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Paper on Quaker Conscientious Objectors

Anne M. Yoder

Conference of Quaker Historians & Archivists

Haverford College

June 22, 2002

I'm glad to be here today to highlight some of the wonderful archival material that can be found at the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. The Peace Collection is truly a unique collection dedicated to preserving the stories of men, women and children who have worked for peace, nonviolence and social justice through the years.

Last year I asked if I might take a break from processing the mammoth archival collections that come to us from modern peace groups, and spend some time concentrating on some older collections having to do with conscientious objection. I was concerned about their preservation status but also fascinated by the material itself and wanted a chance to dip into it more intensely. It's been a pleasure to use my professional knowledge to preserve this material in better form for the future and to provide better access to it for scholars, but it's also been a source of intense personal interest, as I myself am a 21st century conscientious objector. The stories of those who have gone before us are very important in motivating us today to develop and follow viable responses to current violence, and I get a great deal of satisfaction out of helping to save and to relate the historical record of conscientious objection.

Of course, the Religious Society of Friends has long been known for its peace stance, and has produced many men and women who have taken it to heart and made peace their lifestyle and the cornerstone for their convictions against war. I wish I had time today to speak in depth about the materials at the Peace Collection that document Quaker expressions of conscientious objection. But I'm grateful for the chance to share what I can in a forum such as this.

The two earliest Quaker COs who are documented in the Peace Collection as far as I know, are Joshua Pollard Blanchard and Alfred Love. Blanchard was born in 1782 and worked as a bookkeeper in a bank in Boston. He refused military service during the War of 1812. His pacifist philosophy was deeply influenced by the Quaker principle of opposing everything that supported war, and he held this position throughout his life, publishing many articles on his views, especially during the Civil War. Blanchard pasted his published articles from 1819 through 1868 in an old ledger and this survives. Alfred Love, born in 1830, was a wealthy merchant in Philadelphia, who, when drafted in 1863, refused to serve in the Union army or to pay for a substitute to go in his place. He also did not allow his woolen commission business to sell goods in support of the war effort. As a result, his business suffered, and he endured much criticism from those who found his absolutist pacifism too uncompromising. He kept journals from 1848 to 1912 and

wrote in fascinating detail about his family, friends and community, interspersed with his observations about the war and his inner light that convicted him against it. In fact, I hardly got this paper done because I was so intrigued by his journals so that I spent far too much time perusing them this week. He wrote on "[April] 21st, [1861]. Sunday.... Went with Ma to good old quaint Green St. Meeting. I have had for three days an intense feeling & a Spirit moving to attend Social worship there this day & I was gratified by hearing Henry W. Ridgway on the subject of the day—war! He was very earnestly conclusive for peace. I felt the full force of the occasion & the deep responsibility resting upon everyone & especially upon the Quaker. Soon after Henry sat down I offered a few remarks that flowed from me as freely as I felt the flood of light stream into my soul. I am so clear & firm that one ought not to contend with arms but should carry out... the great truths of early Friends. The golden rule seems now forgotten & some of our Friends waver & some have even joined the army. To these I felt called upon to speak.... It was a great trial to thus get up in meeting but this is no time to please ourselves merely & be afraid."

When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917 and instituted a draft, the government had made no provision for men who did not agree to take part in it. COs were sent to army camps where they had to convince army personnel of their "sincerity." The variety of experiences of Quaker COs makes for interesting study. Wray Hoffman was sent to Camp Meade in Maryland, where he accepted work in the camp's YMCA as a movie operator; he later went to France & Belgium to work for the Friends Bureau Office of the American Red Cross. He had a very easy time of it compared to such Quakers as William Marx Kantor and Ulysses De Rosa, both of whom spent time in prison for their absolutist stance in refusing to take orders or to accept noncombatant service as Hoffman had. At De Rosa's court-martial he stated: "In these trying times the only authority that I obey is the "Inner-Light—the great ideal for which Christ gave his life, namely: Humanity. It is the spirit of reconciliation, not hate; non-resistance, not aggression, that should dominate us." He was sentenced to 25 years in prison and sent to Ft. Leavenworth. He noted: "The cells were about 6x7x8 feet high. The bed was a wooden board, the size of an ironing board, flush with the floor, with one blanket..." He was released in 1919.

It wasn't only men who lived by their CO convictions. Dorothy Detzer, Mary Kelsey and Mildred Scott Olmsted worked for the AFSC in Russia and Europe after World War I. A. Ruth Fry was a British Quaker who called herself a "dreadful coward" but who found the courage to spend three years in Europe working for refugee relief. Her journals, published reports, maps and photographs are filled with details about her work and impressions. Mary Stone McDowell was fired from her position in 1918 as a Latin teacher in a Brooklyn school because she refused to sign an unqualified loyalty oath; it was five years before her position was reinstated. Her papers include letters written in 1945 to 1954 to the IRS in which she withheld taxes that would support war.

By World War II, the historic peace churches had become much more organized in lobbying for and directing alternative service for COs. Civilian Public Service camps were set up around the U.S., and some of these camps were directed by the Friends, Mennonites, and Brethren Church, and some were run by the government. We have the records of the AFSC's administration of its CPS camps. These meeting minutes, letters, and case files by the hundreds, help document the relations of the corporate body of Friends to the government and to other denominations; its work to keep track of the many projects of CPS and administer the camps effectively; and its relationship with the CPSers in their various states of health and satisfaction with their placements. We also have the records of the AFSC's Prison Service Committee that provide important information, not only about the COs in prison, but about the prisons themselves and the conditions therein. We have the personal papers of a lawyer who worked for CO rights, of absolutists who went to prison, of men who went into CPS and were content, and of those who were not.

Many COs were eager for a chance to show they were not the lily-livered cowards they were so often accused of being. When more dangerous and challenging jobs became available through CPS, there were many applicants. They trained to be smoke-jumpers to put out forest fires, engaged as human guinea pigs in medical experiments, or served in mental hospitals (and women were involved in the latter as well). Harold Blickenstaff, one of the COs who agreed to be a starvation "guinea pig" wrote on March 16, 1945: "We have now been on our semi-starvation diet for almost five weeks.... At the start... I weighed 150 pounds. This morning I weighed 137.5 pounds.... Only 25 more pounds to go, but when I look at myself it is hard to see where they are going to come from." On Sept. 11, 1945, he noted: "We stopped starving July 29 (army doctors who had been in Europe who looked us over said we were in very similar conditions to the people they found in Belgium and the Netherlands except that we had been able to keep clean)."

Paul Wilhelm served at the Philadelphia State [Mental] Hospital and wrote in an undated letter: "Darling Wife:... Perhaps you'd rather not hear all the details, but I'd like to record a couple of my customers while they're plenty fresh.... I've not had a chance to see Molino's record card, but if I can believe my ears and my imagination, he's the real character Cagney and Bogart get paid for imitating. [W]hen I've gone in to straighten out his sheets under him he's "confessed" enough to me to put him in the electric chair a dozen times—in the "hot shower" as he occasionally [sic.] calls it with terror in his voice.... Tho [sic.] his body is in good shape & he'll probably lay in those restraints for years, all his mind is dead except his memory and his conscience. And they prey upon him so relentlessly that he can only sleep under heavy dope. The rest of the time he lays in there alibi-ing or confessing. In a loud, desperately excited voice, he tries to explain to "Foureyes" that it was the dame that tripped up the scheme, that he had done his part—"smooth, see"—but the dame—"she went upstairs, see, and Jake and me had to wait and that gave 'em time." This account, and many others written by COs, gives us an idea of how their eyes were opened to the realities of a wider world

through their war-time experiences. Often, these were a stepping-stone into working for the betterment of the world in their post-war years. Bayard Rustin was imprisoned for 28 months during WWII and then went on to participate in social justice struggles—he took part in the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, which earned him time on a North Carolina Chain Gang; he organized the 1963 March on Washington; and he served with such organizations as the Congress of Racial Equality and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, to name a few. He is the only African-American Quaker CO for whom we have any papers that I know of.

I ran out of time this week in my research before I could examine the material we have on COs after World War II. I know of the files of the Friends Committee on National Legislation and of the Young Friends of North America's Committee on Conscription; of the papers of draft counselor Channing Richardson, and of Horace Champney who sailed on a peace boat to North Vietnam. I know we have scores of letters and statements from young men who resisted the draft in the 1960s and 1970s. But I expect that there is a lot of material out there that is still in personal hands. Our holdings of post-Vietnam material on conscientious objection is particularly small. I hope in the years to come, as post-WWII COs age and start to clean out their attics and basements, that they too will send us their papers to preserve their stories, and that the organizations that have worked on their behalf will send us their files. Perhaps in 20 years another archivist will have the privilege of sharing with a future gathering such as this, about the wonderful CO resources to be found in the Peace Collection for the 1950s and beyond.

I've passed out a hand-out that lists the Quaker CO collections that I know of at this time held by the Peace Collection. This is a shortened version of one on the Web that has fuller information about the people and organizations, plus some quotes that I would have included in this paper if there had been time for them today. There are also links to a list of the CO collections at the Peace Collection; a database of names of Quaker COs; and my current obsession, a database of names and other information about WWI COs. None of these are complete lists, but are attempts to consolidate the information found in many different sources. If you have any questions about any of these, or about this paper, please feel free to contact me at any time.