Interview with Luke Birky
Date: December 8, 1999
Interviewer: Judith Ehrlich
Camera Rolls:
Sound Rolls:

Interview gathered as part of "The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors". Produced by Paradigm Productions. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Interview with Luke Birky, conducted by Paradigm Productions on December 8, 1999 for "The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors". Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in bold italics was used in the final version of "The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors".

00:00:12:00-00:00:24:00

Interviewer:

And just one other thing. You need to look at me. [laughs] At me. At my eyes. But OK.

Luke Birky:

I'm Luke Birky. Living in, now, now in Goshen, Indiana.

00:00:25:00-00:02:04:00

Interviewer:

Let me just start by talking a little about your upbringing and how it brought you to the peace position.

Luke Birky:

I was raised in a, in a Mennonite home, we were German in origin. My parents spoke Pennsylvania Dutch as I grew up. In fact we spoke it in our home all the time, and we were somewhat isolated from the community. We were very much a part of the church community, that was very, tight and, knit together. And so, I did grow up in a rather isolated way in a, in a way. And of course this was, I was born in 1922 and so we were living, in, in the early days [laughs]—

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm

Luke Birky:

—and in, in Oregon. I was born near Albany, Oregon, and it was a very rural community that I grew up in.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. I don't know if you said that it was the Mennonite Church.

Luke Birky:

Yes, we—

Interviewer:

Start, just—

Luke Birky:

I'm sorry.

Interviewer:

—just start that up a little bit and just tell us it was the Mennonite Church.

Luke Birky:

Yes, I was a member of the, or my parents were members of, of the Mennonite Church, and often referred to as the Old Mennonite Church. It was the largest branch of the Mennonite Church. But my parents tended to be a bit on the conservative side, and so we were, grew up, very much, with a strong sense of Christian community, a, a church community and we were very much a part of that.

00:02:05:00-00:02:39:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. What were the teachings of your church when it came to military and war?

Luke Birky:

Our church, the Mennonite Church, taught very much that we should try to follow the

example of Jesus in returning good for evil. And so we did follow very much of the, what was termed then the nonresistant path which had a stronger emphasis on passive resistance rather than active resistance.

00:02:40:00-00:03:05:00

Interviewer:

Define that a little bit more, when you say passive resistance and active resistance, what do you mean?

Luke Birky:

We would not have been political act—politically active at all. We would have been, some referred to us as the quiet in the land. And we tended to emphasize the, the returning good for evil rather than the aggressive trying to change society.

00:03:06:00-00:03:44:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. So is that what you, is that the position you felt as an individual and did you come to the, to the war, when the war broke out, is that, was that how you felt about your position?

Luke Birky:

Yeah, my own position, I, I accepted that position very much and I followed the, what I understood, Jesus' response was not to resist when people did things bad against you, and that you would live, all the way to death if necessary, rather than to injure or hurt other people.

00:03:45:00-00:05:49:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. Could you talk about what had happened in your family during World War One, and if that influenced you?

Luke Birky:

Well, my father was not drafted, he was on the farm and, and was exempted from the draft. My wife, I married Verna Conrad, later, and, but her father had been drafted and was sent up to Fort Lewis, near Seattle, Washington. And, although he grew up in the Methodist Church, he was a, became a conscientious objector. His family had been Mennonite earlier, but as a member of the Methodist Church he was not considered to be naturally a conscientious objector and, and met a great deal of resistance. He was placed in the Army. He was a, a more active person in terms of, and he refused even to wear the, the uniform. And so he

suffered a great deal at the hands of his fellow draftees. In fact, they took him out one night and, and hung him from a tree, but fortunately an officer came by and caught them before he, he had, he had lost consciousness, but he did not die.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

And then, when he was, they brought court martial action against the soldiers that had done that. And he said, I don't want to testify against them, they were doing what they thought was the right thing to do, and I don't want to do that. But the military forced him to tell his side of the story, and, and he did. And, but he, after the war he returned and went to the rural community and, and joined the Mennonite Church.

00:05:50:00-00:06:15:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. You know, I don't think you said in that that we were talking about World War One.

Luke Birky:

Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, we, [laughs] I'm sorry.

Interviewer:

Could you just go back and say, during World War One.

Luke Birky:

During World War One, my, my father-in-law suffered considerably as a conscientious objector within a military camp

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. That's great.

Luke Birky:

But there was no provision, during World War One, there was no provision, legal provision for conscientious objection.

