Sterling Hall Bombing Podcast Script: Draft

Announcer/Troy: UW—Madison’s Campus Voices’ mission is to capture, present, and preserve some of the strongest historical stories and memories of UW—Madison, through the people who lived them. Campus Voices, a project of the UW—Madison Archives & Records Management Services, consists of presenting extant archival material in 21st century publishable formats, such as a podcast, mini-movie, and iTunes album.

Intro:
This is the second podcast in the UW—Madison Campus Voices series; I’m Troy Reeves, head of the oral history program at the UW—Madison Archives and Records Management Services and today’s host.

This podcast was created to mark the 40th anniversary of the Sterling Hall bombing, which took place at 3:42am on August 24th, 1970.

The bombing has become one of the more infamous events that took place on U.S. soil during our country’s involvement in Vietnam and stood as the largest act of domestic terrorism until 1995 and the bombing in Oklahoma City.

Last month, we—along with the Wisconsin Story Project—co-sponsored the Project’s Story Booth inside UW—Madison’s Memorial Library. The booth has a video camera to capture stories and memories of people on a variety of subjects; for our purposes we used it to get folks to talk about the Sterling Hall Bombing. While that material will not be available for public consumption for awhile, I can say something about it. As a non-Madisonian I have learned about Sterling Hall from the published material. While those books and documentaries tell the capital S Story well, it was great to hear all the little s stories left by the people who stepped into the booth. I did not need to eavesdrop on them to hear their story; almost every person who stopped in told their story to me before they entered the booth. To me that meant they wanted me to confirm the importance of their story AND they wanted to tell it to someone in person before leaving it at the booth. It will be these nearly 100 little s stories, left at the booth, these 3 to 10 minute anecdotes that will help future historians continue to tell this important piece of homefront history during the Vietnam Era.

Over the last 35 years, our oral history program’s staff and volunteers have conducted campus life histories interviews with administration, faculty, staff, and students. And inside many of those interviews, the interviewer would ask them about the Vietnam Era protest on campus and Sterling Hall. We spent the summer finding those little s stories inside the larger audio and transcripts to create an iTunesU album, a mini-movie, and now a podcast.

While we do not pretend that our podcast will become the word on Sterling Hall, we do intend to offer a version of the tale, using some of the voices from the UW—Madison’s Archives oral history collection.
Here’s where I turn over duties to Erin Dix, our current UW—Madison Campus Voices staffer who will lead us through, with great help from our oral history narrators, a story of the Sterling Hall Bombing. Erin.

The story begins with the student protest movement on campus leading up to August 24, 1970. This is Eric Brown, an Economics graduate student in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

**Events Before**

*Eric Brown*

Length: 0:45

EB: During the four years I lived in the dorms, one year in Witte and three years in Sellery, this was the period of maximum demonstration on campus against the Vietnam War. I came here in September, ’67. A month later, in October, ’67, was the demonstration against the Dow Chemical interviews in the old Commerce School behind Bascom Hall. And I remember quite vividly being aware of something going on there. During my three years as a house fellow, there were various demonstrations on campus. And sometimes from our dorm windows in Sellery, we could see demonstrations outside. We could see kids marching down Johnson Street. We could see police cars. We could see police chasing students, etcetera... From the ninth floor window in my room, I could actually, I could hear and see and smell teargas grenades being thrown. You could hear the sounds of glass being broken. You could hear yelling. You could hear sirens. You’d see fire engines. I mean, kids would light fires on campus. It was a pretty distressing time.

A particular focus of anti-war sentiment on campus was the Mathematics Research Center, housed on the second, third, and fourth floors of Sterling Hall. Since its establishment in 1956, the center had been funded by a contract with the U.S. Army (many thus referred to the center in short as Army Math or the AMRC.) In the following clips, Sarah O’Brien (an undergraduate student) and Seymour Parter (Professor of Mathematics) explain their differing perspectives on the Math Research Center and its activities.

