

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

YMCA Project

Youngstown YMCA

O. H. 353

JOSEPH CHECK

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

July 22, 1975

## JOSEPH CHECK

Joseph Check was born in Campbell, Ohio on October 27, 1908, the son of Joseph and Barbara Check. He attended Wilson High School and Penhale High School in Campbell and received a B.S. from Stetson University, Florida, in 1935. While working at Youngstown Sheet & Tube as a boilerman, he continued his lifelong interest in basketball and football. This participation in sports set the foundation for an eventual career as a physical director at the Youngstown YMCA, executive director of the Youngstown Athletic Club, and the director of Camp Fitch. His athletic ability garnered for him awards and recognition such as membership in the Youngstown Hall of Fame for basketball, All Conference basketball in college, King Lion of the Lions Club, and executive secretary of the Mahoning Valley Industrial Management Club.

A member of St. Charles Church, Mr. Check and his wife, Helen, have a son, Joseph. Mr. Check still maintains an avid interest in encouraging people to participate in sports.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YMCA Project

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH CHECK  
INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier  
SUBJECT: Youngstown Athletic Club, Camp Fitch,  
Youngstown YMCA Staff  
DATE: July 22, 1975

CO: This is Jeff Collier. I'm sitting here with Mr. Joe Check. Today's date is July 22, 1975. I'm working with the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the History of the YMCA. The time is approximately 10:00 a.m. and we're sitting at his place on Gypsy Lane Manor on the north side of Youngstown, Ohio.

Mr. Check, could you tell me a little bit about your education, where you were born, raised, and educated?

CH: I was born in Campbell, October 27, 1908, and I graduated from Penhale High School. I was out of school for about a year and a half and I was associated with the YMCA through sports, basketball, in which we were playing a couple of teams. Out of the stands came a gentleman who asked me if I wanted to go to college. Being the Depression time, and not working--I was supposed to be an apprentice machinist--I said yes, and I never even knew that he was serious until I got the telegram the next day, and then I ignored that. Then I got a second telegram and I went down to see our superintendent of Campbell schools, Mr. Coursen, who wrote down to Stetson and found out that it was the real thing. Then I went down there for an interview and I had a scholarship in basketball and football and then it developed into baseball. Stetson University is located in DeLand, Florida, and that's the way I got started. I got my degree in physical education.

CO: What year did you graduate from Stetson?

CH: I think it was in 1935.

CO: When you graduated, did you come right back to the Youngstown area?

CH: I came back to Youngstown and things were really rough. I got a job at the Sheet & Tube digging coal dust out of the boxcar for the boiler house. The reason I got that was because when I came back Sheet & Tube wanted a basketball team, and I got the job through basketball; it was paying thirty-seven cents an hour. Then our team developed into a pretty potent power, so I got promotions from digging in the coal dust to assistant boiler repairman, to boilerman, and then later on the county department thought that I shouldn't be working in the mill, but I should go over to the county department and start there for Mr. Johnson, which I did. That team developed into one of the semi-pro teams around Youngstown. That's where Sweet and Ray Sweeney . . . we got all these boys from the Western Hemisphere.

While I was doing that, I still didn't lose my interest in the YMCA and I used to go down there as a senior leader. I started working part-time and I started picking up weight, and I said, "Well, there's nothing like going down there after work." I had an understanding wife, so I got to be working down there part-time. Then through process of elimination of different openings down there . . . because most of the fellows they hired as physical directors were there for awhile and money was not good, so they just left and I got down there on a part-time basis. Later on they asked me if I would work regularly, which I did, and that started my career. I started out as an assistant physical director, and then different challenges opened up and they put me in different positions. I was fortunate enough to produce. I'm just saying that, not bragging, but my career was a terrific experience and I enjoyed it. The biggest sorrow I had was that it had to end on account of my age. I met some wonderful staff people down there and the youngsters that I've met through my association at the Y today are dentists, doctors, professional people, and other occupational people that you meet on the street who are in their thirties or forties, and a few executives.

CO: It makes you feel proud.

CH: Well, it makes me feel good and proud both because I had the privilege of working with these youngsters.

CO: When you were growing up in Campbell, did you used to go to the YMCA?

CH: No, when I was a youngster in Campbell all we had was what they call suburbs around here now, and trees and open fields where we used to play cowboys and Indians, play baseball, skin a diamond, or go out to the ponds and swim or pick blackberries; we had a wonderful life. There was no such thing as, well, radio or anything else, but we entertained ourselves and I had excellent parents. They were from European extraction. We were disciplined and they were good church people and this is the way I was raised. I didn't even know, at that time, that there was such a thing as another town outside of East Youngstown, which is now Campbell. The first car I ever saw, I was astounded that something could run. Campbell is a very hilly town and playing there, running up and down the hill, you developed an awfully good stamina, a good body. We started in athletics and then we started in baseball, basketball, and football. Football was the latest thing that ever came around. I only played, I think, a quarter of a season before I graduated.

CO: How was your first experience of being away from home when you went to Stetson?

