

Sloan Derk interview with Jim Youngman, 25 April 2024

Sloan Derk: There's that going. So, this is Sloan Derk interviewing Mr. Jim Youngman on April 25, 2024, at the Gelnett Library. I have asked for permission to record this interview, and Mr. Youngman has agreed. This interview is part of a local history project conducted by the students in the public history course at Susquehanna University, thank you so much for coming with me.

Jim Youngman: My pleasure

S: So, well before we start off, could you just tell me about yourself uh when you were born, where you were born, how you were raised brought up

JY: Sure, I was born May 31, 1941. I'll be 83 years old in about a month. I was born actually in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, cause that was the hospital I was nearest. My parents lived in Selinsgrove, and course I lived in Selinsgrove from the time I was born till I went away to teach school in Norristown, Pennsylvania, in 1964.

S: Alright

JY: Of course I spent four years at Kutztown, it was a state college then and now it's a university, but I still in the summers lived at home in Selinsgrove. In fact, in the house that my grandfather built in 1903, and my parents lived there from 1924 until they passed away in 1977 and then I lived in the house till 1984.

S: Alright, and is that house still there?

JY: It is, it's on the corner of Independence and Orange, a big brick house.

S: Nice, I might have to go look at that some time

JY: Yeah

S: I love old houses. And did you say, commuted to Kutztown from home or?

JY: No, I lived at Kutztown.

S: Alright

JY: I came back I came home fairly often. I was dating a girl from Selinsgrove who had, who interviewed this morning, and she ended up being my wife.

S: That's awesome

JY: Yeah

S: Sweethearts from the very beginning?

JY: Yeah, pretty much. We'll be married 60 years in August.

S: That's awesome, Congratulations I should say.

JY: Thank you, thank you.

[2:33]

S: And then, would you just be able to tell me about your family and your parents growing up?

JY: Sure. I've done some genealogy research actually. My 8th great-grandfather migrated from Germany, uh (Kiem) Germany in 1738. He, he was married at the time his wife passed away and had one child. So, he got remarried, had three other children then decided to come to America and on the way over their boat got caught in a storm and his wife at that time and the three young children passed away from starvation.

He ended up in Rhode Island, and in a year's time they were cared for by Native Americans and then came to Philadelphia and then eventually to Oley, Pennsylvania, where he remarried and had eight children, one of which is my seventh great grandfather, Thomas Youngman, who came to Sunbury and then eventually to Beaver Springs where my grandfather was born, and he was a mill operator and, and went to Lynchburg, Virginia, where my father was born and then eventually back to Selinsgrove and he operated the mill at the end of Mill Street, Pennsylvania.

The mill's no longer there, but the coal building where he sold coal is right at the end of Mill Street on the right-hand side, it's I think it has a "circa 1792" on the building, yeah. And then my father became a printer apprentice for the *Selinsgrove Times*, he worked there for 56 years before he retired. And my mother was just a mother and a housewife, which most of them were back in that time.

S: Yeah.

JY: Most women.

S: Yeah, and then that's really interesting because my grandfather on my mother's side, he also worked in the coal mines, and he helped manage up there in Shamokin. Of course, none of them are there anymore but there's still the coal mounds there and everything.

JY: Yeah, I spent some time in Shamokin.

S: What was that doing?

JY: Chasing the girls actually. Yeah we had, it was funny there was a couple, older couple from Shamokin that had a little cottage over on the Isle of Que, it's still there by the way, and they had a daughter and she would bring some of her friends to vacation in the summer time and a bunch of my friends and the girls met each other we started to date and do different things together so we'd hop in my '48 Pontiac and drive out to Shamokin and, you know have a good time.

S: Yeah. And were any of them like locals to, I guess Susquehanna University or anything like that?

JY: I don't think any of them went to Susquehanna, no.

S: Yeah, I figured just because it's so close.

JY: Right, right, you know I kind of lost track of them after high school.

[6:18]

S: Yeah, and of course it sounds like you hung out with a lot of people, and I read in a few old newspaper articles that you had a lot to do with the sports community while you were around here.

