Berkeley in the ‘60s

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SUSAN STAMBERG, HOST: It's WEEKEND EDITION. I'm Susan Stamberg.

Federal prosecutors preparing a case against suspected Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski will put a cryptographer on the stand next month to explain the contents of a diary that may link Kaczynski to a number of crimes.

The diary, written apparently in mathematical code, underscores what little is known of the events that shaped Kaczynski's life. It is known he was a brilliant mathematician who taught at the University of California Berkeley during two of that school's most turbulent years: 1967 and '68; anti-Vietnam War demonstrations; student strikes; a raging fight over a place called "People's Park. " The campus was in almost constant turmoil.

Here's NPR's John McChesney.

JOHN MCCHESNEY, NPR REPORTER: Hot rhetoric and the acrid smell of tear gas were a constant while Theodore Kaczynski taught at Berkeley. But the battle over People's Park in the spring of 1969, just as he was about to quit his job, was the most violent the campus and the city had ever seen.

At issue was a scruffy, weedy lot in downtown Berkeley, owned by the university. Hippies and radicals had camped out there, planted trees and shrubs, and dubbed it a park. The university regents moved in with bulldozers and built a fence around the land, ringed by police.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP)

(SOUNDBITE OF A CROWD)

The next day on campus, at a rally attended by several thousand, student body president Dan Siegel (ph) spoke.

DAN SIEGEL, FORMER STUDENT BODY PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY: I have a suggestion.

(LAUGHTER)

Let's go down to People's Park.

(APPLAUSE AND CHEERS)

People be careful. Don't let those pigs beat the shit out of you. Don't let yourself get arrested on felony. Go down there and (Unintelligible) park.

CROWD, CHANTING: We want the park We want the park

MCCHESNEY: The crowd marched down Telegraph Avenue, and before long engaged the police in battle. Denny Smithson (ph), a reporter for the local Pacifica radio station KPFA, described the scene as it grew increasing ugly.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP)

CROWD, CHANTING: We want the park We want the park

DENNY SMITHSON, KPFA REPORTER: The police are now being charged by people who are throwing rocks in great number. And matter of fact, the police are having to retreat around the corner. People are still running...

(SOUNDBITE OF TEAR GAS CANISTERS BEING FIRED)

... towards that intersection, throwing rocks, bottles, whatever, great number. More gas just went off.

MCCHESNEY: When the police realized that tear gas was not going to win the day, they changed weapons.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP)

SMITHSON: Jesus Christ. All right. They're using guns now. They've all got shotguns now. So, they're using scatterguns against the crowd. The policeman had a fellow running away from him, and he shot him as he was running away from him.

MCCHESNEY: Later, as students hurled rocks down from the rooftops, police loaded buckshot in place of birdshot, and a bystander named James Rector (ph) was killed, and another person blinded.

Governor Ronald Reagan called in the National Guard, and had the campus occupied. Theodore Kaczynski lived only four blocks from People's Park. And two years earlier, when Kaczynski arrived in Berkeley, the Army Induction Center in downtown Oakland became the target of days of violent demonstrations during what was called "Stop the Draft Week."

There were noisy rallies on the Berkeley campus at night to prepare people for the next day's battle. And, the campus was also disrupted for weeks by a student strike over minority studies and admissions issues. Troy Duster (ph) was then and still is a member of the UC Berkeley Sociology Department.

TROY DUSTER, MEMBER, UC BERKELEY SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENT: What I think it's hard for students now to really fathom is how those who were actually engaged thought that was about dramatic change in the society; this was not just about a student movement.

The feel in the middle and late '60s here, this was serious business.

MCCHESNEY: Duster says it was nearly impossible to find any middle ground in those days. And if you found yourself caught in the middle, it could be unbearable. John Addison (ph) chaired the 90-member mathematics department when Kaczynski taught there and he later, reluctantly, accepted his resignation.

Addison says there were times when he questioned the relevancy of his own training.

JOHN ADDISON, FORMER CHAIRMAN OF MATHEMATICS, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY: Those four years as chairman, from '68 to '72, were an immense trial. I mean, I felt at times that I should been a lawyer or a priest, or...

