

**Successful Non-Violence?
Looking at the Thirteenth Street Incident**

Jennifer Stocks
March 11, 2005
HC 421

Introduction

The decade of 1960 is well known for its rebellion and student revolution. Struggle for civil rights, protest against the Vietnam war, and the wrestle for more student involvement in their universities were some of the main issues to take the stage. To many the Sixties are remembered as years of chaos, riots, and violence. The University of Oregon was not exempt from these circumstances. The Spring of 1970, in particular, witnessed some of the most violent and destructive events. There were, however, instances where violence did not enter into the demonstration and destruction was not necessary to send a public message. This paper looks into a non-violent incident that occurred on the University of Oregon campus during this Spring of 1970, asking the question "was the non-violence successful?"

Preceding the Barricade

For over twenty years, the University of Oregon had been trying to close the section of Thirteenth Avenue that ran through campus. Not only did traffic make it dangerous for students trying to cross the street to get to classes¹, but also logging trucks consistently used the road for their routes, which disrupted the classrooms located near the street with their noise.² The City of Eugene, however, had been continually resisting

¹ Letter from John E. Lallas to Hugh McKinley regarding traffic on 13th, August 15, 1969, Traffic, Signals at 13th and Agate; Series I: 1969-1970; Office of President Clark, coll. UA16, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

² Interview, Ken Metzler. January 31, 2005. University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

its closure, citing Thirteenth Avenue as a "key east-west arterial."³ At one point, ten years earlier in 1960, the City had agreed to close Thirteenth Avenue if the University helped pay for the cost. The University, however, was unable to come up with the money.⁴

In the more recent years leading up to the student barricade on Thirteenth Avenue, more attempts had been made to close the street but little to no progress had been made. For three years, city councilman Fred Mohr had been working on its closure.⁵ No action was taken by the City to address the rising danger as more cars and students used the street, until 1968 after a student was hit by a car. As a result, the City installed ten minute traffic lights, which stopped cars during the ten minute passing periods between classes.⁶ These traffic lights, though, were often disobeyed- a majority of the violations coming from University students and staff.⁷

In the same year, 1968, a student study was conducted on the nature of the traffic on Thirteenth Avenue. According to the "Summary of Outstanding Features of the Thirteenth Avenue Traffic Study," 82% of traffic was either proceeding to or from campus and its "immediate environs." It was also found that an average of 286 vehicles used the street each hour. The majority, at 62%, of vehicles carried only one rider and 50% of the vehicles contained at least one student. This study was important because it

³ Ed Kenyon, "Eugene mayor asks public to keep 'cool' on barricades," *The Register Guard*, April 28, 1970, sec A.

⁴ Ed Kenyon, "City Action delays formal hearing on 13th Avenue Closure," *The Register Guard*, May 5, 1970.

⁵ Jim Frake, "City ponders action on illegal U of O street barricades," *The Register Guard*, April 27, 1970, sec B.

⁶ Report, "Ordinance No. 15430" regarding traffic signals on 13th street, September 10, 1968, Traffic, Signals at 13th and Agate; Series I: 1969-1970; Office of President Clark, coll. UA16, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

⁷ Letter from H.A. Ellsworth to Charles Johnson regarding 13th street traffic, September 11, 1968, Traffic, Signals at 13th and Agate; Series I: 1969-1970; Office of President Clark, coll. UA16, Division of

showed that most of the vehicles using Thirteenth Avenue were University traffic, as opposed to city traffic. The City of Eugene had been claiming the street was used by a large percent of city traffic and therefore a "key east-west arterial."⁸

Events just before the barricade incident were much more intense. The ASUO, the student government association, engaged in discussions with the City on behalf of the street's closure and there was continued increasing concern of students regarding the crossing of Thirteenth Avenue.⁹ Only a week earlier, the Johnson Hall sit-in had taken place on campus. This was a demonstration by University students which had started as a sit-in at the administration building while students asked that certain demands regarding university proceedings be met, and resulted in major violence, with the Oregon National Guard eventually being called in. Needless to say, tensions were very high on the University of Oregon campus, with a very thin line existing between non-violent and violent protests.¹⁰

On Sunday, April 26, 1970 a student rally was held at the student union. That evening the Thirteenth Avenue barricade incident began.

