

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

South High School

Personal Experiences
O.H. 1773

DR. KARL SOLLER

Interviewed

On

November 10, 1995

By

T. Lea Mollman

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M: This is an interview with Karl Soller for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program by Lea Mollman in Boardman Ohio on November 10, 1995 at 3:00 in the afternoon. Your father was a teacher at South but when he came what did he teach?

S: My father, when he graduated from Hiram College after the First World War, became a principal and a coach at McDonald High School in Trumbull County. I was born there in 1923. In 1927 or 1928 my father got a job as a basketball coach at South High where he also taught science. So we moved to Youngstown and lived on Willis Avenue in my early years. I can remember those days when my dad coached basketball at South High School because my mother and I would often go to the games. It was important time then for South High had good teams. I can remember going to Rayenwood Auditorium on Rayen Avenue where the tournament games were held. It was an exciting time. I was just a little kid and I can remember wanting to see my dad at one of the basketball games and I ran across the floor and darn near got killed. In my growing up years we moved out to Ravenwood Avenue which is close to Sheridan School. I started at Sheridan

School about the second or third grade and we lived there until about the fifth grade when we moved farther out on the south side to Helena Avenue which is very close to Bancroft School. Bancroft School had been built with the anticipation that the city limits were going to be expanded to Indianola Road but they never were so they never finished the second floor of Bancroft School. I went to Bancroft school through the sixth grade then went to Princeton Junior High School. That was a trying time for me I wasn't a very good student in those days. The ninth grade was held in Princeton Junior High School we did not go to South High School until we were in the tenth grade. So I consider Princeton my freshman year of high school, however when you were a senior in junior high then you became a freshman going to South but it was really my sophomore year. The school was a very busy school because we had to have a class day split into two. There were too many students. It seemed to me that we'd all meet at a certain time in the morning like ten thirty or so. We would start school at eight o'clock in the morning then have homeroom at ten o'clock. The kids that came in the afternoon would come at ten thirty and we'd all be in the same homeroom but then we'd go home and they'd continue on. It was that busy. From Princeton there were two junior high's on the south side one was Woodrow Wilson the other was Princeton. So we would all get together and go to South High School. So we knew all the kids from all over the south side. About 1940 or 1941 they made Woodrow Wilson a high school and it's still a high school today. Since my father taught at South High School he always saw that we were not in his class. It was a good thing. My sister had him once and she worked her fanny off. My dad only

coached for eight or ten years but he was known in the area as an official for football and basketball for many years. When my dad did coach my mother and I attended a lot of the South High basketball games; I myself was very active in sports. Because my dad was a teacher I guess I looked at South High School a lot differently. The teachers there didn't overwhelm me because often we would have faculty things where all the kids would go with their faculty members. I remember Mr. Berkemen who taught Mechanical Drawing had a summer place down in Fredrickstown near the Beaver River. We would go there every fall for the faculty picnic and make cider and have a great time so the kids of the faculty members got to know each other pretty well. My family was very friendly with the Lidel Wiggins Family. He taught physics and my dad taught biology and some German. Also we got to know Mr. Peterson, he taught chemistry and Horace Biggs who taught biology. So we got to know a lot a people as teachers and kids of teachers. My years at South were busy ones I had a paper route that I had the whole time that I was at South High School. The thing about teaching in those days is that they would work until the school year ended in June and be paid two weeks after that and then they'd have to work at other jobs because they never got paid in September until after they taught two weeks. Therefore kids of teacher's families all had a big period of time when there wasn't any income. That's where the YMCA and Camp Fitch played a very important part in my life because it took care of those dry summers when there wasn't any income. The YMCA had programs for the boys called the Torch Club and the High Y Club and the girls had a Girls Reserve Club, which is involved with the YWCA.

We'd have a lot of social events together, dances and things like that during high school. That was a good time and that seemed to be an activity that a lot of kids joined. I learned to dance, I tramped on girls feet like all teenage kids.

M: Did you go to any of the other ballrooms or dance halls? There was one at Idora Park.

