A BUMPY RIDE TO PEACE

A Reminiscence

Here is a personal account of one man’s experience as a conscientious objector, **a CO**, in Civilian Public Service during World War II. If the reader wishes to know more about the whole program and its history, there is plenty of material on it in Wikipedia.

In 1942, **after the US Declaration of War in December 1941**, the word **“**draft**”** was everywhere in the air, **in** the papers, **and** over the radio, lurking like a grizzly bear come to the neighborhood~~.~~ **I was in college** living in a small **student** cooperative house close to the Berkeley campus of the University of California. I shared a room with a Japanese-American boy named Fumio Nishida at the time. It was a shock to me, and **almost** as devastating as to him, when papers arrived directing him to report to an area where he was to be interned in makeshift camps along with the rest of the Japanese on the Pacific Coast. I can never forget the look of bewilderment on Fumio’s face, as he packed together the few belongings he was permitted to take to the camp. Soon his bed was empty.

Somewhat **after that** I obtained a **part time** position as orderly in the general hospital in **Berkeley**, serving in the day, then on night duty, **a job that** afforded board and room to the fortunate college student. Enrolled in the Premedical program at the University, I was deep into scientific studies and had, in fact, been accepted to Stanford Medical School when the questionnaire arrived which politely asked if there was any reason why I should not report at once to the Draft Board in Oakland for examination with respect to conscription. I was in the habit of attending Berkeley Friends Meeting on First Day (Sundays) at the time, and on the evening on which I reported to the examining board, I put “Quaker—Friends” in the space requested for religion. Lest anyone should think that this made the way smooth, let me say that the burly gentlemen of the draft board did not at all take kindly to my declaring my status as 4-E, conscientious objector to the war and the draft. They wanted all the men they could get.

It was not a pretty scene, the drab basement where the hearing was held. All the potential draftees had to strip naked and each man in the long line presented himself to the doctors first for physical and then mental examination. Passing the physical I attempted to make several gentlemen comprehend the mentality of the conscientious objector. But the examiners were the objectors; rude, challenging questions one after the other until one felt like dissolving through the floor. The responses ranged from the abstract and philosophical to the downright raunchy. Though I was not openly called a coward all the implications were clear. I think there was not other C.O. in the draft group that night.

But I must have stood my ground successfully, as ultimately the notice arrived: 4-E was to be my status, drafted for “work of national importance.”

The arrangement the government had made for us was a great improvement over that in World War I. Civilian Public Service was set up to **provide significant alternative** ~~,~~ “work of national importance” for non-combatants, under the direction of General Hershey, himself born a Friend, though obviously not a pacifist. We were to spend our work shifts under the orders of a government agency—in my case, as in most, the Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service; the other hours of the day and night were the business of the Historic Peace Churches—Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren. These heroic souls undertook not only to cooperate with the government, but also to supply the camps with libraries, medical support, visitation and furlough, a small monthly allowance—everything for which the military is usually responsible in time of war. The pacifist congregations rallied to our support in ways of which we were often scarcely aware and, I am afraid, pathetically unappreciative.

I reported as directed to Camp Antelope in Coleville (I think I had to travel at my own expense) in southern California. This was what remained of an old Civilian Conservation Corps camp, built in the 1930s. At the end of the Great Depression President Roosevelt had created the **C.C.C.** giving young men public works to perform for minimal government pay. The program had been a success in pulling many out of the depression. The years had removed the need for such camps, and they lay abandoned; the Department of Agriculture now taking them over for the new program.

The “campus” boasted a fine U.S. flag set in stones and concrete at the center of the plaza. This was the assembly point, drawing from four or five long barracks, lined up parallel. However, most of the work assignments were passed from the Forest Service down to the camp managers, themselves C.O.’s, who would announce those to us at the table after meal or on other informal occasions. Regimentation of any kind was not welcome and our bosses knew it. Many decisions were made by the process of “sense of the meeting” to obviate voting.