*Sarah O’Brien*

Length: 0:43

It had been a demand for years that Army Math be off campus, that we felt that what Army Math did was the mathematics behind very sophisticated computer warfare that was going on in Vietnam. They designed weapons that were designed for the purpose of killing and maiming as many people on the ground without putting American troops at risk. And we felt that that mission to design those weapons was incompatible with a peaceful learning environment, and that Army Math should leave campus. And that demand had been made and ignored for years.

*Seymour Parter*

Length: 0:55

SP: ...We knew, and we had tried as hard as we could to make it clear that the Math Research Center was not doing any classified work. Pure research project. But the propaganda against it was rather fierce.

I’ll give you two examples. There was a little booklet that came out with four authors. One of them was Rowen, Jim Rowen. And one of them was Ed (Zideman?). Now this little booklet was describing MRC. It had two paragraphs. The first paragraph was, there’s research
being done at the Math Research Center on Monte Carlo Method. The second paragraph said the Monte Carlo Method was developed at Los Alamos Laboratory during the war to help build atom bombs.

JC: Was that true?
SP: Now, both statements are true. Both statements are absolutely true.
SP: What’s the implication?
JC: That it’s still for military purposes.
SP: Yeah, right. Right. Of course, it wasn’t.

As the school year of 1969 to 1970 went on, tensions continued to escalate on the UW campus. Events from around the nation, such as the shooting at Kent State in May of 1970, stirred student sentiment against the war and against the establishment. This is James Huberty, an undergraduate student who had been actively involved in campus protests at the time.

James Huberty
Length: 0:35
It was obvious to me that something was going to happen because this is, I mean, where could it go? It wasn’t going anywhere, it wasn’t getting less tense or less violent or less anything. It was getting more and more and more. You know, somebody is going to do something. There was stuff being said, you know. I mean, I didn’t personally hear anything at all from anybody, but it was just that sense of, you know, it’s, you know, it’s going to happen. Something’s going to happen.

In the early morning hours of August 24th, 1970, four men (Karl and Dwight Armstrong, David Fine, and Leo Burt) drove a stolen van up the driveway alongside Sterling Hall and parked it. Inside the van were barrels of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil along with sticks of dynamite. Fine called University Police to warn them of the bomb, Karl Armstrong lit the fuse, and the four jumped into a car and drove off. A few minutes later, the bomb ignited; the explosion was heard for miles around. Eric Brown, physics graduate student Robert Cadmus, Professor of Sociology and Rural Sociology Archibald Haller, and undergraduate Paul Sondel relate their experiences:

Bombing

Eric Brown
Length: 0:46
At the time of the bombing on August 24, 1970, I lived in a house with two other guys on Breeze Terrace. And it was about 3:45 in the morning. And all of a sudden, there was this huge explosion which we could easily hear on Breeze Terrace. It shook our house. It shook the windows. We didn’t know what had happened. And we ran out to the front porch. It woke all three of us up. And we saw these huge flames leaping into the air from Sterling Hall.

One of my roommates got in his car at quarter of four in the morning. And he drove to campus. And he came back. He said, “Well, they finally did it.” Meaning they finally blew up the Army Math Research Center, which is what they were trying to do.

Robert Cadmus
Length: 0:23
I lived on Mifflin Street at the time, and heard a loud noise, which woke me up, and looked out the window. And I could see a mushroom cloud going up very, very high. It’s conceivable I was the only person who ever saw it. It’s hard to estimate the height. But many times the height of the trees that were visible from the second story balcony. Very high.

**Archibald Haller**

*Length: 0:35*

I awoke at what, something like 3:15, and we live about five miles or so from Sterling Hall. And, uh, I heard a boom, and woke up, and I thought, isn’t that strange? It didn’t look like it was going to storm tonight. And I went back to sleep, and about 6:00 in the morning, I got a frantic call from a wife of a, of a police officer, who was a neighbor, uh, saying, screaming over the telephone that they bombed Sterling Hall.

