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Interview with Marion Wilhite

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Transcript of interview with Marion Wilhite

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends
October 31, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Marion Wilhite 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 October 31, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Okay, Marion, what year were you born?

Marion Wilhite: 1927.

Ralph: So, when you registered for the draft, what did you register as, like 1-A or conscientious objector?

Marion: You know, I don't remember ever signing up for the draft. I turned 18 in 1945. I had a brother in the Air Force, another one in the infantry, and when I turned 18, they both invited to stay out of the army, because in that, at that point in time, if there'd been an invasion of Japan, they would have, would have been right in the middle of that, so anyway, my dad signed for me, and I enlisted in the Navy, then, for July, July 7. So when it came my birthday on the 12th of August, then two years later—two days later, the war was over on the 14th, and I really didn't get called into service until probably the 10th of September. I took my 10 weeks of boot camp down in San Diego, and after that, they shipped me over to Guam for the rest of the, rest of the time until September of '46, when I was discharged.

Ralph: Then, so, so you, so you were in the service for a year or two?

Marion: I was in the service about one year, actual, from July of '45 to September '46.

Ralph: Okay. Did you ever consider conscientious objection?

Marion: No, I didn't. No, I was one, if somebody hit me, I usually would try and hit them back.

Ralph: Okay, so you were straight service, just 1-A, straight service, you didn't give any particular consideration—did you hear anything in the church or from your parents or anyone which would help, or which would cause you to think about conscientious objection?

Marion: I don't remember ever having it as an issue discussed.

Ralph: Okay. So...

Marion: I had, had two brothers, one in the Air Force and the other one in the mili—in the Army, so that probably had an influence in my thinking as well.

Ralph: Sure. Yeah. You grew up in a Friends church, a Quaker church, didn't you?

Marion: Yes.

Ralph: Do you remember anything that was said about conscientious objection or about those things?

Marion: I was aware of it, I know, but, but it never was an issue. I don't recall it being an issue, or discussed.

Ralph: Yeah, which was interesting because at that time some, some, quite a few people would say just what you said, and quite a few would say that they were influenced by the feelings that, in conscience, we couldn't kill other people.

Marion: Yeah. One of the things that did create a question in my mind, and that was actually, would I shoot somebody? And that was always a question that I don't know that I could do it.

Ralph: That's a very interesting question, because imagine that you're in a situation (and I know you've imagined this) that you're in a situation where some Nazi or Jap has their gun aimed at a buddy of yours. Would you shoot him?

Marion: That's a difficult question to answer. In conscience, that question was a problem to me, I remember, but I could never decide whether I can actually pull the trigger or not. Under circumstances of the pressure of something happening now, a person is able to react first and think later, so there is that part of the equation that I still can't answer.

Ralph: Mm-hmm Well, it's a tough question, because—

Marion: How do you react when something blows up in your face? You, you, you know, your immediate response is, I presume, survival. That is—I never had to face the issue.

Ralph: I—in another sense, you did face it by just accepting military service.

Marion: Yes.

Ralph: And you faced the possibility—you didn't face it like we're describing now, but you faced the possibility that you would have to kill somebody.

Marion: And that, I think, would depend upon what your immediate reaction is. I don't know how to answer that, Ralph.

Cherice: Well, how about: were there influences from your, from your Friends church about either direction of how you should choose to go into the military?

Marion: I'm sorry?

Cherice: Were their influences that your Friends church suggested about your military service, in either direction?

Marion: No. Actually, actually, my folks were Quakers, and the church we had was about a mile away and, and I don't think we had 20, 25 in attendance, and it wasn't just a matter of a few years, probably, I was probably eight or ten, when they finally sold the building and moved the church building. So my mother came from a Dutch family, and there was a Dutch church there, just right in the same area, so we attended the Dutch church after that. So that may have had a lot of effect on what the Quakers [laugh] advocated. The... I don't recall a paid minister, even, in the Quaker church—Friends church. Was a neighbor of ours, in fact, Stella Hockett, and she was married to Dad's cousin, and she was a Friends minister, and she did a lot of the preaching from Sunday to Sunday, but here I was, 6, 8, 10 years old, so I don't have a good memory anyone on that part of it, or even what they preached about.

Ralph: What church was that?

Marion: Friends church.

Ralph: Yeah, where?

Marion: Stickney, South Dakota.

Ralph: Oh, I see. I didn't realize, I had in mind that you grew up in this yearly meeting.

Marion: No, no, I was, we didn't leave South Dakota until I was... Spring of '45. I was 17 years old when we moved to Idaho.

Cherice: And did you go to a Friends church there?

Marion: Yeah, the Friends church there in Star.

Ralph: Yeah.

Marion: And we got there in March, in July I enlisted, August my birthday, September, so I was there, what, six months? Before I went into the military. So actually I had six months time, and when I came back the next fall in September,

there's three months' time and I was out here to school in January of '47, so I passed through Idaho, really.

Ralph: So your experience in the military was only about a year or so. [louder] Your experience—how long were you in the military?

Marion: Enlisted on July 7th and got out September the next year, so had just around 15 months, but I got the benefit of the full GI bill because I was in.

Cherice: Then it helped you go to college?

Marion: It paid my way to the two years at college that I had, yes.

Ralph: Yeah.

Cherice: How about: did, did your Christian faith have any impact on your military service or why you chose to go into the service?

Marion: Well, I turned 18, and what do you do when [laughs] if you don't enlist they're gonna draft you? So I chose the...

Cherice: And, and did your faith have anything to say about that?

Marion: I don't recall that it did...except fulfilling the requirement of the land where you turned 18 years, you signed up for the, forget what they called it, the registry.

Cherice: Yeah. So fulfilling the requirement of the land was something you felt like your faith suggested that you should do? [louder] So you, you're saying that doing what the law tells you to do was part of your faith?

Marion: Well, I turned 18, and if they, you have to sign up for the draft board so I didn't see any way out of military service. And I'm glad I got it, because it served me well. Then I got the benefit out of it, got the full, full benefit of the GI bill, even though my service was actually during peacetime. My birthday was just right.

Cherice: Yeah.

Ralph: It would be difficult, I would think, to make a decision, but in your particular case, it was fairly automatic, wasn't it? You hadn't really—I'm thinking you hadn't been influenced very much by the Quakers or conscientious objectors, you moved into Star, but, but that, let's see, how old were you when you went to Star?

Marion: 17.

Ralph: Yeah. And so your background really didn't have a lot to do with the Quaker influence.

Marion: Right.

Ralph: It had a lot to do with the Christian influence.

Marion: Yeah, my grandmother lived with us, or we lived with her, I guess you'd... Anyway, she was part of the family. She was widowed early in life. And when mom got married she, she inherited both of them, Dad and Grandma. And Grandma, I can still picture her sitting in her room by the heater with her Bible in hand, so she was a Christian lady, as well as the folks were, so I had that training from, from the crib on up.

Ralph: Suppose you were 17, 18 now. How would you register?

Marion: Probably the same way.

Ralph: Do you have any feelings... I guess I should ask, why?

Marion: [laughs] I don't know why. I don't have any serious feelings either way, I... When you were at war, and duty calls, I guess one thing I looked at, that, this is just part of life. It's one of the stages that I have to go through and I did it.

Ralph: Suppose you'd been born in, in Japan or Germany. I assume you would have signed up with them, too.

Marion: Yeah I don't... I presume. Of course, a lot of that comes from early training from your, from your parents. They've had 15, 16, 18 years of input and...apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Ralph: Yeah.

Marion: I think the folks have a lot of, have a great deal of input into what you're thinking by the time you're 18 years old.

Ralph: Yes, for sure, yeah. And they didn't have any particular inclination that conscientious—you've already said conscientious objection was not an issue as they grew up, or...?

Marion: I don't remember even discussing it or...

Ralph: Yeah.

Marion: Or being an issue during that time. I was aware of it, yes, but... And I had an older brother, Walt, that was a CO, so that I was aware of it.

Ralph: Do you know why he was a CO?

Marion: No, I do not.

Ralph: Yeah. It's interesting there must have been some influence.

Marion: Well, he was out here to—he came out to Idaho, attended NNC [Northwest Nazarene College], and I think he considered the ministry at one point, and I think that was during that time period, and that probably had the, had the effect for him.

Ralph: Yeah. But in your case, that didn't influence you very much.

Marion: No.

Ralph: And so, you just did what is normal, what most of us would have done.

Marion: I was 18 and you're required to sign up, so what do you do?

Ralph: Yeah, and of course you can sign up as conscientious objector.

Marion: You can.

Ralph: But if you're not, if your conscience doesn't lead you that way, it doesn't make any sense.

Marion: That's right.

Ralph: You, you wouldn't. And so the thing that, that, back to the earlier question, that I think about quite a bit when I think of these, is, if I had been born—well, in my case, I'm a conscientious objector. But if, if you had been born in Germany, you would have been killing Americans.

Marion: Yeah.

Ralph: Because your country comes first. And this, as you can tell, this has been a problem for me.

Marion: Yeah.

Ralph: Because it doesn't—to me, it's a matter of what I think Jesus taught, and he—I think he taught the Germans are as important as Americans, or that Germany is as important as the US.

Marion: You made the point of being Japanese, born in Japanese or in Germany. If, if I was born in a Christian family or a religious, religious family, why, with my...
[laughs]

So I think we're kind of jumping to conclusions, thinking that we're [laughs] meanies rather than Christian people, Christian Japanese or German. So I kind of, I think I would feel the same way, provided I have the same—

Ralph: Yes.

Marion: —15, 18 years of input from my parents.

Ralph: Right, I agree. You would, however, my point of course is that we are influenced by who our country is, more than by the matters of conscience.

Marion: And, too, did Germany and Japan, did they have COs?

Ralph: I doubt it.

Marion: Did they have an alternative?

Ralph: No, I don't think they did. Adolf Hitler said, you know, all of the (let's see, how is that?), all of the German soldiers had a belt buckle that they wore, saying, "God is with us," so they were following Jesus, according to Hitler.

Marion: [laughs] That puts God in a tough situation, to decide which one...

Ralph: Exactly, exactly. So how does he [laughs], how does God decide?

Marion: Right.

Ralph: Well, it's, it's important, of course, it's interesting, that we are strongly influenced by who our country is, because we assume it's right, but the issue that I have become concerned about, and what we're talking about now, is that it seems to me that Jesus says that we ought not to fight, so that's, for me that's where it comes down, but of course, not for most people.

Marion: You know, it's interesting, when you read the Bible [laughs] about the wars, the Lord provide, provided support to the Jews quite often in those battles, so I'd like to have somebody explain to me quite how that worked. [laughs]

Cherice: Yeah, well, I think we would like to hear your perspective on what, what you think about all of that, so we don't need to give our perspective, but what's your thought?

Marion: I think it depends on a person's judgment and mentality, it comes from parents and education that, they lead by example, primarily, more than they, by their word. I know Dad was one that his word was as good as his bond, and that had an effect on all of us boys.

Ralph: Well, anything else?

Cherice: I think that's it. Thank you for sharing your story.

Ralph: Yeah, thank you, Marion.

Marion: Yeah, you're welcome. And we won the war! [laughter] And I didn't even have to fight! [laughter]

Ralph: Yup.

Marion: OK.

Cherice: Thanks very much!

Ralph: Thank you.

Marion: You're welcome.