

Harry Wright-Johnson

Interviewed on October 1, 2002, by Nancy A. Robinson,
Clerk, Santa Barbara Friends Meeting

What made you decide to request conscientious objector status during WWII?

I remember when I was four years old my mother was involved with evangelical religious work. We went to meetings every Wednesday and Thursday evening. There I heard testimonies by Christians and was fully indoctrinated with the Ten Commandments. For eleven years, I had a full exposure to Christian thought. When WWII came, my beliefs were firmly instilled by these childhood experiences.

When I attended the University of Redlands, chapel services were held four times a week. It never occurred to me that I would be anything but a CO.

When I was inducted, I refused to step forward to serve in the service. I was then examined by the draft board. One of my friends was sent to prison for refusing to serve. Later my friend was pardoned by President Roosevelt. I lived in a small town and everyone knew me and my family. I don't think the town wanted to call attention to itself by having a member of the community pardoned by the President of the United States.

Where were you assigned to serve?

The draft board in Redlands determined where I would serve. AFSC also became a decision maker in the process. First I was assigned to Coleville, CA and fought fires in that area. Then I was moved to Mammoth Lakes, where there were approximately thirty other COs. Between fires we strung telephone lines. About that time my wife had our first child.

What were these experiences like?

Life was especially difficult for my wife and son. COs had no benefits, hence we had no medical coverage. Just after my son was born, I was assigned to a boys colony for mentally deficient boys in the state of New Jersey. I worked in a clinic there for the next three years. I earned \$2.50 per month and with a wife and child that pay made life difficult. I served for a total of four years. At some point, I received a raise to \$15 per month but still there were no benefits.

One of my jobs was to treat the boys for scabies. Because many boys slept in one large room with beds quite close together, disease was a problem. Once a month I had to wash

them all with sulfur to control the scabies. After I finished the job, I was extremely careful to wash myself thoroughly.

When Germany surrendered, I thought Japan would soon surrender as well. My wife and son moved back to California, where my wife worked for the Red Cross in Oakland. We thought I would be released shortly, but that was not the case. The boys colony was happy to have the employees provided by the COs at \$15 per month and they were reluctant to release us. Finally I had to get an order that I was being held against my will when the superintendent of the colony ignored my request. Eventually a Federal Marshall came and I was put on a train for California the next day. I moved to Oakland where I worked as the membership director for the YMCA for five years. I bought a house in Palo Alto with the director of the YMCA signing on the loan for me. It was still difficult to afford the house on my salary of \$1400 per month and so I went into the insurance business.

Do you feel the time spent serving was worthwhile to you personally? To the war effort in the country?

Fighting fires was dangerous business. However, the alternate service responsibilities were important. One time I had to go on a rescue mission with eight men to Mt. Whitney. A man had broken his leg and had to be carried down. This experience was one of the coldest in my life. Our faces were actually burned by the cold.

As far as the alternate service goes, I have no questions that this was the right thing for me to do. My wife's family was Christian Scientist and she was also in favor of my being a CO.

As you look back on the experiences, do you think they changed you as a person? If so, in what way?

I think I could not have done anything but become a CO. I do not think it necessarily made me better. I think that is who I was. Today I do not march and protest. I have two artificial knees and walking distances is not easy. I feel I have many other things to offer. I accomplish something important by being a good neighbor, by keeping the poetry reading group going.

I made many close friendships over the years and am able to bring people together. Neither my spirit nor thinking has changed. One of the things I enjoyed the most about my service was being very supportive of the patients at the boys colony. I would rather do caring than discipline any day.

Would you advise young men today to consider CO status?

Young men today need to think through philosophically about making this choice to become a CO. If you do not believe deeply in non-violence, it is difficult to obtain CO status.