

Vernus Carey Known as Mr. YMCA

By Isabel Hernandez

Bullying among children is common today, but even 100 years ago, children bullied others because of their physical appearance, their family's situation or other reasons. One little boy from the Midwest suffered ridicule because of his size and his feminine sounding first name: Vernice, a variant of Bernice. In time, his small frame filled out and he came to be known as Vernus, a variant of Vernon and a name that hit its peak as a boy's name in the 1920s.

Vernus Carey came to El Paso in 1914 with his widowed mother when he was 12. The young boy became active in the early Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and found a father figure in A. L. "Doc" Holm, physical education director and later general secretary of El Paso's YMCA. Carey went on to serve his adopted city for 44 years in this organization dedicated to young people, a feat that earned him the name of "Mr. YMCA of El Paso."

The YMCA movement began in London, England, in 1844 by George Williams and a group of young men, who, like many, had come to the city in search of jobs and found only pubs and brothels as places of recreation. The men began the organization to study the Bible and hold religious services, hence the name they adopted that year, "Young Men's Christian Association" or YMCA. The idea grew, with 24 more such groups rapidly forming in the city. Seven years later, an American sea captain, Thomas V. Sullivan, helped establish the YMCA in Boston, the first one in the U.S. Just two years later, 13 more Ys had been opened across the country.

In 1886, a group of El Paso businessmen met in the First Baptist Church, then located on San Antonio Street where the Toltec Building stands, to form the El Paso Young Men's Christian Association. Its first activities were Christian fellowship and prayer meetings for young men held in a simple bare room. The group subsequently moved to a space near a livery stable on San Francisco Street.

An *El Paso Times* article by Carol Viescas tells us that after this first YMCA closed twice because of financial problems, the board decided to build its first facility and raised a whopping \$105,000 in 1906, a sum with a purchasing power of at least \$2,050,000 today, according to the Web site *Measuring Worth*. In 1909, the YMCA opened a modern building, designed by noted architects Trost and Trost, on Oregon and Missouri Streets, across from the public library. The Y had a swimming pool, gymnasium, handball courts, an indoor track and four bowling alleys, this at a time when desperados still walked El Paso streets, and just across the river, the Mexican Revolution was about to commence.

As time has gone by, the Y has developed from being a strictly Christian movement to a nonsectarian organization dedicated to the development of mind, body and spirit. It has also progressed from being a "boys" club into a place where people of all faiths, genders and ages can find recreational and educational activities in branches all over the city. (The acronym YMCA officially gave way to just Y in 2010 in the U.S. Both terms will be used in this article.)

Over the years there have been leaders who have stood out as models of excellence at the YMCA: Vernus M. Carey is one who made working at the Y his life's work.

Carey was born in Burlington, Ind., and after moving to Texas, he attended El Paso High School



Vernus Carey spent his life working with young people through the YMCA. (Photo courtesy of El Paso YMCA)

and graduated from El Paso Junior College in 1922. Carey married Mary Louise Simpson and the couple had one child, Joan, born in 1930. When Carey found the YMCA, he formed a strong friendship with Doc Holm, who became his mentor. In 1922, Carey became the assistant physical education director at the Y, after having served as a volunteer. This would be the beginning of his long career with the organization. When Doc Holm became general secretary, Carey moved up to director of physical education, a position he held until 1946.

Carey's love for athletics helped him motivate the youth of the community. As a child, Carey often had to protect himself by fighting physically when others teased him about his size and name. Little did he know then that in the future he would become a boxer and a wrestling champion in the Southwest. In his 1991 tribute to Carey upon his induction to the El Paso Historical Society Hall of Fame, Wallace Lowenfield, civic leader and owner of Casa Ford and other El Paso car dealerships, said that Carey "arranged for the first Golden Gloves tournament in El Paso," an activity that continues today.

According to a 1919 El Paso High School yearbook, Carey also played basketball. Apart from using his fists and dribbling a ball, Carey was also a member of Holm's first hexathlon team of gymnasts to win a YMCA international championship of North America, a feat the team repeated four more times.

The fact that Carey was an outstanding athlete helped him to guide others in various sports. Among many of the sports he directed was basketball, a game that was invented in 1891 by alumnus and faculty member James Naismith for Springfield College in Massachusetts, a YMCA Training School. Naismith had been asked to come up with an indoor game that would amuse and distract students during New

England's harsh winters. He had 14 days in which to do it. Naismith nailed two peach baskets to a railing 10 feet high and participants used a soccer ball. By 1893, iron hoops and a net replaced the fruit baskets, and by 1903, open-ended baskets saved players the task of retrieving the ball after every basket.

El Pasoan Bud Lassiter, who was a member of the Y's Leaders Club, said in Lowenfield's *Password* article, "Most of us came to the 'Y' attracted by athletics. ... That some became outstanding athletes is verified at least in part by the 1941 Texas Miners Basketball team, which won the first championship of any Miner team, in any sport." All the members of the team had competed in leagues run by Vernus Carey.

