

War Era Story Project 2012

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Another View of World War II

To those of us who were young during the early 1940s, World War II was just another war. In 1940, Congress passed the first peacetime conscription law, but until the attack on Pearl Harbor there was little enthusiasm for American involvement in the conflict.

For me and millions of others, the conscription law changed our lives. A lifelong pacifist, I lived in Reading, Pennsylvania, where I joined the Quakers at 18 and faced the Selective Service System two years later. My options then were to register for the draft or face prison. I could not accept a civilian alternative service program for conscientious objectors because it required approval from a draft board and charged each draftee \$35.00 a month for room and board. I could not pay that and would not agree to serve under a military draft. Wishing to make the strongest possible witness against the entire war system, I wrote the U.S. attorney in Philadelphia to explain why I could not, in good conscience, register.

Soon, two FBI agents arrested me in the first of a series of events culminating in a three-year sentence in federal prison. After two months in an ancient Philadelphia jail, I was moved to a minimum custody federal prison at Mill Point, West Virginia, and a month later was transferred to the Federal Correctional Institution at Ashland, Kentucky.

War resisters and Jehovah's Witnesses made up about a third of the population at Ashland. While there, I worked at various jobs and participated in several actions to protest the mistreatment of prisoners, especially an attempt to desegregate the dining hall so we could eat with our African American friends. Bayard Rustin, who later played a major role in the civil rights movement, led that effort. When negotiations with the prison administration failed, some of us began a work strike and were placed in punitive, administrative segregation. While our Ashland campaign failed, war resisters in Danbury Federal Prison were successful in integrating the dining hall.

Eventually, I was eligible for conditional release, but only if I accepted a draft card and signed release papers – something I could not do. Officials released me anyway and I went to New York City where I worked for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. After a few weeks, arrested for not complying with conditions I had never accepted, I was taken to Lewisburg Penitentiary in Pennsylvania, where I found all non-cooperators like me were confined in one large room. Bayard Rustin had been transferred to Lewisburg, as had several other African-American resisters. It is likely that we were in the only desegregated living quarters in the entire federal government. Ironically, we were there for punishment, not for civil rights activities.

After my release, I attended William Penn College in Iowa to complete my undergraduate studies. There I met and married Lenna Mae Goodson and we both attended Pennsylvania State College, where I got a master's degree in history. My first college teaching job was at Bluffton College, a Mennonite school in Ohio. Although beyond the age of draft registration by then, I ended my first year of teaching back in prison, falsely accused of counseling a Bluffton student to refuse to register. While I had not met the student before his refusal, I would never have counseled anyone to refuse to register.

Bluffton's president supported me, as did the parents of the accused student. With a felony record and facing a hostile court, I ended up with a sentence of 18 months and was sent to the federal prison at Milan, Michigan. Unlike my wartime experience, I did very difficult time. Separated from my wife, removed from my first job and fearing an end to my teaching career, I thought the world had crashed down on me. The only bright spot was Lenna Mae's daily letters and her loving support. This time, to maintain my emotional equilibrium, I accepted parole and was released in December, 1949, after seven months in prison. The Department of Justice was relieved to get me out of their system, and so was I.

Meantime, the case had attracted national attention and appeals reached the U.S. Supreme Court. With one justice recusing himself, the Court split 4-4, which meant there was no written opinion, the ruling of the appeals court was allowed to stand, and my conviction was affirmed.

Still determined to be a college teacher, I entered graduate school at the University of Wisconsin and, in 1953, received the Ph.D in History. After a year of teaching at Mexico City College I returned to the U.S., where determination and good luck enabled me to find teaching jobs at three colleges before accepting a near-perfect teaching post at Wilmington College in Ohio, where I taught forty years and am now Emeritus Professor of History.

I continued to maintain my pacifism and, after a period of adjustment to civilian life and building my professional career, I became a part time activist. I still believe that war is the greatest threat to life on Planet Earth.

The story of imprisoned war resisters is nearly invisible, yet I believe it is an important part of our history. Most of the resisters continued to promote nonviolence while pursuing various careers. Imprisonment often causes serious after affects, including PTSD, which afflicted me in a mild form for a few years. Nevertheless, I have been fortunate to have a loving wife and wonderful family, several satisfying teaching jobs and an opportunity to write six books, including one that tells our World War II story.

Over the years, I have been good friends with a number of veterans of the war. In some ways our experiences were similar. They were fighting in the war and we were fighting war. All of us were separated from work and families and had to come to terms with the anxieties of wartime living. The so-called "Good War" affected a generation of young men and women. During those terrible years the war resisters kept the concept of nonviolence alive. We were only a few small candles in a dark world but those candles prevented the darkness from becoming total.