00:06:16:00-00:07:15:00

Interviewer:

So during World War Two how did you feel, and how did the Mennonite Church feel, do you think, you can do those separately if they're different, about the alternative service you were offered?

Luke Birky:

Well the experience, both for the government and for the conscientious objectors during World War One was quite unsatisfactory and the government was eager not to repeat that kind of situation. And the churches also, the Mennonite Churches and the Quakers, and the Church of the Brethren, particularly, felt that there should be some kind of provision and they entered into dialogue with the government officials and then there was provision for a CO position, conscientious objector position. And so we were allowed to work in programs of national importance but under civilian direction.

00:07:16:00-00:08:50:00

Interviewer:

How did that program work from your perspective, the CPS program? And maybe you could say where you were in, in Civilian Public Service.

Luke Birky:

Well I was drafted in January of 1943, and, of the war, and it was quite a satisfactory set—, arrangement as far as I was concerned. I was drafted first into, to a CPS camp at La Pine, Oregon. Went in there in January of 1943 and we were building a dam and developing a reservoir there that would be used for irrigation. And it seemed to me at the time that it was work of significance and I was very pleased with that arrangement. I, I worked at that very happily. Some of the men felt that we ought to be able to do something more directly for, hum—in human services of some kind but I had no form of training, no education. I didn't even get to high school, I took my high school by correspondence.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

And for me it was quite satisfactory, because I was not prepared to go into the mental hospitals and things like that. So, I was able to do work that I considered important for the, for the common good of the U.S., and it did not cause me to violate my conscience, and so I was quite, quite satisfied with that.

00:08:51:00-00:09:44:00

Interviewer:

And then how did you go on to become a smokejumper?

Camer Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Luke Birky:

I was, I was in La Pine, Oregon first and was there one year, and at that time the, the U.S. government decided that they wanted to have that program to be administered by the government rather than by the church, because they had a, quite a few political objectors that were not, didn't fit, completely into the church situation.

Camer Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Luke Birky:

And so they wanted to take on the project, and it was a very successful program there at La Pine.

Camer Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Luke Birky:

And at that point then, I transferred out, of La Pine and went up to Belton, Montana to work for the Parks Service. See, now I've forgotten your question already.

Interviewer:

Well, how you got to smoke jumping.

Camer Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

00:09:45:00-00:10:19:00

Interviewer:

But La Pine had a lot of people who were resisting the CPS program? Is that right?

Camer Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

Didn't, wasn't La Pine a kind of problematic camp at one point? Was it a Brethren camp or a Mennonite camp?

Luke Birky:

No. It was a, it was a Mennonite camp.

Camer Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

It was the other, OK—

Luke Birky:

The, La Pine, Oregon was a, was a Mennonite operated camp until, and, and it operated as a Mennonite operated camp for one year and at that point the government took it over and managed that directly. And I preferred being in a, in a church administered camp—

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

—and so transferred up to Belton.

00:10:20:00-00:11:13:00

Interviewer:

And some of the people who came to La Pine were people who had had trouble in church camps, right?

Luke Birky:

That's correct.

Interviewer:

And so it was a more punitive kind of camp.

Luke Birky:

Yes, That's, that's correct, yeah.

Interviewer:

somewhere between a camp and—

Luke Birky:

Yes, That's correct.

Interviewer:

OK, so that makes sense. And then you go to Belton.

Luke Birky:

Then I went to Belton and I worked in the shop up there, and again, we worked for the Park Service, and again, it was, was work in the outdoors. It was work, trail maintenance, fire control and so on. And I was very happy there, but had the opportunity to volunteer to go into the smokejumpers, and so I volunteered the first year I was up there and, but the project superintendent didn't want me to go, he thought I, I was needed in the shop. So the second year I volunteered again and was accepted and did transfer down to Missoula, Montana for training in the spring of 1945.

00:11:14:00-00:11:59:00

Interviewer:

How many men in the smokejumpers altogether? And were, I guess in, both that—

Camer Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—and how many in Missoula?

Luke Birky:

I can't tell you how many jumpers there were in, altogether. I just don't have that figure in mind.

Interviewer:

But in Missoula, do you know?

Luke Birky:

In, in Missoula we were, we were broken up into squads f—during our training program. Squads of twelve to fifteen people, men. And so, and there must have been seventy, eighty of us I guess in training at one time.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

And then some of them transferred out to some of the smaller side camps out in Washington, Idaho and Oregon. I stayed in the main unit and stayed right at, at Missoula and jumped from Missoula.

00:12:00:00-00:13:17:00

Interviewer:

How did people, why did people want to be smokejumpers? Why did COs—

Camer Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—want to be smokejumpers?

Luke Birky:

Well I think the motivation for wanting to go into smokejumpers was varied. In the first place, many of us were wanting to do work that was significant and vital to the U.S. good, and smokejumping was, seemed to be, was a new way of fighting fires. Many of us grew up in, in the west and had a great deal of concern about forest fires. And, so, many of us liked

that it, it was a challenge, it was exciting, it was a little scary.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

I suppose also, many of us had been labelled as yellow-bellies, cowards, for not wanting to go into the war. And I assume, for some of us at least, there was a secondary motivation that we may have wanted to try to do tasks that might even be dangerous, so that, to show we had courage also, with. I don't know for sure what percent was—

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

—was that and what percent was just the, the excitement of wanting to be a jumper.

00:13:18:00-00:13:51:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. Could you backtrack on that a little bit and just—

Camer Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—phrase that in terms of your own, what you thought? You phrased—

Luke Birky:

[laughs]

Interviewer:

—that a little generally [laughs]. How did you feel about it?

Luke Birky:

How did I feel about the smoke—going into the smokejumpers? I, I wanted to go, very badly

because it seemed, to me, very exciting and I wanted to do work that was important and I wanted to contribute and I think I probably wanted to prove that I wasn't a coward [laughs].

00:13:52:00-00:14:41:00

Interviewer:

Did you feel that that was, did it turn out to be that kind of opportunity?

Luke Birky:

Very much so. It was, it was one of the, it was one of the nicest experiences that I had, because we did enjoy it and we had wonderful crew le—leaders, our trainers who were Forest Service men of high caliber, well motivated, and we had a wonderful relationship. And the community itself perceived this as important work. And since so many of the young men had been drafted into the Army and there were not sufficient men, young men for smokejumping, they perceived us as being a, a good asset, and so our relationshi—relationship with the community was excellent as well.

00:14:42:00-00:15:31:00

Interviewer:

And was that not what you had experienced with the other communities when you were in CPS?

Luke Birky:

That's correct.

Interviewer:

Could you talk a little about the kind of hostility you experienced?

Luke Birky:

We had, we never felt in danger at all, but being in Civilian Public Service was, being a conscientious objector was not perceived as being a very good thing. We had a lot of difficulty. People misunderstood, and...

Camer Crew Member #1:

Hmm.

Luke Birky:

[laughs] so that we had a lot of problems sometimes. Particularly if we'd go into town and so on, so we, but we tended to stay by ourselves in the camp and tried not to be an irritant to the community.

00:15:32:00-00:19:10:00

Interviewer:

Do you have any specific stories about things that happened to people when they were in town, or the way people perceived you in those communities where you were?

Luke Birky:

Well, [coughs] I guess one of the things that, one, one of the stories that might illustrate this is when I was in Civilian Public Service first at, at La Pine, Oregon, we worked there about thirty miles outside of Bend, Oregon. But we were very isolated, we were eighteen miles from the highway, and no neighbors at all. We didn't have any problems, really. And there was, but there was a military camp, training program not too far away, and they had some, they had their own public relations problems. There was too much alcohol oc—occasionally by the soldiers who'd come into town. And I recall two, two incidents that may highlight this. One is the, the, the community of Bend was very supportive of the military, was not very supportive of the Civilian Public Service. But several soldiers went into town one Saturday evening and got, drank too much, took a young girl out into a park and raped her, and, and injured her ver— the story's a very bad story. The community didn't know what to do with that kind of thing, because they wanted to be supportive of the military. But then after the end of the summer, when we went, I was asked, four or five of us were asked to take and move some of the heavy equipment for winter, down to the town of Redmond, which was where they could continue working during the, the winter, but it was too far for us to drive regularly because it was, be sixty miles I suppose. So we moved and set up some heavy equipment and they brought in some ranchers that were going to do the work on the heavy equipment during the winter. And we worked together, setting up the equipment, getting it going. We were just there temporarily. And one day the, several of these ranchers took our boss aside and said what's, what is this, I, I thought these guys were conscientious objectors. He said well they, our, our government boss said, well they are conscientious objectors. And the ranchers said, well we don't understand, they don't object to anything, they work better than we do. And so my boss, was a wonderful fellow, he just explained what it, what this was all about and the rancher said, well we've got a lot of education of our neighbors to do, and, and we had no problems at all.

Interviewer:

Hmm. So—

Luke Birky:

It was just that, they didn't understand what conscientious objection was, and why we, why

we took the position we did. But our boss did a wonderful jo—he did a better job explaining it than we could've ever done [laughs].

00:19:11:00-00:20:05:00

Interviewer:

What do you think people thought of conscientious objectors during the war, other people who weren't...

Luke Birky:

Well, many thought of them as just being as cowardice, cowards, not wanting to become parti—exposed to danger. Some perceived them as being enemies of the state and subversive kind of things and we'd had some experience of, I mean there had been those kind of experiences where people did actually work against the government, and so people had some difficulty given the, the propaganda machine as it was working and so on, to get all of that sorted out and decide, and to come to ki—some kind of decision about what is genuine, what is true, what isn't true.

00:20:06:00-00:20:45:00

Interviewer:
Mm-hmm. Do you think there was an effort on the part of the government and the propaganda machine to make conscientious objectors unattra—an unattractive alternative for people, or?

Luke Birky:

I never felt that the government worked to try to make Civilian Public Service or conscientious objectors not attractive. I think there, there was a great effort to influence the attitudes of the people in a positive way toward participation and support of the war.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

And so in, indirectly it was, it, it would've been a negative toward this.

00:20:46:00-00:22:18:00

Interviewer:

Would you say that...

Camer Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

...conscientious objectors were, that, I'm not quite sure how to phrase this, were you, would the government have like to've made you invisible I guess is what I was thinking. You know, was, was some of the effort of CPS to keep people out of the public's, out of public sight, to put you in these remote places? Do you think that was conscious or was that just a good thing, you know, a place they thought you'd be useful?

Luke Birky:

I don't, the government, is near, you know, from my experience, I did not experience the government being very negative toward conscientious objectors. I think there was, of course, the, the feeling that to the extent that we could be kept separate from society we would be, there would be less problems for everybody. Now, I don't know, I wouldn't want to impugn any bad motives to that at all, but, it seems to me that there was, there was that, at least in the early stages, a, a need to try to separate the conscientious objectors from society. Later as they were able then, got to be better known and they were needed, like in the smokejumpers or in the mental hospitals, and so on, then they could be more fully integrated back into society, and in quite an acceptable way, and the government was very cooperative and helpful in that, in that process.

00:22:19:00-00:23:32:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. That's a good analysis. Did, could you describe what it was like being a smokejumper?

Camer Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

What did you do, how were you trained and what was your job?

Luke Birky:

The training for the smokejumper job was a very rigorous training. They'd run us through very rigorous programs, in the first place, to try to try and weed us out if we couldn't, didn't have the necessary stamina, and once we made the, made that, then there was a great deal of

effort, and good effort, to get us into shape physically so as to minimize harm to our bodies and to increase our effectiveness as fight, firefighters. So there was very rigorous training, and it was, but it was fun, it was exciting. Everybody, you know, to, to jump in, out of a plane was an exciting episode. All the other guys, the first jump I know, they turned pale. I don't think I did, [laughs] but the rest of them did.

Interviewer:

[laughs] You couldn't see your face.

Luke Birky:

[laughs]

00:23:33:00-00:24:09:00

Interviewer:

Was it pretty experimental, smokejumping, when you were starting to do that?

Luke Birky:

Well, the, the program had been started some five, six years earlier and was considered experimental until probably the year before I went, before I was drafted, or you know, before I volunteered for the smokejumpers. The year I was in, it was considered, it had proven itself, and, as to being a good way to go, for fighting fires, and the, most of the kinks had been ironed out. And so it was not considered experimental when I went into it.

00:24:10:00-00:26:02:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. How, what did you do? Would you just, would you drop into a middle of a fire with an ax and start—what exactly did the firefighters do? Did they bring chemicals? Or?

Luke Birky:

Well, no, this, this was, firefighting in 1945 was very different than it is now. We used, the whole idea was to get to a fire before it got large. In, prior to smokejumping, if there was a fire, they'd notice smoke and then they'd get a crew and they'd hike in, maybe a day or so to get to the fire because we worked mostly in the wilderness areas.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

But the idea of the smokejumpers was that within that matter of hours after a fire started, that you could get there before it had chance to spread.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

So we normally'd only jumped maybe two, three guys, four guys at, at a time on a fire.

