

Reflections of a Recreation Educator

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When I first appeared on the scene in 1931, the social movement phase of parks and recreation was coming to an end. Our second generation of leadership was emerging — Meyer, Brown, Hjelty, Matherson, and Nash — replacing Gulick, Lee, Heatherington, Curtis, and Addams as those who were shaping the field. The new leaders, like their predecessors, were value oriented people who believed in play and the significance and importance of recreation. They saw recreation as a field of service that was meritorious of one's energy, thought, and money. At the time, most states were finally accepting physical education as a legitimate activity within the school system. The battle for that right had been won with recreators and physical educators as strong allies. Many of those who were advocates for recreation were also leaders in that field of physical activity.

Social movements are short lived. They draw their energy from those who are committed to the cause. They emerge out of a social need and once institutionalized, their concerns and programs become wards of the professions which evolved to provide the needed service. Harold Meyer was one of those who had entered the field in 1921 as a young faculty member at the University of North Carolina. He came here to examine play, offered a course in community recreation, and began working for the implementation of local recreation services. He found that he and the University were so far ahead of the movement in North Carolina that some preliminary steps had to be taken. Consequently, he turned his attention to youth and youth development.

This decade following World War I and its War Communities Camps Services gave communities public recreation services. Municipalities were beginning to replace schools as the basic provider of playgrounds. Elite colleges and universities, such as NYU, had been offering courses about play as early as 1905. Harvard University had appointed George Johnson to teach about play and the play movement. Our normal schools and teacher colleges were emphasizing the more practical aspects of play management or playground management. We were at the beginning of the profession's development and professional preparation.

My birth also coincided with the Great Depression years which ushered in a series of programs of social engineering. These programs were designed to get the country back into an economic situation where people no longer stood in bread lines and where the good things of life would be available, including recreation and play.

When I entered the first grade in 1937, several of our Depression programs were underway: the construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway, the reforestation of our lands and construction of recreation areas (CCC and WPA), and the employment of thousands of individuals as recreation specialists. It was also the year the American Recreation Society was created. Meyer was in Germany and Italy that year studying the youth movements of Hitler and Mussolini. It was also the year that the first curriculum

conference was held at the University of Minnesota, supported in part by the Russell Sage and Doris Duke foundations and a grant from the Recreation Division of the WPA under the direction of Eduard Lindemann. Recreation specialists, university and college faculty, and the American people in general did not realize what was going to happen two years later, when Germany invaded Poland in 1939. The world underwent quite a metamorphosis in the next eight years and so did I.

The war was over in 1945, my first year in high school. I was manager of the JV baseball team, not a very good man with the "stick" but good with the pencil. I was a score keeper for our local recreation department at a park two blocks from my home. I had grown up in the park selling peanuts, "Get your red hot peanuts." I was aspiring to be a sports writer. I later found out I could not spell, and gave up journalism. At the same time the world was discovering the many uses of plastics and light weight durable materials such as rayon. Scientists were flirting with television, atomic energy, rocketry, and wonder drugs. We had also experienced the Holocaust. The world, indeed, had changed.

I graduated from high school in 1949. I had grown a little bit since I'd started high school at 5'2" and 85 pounds. By my senior year, I was 5'10" and weighed 119 pounds with lots of hair. The parks and recreation profession, too, had undergone significant changes through a rapid expansion of local recreation services for youth and adults, especially in sports and social programs. The American Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance was assuming a major role in recreation education through a series of National Curriculum Conferences on health, physical education, and recreation. The College Recreation Association and the Great Lakes Training Institute had been created and state recreation societies were emerging which were often affiliated with the American Recreation Society.

The GI Bill was affording the opportunity for returning veterans to go to college and many were choosing recreation and physical education as a major. Garrett Eppley had gone to Indiana, Tom Hines to NC State, G. Ott Romney to West Virginia and David Gray to a new school in California called Long Beach State. All had been recreation practitioners before entering higher education. They had worked in the WPA programs, been involved in military recreation, or worked for some social agency. The Red Cross had sponsored a conference in 1948 to discuss the need for a special kind of preparation for those who were going to work in hospitals, providing recreation services. According to Gerald B. Fitzgerald (our first curriculum studies chronicler), 40 colleges were offering a recreation and park major.

My college years passed quickly and I met Harold Meyer. I remember walking into his office at the end of my junior year. I was a radio and television major who had become dissatisfied and was looking for something else. I was taking a couple sociology courses and enjoyed them. I had seen in the catalog a course called "Introduction to Community Recreation," Sociology 73, taught by Meyer. I recall asking him if he thought this recreation course was appropriate for someone who might wish to major in sociology with a personnel management focus. He said, "Son, what is your name?" I

replied, "Doug Sessoms." He said, "Son, I have been looking for you." Startled, I asked why. He replied that Arnold Peterson, the recreation director in Wilmington where I had worked on the playgrounds as a summer employee, had told him that I was a potential recreation major. When I walked out of his office I was carrying the banner of parks and recreation and have carried it ever since.

My second experience with one of our great educators occurred at Illinois. Charles Brightbill was in his second or third year there when I went to do my masters degree. I discovered that recreation and physical education were not as close and compatible as they had been in the early years of their respective movements. Recreation was struggling to become a profession in its own right while physical educators were viewing it as a field within the profession of HPER. Sound familiar to TR educators? By this point Mary Wylie had gone to San Jose and Allen Weatherford had begun one of the first programs in a predominantly Black college at North Carolina Central. The early 1950s was a time when recreation educators were primarily interested in developing practitioners and the profession, leisure was being defined as free time, and recreation was seen as an activity pursued in leisure for satisfactions derived from the experience.

I joined the faculty at UNC in 1954. I was hired via telephone by Meyer; no interviews. He just simply said, "Son, you want to come home?" and I replied, "Yes Sir." He continued, "Essentially there are three things you have to be aware of: one, you have to start your doctorate immediately; you have to be philosophically compatible with me; and..." I did not hear the third requirement. I was on my way home.

1954 was an eventful year with Brown verses Topeka, the Boomers pushing out the walls of our elementary schools, and families moving to suburbia and changing the dynamics of urbanism. The typical recreation curriculum had less than two faculty members and about 40 majors. I matriculated at NYU and finished the degree program four years later when I defended by dissertation. 1958 was the same year in which Congress passed the bill creating the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission. North Carolina and California established voluntary certification programs and several local departments of parks were merging with their recreation counterparts to create departments of parks and recreation. It was the year I attended my first National Curriculum Conference in Washington sponsored by AAHPERD. I met Betty van der Smissen. She and I were new kids on the block. We learned there something that we already believed: most recreation educators felt that specialization should occur primarily at the graduate level and the undergraduate experience should be where a student has a general base. You specialize at the graduate level, ideally, after you have some experience in the field.

By 1958 we had had a taste of things to come: integration and strife (Little Rock Central High School), the interstate highway bill had been enacted and people were travelling in increasing numbers, the National Park Service had established Mission 66 and the Forest Service was in its first year of a five year development plan, McDonalds was serving burgers, and Holiday Inns were greeting travelers. The franchise business was alive and well.

I was promoted to Assistant Professor in 1959 and Associate Professor in 1963. I remember the latter promotion well: the Chairman of the Department of Sociology came to my office and told me I had tenure. I wasn't sure of what that meant. Was I to get some type of certificate? At that time tenure meant very little to academics. As long as you were meeting the mission, doing your job, you got tenure. University work was a life commitment from both parties.

A lot happened during those four years between 1959 and 1963. Meyer retired and I became chair of our program in 1963. I met Bert Brantley and we became good friends. Our accreditation project was alive and well under the auspices of the Federation of National Professional Recreation Organizations. We were meeting regularly and developing curriculum standards. Merger talks between AIPE and ARS were really on the front burner. Our enrollments were expanding. We had several recreation programs with more than 100 undergraduate majors. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation had established training program grants to support faculty and students interested in recreation for persons with disabilities. Therapeutic recreation was beginning its quest for identity as a specialization.

Those years were ripe with social reforms. In California we saw a different lifestyle emerging with student sit-ins at Berkeley. The civil rights movement was also well in gear when four Black youths from Greensboro decided there was no reason why they should not be served at Woolworths. When they were told they should go, they did not; Blacks deserved the same service as others. New attitudes about opportunity and rights were developing. Old ways were being challenged including our thinking in parks and recreation. Outdoor recreation was exploding and so were we both in terms of student interests and curriculum content. The Bureau of Outdoor Recreation sponsored consecutive national conferences on outdoor recreation research and professional education for outdoor recreation. DeGrazia published his Of Time, Work and Leisure and a young Michigan State graduate, Les Reid, was packing his bags and getting ready to go to Texas A&M to begin a recreation education program there.

The 1960s was a decade of change. Therapeutic recreation and recreation for special populations came on strong with lots of federal support. Student riots, urban riots, the merger of five professional organizations to create NRPA, humans in space, and men on the moon occurred. Liberalism and concerns for the environment abounded. We enacted both clean air and clean water bills. The National Recreation and Park Association published a report in 1968 stating that there would be a need for one million employees in parks and recreation by the turn of the century. Everyone was jumping on the bandwagon, even though Tom Goodale wrote a scathing article about the quality of that research study, its methodology, and the grounding of some of its conclusions. There was an explosion of two-year and four-year programs. I published my first text and was promoted to Professor in 1969. It was about that time that our curriculum left Sociology to become a program area within the School of Education. We left Sociology primarily because it viewed us as practice-oriented; the sociology department was becoming more and more quantitative with its research and less concerned about people from a service perspective. Recreation and Park Administration was becoming the preferred title for

many of our recreation curricula. "Leadership" was being dropped; "administration" was replacing it.

Other changes in professional preparation were occurring. To meet the demand for additional faculty, several universities created doctoral programs in parks and recreation. We also began to employ educators trained in related fields to staff our courses, thereby bringing us an interdisciplinary focus. These different views sometimes created dissent and ambiguity, particularly in terms of the mission of the field and the role of our curricula. Were we leisure studies developing leisure research, or parks and recreation, professional preparation for practice? Recreation and physical education professionals were in conversations with NCATE about our desire to accredit park and recreation curricula. Thanks to Edith Ball, we were succeeding in those negotiations. SPRE was assuming a major role at the national level on all aspects of professional preparation, accreditation, and certification. Therapeutic recreation professionals had created a voluntary registration plan while the Bureau for the Education of the Handicapped was offering grants to provide training for those who would work in communities with people with disabilities. We had Land and Water Conservation Fund grants and pilot accreditation visits.

The 1970s was a decade of contrasts and change. Curricula swelled their numbers in the early part of the decade only to decline later. Concerns for special populations grew but then seemed incompatible philosophically with those who viewed recreation as treatment-oriented. Were therapeutic recreation and recreation for special populations the same? The Bureau of Outdoor Recreation became the Heritage Conservation Recreation Services. Many of our universities added leisure to their departmental title: Departments of Leisure Studies and Recreation and Park Administration. SPRE has its first midyear conference in 1971 at Illinois. This event later spawned our teaching institute and our annual Chair's conference. We held a series of junior college institutes and Leisure Education became a major concern for many curricula. We also saw the emergence of female educators as association leaders, especially as presidents of SPRE. We are indebted, for example, to Jan McLean and Fran Cannon.

Public recreation in the late 1970s was at its height. With increased tax support and land and water conservation fund monies we saw a shift in service and administration. Professionals took charge. Our policy boards were replaced with advisory committees; there was a sharp decline in the role played by our lay leadership. The profession was replacing volunteers with professionals and part-time personnel. The system was changing. With less money for programs, they were to become partially or completely self-supporting. Increased budgets for maintenance resulted in a trade off of less programming, especially for the poor.

I was in my forties, had been president of SPRE, was seeing the US, thanks to some friends who had invited me to teach during the summers at Teachers College, Columbia; Oregon State; University of New Mexico; University of Oregon; University of Wyoming; University of Massachusetts; and Clemson University. We spent a year at Texas A&M and our boys were becoming teenagers. Because of student numbers, recreation curricula

were able to respond to our special interests. We had enough students to create specializations at the undergraduate level. We also had enough people who bought books in those expanding markets. Scholarship was encouraged; JLR and Leisure Sciences gave outlets for scholarly research. Professional identity was no longer in question as we were moving towards accreditation and certification. The National Recreation and Park Association through Don Henkel was leading the way.

These trends continued into the 1980s but with new challenges for the profession. We saw Ronald Reagan elected, the abolishment of HCRS, and less Land and Water Conservation Fund monies. We experienced a recession and the rise of entrepreneurship. We saw a growing national debt that changed the way we funded programs and services. We experienced a decline in student numbers, and those who majored with us had a different orientation than those of the 1970s. Our universities were changing. The liberalism of the 1960s that had resulted in an explosion of new courses and areas of study, less requirements, and more involvement with university administration, was dying. Professional administrators and frustrated legislators were taking control. Bolstered by the Carnegie Commission report on higher education, these people moved us to the right. We moved to a more prescriptive course of study with a heavy dose of the liberal arts. We saw less student involvement in curriculum and university decisions, more emphasis on scholarship among the faculty, and a redefinition of the mission of the university. To some degree abolition of the School of Community Service and the threatened loss of their park and recreation program at the University of Missouri were a wake-up call; things were changing. We also saw an increasing number of females in our curricula and the impact of Title IX on university sports programs. At the local level we saw a decline in public recreation services funded by tax revenues. New terms such as marketing and recovery cost were becoming a part of our vocabulary and behavior.

For many recreation educators the 1980s was the "age of entrepreneurship." Some educators believed that our future survival depended upon our embracing commercial and resort recreation services and that public recreation services were going to die. By the way, the public sector never died. In fact, it is stronger today than it was twenty years ago. In North Carolina we know this as a fact. I cannot recall a bond issue in the last five years for parks and recreation in North Carolina that has not been approved. We have had no defeats. To me, that fact says the public is with us and that they want and are willing to pay for public park and recreation services.

But in the 1980s our language and priorities began to change. Clients became customers. Operations replaced programming. Management replaced administration. Special interests were the rage. We were shifting directions again.

The Council on Accreditation added to our dilemma by enacting a policy in 1983 which further fragmented the movement toward one professional voice. By accrediting options only, every curriculum was forced to give emphasis to its specialty, even if that was to prepare generalists. By 1989, some thirty different specializations had been approved by the Council. New professional organizations were also being developed. One, ATRA, was serving those recreation therapists who saw themselves more as allied

health professionals rather than as traditional recreation and park professionals. Both NRPA and NCTRC had created certification boards. Although commercial recreation and resort management did not last long, it did lead us to travel, tourism and hospitality as professional interests.

Changes and issues were being revisited in the 1980s. In 1985, SPRE began its teaching institute, created SCHOLE as another outlet for information about our profession, and put new energy into the research symposium. COPA approved our accreditation program, and both the NCTRC and NRPA hired firms to help them develop certification examinations. We also saw in the 1980s a replacement of Sociology with Social Psychology as the dominant discipline affecting our scholarly thinking. This change meant we were looking more at behavior than at institutions. Many new park and recreation educators were entering the field during this era bringing new energy and a new perspective, especially one regarding research and research reporting. These new educators were not always aware of the traditional mission of parks and recreation. Concerns for both leisure behavior and the management of leisure systems encouraged the development of dual tracts in our curricula: one for those who were oriented toward practitioner interests and one for those who were interested in leisure theory and concepts. Two Academies were established and JPRA was created, giving us another outlet for research. And in 1990, I stepped down as Chair of UNC-CH's curriculum after 27 years.

This all leads us to the last decade of the 20th Century. Interestingly, many of the issues of the last decade of the 19th century are with us again: concerns of the poor; concerns about immigrants, both legal and illegal; concerns about our cities; concerns about crime and delinquency and how we are going to approach those in need; and how we are to control our exploding social problems. For many professionals, the past five years have been a period of rediscovering our mission and the role of parks and recreation. We are once again concerned about values and recreation's role in human development and the amelioration of social issues. After a decade of declining numbers, we are seeing enrollments increase with students more concerned about service and mission than about entrepreneurship. We are also seeing new academic configurations develop with mergers and rearrangements of academic units. In many cases these new academic configurations do not include our traditional allies such as physical education or natural resources. They are in units with travel and hospitality or with health or health development. We are also hearing cries from both our legislature and from the public at large that the mission of the university and college faculties is to teach and provide services rather than pursue scholarship or research. Politically we are seeing a decline in support for the poor, more anti-welfare rhetoric, cultural wars, revisionist history and new racism. Old problems with new faces are unresolved and demanding solutions.

Professionally we are making strides. Sagamore and Venture have provided opportunities for our writings. We have certification of therapeutic recreation specialists (CTRS) and certified leisure professionals (CLP), although I question why we call ourselves certified leisure professionals when that is really not what I think we are. We are parks and recreation, not leisure services. We are talking with physical education about sports administration as a joint concern and the NRPA has successfully completed a

drive to build a national headquarters. We are now in our third or fourth generation of park and recreation educators and perhaps a fifth generation of recreation practitioners.

My involvement with parks and recreation directly or indirectly, including my time with Harold Meyer and the history it gave me, is close to 75 years. It has led me to certain conclusions. We are grounded in two social movements: social welfarism and conservation. Our concerns are concerns for people and the environment, not economics and not necessarily for theory. We are oriented toward practice within a well defined sphere of service: public parks and recreation. As a field we have gone through cycles, flirted with fads and trends, and struggled at times with our identity but have been defined by what we do and what is expected of us. We have gotten into trouble when we have created ambiguities for the public and ourselves about who we are and what we do, when we have failed to do the job expected of us, and when we have not demonstrated our expertise. We are parks and recreation.

We have experienced change. We have seen our country go from rural to urban to suburban. We have become more indifferent and detached. We have seen the excitement of industrialism with labor saving devices lead us to consumerism, the joy of purchasing. We have gone from governments which govern least to ones with centralized massive bureaucracies, from consumer savings to consumer debt, from volunteers to professionals. We have gone from a time where we had five jobs for every recreation and park graduate to where we have five graduates for every park and recreation job. We have seen recreation leadership become recreation administration, park and recreation administration, leisure studies and services, recreation resource management, or recreation, travel and hospitality management.

But through all of these changes, certain constancies remain:

- 1) People continue to play and recreate and they expect to do that best in areas that are safe and well maintained.
- 2) Students come to us with idealism and hope, wanting to know how and why.
- 3) Faculty teach what they know and learn to be effective teachers by teaching what they know and continue to learn.
- 4) Park and recreation professionals enjoy being practitioners and have done what is necessary to establish the field as a profession through accreditation, certification, and professional organizations.

Yet, much work remains. The challenge is to stay with our mandate. The responsibility of leadership and expertise is ours. We must continue to merge theory with practice. We must understand the importance of adapting to change but in doing so not to lose or direction and not to lose sight of what is important and central to us.

For me, these have been fun years to be a recreation educator, a faculty member at my alma mater, a member of my state and national organizations, a recipient of opportunity, and a student of play. Thank you for your friendship, your challenge, and your nurturing. I am and will remain, even in retirement, a recreation educator. May your experience be equal to mine. If so, hold on and enjoy the ride.