

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown YMCA Project

YMCA Experiences

O. H. 332

JOHN MCPHEE

Interviewed

by

Jeff Collier

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN MCPHEE

INTERVIEWER: Jeff Collier

SUBJECT: YMCA experiences, Programs at YMCA, Camp Fitch

DATE: September 24, 1975

C: This is Jeff Collier for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Youngstown YMCA. I'm sitting today with Mr. John McPhee at his home on 23 Botsford Street, Poland, Ohio. Today's date is Wednesday, September 24, 1975, at approximately 10:15 a.m. Mr. McPhee had been very active in numerous functions in the Youngstown area, including of course, the Youngstown YMCA and also included in his activities the "Y" college and Youngstown State University.

Could you give me your personal background Mr. McPhee in terms of where you were born and raised, education, and lastly we'll get into how you became involved in the YMCA?

M: I was born in Youngstown, Ohio, on the east side, April 8, 1907. My mother's name is Hanna McPhee and my father's name is Amos McPhee. I attended East High Street Grade School of Cleveland, Ohio. I graduated from there in 1924. I then went to Oberlin College and spent three years there. I spent a year at Grove City, and then received my A B. degree from Youngstown in 1930. Then in 1930 I became affiliated with the "Y" staff, but my earlier affiliations with the YMCA staff as an employee would be back around 1916.

A few of the names and persons there at the time would be Ralph "Skinny" Johnson, now on the East Coast, and Wes Fester, who was also living at leisure world. These two would reminisce often of our days as kids at the YMCA. Reniere was one of our swimming instructors

of that year. About 1919, Coral Batties, who later became the general secretary of Youngstown, graduated from Ohio State University and came back as director of boys' activities along with E. N. Hale. Pat Brennan was our physical director. Pat now lives in Tuscon, Arizona.

Many years later my son John attended the Univeristy of Arizona, and looking for an apartment to rent he parked his car at the back of the apartment and went in to talk to Mrs. Brennan. Shortly thereafter, Pat came in asking who owned the Ohio car. Johnny spoke up and said, "I do." After comparing some notes as to where Poland, Ohio was, Pat said that he had been the former physical director at the YMCA and inquired if John was any relation of mine. John said, "He's my father." Well, as the years passed by we had many visits with the Brennans out in Arizona and back to Poland, Ohio.

- C: Could you relate to me how you became involved as a kid with the YMCA? Was it the fact that your father pursued it or that he had attended the "Y"?
- M: No, the only thing I can say about that is that my two older brothers, Harry and Hugh, who just recently passed away, as kids were active at the YMCA along with a very prominent name in Youngstown today, Dr Harry Gasten. Harry Gasten's brother Bob and I were together at the YMCA, so it just seemed to come down as a family tradition as kids to spend an evening at the YMCA at the school and be down there on Saturday.
- C: Where was the YMCA located at that time?
- M: In the very early stage they had the YMCA on the corner of Champion and Federal. And when I came along they had already built the new YMCA at the present location on Champion Street. It has been my experience to go through about three of these modern improvement campaigns over the years that I've been affiliated with the YMCA.

You asked a moment ago how I had become affiliated with the YMCA as a staff member. You were not around so this doesn't mean much to you as far as dates are concerned, but in late 1929 we had a stock crash in Youngstown. I was learning the steel trade at Sheet & Tube Rod and Wire Division. I was working for Jack Oliver, who was superintendent of the rod mill. At present, his daughter, Trudy Price, is secretary to

Camp Fitch. I had been approached by the YMCA to teach physical education and also by the Youngstown College to teach physical education and coach basketball. So I accepted that and started in September of 1930 teaching young men's physical education at the YMCA and teaching the college physical education classes and teaching hygiene at the college and coaching basketball. I stayed with that work until 1935 and in the summer of 1935 I went to Camp Fitch and pinched hit for Curly Johnson, who was ill and died in July of 1935. Then we left; my wife and I left and moved to Ellwood City, where I was affiliated with the National Tube for one year and then to Wilmerding, Pennsylvania, where I was working for the Wilmerding Christian Association and the Westinghouse Airbrake as a layist man between the two organizations.