Camp included a laundry on a giant scale, managed by one of us; the lad was a motherly, sympathetic sort of soul, who saw to it that men lacking sufficient clothes were supplied with them. At the far end of each barrack was the common bathroom—just round holes in a row cut in a board with no partitions but with slowly running water beneath; open showers—private, they never were. In the barracks**,** beds were lined up in a row on both sides, passage down the middle. One building housed an empty library, now filled with books the Peace Churches had gathered for their men. It was truly a very good one. There was room for small activities. I joined three others who formed a group who read aloud together.

Meals for the men were handled in the usual quantity fashion, with a camp dietician, chef, bakers, and the food was not bad for its type. Having had cooking experience in the “Coøps,” I was at once drafted into the kitchen crew.

Camp Antelope had a chapel. A simple wooden building unadorned in any way, wooden benches, a lectern and choir benches inside, it bespoke in its lack of décor or pretension of any kind the Quaker administration which occupied it. It could easily have been recognized as a Friends Meeting House. Sometimes a preacher or speaker came but the Sunday morning service was led by men prominent in each of the various denominations, by turn. This is perhaps the point at which to mention the religious diversity of conscientious objectors. Mennonites probably were more numerous than others; but there were Brethren, Quakers, Amish, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Mormons, a scattering of main line Protestants, and a miniscule representation of Roman Catholics. There were others too, the names of their faiths unheard before. Coleville had nearly all of these, of course: liberal (and brilliant) California intellectuals were much in evidence, but the men were drawn from all over the country.

The total enrollment was said to be 150.

Forestry Camps in the forties were doing traditional things. Road building, fence and corral building, ditch digging, erosion control—these were the humdrum projects. But everyone was in suspense for the breakout of the next forest fire. Fighting the fires can be called *the* priority work of such camps, their *raison d’etre*. Fortunately, during the six months I spent in main camp I recall no fire requiring my attendance.

By far the most interesting part of the life in these camps—at least those run by the Friends—was the intellectual. Some of those men were positively brilliant, going on to become authors, scholars and scientists after the war. The free hours in the barracks were full of high-level discussion and fortunately lots of humor, some of it very erudite. Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Wittgenstein, Einstein, Hegel, Alexis Carrel, Gerald Heard, Simone Weil, Gertrude Stein, Henry and William James, and—just coming in—Merton, Salinger, Sartre—these were the names bandied about and occasionally hotly debated. There was a pair of scholars of comparative religion and linguistics of the Fritjof Shuon school who spent all their personal time in abstruse study and discussion. About half-a-dozen of us persuaded a man who knew Sanskrit to introduce us to the language; that was my start, where I learned the *devanagari* characters. Sometimes the high and mighty fell flat on their faces as they are wont to do: this same man later cooked a pheasant for dinner in one of the spike camps and neglected to clean it first…

That brings me to the subject of spike camps (in the military, boot camps). Small groups of the men were stationed away from main camp, high up in the mountains or far down in the valleys, to fight fires or to carry out a particular project. One day the camp managers let it be known that a new spike was to be started, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas, where Nevada pokes its elbow into California. Five men would be needed, four day laborers and a cook. Already there was a spike camp up there, in the village of Yerington, Nevada, one of its members being my elder brother. Drafting the four hefties for this new venture had not been difficult: there were always, and always will be, men, strong men, who prefer the unknown to the settled and familiar. But who would go as cook? The cooks at main camp were at a loss, each looking at the other: how about you? No, you go if you like. Clearly we were overfond of our food, our warm stoves and bake ovens and of a life not disturbed by uncomfortable surprises. It had always been difficult to get a cook to go out. The question stalled for several days.

Finally I felt (as I sometimes have) the obligation to step in when no one is volunteering, and said that I would go as cook. At once the director happily pronounced, “Griggs’s stock is going up!”

The five of us, together with the two camp directors and probably a guide, set off in a camp vehicle of some sort for points east. Taking highway 78 we headed north along the Nevada border to that place where Nevada juts into California, to Alpine County. The lakes of Inyo County, then Mono County, past the spectacular Mono Lake (I had not even suspected its unique stilletos and other weird formations) and on to the lower forests of Alpine County. It was becoming summer.

