Interview with Nelson Fucson
Date: November 5, 1996
Interviewers: Judy Ehrlich and Karen

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.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Nelson Fucson, conducted by Paradigm Productions on November 5, 1996 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*.

00:00:11:00

Interviewer #1:

You're, you're OK, Rich? Everybody's good? Alright. When Karen shuts the door we'll start. So what I'm going to do is ask you some questions, and I would like you to incorporate my question into your answer, cause the, the audience won't hear my—

Nelson Fucson:

OK. Alright.

Interviewer #1:

—my, question, OK? So just, you know, as you can, just make it into a sentence. It's a complete sentence, a complete thought about what you're talking about. And I guess, yeah—

Interviewer #2:

And we are, though I'm very interested in what you're saying, please don't talk to me. Only talk to Judy.

Nelson Fucson:

Alright.

00:00:45:00

Interviewer #1:

Begin by introducing yourself.

Nelson Fucson:

Well, my name is Nelson Fucson, and I'm, at the present time, I'm retired professor of physics from Fisk University, having been there for thirty-five years. And I was a CPS, I was in, Civilian Public Service camps for four-and-a-half years during the, first, Second World War. Is that as much as you need?

00:01:14:00

Interviewer #1:

That's fine, that's fine.

Nelson Fucson:

Alright.

Interviewer #1:

What, where were you in Civilian Public Service camp?

Nelson Fucson:

I was in many camps. I started out in 1941, fall of '41, before the war, America got in the war, at Patapsco, Maryland, in a camp working in, a, a, what you might call, park. We were working, getting a park ready. Then I went to Lagro, Indiana, to a Brethren camp, when we were hoping to go to China, and they had a unit. And since I was born and brought up in China for fifteen years, I knew Chinese. And they got people who knew Chinese particularly—we got half a dozen of us—and we were going to go to China. Then that program was blocked, and I worked on the project there for a while. And in in-between times, did some, interesting things. There was a, a tornado that came through Goshen, Indiana, and the Red, Red Cross was looking for somebody to help. And our China unit had not gotten to start working on the project, and we, we volunteered to help on the, on the tornado damage. And the people were afraid, but the Red Cross was there, and they said, we'll take anybody. We don't care whether they're COs or not. So we all went up there and worked for a week on the, that. Another time, while we were still not on project, because they were, this ambiguous period when we were, had been blocked, there was a, a, a college, debate tournament. Well, one college dropped out, and they wanted somebody to fill it in. So, they called the CPS camp and said, do you have some people that'll come and, and debate? We said, sure. So, four of us went up, two of us took the, affirmative, and two, the negative,

and we won the affirmative, not knowing even what the topic was going to be. We just made it all up in that moment. Our negative lost, because they had to, they had to—no, we were the negative. We learned, we heard what the others said, we defeated it. The affirmative, they didn't know what the subject was, so they lost. But that's, then, then, after that, there was a chance to do work at Columbia University. There was a naval group of about, thirty naval officers, who were, went there to study occupational administration. And one of the, professors at Columbia, who was a professor of international law, said, we ought to have COs here, also, studying relief administration, because they're the ones that are going to be doing that sort of thing after the war; maybe even during the war, if we can, if they are released. So, fifteen of us—five from each of the Brethren, Mennonite, and Friends camps—went there. And, I, at that time, studied the national Chinese language, the Guóyu, rather than—I knew Cantonese, where I'd grown up. But after one semester there—it was a two semester course—it looked like the American Friends Service Committee was going to be able to have a, have a China unit to join the Friends Ambulance Unit, which was already in China. Mostly Britishers. So, I was asked to direct that unit. And we went to Pendle Hill, right here at Pendle Hill, and, we had, and there were about five, seven men that got as far as South Africa on their way to China, before the Starn's Rider, an, an a, an amendment to an, military appropriation bill in Congress, was passed, which, which, blocked any CO from going abroad by a very indirect method. It was blocked by anybody who was paid by the military bill, which was billions of dollars, of course, right in the middle of the war—1943. Anybody paid by that bill, if they enabled any conscientious objector to go abroad, for any reason, would immediately not be paid anymore. They would lose their salary. Well, this was a little amendment in a huge bill, and it was almost impossible to do anything about it, because—so, we were all blocked. So, I then went to Big Flats, a New York CPS camp. I worked on the Asia desk of the American Friends Service Committee for two months before I was sent back to camp. Cut down trees at, Big Flats camp in New York for a winter, and then I went out to North Dakota—to Trenton, North Dakota—to work on the project, which was a land reclamation project, where I, again, drove cat, cat-can outfits, leveling ground, doing surveying. But in the evenings I taught Chinese, because we were hoping still to be able to go to, to do relief work in China, and teaching Chin-, other CPS men Chinese. Then that became clear that we were never going to be able to go while we were drafted. And of course, there was no, we didn't have any time of stopping. I mean, we were in for the duration, however long it was. Then my thesis professor at University of Michigan—see, I had already been, finished my degree and had been teaching—he persuaded, selective service to let me be on what's called detached service; this is still a drafted conscientious objector, but on an individual assignment. And I went to Ann Arbor, Michigan to work with him and two others on the study of penicillin, using infrared spectroscopy—it's a, it's long story, but I can just say it. And I worked there for a year. And, I have to tell you one [laughs] little thing. This, I'd already been in, in camp now for four years, this is 1945, and V-J Day had already happened but V—no, V-E Day had happened, but V-J hadn't, day. And by this time, since I had represented my camp, Trenton, in Philadelphia, and I met Marian Fus-, Marian Darnell, again after two years, and we had a quick romance and we got married while I was still doing this work. She came, and I wasn't paid, but my landlord, or landlady, would be paid, my restaurant would be paid, and my laundry would be paid. But when she came and we were, had a small apartment, she became my landlady, my restaurant, and my laun-, laundress. So, she got a check for Nelson Fucson, conscientious objector, so much for housing, so much for

