

THE YMCA CELEBRATES “A DAY TO REMEMBER”

By Marie Coady

In 1844, when the Industrial Revolution was at its peak, young men were forced to leave small villages and family farms to seek employment in large industrial cities that dehumanized them and seemed to swallow them up. These young men now bereft of the structure of family and church life suddenly became prey to the evils of society. This crisis of lifestyle did not go unnoticed. One young man of twenty-two, upon noting the loneliness and decadence the Industrial Revolution proliferated among his friends, offered an alternative. That alternative was the Young Men's Christian Association more commonly known today as the YMCA.

George Williams was working as a clerk in a dry goods store in England in 1844 when he gathered eleven of his friends together and started a small club designed to fill the void of family and faith and bind them together through biblical instruction, academic classes, sports and general camaraderie. He called the group the Young Men's Christian Association, a group he hoped would encourage the high ideals of “health in spirit, mind and body” and practice the virtues of “friendship, love and understanding across nations and even across the impregnable forces of race, creed and social status”.

As Williams' idea took hold and his small group swelled in numbers, he also hoped his YMCA group would “reflect creative optimism, and the ability to adjust with the times, experiment with progress and never let down in the search for better ways to serve youth”. As it turned out, he realized his hope beyond his wildest dreams.

By 1851, word of the YMCA had spread to America by way of a retired sea captain, Thomas Valentine Sullivan, who brought the philosophy and structure of the YMCA to Boston. Sullivan was a religious man and found the ideals of the YMCA so compelling he advocated the new found organization with the zeal of a preacher. Soon, in spite his death only a few years later in 1859, Sullivan had managed to encourage the residents of cities and towns all over New England to form YMCA groups in their community. Woburn was one of those communities.

According to “An Historical Narrative of Service to People” written by Bob Robblee on the occasion of the North Suburban YMCA's 100th anniversary, the Woburn chapter of the Young Men's Christian Association was incorporated in Woburn in 1878. But while researching through some old newspapers at the Woburn Public Library, I came across mention of the YMCA as early as 1857.

In an article in the Middlesex Journal, dated June 9, 1860, it was reported that the Young Men's Christian Association had celebrated its third anniversary in Woburn only a few days before on June 6, 1857, making the Woburn YMCA's presence in Woburn 145 years old. Of course, the YMCA of 1857 was not as structured as today's and had no formal meeting place, but it did claim the same values and conduct their meetings with the decorum befitting a religious-based group.

That Middlesex Journal article tells of a "YMCA or Young Men's Christian Association" that "held its third anniversary last Monday evening in the church of Rev. Mr. March, who was pastor of the First Congregational Church in Woburn at that time. Rev. March was joined by Rev. Bronson representing the Woburn Baptist Church, Rev. Otherman of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Batt of Stoneham, and Rev. Kimball of the North Woburn Congregational Church all offering prayers.

The YMCA of 1860 met in East Woburn and maintained a "Sabbath evening prayer meeting" there in a school-house "warmed and lighted" by benefactors who offered the space free of charge as well as a library of some 100 volumes of scholarly works that were reported to be in "constant use". The rooms were made available at "Kelly's block" and gifts of "several beautiful pictures" donated by "gentlemen interested in the objects of the Association" decorated the rooms and made it a pleasant place where young men could gather in a reading room generously supplied with newspapers and periodicals and that was open every night until 10 pm.

The Journal article concluded with a fervent hope that the YMCA group would grow and prosper, but with the untimely death of Captain Thomas Sullivan in 1859, that hope seemed to be put on hold. Captain Sullivan was buried at Woodbrook Cemetery and honored by his Woburn devotees with a handsome stone marker placed on his grave that reads: "Captain Thomas V. Sullivan, 1850-1859, Founder of the first YMCA in the USA in Boston December, 1851". The stone is adorned with the thought provoking line, "He Rode out the storm."

One wonders what "storm" the inscription on Sullivan's tombstone could be referring to as there is no plot or internment card on file at the Woodbrook Cemetery office cataloging the details of his death and very little is known about him. But one could speculate that he most likely died from an illness that made his last days on earth ones of great suffering. The stone marking his grave appears to have been put in place much later than 1859 and has the YMCA logo at the top with the inscription "Spirit, Mind & Body" engraved on it.

In any case, the official date recorded in Robblee's "An Historical Narrative of Service to People" for the first YMCA in Woburn is 1878, and from then on its growth and willingness to change with the times has assured its success.

Ten years later in 1888, the first president of the then incorporated Woburn YMCA Board of Directors, Hubbard Copeland, was chosen and although the core activity of the YMCA groups was still punctuated by the singing of hymns and bible classes, Copeland strongly advocated trips to camps around New England to promote physical fitness.

By 1895, a steady stream of contributions allowed the Woburn YMCA to purchase the Connelly property at the corner of Main and Broad Streets in Woburn for outdoor activities such as baseball leagues, a mini Olympics, and a full range of track and field events that attracted Woburn's best athletes. In 1899, they moved to Five Cent Savings Bank building and that remained their headquarters until their building on Main Street in Hammond Square, designed by architect A. C. Moore, was completed in 1923 on time and on budget by the Atherton Company contractors.

The then new Woburn YMCA was dedicated on April 21, 1924 and John C. Reily was hired as general secretary to oversee the organization. The building was recently demolished to make way for a condominium development. By 1932 strong emphasis was being placed on physical programs and the YMCA was sponsoring an amateur baseball league that saw more than 300 register to play.

It wasn't until 1939 that the YMCA decided that it might benefit financially from what they called "family sport" and installed bowling alleys in the basement of the building that not only allowed for "family sport" but an opportunity for employment for some young men. But as it turned out, those bowling alleys never did make money. In fact, they never even generated enough income to make up for the cost of building and maintaining them. Although scores of former YMCA members will attest to many enjoyable hours spent there in "family sport".

The year 1965 saw a great change in the Woburn YMCA when it was accepted into the Greater Boston YMCA and two organizations merged. By Feb 13, 1967 the Woburn Area YMCA became known as North Suburban YMCA as it is known today. And after much fundraising the organization finally had the funds to open the new North Suburban YMCA on Lexington Street in Woburn on December 14, 1970 opened and the membership grew from 812 to 5,890 members.

Today, the diversity of its members and the YMCA's philosophy of changing with the times and “experiment(ing) with progress” has allowed the YMCA to continue its growth to include all comers. It has never lost its focus in searching for “better ways to serve youth” in “friendship, love and understanding across nations and even across the impregnable forces of race, creed and social status”.

This Sunday, September 22, 2002, at 3 PM, the North Suburban YMCA will celebrate “A Day to Remember” with a full program of family events and a celebration of the many anniversaries that have made the YMCA a powerful presence in Woburn since 1857.

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