The Barricade Incident

At nine o'clock Sunday evening, a group of students began to build two brick planters on either end of a three block stretch of Thirteenth Avenue, between Kincaid and

Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

⁸ Report, "Summary of Outstanding Features of the Thirteenth Avenue Traffic Study," study took place on February 28, 1968, Traffic, Signals at 13th and Agate; Series I: 1969-1970; Office of President Clark, coll. UA16, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

⁹ Letter from John E. Lallas to Dick Jones regarding traffic on 13th, October 15, 1969, Traffic, Signals at 13th and Agate; Series I: 1969-1970; Office of President Clark, coll. UA16, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

¹⁰ Interview, MaryAnne Wakefield. February 13, 2005. Portland, Oregon.

University Drive.¹¹ Although newspapers such as the *Oregonian* and the *Oregon Statesmen* reported hundreds of students participating, the *Register Guard* reported that less than twenty-five people actually participated in the building of the barricade. As the planters were being constructed, 100-200 students watched and "discussed the merits" of closing Thirteenth Avenue permanently.¹²

The group participating in this demonstration was not violent. As evidence of their peacefulness, the barricades, which also consisted of bike racks and trash cans, left room for emergency vehicles to pass through the street. According to Ron Eachus, the President of the ASUO at that time, the event was a collaboration of efforts: some students carefully measured the width of the emergency lane, a student who worked at a nursery brought plants and shrubs for the planters, and others brought bricks from the construction site at the law school.¹³ Because of this lack of violence, while city police were at the scene during the barricading of the street, they took no action to stop the students for fear of provoking the crowd into violence.¹⁴

The barricade itself took less than an hour to build, resulting in two foot high planters, which were planted with a tree and shrubs. The demonstrators also made signs, renaming the three block section of road "The People's Street" and "Liberty Lane." During the evening, city councilman Fred Mohr came to speak to the protestors. He was upset by their actions, because he was concerned it would create further opposition by the public and hurt all the work he had previously done trying to close Thirteenth Avenue. However, in the *Register Guard*, the caption under his picture at the barricade read only

¹¹ Jim Frake, "City ponders action on illegal U of O street barricades," *The Register Guard*, April 27, 1970, sec B. *The Register Guard* is supported by archival research.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interview, Ron Eachus. March 1, 2005. Salem, Oregon.

"Councilman Fred Mohr speaks out against brick barricade."¹⁵

Monday the barricade still remained, although by seven o'clock that morning police had removed the bike racks and trash cans from the structure. Picketing began, with students protesting for their student demands to be met.¹⁶ These demands were also a part of the protest at the Johnson Hall sit-in, showing the issue had potential for another violent outbreak. The demands the students were asking for, and which had been declined at the Johnson Hall sit-in were: the "Removal of Naval recruiters from campus; ending ROTC; amnesty for individuals arrested as a result of last week's disturbances [referring to a violent demonstration at the ROTC]; removal of all police from campus."¹⁷

At the time of the barricade, the major question on campus was whether or not the ASUO was going to back an official student strike, asking for the list of demands to be met. As the brick planters continued to block the street and the city took no action, citizens began building their own barricades in protest. The first "mock barricade" noted in the *Register Guard* was named "Taxpayer's Terrace" and it blocked Forrester Way in the Willakenzie area.¹⁸ The frame of mind was "if the students are going to get away with it, then we'll do it too," in order to show the City how ridiculous their inaction was. However, while the citizens were forced to take down their barricades by police, the barricades on Thirteenth Avenue continued to stand.

Monday evening a City Council meeting took place. Prior to the meeting, a "non-

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jim Frake, "City ponders action on illegal U of O street barricades," *The Register Guard*, April 27, 1970, sec B.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Article, "Students take Johnson Hall; stay all night" in the Oregon Daily Emerald, by John Lanier, regarding the student occupation of Johnson Hall on Earth Day, 1970. April 22, 1970, Student Unrest, ODE Clippings 4/15/70; Series 1: "1969-1970"; Office of the President Records, coll. UA16, Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

public executive session" transpired. Interestingly, none of the usual reporters who covered the meetings were notified and the session was not announced in advance, an "oversight" Mayor Anderson attributed to the "stress" of the situation. At the City Council meeting, the discussion was "surprisingly moderate." One student presented a petition requesting a legal closure of Thirteenth Street to the council with 1,310 signatures on it, which had been gathered in five hours. The final city council decision was to hold a May 11th public hearing on the issue of legally closing the street, on the condition that the barricades were removed. This decision had been reached at the private meeting held earlier. The City Council carefully "avoided setting a deadline for the barrier removal." Mayor Anderson also agreed with this move, saying it should come down within a "reasonable" amount of time. Only one member of the council felt a deadline should be set, H.C. McDonald.¹⁹