meals, and so much for laundry. And, you know, we never kept a copy of that, 'cause it was too bad, but we had kept—all, all sorts of interesting things happened. But you can see that my, my period in Civilian Public Service had a lot of variety, and a lot of interest, and I—for me, it was, it was a very important experience, and it changed my life in many ways, because I have gone on, I've been—in addition to going on in physics, because I've taught physics for forty years after that, and I've gone abroad. I've worked as draft counselor, I've worked in race relations, I've worked in—all the things that I was doing in CPS continued for the next forty or fifty years. Here it is, fifty, fifty-five years now since I did it.

00:09:12:00

Interviewer #1:

Talk a little about—actually, you know what you didn't say? You said that you had your degree, but you never said that you had a PhD in physics. If you could just say that.

Nelson Fucson:

Oh, yes, well I, I, you asked about what degree I had. I had a PhD in the field of physics. And, my specialty was molecular spectroscopy: infrared, using an infrared and Raman, spectroscopy to study the structure of molecules. And it was a—it's a very important, nowadays it's very common. All, all sorts of laboratories work on it. But at that, in those days, it would take, it would take eight hours at night to run a spectrum, because you had to do it at night, so the streetcars weren't running. People don't know about streetcars anymore, now. But, now you can do it in a fraction of a second, because the techniques have changed so rapidly. So I've, in addition to living through CPS and so on, I've lived through the beginnings of infrared spectroscopy, until the present. I'm now retired, I've been retired for ten years, not, not—

00:10:21:00

Interviewer #1:

That's very interesting. Tell me, what you just said about how CPS changed your life, could you give us a little more exam-, of your experience in CPS? What were some of the, what are some of the things about CPS that changed your life? What did you learn there?

Nelson Fucson:

Well, when I was drafted at, Rutgers University, where I was teaching in New Jersey, the draft board really did—this is right, very early, this is before the United States got into the war—the draft board was not interested in having conscientious objectors listed on their, in their lists. So, however they did it, and I don't know all the details, but the doctor that examined me gave me, said I was unfit for any kind of service, military service, so I was 4F, because I had what he called a poker spine. Well, I, I resented this, because I thought, I'm, perfectly, physically fit. So, I said, I said I've got to have a second opinion. And the doctor,

the next doctor that examined me said, there's nothing wrong with you, what are you talking about, this poker spine? You don't have any poker spine. So I took this to the draft board. Well, they had no, they had no argument then. They finally gave me the CO position, which—'cause I was, I wanted to do something, and this looked like, at that time, the time for a conscientious objector to make, do some work of national importance under civilian direction. That was the term. There were many drawbacks, and for people who didn't have the background that I had, it was difficult. We paid, I paid thirty dollars a month all the time that I was in CPS. I was able to do it, because I had been teaching three years, but most men were, didn't have any money, so that the Mennonites, Brethren, and Friends, and Methodists and whoever others, paid for them. But I just happened to have enough money, so I could pay myself.

