

12-6-2017

Interview with Sam Farmer

Cherice Bock

George Fox University, cbock@georgefox.edu

Ralph Beebe

George Fox University, rbeebe@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/conscientious_objectors

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bock, Cherice and Beebe, Ralph, "Interview with Sam Farmer" (2017). *War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1940-1975*. 1.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/conscientious_objectors/1

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Museum at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1940-1975 by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Transcript of interview with Sam Farmer

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends
December 6, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Sam Farmer for the project War and Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1940–1975. You will also hear the voice of Ralph Beebe, one of the researchers for this project, and I am Cherice Bock, the other researcher. The interview took place at Friendsview Retirement Community in Newberg, Oregon on December 6, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Hi, Sam. It's nice to have you here.

Sam Farmer: Good morning to you.

Ralph: This—in the first place, what year were you born?

Sam: 1934. January 30th, 1934.

Ralph: 1934. Okay, so in '52 you were 18, and so that was right in the Korean War. Do you remember how you registered for the draft?

Sam: I probably registered straight, straight in the draft. I did not register as a conscientious objector or anything of that nature at that point in time.

Ralph: Were you drafted?

Sam: Nope.

Ralph: Why?

Sam: Well, first of all, I had a college deferment. Then, I had three kids by the time they got around to calling me. So I never had to, I never had to serve. And I had tried to enlist once, and they wouldn't take me because of my eyes.

Ralph: Really? So you were never actually drafted?

Sam: Never actually drafted.

Ralph: Well...

Cherice: So when you made your, your choice about draft registration, what was that process like? Did you think about it?

Sam: Oh, sure. We all did.

Cherice: I'm sure.

Sam: We were all in school here at the same time, and we had some pretty good counsel, both...

Cherice: Here at George Fox, you mean?

Sam: Oh yeah. Paul Mills and Arthur Roberts. My inclination was not to be a conscientious objector simply because my background, which while it was Quaker, had a strong Presbyterian influence in it.

Cherice: Okay, so tell us about your background a little bit in terms of the churches that you grew up in and that sort of thing.

Sam: When I was born we attended the Boise Friends Church. Everett Craven, at that time, was pastor, and then Clayton and Verella Brown became pastors shortly thereafter. We moved to the Nampa Friends Church about the time it was started, I think about 1937, and were there for a short period of time until my sister died, and we moved to Greenleaf to be closer to the family. My family, my mother's family, were some of the original settlers in Greenleaf.

Ralph: What was their name?

Sam: Tucker.

Ralph: Ah. Very familiar name, to me.

Sam: Yeah, well it would be in your, you know. Dilla, Dilla Tucker, my aunt, wrote the, wrote a history of Greenleaf some years ago.

Cherice: Oh wow. And so you grew up in some Friends churches, but then you said you had some Presbyterian influence?

Sam: My father was a Presbyterian.

Cherice: Okay.

Sam: My mother had the strong Quaker influence. My father was Scottish Presbyterian. It was a second marriage for him; he was a widower, and at that time was principal—actually principal of the old Riverside Grade School. He had Dwight Macy and Wilbert Eichenberger in his classes, and my mother was the first grade teacher in her first year of teaching. And he had just lost his wife, and so they ultimately married, but he always had this Presbyterian thing, say, “Well, let's think this through.”

Cherice: So you had some conversations with him...

Sam: Oh yeah.

Cherice: That were a little different from Quaker theology or practice?

Sam: Although he taught Sunday school classes for 65 years in Friends churches. With the Scofield Bible, no less, which in those years was not normal.

Cherice: So, what were some of the conversations like between you and him?

Sam: Well, he never discouraged me. He always just said, "Think it through and decide what you feel is right for you." And so, I did.

Ralph: When you registered for the draft when you were 18, how did you register?

Sam: I probably registered without any—1-A. I was one—at least I was 1-A when I registered.

Ralph: Yeah.

Sam: I didn't register with any prejudices at all.

Cherice: Yeah. And I assume you registered before you came to college, right? Or right as you were...?

Sam: Yeah, yes, I was.

Cherice: So you were thinking about it in high school?

Sam: I was registered in high school, yeah.

Cherice: So what were some of the influences on you as you were thinking through that choice?

Sam: Well...our family, our family, while they were Quakers, were not necessarily conscientious objectors. I had cousins that were either in—well, I guess none of them went into the service, because they were released for farm work in those years, or they weren't accepted. I know, I know I had one cousin that tried desperately to join the service, Millburn Tucker, and, and because of a heart condition he was never accepted. But the—my family focus was very strong at that point of time. And my Christian values at that time were not very strong, because...[shrugs]

Ralph: Not very strong in general, or...?

