

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown YMCA Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 409

TOM COLLIER

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: TOM COLLIER
INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier
SUBJECT: Youngstown YMCA - 1957 to 1969, Membership,
Adult Program Development, Campaigns
DATE: August 31, 1975

JC: This is Jeff Collier. I'm sitting with my father, Mr. Tom Collier. Today's date is August 31, 1975, and we are at his residence at 42 Martts Avenue in Ramsey, New Jersey. We're talking about the Youngstown YMCA in conjunction with the Oral History Program at Youngstown State University.

Okay, we'll be taking up the second part of our conversation that deals with the time that he spent at the Youngstown YMCA, which began in 1957 and ran up until 1969.

In 1957 you came to the Central Y and went into membership. Prior to this you worked for the McDonald Y. Could you start by telling us who were the directors, executive director, and your immediate supervisors at the YMCA in Youngstown. Also tell us about what your job was in membership, what you did there, and generally just a progression of the twelve years that you spent there at the Youngstown YMCA until the time you left in 1969?

TC: I went down to the Central Branch as the membership director, as you stated, in 1957. My primary job, of course, was to be responsible for the membership campaign, which we held annually. At that time it was in September. The membership campaign usually ran for about three or four weeks, and we tried to get all the people to renew their membership during those three weeks. We had, normally, 400 or 500 people who volunteered their time to go out and get all of the people to renew. So, that was my job.

The other thing was keeping records of members, sending out statements to those people whose membership expired throughout the year. I think, as I reflect back, we always had on the rolls between 10,000 and 12,000 members. The Youngstown association had quite a large membership.

For the other part of my job, I was asked, after I was there about a year or so, if I would take on the responsibility for adult programming. This pertained to social, educational type programs. At the time that I was requested to take on this responsibility, I think, the only adult program we had along the line of social education programs was square dancing. Anyhow, I finally did accept that position. It was another part of my portfolio.

I initiated a number of things such as speed reading, ballroom dancing, and golf lessons. These, to me, fall in the realm of social educational type things. We had classes in driver's education and a lot of things of this nature. Over a period of about four or five years, we initiated enough programs that we had an income of around \$10,000 a year from various sources.

I had this position from 1957 until around 1962. At that time Paul Davies was my immediate supervisor. He was the one who I was really accountable to. I don't recall what year it was that Paul Davies retired. He retired prematurely a couple of years because he had a heart condition. Then Sweet Hunneke, Henry Hunneke, became the general executive. Sometime after he had taken on this new role, he asked me if I would take on the responsibilities of resident director, and program director. It was a different type of portfolio. I did it with the concept that I could broaden my horizon, my YMCA experience. I accepted the resident director. At that time, I think Bob Mowey moved into the membership director's position. He and I just switching roles was what it amounted to.

We had 150 rooms on the fourth, fifth, and sixth floor of the Y. At that time, I think we had just started to take in college students. Some college students had started to come to the Y for housing. We moved a lot of the older fellows, who had been there for a number of years, off of the fourth floor onto the fifth and sixth floors. What it amounts to is that we took the one floor and converted it into almost like a college dormitory. The whole floor was turned over to college students.

Maintaining discipline on that floor was quite a job. I recall one time when I was up there just checking on the college students. It was rather a rowdy group

up there. They were all boys, young men. Most of them came from the Pittsburgh area and were attending Youngstown State University. I was up there and I made a comment about it being so noisy and one of the guys said, "Yes, it sounds just like a zoo, doesn't it?" Thereafter they always commented about the fourth floor being a zoo. Anytime I would make that type of statement, they would make all kind of animal noises. It was really very comical. I held that position from 1962 for about six or seven years, until I went down to Carolina.

- JC: A couple of questions in conjunction with each of those positions. First, in terms of membership, what was your reaction to move from an executive directorship having 600 to 800 members to one having 10,000 members? Was that quite a change for you?
- TC: I don't think so, no. Everything was just on a larger scale really. For example, the membership campaign we ran was very similar, except at McDonald we only had maybe sixty people who were out soliciting memberships. Down in Youngstown on this new position, we had 400 or 500 people willing to go out and solicit membership. Of course, you get that many because you have a much larger area to cover. There are many more people to recruit.
- JC: I would think that you have a lot more facilities, though, at your fingertips, a lot more people in higher up positions, a lot more businesses to work with, things such as that. Even if, like you're saying, it is on a grander scale or a larger scale, it would seem to me that the people in Youngstown would have a lot more to offer you because you are not attracting people from a small village like McDonald. Didn't you find that to be the case?
- TC: The resources were greater, of course, but like you say, you needed greater resources to do a bigger job. I think it was comparable.
- JC: In conjunction with the social programs, you had mentioned that you started numerous ones. Would the background at the McDonald Y in any way, shape, or form help you in this area, in terms of getting programs started?
- TC: No, I don't think so.
- JC: Why did the beginning social programs come about? Was there a definite lack in the community?
- TC: Well, yes. I think it came about primarily because of the other YMCA's. Just looking at the brochures and flyers that came out of places like Pittsburgh, you

saw that they had a whole large adult education school there. A lot of YMCA's throughout the countries were connected with educational institutions. For instance, Youngstown State University began as a night school within the Youngstown Central Branch. At one time it was the YMCA Night School. A lot of people, even today if you talk about some of their backgrounds and where they went to school, many of them will say at one time they had taken blueprint making or some course at the Youngstown Y Night School.

Anyhow, I'm saying that our Y at one time had some kind of social and educational programs and for some reason they degenerated, declined, and disappeared. We felt that this was a need. There's an area that we could provide some outlet or some areas of learning to people in the area. We felt that there were a lot of things that weren't being offered that we could supplement with social education programs. We provided it because we didn't have anything going along that line. The only thing we had, which was more recreational, was the square dance. We had the square dancing primarily for adults. We felt that we had rooms available and there were resources, people that could teach these things in the area, so we decided we would try it out. It went very well.

JC: Did you start off with just one course to get it rolling?

TC: Yes. We started off with probably three things, which got it going and then it grew to a dozen things.

JC: I have thought of an interesting note as a result of talking recently with Bob Doyle from the Youngstown branch. They have pretty much given up a lot of those programs because, I guess, a lot of other community activities, like universities or technical schools, have taken many of those people that the YMCA would have once gotten. Now the Y doesn't have, I don't think, the volume of people coming through. I'm sure that they aren't making the money now that they did then, so they have dropped a lot of those courses.

TC: I think at the time I initiated these types of classes, some things were already being offered out at South High School or Wilson or someplace. But there were always some people who would come to the Y that wouldn't go to some school situation. I think maybe they felt more relaxed in a YMCA atmosphere. I don't know.

I think one of the most prominent courses that I can think about was our speed reading course taught by Dr. Robert Zorn. He was a superintendent. At that time, when we first had knowledge of him being able to teach this course, I think

he was a school teacher. Then he had been here a number of years when he had furthered his education and became assistant superintendent of the county schools. He did a marvelous job. I don't think we really had to do much in the way of publicity about the course because word of mouth got around about what a fine course it was and how successful the people were who took the course. The class has always gotten filled.

There were also courses in golf. They went very well too. We taught those late at night. We had those courses going from 9:00 to 10:00 at night in the upper gym. We always had them filled. A class was about twelve people. That was all we could accommodate in the gymnasium. Tom Jones, who was at one time the State Amateur Champion of Ohio, taught the course. He did a very good job for us. They were always coed programs. We had men and women both. We took youths down as low as--if they were interested--twelve years of age and up.

JC: Do you remember any of the other things you made mention of like square dancing, ballroom dancing, and, I think, guitar lessons?

TC: We had guitar lessons and we had, I think, stock investment classes, and things like that. They went very well.

JC: The old Carnegie?

TC: Yes, the old Carnegie courses; we had that going for a number of years. I think, at the time we started them, as I remember, a lot of these things were already offered in the school system, but we had such a large population to deal with that there was always people to fill up some of these classes, even at other places.

JC: Do you think that these educational classes were sort of a sign of the times or something like that? The reason I ask that is because it was successful for awhile then, maybe because somebody wasn't promoting them correctly, they had sort of fallen out as far as the money they made for the Y. I just wondered if there was any particular reason?

TC: I don't know whether it ever was that much of a money-maker; I don't think it was. When you considered all of the cost factors involved, you might have been lucky if you broke even. I think it was a fine program, a program that people wanted. They were coming and enjoying the classes at least.

- JC: Not only that, but I'm sure some memberships grew out of that too.
- TC: Oh sure. The people just in the classes saw the facilities that were around there and eventually ended up being members. As I recall at that time, we charged one rate for a member and a higher rate for a nonmember. There was always a program to involve them. The program fee was higher for a nonmember than it was for a member.
- JC: When you went in as membership executive, what was the fee for a membership at that time at the Youngstown Y?
- TC: The fee has always been variable according to age. For instance, I think, at that time the grade school membership might have been \$17 or \$18. The adult membership, which was usually the age group of 18 to 24, would be \$30 or something along that line; the 25 to 29 would be \$35; thirty and up would be \$40. That's about the way the membership ran at that time. When I first went there I think they were somewhere in those proportions. They increased over the years. The \$18 membership went up to \$22 over a period of a couple of years. The others went up about \$5 each or so. Now today they're just about, I guess, close to double what they were back fifteen years ago.
- JC: When you moved from membership into residence and programs, what did your job entail at that point?
- TC: My job was to be responsible for the front desk, like an innkeeper. There were five women who worked at the desk. There was also a night man. The women's job was to register people who . . . they collected rents and receipts for rentals; anyone who came in was assigned a room and so forth. Really my job was to try to keep the residence filled up. We always were hoping that we could get 80% to 90% occupancy.
- JC: How many rooms did you occupy?
- TC: We had three floors and each floor had 50 rooms, so we had 150 rooms all total.
- JC: What percentage of those were permanent residents and college students?
- TC: Fifty of them were college students. The fourth floor was devoted strictly to college students, and the other two floors were made up of working people. Many of them were people who worked on the railroad and in the steel mills and so forth.

JC: Did you have a lot of transient people?

TC: Yes, I don't know why, but you were supposed to keep so many rooms for transient people. There were quite a few people who had been there for fifteen or twenty years. We tried to keep the proportion of different age groups up there. We didn't want the Y to become an old men's home or anything, and this can happen very easily because the rental was very reasonable. We only charged like \$10 or \$12 for a room. Can you imagine that today? That was the home rate. After awhile you could become, like I said, a home for the old men if you're not careful. This is really detrimental, especially for the parents who brought their children to the Y. It was really discouraging to them if they saw too many people of 65 and over category. We tried to make sure that we didn't get too many old people in the Y.

JC: In conjunction with that, you also took over the cafeteria?

TC: Yes, later. I think that was, let's see, about 1966 to about 1969. I had the cafeteria for about three or four years.

JC: What changes were made when you were in charge of that area?

TC: I think Sweet Hunneke was in charge of food service. He asked me if I would take on that responsibility that he had carried with him for awhile. He then asked me if I would accept that and take on a supervisory job which I agreed to. This job included supervising approximately fifteen full and part-time people, who were all women. My job actually was to make certain that people fulfilled their jobs, that they carried out their responsibilities. I ascertained that they were on the job on time and I kept records along that line.

I was also responsible for an attractive menu, one that was palatable to most of the people we served who were mostly members. I think the biggest change we made was to revise the menu quite a bit, made it more attractive. We started a thing where every Friday we had all the fish you could eat for a certain price and so forth. The college students loved this. I think that they saved their appetite the whole week so they could have a big meal on that Friday. Anyway, we started a varied menu which I think people loved very much. The income really changed. I think a lot more people started coming in for awhile because we did offer things that were different, or what they hadn't been having for a number of years. That budget improved quite a bit too. I think part of this was just the fact too that the renovation of the downtown had taken place. What they called urban renewal.

We remodeled the cafeteria and made some changes up there, which I think were beneficial. We redid some of the furniture and the walls and so forth, and some of the light fixtures. I think that made it more attractive to people coming in.

JC: What about taking over different programs than those of the social and educational activities? Could you expound a little bit on what the programs entailed?

TC: What program are you talking about? I'm lost.

JC: Didn't you take over a program when you moved from membership?

TC: I'm talking about the speed reading and things like this. These were the courses that I planned and organized.

JC: That was all in the program?

TC: Yes.

JC: In essence, they sort of created a new job? When Bob Mowery moved, he had been in charge of programs, right?

TC: Yes, but they really had no programs going.

JC: So in essence, 'program' was merely a title?

TC: Yes. It amounted to him being called resident director and program director, but there were no programs going on at that time.

JC: What did he do?

TC: His primary responsibility was to take care of the residents.

When Bob and I changed, Mr. Hunneke asked me if I would try different programs, like educational things and so forth. I said, "I'll try to do my best." So anyway, they started to really go. In a couple of years, we had a number of programs going and had an income of at least around \$10,000 which we never had before.

JC: While you were there, except for the early portion of 1957 to 1962, Sweet Hunneke was the general executive or branch executive?

TC: I don't know what year it was. Paul Davies retired one year.

JC: I think it was 1962.

TC: That sounds right. That's just about the year I guess when I became the residence manager.

JC: Who else beside Sweet Hunneke was your boss?

TC: Well, I think he was really about the only one who was my boss.

JC: Who were the other staff members?

TC: Holly Brown was there most of the time I was. He was the youth director and also the camp director. Jane Brown was the associate youth director, and then Bob Doyle came on the scene. He was the associate youth director and then later on moved into the youth director's position when Holly Brown left. Bill Wyler came on the scene later and he became the camp director. That became a full-time position and the camp became winterized quite a bit, so he devoted all his time to that position. Bob Mowey was there, as I say, in residence and membership. He and I switched responsibilities back and forth. Then Dick Bennett was there for a long time as the physical director. I think Joe Chester was in charge of physical education when I first went there. Then he became chief there and Bob Mowey was with him as physical education director. Don McConnell was also there. He was the aquatic director. Later on he became the physical director. Cindy Boyd was there for awhile as physical director. I can't keep all these things in perspective.

JC: Was Gene McDonald there?

TC: Yes. He came out of physical education as a director and later went into membership; he had moved into that job.

Bob Zajack started down there. He was working part-time for me out at McDonald teaching aquatic and so forth. He came down to the Central Y to work with the aquatics. He later became the head of the aquatic department. Joe Check was in charge of the health club and the industrial management club. Like I said earlier, he was the business director. He was in charge of the business office at one time and also held the position of food services in the cafeteria. So over the years, we had a lot of different staff members, and many of them have gone on to other positions since then.

JC: In the approximate twenty years which you have been with the YMCA, what has been its biggest change?

TC: I think the YMCA is constantly changing. It has moved out into all different classes of work. The Y used to be more building oriented. Everything was done in the building and I think over the past hundred years it has dealt primarily with gym work, aquatics, and camping, with a flavor of Christianity teaching and so forth wrapped in with all of

these things over the years. I think now the Y has taken on a different role. I think it still does those kinds of things, but today it's going out more into the community. They have a lot of outreach workers, people going out to work with youths on the street and so forth, especially in large metropolitan areas like New York City. They are taking vans and mobiles, which are almost like a mobile unit, and going out to the areas where the boys and girls are in the poverty regions. They are providing them, right there on the spot, with basketball, different kinds of games, handicrafts and so forth. They are taking the supplies right to the kids, so they are called outreach workers. A lot of this is getting done. This is new; it has never been done in the past. They have even taken portable swimming pools out to the neighborhood areas and taught them swimming. They are even working in people's own private swimming pools; we started it this year. If anybody has a pool, we use their pool to teach anyone they want to gather together as a group to swim.

JC: They pay you to come in?

TC: Yes. We use their pool and teach their friends and so forth how to swim. These types of things are being done. I think the YMCA today is working more with families and this is a new development. The Y is 130 years old and it has only been in the last twenty years that the Y has really gone into the family trend type thing.

JC: Was it out of necessity for money or just because they want to go that way because . . .

TC: I don't think it was for the money, but I don't know that could be part of it. I think that the important basic unit of everything is the family. We feel why should we provide only programs for half of the population, when we could get the whole family together and do things with them. We feel this is the most important thing to meet and strengthen family life for all, which is work of the whole family. The YMCA has gotten into a lot of things.

We call it a family focus where we bring in parents and children and have people who are trained to help them solve their problems or to get along with each other come in. We call this family communications: Helping the parents to understand how they can be better parents and helping the children to understand why their parents think a certain way and how they can come to some kind of solution on things that they differ on, how they can sit down and resolve problems that they had within the family. So the YMCA is getting into a lot of family communications programs. We have one fellow who was trained in that kind of stuff.

The YMCA has also gotten into more things like counseling with people who are having problems with alcohol and drugs and so forth. This occurs especially where there is a large metropolitan area.

I think the YMCA also has gotten into a new area of what they call juvenile delinquency or working with juvenile justice. In this program, they provide the children with minibikes. These are areas where they have young people, boys and girls, who have had confrontations with law. They had problems with being truant from school or so forth because they are just mixed up. The YMCA has gotten a program where the organization makes a bicycle, a minibike. They ride the bikes to the YMCA's. The YMCA was usually a tool for these young people. They would give these young people a bike to use and they go out in an area and ride the bikes in groups. They maintained the bike; they took care of it. They found out by giving them something constructive to do like riding the bicycle and taking care of the bike, that this makes them a better person. They had something to be responsible for. The children looked up to the person who was in charge, the director. He is doing something that is really helping them out. He is keeping them off of the street so to speak. Anyway, they have had a lot of luck with this program. The kids who have had a lot of problems with police and also problems in school are looking forward to being able to do this, ride these bikes and take care of them. The reward is being good in school. If you can have this bike and have this fun, you will really do a better job in school and so forth. It is like a reward for acting better in school and also for getting along better with the law. They call that juvenile justice.

JC: Do you perceive that trend continuing or growing? What do you perceive of the Y in the future, you know, five years down the pipe. What's it going to be like?

TC: I don't know. The Y's never change. A lot of things have been done in the past. As soon as some other agency moves in and starts picking up some of those things, the Y moves out and into a new shell.

JC: Do you think that the Y is as involved with the Christian aspect as it was once?

TC: No, I don't think so at all. That's where the Y has been really unique. I think any organization can be a recreation facility, but I think the uniqueness of the YMCA is that everything that is done is tied in with Christian endeavors. I think the Y has really been a recreational area of the church. I don't know where it's going to lead to in the future. I hope it never loses the Christian emphasis of the Y. It has lost a lot of it, but they are trying to

get back to it. They are always bringing up the subject; it keeps surfacing: What has happened to our Christian emphasis now? The people that I have talked to want to redeem that. I hope that it does get back into it more because I think when you lose that you lose an awful lot. I think without Christianity the world is lost.

JC: What do you think about the YMCA and YWCA? Do you perceive combining or setting together at any point, because they both bring families in and things like that?

TC: I think out of necessity it's going to have to happen. The YWCA is not only reluctant, but they will just not have any part of a combination YM/YW. Their national office will not permit a combination of the two. I think that things such as financing, the United Way and community charities, are going to make it a must that the two combine under one shelter so to speak, in one facility. It is more economical and everything today is economics, you know. I think it is going to be done out of necessity, not because of the desire of either one of the organizations. I think the problem is that both organizations would hesitate or dislike losing their identity; they have a real proud background and neither one wants to fade out of the picture. Both want to be dominant. In a case like this, eventually, somebody is going to lose out. The YMCA is a much bigger organization than YW so I think eventually it is probably going to be all YMCA's.

JC: One final question, and that is what would you say are the strong points and the weak points of the Youngstown YMCA? Did you feel, first of all, that it prepared you for stepping out, and then in looking back comparing the two Y's, would you say the YMCA in Youngstown is a pretty good organization?

TC: I think the Youngstown Association is a good program and learning place. I think that they do very well in programming, but in the areas of teaching their staff members financing, budgeting, and so forth, I don't think they do very well at all. This is the area that I felt I was lost in. You know, being sixteen years, I really should have had a much better basis of knowing budget developments and finance developments, but I didn't get much of that at all. I think that is their weakness. They need to prepare their people. The old traditional line budget items--those things don't hold up anymore. The United Way, the community charities, and even the national office of the YMCA acknowledged that a lot of the state and federal forms require a lot of reporting what they call the cost analysis basis. Today the Y has to be run more like a business operation. The financial reports have to be on a more businesslike basis. You have to show where your income expenses really are and like I said, the old traditional line budgets that we were

accustomed to just don't get it anymore.

JC: What about the strong points of the Youngstown Y?

TC: I think their strong points were doing an excellent job in membership promotion, membership organization, and campaigning; they were very good in that area. I think that their programs for grade schools and high schools were excellent. Physical education and swimming programs, in that area, I think they were top beat.

END OF INTERVIEW