Interview with Kermit Sheets
Date: August 22, 1999
Interviewer: Judith Ehrlich and Rick Tejada-Flores
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Interview with Kermit Sheets, conducted by Paradigm Productions on August 22, 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."

00:00:11:00—00:00:18:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

We're waiting for it to start sh—

Interviewer #1:

Rick and I are both gonna ask, ask you questions, but—

Interviewer #2:

But just look towards me.

Interviewer #1:

Look, even when, if I ask you the question you still look at him when you answer.

Kermit Sheets:

Oh, OK.

00:00:19:00—00:00:24:00

Interviewer #2:

So let's start off. Tell us who you are. Give us your name and—

Kermit Sheets:

My name's Kermit Sheets.

00:00:25:00—00:00:59:00

Interviewer #2:

And tell us what you did fifty years ago.

Kermit Sheets:

Fifty years ago, was time to register for the draft. I was at that age. And, because of the situation in Los Angeles and the friends I had made down there at a small college, Chapman College, I was going certain times per month to a minster's house who, who was very much a conscientious objector to the war coming on. I'm speaking of the nineteen, the late 1930s.

00:01:00:00—

Interviewer #2:

So, even then, the war was coming. It just wasn't here, but everyone felt it was—

Kermit Sheets:

Everyone felt that, well, the draft had come and so you, you, you had to decide what to do about the draft. And I decided to be a consc, conscientious objector, and signed up for that, and within, how long, within the next two years, my number came up to be drafted to join the Army or, in this case, go off to a, a camp for camp, campy, [chair squeaks] conscientious objectors.

00:01:41:00—00:01:48:00

Interviewer #2:

Now, we've talked to—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Say that again.

Interviewer #2:

Obstruction

Camera Crew Member #2:

Say that again. The chair squeaked when you said that, so.

Interviewer #2:

Oh, OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

The end of it.

00:01:49:00—00:04:30:00

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, talk, say a little bit about how you made the decision. I mean, were you a religious person, or where did—

Kermit Sheets:

Oh I grew up,

Interviewer #2:

—where did the idea of being a pacifist appeal to you?

Kermit Sheets:

—I grew up in a kind of Fundamentalist family, not the violent one, but the, the same that Reagan belonged to actually, The Disciples of Christ, or commonly called the Christian Church. And, I, I was taught to believe what was in "The Bible", and especially in the New Testament, and I believed love your enemy and do good to them that persecute you, and I, I believed that, that, that the truth lay within that idea, and so, although friends and relatives were joining the draft, joining the Army or Navy, my best friend in Fresno where I grew up went into the Navy. And, so at one point I, I went up to a camp in Oregon on the Columbia River, near Cascade Locks, and we were working with the Forest Service on building fire trails and that sort of thing. I mainly worked first in the laundry and then, following that, in the dining room. And there were some activities in the evenings and on Sundays, but all six weekdays, including Saturdays, we worked in the forest, or on the administration, I was mainly in, part of the administration. And a representative from the Brethren church who took care of the bills for this camp project, came 'round and said, we were thinking of establishing, allowing the men to establish educational activities in the various camps, and a different one, a different kind of [laughs] of study to be in the different camps, and what would you like to have in one of the camps? And one of the young men there and I both

decided a fine arts group would be what we'd like. And, there were then about three men in another camp on the Oregon coast who thought the same thing, and, eventually, the fine arts program was established there. It was supposed to be a study of the fine arts, but once the men got there [laughs] they wanted to make it a producing activity.

00:04:31:00—00:05:50:00

Interviewer #2:

Let's back up a little though before—

Kermit Sheets:

Oh.

Interviewer #2:

—before you even got to camp. There's a real logic to how you formed those ideas and working with the minister, but at the same time, you were aware that, that you were taking a position that had to be, at, at the least, unpopular, that not very many people were gonna do that. Were you criticized for making that decision?

Kermit Sheets:

Well, I look back at that time and it seemed to me that my decisions were based on the people that I liked and what their thinking was. And, I like these ideas and it was in line with what I thought the New Testament was about and I went along with it. But, even there, there were other people my age, early twenties, who decided to sign up as a CO, conscientious objector, and I kind of drifted into it all. I don't have any, any, didn't have [laughs] any high minded ideas about joining activities, going to change the world. That came when I got to the camp [laughs].

