

**“WE FELT LIKE WE WERE SERVING HUMANITY:”  
MCPHERSON COUNTY, KANSAS CONSCIENTIOUS  
OBJECTORS DURING WORLD WAR II**

by  
**Nicholas A. Krehbiel**

Conscientious objectors (COs), those who object to war either on moral or religious grounds, found themselves in an interesting ideological dilemma during the Second World War. The United States dedicated itself to fighting evil incarnate in both the Pacific and European theaters of war. Many people asked how a person could refuse to fight when the cause was certainly just. Few, if any, people debated whether Nazi Germany and Japan should be stopped. Nonetheless, about 43,000 people registered as COs, citing moral or religious reasons.<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Kohn, a professor of law, writes, “The objectors had a message of nonviolence, despite the violence that wracked the nations. Regardless of the logic of the war, they maintained the logic of peace.”<sup>2</sup> Was the cause of nonviolence logical? Was the logic of nonviolence un-American? No matter what the conflicting answers to these questions, the fact remained that COs did exist during the Second World War.

McPherson County in Central Kansas had a large number of conscientious objectors due to the overwhelming presence of the Church of the Brethren and the Mennonite Church, both historic peace churches that fervently believed in pacifism. These citizens did their duty during World War II, but in a different way. Conscientious objectors from McPherson County helped improve the quality of life in the United States by serving in Civilian Public Service (CPS) during World War II. The experience of three McPherson County COs illustrate the important contributions made to the homefront by way of their alternative service. Their efforts in soil conservation, forestry, mental hospitals, and

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Nicholas Krehbiel is a second-year graduate student at Fort Hays State University. He is originally from Pratt, Kansas and plans to begin work on his Ph.D. in the fall of 2004.

scientific experiments served as an example of the contributions made by all conscientious objectors during the Second World War.

With the establishment of the Selective Service Act of 1940, many conscientious objectors found their beliefs being questioned in both the government and society. But COs had a friend in General Lewis Hershey, head of the Selective Service. Coming from Mennonite ancestry, Hershey understood the beliefs of the COs. When the government implemented the Selective Service Act on 16 September 1940, Section 5(g) made sure the rights of COs were protected.<sup>3</sup>

Nothing contained in this act shall be construed to require any person to be subject to combatant training and service in the land and naval forces of the United States who, by reason of religious training and belief, is conscientiously opposed to war in any form.<sup>4</sup>

The Act also provided legislation for noncombatant service and alternative service, though no one had given much consideration to administering an alternative service program.<sup>5</sup>

After passage of the bill and creation of the Selective Service, General Hershey asked the peace churches to submit ideas concerning alternative service. Hershey felt the government had not thoroughly considered alternative service and he wanted the peace churches to advise him and others on how to construct and administer the program. The National Service Board for Religious Objectors (NSBRO), a board that represented the peace churches, advised alternative service work camps sponsored by the churches. By 6 February 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt approved the plan submitted by Hershey, and the CO program commenced forthwith.<sup>6</sup>

The process of becoming a conscientious objector involved the classic role of government bureaucracy. Firstly, the Selective Service required COs to fill out Selective Service Form 47. This form posed questions about the applicant's history, positions on pacifism, church affiliation, and the church's position on war. The form also required references to vouch for the applicant's religious conviction.<sup>7</sup>

After the applicant completed Form 47 he would then appear before the local draft board. Paul Flynn, a draft history expert, wrote that although General Hershey told the “local boards that objectors should receive the same treatment as non-objectors,” draft boards had a tendency to be inconsistent.<sup>8</sup> Whether or not a CO received a deferment often depended on which people constituted the draft board. The members usually came from veterans groups, patriotic clubs and/or the local Chamber of Commerce. These “elites” generally did not identify with the conscientious objector. The boards sometimes made their decisions based on how they felt about conscription or their own personal experience with COs. Some boards gave CO status to all who asked, other boards flat out refused to all applicants.<sup>9</sup>

The reluctance of draft boards to grant CO status lay in part with the quota of draftees required for each county. Depending on the classification of the objector, a CO may or may not have counted toward fulfillment of this quota. The government grouped conscientious objectors into two categories; 1-A-O or 1V-E.

