On May 8, 1970, students from ISU and IWU march to downtown Bloomington to protest President Nixon’s decision to invade Cambodia and the Kent State killings.

To have a voice is a human right clearly defined in our constitution for all citizens of the United States. That voice can be expressed in many ways — writing letters, voting, publishing articles, public speaking, protesting, and more. Many voices are resounding now as our country reacts to the unlawful discrimination and deaths of black citizens at the hands of police officers across the United States. Their voices make clear that change is necessary. But will they be heard?

It is no surprise that our own citizens have taken up this urgent cause as our community has a long history of discriminating against its black citizens. McLean County also has a long history of individuals and groups using their voices in an effort to right what they believed was a wrong — making the choice to rise to the challenge and appeal for and bring about change. In the last 55 years alone, numerous voices have attempted to affect change on many different issues in our community. The same question resonated in our past as it does today — who has the power to be heard?

In 1967, Illinois State University began a concerted effort to recruit black students. But an open housing ordinance had not been passed in Normal, and the ability of black students to find housing was severely limited because of limited on-campus housing and discriminatory housing practices in the community. Discriminatory housing practices were also a problem for black teachers — realtors refused to show homes to black professionals in white neighborhoods.

The town of Normal’s Human Relations Commission had drafted an open housing ordinance that was supported by the local NAACP and others in the community. A public forum was held where many spoke in support of this draft. But the town council rejected and redrafted this proposal, then passed it prior to sharing it with anyone in the community. Bloomington civil
rights activists Merlin Kennedy and George Warren of the local NAACP decried the ordinance through a letter to the editor in The Pantagraph: “To attach a name to what Normal calls its open occupancy ordinance does not make it so. We prefer to call this sham the open bigot law ... It excludes from coverage one- and two-family houses in which the owner lives. This is almost all of Normal. Bigotry now has sanction of law in Normal.”

The town of Normal never passed a fair open housing ordinance. Instead, an advisory ballot on open occupancy was added to the Normal municipal ballot for the following March. The results of the March 1968 referendum revealed that 54.5% favored an open occupancy ordinance of some kind. Of those voters, more than half supported the comprehensive ordinance drafted by Normal’s Human Relations Commission. One month later, President Johnson signed the federal Fair Housing Act, making it unnecessary for Normal to take action on a fair housing ordinance.

A decade later, during the Vietnam War, there were strong public objections to the war and the draft of soldiers, as well as to policies supported by President Johnson and later President Nixon. On the campuses of Illinois State and Illinois Wesleyan universities, students organized anti-war groups and held rallies, then went to the streets with their message of peace.

When 13 Kent State University students were shot by troops of the Ohio National Guard and four died during a 1970 KSU protest rally against President Nixon’s attack on Cambodia, students on both ISU and IWU campuses responded with a peaceful protest march to the McLean County Courthouse (now the museum).

Student objectors to the Vietnam War were not alone in their views. By 1971, both local and national public opinion revealed a growing desire to get all U.S. troops out of Vietnam and to end the war. In a letter to the editor in The Pantagraph, Bloomington resident Mark S. Maginn stated, “The war in Southeast Asia drags inexorably on! Men, women and even children die daily through ‘justifiable acts of war.’ ... How many more Americans will have to be sacrificed as we ‘wind down the war?’” Army veteran Chris Koos also shared his thoughts: “When I came back ... I would say the majority of the people that I had contact with were really against the war ... my parents, my parent’s friends ... they weren’t as vocal about it, of course, as people on college campuses ... but you could tell they were definitely not supporting the war.” But the war continued for two more years as President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger worked on a peace agreement.

Shortly after Donald Trump was elected to the presidency, a movement began across the U.S. in which women united to protest the negative rhetoric used toward women and minorities during the election. On Jan. 21, 2017, over 1 million women mobilized and amassed in Washington, D.C., and other cities across the nation. They marched in solidarity hoping their voices would be heard. Among the Washington marchers were nearly 200 women and men from McLean County. This included Bloomington resident Jackie Baurer, who stated, "The new president is clearly a threat to the rights of women and many others. I participated in the Women's March on Washington to express to him and his administration that many of his views, including those on women's issues, health care reform, climate change, racial justice, immigration, and the LGBTQ community, are not supported by myself and many U.S. citizens.”
The McLean County Museum of History continues to collect and preserve voices in their many forms from the distant as well as recent past. Preserved for today and for the future, these materials reveal the truths of how our citizens have treated and viewed each other and their efforts, sometimes successful and sometime not, to be heard. We look to our community to continue to support us in this effort. If you have objects, images, documents, diaries, etc. of all types and topic, that can help us tell the history of our community, please reach out to the museum. Email bkemp@mchistory.org to donate papers, books, and photographs, or shartzold@mchistory.org to donate objects.