

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown YMCA Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 388

JAMES LOTTIER

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

September 5, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Personal Experience

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES LOTTIER

INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier

SUBJECT: West Federal branch, Activities, Closing of the Y

DATE: September 5, 1975

C: This is Jeff Collier. I'm with the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. Today's date is September 5, 1975, and the time is approximately 6:50 p.m. I am sitting here at the home of Mr. James Lottier at 1149 Park Hill Drive in Youngstown, Ohio. This evening we will be speaking of Mr. Lottier's involvement in the YMCA.

Mr. Lottier, would you tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and raised, and where you went to school, high school and college?

L: I was born and raised right here in Youngstown, Ohio, on the south side. I went to all the local schools here; Monroe Elementary School, Grant Junior High, which later became an elementary school, and South High School.

C: When did you graduate from high school?

L: I graduated from high school in June of 1934. I participated in sports there and in other activities. I was fortunate enough to be able to go away to school because it was right in the Depression. I was also fortunate enough to participate in athletics. I played football in college also.

C: Where did you go to college?

L: Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio. It is now known as Central State. There is a Wilberforce also, but Central State was the state-operated school at the time and has since split. There are two schools. I graduated in June of 1938.

C: When you graduated did you come right back to this area?

L: I came right back to Youngstown. It was still a little difficult getting employment, and I couldn't see myself going away to teach. I had a couple of job offers, but the money was not enticing. I had never been south and I had a little fear of going that way.

I was employed for a period at the Youngstown Metropolitan Housing Authority until the Westlake Housing Project was built. Then I got laid off and I went with United Engineering, which is now Wean. I worked there for a period of years until going into the YMCA. After coming home from the service, I went to the YMCA in 1946.

C: When you went with the YMCA did you start at the West Federal branch or where did you start?

L: I was hired at the West Federal Street branch YMCA as the physical director. With limited funds and a limited budget, I had to do what a lot of branch employees did; I was physical director, secretary, and boys' worker.

C: Jack-of-all-trades?

L: Yes, jack-of-all-trades. It was a beautiful experience and I have no regrets.

C: Did you ever go the the Y as a boy?

L: Yes.

C: What were your experiences along this line?

L: I guess the Y program hasn't really changed over a period of years. When I became associated with the YMCA at the time of its conception in Youngstown, Ohio, previous to the West Federal Y--which was the community center--most of the young fellows had parents who were trying to give them guidance and had hopes for them trying to build a future for themselves; They took them into the Y for a membership.

Our physical activities were held at various places. The News Boys Center, where Youngstown State University is located now, is where we used to go to participate in gym classes because we didn't have a gymnasium. That was before the construction of the new building at the present site. We also had some activities at what they called Christ's Mission. On the completion of the West Federal Street branch, we were very fortunate because we had a gym, a pool, club rooms, and all-around activities for Y memberships.

- C: Could you give dates to any of those instances? For instance, when did you first go to the Y or community club or whatever it was and when was the West Federal branch Y built?
- L: I think the West Federal Street YMCA was completed and dedicated in March 1931. The Y itself came into existence in the year 1927. I became affiliated with the Y when the YMCA was transferred from the Booker T. Washington Settlement. Being young I would only go once a week, sometimes twice a week. We had the usual activities. It was mostly volunteer help. I think Mr. Sauly Johnson was the first executive director of the Y and his experience had been with the settlement home. The first full-time employee of the Y was the executive secretary of Mr. S. S. Booker. I think he came here from Baltimore, Maryland.
- C: I think that's right. What types of programs did they have set up? You mentioned that it was mostly physical activities. When you went to the Y what would you get involved in? What would a day be like when you were young and going to the Y?
- L: After the completion of the West Federal Street branch Y you had club groups. You would plan programs for clubs, and speakers came in. They tried to teach you in a manner to give you some incentive to try and make something out of your life. You had devotions of all kinds. There were organized choirs, glee clubs, craft groups, and dramatic clubs. Wherever your interests layed, you had something to participate in, other than just gym classes or swim classes there. You had some guidance and training in conducting club groups because they wanted you to participate not only as members, but as officers, especially if they thought you had some type of leadership ability. I think they were always stricter on the type of discipline. You did have some guided, sponsored leadership in which it was not only fun, but you were learning some of the things of life which could in some ways prepare you to give part of your life back to the community.
- C: Did they have leaders' clubs and things such as that down there?
- L: Yes, indeed, we had leaders' clubs. We had clubs for all age groups. From eight years up there was always some type of organized club groups. The YMCA was just not a matter of going to gym and going swimming.
- C: In relation to that it's kind of interesting that you mentioned you had played sports both in high school and in college because in talking with YMCA people, whether it be Tom Franklin, Dick Bennett, Sweed Hunneke, or even my father, it seems like most of the people that were

