

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown YMCA Project

Personal Experiences

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TOM COLLIER

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

August 24, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: TOM COLLIER

INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier

SUBJECT: Personal History, Education, Beginnings in YMCA,
McDonald Branch, Programming

DATE: August 24, 1975

JC: This is Jeff Collier. I'm speaking with my father, Mr. Tom Collier, at his residence at 42 Martts Avenue in Ramsey, New Jersey. The date today is August 24, 1975. I'm speaking with him about the history of the Youngstown YMCA, and his part in that history. I'm representing the Oral History Program at Youngstown State University.

Dad, could you give me the background of yourself, as far as where you were born, raised, education, and activities?

TC: Yes, Jeff, I will. I was born in Harrisonberg, Virginia, on December 1, 1925. At the age of three, my father, mother, sister, brother and I moved to York, Pennsylvania, where he had taken on a new job.

To earn my stay in York, I attended Hannis Family Junior High School. I played basketball there. Later on, I went to William Penn High School. I graduated from William Penn in 1944. For my stay at William Penn, the thing I liked to do best was to play basketball. I was always very interested in things, such as gymnastics and so forth. I think this was the type of activity that I thought I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

In 1944 the United States was at war with Germany. I had taken a V-7 on the Air Force examination and went into the Air Force from there. I spent between the years 1944 and 1946 in the Air Force.

Upon being discharged, I enrolled in the York Junior College, where I spent one year. From there I went down to the University of Maryland and matriculated from there.

I spent three years at the University of Maryland, and graduated with a BS degree in 1950.

Upon graduation, I went to work with the United States Navy Department in Washington, D.C. While I was in Washington, I discovered that a former classmate of mine, Rodney Hibner, was the youth director at the Washington YMCA. So I would go up and visit him on my lunch hour. We would discuss the good times we had at the York YMCA. I told him about my interest and my graduate degree in physical education. He encouraged me to pursue working in the YMCA field. Upon his advice, I sent for some literature on a career in the YMCA. They sent me some papers, which I filled out and applied to work in the YMCA field.

JC: Okay, you can project something here. You talked about the good times at the York YMCA when you were growing up. Did you used to go there quite frequently?

TC: Oh, yes. I used to go to the York Y about twice a week. I think the thing that really impressed me was we had a fellow by the name of Guy Sheeps. He was the youth director at the York Y. He was a very fine Christian man. I think he had a lot of influence on how I feel. I used to attend some of his club meetings.

Everything that he did had a Christian background. We used to sing Christian hymns and we would have readings from the bible and so forth. I used to attend the bible classes in the York Y auditorium. It was a big thing back in those days, really. I think the Y had a much bigger Christian emphasis in those days than it does today.

Anyway, I always wanted to emulate a person like Mr. Sheeps. That's where I got my first taste of what the YMCA was like.

JC: Did you incorporate any of those ideas in things, such as the programs that they ran into the YMCA, when you became active as a director of any type? Do you think it ever influenced in any way, shape, or form?

TC: Yes, I think so. When I became the director of the McDonald Branch of the Youngstown Association, I think that the traditional YMCA programs as were carried on in the York Y, I carried with me to Ohio and started a number of them at the McDonald Y especially; I think things that pertain to physical education. There are all types of games, mass games, and so forth that I would run that were similar to the ones we ran

in York.

JC: You said that you were working in the government in 1950 or 1951 when you graduated. What were you doing with the government?

TC: I was working in the cataloguing department for the Navy. I did that for two or three years, but that was not my interest. Of course, being a graduate in physical education and recreation from the University of Maryland, I decided I should pursue that line of work.

JC: When you applied to get into the YMCA work, where did you apply? Did you get your papers from New York City out of the headquarters of the Y?

TC: Yes, the papers came from the national headquarters at 291 Broadway, 12th Street.

JC: How was it that you got to come about to go to Youngstown? Did they just notify you that there was an opening in Youngstown and you went up there?

TC: I received notification from a couple of agencies, and applied to those two areas. One was in Minogga, Pennsylvania, and the other one was in Youngstown for the McDonald Branch. I went and interviewed for both jobs. I decided that I preferred the one in McDonald over the one in Pennsylvania in Minogga.