S: We did that more as we got to be seniors. There used to be a great dance hall up on the north side called The Mansion. I remember my senior year I was editor of the school Annual and we had a dance there as a money raiser and Mugsy Spanier was the band. I remember him because he was missing a couple of fingers. Idora Park was a fun dance hall. I don't remember having had many activities from school at Idora Park. Some groups would take over the park for a day but I don't remember south ever having a South High Day they may have but I wasn't aware of it. I can't think of anything unusual except the High Y that sort of thing. Once each spring they would have a Civics Day for the High Y program and the YMCA and I was chosen Mayor for the Day and that was big deal to be that and I got to know kids from all over town through that activity. I guess I just got through school. I don't know what to say about being in school except that it was busy you know when you have that many kids and you split up into two sections for the school day. You don't always get to know all the kids that are in the schools. After three years I had gotten to know quite a few people. Did I tell you I played basketball? South High School built the South High Field House and my senior year and I was on the varsity basketball team and we played the first game against Massilion in the South High Field House. They were much better then we

were but it was the heyday of sports at the South High Field House. I must say that I'm saddened that South High is closed and the field house is closed and that people don't feel safe to go down in those areas. It depresses me some because it was a good school. I still think that South should have been used. I told one of the school board people that they closed the wrong school when they closed South High School, the school was still in good shape. I went down to meet Mr. Grahovik, the last principal and was impressed by how well the school had been taken care of all of these years.

M: I heard originally that there was a swimming pool in the school?

S: Yes and that would have been covered over. Mr. E.G. Dehm had a speech class over that facility. The pool was never there when we were there. The huge study hall, room 100 upstairs was an active room. I don't know how the teacher kept any order in that room because there'd be about two hundred kids in there. We had pep rallies before the games and the annual event of course was the Rayen South football game on Thanksgiving Day. It was especially important to me because my cousins went to Rayen and their father was the principal at Rayen School so we always had an inner family competition. Those were exciting days. We'd go down those cold winter days and stand there and cheer for South High School.

M: Do they still trade that trophy, the statue?

S: I don't know. I never played football so I never got into that. I know to my knowledge there wasn't that strong competition with Rayen South in basketball. That was more of what I was interested in then football.

M: I don't remember when they first started using the statue but I guess there was a competition there from the time South was built.

S: I'm sure.

M: We'll start with the scrapbook. I'm really impressed with this.

S: My mother and father are no longer living so I've called out the stuff from her picture albums. Also my grandfather was a Lutheran Minister in Youngstown on the north side, he was an important person in our lives.

M: What church?

S: St. Paul's Lutheran. It's near Fifth and Caroline now. He died shortly after that church was dedicated in 1941.

M: Where was he a minister before?

S: He'd been here for years. He'd been a minister in Ohio on the border of Indiana at Savannah Ohio. This scrapbook that I have shows my involvement in Camp Fitch in the summers and my involvement in the early days of South High School and the High Y Club that was there. Here's Plenny Powers who was the superintendent of the school in Youngstown. We had big people that talked. Then there were always High Y dances. Here's my certificate when I got my basketball letter from Merle Rossell, he was the coach and Bob Fleming was our principal at that time. This shows a picture of me playing basketball and some of the games. I scored four points! I was one of the high point scorers. You didn't score a lot in those days. We had some great games. It's say's "Dick Lally, Karl Soller Jr. and Rossell displayed uncanny as south swept into the thirty-one sixteen third period margin." That's a big deal! Thirty-one sixteen my gosh

they score more than that in the third quarter! I think the Y gave an interesting flavor to high school because it gave a religious overtone. I was at the Y today; I'm on the Camp Fitch Board. The people I met today are friends that I made through the Y and my early days at Princeton Junior High and South High School so these were important times for us.

M: In talking to Bill Karning, as a catholic kid, he told me that he wasn't allowed to participate in Y activities because it was considered a Protestant Christian organization at that time.

S: I don't think it ever was.

M: I don't think the Y discriminated against them I think they were told they were not to go there.

S: I think that has changed. At one time it was considered a white organization and that has changed too because there are a lot of African-Americans going to the Y now. At Camp Fitch we had Jewish kids there. I never felt that, of course I was on the other side of that but I can't believe that anybody that espouses Christian virtues of fairness and that sort of thing would have anything against the Y. In fact a lot of people on the board were Roman Catholics. This scrapbook picture shows when High Y took over for the day and shows people from all over. It was a great time for people from all over to get together. I think we put the principal in jail that day and of course that was a big deal you know. Princeton Junior High School had just had a new auditorium built in 1941 or shortly before and we had this big event then. That was before I graduated. Then it shows our senior banquet and people who were recognized for awards and this is all the people that

spoke at our graduation exercise so those were really important days. I met my wife at Oberlin College and I have a letter from Robert Flemming. He said something nice about me and I was able to get some scholarship help at Oberlin College. Do you know how much I got that year? Three hundred and fifty bucks. That was for a semester. Times are a lot different now financially.

M: Mr. Cash this morning told me at Miami that he paid forty dollars a semester for tuition and two dollars a week for board.

S: That's probably right.

M: That's just amazing.

S: I talk about 1943 when I was inducted into the army as my last days of innocence. I regard my time at Princeton Junior High and South High School and my association with the Y as my days of innocence. Then I ended up in the infantry division in Europe in the forty's. So I look back on these days with fondness. They weren't really great days but they were innocent days. I lived not far from where I live now and we would walk to and from school on Market Street and think nothing of it. We didn't have school buses. We would often hop on the streetcar or bus or trolley car and paid like seven cents and we did a lot on our own that way. It's a different time.

M: How far did you live from south?

S: If you shoot an arrow from here about seven blocks over that is where we grew up on Helena Avenue. If you know where Jack Velker's Funeral Home is it's at the bottom of that street.

M: Is it a couple of miles do you think?

- S: Sure it's a couple of miles.
- M: Market Street is so strange. It seems endless.
- S: It's a major street. That and South Avenue of course. South Avenue doesn't go that far because Market Street continues to North Lima and becomes route 7 on down to Rogers and down to the Ohio River. I don't think we had the fear that kids have now of being on the south side. South High was not a place to be feared. I guess as years went on they had to close the south field house for tournament plays because it was dangerous. People's cars were broken into and stuff like that. That has always bothered me that they were not able to keep that a safe haven for kids going to school in that area because it was still a substantial building and place. The other thing that's different from educators in the public school system is that we had teachers that graduated from many colleges. We didn't have YSU students graduating and coming into the school system.
- M: I noticed looking at the Annual that several of the women teachers were from the Seven Sisters, Wellesley and the other really good eastern schools.
- S: Oh yes, they were teaching Greek at Rayen at one time. South had wonderful teachers. Harmon Welsh was a math teacher par excellence. One of our leading people at Commercial Intertech John Nelson was one of his prime students in math. I can still remember he was a great teacher and challenged us and that was good. As teacher's family we were always concerned as are people today about passing school levies. I can remember as a little kid passing out hand bills to pass a levy. This was important to our lives that school levies were passed, that

teachers got paid. I'm still working on school levies even to this day. That was an important part of the finances of the school system.

M: Your father had a steady job in the depression?

S: My father had a master's degree and never really earned a lot of money as a teacher. I always felt it a travesty that he never earned what he was capable of in teaching but maybe some other field. But it was the depression and we did have an income. When times got better however teachers didn't go along with the increase in the economy. We did feel the depression. My grandfather who was a physician in McDonald would give me five bucks for YMCA membership. That was a big present. My folks didn't have extra money to buy those things even though they had a steady income. The money wasn't there. Also we'd get on the Youngstown and Southern railroad and go downtown and ride the trolley into town. I think the Y and sports are what got me through the education in the public schools in Youngstown. I never felt that teachers were my enemies. I always felt a friendship to our teachers. I didn't like them all but by in large they were good teachers and friendly people. In regards to the army there were two history teachers of mine Jim Scannell and Jim Campbell. They never got married. For some reason when I was out in the army in California they looked me up and another guy by the name of John Sosnoski who was in the Marines. They looked us up and took us out to dinner when we were out there. That was the type of friendship we had with the faculty. That was just another little plus. I was often thankful for those men. Neither of them are living now they died a number of years ago but it was a good friendship. I graduated from high school in 1941 so I

was in Oberlin College in 1941 when the war was declared. I was drafted in June of 1943 so I was pretty much away from high school. I was in with a whole new group of friends from college and that whole scene. Let's see I started school in 1941, then I went into the army, then I taught at Howland School for a while, then I went to Dental School at Case Western Reserve and graduated finally in 1952. So it was a long time between high school and earning a living as a dentist. When I came back to Youngstown I picked up with some of the friends I had known in high school. I think it's different when you go away from a community and get a whole new set of friends and then come back to the area. I haven't picked up with too many of my high school friends. On the street we're friendly but we don't go out socially. Some people that never go on to college or who just stay here perhaps have a stronger bond with the kids they were in high school with. Perhaps you've had that experience.

M: Yes. My sister who stayed where I group up is a lot closer with the kids she went to school with than I am.

S: I can truthfully say that I've been proud of my father in what he stood for at South High School and the caliber of teachers that were there because they were a cut above. I'm proud of that heritage.

M: I noticed that both your father and you spell Karl with a K and I know it's a German name. Was there any discrimination do you think WWII or WWI?

S: My grandfather was a young man in Germany and there were a lot of German people that migrated to the United States. As a young man there were some German ministers who went to Germany to try to recruit young Germans to come

and be pastors for German congregations. My grandfather came in the late 1870's for two reasons. One was that he was recruited by other ministers to go to Capital University in Columbus and become a Lutheran Minister. The other was conscription in the armed forces. I think young men were supposed to go into the army and stuff like that and I don't think that was a part of his lifestyle. My mother claims that that is part of the reason he came. So when he was here in the First World War he'd been here long enough but the street that the church was on was called Berlin Street and they did change the name of that street to Funston Street. The church is still there and it's been renovated and the manse that my grandfather lived in has been torn down. So that's how my grandfather came to this country. Later his fiancé came and they were married and they raised three kids. My father was the second and there was my Aunt Marie who married the principal of Rayen Frank Tear and then a younger brother Ted Soller who lived on the north side. That's a history in itself the early days. Hard working conditions, people working twelve hours on and twelve hours off at the steel mill. The name Karl is German and I was named for my father. A little aside my middle name is Ewing. My mother's maiden name was Mary Ewing and my wife's mother's maiden name was Marion Ewing. Somewhere in space we were related but it was long ago like Revolutionary wartime. Many of my mother's family came from Scotland to Ireland and immigrated to the United States and many of them came from western Pennsylvania from Beaver Township. We had a solid family reunion several years ago and we had all the Ewings' and Sollers' together it was a good time. Our family has always been very much interested in

education. My mother and father both got degrees. My mother got a two-year degree to teach at McDonald. She was the first elementary teacher to teach at McDonald. After we kids were grown she went to YSU. In 1950 when I got my bachelors degree she got her bachelors degree. She taught in Mahoning County then she taught in Liberty schools. My folks were always interested that we pursued higher education. We have done that with our four kids and I'm sure they'll do that with their kids. It's been an important part of our family lives. I think in my day South High School was an excellent school to prepare me for higher education. Basically we had good teachers throughout, from Bancroft school to Princeton Junior High School. I think Mr. Rayen who was the principal of Princeton Junior High School was a strong administrator and set the tone for the school; one that I think schools need. So I feel fortunate that I had those kinds of people as part of my early life.

M: Do you think the education that you got at south is better than what most high school kids get today?

S: I think the diversity of the teachers for the Youngstown area was better. I don't think it's as diverse now as it was then. Whether that is good or bad or makes a good or bad teacher I can't say but I come with it from a different perspective. You don't always come with a Youngstown State University School of Education background. I've always felt that if there is anything that has not been as good for the present schools that might be it. Teachers are trained so much differently now. I think we're getting more and more state teaching schools to prepare the teachers. We didn't have the testing they have now, the SAT's and that kind of

stuff. We went by the recommendation of our principal and your grades were very important. In 1941 the war in Europe was flaming up and I think they accepted you pretty much on your grades. Scholarship awards were given based on your qualification. Probably the weakest part about my high school education was that we were not tested very much. The kids today with SAT's are able to do better with testing. Maybe that's the biggest change.

M: Or at least to do well on tests.

S: I think there is a certain knack to taking tests because that's how you're graded all the way through. They don't go by your personality. I can't say anything too bad about South. For me it was good. I do believe that there is a lot to be said for education in Youngstown. The quality of people on the school board in the city of Youngstown is not the same quality of people who were on the school boards in my growing up days. Warren Williamson was a very strong person on that board. Mrs. Marshall from the north side was a strong person. They were strong people in the community and it was a well-respected job that those people did. We didn't have this bickering or positioning for a political future. That doesn't go anywhere. The purpose is to serve the kids. They had some strong principals in the area. Mr. Glasgow at Woodrow Wilson, Ricksecker at Chaney. I can't remember all those people but they were strong people in the education field. They didn't fuss around and put up with shenanigans. I don't think that parents were so involved as they are today with all the complaining. Maybe they have more to complain about today than they did back then. I remember my mom went to PTA but I don't remember controversy like I see in today's education system.

M: I always felt growing up that my parents felt it was their job to keep me in line at home and that the teachers had their job to do in school and I was just expected to do what was expected of me. They didn't interfere a lot but I don't know if that was a good thing or not.

S: I knew I had to behave at school I couldn't play hooky. I'd see guys playing hooky, playing golf or something else and I never did that because I knew that my dad would find out about it and I didn't want to make him unhappy with me. I don't know, I think maybe we lived in a time of more trust. You trusted your teacher, you trusted your minister, you trusted your government people more, not that they were all the best, but I think maybe that's the difference. I think my parents trusted the system. I know if my mother was unhappy with some of the things that happened that she'd complain to the principals. I think my folks took the attitude that you're going to run into these kinds of people all your life but you come home and you discuss ways to get around that. I think your folks might have done the same thing. Just outward complaining I don't think gets you anywhere. In my Junior High School days of playing basketball with blacks we never had any big feeling one way or another. We seem to have come to a division now on this business of races and I think we just accepted each other for what we were. If a guy was a bad actor and he was black or white then he was a bad actor. The south side it's so different now than it was then. Right now a lot of friends or family of friends that I grew up with in high school moved across the line between Youngstown and Boardman. A lot of them moved to Boardman and Canfield and Poland. That's where most of them settled, farther south.

- M: Mr. Cash said that he thought that after World War II that a lot of people came back to Youngstown but instead of settling into the city they moved out to the suburbs and that made a big difference.
- S: There was a brand new area built over by Mill Creek Park and a lot of young people went over there. That was still the city of Youngstown and it's still the city of Youngstown. That's where a lot of the strength comes from on the west side of the schools now. There's St. Christine's Roman Catholic Church, there's an elementary school there, the new Chaney High School's there now, and the old Chaney School was West Junior High. If you were a Roman Catholic family then your kids generally went to Ursuline. I think they were all interested in the schools. I don't think it was immediately after the Second World War was over in the 45's because I talked to a lot of people who were still going to city schools in the early fifties and sixties who still lived in the city and thought it was a decent school.
- M: Mr. Beach thought that there was a lot of change in the sixties too with Vietnam.
- S: Yes that was a trying time. It was a war that should never have been. I tried talking one of my young friends out of going to Canada. He did end up going to Canada to avoid going to Vietnam and it's kind of messed up his life. I think a lot of people were messed up who avoided going to Vietnam and a lot of people who went to Vietnam were messed up. It was a bad time for people going to a war. I think with the Nixon scandal people distrusted the Federal Government it was especially bad when you distrusted the president of the United States. That was a whole part of that generation. My daughter was at Oberlin College when the Kent

State incident happened and that was a bad time for young people also. I don't think these kids will ever have a day of innocence like we had. I don't think it's in the cards and it's too bad.

M: My daughter's a freshman at Chaney this year and when I think about how different her school years are already from mine and then compare mine in the sixties with the forties and my dad's at the time of World War I it's just incredible how much education and perspectives have changed in this century.

S: There's more information out there than there's ever been and with this internet and all this kind of stuff there's just more stuff out there altogether. I've had the feeling that regardless of what's out there if you come back to a home base with some stability I think that's where it is for kids today growing up. They can make their own decisions about some things and I want them to think on their own but I want them also to respect our generation for what we've been through and what we lend to their lives. I don't know that we have the answers any better than anybody else but I don't think interpersonal relationships have changed that much over the years.