(LAUGHTER)

And that being a mathematician didn't really have much to do with it. There was certainly a tremendous feeling of unrest.

MCCHESNEY: And it would certainly not have been a comfortable place for a shy, withdrawn person like Theodore Kaczynski. No one remembers Kaczynski taking part in any kind of political activity at Berkeley, but it would have been impossible to remain oblivious to what was going on.

For example, in his own mathematics department meetings, resolutions against the war in Vietnam were debated and voted on. Some of the most politically active faculty members taught in the math department back then.

Professor Morris Hersh (ph), still with the UC Berkeley Math Department, was one of them.

MORRIS HERSH, MATH PROFESSOR, UC BERKELEY: Mathematicians have a kind of net — clear narrow view of things. If they can see a logical point, they sort of take it to heart. So, they were, maybe, more active than most departments, in supporting the younger students and non-student — the radical movement.

MCCHESNEY: But there was a deep divide in the youthful uproar of the '60s. The bulk of what came to be called the counter-culture generally steered clear of traditional liberalism, as well as the several varieties of Marxism afloat at the time. Within the youth culture, there were the flower children, whose lives revolved around music, drugs, and individual fulfillment.

And there was also a more serious, back-to-the-land movement, an attempt to escape the stresses of modern, urban, industrial life. Thousands of young people moved into Northern California and other rural parts of the nation, trying to pare down the scale and the complexity of their lives.

Historian Theodore Rozac (ph) described the movement in his book, "The Making of a Counter-Culture," published in 1969.

THEODORE ROZAC, HISTORIAN, AUTHOR, "THE MAKING OF A COUNTER-CULTURE": I always found those other issues that had to do with what I would call the rightness, the rationality of urban industrial culture, in many ways more significant, because hidden in there somewhere was the whole environmental issue, the ecological relations with the planet, and the sustainability of this entire culture.

MCCHESNEY: In his terse letter of resignation, Kaczynski did not explain why he was leaving the university. Department Chairman John Addison tried to dissuade him, but failed. Describing Kaczynski as pathologically shy, Addison attributed his resignation to the atmosphere on campus.

And, Kaczynski may also have been pulled away from academic life by the counter-cultural ideal of voluntary primitivism. It's reflected in his lifestyle, and his writings. Two years after he left Berkeley, he wrote an unpublished essay, arguing that technical progress would inevitably destroy individual liberty.

And the Unabomber's manifesto, which the government says was written on Kaczynski's typewriter, certainly echoes the counter-culture's skepticism about orthodox leftism, as in this passage.

READER: A movement that exalts nature and opposes technology must take a resolutely anti-leftist stance. Leftism is, in the long-run, inconsistent with wild nature, with human freedom, and with the elimination of technology.

MCCHESNEY: The manifesto advocates a return to a primitive lifestyle. But Historian Theodore Rozac, who calls the manifesto a hodge-podge, says the Unabomber overlooks a key ingredient of the back-to-the-land movement: a passionate commitment to communal living.

ROZAC: What is most divergent of the Unabomber is the attempt to be so rigorous and consistent. It's the kind of rigor and the kind of consistency that can only be achieved by a single, isolated person, which is what he turned out to be.

MCCHESNEY: Rozac adds that the Unabomber believed that all traces of the past 200 years of industrial society could, and should, be wiped from the face of the earth. But this was certainly not a consistent theme in the back-to-the-land counter-culture.

For example, the Whole Earth catalogue was one of the primary texts of this movement. And there, one could find the finest gasoline-powered chainsaws, and the best computers of the day, listed right alongside wigwams, seeds, and gardening tools.

Kaczynski, on the other hand, maintained a fanatical anti-technological purity in his hermit's life, while clinging to a fixed set of ideas for nearly a quarter of a century, long after most traces of the counter-culture had vanished.

THE DEFENSE WILL UNDOUBTEDLY ARGUE: these are the delusions of a paranoid schizophrenic, and not the characteristics of a cold-blooded ideologue.

John McChesney, NPR News, Sacramento.

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