1-A-O status classified a CO as a noncombatant. Noncombatants served in the military and participated in all training exercises except weapons training. Initially, noncombatants served in the signal corps, engineering units, quartermaster corps, or decontamination units.<sup>10</sup> This continued until Secretary of War Henry Stimson declared on 25 January 1943 that the government would require all noncombatants to serve in medical units.<sup>11</sup>

The other classification, 1V-E, pertained to the COs who refused to serve in the military but would work in alternative service. Most draft boards did not care for alternative service because those who served in it did not count towards the local quota. Those with noncombatant status (1-A-O) counted towards the local quota; those with 1V-E status did not.<sup>12</sup> Of the 43,000 COs, 25,000 served as noncombatants, 12,000 served in alternative service, and the remaining 6,000 refused to serve in any capacity and spent time in federal penitentiaries.<sup>13</sup>

As stated earlier, the National Service Board for Religious Objectors advocated alternative service for the nation’s population of conscientious objectors. Alternative service manifested itself as Civilian Public Service (CPS). The CPS program can best be described as continuing the

programs of the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). In fact, CPS used old CCC facilities and equipment in the CPS work camps. Most of the work consisted of forestry and soil conservation programs. Many objectors also worked in detached units of CPS. The detached units labored in dairies, on farms, in mental hospitals, and volunteered for scientific experiments. Over time, these detached units would become quite popular. After 90 days of labor in the CPS camps, men could volunteer for the detached units. By January 1944, more men worked in special projects than worked in the camps.<sup>14</sup>

Of the aforementioned units, the four outlined in this study are forestry, soil conservation, mental hospitals, and scientific experiments. Men who worked in soil conservation and forestry lived in work camps placed mainly in the northern half of the United States with a few camps in southern California and the southeastern United States.<sup>15</sup> In regards to the detached units, a large amount of documentation exists in the areas of mental health and scientific experiments.

Most of the CPS members in the forestry service worked in fire prevention. They built firebreaks and cleared underbrush and rotting timber. Aside from the timber labor, they also hung telephone lines and manned fire lookout posts. But, as Albert Keim, a CPS historian, stated, "Probably no assignment carried a greater aura of mystique and adventure than smoke jumping."<sup>16</sup> Smoke jumping was not a daredevil stunt in the modern sense of the word, but it did require a sense of adventure and a strong will. When CPS camps received a report of a forest fire, smoke jumpers flew near the area of the fire. The jumpers would parachute with their equipment into the hot zone and put out the fire. This procedure worked well because of the quick response time and the small manpower required to fight the fires.<sup>17</sup>

Although the forestry CPS story provided the most adventure, a large number of men worked in the soil conservation camps. In fact, Keim wrote, "One out of every six man-days worked by CPS was in soil conservation activity."<sup>18</sup> The objectors built contour furrows, dug ditches, constructed water reservoirs and dams, built fence, and laid many yards of sod in gullies and on slopes. Basically, they continued the New Deal's soil conservation projects.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the work camps, many CPS men found themselves attending to patients in mental hospitals. A labor shortage had decimated the pool of labor in mental hospitals. Due mainly to hospital staffers leaving to work in better paying wartime jobs, the shortage provided another outlet for members of the CPS to help society.<sup>20</sup> From 1943-1946, three thousand men served in mental hospitals.

Long hours and hard work constituted the norm at these institutions. Most men worked as attendants in the areas of ground maintenance and patient care. The hours averaged between 72-100 hours per week of caring for the lawn or garden, feeding patients, changing beds, and other general hospital duties. Mental ward administrators did not limit their labor force to men; women worked in the hospitals as well. Between 1943 and 1946, 300 college-age women cared for patients in a select number of state-administered psychiatric institutions.<sup>21</sup>



*Figure 2* Minnesota “Nutrition Test” subject  
Source: Eisan, facing 193

In addition to the basic work camps and other detached units, many conscientious objectors volunteered to be test subjects or technicians in scientific experiments. Administered by the Church of the Brethren, these experiments related to the soldiers in both the Pacific and European theaters of war. Many college campuses housed these experiments. Chicago, Cornell, Illinois, Indiana, Johns Hopkins, Minnesota, Ohio State, and the Mayo Clinic all had CO experiments conducted at their campuses. These units, known (not affectionately) as “Guinea Pig Units,” conducted a broad range of experiments. The unit in Bloomington at Indiana University administered tests on the physiological affects of clothing in different climates. The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor observed the affects of tropical climates on the ability to work. Of all the different experiment stations, the most appalling study occurred at the University of Minnesota. Here, COs were subjected to “nutrition experiments.”<sup>22</sup>

All of the aforementioned activities under CPS created a very dynamic environment for an objector during the Second World War. According to Rachel Goossen, a World War II conscientious objector historian, men in CPS moved to different areas an average of three times throughout their tenure in the service. The purpose of these changes of location involved manning new camps and working in different jobs, such as the mental hospitals or scientific experiments.<sup>23</sup> Evidence of this occurred among several conscientious objectors in McPherson County.

Merrill Sanger, a member of the Brethren Church, had just begun his second year of college at McPherson College, a small 4-year college supported by the Brethren Church. His whole life changed on 21 October 1942 when the U.S. Government called his draft number. Sanger had already registered as a conscientious objector for two reasons. He regarded the Ten Commandments as literal guides for living. “You don’t kill somebody to settle your differences, you try to work them out,” he stated during an interview. He also added, “If I had fought the Germans, my family came from Germany, and I might be shooting some of my own family.” Rather than serve in a capacity that he felt was wrong, he chose Civilian Public Service.<sup>24</sup>

Einer Jaderborg, a student at Bethany College, in Lindsborg, felt much the same way. Drafted in January 1942, Jadorborg participated heavily in activities at the local Lutheran church. His active role in the church led to his objections to warfare. To him, "Thou Shalt Not Kill" was a command, not a suggestion. He, too, chose Civilian Public Service as an alternative to military service.<sup>25</sup>

Merrill Sanger's younger brother, Warren, also registered as a conscientious objector. He remembers little opposition to his decision because, "McPherson County had the highest percentage of COs in the nation." Being raised in the Church of the Brethren provided Warren with many of the same beliefs as his brother. Working on a farm in Conway when his draft notification arrived in 1945, Warren Sanger followed his conscience and served in Civilian Public Service as well.<sup>26</sup>

Jaderborg and the two Sangers were not alone, even though Jaderborg was the only CO in Lindsborg. Many young men in McPherson County chose CPS over military service. By April 1942 at the latest, many conscientious objectors began serving in work camps around the nation, including Henry, Illinois, Magnolia, Arkansas, and Colorado Springs, Colorado. The men came from many communities, including Inman, McPherson, Canton, Gypsum, Moundridge, Galva, and Lindsborg.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Merrill Sanger's draft class in October 1942 contained eighty men and according to him, every last one was a conscientious objector.<sup>28</sup>

Both Jaderborg and Merrill Sanger began their Civilian Public Service experience at Camp Magnolia, Arkansas, a soil conservation camp in the northeastern part of the state.<sup>29</sup> Established on 10 June 1941 and administered by the Brethren Service Committee, Camp Magnolia provided conscientious objectors an outlet to work in an area of "... national importance under civilian direction." The U.S. Soil Conservation Service directed the labor and a CO's family, church, or savings account helped support him because the men received no compensation for their activity.<sup>30</sup> According to Jaderborg and Merrill Sanger, they received a few dollars per month for necessities such as toothpaste, but that was it.<sup>31</sup> Alternative service was a group effort; it was very difficult for one man to work without support from home or his church.



*Figure 3* Soil Conservation Service office at Camp Magnolia  
Source: Personal collection of author

The work at Magnolia fell in line with the purpose of CPS's soil conservation goals. The men built waterways for irrigation, terraces, fences, cleared river bottoms, and when necessary, fought fires. The labor was intensive, but the men who grew up on farms generally did not have much trouble adjusting to it.<sup>32</sup>

Of the two men, Jaderborg left Magnolia first, arriving in Mansfield Depot, CT during the spring of 1943 to work in a mental hospital. Due to the wartime labor shortage, mental hospitals found themselves severely understaffed. CPS provided the manpower these hospitals needed in order to continue providing care. Jaderborg served as a ward attendant, taking care of patients suffering from mental retardation. He remembered it as a fairly positive experience. "I do remember we had a lot of nice relationships with the people who were already working there," he stated.<sup>33</sup>

Such was the reaction of many hospital supervisors in other institutions as well. In a report to the Selective Service, many hospital superintendents had extremely positive recollections of their experience with conscientious objectors. One wrote, "We found these men to be



sincere, loyal, and cooperative. They were extremely helpful and as a matter of fact, I do not see how we could have operated this institution during the war without their assistance.”<sup>34</sup>

Warren Sanger worked in a mental hospital as well, but not before he served his time in a CPS work camp. Working in a forestry unit in Waldport, Oregon, he helped improve forests by maintaining trails, fighting forest fires, and “cruising timber.” Cruising timber involved surveying selected areas of timber and taking inventory of the different types of trees. Officials then used the data to determine which types of trees should be harvested for lumber.<sup>35</sup>

When the fire season ended in the early fall of 1945, Warren Sanger applied for and received a transfer to Lyons Veterans Hospital in Lyons, New Jersey. While there, he served as an aid in the most violent psychiatric ward in the entire institution. His job, aside from normal patient attendance, included protecting nurses from patients in case a patient became violent during specialized treatment. “I was a pretty big guy, so they liked having me in that job,” he remembered.

Warren Sanger remained in Lyons until he worked in other jobs beginning in 1946. He eventually traveled the globe in the service of his fellow man working in different projects sponsored or aided by the Brethren Church.<sup>36</sup>

Jaderborg remained at Mansfield Depot until 1944. He transferred to Cascade Locks, Oregon to work in a CPS forestry camp. While at Cascade Locks, Jaderborg helped clear roadways and fight forest fires. Staying there until the summer of 1945, he moved on to Modesto, California, helping assemble relief packages for the war-ravaged areas in Asia. He served there until discharged in early 1946.<sup>37</sup>

Merrill Sanger, too, left Magnolia in December 1943 to help administer and subject himself to scientific testing in a “Guinea Pig Unit” at the University of Indiana in Bloomington. He remembered the experience vividly.

Dr. Sid Robinson came down from Indiana University to interview some of the boys [at Magnolia] for this special unit. I was one of four chosen. The study covered the physiological effects of clothing on the human body. We exercised; constant

exercise on a treadmill two hours a day, in eighty-seven degree temperature at eighty percent humidity, and you had to walk on a treadmill at three and a half miles per hour on a two and a half percent grade. We were supposed to drink as much as we perspired, so the [water] drinking was closely monitored. The purpose of this was to test clothing material.



*Figure 3* Side view of the walking test at Indiana University. Merrill Sanger appears at lower right. Source: personal collection of author

Another test Merrill remembered involved wearing soaked clothes to sleep in. The experiment administrator would then blow a fan on the subjects and monitor how long they could sleep in the frigid conditions. Merrill recalled being able to last until 4:00 A.M., unable to sleep any longer. He stayed in Bloomington until the end of 1945. After he developed food poisoning in Bloomington (unrelated to the testing) he moved to Wellston, Michigan, where he remained until his discharge in April 1946.<sup>38</sup>

In McPherson County, attitudes toward conscientious objectors fell within a broad spectrum of emotions. A person who wished to remain anonymous lost a job in McPherson when a supervisor discovered that the person's significant other was a conscientious objector. Some

businesses refused to serve men after they returned home because of their status during the war.<sup>39</sup> Throughout his tenure in CPS, Einer Jaderborg had very little adverse reaction to his decision. He did, however, recall an incident after he graduated from Bethany College.

He remembered being asked to rescind his application for employment from the local high school. He refused to do so and the district hired him nonetheless. Though he was not able to document why the school board asked him to rescind, he cited his objection to the war as one possible reason. His status ceased to play a role later, however. He would eventually become superintendent of Lindsborg's school system.<sup>40</sup>

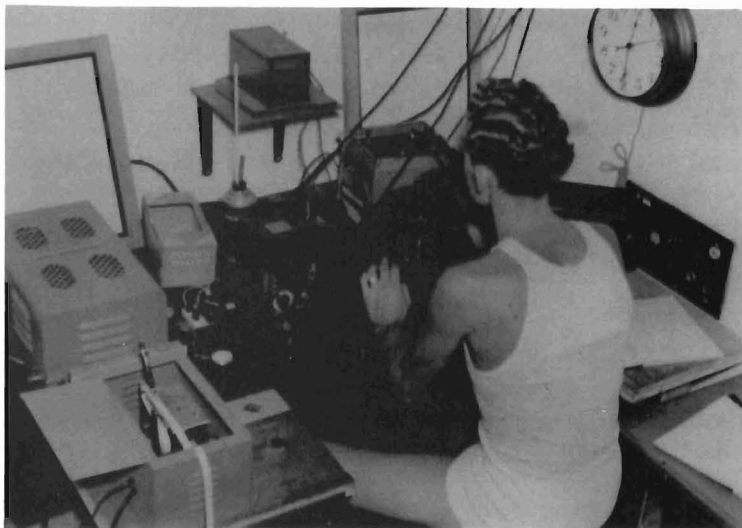
Neither of the Sanger brothers recalled much opposition to their decision, either. Merrill Sanger believed that was due in part to their mentality and activity when they returned. "It wasn't something we broadcasted to everyone," he said. "We kept it to ourselves and went about our business."<sup>41</sup> Warren Sanger had a somewhat different reason for explaining his lack of controversy, but the result was the same for him as it was for Merrill. "There were so many of us that it wasn't a really big deal," he recalled. "Once in a while you'd run into someone [who was somewhat hostile]. That was especially true if they'd lost a relative in the war."<sup>42</sup>

Though their decisions may not have been extremely popular during the war years, the conscientious objectors of McPherson County did help improve the quality of life in the United States. They were but a small part of the 12,000 men that served in CPS; but they, like the others, served a very important role in soil conservation, forestry, mental health, and advancements in scientific knowledge.

Soil conservation and forestry both served as the original divisions where CPS men worked. The soil conservation camps internally improved the United States by continuing the programs of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.<sup>43</sup> Evidence of soil conservation's importance laid in the experience of Dust Bowl farmers during the Great Depression. Croplands destroyed by drought and poor tillage techniques led to a disaster in the agricultural areas of the United States. New Deal programs helped to rectify the situation. Once the Second World War changed the priorities of the United States Government, New Deal

programs fell by the wayside. Civilian Public Service continued those programs, thus preserving a vital component of the United States' economy. The forestry camps played the same role by preserving the nation's forests through smoke jumping and forest conservation.

The men of CPS improved the quality of life in mental institutions as well. Here they had the most impact, as they advocated non-violent care and treatment of patients.<sup>44</sup> Warren Sanger recalled the feeling of satisfaction he received from serving his time at Lyons Veteran's Hospital. "I got a really good feeling about it; one of those kind of fuzzy feelings."<sup>45</sup> This example also reinforces the peace stance of many COs. They advocated non-violence wherever they went. It was not an empty belief. They did not claim opposition to war because they did not want to get killed. Their belief in non-violence manifested itself in everything they did, whether it was objecting to the draft or helping care for mental patients.



*Figure 4* Merrill Sanger at work on a heart monitor at Indiana University  
Source: personal collection of author

One of the more controversial areas for CPS men involved the Guinea Pig Units. These scientific testing units did have significant medical value and benefits arose from them,<sup>46</sup> but at what cost? The picture of a nutrition study subject in figure 2 serves as an example of how harmful and physically demanding these tests could be. Merrill Sanger's Guinea Pig Unit provided vital information on how different types of clothing responded to different climates; but while forcing the men to sleep in wet clothes in front of a fan may have provided vital medical knowledge, one can argue that it needlessly exposed the men to adverse conditions.

The general sentiment from these men today is one of pride and understanding for what they endured as conscientious objectors. To some of them, Guinea Pig Units were a small price to pay compared to the alternative; taking another man's life. Others saw places and did things they never would have done had it not been for CPS. One constant sentiment is that this was a time when disruption was a part of everyone's lives. In a time of national crisis, a person had to be adamant about protecting one's beliefs and convictions if one felt strongly about them. General Lewis Hershey knew this and advocated protection for the CO population in the United States. According to Hershey, the entire CO program constituted an, "experiment in democracy . . . to find out whether our democracy is big enough to preserve minority rights in a time of national emergency."<sup>47</sup> By allowing COs to serve in CPS or other forms of alternative service, the United States government did indeed protect their rights. In doing so, the government's policies allowed the men of McPherson County to serve humanity while protecting their right to oppose war no matter the circumstances.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ronald H. Bailey, *The Homefront: USA* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life, 1978), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen M. Kohn, *Jailed for Peace: The History of American Draft Law Violators, 1685-1985* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 45.

<sup>3</sup> George Q. Flynn, "Lewis Hershey and the Conscientious Objector: The World War II Experience," *Military Affairs* 47, no. 1 (February, 1983): 1; Cynthia Eller, *Conscientious Objectors and the Second World War: Moral and Religious Arguments in Support of Pacifism* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 11. Historians differ on the impact of Hershey's

Mennonite ancestry. It is the opinion of the author that Hershey's knowledge of his ancestry, though it may not have directly influenced him, possibly led him to at least understand the position of pacifism.

<sup>4</sup> "Selective Service Act," *Statutes at Large* 54 Part 1, 889 (1940).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Flynn, "Lewis Hershey and the Conscientious Objector," 2.

<sup>7</sup> Eller, 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Flynn, "Lewis Hershey and the Conscientious Objector," 2.

<sup>9</sup> Flynn, 2; Eller, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Eller, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Flynn, George Q, *The Draft, 1940-1973* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Eller, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Bailey, 45-46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> Albert N. Keim, *The CPS Story: An Illustrated History of Civilian Public Service* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990), 106.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, 46.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, 49-50.

<sup>20</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Women Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Home Front, 1941-1947* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 105; Keim, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Goossen, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Leslie Eisan, *Pathways of Peace: A History of the Civilian Public Service Program Administered by the Brethren Service Committee* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1948), 459; Merrill Sanger, World War II conscientious objector, interview by author, 2 September 2002, Quinter, KS, tape recording, in possession of author, Hays, KS.

<sup>23</sup> Goossen, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Merrill Sanger, Interview.

<sup>25</sup> Einer Jaderborg, World War II conscientious objector, interview by author, 14 September 2002, Lindsborg, KS, tape recording, in possession of author, Hays, KS.

<sup>26</sup> Warren Sanger, World War II conscientious objector, interview by author, 1 October 2002, Hays, KS, telephone interview, in possession of author.

<sup>27</sup> *McPherson (Kansas) Daily Republican*, 23 April 1942; Jaderborg, Interview.

<sup>28</sup> Merrill Sanger, Interview.

<sup>29</sup> Jaderborg, Interview; Merrill Sanger, Interview; Keim, 106.

<sup>30</sup>*Peace Pathways* (Magnolia, AK, 10 June 1940), 18. This is a newsletter printed by the members of Camp Magnolia. Merrill Sanger helped print this, and he loaned me one of his copies for use in this study.

<sup>31</sup>Jaderborg, Interview; Merrill Sanger, Interview.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>Jaderborg, Interview.

<sup>34</sup>“Reports of Superintendents of State Mental Hospitals on the Work of Conscientious Objectors, 1943-1945,” in Lillian Schlissel, ed., *Conscience in America: A Documentary History of Conscientious Objection in America, 1757-1967* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1968), 234.

<sup>35</sup>Warren Sanger, Interview.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.* Warren Sanger’s story is quite amazing. He worked in China with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). He lived in Australia once the Chinese Civil War put the men in danger. After spending a number of years there, he eventually worked in Costa Rica where he met his wife, Betty. They are married still and live in Bucyrus, Ohio.

<sup>37</sup>Jaderborg, Interview.

<sup>38</sup>Merrill Sanger, Interview.

<sup>39</sup>*McPherson (Kansas) Sentinel*, 22 May 1993. In some cases, the stigma still remains. This person did not consent to a formal interview because she felt the unpopularity of her decision 60 years ago would hurt her current business. I have spoken to family members of some veterans from McPherson County who eluded that their father would not have had to fight if, “it weren’t for all those CO’s.”

<sup>40</sup>Jaderborg, Interview.

<sup>41</sup>Merrill Sanger, Interview.

<sup>42</sup>Warren Sanger, Interview.

<sup>43</sup>Keim, 41.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup>Warren Sanger, Interview.

<sup>46</sup>Keim, 41.

<sup>47</sup>Flynn, “Lewis Hershey and the Conscientious Objector,” 2.