

11-7-2017

Interview with John Lyda

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Recommended Citation

Bock, Cherice and Beebe, Ralph, "Interview with John Lyda" (2017). *War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1940-1975*. 12.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/conscientious_objectors/12

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Transcript of interview with John Lyda

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends

November 7, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of John Lyda 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 November 7, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Okay, John, we will ask you a few questions. What year were you born?

John Lyda: 1936. I want to back up a little bit. I thought you said November. Isn't this...? I wrote the wrong date over there. (I put a ten on it.)

Cherice: That's okay; we'll deal with that later.

Ralph: Thank you, John. So again, we wanted to know what year you were eligible for the draft? Again, what year were you born?

John: '36.

Ralph: 1936. When you registered for the draft—

John: Conscientious objector, 1954.

Ralph: Okay, and what resulted from that? Were you drafted? Were you a total conscientious objector, or were you the 1-A-O where you could enter the service but not carry a gun?

John: I don't remember the acronyms at that time. I just know that it was general consensus in our home and in our church to not participate in, in the war.

Ralph: So did you have to enter the military at all?

John: No.

Ralph: So you were probably 1-A—I mean 1-O. Excuse me.

John: I understood that if you continued in school they probably wouldn't draft you, and then if you were out of school if you had a family they probably wouldn't draft you. So that's the route that I followed.

Ralph: Okay. So you weren't drafted.

John: Correct.

Ralph: Did you ever have to appear before the draft board or any—

John: I don't recall when I—ever being in front of a draft board, a panel. It may have happened. If it did it was so brief that I forgot about it.

Ralph: Yeah. Well, I want to talk with you a little bit, or ask you a little bit, about how you made the choice. Why did you choose conscientious objection?

John: Well, I don't know whether to go into the background, family, or not. But I could, I guess.

Ralph: Yes.

John: My dad was the youngest, or next to youngest, of a dozen kids raised in the western hills in North Carolina. So some of his older siblings, one of them that I remember especially, had been in the Spanish-American War and came back with—I don't know what—wounds on his legs that were treated the rest of his life, and a cigarette habit.

And one of his other brothers, I think, had been in maybe another war, and I don't know anything about his situation.

But my father was born—we'd been told that he was born in 1900, but my daughter found out recently that the census said he was two years old in 1900. So my dad's dad had a habit, if it helped, to change the age—he changed the age, and—which might put them in a different category as far as being drafted into military service. That was the way I took it. That was the way I understood it, but when my oldest brother, that I mentioned in the bottom line here, was having a tough time getting along with his dad (and I'm not sure of all the details there) and left home a time or two, when he came with a piece of paper wanting to go into the military in 1943, he was age 17 and Dad decided to even sign that paper and let him go in. But I knew that he didn't want me to, or wasn't encouraging me to, when I got that age.

And my mother was born into a Quaker family, and that was not an expected thing to want to go into the military, as well.

Then I had one other brother that got married at 18 and started a family right away, and so he didn't go in the military, but it was interesting that two of his three boys did later on. So there's all this ambivalence.

Ralph: You've touched on this but I would like to know a little bit more. What did your faith in Jesus, and your Quaker faith specifically (as opposed to)—

John: Yes. Someone, I'm not sure who it was, in our Nampa Friends Church was meeting with us boys that were approaching draft age and expressing the viewpoint of (might have been Harley Adams, I'm not sure) expressing the viewpoint of non-military action: that we could not. I had the inner belief that I could not take the life of another person.

Ralph: Pretty strong. It must have been pretty strong, his—

John: Oh yeah.

Ralph: —influence and—

John: Yeah, and yet there was, there was probably some, what's the right word? When we played sports you might do damage to some other person but you weren't trying to kill them.

Ralph: Yeah. So you could hit them, but not kill them.

John: Yeah.

Ralph: Talk a little bit more about the Quaker part of it. Do you think that the Friends, the Quaker influence was pretty strong?

John: Yes, I believe it was. I didn't say what faith my father came from. I think he was in the Baptist Church. But he got into the Quaker Church with my mother, and so I think our teaching, the Quaker faith, was pretty strong in the anti-military. And that almost became a stumbling block with me, the anti-military, that there was a feeling, I thought there was a feeling, against people (like my brother, Lloyd) who were in the military.

Ralph: Well, tell us a little bit more then. What did you do during that period of time as a conscientious objector?

John: I remember at Greenleaf Academy, Frank Engle, Sr., who's a member here somewhere [Friendsview], was doing his CO work there at Greenleaf, and when I wound up going to George Fox College, I remember J.D. Baker doing his CO work here, and J.D. had such an effervescent, outgoing personality that he made it look like a good thing. And I was not a studious person. I would rather have been building something with my hands. But raking leaves like I saw J.D. doing didn't appeal to me particularly. He obviously had other things to do besides that, but that's what I probably saw him doing most.

And so I really wanted to quit George Fox, the classes and I—they were off up here somewhere. [Waves hand over head.] But then I discovered students doing biology work and dissecting cats and you could actually see inside the heart! Wow! That pulled me. So in the last two years of George Fox, I majored in biology and minored

in chemistry, and then by that, by the time I graduated, Janet and I—our older son Jack was six months old, and I wrote to Greenleaf Friends Academy to see if they wanted a science teacher and they did so they hired me. So that kept me going along that line of being in school, being a family man, and working in a religious organization.

Ralph: But you still maintain that testimony, or that conviction, against killing people, even if they're a horrible enemy of the United States.

John: Mainly. Say that again? Mainly.

Ralph: Well, if some major enemy was about to attack the United States would you get a gun and try to help?

John: I never knew what I was capable of doing if I were mad enough. But I would never have used a gun, I don't think. I don't think I would.

Ralph: And you maintain this testimony, not wanting to hate people or kill people, because of Jesus?

John: Well, he certainly left us an example of not being aggressive against other people, and I've tried to follow his example of not being aggressive against other people, even people that I disagree with I don't want to be aggressive against them.

Ralph: Mm-hmm. That's a tough one because he was willing to go to the cross and sacrifice.

John: Right.

Ralph: You're saying that that's where you stand.

John: I don't know if I can go that far, but that's what I know is right. That's a tough question.

Ralph: Cherice, do you have any more?

Cherice: Well, I guess I would be interested in hearing more about the process for you of choosing conscientious objection yourself. You said some about your family influence and your—the person who was kind of a mentor from your church. So how did you go about thinking about those things and any other, you know, reading the Bible or that sort of thing that influenced your personal decision? How did how did you make that decision yourself?

John: Well, I knew it was the right thing to do and the alternative route was not something I wanted to do, so it was a mental decision. We might say it was a

spiritual decision, too, but it's hard for me to define sometimes the line between spiritual and mental.

Cherice: Mm-hmm. You say that you knew it was the right thing, so what did that knowing feel like, or how did you know for sure that it was the right thing?

John: Well, that's the teaching of the church, according to church, and that's the teaching of the Bible as I read it. I have a very hard time reading the Old Testament, and I've been reading through it again recently, because there's so much violence that it seemed God inspired, and I don't understand that. I just don't know how we can say God is the same yesterday, today, and forever when there was so much violence in the Old Testament times and yet so much love in the New Testament times. I struggle with that.

Ralph: I struggle with it, too, but it's wonderful that Jesus came, and so the difference from the Old Testament and the New is totally different. The New Testament is Jesus and he's our example, and in my opinion it's okay to read the Old Testament, but I don't model after it very much, at least not on those particular issues of war.

John: Yeah. I can see why people even today struggle with what do we do with these terrorists. What do we do with the countries that are destroying all of their native people that live there in peace and they're dismantling them, their society and their homes? And do we just stand by and watch? What would Jesus do? That's the tough question.

Ralph: But we know what he would do.

John: He would teach love, and that's—and we're taught to believe that love will be predominant in the end, and we have to encourage our faith to believe that and keep holding that as a goal.

Ralph: Pretty good.

Cherice: Alright.

Ralph: Well, thank you John. I think that we appreciate your testimony: very strong very worthwhile, so—

John: Thank you. It's been a little more different. My wife came from the Christian Church and she and I have shared a lot of things that we learned in our church that corresponded. It's amazing how much between Disciples of Christ and Quaker Church had in common. But somehow she is more pro-military, and so when our first son, Jack, was interested in military and she was encouraging to him and maybe I could have or should have spoken out more. I don't know. But he's had 20 years in the Air Force. And our second son, James, come next summer, will have 20 years in

the Oregon Army National Guard, so I still show love to them. I don't discourage them from that. And then a sideline of that is that we have felt—Janet and I have felt—that our second son, James, has experienced more love from his contemporaries in the Oregon Army National Guard than he has in the Quaker Church. It's an interesting phenomenon. I don't know. They see him as an energetic, well-disciplined guy and they want him. They see quality in him that the rest of us maybe don't see. I don't know why I added that but I felt like it.

Ralph: Well, thank you, John. Appreciate it.

John: Okay.

Cherice: Thanks for sharing your stories.

John: Okay.