CH: When I went to Stetson, to be honest with you, I wouldn't even eat in a restaurant where there was a girl waitress, when I drove down there. I mean, I used to stutter an awful lot, you know what I mean, and this is an amazing thing, stuttering. I was backwards and everything else. When I went to Stetson, the first place they put me was with the Dean of Men and Women who were man and wife. They put me at the table to eat with them and I was so shocked I wouldn't eat anything. Later on they put me at a regular table and I wouldn't eat there. So finally, I wound up eating with the help. But I got over it and you wouldn't believe it, but that's the truth.

CO: When you graduated you came back to Youngstown. Was that your first affiliation with the Y in playing basketball and things? Is that how you started going down to the Y?

CH: No, before I went to college I went there.

CO: Oh, okay.

CH: Because when I was in, well, it was East Youngstown-- Campbell--at that time, we had a pretty good high school team. A couple of boys that I played against independently, like Roy Mills and Ray Copeland, invited me down to the Y. And this is where I started . . .

CO: Okay, that's where I wanted to get at.

CH: Then the Depression came and this fellow came out of the stands and asked me if I would go away to school. I thought it was just a joke, so I said, "Sure." I wasn't working so I went away.

CO: Could you tell me a little bit about when you started working part-time at the YMCA? When you worked part-time was it strictly in the youth as you mentioned, or was it in physical, or was it both?

CH: Do you mean when I was working part-time or before that?

CO: Yes.

CH: Before I went down as a leader.

CO: Okay, could you start there and tell me as a senior leader some of the things that you did, and also, if you could remember, some of the people that were down there? I guess Paul Davies was down there at that time.

CH: Yes, Paul Davies, at that time, was down there and "Ocky" Pannier . . .

CO: What did "Ocky" Pannier do down there?

CH: "Ocky" Pannier was the physical director at that time.

CO: Physical director, that's what I thought.

CH: Previous to that, there was Hartman, Al Fairfield, and let me see, Pee Wee Ryan; I just can't remember all of them. It has been so many years ago. I've been in Y work close to thirty years.

CO: I'm sure you'll remember many things as you start going back because you probably don't sit down many times and think about things.

CH: Ross Clark was the physical director before I went away to school.

CO: What was the Y like in the time when you started?

CH: The YMCA when I started was the hub of Youngstown as far as recognition, interest, and everything else that was concerned. You didn't have all these other social agencies and church programs where they used to frown on having dances at churches and different clubs. Everything used to revolve around the YMCA. It used to be quite an honor for anybody to be selected as a membership drive chairman or a layman. They used to get an awful lot of recognition in town about the YMCA. If you dig back into their past volumes of history of the Y and people who served it, you would find that they were all the top executives and financial people around town. For instance, in 1929, they had a meeting and raised over a million dollars, and that's in 1929. This is where the outgrowth of Youngstown College's first little building was. Also, that's when they added the other addition on to the Y.

Now with the progress and everything else, all those people, like Mr. Warner, Mr. Campbell, and all those local people who used to be president and Youngstowners that I would call real citizens, who used to be dedicated people to the Y, are all gone. You have these outside executives, so naturally, the interest in the Y is not there like it used to be. There was a time when Sheet & Tube used to give x amount of dollars just like that and the same with Republic Steel when they had the Youngstown people running these companies, and these smaller companies the same way, like the Cushwas and the Benders, and these other people. All those fellows are gone, so their contact was with the Y and it was downtown, and now, these people are grown up. You've got your social clubs and country clubs and there are too many outside interests. Thank God we've got fellows like Rowland and Young and some of the fellows that are on the board, if you check on the board, that are still dedicated.

CO: Those people are Youngstown people too, aren't they?

CH: Yes.

CO: Like Bob Rowland?

CH: Yes, they're all Youngstown people--Dr. Wales. Just go down to the Y and get your board members and look them up on what kinds of positions they had, and

- you'll find out that most of them have come up through the Y. Bob Rowland used to be a leader, and he hasn't changed since he was small. He used to fine the leaders five cents if they missed a meeting.
- CO: He's in banking, too. Wouldn't you know it?
- CH: You'll find that many boys that came to the Y, today, throughout the world, you'll find that their affiliation with the YMCA has been very strong. In those days, your personal contact in the YMCA was real close with the staff people. You were a name and you always latched on to somebody whether you had trouble or what it was. Of course, I'm just talking about my time. I can't compare it with down there because I haven't been down there in several years.
- CO: You ran Camp Fitch for a good number of years. When did you first become affiliated with Camp Fitch?
- CH: I got affiliated with Camp Fitch in 1949 when Mr. Smith was up there as a boys' director and camp director and they ran into some kind of program difficulties. His idea was throwing everybody together regardless of age; everybody on that playground whether you played ball with a nine year old or a fifteen year old. This was his new philosophy in boys' work. I don't know what happened, but anyhow, Mr. Davies went to Jim Wearing who was my boss, head physical director.
- CO: His name was Wearing?
- CH: Wearing, yes, Jim Wearing. Jim right now is general secretary out in Waco. He is one of the greatest guys in the Y work, and I learned more from him than I did from, I'd say, ten years of college, having his philosophy about the YMCA. I went up there and we organized a program like age groups. This was only all my function was. Later on when "Smitty", Mr. Smith, left the Y or whatever happened, Dick Alsh took over, if you remember.
- CO: No, I don't remember.
- CH: Dick got into some kind of difficulties up there and I was going down the Y to get my vacation check and I ran into Mr. Davies and he said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to get my check because I am going on vacation." He said, "Oh no, you're not!" He said, "You're going out to Camp Fitch." I said, "Why?" He told me, "I want you to run the Camp." Dick Alsh, in the meantime, I don't know what happened