Camer Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Luke Birky:

And it would be small, maybe not, not as large as an average living room, and so we would be able to get around, and, and dig a trench around it, and put it out. So we jumped as near to the fire as we could, and then they would drop three tools to us: a pulaski, which is an ax and hoe kind of combination and saw, and, and then we would just work with our hands. We used very little water, we put out the, tried to get down to mineral earth and used soil itself to cool the fire down and then, after the fire was under control, we'd go through it inch by inch, with our hands to see that all the sparks were out and, and it was safe to leave.

00:26:03:00-00:26:45:00

Interviewer:

So it really was all predicated on the idea that you got there—

Camer Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—sooner when the fire still was not, didn't get out of control. So you were preventative, sort of thing, yeah?

Luke Birky:

That was, the smokejumper unit was started on that, on that notion that it's a lot better to get there while the fire is very small. And most of the fires were started by s—lightning and, and

were started by very remote, in very remote areas. And so if you could get there while the fire was, you know, many times we'd get to a fire before it was more than four, five feet in diameter and just be maybe burning in the, in the leaves and so on, on the ground.

00:26:46:00-00:27:16:00

Interviewer:

But you could spot the smoke from the—?

Luke Birky:

From the towers, they had towers on, on, on the various—

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

—high points across. And then they'd, by using the degrees and so on, they'd find and locate exactly where the fire was, and then so we'd, then we'd fly over the fire and spot it from the air and then the spotter in the plane would drop us just as near to the fire as, as is safe, and, and then we'd go in.

00:27:17:00-00:28:17:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. What was the most dangerous thing you experienced—

Camer Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—as a smokejumper?

Luke Birky:

Well, other than the jumping and coming down into very rough terrain, I, the, the, the biggest, the biggest danger was if a fire got out of control, and I did jump on one fire where we just, it was a large fire by the time we got there. And, so we were just beginning to fight fire and, and, and the wind came up, and the fire went up into the trees, crowned and, and starts moving very r—fast then, and so we just had to run for our lives, and get away.

Fortunately we were able to, no one was injured or hurt during that one. A couple, a few years later, after I was out of the smokejumpers, there was a, a very bad fire in which a dozen guys were, just couldn't get away from the fire. It had just, the wind had just made it come up too fast—

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Luke Birky:

—and they died.

00:28:18:00-00:29:59:00

Interviewer:

But there weren't any smokejumpers lost? CPS guys?

Luke Birky:

No, no, there were no CPS men lost, we had several with very severe injuries and I, I jumped in twice to carry guys out. One, had, when he jumped, he landed in a dead tree, a snag, what's called a snag. His 'chute was collapsed of course, and he was hanging in the tree, and then the tree had, was rotten enough that the tree fell, and he came down and broke his legs and broke his feet and so the guys that jumped with him carried him, they, they jumped in the evening, I guess it was around five, six o'clock in the evening and then all during the whole night they, they moved him about three, four miles to the nearest trail and then the next day, I and seven other guys jumped in to carry him the rest of the way out. It was another twenty miles out to the road. But on that one, the Forest Service, as, as they did every time in the case of a true emergency, they, they would not hesitate to get whatever su—help was necessary, and in that case they brought in a physician from the Army, from Pendleton, Oregon, flew in. And while we were carrying him out, the, the sur—, the doctor jumped in also and administered medical, gave him medical attention and, and then stayed right with him all the way out.

00:30:00:00-00:30:09:00

Interviewer:

Oh, it was a med, a military doctor.

Luke Birky:

A mil—

Interviewer:

The doctor jumped in [laughs]? Oh yeah—

Luke Birky:

Yeah.

Camer Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—he was trained—to jump.

Luke Birky:

Yeah, he was, yeah.

Interviewer:

Uh-huh, that's great. So, how—

Camer Crew Member #1:

We should change tapes.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

00:30:10:00-00:30:49:00

Interviewer:

—what you learned, at, by your experience in camp. A man, several people called it a, a training ground for pacifists.

Camer Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

Was it some—is that something that you experienced and, and/or how did your thinking mature? Also you, you said—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Dave, we're ready!

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

Interviewer:

What have you done after, after you got out of camp? What did you do as, professionally?

Luke Birky:

OK, well, I can, let me speak—

Interviewer:

'Cause you seem like—

Luke Birky:

—let me speak to that.

