

Lexington Oral History Projects, Inc.

MINUTES OF SELECTMEN'S MEETINGS

Excerpts From the Official Recorded Minutes on the Subject of Memorial Day Weekend, 1971 and the Vietnam Veterans Against the War

**Regular Selectmen's Meeting
May 24, 1971**

“Mr. Marvin Gross of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War met with the Board.

The Chairman: The Board has received a letter, signed by Mr. Gross, that the Vietnam Veterans Against the War-New England Region, will be holding a symbolic march covering in reverse the route traveled by Paul Revere on April 18, 1975, entitled Operation P.O.W. Its purpose is to further spread the anti-war message of these returnees from Vietnam to the citizens of New England and the entire nation. Along the way, we will be talking to townspeople, leafleting and staging guerilla theatre as part of our general informational effort. On Friday evening, May 28, we will be gathering at the North Bridge area in Minuteman National Park for an overnight encampment. On Saturday, we will march from Concord to Bunker Hill where we will bivouac for the night and on Monday, we will continue on to the Boston Common for an alternative Memorial Day celebration of life. We expect 250-350 Vietnam veterans, including some 50 disabled veterans to participate in this weekend activity. For the purpose of overnight camping area on Saturday, May 29, we hereby request permission to bivouac at either Lexington Battle Green or Tower Park. We have made provision to provide our own sanitation and medical facilities. Food will be provided for us by local citizens at each meal stop along our route. We are also requesting permission to march through Lexington via Route 2A and Massachusetts Avenue. We will march single file on the side of the street and will not block traffic flow.

Mr. Gross: I would like to add we have received the cooperation of Lincoln authorities and the Minute Man National Park gave permission to encamp on May 28. This is, as you know, this coming weekend and we expect 250 to 400 veterans from Boston and New England; today, I understand there is a contingent of disabled veterans coming from the Veterans Hospital. We have made every effort to undertake preparations so the authorities would cooperate with us. We plan to conduct ourselves in a decent way and I come to you confident that it will be in the fashion I have

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stated. Supplied will be available. This activity is the first, perhaps the foremost of its kind and the Vietnam veterans will be attempting to draw what occurred in 1775 and some of the feeling of the Vietnam veterans. We hope that with our information efforts the citizens of the Concord and Boston area will know how the members of our organization have come to feel; it is our message. It will be another activity in a number of activities we have staged thus far of what the Vietnam veterans have seen and how they feel about the Vietnam affair.

The Chairman: You say as part of your general informational effort?

Mr. Gross: By guerilla theatre, they have brought home to them, in a dramatic fashion, what it means to be a victim of search and destroy, to be overrun and seized by American G.I.'s; and an attempt to show to citizens what goes on as a daily activity in Vietnam. The players will be Vietnam veterans against the war and we will take strict precautions not to have the public in our dramatic function. After the theatre, people will pass out leaflets.

The Chairman: Where will this take place?

Mr. Gross: We hope it would take place in Lexington Center.

The Chairman: You say along the way; evidently you mean in a specific, planned area.

Mr. Gross: It is not spontaneous, we survey the area and make plans for our suspects and we know they will be located in a specific area; we know ahead of time where they will be.

The Chairman: You don't say where.

Mr. Gross: In Lexington Center.

The Chairman: On the Green? Will you show the people what the Viet Cong do our boys?

Mr. Gross: It is difficult to show Americans what the Viet Cong will do; people say what the Viet Cong do is a Vietnamese problem and what Americans do is an American problem.

The Chairman: Who will take the responsibility of this operation?

Mr. Gross: There are 400 coordinators in the area working in Boston and Cambridge and they will be on the scene at all times. I am the staff organizer.

The Chairman: Is the organization willing to put up a bond to cover the cost of this and take the responsibility of damage along the way?

Mr. Gross: Not willing to take the responsibility against damage? On April 19, there was no damage to any property in the camping area; we know what it is to camp out and don't expect any damage to any area, to persons or property.

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The Chairman: So your answer to my question is no.

Mr. Gross: We never had cause to have any damage. Asking for a bond in advance, the request hasn't come before.

The Chairman: Sanitation facilities?

Mr. Gross: We rent Portasan facilities, they are portable to take from one camp to the next; we have a team of Doctors and nurses and a medical van and they will be on the march and camp at all times.

The Chairman: Would you march on the street or the sidewalk?

Mr. Gross: On the street and single file.

The Chairman: Are you willing to underwrite the cost of protection by the police?

Mr. Gross: We would have to know what it is; Concord had a \$20 minimum per day and we would be willing to undertake the same sort of arrangement.

The Chairman: We would be thinking of hours; the question is are you willing to pay?

Mr. Gross: Yes, we are willing to pay but don't know what the terms will be; we are willing to pay for this sort of protection.

Mr. Kenney: What time of day, during business hours?

Mr. Gross: Saturday afternoon.

Mr. Kenney: How are the Viet Cong dressed?

Mr. Gross: In civilian clothes and armbands.

The Chairman: What happens, what do you do?

Mr. Gross: At the Government Center setup we were there early at 8:00 a.m. and a number of our people, suspects, staged it at the doorway exit from the subway. They were standing there and it was not difficult to become part of the crowd and troops in combat fatigue would approach these people to seize them, interrogate them and drag them to an area and tie them up the way Americans would or shoot them on the spot. This is an attempt to bring to the American populace an eyewitness experience in the normal course of events.