00:05:51:00—00:06:39:00

Interviewer #2:

Well, but it's interesting. I mean you can take the pacifist position, you can say I can do it in spite of the fact that my views won't prevail. I'm doing it because I think it's the right thing to do.

Kermit Sheets:

Yes, yes. [laughs]

Interviewer #2:

But were you criticized? Did anyone say, you know what you're a, you're a lazy coward, or did you get that kind of—

Kermit Sheets:

I can't remember ever being criticized in, in any, in any way that affected my feelings about doing it. I, I just can't. I think I was around, I was around enough people and it, it was a religious college for one thing, and, and they, I couldn't be told you're wrong to believe that. Read your Bible I could answer, you know. About as snotty as I got I suppose, if I was criticized.

00:06:39:00—00:07:12:00

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm

Interviewer #1:

Could you, you, could you say the thing about that change when I get to the camp again?

Camera Crew Member #1:

The high-minded ideas.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, I had, I didn't have any high-minded ideas that changed when I got to camp. I just, Rick started, asked the next question before you finished that. Could you just see if, is it possible to say that again?

Interviewer #2:

What do you want him to say?

Interviewer #1:

It changed when, when I got to camp.

Interviewer #2:

What changed?

Interviewer #1:

The rest of the sentence is there. We could put it together, but if we, if you could say the, oh,

never mind. It's too hard; it's just lost—

00:07:13:00—00:08:27:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

You said something about the fact I didn't have any fancy ideas or something—

Kermit Sheets:

Well—

Camera Crew Member #1:

—and so I went to camp and then I went to camp and all changed or something [laughs].

Kermit Sheets:

Well, one of the things that had an influence on what my thinking was and continued to be was that [laughs] there was formed, in, in the camp, a local of the American Socialist Party, and now names are going to escape me, I'm trying to remem— Norman Thomas and, who ran for President as an American Socialist, and the man who ran for Vice President with him, and I can't remember his name at all, but he came out to the camp and somewhere I have a photograph of the men in the camp, plus one preacher from Portland, Oregon who was out that weekend, having their picture taken with, the name Maynard is coming to me, but I'm not sure if that was a first or last name. And so, I think that it was, that was, the clearest thing to refer to, to indicate a change that was away from religious to political.

00:08:28:00—00:09:15:00

Interviewer #2:

And you said, you were saying before we were starting to talk, that, that, that one of the things you had in camp was lots of time to argue about everything, right?

Kermit Sheets:

Oh yes, well that went on all the time.

Interviewer #2:

What would you argue about?

Kermit Sheets:

Oh well there were details to argue you about that went on all the time. To the extent that one

of the men there said, we've got to have a committee set up for the drawing of the line, 'cause men would always say no I draw the line at that. I, whether it was to work on Sundays or to have some kind of free time in the evening, or be on, on the sick crew, or, or what—

00:09:16:00—00:09:57:00

Interviewer #1:

Could you talk Kermit, about drawing the line, about how people made the choices they made and kind of what the, what the choices were that people made, and the whole spectrum of choices that were out there for people who didn't want to fight?

Kermit Sheets:

[laughs] I'm going to sound a lightweight, I know, because I think my decisions were [laughs] based on the people who made them. And, I wanted to be friends of theirs, and I wanted them to be friends of me. And, unless they were absolutely stupid I went along with it, so—

00:09:58:00—00:10:06:00

Interviewer #2:

Well, but I mean that's the point. You can have friends that you disagree with too, but their ideas were convincing, weren't they? I mean they—

Kermit Sheets:

Sure.

Interviewer #2:

They worked.

00:10:07:00—00:12:01:00

Interviewer #1:

But, but maybe, but, what, what was, how were people making decisions and what were the choices that faced you? I mean you decided—

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

Interviewer #1:

—to stay in camp and not go to prison for example, or not become a non-combatant. When you made that choice to go to camp did you consider—

Kermit Sheets:

Well my friends, my friends were going to camp, and so I just, I mean were, were going to jail, were walking out that's the way it was always described, as walking out. And then you were picked up and sent to jail. And so I decided I was going to do that too, because by staying there I, I was cooperating with the war effort. So I wrote home about that, and I got a letter that broke me up, and I, I didn't have the strength to go against the family on that sort of thing. They were gonna have to leave town. My sister would not be able to, if I were in jail, my sister would not be able to graduate with her high school friends, and she'd have to go into a school, a high school where she didn't know anybody, and maybe they would get to know her as that slacker who was up there, and, and so on. And so well I caved in and I didn't go. And, by that time, I was in the camp at Waldport where the fine arts group was setup, and I was probably in the middle of playing a part in a play. Or, I, I had been in theater from the time I went, went to college, well even in high school I'd been in high school productions, in Gul—Gilbert and Sullivan, and in college in a Noël Coward play, and, and so on. And so, that was just in my bones by that time. It started as a child. My mother took me to the Ladies' aid group in our church to give recitation, when I was six year ol—six years o—