Sam: Not very strong in general. I graduated from Greenleaf Academy, and immediately came to Portland to get away from that influence. And actually, my

intention in coming to Portland was to join the service. So when I graduated from the Academy I came here to do that.

Ralph: And what happened?

Sam: Well, I got lost on Burnside, and I had somebody step out from the building on Burnside and say, “Are you lost?” And I was. And at that time, my life began turning around.

Cherice: It was a turning point, getting lost like that?

Sam: Yeah, it was. All of a sudden I was, I was all alone in the big city, and didn't have, didn't have any place to pin myself.

Cherice: So that—did that influence your decision about entering the service, or...?

Sam: It influenced my decision about what I was going to do. It, I turned around by saying I want to come to George Fox instead, which I did. It didn't interfere with my, my draft status at all, but I came and did that. And I started going to First Friends Church, so I fell under the influence of the Beals—Charles Beals had grown up in Greenleaf, and had actually lived with my grandparents at one time. So that was a strong influence for me at that point in time as well.

Ralph: Go back just a bit and define a little more what you meant by “getting lost.”

Sam: Well, I literally got lost. I was a, I mean, I was a 9-year-old farm kid on the streets of Portland all by myself. I didn't know where I was, physically.

Cherice: And you were trying to find the place to register?

Sam: I was trying to get back to the YMCA.

Cherice: Okay, so it wasn't like you were intending to go enlist at that exact moment, but—

Sam: No.

Cherice: You had come to Portland—

Sam: I was just kind of wandering around. I was just out and got myself lost.

Cherice: But that sort of felt like a metaphor for your life at the time?

Sam: Oh, it was. I went back to my room and took a serious look at my life and said, “I better make some changes.”

Ralph: And you were what age?

Sam: Oh, I would've been 18—uh, yeah, would've been 18.

Ralph: Yeah. And when you registered for the draft, you just registered straight 1-A?

Sam: Yep, I did.

Cherice: And so what, what were some of—as you made that decision and you told us a little bit about some of the influences, so did your faith, your personal faith, have anything to do with it? You said your dad told you to kind of think through it and decide for yourself.

Sam: I think one of the things that I saw, both—I saw both good in some of the lives of the young men that registered, but I also saw some of the other things happening. I saw some of them leaving, actually leaving the country, you know, and going to (apparently to) Canada and the like, and that just turned me off. That did not appeal to my sense of—I just didn't think that was the right thing to do.

Ralph: What you're saying is, they took off to Canada to escape the draft.

Sam: They did. These were, and these were young people, or at least one, from our own church in Nampa.

Cherice: So they felt like they couldn't register as conscientious objectors?

Sam: I don't, I don't know. Apparently he either registered and decided to leave the country before he was called, or he didn't register at all, and I, I don't know. I don't remember that.

Ralph: But there were several who did that, yes, I think just to escape the whole thing.

Sam: And that, you know, perhaps part of my Presbyterian background, that's—being reared to be patriotic in your own country, although I think that may have been a Quakerly thing, too, but certainly it was a Presbyterian thing, and that just turned me off. And it did some others that I remember growing up with, as well.

Ralph: Talk about that a little bit more.

Sam: Well, we had a pretty strong group of young people in the Nampa Friends Church growing up. We got along well. We did a lot of things together. But then we, we would see this, especially this one person that was part of our group just, just take off and go to Canada, at the urging of, I think, of his parents, as I recall.

Ralph: But because of the draft.

Sam: [nods]

Cherice: And so what, what was it about—

Sam: That's my take on it.

Cherice: Yeah.

Ralph: Yeah, well that seems pretty accurate.

Cherice: What was it—

Ralph: Sounds pretty accurate for a lot of people.

Sam: And I wouldn't—maybe you might even know him.

Cherice: What was it that that particularly triggered in you, as far as being something that you didn't feel like a person of faith should be doing?

Sam: Well, I just, I think at that point in time, I felt a strong patriotic leaning. Maybe in response to this or because of this. That was just my thing.

Cherice: And what, what about that was a faith thing? Like, how was your patriotism connected to your faith?

Sam: Oh, well, I, I think my faith stood on its own; I think my patriotism stood on its own. I, you know, I've never been a "God is a Republican or Democrat" type of a person. I just, that has never worked for me.

Cherice: So they're kind of separate in your mind.

Sam: Separate, yeah.

Cherice: You're very patriotic and you're a person of faith, but it wasn't that you felt like they, they needed to go together?