00:12:25:00

Interviewer #1:

So did you resent that, that you were sent to CPS camp versus, rather than do work of, of the scientific work you were doing?

Nelson Fucson:

Well, interestingly enough, when I, before, before I, just before I got married, my wife's family never knew I was a physicist at all, because I'd been out of physics for four years, you see, working in everything else. But, no, I, I was looking for some way that I could make a contribution to the United States, but not as a, not killing anybody. This was a thing which I could not do. I started out as a Presbyterian, I'm now a Quaker, but I was a, in the Presbyterian Pacifist Fellowship, which—as a college student, and graduate student. And, there was no question in my mind, but what I would not go into the Army. So this, it looked like this was a way in which I would be able to continue my, keep to my convictions and still do something important. And, in a way, I think I did, but in spite of the fact that it was unpaid labor, drafted, and so on. And there are lots of drawbacks, and I, I felt very lucky myself, and I felt so sorry for lots of the young, younger fellows that didn't have a chance. And they, and they didn't have the chance to move around like I did.

00:13:55:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. You said something before, that people were afraid when you were enlisted to help with the tornado relief.

Nelson Fucson:

Well, they were afraid—

Interviewer #1:

What did you mean by that?

Nelson Fucson:

—they were afraid to have conscientious objectors, there, because they didn't know what we were like. They thought we were some kind of, you know, wild men, I guess, or the term yellow-bellies, and so on. They, they didn't want to have any contact with us. It's as if we were lepers, some, something of this kind. But the Red Cross said, we'll take the responsibility for bringing them here to work, because we've got so much work. This tornado went through a part of town, destroyed all the buildings, and we need to clean up. So we went. And it was actually, this is a Mennonite area, and the Mennonite churches, we slept in their churches, they fed us. It was a, it was a, really a great experience to be able to do something like that to help out. And, the town tak-, after they got used to us, they took us, they just, they took us, into their arms as a result of what we were doing. But that was just lucky that we could, we were free to do it, because all the other men in the Lagro Camp that were working on project, they were no allowed to do that, they were working on project. We were in this, sort of a, a, [laughs] no, never-neverland of not being on project, but not being able to go to China at the same time. And they didn't know what to do with us, until we finally did—

00:15:24:00

Interviewer #1:

You were just sort of dead-ended there, until they could—

Nelson Fucson:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—think of something to do with you.

Nelson Fucson:

That's right.

00:15:28:00

Interviewer #1:

What was the attitude of most Americans towards conscientious objectors, in your memory?

Nelson Fucson:

Well, it all depended on the area. I remember, when I was in Trenton, North Dakota—this is farming area, and we had been working there. We went to a farm bureau meeting, and one of the farm, one of the people in the town that attended the meeting, felt, we shouldn't have any COs at this meeting. So he said, I move the meeting be adjourned. Well, the person who was in charge of the meeting, I guess, Robert's Rules of Orders, that's, a motion that has to be, can't be discussed, it just has to be voted on. So he said, all in favor? The two persons that made the motion and seconded said, in favor. All opposed? Everybody else. The whole community was opposed. So the meeting went right on, and we had the meeting, and, so we were welcomed by areas, depending upon the time. This was already four years after the war had started, so that—and this may have been an area where there were a lot of people who were not interested in going overseas, and so on. I don't know, but—so we were welcomed by, in some areas, we were isolated and, in other areas. It was very—

Interviewer #1:

Did you have—

Nelson Fucson:

—different.

00:16:52:00

Interviewer #1:

Did you have any personal experience with being, treated hostilely because of your, the position you took?

Nelson Fucson:

I didn't. I, I did not, myself, have any feeling we—I remember going to, when I was in Maryland—before the, before the United States entered the war, we would go to, in the weekends we would go to some of the square dances, you know, and we'd just dance with everybody there, and so I got, I learned more about square dancing [laughs] during my first two months in Civilian Public Service than I'd ever known since that time. So, so, but, indirectly, so many fellows did have that experience. Particularly those who went into the mental hospitals at first. They were very badly treated, in many ways, and—but I never had that kind of experience myself.

