

The Perils of Conscientious Objection

An Oral History Study of a 1944 Event

by Roger Juhnke

This account, written by Roger Juhnke, involves a deceased Eden member - Forrest Goering. This excerpt of the account is used with Roger's permission. The full work can be found in *Mennonite Life*, September 1979.

Roger Juhnke is a Bethel College graduate who earned a master's degree in theology at Oxford University in 1978. He worked with the Schowalter Oral History program and Kauffman Museum at Bethel College in 1978-79.

"During the six-month period November 2004-April 2005, the Monthly Features will comprise six personal accounts, mostly by past or present members of the Eden Mennonite Church, Moundridge, KS, of their experiences as conscientious objectors during times of war. They will include experiences during World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the war in Vietnam. These accounts have been written by the individuals concerned. They are part of a larger collection of stories contained in a book published in 2004 by Jebeko Publishing entitled *The Eden Peace Witness: A Collection of Personal Accounts* and edited by Jeffrey W. Koller. The Eden Mennonite Church and Jeffrey Koller have kindly agreed to the publication of these accounts as Monthly Features of the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association website. Editors of the website are profoundly grateful for this courtesy. -The Editors"

Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.
-Dostoevski's *Grand Inquisitor*

Central Kansas, particularly Harvey, Marion, McPherson, and Reno counties, was certainly not unique or exceptional during World War II for the wide divergence of attitudes and responses to the war among the residents. But the large Mennonite population in that area helped create an unusual mixture of militarism and pacifism not commonly encountered in most other sections of the nation. Indeed, much of the impetus and leadership behind the creation of the Civilian Public Service (CPS) program which provided alternative service nationally for conscientious objectors during the war came from the Mennonites in Central Kansas.

Moreover, almost 50 percent of the Mennonite men in Kansas drafted for service chose the CPS alternative with another 18 percent of those men opting for noncombatant military duty. Even for Mennonites and other Peace Church members in other parts of the country these figures are exceptionally high. Thus, the war supporters and the pacifists lived together with full knowledge of each other during the 1940s in Central Kansas, and while the traditional Mennonite pacifist stance was so well known and understood that local draft boards rarely hesitated to give church members the CO classification, the non-Mennonite community in general was occasionally less

understanding. Various arguments, confrontations, and incidents between Mennonite and non-Mennonites (and even Mennonites and other Mennonites) did occur.

On August 16, 1944, the Eighth Army was consolidating its defeat of the German resistance in Empoli, the air force had been busy with the saturation bombing of Leipzig and Magdeburg, and Patton's army could see Paris as the German Seventh Army was breaking up into small groups and fleeing toward the Rhine. At home thousands of COs in Civilian Public Service were just waking up to a new day of conservation work, mental hospital duties, dairy testing, and forest fire smoke jumping. At seven a.m. that morning in Hutchinson twelve young men boarded a bus to travel to Newton. They had been placed under the unofficial supervision of one of their number, James Arthur Young, by an official of the Reno County draft board to report to Fort Leavenworth for their pre-induction physical examinations. Few of the Reno County men knew each other prior to that day and none of the twelve was a conscientious objector.

In Newton the twelve transferred to a specially chartered Santa Fe Trailer bus, which took them directly to the McPherson County Courthouse in McPherson. The Santa Fe bus itself warrants attention as it was somewhat unusual, even for its day. More commonly called a Cab Car, it was designed like a semi trailer truck with independent tractor and trailer. The trailer contained double-deck seating compartments and a single aisle along one wall of each deck. Stairs connected the decks and the whole rig carried two Santa Fe employed drivers—one to drive the tractor while the other sat in the trailer to serve as a conductor. This bus design was to become significant.

The bus stopped in McPherson to pick up twenty-one more inductees from McPherson County, including six conscientious objectors:

- Forrest Goering (who was to receive cuts and bruises about the head, face, and neck; one broken tooth and two loosened ones; a dislocated arm, and heavy swelling on the neck and back) .
- Wilmont Boeckner (to be given cuts and bruises about the head and face).
- Menno Ensz (to receive cuts, bruises and a badly split lip).
- John M. Dyck (one chipped tooth, one loose tooth, cuts, bruises).
- Arlyn Wedel (cuts, bruises, and a broken lip).
- Carroll E. Yoder (cuts and bruises).

A Mrs. Johnson of the McPherson County draft board had placed Arnold Loepp, one of the regular army inductees, in unofficial charge of the fifteen McPherson County regulars, and Arlyn Wedel in charge of the COs and their papers. At ten a.m. the bus left McPherson for Fort Leavenworth via Marion, Emporia, and Ottawa.

The interview sources and the official statements taken later all agree that nothing out of the ordinary occurred before the bus got to Marion. The men slept or visited. But for some reason the six COs had ended up sitting together, even though none of them knew each other well. John M. Dyck said, “We kind of segregated ourselves,” while Menno Ensz remembered that in McPherson the Reno County men got off to stretch their legs and the COs were called first to board the bus when it was reloaded, thus identifying them as COs to everyone and making it natural for them to sit together. Also Wayne Nelson, a McPherson County regular, said later that

Mrs. Johnson indirectly identified the COs by explaining that they would not receive meal vouchers for lunch as would the regulars.

Yet as the bus traveled between Marion and Emporia, trouble did begin. Here the interviews and statements vary. Arlyn Wedel, a CO, told me, "Before leaving from the courthouse at Mac I knew something wasn't right." All the COs recall sarcastic comments and jokes being made about them. Several men said that some of the COs and regulars knew each other. Menno Ensz claims he knew several of the regulars, almost everyone suggests that Forrest Goering was a buddy to several McPherson men, and Arlyn Wedel must have been known since he had been a standout on the McPherson High basketball team during the previous winter.

The discussion which led to violence seems to have centered on Forrest Goering. Some who knew him claimed that he had no business being a CO since he was known to run around with a group of "rowdies" from Galva. Several COs admit, and other sources corroborate, that Goering had a reputation for boldly stating whatever was on his mind, and that he confirmed that reputation in this instance. The charge of "murderers" was leveled against those who served in the military, and when the bus conductor defended the actions of his brother serving in England, Goering said he did not care. Johnny J. Schlatter of McPherson then hit Goering in the face.

Apparently immediately thereafter, Walter Miller, Jr., from Hutchinson, inquired into Goering's attitude toward Miller's brother serving in France and his brother-in-law in the navy. Goering replied, "I don't know why I should care about (them)." Miller hit him in the right eye and returned to his seat. The harassment began in earnest. While Schlatter later claimed that he and the bus driver started it, Donald Blackman and Kenneth Arnold, both of McPherson, were adjudged the ringleaders in the attorney general's investigation. (One might mention in passing that Arnold was on parole with ten months left to serve in the county jail when he boarded the bus.)

John M. Dyck recalls, "It seemed to be like a snowball. It gained momentum. . . . We were afraid to do anything. . . ." One of the regulars' testimonies is interesting. He said, "We talked to them quite a bit and they just definitely said they wouldn't fight for any country, and we asked them about it, and they said there wouldn't be any war if anybody didn't fight, and we asked them how they were going to get this over with if they didn't fight, and they said they hadn't thought about that."

Another frequent question the COs could not answer regarded what they would do when their mothers were raped when the Nazis were allowed to overrun America. Several of the regulars seemed to know that to be Mennonite probably meant to have German ancestry. This theme was expanded. Since the COs were German, they had no business living in the U.S. or being accorded the rights of American citizenship. Furthermore, their CO position belied their allegiance to the Nazis. Confident that they had unmasked the Mennonites, the regulars informed them that after the war they would see to it that the COs had their farms taken from them.

At that point a few regulars began taking the COs out of their compartment one by one up to the front of the bus trying to get them to change their minds and renounce their CO position. One can only reflect that for the COs such a renunciation would have been to deny their upbringing,

to reject beliefs they had had instilled in them by their parents and the church, and to place themselves in a highly embarrassing position with the other COs as well as their community upon returning home. Even if at age 18 they had not all thoroughly thought through their beliefs and committed themselves intellectually to pacifism, the requested renunciation was unthinkable. Surely the pragmatist would have suggested a false renunciation for the duration of the trip, but these six refused to be convinced.

