

## A Mystery Hotel Institution In New York City

By Stanley Turkel | September 26, 2003 Part II

### Harlem YMCA - 226 Rooms

The 135th Street YMCA traced its roots to the summer of 1900 which was marked by racial disturbances in the still predominantly white Harlem and Manhattan's Tenderloin district over the growing inequality of black citizens. Earlier a "colored" YMCA operated at 132 W. 53rd Street in the heart of San Juan Hill, an African American residential area where fashionable clubs fueled artistic life and gave the district its reputation as a "black Bohemia". An elegant hotel, the Marshall, was a showcase for black talent especially jazz groups. Three years later, the YMCA acquired two three-story brick buildings at 252-254 W. 53rd Street and set up a reading room, a small gym and dorms in "an ideal location... furnished with modern improvements," *Colored American Magazine* noted. Between 1910 and 1930, Harlem's black population doubled creating the only large-scale, fully developed African American community in the nation.

Julius Rosenwald, a top executive of Sears, Roebuck and Company in Chicago gave a total of \$600,000 in challenge grants to build YMCA's and YMCAs for African Americans in many North American cities. One of those was the 135th Street Y which opened in 1919 at a cost of \$375,000. The *New York Times* called it "the most modern and largest YMCA buidling for Negroes in the country." The Branch quickly established itself as a pillar of the community in civic and social affairs and of the Harlem Renaissance that began in the 1920s. Writing in the *Outlook* in 1914, Booker T. Washington noted that the gifts from his friend Julius Rosenwald to the YMCA "have been a help to my race...in what they are doing to convince the white people of this country that in the long run schools are cheaper than policemen; that there is more wisdom in keeping a man out of the ditch than in trying to save him after he has fallen in; that it is more Christian and more economical to prepare young men to live right than to punish them after they have committed a crime." The Harlem Y's membership more than doubled from 1917 and 1918 and then doubled again between 1920 and 1940. By then, the original Harlem Y was inadequate, overcrowded and worn and needed program space for boys, a supervised dormitory and counseling facilities for the thousands of youth leaving school each year to seek work in the community. Transient "Red Caps", Pullman porters and dining car men, who were not allowed to use the segregated Railroad YMCA's, also needed accommodations. At \$750,000 Building Fund Campaign was launched to build on a site on West 135th Street directly across from the existing Harlem Y. The new building opened on January 1, 1933. By 1938, the original Y was remodeled as the "Harlem annex" to house its boys' department. In 1996, it was remodeled again, reopening as the Harlem YMCA Jackie Robinson Youth Center.

A cultural center unto itself, the Branch hosted and housed renowned writers such as Richard Wright, Claude McKay, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes; artists Jacob Lawrence and Aaron Douglas; actors Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Cicely Tyson and Paul Robeson. In years gone by, the Harlem YMCA's 226 rooms were often occupied by African American visitors and performers to New York City who couldn't get rooms in midtown hotels because of racial discrimination.

### Flushing YMCA - 127 Rooms

In 1920, when the Brooklyn Association formalized its expansion into Queens, it made plans for two new YMCAs in that borough. Citizens in Flushing broke ground in 1924 for a Branch on Northern Boulevard near La Guardia Airport to serve residents of Bayside, Douglaston, College

Point, Whitestone, Kew Gardens and other nearby communities. The building with 127 guest rooms opened in 1926. Subsequent expansion took place in the following two years with new playgrounds, athletic leagues, and summer camps. Flushing added a new wing with an Olympic-sized pool and a businessmen's athletic club in 1967.

In 1972, YMCA residences in three boroughs, including Brooklyn and Queens, provided students, senior citizens and visitors from other U.S. cities and abroad with clean, comfortable lodgings at an affordable cost. Flushing added 48 guest rooms in a \$300,000 expansion. In 1978, it purchased a new center for programs in Bayside from the Boys Club.

### Greenpoint YMCA - 100 Rooms

The Brooklyn Association raised capital for new buildings through the 1903 Jubilee Fund, a drive that marked its 50th Anniversary. Between 1904 and 1907, the Association completed three new buildings: Eastern District in Williamsburg; Bedford between Gates and Monroe Streets; and Greenpoint. Each of these branches contained a swimming pool, running track, gymnasium, club rooms, lounges and residence guest rooms. In 1918, the Greenpoint Branch added two floors of dormitory rooms. In its early days, it was known as the workingmen's Christian Association because of its focus on the needs of employees in many nearby factories. Later, Greenpoint added a "Kids in Control" (KIC), a substance-abuse service and outreach program for kids ages 9 to 18. In 1972, Greenpoint, in the city's Polish-American community, mounted a \$145,000 campaign to renovate 100 rooms.

### Other YMCA Branches

In 1930, the William Sloane Memorial YMCA opened with 1600 rooms on West Thirty-Fourth Street and Ninth Avenue in the Pennsylvania Station area. The building was built primarily to serve the thousands of soldiers, sailors and marines who came through midtown. It also provided a temporary home for more than 100,000 civilian young men and boys seeking their fortune in New York City each year. Its Army-Navy clubrooms, cafeteria and 1600 sleeping rooms cost \$3 million to build. The late Massachusetts Congressman Tip O'Neill in his 1987 memoir *Man of the House*, described this humorous incident: O'Neill recalled a trip to Washington from Boston at age 21 when he and a friend Lenny Lamkin, stopped over in New York and stayed at the Sloane YMCA. "We had a keep quiet about that because Monsignor Blunt, our local pastor, wouldn't allow us to go to the Y, which was run by Protestants- not even during the Depression, when the Y gave out free memberships to the unemployed," O'Neill wrote. "Blunt spoke from the altar and proclaimed that anyone who went to the Y had to tell about it in confession because it was a sin.

"So there we were, Lenny and I, a Jew and a Catholic, staying at the Sloane House, which was run by the Y. A night's lodging was sixty-five cents, which was a lot of money. But if you signed up for the Episcopal service, it was only thirty-five cents, with breakfast included. We were nobody's fool, so we signed up for the thirty-five cent deal and figured to duck out after breakfast and before the service. But apparently we weren't the first to think of this brilliant plan, because they locked the doors during breakfast, which meant that we were stuck. Although I was in my twenties, it was the first time in my life that I had ever listened to a Protestant minister."

During the World War II, Sloane House and other YMCA Branches with residences had few vacancies. A soldier's uniform was accepted as a pass to any YMCA. At the four active military Branches around the city—Governors Island and Forts Totten, Hamilton and Slocum—the two



Associations provided recreation for service personnel, and the Navy YMCA stepped up its efforts to serve increased numbers.

Sloane House and other YMCA Branches with residences had few vacancies, with their clean, reasonably priced rooms in great demand by the uniformed forces. Off-duty soldiers and sailors could swim, use Branch libraries, tour the city and socialize with young women who volunteered to provide hospitality. The West Side Y housed, fed, or provided recreation to more than a million servicemen from 1941 to 1945, including a specialized physical fitness program for the Army Air Corps. The Branch's physical department was used two hours per day by a Military Police Unit, and twice weekly by an aviation mechanic unit. The Coast Guard trained in rescue operations in West Side's pool and took over several residence floors for use by 400 men. Seamen's House housed another 600 Coast Guardsmen. As well, every New York Branch organized for air raids.

Finally, in 1991, the Association closed the 1600 room Sloane House. The day had long passed when Sloane was used by legions of military personnel. As the YMCA refocused its programs and activities on youth, it consolidated rooms in Manhattan for short-term tourist stays at the West Side and Vanderbilt Branches.

After a half-century in which they played mainly auxiliary roles, women came to be full participants in the YMCA in the first half of the twentieth century. So did girls and boys, beginning with summer camping programs. Racial and ethnic groups formed separate YMCAs during the

Y's first century, but today's Association is wholly diverse, welcoming all people at each of its twenty branches. In 2003, the YMCA continues its longstanding tradition of programs to meet the needs of new Americans. The organization's holistic guiding principle, "spirit, mind and body," has encouraged countless New Yorkers to enhance their health and wellness, longevity, friendships and family life, and, for youth, to enhance their chances for success in school and work. Today's wide array of educational and self-improvement options include child care and youth/adult computer centers as well as health enhancement programs for all ages.

Although the Association adopted a policy of no longer building new residences, in line with a national YMCA trend, it makes full use of existing accommodations. Several Branches, notably Flushing, Greenpoint, Vanderbilt and West Side continue to house visitors both domestic and international seeking affordable accommodations on visits to New York. Prior to 9/11, these Branches have registered as many as 300,000 foreign and out-of-town visitors annually. The West Side YMCA, within a few blocks of Lincoln Center, has hosted the largest Elderhostel program in New York State.

*Stanley Turkel is a New York-based hotel consultant who specializes in hotel franchising, litigation support services and asset management. He is a member of the International Society of Hospitality Consultants and can be reached at 212-838-5467 or e-mail: stanturkel@aol.com*