

VICTOR GOERING TALKS ABOUT CPS

Victor Goering, a retired teacher, remembers World War II as a time when central Kansas' Mennonite groups found themselves in "one big ball of wax." He was interviewed by Jason Holcomb on June 24, 2011.

JH: Are you familiar with the phrase, "Quiet in the land?"

VG: Oh, yeah! *Stille im Lande*. I heard that hundreds of times!

JH: And what did that mean to you? Did your parents, grandparents ever explain that to you?

VG: My parents' age, I think that already was starting to go, and my grandparents ... well, like my dad went to college. It seemed pretty unusual in 1916 he went to college.

JH: At Bethel?

VG: Mmm hmm. They had an academy here. He went two years to high school in Moundridge and finished the academy here and then went two years to Bethel. Didn't ever finish college, but he went two years. So by that time it was starting to broaden out. It wasn't "quiet in the land" ... quiet in the land, you mind your own business ... there is very little proselytizing, too. In the Swiss community, we had other Mennonite communities on two sides of us, Goessel and Inman. To the north we had the Swedes, and we had almost nothing to do with the Swedes, very, very little. Once in a great while, but almost nothing.

JH: By choice or ...

VG: Yeah.

JH: There was a conscious decision in the community to

...

VG: Well ... partly, and because of location. McPherson was kind of the dividing line. McPherson was a little bit out of our territory, and the Swedes were from there on north to Lindsborg. So, I don't know if I knew any Swedes until I was older. We just didn't have anything to do with them. The high school was basically Mennonites in Moundridge, and Inman the same way, and Goessel the same way. But "the quiet in the land," I heard that many, many times. But as far as I know, it broadened out like in my father's generation. I think that was already going away. ...

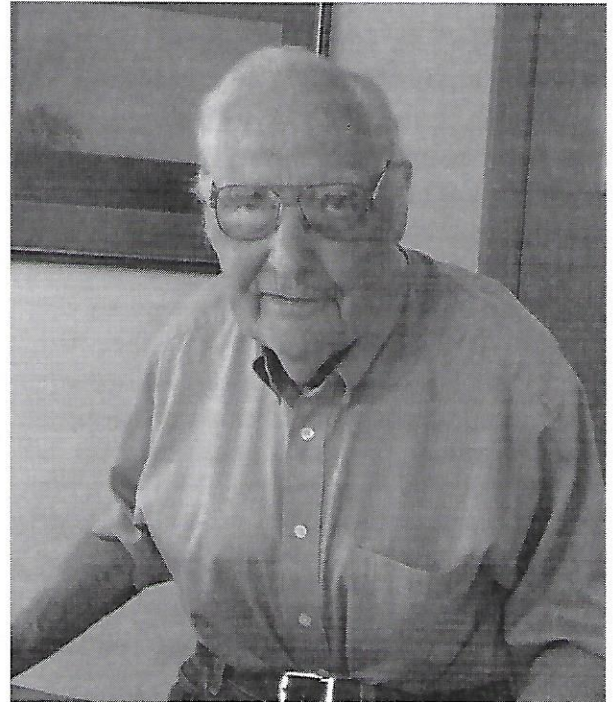
JH: Your dad's generation ... did they give you any specific details, say, why you should remain the quiet in the land? Why remaining separate was a good thing?

VG: Well, basically, "be in this world but not of this world" I think might have summed it up. ... But there were also different factions, like my dad, there weren't too many families that went to college. There were other families that just kept on farming ... a lot of them didn't even go to high school, that was kind of unusual there, too. A lot of my cousins ... my older cousins, there were several that didn't go to high school, I can think of 1, 2, 3, 4 ... of the Zergers, I can only think of two that didn't go to high school, of the Goerings probably a half a dozen.

JH: And was high school education emphasized, de-emphasized ... was there a balance, or what was the view on education at the time?

VG: Well, it varied in the community. I would say that the Zergers and the Goerings were probably on the forefront of education, and other families had less. In fact, I know one of my older cousins married a Stucky, and his oldest daughter was five years younger than I, something like that. He said, "I'll buy you a piano if you don't go to high school." So he didn't have much use for education.

JH: Were there any theological, religious reasons that the church said ... to remain separate from the world?



VG: Well, pretty much basically they took it that a worldly influence was not good.

JH: That a worldly influence was not good, things coming from outside, other cultures, other language

...

VG: Yes, right, but ... the Swedes were the only [other] ethnic group ... [and] we never heard them condemned much as far as that's concerned, but we had no interaction. In fact, ... it was years and years before any of my relatives married a Swede, some of my cousins' kids did, but very limited.

JH: And what do you remember about the Turkey Creek divide?

VG: So you heard all about that already? *[laughter]* Well, it was basically the two Mennonite groups were there and ... personally, I always felt that ... that we spoke without an accent and they had a bad accent. Now, we had an accent, but we didn't know it. When I came to college they said, "your accent is as pronounced as the Low German accent." Boy, that was a shock. We never thought about that. They had kind of a flatter accent. ... Yeah, the Turkey Creek, basically the story that I heard ... well, I don't know how to put it exactly ... not that they were inferior, [but] that they were maybe just a little bit lower than we were as far as culture is concerned. Yet, I realized much later on, in some ways their culture was much above ours. They were more interested in the arts and stuff than we were, although we were interested in music. I know the Mennonites are good musicians ... It's pretty well known that the music is a very important part ... my dad sang in the men's chorus, the men's chorus was organized in 1913 in our church and it's still going. It used to be a very select group, you had to be voted into the men's chorus. They had 20 members, and if somebody died or got too old to sing, they added another one. They had to vote them in, you couldn't go and join. Now, of course, it's wide open, but, yeah, they had 20 members. Dad directed it, my uncle directed it, and they sang without an instrument ... for years and years and years. But as far as going back to the Turkey Creek, we had a few from our church that went across the creek, maybe a half a dozen, the rest of them were all on the east side.