The order of events then becomes somewhat confused, but it is clear that between Florence and Emporia the verbal abuse intensified to the point that many admitted frequently calling the Mennonites “sissies,” “damn fools,” “sons of bitches,” “COs,” and “c***suckers.” The COs were slapped, beaten and kicked repeatedly. Finally, a razor was produced from one regular's overnight bag. Three of the COs were members of the Church of God in Christ Mennonites, a Mennonite branch which has the tradition of growing beards. And although Wilmont Boeckner says, “I didn't have much beard at that time,” the regulars began dry shaving the COs with no regard to nicks or cuts. Even the clean shaven COs received this treatment. Menno Ensz makes the relieving admission that even though his soft red beard was lopped off; the regulars took care not to break his eyeglasses.

When James Arthur Young, the unofficial overseer of the Reno County group, heard upstairs that the COs were being cut up downstairs, he worked his way through the men standing in the aisle and stood in the doorway of the COs compartment. Forrest Goering remembers that Young told the regulars, “This is what we are fighting for, for freedom of religion.” But, as Young later testified, there was nothing he could do to stop the threats and he was eventually overpowered. The COs recall that it was mainly while Young blocked the door that the COs prayed and again tried to explain their position by quoting the Bible and telling about the Mennonites. It did not work.

Throughout the trip the conductor, who was later fired by Santa Fe for his actions, not only stood by but encouraged the regulars. At the Emporia stop he helped the regulars to keep an eye on the COs who were allowed to leave the bus. It was probably there that one of the COs tried to flee through the back of a store but returned, crying, to continue the trip. It was certainly in Emporia that a pair of ordinary scissors was purchased. When the bus pulled out, the haircuts began. Using the “hack-in-hew” method of hairdressing, several of the regulars took turns cutting the COs’ hair. Again, no precautions against cuts were taken. The verbal abuse and beatings continued until the COs were ordered to take off their pants. They were beaten with belts and told to commit homosexual acts. This “c***sucking” affair receives as much attention in the official statements taken later as any element in the case. But the men did not perform the sexual acts and were not forced to do so. Cigarettes were brought out and the regulars tried to force the COs to smoke, since traditionally Mennonites abstain from tobacco. Three COs admit to “puffing” on cigarettes to avoid further mistreatment. Arlyn Wedel explains, “There was no use trying to fight. We could have fought maybe one at a time, but we were outnumbered.” Forrest Goering claimed that at one point one of the regulars threatened to stab him with the scissors.

The beatings continued until the bus stopped for lunch in Ottawa. A waitress in the restaurant noticed one of the boys “had a bruise on the side of his face and was crying . . . a lot of his hair had been cut off.” An army veteran eating there saw what was going on and offered to buy some

beer for the regulars to liven up the party, but they declined the offer, which brings us to one fact clearly established by all sources. No alcohol was consumed by anyone during the entire trip.

Shortly after leaving the restaurant, the bus stopped for gas. A Kansas highway patrol was parked at the station and James Arthur Young explained to him what was happening, hoping he would help. The patrolman turned, looked into the bus, and left.

When the bus made a brief stop at the bus station in Lawrence, Wedel was dragged out of the bus in front of a crowd waiting for other buses while the regulars yelled, "Look at the conscientious objector who won't fight for his country."

The verbal arguments continued but the physical violence was minimal after that. Forrest Goering recalls that as the bus neared Fort Leavenworth, "I told them guys, 'You're in for it'." But when they got off at the fort and were taken to barracks for the night, none of the COs said anything about the events of the trip, while several sources claim the regulars were heard bragging about their actions to some soldiers. Several people asked the COs about their haircuts, bleeding faces, and welts, but apparently none of them said much. One CO suggests that they thought they would not receive any help from the army while another claimed later that his injuries were not serious enough for him to make any objection. The COs were put in separate barracks from the regulars, seemingly the usual routine, and reported for their physicals the next day. It was then that the army doctors saw their bruises and cuts. Quickly the story was brought to the attention of Major G. B. Nemic, commanding officer of the induction station. After the physicals, which four of the six COs flunked, Nemic and Lt. F. E. Muhmel, fort intelligence and investigating officer, questioned the COs and then took separate statements from the six. The twenty-seven regulars were brought together and the COs were asked to point out the men responsible for the incident. At first the COs said they would rather not; the incident was over and they preferred just to be sent home. But Nemic insisted and the COs complied. "After all," Wilmont Boeckner, a CO, explains, "this land has law and order and that was against the regulations, against law and order."

Sorting out the matter at Fort Leavenworth took several hours and the COs had their hair evened out by a Fort Leavenworth barber that evening, so the men missed their bus home. But after spending an extra night in the barracks, they began the return trip. The official statement sent to the state attorney general's office by Lt. Muhmel explained that the COs and the regulars were sent home on separate buses, but in fact the two groups met each other in Topeka where the bus schedules mandated their return to McPherson on the same bus. The COs were wearing hats over their short hair and cut scalps and a few of the regulars began kidding them about it. But the joking was cut short by a group of regulars who reminded the kidders that they were in trouble already and did not need more. The ride back to McPherson was peaceful and many of the regulars introduced themselves to the COs and talked with them. Most of the regulars eventually apologized for their actions and even offered to give the COs money for their next haircuts.

When the men arrived in McPherson, the county sheriff was waiting for them. The state attorney general, A. B. Mitchell, had been informed by the military about the incident and had instructed the McPherson and Reno county attorneys to take statements from all the men immediately upon their return, since he anticipated charges being filed against the regulars. Moreover, the

Associated Press had released an article on the affair which appeared in newspapers all over Kansas and at least as far away as St. Louis. Forrest Goering recalls, "When we got home, everyone seemed to know about what had happened."

The events of the next several days are rather complicated. Basically, the COs refused to bring charges of any kind and returned home. Statements were taken from all thirty-three men by their respective county attorneys. A series of correspondence between A. B. Mitchell's office and Fort Leavenworth, and Mitchell and McPherson county attorney E. W. Jernberg and his Reno county counterpart, H. H. Dunn, brought the authorities to the conclusions that, "We all regret an occurrence of this kind," that, "the major portion of these assaults probably took place in Lyon County immediately after the bus left Emporia," that "Everett Steerman, Lyon County attorney, should prepare a complaint. . . . against the offenders," that warrants should be issued for the arrest of the eight regulars, and that these eight men should be charged by the state with assault and battery.

Newspapers around the state continued to give the story and the investigation front page coverage, especially the Hutchinson News Herald and the Emporia Gazette. On August 24 the Emporia Gazette carried a statement by Lyon County attorney Steerman: "... on August 16 the defendants individually and by counseling, aiding and abetting one another, did unlawfully and willfully strike, beat and bruise the six named COs contrary to law and against the peace and dignity of the State of Kansas." Steerman went on to reveal that his office was investigating the roles played by the bus driver and conductor and that he was considering charging the other passengers on the bus "with counseling, aiding and abetting the eight men charged."

It must be remembered that all these men had been reporting for pre-induction physicals and had not yet been inducted; hence their trial was a civil matter rather than a military affair. Warrants were issued for five McPherson County men (Blackman, Arnold, Schlatter, Waddle, and Anderson) and three from Reno County (Jones, Stiggins, and Spaniol). The men were allowed to report voluntarily to the Lyon County court of Justice of the Peace W. T. Crawford for the August 25 trial. The COs were also invited to bring testimony but none of them came. Two of the men charged did not appear; one had already reported for military service and was not available, and another, visiting relatives in Cherryvale, Kansas, had not received notice of the trial. Both were tried at a later date. The charges carried a possible \$500 fine or one-year imprisonment. When the men arrived, Steerman talked with them informally and conferred with Attorney General Mitchell during the discussion. The men told him that the CO question is a big one around McPherson and that while many farms have practically been cleared of youths not opposed to bearing arms, some CO families have two or three young men left at home. (The court reporter said that the CO question is not an issue among people in Emporia.) Ultimately the men pleaded guilty and were fined ten dollars, plus one dollar and twenty-five cents in court costs. After the trial the men shook hands with Steerman and thanked him for giving them a "square deal." They thought Judge Crawford was "swell" for not piling up the court costs.

Although none of the men had brought his own lawyer, Schlatter had come prepared for the worst. He carried five \$100 bills with him. One of the other men, however, must have anticipated either acquittal or jail as he had only 55 cents. The others paid his fine and a Lyon County commissioner listening at the trial bought him lunch.

The affair was ended. Six of the eight men fined ended up in the army. Concerning the other two, McPherson County Attorney Jernberg wrote to Attorney General Mitchell, "I have been informed that Arnold and Blackman, the two boys who seem to be the ringleaders in this affair from this county, have been turned down by the army and are classified 4-F. In all probability this classification is due to the fact that they were the instigators in this affair. However, I have no proof for this; it is just my opinion."

And what of the COs? Three of them ended up in CPS while the other three stayed at home on the farm. They all let their hair grow out.

The event lends itself to a variety of interpretations. It could be seen as an example of the dangerous and sacrificial path the pacifists trod in wartime America. It is indeed remarkable not only that the COs refused to dent their convictions in the face of torture, but that they also refused to bring charges. County Attorney Jernberg explained, ". . . the COs hold no ill will against anyone, and they themselves do not contemplate any proceedings." In their statements two of the COs said that they did not care what happened to them but hoped this sort of thing would not happen to future groups of COs reporting to Fort Leavenworth. But two major factors, I believe, must be remembered. First, regardless of the jokes and verbal provocation by the regulars, Forrest Goering's responses can be regarded as the sparks igniting the fire. Perhaps his inflammatory words can be seen as an example of how at least some COs were not fully aware or committed to the wider demands of the pacifist position. The traditional peace position in the Mennonite Church, then and now, involves more than simply refusing to carry a gun. Second is the fact that these were thirty-three young men, all but a few of them eighteen years old, most of them farm boys, many of them untravelled and rarely confronted with beliefs radically different from their own. The small ten dollar fine perhaps indicates the judge's cognizance of the spontaneous and highly untypical nature of the violence. It is true that one of the ringleaders was a convicted criminal, but for the most part the regulars could be classed, not only by their mothers, but by the community, as "good boys" dutifully responding to their nation's call.

The COs themselves, in retrospect, agreed that the young age and immaturity of everyone was the key factor behind the whole affair. I quote the interview with Menno Ensz: "It was a little like, you know, boys. It was all eighteen year olds.... Just like a bunch of kids if they got started. It was kind of like a mob. If there had been an older person there to make order, things wouldn't have gone like they had." Carroll Yoder, another CO, expresses feelings typical for the six COs today. ". . . Looking back at it now... I don't think the incident itself hurt us any. Even locally, not many people heard about [the incident] or found out about it. . . . I was eighteen years old and thought this was what I had to do. Today I wouldn't have been on that bus. At that time. . . when those papers got there saying we had to be there... , we thought if anything went wrong at all we'd automatically end up in the army or something, you know, if we fouled this thing up. But now if I'd have been there when we stopped to eat,. . . I'd have been long gone. I'd have gotten up to Leavenworth riding my thumb or something else. We didn't have to go on that bus, but we didn't know it."

Thus the combination of youth, wartime prejudices, opposing beliefs, and mob logic ended up compromising the peace and dignity of the State of Kansas, not to mention the well-being of six

farm boys. The re-creation of events and attitudes indicates that the regulars almost certainly did not think they would get into any real trouble for “roughing up” some “COs”. The mood of the times was on their side. Even the COs were surprised when Major Nemic came to their defense.

Mrs. Adeline Fisher's letter to the editor of the Hutchinson News Herald represents the side of public opinion which the regulars probably assumed would exonerate them. Of the incident she writes: “I feel that the regulars were fully justified in what they did. How anyone could uphold a CO in such a case is beyond my understanding of anyone who believes in America or what we are fighting for. . . . COs greedily take all this country has to offer them and when our country needs them, they simply say, ‘We don’t believe in fighting,’ that’s all... Well, I wonder if they wouldn’t do a little fighting if someone tried to take their farms or liberties away from them. I’m sure our fighting men will be proud of our country when they hear that selectees are being taken into custody by authorities for upholding servicemen overseas.”

Today the significance of this event lies in its testimony to the value of oral history research. The reconstruction of details, attitudes, feelings, and, in this case, knowledge of the event itself occurred because we are trying to preserve the human element of World War II. The newspaper articles and attorney’s statements might one day have been stumbled upon by some student, but the anecdotes, the details which make analysis possible, and the retrospective statements-in other words, the life of the story-are the product of the oral historian’s method. Not only can we tell the story of an unusual bus ride, but we have gained another glimpse into the real lives of Kansas neighbors at war thirty-five years ago.