I'll be asking the questions, and we're in Minneapolis today, and it is March 4th, 2019. I think that covers what we need, right? Okay. So generically, let me start that way and ask you your first impressions of Dinkytown, either when you arrived in 58 at the U, or at some other time.

ES: Well, it was probably my high school years when I started hanging out with people from the Mount Curve Unitarian Youth Group. That included a college group of people whom to me were very mature elders, who were some of them even graduate students, and so the Scholar was a place of resort. Very exciting to be in that scene, which was looking to North Beach and Greenwich Village as inspiration. The beat poets; Ginsburg, Snyder, Kerouac.

So, I, like many of my buddies, were much taken with that, wanted to be no longer mainstream American kids, but kind of in the mold of the beatniks.

RH: I'll try not to jump around too much, but—

ES: Oh, whatever.

RH: And as I recall in your book you have a tale about McCosh and a Ginsberg book of yours.

ES: Well, yes, I first encountered Ginsberg, I think, at McCosh's bookstore, and of course he was the resident village troublemaker in Dinkytown with his very eccentric bookstore and very eccentric persona, a great beard, and so we were all fascinated with Ginsberg's poem "Howl." That fit our attitudes perfectly.

America was going to hell and we wanted these voices of protest, protest against the boring Eisenhower 50s, so that was a big component of those gatherings we would have, drinking coffee at the Scholar, parties that would happen on any given night, both around the Dinkytown neighborhood and then later around East Hennepin, and then around Seven Corners.

So, the Scholar and Gray's Drugstore were places where you could run into people and have long conversations about philosophy, history, film, religion, politics, all of that.

RH: What was it about the area of Dinkytown that was so conducive to this exchange of ideas, talking about different topics, becoming more bohemian, as you say?

ES: Well, I think because it was a small, essentially a few square blocks, it had a sense of its own center. There was Bridgeman's, Gray's Drugstore, the Ten O'clock Scholar, a pizza place, I forget the name. So right, there were things—places where you could gather and you could sit over coffee for a long time and it felt like its own neighborhood, something that we're, of course, losing as it gets overbuilt and built-up with high rises. A shame, but it's happening.

RH: You mentioned some of the hangouts. I'd like to go through a few of them one by one, and maybe you could share a specific story that you remember or just your general impressions. Let's start with Bridgeman's.

ES: Well, Bridgeman's was a perfect example of the forties and fifties in its décor. I forget what you call that kind of table surface that's a kind of linoleum, but not linoleum. Kind of a hard table surface. Everything was geared around hamburgers and ice cream and Coke and that kind of thing.

So, it was very ordinary collegiate, and not much different than the Bridgeman's downtown in décor, but you know, you could sit there for an hour and more and just have coffee. You didn't get thrown out. It was just around the corner from McCosh's bookstore, so you could go into his bookstore and then right across the street was Gray's. I just remember that Bridgeman's—going there maybe to get a sandwich or whatever, and you'd bump into people, sit down and talk.

RH: How did Gray's differ from other places in the neighborhood?

ES: Well, that, too, was like a standard drug store with a long counter and stools, and I didn't spend as much time there. That was more of a resort for older guys in there. I suppose they were in their late twenties. There was a group of Dinkytown hangers-on who were kind of the Bohemians that we younger guys were very

curious about. Kind of dubious characters like Lyle Tollefson, and Max Von Rabinof and John Shevlin.

Heavy drinkers, but during the day they would end up around Dinkytown, hanging out and talking. They seemed very enlightened and free spirits, although as you come to know their lives there was a lot of chaos and tragedy there.

RH: How about the Ten O'clock Scholar? You've mentioned it, but talk to me a little bit about the interior, about the music that was played there, and did you ever encounter or hear Bob Dylan?

ES: Oh, I'm sure I heard Dylan there a number of times, which reminds me, you should really interview Fred Hoffman, who knew Dylan better than I did and has some great Dylan stories which I can mention, but I don't want to—it would be better if they came from his mouth—but the Scholar was fascinating to us because it was a real coffee shop in the mode of what we imagined Greenwich Village or North Beach would be.

So, it was funky, it had art on the walls, kind of weird modern art or photography. There would be often classical music playing in the background, a series of folk singers went through like Koerner, Harry Weber, Bob Dylan, Dave Ray, and at the time we didn't remark Dylan particularly. He was just another kid who showed up and had a guitar and wanted to be noticed.

He came in 59, the year after I came, but he sat—he and Fred took some music classes together. Fred brought him home to visit his mother, who was a music teacher, and anyway, I shouldn't go into that if Fred—

RH: You can go into it.

ES: Well—

RH: If we can't hook up with Fred, then at least we have some of your memories.

ES: Well, yeah, I mean, these are stories I remember from Fred, kind of his repertoire of Dylan stories. So, Fred used to drive him to parties, and at one point Fred was very impressed with Dylan, so he took him home to meet his mother, the music teacher, who was a classical music—trained in music and opera, a singer and teacher, and Dylan played for Mrs. Hoffman, and then later Fred reported that his mother said, "That boy will never go anywhere."