We stopped at some nameless place to begin the trek into the mountains. I do not recall how much our back packs weighed, but at our age it mattered little; we carried enough to serve our personal needs for about six weeks. The trail was well established. It wove in and out and up for some miles, and took us into the canyons and forests of the lower Sierra Nevadas. The first experiences on a trail like that become indelible memories. I can still see the expanse of green pasture spread before us from a promontory at one of the rest stops. The Sierras have their own particular kind of beauty and attraction: something like desert, something like alpine, something like your own backyard.

Our first encampment was in a spot they called Coyote Valley. Not much of a valley, it certainly was home to plenty of coyotes, who made their presence felt by howling at night. Two tents were set up, side by side close to the running brook that fed into the valley. The water was clear, potable, but we boiled it before drinking, as there were deer and other critters upstream. In the cook tent the portable stove was installed and unbelievably**,** a dining table, lugged all the way on horseback. All around was stunning scenery—a peak rose maybe 200 ft. above our tents, an easy climb and worth it. Coyote Valley was just a flat place where sheep and horses could graze. Our horse was put out to pasture, an old corral of sorts, where he was happy to graze on grasses. At a little distance from campsite a sanitary trough was dug, all in the military style.

In the sleeping tent, Army cots were the order of the night, and I have to say that sleep in that tent was some of the best in my life. I can still recall the big clumsy alarm clock. As “cookie” I rose first and made fire in the stove, rustled up common breakfast fare. But not always; I would get inspired to make pancakes or muffins now and again. This was one cookie determined to be appreciated! It is wondrous now, to see the refinements, the down-sizing and lightening of camping equipment over the last fifty years. (What has been done for the bath?) We took turns in an old metal washtub heated over the campfire or the stove.

We did not stay more than 10 or 12 days in Coyote Valley. I had had to digest the solitude, being alone after breakfast until dinner time. The job there was wound up and, after packing everything on the horse’s back, we marched away from the little stream with its picturesque cascades and the great stone that rose above us on one side. Half a day’s hike, packs on our backs, took us to the next site. It had the appealing name of Poison Flat. This was reached by a steep climb up a slim path leading onto a larger grazing land than Coyote. There were different versions of how it acquired its name, none very appealing. Obviously used for cattle for years together, it was full of old cow pies and bordered by great trees on whose bark romantic initials and hearts had been carved by summer climbers over the years. A shady path between the big trees led to the obvious campsite: a small level field close to a running brook; there the equipment was unloaded, the tents set up, and now our days, which led into weeks, in Poison Flat had begun. The work crew had started with four; then one day a messenger came through, ordering Jim to accompany him back to base camp, as his wife was in dire need of him and he would be discharged. Archie, Bill and Ben, then, were to go quite a distance away every day to do the forestry work. As I never went along, I cannot say exactly what they had to do, but it was one or more of the tasks mentioned at the beginning of this writing, probably ditch digging and soil conservation. Archie, an older man seasoned by much tough work in diverse places, had been designated work leader—virtually in charge of everything. Bill was the cheerful farm boy from the Midwest, simple and quite accustomed to “going along.” Ben was a college sophisticate, reading Spengler and being anti-everything.

They had one day off every week, while I cooked two or three meals a day and cleaned up, but the many hours in between were mine to fill. It was the beginning of my opening up, in the hours and hours of silence and solitude…..There were no electronic systems in those years and even wireless radio was incompetent; unbelievably, my teeth felt like receptors; I began to imagine that radio waves were running through them; I could dimly hear music! Of course I hiked, explored, found the haunts of animals, the dells and coves where Native Americans must have once hidden themselves. Strangely – or perhaps not strangely—certain spots in the terrain seemed “different”, special, even enchanted. Were these perhaps places where natives had prayed or set up an altar, centuries ago? This kind of mystical thinking is often born in the Sierras.

Almost unbelievably, we had a chess set, and on a few of the long evenings Ben and I practiced our “moves.” As it was midsummer I set my cot up in the open and with the amazing overhead display of light went to sleep. If no owl hooted and no wolf howled the silence would be awesome.

And I read. The books I read up there changed my entire life. Our supply of fresh food and weekly needs was brought in on muleback, and by the time they arrived the meat we had on hand would be almost “ripe” in spite of our best efforts to keep it cool. The mule was led by a young man from base camp, a brilliant scholar whose name was Joseph Epes Brown III. Readers may recognize him as subsequently the author of *Black Elk Speaks* and other works on the Native Americans. Joe and I had made friends in Camp Coleville and, knowing of my interest in eastern religions, he kept me supplied with relevant books. Out there, on the flats of the lower Sierra, I met the Buddha, in *The Story of Oriental Philosophy* by L. Adams Beck. She had carefully researched what was **known** at the time; the book is still available and I cannot recommend a better one to a new inquirer. When I say I met the Buddha, I did indeed. My parents had been missionaries in China and had brought back a Chinese image of Buddha, squatting and fat, face graced with a silly smile. They told us nothing about it. One can imagine what a grand picture I had of this founder of a world religion! The revelation of the actual account of this Indian prince’s renunciation into the forest, his severe vows and days of austerity and his subsequent message to mankind captured my imagination and admiration as nothing had done for a long time. I began to feel my love for the Buddha and his simple teachings rivaling the devotion, of years, to Jesus. This was resolved only at my encounter with Sri Ramakrishna – wherein I understood it was One Divine Being, embodying Itself in a different form, age after age. *The Wisdom of China and India*, containing sayings of Ramakrishna was another great find dropped off by Joe Brown.

At all of our campsites there was at least one vast outlook where the colorful soaring Sierras were in view, subject to passing clouds. What indescribable lure and majesty characterized those ranges! But while we were in Poison Flat we fought two fires. One was large and up near Alpine Meadows. “Back-firing” was used to contain it; that’s when a smaller controlled fire is set to burn up what the big fire is about to confront. The second fire was more dramatic for me. A large old tree high on a hill, standing rather by itself, had caught lightning. The ranger who was sent out to take care of it came to our camp, expecting to find the workers. There was only this small cook. So he enlisted me, and the two of us carried up the hill the largest tree saw I had ever seen; it was heavy, with a handle on each end, and with this the two of us proceeded to saw down the tree; then the fire could be beaten out.

As summer began to pass into fall we realized that all this would soon come to an end. It may have been late August or early September that we broke camp in Poison Flat and started the trek to our last hangout. And hangout it was: just a tiny pocket of flat land beside the trail, perched high over river and cliffs, way up in the clouds, so to speak. This was the greatest, most incomparable view we had had. The trail had led out of the Flat down through a spot called Soda Springs into a long narrow file for over an hour until it climbed high on the cliff to the tiny place where we were to settle. We stayed there only about two days, but I shall never forget it—so picturesque. On one side a rather gentle hill rose, heavily forested. But on the other side land dropped away sharply, giving way to a gorge—in which a stream must have run—we couldn’t see it, so far below. Across the gorge from our camp the peaks rose, jammed up together in a wild ascent of blues, browns and russet tops. As darkness came on we made our campfire in the middle of the flat and unpacked only the stove. Each man chose his own cot site, under the stars.

One morning the sky darkened and we scented rain. Hurriedly packing, and wearing our “rain-proofs,” one by one or two by two we marched off downhill and into the valley for a long trek to the tiny town of Markleeville. Ben, ever the maverick, with a bit of masochism chose to remain behind, in his cot, rain pouring down. I admit I wondered about his sanity. He came down the next day. Markleeville had the aspect of a frontier town of sometime back; it might have been good to explore. But we went straight to our outpost. It proved to be an old rented house in which two objectors, good friends, were carrying on for months some kind of forestry work—I don’t recall the nature of it. The house had a shower bath—a supply of good hot water: oh the joy of it! A shower after all those weeks! Bless you, camp Markleeville.