involved in the YMCA were very active in athletics in high school or college. In some way or another that influenced how they became affiliated with the Y. Was that the case in point with you? You mentioned that you went in as a physical director. Do you think that stemmed from the fact that you were still active in sports and things?

- L: It might have had some bearing, but it was always my ambition to work with people. I had a dual major in social administration and education and I chose to work along those lines. I was always interested, as you said, in athletics so when the opportunity came I did accept the position as a physical director. I think most fellows who have participated in any type of organized athletics with competitive training and discipline learn to respect others for their abilities and talents. It's just a teaching in life in which I think you are ready to dedicate yourself in order to help someone. It's not so much being an athlete, but if you're so inclined you can always persuade others to take advantage of their talents and abilities that they might have in organized sports--whether it be on a small scale--or you can help train them so they can go on and accomplish things. I've had the satisfaction of seeing one young boy recognize some of his abilities. I talked to him and tried to give him what little training I could and persuaded him to go a little further in the areas in which he was really outstanding in high school and later in college. It just gives you a good feeling within. Not only that, but you also learn other lessons of life that you learn through the competition thing in athletics and you learn to respect the abilities and accomplishments of others.

- C: I certainly agree with you. In my growing up with the YMCA, I would say that this has certainly been the case. Athletics, of course, teach you the discipline and to always have respect for the other person.

When did you say that you started with the Y in the physical department?

- L: I started out in January of 1947.

- C: Who was at the Y previous to that time? In other words, whose place did you take?

- L: There had been several people who worked in that capacity. I think the oldest and most prominent would be Jim Smith, who really grew up with the West Federal Street Y because from its conception he seemed to be a part of the Y. As a junior high school student he was a volunteer worker and later a paid employee. He had the physical department for quite some time until he went off to school and

several other fellows came in. Meredith Matthews is one who I can think of. Mr. Booker was the only executive director we had previous to James Smith.

C: When you started you worked in conjunction with Jim Smith?

L: I worked with Jim Smith. He was the executive director and I came in as the physical director.

C: What types of programs did you initiate when you came in? What were the types of duties that you had as a physical director and what things did you help to bring about or institute as physical director when you were there?

L: I don't think there was any outstanding or new thing that I developed in the Y. For a period of a year or so they had a breakdown in programming because of staffing. There was a case of reorganizing the leaders' club so we could have someone to assist and to see that the program was operated and ran. A strong leaders' club was organized, which they didn't have for quite some time.

C: That is certainly a very big help.

L: Right. Some of the adult activities were organized not only for their enjoyment, but for what leadership and guidance they could give to some of the youth groups.

I assume you've heard of Pedro Tomez. He moved to town about the time I started in the Y. Through conversations with him I found that he had some experience in boxing and was really interested in trying to develop some fighters and a boxing program for the good that it might do--not only to teach the skills of boxing, but to give the youths some added activity and to keep them off the street. This is why the boxing group was organized. We persuaded people to get involved. He has been going ever since.

C: That's right. Where do his people train now?

L: They train now at the youth center of the Buckeye Elks on North Avenue since the West Federal Street Y closed.

C: Was Helen Suber working with you and Jim around 1946 or 1947?

L: I started in January 20, 1947, and Helen Suber started to work January 1, 1947.

C: Is that right?

L: Yes. She was nineteen days older than me.

C: She had a little seniority over you.

L: Right.

C: Had she worked there previous to that? I thought that she might have been in some other capacity with the YMCA before she started there?