So, that was her assessment of Bob Dylan in probably around 60 or so. "He'll never go anywhere, a hopeless case," and of course he wasn't highly skilled at that point. He came to Dinkytown planning to be a rock and roller and then discovered that no one was interested because everyone was listening to folk music, Folkways Records. Everybody—half my friends had purchased guitars and were becoming folk musicians.

Well, that was a very powerful part of that milieu at that time. You couldn't go to a party without someone playing a guitar and singing some, at the earliest stage, white working songs, white work protest songs.

RH: What about the evolution from the folk working songs to blues?

ES: Well, somewhere in there it happened, and I wasn't paying much attention to the music scene. It was all around me, I went to stuff, but I didn't think about it and I wasn't interested in getting a guitar or trying to become part of it, but at some stage in there, maybe in the early sixties with people like Koerner, Glover, and Ray, it turned over much more to the black blues, and that began to be more of what we heard.

RH: I want to jump forward a little and ask for a comparison. You went to Berkeley after finishing up at the U. How would you compare Berkeley during your time there? It would have been 62, 64-ish or so—

ES: Yeah, 62.

RH: To Dinkytown both before you went to Berkeley and maybe compared to Dinkytown when you came back in the later sixties?

ES: Well, when I got to Berkeley, things were still somewhat quiet. It hadn't become a major hippie scene, although Telegraph Avenue was classic coffee shops and bookstores and so forth, but by 63—let's see, maybe the fall of 64, is when the free speech movement started, and then the campus erupted, huge demonstrations, a takeover of Sproul Hall.

Finally, the police came in after students sat in for many days. I didn't go in Sproul Hall. I was in the crowd outside and decided that was not my scene. I went to some of the organizing meetings, but at that point I was much more interested in exploring all these new medicines that were showing up, everything from LSD to marijuana, and so I, unfortunately, in many ways, gravitated to the drug scene there.

Not hard drugs, but just everybody experimenting with all this stuff that had shown up, and I was really—I was probably 21 before I ever smoked a joint here in Minneapolis just before I left, so it's not like today where the 13-year-olds are being introduced in middle school, but as I mentioned earlier, that was kind of a divide between some of the older Dinkytown people who just continued on with a romance of the forties and fifties with alcohol, which was the drug of choice, and we romanticized it tremendously when I was in high school.

We were reading Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and you know, this sense of alcohol is the solvent which helps dissolve the evils of the world and our pain, our existential pain as suffering individuals, so that was the huge—the biggest switch I saw going to Berkeley. Suddenly, the scene was primarily grass, marijuana, and

of course Kerouac and Ginsberg had all romanticized that and moved away from the, the whole culture of drinking, and I think most of my—many of my mentors in the English department were alcoholics, and that was just the way it was.

RH: Did that change when you came back to Minnesota? I mean, did you see a change, I should say, a switch from alcohol to marijuana in the Dinkytown area and other areas around campus?

ES: Yeah, I think then it was a definite mix of people doing everything, and some of the older folks, and by older, some of the people who were five or ten years older than I was, were kind of appalled by that and not interested. But my generation was very interested.

RH: You talked earlier about kind of getting out of the stodgy Republican and Eisenhower years or breaking from that mold. What was the vibe in Dinkytown when Kennedy was elected?

ES: Well, you know, I never—I don't particularly remember. I think it was exciting, of course, but I don't have any specific memories of my own, of how people felt about it. I think some of us, and I was among them, were distanced from politics so that we just let that slide by, not my concern, nothing I can do about it. Much more concerned about the nuclear threats, the Cold War and the possibility of a nuclear exchange, and of course that got much heightened during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

RH: Let's go back to Melvin McCosh. Tell me some more stories about him because everyone seems to have a unique, different take or story or memory about McCosh.

ES: Well, he always fascinated me because of his slow, ironic speech and he always had a kind of cryptic comment to make. He was always putting up signs in his window to kind of put down the preppy scene on campus. I remember during homecoming he'd put up a sign "Homecomers Go Home" in his plate glass window.

And this strange bookstore filled with the most obscure books, things I'd never seen in my life. "Orientalia" as he called it, different sections. It seemed like he never refused to buy any book. The place was loaded, and I always remember my girlfriend at the time coming back from a visit to McCosh's bookstore rather horrified because he led her down into the basement to show her ostensibly a book she wanted, and made a move on her and she fled. So, McCosh was—that was part of his character.

My professor, Barney Bowron, told me of asking McCosh for an obscure book and McCosh said, "Well, I may have that." And McCosh then said, "Well, come to the house. I think I have the book at my house." And he lived just down from the Scholar a couple blocks where the boarding house upstairs is. People like

Greer and others, Dylan played poker up there with some of those guys, so McCosh rummages around his house while Barney's standing, and then finally says, "Oh, I know where it is," and he goes to the baby's cradle and pulls the book out from the cradle that has their baby. And Barney said, "I think that was just showmanship. He was making another legend about McCosh who even has books in the baby's cradle.

RH: How would you describe the activism in Dinkytown throughout the 60s? Whether it was political protests, social protests, things along those lines.