up there, but he got an interview to go to some other YMCA. I don't know what it was, but there was a lot of friction down there between the two of them or whatever it was. I went up there and I stayed until 1960. That was the way I went up there. It was rough up there because I had to undo all these blanket parties, the leaders.

CO: A lot of your time, sure, I remember them well.

CH: When I went up there, why naturally, I had to face the whole bunch because all these kids were loyal to Dick. It wasn't my doing that I was sent up there. Fortunately, I had eight of my leaders up there, which they told me what the scope was. The kids were going to go on strike, and they would go home, and all this and that static. I sat them all down and said, "Look, it's unfortunate that I was sent up here, but it's not my doing. I came up here because I was sent up here and there's a job to be done. I understand there are a lot of rumors and I don't want to pinpoint any particular person, but you youngsters signed an agreement when you came up here that you were supposed to fulfill your duties. I know most of your parents, and if you think that there has been an injustice done or a dislike for me or anybody else, just say it right now. In the meantime, if you give me your names, if you want, I'll go down and call your parents to come up and pick you up and I'll tell them why. You can go up there right now and a truck will be up in an hour to pick up your bags and things and bring you down and then we'll start calling your parents. Go home, but don't forget that you're letting down a bunch of youngsters. If you want to do it, fine."

CO: Nobody took it, huh?

CH: Nobody took it except a couple of the top staff. I had it out with them, but everything turned out all right. I had to get rid of two of the staff people up there because . . . From then on I was fortunate enough to get kids in there and they all turned out fine and everything ran wonderful and now they have a heck of a nice camp. The other nice thing about going up there, I had contact with Sheet & Tube, Bill Yeckley, Gloves Prenner, and Sharon Steel, where they used to give us free pipe. They gave us 3600 feet of pipe; that's a lot of money.

CO: You're not kidding!

CH: Then I knew electricians that buried the wires. This was contact through the Y, is what I meant, and this is what I'm trying to point out. When they used to have all this interest around the Y, people would do all this work free. Carpenters would come up there on Sundays and build things for you, and just like they were under construction. Those piers that they had out there, they brought a big crane out there and put those piers in for us for no charge. The same for the flag pole, a hundred foot flag pole, where they put that thing up. I don't know if you were up there the time that flag pole collapsed. These are the things that are missing today that we did have then. Fortunately, right now, they've got a camp committee--like Jack--that are still from the old school, that are influential. Jack has a lot of contacts. They're doing a terrific job and they're doing a lot of things. I don't know if this is helping any, but . . .

CO: Sure it is. What about the physical aspects of the camp in 1949?

CH: We didn't have very much, if you recall. We used to have to sew our own tents up. Kings and queens, if you recall, were the old-fashioned ones. It was just very primitive. I mean, this was the nice part of it. It felt like camp. The kids had a good time. In those days, the kids used to come up. When I first went up there, the dads used to come up. It shows you how things change up there; they used to come up and they would all get out of the car. Mom would start fixing the bed; pop would get out there with a baseball glove, and they would be playing catch, a lot of activity. As time went on, what happened towards the 1960's, before I left there, you would see a father come out and he would lay under a tree. At one time, we had a ball game going and we only had five gloves that the kids brought up. I mean, the contrast between the change of later kids. They had very little knowledge about any of the sports. They had television. I'm thinking about how these things change. In the beginning, well, you were up there, you'd just run out and get a suntan and play or you could be mischievous and raid tents. They used to have a lot of fun. Now they come up and they don't want to take off their pants, I mean their blue jeans. They want to sit in the tent and read funny books and eat popcorn and argue. The rules during activities used to be everybody out of the tents.

CO: That's right.

- CH: There's your contrast. Now I don't know how it is because I can't say, because I haven't been up there since I left but three times.
- CO: When you stopped going up to Camp Fitch in 1960, what were your duties at the Y previous to that?
- CH: I was physical director, head of the physical department, head of the YAC, and that was it, executive director of the Y Athletic Club.
- CO: When did you move into that position at the Athletic Club?
- CH: Let me see. When they made the new addition, I just forget the exact date. Bill Cumberland was the head physical director, and he moved up in that position and I was made head physical director. In the YMCA at that time, they only had, I think, 140 or 150 members.
- CO: Who was running the YAC at that time?
- CH: Bill Cumberland. Because when they had the old YAC, they only had one physical director, that was downstairs as you remember. He was in charge of everything. Then when he went upstairs, he couldn't go out and sell, that's what it was. He just got so bitter that he asked to be relieved of the job. So then what happened, of course, I knew everybody in town, and I used to go around so they switched positions. I went up to YAC and Bill went back to the physical department. Then later on he left because he was almost a nervous wreck. After that, then I was in charge of that, and physical director, and then when they had a little lull in the boys' division, I had a little of that. And of course, I had the pool and everything else.
- CO: Who were the people that came in that you were training at that time? Was Dick Bennett there at that time?
- CH: There was Dick Bennett, Bob Doyle, Brown, and Bob Mowery. At first, Jean Norris was in physicals. Then from there on they had a lot of leaders that came up here like "Stretch". Do you remember "Stretch"?
- CO: Yes.
- CH: I can name a whole bunch of them that were down there after that. Every one of those kids down there we were proud of because everybody went out and was at the top. Doyle, he's the head of the downtown branch. Brown has got that camp.