00:17:50:00

Interviewer #1:

They were badly treated by the officials in the, or the—

Nelson Fucson:

Not by, not by the officials, but by the other attendants who couldn't understand these fellows that, you know—but the other attendants all could get better jobs. But the other attendants were usually people who didn't, they were very, unable to handle what they were—they would—oh, my brother-in-law, who was, worked for four years at Byberry, tells me of the, the other attendants, who always would, carried baseball bats with them, and that was the only way and they knew how to control anybody, was to hit them, and to, in some cases, wound them badly. Well, the COs that went in, they said, this is not the way to work with people. You've got to, we've got to use nonviolent methods. And it was an entire, a changeover. And, of course, as you, as you probably know, it was the National Mental Health Association [sic] which grew out of the work of conscientious objectors in mental hospitals. And the, the directors of the mental hospitals were very thankful for the change. They, they appreciated it. But the neighborhoods, at first, wouldn't have anything to do with them, people living in the area. They, that was, that, they had lots of that feeling.

00:19:12:00

Interviewer #1:

Did you just say the National Mental Health Association? 'Cause I understood the National Mental Health Foundation—

Nelson Fucson:

Yeah, well, foundation.

Interviewer #1:

Foundation, OK.

Nelson Fucson:

I'm, I'm, yeah—

Interviewer #1:

That, that's a big organization—

Nelson Fucson:

—yeah. It's, it's—

Interviewer #1:

I know the National Mental Health Foundation—

Nelson Fucson:

—yeah, that, it's the, the big organization. There was nothing of that kind before, that's right. They—

Interviewer #1:

Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Nelson Fucson:

This is all started as a result of conscientious objectors in various mental hospitals who corresponded with each other, and they finally got this started. This, I mean, they, they started training people, 'cause the attendants never were, had any training. They would just, they were, a person would come in, and they got very low salaries, they were said, well, here, you're to take care, and if anybody has any trouble, you, you're, you have to control them, however you want to do it. And they never had any training, so that the COs started, when they, after their experience, they started training each other, and training the whole group that came in afterward. And that whole training program and the Mental Health Foundation started as a result.

00:20:10:00

Interviewer #1:

Important. The, the things that you did in CPS camp, the things that you learned at CPS camp, from your relationship with other people, and, and, and from, a, comm-, would you, did you feel there was a community of people that had a commitment to nonviolence in the—

Nelson Fucson:

Oh—

Interviewer #1:

—CPS camp that influenced you?

Nelson Fucson:

[pause] Yes and no. I, I know that, that, it, in many cases it was that, but, I know that one of the camps that I was in, I was in it when United States declared war. A lot of the, maybe a quarter of the men in that camp, their parents, who had sent them to the camp, because they were opposed to anybody going overseas, or, there was, what do you call it, that, they were, I don't, I forget the term, but anyway, as soon as the United States declared—

00:21:17:00

Interviewer #1:

They were isolationist, isolationists?

Nelson Fucson:

They were isolationist, thank you. They were isolationists. As soon as the United States declared war, the parents said, oh, we've got to send our sons to, to, war, so that quite a number of the men were pulled out, not because they wanted to. They were, these were young, eighteen year-olds, and who had been, grown up in a family where the family was isolationist, and they, when they, they were pulled out and sent to the army. Well, the rest of us thought, my gosh, this is, this is, it isn't, these, these kids were just tools of their parents, in a sense. They hadn't made, they didn't have, they were too young to have a conviction of their own. They didn't know why they were there. They were there because they were sent, and then they were pulled out because their parents. That was a, a disillusioning period right there, at the beginning.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Nelson Fucson:

Yeah.

00:22:07:00

Interviewer #1:

So, so, did you, could you describe how public opinion changed towards conscientious objectors at that moment? At that—

Nelson Fucson:

Well, it was, of course, largely at that moment that the, that the public began to, to think that we were disloyal, that we were unpatriotic, and so on; that we were maybe communist, maybe we were all sorts of things.

00:22:29:00

Crew Member #1:

Excuse me, there was a—

Interviewer #1:

Plane?

Crew Member #2:

Yeah, if, if you want to get that again.

Interviewer #1:

OK, actually, maybe you could go into that a little bit more. What was the—

Camera Crew Member #3:

Plus, I have to—

[cut]

00:22:39:00

Nelson Fucson:

—and he's, he's quite a guy.

Interviewer #1:

He's great.

Nelson Fucson:

He is, yeah.

00:22:43:00

Interviewer #1:

So, you think that there was, maybe you could go, let's back up a little bit, and talk, a bit about how you see the—

Nelson Fucson:

Could—

Interviewer #1:

—civil rights movement being influenced by—

Nelson Fucson:

Oh.

Interviewer #1:

—people from CPS camp.

Nelson Fucson:

Alright. Whenever, whenever you're ready.

Camera Crew Member #3:

We're rolling.

Nelson Fucson:

Oh. You are.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

00:23:00:00

Nelson Fucson:

Well, I, the, Civilian Public Service camps, the drafted conscientious objectors, we did a lot—there were some of us that were older, but there were lots of young men who, whose position was a religious position. They couldn't, couldn't use weapons, and so on. But they weren't, they were not, they didn't know exactly what they could do. And we, we in the Civilian Public Service camps we did lots of, you know, it, it became a very close-knit group, and we did lots of training of the younger people; lots of debating, what, what should we be doing, and so on; and how, how, can you, how can you work on international relations if you don't use force, if you don't use military weapons? So that, it was a training ground for all kinds of use of nonviolence as an alternative to the accepted idea that, if anything goes wrong, you use violence to correct it. And as a result, after the war was over, for example, I taught at a school, college—Fisk University, which is predominantly African-American students. And, I was very much involved—I was teaching physics, but when we had, the sit-ins in Nashville, Tennessee, and the stand-ins, the sit-ins to try to eat downtown, where they couldn't eat before, and—they couldn't sit down and eat, they had only to stand and ask for something, and then leave. And, stand, and stand-ins at the theaters, and then the Freedom Rides, where we, went to, tested the whole transportation, after the various federal laws had been passed. The teaching of nonviolence as a method for social change was very important,

because the reason that the Freedom Rides were freedom rides was because the students—and these were both black and white students that participated—they were, they had agreed to use nonviolent methods. They were not going to carry weapons. They even, in many of the experience, after the training—we did training, after CPS, this is long after that. You even left your pocketknife. You know, here I have [reaches into pocket] a pocketknife here. Nowadays I have to take the pocketknife out, because of the, the, on the airplane, [produces pocketknife] this makes a noise in [laughs] the airplane. But [returns knife to pocket] we had to leave every possible weapon behind when we went on vigils, or demonstrations, or so on, in order to, not to use any violence, not to—because kids, you have something like that, all of a sudden you may revert. And so, that was part of the training. Take it, but stick to your, stick to your feeling of, that you are as good as anybody else—I'm thinking of the black students who had been walled out of everything—and, take the punishment, but continue to take, do what you're doing, because you are as much an American citizen as anybody else, and you have just as much rights. We've got to change the local laws. So this is, this is, this is part of reason, the reason that I was working in this field was partly because I had been, for four-and-a-half years, a conscientious objector, a drafted conscientious objector. I was conscientious objector before that, and after that, but, so...

00:26:54:00

Interviewer #1:

So, were there other people as well who were influenced by CPS camp who influenced the civil rights movement that you are aware of? And were there, were there other CPS—

Nelson Fucson:

Oh yes.

Interviewer #1:

—people you met in the civil rights?

Nelson Fucson:

Oh yes, yes—

Interviewer #1:

Who?

Nelson Fucson:

—there, there are half a dozen in Nashville, Tennessee, who are still living after fifty years, you know, and all involved in all these sorts of things, but lots of other people. I mean, it's, it, it's just one of the influences. But, in the case, the importance is—well, not, for example,

when I come to this, meeting here, of about fifty people, I know about half of them, even though I haven't seen some of them for fifty years. We were working together, and we still keep in touch with each other. So it is, it is, it was an inspiration to know that other people are working on the same thing at other places. So, it, it was—and that we knew them. That, that was important. And—

00:27:55:00

Interviewer #1:

And continue to meet, to be working on—

Nelson Fucson:

Continue to work on it—

Interviewer #1:

—throughout your lives—

Nelson Fucson:

—that's right.

00:27:58:00

Interviewer #1:

So what are the important things that people at a CPS camp worked on? Where do you think they had an influence in the, in the world, in the, in the U.S., in terms of social action?

