

11-20-2017

Interview with Bill Rourke Part One

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Recommended Citation

Bock, Cherice and Beebe, Ralph, "Interview with Bill Rourke Part One" (2017). *War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1940-1975*. 24.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/conscientious_objectors/24

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Transcript of interview with Bill Rourke

War & Conscientious Objection in Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends
November 20, 2017

Cherice Bock: The following recording is an interview of Bill Rourke 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: Okay, Bill, what year were you born?

Bill Rourke: I was born in 1943.

Ralph: '43, good year, good year! So you would have been eligible for the draft in about '61 or something like that?

Bill: That's right, I graduated from high school in '61.

Ralph: '61. And when you registered, how did you register?

Bill: I registered as 10.

Ralph: 10 means full conscientious objector?

Bill: Full conscientious objector, yes.

Ralph: And why wouldn't you go into the military?

Bill: Well there's a bit of a story there. I was, I grew up at Whitney Friends Church, where Walter Lee was the pastor, and his son, Arnold Lee, was a little older than I and away at college while I was in high school, I'd say, and during that time, Arnold Lee came home and, as he remembers it...[phone rings]

Cherice: With a brief interruption with a phone call, we are back again with Bill Rourke. So, continue letting us know how, how you came to be a conscientious objector at Whitney Friends.

Bill: Arnold Lee came back from college, apparently, and taught a class, as he remembers it, most likely on the history of Friends. I don't remember that being the topic in the class or whatever, but what I do remember is as part of that class he talked about the, the peace stand of the Friends traditional—peace stand of the Friends church, and, and encouraged us young men that were in this class to consider this seriously. And I did. I got ahold of my Bible that I had at that time, which I was very familiar with—I was, I was good at finding things in the Bible in high school. I won all the contests. And I highlighted in the Bible all the stuff that

Arnold talked about, about, in the New Testament, Jesus' (especially) words about living at peace with folks and loving your enemies. And that Bible was marked up big time. I wish I still had that old, zippered Bible that I had, but it wore out a long time ago.

And I became convinced that that was the right thing for me, based on he and his father's encouragement. My church supported that as well and encouraged me, because of the draft and the situation at that particular time, and this was going on in 1961, to document my views about this, and, and the church encouraged me to write down how I felt about those things, and I wrote a letter to the church where I wa—just reviewed my, my research into the topic and how I came to that conclusion, and, and so that's sort of the background of how I came to understand that. I studied the scripture, I listened to my pastor and his son, and I became convinced that that was the right thing for a Christian to do.

Ralph: Did you read Leviticus? And check about Israel and all its wars?

Bill: Those were hard discussions, and I was able to, some would say, rationalize my, my view based on what Jesus said, and I didn't spend a lot of time in Leviticus or the other Old Testament stories of, of the war that God seemed to almost encourage, or as a young man, it seemed that way to me.

Ralph: But Jesus brought the message of peace.

Bill: Jesus brought a whole different story for us, and, and I came to believe that what happened in the Old Testament was a result of the Israelites' disobedience, and that—rather than God's perfect plan for them.

Ralph: So you were classified, then, as a conscientious objector?

Bill: Yes, I was.

Ralph: Were you ever actually drafted?

Bill: No, I volunteered.

Ralph: And tell us a little more about what that means.

Bill: I don't remember exactly all the details. I was not, I don't believe I was ever, quote, "drafted," but right out of high school I decided I ought to, y'know, meet my obligation, and, and so I went through with everyone else who was either volunteering or drafted at that time, a physical—went down to the place where the guys did their physicals for the military. And with a bit of fear and trepidation for a pretty immature eighteen-year-old kid, I'm in there with all these guys who are headed off to the military. And I had to—not knowing whether I needed to or not, talked to the sergeant (or whoever he was) that was in charge of things at that point,

in telling him that I was a conscientious objector, and he said, "That's no big deal, just keep on going down the line and have your physical." So I, right out of high school, volunteered just to do my two-year duty, which I did at St. Luke's Hospital in Boise, Idaho.

Ralph: What kind of duty was it?