What followed was a few weeks’ spell back in Coleville’s Camp Antelope. I apprenticed myself to the baker, a Hollander and a Mennonite, of even temper and much skill. He had responsibility for all the bread, rolls and cakes that fed us; I am sure he worked overtime. Assisting him proved to be satisfying work. I was not to be there long, however, as the Camp Director tapped me for another “spike camp” as they were termed. It would be a winter camp again up in Nevada, by the California border. “Take all your warm clothes.”

Wellington is a mountain village north of Reno. I went by bus through Bishop, Gardnerville and Minden, and as usual, arrived at Nowhere. This forestry crew had been working in the nearby village of Yerington; the work was now in this new spot. Instead of a camp, they had old work trailers: a couple for sleeping, one for cooking and dining, two for showers. A road ran past this trailer camp; on the east of it were the snow-covered peaks of Nevada, appearing very close; on the west, forested hills which could easily be Californian, so to say. The road was covered with snow and ice during most of our time in Wellington.

Their cook needed replacing and here I was in a kitchen that was actually quite good. These ditch-digging “conchies,” numbered a dozen or so and an interesting thing was that one of them was my elder brother, Thurston. That was a mixed blessing. Getting to know the other men was a rich experience. All the big three were there: Quakers, Brethren and Mennonites; and more. We had time to talk, to sing and play guitars and a few even visited the local bar—a colorful place indeed. I discovered that I could volunteer playing the hymns on the reed organ at the tiny local church. Except for one bout of ‘flu, with me lying miserably in my cot, the experience of the Wellington spike was not at all bad..

That was the Forestry branch of Civilian Public Service. There was also the branch of Service in Institutions. Having **served** in camp for six months, and in “good standing,” I had become eligible for what was called detached service—working in an institution for public care: a hospital, infirmary, mental asylum or the like, without pay of course and with long hours. We were replacing men who had gone to fight and we knew it. At least these places usually offered the urban company and conveniences of a city, town, or suburb—a place more genteel and “civilized” than the forest camps. When we were still in our last perch atop the Sierra a questionnaire had arrived, via the mule, asking for first, second and third choices for detached service. Thinking at the time that I might one day be a psychiatrist, I elected mental hospital as my first choice. I did not get it: I was given the second choice, a “school” for the mentally deficient.

Bidding farewell to friends in base camp, except for one who would be joining me later, I boarded the train for Pennsylvania. Not far from that Quaker center, Philadelphia, was Pennhurst, the property on which stood the Eastern Pennsylvania School for the Mentally Deficient. (Not sure that was its name) to which I was being sent in a contingent of thirty conscientious objectors. Exiting the “Pennsy Station” one boarded the Paoli Local train. It passed through stops with names like Conshohocken, Wissahikon and Paoli Junction onward and up into the interior of the state. It made stops not at Pennhurst (except for shipments) but at the tiny towns of Spring City and Royersford. From Spring City one went on foot along the flowing waters of the Schuylkill River, then up the hill to the brick dormitories. An entire hill laid out with a series of brick “cottages, ” it was home to 1500 or so unfortunates—girls and women high on the hill, boys and men at the bottom—whom society or somebody had judged to be subnormal in native intellectual ability or otherwise beyond the pale. Of course they had been labeled: morons, imbeciles and idiots, IQs in the 90s, in the 60s and in the 30s and on down, respectively.

One of the first things I recall seeing is the attendant with the wooden leg hobbling down that railroad track toward the station. Old Pegleg had been fired. He was not needed—now that all these young men had come to be “tendants,” as the patients called them. Moreover, they said, that leg could hurt and bruise you when he used it as a paddle. No doubt he had done that once too often.

But this was 1944 and we said “mentally deficient” in those days; later it became “retarded” and today one says, “challenged.” C.P.S. Unit 129 had arrived, 30 men, a few with wives accompanying, to serve out their time in alternative work. In fact, it was they who were challenged—their ideal of non-violence was to be put to the test as never before, as they handled the inmates and mixed with the hired staff.\*

The long brick “cottages” each had a large common sleeping room and a smaller dayroom with a large fireplace and were designated by letters of the alphabet: U2 being the second floor of U-cottage which served as the lockup, by the way; it had special attendants, such as Pegleg. The C.P.S. unit was housed in M building, one of the newest. The whole third floor had been given over to us, two persons in a room designed for one. My roommate, Maurice Friedman, I had known at Camp Antelope and we had agreed to share. Maury went on after the war to become the first to translate into English works of Martin Buber, Jewish philosopher and mystic. In the next room were two college graduates, also already into meditation and yoga, and the four of us formed the *Gemeinde* described in detail in my book.