**Paul Sondel**

*Length: 1:20*

I was asleep and all of a sudden heard this huge explosion. I thought it was a car backfiring that was parked right outside my window. It was that sort of a huge, loud explosion. And I immediately ran out the door and looked out the sky. And literally, there were papers coming out of the sky. You know, loose leaf kind of paper. Because our apartment was exactly two blocks from Sterling Hall. And I heard the explosion and I saw the paper. And my reaction was to run towards it. Someone’s in trouble. And my college roommate grabbed me by the belt and said, “We don’t know what’s going on there. We probably shouldn’t run up there and get involved” because there was enough noise and stuff coming out of the sky. By now, police sirens and other things were happening. So we walked up there and police told us to go back home. We weren’t sure exactly what had happened. All we knew was that there was this huge explosion and we felt it in the pit of our stomach.

Though the bombers later claimed that they planned detonation for early-morning to avoid causing death or injury, the blast injured five and killed 33-year-old physics postdoctoral fellow Robert Fassnacht, who had been working through the night on a superconductivity experiment. Ralph Hanson, the Director of Protection and Security on campus, was on the scene shortly after the bombing.

**Ralph Hanson**

*Length: 0:41*

In the first place, there was the concern for the safety of people in the building and have we got them all and what have you. And this was -- it was a long time, quite a period of time we were establishing if everybody was accounted for that was in the building. They had found that the police with the firefighting people, of course, had found a young research assistant... And I remember vividly him in the [word unclear] on the stretcher with a blanket over him. He was dead then. There was no question about it.

Richard Knowles, Professor of English:
Richard Knowles
Length: 0:20
The Sterling Hall bombing killed a good friend of mine, actually. Bob Fassnacht. He was the student who was killed. We were (offices?) on a chorus in town. We both sang in it. And we were good friends. His wife later worked with my wife in the Ag School. So I took that very personally, actually.

Hours after the bombing, President Fred Harvey Harrington and Chancellor Edwin Young issued a joint statement condemning the action as an “unspeakable crime.” Paul Ginsberg, Dean of Students:

Paul Ginsberg
Length: 0:09
One of the most moving moments that I can ever recall was in front of Bascom Hall the day that Sterling Hall was bombed, and Fred Harvey Harrington and Ed Young in tears, tears reflecting, I’m sure, a lot of, a whole myriad of feelings, a whole range of emotions. But those tears were real.

Aftermath / Reflections

In addition to the death of Robert Fassnacht and injuries caused to several others, the bombing inflicted tremendous damage to Sterling Hall and the surrounding campus buildings. The physics and astronomy departments, housed in Sterling Hall, received the brunt of the damage, while the Army Math Research Center was little affected. Eldon Newcomb, Professor of Botany:

Eldon Newcomb
Length: 0:41
EN: But when I came over, of course Sterling Hall was not far from the west side of our building.
BT: Right. Yeah.
EN: And all of the windows on the west side of our building had been blown out. And my laboratory was on that side.
BT: Oh, my.
EN: And my sectioning room. And Irving Shane was controlling access to the buildings. And I told him who I was, and he let me through. Well, the damage in our lab was extensive. I mean, some equipment was damaged.
I could still go down there and show you glass splinters in the doors.

Years and years of professors’ and students’ research was also destroyed. Robert Cadmus:

Robert Cadmus
Length: 0:47
RC: I guess one of the considerations from my own personal interest at the time was not so much in whether there was, whether my books or papers were intact or not. Whatever. But whether or not there was going to be nuclear physics at this university after that. It was quite a while after, without going into details of how the accelerator is constructed, it’s fragile. And it’s
conceivable that if it had been, its main structural parts had been destroyed through the shock, that funds would not have been available to rebuild it.

LS: I see. I didn’t realize that.

RC: And nuclear physics at this university could have just come to a stop instantaneously, effectively.