Bill: I'll have to just say, you know, it provided the impetus for my entire career the rest of my life. I was in a hospital and I worked in two different areas, specifically: a central supply where I prepared materials for surgery and various other things that, I sterilized things and so forth for the hospital's use. And then, I did that for over a year maybe even a year and a half, and then I wanted to get a little more broad experience and asked to be relieved of that duty and moved into a general orderly position where I just did a wide variety of things around the hospital, especially with male patients, preparing them for surgery and doing those sorts of things that orderlies in hospitals do.

Cherice: Was it a military hospital, or just a regular one?

Bill: No, it was the hospital I was born in, St. Luke's Hospital in Boise, Idaho. No, it's just a regular old, regular old hospital. At that point in, period in time there were a lot of young Friends kids doing that exact same thing. I was, I was with Chuck Smith, I was with Paul Cousins, there were a bunch of us who did our alternative service at St. Luke's, those of us who went right out of high school. Some went on to college and did their alternate service work after they got out of college, and I often wondered what I have, what my life would have been different if I had gone to college straight, and then decided what I would do for alternate service, because what I did wasn't particularly exciting, and some would say it was pretty tame duty as an alternative to, to the military action, but that's what I did and, worked for me. I went into the medical profession after that, and I think that prompted that. To be honest with you, I just got that exposure and felt good about help, helping people and that sort of thing, so...

Ralph: It's quite, quite a contrast to what your profession might have been if you had gone into the military.

Bill: Who knows what, you know, yeah, it never crossed my mind to go to the military, to be honest with you. What did, in retrospect, crossed my mind is, should I have waited, should I have just gone to college and graduated with my class? But instead, I did my alternate service, went to school at Boise Junior College at night and finished two years of my college degree while I was doing my alternate service, and then I transferred to George Fox to finish two years behind my, my peers.

Cherice: And, how was that arranged? Because I know that sometimes there were different groups that would arrange the alternative service. Was it something that you arranged, or the military, or some other—

Bill: I totally arranged it myself. It was, you know, as I mentioned, pretty common for the guys in the Boise Valley and Greenleaf areas to work at St. Luke's Hospital. A whole bunch of us did it during those years. And you know, I just went down—I don't remember, to be honest with you, all the details. I'm sure I had to tell someone that I was doing this. I don't honestly remember that detail, but I had a job. St. Luke's was happy to have us guys there.

Cherice: Were you full volunteers, or did you get a little salary?

Bill: No, we did get a salary. Wasn't a huge, big salary, but there was—we were hired as orderlies in the hospital and so they, they paid us.

Cherice: Okay. And was it through the military at all? Did you have to do any sort of paperwork with the military?

Bill: You know, I assume I had to tell them that I was doing this. I don't remember, to be honest with you. But I wrote a letter or filled out a form. I probably—no doubt there was a form to fill out that indicated what I was doing. I just don't remember it.

Cherice: Yeah. And did you have to appear before the draft board to be approved as a conscientious objector?

Bill: You know what, unlike other stories that I've heard, it was just no big deal there. I think the precedent had been set by folks that were in the program before me and from our area, and the local draft board there, it was not a big issue. I never felt like I was, you know, beat up about it or had any serious questions. I turned in my letter to the draft board folks during the time of my physical, so that they knew, that letter from—that I had done a year or two before, and so they had all that information, and I honestly don't remember there being any sort of problem with my getting that status at all.

Ralph: And that lasted two years?

Bill: Two full years, yes.

Ralph: Yeah, and then you were released and went to college?

Bill: That's right, finished my college, yeah. I stayed in Boise one extra year after my thing because my wife was finishing—my then fiancé—was finishing school as a registered nurse, and that was an important milestone that needed to happen before we came out to George Fox because someone had to make some money, and I was going to be going to school full time, and so we waited one year after I finished that. That's how I finished my second year at BJC, as a matter of fact.

Cherice: And so, I'm wondering more about the class that you took at your church, and did that—what do you think that you would have chosen if you hadn't had that class? Was that a new concept to you when that class started or was that kind of just a continuation of learning that you had before?