CO: Father Brown is doing very well.

CH: This is what I'm talking about. They're all nice kids. They were what I would call dedicated fellows. Time meant nothing to them. If a kid was an individual, every time you would see the youngster walk, there would be one of the men with fifteen or twenty kids around them. They were with Hobby or Doyle or Stretch or Mowery. This is what makes the YMCA. The kids have to model themselves after somebody. What I'm trying to say is that if somebody shows interest in a youngster, he's really going to come around and respond.

CO: You had mentioned something about philosophies earlier. When you started with the YMCA, how would you say that the philosophy then has changed with now? Also, if you could think, could you perhaps see a gradual changing over the years?

CH: Let me get back to that. When I went in there, I went in there with tensions just like everybody else. I was a sports-minded fellow; I figured, well, there's basketball. We're going to have a big time and everything else. Then, fortunately, Jim Wearing came in from Detroit as the head physical man. At that time I was just working part-time, and he was the one that asked me to come on full-time. In the meantime, before he did, he sat down and we were talking, and his philosophy was that you were there as a kind of member, and the members weren't there because of you. He pointed out things like, I should be an example for the youngsters, and interested in everyone. Everybody in that membership was an individual, not a group. No matter what it was, you were supposed to take care of your program, and not by the hour, but by the time you finished your program. As time went on, why, he started training me. Don't forget I started in the Y in my 30's. Every day he would watch me work, and he would call me in and say, "Joe, now you did this good, but you could do it better." See, if you had a program, only you were supposed to be on the floor fifteen minutes before and have all the equipment out. Then you were supposed to walk through the gym and say, "Hi, Jeff. I'm Joe Check, I'm the director. Is there something I can do for you?" If you had youngsters come in there, why, the first time a youngster came in you should walk up and say, "My name is Joe," and talk to him. If you see a youngster that was shy, you didn't walk up to him in front of everybody and try to make a big fuss over him, but in a quiet way where he wasn't put on the spot or

where everybody was watching him.

The other thing was organizing games, I'm just talking about the kids that were bashful. Like if there was a big, fat kid there and the kids said, "We don't want him." I never let them choose sides. I used to line them up 1, 2, 3, 4. Then you line them up, and if any of the lines are off balance, you never pick the weak kid and put him in a strong one, you always pick the strong one to balance it out. The emphasis was on the better boy and not on the youngster. Little things like that.

Once or twice or three times you would get somebody that was ornery or something. You give him a warning and talk to him and try to reason with him, get him around your way of thinking that he wasn't part of the gang. To be part of the gang you have to do this and that. He worked with me for a long time. He watched me and never told me anything was every any good. It was good, but, you know . . .

CO: It could be better.

CH: It was the same way with the help. Now, just put yourself in their place. Treat them as you want to be treated. He said, "The janitor, the man at the basement desk, is just as important as you are. When you sell a membership, that's just part of it. The big thing is that you service that member and make sure you get to know him. If they don't show up, try to contact them." So these are the philosophies that I went by and it turned out pretty good. I won't say that sometimes I got frustrated and things, but you don't. I would always think: Would I rather be in Y work or would I rather be back at Sheet & Tube? Every time I ask my question . . .

CO: That would be it, you would rather be at the Y.

CH: The other enjoyment was working with the staff, like your dad and the whole bunch. I liked the system we had better than we ever did, because each department head was responsible for their own department, and then they went to the general secretary, who was Swede. This way, why, naturally, everybody was jealous of their own department, and they were going to work at it to be top. There would be conflicts and little discussions like in anything else, and everything would be ironed out at the staff meeting. There's a group, I simply had a terrific staff.

CO: Sure I know because . . .

CH: The nice part about it was that they were all local boys. Sometimes this is dangerous when you get interbred too much, that can hurt you. Fortunately, with the boys that we had, they're all good Christian kids and they came up through the Y.

CO: That's one thing that Mr. Hunneke made mention of; he said that he was very proud of the fact that the people who were on the staff that you're talking about, most of them were executive directors with the YMCA.

CH: Sure, and the big thing you want to remember, too, is that they really worked hard for it. Like I was telling Mr. Hunneke, if the staff's good, it's you, which is the truth. Everybody used to look at each other and if I needed help sure, bang. They had membership drives, boy's program, going out to these fun trips. It wasn't 40 hours a week, or 48 hours a week, or each Sunday, it was, you needed help, fine. Wives, just like your mother, and the rest of the people who had wives, they understood and they tolerated it; this was the difference. Anybody that's in Y work cannot be a socialite.

Another thing is, you have got to conduct yourself outside. Well, I'll give you an example. I used to referee a lot, you know that, to help my income and one thing or another. After the ball games, we used to go to a place they called Shortstop. Of course, I never touched liquor and I don't do now in saying this, but I'd go up there with Rollice and the whole bunch. One day, I walked in there and every time we used to sit down, I always used to order milk just to antagonize them. Not only that, but I always used to do it so everybody could see that. Anyhow, I walked in and a couple of guys said, "Hey, Joe, how's my kid doing down at the Y?" That struck me funny; I thought to myself, here I am, a YMCA guy, and in those days now I'm talking about, here I am in a beer joint and they're asking me about their kid. What do you think of them? So I never went back there. Of course, now, ethics are all different, I mean as far as drinking and everything else.

CO: A couple of questions about both Camp Fitch and the YAC. You took each of them over and they developed into very successful programs at the Youngstown YMCA. What did you try to do or do differently that made them successful?

CH: Nothing, the only thing in Camp Fitch that we did was get the kids to be dedicated to the kids at camp, and make sure that the kids had a good time, and that they learned something, to get along with each other socially, and pick the right leaders. I mean, I don't take any credit for that. It was the youngsters in those days. Well, just like yourself. We used to have meetings and organizations and we had good staff people like Doyle, Browning, and these fellows. Then, as the programs were good, more kids started going home, and started spreading the word, and we started getting more campers. The more campers we got the better we got financially. Then the biggest thing I attribute to camp to is Mary Bohatch. I don't know if you were up there and ate her cooking, remember?

CO: Ten summers!

CH: Yes, I know, I'm just saying how she used to get up and make doughnuts; she went way beyond her duty. I don't care what you say, no matter how bad the weather is or anything else, she would feed those kids a good meal and they would enjoy it. Two-thirds of the battle is won. I was out there when they first went up there and we had a couple of lousy cooks. It was terrible. The meals were lousy and the kids were grumpy. The first thing when they go home their mom would say, "How was the meal?" Don't forget, when a youngster goes up there, that youngster is to be treated just like your own; that's the way I always felt about every one of them. The person that sends their youngster to camp, that's their darling.

CO: Sure, that's right.

CH: It was the same thing when we were down at the infirmary. Every youngster that came in, I don't care how scratchy it was, I had the nurse order, when somebody came down there after dark and knocked on my door, I wanted to see that youngster. We had a couple of broken arms and things like that. We were fortunate enough to have Dr. Greer up there; he was always on call. Then later on we got the clinic.

CO: When did Mary Bohatch come up there?

CH: Well, I think it was the third year that I was up there.

CO: About 1951 then or 1952?

CH: Something like that. She used to run this Junior Coffee Shop on Market Street. I was talking to Don Gardner one day, and his wife was working at the Employment Agency. She called me up and said, "Joe, I have a woman here that's looking for a job." At that time, I said, "Well, send her down." She came down and naturally her English wasn't up to par. I talked to her, then I backchecked her, and I talked to a lot of fellows who used to eat at the restaurant. I found out that her husband was kind of a nonchalant guy who liked to play golf and stuff. She needed a job and there were family difficulties. I said, "Fine." I wanted her to have an interview with Davies. Well, Paul wasn't too impressed with her. He said, "Go ahead and take her, but don't forget that it's your responsibility." When I went up there, I had difficulties because I had a fellow whose father was a fireman. He was a steward, and she was ready to serve meals when he said, "You don't do anything until I tell you to," and then she started crying. After the first couple of meals, it was great! When I first went up there, they had what they called bug juice. They were only allowed to have one glass of milk up there. We went to play Erie YMCA camp in softball and at the end of the game they came out with a whole wheelbarrow full of milk. I said, "Where are you getting all that milk?" They said, "From the government." This is the way I came back and found out that the government was subsidizing camps. We came back and told Mr. Davies and he said, "No, no way. We don't want any part of the government. You couldn't get it anyhow because we're an Ohio organization."

Well, I went back to Erie and talked to the guy, the same one down in New Castle. The guy that was responsible for it, here it was one of the fellows I used to play against in basketball and referee with. He wasn't doing me any favors, but he said we were eligible. We used to get 20 or 25 gallons of milk. You used to swim in milk. Besides that we got flour, meat, and in retaliation, I used to have Mary Bohatch, every Sunday or something like that, every second week, make twenty dozen doughnuts. I would pack them in a box and take it down to New Castle to the government place and give it to the employees. We would get all the butter and cheese. We did the same with the camp down below, that church camp. Then to get the Catholics up there, that's another nice story. I was trying to get the Catholic priest to come up there and no way would this guy Welsh . . .



- CO: You mean to give sermons or mass on Sunday?
- CH: Yes, or even to come up and visit the place. No way.
- CO: Why not? Why wouldn't they come up?
- CH: The bishop said no. At that time, it was a big sin if you went to the YMCA. I went down to St. Mary's Church and I talked to a priest and he said, "Certainly, I would be glad to." In the meantime, every Sunday they'd go in and Mary Bohatch would send a bunch of doughnuts to the priests and the nuns. They wouldn't even take money for gas, but then we would give them a donation now and then. I'm reminiscing; I don't know if you want this stuff . . .
- CO: Sure, that's what I want to hear.
- CH: From there on the camp started to grow. I think there were only about one hundred or some. They didn't even have girls up there. The first year the girls were there . . .
- CO: When was that?
- CH: 1950.
- CO: 1950 was the first year for women at camp?
- CH: Something like that. From there on it started to grow.
- CO: Before 1950 it was all boys up there. They didn't want girls or they just had never approached it from that angle?
- CH: No, it was all boys. I used to go up there because my son was a camper with Jack McPhee who was up there. In those days, everybody used to run around naked on top of the hill, no girls on the hills. They used to dive in that mud pack and have a great time. Somewhere along the line they slipped and they let the girls in. By bringing the girls in, it takes up time; it takes away from the boys. This is my philosophy. When I was physical director, if you remember, there were no women's gym classes nor were there any girls' swim team. My philosophy at that time, I used to fight it like the dickens, was keep those boys in good shape.
- CO: What do you think about right now with girls playing little league and everything? You don't buy that?

CH: No, I don't buy that; I don't buy that at all. If they want to have their own little league teams, that's fine, but I can't see a girl going in there getting bashed or someone sliding into them. Maybe I'm wrong, I don't know, but boys are boys and girls are girls and that's it. Look what they are trying to do in college . . .

CO: You mean co-ed dorms and things like that?

CH: Even that and everything else. Take your life, you didn't have co-ed dorms and everything else. You grew up as a boy and you had a good time. You enjoyed your boyhood. Right now, what the YMCA is doing, nine and ten, teaching them dance, and getting them together, well, they've never lived as a boy should live. Of course, let's be honest about it, things are different. In the old days you had a lot of open lots and vacancies. You didn't have television and cars and everything else, and kids had a good time. Now houses, where can they play, nowhere. You go to city playgrounds, down to the ball field, you have to get a permit. Then if they do go on the playgrounds, you've got these bullies. Things are just changing, just like life, crime, and everything else.

CO: Well, when I was up at camp, the many summers that I spent up there, I don't remember ever being affected, I don't think, by the girls' camp because it was sort of separate; it was kept separate.

CH: Yes, but the big trouble there was the attitude of the kids. Getting down to the fine points, no leader was ever allowed to leave that tent. Number one was the safety factor; number two was the youngsters' first time away from home. If the leader was out and the youngster fell out of bed, negligence, you know what I am talking about?

CO: Sure.

CH: Just like myself when I went up there, I didn't even go fishing or didn't take a trip out of that camp. Not that I could prevent any accident, but every time we had the broken arms and a few things they would say, "Where was the camp director?" Dick Welsh used to go to Niagara Falls or he would go out fishing. Well, parents can't understand that. They'll say, "Where was the camp director?" He was in camp and that satisfies them. They're always looking for some excuse and anything can happen. Then there are a lot of safety factors too, that you have a look after. Just like this one incident where this kid sneaked a golf club on one of the leaders and he went back

to the tent. I don't know if you were up there then.

CO: No, I don't think I was.

CH: He was swinging a, I think it was a nine or a ten iron, swinging it, some kid runs around the tent playing tag and caught him right in the mouth. The camp director is the most loneliest guy in the world up there. I had my own little tricks. I would go down to the hill and check everybody in and walk up the hill, go around the different tents, especially the youth group. I used to go around these camps and check every tent. I even got up at 2:00 and came up because we had this one bad accident where one of the leaders was out and this kid went to go to the bathroom or something, and he fell out of his bed.

CO: Out of the bed?

CH: Yes. He fell out of bed and broke his arm. The first thing the woman said, "Well, where was the leader?" Then we had this one leader sneak in and go to another vacant tent with a gal up there. When that happened it was all over town. This was before I went up and this was one of the reasons I was sent up there. They were supposed to be having blanket fights.

CO: I thought that you said there weren't any, that 1950 was the first time the girls came up?

CH: Yes, well, they were up there when Dick was up there.

CO: What year would that have been then? If you started in 1949 and . . .

CH: 1949, I just went up there; that's when Smitty was up there.

CO: Okay. Were women up there then? I'm just trying to get the year straight, that's all.

CH: That time they weren't up there at the same time. I do remember that all the tents were all boys and then they brought the girls in. It was Heloise; she's down at the Vindicator now. I think what they had was a couple of weeks of girls programs they started first, then the boys, and then it got to be co-ed.

CO: I think I remember that and hearing about that. It was either at the beginning or the end that the girls came up just a couple of weeks on the run. That camp has really developed; it has now turned into a year-round program.

- CH: Well, it's good. The only thing I'm just saying is that as long as it's well supervised and the leaders don't neglect the children and have standards . . . These little kids would squeal on their leaders. "Oh do you know that my leader was over so-and-so's tent?" And they go home and just magnify it. You know the game.
- CO: Yes I do.
- CH: My athletic club, when we started, it got so that we started with a 160 then ran it up to 600 and we didn't even have any room, so we used to have to have baskets up there. I got on Swede and a couple of the board members and that's when the guys got those offices and made the new section, which I'm proud of. It developed into one of the nicest ones in the country. This is what I'm proud of: When I left it had 920 members.
- CO: Most of these are Youngstown businessmen?
- CH: Yes. They're not all businessmen but they're Youngstown people. We started out because at that time most of the fellows were business people, and then the wages got to be better and everything else. The fellows started having money to go on then.
- CO: One final question and that is, what do you remember, if anything, about the affiliation with the YMCA and the Youngstown College, or the Y College?
- CH: Oh, very good. Years ago, when . . . I'll tell you what you ought to do, Jeff, go down to the Y and get that backlog book and it goes way back. It started as a night school there and a business school, and they even had a law school down there.
- CO: Yes. I've gone through and gotten some of that stuff, but I meant directly what do you remember on it, not necessarily the history of it. In other words, when you were at the YMCA there and started at the Y, were there things like the physical classes from the Youngstown University?
- CH: Definitely. That has been going on for years. Even prior to my time, before they built that Youngstown College on top of the hill, Mr. Fairfield and a few of these other fellows used to have regular theory classes up on top of the hill. As they expanded then we used to take physical education classes. It

was part of the physical ed, because all we did was give them the physical part. It was a hardship on the youngsters and it wasn't quite fair to the kids either because they had an hour's time and they had to come down, walk down over the hill. By the time they got dressed, they really only had what you would call a good half an hour or so. This went on three times a week, well, different classes. They used to get a half point. Well, it got so that some of the fellows started staggering in and I wanted to know why.

I had a run-in with one of the mathematics professors up the hill. He wouldn't let his kids out because he thought it was all nonsense and it wasn't important. I went up and talked to him and I said, "I believe in what you say. Class is important, but I want to tell you something. My class is important even if you just get a credit, one credit, or half a credit, or whatever it is. I'm not going to tolerate it. Those kids are going to come out of class and come down. That's all you think about, these kids flunking then. They have to have that credit. You just go ahead and have it on your conscience." Then I saw Mr. Smith, who used to be the administrator, kind of talk to Mr. Jones and Jones and I are pretty good friends and we got that straightened out.

Then I would have a kid come in and say, "Mr. Check, I'm having a heck of a time at school. I have to work on Tuesdays and Thursdays and I can't make your class." I said, "Fine." The nights I used to work, I said, "Right after work you come down and put in an hour and a half or two hours." I used to give them a routine or help them with classes, because I realized myself that some of these kids had hardships and needed help. We used to have some smart aleck and one of them is a pretty good executive now. They'd come down and climb up on those windows and then sneak off and go upstairs and shoot baskets and duck out. I thought, I'm not that stupid. What I used to do was blow the whistle for them to line back up again. If they were missing I'd mark them absent. This one day I went up and they were shooting baskets and this smart mouth, his father was a big automobile dealer . . . I said, "Fine, Jim, this is where you want it, you see these words. I can't tell you what to do. You're a man now; you're in school. On these cards, you have to graduate and you need that credit, and you're not going to get it unless you come down here. I'm not going to argue with you. It's up to you." I never had any trouble. I never fussed with the kids and I

gave everybody credit. I don't care how, as long as they tried. I gave them an A or B or whatever it was. I used to run the hell out of them, get them into shape. I'd get them so that they had to run a mile or so much, and if the kid was handicapped or wasn't coordinated, I'd cut the time down and he tried. Maybe I would give him a B or whatever it is, because frankly, the big thing was that he was doing it. When you get out of high school, in high school you're always running and burning up that energy and everything else. What happens when you get out of school? You're either a real studious guy that sits down and really studies and works and doesn't have a chance to exercise, or you're one of these gay boys that goes out. A lot of them used to line up and I used to smell alcohol. I used to just run them to get them a little bit in physical shape and then once they did that, then I used to have free play for them. They were pretty good. There were only two kids I really had it out with, and what I did with that, I said, "Okay, you're like little kids," and I called their parents. One was a doctor and the other one was a steel executive. I called them and told their parents about what was going on, so they straightened them out. Of course, the kids never spoke to me, but they still straightened out.

I always put myself, even with little kids . . . A nine year old kid came up to me and started telling me his troubles. I'd come down to the nine year old level and listen to what he said. To him, this is what I learned from Wearing, to him that was the most important thing. I don't care if he lost a nickel or whatever it is, or somebody did something; you've got to listen to their troubles. Then you're interested in them and you listen to them. It's not the good Joe Check because you're nine years old, try to forget it, it's all right, and push him aside. This is one thing I think that's lacking around here where a kid can't latch himself onto somebody. Everybody likes attention. Today, with the parents, they're brushing the kids off. Like I see so many times growing up, you have baby-sitters, going out to cocktail parties. Parents come up to me many times.

When they're around thirteen or fourteen years old, they've made their friends and lost contact with their parents to a certain degree. The parents want to go here and there. Well, they don't want to go with them because they would rather do something else. You take a dedicated person, for example take Dr. Wales, and your parents, they'd stay with that kid. Their son, John, came right along to the Y. On family night, take all those people who come down to the Y

with their kids. They could be out to a cocktail party, they have the money and the country club; they're the country club type. They come down with their kids and the kids are growing up with their family. They have a good rapport with them, you know what I mean? Then there's that love and that feeling, and you respect your parents and then you can talk to them, can reason with them in some cases. That's one thing that's lacking, I think, today. Everybody's in a hurry and they're not taking time out to talk to anybody personally. Just like yourself now, if you called me up and said, "Hey, forget it, I'm not talking about it." It also makes me feel good that you came to me to interview me because I felt that maybe I did something good and somebody is interested in me. That's an old man's view and I enjoy this and I'm not the one that goes out and says, "Well, in the good old days, this and that." Down in the good old days they used to have Stone Ages, too, but it has changed. There are a lot of things that went on, and take the older fellows, they used to come in and try to get news about their kids. This is what I'm talking about, like this one fellow that's a realtor out in Boardman. This was in 1957 or something. This kid got booted out of school; at first he was in high school. They bought him a convertible. Imagine now, a brand new convertible that he had 3 months. He was picked up for stealing batteries and hub caps. All the money in the world, parents doing everything for him, and then he went to college and started drinking and everything else. When the parent was talking to me, he said, "We used to give him everything. When we went out, we had so-and-so watching the kids." Well, you see what I mean?

CO: Sure.

CH: They were too busy for their youngsters. I'm talking about my young Joe, we always used to say, "Be a pal." Hell, I was a father. I used to argue with the wife. I used to tell him two things, "Ask yourself if it's right or wrong. If it's right, full blast ahead. If it's wrong, cut it out." I used to tell him, "Don't run with a gang, make your own decisions. You think you're chicken, that's when you're chicken, when you go around with a gang. Do your own thinking." He got along, and when he graduated from high school, he got a scholarship from Mount Union. I figured like when I was in school. I used to have five cents and we used to go down and get a coke. You know, we didn't have much

money down there. So he saved money and he had about \$800.00 and when he graduated he wanted to buy a car. There was no way, and his mother said, "Everybody else is having a car." I said, "No way, he's going to school. His freshman year is the biggest year for adjustment that there is. You're away from home and everything else." We had a heated battle, his mother and I and him. I said, "Okay, here's the bankbook and you have two choices. You want the car, you're not going to school; you're going to get yourself a job and you're going to pay your way in town. The other choice is if you go to school, forget the car. When you get in your junior or senior year or when you get a little older, and grades, we'll talk about a car. Besides, I still have a mortgage on the house and everything else. To get you through school, I'll remortgage that house, but if you start goofing off, forget it." Boy, for two days I really sweated it out. He finally said, "Dad, I want to go to school." Today he says, "Boy, am I glad . . . "

CO: He made that decision instead of the car.

CH: Yes. Other than that, Jeff, I don't know.

CO: If you could start all over again, would you go into YMCA work today?

CH: I certainly would. Of course, I don't know about today's practices. It would be a hard thing to do, but if I had the opportunity, like I was with the group that we had, and the leadership down at the Y like Mr. Hunneke, Mr. Davies, and the group that we worked, that was like a family; yes, I would. One more thing about our Y, our Y was . . . we started this morning class which I did, and in the morning until ten at night; it was complete activities. You go to Columbus and these places and you won't see a physical director on that floor until about 4:00 or 4:30. Maybe it's not their fault, I don't know, but Youngstown, I think, is one of the most outstanding YMCA's that I've known.

CO: I would agree.

CH: For activities and things, yes, I'd go back. The only thing when I went in there, number one, the Catholics at that time, the Protestants at that time were just as much against the Catholics. Things have changed. Another thing was if I would have started in Y work, like if I got out of college . . . As far as I got, I'm tickled to death, and I'm glad that I did. I'm proud of as



far as I got, because I was uncertified. As far as doing the job was concerned, I guess they were satisfied with it. Then on top of that, I got the pleasure of running the Mahoning Valley Industrial Management Club, the largest foreman's club that Swede used to have. This was another lucky thing I had.

When I retired this young fellow from the department came to me, in fact, he wanted me to quit down there and go into managing. No way, because I was thinking about my retirement which is not too big, because I never made any money by it because I started at \$2900.00 a year. The best I ever made was \$10,000.00. So I said, "Fine, I'd come up here." My wife and I came up here and there wasn't a carpet on the floor or anything. We were the first ones there and I was scared of a big building like this. Then we started filling up and I was there about a year. Then I was retired. I have a nice set-up, and it's confining to a certain degree, but I'm with people, so I'm happy. They're nice people and I think eighty-five percent of them are of Jewish faith, but they're nice people. They treat me nice. So far so good.

CO: That's what I like to hear. Thank you very much for taking the time.

CH: I don't know if I've helped you any.

CO: You added a lot of little things.

END OF INTERVIEW