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## Interview with Ron Stansell

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## **Transcript of interview with Ron Stansell**

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends

December 5, 2017

**Cherice Bock:** The following recording is an interview of Ron Stansell 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 5, 2017.

**Ralph Beebe:** Welcome, Ron.

**Ron Stansell:** Thank you.

**Ralph:** Nice to have you here. First question: what year were you born?

**Ron:** 1943.

**Ralph:** 1943. And I know that you were born in the beautiful city of Homedale, Idaho.

**Ron:** Actually in Caldwell.

**Ralph:** Oh, Caldwell.

**Ron:** My family was living in Homedale.

**Ralph:** I see, oh yeah, okay, yeah, I got you on that, or you got me! Yeah, okay. So, when, when you registered for the draft, the choices would be 1-A, 1-A-O, which would be you would go into the military but not carry a gun, or 1-O, you wouldn't even go into the military. Do you remember how you registered?

**Ron:** I did register as, as non-entering, would not enter the military, but that was, I don't think there was any place to indicate that I was ready and willing to do alternative service, but alternative service was clearly in my mind, and for something I considered a great deal, I did not do alternative service, but I, I thought about it quite a lot, made the decision that I, I had other things that I thought would be as valuable to the Kingdom of God as alternative service, and as valuable to my country as alternative service. So, but I did register as a conscientious objector.

**Ralph:** Why?

**Ron:** I remember studying the Sermon on the Mount, and statements in the Sermon on the Mount that I felt were unequivocal [laughs], that I could not explain away and say, "Well, the Christian way is to enter the military and be ready to take the life of

another," that was not the tenor of the Sermon on the Mount at all. And passages there that were clearly passages connected with loving of and caring for one's enemy, and going the second mile. And I was aware in the world in which I lived, in the world of church and Christian faith, that there was this disconnect: of people saying, "Well, we treat our enemies, we treat the people around us with kindness and love, but on an international, national, international level, the business of treating your enemy, or somebody with whom you disagree in the same way, that doesn't work on the international level." And that, that always seemed strangely inconsistent. It was something that I couldn't ever come to grips with. [laughs] And, after a while I quit coming to grips with it and decided that that wasn't, just wasn't right.

Were there influences of my church? I'm sure there were, including your mother, Ralph, who was my Sunday school teacher for sev—a couple of years, but it wasn't wasn't an agonizing statement, it wasn't an agonizing decision for me. It was something I felt very clear about.

**Ralph:** So you figured it out, you became a conscientious objector to killing people.

**Ron:** I did, I did.

**Ralph:** Even if they were about to kill somebody you love.

**Ron:** Yeah, I went through that whole process, and I personally came to the decision that I would, I would be ready to resist evil. I would be ready to resist evil with physical force in many situations, and I never came to believe that pacifism meant passivity. And I would never have—but I drew the line with deadly force. I felt like that, that the use of deadly force was—I would rather give my life rather than use deadly force against somebody else.

**Ralph:** Would you expand on this a bit, in terms of what influenced you? You already talked about it a bit, but, but, but I'm interested in the fact that probably 99% of people like you and me just go ahead and go to the military, and yet, you didn't, and I'd like to know a little more about what you think were the influences which caused that.

**Ron:** I think that, this is where I probably should have done more preparation for this meeting. [laughs] But there are two things that that come to mind that were influences as, during my junior high and high school years, prior to the need for registering for the draft, and it has to do with scripture. I entered a, a speech contest on the Sermon on the Mount. That meant reading and studying out the Sermon on the Mount, and writing, delivering the speech on the Sermon on the Mount, and that was pretty formative as a, as a kid, trying to deal with the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount deeply.

And another similar influence was Romans 12: memorizing the twelfth chapter of Romans, and there's, you know, some very clear passages there that deal with how you deal with enemies, and I, I've reveled in the sense of wholeness in those two passages.

Influences? I think I grew up in an environment where, in my family environment, the military was not idolized, by any means, and I had one uncle who was in the military, but my father, my closest uncle, took agricultural deferments, did not register as they were—they had no conscience against war, but they were farmers, and Uncle Sam wanted farmers to produce food, and they were good farmers, and they, you know, there's no question they were not drafted because they were in farm production, and so there was no, it was not a military tradition in my family at all. My, my mother's one brother was in the Navy, but it was kind of off to the side, and it wasn't something that was idolized, like I know that there are some military families that honor duty and the call of country and loyalty to country as expressed in military service. Was not a part of my tradition.

So I guess I was, I was susceptible to the hints and direct teaching of my Friends church as a child. So I guess maybe that's about as far as I can go on "why." My brother, my older brother, was in the National Guard. I just, I never had any sense that it was the expression of loyalty to country that would, was right for me. He did it because he was draft age and had to do it. He had no conscience, he had no Christian conscience. So I saw my, my statement of conscientious objection being very much a part of my Christian conversion, my commitment in Christ. That was, that was at the core.

**Ralph:** Talk a little bit about that, in terms of that, because you were in a Friends church. I'm really curious as to how much—because most people, I think, if you'd been in the Baptist Church, or Methodist, I'm not sure these issues would come up for you.

**Ron:** I think, I think that that's probably right, and the two references of the scriptural study that I mentioned were specifically, were scriptural studies that we were encouraged to do because it wasn't, it was a part of the Friends church, and those particular two passages, we were asked and invited and encouraged to study and deal with, which I thought was, was probably quite pivotal to me.

What was the role of my particular congregation? It was, it was clearly some planting of seeds, and then I attended Greenleaf Academy, and it was one of the things that was discussed, because of junior and senior year of high school, that was the age when draft registration was, was happening, and I certainly never, never, I have no feeling whatsoever of being pressured, but I knew that there were several of my friends around me that were making the same decision, and there was a group, there was a group of us in high school that did register as conscientious objectors, and two or three of the people that were in that circle of friends are still in my circle of friends, but they, they did alternate service and went to college part-

time, they didn't go straight to college. And I, I did not opt to do that. I went straight on to college. And then in college—then, I mean, I'd registered as a CO. So, I'm sure that there was influence of high school friends that we're talking about the same issues.

**Ralph:** Uh-huh. Do you have any...?

**Cherice:** Yeah, so, what age were you when you did the, the speaking exercise on the Sermon on the Mount?

**Ron:** I think I would have been 16.

**Cherice:** Okay, and was—

**Ron:** Old enough to drive, because I remember driving to the event.

**Cherice:** Where was it?

**Ron:** It was over at Greenleaf Friends Church.

**Cherice:** Was it organized by the church or the school?

**Ron:** Yeah, the youth organization that organized it ["yeah" indicating the church]. And the Romans 12 memorization was earlier. I think I would have been maybe an eighth grader or a ninth grader when that happened.

**Cherice:** And your friends that did alternative service, do you know what they did for their service?

**Ron:** Yes, there was a group of them that worked as orderlies at St. Luke's Hospital in Boise, and pretty menial work, but they—I'm thinking back on the three that I'm thinking of—two of the three ended up, one in a medical field, and one in ministry, and the third one was, entered business with a few or three friends. I think there was one or two others that were with them as well, but I can't remember for certain. There was a whole group of them that did their CO work together at St. Luke's.

**Cherice:** Yeah, great.

**Ralph:** It seems like that a higher percentage of your friends and you became conscientious objectors than the general public, so can you talk about that a little bit more? What were those influences?

**Ron:** I'm sure there were influences at, in high school Bible class. I'm sure there were influences, I mean, I read, I read some material, some literature on the subject. But, there wasn't an influence for my family, from my parents, because they were, they were on a different, it wasn't something they were talking about or even

thinking about. I can't even remember talking about with my mother or father about the subject when it came to registration and to what I wanted to do, and I just did it.

**Ralph:** But they didn't strongly object.

**Ron:** I don't know if they, I don't know if they talked about it, but they didn't object.

**Cherice:** Were they Quakers before they came to the Greenleaf area?

**Ron:** No, no they were not. They, during my grade school and early high school—grade school years, they were not church attenders, none of us were. We began attending church, loosely when I was about fifth or sixth grade, more firmly when I was a seventh or eighth grader. And then my mother and father joined the church, and I became an official member of the church when I was a sophomore, along with my mother and father.

**Ralph:** In Homedale?

**Ron:** In Homedale.

**Ralph:** Homedale Friends.

**Ron:** So there was a there was a spiritual growth in their lives that was happening simultaneously with mine, and my, my mother and father counted that as their conversion experience, those—that year, my freshman and sophomore year. If there was any conflict in spiritual things with my folks, it was when I made the decision that I wanted to attend Greenleaf Friends Academy, and, and my father thought that was a crazy idea, that it was off the wall. But we talked about it, and there was a whole group of us that wanted to do it together, driving from Homedale to Greenleaf.

**Cherice:** So, why did they think it was a crazy idea?

**Ron:** Oh, we were just freshmen, and how were we going to get there? 15-year-olds, and none of us were really old enough to drive.

**Ralph:** And Homedale High School was close by.

**Ron:** Home—you know, my brother, my older brother, had gone through Homedale High, and they thought it was, I mean, it cost some money. What's the deal, here? But it was very clear to me that I had found connections of friendships at camp with kids that were, were thinking of their life being given to Christ, and living a life of obedience in Christ that was very, very attractive to me. And the social—I attempted, I attempt to identify, in my own spiritual life, I came to identify with this group of Christian kids. This was my point of reference, that happened in my seventh and eighth grade, those two years of junior high.

That my older brother ridiculed and thought it was goofy and, and actually it was a, it was a spiritual struggle for me, because his approval was important to me, but he, he let it be known that, that I was a doofus for wanting to attend, wanting to be involved in things of Christian faith, and [laughs] when I look back on it now, it's humorous, and we, we have come to grips with being friends again, many, many years since, since that time. He was, he let it be known that he was going to make life difficult for me. [laughs]

**Ralph:** He was older than you?

**Ron:** He's four years older than I, I was.

**Cherice:** Did you go to camp at Quaker Hill?

**Ron:** Yes, yeah.

**Cherice:** Okay.

**Ron:** Okay, thank you, this all triggers other, other memories. Arthur Roberts taught a class on, on peace at Quaker Hill that I listened to carefully. This would have been somewhere, freshman, sophomore, junior year, somewhere, of high school. I remember having a great respect for him, and it spoke—it just made a lot of sense to me.

**Cherice:** Do you remember anything about what he said that made an impact, or was it more his, himself as a person?

**Ron:** Well, his own personhood was influential, but he used scripture, and he used scripture well. He used several references that stick in my mind. One is, is it from Hebrews? Holiness—well he, well, in a broader sense, he identified peace as a part of holiness. He did an articulation of the meaning of holiness and holy living, and holy living involved peace. And he, I can't remember—that, that was one of the things, and of course the reference about holiness and peace with which, without which we will not see God, in Hebrews? And that was, seemed real clear. [laughs] And his application was of living in peaceful relationships in all of our lives.

**Ralph:** Tell us again a little bit about the specific things that happened. You have made your decision to be a conscientious objector, then you became 18, and what happened?

**Ron:** I went to college, and I talked—I had conversations with both Arthur Roberts and with Myron Goldsmith, about, you know, “Where do I go with this conscientious objector thing?” And I know that there were times that Arthur counseled some young men to consider conscientious—you know, alternate service, and giving a period of life where one really would work on behalf of peace, and I think both

Arthur and Myron counseled me in a different direction, and they recommend, they encouraged me to prepare for ministry, and to go directly into preparation for ministry, and that resonated with my spirit. I did not feel—I felt like I could work for peace in a ministerial role, and I didn't have to, I mean, the ministerial role would be, would include my working on behalf of peacemaking. And so I went straight on into seminary, and, and then it was actually—we were invited by the mission board to cut short my seminary work to go to Bolivia. So, it didn't work out as I had intended, for after graduation from college to spend three years in seminary, and then take a pastorate, but I spent two part-time years in seminary, and went to Bolivia. And then finished my seminary degree in stages, so I started seminary in '65 and finished it in 1975. So, but I was, spent six years in Bolivia during the same period of time.

**Cherice:** Okay, and you said you kind of see that as a way of putting the peace stance, or doing active peace work in the world through missions?

**Ron:** Yes, through missions, and through, initially it was, my thought was through pastoral ministry. But then with the passage of time, when I was 22, I took a trip to Bolivia for a six-week experience, and it was very, very, very impactful on me, but I left with a very clear—two very clear feelings: one feeling was that I was being called to pastoral ministry in the United States, and the other feeling was, as I sat on the plane, you know, these are very subjective things. As I sat on the plane, looking at the people who were saying goodbye to me, I had this very strong feeling that, “I know I'm going to see them again, I'm going to be back here someday,” and I left that, I just let that slide, because it seemed way, way too subjective. I didn't, I didn't try to feed that at all, but what I did do as I returned to the United States, I began corresponding with people there and praying for them. And the correspondence and writing and interchange and prayer for them, in the course of about four months, I had a radical shift in what I felt was, was my sense of calling, from pastoral ministry to missionary, to missionary ministry.

In that same period of time, right after I returned from Bolivia, my mother died suddenly, and I don't know what influence that may have had on me, but it was a time of turmoil. It was a time of personal turmoil. And it was a it was a time of deep personal spiritual seeking, that I know. And the death of my mother was part of that whole process. So, to my great surprise, I, you know, I entered seminary and I was headed in the direction of, of—I mean, I was in seminary already, and then it was in the middle of my second year of seminary, and the mission board came to us and said, “We would like you to consider going now.”

I said, “Well, I've got to finished seminary.”

They said, “We'll make provisions for that. If you will go now, we'll make sure that you will have time and space to finish your seminary degree.”

I said, “Okay, it's a deal!”

So, they did, but I did it in two, during two furlough times, I finished the seminary degree.

**Ralph:** How does Carolyn fit into, to this? When, when did you meet her and marry her?

**Ron:** [laugh] Well, we laugh, but I say I met her before she met me. I knew who she was, but we didn't, I don't know that we ever had a conversation when we were in high school, through youth events. She didn't, she didn't really know who I was. I knew who she was. And then we began dating when I was a sophomore and she was a freshman in college.

**Ralph:** At George Fox?

**Ron:** At George Fox. And her family was clearly a family of conscientious objectors. Her brother was, and her father was, was not a military man, but her grandfather was clearly a person of pacifist convictions, and the family held those convictions.

We—I went through one year of seminary, and she was, her senior year of college, and we were married right after graduation. And then we were invited to go to Bolivia before we'd been married a year.

**Cherice:** Wow.

**Ron:** Which was a little risky! [laughter] But it seemed, it seemed the right thing to do, and...we were, yeah.

Charles Ball called me in after, after prayer meeting one Wednesday evening, and said, "Ron, we—" (I, Carolyn was in choir practice), and he said, "we have a proposal for you. Would you—" (this was in April), he said, "Would you, would you consider going to the mission field, going to Bolivia, this summer?"

I said, "Wow!" And, and I waited 'til Carolyn was done with choir practice, and then we took off and drove around the hills and talked [laughs] for a long, long time, just trying to sort this out, all out, and what the Lord's direction was. We didn't make an immediate decision, but it was, it came quickly, and, April, May, Carolyn had already signed a contract to teach, she backed out of that contract, and we went to language school in mid-August, without a whole lot of preparation. [laughs]

**Cherice:** So it sounds like you—well, I mean, maybe in in the Christian church as a whole we tend to separate out missions and evangelism from peace and social concerns types of things, but you kind of put them together.

**Ron:** I didn't, I did not see the separations, because I'd, I saw what missions meant in Bolivia, and I knew that it meant, it meant that in—the en vogue term now is "whole life discipleship." David Thomas uses the term "whole life discipleship" rather than

than “discipleship for development,” because all the life is being, is being touched, and I saw that very clearly in Bolivia. People's lives were changed in many ways, not just because, you know, they could come to church and sing. Coming to church and singing and worship was a huge part of what it meant, but it meant that they lived with the families, it meant they lived differently with neighbors who were not Christians, it meant that they had a different idea about how to care for the health of their families, they were eager for the education of their family. And, one additional thing that became very important to me, was watching the merging of social action from within the church. The church was—the new church was the new believers. The social action, the social concerns that they undertook, in normal, everyday sorts of ways. And I could see that happening, and so I didn't see the, I didn't feel like there was a disconnect between the commitment to Christ and the emerging social action. It was very clear that the emerging social concerns did not happen until after a very firm conviction—commitment to Christ. There was, their commitment to Christ and to follow Jesus meant revolutionary change in their lives. And I saw that on that trip, and I continued to see it in the years to come.

**Cherice:** How did you go about teaching the, the emphasis on peace within Quakerism on the mission field?

**Ron:** The reason the board wanted me to go, wanted us to be there, was that they wanted me to be through language school and ready to step into a teaching position at a small Bible institute, which was being administered by the national church, and there's all kinds of—if you're teaching the Bible, you've got all sorts of opportunities! [laughs] And so, I did so. And one of the things—we lived in an era of great tumult in Bolivia. Let's see, we arrived in 1967. Che Guevara had just been killed by the Green Berets, you know, in October or November of 1967, and we arrived in Bolivia itself in, in April of 1968, and so this was all very fresh memory, and the leftist-rightist thing that was going on. There was a right-wing military government. There was a left-wing insurgency. And who was, who were being oppressors and who were the oppressed? And it became pretty obvious in that situation that both sides were oppressive and both sides were being oppressed. There was no good guy on this scene.

And so people would—what I'm getting to is that people would ask you, “Who are you? Where do you stand on these things?” And so we were frequently called to make some kind of a statement about it, about social justice or about law and order. These were the two, the way the two sides characterized themselves. One side were for social justice and non-oppression of the indigenous population. The other side said, “We have to have, we have to have law and order or nothing works in our country.” And it just so happened that both were right!

**Cherice:** Yeah.

**Ron:** Because inflation in the economy was—the economy was shatters, in tatters, and, and part of that was because of the agitation of the left wing. And then there

was, you know, at the same time the left—the indigenous folks were not being given a chance to—so, it was just chaotic.

“Who are you? You're a foreigner. You're rich. Where do you stand on these things?”

And so we ended up making the statements such as, like, “We do believe that it's important that we have—that there be justice for the poor, and at the same time we recognize that government is important to be order, or there cannot be justice.” So, I don't think that that made very many people happy [laughter], but that's where we stood.

**Cherice:** Yeah.

**Ron:** Those were statements that we had to make on a regular basis.

**Cherice:** Were the Friends speaking differently on that from other denominations that might be doing missions or already established there?

**Ron:** You know, we didn't, we didn't talk about that among, with our mission—missionary friends, but I think there was. I think there was, to a certain degree, because we had some that—we had some missionary friends that, their answer to everything was a, was a stronger central government that would free the, free the country of leftist agitators. And I—the tenor that I felt within our mission organization was that, “Hey, you know, let's be honest here. The people who we're working with have been oppressed by the Spanish overlords for 300, 400 years, and they're not doing a very good job of bringing [laughs], of solving the problems by, by military action against the indigenous folks.

And yet, at the same time, there were agitators that—Che Guevara's and those that he worked with—would use, were using every form of deceit possible to bring about what they thought was justice. And Che Guevara, I read his journal, and he was, he was using deceit on every hand. He was lying to the indigenous folks, and he didn't pull any punches. He recognized what he was doing.

**Cherice:** So you were kind of seeing it as a peace testimony to stand in between those and hold up truth?

**Ron:** I did. I felt like it was...and in informal conversations, I don't, I don't, we didn't make any campaign about out of it, but in informal conversations, I would frequently acknowledge that, that I wasn't pleased with the military, military regimes. But I also recognized the deceit of the leftists, because Che Guevara very quickly became an idealized hero. And, it's interesting that his image—the outline of Che Guevara—became an icon throughout the world. It was used as an icon in the Congo. [laughs] I've seen it, I've seen shirts in Africa with, with the iconic profile of Che Guevara, as well as in South America.

And our kids grew up in an environment, hearing of Che Guevara, and they, they admired his idealism. And so, from David Thomas and our daughter, Sarah, were taking, were students here at George Fox, and they were in a French class, I think together, and they, they made a present—well, I don't know whether it was French or Spanish—and they were, made a presentation on Che Guevara. And Susan, the language teacher at that time—she was scandalized, and incensed that they would make a sympathetic presentation on Che Guevara [laughter], and said, “You must straighten that out in those kids' minds!” because she had lived in Argentina and Che Guevara and the leftist regimes were a huge threat to her. I mean, she survived the World War II in Paris and then lived in Argentina, and then was here teaching at George Fox. And she couldn't understand how the kids had gotten off on the Che Guevara—well they, they were not really sympathetic with Che Guevara, but they were drawn to his, his idealism, which I thought was pharisaical, because his idealism didn't coincide with his actions.

**Cherice:** Yeah, yeah, so as Friends, holding together the, the ideals with actual feet?

**Ron:** Yeah, I felt, I thought, and I saw that in our kids, that they picked up on...

**Ron:** And I heard, can't think of her last name, but you know who I mean. She would have been teaching there when...

**Cherice:** Susan?

**Ron:** She was teaching there when I was, I first started, first name was Susan. She... I could see what was happening in our kids. It didn't really upset me. But she was, it was beyond her possibilities. [laughter]

**Cherice:** Yeah, yeah.

**Ralph:** Well, thank you so much, Ron.