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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.

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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

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Mennonite Central Committee, which served as the administrative agency for the camps under Mennonite jurisdiction, opened a total of 63 units that were operated either independently or jointly with other church agencies. The first camps, established under the Department of the Interior, engaged in soil conservation. They were soon followed by camps under the direction of the United States Forest Service. Other camps were organized in conjunction with Agricultural Experimental Stations, the National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation. "Detached service," or non-camp work, began in June, 1942 with the placement of draftees at a psychiatric hospital in Elgin, Illinois. By the end of CPS more than 1500 men served in similar hospital units. Others worked under the United States Public Health Division on hookworm control programs. Some of the side units received considerable publicity as "guinea pig" groups working under the Office of Scientific Research and Development. They volunteered for studies dealing principally with nutrition and disease control.

From the opening of the first camp in May, 1941 near Grottoes, Virginia to the closing of the last camps on March 31, 1947 nearly 12,00 young men represented 86 denominations worked in the CPS system. Mennonites were the largest single group with 4665 or 38% of the total CPS population. To operate the camps under Mennonite direction the churches contributed to MCC money and goods totaling over \$3 million.

Civilian Public Service was not the only Mennonite war-time experience. Mennonite young men facing the draft had to choose between three alternatives: unconditional military service, conditional military service (noncombatant) and alternative service. Among all Mennonite groups 39.5% chose unconditional service, 14% selected conditional service and 46.2% were part of the CPS alternative program. While slightly less than half of Mennonites responding to the draft selected CPS, this experience more than the other choices changes the nature of twentieth-century American Mennonitism. As the recommended choice of Mennonite leaders it was more central to the life of the various conferences than the other choices. Yet its transforming impact arose not only because of its preferred status, but rather from the nature of the experience itself. Among the many consequences of the CPS experience four of transforming magnitude are identified: a historical identity transformation, an ecumenical transformation, a missional transformation and an administrative transformation.

The CPS educational program was an important part of the camp experience. The time beyond the work week permitted a host of structured leisure and educational activities. The educational program was designed to nurture the development of varied interests and skills, earn high school and college credits and — most importantly from the viewpoint of the planners — socialize the young men into a fuller and more appreciative understanding of the Mennonite tradition. A core curriculum studied at virtually every unit was a six-booklet series entitled *Mennonites and Their*

Heritage. It mediated to the next generation a new understanding of Anabaptism as a distinctive tradition with particular relevance for the twentieth century. This core curriculum was an important part of the process by which Mennonites finding a refurbished historical identity were better able to articulate that identity in the postwar era.

The discovery of a shared past contributed toward the ecumenical quality of CPS. But more importantly the experience brought Mennonites of various kinds — Old and New, Swiss-German and Dutch-Russian, expansive and restrictive — into contact. Mennonites who had drifted apart because of differing histories and schisms found each other anew. The ecumenical renaissance since the Second World War that resulted in the creation of over 100 inter-Mennonite agencies, institutions and societies received its strongest stimulus from the CPS intermingling of various Mennonites who found a shared faith in spite of the boundaries.

There is a Mennonite missional and service activism in the post-war era that clearly had its roots in the CPS experience. The dramatic growth in MCC work around the world and the parallel expansion in denominational mission program reflected an enlarged commitment to the ideals of service that were nurtured by the war-time work. Mennonites gained a sense of self-confidence about the appropriateness of their gospel testimony and effectiveness of their work that was now channeled into far-flung missionary and benevolent work.

Civilian Public Service was the largest administrative undertaking ever attempted by American Mennonites. Other institutions of the church—colleges, retirement complexes, hospitals, publishing firms—were small by comparison. The war-time administration required negotiation with government officials, management of manpower resources, fund-raising and allocation of supplies on a scale previously unknown. Young men were thrust into positions of responsibility as camp business managers, educational directors, unit leaders and a host of other positions. The CPS system nurtured an administrative potential ready to build the enlarged institutions of the church in the following decades. This new leadership, built on the camp experience, was also influential in the movement of the various Mennonite conferences toward more democratic, consensual and shared styles of leadership.

Mennonites entered the war substantially preoccupied with issues arising out of the controversies of American fundamentalism and the doctrine of nonconformity. They existed from the war empowered by a more distinctive sense of historical and present identity, more acquainted and knit together with other members of the Mennonite family, committed to a missionary activism and strengthened by a new leadership tested by war-time demands.

—Paul Toews