Mr. Kenney: What will it do to the traffic in the Center?

Mr. Gross: It would happen on the sidewalk, not on the street; our own people would be pulled away from the other crowd in such a way that it would not involve other spectators. Our purpose is not to interrogate the people of Lexington.

Mr. Kenney: Do you think you would have more adequate control by doing it on a field? If someone came out of a store, it could startle them and they could be beaten up; I understand it did happen to people coming out of the subway. How would you prevent this happening?

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Mr. Gross: You realize the theatre is not to let the onlookers go home with pleasure; the purpose is to shock people. As far as the affect in a negative way to onlookers, we have our people there to explain it to them on the spot that people are not being killed.

Mr. Kenney: Your purpose of realistic theatre is well and good; our purpose is for public safety.

Mr. Gross: We haven't disturbed public safety in the past and don't think it will be disturbed in Lexington.

The Chairman: What is your position with this organization?

Mr. Gross: Staff organizer.

The Chairman: Are you a veteran?

Mr. Gross: No.

The Chairman: Are you a paid employee?

Mr. Gross: Correct, yes.

The Chairman: What about the officers. Is this a listed organization with the Secretary of State?

Mr. Gross: The organization is incorporated with headquarters in New York; in the local Chapter we have Arthur Johnson, staff organizer, a veteran and paid employee.

The Chairman: How are you raising money to operate?

Mr. Gross: From interested citizens who feel motivated.

The Chairman: What is the primary function?

Mr. Gross: The Vietnam Veterans Against the War come together united by their Vietnam experience to show what is wrong; there are 15,000 across the nation; in Boston, we have 500 or 600 people who have volunteered.

The Chairman: They are not members?

Mr. Gross: They do not want to pay dues.

Mr. Busa: Is there anything being done on the good that is done by our veterans in Vietnam? You are showing your opposition of everything bad but I am sure there are quite a few good things that could be shown for consideration.

Mr. Gross: Our organization is not so much showing what is good or bad but what is good for people to know.

The Chairman: Why isn't Arthur Johnson here?

Mr. Gross: He is at another function.

The Chairman: I would be vehemently opposed as I would hate to see an old man come out of a shop and drop as a result of shock. In Lexington Center, automobiles would stop and create complete chaos. If this is like I saw one night on television on the entrance to the subway, I am opposed; the

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police were not completely happy with what they saw. I would hope the Board wouldn't allow this in the Center where there are a great number of people.

Mr. Bailey: They have asked for permission to march; permission to leaflet as they march; permission to perform guerilla theatre; permission I assume, for talking to townspeople, I assume they will be making speeches; permission to bivouac. I look at this as a request whether it is from the Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Sons of Italy, etc. or from this organization. In my opinion, I would grant permission to march and allow them to leaflet, but I would not grant them permission for guerilla theatre or to bivouac. It has nothing to do with the organization, it is strictly treating them all the same.

Mr. Gross: As far as talking to townspeople, we are not interested in formal conversation in a formalized manner. The others are correct.

Mr. Kenney: Would you bring your own food?

Mr. Gross: No; food will be brought to us at every stop.

Mr. O'Connell: On the sanitary facilities, do they meet the standards of the State Department of Public Health?

Mr. Gross: I don't know; Minuteman National Park has two toilets; we are providing six.

Mr. O'Connell: We are familiar with that facility, Portasan, and it doesn't meet the standards. I raise a question about the leaflets passed out, who is responsible for cleaning up?

Mr. Gross: At the Government Center, they passed out 3,000 and there were none on the ground.

Mr. O'Connell: I talked with Mr. Forgione and there was extensive litter on April 14 and I understand the Boston officials had considerable concern after that demonstration.

The Chairman: We will take this under advisement and inform you of our decision.

Mr. Gross retired from the meeting.

Mr. Ed Moore, a member of the audience; I would like to comment. I am very much in favor of allowing the Vietnam veterans to use our facilities, the park and public facilities. I think it is a grand thing they are doing and the Vietnam veterans have demonstrated better than anybody in an adult manner and the presence of how terrible hand-to-hand combat will be and I hope the Board approves. I would like to see the ground in Lexington help restore the world. It was years ago and I hope the ground of Lexington is used for that purpose.

Margaret Mafello: I have the same sentiments as these. If not given

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Tower Park, to camp on private property.

The Chairman: We would have no jurisdiction over private property.

Later on in the meeting, the Board had further discussion.

The Chairman: If they went on private property, they would have to get permission from the owners.

The Board agreed to let them march; to leaflet but not harass people to take them or use objectionable language if they refuse to take them; this decision would be policed. Also, to deny the guerilla theatre or to bivouac.

Upon motion duly made and seconded, it was unanimously voted that permission be granted to the Vietnam Veterans Against the War to march single file using the sidewalks on May 29 and May 30, 1971, and to grant permission to leaflet, subject to the condition of no harassment of citizens to accept them, and no littering. To deny the request to conduct guerilla theatre or to bivouac.”

[The meeting continues with discussions about granting a permit for a concert on the Battle Green or Lincoln Street fields, recycling, and cable television.]