L: No, not to my knowledge.

C: Was the Y there supported pretty actively by the adult population in the area, or was it mostly kids?

L: The greatest number of participants in the program were the youths. This has always been a problem of the West Federal Street branch. There were always difficulties in meeting your goals and objectives in the way of raising money. I think it stemmed from the fact that there was a community center in the area in which membership fees were at their lowest or there were no membership fees whatsoever. The biggest number of participants were people right in that locale who had been used to going to the Booker T. Washington Settlement. When the YMCA started they began to come here. It was hard for them to overcome having to pay for memberships when they hadn't been doing so for previous years.

Then again, we ran right into the Depression period in which there just wasn't too much money available.

C: Is this right after the war or early 1950's?

L: I would say in the early 1930's. The Y was built almost in the heart of the Depression.

C: I thought you were referring to after the time you started.

L: After the time I started a lot of young fellows were just getting on their feet. They had jobs and were starting to buy homes, and they just couldn't see themselves spending money for a membership. It was always a little hard, but we managed in some manner and met some of our goals. Fortunately, we are always getting contributions. We weren't outstanding, but we always had a little difficulty.

C: What would it cost for a membership? Do you happen to remember?

L: I can remember when boys' memberships started out at a dollar. An adult membership was three to five dollars. Like I say, that was a lot of money, especially if you had a man in the house who hadn't had steady employment for two or three years.

C: Did you receive much support from the central branch?

- L: I think Youngstown has been very fortunate with their relationship between the central and the branch Y's. It was just like family. If one had a crust of bread the other one never went hungry. If they had an extra dollar we could almost depend on fifty cents. They have always had a good rapport and a very good relationship. This is one thing which has kept us going.
- C: You mentioned that the conferences for the YMCA are learning experiences. I'm sure there is a lot to be learned when you move into the YMCA besides the physical and administrative things. I'm not sure if you took care of those, if Jim Smith did, or if you worked hand in hand, but did the central branch give you any instruction or was that something you had to pick up on your own?
- L: It was mostly what you picked up on your own and with just your association with your fellow employees, getting their ideas on how they ran certain programs and how they stimulated certain things within the programs. This is the exchange of ideas. I didn't actually go down for training sessions.
- C: At that time was Paul Davies the general executive?
- L: Paul Davies was general executive secretary. You mentioned Sweed Hunneke; he was the program and membership secretary.
- C: As far as campaigns and things like that, did you run your campaigns in conjunction with the central Y at that time or were you having your own campaigns?
- L: We were having our own campaigns. The only thing which corresponded was the time of the campaigns. They ran them both at the same time, but they were really separate campaigns. The West Federal Street YMCA had a campaign fund goal and the central branch of the YMCA had a campaign goal.
- C: Would you also use themes like they used?
- L: We used themes; it was the same type of outside membership structure or team structure in that matter. They would give prizes to those who reached their goals.
- C: How successful were you, if you can remember? I have no conception as to what the budget was, but you might even remember some of them. In terms of the budget versus what you took in, did you achieve fifty percent, one hundred percent, twenty-five percent? Do you happen to know that?
- L: Percentagewise, no, but we were always up there. We had eighty to ninety percent of our monies for the year and



for our budget. We had fairly good years at times. Then, of course, there were some years when we had really, really poor times. It all hinged on employment. If the employment was good, that meant that your dormitory rooms were rented. There were always outside groups that wanted to rent some of your facilities. You always had a little extra money coming in from that manner which kept your monies rolling in pretty good. When things were down and employment was bad, then you suffered along with the rest of the community.

C: Was the West Federal branch built as a black Y?

L: Yes, it was. It was built, organized, and structured as a black Y.

C: Dave Fleming told me that there were both blacks and whites who participated in the program.

L: I think that every sense of the building was organized according to the make-up of the neighborhood. The West Federal Street branch was the one in which we always had black and white memberships.

C: How about at the central branch at that time, was it also black and white?

L: No.

C: It wasn't?

L: A black could not purchase or be served in the dining room of the YMCA for quite some time, even after I was employed at the Y.

C: Until what time?