ES: Well, I think what really heated things up were the Freedom Ride to the south, where people like Marv Davidoff, who's gone, and Dave Morton, whom I think probably couldn't give an interview at this point, and you probably got some interviews where there's some other people who went on those freedom rides. So, that was very exciting.

I remember Davidoff urging me to join them and go to the south and I was busy. I was taking a class that summer, so I didn't consider it. And at that point I wasn't much engaged with the political element. I was much more interested in the philosophical discussions, the literature, the film. So, until the Vietnam protests when I, with another woman, led our constitutional law class to go on strike, I was not much engaged.

RH: So, we left off with Marv Davidoff.

ES: Yeah.

RH: What was it about him that brought so many people around him, and how was he able to inspire and essentially lead so many of these activists?

ES: Yeah, well he was unstoppable. I mean, tireless. He would appear in front of the Student Union and talk and harangue and promote something. And when I first met him at the East Hennepin Bar in the early fifties, he was an art dealer and a life model. That's how he was making his living, and then as the politics heated up he got totally engaged with protest politics, nonviolent protest, and when he was on he had a very outgoing, ebullient personality, talk a mile a minute, grab your attention, and from what I learned later at times then would sink into depression and just not appear.

I asked Bruce Rubenstein when I learned that Marv had apparently been diagnosed with bipolar, when he was ever depressed, and Bruce said, "Well, when he was depressed, he just didn't come out of his room." But when he was on, he was totally on, and people would coalesce around that. And you know, he organized the Honeywell project and other things that were very effective.

RH: What about the transition of Dinkytown over the years? To be blunt, what has it lost over the last decade or two?

ES: Well, the first thing—and this is very important, I think—is simply the loss that it is a corner, it's a neighborhood, the city allowing all this high rise stuff to happen really eats at the heart of what was once a neighborhood. So now it becomes more like a center for apartment buildings. And then you've got just the corner itself, some of the businesses hanging on, but now it's far more transient.

I don't hang out there anymore. It's been many, many years since I've spent time there, but my sense is there's nothing that would be inviting the way places like the Scholar and Bridgeman's and Gray's Drug were for just, "Oh, we're going to spend the afternoon here listening to music, drinking coffee, talking."

Now maybe some of that is going on, but I don't know. But you change—I mean, people tend to dismiss how important the physical environment is, and that was a neighborhood that catered to the students of all stripes, both the preppies and the want-to-be beatniks like me and my friends. So it was welcoming. It didn't feel—

RH: Were you there when I-35 came through and changed the whole neighborhood?

ES: Well, I was—the big change for me was when they knocked down all of the stuff around Seven Corners. When they did the redevelopment all the way from the gateway up to Seven Corners, and a piece of that history, and someone surely has talked about it, but when I first went to the U, the bar of choice was the East Hennepin Bar on East Hennepin, because that was the nearest liquor bar. I write about this in my book.

So, at some point I had my phony ID and I could drink with the big boys up at the bar in the East Hennepin, which was a working-class bar. The whole street was kind of eastern European, Polish, Czech working people, but the East Hennepin Bar gathered lots of people from the Minneapolis Symphony because it was the closest liquor bar.

Then the Greek proprietors refused to serve a black guy who was bringing his white girlfriend, and we protested and refused to go there anymore and went over to Seven Corners, where we found the Mixers Bar that had no concern about color.

But another interesting thing about that milieu was the openness to African-Americans, to gay people, to lesbian people, working people, professors, artists. I mean, I can't imagine that there is a bar in this country now where you could sit down next to a professor like James Wright would be sitting down chatting next to a truck driver like Slim Davis, and we were all very curious about each other.

So, there wasn't that divide we now have in the country where if you're working class you're probably voting for Trump, and you would never sit down next to a professor or an artist. So, we're fractured in a way now that we were not fractured during that period I would say of the late fifties, early sixties at the mixers bar and all up and down the street.

We students and arty types would go to all the bars up and down Cedar Avenue and they were all working class. No conflicts, no conflicts, and I think the city got frightened at some point that this was becoming an enclave of beatniks and potential protestors, so that fueled in part the redevelopment, moving it all the way down, I think, to Seven Corners, destroying all sorts of the neighborhood just to—and then to put in freeway systems right there at Cedar.

RH: Anything we're forgetting to ask about regarding Dinkytown that you want to add?

ES: Well, well it was a heady time. It was a lot of fun, a unique time. I think a unique time where in Dinkytown, also, we had this mix of all sorts of people from the university, from the working community, students, older people.

RH: How about the idea that you could go to Dinkytown and take on a whole different persona and kind of reinvent yourself?

ES: Well, I think you could. Yeah, I think I did, you know, and I started doing that as a senior in high school, but I wanted to be a beatnik, and I was, of course, 15 years too young to be a traditional beatnik, but we were looking at that and turtlenecks and black clothing for awhile, being kind of flamboyant, singling ourselves out so that we wouldn't be identified as frat boys or sorority girls, and that was a strong element.

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 those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the State of Minnesota, the Minnesota Historical Society, or the Minnesota Historic Resources Advisory Committee.