Many athletes were created at the Y with Carey as their mentor and coach. In 1942, Carey even began a program to condition young men who had not passed the physical requirements of the military by participating in calisthenics, body building, gymnastics and basketball. His own love of sports motivated him to teach others the discipline and enjoyment sports bring.

Another of Carey's most effective programs was the Leaders Club which taught young people leadership skills and empowered them to help others to develop in their own community. Carey had been part of this Y activity himself under Doc Holm and led members for years to respect themselves and others with the same caring attitude which his own mentor had displayed. The club, with some similarities to the Big Brothers program, included boys from ages 12 to 18. Today it is important for young people to develop a healthy self-esteem, an idea Carey inculcated into the young men in this organization through sports and other team activities.

According to a 2011 *El Paso Times* article by Kevin Pearson, then-president and CEO of the El Paso YMCA, 18 of the 20 members of the Leaders Club known as the Desipers enlisted in the military after the U. S. entered World War II, with the other two working at war plants. Several of these young men were also members of the aforementioned Miners basketball team; they listened to their coach who encouraged them to wait until after their season ended to enlist.

These "boys" became engineers, pilots and officers, leaders in their country at war. The young men corresponded regularly with Vernus Carey who then shared news with the others. Pearson wrote that even after the war, the men continued to meet at the YMCA, becoming leaders in their community, with several serving on YMCA Boards of Directors.

During World War II, Carey and his wife established a club for young married couples, known as the 50-50 Club, and maintained it following the war to help these young adults readjust to married life, even forming basketball and volleyball leagues. Because older adults found a way to help the war effort and young men and women were serving their country, less attention could be paid to teenagers and their plaintive cry of nothing to do in El Paso. Enter Vernus Carey and the YMCA.

Carey established the Y Co-ed Club for high school students and found a way to provide a distraction from the war that consumed their parents: the Teen Canteen. Frank Mangan pointed out in his book *El Paso in Pictures* that despite the war, "life went on for the local kids." Carey somehow knew the right thing to

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do: create a place for youngsters to meet and have fun. Mangan wrote that the teens danced to Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman while drinking Cokes, and they “puffed an occasional cigarette outside.” The Teen Canteen opened in the old Jewish Temple on Oregon Street and Yandell Boulevard in 1944 and was later incorporated into the Central Y.

Apart from mentoring others in sports and other leadership activities, Carey also enjoyed educating children about the importance of loving nature. His purpose was to teach city children to discover and respect all forms of life and to love the outdoors. Carey ran the Y’s Skyline Camp in the Sacramento Mountains near Cloudcroft for about 10 years during the Depression. It must have been an unforgettable experience for those who attended these camps as they still remembered their times in Y activities led by Carey even after he died. The late Frank Mangan, El Paso writer, historian and publisher, was one of the children that Carey cared for. In Lowenfield’s tribute to Carey, Mangan said, “Some of my fondest memories are those summers spent at Skyline Ranch. As a camp director, Vernus taught us more than any other human being could have — about nature and how to get along with and appreciate other campers.”

Holm and Carey worked together for about 20 years, and in those years they inspired many young people. After 22 years as the YMCA’s general secretary, Holm retired and chose Carey to succeed him as the next general secretary in 1946. The trust and affection that Holm had for Carey inspired him to take the same ideas and expand on them while initiating new programs for the Y. Carey became the YMCA’s executive officer and would continue to serve as trainer, mentor and confidante to El Paso youth for 16 more years.

In 1946, Carey organized the Boy’s Trail Camp, later known as Carey’s Ranch, a private camp for boys in the Sacramento Mountains six miles from Cloudcroft, N.M. Carey bought 160 acres to design a camp for boys to learn horsemanship, to explore natural sites, to participate in polo and other horseback games and to go on pack trips. The program also offered archery, marksmanship, golf and crafts. Carey’s love of nature and passion for sports led him to offer opportunities for different outdoor experiences than the Y.

Carey opened the camp early on to girls, who, for the most part, had few opportunities for camping, organized outdoor activities and horseback riding. In later years, Carey’s daughter Joan led the sessions scheduled for girls, with her husband Jim Goodman leading the boys’ sessions. Carey himself directed the equestrian activities, using his own string of quarter horses. The culmination of each session was a two to four-day wilderness pack trip.

Lowenfield quoted Barbara Kaster who recalled her experiences at Carey’s Camp this way: “He continually encouraged us to try new things, to mount the horses with pride and strength, to shoot with accuracy, to learn the names of all the wild flowers.” So long before women won broad civil rights and the right to compete in athletics through Title 9, El Paso girls were learning how to explore nature on horseback and participate in camping and competitive sports through Carey’s camp.

Sessions were organized by gender and age, with an emphasis on teens. In a 1966 *El Paso Herald-Post* article, Carey explained, “A lot of people don’t like to fool with teenagers because they are tougher to handle. But they make as much if not more use of what we have to offer as the little ones.” That many of Carey’s

campers learned how to handle horses well is illustrated in the same article which made note that “many a Carey’s Camp graduate and undergraduate came off with top honors” at a 1966 Riding and Driving Club Spring Horse Show.

Carey motivated and captured the attention of thousands of young El Pasoans with such activities. In 1956, Y-Indian Guides came to El Paso, a program for fathers and sons six to nine years old, using the lore of American Indians. Carey said, “It is a home centered program based on the simple conviction that educating a son is the father’s responsibility as well as the mother’s ... [it] is a program for the busy but thinking father which gives him an opportunity to be a companion to his son at an age when the boy is most receptive.” The national program included crafts, storytelling, informal discussions, hikes, swimming, campouts and more.

Perhaps keenly aware of how important a father is to raising a daughter, Carey also began a similar program for fathers and daughters called Indian Princesses. Today these programs have shed the references to Native Americans at the national level, and the groups are known as Y-Guides or YMCA Adventure Guides, still promoting a love of nature and the importance of family ties and community.

By 1948, the Y was serving a community of about 130,000, more than four times the population of El Paso when the first Y was built on North Oregon Street. That was the year the Board of Directors decided to buy an entire block of land on Montana Street where Baily School was located. This year also kicked off the beginning of a 10-year fundraising program, culminating in the building of the Central YMCA, an all-inclusive community center, including lodging and food service for young men away from home. As general secretary, Carey led fundraising activities to the tune of more than \$2 million. This large complex, considered one of the finest in the nation, opened in 1958 at 701 Montana.

For decades, the Y provided housing for hundreds of young men coming into the city. In addition, it had a food service, a men’s health department, a co-ed department, snack bar, lounge, club rooms, craft shop, gymnasium and swimming pool — with a women’s dressing room. Carey is given the credit for opening the Y to women through various activities even before the building of the Central Y.

In addition to his Y duties, Carey belonged to the Lions Club and the Valley Congregational Church in the Lower Valley where the Careys lived. He was president of the El Paso Athletic Hall of Fame in 1962 and worked with the Sun Carnival (Sun Bowl) Association for many years. Not surprisingly, Carey was a member of the El Paso County Sheriff’s Posse, under the leadership of Chris Fox, when riding horses was still a condition for membership. It was an adventurous way to watch over the town. The Sheriff’s Posse enjoyed their Sundays “riding for the sheer joy and pleasure of it,” wrote Hawley Richeson in his history of the organization titled *The El Paso Sheriff’s Posse: Fifty Fit 1936-1986*. The posse went for a five-day “Spring Trail Ride” for years.

The late Wallace Lowenfield met Carey when Lowenfield was just a young boy. In his 1991 tribute to Carey published in 1992 in *Password*, the journal of the El Paso Historical Society, he wrote that Carey “was the rock we could rely on. And to this day thousands of El Pasoans stand proudly and securely upon that rock.”




Vernus Carey retired on January 1, 1963, after more than 40 years of service to the El Paso community through his work at the Y. At the time of his retirement, the Y boasted a membership of 8,600 and Carey was deeply involved in the plan to begin branch locations in other parts of the city and to improve facilities at Skyline Ranch Camp.

Still fit and youthful at age 60, Carey continued raising and training horses as well as directing the equestrian program at his camp in Cloudcroft until 1972 when he and his family sold it. In a 1962 *El Paso Times* article, Carey said, “I have always loved kids...I look back over 40 years and events, at the young men scattered all over the country and there is satisfaction that you watched the normal kids and the problem kids grow up and develop into something worthwhile. I have enjoyed it very much.”

After all the years of hard work, dedication and love, the general secretary was honored with several awards and acknowledgments. He also was inducted into the El Paso Athletic Hall of Fame in 1971, the same year as Don Haskins. Carey was a Hall of Honor inductee into the El Paso County Historical Society in 1991, four years after his death in 1987.

Carey inspired countless lives and was a man ahead of his time. He appeared to know the importance of every stage of childhood and strived to develop programs for children of all ages — and adults as well. He knew that girls and women also needed opportunities for sports and outdoor pursuits and designed activities for them as well. He knew how important the father-child relationship was at a time when many men had little to do with the day-to-day raising of children. He raised his own daughter to love nature and taught hundreds of children to love and care for horses, beginning the Kids Rodeo in El Paso and directing horse shows for children.

Today the Y is a different place than it was in Carey’s day. The once bustling building on Montana was closed as a YMCA facility in 2007 and turned into the city’s Pat O’Rourke Recreation Center in 2010 after renovation through Community Development Block Grants. The YMCA now is organized by branches, including the Westside Family Y, the Loya Family Y in the Lower Valley and the Bowling Family Y in the Northeast. Skyline Ranch Camp continued operations until 1980 when it was sold to private parties.

Children do not go to outdoor camps as much as they used to; rather they attend computer camps and play video games. But the Ys of El Paso and the rest of the U.S. still offer a multitude of exercise classes and promote fitness for the entire family. Their goal is still the one that guided Doc Holm and Vernus Carey: the development of body, mind and spirit. 

Additional research by Emmanuel Correa.