



# Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast BULLETIN

No. 19

April, 1988

Volume VIII, Number 1

## Civilian Public Service and the Transformation of American Mennonites

*(Editor's note: 1988 marks the 48th anniversary of the Selective Training and Service Act, which made possible the Civilian Public Service program. As we approach the golden anniversary of Civilian Public Service it seems appropriate to examine the significance of that experience. Articles in this issue by Paul Toews and Kevin Enns-Rempel are contributions toward this goal, while this year's annual dinner meeting will also reflect on the continuing impact of Civilian Public Service. Further details about this year's annual meeting are found elsewhere in this issue.)*

The Second World War was a transforming experience for American society; it marks one of the dividing moments in the nation's past. For American Mennonites the war was the transforming event of the twentieth century. Issues that had dominated the life of the church before the war receded and new ones came to define its life and character. There are many factors that account for the significance of the war for Mennonites, but no part of the war had a greater impact than the Civilian Public Service (CPS) experience.

The Mennonite search for some form of alternative service began during the mid-1930s. As the prospects for another round of European military conflict increased the agonized memory of Mennonites about the past war encouraged an active search for something better. The draft system of the First World War recognized no rights of conscientious objection. Mennonites were drafted into the military with the expectation that they would perform non-combatant duties. Large numbers refused to do so and the resulting clash between the state and the rights of conscience was injurious both to the American tradition of civil liberty and the standing of Mennonite communities. Both the State and the conscientious objectors were eager to find a more acceptable solution.

The Selective Training and Service Act of September, 1940 included provisions more satisfactory to both parties. This law, which defined the conscription system for the Second World War, recognized a class of conscientious objectors who would engage in work of national importance under civilian direction rather than military command. The system opened the way for considerable church involvement in the administration of draftees and reflected the impact of sustained work in Washington by Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren with both the legislative and executive branch framers of the law.

The young men who qualified as conscientious objectors

under this legislation were assigned to various work camps across the country. A dual system of responsibility was established whereby Selective Service provided the general administration and policy directives while the financing and direct supervision of the program was coordinated through the National Service Board of Religious Objectors, a cooperative agency that linked the "historic peace churches" together with other denominations interested in supplying alternatives for their young men as well. The government determined the sites of these work camps, but the church selected the administrative personnel for each camp and retained considerable autonomy in structuring the experience of the draftees beyond the eight hour working day.

*(continued, see CIVILIAN, page 5)*

## The Pacific District Conference and CPS: A Reciprocal Relationship

When examining the relationship of local churches and CPS it is easy to focus only on the assistance provided to the camps by the churches. While the camps did benefit immeasurably from such financial and spiritual aid, benefits were received by both parties. The CPS experience also nurtured a sense of Christian service in the conferences and congregations. The experience of the Mennonite Brethren Pacific District Conference after the Second World War is but one example of this phenomenon.

The Pacific District Conference played an active role in the spiritual nurture of men in California CPS camps. At the spiritual nurture of men in California CPS camps. At the 1943 conference in Lodi, California, the delegates resolved to supply the local CPS camps with visiting ministers under the supervision of the Home Missions Committee. One year later the committee was able to report that 35 ministerial visits has been made to the three California camps at Camino, North Fork and Three Rivers, roughly one visit to each camp per month. A similar schedule was maintained during 1945, with the addition of extended visits in the

*(continued, see THE PACIFIC, page 7)*

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# Menonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast

## Annual Dinner Meeting

**Date:** May 14, 1988

**Place:** British Columbia Lounge, Menonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (4824 E. Butler Ave., Fresno, California)

**Program:**

**2:00-4:00** — Alan Peters will once again conduct a genealogical workshop in the Center for Menonite Brethren Studies. You are invited to bring questions regarding your family history and Alan will provide suggestions to help you in your genealogical search. The Center for MB Studies is located in the Hiebert Library, on the campus Menonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and Fresno Pacific College.

**5:00-5:45** — Paul Toews will present slides of his recent visit to the Menonite colonies in Paraguay. This session will take place in the Manitoba Room of the Seminary classroom building.

**6:00** — **Annual Meeting** — After a traditional *faspa* dinner will follow this year's program, entitled "**Civilian Public Service: A Retrospective.**" Arthur Wiebe, Marvin Hein and Dan Neufeld, all of whom served in CPS, will share stories and reflections from their experience. Time will also be provided for comments from the audience.

**Cost:** \$6.00 per person, payable in advance or at the door. Reservation for the dinner should be made by May 9. You may use the response sheet or call Kevin Enns-Rempel at (209) 453-2225.

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### *The Pacific Dist. Conference* (cont. from page 1)

camps by Rev. George Warkentin and Rev. Jacob Eitzen. These visits were so well received that the Conference in 1945 authorized the Home Missions Committee to give sixteen weeks to such work and approved a budget of \$1000 for that purpose. The work continued in this manner until the closing of the camps in 1946.

The Conference also saw the need for financial support of CPS men. At the 1943 sessions P.C. Hiebert, Chairman of the General Conference Board of General Welfare encouraged the conference to carry out this responsibility by providing for the dependents of drafted men who were serving in the camps, and assisting CPS men re-entering the work force by holding jobs for them or saving money to be given to them upon discharge. At those same sessions the Pacific District elected a Service Men's Committee to help fulfill these and other responsibilities. The first members of this committee were J.D. Hofer, O.B. Reimer, Frank J. Wiens, D.L. Schellenberg and A.W. Gaede.

The Service Men's Committee 1944 report indicated that they were working with individual congregations to raise funds for payment to local CPS men upon their release, similar to discharge payments offered by the military. The Committee also planned to help returning men find suitable farm land or help them enter other professions by providing loans. At the 1947 sessions, by which time the CPS program had been terminated, the Service Men's Committee could report that it had disbursed \$15,400 in direct payments and \$473 in educational grants.

One might expect that the work of the Service Men's Committee would have ended with the closing of CPS. On the contrary, the committee's vision and responsibility grew markedly after the war. In 1949 it was reorganized as the Service and Welfare Committee (later known as the Com-

mittee on Welfare and Public Relations). Under its new identity, the committee worked to promote and coordinate voluntary service and relief work and continued to meet the needs of drafted men. The committee worked closely with Menonite Central Committee, Menonite Disaster Service and Kings View Hospital, helping present the programs of those organizations to the Pacific District. Its own projects included a service unit at the Mendocino State Hospital in Ukiah, California, overseas relief shipments, counseling and support for men in alternative service programs, work with the aged, assistance for migrant workers, peace education, and marriage and family counseling services. The radio broadcast that would eventually become known as "Words of the Gospel" also had its origins in the work of this committee.

The Pacific District Conference entered the Second World War without any organization devoted specifically to relief work and voluntary service. Forced to initiate such a program because of the demands of CPS, the conference caught a vision for service and relief that transcended government requirements. The transformation of the Service Men's Committee into a more broadly-conceived Committee on Welfare and Public Relations is but one example of how the CPS program helped the church accept its responsibility as an agent for service to the world around it.

—Kevin Enns-Rempel

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The *Bulletin* is an occasional publication of the Menonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast, 4824 E. Butler, Fresno, CA 93727-5097. Editor: Kevin Enns-Rempel.