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Interview with Gerald Lemmons

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Transcript of interview with Gerald Lemmons

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends

November 20, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Gerald Lemmons 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, OR on November 20, 2017.

Ralph Beebe: Thank you, Gerald, for coming. We need to know first, what year were you born?

Gerald Lemmons: I was born on March 4, 1931.

Ralph: 1931. So, and you would be 18 in about '49, which was between the wars but just at the beginning of the war in Korea.

Gerald: Yeah.

Ralph: Pretty much. When you registered for the draft—registered for the draft, how did you register? What—1-A, 1-A-O—in other words, straight combatant or conscientious objector, or, or go into the military but not carry a gun?

Gerald: When I registered for the draft I decided to go 1-A, I did not go noncombatant or conscientious objector, either one.

Ralph: Did you consider those at the time?

Gerald: A little bit, but not a whole lot, because I was raised in the Methodist church and that was not emphasized at that time, and then when I was about the sixth grade, my parents attended a Friends church, and so I just did not feel that that was what I should do at this time.

Ralph: OK. Were you drafted into the military?

Gerald: Yes, I was drafted. I was going to George Fox College at that time and the draft board sent me notice that I was to report in April of 1952, and I contacted them and asked them if I could not finish the school year, because I was to graduate in June of 1952, and a few days later, after I graduated, I received a notice to report.

Ralph: And you did.

Gerald: And I did.

Ralph: And what happened? Where did you go?

Gerald: My original draft was registered in the state of Kansas, and I was living out here, so I asked them to transfer my records out here, and so I was to report to Portland, Oregon, and then we were transferred to Fort Lewis, Washington.

Ralph: And what happened then?

Gerald: When I was at Fort Lewis, they decided to send me to Camp Roberts, California (which is up about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco) for my basic training.

Ralph: Tell us a little bit about this—more about the decision-making. How did you decide to be a regular combatant? In other words, was there any interest in conscientious objection?

Gerald: I don't recall that I thought too much about the conscientious objector option, so I just assumed that that's what I would do. I probably did not pray and seek God's will as much as I might have, but I just took things as they came.

Cherice: And so, you said you grew up Methodist, but then your family started attending a Friends church. Was that out in Kansas, or did you move here with your family?

Gerald: At that time, we were living in Oklahoma, and so, my father was a Friends minister then, and he pastored a church in eastern Oklahoma, and then later we moved to northern Kansas, to a Quaker church there.

Cherice: So your family had been Friends, but you had had spent some time in Methodist circles—

Gerald: Yes.

Cherice: But your father had—was a Friends minister in different places, just not at the particular time when you kind of had your formative years, is that right? [alarms in background]

Gerald: He was a Friends minister at that time, yes, but he did not try to influence my decision. I don't know exactly where he stood as far as the conscientious objector was.

Cherice: And then you came out to George Fox as a college student?

Gerald: In the fall of '49 I transferred from Barclay (now—it was Friends Bible College at that time) to George Fox, and I graduated from there, then, in June of 1952

Cherice: OK. And during your time in Friends churches, did they bring up anything about draft choices?

Gerald: I don't recall that. It was not emphasized in the churches I happened to be attending.

Cherice: Yeah.

Ralph: And this, of course, was after the "big" war, quite a bit after, and so there probably wasn't as much emphasis [throat clear] excuse me, on these issues at that time, but the Korean War was coming up, and did you have any feelings about maybe the Lord doesn't want me to go, that sort of thing?

Gerald: I don't recall having that feeling at all. I did on choice to not become serious about anyone at that time because I did not think it would be appropriate for me to get serious about someone and then leave them for several months for overseas.

Ralph: So what, what did you actually do during that time?

Gerald: I had my basic training in Camp Roberts, and then I was transferred to a radio operator school in the communications, and I learned the Morse code and all the stuff about operating radios while I was there at Camp Roberts. And then they gave me a leave and then sent me to Korea.

Ralph: What did you do there?

Gerald: And then I went to Korea, my job there was to be a radio operator for a tank battalion, which was assigned to the 7th infantry division, and we were in—the DMZ kind of goes to a neck up in the middle of it and then back down—we were stationed in the apex of that neck that goes up in there, and we had a switchboard that we operated, and then we kept contact with the people as they go out in Jeeps, and also with the tanks that went out. I was about to call it battalion headquarters, and then we had tank companies under that, and then [alarms sounding in background] our direct line was back to Division Headquarters for 7th infantry division.

Ralph: How long?

Gerald: How what?

Ralph: How long were you in the service?

Gerald: Uh, I was in, I was at Korea from—well, I celebrated my March 4th birthday in 1953 by going under the Golden State Bridge and heading for Korea, so that was very memorable!

Cherice: Yeah!

Gerald: And then, I was supposed to be in there for two years, but then the ceasefire happened in July '53, so I put in for early dismissal so that I could attend college to get my teaching certificate—as you know, we—Ralph and some of the others commuted to Linfield at that time for our master's.

Cherice: Great!

Ralph: Especially Gerald and Verne Martin and I, we drove.

Cherice: Oh, that sounds like it would be a fun carload! [laughter]

Ralph: For a year. Yeah, it was great!

Gerald: We studied once in a while. [laughter]

Ralph: Talk a little bit more about, whether there were any questions in your mind about whether Jesus wanted you to kill anybody.

Gerald: I don't recall if I was any, you know, questions about if I should go as a conscientious—I thought some about non-combatant duty, but I decided I was, not to do that.

I was very fortunate because I was in the communications and we did carry weapons but we didn't use them. We did sometimes direct shots, as artillery would go or the tanks would go out, whether long, short, you know, spotted for them, but... Some people have said that that's just as bad as doing it yourself, but I was fortunate to not have to.

Ralph: I wonder, can you imagine, had you been born in North Korea, how these things would affect you, had you been born in a country that was the enemy to the United States, would you have gone into their army?

Gerald: We had a First Rock Division assigned to our tank battalion, and, one of my—not exactly about your question, here, but—one of my jobs was to try to teach them how to operate radios properly and I did not speak any Korean and they did not speak any English, so we had to go through an interpreter, and that was a very interesting experience.

Now about your question, I hadn't thought too much about it until recently when there was a comment about North Korea [alarm sounding in background] ruler saying that he had lots of things to make up to the United States because of what we did in South Korea, and that got me thinking a bit. What would it have been like to be there? Korea was a very poor nation when (it seemed to me) when we were there and—poor enough. I did have the privilege to go to Seoul different times, and a lot of devastation there, and it was not a pleasant situation for us. I was going to put the—

raise a family. But when I was released, I was released in Pusan, which is down in the southeastern part, and I was more encouraged because there was, uh, vegetation and farms and it looked much better down that way.

Ralph: I guess the larger question, essentially, was thinking from whatever the enemy's position was, had you been born there, would you have done the same thing, except for the opposite side?

Gerald: I don't know how to answer that, really, because I did feel sorry for the Korean people, being there, but I—I personally did not feel that I hindered them in any way, but I might have been an accessory to it.

Cherice: Did your faith have any impact on your choice to enter the military?

Gerald: I don't recall that it did. I was young in those days, and foolish probably, and had lots to learn.

Cherice: You just did what you were supposed to do and signed up, and went forward?

Gerald: Right. As the years have gone by, if that same thing had happened today and I were younger, I might have to think about it more, because I've had more introduction to the conscientious objector and the war situation. But at that time I did not have...

Ralph: Not much, not much teaching that even been brought up the issue of conscientious objection.

Gerald: I don't recall anyone really—although I was going to George Fox for school—I don't remember anyone particularly trying to persuade my thought in any way like that.

Ralph: Back when you were 18, no—nobody influenced you in that direction back when you first registered for the draft.

Gerald: No, I don't recall that anyone did at that time.

Cherice: Where were you attending church at that time?

Gerald: Yes, I was—when I was 18, I was at Friends Haviland Academy going to high school there, yes.

Cherice: In Kansas?

Gerald: I attended the Haviland Friends Church there, yes.

Cherice: OK.

Gerald: But I don't recall at Haviland, the Friends Academy, even doing a lot of emphasis upon conscientious objector—there was some on non-combatant, and that was a little bit of a hard choice for me to decide, but I didn't feel that that's what I should do.

Cherice: And you mentioned that now you might, it might be a little harder for you to make that decision. How would you go about making that decision if you were trying to enter—or asked to enter into that same war now?

Gerald: I would probably spend some time praying about it. As a young, so that way, I probably didn't do as much of that as I should have. So, and I've been introduced more to the conscientious and peace and stuff like that in the future years here.

Ralph: But it's fairly likely that there wasn't enough influence on you to even make you make it a matter of prayer.

Gerald: I would say that, yes, but is that my own problem, that maybe other people tried to but I did not listen at, you know, younger age that way? I'm not sure that I probably listened too much. I also had an older brother who was in the World War II, and he went in as a 1-A, and so...

Cherice: And you said your dad was a Friends minister but didn't talk to you about it at all, just let you make your own decision.

Gerald: No, I don't recall he ever discussed that with us. He may not, you know, by him being transferred to the Friends church [in] later years, he may have not felt that way. I never did to ask him how he felt.

Cherice: So was he a Methodist minister first?

Gerald: Yes.

Cherice: Okay.

Ralph: And how old were you when he—I, I don't have it in mind when your family became Quakers.

Gerald: Let's see, I was in the sixth grade, so that would have been, what, about six... eleven, twelve years old.

Cherice: Do you know why your dad became a Friends minister?

Gerald: My father did not have a college education, and if he stayed in the Methodist church, it seemed to be that they wanted him to have some more, and we were—he was a farmer. We had 480 acres there in Oklahoma that was farmed. And then he was a preacher at two small Methodist churches in the area.

Cherice: Wow.

Gerald: And he was going to go to a Methodist conference, but some way he ended to a Friends conference instead, so he came back and said that he decided that God wanted him to be a Friends minister.

Cherice: OK.

Gerald: There was a Friends church about 15 miles from our home, and he was acquainted with the Friends minister there, who by the way was a Craven. Hubert Craven.

Ralph: Yeah.

Cherice: A family name that came out here as well.

Gerald: Fact I have a picture of my father, Reverend Craven, and my uncle—two uncles. And one of my uncles was a Nazarene minister and the other one was a Quaker minister, and then my father later became one, and then Mr. Craven was a Friends minister.

Ralph: Yeah.

Gerald: I've shown that to some of the Craven people around here.

Cherice: OK. And I guess...do you feel like that when you came here to college, was there any sort of, you know, either way, people trying to influence you, or once you made the choice about how to be registered, among Friends, did they care how you registered, or give you any advice or, or anything along those lines in this area, once you moved here?

Gerald: I don't recall what anyone tried to influence me to go as a conscientious objector. As I recall Paul Mills probably was quite influential in that line, but I don't know that he really tried to counsel me that direction.

Cherice: And were people okay with your military service, or did you get any pushback on that from Friends?

Gerald: I don't recall that I got any pushback from it, no.

Ralph: Go ahead.

Gerald: Oh, I just, this is a side kind of, and then when I was in Korea, why, I had gone with Margaret Shattuck a bit, and so I was engaged to her by proxy. [laughter] I had, of course we'd written back and forth and so forth, but I had a sister living with Margaret at the time, so I contacted my sister and asked her to take Margaret downtown to look at the wedding rings and so forth, and so she told me which one Margaret liked, so I sent her—well I actually had to make down payments on the ring, and so then I wrote her a letter and so forth, and then on yearly meeting Sunday, why, we announced our engagement, and her folks were there, and my sister, and Margaret, so, that was a little side light.

Cherice: Yeah, that's great.

Ralph: Nice.

Cherice: And is there anything else about your service in Korea that is something that you would want to share?

Gerald: I felt that the military tried to see that we worshipped in the appropriate manner. They had chaplains, and I remember that we went to chapel services every Sunday, if we could, and I have, you know, remember some of the details of our work there, but...pretty much routine. And then after the ceasefire, why, then we would go on expeditions and practice military stuff like that.

Ralph: Well, thank you so much, Gerald.

Cherice: Yeah, thanks for sharing your stories.

Gerald: You're welcome. I'll be interested to see the end product.

Cherice: Yeah, thank you.

Ralph: OK.