Then in 1940, Paul Davis called me and asked me if I would be interested in coming back to Youngstown. So I returned in February of 1940 to run Camp Fitch and later in 1940, I became the boys' secretary. I held both of those jobs a couple of years and then became executive secretary of the central branch. Late in 1944 I resigned from the YMCA and went with the Ironside Company of Columbus. So that would bring me up to date quickly as to how we moved along.

- C: When you came in 1930 to the YMCA in the physical education capacity, were you hired by Paul Davis?
- M: Leonard Stiggs was the general secretary and Paul Davies was the executive secretary of the central branch. At that time there was West Federal Street branch and Youngstown College. Simion Booker was executive secretary of the West Federal Street branch and Homer Nearpass was the director of the Youngstown College. Paul Davies hired me and I worked the central end for the college.
- C: Did the YMCA and the college work very closely together in those days?
- M: The Youngstown College was owned by the YMCA. Later on, probably in the 1940's sometime, the transition took place where the college became separated from the YMCA, about 1947.
- C: A couple of questions about the activities that went on in the YMCA whereby you were physical director. How was the YMCA different in the 1930's from when you

worked there in the 1940's? How did it change, do you feel, in the course of the decade, as to how it exists now? As to the physical side of the YMCA, it has gotten larger and there are probably more members, but can you see any changes that occurred in the YMCA over the course of the decade that would be outstanding in your mind?

What would be the major changes that you would consider as to what has happened to the YMCA over the decades?

M: I would say as far as the physical program is concerned at the "Y", basically it is the same, but it has broadened. The youngsters today are learning to play squash and handball and activities as such, while we as kids took our calisthenics and then we had our team sports, like basketball, et cetera, which is a much broader program than what we had in our days.

I think one of the outstanding physical directors I've seen at the YMCA, where boys are concerned, was a lad by the name of Carl Moral. He had his junior leaders set up so that on Friday night he had his Junior Leaders Club meeting and when the business of the meeting was over each junior leader got to a phone and called his team up to make sure that they were present on Saturday morning for the class. Therefore, it carried through very well and they had great attendance and great interest in the league. We didn't have that in our day and we don't have it today.

I think another phase of the program, other than physical, were the youngsters back in grade school. I remember going down on Sunday afternoon with my dad to what was the old gym at the "Y" where they would have meetings and they had outstanding speakers and the form type of meeting and practically all of the meetings were on the spiritual side, with outstanding people. We don't have that type of program today at the "Y", but we do have the chapel service which is held in our little chapel at the "Y", which we did not have in those days. I would say that the spiritual program is still being carried on at the "Y" in a much different way than it was sixty years ago. I think it is doing more of a community program today, a wider community program with its High-Y, its various Indian Club organizations, and things of this type. It's a much broader community program.

C: Do you think that would have gone over in 1930?

- M: This I am probably open for a lot of criticism, but I would say that we of our day were interested in football, basketball, baseball, and such sports. We did not have the TV; we did not have the automobile. We walked to the YMCA and we walked back from the YMCA. Our minds in those days were, or our lives, competing in sports. Today, the youngster has so many other things to attract his attention. I don't think that program would have gone over in my day. Girls were not a part of our life; today they seem to be a part of all of the programs.
- C As you mentioned, the YMCA is moving into family areas, and when you began at the "Y", was it pretty much just father and son, or was it all a boys' organization or a mens' organization at that time?
- M: I would say there was a clear line of men and boys, and in separate programs my father did not belong to the "Y", I did. Thinking back over our neighborhood on the east side, I question that there were any fathers who were members of the YMCA, but yet their boys were members.
- C Was it sort of the thing to do then, to join the "Y" as a kid?
- M: Yes, that was the thing to do because when you think back to that era the schools did not have, with the exception of some places, like Rayen High School or South High School . . . possibly Princeton Junior High and Lincoln Junior High were the only gyms in the city at that particular time. Therefore, if we wanted to have physical activities in the winter such as basketball and others, the only place open to us was the YMCA. I know that in my family my mother and dad felt that the YMCA was the place to be. We could not be in any trouble there and it was the truth. Mothers and dads always spoke very highly of the YMCA and what it had contributed to their children's lives.
- C: In terms of the program was it a pretty regimented program that you had when you went to the "Y" as a kid, or was it like today when kids go into the "Y" they're given a little freer hand basically? Was that the case then or . . .
- M: No, I would say that we had pretty much regimentation in that prior to our gym class we had a little short spiritual program or religious program and generally we would sit down and then we would go down and get

dressed for our gym class and have one hour of calisthenics, playing, et cetera. Then we would have a half hour in the swimming pool. Following that on Saturday afternoon, we would have movies, so that was pretty much the program Saturday and Saturday afternoon.

- C: What about during the week, you made mention of the fact about going down there during the course of the week?
- M: Well, we had classes like Tuesday and Thursday. After school we would go down and again we would have our hour of gym. We would have the half hour in the pool and then on Friday night we would have our Junior Leaders Club, which we spent the short religious service and went up on the gym floor and went through our program that we would have on Saturday. As we became Junior Leaders, to pass on to the others the job of supervision was helping to instruct up on the gym floor, being like an assistant lifeguard in the pool, the general program of helping out. When you became a Junior Leader you felt very important.
- C: Could you comment if you would a little about Camp Fitch? Did you ever go there as you were growing up?
- M: Yes. I'm going to tell you a story that very few people realize. In 1940 when I returned to the Youngstown YMCA to run Camp Fitch, many things needed to be done. Since your dad was a former YMCA secretary you can appreciate that they operated very close financially. There are two occasions that have happened very close to Camp Fitch. One night I was sitting in the upper flat worrying about the camp, particularly financially. Two men came over and sat down next to me, one was Russ McKay, who was then president of the YMCA, and Sid Collins, who was very active in the YMCA. They asked me what was on my mind and I told them. They said, "Dear God, keep these kids happy and content and let us worry about the finances." On another occasion we had a problem at Camp Fitch and Al Rosco, who later became president, chief, and his two boys, Al, Jr. and Bunny, were on my camp staff at the time. Al asked me my problem and I explained it to him. He said, "You take care of the camp and I'll take care of that problem." Now that is the type of thing that happened to me in that era, and I think down deep I made a promise to

myself that if the time came that I could help Camp Fitch, I would gladly do so.

In the past fifteen months a few of us old-timers, such as Gordy Harrison, Georgie McNab, Bob Roland, Brad McClury--and I could go on and on with names--we got together and decided that some things had to be done for Camp Fitch. For the past fifteen months we have gone to camp; we have put down over thirty-five hundred feet of water and gas pipe; we built a new steel maintenance building; we built a new horse barn which anybody would be proud to have on their place; we had put a new floor in the McCleery Lodge; we have put flowers and toilet facilities in that lodge which were never there before, put new heating units there; we've gone to the girls and boys toilet buildings and we've redone them too. When you walk in there you think you're probably in one of the best school toilet buildings in the country, or a country club place. We have some other things to finish up, and it has been done by a group of boys that have been affiliated with Camp Fitch. We're proud of it; we're not finished and we hope to get some more work done

C: Are you physically doing the work yourself?

M: This is an angle that some of the older fellows, who were older campers at Camp Fitch, such as Patsy and Curly Johnson, Howard Conner, Al Moran, Jennie Materhold, George Burgman, Ken McKee--I could go on and on with names--men who I've rehired and most of them past seventy, have spent probably about eight or ten days at camp doing physical work which has cut down on the labor cost. A younger group of fellows like Kenny Wilson, Carl Saller, and some of those boys had gone up and done some work there also. I think the best example of what camp has meant to people . . . Dick Bennett, who's the executive of central branch now, recently called Republic Steel and the present membership campaign. He reported back to me that all I can get those people to talk about was when they were kids at Camp Fitch. It seems as though the traditions back at Camp Fitch and a loyalty those boys have found there . . .

Now this past summer our two grandchildren went to Camp Fitch and this is so common where you go there and meet the grandchildren, the father and the mother, and the kids that were there; it's remarkable. The summer of 1974, I remember particularly a boy who had gone to camp some time ago and lives in Washington, D.C., and there was only one camp for these kids to



go to and that was Camp Fitch. We've had this happen so often. So we're proud of Camp Fitch, we think it's great.

C: You said you were first affiliated with the camp in 1935 when you filled in for Curly Johson, is that correct?

M: That's right.

C: How was running Camp Fitch at that time a new bag so to speak?

M: Looking back to that year of 1935, plus 1940 through 1943 when I was at camp, we at camp stressed athletics. We had on our camp staff teaching basketball, Jim Bennett, who was an All-Eastern intercollegiate forward at Cornell. I could go down the line and tell you so many . . . We had Laddie Ohl on the wrestling team of Ohio University, Buck Forn, who played football for W&J, Washington & Jefferson, Ed Enerline, who played basketball for Youngstown University, he was staff. We placed our emphasis on athletics. We had other programs such as nature hikes and so forth, but our main emphasis was athletics. The amazing thing to me today is at a camp the athletic phase of the program is just minor, which is all right with me. I mean the youngsters seem to be interested in crafts, swimming, boating, canoeing, hiking, and bicycle trips. The program today at camp is much better than what we had. So I think the camp has really made some great strides. Yes, 1935 was teaching the fundamentals of football, basketball, and baseball. Today, that's just a very minor part.

C: Just sort of something out of perspective here, but at that time did Youngstown College, Youngstown University or whatever football team, go up to Camp Fitch?

M: Youngstown football, I think, started about 1938; I'm not sure. Then they went to Camp Fitch under Dike Beatty, he was an old Camp Fitcher. He goes back to the days when Camp Fitch was down on the Little Beaver in Columbiana County. Yes, they went to camp until probably about 1970 or 1971, somewhere in there. They went up every summer to camp.

C: I did not know about the team going up there. Is there anything that you might like to add, any stories, any ideas or anything like that to conclude this in terms of . . . Of course, now you being affiliated with the YMCA and in the past working there on the

board, anything that you can think of that you might like to add about the YMCA in closing?

M: I'm glad you asked me that because this is my philosophy of the YMCA as well as Camp Fitch. I think back to the very happy, wonderful days I had as a kid at the YMCA, people whom I met that have meant so much to me and have been so much of a help through life. Then as I went into the business world in the end of 1944 and couldn't spend the time at Youngstown that I would have liked to, I mean around home as I would have liked to, now that I'm on the retired side this is my present day philosophy: I am going to work hard for the YMCA and Camp Fitch to keep those doors open for the kids today and the kids that are coming on later, because somebody did that for me, about sixty years ago. That is my philosophy.

C: Is that harder to do today? Is it harder to keep those doors open?

M: Well, no. There are a lot of very generous people. They are generous in that they're willing to give and do things for kids. I could go on and tell you story after story and use names, but I don't think it's wise at this time, of some of our toughest business operators, who will turn the world upside down for a kid, but for an adult the answer is a definite no, now. So that when you appeal to people on the basis that you're doing this for the youth, they accept a responsibility. I have over the years--I'm doing it right now--worked on the membership campaign and I appealed to some golfers on the basis that caddies should have membership at the "Y". They bend, because they want these kids to have every opportunity they can and to get it in a good atmosphere. So yes, the people today have been very good to the youth of the country.

C: I think that probably the same thing holds true, that parents today, as you said your parents felt, it's pretty hard to get in trouble at the "Y". There is a lot of good learning and a lot of widening out of personal horizons, growing up at the YMCA, that they can offer, and hopefully this will continue.

M: I wouldn't give up the years that I worked at the YMCA; I wouldn't give up those experiences for any other years of my life because you cannot place a dollar value on friendship. When I think of the men and the kids that I knew during that period of working

at the "Y" and how much they have meant to me since in many, many ways, I just couldn't place a value, but I wouldn't give those years up. They were rich; they helped me tremendously.

C: I'd like to thank you for taking the time to sit and discuss some of your past experiences, and your affiliations with the Youngstown YMCA.

M: Well, I appreciate it; I'm always for the "Y".

END OF INTERVIEW