JY: Well, I was an athlete, I played three sports: football, basketball, and baseball. Baseball...I couldn't hit the curve ball and about my junior year...a...I think he taught for Susquehanna...Blair Heaton was his name, I think he's on the hall of fame at Susquehanna—he tried to start a track team. So I didn't play baseball my junior year but it I went out for track, it never really got off the ground too much, and then my senior year I did play baseball again.

S: Yeah

JY: And I played ... I went out for football at Kutztown University and blew my knee out and consequently now I have an artificial one. Two of them matter of fact.

S: Yeah, that's like my dad, he doesn't have an artificial knee, but he gets back shots nerve shots all the time just because of old knee injuries and all that.

JY: Well, he's, he'll get an artificial one soon.

S: Yeah, he's probably talked about it.

JY: Yeah, I'm sure, when the pain gets, hell know it when the pain gets too great, so, they're amazing.

S: And of course, you said you were on the football team not just for Kutztown, what was it with watching big sports, it seems like I that read you and a group of people went and watch a Steelers game.

JY: Oh yeah, we had a guy here, I think he was interviewed, he worked for the football hall of fame in Canton, Ohio, he also worked for the Pittsburgh Steelers on the sidelines calling up injuries and in fact, are you familiar with the Immaculate Reception?

S: I've heard of it.

JY: Yeah, Franco Harris he went to the ... he actually went to the Super Bowl because of that. He has a picture was taken of him of Franco Harris throwing down the field and he's in the background.

S: Nice

JY: And down field so that's pretty, pretty interesting.

S: That's pretty cool.

JY: But we'd go out there and for \$3.15 we could sit in the endzone and watch the Steelers play and probably at that time we probably would go to see two or three games. And we'd stay over with him at this house in Canton, Ohio.

S: Were any of those games advertised at any local bars or anything around here that your friends would go and watch?

JY: Oh yeah well, we would you know, when you think about it and you look at that TV and you think about the Governor Snyder, where BJ's is now—that was the Governor Snyder Hotel—that's where we used to go. The TVs were longer than they were wide, and you had about a 24" TV so there wasn't a whole lot of places where you could go and actually with a group a big group of people and watch the games. But we'd go down there, several of our friends, and go watch a game or two, especially the Super Bowl's, We'd like to watch those. And we used to put...if you got there first you'd take a napkin and you write your friend's name on it and hang it over a chair next to you so that no one else could sit there.

S: Yeah, reserved seating.

JY: Right.

[10:12]

S: Alright, and then I want to switch gears a little bit here and go back to high school times for you. I read that you participated in holding like art classes for children and a few things like that, so I just wanted to ask what exactly did you do for that, what was that like?

JY: Well I think maybe that's some wrong information, I would actually not in high school but when I graduated from college, I would have art classes for *adults*. And you know where, you know where the Selinsgrove Inn is and the big lot empty lot behind there... I think it's Bayada or some group that deals with autistic children, I think. That used to be the Selinsgrove Moose, and on the second floor they'd have art, painting, and drawing for adults, and I did that for a while. That the only thing I did with children was much later on when we had a contest to like quit smoking, and I'd go in with a group of kids and have them come up with ideas, and then we'd have a contest and the winner of drawing would be on the big billboards around town

S: Alright

JY: But that was probably, that was after I retired from the Bureau of Prisons... that was probably in late 1990's I did that so, yeah.

S: Well, could you tell me about those adult art classes?

JY: Well, it was painting mostly. And it was sometimes it was a little frustrating, because in order to be satisfied with your paintings, especially if you're one that had some realism, you had to be able to draw first. And some of these people came in and just wanted to paint and couldn't figure out why they weren't getting what they wanted, and I would tell them you have to practice drawing, you know. But for the most part they were active

and they were satisfied, and they came up with some pretty good stuff. And then we'd have a...in the same building they'd have a showing of their art of their art, and I could enter some of my art also, so that went well.

[13:00]

S: And then, just speaking of art, I guess just say the arts I heard not heard but I read that you acted in quite a few performances while you were here like musical and plays, could you tell me about those?

JY: Sure, I can show you one.

S: Oh, even better.

JY: [Presented a newspaper article.] This was my first stab at acting and actually it was at Susquehanna University, and it was a play called the *Willow and I* and here we are, and you notice, this is me and these are the students at Susquehanna University. And you notice I'm playing a African American and so is this woman, because in Selinsgrove there weren't any, and there weren't any going to Susquehanna so the people that took those parts we had, I don't know if we'd be criticized for that today or not but there it is. And I guess I did pretty good because there was a little article.

S: Oh yeah, they wrote a lot about you.

JY: Yeah.

S: And then why do you think the town took such a I guess interest in you and the arts?

JY: Well I was always kind of an outgoing kid you know and this other boy here ... where is it Askold Zagars—he, his father was a professor at Susquehanna, and we were in the Boy Scouts, and we put on little things in the Boy Scouts and I was always the I guess you would call it a ham. So when they were looking for this part my friend Askold told the people about me and they came and they asked me if I wanted to be in the play. And I said I would.

Now this was the guy here that was the director, Axel Kleinsorg, I don't know if you ever heard that name, but he was big in Susquehanna and in plays and so forth. Here's a little write up of the three plays they had and so this is an interesting paper, it goes back to 1950. I read this this is satire for sure of the revolution at Susquehanna University where if you were if you were an A student they wanted to throw you out. It's...well...I'll let you read it when were done here, it's pretty interesting.

Then I was in a few plays at school. I was in all the plays at school and this guy, our science teacher... we had a junior and a senior class play, so he said the sophomores should have a class play, so he wrote and a musical director arranged some of the music and so forth. And he wrote a play called *Joey* and it was about a guy who gets hit by a car and then he travels to different places in his mind and his brain—one was a hillbilly place and I was played the "Paw" hillbilly. And he goes to different places to Arabia to the Arabian nights and all different places like that.

And that went over so well that the next year he wrote a play called *For Love Alone*, and it was about a town in... Troleia was the fictional town...but it had to do with the Nazi Germany's taking over that town. And I played Colonel Von Fritz, the head of the German contingent that was there, and this was about people in Austria putting on a play that kind of criticized the German rule of the place. And so the Colonel Von Fritz and his henchmen arrest them, but then they escaped, and you know they lived happily ever after.

And then I was in all of the class plays also, and I also was in another play out at Susquehanna—*Macbeth*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, I was an apparition and if you're familiar with the play... "Double, double toil and trouble..." something, and I was they had a thin a big pot these three witches were around they had a light and as a apparition you had to lay on your stomach and you came up under the pot and it looked like you were in the fire, you know. I still remember my line from that, it's amazing: "Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care who chafes, or frets or where conspirers are Macbeth shall never vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to High Dunsinane".

S: That's really cool

JY: And a friend of mine, they wanted younger looking people, and so a friend...two friends and I from high school were the apparitions. I think I was about... I might have been a junior in high school perhaps, so. Yeah, that was fun.

[19:20]

S: And then, I just wanted to bring it back to your family a little bit. Did they ever have any involvement with this, because I know today some schools will have their parents do fundraising and things with the kids

JY: My dad was funny, he'd show up at my games just when you'd least expect it. It wasn't like he you know had to be there, you know. I mean it wasn't like...when we played little league, it was in the afternoon, when the parent couldn't even go to the games, you know. And that's kind of how it was. He did...the Harold L. Bolig Memorial Fields was opened when I was a junior in high school. Up until that time we played on the field out at Susquehanna and he headed the fundraising to buy the scoreboard, for the first scoreboard for Harold L Bolig memorial field. Yeah and I don't think my mother ever came to a game. Yeah it was a lot different back then you know, sure was.

[20:35] s: Yeah, and then you mentioned it earlier how you worked in the Lewisburg prison system, could you tell me a little bit about what you did there?

JY: Sure I graduated from Kutztown and I taught school for four years—I taught art for four years at Norristown Junior High School. So we wanted to...I had a child by then...and we wanted to come back to Selinsgrove. So, a friend of mine worked at the penitentiary, and he knew there was an opening there, and even though I had a degree in art education all they wanted was you had to have a college degree, so I ended up in the education department, and I did. I taught adult basic education, I taught GED classes, I did vocational training stuff for about a year and a half. I was assigned to the satellite camp at the

penitentiary and did everything: recreation, arts and crafts, and GED teaching, ABE teaching, ESL teaching, even though I could say *hola* and *como estas usted* and *como se llama*—that's about all I knew, but we muddled through it.

And then eventually I was promoted to supervisor of education, which is principle, at the Allenwood prison camp, and also as a public information officer, so that was then I retired from there in 1991. And then I did contracting work in penitentiaries traveled around the country to Tucson, Arizona, Waseca, Minnesota, Petersburg, Virginia, Morgantown, West Virginia...a few other places. And then I taught twelve years of life skills classes and parenting programs as a contractor. And then I spent four years teaching GED classes at Northumberland Country Prison. So I tell people I did three life sentences—a life sentence is fifteen years and I did about forty-five years in prisons. I retired when I was 70 years old.

S: That's a lot

JY: Completely retired yeah.

[23:15]

S: And then did you have any like, I don't know if it's asking broadly over what did you say a 45-year span, but did you have any uh memorable moments or scenarios while you were in the prison system?

JY: Oh hundreds, my wife says I should have written down something every day, I could have written a book.

Jimmy Hoffa worked for me in the library, was one. I was there during the Vietnam War and there was a lot of protests from Bucknell University. And a friend of mine and myself ... we were kind of the youngsters and we were in education, so we wore suits and ties. And they would send us out to the front gate to confront the protestors coming up, and to be honest with you, I'm not sure that... I was probably more in tune with the protestors than I was with the Bureau of Prisons at that time in my life, because I didn't like the Vietnam War either, so. But we did our duty. And they'd come up and you would stand there and they would come up this far from your face [made a gesture showing how close] and take a picture. And they wanted you to break their cameras, but we wouldn't do it. So that was interesting.

At Allenwood as a public information officer, I had to deal with all kinds of celebrities. Peter Lemongello, the famous rock and roll guy, a few congressmen, one senator, LaMarr Hoyt, a Cy Young award winner. He'd get requests all the time to be interviewed, and he didn't want to do it, but every time he'd did, I'd have to he had to sign a paper. And I thought to myself after so long... I should have kept them, I should have kept those papers for his autographs, but I didn't, so yeah.

S: Then you said about that senator, who was that?

JY: I can't remember his name right now, to tell you the truth, but I can almost see...and it was funny...they did a...news people come in and do an interview. And Allenwood was like a minimum security institution—there were no bars, no locked doors, or anything. Guys could walk around. Well they set up in a room with...they had a like a cardboard cutout of prison bars, and they set that up and shone a light through it so that it would like be the shadow of prison bars on the wall, like they were a what the media does sometimes, yeah.

[26:28] s: Alright, then, well we're coming up on time here so I wanted to ask you one more question...so you seem to be involved a lot in education throughout your life, I just wanted to ask you because I'm going to be an educator soon enough, what your like, your opinion of the local school system today I guess do they need more financial support or from the local government.

JY: They all need that they have to start paying teachers what they deserve, you know. My middle...oldest granddaughter from my youngest son is going to Kutztown also, and she's elementary major, double major art and elementary. And I see they're... our new governor is starting to you know kind of understand that more money should be funneled into the systems and teachers should be making more, that kind of thing. You know what they what they want to get rid of as soon as they don't have money is music and art, just about, that's what you hear and you know. They're the humanities and they're what make us human—they should be the ones that get most of the money in my opinion, so. Yeah, I still do artwork, and the last thirteen years I've done more art then I've done my whole life. I even have a couple pictures here I can show you and maybe we can give it up. [Displayed art works]

S: That's interesting.

JY: There's another one.

S: I like the colors.

JY: Yeah. A Chicken. Pumpkins, and you see... They have an art show downtown every September, it's called the Plein Air, and this was my entry into the Plein Air the Susquehanna River and lower Mahanoy. I didn't win anything, but I sold my paintings, so that's really a winter. So that's about what I'm up to, I go to the gym three times a week, or sometimes two in the summertime, especially when the grass needs to be mown.

S: That's a lot better than I am right now. Well, thank you so much for sitting with me.

JY: My pleasure, I enjoyed it.

S: It was great to meet you.