*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Protests, riots separated by fine line**

Journalists sometimes land in harm’s way when doing their jobs. But in more than 30 years of covering news there was only one time for a brief moment I thought I was going to be killed.

It was the early morning of April 28, 1991, on 3rd Street in downtown La Crosse. I watched flames follow a puddle of gasoline that led to an overturned police car. I was standing less than 20 feet away and started to retreat. I had seen enough action movies and police shows to know what would happen next. The car would explode and I would be killed from the blast.

I was a reporter covering the melee that had ensued downtown following the Coon Creek Canoe Races. The crowd clashed with police clad in riot gear. Police pushed the crowd north on 3rd Street. I tried to stay out of the way.

I was huddled in the doorway of a downtown business when I felt the business end of a baton strike me in the back.

“Get moving,” I was told.

I turned to face the police officer — whom I knew by name.

He said “Oh, Chris,” and stepped around me before beginning to prod someone else.

I overheard someone say a cop car was being turned over. I dashed south down an alley and circled back to the 100 block of South 3rd Street just in time to see a few men successfully overturn the car. Gas began leaking.

After a few cigarettes were tossed at the pool, one man stood over the puddle; he lit a dollar bill and the fuel ignited. The boisterous crowd was hushed; flames lapped at the side of a restaurant. It had become a full-fledged riot.

Overhead in the dark upper floors of his business, Big Al’s Pizzeria owner Alvin Muenzenberger filmed the melee on the street below. Police eventually used tear gas to disperse the unruly crowd. Later that same year they used it again when the La Crosse Oktoberfest was the backdrop for more clashes with police.

The man who started the fire fled. But thanks to Muenzenberger’s video — which was picked up by TV stations all over the country — the suspect was identified. A warrant was issued and a year later a man was arrested. He was sentenced to five years in prison for arson and other charges.

The nationwide protests regarding George Floyd’s death at the hands of police in Minneapolis made me think of covering some of those riots. There’s sometimes a fine line between the right of the people peaceably to assemble — a right protected by the First Amendment – and criminal activity. There’s nothing peaceful about looting and destroying property.

But the onus also is on law enforcement to allow peaceful protests and not be over-the-top confrontational. In 1993 under a new police chief, La Crosse police took a much-less confrontational approach to the overzealous crowd at Oktoberfest. Instead of lining the streets in riot gear and forcing people to stay on the sidewalk, 3rd Street was closed to traffic.

Police disappeared at bar time, although they were close by ready to respond if needed. When the crush of people who poured into the street didn’t have police to confront, they dispersed and went home. Sometimes if we don’t give people spoiling for a fight a target, they give up.

I’ve heard many opinions about the recent protests. While polls show a vast majority of support for the protesters, some respondents are upset about protesters blocking traffic and causing other inconveniences.

That’s just what farmers did in 1979 when a tractorcade descended upon Washington, D.C. Thousands of farmers and an estimated 900 tractors demonstrated as part of the American Agriculture Movement. The farmers wanted the government to support a more profitable and equitable farm industry. They wanted a fair price for a crop — a price that reflected the cost to the farmer.

Some farmers drove for weeks across the country before arriving Feb. 5. Some tractors were impounded; police corralled the tractors in the confines of the National Mall, where they were parked for weeks.

The protest was marred by some damage to public facilities — including an estimated $1 million damage — much of it to the grass on the National Mall that Maryland farmers later volunteered to fix. There were some troublemakers who broke through barriers, crushed some police motorcycles and threw a thresher over the White House fence.

Organizers lamented that the few bad apples received much of the publicity, taking the focus off the plight of the farmers. That sounds familiar. The farmers regained some favor when a weekend blizzard hit President’s Day on the capitol and they helped dig out the city. But once the snow melted, the D.C. police banned all future tractorades; the demonstration that lasted for weeks slowly faded away.

Tractorcades were replaced by legislative efforts to influence farm-bill legislation. The 1980s farm crisis resulted in tight credit and plummeting farmland prices. It also left the Farm Credit System with deep financial problems.

Political change doesn’t always come quickly but the wheels continued to slowly turn. Finally, some relief came from the 1987 Agriculture Credit Act, which gave farmers the ability to restructure debt. It authorized $4 billion in financial assistance for the Farm Credit System.

It took eight years for the farmers to see some change. And yet their original protest — receiving a fair price for their products — remains a challenge today.

Freedom of speech and protests are not always easy. They are sometimes divisive. But they remain an essential part of our democracy as an avenue for change and the hope of a better government for all.

“Tractorcade to D.C.” is the result of a Kansas Humanities Council 2012 Heritage Grant in support of an oral-history project. Visit kinsleylibrary.info/tractorcade-to-dc for more information. Visit youtu.be/vu826as2LUU and youtu.be/I3K4YMzrlFQ for a tractorcade-photo collection from the project.

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070220-agrv-life-hardie-1: Beverly Synder drove the whole way to Washington, D.C. Courtesy of the Kinsley Library

070220-agrv-life-hardie-2: Protesters tip a thresher onto the White House lawn. Courtesy of the Kinsley Library

070220-agrv-life-hardie-3: Tractors gather in February 1979 in front of the U.S. Capitol. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Archives

070220-agrv-life-hardie-4: Tractors park in February 1979 on the National Mall in front of the Smithsonian Castle in Washington, D.C. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Archives