Bill: You know, I knew about this position, but hadn't just studied it that much, until apparently they had a focused class on this topic. I talked to Arnold Lee about this many years later. I wanted to say thank you to Arnold for helping crystallize this for me. He didn't remember it and he just assumed he came home from school and taught a little history of Friends class or Friends doctrine or something. And you know, it was a one-off sort of thing, maybe. I don't remember whether it happened every year and all the kids got the same thing that I did, but it influenced me, that's all I can say. Not every one of my peers at that church made the same choice I did.

Ralph: Supposed the draft, today, were for people your age. How would you, what would you do?

Bill: I wouldn't go with the military.

Ralph: It'd be the same.

Bill: Same. You know, I remember having this conversation with my oldest son, who, we were lucky enough that the draft was not an issue there, but we had the conversations, and we all agreed as a family then that if it came to that, and if our country couldn't respect our views, we'd go to Canada before we submitted to the, our country's demands. I thank God regularly that we weren't forced to do that. And the sacrifice of lots of folks before me paved the way so that I didn't have to, and my family never had to face that sort of thing. But that's how strongly I felt, and still feel, about that.

I think about guys who chose the 1AO draft status, where they actually joined the military, but as a non-combatant, and did amazing good work. I decided that I, I couldn't even do that. It was, for me, sort of like holding hands with—I don't want to overstate this. I'll say it, though: holding hands with the Evil One in order to accomplish some good thing.

And I would rather if I had waited, for example, 'til after college. I would have gone with the Red Cross to accomplish those same sorts of missions, in Vietnam or wherever it was, or with, you know, World Concern or some other organization. I wasn't mature enough at age 18, when I made this decision, to think that process clear through. But it was, was then, and still is, a very important decision for me, and I'd make the same decision today for sure.

Cherice: Yeah, and what was it like—you said that not everybody in your peer group made the same decision. Was there any—what was the reaction of your

church to anybody that decided to join the military, or was there any disagreement between your peer group around those decisions?

Bill: You know, several of my peers did go in—and my brother, who started out trying to be a conscientious objector (but I think because he didn't enjoy the orderly work very well) didn't last long, and he joined the military and served two terms in Vietnam and has, to some degree, suffered the consequences of that over the years.

But I never felt any negative stuff about folks who made a different decision. I sure felt plenty of support for what I did, but I don't remember hearing anything about my other, my peers during that time, most of whom went on to college and I lost, sort of, track of how they dealt with that, because not all of them ended up in active military service that I'm aware of. But you know, the church didn't—it wasn't such a strong position of the church that they ostracized folks who made a decision different than I did. We were all pretty well loved and appreciated by the church for the position. But I really felt strong support from my pastor and my folks at my church. They brought me through a process of crystallizing my, my views on the topic and writing it down. I wish I had that letter. I don't have that one- or two-page letter I wrote back then.

Cherice: Yeah...yeah. Do you remember what you did with it? Did you put it on file at your church, or did you just hold onto it?

Bill: No, it was the church had it in its records, and then I gave a copy of it to the draft board as I was going through that process. I wish I'd kept a copy of it somewhere.

Cherice: Yeah. And how about the reaction from the outside culture? Did you feel like, in the hospital or anybody else that heard about your service—alternative service—did you hear any feedback on that, that was—that impacted you, that you still remember it?

Bill: You know, the hospital environment, they loved us little Quaker boys that were doing that work. They really did. They, they just loved us. And I got no pushback or negative comments, and I certainly don't remember any overt sort of stuff that happened in my little environment. Maybe I was in such a protected area that I didn't hear it, but I didn't get any real negative feedback from people that I was associated with about making this decision. Unlike some—I know of some who did, but I, I didn't feel it, and maybe I was just insulated for some reason.

Cherice: Yeah.

Bill: I spent a lot of time working during those times. I did volunteer work and I was taught that—I mean, I volunteered back at my work at St. Luke's, plus I did some other jobs, and I was going to school part-time during this, and that's—I didn't have

much time to interact with folks to discuss philosophical things, so no negative feedback that I recall, really.

Well, except a few friends at Greenleaf, where I went to school, who weren't Quakers. We had friendly sort of "discussions" on this and other Quaker distinctive topics during the latter part of my high school years, but there's also, always a friendly sort of thing that high school kids do.

Cherice: What was the hardest question that you got on this, that you can think of?

Bill: Probably back to the Old Testament, and the fact that God really encouraged annihilations of full populations of people and, and those were probably the hardest for me to, to deal with. I think, also, you know, I think our—there's a certain ego involved with supporting your country, and I'd say it's a little bit hard for me to say, especially, not necessarily during that time, but even now, you know, you're supposed to submit to your leaders in your country and do what they say and, and that all figured out in my mind, but it requires some discussions sometimes, and it did then, rationalizing how scripture on one hand sort of hints that you ought to do all those things and—but it's pretty clear to me that isn't what Jesus wants for me.

Cherice: Would you say a little more about your thought process in that, of how do you make that decision of when to obey the leaders of your country and when to obey God?

Bill: My thought process is, and I haven't—I'm not a lot of theologian, so I—but as far as I'm concerned I should submit to the leadership of my country until it conflicts directly with what God's call for me a Christian is. And if I choose not to submit to my country and take some action to solidify that, I am willing to pay the consequences of that that my country would impose.

So I'm very lucky that I didn't have to pay a very high price because predecessors to me paid that price and went to jail, for example, because they wouldn't—they wanted to obey their view of what God said over what their country said. I'm very lucky I didn't have to, to do that. But I've said very strong thank-yous to people like Ed Beals here at Friendsview, and others, who paid a price. But, that's just basically you know, I...

If you're going to fly two flags, and one of them is a Christian flag and one that's a US flag, the Christian flag has to be up top of the US flag. And I really am offended by Christian schools that I see in Newberg and at Hayden Lake, Idaho, where they have the American flag just above the Christian flag, and for me that's very symbolic, and the real message of what comes first. And for me, the Christian flag, even though I don't fly it particularly, it's symbolic. It trumps anything the country wants me to do if there's conflict. But I know that if I disobey my country, or the law enforcement folks, for conscience's sake, that I might pay a price for that, and that's, that's okay.

Cherice: And I know you a little bit, and that you have done a lot of service, as well, since then, so would, would you say that your alternative service impacted your willingness or your, kind of, the way that you, you live your life in terms of doing acts of service? You do medical work and other types of projects, I know, a lot of times, so how does that come forward, not just in your career, but in your volunteer service?

Bill: I'm not positive, but I think the same thing that motivated me to do alternative service is what motivates me to do other things. I really think that as long as this guy has something to contribute, he wants to keep doing that. And so I spend a lot of time, honestly, doing volunteer things of one sort or another, and I think it's from the same motivation that motivated me to be of service in the alternate service years as well. It's the same thing that drove both things. I don't want to say that what I did as an alternate service is why I do good volunteer things today, but the motivation for doing both was the same.

Cherice: What would you say that motivation is? Like, when you look at that inside of yourself, what, where does that motivation come from?

Bill: Yeah...I think Jesus has asked us—told us—to care for the needy around us and help those that we see that are poor and all those sorts of things, and, and I felt some obligation to do that in the alternate service arena, because the country offered that option to me and, and I appreciated that very, very much. So you know, I think we're told... I'm not going to spend my life sitting around watching TV. If there's something that I'm physically able and I've got something to contribute, I think Jesus tells me I ought to be doing that.

Ralph: What you say takes me back to what we talked about before: the difference between the Old Testament and the New, how, when Jesus came, that brought a total change for a lot of people, those who would follow him, and you're expressing the same thing.

Bill: That's exactly right.

Ralph: Exactly the same thing. And it's nice to follow Jesus.

Bill: Jesus made a big difference. I guess I'm not supposed to be a dispensationalist—I don't understand all those things—but Jesus's coming made a huge difference to the world, I think, and he's made a big difference to me, and it's his words in the scripture are the ones that drive me and make the decisions I make about, about things, and especially this one.

Ralph: Very good.

Cherice: Yeah. Well, thank you very much for sharing your stories.

Bill: You're welcome.

Ralph: Thank you, Bill.

Bill: It's not as dramatic as some stories I've heard people tell, but it's just the way it was for me.

Cherice: Yeah, it's encouraging.

Ralph: It's very dramatic.

Bill: Yep.

Ralph: Thank you so much.

Bill: You're very welcome, I'm glad to. Good luck on getting this project completed.

Cherice: Thanks!