During the City Council meeting, two citizens rammed their vehicles into the barricade in an attempt to take action themselves. Once the cars were towed, though, the students quickly repaired the barricade.²⁰

On Tuesday, as citizens became more and more angered by the still standing barricade, Mayor Anderson issued a "keep your cool" plea.²¹ The Mayor explained the decision not to force the removal of the barricade on Thirteenth Avenue stemmed from the fear by both the City and the University that "property damage and personal injury" might result.²² The demonstrators at the barricade had been non-violent thus far, and the

¹⁸ Mike Strahlberg, "Citizens raise second barrier," *The Register Guard*, April 27, 1970, Sec. A.

¹⁹ Ed Kenyon, "Eugene mayor asks public to keep 'cool' on barricades," *The Register Guard*, April 28, 1970, sec A.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Peter Berkeley, "UO Street barricades Upset Eugene Citizens," *The Oregonian*, April 29, 1970, sec A.

Mayor did not want to provoke an escalation of the situation into violence.

Tuesday showed the most potential for violence, as citizens remained upset with how the situation was being handled by the City. Some felt that violence was necessary in order to put the students in their place. In a letter to the editor of the *Register Guard*, Robert Burnham wrote, "Why must this be handled in the 'least provocative way'? No kid gloves are needed, just brass knuckles."²³ Other citizens showed their "concern" by marching to the city manager's Tuesday night.²⁴ Citizens continued to threaten to close down other streets and still more flooded the telephone lines to their public officials.

With Wednesday came the de-escalation of the incident, as the barricade was taken down around noon. The students were split on the removal of the barricade: some felt it should not come down at all; others thought they should wait until a "show of good faith" was made by the City Council; and still others felt it should be taken down before the council meeting.²⁵ In the end, it was the latter group which won out, and much of the demolition crew included the same students who had constructed the barricade Sunday night. As one student told the *Register Guard*, "We'd rather take it down ourselves than have somebody else do it."²⁶ The hope of the students, in taking down the barricade, was that the public hearing would be moved up from the May 11th date.

The press gave much less coverage of the barricade's de-construction than the initial media coverage when the incident began. While many of the newspapers had several articles on its construction and potential for violence, the take down received only

²³ Robert Burnham, "Letters In the Editor's Mailbag: Another Berlin Wall?" *The Register Guard*, April 30, 1970, Sec A.

²⁴ Lloyd Paseman, "Group marches to protest city inaction on barricades," *The Register Guard*, April 29, 1970.

²⁵ Gene Bryerton, "UO campus returns to normal with street barricades gone," *The Register Guard*, April 30, 1970, sec B.

small blurbs in the newspapers around the state. This was demonstrated by an incident that occurred almost two weeks after the barricade. A Mr. Charles Whittemore of Salem called the University of Oregon, complaining about the inaction taken on the barricades. It was not until further into the conversation that Jan A. Medrano, the person taking the call, realized that Mr. Whittemore thought the barricades were still up. Once she informed him that the barricades had been taken down, he was "happy to hear the barricades had been removed voluntarily by the same group who had erected them." They agreed that "the news media had not given the same sensational coverage to the removal that had been given to the erection of these barricades."²⁷

The barricades came down Wednesday, just before the City Council meeting. Possibly as a result the legal hearing for the closure of Thirteenth Avenue was moved from May 11th to Monday, May 4th, although some argued that the change of date was a result of a previous agenda already planned for the May 11th date.²⁸ The May 4th meeting was only to be a preliminary hearing because, according to the law, an "official" public hearing could not take place until at least twenty-eight days later.²⁹

After the Barricade

On Thursday, the University of Oregon Campus Planning Committee met to discuss the issue of closing Thirteenth Avenue. At the meeting the motion was

²⁶ Gene Bryerton, "UO barriers taken down," *The Register Guard*, April 29, 1970, sec B.

²⁷ Report, "Memorandum for the file," by Jan A. Medrano talking on the phone to Mr. Charles Whittemore of Salem, May 12, 1970, and his concern for the barricades on 13th street, Complaints; Subject Files, coll. UA Ref1, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

²⁸ Lloyd Paseman, "UO planners back closure," *The Register Guard*, May 1, 1970, Sec B.

