

INTERVIEW

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April 5, 1938  
Yale Club  
New York City

The following interview was reported at the Yale Club, New York City, on Tuesday evening, April 5, 1938.

DR. SHARP: Put it as hard as you can and I may get hot and I may not, but put it from the point of view of people who are just keenly interested in the condition of this country. You know of all the war talk and all of the social conditions, and the economic downfall that we are in the midst of, and you are thinking of the youth in America and you are thinking of the educational problems in America, and you are thinking of what is going to happen to the youth, the increasing numbers of unemployed people, and the lack of educational facilities, the lack of social service facilities, the lack of opportunities for youth in these crowded city conditions, and here you are, three businessmen not in this kind of work, you have taken off a couple of hours to talk about that thing, and possibly that back in your minds you may have, assuming that you have money that you want to do something with to help, or else giving your personal service or in ways of endorsements to work for youth in the country, and for some reason you want to formulate your own ideas as to what you should do as businessmen in relation to youth problems and the like.

Now, you have been introduced to me and I am interested in just one phase of the youth problem, so you have met here

to just milk me dry to get all you can from me, what I am doing, and how what I do our program is doing in relation to all these things, and at the conclusion of it you would decide that this is a fine thing, it is a mediocre thing, or it is a poor thing, and that you are either going to support it very actively or moderately or not at all. You may be interested in your local communities in all kinds of welfare and educational work as a citizen and you are going to take this opportunity to find out all you can about it.

MR. LUCE: I possibly might start finding out exactly what Life Camps is from the standpoint of a physical entity, if you put it that way.

DR. SHARP: My point in the last sentence of what I said would be that I think in an informal thing if you start to follow a line I am afraid it might not unfold just right.

MR. LUCE: No; I wasn't going to follow any line except the possibility of starting from the physical end of it you see. You get warmed up a little better.

DR. SHARP: That is all right.

MR. DWYER: As if some of us asked the question, Just how many camps are there and where are they and what equipment is the nature of them?

DR. SHARP: That is right; very logical.



All this is to get in writing a lot of things that I say informally at times that we have lost, and in conversations many times I say things that I myself haven't put just that way before, you see, and under the stimulation of keen questions and conversation I get warmed up, and this is all to be used not as one story, or anything like that at all. It is just the source material, isn't that right?

MR. LUCE: Yes.

DR. SHARP: And I can use it myself.

MR. LUCE: I would like to know first of all about the physical aspects of a camp, and what they are when I give some money; what the actual physical result is, you see. I mean the physical plan to which I am giving money.

DR. SHARP: Well, I am going to forget part of what you know.

MR. LUCE: You forget everything I know.

DR. SHARP: In the first place, this is the fifty-second year of this Fund, started in 1887 by James Mitchell the founder and owner of the old Life Magazine. His interest was stimulated by Mr. Gilbert of Georgetown, Connecticut. Mr. Mitchell lived at Ridgefield, Connecticut, and Mr. Gilbert was a neighbor and they got acquainted that way and Mr. Mitchell got the idea, I think, from the Tribune Fund which



was already started a year or two before. Life Magazine was founded in 1883.

So in 1887 was when he started this fund, you see, and it is one of the oldest organizations of its kind in existence. It started out with the old idea of fresh air and getting the kids of the hot, smelly streets into the country. The Children's Aid Society was the first organized effort in the so-called fresh air work and it was known as fresh air work. So it is quite logical that at that time they named it the Fresh Air Fund and, being Life Magazine, they called it Life's Fresh Air Fund. The appeal was because of the slum conditions and getting the kids off the hot streets and into the country.

They started out by sending them a week, and for the first few years they sent them just to homes, to various people around who did that for several years. Then, there is a story. I think it is a rather interesting story of the village called Eau Claire--that isn't quite it--over in New Jersey. There was this corporation that built a manufacturing plant and it had built houses for its workers and it went out of business. There was an incorporated village just where this manufacturing plant was located with these houses, so that Life's Fresh Air Fund took over this whole village,

leased it for \$1.00, and sent the children out there for several years, two years I guess.

That was rather a novel thing back in those days. Then, it continued until Mr. Gilbert at Georgetown had built an estate at Branchville. When he became interested in Mr. Mitchell's work he offered this estate to Mr. Mitchell to use as a place to send children in the summer time because he built another place and moved.

Well, when Mr. Gilbert died, in his will he had written that Life's Fresh Air Fund should have the right to use this estate as long as it cared to so long as it sent one child out there a summer, and then he created at the same time a Branchville Fresh Air Association and the officers of that Association were officers in the Gilbert-Bennett Manufacturing Company and he made an arrangement so that some income from the company, a certain percentage of the shares or something, I don't know just what that arrangement was, but the earnings of that would go for this Branchville Fresh Air Association and to this day that arrangement exists that there is a Branchville Fresh Air Association and it holds a deed to that property, but in that deed there is the statement that Life's Fresh Air Fund shall have the right to use it as long as it is usable. Well, that part of the history is very



important. That brings us up to around 1900. I don't know whether you have heard or not, but if you will do some reading back in the orphanage days, you will remember that a lot of orphanage institutions existed. There are still quite a few, but they are rapidly going out of existence. However, from 1900 to 1915, perhaps, about that, you found a lot of orphanages and a lot of institutions of this sort where they sent children for care and as near as I can find out these fresh air places modeled their work after the orphanage institution and the second kind of an institution that it modeled after was the penitentiary for handling ill-behaved children or children that they could not handle except by mass organization.

Then, the third factor that dominated this kind of an institution was the Army, military theme, and that came in later. You wouldn't believe it, but as late as 1925, the first year that I started with the Life's Fund, I visited in the next two years about a hundred camps, hundred places, and all too large a percentage of those were modeled on some basis of the old orphanage idea or the penitentiary methods and certainly the military plan and to this day I would say still too large a number are modeled after military management.

So in 1925 when I reorganized the work, or these camps, we abandoned all of that; the fresh air idea was out



entirely. Just as a human interest point there, Charles D. Gibson was President of Life at that time. I made a survey of the camps, or farms as they called them then; I made my recommendations, not knowing at the time that I was to direct them. I was on the staff up at Teachers' College at the time and I made two recommendations: Firstly, that they turn these over to some welfare organization; secondly, that they get someone to organize them, reorganize them along the following lines, and Mr. Gibson called me back to the office one day and said, "We don't want to give them up, but we certainly concede that they need to be reorganized, and we haven't been able to find anybody to do it. Will you do it?"

By that time, I was pretty much interested in the idea because this preponderance, this militarized, this orphan system and the prison system has played in this a part of what seemed to me a very important educational movement. Certainly, something needed to be done. So I thought I would do it for a year. I said, "On the condition that you give me back the report and let me change the recommendations."

The old fellow laughed as only Gibson could do and he said, "You are not getting cold feet, are you?"

I said, "No; in fact, they are getting hotter. I would like to revise my recommendations upward." I did that

and then I started. Well, the basis of the reorganization was this: That on the basis of educational and individualized procedure attempting to model it after so-called progressive ideas in education as against this old thing, this old procedure. I think this time, as there are already many indications if we had time to go into that any further, would show that there was a definite turning point in the care of underprivileged children in 1925 from the old fresh air idea to the different point of view, and I think I can truthfully say that Life Camps have played a very important and prominent part in that, and if we see what the basis of our organization is now and the interest that the United States is taking in the Life Camp procedure it is rather a fascinating story.

Now, we go back to this: You would say, I know, possibly in your mind, "What did you have in mind when you said 'prison?'" No more than four years ago, I visited--of course, this must be eventually entirely out of the record--but I visited a camp for the Herald-Tribune Fresh Air Fund and drove up to this place which was supposed to be one of the best camps. As soon as the car stopped a flock of kids came around and got on the running board and said, "Hey, mister, are you from New York?"

I said, "Yes."

They said, "Will you take me home; will you take me home?"

I said, "Well, I am not going to New York; I am going to another place."

"Well, won't you take us home? We want to go home."

I said, "No; I came to visit your camp."

I looked over the heads of the crowd and saw an old tree which looked like it had been climbed a great deal. I said to one of the counselors, "They are lucky to have this tree. It looks as though it was used a lot."

There were a couple of boys in the tree, so I went over and here sat one sullen-type of a kid on the tree with his lip corners down. I said, "Hello, sonny! What are you doing up there?"

He said, "Nuttin'."

I said, "Nothing? Well, that's fine. Isn't it fine to have a nice tree? You don't have anything like that in the city."

"No."

"Don't you enjoy it?"

"No."

"What are you doing up there?"

"Nuttin'."



I said, "Why did you get up there?"

He said, "I didn't want to get up here."

I said, "What made you get up there?"

He said, "They sent me up here."

I said, "For heaven's sake! Did they send you up there? What for?"

He said, "I did something I shouldn't do."

I said, "You mean you had to go up there for punishment?"

"Yes."

I said, "Is that why the other boys are up here for?"

"Yes."

I said, "I see," and walked on.

Well, I went out to the places where they sleep, the barracks.

MR. LUCE: You don't mean that you are against punishment, or is that what you mean?

DR. SHARP: No. I think that will come out pretty soon.

I went out to the barracks; twenty-five boys, one counselor, lower bed and an upper one. Walking in that overcrowded, stuffy place, the first thing I thought of was fresh air work. By going to the country there is no guarantee of

fresh air, and I smelt smells in the city that were ever so much pleasanter than what I smelled there.

Well, to make the story short, we started getting back in the car. A little kid ran up and said, "Hey, mister, will you mail this letter?" and he pulled it out of his shirt.

I looked at it and said, "It is addressed; there is a postage stamp; mail it in your own box. Haven't you got a mailbox here?"

He said, "I can't mail this."

I said, "Why not? What is the matter with it?"

He said, "It's sealed."

I said, "Won't they take it here?"

"No," he said, "they won't allow to seal mail. They read your mail before they send it."

I said, "You mean they have to read your mail?" I said, "Give me that letter." I stuck it in my pocket and said, "Sure, I will mail it."

Well, that is enough to illustrate what is a terrific picture of a very great number of our underprivileged boys and girls of this country, and that is only just a few years ago, mind you.

You would be interested in this: When I went at mealtime to this place, and I have since visited other places,

it is only a sample of a good many, there was a long table of boys lined up there. They sat down and the counselors came along. One had a bucket of potatoes, boiled potatoes. They would pick out a potato as they went along and put it down. Another came along with a basket of bread and pulled out two slices of bread and put that down in front of each one. Another would come along with chunks of meat or whatever they had and put that down. The staff did that. Then, with all the noise and the confusion, the kids would be grabbing or snatching or reaching across the table and grabbing each other's bread and it was a gobble or a scramble to get what was before them. There was too much noise and the person in charge would blow a whistle. They would put their hands under the table and wait until there was dead silence.

"Now, you act like human beings. This is no place to grab like that. Cut it out."

Then, he would blow a whistle and they would start in quietly and softly and then with an increasing tempo they would do it over again.

In the next room adjoining was this table for the staff with tablecloth and dishes and butter and everything else, separate menus, separate food, and so forth. That is going on in a lot of respectable camps today, that meal type



of thing. That is enough to give you a ghastly picture and, so far as censorship of mail, there are only two places when it is possibly justified: one is in a penitentiary and the other is in time of war, and perhaps under a very peculiar condition in a hospital.

MR. DWYER: May I interpose one question? Are most of these things due to a lack of enlightenment or a lack of interest on the part of the people on the top?

DR. SHARP: I think it was because of a point of view; no one had up to that time had done much to think the problem through, what it was they were doing. The motive was to get the children off the streets and that sounded good, and to the average person it is something that ought to be supported financially. "Yes, it is a fine thing to get the kids off the streets. God! These poor kids in the hot smelly streets! Give them a breath of fresh air in the country. Sure, here is my \$1.00, or here are my \$5.00."

MR. DWYER: No matter what you did with them, they were better off than they were on the streets.

DR. SHARP: That is right, and no one ever checked up on that. It is still that type of thinking that is going on today, but not nearly as bad. I pictured this thing some years ago; you can imagine what it was in 1925. I have delved in

the history of that and it tells much more fully, but I think I can say, without flapping our wings too much with full credit to our whole program, that we have been real pioneers in jarring that terrible thing loose and putting it on a different basis, and we have to admit that Life's Fresh Air Farms, as they were then called, were as rotten as the rest of them.

To shift from that to the present situation, it is true that a lot of people are now looking to our camp program as a model. It really is quite a transition and, of course, the impetus that we have gotten in that since the time when Life took this over certainly has helped push it right over the top, and with March of Time coming in and turning on the spotlight, and all of that, it is certainly giving it a great shove. I think the possibilities of really playing a vital part in movements and even education for youth in the country are rather hopeful.

I am saying an awful lot, but you might well ask me what my ambition is in Life anyway, but that isn't the point, and I would say I think there is enough in it that caused me to give up a university appointment, where I was going back to the University of Chicago, and I had to decide between that or staying with the new Life program. It was a gamble; I tossed my hat in the ring. I think it is possible if you fellows and the Life and Time organization have a genuine



interest in it, and it has been shown to me at least, I think it is possible if we play our cards right and get the breaks that we can be a real influence in education work in this country.

MR. LUCE: At present, here is a question that I am not asking for the sake of asking it: In a general charity work in the City of New York, what part does Life Camps take? I mean, whereabouts in the picture does it fit?

DR. SHARP: Well, that is a good question, because at our luncheon your baby interfered with part of your education the other day. Continuing, that luncheon on that day was called for the purpose of trying to clarify with the organization the place of the Life camp program in relation to the social service work in New York City and, as I stated in the letter, I said that was the purpose of it, to evaluate the work of Life Camps in relation to the total social service program of New York City and, secondly, to take a look into the future for camping of Life Camps with this social service condition, educational problems and the like, in the background.

Now, looking on ahead, what is there for the future of the Life camp program in relation to that? I put the questions to them: How can we serve these social service and educational agencies to extend their work? I made this second



point, that we are a cooperating agency and therefore that we are looking to them to open up possibilities and avenues of service to help them in their work with individual families rather than looking at ourselves as an institution and that we are going to run our institution independently without consideration of where they are going and, as I made it clear there, I said, "I have to admit that ideally, as it seems to me, the time should come when Life Camps will go out of business." I said, "That time probably won't happen, but ideally it seems to me that this work is so important that it should become increasingly an integral part of all of your work and so closely related that you will need to have your fingers on it and utilize it to further your program of building the home with these working closely in the homes." Therefore, until that time, if and when it did ever come, we should then try to work more closely with these agencies scientifically in the field of social work to do our job better for them, but I did say that we recognize our field as we are camping in our own right; that is, it is our distinct field of conducting camps, but I said again that we do not want to do it without consideration of their problems that they have with the families.

MR. LUCE: Well, suppose a family right now--suppose a father loses his job and after a year their savings are gone

a national job.

DR. SHARP: I think for your own information, and to get it in here, we can't tell this to other people yet, but there is under the surface ready to break through a very significant development. We have a very good admirer of our work who found us and we did not find her. (Off the record)

The greatest obstacle in the way of making camping an integral part of the educational system is this legal matter of the recognized education period which is from September to June the 1st. That is when the schools are in session and that is legal education. That is when the children are required to go to school to get their education, and during July and August is the vacation, and education is closed for that time. There is nothing that happens during the vacation that can be counted as education. So I felt for many years that we are just butting our heads against a stone wall by talking education when we are really doing it in a period of the year when the recognized educational authorities by law can only acknowledge what happens in the rest of the year as education.

The only way we are going to crack that nut is to set up some experiments somewhere in the country to show what the children do get in a certain kind of a camping situa-



you know something about its shade and about its color and about its fragrance and what kind of birds live in it and a whole lot of things about the trees before you really even need to know the name of the tree. (193)

I went through this course of study and made two columns: In column "A" were the things that could better be experienced in this course of nature study in the city as against this column that could better be done out in nature and, when I got through, this column was very short and this one was very long. I started to do the same thing in geography and in history and some of the science subjects and I got far enough in it until I was convinced that I had something.

So when we can set up an experiment and carry this out, I am willing to match the educators in the city with what they can really teach that is educationally sound in the city as compared to this other kind of a situation.

MR. BLANKENHORN: What about the history? I can see where science and nature would be conducive to that study, but how about that English history? How would you decide that?

MR. HURST: I just have one question for the record which is probably a perfectly obvious question, but terribly important for a Fund of this sort. Is the Life Fund so set up legally in a corporate manner so that contributions to it



too long, we can shift them into a different gear of camp life and they will make a success.

You have got to think faster in a camp situation than you do in school. You can't tell them to sit in their seats. The spaces are open and you can't control them. You can't blow a whistle and they all come running in. It just doesn't work that way.

I think that is where this group would probably fall down. I think you with your scout experience would know more about what I mean. I don't know how the rest of you would respond, but even you I think will recognize without any experience in the field at all that it is tough.

MR. LUCE: I would probably respond with an axe or something.

DR. SHARP: Then you would create more situations to be settled.

... The interview adjourned at twelve-fifty o'clock ...

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