Interviewer:

—I mean you obviously got a lot of, lot of education. Later in—

Luke Birky:

Yeah, right.

Interviewer:

And now, I didn't know, somewhere. Anyway, so, Dave you're here?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Oh, yeah. All set up.

Interviewer:

Everybody's ready? Okay, great, good, thank you. Go ahead. Do you want me to ask that again?

Luke Birky:

Yeah.

00:30:50:00-00:31:05:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, how were you influenced personally in terms of your, was your thinking expanded or matured by your experience in CPS?

Luke Birky:

It, Civilian Public Service—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Can you sit back?

Interviewer:

Oh, he needs to lean back a little bit, sorry. The way the mike's set up.

00:31:06:00-00:34:48:00

Luke Birky:

[laughs] Civilian Public Service for me was a, was a, a wonderful training period. I was in, was, had grown up in a quite isolated, close, closed family, close community, Christian community and Civilian Public Service then gave me a chance to be exposed to a lot of other viewpoints, a lot of other different Mennonites, different Church of the Brethren, Quaker folks, as well as some of the political objectors and, and people from the Mormon Church, the Methodist Church, of all persuasions. And this was a, an enormously stretching time for me, in lots of ways it was very painful for me. But, it was also one of the best times that I had, because it was as intense, I'm su—, as most college ex, experiences are, because we had educated people, we had people that were, came at their convictions from very different backgrounds. So it was a time of a lot of arguing, and we'd gather in bull sessions and we would talk and solve all the problems. But it was a time of testing our own, our own convictions, our own beliefs, and out of that I moved from being more, just nonresistant, being opposed to killing, to being a much more of an activist, kind of outlook where I thought there would be things that we can and should do to work for peace instead of just being opposed to war. It probably set the direction for my life after CPS. I, by the time CPS

was over, I was engaged to a young lady who was in nurse's training. And there was so much work to be done after the war, particularly in relief and rehabilitation a, around the world. And so although I had, was getting tired of being drafted, I, we, we decided we would marry and serve the Church in the relief program. It was at that point that the Church asked my wife and I to go to Puerto Rico to work in a community development program and that included health services, agricultural services, recreational services to the community. And so we'd volunteered for, for eighteen months and although I wanted to go home and get st—started and established, it seemed that if the government could take three and a half years of my life and never even say thank you for it, that maybe if the church needed me in one of their programs for eighteen months, I'd volunteer. So, Verna and I, my wife, went to Puerto Rico for eighteen months to work in this program and then we ended up staying six and a half years and during that time we worked in the health services and I came back and got additional training in hospital administration and worked the rest of my life in, in healthcare administration, including finally ending up as administrator of a retirement center in Albany, Oregon.

00:34:49:00-00:35:18:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. So, you've retired to Goshen, you stayed in Oregon—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—for your career.

Luke Birky:

Yes, but I worked for, I, I did retire from Oregon, and I, I grew up in Oregon, retired from my work in Oregon, but from 1966 to '79 I worked as Secretary of Health and Welfare for the Mennonite Church and the office was in Elkhart, Indiana. So our children went to high school in Elkhart and several of them settled in this area, so we came back to retire here.

00:35:19:00-00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Did you, have you had much to do with the mental health, with Mennonite mental health service?

Camera Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

And, and was there also an offshoot from CPS in terms of Mennonite Health Service in general, that I'm not really aware of?

Luke Birky:

I was not as directly involved in men—in mental health services as many of the CPSers were. And when you, when you talk about courage for example, it was not nearly as frightening for me to jump from an airplane as it would've been to go into a mental hospital. So I, I always had great admiration for people, the young men who went into the mental health program, mental hospitals and so on, and, because the hospitals were not very good places in those days. There was not very good treatment, often. And, but out of the CPS experience, the men, the conscientious objectors in the mental health services of, of the country, out of that grew a whole new emphasis on community mental health and out of that grew the Mennonite Mental Health Services board that developed a number of community hospitals, community mental health hospitals across the country, from California to, to Pennsylvania. And I served on the Mennonite Health Services mental health board for a number of years as—and so, although I never worked in a hospital itself, I did work on the, on the management side, or I mean, on the policy side.

00:36:57:00-00:38:47:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. Could you just briefly say—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—how Mennonites have influenced—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—the care of the mentally ill in the United States? Do you think that's a, and is that an offshoot of their experience during the war?

Luke Birky:

There of course were many things that affected that, and I think we maybe ought to back up a little bit on that. I, I come from the German branch of the Mennonite Church. Our, my ancestors came out of Switzerland and Germany and France. And, but there were many of the Mennonite people that had come out of Russia and the Mennonites in South Russia had been very progressive, had been very well-to-do and had developed significant programs for treating the mentally ill. Now, when they had to leave Russia, many of them came here, and they came with that memory of what to do about mental health. And so there was, within one segment at least of the Mennonite Church, a, a very strong interest in mental health services, and CPS provided a, a chance to, to work within the systems. Most of them worked in state hospitals. And yes, the Mennonite, the history of the mental health services in the U.S. if you read that carefully you will see that the time of the conscientious objectors in the mental health, in the mental hospitals, really changed the direction of mental health services in the U.S. and had a great deal of influence. Yeah.

00:38:48:00-00:40:53:00

Interviewer:

Is there, I think we're al—nearing the end here. Is there anything else that you think—

Camer Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—is important about your experience in, during World War Two, or the Mennonite experience during World War Two, or, or the legacy of that experience?

Luke Birky:

My own reflections on, on conscientious objection and service, out of all of that and my life in, working in the health field all of my life, health administration, never, never in the clinic side, but, is that the Christian faith seems to be a very good base from which to serve humankind. And I, I was very privileged to be able to work in the health field, whether that's treating physical illness or mental illness, and it has given me some appreciation and understanding about what it means to treat the human being as a whole person: mind, body, soul, spiritual, intellectual, social. All of those things have to go together and if we don't do well physically we become ill, often, and if we don't do well mentally, or don't do well spiritually, then we, our bodies break down, and so on. So that, for me, Civilian Public Service came, became a training period to look at, again, what it takes to be a whole well person. And it seemed, it reconfirmed my notions that Jesus came to offer that kind of life, life-giving attitude and, toward the divine and toward our fellow human beings. And it was most rewarding for me.

00:40:54:00-00:44:07:00

Interviewer:

Would you put that in the context—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—you just made me think of something I've never really thought about before which was, kind of the part that pacifists and conscientious objectors played in terms of the body politic of the country at the time in terms of providing, an alternative for, I don't know, just, you're just making me think about something I haven't, I'm not quite sure how to phrase it. But if you think about the country as an organism and what part did the willingness of some people to take the position of conscientious objection, did that have a role to play in terms of the health of the, of the nation, and, at a time of war? I mean, you know, do you know what I'm asking? I'm not sure if I know what I'm asking.

Luke Birky:

[laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs] But I'm thinking, I mean, if you could, I thought that was really an, that's an important analogy you made and I'm just trying to think if there's a way we can stretch that to think about conscientious objectors' relation to the, to this effort to make war and people willing to take the position and stand up to that and say they wouldn't do that. How did that affect the whole? Was that important?

Luke Birky:

Well, Jesus uses the word, you are the light of the wo—world, or you are the salt of the earth. And I don't, I don't see the conscientious objectors as having done an awful lot, but I think it contributed toward the, toward the attitudes of the, of the U.S., the whole, the whole population, because you had a lot of very positive experiences on the part of both people within Civilian Public Service and those within the military. The military came back, many of them feeling, there's got to be a better way. And because World War Two, as you'll recall, was a very bloody, so many lives were lost and we ended with use of atomic power for the first time. And so many people, you know, so I don't think conscientious objectors can have credit, should have credit for this, but it just meant that as the nation reflects on its experience and the soldiers are saying, there's got to be a better way, the returning soldiers, there's got to

be a better way, and the conscientious objectors are saying, well, we tried one way, and, and putting that all together, the mix, it seemed to me, provided a new way for the government to start thinking about how to work and what our place is in the world and how we can be more effective in improving the human lot.

00:44:08:00-00:45:07:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. You think things are better now, people think more positively towards a peace position now than, than they did during World War Two?

Luke Birky:

Oh much different, there's, there's considerable tolerance now and openness. That doesn't mean there aren't pockets of, of people that feel that there's only one way to solve problems and that's the, using the old wild west [laughs] image. But, I think there is, there has been considerable shift, considerable shift. We still have the ten—the tension whether we should use the United Nations, or whether we should, which is the most effective, United Nations or the military in keep, maintaining peace? They both, they have strong elements in both that want to maintain peace, and our definition of peacemaker is not uniform.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:45:07:00