

What does it mean to be a

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR?



by Ann Marie Swartz

Written January, 1991

Revised April, 1996

What Does it Mean to be a CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR?

by Ann Marie Swartz

Conscientious objectors are people who believe it's wrong to use violence against another person. They base their belief on the New Testament in which Jesus says, "But I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44) Conscientious objectors interpret this to mean not participating in war in any way.

Conscientious objection is a historic belief of Mennonites. Menno Simons, from whom the word "Mennonite" is derived, said, "Spears and swords of iron we leave to those, who, alas, consider human blood and swine's blood of well-nigh equal value." Instead of doing violence, Mennonites are ready to serve people.

The freedom to conscientiously object to bearing arms is what brought my ancestors to America. The history of my family reflects the development of the right to conscientiously object to bearing arms in the United States.

Mennonite Roots of Conscientious Objection—Tough Persecution

The history of my family traces back to Europe where they faced intense persecution. Military training and service were mandatory in Germany. Because participating in the military was against my ancestor's beliefs, they and other conscientious objectors faced persecution from both Catholic and Protestant churches.



Persecution came in different ways. Some people were hung on their door posts. Others were burned to death in their homes. Still others were burned at the stake, drowned, or died under the headman's ax. The



This famous Martyr's Mirror illustration depicts Dirk Willems saving his captor's life

government of the German Empire passed a law in April of 1529 that stated, "Every Anabaptist (Mennonite) and re-baptized person of either sex shall be put to death by fire, sword, or some other way." Later, persecution was not carried out to this extent, but conscientious objectors were still forced into the military camps. Levi Miller in his book, *Our People*, writes, "To this day the consciousness of these persecutions is strongly etched into the minds of Mennonites...in North America." Many Mennonite homes have a book called the *Martyr's Mirror* by Thieleman J. van Braught (Herald Press) which contains over one thousand pages of accounts of these persecutions.

To America for Freedom

After centuries of persecution, Mennonites looked for the religious freedom they heard existed in America and hoped that there they would have the right to conscientiously object to bearing arms. However, it did not turn out as well as they had hoped.

The issue of conscientious objection started early in the history of the United States. James Madison proposed to the first session of the first Congress that the following portion be included in the Constitution:

"The right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed; a well-armed and well-regulated militia being the best security of a free country; but no person religiously scrupulous of bearing arms shall be compelled to render military service in person."



However, everything but the phrase about conscientious objection was included in the Constitution. Even though the right to consciously object to bearing arms was not guaranteed, there was a climate of religious freedom in America.

Many Mennonites accepted the invitation that William Penn, an English Quaker, gave them to move from Europe to Pennsylvania.

My Bender ancestors sent their oldest son Wilhelm to America before he reached the age of military service in Germany. Since Wilhelm could not afford the passage fee, he became an indentured servant to a nursery man when he arrived in Baltimore. When Benedict Miller heard about Wilhelm, he traveled to Baltimore, paid his redemption money, and brought Wilhelm home to Somerset County, Maryland.

Wilhelm soon earned enough money to pay the passage fee for his brother Joseph, who had reached the age of military service in Germany. Together Wilhelm and Joseph earned enough money to bring their parents and four younger brothers to America. Sadly, their father, Daniel Bender, died before they arrived. Now that they were all in America, the family hoped they would have religious freedom and the right to conscientiously object to war.

The Bender family and other conscientious objectors carried their beliefs into everyday life. They did not use force to protect themselves, nor did they use weapons. Instead they followed the verse in the Bible "... if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matthew 5:39, NIV) They treated a person who violated them with love and kindness.

This practice is shown in a story about my ancestors, the Jacob Hostetler family. On the night of September 19, 1757, the Hostetler family was attacked by a group of Indians. The family had guns and ammunition on hand and the men in the family were good marksmen, but the father would not allow any use of it against human beings. When the Indians set fire to the Hostetler house, the parents and four children went to the cellar for refuge. The family tried to escape through a small window but were seen by the Indians who surrounded the house. All but one boy in the family was either captured, killed, or tomahawked and scalped.

During the Civil War - "Poor Marksman"

In times of war, conscientious objectors tried to persuade the government to let them participate in alternative service instead of fighting. The treatment of conscientious objectors differed throughout the United States during the Civil War. However, a uniform policy was never enforced.

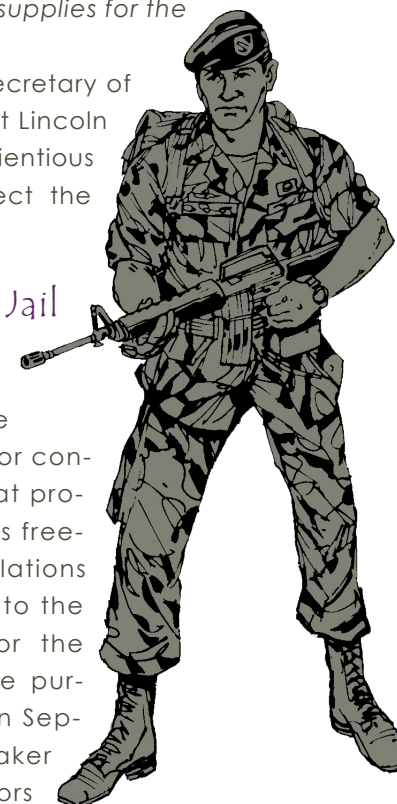
In the South during the Civil War, Mennonite people of the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia lived in the area of battle. Since no provision was available for conscientious objectors, some hid and some were arrested. Still others were drafted into the army under force and refused to shoot. Stonewall Jackson said:

"There lives a people in the valley of Virginia, that are not hard to bring into the army. While there, they are obedient to their officers. Nor is it difficult to have them take aim, but it is impossible to get them to take correct aim. I, therefore, think it better to leave them at their homes that they may produce supplies for the army."

Near the end of the Civil War, the Secretary of War Stanton said that he and President Lincoln felt that "unless we recognize conscientious religion scruples, we could not expect the blessing of heaven."

World War 1 - Cesspools and Jail

The United States formally entered World War I on April 6, 1917. When World War I began, no alternative service or exemption was available for conscientious objectors. The only law that protected them was the right to religious freedom in the Constitution. Military regulations allowed noncombatant service, but to the conscientious objectors, working for the military in any way served the same purpose - to aid in killing the enemy. On September 1, 1917, Secretary of War Baker declared that conscientious objectors



should go to military camps and could expect the following:

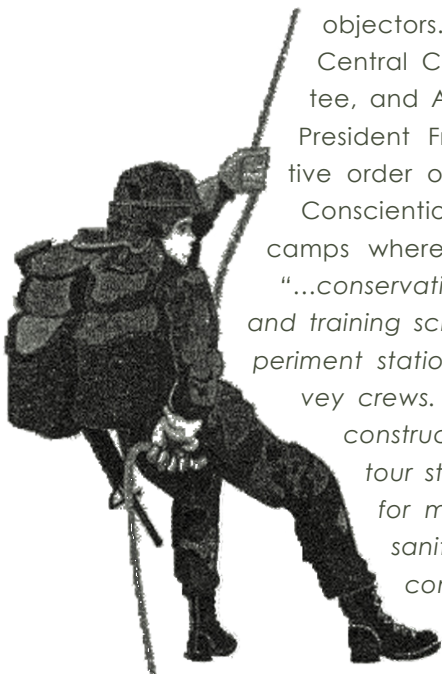
- They would be segregated.
- They would not be required to wear uniforms
- They would be offered a list of services considered noncombatant.
- Those who could not accept this would be held in detention camps to await such disposition as the government should decide upon.

Many conscientious objectors were sent to camps where they were treated roughly. For example, in 1918, Emanuel Swartzentruber was drafted into World War I at Camp Greenleaf in Bad Axe, Michigan. He later refused to put on a uniform or do drills and chores. Later when the sergeant gave him orders to put on a uniform and he did not obey, the soldiers forced it on him. The other soldiers treated Emanuel roughly by throwing him into a cesspool and into an oats bin. He was finally put into jail because of his beliefs. Even though they received harsh treatment, many conscientious objectors remained true to their beliefs, and the government took notice.

World War II – New Opportunities

During World War II some new options were provided under Civilian Public Service (CPS) for conscientious objectors. CPS was operated by Mennonite Central Committee, Brethren Service Committee, and American Friends Service Committee. President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order on February 6, 1941, approving CPS.

Conscientious objectors were placed in CPS camps where their jobs included the following: *"...conservation and forestry camps, hospitals and training schools, university labs, agricultural experiment stations and farms, and government survey crews. They built roads, fought forest fires, constructed dams, planted trees, built contour strips on farms, served as guinea pigs for medical and scientific research, built sanitary facilities for hookworm-ridden communities, and cared for the mentally ill and juvenile delinquents."*



The government assigned these jobs because they helped make the country a more suitable place to live. Because the CPSers received no wages from the government, their families and churches contributed money to meet their needs.

After World War II, alternatives such as the I-W program allowed conscientious objectors to contribute to the maintenance of health and safety of the American people. Many I-W's worked in low-paying jobs in hospitals and health facilities.

A I-0 status was given to a conscientious objector who was available for civilian work but was not needed. My father received this type of status in 1973 at the conclusion of the Vietnam War. The first time he applied for a conscientious objector status, he was denied by his local draft board in Flint, Michigan. He appeared before the draft board and explained his reasons for being opposed to war. The board then approved his status as a conscientious objector.

Needed – Courage and Commitment

Because of their beliefs, conscientious objectors are sometimes accused of being cowards, especially by people who serve in the military. However, some conscientious objectors showed that they were not cowards by serving as guinea pigs in research labs. They were used in experiments and tests to treat diseases. Conscientious objectors are commended by others because they are willing to go to all measures to stand up for their convictions.

Although we live in a time of peace in America, I hope that my generation can be as courageous as the last. We need to teach our children and grandchildren what it means to be conscientious objectors. We need to carry out our beliefs every day by what we say and do. This will show the world that we are serious about living for Jesus and that we are ready to show God's love to our friends, as well as to those who persecute us.





Ann Marie (Swartz) Schrader wrote “What Does It Mean to be a Conscientious Objector?” in 1991 for a middle school History Day project. As a senior in high school, she edited the paper for Rosedale International (previously Rosedale Mennonite Missions). Ann Marie is a pastor’s wife and lives in Freeport, IL.