Nelson Fucson:

Well, I can just point out that, myself, I'm the secretary of the Nashville Peace and Justice Center, which—and of Nashville Peace Action. And, that, these are working on peace activities, trying to reduce the—the United States is, is the biggest seller of military hardware over the whole world now. They've, the, tremendous, we are, we are the country which everybody looks to for getting military materials. And a lot of that is used against us. And, but it's, it's a problem of, United States says, this is a way we can make money, we can sell military goods. And, that's, and, we have supported dictatorships by sending them military things which they use against their own people, so that it's so important for us here to work on our own government, trying to get our congressmen and our senators to change their ways. And, of course, there's the American, there's the Friends Committee on National Legislation, which is working on this. There are many church groups that are working on it. But a lot of the leadership has come from men that are in, were in CPS camps at that time.

00:29:40:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you be more specific about that? When you say, a lot of leadership—

Nelson Fucson:

Well, Steve Carey, who was, who talked to us last night, who was the, after his CPS experience, became, the, the clerk of the Phili-, of the American Friends Service Committee, and many others who had worked, who had been in CPS camp—both Brethren, and Mennonite, and Methodist, and Presbyterian—went on to work in various peace and social order programs over the United States. Do you want me to list a whole lot of names? [laughs]

00:30:27:00

Interviewer #1:

No, I'm just thinking, the other thing I know you did was something about alternatives to violence. Can you give us a little bit more about that? What I'm trying to do is get a sense of how this, the experience in CPS camp continued on in some ways, spiritually, through people's lives, that, that somehow, that a kernel of, of, that a, a, a, you know, group of people who were, who were committed, in a, in a very deep way, went on, and influenced other people because of their experience in CPS camp. Do you know what I mean?

Nelson Fucson:

Yes. Well—

Interviewer #1:

I could give you some more details.

Nelson Fucson:

I can't separate the ones that were in CPS camps from the ones who conscientious objectors but went to prison because they felt—

Interviewer #1:

You don't need to do—

Nelson Fucson:

You don't—

Interviewer #1:

—either of those, because I don't care—

Nelson Fucson:

You don't care.

Interviewer #1:

People who were conscientious—

Nelson Fucson:

Alright.

00:31:14:00

Interviewer #1:

—objectors,

Nelson Fucson:

Well—

Interviewer #1:

—and how they influenced—

Nelson Fucson:

Take, take the Reverend Jim Lawson, who came, who was a black American and became the first black student at the divinity school at Vanderbilt University, and who was kicked out by the chancellor after he organized nonviolent methods of social change. They just, in the last few days, after thirty-five years, have given him an honorary degree, because it takes thirty years for them, for people to begin to realize that what they, the people that they kicked out are the ones that had real impetus. He's a, has a big church in—Meth-, he's a Methodist—a big church in—but he was an, he was a conscientious objector and was imprisoned for a year or so during the war. So this, this is the sort of thing which innumerable people of that kind, either people in prison or because they were conscientious objectors or were in the CPS camps because they were drafted, have gone out and continued the work that they're doing. Oh, some of them haven't. I mean, it's not, it's, we're all human beings. [laughs] You know, we're all ordinary people. We're not, nothing special about us.

00:32:34:00

Interviewer #1:

Is that true?

Nelson Fucson:

That's true. We're just ordinary people.

00:32:38:00

Interviewer #1:

How come so few—I've learned at this conference, actually—I sort of assumed at one time that most Quakers became conscientious objectors—

Nelson Fucson:

Oh, no.

Interviewer #1:

That's not the case at all?

Nelson Fucson:

Oh, no. You know—

Interviewer #1:

Why?

Nelson Fucson:

The Mennonites, they had the much, largest percentage of their, of their, I guess, what did the, something like fifty percent or more. But a lot of them were farmers, and were left to work on the farms. But, I regret to say that—see, I wasn't a Quaker, I was a Presbyterian when I went into camp—but, I regret to say that, maybe only ten percent of young men who were Quakers became COs at, when the war started. Some of the churches, more, the more Evangelical churches, a lot of the young men in, in those Friends churches, didn't know, much about the peace testimony. They were—it, so the, it, we're, the Society of Friends is not just a, all-unified. We're a lot, we, we're just ordinary people, and it depends upon what particular group you're in.

