

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown YMCA Project

Personal Experiences

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JAMES MITCHELL

Interviewed

by

Jeffery Collier

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: JAMES MITCHELL

INTERVIEWER: Jeffery Collier

SUBJECT: Handball, Squash Racquet, Expansion of building

DATE: July 25, 1975

C: This is Jeffery Collier, and I'm sitting here with Attorney James Mitchell in his office on the seventh floor of the Union Savings & Trust Building. I'm working on the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the history of the Youngstown YMCA. Today's date is July 25, 1975, and the time is approximately 9:18 a.m.

Mr. Mitchell, could you tell me a little bit about yourself in terms of your background?

M: I was born in Washington, Pennsylvania. My father, shortly after I was born, moved to Youngstown where he was general council for what was then known as the Petroleum Ironworks Company in Masury, Ohio. Immediately upon locating in Youngstown, he joined the Youngstown YMCA and became an active participant in its physical education program. My first recollections of the YMCA are in the early 1920's when my father took me to the YMCA to teach me to swim in the old, YMCA swimming pool, which has now been remodeled and turned into a locker room. Late in the 1920's, I returned to Washington, Pennsylvania, where I went to college after graduating from Washington & Jefferson College. In 1933, I went to law school at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and finished there in 1936. During the years that I was in college, I came back to Youngstown for summer vacations and went to the YMCA with my father, who was then an active handball player with such men as Eddie Westwood, Roy Manchester, Jim McMann, Al Fairfield, and Dr. Walter Strand. There were others whose names slip me at the moment.

While in law school at Cornell, I learned to play what we then called squash and is now called squash racket. When I returned from law school in 1936, along with a man by the name of William Samuels and another man by the name of Charles, I introduced the game to the YMCA here. We arranged for the remodeling of one of the handball courts. The first squash court was built in Youngstown in 1938. I played handball and squash regularly from 1936 until 1942, when I went into the service. During those years, I was active in all other activities in the Y and was particularly friendly with Al Fairfield, who was then a physical director of the Youngstown Y.

There were a number of handball players of more than average ability at the Y in those days, some of whom were Olin Masters, Richard Truke, Victor Berkeley, Red Royale, Charles Dubrosky, Don Mastrin, and Don Foley.

When I returned after the war in 1946, many of these men had departed from the Youngstown area and a whole new group of handball players were playing regularly at the Y. Squash racket had become a very popular game with men such as Martin Bentley and Henry Coffel, who were among the most active participants.

In the late 1940's or early 1950's, the Y undertook an expansion program and at this time remodeled the handball courts and built new squash courts, as well as constructing a new gymnasium. Handball and squash racket took on more interest after that remodeling. In particular, squash racket became one of the major activities of the YMCA.

I have been an active participant in YMCA programs since 1946. I became a member of the board of trustees some time during the 1950's and was an officer in the late 1950's. When Bob Rolan's term as president was completed I succeeded him. During my term, the decision was made to expand the downtown branch, rather than to go into construction of branch YMCA's. After that decision, we undertook a campaign to raise two million dollars in order to build additional facilities, consisting principally of a handball court, a remodeled businessmen's club, an additional swimming pool, and a community room, which would also serve as a gymnasium. The campaign raised about \$1,800,000, and contracts were let on the basis of the pledges and the work proceeded. I can't remember exactly the year that the project was completed, but the additional facilities brought more members to the Y, particularly the businessmen's club.

My impressions of the Y over the years are that it is probably the leading community institution in this area. It has enjoyed a fine reputation with the community. Its campaigns for building funds have been universally well received and supported. Like all downtown institutions, it has had its problems because of the growth of suburban areas. So far as I know, the attendance at the Youngstown YMCA has not fallen off by the suburban growth. In a day when private athletic clubs are booming, the YMCA still continues to maintain its membership. The Y programs for young people are good. They have changed over the course of the years, but both boys and girls are still interested in the programs and the various classes offered by the Y.

During my association with the Y, its connection with Youngstown College was severed; but the Y can take pride in the fact that Youngstown State University is an outgrowth of the YMCA night school, which initially grew into Youngstown College, next into Youngstown University, and finally into Youngstown State University. On the whole, I think Youngstown YMCA is one of the finer YMCA's in the country. I've visited YMCA's and used their facilities from coast to coast almost, and I think the Youngstown YMCA, both in facilities and in friendliness towards visitors, is equal to any. The YMCA movement, which was originally a religious one, has gotten away somewhat from the religious side. It has become more secular and certainly more of an athletic and physical education activity than it was originally. I would think, though, that in time it will get back to an institution that has some definite religious programs in order to differentiate itself from the athletic clubs, which, as I said before, seem to be springing up all over the country.

During my lifetime YMCA membership has changed. For years it was a boys' and men's institution. Today it is a boys', girls', men's and women's institution. The change came about by opening the doors first to family activities and to women and girls who wanted their own YMCA activities. Of course, this has increased the use of the Y facilities, possibly at the expense of the YWCA's, though I don't know. I'm not sure that there should be any competition between YMCA's and YWCA's, which is one of the features of this new movement that sometimes gives me some concern. In any event, both institutions seem to be getting along at the moment.

C: When you said that your father had come here from Pennsylvania and brought his family when he had moved to Youngstown, was there any previous YMCA interest on his part? Did he attend a YMCA in Pennsylvania?

M: I think there was a YMCA in Pennsylvania. I used it

myself, but I don't think he did. I don't think he ever used a YMCA until he came to Youngstown.

C: How was it that he got interested in the YMCA?

M: He was always interested in physical conditioning, and he had his own program of conditioning. He became interested in that in college, when he was rather underdeveloped and the college physical director had encouraged him to take a regular exercise program and follow it.

C: Was your father ever on a board or anything at the YMCA?

M: Not to my knowledge. I think he headed up a membership campaign once or twice, but to my knowledge he was not on the board.

C: What were the facilities like when you began attending the YMCA as a boy?

M: There was a small pool, one gymnasium, which is now the old gymnasium with the running track, and there were three handball courts.

C: You played handball actively when you went to the YMCA, before going to college?

M: A little bit; when I was in high school I would go down with my father and play a little bit. I played some with a fellow by the name of Dick Evans, who was then a professional boxer and a contender for the middle-weight title. He lived in Youngstown, and he and I played because we were about equal in ability. We played a lot of handball one summer.

C: At one time, wasn't the Y pretty big in promoting boxing?

M: There was a lot of boxing activity in the 1920's and 1930's at the Y. Many professional boxers trained at the YMCA. I think boxing stopped in the 1940's at the Y. It continued on at the West Federal Street branch, right down until the time they closed the branch. The boxing at the main branch, however, was phased out and I never did quite understand why. Both boxing and wrestling were activities at the Y in the 1920's and 1930's.

C: Do you know if the YMCA ever had a team in boxing or wrestling or was it strictly for training purposes?

M: It was all training. The Golden Gloves boys all worked out down there and trained, too. They had a ring at one time.

- C: Yes, I remember it well. In terms of squash, you had mentioned learning the game at Cornell University. Why wasn't squash a big game in Youngstown? Do you think it was more an East Coast game?
- M: Squash was not really played outside of the Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore areas. I guess there were some in Cleveland, Buffalo, and Chicago, but it was not played in Youngstown or in any of the so-called rural areas of America. There wasn't even anybody here who knew what the game was until 1935 or 1936, when different articles started appearing in papers and magazines.
- C: How was squash accepted among the handball advocates?
- M: The partnership of Samuels and Danford, who were chemists on South Avenue, loved handball. They had learned somewhere about squash and they had learned that I had played it. They came to me and asked me about it. I arranged to get them rackets and we put a "telltale" in one of the handball courts. We went in and I played with them. We were the first ones to play squash here. I think maybe they even played when I was a senior in law school, between my junior and senior years. They played with each other, and I played with them, and people began to ask questions when they saw us playing and they wanted to try it.
- There was a man by the name of Myers who came out here to work at General Fireproofing. He had played on one of the teams for an eastern university; he was quite a squash player. He looked for competition right away, and so he and I began to play quite a bit. It was the result of our playing that the Y agreed to remodel one of the handball courts into a squash court, by putting a short wall in the back and changing the painting and the lines. We had a remodeled handball court for a squash court for about four or five years. It was all right. It was a little narrow, not standard width, but it served as a squash court up until the time they built the regulation courts.
- C: I might add that they've gone one step further now, and I think they have some racquetball courts.
- M: The handball courts are racquetball courts.
- C: It's the same thing?
- M: Yes.
- C: Out of curiosity, do you know if there was any difficulty in getting that started here, racquetball? That's relatively new here within the past couple of years.

M: The difficulty was keeping it out.

C: Is that right?

M: It wasn't in a long time ago and the handball people and the Y people were very reluctant about letting it in, figuring that it would drive the handball players off the court because there would be some money in it. Racquetball is a much easier game to play than handball, and many more people can play it and enjoy it. There was a feeling for a long time that if we opened the doors to racquetball, the handball courts would be monopolized by racquetball.

C: Has that proven to be the case?

M: I think it's going to be.

C: You've also mentioned that you were on the board when they had decided to take and expand the downtown facilities, as opposed to opening up new branches in other areas. The central concept of the YMCA has been to go into the suburbs. Has that proved to be successful with the downtown YMCA, that is, the decision to remain downtown?

M: We don't know. Our institution has maintained itself. Financially, we have had some difficult years since we put the new addition on. We anticipated that we were going to have those years because we have a lot more facilities to maintain and you have to build your membership up to that point. The expense of maintaining branches is overwhelming. Unless you have a large population to draw from, you cannot get into the building and operation of branches. From everything we could learn on studying branch activities in other cities, we don't have that kind of population in this area.

C: To conclude, you noted previously that there has been a spiritual aspect to the YMCA. Could you elaborate on this?

M: They were very close to churches. They had church leagues and I think there were Sunday school classes at the Y. They had meetings when religious speakers were at the Y. Yet, they worked very closely at one time with the churches. I think that that association now has been modified considerably, and I don't know how close they actually are to the churches. I know there is no longer a church basketball league as such. We have a YMCA Sunday once a year, but I expect that seventy-five percent of the churches don't even know there is such a Sunday. The YMCA just does not maintain the relationship with the churches that it did

- thirty-five to forty years ago. It was established as a place for men away from home where they would get some religious services and instruction if they wanted it. I think that has pretty well gone; I don't see that at any of the YMCA's.
- C: Do you think it is because of the times, or perhaps that the YMCA is now a big business?
- M: I think both; I think that there are many reasons that enter into that. A lot of churches have built gymnasiums, and they want to run a social and athletic program in the church, too. I don't know if any Y's have church league basketball or not.
- C: How has the YMCA developed its members' minds. For example, does the Y offer educational programs, such as rapid reading?
- M: I think there are some of those courses offered now. Your father, I think, organized a series, but I don't think there are as many as there were at the time. They give a course once in awhile in rapid reading, golf, and tennis. Languages, accounting, good books, courses of that kind, no they're not giving those.
- C: Would you say those were given when you first became affiliated with the Y?
- M: I remember a year in which some courses of that kind were given. I really don't know much about them other than I saw them.
- C: Is there anything you might like to add about the YMCA that you can think of?
- M: There are probably many things, but I have to sit down and think about them a little bit. I think it's a fine institution, and I hope that what people are saying about the YMCA being on its way out is not so. I don't think it should be so. I think in inflationary periods when prices are rising that private clubs who have to operate on strictly a profit motive aren't going to be able to provide the services that the Y does from a physical standpoint. I think that the Y has a definite place in the community from the standpoint of the other activities and the character-building services that it furnishes for young people. I hope the Y gets back into the programs in the schools, which I thought were good.
- C: You mean such things as High Y and Tri-high?
- M: Yes.



C: I think those are still active, if I'm not mistaken.

M: I think those programs ought to be emphasized by the Y. I don't think the Y is just a physical facility. If we're going to make it a physical facility, we probably can compete with the health clubs because we can get community support through community chests and other organizations. I think we get that support because we are more than just a health club. I think we have to emphasize those other aspects of the program as well as the physical end of the program. The Y is going to continue to be an active, important community agency.

C: Thank you very much.

M: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW