

Lawrence K. Hall: The Right Man for the Job

As a leader, teacher and author, Hall helped thousands of young people and YMCA professionals to improve their lives and careers.

Paul Katz

This is one in a series of articles featuring members of the YMCA Hall of Fame at Springfield College.

—Editor

Many successful professionals have a plan that influences their career choices and professional development. Lawrence K. Hall's career, however was not the result of a carefully constructed plan, but was instead the result of being the right person in the right place at the right time. In many ways, his lifetime of service in the YMCA mirrors the growth in sophistication and expansion of the YMCA in the 1900s. Hall's leadership in student YMCAs, rural or "county" work, camping, world service, the International YMCA Training School (today's Springfield College), the Association Press, Association of Secretaries (today's APD), and his ability as an accomplished writer touches on nearly all aspects of Y work of the early and middle 1900s.

Hall was born in Kansas in 1886 and grew up on a small family farm. He attended Baker University, majoring in mathematics. After completing school, he accepted a position as a math teacher and athletic coach at Norton County (Kansas) High School as "the quickest way to get out of debt." At Norton County and the following year at a school in Cheney, KS there were active

student YMCAs. He took on the role of advisor to the programs and "found a great deal of satisfaction in doing some good...personal counseling with the boys and sometimes with the girls stopping after school." The experience had a profound impact on him, especially in the way he was able to help young people make critical decisions about their futures.

The student YMCA movement in Kansas was beginning to flourish at that time, with approximately 30 active programs across the state. Many of the chapters met during the summer for training conferences. It was there that Hall first attracted the attention of two prominent YMCA leaders, Edgar Robinson, the national YMCA staff member responsible for the expansion of boys' work and camping programs and John Manley, secretary of the State of Kansas YMCA. Manley recruited Hall to work with the Kansas YMCA to provide leadership to the rapidly expanding high school program. Later in his life, Hall recalled that the job gave him "one opportunity after another to do the kinds of things that seemed to satisfy the

impulses that lay deepest in my life." During his five years as a state secretary, he helped to establish a permanent conference center and camp as a training site for the high school program.

Hall's work in Kansas was seen as a model for other state movements and provided him with a degree of national recognition. In 1917, he was hired by the International Committee of the YMCA (today's YMCA of the USA) to develop programs for rural youth nationwide. After just two years, he was recruited for Y work in China.

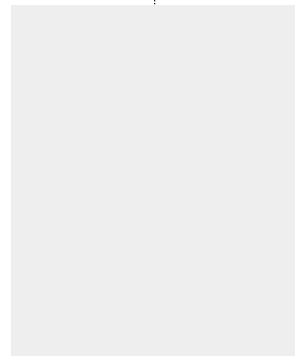
Collaborating for Literacy

In the early 1900s, several American institutions had outreach or mission programs in China including: Yale University, Johns Hopkins Medical School, the Rockefeller Foundation and the YMCA. Hall was sent to China to develop boys' work programs for the well-established network of YMCAs in operation. He spent the first year learning the Chinese language and culture and began to implement programs and ideas.

His most significant contribution in China was collaborating with Jimmie Yen in the development of the "popular education movement." Yen had served the YMCA during World War I as an educational secretary to the thousands of Chinese laborers hired by the Allied Forces in France. Charged with teaching Chinese peasants to read and write, Yen struggled against four thousand years of tradition that allowed only scholars

access to written language. Through study and experimentation, Yen devised a simplified Chinese alphabet of 1000 characters and a method to successfully teach uneducated peasants. When he returned to China after the war, Yen set out to educate the millions of people in the lowest levels of Chinese society.

The YMCA was the perfect vehicle to implement this program. Yen



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had the tools and teaching method. Hall provided the organizational strategy to ensure successful implementation. They targeted boys who were serving as apprentices in numerous small factory shops. Typically, these were teens that were not paid, had no opportunity for formal education and were required to work 15- to 16-hour days, seven days per week. They began their project in the central Chinese city of Changsha. Hall worked to gain the support of the regional chamber of commerce and governor's office. He then convinced shop owners that it was in their own best interest to require their apprentices to attend the YMCA school for two hours each day. For teachers, Hall recruited 75 Yale students who were in China at the time. Fourteen hundred students attended the schools in Changsha; all of them were illiterate. Incredibly, after four months, 964 of the students passed an exam proving their ability to read and write. Yen went on to replicate his program throughout China, leaving a lasting effect on Chinese culture and society.

Hall continued his work in China as executive secretary for boys' work for the China National Council of YMCAs until 1925. He considered his work there, especially the development of the popular education movement, as one of the most satisfying experiences of his career. Looking back at his work in Changsha, Hall said, "The typical YMCA man is confronted by challenges of just about that kind, pretty nearly every day of his life. Characteristically, he is solving problems which no one else has been able to solve."

Return to Teaching

Upon his return to the U.S., Hall enrolled at Union Theological Seminary and Teachers College where he earned his master's degree and completed the residency requirements for his Ph.D.

Meanwhile, at the YMCA Training School in Springfield, E. M. Robinson, whom Hall had first met at the Kansas high school conferences, recommended him to direct the boys' work department and the college's YMCA training program. L. K. Hall remained on the college

faculty for 15 years, from 1928 until 1943. He developed close relationships with students and took great pride in their accomplishments. His students included many who became successful YMCA secretaries, and some that influenced the emerging field of group work, which had its basis in camping and boys' work. One of his students, Ronald Lippett, developed a significant career in the group work arena, including co-founding the National Training Laboratories and developing group therapy strategies. As an instructor, Hall considered himself to be only an adequate teacher, but felt successful in helping students with all aspects of their personal and professional development. He tried to instill in others a passion for inquiry about the principles of, and sense of duty related to, the "big ideas in life."

Publishing Y's Mission

Hall left Springfield to become the director of the Association Press, the national YMCA's publishing enterprise. The Association Press had been established in 1907 to publish books to promote the Y's mission along with manuals and materials used by YMCA staff members for programs and operations. Although he accepted the position as a temporary assignment, his well-established skills as a writer and editor enabled him to achieve considerable success. He remained employed by the Association Press until his retirement in 1952.



Lawrence K. Hall

Retirement did not last long, however. That same year, the Association of Secretaries (AOS), the precursor of today's APD, determined that its organization had grown to the point that professional, paid leadership was required. Hall was named the first executive secretary of AOS, a part-time position he held for five years.

Retiring Actively

In full retirement, Hall remained actively involved with the YMCA movement. He continued to write articles, reports and book reviews on a variety of subjects, including his own experiences in China, group work, YMCA history and a book on the legendary president of Springfield College, Laurence L. Doggett. Throughout his career, Hall remained humble about his own accomplishments and seemed to marvel at the varying directions that his work took him. Hall recalled reading a report of the committee charged with hiring him for the AOS executive position. "They were trying to define the job, define the characteristics," he said. "I certainly didn't fit the requirements. But, anyway, I got the job."

In honor of his extraordinary work over decades of service in the YMCA, APD created the L. K. Hall Outstanding Director Award in 1969 as a means to recognize an APD member who had an outstanding career and accomplishments as a YMCA professional, especially in the development of others.

Laurence K. Hall died in 1979. He never had an overall plan or a burning desire to change the lives of tens of thousands of people around the world. Opportunities presented themselves, however, in such a way that time and again Hall was the right person at the right place at the right time. One can imagine that, even if circumstances were different and he worked in alternative settings, Hall would have had a significant impact on people and social institutions. He was grounded in a strong sense of morals and values, had the ability to see the big picture and had the determination to address the details required for success. 