At the height of anti-war sentiment, the Quad was a center for dissent, demonstrations

Bill Wickersham, a former MU professor, recounts how he was arrested in front of thousands at an anti-Vietnam War protest in 1970.

Multimedia by Sydney Miller; text by Lukas Udstuen

Just as Bill Wickersham was about to administer a master’s examination on May 8, 1970, a colleague rushed to him and urged him to head over to Jesse Hall.

“Your students are sitting in,” he was told.

“I found them, yes indeed, sitting, blocking the chancellor’s office,” Wickersham said.

Days earlier, former university Chancellor John Schwada had threatened to fire sociology professors who voted to cancel classes in support of a student-led anti-war demonstration.

“Much of this started because the sociology professors — most of the Sociology Department, not all … did dismiss classes,” Wickersham said.

By that afternoon, the crowd grew to more than 2,000 students, becoming one of the largest student protests ever held on the Quad.

The previous week, President Richard Nixon announced the war in Vietnam would spread into Cambodia. Anger over the expansion of the war was further fueled when an anti-war protest at Kent State University in Ohio resulted in four student deaths and nine injuries.

On the night of what has come to be known as the "Kent State Massacre," protesters at MU painted “Kent State” on the base of two of the six Columns on the Quad, according to Wickersham’s book, “Reflections of a University of Missouri Peace Activist.”
According to the book, at Friday morning’s rally at Jesse Hall, students had four basic demands. Among them were that the MU administration take a position against the war. Students also demanded that MU stop punishing professors who had decided to strike and that amnesty be granted to all those arrested in peaceful protests.

The suggestion that the MU administration should take a moral stance on the war was later removed from the students’ request, as reported by The Maneater.

“The unfair thing was to ask the chancellor to take a position, the position we wanted, on the war,” Wickersham said, reflecting on the protest. “You do not do that in an academic institution. Unfortunately, that was one of the so-called demands.”

Wickersham said the demonstration used a model of nonviolent protest, inspired by Thoreau, Gandhi and King.

“Months later, they would refer to this as the ‘MU Riots,’” Wickersham said. “There was no such thing. We went to great lengths to make sure things did not get violent.”