00:33:45:00

Interviewer #1:

So did you, what made you take that position, though, personally?

Nelson Fucson:

Well, I took it, I took it before I ever became a member of the Society of Friends. My parents were missionaries in China, and I grew up in the Christian tradition, and even though I, when I got to college I said, I don't believe some of these things that I was taught as a child, and so I left the church, but those were the things which, the, the, my background, my background was important for me, and, while my theology has changed a lot, my feeling of the importance of, that of, that of the divine, that of God in every person, you can't destroy another person because you're destroying a piece of God, a piece of the divine, when you destroy. There's always a potential for people to change if they are, are in difficulty, and we've got to give them the chance. And that's the sort of thing which—it's hard to say, but it's, it's just a feeling that everyone—I have, I am not the person to take another person's life because I think they're bad. I can work with them, I can sacrifice, but I can't take another life. That's me.

00:35:09:00

Interviewer #2:

You got that? I just had one question—

Interviewer #1:

Oh, I'm sorry.

Interviewer #2:

I'm sorry. I would, in, in the section on the civil rights movement and training the people in nonviolence—

INTERVIEWER #1:

Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER #2:

—what I would, I would like to hear Nelson say that I was a train-, I trained people. He talked about, we trained people.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

I would like to hear him say, I was training these students at Fisk, and—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, do you understand?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, yeah, yeah—

Interviewer #2:

We don't have that, do we?

Interviewer #1:

I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER #2:

I don't think so.

00:35:32:00

Interviewer #1:

Do, actually, did you, I don't think we got that, you, did you actually train people in nonviolence?

Nelson Fucson:

Yes, I was part of it. But it wasn't just, just me. I mean, it was—

Interviewer #2:

No, no—

Interviewer #1:

No, no, it wasn't just you, but—

Nelson Fucson:

Oh, yes, I was—

Interviewer #1:

—it was you, but—

Nelson Fucson:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

We'll make it clear through narration that there was a whole movement, but for the purposes of the interview, it's, it would actually be really good to hear you talk about, that you did it, I did it.

Nelson Fucson:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, alright.

Interviewer #2:

Do you agree, Judy?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, I think so, yeah. I mean, it can be, I was a part of the group that did it—

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—but that, but it doesn't have to be, but it—

Interviewer #2:

OK, we're rolling—

Nelson Fucson:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—so we need quiet, please.

00:36:02:00

Nelson Fucson:

Alright, well, during the civil rights movement, many of us working with students, I worked with students, tooki-, taking them to conferences, and working with them, and on the whole subject on nonviolence. I was one of the people that, who helped to train people to use nonviolent methods, rather than to use, not, rather than to depend on arms, or to participate in training for arms. But as a, as a draft counselor, I don't make the decision for another person. I present them the alternatives, I let them know what my feelings are, but they must make up their mind, because if it isn't their decision, it's superimposing something on them, and I, I'm not going to do that. So, much as you would say, well, I'd like to tell you what to do, no, I'm not going to tell you. I'm going to let you know, and you choose what you feel is right for you.

00:37:05:00

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

Interviewer #2:

Could we just have one statement about the trai-, the, civil rights movement, the sit-ins, where we say, where you talk about your involvement with helping people who were participating in the sit-ins, and the stand-ins, and the Freedom Rides?

Nelson Fucson:

Well, yeah. In the, for example, during the, in Nashville, during the sit-, the stand-ins—this was a little later, after the restaurant—well, my son and I were, were, participated in the sit-ins. He was just a boy at that time. But in the stand-ins, trying to open the theaters for the, so that everybody could seat anywhere they wanted to, I participated in, in this, in the training, but then also in, actually participating in trying to get into the theaters. And actually, quite often, a white person in a line going up to try to get a ticket to get into the theater, was picked out as being somehow a traitor, because they would, some of the, feel, peo-, young people, the crowds around who were feeling that this was, it was alright for the blacks to be working on something like this, but you're a white, and you oughtn't to. You are, you're a traitor to us. So I got knocked out during this period, once, and had to be picked up and [laughs] carried away, and a cut [points at his face], cut—I forget now where it was. And, some of the black

students in the medical school came over to see me afterwards, to see whether I was alright, [laughs] so anyways, so. But it was, in other words, we were very much involved. In fact, I have lots of pictures that I took as we, I took my classes downtown, I took pictures of them just, jokingly, telling them as we went on vigils, that this was my way of taking roll in the class. [laughs] That was—1960 and '61 were a very exciting period in Nashville.

00:39:07:00

Interviewer #1:

And you were right in the middle of it.

Nelson Fucson:

And again, this was not the whole student body. You know, only ten, twenty percent of the student body participated in this way, but hundreds got arrested, so you can get some idea.

00:39:20:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I, you know, one thing that you brought up, and I, just, just a quick thing, which is—

[children speaking in the hallway]

Interviewer #2:

Wait, [unintelligible] I'll see—

Interviewer #1:

Children? Oh my god, [laughs]—

Nelson Fucson:

[laughs]

00:39:29:00

Interviewer #1:

—quiet them down. And we should wrap up. But just a, just if you have a thought about how you were mentored. What, what, what, if there was a moment when you, or a person who influenced you profoundly that, that helped you to shape your ideas, and whether you think you were a mentor to other people who followed as conscientious objectors, or nonviolent,

committed to nonviolence?

Nelson Fucson:

Well, I think that maybe one of the places where I got—you know, I grew up in China, I saw, in 1926, I saw the changeover, I saw the different warlords come into Canton, taking over the city, being driven out by another one. I would see, go over to, to town afterwards, and I would find lines of people had been shot down, who had been on one side, or another. And, war just seemed to be absolute chaos. It was, this side got killed, that side got killed. And, when I went back to China with my wife, fifty-five years after I had left, and we had a guide who was showing us around where I had lived, and when he was so interested that we knew so much about it, he said, well, you, you were, you were here during all that time, did you know Sun Yat-sen? And my brother, who was with us, said, well, yes, he came to tea one day. And the, the Chinese guide said, well, you're part of living history here. And he showed us all sorts things, he—because, but it was that experience, I think, early experience in my life which made me say, I can't participate in this sort of thing which is going on, because people are being killed for no reason at all. It was just back and forth. That, that's another past, I hadn't thought about it, but that's one of the things which I went through, which made a, lasting impression on me.

00:41:31:00

Interviewer #1:

That's a pretty profound impression, to see war at an early age like—

Nelson Fucson:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—that.

Nelson Fucson:

It was.

00:41:35:00

Interviewer #1:

Do you think you made an impression on other people because of your witness to nonviolence?

Nelson Fucson:

I don't know. I hope so. [laughs] I don't know.

00:41:42:00

Interviewer #1:

Do you have any, do, do you feel that that was something you were interested in doing, in helping young people to understand the, that nonviolence is an alternative?

Nelson Fucson:

Yes, sure. It's, it, whatever I could do, and, and that's why I've been continuing to be active in it, and working with people. I've been, actually, worked with, during the, Vietnam, not Vietnam war, but even the most, Gulf War, just in the last few years. We had a large group of us in Nashville, a lot of lawyers who were working on draft counseling, and, mainly military counseling, 'cause a draft wasn't in, going on at that time. And I worked with women, 'cause a lot of women who were in the reserves, who thought that they were there just to get money to go to college, all of a sudden found themselves having to go to the Gulf. And, they, some of them said, well, this, I didn't even realize that, that we were, ever going to be in war again, with this—

INTERVIEWER #1:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Nelson Fucson:

—well, it was their fault, in a sense, but they turned out then to be conscientious objectors. And, at least they, they needed to look at it. Some of them applied as a result. But, it was much more difficult once you have agreed to be in the army, then to say, oh, I didn't realize what was going on. But, you know, it's, it's, it's tragic how many young people don't know they, the recruiters tell them, oh, this is a chance for you to travel, and you'll get money, and you'll get training for this and that, and never mentioning the fact that you may have to kill people. And that's the sort of thing which, has been about, farthest from the minds of lots of the kids that have gone into the reserves.

00:43:30:00

Interviewer #1:

So you continue to do the—

Nelson Fucson:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—draft counseling in the Gulf War.

Nelson Fucson:

Yeah.

00:43:33:00

Interviewer #1:

Well, I think it's time for lunch. But that was—

Nelson Fucson:

Alright.

Interviewer #1:

—great. But, thank you very much, Nelson.

Nelson Fucson:

Well.

Interviewer #1:

Appreciate it. Maybe we could—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:43:39:00