

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Y. M. C. A. Involvement 1950--Present

McDonald Y. M. C. A.

O. H. 285

ROBERT W. ZAJACK

Interviewed

by

Jeffery S. Collier

on

September 4, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Y. M. C. A. Involvement 1950--Present

INTERVIEWEE    ROBERT W. ZAJACK  
INTERVIEWER    Jeffery S. Collier  
SUBJECT:        McDonald Y. M. C. A.  
DATE:            September 4, 1975

C· This is Jeff Collier, I'm with the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. Today I'm speaking with Mr. Robert W. Zajack at his office at 17 North Champion Street in Youngstown at the Central YMCA. The date today is September 4, 1975. The time is approximately 9:30 a.m.

Bob, could you tell me where you were born and raised, where you graduated from high school, your college education, a little bit about your family as far as the number of children that you have, and also your present position here at the Y?

Z· I was born in McDonald, Ohio. In fact, I was born in the house that my parents still live in. We moved away from there during the war when my dad worked for the government. We lived at Fort Belvore, but part way through first grade we came back to McDonald and I went all through the McDonald school system.

After McDonald I went to Youngstown College and got a major in psychology. During my senior year they had a position open down at the Y here because at that time while I was going to Youngstown College I was also working part-time at the McDonald Y. During my senior year they had an opening at the downtown Y here because they were closing up the McDonald branch. I still had one history course to take at Youngstown State to complete my graduation and as of this date I have never gone back to take that last course. I think the course at that time, we were on semesters, was an American History course, I think

before or after 1865 (American History before 1865). Up to this point I haven't gone back and taken it (since then, I have completed that course and graduated!).

C You were married to somebody from McDonald?

Z· No, Carol was from Mineral Ridge, which of course is a neighboring town to McDonald and one of its school rivalries.

C: How did you get into working at the McDonald branch of the YMCA?

Z I was pretty active in scouts and I worked at a Boy Scout camp up in Parkman, Ohio. I was really active in their aquatic program. Of course, McDonald at that time was one of few schools around that did have an indoor swimming pool. I did have an extensive aquatic background. Actually, when I was younger I remember when your family moved in to McDonald and the house that they lived in. I was still in high school then or probably in junior I should say. Your dad, at that time, was running a summer program for the Y and I was involved in some of the swim programs that they had then.

After that, when I was going to Youngstown, Ray Coutant was the director of the YMCA there and he knew of my background and asked me if I would be interested in working on Saturday mornings and then also for some family groups just in aquatics. After a few years there working primarily with aquatics, and this was actually at the high school, but the Y ran the program, then from there I moved into working the other parts of the Y building down there as far as the supervisor, running tournaments and various other programs that Ray Coutant had for them at that time. I think your dad, Tom Collier, left the McDonald branch to come downtown to work at the central branch.

C Were you ever involved in the Y before Tom Collier was there?

Z· No. I was really never a member of the Y except in McDonald, not downtown here. As a little youngster, about four or five, I remember they used to have a bowling alley over there and they had two lanes and they had leagues there. I actually got started in the Y as a pin boy. At that time I think we used to get something like 7¢ a game to be a pin setter there. Later on I think it went up to 10¢ a game.

C Do you remember much about the Y in terms of when you were setting pins there for instance, what time would that be?

Z: For dates I'm pretty poor on that.

C: How old were you, then we can figure out the years from that?

Z: I was probably in the sixth grade then.

C: That would have made you eleven years old, ten years old.

Z: Eleven or twelve, around there, right.

C About what date would that put that?

Z: About 1950.

C Do you happen to know who was the director of the Y at that time?

Z No, I can't recall. There was a George Ryan that ran the program for a while out there, but really the only ones that I can really remember being out there was your dad and Ray Coutant.

C: In terms of the program out there, as far as aquatics, could you expand a little bit on that program, what would that involve as far as the YMCA involvement in conjunction with the high school utilizing their pool? What types of programs did they have?

Z: The high school, to deviate from your question a little bit, the community is very youth oriented and they were giving the use of the pool to the Y on Saturday mornings. On Saturday mornings there would be swimming instruction and also some play swims. During the week there was a life saving course, just recreational swims, and a couple of family swims, plus adult swim lessons. During the summer months the Y ran the program, but it was actually open to almost anyone in the village. This included swimming instructions in the morning and play swims during the afternoons. The times basically ran from about 9 to 12 for lessons and starting at 1 until about 3:30 or so it would be play swims or recreational swims.