A small separate building was called the Hospital, and it was there that I received my first assignment, as the fact that I had been a hospital orderly was on my record. The staff was worth description: one full time M.D. in her declining years and visits from two or three others when needed, one of whom was bent and bowed under his white hair. I was not able to stay long in the little infirmary, being wanted elsewhere; but in that time there were two unforgettable experiences. I watched a young man die of tuberculosis in the night, and one day held up a crying baby to take his temperature: 107 degrees, the highest I have ever seen. They said that he lived through it.

This group of C.P.S. men was a different set from those previously known to me, Several came from highly aristocratic backgrounds. One was the younger brother of the celebrated early folk-singer Richard Dyer-Bennett. Another, Howard Schomer, a minister with his wife, Elsie, secured a post preaching on Sunday in a Royersford church**.** Howard later became head of Union Theological Seminary. Another, professional organist, did his part in another church. There was but one actual farmer, and as the institution had a small farm, that was his place. The women served (with pay) as secretaries in various parts of the “school.” The rest of the men were attendants—supervising the wards by day or by night. Attendant was the most difficult of all because of the erratic behavior of the “patients” and confrontation with staff habituated to violence. Didn’t these unfortunates’ parents visit them? Only a few, and that not often . Most of us worked 12 hour shifts. The American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) who ran the camp, managed to pass on to each a monthly allowance of $15.

The physician in charge at Pennhurst proved to be an alcoholic and was considered by our men a washout. A couple of the regular staff eventually accepted the peace “witness” of the COs and softened their ways; others, hardened by long years of exposure to the job, had nothing but contempt. I must say, in defense of this state institution that an attempt was made to alleviate the dreariness: in addition to a large playground, where some of our more athletic members could coach, there was a little theater, and for those bright enough to appreciate it, a weekly movie. The most popular film in our time there, believe it or not, was “King of Kings,” the life of Christ.

There was a tennis court for the staff, and the food, for staff and employees, was standard Pennsylvania Dutch fare. The patients’ food, on the other hand was cooked in huge vats and turned out almost tasteless. Having a resume which included cooking and baking, I was now sent from the infirmary to the kitchen. Thus began some of the most memorable interactions in my life. The *dramatis personae*: a dietician/manager who succeeded in being as rigid and autocratic as she was, basically, fair and forgiving; an elderly Dutch baker who jealously kept to himself everything I would have needed to know in order to assist him; four “high grade” patients as kitchen helpers, who helped to keep the place in constant turmoil; separate cooks for the patients’ food, the employees’ food and the chef for the management—all conscious of their three respective castes. Eventually I wound up as dessert cook in the employee kitchen for a period of some months.

In comprising the Pennhurst experience two more assignments need to be included: night duty—twelve hours of near solitude and relative quiet. This was the beginning of my immersion in the Christian mystics, which I read on and on at the huge old desk of the U-cottage office. It was that experience of my life which best prepared me for monastic adventure, changed my perspective and gave me resources for future **occasions**. Finally, for a few weeks my night shift was changed to H-cottage, where there were only beds, full of the lowest IQs in the place. Although the volunteers usually did not do “the dirty work” of such places—simply seeing to it that the worker patients *did*—still, the sights and smells of H-cottage were a very fit send-off when in 1944 my discharge arrived.

Unfortunately at a much later period the Pennhurst facility fell into historic tragedy and disgrace.

We served the government in these capacities, I for a year and a half. And the above is but a small episode in the story of Civilian Public Service in World War II.

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\* For a more detailed account of Pennhurst and personal experiences in it see the Introduction to my book *Six Lighted Windows*, Vedanta Press.