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Soviet Youth

Michel Evaded Expressing An Opinion

(The Good News Singers of America, some 137 young people from North Carolina and mostly from Shelby, spent two weeks this summer in Europe and Asia. Jo Anne Yates, a Shelby girl who is now at Appalachian State University, was their chronicler. Here is the first of five reports she wrote about the trip, dealing primarily with the Soviet Union. Four other reports will be presented this week, only in The Shelby Daily Star.)

By JO ANNE YATES

Tall, blonde, blue-eyed, muscular, winsome personality — that's Michel, a 16-year-old student from Leningrad, USSR. Michel, as I remember him, was the classic example of youth — vibrant, mischevous, eager to discover himself, and very bright.

In talking with Michel, one immediately noticed the effects the educational system of the USSR has on the minds of the young.

Michel was very comfortable as long as the conversation dealt with cold facts, but when talk wandered into the realm of opinions, his enthusiasm noticeably dwindled. This tendency to evade expressing an opinion or making a decision was consistently evident in dealing with the people of the Soviet Union.

Perhaps it traces back to the early education a young Soviet receives. The life of a young person in the USSR is completely centered around education and government.

From a very early age, Soviet children are required to spend their summer holidays in various pioneer camps around the Russian countryside where they are repetitiously indoctrinated with the teachings of Lenin, with governmental propoganda, and with the theology of atheism. This method of teaching, the constant repetition of ideas, can be used most effectively with the young and does cause within



JO ANNE YATES

such flexible minds an allegiance to the ideas presented.

According to Michel, a Russian youth is required to attend ten years of public school

and to participate in a pioneer camp during the summer holidays. Students capable of advanced education may study in state-supported universities with no tuition fees. All institutions of learning are government owned, government controlled and government operated. All textbooks are printed and revised as the government sees fit.

When asked about a young person's social life in the Soviet Union, several English-speaking students admitted that "most students fill their spare time with friends." Dating is severely frowned upon for 16-year-olds, Michel told our group. And another girl added if a young person is seen smoking at school he is reported to the principal, his parents are notified and he is reprimanded accordingly.

All young people find common ground, though, through one media — pop music. Several of the Good News Singers were eagerly questioned about American vocalists such as Tom Jones; Blood, Sweat, and Tears; and Simon and Garfunkel.

American pop records are very popular among Soviet teens, but they are practically inaccessible. Young Soviets are fast creating a demand for current popular music of any sort since the music commonly heard on the radio still patterns after styles which have long been extinct in the U. S. pop charts.

It's amazing how young people transmit jokes from country to country. I asked Michel to tell me a Russian joke — a native Russian joke — (so

that I'd have an international joke collection at the end of the tour), and he immediately grinned and asked, "Why did the hippopotamus paint his toenails red?" "So he could hide in a strawberry patch." That joke (or a variation thereof) has filtered through almost every school in the world, to be sure.

For the most part, the youth of Leningrad and Moscow were very bright, friendly and enthusiastic in the doctrines of their government. Yet, at the same time, their creativity seemed a bit cramped, especially when crossed schedules and cancelled concerts called for impromptu negotiations with Intourist, the official travel agency of the Soviet Union.

Dramatic as it may sound, it is evident that these young people have mastered great worlds of knowledge but haven't yet discovered the simple delight of making up their own minds on controversial issues.