L: We were still having problems in the late 1950's.

My son was one of the first blacks to go to Camp Fitch.

C: Is that right?

L: That was in about 1956 when he was only about ten years old.

C: How much longer then did you stay with the Y?

L: I was with the Y for about twenty years. I was a few months short of twenty years when I went to the Youngstown Metropolitan Housing Authority.

C: When did you go with the Metropolitan Housing Authority?

L: I left the YMCA in 1966.

C: The West Federal branch was still open then at that time?

L: Yes, it was still open.

C: Until 1972?

L: Yes, 1972.

C: Have you strongly participated in the Y since you left the YMCA?

L: I have always been active in some committee in some capacity with the West Federal Y. I am presently a member of a couple committees at the central Y. I try to stay active in some way, to keep connections, and to work in the membership campaigns.

C: Which you might add is just getting ready to go.

L: Yes, it's getting ready to go. Tuesday night is the kick-off dinner. After leaving the Y, I was chairman of the committee of management for the West Federal Street branch, and I still was at the time of the closing of the Y, which is a sad note in my life.

C: What do you feel about that? Expand a little bit on that.

L: I still feel it was almost a losing proposition. Business-wise I would say the Y should have been closed. By the same token there are a lot of little fellows who live in the area of the West Federal Y in the public housing project who are going to miss a great experience in their lives by not being able to participate in some type of Y program. I say this not because they wouldn't get accepted at the central Y, but they just don't have the means of buying memberships. There are also transportation problems, and the problems of buying proper gym clothing and swim trunks. And then there is the embarrassment of going to a place where eight out of ten boys at the completion of the gym class, the swim class, or the club group can move to the cafeteria and have hotdogs, hamburgers, or what have you. These boys just couldn't afford that. This was my one regret in seeing the Y close because I felt that it served a great vicinity. It was a big part of the lives of the youngsters who lived in that area.

I don't think that the Youngstown YMCA ever intentionally turned a boy away because of the fact that he didn't have a membership. They would make some provisions in which he could earn it or someone would purchase it for him. To participate in a gym class, if you recall, you had to

have gym clothes. Many of those little fellows just didn't have gym clothes. In many cases they wouldn't accept cutoffs for gym and going in your stocking feet. You had to have a gym uniform.

Other things also become involved such as the matter of getting there. A lot of kids don't believe in walking anymore so they need bus fare or have to get in a car pool. So it makes it a little difficult getting to the Y.

C: How did you used to get to the Y?

L: I walked.

When you think of the Y strictly as a business proposition, it is a losing thing. It is too bad that more people don't take advantage of the facilities because the Y has one of the best facilities in the country.

C: I certainly agree with that.

L: They have good facilities and a competent staff.

C: During the years in which you were affiliated with the YMCA, what were perhaps the most profound changes that took place?

L: I would say the most profound changes were the ones in the attitudes of the youths, the rapid maturity of the youth at a certain stage. Once they were fifteen or sixteen they no longer participated. They felt they were too old to be in a supervised class. At this time they have total disrespect for adults.

C: When the kids would come in, would you have a rigid program in which they would all get ready, march out, stand in line, count off, and then do their exercises? Was it the same type of program that I knew at the YMCA?

L: This was usually the program. There is some type of lesson that you are trying to teach a youngster through all your activities. You had to have some type of discipline so that everybody could hear and understand what you were trying to do. You went through exercises or different drills to try to evaluate their abilities, how they progressed physically, or to determine their leadership abilities so that they could have an opportunity to lead classes. You go through drills in order to teach basketball or volleyball, a structure of team play, not individual things. You had a great number, so you had to try to teach kids to play together. You knew

that there was always going to be somebody who was an outstanding dribbler, shooter, or an exceptionally agile kid who could play volleyball. You tried to teach them to utilize their abilities and talents. Some may have tried to assist a kid who was a little weaker because at the next activity they went to there might have been a thing in which the two of them had to work together in order to make some achievement. There was always something behind the structure.

C: You said that as kids grow older now they seem to fall away from the Y. Was that not the case when you started out there?

L: No, not always.

C: I wanted to ask you about the closing of the West Federal Y. You said that you served on several committees at the West Federal Y even after you left. Who was the next person to move in there after you left? It wasn't Tom Franklin was it? Who were the people that followed you?

L: Tom worked in the physical program and from there he went into the executive director position. I believe Tom took over right after I left. Isn't that funny, it hasn't been that long and I can't remember.

C: This would have been in 1967, 1968, or 1969. I know Tom wasn't in there because I graduated with him.

L: Tom came and was doing part-time work.

C: After you left the Y what committees were you on, and how did you remain active in the Y?

L: I was on the committee of management.

C: Who were some of the other people on that board?

L: Dave Fleming, Grant Perry, Booker Clark, James Alexander, Roosevelt Carney, Bob McGee Sr., Mr. Hunneke, Bill Gutnecht Jr., and Thomas Young. We had about twenty committee persons. Most of them had been participants through the West Federal Street Y and in some manner had connections through most of their adult life.

C: When was it first brought up to close the West Federal Y?

L: There was some discussion over a period of a couple of years. We kept trying various things. Businesswise it had to be almost a losing proposition. With a limited staff, there was only so much you could do. We were not

meeting our budget so far as raising money is concerned. I guess all in all it was the smart thing to do.

C: Was there anything in particular that you tried to do to continue the existence of the West Federal branch?

L: We tried several things and were very fortunate in raising two thousand dollars. Attorney Floyd Haynes organized the committee to raise the money. It rekindled some of the interest, but it wasn't a lasting thing. We raised a little money, but the YMCA, or any type of program of this nature, is one in which you have to be dependent on the public to make annual contributions in order to keep the thing going.

With the inflationary years that we had in the last few few years where the prices went up on everything, repairs, trying to entice someone to take employment with what we could offer to pay got to be a hassle.

C: In working so closely on the board of management and everything, how do you feel about the closing of the West Federal branch and the people there being taken into the central branch? How has it worked out?

L: I have mixed feelings. I haven't given it much thought or consideration because I don't think there were any difficulties in making the shift. For the last ten years there has been no problems with blacks going in and having some association or membership or affiliation with the YMCA. There weren't a great number participating in the way of committees, but there were a few on committees. In that manner the changeover wasn't too great. I guess it's more of a sentimental thing. I just hated to see that building closed. As I mentioned, there are hundreds of kids in that area who I feel will never participate in a program of such without the readily accessible West Federal branch right there practically in their backyard.

C: That's a mission building now?

L: Yes.

C: They still have the pool in there?

L: None of that is in use. I do feel that they do a tremendous service. It's a mission in which they try to give lodging and food to people who are down and out or who are in transit with no place to stay and are very limited in money. They see to it that they have a place to sleep for a couple of nights. These people know that they can

- get a couple of meals and a place to wash and change clothes. They keep clothes around. If necessary, they can give clothing and what have you.
- C: It is sort of like the Salvation Army?
- L: Right. It is a mission type thing. They were formerly located on South Avenue, and at one time they were on East Federal Street. They gave assistance to those who were down under.
- C: Too bad I didn't ask anyone else that question. I knew that it was a mission, but I really didn't know anything about it.
- L: We were a little skeptical at first about turning over the Y to that type of mission because of vicious rumors. I heard it was a flophouse for drunks and derelicts, but this is not the case. It is very well managed and kept. They have to depend strictly on volunteer contributions and they've done remarkably well in this manner. They keep a good supply of food; they keep clean bedding.
- C: Do they use those dorm rooms upstairs?
- L: They use the dorm rooms to sleep, and they will sleep men or women or families. It has proved to be a serviceable thing.
- C: I would like to thank you for taking the time to talk with me about your knowledge of the YMCA.
- L: It has been a tremendous experience for me and something I wouldn't trade for anything else in the world. The relationships, contacts, and associations with the YMCA, both with the members and fellow workers, has been a cherished part of my life.
- C: The funny thing is that most of the people who are in the YMCA have this feeling.
- L: I think so. It's just something that rubs off on you. You just get in that rut and keep on plugging and hoping you can do some good for someone.
- C: Thank you again.
- L: You're welcome. It has been a real pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW