

Life of a COs Wife

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Life of a COs Wife

Chapter I: My Life as a COs Wife

My children say, “Tell us more about your life as a wife of a conscientious objector.” They speak of the second world war fought in the early 1940’s. It’s now 74 years since their Father and I first met on Valentine’s day. 1941. Where to begin!

Who we were and how we got that way.

I was still in high school when rumblings of conflict in Europe began. Many people first expressed strong feelings for our country to take an isolationists position and keep out of a European war. Talk of conscription followed. I quizzed boys in our church fellowship group as to how they felt about killing another human being. All took it for granted that if a draft occurred they would just have to go. I felt uncomfortable that these good people could so easily ignore the commandment ‘*Thou shall not kill*’. Of course they didn’t have a father like mine who spoke so earnestly of how to bring about a peaceful kingdom. Our dad hoped living life as a vegetarian would become a beginning of one way to reach that ideal.

A leader in Wayne’s church youth group became his mentor by advocating pacifism. Wayne also had a group of friends from different congregations who had asked to use a church basement for discussion meetings and youthful jubilation, like volley ball. The minister’s wife called them Heretics. So they adopted that name and met in each others homes. They were taking turns discussing, *Who am I, where did I come from, and where am I going*, when Wayne invited me to meet this group of his friends.

I wouldn’t say meeting Wayne was love at first sight for us, but rather a gradual appreciation of each others values that drew us together. Yet some years later Wayne did ask what ever happened to that black dress you wore the first time we met. What I appreciated about Wayne was that he knew what he believed and had the courage to stand up for his convictions. Enjoying the beauty of the world while on bicycle trips was the catalyst that brought us together.

Our first bump in the road came when Wayne introduced me to his mother. She said, “You live on the south side”. I viewed West Allis as more west than south of Milwaukee, but my address was on South 57th Street, and West Allis is a factory town.

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Both of Wayne's parents were first generation American born; and his mother was very proud of Mr. Arhelger. He owned a school on Downer Avenue in Shorewood teaching auto mechanics which he directed from the time of their marriage in 1910, until the depression forced him out of business.

About nine months after we met Wayne told his folks he had proposed and that I had accepted. His mother's reaction was, "She is not good enough for you." He told me, in his mother's view there isn't any woman good enough for him, then he said, "Don't worry she will come around in time." She had sons but no daughters. It just seems like I just didn't fit the role of her dream for a dutiful and devoted daughter. His folks did lend us their summer cottage on Lake La Bell until we found a place to live, then it was Wayne not me, who had bride's nerves the first time we invited his folks to dinner.

War disrupted the plans of so many newlyweds of our generation who had to put on hold their plans and ambitions for building a home together. So it was for us.

We married six months before Wayne's work deferment ran out. Then he applied to his draft board for a conscientious objector's classification. I watched him fill out the forms and knew what he was thinking. It had been an ever-present topic in our conversation since we first met, and we had hashed out all the pros and cons with our friends. Some people challenged Wayne's beliefs just enough to strengthen and confirm his conviction that he could not kill and therefore could not take part in war in any way. Others said, "I don't agree with you but I'll fight for your right to believe as you do."

He looked long and hard at what he had written before sliding his application in the envelope as he said, "I'll mail this and ask my folks to come over tomorrow. Telling them won't be easy, you heard how proud Aunt Liz was when she talked about my cousin in basic training at Ft. Bragg. Well now my mother won't be able to boast about me to her relatives because they regard COs as slackers and yellow bellies."

The next evening, when his folks got settled in the living room, I busied my self preparing refreshments in the kitchen and to give them some time together. I heard Wayne as he began "You know I no longer have a work deferment so I have applied for a conscientious objector's classification. If the draft board grants it I will soon be sent to a Civilian Public Service camp." (CPS)

"Where will you go?" asked his mother.

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“I don’t know. It could be quite far as there aren’t any camps in Wisconsin. But it will be some place where I will be able to do work of national importance.” He paused before saying “I hope you are not disappointed in my decision.”

His father, a son of a civil war veteran, stiffened as he said, “Where is your loyalty to your patriotic duty? You could join the army as a noncombatant.”

“No, I couldn’t Dad, even 1-A-Os have to carry guns and I can’t do that; but I am willing to do alternative service,” After a long apprehensive pause Wayne continued, “I hope the draft board doesn’t give me a hard time. You know our neighbor Mrs. Decker is on the draft board but I haven’t heard of any one else in this district applying for a 1V-F status so I don’t know how the board feels about conscientious objectors.

“What will you do if they classify you a 1A?”

“I will refuse. If the Board doesn’t grant a 1V-F, I will have to go to jail.”

“You would disgrace us by doing that?”

“I would rather be in jail than kill any one.”

Horrified his mother said, “Come Dad, let’s get out of here.” They stomped out of the room just as I was about to enter with the tray of refreshments.

“I suppose you encouraged him to do this,” his mother accused as they walked pass me and left our apartment. Wayne put his arm around my shoulder and said, for the second time, “Don’t worry I am sure they will come around in time.”

A short time later Wayne was ordered to report for a physical. The military Doctor saw that Wayne had rickets as a child that had caused a overlapping rib but it was not serious enough to keep him out of the army.

The draft board granted Wayne a CO classification, and promptly sent him two weeks’ notice to prepare to leave. We moved our belongings into my parents’ attic and went on a week-long bicycle trip to the Smokey Mountains. It was early May and beautiful, the trip produced great memories and eased the anxiety of our upcoming separation. Wayne would phone his mother every evening to see if his date to report had come in the mail. As it turned out we returned home with three days to spare.

For his anxious mother, that was more than she could handle. She worried herself to a sick bed, then told me because I didn’t oppose Wayne’s decision, I was an abettor to

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his crime that made her sick. Therefore, she contended, “It’s now your duty to come and do-for-me.”

Just my dad and mother came along with us to the railroad station to see Wayne off at one o’clock in the morning, and so I wouldn’t have to drive home alone in the total darkness. At that time Milwaukee people, in the middle of the United States and miles of ocean between us and the enemy, were governed by a lights-out curfew at sundown. I was surprised by the complete darkness without street lights or lights from windows and we the only people waiting in the dark on the unlit depot platform and also, how quickly the train with Wayne on it seemed to vanish into a black hole. My future now as a COs wife began as blank and bleak as the dark night.

He was sent to a former CCC camp near the small Indian village of Trenton on north west border of North Dakota. The closest town was Williston about fifteen miles to the east. That was where I would go as soon as he could find a place for me to live.

The next morning I dutifully went to my mother-in-law’s. She let me in and then went straight to bed. I took a quick survey of what needed to be done. I saw by the three coffee cups and bowls left on the breakfast table, she might have eaten with Wayne’s father and brother Bill before they left for work. In the living room I felt a warm spot on the couch where the news paper and afghan had been tossed aside. Could she have been sitting there reading and warming that spot until I rang the bell? I tidied up and made and served supper for the men and left while they were eating. The next day she asked me to stay to wash the supper dishes before leaving. It was close to curfew time when I left that evening, and I had just reached the alley where I rented a garage when the curfew alarm went off, but I had to keep the car lights on to steer the car into the garage. The garage owner was our block warden who rushed out to scold me for having lights on after curfew. He warned me if it ever happened again I could no longer use his garage.

Now as a COs wife on my own, my most urgent need was to get a job to be self-supporting, because COs were not paid for their work, nor was there any compensation for their families or health insurance. I could have gone back to the job I had at Allis Chalmers but it wouldn’t have been fair to work just a short time and quit again. So I found office work in a foundry.

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Chapter II: My Life in North Dakota

Wayne wrote that the camp at Trenton had just opened two weeks before he got there and he was bunking in the same cabin with the CPS men who had just transferred from Merom, Indiana. These men had finished a Soil Conservation Project that had started in the CCC years, and the Indiana farmers were very appreciative of the finished grading of their farmland. But the COs had trouble in the area around Merom as there were CO haters and bigots who would way-lay and beat up “Conchies” as they called them whenever the CPS men would try to hike to a nearby town to see a movie. This made these fellows from Merom very anxious to establish and preserve goodwill in this new North Dakota community.

Wayne also told a bit about camp life and the work project at Trenton which was also a Soil Conservation Project. A government hired man was in charge of the work assignments, while it was the Peace Churches, Mennonites, Brethren and Friends Service Committee (Quakers), who took on the responsibility of supporting and directing the camp life. That meant these peace church groups paid rent to the government for the former CCC cabins, including the cots, bedding, and even the work tools. They also supplied all the food, the cooks, the nurses, and small amount for the men’s personal needs. The only thing the government ever paid for was the COs train ticket to the camps.

We came to appreciate that it was the Quakers who were in charge of operation of the camp at Trenton, because we both learnt so much from their gentle ways. (later in New Jersey and Pennsylvania I was so grateful for the tremendous help and influence they brought to my life.)

Two months later Wayne wrote that due to lack of transportation he couldn’t get into Williston to hunt for a place for me to live, but I should come any way. My job in a steel foundry in West Allis offered a better income than I would be able to earn in Williston, a poor farm town out in the wheat fields of North Dakota. Yet I packed everything I’d need, or not, for light housekeeping in the back seat of Wayne’s blue Buick, including my sewing machine and a cookie jar full of an assortment of spices I had received at a wedding shower. This jar was topped off with a bittersweet chocolate

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bar that melted in the hot sun shining in the cars rear window and chocolate coated the top of every tin spice can. After my dad helped me secure both of our bicycles on the top of the car I was off with just enough gasoline tickets to get all the way there. (My sister Echo came along for the ride and later said the train trip back home was the best part of her trip.)

Again my first priority was to find a job and a place to live. I cycled up and down every street seeking For Rent signs until I found a one room efficiency apartment. Trying to be very cautious to avoid any future trouble, I thought I was being up-front when I told the land lady that Wayne was at the CPS camp out near Trenton and would only be with me on weekends. One evening the young women in the adjoining apartment came over to visit long enough to smoke one cigarette. She told me that she met her husband at a USO. They had a 2-week courtship, then and married just before he was deployed. He had been gone about 2 months, and already she was forgetting what he looked like, and was missing out on the fun of this period of her life. So she was going to move to a big city. Many young women found themselves in the same position so I felt fortunate in this first year of marriage to be able to see Wayne almost every weekend.

Every other weekend and I would cycle out to camp and stay in the guest house set aside for visitors and Wayne would come to town the following Saturday evening. On my way to camp I seldom met any cars going either way. One evening while bicycling at dusk I was surprised to hear a migrant Mexican singing a mournful song echoing through the hills. He to seemed to be longing for home and family. Wherever the singer was I didn't see him. Perhaps he was laying on his back hidden in the tall grass or perhaps when he saw me he was too shy to continue singing. That was a pleasant trip.

The first jobs I found were clerking first at J C Penney and then at Montgomery Ward. But both stores only gave me work two or three days a week and I couldn't survive on that. So I applied for work at a locally owned department store and was hired to start on Monday with less pay than Wards would pay for a full forty eight hour work week. At this store my landlord would be my supervisor in the china department. Before leaving work at Wards on Saturday evening I told the assistant manager that I needed a full week's work to support myself. He told me the manager was on vacation but would be back on Monday and he would see what he could do then.

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Feeling unsure that I made the right decision I hurried home as this was the Saturday for me to cycle out to the camp. But when I got home, I was stunned by finding a telegram that had been slipped under my door from the local store owner stating tersely he could not use my service. Could I still go back to Wards on Monday? Then another telegram came, this from my landlady giving me a week's notice to move out of the apartment. This local store owner would have nothing to do with any one so unpatriotic and his employees shouldn't either. No job, no place to live, what would I do? I was being ostracized for being different. There were so few places to look for work and apartments were very hard to find.

That evening I dawdled over supper and in despair got a late start on the hour-long bike ride to camp. It got dark. I knew Wayne would worry, but I just could not hurry. I had biked most of the way when truck lights came toward me. It was so unusual to meet any traffic going either way. The truck stopped, fellows jumped out of the truck saying, "Can we give you a lift?" Before I recognized anyone they had my bike in the truck and had me in the cab. When they turned the truck around, I realized these fellows were from camp and had come out looking for me. One of the fellows was in charge of the trucks and another had the keys to the gas pump. Without telling anyone they had formed their own search party risking reprimands for illegal use of government equipment.

It took a couple of weeks to find another place to live, which unfortunately had some insects, that bit me. I couldn't identify the bug, so I sent a dead one to a pest control company in Milwaukee that identified it as a bed bug. I had to move again.

Then I placed a blind ad in the news paper looking for an apartment with no more information than a post box number. Mrs. Peterson, a kind, sympathetic lady of the Jehovah Witness persuasion sought me out at my place at work and offered me her basement one room efficiency apartment. That is the way things work in small towns where everyone knows everybody's business. We became good friends.

I may have taken bed bugs with me, but Mrs. Petersons blamed her former tenant. Wayne had accumulated enough off days so we could go home for Thanksgiving. She moved everything from our apartment to a motel where she could fumigate them, then

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she stripping the wallpaper and painted the room cleaning every crack the bugs could hide in.

Life as a pacifist in time of war puts one in a minority class but not the same as if marked with color. There was just one other time when I witnessed hateful loathing. It happened on a Monday morning after a weekend visit camp when I got a ride back to Williston with David Christopherson. He was a tall, lean, lanky fellow affectionately nick- named Stubby. His job was to go into town after supplies and groceries every Monday morning. Usually, one saw farm trucks and families in town shopping and visiting only on the weekends, so it was unusual to see a bunch of husky tanned farm boys dressed in clean western shirts and jeans lolling around trucks parked on the main street on a Monday morning. As Stubby maneuvered the camp's truck into a parking space we heard the hostility in the voice of one brawny fellow as he asked, "Are there any of them Yellow-Bellies in this part of the state?" As we got out of the truck and walked toward them we heard the response of a local fellow, "Yeah there are some around Malta and there's a camp out by the Indian town on the border. Sometimes they come in town for supplies. Here comes one of them now!" They stood with their feet apart, arms folded as they flexed over-sized muscles made hard by tossing heavy hay bales. They were staring Stubby up and down as we came abreast, our eyes looking straight ahead. I walking on the inside eyed the rough brown brick building and thought, "If they tie-into Stubby he will fall against me and I will tumble like a domino against this hard brick wall." I tried to estimate how badly I was going to get scratched up. At the store entrance Stubby said, "Whew! I thought for sure those fellows were going to take a swing at me." I believe they would have if he had been alone that day.

Camp life for the men and growing discontentment

The government kept COs in very remote places as the public had to be isolated from criticism of the war. Because of the isolation of these work places, camp life became a time of intense self- inquiry, self-interrogation and introspection. Being with so many like minded people gave COs a sense of comradeship like a kindred spirit.

One CO who worked at a Forestry Project summed it up by saying, "We split wood all day and split hairs at night." These bull sessions were intellectually stimulating. I was fortunate to occasionally listen in or hear a visiting speaker.

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I felt it was fortunate that camp life at Trenton was under the leadership of the American Friends Service Committee for the majority of men we made friends with enhanced my education as they came from urban communities and had a year or two of college education to others with PhDs, and who had been working in leadership and high management positions. In contrast to the camps directed by the Mennonites and Brethren where a larger majority of men came from farming communities with less than a high school education.

Among COs there was unique individuality, great diversity of values, aspirations and activists in the cause of brotherhood. Among Quakers there was the spirit to go the second mile and be more productive than during the CCC era. As time went by, for some men, opinions about the work assignments changed to feeling that the government was taking advantages of the Peace churches, and not assigning the CPS men to work where their skills could make a greater contribution to the country. This unrest intensified when they learned that another branch of the government had plans to build a dam that would cause water to back up and flood the area which they were preparing for farm families.

As our second anniversary approached, I too became restless that we could not put any money aside for the home we were so eager to build. Or if the war continued for years soon I'd be thirty years old before having our first child.

About that time Mental Health Hospitals and Training Schools became so under staffed and they were crying out for help. So the government finally allowed Civilian Public Service units to fill the gap. Wayne applied for a transfer and was allowed to transfer to the State Training School for Boys in New Jersey. But it was the men who worked in the Mental Health Hospitals that led the way in making great changes in the conditions and treatment previously neglected people with mental problems were treated.

A few months before Wayne was granted a transfer, I had found a new a job as a book-keeper in a Ford Auto Parts Store with more pay. I would have liked to stay at this job long enough to become skilled in this field of work. The owner was a good teacher and begged me to stay.

Some times one must do things out of their planed order.

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Chapter III: New Jersey

At the end of November 1944, we left North Dakota's white CCC barracks set in a sea of undulating wheat to go to New Jersey's garden state. There we found the State Training School for Boys to be a cluster of white cottages many miles from urban culture. These cottages buildings were designed with two story fronts facing the winding streets. The house parents lived on the first floor. Extending out to the rear was an attached single-story building with beds for about thirty inmates. We were assigned a room on the second floor where another CO and his wife also lived. The cottage we were assigned to was the home of the least teachable men and boys. I never got a peek into their quarters. We were not to make our bed or do any cleaning in our room. That was a training job for the inmates. The man who cleaned our room got down on his hands and knees to scrub the carpeting every other week and he thrived on the praise he got for doing a good job.

I missed the benefits of the exercise a housewife gets while doing housework.

The first time I went walking on the path to the gardens I received a reprimand from Dr. Jones, the Colony's administrator, letting me know it was forbidden for a woman to go anyplace alone. Bike riding was not allowed on the Colony grounds, and Wayne wasn't free to go off the Colony grounds except every other Sunday. Then we would often go into Philadelphia.

Before being hired I had to be examined by the Colony's Doctor. That meant I had to be very careful about how I answered his probing questions into what I considered none of his business. I was strong and healthy and he wasn't a Pediatrician. And he had the power to veto my employment.

My job was to type and file a monthly progress report required for every inmate. It was a monotonous and tedious job because three different forms had been used during the previous years. This meant resetting the indent stops on the typewriter to different places in order to fill in the date, and any changes in their learning progress, health, or disposition. as every form appeared in the pile I worked from. Most often I'd just type in "no change" in all the spaces except for the date. The other women in the office were friendly but never shared anything about their home life.

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In the dining room we were assigned to a table in somewhat like a caste system. In that the house parents sat on one side of the room and the single workers sat on the other, and the CO and wives were assigned to two tables closest to the kitchen. The boys being trained to be bus boys brought us our meals. Our conversation with the other COs was stimulating and often challenged one to think of a problem from a different point of view. As time went by I became hungry for female conversation, especially for that of women who could share their experiences of having children.

In Women's Magazines there were articles about a new method called Natural Child Birth and yet the Pediatrician touted as the best doctor in Philadelphia said he delivers by sedation and uses forceps. One day on my way to Philly to keep an appointment with him a group of men and one woman got on the train. This woman stopped by my seat as though choosing a place to sit. Then she said, "I go this way quite often and know just about everyone on this route except you. You must be new in this area, mind if I sit and chat with you." This open outgoing woman drew out all the answers to the who, what, where, and why I was in the boondoggles of New Jersey. Then she said, "you look sad." I owned up to feeling lonely for the companionship of women, and yes I was sad that my husband and I would miss out on the fun of preparing a baby's room together. She had young children and invited me to come visit her any time, but lack of local transportation and my work kept that from happening. We had no idea where I would live when motherhood would change our life, or how long would our savings last before I would have to find a job again. That was still months down the road.

Somehow news must have leaked to the Quaker community that there was a pregnant COs wife at the New Jersey Colony who would soon need to find another place to live. The CO in charge of the men working at the Colony came to me with the news that the Germantown Quakers would help me with that problem. Concealed in their invitation was the humble way they chose to give shelter to me, a stranger. The Scattergoods pretension was that gas rationing would prevent them from using their summer cabin, and they would be happy to have some one there to keep the tramps from breaking in. Then Mrs. Smith an elderly lady in Germantown said, "I have this big empty house and one of my cleaning ladies has taken a job in a factory, you could help me with

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the dusting. Come here first to be close to the hospital. There is plenty of room for your husband on his free weekends.

The invitation Mrs. Smith proposed was worded as if I would be doing her a favor. The only problem, she said, was that she had heard that many wives of COs had a college education and she didn't know whether I should eat my meals in the kitchen with her other help or in the dining room with her. I told her the only education I had after high school was some night school classes and I had worked as sales clerk and a mimeograph operator. When time came to go to her house, she said she would prefer to have my company at her table. She lived in a great old home with high ceilings and tall chiming grandfather clocks. I'll always remember her elegant manor in the way she served tea. The first thing she asked me to do was to sweep the porch that went half way around the house. I went at it too vigorously for a person who hadn't used those waist twisting muscles in seven months. It resulted in side pains that kept me stiff for a week. Mrs. Smith's daughter, Sally lived with her and kept the table conversation stimulating. Some of Sally's ideas on how improving conditions in one's own community after the war. gave me courage to think that even I could be a community activist where ever home would be after the war.

Mrs. Smith's spoke to her daughter, Sally in the endearing way of Quakers. I heard things like "Will thee bring down thy skirt so I can turn the hem up for thee this afternoon."

Joan's Birth

Wayne was with me the evening the quickening began, not strong but paced at intervals that kept me from falling asleep. About two A.M. Wayne talked to the Doctor and called a Taxi. When the taxi driver let us out at the hospital calmness had returned and he said, like a man who had made it is trip with many women, your baby won't come for many hours yet. He was right.

War time hospitals were crowded and short handed. I was given the third bed in a room equipped for two. The other ladies already had their babies and were chatting together like old friends about their children at home.

When the Doctor came after noon, he suggested I walk the halls to get things started again. My body was craving sleep. Mrs. Smith kept Wayne busy labeling

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furniture in her attic for her children's inheritance, so he didn't return to keep me company.

The nurses brought the babies to their mothers on the hospital's four-hour schedule. If a baby cried in the meantime, they gave it a bottle in the nursery. That must have happened to Joan because she was always sleeping soundly and wouldn't wake up enough to suckle the first times they brought her to me. She lost weight. I worried when told if she didn't start gaining weight she wouldn't be able to leave the hospital with me. They kept bottle feeding her and she seemed to prefer the bottle.

Mrs. Smith came to visit once, my only visitor.

The husbands of the other women came every evening. Once one of them brought a snack for his wife that made her very happy. It was a round something in a square box with a pungent odor I didn't recognize. They picked up pieces with their hands, and ate it, then licked their greasy fingers. Once before leaving New Jersey Wayne got a chance to taste what he called a tomato pie and often later he would ask me why didn't I make one for him. Tomato pie! Tomatoes for dessert. I had no idea what he was talking about until years later when pizzas became popular in Wisconsin.

I went back to Mrs. Smiths for a week. Then to The Scattergoods Cottage. It didn't have running water or electricity, and of course no radio or telephone but, there was a small store I could walk to. No neighbors came to the two other cottages on that road. Wayne was able to be there every weekend. He made sure we got a picture of him washing diapers on a washing board in a sink tub. Otherwise, I was there alone with Joan until September and then went back to Mrs. Smith's until late November.

Because the war was declared over and brother Glenn came home from Army duty in France, and because Mother was anxious to have all of her family together again, I came back to Wisconsin. I thought it would just be for a visit as we had no idea when Wayne would be released. As it turned out he didn't get home until June 1946. In the meantime, I took a second shift job at Allis Chambers transferring numbers to punch cards in the early stage of industrial computers. Wayne soon found a job and we rented an apartment out on 124th Street Near Lincoln.

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(I often wonder if we had taken a different path, such as a two-family income we might have bought a house sooner, but then missed out on building it our self. Or I might have learned the workings of a computer instead of waiting twenty-five years for my son to teach me.)

Most of my and Wayne's experiences were positive and enriching. I feel I owe a great debt to the Peace churches and especially the Quakers (AFSC) for doing the best they could working with Congress and the President in behalf of the conscientious objector so they could contribute constructive work. instead of destruction.

Historical Notes

When things accelerated and talk of a draft became imminent, leaders in the Historical Peace Churches [Church of the Brethren (Dunkards), Mennonites and Society of Friends (Quakers)] united to prevent the inhuman treatment COs suffered in the first world war. They approached President J. D. Roosevelt and Congress about provision for COs to be exempted from military service based on religious beliefs. The Selective Training and Service Act, passed by Congress in September 1940, required conscientious objectors to perform alternative nonmilitary service under civilian direction. That meant the conscription law exempted religious objectors "COs" from military duty, instead required civilian "Work of National Importance" under civilian direction called Civilian Public Service (CPS).

[NSBRO: The National Service Board for Religious Objectors](#)