Marcus Singer, Professor of Philosophy:

Marcus Singer  
Length: 0:19
They destroyed the research of a number of physicists on campus. I remember some of them saying, “Why did they aim at us?” It wasn’t being aimed at. “We’re on their side. We’re opposed to the Vietnam War.” And so were many of the mathematicians in the Army Mathematics Research Center. Simply because they’re doing research for the military doesn't mean they’re in favor of the Vietnam War.

Beyond the immediate aftermath and physical devastation, the bombing had long-lasting effects, particularly for the physics and astronomy departments. Again, Robert Cadmus:

Robert Cadmus  
Length: 0:45
I think everybody was in a state of shock for a while. After that, I think, when it became clear that the lab was going to rise from the ashes one way or another...at that point, I think people mostly had the attitude well, the faster we get it cleaned up, the faster we’re back in business. But there were lots of supplementary pieces of equipment. It was years, I mean, it’s only been fairly recently that the effects of the bombing haven’t been quite noticeable. For a long time after that, you would need some tool to do something and you’d look around and say, “Must have gone in the bombing.” It’s really been just the last couple of years when the bombing didn’t sort of have an effect on what was going on.

Don Reeder, Professor of Physics:

Don Reeder  
Length: 0:43
DR: ...the effect on individuals was vastly asymmetric as well. I mean, Joe Dillinger, whose student and finally graduate student postdoc was Bob Fassnacht, who was killed-- he really never did psychologically recover. He died within three or four years. And he was distraught that whole time. Unable to focus or essentially accomplish anything after that.

The bombing and its consequences received national attention and truly shocked the wider campus community, causing profound change in the protest movement on campus. James Huberty and Richard Knowles explain:

James Huberty  
Length: 0:46
I went to one of the first rallies or one of the first protests of the fall of 1970, one of the first things I went to. And it was like where is everybody? Like where is everybody? And what occurred to me, you know, not just like it was, it occurred to me then, but I kind of, oh, okay, this is what happens is that that event, the bombing of Sterling Hall and certainly the killing of that researcher just was like taking a pin and pricking a balloon, and all of the built-up energies from all the rallies and demonstrations and all the student involvement and participation was just reduced to a few hundred people because no one wanted to be associated with that bombing where someone had died.

Richard Knowles
Length: 0:36
In the early days of the confrontations with police, in which the police behaved very badly as well as the students, it was easy for students to pose as heroes. To walk around with their arm in a sling and with a bruise on their head and so on. It was sexy to have been injured in the conflict, and heroic to have been engaged in it. But after the Sterling Hall bombing, they said, what are we doing? We’re becoming our enemy. And that really was, I think, all over the country, the turning point of the movement.

Troy: This is Troy again. For those who might have this as their first entrée into the bombing, a brief epilogue: Karl Armstrong was arrested in Toronto on February 16, 1972. He was sentenced to 23 years in prison and served 7. He resides in Madison today. Dwight Armstrong was arrested on April 10, 1977, also in Toronto. He was sentenced to 7 years in prison and served 3. He died in Madison on June 10, 2010. David Fine was arrested in San Rafael, CA on January 7, 1976. He was sentenced to 7 years in prison and served 3. He lives today in Portland, OR. Leo Burt remains at large.

Thanks to Erin Dix for her work on this podcast, the oral history program staff and volunteers who conducted the interviews from which we took these clips, and the Brittingham Fund for financial support of this and the other web-based publications of ours on this important, historical topic.

This concludes the UW-Madison Campus Voices podcast on the Sterling Hall bombing; thank you for listening. Check out our Campus Voices website for more information about this historic event and others in UW—Madison’s past. The easiest way for us to verbalize the web link: goto archives.library.wisc.edu, then click on oral history program, then click on campus voices. At least we think that’s the easiest way to verbalize it, anyway thanks again for listening and take care.

TOTAL LENGTH: without narration, 11:52