C: Did this continue also when Tom Collier left and Ray Coutant came?

Z: Yes.

C: My father came in 1953 and left there in 1956 or 1957. Ray Coutant was there for two years?

Z: Right. I think two or three years and then after that Bob Doyle came.

C: Did you also work with Bob Doyle or at that time did you come down to Youngstown?

Z: No, I worked with Bob Doyle. In fact, Bob and his wife Cathy worked there and I worked up there right until the time that they closed the building. I remember when they moved some of the equipment out and moved out of the building completely. It is kind of ironic because since that building closed the youth of the community still call it the Y. They really haven't changed the name as far as the youth are concerned, but it is the McDonald Recreation Building right now.

C: When Bob Doyle was there before they closed the Y down did you find the activities falling off a lot?

Z: No, I don't think the activity was falling off at all. From what I understand it was just, financially, a losing proposition for the central Y to subsidize that building because for them to run it they had additional expense burdens that if the village would own they would not have. They would be able to save money in such areas as they would not have any regional dues to pay, they would not have any national dues to pay since it was just the McDonald Recreation Center, they did not have to contribute into our business office downtown here or the Y NEWS publication. In these areas they were able to save money too because the grass was cut by the village instead of having someone paid to cut it. The same with plumbing that had to be done. If they had a slow day in the water department one of the fellows would be able to go up there and do some work. Actually, they were able to do some of their maintenance without calling in outside help.

C: That brings us up to 1965 then when the YMCA closed in McDonald at which time you said you started at the central branch?

Z: Right.

C. In what capacity did you start down here?

- Z At first it was just as an associate physical director and I had major responsibilities in the pool and also in the gyms. At that time my primary gym responsibilities were the Youngstown College students. With my work schedule I ended up with four classes that met two days a week. I had the Monday, Wednesday class and there were four classes on each of those days which I ran the gym classes. That took two days, almost all towards the university classes and then the rest was with physical fitness classes and the pool work. A few years later my title changed to Aquatic Director and this involved setting up different programs, the hiring of the guards and so forth. During my time down here as Aquatic Director I served as a scuba field agent for our region, which at that time was Ohio and West Virginia. I also served as the Aquatic Commissioner and this was for that same area and then later on went in to what we call the Great Lakes Region when we added Michigan to our area.
- C: How many states were included in the area?
- Z: The regional set up was Ohio and West Virginia. In fact, it was called the Ohio-West Virginia area. Then it moved to the Great Lakes Region and at that time we just incorporated Michigan into it. My responsibilities then were to coordinate the aquatic programs as far as certifying instructors, holding institute workshops and clinics in the area of aquatics.
- C: To go back and come through what you told me so far, you started out here as associate physical director, you said you were involved with the Youngstown State University students, about how many students would that include on a weekly basis, do you have any idea of the numbers there?
- Z. The classes were really quite large. I remember a few classes we had about a hundred students in them, which of course was excessively large. A lot of the classes ran around 65, 70 students in the class.
- C. Any reaction as far as the students coming to the Y for their physical education? Did you hear scuttlebutt from the students, was that good, bad, did they care one way or the other?
- Z They really didn't seem to mind and I really enjoyed the classes. I got to know a lot of the students quite closely and none of them felt negative that the university didn't have full facilities. In all the classes that I

handled I never heard any indication at all that they were dissatisfied that the university wasn't fully equipped.

C: What time did they stop coming out to the Y from the university, do you know the year that the Y.S.U. students began having their own facilities?

Z: Again, I don't keep very good track of dates, but of course that was right when they opened Beeghley up.

C: About four years ago or so?

Z: Yes.

C: When you moved in to the aquatic program here at Youngstown could you tell me what that involved and what type of aquatic program they had at that time, and any innovations or things that you've made changes with or brought about?

Z: The Y has their own national program and I really personally feel that it is a little better course than what the Red Cross has, but the Red Cross fortunately has a broader scope and they're a lot more recognized in the area of aquatics. But yet it seems that the YMCA's do have the facilities much more so than the Red Cross. Their program is not as widely accepted and not as widely known as the Red Cross program. We do run the national YMCA aquatic program for what we call our progressions, which would be the swimming program for learning how to swim. When I came here we were running what we call dual certification for our higher level courses. This would be the life saving and also the swimming instructor's course. As of two years ago we no longer run the Red Cross programs at all, we run a total YMCA program.

As far as our innovations down here since I became involved in the program, we set up a scuba program which for a while was second to none as far as any scuba program in the state. We were one of the first YMCA's in the country to maintain all of our own equipment and our own compressor. We have a compressor right now that's probably valued at about \$3,000 which we use to fill the tanks. We have purchased about 18 complete sets of scuba equipment. In fact, in history the Y was one of the first organizations to offer an instructor's program in the area of scuba. They were actually in on the ground level in the scuba program.

We also added what we call a lifeguarding program because in the area of aquatics the criteria for a lifeguarding job is a lifesaving certificate. The lifesaving certificate is just as the word says, water safety and lifesaving. No where in the textbooks of the Red Cross or the YMCA until a few years ago has any part of the textbook gone into the aspects of lifeguarding. They deal, as I said, with the life saving part, but they did not go into any techniques of guarding. I was involved in a national YMCA committee in which we instituted, and it is still in the early phases, a lifeguarding program where we would go in to the techniques of guarding, legal aspects of guarding, how to handle different problems, fill out accident reports. As I said, this is a relatively new program. We kind of got in on a ground floor in Youngstown where we ran some experimental programs for the whole city in the training of guards for a lifeguarding program. This is for those that have already completed their lifesaving program and they would move on to a lifeguarding program.

C: When you came here who was the aquatic director?

Z: At that time there was not a title of aquatic director, it was all under the physical department.

C: Was there a reason why they broke it out between the physical department and the aquatics?

Z: The program started to grow such that in reality it was a completely separate budget and the program was big enough to make the division there, to go in to an aquatic program and also a physical department program.

C: One sidelight of that and that is over the years the Youngstown YMCA has had some very good YMCA swimming teams, is that part of the aquatic program or is that totally separate?

Z: No, that comes under the jurisdiction of the aquatic department and that is a very big part of our aquatic program. In fact, Youngstown State University got their start down here at our swim pool. Their meets were held here. They generally practiced between the hours of 2 and 4.

C: The meets were also held here, were they held at the same time?



Z: Yes, the meets were generally held during that time.

C You went from the aquatic into the YAC [Youngstown Athletic Club] is that correct?

Z: That is correct.

C: Could you tell me whose place you took, what your duties were, what the job entailed?

Z: My responsibility as the Athletic Club Director here is being responsible for the employees of the club. This includes the locker room attendants, secretaries, two full-time masseurs. It means working out a budget, providing programs that we can have within the budget, and to offer a full health club facility such as the availability of rubdowns, massages, whirlpool treatments, supervising, (weight) lifting facilities, and so forth.

C: How many members do you have in the athletic club?

Z: I think in the vicinity of approximately 850. This does fluctuate from time to time. My goal would be to fill every locker. Up here each one has their own individual locker so I think we'll have a capacity of about 900. Hopefully not too far in the distant future we can go ahead and close out our memberships because all lockers will then be occupied.

C: How many did you say would be the capacity?

Z: I think it is approximately 900. In fact, I'm just working on the bookkeeping end of this now.

C: When did you move in to take over the YAC, when were you promoted to that position?

Z: This occurred in March of this year.

C: Who would run the YAC previous to that?

Z: Sam Brown had the YAC and previous to that Joe Check had it. When Sam had it he also ran the physical testing part that we had at the Y here and really it was too much of a responsibility to handle the testing part and the YAC. When the decision was made to move me up here I did not have to take the testing part of it or the physical fitness part of it, so I was limited solely to YAC operation.

C: Before Sam Brown had run the YAC Joe Check had not been in charge of that before had he? In other words, he was in charge of the YAC, but there was at that time no testing program?

Z: Yes.

C: Sam brought out both of those together?

Z: Yes.

C: What types of things are you doing with the YAC to make improvements on it and things like that? The athletic club, I think, is very widely known. A number of well-known people in Youngstown belong to the YMCA and the the YAC specifically because of its facilities and things like that. What is the YAC and the YMCA doing to improve that over the course of the next five years?

Z: We're trying to offer a little extra that we haven't had. We've put in that universal gym just recently, which they kind of like. Just little things that they appreciate, like hair dryers to style the hair with. A few years ago they would have thought that was highly feminine, but the fellows really want to be catered to a little. In the past it has kind of been "neglected" just a little bit, but we want to try to make it a little more plush, give them a little more service for their dollar. I think they've always gotten quite a bit. It's just really the little things that I feel they should have. We are adding some other programs too. We're trying to do more as a group. We've just completed our first golf outing that was quite successful. From time to time we might have a dinner-dance. We've had some of our own social programs out of the building as well as in the building.

C: The members of the YAC, being 800 in number, are they mostly young people, middle-aged people, or older people?

Z: Until recently we've just gotten some of the younger fellows to join. You have to be twenty-one before you're permitted to join the club, but I would say the majority of them are the older fellows. There is a very high percentage of doctors and lawyers, but it's not limited to that. We do have some ironworkers and steel workers, but the majority of them are professional people.

- C: Do you foresee the future of the YMCA and the YAC specifically being hurt in any way by the health clubs and the athletic clubs that are going up around town?
- Z: On the contrary, I remember when the European Health Spa was promoting we probably signed up more members when they were advertising than at any other time except during our own campaign. It made people more aware of fitness and training and facilities such as this. The people would actually do a little shopping and their advertisement would draw them into the shopping and many times we would sell them a membership over the original intent of them to go out of the health spas. A lot of the other clubs that are opening up in the area are charging additional court time, whether it's squash, handball, or tennis, and this is something that we don't do. Our other facilities offer so much more than they can offer, such as big gymnasiums instead of just a small workout area, and two nice swimming pools, which no other facility in this area can offer. The health spas, in many cases, also make you sign long-term commitments whether you use them or not, and whether you move away. Many times we understand that you're still committed to this. Our YMCA policy would be that if you transfer out or move away then of course we would either transfer your membership or give you part of your money back. This is the difference also.
- C: A couple final questions. One is, what do you see as the biggest changes in the YMCA since your involvement with it? Let's go back to 1955, 1954, whenever you began working just in aquatics over at the McDonald YMCA. Besides perhaps size, is there anything that sticks out in your mind as a major change?
- Z: Yes, of the two major changes that I see one would be the acceptance of women in the program. Before, the programming for the women was very minimal and right now the women even have use of the squash courts, racquetball courts, over and above just the swimming program. One of the biggest changes would be in the area of the women's programs.

The second area that I see, as far as our Y is concerned, I don't know if this is the kind of significant change that you were referring to, but when I first started down here we really just had a few blacks in our membership. I'm talking total membership now. Right now I think that we've accepted them quite well and hopefully they've accepted the whites well. There really doesn't seem to

be a difference that is too evident right now as far as color is concerned. I think that this has been a big change.

Probably another change in the YMCA is that they're going a lot more into physical testing on a scientific basis. I think that in the future we're going to see a major role that the YMCA is taking as far as physical fitness evaluation and physical fitness programs are concerned.

- C: The women's involvement, you mentioned this is something new, do you see that becoming more and more the case?
- Z: Yes, in fact I think the trend will actually be more towards a family organization, involving the total family and so consequently the women will become a lot more involved.
- C: Secondly, the black involvement or influx came about with the closing of the West Federal branch YMCA I guess several years ago. Up to that point could you say what portion of the membership at the Y here was black versus the portion it is now?
- Z: I can't site any statistics, but the change was definitely coming before that. I'm not sure that's the result of the closing of the other Y. I think it was just a natural thing that would have happened regardless.
- C: As far as the testing goes, do you see the YMCA becoming a leader in that area or anything along those lines in the country?
- Z: Yes I do. They're laying a lot of groundwork right now. We have a full-time person on the national staff who's related to this. The two closest authorities on the national program right now would be Dr. Larry Golding, from Kent State University, that serves as a key figure in this. The other one would be Clayton Myers from Columbus. The two of them together are really doing a good job promoting physical testing and documenting a lot of studies and research in this area.
- C: Thanks a lot for taking some time to review some of the things that have happened with you and your history with the YMCA. Is there anything you might like to add?
- Z: The concern that I have a little bit with the Y, from time to time we always get into the philosophy as to should we be doing more for the real underprivileged,

the problem-maker in schools. From time to time we always hear that a Y experience would be good for this problem child in school, but we get to the point where we almost become oversaturated with problem children and then it gets to the point where it starts affecting the better boy or girl no matter how closely we try to supervise it. It seems too often that there is not an institution that is available for just the average person. There's the country club and so forth for the above average. It seems like a lot of groups feel that we should do a lot more for the underprivileged. I think also that we have to accept the fact that there has to be an organization for the average person. As I said many times I don't think that there is anything wrong with this. This is one of our major thrusts in the community, that is to make the good boy better instead of working totally with the bad boy.

C: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW