

Ryan Flood interview with Jim Campbell, 24 April 2024

[Ryan Flood] This is Ryan Flood, interviewing Jim Campbell on April 24th at the Gelnett Library's Keystone Room. I have asked for permission to record this interview, and Jim Campbell has agreed. This interview is part of a local history project conducted by students in the Public History course at Susquehanna University.

[00:20]

So to start off, would you tell me a little about yourself? Where were you born, what your parents did for a living?

[Jim Campbell]

Ok... I'm almost a native, I was born in Sunbury in 1937. My family moved to South Jersey when I was a year and a half old.

[Flood] Oh, wow

[Campbell]

But we moved back to Selinsgrove in the middle of fifth grade, I was ten years old at the time, it was December of 1947. My dad was a sales rep who was on the road quite a bit. My mother was pretty much a housewife, but at various times she was a licensed beautician and had a salon in our house.

I was... a pretty good student. In fact, I got pretty good grades, but I should amend that—I wasn't a good student. A lot of it came naturally, and I can remember teachers telling my mother that "Jim does B work, but he's capable of doing A work."

[Chuckling]

I was coasting. I had a great interest in History and Geography. Did okay with arithmetic, but mathematics proved to be a bit of a challenge. The Selinsgrove school system was a little bit different from the one I experienced in South Jersey. The classes were longer...we moved from classroom to classroom, and in New Jersey, the first five years, we didn't do that.

I got here in the middle of 5th grade, in New Jersey, we had done the first five multiplication tables. Selinsgrove, they had gone through all nine. To this day, I have trouble with the six, sevens, and eight times. The nines—have you ever heard them referred to as the magical nines? Every one of the uh, problems in the nine time table adds up to nine.

[Flood] Oh... Oh, yea

[Campbell]

81, 72, 63, 54, on down the line

[Flood] That's a great way to remember that

[Campbell]

Yeah, so I always did well with the nines, but as I said, the uh six, sevens, and eights, still a problem, sometimes. But thanks to the calculators and whatever, it's not a real problem.

[Flood] Of course.

[Campbell]

What we would do for entertainment, one of my classmates, who also had a brother that was just a year ahead of us, their family owned a feed mill where the Selinsgrove Inn is now. And on weekends we would play Cowboys and Indians, and whatever in the feed mill. It was really great.

I was also involved in scouting. I remember passing my second-class scout badge on one trip, the one nature hike. You had to identify birds and animals, whatever, and I was able to do that with just one hike. I really had my goals set on going pretty far as a boy scout, but by junior high age they had sports programs, and I got involved in athletics, and scouting went by the wayside.

[04:32]

[Campbell]

I think one of the questions you asked was what was the attitude towards athletics in Selinsgrove..

[Flood] Yes

[Campbell]

The Varsity basketball team was very good in the late '40s, early '50s, football team was awful. My junior- Freshman year we had a junior high program which I participated in. My sophomore year, the varsity won one game by touchdown. We were 1 and 9, and the coach was a screamer and a yeller, and he really intimidated a lot of kids. My junior year we got a new coach, Tom Dean was his name. He was one year removed from Bucknell.

The first day of practice, fifteen kids showed up. I remember the fifteenth guy goes in for his interview with the coach, Tom says "send the next guy in" and Beetle Bailey says "There isn't any." And we never had more than twenty-one kids on the team, we had a few more kids come out when school started classes. So what we would have to do is take the right offense, against the left defense. We couldn't go eleven-on-eleven. But, to compensate, we scrimmaged Coal Township, Mount Carmel, the real tough coal region teams.

And... I remember the coach telling us we didn't do that well. I mean we started out well, but with a lack of reserves... it was tough and... Tom said "Guys I know this isn't easy, but the regular season games will be a little bit easier." And, we had our first winning season in ten years. It was the second winning season in eighteen years. We beat Sunbury for the first time ever and we were kind of local heroes. We got jackets, and we had dinners, and banquets, and awards, dinners and so forth.. And the next year... we had... forty-three kids the first day.

And it was a case where... If you looked in our yearbook, under the activities, a bunch of guys as had football 1, and football 4. They weren't about to get yelled at by the yeller and the screamer, their junior and sophomore years.

After I was involved in football, basketball, and baseball, which were the only three sports available. And, what I found out later was the intramural program that was offered to kids that weren't playing varsity, doesn't exist anymore, because everyone's got a varsity sport. I mean, track and field, tons of kids, soccer, tennis, golf, uh, cross country, whatever, and same with the girls. The girls only had softball and basketball, now they have everything.

[8:30]

So that's pretty much uh, I think one of the questions was what did we do on weekends? Well, if you were lucky you had a car, and I guess I was unlucky because I didn't have a car. But if you were smart, you became friends with somebody that did. So we had weekend excursions and whatever and... it was a pretty good life. I enjoyed Selinsgrove.. I maintain it's a good place to grow up, good place to retire, but you gotta get out of town sometime. Even if it's only four years of college.

It's interesting in that class reunions, as people scattered, the first couple years of reunions people would come back from distances, but later... now we don't even have them of course we've been out seventy years. The only people that show up are the same locals who have been coming for years and years. And with driving at night and whatever, we moved from the evening reunion to the class luncheon and now we don't even have that so...

You ask about the books I've done on Snyder County, and Selinsgrove, and what that kind of opened up to me. And one of the things that it did, is there were people who I knew on site, people I knew casually, and people I knew quite well. But until I started researching the book, you didn't know that much else about them.

One man in particular was a mail carrier named George Luck.. and the book has a picture of him on his last day. He was a mail carrier from 1922... to 1957. And I was just amazed at what depth there was to some of these people.

Like people I knew around town, I got to find out what their World War II record was, what their accomplishments were, how maybe they worked out of town, came back and retirement and so forth.. And it was really interesting to know that... So.. I think I've rambled long enough, and I think maybe you might have some specific questions.

[11:27]

[Flood] Yeah , so you said that your mom ran a salon out of your house, so, is that an opportunity to get to know more people around town? Are there-

[Campbell]
For me?

[Flood] Yeah.

[campbell]

Yeah I knew her clientele quite well, you know, Mrs. Plumber, and she eventually became part of the purple hair group. Uh yeah, it was a good experience. I can remember the beauty shop was in the basement and we had a record player in the living room, and I would play that when there were customers in her shop. And I remember one of her customers remarking “those records that Jimmy plays... there’s a lot of bass,” and that’s what you would hear through the floor.

I was into boogie woogie and jazz, and it was right before rock ‘n’ roll. I tell people that associate the ‘50s with rock ‘n’ roll and Elvis, the early ‘50s were terrible.

Joanie James and Eddie Fisher and ... and Montavani and Hugo Winterhalder and it just really... just slow, sugary vocals that.. Eddie Fisher, they’d want to leave him out he was terrible, and I was into what was known as rhythm and blues before rock ‘n’ roll. There was a friend that had moved to Selinsgrove from New Orleans, and he had brought the Lloyd Price, and Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, the real founders and fathers of rock ‘n’ roll.

[Flood] Right, yea, “Blueberry Hill”? Is that Fats Domino?

[Campbell]

Oh yeah, yeah, but Fats Domino had a lot of the original Rhythm and Blues like “Walking to New Orleans,” “Ain’t that a Shame.” “Blueberry Hill” was a standard uh, Probably, I think Louis Armstrong recorded that in the ‘30s.

Fats Domino.. I tell people that anybody who made a nickel off of Rock and Roll oughta send 3 cents of it to Domino and Berry. They,-they really.. I mean the Beatles admit, the Rolling Stones, they admit they were their influences.

[14:21]

[Flood] Yea, about Rock and Roll actually, obviously it was a big sensation for American culture in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Um, how would you say that affected Selinsgrove?

[Campbell]

It got here eventually. Everything eventually gets to Selinsgrove. Uh, You have to remember that television really kind of exploded nationally about 1947.. and, because of the mountains... Selinsgrove... we had to wait for Service Electric Cable, which started in 1948, and was the first cable system in the country, and still going strong.

[Flood] Yea I think they service my hometown.

[Campbell]

Which is?

[Flood] Fleetwood, Pennsylvania.

[Campbell]

Fleetwood? yeah yeah...

[Flood] Yeah

[Campbell]

Yeah they're pretty much north, central, go into the east. They started in Ashland and still going strong. But the advent of television really brought Selinsgrove into the twentieth century. Maybe kicking and screaming, on the part of some but that's the way that developed. And I think, I remember, we never got television until Christmas of my senior year in high school, but I remember going to a friend's house and after school watching like.. Soupy Sales, and Pinky Lee, and all this crap.

But before that, and this is something and it's very important, at least to me, was radio. Starting at about 4 o'clock you had fifteen-minute serials every fifteen minutes, obviously, until 6:30. You started with *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Captain Midnight*, *Superman*, *Tom Mix*. I think *Captain Midnight* was 6:00 and 6:15 was... that was... was.. I forget the program's name but it was sponsored by Purina.. The Ralston Purina.. Which was a breakfast food which then of course became the conglomerate with all the pet foods and whatever so.

And that was important to us, the *Lone Ranger* was an evening program, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, at 7:30 and I can remember, I was still living in New Jersey at the time, but it was the last years of World War II, uh.. during World War II we had what amounted to Daylight Savings Time. But it was called Eastern War Time. So... in the summer it stayed light until 10 o'clock and we'd be outside playing, and I'd miss the *Lone Ranger*. But I survived.

[17:50]

[Flood] So these serials, when you moved back to Selinsgrove, were they popular with your class?

[Campbell]

They were, but television was starting to make inroads, as I said I moved here in December '47 so basically 1948 and by '49, maybe even as early as '48, some of the families had TV thanks to the cable. But, I remember the radio serials were kind of fading and it was the after school television and then the evening, the prime time. And I think I have the year right, but you know if we get all the 24-hour news, the 6 o'clock news was 15 minutes until 1963. That's when it went to half an hour. And then now you have the first half hour would be local and then the networks from 6:30 to 7:00. So things were a lot different.

I can remember, just to give you a little bit of the economics, there was a gentlemen that worked for the J.G. Ott Box company, I don't know if you have any recollection of that, it's where the Weis Markets is now, but it was a big operation. And his name was Bud Trutt, and he had a new car every year. And what he would...cars then were costing twelve hundred fourteen hundred, and you had a year guarantee, so Bud would trade in his car after a year, and a new car would only cost about 200 bucks more than his trade in, and he was always under guarantee. And at the time it didn't register with me, but later i thought: that's a pretty good way to get around. Cuz they're always, their car was guaranteed.

There were a lot of mom-and-pop grocery stores in town. In fact, the four years I was a student at Susquehanna, I worked at Miller's which is at the corner of Pine and Orange, I think it's a dance studio now

[Flood] Yea.. Selinsgrove dance hall? Is that it?

[Campbell]

Yeah

[Flood] Okay

[Campbell]

Yea that was a mom and pop. there was one two blocks up on Orange and Snyder street, there was one at the corner of Mill and Eighth, there was one at the corner of Orange and Sherman, there was one further up on Market Street, up where the NAPA Auto Parts is, across from the sushi bar, which amazes me how, knowing what Pennsylvania Dutch people eat...how a sushi restaurant survives. I like my meals cooked rather than raw, so.

Selinsgrove and Susquehanna, it's an interesting symbiotic relationship. From 1929 to 1957, Susquehanna had a president that was truly from the dark ages. He thought that the small liberal arts college, enrollment should be capped at 500. During the Depression that was no problem. Nobody had any money to go to school. World War II came along, and that was also no problem. All the men were in the service.

I was the Alumni Director of Susquehanna from '86 to '90, and I think it was the '45 yearbook... I think their graduating class was only about 25 people and one male. And he was a guy that had part of his arm amputated. I thought it might have been a war injury but it was a farm accident. And where the president, Dean Smith, really goofed in my mind, was that one the guys coming back had the GI Bill, they didn't have to worry about whether they had to pay or not. Still 500...

Then Gus Weber came along, and during the time I was a student the enrollment increased from 500 to 750. And then now, what are you, about 2,200?

[Flood] Yea much bigger than that

[Campbell]

When I was the Alumni Director, you know, so many of the "like-minded institutions" as Joel Cunningham referred to them, were at 1,500 and why did they want to go to 2,200? Well, tuition then was about 40,000, so 700 times 40,000, there's your answer. President Weber...I maintain that had he not come along when he did, and was as progressive as he was, Selinsgrove, or Susquehanna wouldn't exist today. If they stayed at 500, they would've gone under. I mean can you name another college with 500 enrollment?

[Flood] No, I don't think so

[Campbell]

They went out of business, or merged with someone, or expanded their enrollment. I mean at the time Swarthmore, Haverford, Dickinson, they were all about 500, but after World War II, they increased their enrollment.

[24:30]

[Flood] Okay, and then about Susquehanna: what is it like growing up in a college town?

[Campbell]

It was great. There was a candy store, ice cream store/soda fountain which is where I think Beverly's Alterations or something is. That was um, a gathering point. You went there every evening, from junior high, high school, college...They were all there, and unlike the Hotel Selinsgrove, it was not a toxic mix of townies and gownies. Everybody got along. And when I was a sophomore, junior in high school I had good friends who were junior, senior students at Susquehanna.

And it was really, really, great for me and I think other people enjoyed the friendships over a number of years, and as I said there was no friction. And the high school senior girls loved going out with the Susquehanna students, and vice versa. I-it was and I think the town kind of...well...they're out there people refer as "out there at Susquehanna." Then as enrollment increased, I think the more cerebral people realized "hey, we can make money from these people!"

And in some cases there was a little price gouging, or things weren't that realistic, and, but I think Susquehanna obviously now and through the '60s, '70s on, it became an economic force of the community, and that was a good thing. So, uh, there are things that a college town has to offer that other towns don't. Look at Selinsgrove, look at Sunbury.

[Campbell]

(to Emily Ford) where are you from?

[Emily Ford] I'm from York.

[Campbell]

York?

[Ford] Yeah.

[Campbell]

Ok. always a big York presence.

[Ford] Yes, very much so.

[Campbell]

A teacher - a Susquehanna alumnus was a teacher at West York named Don Wissinger, and he sent an awful lot of kids from West York. with the other people in York also saying, "hey that's not a bad place." And another thing I noticed when I was a student there in the early '60s is a lot of my

classmates and other students were like first in the family to go to college. And I think that their parents felt very safe in sending junior off to a Lutheran school. That was a factor.

Then I think the only time—I say this cynically—the only time Susquehanna brings up its Lutheran affiliation is when they want money from the Lutheran Church. The rest of the time -and I think um, to me I saw a shift, not predominantly, but Susquehanna very much became aware of the Jewish community, namely because of Charlie Degenstein. Who was a tremendous benefactor, and the Weis family to a certain extent. And Charlie Degenstein was married to a Weis Daughter. And Gus Weber cultivated Charlie through playing golf at the Susquehanna Valley Country Club, so that's how all that came about.

[Ford] I'll just say that we're approaching, we're at the 30 minute mark so Ryan...

[Flood] Uh, yeah, so then to wrap up: in your book *Around Selinsgrove* you said that Selinsgrove is both a "typical and unique part of the nation" how is that?

[Campbell]

Well, it's the typical small town. But I think the individual people kind of make it unique. You know the George Lucks, the Bud Trutts, the Harro family that ran Miller's store where I worked. I mean every town has them, and they're all unique individuals, but as a whole, smalltown PA is like small town Indiana. Anything else?

[Flood] No, I think that's it, so thank you very much for your time.

[Campbell]

You're quite welcome

[Flood] And thanks for your—thanks for the stories, um, and the opportunity to shed some light on Selinsgrove, and the people, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to have interviewed you.

[Campbell]

It was good to meet both of you. You're both sophomores, what happens in two years?

[Flood] We're outta here, right?

[laughing]