JC: Any particular reason?

TC: I think primarily because in McDonald I could be my own person. I could be my own boss really. I imagine the title had some influence. In McDonald, Ohio, I was the executive director. The one in Minogga, Pennsylvania, I was physical director. There I would be working for someone, a boss director over me. It was a one-man operation in McDonald. I felt that I could really prove myself and that I could really do the job.

JC: When you came to Youngstown to interview, did you interview at the McDonald Branch, or did you go down to the downtown Y?

TC: No, I interviewed at the McDonald Branch.

JC: Who interviewed you?

TC: I think it was Jim Pierce. There were a number of people on the board of directors who interviewed me. But Jim Pierce was the President of the McDonald Branch at the time.

JC: You talked to no one from Youngstown?

TC: Oh yes. I interviewed also with William Durwell.

JC: What was his position?

TC: He was the business man, as you might say, the associate executive director.

JC: He was under Paul Davies then?

TC: Paul Davies was his boss, yes.

JC: Was there anyone else who interviewed you? You interviewed then with Durwell and Pierce. Who was on the board?

TC: Pierce and a few other board members. I don't recall who they were, though.

JC: Okay. Then you decided to take the position at the McDonald Branch?

TC: Right. When I came to McDonald in 1953, the YMCA there had been closed for about a year, probably due to financial problems. I don't recall exactly what it was. But it seemed to me they were closed down about a year.

Membership was very low. Right before the branch had closed, they had only a few hundred members, as I recall. When I came there, they wanted very much to reopen. They had hired me to reopen and get things active again.

JC: What had happened to the previous director?

TC: I don't know. I should, but I don't.

JC: Do you happen to know who it was?

TC: Ben Davis, as I remember, had been there prior to myself. I remember him as being a sort of hard-core individual. He was the type of person who wore western-type clothing. He only wore a western-style tie, because they wanted him to wear some type of tie.

When I came there, the building wasn't in too good of shape. It had been closed down. We got bigger right away. I organized a lot of young people to come in and renovate the place. They did a lot of cleaning, painting, repair work, and so forth.

McDonald is a town that was built by US Steel really. The housing there was built by the company to take care of employees. The whole village and the community's

livelihood is dependent on US Steel. They had a different body of personnel to come out and repair the houses and anything that needed repaired. The personnel from US Steel did all repairs for them, such as road and window repairs. The same thing applied to the YMCA there for years. As I understand, that building was one of US Steel's office buildings at one time. When they no longer needed it, Mr. Davies, I think, asked them to contribute or sell it to the Y.

When the building went up for sale, they purchased it for approximately \$25,000, which was a small sum. The Y didn't actually pay any money for it; there was some sort of fund exchange. I imagine they got some kind of a tax write off.

So the Y ended up with the building and US Steel was very generous over the next few years, providing things like the heating plant. I think the furnace and so forth had gone off. They replaced the heating system. They also renovated the fire escape and the roof. They did a lot of other work.

JC: All for free?

TC: All for free. Many of the people on our board were from the US Steel Company, fellows like Jim Pierce and Eddy Roste. There were quite a few.

JC: When you first came to the McDonald Y, could you describe the building physically?

TC: The building was located on the corner of Fifth and Ohio Avenue, I think. It was a rather nice-looking building. As I say, it needed some painting and repair work done. It was sort of a colonial structure type of building with three stories.

The first floor consisted of a post office, barber shop, beauty shop, and so forth. The second floor was where the YMCA put on most of their programs. On the second floor, we had a large room. To the right of the large room were pool tables and two bowling alleys. Then to the other side of the building, we had a library. We had a game room and a dance room. On the third floor was a large, open space used primarily for large meetings and all sorts of roller skating. Off to the one side, there was a kitchen with a refrigerator and desk and so forth.

JC: Were the establishments that were in the bottom of the building--the post office, real estates, barber shop, et cetera--those rented spaces?

TC: Yes, those were rented spaces. The revenue gains from those sources were used to help provide some of the YMCA programs, because the membership rate back then was very, very reasonable.

JC: When you set it up, became established, and began running the YMCA there, how much did they charge for memberships, do you remember?

TC: I think we got it for about \$6.

JC: Per Year?

TC: \$6 per year. It might even have been as low as \$4. Family membership was about \$8 or \$10 a year, I don't know.

JC: Very, very inexpensive.

TC: Yes, I think the next year after that the total budget as I remember was \$9,000. A \$9,000 budget for the whole YMCA. When I left four years later, we had over \$17,000. It about doubled in those few years.

JC: When you began setting up the programs, did you get anyone tellying you what type of things you started setting up, about what type of programs you initiated, the involvement with the school system as far as their facilities and things like that?

TC: Yes, we established a pretty good relationship with the high school there. Mr. Migallen was the superintendent of schools. He was very, very cooperative in really allowing the YMCA to use their gymnasium and their pool. We started a lot of gym programs for grade school age. They were primarily recreational, teaching some skills and sports and so forth. We taught skills in basketball and things of this nature.

We had gym programs for grade school, for junior high, high school, and also for adults. We started the basketball leagues especially for the adult men. We had basketball leagues for them. They were very generous with their grade school gym too. We had men's basketball in the grade school. we had all kinds of gym things, different types of mass games and recreation and physical exercise programs for work.

The high school was very fortunate. I think it was the only high school in the area that had a swimming pool. We were permitted to use the swimming pool and we taught life saving classes and all different skills of swimming. We even taught women up there how to swim and so forth.

We were lucky, also, that we had a beautiful park area, in which we started baseball leagues, baseball teams, and so forth. We had, as I remember, sixteen through eighteen for baseball. We had baseball for boys and softball for the girls. We had things like movies out in the park area in the evening. I recall we had Mr. Robbins come over there to the park. He was pretty perturbed that we had started movies out in the open like that. He thought we were giving the Robbins Theatre some competition. But we didn't charge anything. We told him it was free, and gratis didn't disturb him as much. He thought we were taking business from him, from the theatre. We got feature movies at least once a week. We would show them on the hillside at night. It became a very popular thing for people to go there.

JC: Then the complex was pretty much like a YMCA/YWCA? Was it set up more on that basis than strictly YMCA?

TC: Yes. Well, really we had many, many family memberships.

JC: In 1953, were family memberships popular at the YMCA or not?

TC: I think they were starting to become in vogue. I know at one time the YMCA was a Young Men's Christian Association, which is strictly a male oriented organization. But about in 1950, a lot of YMCA started moving to assume a very family type program.

I think we were one of the leaders at that time in the field. In the beginning of 1953, some YMCA's started going in that direction. Now today, at least a third, over a third of the total membership of the YMCA, which exceed 7,000,000 are females, I think.

JC: How about support from the main YMCA in Youngstown, was there a lot of support? In talking with people from the West Federal Branch and also other people about the McDonald Branch, I sort of get the feeling there wasn't a lot of support. Did you feel that there was? Did you attend staff meetings down at the Youngstown Central Branch? Also, did they come out and give you a lot of help moneywise and supervisionwise?

TC: I think we were stated as a branch and they expected us to carry all of the weight. I never did feel that there was an awful lot of support. I don't think there was a lot of faith from the Central Office that the McDonald Branch would ever amount to that much. I think they helped if you asked for it. If you really wanted it, I think they would have come out and given a hand. I think also, the Board of Directors, Board of Managers

as it was called at the time at McDonald, felt that they were like a stepchild that didn't receive much help. But then again, I think if you want help, you have to pay for it. I think you have to pay your own way.

I think that people in McDonald were always supplied by US Steel Company. When that disappeared and the Youngstown YMCA had taken over, I think they felt the Youngstown YMCA should do the same thing for them that US Steel had done. That is, take care of this or replace this furniture; whatever needed replacing should be done by the Youngstown Association.

I never thought that it should be. I think that every branch should separately be self-sustaining. I felt that they were cooperative enough, but I don't think they were that much interested in the total effect about McDonald. I think the general executive was concerned, because it was really one of his concerns as a branch of the downtown, just like you say West Federal was. I can see why they wanted both of them to go. The rest of the staff recognized it was there but they were more interested in their own job.

JC: Did you get to know anybody at the Central Branch very close?

TC: Oh, certainly yes.

JC: Were you close with them through the course of time?

TC: Yes, I think that all of us guys were nice fellows to work with.

JC: Would they ever come out and help you?

TC: No, no I don't think.

JC: Did you ever ask them to?

TC: No, I never asked them to. I always felt that they had a full-time job down there, just like I had a full-time job. I mean if they asked me to come down to help them at the Central Branch, I don't think I would come either. You know I was too busy doing my own job. I felt the same way about them. I didn't feel as though they should come out and help me, you know, because they had a full-time job down there to run.

JC: In terms of budgets, it was pointed out to me that the West Federal Branch never carried its share as far as the budgets. If they would have a budget of maybe something

hypothetical, \$20,000, then they would raise \$10,000 and the Central Branch would have to give the other \$10,000, was that the case at McDonald? If your budget was \$9,000 when you came there and it went up to \$17,000, would that be because you were retaining that budget and exceeding it? Is that why it continued to grow?

TC: I think our budget grew. I think the budget about doubled in, say, three or four years. I think it was primarily the fact that we started providing a lot of programs for a lot of people, so our membership grew.

JC: What did it grow from what to what if you can recall?

TC: I think it went from 250 members to 600 members; that's counting families. You know, one family may have five members. They only paid maybe \$10 for membership the whole year for each one. Each one was only paying like \$2.

JC: Sure it's mighty cheap, dirt cheap.

TC: Then the thing about it, our revenues from the community chapter remained rather stable, even though our budget increased rapidly. We were receiving, I think, \$1,500 and a few hundred dollars from the community chest. That stayed the same amount for three or four years. We really didn't get a fairly good increase from the community chest as I recall. It's hard to remember some of these things, because it has been so many years ago. You're going back some twenty years now.

I think one of the most beneficial things we did there was initiate a women's auxiliary. What the women's auxiliary was, was a group of women who were available to assist the Y in different things. They assisted the Y on putting on membership campaigns. They even worked, not only just providing the dinners for the people who worked on it, but they also worked on the campaign themselves. They also ran functions such as club parties, auctions and different things to raise money to help the YMCA meet any expenses coming up. They were a very, very good crew. That was fun.

JC: One of the things I wanted to ask you about was the actual membership campaign when you were there. You did not run them in conjunction with the Central Branch, didn't you have your own campaign?

TC: Yes, we had our own. When I first began there, we had to run our campaign individually. They had their campaigns, even though they were at a little different times. Then after I was there about two years, we decided we ought to go and do it together.

JC: Why do you think that decision was made?

TC: It was a decision made primarily because we felt we could get a wider range of publicity, because we could announce both of them together and so forth.

JC: Was the campaign set up the same way as the Central Y even when you didn't have them in conjunction with each other? The Central Branch used to have theme campaigns. Was that the way you set it up here?

TC: Yes, we did the same thing. We would use some kind of western theme or some kind of . . . just something that would create interest in it. Even automobile racing where each team would represent a different certain automobile. We would make it more competitive and more fun really.

JC: Did the news media cover it pretty well for you?

TC: Yes, they did a very good job.

JC: The Vindicator?

TC: Yes, The Girard News and the Niles Times, all of them.

JC: The time that you were there did you feel that US Steel continued to help you?

TC: Yes, US Steel was very, very cooperative. Now being far removed from it at this point, I've never been in any area of a YMCA, either North Carolina or Jersey, where the corporation and factories and so forth were so much part of the Y. They allowed you to come in and put on a membership campaign within the plant itself. You won't find this anyplace else. I think it's still going there, but I'm not sure.

JC: Do you think that when the YMCA was in McDonald, US Steel continued to help because they felt an obligation to the Y? Why would they continue to help when they got rid of the building?

TC: Because they were liked. I think the happy employee is a much better worker. I think that they feel that probably 80% of the people in McDonald were working for US Steel. The McDonald Y served all of those people. It served the whole community. I think McDonald was one of the richer ones. I think people in McDonald felt that that job was their job. It didn't belong to people in Girard or Niles? In fact, I felt that there was resentment toward people coming in from the outside.

JC: Did you have many members from Girard and Niles?

TC: Not very many. I think a lot of the people had pride in something that belonged in their community.

