

Interview for the 30th Anniversary of the Club (2001) with James Ronquillo

This is only part of the original interview - discussing the "Big Trip"

Note: The "Gordon" referred to, is Gordon Eldredge, the first Executive Director of the Club.

Kevin Kooistra, Community Historian of the Western Heritage Center

Interview with James Ronquillo for the Boys and Girls Club History Project.

When did you first get interested in the Club?

Probably about two years after it opened, that's when I really got involved. It was on Minnesota Avenue in the International Harvester Building - when it first moved there. My folks were pretty strict, so I could only go on Friday nights and maybe Saturdays. I wasn't allowed to go during the week.

Obviously a lot of activities. I know you mentioned that you were on the "big trip" - tell me about that.

I don't know who sponsored me - some lady sponsored me to go on this. Gordon Eldredge had picked ... can't remember what there was from our Club - maybe five or six - it was through a church group that we got to go. But we got to travel the eastern United States and stayed at every Boys Club. We went with a bunch of kids from Casper, Wyoming from their Club. We went to Minneapolis, Dayton, Ohio. Minneapolis was the newest and in a dome. And Dayton was the biggest. They took up, I don't know how many city blocks out in a field. They had a normal size football field, soccer - they were really involved. I can't remember how many numbers of kids that were members at that Club but it was just outstanding.

You left Billings but it was a

It was a three week bus trip. We got to swim in Atlantic City, walk on the boardwalk, I got an ear infection, we got to see the Liberty Bell, baseball games. I got to see Hank Aaron and Reggie Jackson play.

Where was that?

In Philadelphia ... it was toward the end of their careers 'cause I think Hank Aaron was playing for Milwaukee? I'm not sure. We got to go to that - we could either go to the Liberty Bell that day or go to the baseball game - so we went to the baseball game.

I know Reggie was in his last couple of years. I know Hank Aaron was just about done too. But, it was fun because we could either go to the Liberty Bell or go to the game.

Where did you stay on this trip? It sounds like a difficult thing - you stayed at Boys Clubs?

Yeah, we stayed at every Boys and Girls Club. They fed us - a lot of times we'd get up early in the morning. We had to be at a certain Club the next day so we'd get up early, have juice and donuts on the bus and go. Half of the bus was filled just with clothes and stuff. They had taken the seats out because there were only so many that could go.

There were 5 or 6 kids from Casper?

Yeah, there were four from here - and probably 6 or better from Casper. Then the rest were from a church here. They're the ones that sponsored this thing and let us go.

Obviously Gordon must have had something to do with it.

He put it all together - his brother ran the Baltimore one, which was real fun. They even had a ghost town at their Club. I mean, they had their big Club up front and then you went in the back - and theirs was out in nature - in a forest. You'd walk through trees and they had beautiful nature hikes where those kids got to go. And they had a ghost town set up back there. When they bought the property it was there, they said. And they just left it. There was a jail, and a light would come on in the jail and they'd tell stories and stuff. Yeah, I wish I had got to do it when I was older. I think I was 11 or 12, somewhere in that age. Just to remember. We saw the Statue of Liberty. We went clear to New York and back. We saw Niagara Falls. We got to see everything, I mean it was something! It was a long three weeks.

So you went Minneapolis, Milwaukee, up toward Buffalo, down to New York City, Philadelphia? And then came back from Baltimore?

I think that's the way we went. Stayed there, I think, two days. Then we just worked back because I remember staying at a lot of them - I can't remember everywhere we stayed - as a young kid you remember all the things like that. We got to go through the Capitol in D.C., saw a lot of programs. Gordon knew a lot of people back that way which really helped out.

Was there a lot of supervision?

There was probably the bus driver, Gordon and his wife, another gal that worked for the Post Office here now, and then Alma Talez - probably 8 or 9 supervisors and each night that would be for the night. During the day there were probably other adults from other Clubs. There wasn't ever any trouble - just the bus breaking down sometimes. That's what I remember. My ear infection was one big thing! Swimming in the ocean. But it was fun. I remember a couple kids even stayed in Baltimore - because their grandparents lived there - they made arrangements in the beginning to stay there and then the grandparents brought them back.