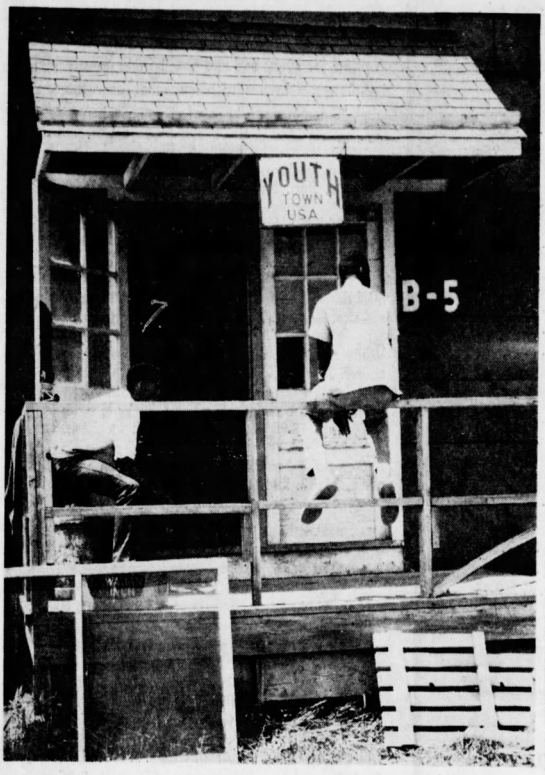


A BEGINNING — Two pioneer residents of "Youth Town, U.S.A." wait outside administration building. Photos by D&C photographer Herb Schaeffer.

Will The Ghost Town Of Sampson Become . . .

Youth Town U.S.A.?

By STEPHEN HAMMER
D&C Staff Writer

On July 1st four youngsters from the streets of New York moved into part of the ghost town on Seneca Lake which once was bustling Sampson Naval Base. Their hosts, headed by the colorful radio philanthropist "Big Joe" Rosenfield of WABC, New York, hope the four will be the vanguard of 1,000 youngsters to take up year-around residence next year in "Youth Town, U.S.A.," their dream town to be redeemed from the dilapidated, weed-infested barracks area. Here is the story of this freewheeling operation and the men and the money behind it.

A YOUTH PROGRAM aiming for the stars — the preservation of wholesomeness among thousands of teen-agers — is getting is first test on part of the old Sampson Air Force Base in Seneca County.

The privately-financed program, "Youth Town U.S.A.," became a small-scale reality July 1 with the arrival of the first four boys from New York. Since then nine others have come, and so far at least they all say they're glad to be there.

The nobility of purpose of the program, however, is almost matched in scope by the acrimony of the open fight between the two principal founders, one of whom—the one who conceived the idea—has been forced out of the operation. Another striking aspect is the degree of improvisation that was used to get the project moving and keep it rolling.

Youth Town is sponsored by Big Joe's Happiness Exchange Foundation, Inc., a New York charitable institution founded and still headed by Joseph (Big Joe) Rosenfield Jr., an off-beat radio personality who dispenses cheer and charity on and off his nightly four-hour program on Station WABC, New York.

Big Joe said his foundation has assets totaling about $2.5 million. This capital, as well as much of the everyday charity he dispenses, came in as the result of the radio program, on which Rosenfield presents many of the hardship cases he considers of merit.

Donations Substantial

Donations at times have been substantial. One Connecticut widow, a long-time contributor, some years ago willed the foundation 22,000 shares of General Motors Corp. stock, worth more than a million dollars. The widow's heirs contested the bequest in court, but Big Joe defended it successfully—as he has every other court action brought again him or the foundation so far.

Big Joe, an expansive ex-newspaperman and a self-styled reformed alcoholic, last year stepped into the Youth Town picture. A year later he had the project going and Fred P. Amershadian, who had worked on the idea for years, was out of the picture.

The very least that can be said about the operation — which has no racial or religious bars — is that it entailed less talk and more action than most of this type, and, so far at least, no demand at all for public funds.

The camp is on a 130-acre parcel of the old military base, about eight miles from Geneva near the east shore of Seneca Lake. It is separated from the beach by a 1,000-foot strip that is part of a future park site given to the state by the federal government. The beach and the park itself will remain closed to the campers until improvements can be made to eliminate hazards.

Amershadian, a former New York City YMCA recreation director, last year bought the property from the government for $35,000. But he needed $28,000 in outside help to swing the deal, and Rosenfield was the only one willing to put up the money. The foundation got title to the land, Amershadian got a job with Big Joe as Youth Town director, and Big Joe got the driver's seat.

Agreement Terms Unclear

The terms of the agreement leading to this relationship, however, are less clear. The next fact that emerges clearly is that Amershadian was dismissed after about six months. Since then he and Rosenfield have traded charges of improper conduct, both personal and financial, but documentation offered is scanty.

Amershadian maintains he still is head of Youth Town and that the group at Sampson are mere impostors who stole his idea. But while Amershadian's claim is backed up mostly by a letterhead, the rival group has a boys' camp going, and the nucleus for large-scale expansion.

The present director is Ray Yocom. The boys in his charge came by referral from a number of agencies in Metropolitan New York, including Big Joe's Happiness Exchange. Their mornings are spent working to improve the camp, and their afternoons and evenings at play. They range in age from 16 to 19, but the age limit is scheduled to be lowered next year.

Yocom, a dimpled, smiling, persuasive, quiet, articulate man of 38, had enough faith in his project and his boys to bring his wife and three pre-school children to live in the camp even before their quarters were fully equipped for family living. He expresed no apprehensions, although

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he conceded that among the boys—many of whom he called "underprivileged"—there are some short on discipline and social graces.

Expansion Anticipated

"Sure," he said, "the boys can be pretty rough, and we have had to cope wtih some fights. After all, a lot of these kids have grown up fighting. But one thing we'll give them, even if we don't do anything else, is a little polish—teach them table manners, a little courtesy, how to carry on a conversation.

"But don't get the idea that these kids are delinquents," he added, "or boys with serious problems. One of them has the highest IQ in Nassau County—145; and the lowest IQ score we have here is 101. One of them, Bobby Bodnar of Westbury, N.Y., is going to college in the fall."

The group will grow some but won't exceed 50 this summer, Yocom said. But by next year, he said, Youth Town might have as many as 1,000 boys, and some have talked in terms of 3,000.

Rosenfield, in a long telephone interview from New York, said that the present operation is merely a pilot run.

"We want to see how much it costs to keep a boy in Youth Town," he said. "Next year, if we can get the amount of backing we need, it'll be a different proposition. It will cost half a million, maybe a million to fix that place up. If we can raise that kind of money we'll really go to town."

The ultimate idea is to operate Youth Town on a year-round basis, complete with a home school where boys can earn diplomas while learning a trade. Both Rosenfield and Yocom claimed that "a lot of foundations are interested in providing the needed capital for rehabilitation of the 52 buildings in the camp, many of them in advanced stages of dilapidation.

Young Campers Enthusiastic

The idea of spending all year at Youth Town appealed to most of the boys in random interviews of some of them.

"I sure hope I can stay here for good," said Jerry Brudner, 19, from Brooklyn. "I want to learn to be a carpenter."

The Vitale brothers from Brooklyn—Joe, 18, and Carmine, 16—were equally eager to stay. The chief attraction for them was the great outdoors.

"Last night we went 'coon hunting," Joe reported with enthusiasm. "We caught one, too. But he got away. I want to go again tonight."

Athletics are a heavy part of the Youth Town program, a fact much appreciated by most of the boys.

"When are we gonna start building the track?" asked Vincent Hicks at least three times in one half-hour period. The boy comes by his athletic bent naturally: his father, Ellis Hicks of New York, is the camp athletic director with the build of a tackle and a former player on the Buffalo Bills football team.

The camp routine—sometimes hard to enforce to the letter, Yocom admitted, is:

Reveille—6 a.m.
Breakfast—7 a.m.
Work details—8 a.m. to noon.
Dinner—12:30 p.m.
Free time—1:30 to 2:30 p.m.
Organized athletics—2:30 to 5:30 p.m.
Supper—6:30 p.m.

Program Outlined

The evenings for most are devoted to informal recreation and sports. But they also are given to individual interviews of boys with the staff, to buck up flagging spirits or to dampen rambunctious ones, as the case demands. Lights out is at 10:30 p.m., but Yocom admitted that he and his staff so far have found this "almost impossible" to enforce.

The long-range program of Youth Town was drafted by Amershadian but adopted by Rosenfield. It is spelled out in a brochure distributed to potential sources of boys and funds. It calls for:

——Remunerative employment for boys in nearby industries to train them for a productive life.

——Visits by families for reunions and counseling "to help the family keep its inherent unity."

——A home school for September-to-June classes for the rehabilitation problem children before they can become problem citizens.

——A summer camp, with continued vocational and counseling services.

Although Youth Town is meant primarily for boys with problems, both Yocom and Rosenfield emphasized that adjudged juvenile delinquents will not be accepted under normal circumstances.

While Youth Town's founders thus are dreaming big, for the moment they find almost daily that the project must creep before it can fly along with their imaginations and hopes. Even before the first boys checked in there were problems.

Problems Develop

First there was the controversy with Amershadian.

Then came the question of water. While the camp has a system of mains, it relies for supply on the Finger Lakes State Parks Commission since the old Sampson pumping station is on the park property. Twice the commission refused to furnish water, on the grounds that it has no obligation to that end, and that its plant could not furnish adequate service. The camp finally got the water turned on by getting a temporary Supreme Court order—but only a week after the first boys arrived. Until then the boys and the staff used water carted in by tank truck, and they might have to again if the court revokes its temporary order after a hearing set for July 24.

The old steel mains had to be given extensive repairs before they became fully serviceable. They had been in use two weeks when Seneca County health officials came to check the purity of the water—and found it deficient. A chlorinating system had to be installed to make the water safe; but so far there have been no reported cases of illness caused by the water supply.

Other problems, most of them minor, cropped up as the result of getting the camp into operation before the arrival of the boys was fully planned. In addition to the water problem, there was the lack of some of the furniture and equipment needed. The boys found plenty of beds—but no tables to eat from, and no tools to build them with. A truck loaded with hand tools arrived seevral days after it was due—and after ingenuity and sweat had produced rough but serviceable tables and benches.

What the camp lacks in refinement and advance planning, however, it makes up in dedication and willpower. The one barracks building used as sleeping and living quarters, although still sparsely furnished, was spotless during an unannounced visit. The kitchen, presided over by Fred Murchison, 22, once an airlines cook, was adequately equipped—and there were four turkeys in the oven to feed the 19 in the camp.

No Qualms Expressed

The situation—determination overcoming a string of problems—reflected with some accuracy the state of youth work training of the staff, and its strong will to succeed anyway.

Yocom, a native of Oregon, holds a college degree in speech and business administration and knocked around in the fields of radio, movies, and advertising before getting his first full-time job working with boys—two years ago. But for some years before that, he said, he had been active in boys' work as a volunteer.

His assistant, Frank M. Kalaba, 56, of New York, has the boys firmly in hand although his background is in the fields of safety, sanitation and construction. Francis Close of Seneca Falls, assistant athletic director under Hicks, and Robert R. Barrett, camp secretary, are barely out of their teens themselves.

But Rosenfield had no qualms about the situation.

"Yocom is doing a fine job. After all, this is only a pilot operation for this summer, and he's qualified to run it. If later we find that we'll have a larger operation with a school and need a more experienced man, we'll get a more experienced man, that's all."

Rosenfield's organization so far has sunk important money into the project. In addition to the $35,000 purchase price for the property, Yocom said, $21,000 more already has been spent on construction, in addition to the cost of such capital items as kitchen equipment, a tractor and a truck. For the three months beginning July 1 there is a budget for all purposes of $87,000. But Yocom emphasized that, lacking adequate operating experience, this figure must be regarded as tentative.



CROSSROADS—Youth Town residents stand at corner of Happiness Exchange Boulevard and Rosenfield Avenue, named after philanthropist Joseph (Big Joe) Rosenfield and his WABC radio interview program.

Some Scoffers Remain

Just how the operation would grow to accommodate thousands has not been specified by the executives. One hope they expressed was that the Peace Corps would use the camp as a training center, thus providing, among other benefits, a revolving faculty for a camp school. But Peace Corps officials in Washington said there seems little chance that this plan, suggested by Youth Town, will become a reality.

While the minimum age for the boys now is 16, Yocom said that ultimately he hopes to accept them much younger. The present age limit had to be set because time did not permit the organization to get State Welfare Department approval needed to run a camp for boys under 16, he explained.

Despite Youth Town's lofty ambitions to become a permanent, year-round school, there remain some scoffers in the Geneva area who say they'll believe it when they see it. The property, within hailing distance of a large public beach, is too inviting as a commercial resort proposition to be easily ignored, the skeptics say. There has been talk about using the old base administration building—an enormous structure—as a motel. This could be compatible with a youth camp operation on the rest of the property; but a number of Genevans are wondering if most or even all of the 130-acre parcel might ultimately become a money-making project.

Yet even the skeptics concede that Yocom and his staff have done nothing to indicate that the nature of the camp might be changed. "Friendly" and "apparently dedicated" are some of the adjectives they often use in connection with the camp director.

Time will tell.



RAYMOND YOCOM
. . . Youth Town director



VIEWING THE FUTURE—Youth Town administrators Frank M. Kalaba, left, and Robert R. Barrett look over old Sampson Naval Base plans to find location of water lines to be reconstructed.

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