JC: You were at the McDonald Y for three years before you went down to the Central Branch in Youngstown?

TC: About four years.

JC: In terms of the McDonald Y, what would you say would be the biggest change between when you came and when you left?

TC: I think there were a number of changes. I think one thing is that we had programs for all different ages, much more than we ever had before. The membership was much larger. I think that the building was much improved too over what it was when I first came there. I mean when I left there after four years, the building was really in good shape. We spent quite a bit of money on it. We had a lot of people volunteer to do things within the building that really improved it, such as putting down a nice new floor in the recreation area where the pool tables were located. We put in all new tile floor and so forth. All that was done, with voluntary labor. The building was in much better condition.

I think our public image with the community was improved quite a bit too. I think because of the programs we had, the children were kept well-disciplined during the time I was there.

JC: During the time that you were there, did you have other staff members besides yourself?

TC: Yes. We had volunteers. We did have some payed staff. We had for instance, a fellow named Gib Woods. In fact, when I came there, he was my right-hand person; he had been there prior to my arrival. He knew the people and knew some of the programs that were presently going on. I relied quite heavily on him when I first came there, you know, his knowledge of what the community did need and what they did want. Gib Woods was there quite a number of years and was very helpful. We did employ some people that had skills, such as water safety instructors to help with some of our water programs.

JC: Did you yourself do most of the physical part, like the gymnasium involvement and things like that?

TC: I think initially I tried to run other things myself,

but after we got quite a wide range of programs then we had to bring in some part-time people to supervise and also instruct in those programs.

JC: Seeing that you felt that the Y had grown substantially and in fact, it had in numbers and improvement of the building, why do you think it went downhill so fast after you left, because you left?

TC: I wish I knew. I really don't know how it went downhill.

JC: Who took your place?

TC: Ray Couton.

JC: How long was he there?

TC: He was there, I would say, about two years.

JC: Then who came?

TC: I think Bob Doyle came in after that. I don't know what the reasons were. I never looked into it to see why it seemed as though it started to decline. Maybe it was just the times. It degenerated or something. I wish I knew the answer. I don't know. I didn't do any research on it.

JC: A quick question about membership in terms of dollar increase gain: Did the membership for four or six dollars continue to rise in the course of the four years that you were there?

TC: No.

JC: They [memberships] stayed much the same?

TC: Yes. I think in the course of four years we only raised them one time. YMCA's have been reluctant to raise the rates for memberships. They have always undersold their product for years. I think it has only been in the last ten years that the YMCA's have been raising the costs of their membership in ratio to the expenses that have been going on. They are trying to keep abreast of the cost of operating the Y, on a business basis.

JC: If you had a \$9,000 budget when you started there, and raised the membership zero times or one time in four years, and your budget doubled, where did the extra money come from?

TC: Well, bowling. We had quite a bit of money come in from bowling. We had two bowling alleys then. I'm trying to think how many thousands of dollars would come in. A

number sticks in my mind like \$3,500 a year spent on bowling. We kept those bowling alleys going constantly. They were very active. We started mixed leagues and junior-senior high leagues.

JC: You had to be a member to bowl?

TC: You were supposed to be a member to bowl, yes. We put a person on the steps at the entrance to the Y for a long time. People used to come to the Y apparently, and membership or not, they would get in. We became very strict. Everybody had a membership card and they carried it. We made them show it to identify themselves if they would come in. I think people knew that we meant business.

Bowling was a good source of income. I think that was one thing that really helped us. The other thing too was that we raised the rents over the time that I was there, the rent for the post office, barber shop and beauty shop, and those things.

JC: Was that a major portion of the total budget?

TC: Yes. If you would add \$3,500 for the bowling, \$1,500 from the community chest you have \$5,000. If the budget was \$17,000, you still needed another \$12,000.

JC: How much was the rental then?

TC: I don't know. I would guess from all of the different sources probably about \$3,000.

JC: Per year?

TC: Yes.

JC: You have about half of your budget then with the bowling, the rentals, and the community chest?

TC: We got a sum of money from the community chest out of Youngstown too. They supplied us with a certain amount of money. I wasn't told what the figure was, but it seems to me it was \$800.

JC: Did US Steel ever give you any money?

TC: They furnished some large items. They replaced a door. That probably cost \$2,000.

JC: Did you have to go to them to get that replaced? Did you ask them?

TC: No. I think that came about because we were having problems

- with heating the building. We started noticing that certain parts of the furnace were breaking down. We had people on our Board of Directors who worked with US Steel. They were in management for US Steel. So they approached US Steel higher-ups for requests for replacing our furnace. I think Karl Woodward might have been the person that someone had talked to. He was superintendent of US Steel. He got permission. They get the funds replaced anyway. They also sent men out to rejuvenate the fire escape, which probably cost about \$1,500. The fire escape was becoming rusty and hazardous to walk on. They redid that for us.
- JC: In terms of the board that was there, in the four years did the board remain the same?
- TC: Oh, no. People come and go.
- JC: You would elect them every year?
- TC: Yes, if I recall every year. I don't know.
- JC: Twenty people on the board?
- TC: Twenty people on the board. There were a couple of women on there. I remember Mary MacIntire. She was real active on the board. She also headed up the women's auxiliary force. Every year a third of those people would come up for renewal.
- JC: Reelection?
- TC: Reelection type thing, yes.
- JC: Was anyone from Youngstown on the board for the Y or community chest or anything like that?
- TC: Wayne Durwell was from Youngstown. He was active for some years. He would come out and sit in on our board meetings. He's the only one I knew though.
- JC: After your four years, how was it that you moved down to the Youngstown Y?
- TC: I think the way it happened was after about four years I felt that I had accomplished what I could. We would come a long way. I felt also a need that I should move. I wanted to look for a little better position. When I told Mr. Davies, the general executive, my boss, that I would like to look for a different position, he said, "Well..." In fact, he had asked me many times if I would be interested in coming down to the Central Branch as the membership director. I declined the offer.

JC: Is there any particular reason why you declined it?

TC: I don't know. I probably felt that it might be a come-down. I think that's one of the foul ups of starting in a position of a branch executive, even though it really wasn't that impressive of a job. It was like being the vice-president of a bank; you get a big title with a little bit of money. I think that's one of the reasons probably why you would take the job as executive director of a lesser Y, than you would a physical director of a much more modern Y. The title means something to you, you know.

Anyway, when I told Mr. Davies that I would be looking for a new position at another association, he said, "Remember that we offered you the membership director's job at the Central Y." When I went out looking for a job in Baltimore and so forth, I set my mind to one back home so to speak. I finally ended up taking the membership job over other jobs.

JC: Do you find that your background at the McDonald Y helped you possibly in terms of the membership job that you took over at the Youngstown Y? I would think that you would have gotten much more training in McDonald. Becoming involved in membership alone seems much more specialized than the things you had to accomplish there at the McDonald Y. You actually ran a small Y.

TC: Ran it by myself. I think you run it on a hit or miss proposition, which I don't think is good training really. It's not beneficial for a person coming fresh out of college. I don't think it's advantageous for the individual to go into a one-man operation, because you have nobody to train you. I think I would have much preferred to go into an operation where you have other staff members to work next to, or alongside of, or with people who have had some experience. I don't think it was a good move on my part to start off as executive director because I really trained myself. In Y work, there's a lot to learn. There are an awful lot of things that you can learn from other people who have the expertise.

JC: With that in mind, did you ever give any training at all to your replacement?

TC: Yes, pretty much. I mean I spent some time with them, maybe a few weeks, but not enough of it. I think people that came in my position were left pretty much on their own. That's the same way when I came here; I just picked up my own boot straps and went to work. The person who helped me the most was really just a part-time worker.

JC: Gib Woods?

TC: Yes, Gib Woods. He was the one who showed me everything about those first years.

JC: Did he remain on when your replacement came?

TC: No, I think he had left before. A fellow named Jimmy Astro came and took his place. Jimmy Astro was good to work with young people.

JC: Did Jimmy Astro remain on when . . .

TC: Yes, I think after I left he was still there if I recall. Then Ray Couton came on.

JC: You went to the Youngstown YMCA when?

TC: 1957.

JC: You started in January of 1957. Do you have any idea when you started?

TC: I don't recall the month now.

JC: You were still living in McDonald at that time?

TC: Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW