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Interview with Howard Macy

Cherice Bock

George Fox University, cbock@georgefox.edu

Ralph Beebe

George Fox University

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Transcript of interview with Howard Macy

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1940-1975
November 30, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Howard Macy 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 30, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Hi Howard, thanks for coming.

Howard Macy: Yeah.

Ralph: And a few questions, like: What year were you born?

Howard: 1944.

Ralph: 1944. Okay. Is that right?

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: You're a kid.

Howard: They keep asking me at the pharmacy, so I have to keep remembering.

Ralph: Yeah.

Howard: Or, when I go to see a doctor, I think when they—when I can't remember anymore they just kill me, I think. [laughter]

Ralph: So that means that you would've been eligible for the draft in '72? You were 18 in...

Howard: Earlier than that, I'm...

Cherice: '62?

Ralph: I mean—

Howard: '62, probably.

Ralph: Oh, '62, excuse me.

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: My math's a little...

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: A little weak.

Howard: I would've been 18 in, yeah, in that year.

Ralph: Yeah, '62, right in the Vietnam...

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: In the Vietnam period. How did you register, or, how did you register for the draft? As 1-A, or 1-A-O, or...?

Howard: Well, can I give you a little background here at this point? But I'll give you a short answer. I registered in Wheaton, Illinois, where we were living at that time. I'm a preacher's kid, Mahlon Macy's son. I lived in Northwest Yearly Meeting until I was about 10 or 11, and dad was a pastor at Piedmont [in Portland, OR], and then we moved to Kansas where dad served an interdenominational group, and then to Illinois. I came to college in George Fox from '62-'66, and then went on to graduate school and bounced around the country. So I wasn't actually in the formative period about draft stuff in Northwest Yearly Meeting, though our membership as a family was at Greenleaf Friends [Idaho], where dad grew up and where mom and dad were married. But that was, we were members who lived in Wheaton, Illinois [laughter] at that time.

Ralph: But you did have to register for the draft.

Howard: I did have to register, yeah.

Ralph: And did you register as a conscientious objector?

Howard: I did. I hadn't had very much instruction about that except through, through dad, and I wanted to be a CO, but I also was planning to be in ministry, and so they gave me, I think it was a 4-D classification while I was in school and preparing, and that continued on through my seminary years, and so on, so.

Ralph: Yeah. So you didn't register—you wouldn't go into the military, but you would be excused as a conscientious objector.

Howard: Well and I, if it had come to that, I think so, I never had an interview with the Selective Service Board about it, though I did register as a CO as well as indicate my intentions.

Ralph: And that was what I was really getting at, was that your position was that you wouldn't go into the military, but that you would be a conscientious objector to killing.

Howard: Yeah, I registered in that way.

Ralph: Okay. And what, what made you make that choice?

Howard: Well, even though we weren't in (in those years in Wheaton, where I, where I went to high school all my four years, so it would've been during that time), we were not part of a church that would have supported CO registration, so I had it through my family and through my tradition that that would be a right thing to do. But, so, so would have been out of, kind of, instruction in the family and an awareness of our heritage, which I agreed with. I didn't want to go kill anybody.

Ralph: Even for the United States.

Howard: No. Maybe for Quakers. No, no, no, [laughter] I wouldn't, I wouldn't have participated. I felt that was wrong.

Cherice: Do you remember what your parents taught you, or did they do formal teaching, or have you read things, or how did they communicate that to you?

Howard: I don't recall formal stuff, except, you know, conversations kind of around the time that we had to pay attention to that stuff. Yeah.

Cherice: Yeah.

Howard: Yeah.

Cherice: So they somehow communicated to you that this was the Quaker way, and why?

Howard: That's my memory, such as such as it is. [laughter]

Cherice: Yeah.

Howard: But it, I don't remember any kind of a "sit down and read about or teach about" or that kind of thing so much, but I think it was kind of in the climate, and I think...

I don't remember how much in World War II people registered. Dad would have been eligible, but he didn't volunteer, and I don't recall whether we had registration then, that they'd call up in World War II. A lot of people volunteered and a lot of people went who probably didn't want to go, but maybe felt they should or something.

Ralph: Yeah, there were, and they just called it “drafted,” they were drafted into the military.

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: And unless they were conscientious objectors, or had some other factor, they would be eligible to go, and so in my—our family’s case, my oldest brother, David, was called in, but my second brother, Rex, was not, because there was a rule that if the, if one son—

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: ...in the farm, at least there's another son would stay and help with the crops, which was considered important as well. But in your case, you, they, you were just drafted—you were eligible to be drafted.

Howard: Yeah. Well, Dad was born in '22, so he would have been what, maybe '38 he would have needed to register, then, maybe? Or no, '30...in '40.

Cherice: '40, yeah.

Howard: And he was in college by then, and again on a path toward ministry, and he had his first pastorate, actually, after he was married, and still in college up at Middleton Friends Church, which is no longer there. Maybe—I don't know if the school, Middleton School, sits on what was that property, but it's that side of Sherwood [Oregon]. There was a lot of Quaker activity up on Rex Hill back when. And there's a Rex Hill Friends and a couple others. Anyway...

Cherice: So, you don't know whether he was a conscientious objector?

Howard: I think he, I think he was. I think, and he told me once that if he had been sent, in any case, he wouldn't ever shot anybody. Yeah.

Ralph: So he was a conscientious objector: whether legally or not, he was. Yeah.

Howard: Yeah, yeah.

Ralph: Okay, well, so you didn't go into the military. Tell us a little more about what you did.

Cherice: Were you, were you drafted, or did they not even try to draft you because you were in school?

Howard: Well, because of the, yeah, because I was in school and studying for ministry, so it's kind of a...

A lot of people stayed in school or even went to seminary so that wouldn't be drafted.

I had, I went from George Fox to Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota for a year, and I was back at Western Evangelical Seminary for a year, and then I went to Earlham School of Religion and was there two years, which was an interesting place to be at that time. That would have been in '68-'70.

I had, one of my fellow students there had done Peace Corps work and was in seminary not to be drafted. I had another fellow student who had been in Southeast Asia doing relief work and had seen the United States bombing where it said it wasn't going to bomb and had seen kids running down the street holding their innards because they had been hit and had a lot of anger and stuff to work through. And another guy who is—grew up Quaker, and for some reason he couldn't quite explain, he got in an ROTC program when he went to college, discovered almost right away that he didn't belong there so dropped out, but because he had done that, the draft board would not accept CO status even though he was a Quaker historically. And he eventually wound up going to prison because he wouldn't, he wouldn't go, even though they drafted him. So it was a, quite a variety of experiences and convictions there. Yeah.

Ralph: But you feel pretty good about your conscientious objection?

Howard: Yeah. I'm glad, I'm glad it wasn't tested, in the sense of my having to choose whether to accept being drafted or not, so the draft board just didn't, didn't bother with me because of, because of my 4D classification, basically. And between that and school (and I was at school forever, because I was real slow learner [laughter]; I graduated with my PhD in 1975), the war was almost over by then.

Ralph: Just made it.

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: Yeah. If you were drafted today, or, that is, if you were eligible, would you be a conscientious objector or would you go into the military?

Howard: I would be a conscientious objector and would refuse to join.

Ralph: And do you want to explain why a little bit?

Howard: Well, at the most personal level, I think I'm not, I can't even be a, I can't be a follower of Jesus and decide to go kill people when I'm told.

Ralph: Even bad people? Even kill bad people?

Howard: No.

Ralph: Like Nazis, or...?

Howard: No. There'd be a, I think there, I believe there are ways that a person can resist evil without shooting people, and take active steps to do that, but I would not, I would not participate, and I don't, I wouldn't carry a weapon.

I suppose that could make me a target. [laughter] I had friends who did alternative service in Vietnam (and you know these guys: Fred Gregory and John Newkirk and Jerry Sandoz). There was another—a couple classes behind me in college, Geil: Steve Geil, who went as a medic, and was in Vietnam, but medics wear uniforms that have targets on the back, you know. (Well, not really but...) They're identified, but they were, they were treated as targets by the enemy, and so he got shot up pretty bad and I—he survived that experience, but I've lost track him. I think he's passed on by now. Yeah. He was the son of a pastor, Earl Geil, you may remember,

Ralph: Yeah.

Cherice: So, I happen to know that you might know a few things about the Old Testament!

Howard: I've read it, yeah!

Cherice: Yeah. [laughter] Spent your career teaching Old Testament.

Howard: Yeah.

Cherice: So, a lot of the questions that people have about pacifism and basing that on—in Christianity has to do with God in the Old Testament, so how do you reconcile that?

Howard: Well, the short answer is, I follow the Joshua of the New Testament and not the Joshua of the Old Testament.

Cherice: Uh-huh.

Howard: And I think Jesus is clear. The whole issue of wars in the Old Testament, whether God really told them to do it and all that kind of thing, are difficult questions that I struggle with, because—and I've actually, I've written, actually, a series of four lectures that I did when I was in New England, while I was still studying at Harvard, when I... They were the "Bible half-hour" talks for New England Yearly Meeting, in maybe '73 or something like that, on "The Shalom of God." And so I convinced that the, that God's purpose is peace. And I've come, in later years, to think that gives a report of God having told them to go to war may, may not really be

what God had in mind, and that's... But that, that, there's all kinds of thorny stuff around that.

But it seems to me that people like to follow Jesus, except when they want to go to war, and then they want to follow Joshua. And, and that seems to me inconsistent. And I'm also aware of early church history, that early Christians were not soldiers, or if they were soldiers, they weren't soldiers for long, so I think that's, I think there's a clear witness to what Jesus had in mind, at least borne out in the first centuries of the church.

Ralph: And the Quakers picked that up...I say, the Quakers picked that up, too, in the 17th century.

Howard: Yeah, yeah. You know, that's kind of, kind of interesting that, though they may, they may have had some contact, I suppose, with Mennonite folks or others, I think they had the most contact with Jesus in the New Testament, in a very War-filled time. I mean, in England at the time, and the Parliament was fighting and beheading the king, and, and so on, but you also have the wars on the Continent that came out of religious roots, actually, in Germany, that was decades long and that kind of stuff, and they would have of course been aware of that. But to see the alternative of the Jesus who didn't, who called us to a different kind of standard, and so, they, they actually knew the Bible pretty, pretty stinking well! [laughter]

Ralph: And George Fox heard that, "There is one, even Christ Jesus..."

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: "who can speak to [his] condition..."

Howard: Yeah. Well and, when he was offered a military position to get out of jail, he refused it—and they didn't seem to do stuff to get out of jail, actually, which is stunning to me because those were really stinking holes back then. So you wouldn't want to really stay just because you liked it so much. So... [laughs]

Ralph: But if Jesus told you to stay, you better stay.

Howard: Yeah, yeah.

Cherice: So, taking it back to when you were 18 and making that choice, how much of this did you know at that point and how much, like, I guess, which of these things would have formed that, the basis for that decision at the time?

Howard: I wasn't... I mean we were in Bible churches and stuff like that, but those churches didn't understand Jesus the way the Quakers did. Though, you know, the high school years would have been '62-'66, so the kind of, that period, it wasn't

really talked about much. I mean, because Vietnam was just sneaking underway, you know, I mean, it was, what, '65 that...

Ralph: '64 was the big...the big event.

Howard: Okay but I, you know, the Gulf of Tonkin thing was...

Ralph: Yeah. Oh yeah.

Howard: Was that...?

Ralph: Sixty...

Howard: Anyway, right in there, and it wasn't on much of anybody's radar, so it wasn't the, the kind of first concern for teaching.

Actually, my experience, most of the churches (kind of evangelical frame, the Bible believing churches) just didn't talk about peace and war very much. That wasn't their central theme.

So I would have would have had it through awareness of Friends tradition and understanding of the nature of Jesus' teaching, but not in much, not in much detail. I think I was glad not to have to go to sit for an interview with my Selective Service Board, though I would have, certainly would have prepared for that occasion, had they called for it.

But I've envied—sometimes Friends have done a pretty good job with this and sometimes not so much, and you're trying to find out when, I think, but in some Mennonite communities, they do a lot of proactive teaching with younger folks and have them develop a portfolio and why they believe this, that, and the other, so if there's a time for them to go sit with the Selective Service Board they, they have their portfolio and they thought about it and they're quite articulate. And that, given their tradition, I think it makes the interviews easier.

Ralph: Well...

Howard: I'm guessing my own local board was not one of those that you hear stories about where they were aggressive and hostile, so they never asked me to come talk with them.

Cherice: It helped that you were in school, also, so you had a deferment.

Howard: Yeah, there were a lot of, kind of, factors and, and I don't know how much it mattered in the Vietnam era whether you were married or not, but then in other eras, there were times that married guys didn't get taken so quickly, and if you had kids, why, that—you were less likely yet, I think. Yeah.

Ralph: Well, Howard, thank you so much for coming.

Howard: Yes, you're welcome, thank you for inviting me.

Cherice: Yeah, thanks for sharing.

Howard: So I'm kind of an outlier, I think, in terms of your, your research, but here I am.

Ralph: Well, and you're, a lot of other people are like you.

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: Actually, to balance everything, we need more people who were in the military and carried guns and told us why, because most of the people we're interviewing from around here are conscientious objectors.

Howard: Well, you...I was teaching about it in my experience in Kansas as an adult. The church we attended, most of that time they never much talked about peace because we had World War II veterans who were good tithers who didn't want us to talk about it, and you know, didn't want us to take down the American flag at the front of the sanctuary either, so yeah. But that would have been, well, '80s. We were, we were in some wars but they weren't all that important to us, I guess. We were starting wars and sending money to people...

Cherice: Not, not actual wars, just "conflicts," right?

Howard: Nicaragua, and that one, one-day war that Ron Reagan was so proud of, that little island, I forget the name of.

Ralph: Ah, I forgot, too.

Howard: Yeah.

Ralph: Well, thank you, Howard.

Howard: You're welcome.

Ralph: Appreciate it.

Howard: Thank you.