



*A lunch at the Y – coffee, culture and current events.*

## *The Caltech Y*

A critical look at the organization which is the “originator and guardian of almost all organized culture on the campus.”

Joe D. Tekmen, typical undergraduate at the California Institute of Technology, makes his first contact with his Young Men's Christian Association the summer before his freshman year, when the Y sends him an impressively heavy Manila envelope chock-full of really-not-too-badly slanted descriptions of its programs. Joe's last contact with his YMCA may be marked by a wan deathbed cackle at an enticingly-written request for more money.

In between, and especially during his four undergraduate years, the Y will have exerted a broad, powerful, and underrated influence on Joe, for it is the self-appointed, unchallenged, and slightly smug originator and guardian of almost all organized culture on campus.

Suppose you wonder, as Joe sometimes does, whether Caltech's famous New Student Camp is really not just a vaguely innocuous waste of time, backed

by Higher Authority? Don't question it. The YMCA originated the Camp and Y members are still common there. Or suppose, again like Joe, you want to be an intellectual: you want to know what this guy Camus is all about; you want to be a cultured scientist. The YMCA sponsors discussion groups to fill your need. These give you a chance to sit around and talk in gravid phrases every Sunday about everything from Thales to Existential Theology, Bhagavad-Gita to Bertrand Russell. (Neglected is a question about the utility of discussion every Sunday of a book some of the discussers barely skimmed on Saturday night.)

In fact, if you are interested in almost anything, again like Joe, you should by all means go to the YMCA. If one of its myriad programs doesn't cover what you like, you may find yourself heading a committee dedicated to considering your interest for a meeting or so, before it moves on to greener pastures.



If, by the time your committee has finished its deliberations, you haven't decided that Faulkner or Folk Singing is best approached on an individual basis, you may be appointed to a committee in charge of committees. You have taken a step up the Y ladder of Leadership.

### *The Organization*

The YMCA is organized like a holding company, with tiers of committees radiating out from a central core of leaders with fingers in everything that goes on. Core of the core is occupied by Wesley Hershey, executive secretary. Other permanent Y staffers include Alan Green, assistant exec. sec.; Harville Hendrix, Danforth Foundation "intern;" and assorted clerical help. Next in authority come a student cabinet and various commission chairmen; and below these come all the committees, programs, and members which constitute the Y. Most of the upper level leadership justifies the Y's name — it is liberal Protestant Christian. (But there are occasional atheists.)

Wes Hershey, who runs his organization with a minimum of fuss and bother — and a maximum of coffee — is a short, greying, suntanned, and active man of 46 years. His chief occupation (and the chief reason for YMCA success) is scattering oil on the troubled waters that invariably appear when Joe Tekmen and his contemporaries plan anything. One committee chairman called him a "man of many cares and solutions."

Hershey is hired by, and is theoretically advised by, the YMCA Board of Directors. The group, composed of various faculty members and interested Pasadenans, meets monthly. It usually sits as a rubber-stamping session, approving policies set by Hershey or other leaders, but occasionally provides ideas on its own.

Alan Green, chief assistant in the hierarchy, is an *ex officio* member of most of the Y committees, and is more specifically in charge of graduate students. He is 29, blond and married, diligent and earnest. As a committee member, he provides many of the ideas, and usually pushes his own through. He draws cartoons for the "Beaver," the Y's bi-weekly newspaper and announcement of meetings, and is probably as responsible as anybody for the current raging controversy about the loyalty oath in the National Defense Loan Program. (Next to populating the new Student Houses, it has been the most widely argued subject on campus this year).

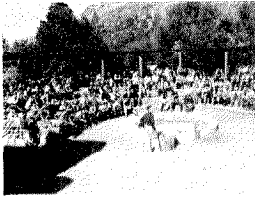
### *The Activities*

The Y was founded in 1916, and its process of cultural aggrandizement has been going on ever since. Over the years, it has started or operated at various times an impressive number of activities: New Student Camp, the Freshman Tea Dance, four different lunch clubs, an indefinite number of semi-permanent discussion groups, the Leaders of America program, a week-long campus visit every year by eight theology students, hundreds of lesser visitors every year, and Sunday evening movies. Just this year, the Y has acquired proprietorship of a Folk Dancing class and two Folk Singing groups.

The YMCA's big production is the Leaders of America program. Every year it imports two or three "leaders of America, molders of American thought and action," to stay two or three days on campus and talk to students and faculty. Past molders have included Abraham Maslow, a psychologist who spent most of his time here saying that really creative people are mentally healthy, and complimenting Caltech students on being by and large mentally healthy; Robert Oppenheimer, who said hydrogen bombs are bad; and non-American Vedantist philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Coming this year are Norman Cousins; and Carl Rogers, who invented non-directive counseling. Notably absent from any Leaders of America roster have been segregationists, warmongers, scientists who think H-bomb tests are useful, writers who think psychologists are useless, Communists or Communist-baiters, anybody who is not liberal, humanitarian and good as defined by the World Council of Churches and the *Saturday Review* set of magazines.

When he gets here, a chosen Leader is not given much of a chance to expound his doctrines. He spends most of his time answering questions put to him at a succession of panel meetings, discussion meetings, after-dinner meetings, and meetings. Most of the questions deal with what he said in his speech last night, and he is constantly explaining and re-explaining the same old stands to a shifting multitude of questioners. Personal contact and individual exchange of ideas is limited to what can filter through the group of Seekers After Truth constantly surrounding him.

The Y's other avowedly intellectual activities follow the same pattern. In the multifarious lunch club meetings, a visitor comes, exchanges small talk across the table with those fortunate enough to sit near to



him, gives a speech, answers fifteen minutes worth of questions, and is escorted away by the ever-present and pleasant committee in charge. Appointments between the visitor and individual students are never set up. Most attempts on the part of a listener to engage in individual conversation at the end of a meeting are broken up by a committee member pointing out that "Mr. So-and-So is very busy and has to go." The Y operates its luncheons on the theory that individual thought will be started by fleeting appearances and sketchy answers on the part of visitors. It usually isn't.

In the seminar-discussion groups (with names like "Critique of Religion" and "Philosophy of Life"), the ideal is extended discussion of books and articles, with each participant knowing what he is talking about. Sometimes this works; usually it doesn't. Most of the discussion groups end up split in two, with the ones who didn't read the books sitting quietly listening to the ones who did read them (usually the Y-appointed group organizers or leaders). Although the talkers often come out with absurdities like, "I was reading Nietzsche last week, so don't pay a bit of attention to me," they are the ones who select the books and do the talking about them. What starts out with hopes of becoming a high-level intellectual-type discussion often ends up as a tired recital of prejudices supported by cursory reading.

### *The Social Events*

The Y takes its role of character-building seriously when it plans and operates its relatively small, but carefully selected, array of social events. Edification, rather than entertainment, is the guiding principle in all of these, and much of the enjoyment is postponed until tomorrow so basic concepts can be learned today.

The Freshman Tea Dance, held the first Sunday after New Student Camp, is designed to impart information on How To Meet College Girls. Tech frosh generally arrive before the dance begins, and congregate like drones under the trees in the garden behind Dabney Hall. The rest of the afternoon, they are herded by selected (self-appointed) upperclassmen toward hovering clusters of giggling Scripps freshmen and high school seniors. Most of the Tech frosh, despite the prodding, are too scared to be successful, and most of the spoils go to the upperclass chaperones.

The Folk Dancing and Folk Singing groups are dedicated to the proposition that anyone can become the master in only five lessons of the curious pleasures of those charming and unsanitary folk who live away over there beyond that hill and who don't speak English. Everybody who attends the class is urged — nay, expected — to become proficient in the arcane subject matter, with entertainment again being offered only as an unprofitable sideline.

In addition to its own local affairs, the Y sponsors conferences and meetings with other colleges. The most popular of these is the Caltech-Scripps conference, held winter term. Its purpose is to allow Techmen and Scrippsies to exchange ideas on matters of such import as "Man at the Crossroads" (meaning what you want it to mean). Discussions are interspersed with square dancing at the conference; presumably agonizing personal decisions about the Destiny of Man are aided by a relaxed atmosphere, inspirational talks by professors, and girls. Despite its high ideals, the conference invariably degenerates into a lot of fun.

### *Religion and the End*

The Y is impressively multi-religious (even militant atheists can belong) and its library provides shelf space to practically every religious innovation from Mary Baker Eddy to Sri Ramakrishna. Its statement of purpose calls it "a fellowship of students motivated by the desire to understand more fully the social problems and moral concerns of mankind and man's place in the universe." Joe Tekmen and most of his contemporaries are interested in these very problems; the Y fills a real need by providing Joe and friends a means for religious exploration.

In fact, the YMCA is extremely successful as a religiously oriented organization on an agnostic campus. It is also successful as a clearing house for organizations and clubs. Its failures, however, stem from its very successes. As a liberal religious organization, it imports liberally religious speakers; as a hierarchal organization, it insures that most of its discussion leaders are of one mind; as an educational organization, it concentrates on quick once-over-lightly doses of culture; as a broad-ranging and powerful organization, it imports most of the speakers, sponsors most of the discussion groups, and disseminates most of the culture on campus. And no organization is good enough to do all this.

— Lance Taylor '62