Sam: Yes, yes. I'm afraid I wouldn't be very popular in evangelical circles today.

Ralph: Where, or when, did you accept Jesus?

Sam: At that time when I was in downtown Portland. That was a time when I was probably 18.

Ralph: Okay, I'm connecting it with when you registered for the draft.

Sam: I had registered for the draft before.

Ralph: And it didn't—and so there's really no connection.

Sam: Not really. And that may have been one reason why I registered for the draft the way that I did. It's because I didn't have a small, a strong Christian connection.

Ralph: Yeah, so you were just straight 1-A. If you were 18 today, registering for the draft, how would you register? (Of course it doesn't exist today, but...)

Sam: Oh, I'd have to, I'd have to think that through. That's, my attitude would certainly be a lot different. [cough] And I'm afraid that I wouldn't be a very good fighter anyway. But I'm not sure, even today, I would register as a conscientious objector. I would very much like to register as a noncombatant, but I don't think I would register as a conscientious objector.

Ralph: So, the, the differences were, of course, 1-A, but you'd go in, or 1-O, which is a conscientious objector and wouldn't go in the military. The 1-A-O was the position where you would go in the military but you wouldn't carry a gun.

Sam: That's correct. And we saw, we saw in college a number of our classmates go in as noncombatants and serve, and some that didn't serve at all. And I have no problem between, between that.

Cherice: What—so you kind of changed your position from when you registered to now, that you would—you said you probably would be a noncombatant?

Sam: Well, I'm looking at it from a different perspective now. I'm looking at it from a Christian perspective, when I wasn't at that point in time.

Cherice: So what about being a Christian now influences that decision?

Sam: Well, I do believe the Bible tells us we're supposed to try and get along with all people. [laughter] That probably didn't register as much 80 or 70, almost 70 years ago, as it does today. And I'm probably—and the other part may be that I'm perhaps not as enamored of our country as I was at that point in time. In those years, I didn't feel the country could do much wrong. You know, we supported our country. You didn't hear the discouraging words that you hear today. It was, they, it was a different time and a different place, and we don't have that today.

Ralph: But the issue—and it's a double issue—one part is the conscience issue, and the other part is patriotism. And if we lived in a perfect country and you were drafted, would you carry a gun and go kill bad people?

Sam: Probably not, probably not.

Cherice: Because of your faith?

Sam: Well, certainly that. That's certainly part of it. I'm just not—I don't, I don't, I think that my faith indicates that that's not the way I treat people at this time in my life. I didn't always feel that way, but I do at this time in my life. I, I could remember discussing with my mother, who was a very ardent pacifist, in the, in the best of the Quaker way, what would happen if somebody would break into her house and start killing you. What would you do? Well, she said she would not, not lift a hand to, to try to keep from that happening. My father always said, "I would stop people from hurting my family, whatever it took." That was a difference in our family.

Ralph: So which would you choose?

Sam: Oh I—in this particular case, I'd have to take my father's side. I would do whatever was necessary to keep my family from any injury.

Cherice: So at the family level, you would protect them?

Sam: I do not have a problem with that. Yeah, it's the old story of the Quaker who heard the, heard the burglar downstairs and went down with his shotgun and says, "Friend, I'm a Quaker, and I would never shoot thee, but thee is standing right where I'm about to fire." [laughter] So I, I believe there's a bit of truth in that.

Cherice: So at the, maybe, individual and family level, you would feel it's necessary to defend your family?

Sam: Oh yes.

Cherice: But at the national level, you're not so sure what your role is in that?

Sam: Well let me put it this way. If there was a point in time when there was a cause... If there was a cause worth fighting for, then perhaps. However, I'm afraid I haven't seen any those since maybe the Second World War.

Cherice: Yeah.

Sam: I, we, I won't discuss Augustine's Just War concept... [laughter]

Ralph: Well, that's—

Sam: But, but I, I do believe so that there's something to that.

Ralph: So there is a just war occasionally, but not often?

Sam: Not, not as far as I'm concerned since the Second World War took place.

Ralph: Well, your mention of the Second World War leads me to the question I wanted to ask anyway. Suppose that you had been there, that age at that time, and lived in Germany, and wore a belt buckle that said, "God is with us" in Hitler's army. Would you have fought?

Sam: Oh, in Hitler's army? Probably not, probably not. And I think that the movement in Germany, Reinhold Niebuhr, or...

Cherice: Niebuhr, yeah.

Sam: And that that movement that came out of the Lutheran Church at that time is something that I could ascribe to very strongly.

Ralph: My problem is that if I think I would have fought for the Americans, I'm pretty sure that if I had lived in Germany, and was filled with the patriotism of the Nazis, and their feeling that they were—had been terribly [cough] desecrated by World War I, now we've got to get even, we've got to build the army, and so forth.

Sam: Yeah.

Ralph: Well then if I, if I would fight for America today, I probably would have fought for Germany, and wore that belt buckles that said "God—Gott mit uns," God is with us.

Sam: God is with us, yeah.

Ralph: So to me, it becomes more an issue of me and God, and where God leads no matter where I am.

Sam: Sure. And I'm not, I'm not sure what sort of a decision I would make today, with where I'm at today.

Cherice: But I think I do hear you saying that you would, you would weigh each war more intentionally now than you did at the time.

Sam: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Ralph: And so you mentioned just war, and that's what you're talking about. You're suggesting that in the final analysis, the issue is not whether you could kill somebody, but it's whether or not it's justified, whether it's a just war.

Sam: I think, I think in the final analysis, Ralph, it has to be what I would, you know, I look—that God gave me the opening to support anything, essentially. I think we come down to that point of saying, you know, what, where should I be here?

Cherice: How do you personally go about making those decisions? Like, how do you know if God is telling you that something is—?

Sam: Really good question, isn't it?

Cherice: Yeah!

Sam: I usually sit back, if you want to know the truth, after everything is done and the smoke is cleared, and I think, "Oh my goodness, that was a God thing, wasn't it!" So I claim no, no, no supernatural guidance, except to ask God to guide me to do the right thing at the right time, and then it's all over and done with, sit back and say, "Well, I think that was his leading this time." However, there's some other times.

Cherice: [laughs] Yeah. So you go through life trying to make the best decisions that you can but...

Sam: You make the best decisions that you can, and I don't, I think one of the things, one of the things that bothered me, Ralph, back at our time as kids growing up—young kids, before we got to college, you know—is the, is the movement that was among Friends, at least in the Northwest, that I remember, of the old saints who would stand up and say, "I've been forgiven, I've been sanctified, and everything that I do is ruled by God in my life." And I could never see that as that clear. I could never see that as that clear. My mother, I think, could. My father, I don't think could. So I think there's a difference in your perspective of things, and that part of it, that part of it, that intense—I think is that, maybe that holiness type of emphasis in life really turned me off at one point in time.

Cherice: What was it about it that turned you off, do you think?

Sam: That you could be perfect and never sin, and sit in your front porch and rock until God came and took you away.

Cherice: Right.

Sam: And I was never there! And I also saw in the life of the people that *were* there (according to them) people that were living lives that were nowhere as, as good as what I saw in people who say, "I sin every day and I have to, I have to repent from it."

Cherice: Kind of that hypocrisy versus humility?

Sam: Well, maybe it was hypocrisy, I don't know, I can't, I can't speak to that. That's their job, not mine. But it just didn't work for me.

Ralph: You're, you're bringing back lots of memories for me, because there was this very strong emphasis back in those days about what we call "justified, sanctified"—

Sam: Yes.

Ralph: "Petrified."

Sam: Yes, I remember that, and it just, it just didn't, just didn't work for me. And I mean, maybe it's 'cause I was kind of an ornery cuss anyway, which I was, but it just...just...there was just something that wasn't there. And fortunately, I've been exposed to a lot of different groups in my life since then and I've found a lot more freedom in other groups that have not been so tied to that particular dogma, doctrine, whatever it may be.

Cherice: So for you was that connected with Quaker ideas about the peace testimony? [cough] Did you see that the people who were talking about this holiness thing were also emphasizing conscientious objection, or was that a separate issue?

Sam: It was a separate issue, it was a separate issue.

Ralph: Goes with my experience, too.

Cherice: Okay. And do you remember learning about Friends emphasis on peace as a kid?

Sam: I grew up in Greenleaf, yes.

Cherice: But for those of us who weren't there, what was that like? What did you, what do you remember learning?

Sam: Well, some of it, it depends on the, it depends on the teacher. There were teachers that taught; there were teachers that wanted to pour it into you. (I guess that's a good term.) I, and, and that turned me off. I wanted to be, I wanted the ability to think for myself, not because the church told me I had to do this. I wanted to work through that myself. And that may have had something to do with it, too. Still does, actually.

Cherice: So, at the Academy or at the church? Was that teaching coming through at both of those places or one or the other more?

Sam: Well, the church earlier on, because we attended the church in Greenleaf when I was young, when I was fairly young, and then I came back and graduated from the Academy. I was only there one year. It was not my prettiest time in my life, but at any rate, it got me through school, so...

Cherice: But you felt like they were kind of force-feeding that peace testimony?

Sam: Not at the Academy at that point in time, no, not at all.

Cherice: But at the church?

Sam: Earlier on, earlier on. There was more of a, like, a group, a groupthink. Is that a good term to describe Greenleaf?

Ralph: Yeah.

Sam: It was, it was groupthink. [cough] And there were things that happened. There were, there were personal things that had no theological value at all, but really turned a lot of us off at that point in time, and we just went elsewhere.

Cherice: By personal things, do you mean, like, personality traits of individuals in leadership or—

Sam: Well, that, yes, to some degree, but just, just, just the personality of the service at that point in time. You were expected to think certain ways. For example, on Sunday nights, and I noticed it in Greenleaf from time to time, it was a large church in those years, and there were—everybody milked cows and came to church after milking, so they were probably 300—close to 300 there, and I can remember the pastor standing up at numerous times and saying, “Well, tonight we're going to have a testimony service. Everyone stand up.” And they would start out in the front row, and everyone was expected to give a testimony.”

Cherice: Wow.

Ralph: Wow.

Sam: And you know, as a, as a youngster—I was, I think, just in grade school the lower grades. That just absolutely turned me off. And my father sometimes would not get up. He'd say, “I don't feel led tonight to do that,” and he says, “I won't.” And he didn't. But if you didn't stand up, you were a marked man. He didn't particularly care. The Tuckers were kind of—he fit in with the Tuckers. They were kind of an ornery bunch, anyway. And, but that was the way things were conducted. And if you didn't do that—I can remember one of the, one of the missionaries from Africa, was it Haskins? Was it Haskins or Hoskins?

Ralph: There was a Haskins.

Sam: Coming and speaking when we were in the old, in the old gym, before it blew up, and “separating the sheep from the goats” right in the middle of Sunday evening service. He says, “If you're a sheep, you need to get over here. If you're a goat, you need to be over here.”

Ralph: Oh, wow.

Sam: Terribly, terribly distressing to a kid like me, who wasn't sure whether, yet, whether you were a sheep or a goat, and, and it had to be very embarrassing to people who came. But that was the way it was done.

Ralph: I didn't get those experiences. I went to Greenleaf; however, I didn't go to Greenleaf Friends Church.

Sam: I know that. Absolutely.

Ralph: I was at Ridgeview or Homedale, and so...

Sam: And there was one time that you, that your family was living in a basement house.

Ralph: Yes.

Sam: Was that at Nyssa?

Ralph: No, well, it was straight west of Homedale.

Sam: Okay, because I can remember my mother and I coming there, because you were holding Sunday school.

Ralph: Yeah.

Sam: And I came with my mother when she came to the Light, one of those that she did quite a bit.

Cherice: So it felt like—it sounds like you felt like, in order to be a part of the group at Greenleaf, you had to go along with whatever they valued, in whatever they were doing...?

Sam: That was my, that was my take on it, not necessarily accurate. But my take.

Cherice: Right, right, yeah, that was how you felt, anyway. So when, when you decided to register as, you know, regular enlistment, did you feel pushback from Greenleaf on that, and did you feel excluded from the community or, they were...?

Sam: No, no, no, by the time I got around to that, that wasn't a big, really big issue. I can remember as a younger kid, during the Second World War, people talking about people that went and enlisted. I can remember that talk in the church as a, as a young kid because I thought that was great if they went and enlisted in the Navy or whatever.

Cherice: And so you—since it was sort of not as important of an issue at the time, in politics and in—

Sam: Well, it was important when I was a young kid.

Cherice: Right.

Sam: It was the middle of the Second World War at that time.

Cherice: No, I mean, when you, when you, when it was your turn, it was, like, the beginning of Korea.

Sam: It wasn't—yeah. And we didn't, we didn't hear a lot about it.

Cherice: So since it wasn't as big of a deal—

Sam: [inaudible] about that.

Cherice: Yeah. But you didn't feel like Greenleaf people were excluding you because of your choice?

Sam: Oh no.

Cherice: Okay.

Sam: I never had that problem.

Cherice: Yeah.

Sam: If they did, it was because I deserved it. [laughter]

Cherice: Yeah, okay.

Ralph: Well, I think that's all the questions.

Cherice: Yeah, I think so.

Ralph: Thank you so much, Sam.

Sam: Well, I'm afraid I blew that interview clear out of the water for you! Sorry about that.

Cherice: No, it's great!