²⁹ Gene Bryerton, "UO campus returns to normal with street barricades gone," *The Register Guard*, April 30, 1970, sec B.

unanimously approved to support "in principle" the closing of Thirteenth Avenue. Only one person, associate professor of history William Hanna, voiced concern that it was the illegal actions of the students that had "pushed" the city into response. The Campus Planning Committee was a group made up of both faculty and students to help advise the President, Robert D. Clark. In this event, though, the council's advice came after Clark had already filed a formal letter to Mayor Anderson "requesting vacation of the street."³⁰

In the letter written to Anderson, Clark sided with the students both subtly and clearly. In the first part of his letter, Clark appears to share the same view as the City in looking at the students' actions as dangerous and irresponsible. By looking carefully at the word choice Clark used, it can be seen that he also recognizes the students' point of view. The first sentence states, "I deplore the unilateral action of students in putting planter boxes across 13th Street, an incident which might have led or might yet lead to serious consequences for the University and the City." A student was quoted at the site of the demonstration saying they were not building barricades but planters, in essence saying that they were creating something beautiful not destructive. Not once in the letter does Clark refer to what the students constructed as a barricade. Even in this strong opening sentence, Clark refers to what the students constructed as a "planter box." Later in his letter, Clark clearly sides with the students on the closing of the street, saying "In regard to this basic issue, I must say that the University has for 20 years or more sought to have the street closed...I believe it would be a great thing for the Council to act favorably on the request to close 13th Street."³¹

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Letter from Clark to Mayor Anderson Regarding 13th Street Closure, April 27, 1970, Closure 13th; Office of the President Records, Division of Special Collections and University Archives; University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403

On Monday, May 4th, the third City Council meeting took place regarding the issue of Thirteenth Street. Instead of making progress on the issue, though, the meeting delayed the approval of an ordinance which would have called the official hearing. The "concept of delay" was approved by a 4-3 majority.³² The City said that before having the meeting, a City Planning Commission study needed to be conducted and the State Board of Education needed to take an official position.³³ At the meeting, a group from the University of Oregon's school of architecture came to give a slide show.³⁴ According to Robert D. Clark, it was these students who originally built the brick planters, before the student strikers took the site over.³⁵ Since the barricade went up, the group had been working on solutions to the street problem.³⁶ Because of the council's delay in approving an ordinance, this pushed the closest official hearing to twenty-eight days after May 25th, when the council's next meeting would take place.

A week later, Monday, May 11th, the City Council "quietly" approved a two-week test closure of Thirteenth Street. During this time, city traffic engineer Al Williams was going to conduct a study of the traffic effects the closure of Thirteenth Street would have. The temporary closure of Thirteenth Street was to begin the week of May 18th. The City began to look at every option for closing Thirteenth Street, both positive and negative. In an unofficial visit to Robert D. Clark, city manager McKinley suggested that the City would look highly on the street closure if the University gave the south river bank land to the City, which would be used to build a highway to Springfield. President

³² Ed Kenyon, "City Action delays formal hearing on 13th Avenue Closure," *The Register Guard*, May 5, 1970.

³³ "Street Talk Postponed," *The Oregonian*, May 6, 1970.

³⁴ Ed Kenyon, "City Action delays formal hearing on 13th Avenue Closure," *The Register Guard*, May 5, 1970.

³⁵ Interview, Robert D. Clark. March 7, 2005. Eugene, Oregon.

Clark responded saying that Thirteenth could be open forever, but the city was not going to take the river bank land. In response, McKinley "slapped his knee" and agreed.³⁷ It was also scheduled that a subcommittee of the University of Oregon's Campus Planning Committee would meet with the City Planning Commission in order to discuss the issue.³⁸ At the joint meeting, the city suggested that the University should share in the costs of providing alternate routes for traffic as a result of the closure of Thirteenth Street. Larry Bissett, a University Campus Planner, strongly objected to this idea, however, because according to the study conducted by students in 1968, only 18% of traffic was not related to the University. City traffic engineer, Al Williams, on the contrary, argued that city statistics indicated that 42% of the traffic on Thirteenth Street was not related to the University. The basis of the city's statistics, though, differed from the student's study: the student study focused specifically on the traffic of Thirteenth, while the city statistics were from a general study.³⁹

In June of 1970, the "13th Avenue Closure Study" was presented. The study had been conducted in two parts. During the first part, temporary barricades had been placed on May 20th in order to shut down Thirteenth Street between Kincaid and University. Studies of traffic were conducted both before and after the barricades were placed. The second part of the study, which had been conducted on June 3rd, closed Thirteenth Street between University and Onyx. The second part had only limited studies conducted, though, because it was quickly seen that closing this section of Thirteenth Street had little

³⁶ Lloyd Paseman, "UO planners back closure," *The Register Guard*, May 1, 1970, Sec B.

³⁷ Interview, Robert D. Clark. March 7, 2005. Eugene, Oregon.

³⁸ "U of O portion of 13th Ave to be closed for 2-week test," *The Register Guard*, May 12, 1970.

³⁹ Ed Kenyon, "UO planner disputes street closure effect," *The Register Guard*, May 19, 1970.

effect on slowing the traffic.⁴⁰

The study revealed several problems with closing Thirteenth Street. The first was the underground utilities on Thirteenth Street, which would need addressing before the street could be closed. The second problem was the interference the closure would create for emergency vehicles. The third problem was that the bus route would have to be changed. It was also discovered that the change in bus route might result in some loss of business, although the report made no estimate as to how much.⁴¹

The study concluded that the problems found in closing Thirteenth Street were problems that already existed and that the closure would "merely accelerate the point in time that the solution [would be] needed." It was decided that Thirteenth Street could be closed between Kincaid and University as long as the problems listed were resolved. The report also suggested that because the closure of Thirteenth Street "substantially eliminates all but University oriented traffic on 13th, University, Onyx and 15th Ave within the main campus area" and because the city spent lots of money each year on maintaining the streets at the time of the closure, University-City discussions should begin immediately in order to create a "reasonable schedule" to "transfer these responsibilities to the University." The report then went on to suggest that additionally, "Pedestrian-vehicle conflict at 13th and Kincaid will probably ultimately justify an alternate vehicular pattern west of Kincaid, the cost of which would appear to be at least partially the responsibility of the University."⁴²

⁴⁰ Report, "13th Avenue Closure Study" prepared by the Traffic Engineering Division Department of Public Works City of Eugene, June 1970, 13th Avenue, Subject Files, coll. UA Ref1, Division of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Report, "13th Avenue Closure Study" prepared by the Traffic Engineering Division Department of Public Works City of Eugene, June 1970, 13th Avenue, Subject Files, coll. UA Ref1, Division of Special

Conclusion

The question of whether or not this incident was a win or loss for the students is difficult to answer. The more the question is delved into, the murkier it gets. In some ways, the event was a clear win: both the University and the students had been working for years to get the City to permanently close the street. For a moment during the turmoil of the 1960s, both University and student concerns coincided. If it had not been for the students' barricade, the issue might never have come to such a head and the street might still be open. However, taken from the point of view of citizens and students who were not directly involved in the incident, the barricade situation was more of a loss. Because the citizens were unhappy with the way the City dealt with the situation, the students developed a very bad reputation. To this day there are citizens who still hold a grudge against University students for the actions they took, believing them to be a bunch of "rabble rousing" radicals.⁴³ Students who did not participate saw the barricade only as a symbol for the strike that was potentially going to take place for student's rights. When the strike idea fizzled out and the barricade was taken down, they assumed it was because of lack of interest by the students.⁴⁴

Because there were so many different reasons why people believed the barricade was put up, it seems important to judge the win or loss according to the original reasons that the barricade was put up and taken down. The barricade was put up in order for the students to take charge and hold control over their safety. They used the blockade of the street to represent the authority they should have over matters that affect them directly; in

Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403.

⁴³ Interview, Katie Stocks. February 5, 2005. Eugene, Oregon.

this case, they were closing the street which otherwise was a danger to them. The barricade was taken down in order for the City to make a decision to close the street permanently and legally. The result of the whole incident was the closure of the street by the City, proving a win for the reason why the barricade was erected and why it was taken down. For these reasons, the non-violent barricade incident was a success.

With so much turmoil and chaos surrounding the time, the Thirteenth Street incident was an oasis of non-violence. While the burning of the ROTC building and the Johnson Hall Sit-in failed to bring change, the students were able to accomplish their goal by simply building planter boxes across the street. For a period of time in those tumultuous years of the late Sixties, the students, the University, and the City were able to talk and work together to come up with a solution that was best for everyone. The result was a non-violent success.

⁴⁴ "Diary of a Freshman Coed," Old Oregon 49-50 (1971): 27-34.