JH: Went across to live?

VG: Yeah.

JH: Did they marry?

VG: Not that I remember, just bought farms there, didn't marry there, in fact we didn't have ... until 1933, before we had a member from [the] Inman group join our church, married a lady from our church.

JH: In what year?

VG: 1933, after we'd been here for many, many years, over 50 years.

JH: And was that scandalous?

VG: No, it wasn't scandalous, but different. No, there was no scandal to it.

JH: Did your parents discourage you from socializing with the people from across Turkey Creek?

VG: No, no, no, not at all. And in college it was my business who I went with and socialized with. And friends became ... you know, have you heard about CPS? Civilian Public Service, conscientious objectors?

JH: Yes.

VG: That's where it really opened up. Boy the Mennonites were all thrown into one big ball of wax.

JH: Did you do that yourself?

VG: Three years and eight months.

JH: During World War II?

VG: Yes.

JH: And where did you do your service? ...

VG: In four different places. Hill City, South Dakota, west of the Black Hills, we built a dam there. Spent some time in a mental hospital in New Jersey and some time in Montana where it was also a Bureau of Reclamation — an irrigation project. We had several different things there. They'd pump water out of the Yellowstone River — before I got there, they built one of the pump stations — and we dug irrigation ditches.

JH: Where exactly in Montana?

VG: It's the eastern side. Yellowstone starts up and runs into the Missouri.

JH: What town was it closest to?

VG: Terry was the town. Glendive and Miles City were the bigger towns, between Glendive to the east

and Miles City to the west, and Billings was on further west. ...

JH: And ... you did some dam construction in Hill City, South Dakota?

VG: Yeah, built a big dam ... an earthen dam. The CCC boys had started it, and it was pretty well finished when the war was over. And then my last part of service I took a load of horses to Greece with the United Nations Relief [and Rehabilitation Administration]. ...

JH: That would have been after the war, right?

VG: Yeah, right after the war. I was still in camp, but the war had ended, yes. They sent cattle and horses all over, on the slow boat to China, or slow boat to Greece. Went on Liberty ships they converted over to haul animals.

JH: What was the reason to send horses to Greece?

VG: Well, they were all gone. They ate them, they slaughtered them.

JH: Oh — the devastation of the war.

VG: Yeah, and cattle the same way. They sent cattle to a lot of places, so they replenished their power supply. Yeah, that was quite a deal ... We sailed out of Houston and got in the Gulf, you know, and east to Greece. The water was nice and calm, and I thought, "Well, this is a piece of cake." Four days out, one of the merchant marines said, "There's Key West." After four days, can you imagine how long it takes to get to Greece from Houston? Twenty-four days on the water and we had a relatively mild ocean. We didn't have any storms or anything like that. Sailors, regular guys, said, "This is a kids' trip." But that was quite an experience, too.

JH: How long did you stay in Greece?

VG: Three weeks. ... Usually they just unloaded and came right back, [but] we had an accident. The captain and the crew got their signals mixed up and rammed the boat into a pier, bent the rudder into the prop. It was a low pier, and we had to unload part of the cargo to get off that pier and then ... we came home on a different boat. They took ... [the damaged ship] to dry dock in Italy to repair it. So we got to see Athens fairly well. We were in Athens for a couple of weeks. We didn't know much about it, but learned a little there. But there were no tourists ... we went up to Acropolis — nobody. They were just recovering from the war. This was in June ... after the war had ended in May.

JH: Were you married at the time?

VG: Got married when I was in CPS, yes.

JH: Where did you meet your wife [Elizabeth]?

VG: Right here, Bethel College.

JH: Did she go with you when you were doing your alternative service? ...

VG: Yes, she did some. She was a school teacher. We got married and she came home that next year and taught school and then joined me in New Jersey at the hospital and worked there for a while. Which was kind of tough because we had 100 CPS men on the wards and only about a third as many women, and she would be in a ward by herself with 150 patients, and some of us helped on the wards then, too ... on the women's wards, which I did too. Then she joined me in Montana, and then she came home and taught school when I went on the boat. Right when the war ended, she came home and taught school that next year, and I didn't get out until the next June. So she taught for one year.

JH: And then you went to teaching?

VG: I went to farming. I taught, then, the first year on an emergency basis because I did not have a teaching certificate. But the school board, it was a one-teacher school, one was a member of my church and he said, "We need a teacher." It was a week before September 1. I said, well, my wife won't teach, I'll tell you that. He said, "Well, you can teach." I said, "I don't have a certificate." He said, "You went to college, you can teach." I went home after lunch [and] the school board came over, and they were desperate. So I ... taught one year then, and then didn't teach for five more, and then after that caught on that I didn't have enough farm ground to make a living so I renewed my certificate and started teaching then for the next 30 years.

JH: So you farmed for five years and then realized you couldn't make a living on that amount of land?

VG: Yeah right ... I had four kids, and I knew we wouldn't make it and she couldn't go on teaching because the kids were too small. After the kids were in school, she went back to teaching too, so we both taught.