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

00:12:02:00—00:12:09:00

Interviewer #2:

“The Mikado” was—

Interviewer #1:

As most them were. That's right.

Interviewer #2:

—at Cascade Locks wasn't it? Yeah, it started “The Mikado”.

Kermit Sheets:

Yes it was.

00:12:10:00—00:13:02:00

Interviewer #2:

I'm interested about something too which is that, these are sort of small little groups of men, you're out in the country, sometimes you're by a small town, sometimes you're way out in the—

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Did you have a sense, I mean did you really, did it feel like a refuge from the rest of this world gone crazy, where, where you can actually think about things that are important instead of war and killing, or are you, are you still, can you not escape that world?

Kermit Sheets:

Oh you can't escape the world. We had radios after all. We did get the news. But we were intent on what we were doing there and, and we made very close friends. I mean, here's Kemper, and Al McRay, and, and Charlie Davis, and all the rest, very, very good friends, and they were, that had more effect on me than college had had.

00:13:03:00—00:13:15:00

Interviewer #1:

We, we've got a—

Interviewer #2:

What is that? What is that?

Interviewer #1:

—saw going on here.

Interviewer #2:

Maybe we have to shut that door.

Interviewer #1:

[inaudible] shut the door.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah, I was in—

Interviewer #2:

We might have to.

Interviewer #1:

[inaudible] once we start. Could you, that was, that was, would you say what you just said—

[cut]

00:13:16:00—00:13:47:00

Interviewer #2:

Could you ignore it and you said no you had radios, but you still made these important—

Kermit Sheets:

Well I'll say this. In 1986 I went to Orange, the town of Orange in Orange County, where Chapman College has been for some time, for the fiftieth anniversary of my graduation. And [laughs] I'm gonna have to pause here, you're gonna have to do some snipping out—

Interviewer #2:

That's OK. That's OK. We all—

Kermit Sheets:

What did you ask me? I know that was—

00:13:48:00—00:15:38:00

Interviewer #2:

Well I was talking about, during that period when your in these camps and you're isolated, can you really escape the rest of the world, and you said no I, we could listen to it, but even so the relationships we made were important to us.

Kermit Sheets:

When, when it got, came to my turn to stand up and say what I'd been doing in the fifty years since I graduated from Chapman college, I said well, I've had three families: The one I grew

up with, the one I had at Chapman college, and the one I had in the conscientious objector camp. And I think I really actually said I had four, and the fourth was then the theater company that we, we formed as a result of the plays that we did in, in the CO camp, after the war, and those, those were my four families. And, so that from the period of being in the camp, my family was made of the men who were there and we just remained friends through, throughout the years. Don Baker from the Cascade Locks camp whom I got to know, as, as well as Kemper Nomland who went on to the arts camp in Waldport, and Alan McRae and so on, became, I think they were part of my family there, that, that family stayed in touch with each other, in some cases quite close. Don Baker's been a very good friend and has [laughs] helped me see through the change in my life when Jane had to go the hospital with Alzheimer's.

00:15:39:00—00:16:43:00

Interviewer #2:

So, talk a little bit now about, let's turn to Waldport specifically. What happens when you get a bunch of creative people together? What's that like? Does it, does what they're doing encourage you to do more or is there sort of, some sort of energy created?

Kermit Sheets:

Well, well it seemed to me, in looking back again, that a lot of the energy came as a re—, as a result of, of the personality, the persona, of William Everson, who was a poet and had learned to operate, set type and operate a, a printing, a press, a printing press. And we had meetings as the fine arts group, I'd— [laughs]. Again, I don't remember much about what we talked because the meeting was over we each went to his art and worked at it.

00:16:44:00—00:16:59:00

Interviewer #1:

Kermit, could I ask you something?

Kermit Sheets:

Mm-hmm

Interviewer #1:

You're doing this [slapping sound] a lot, slapping your pants—

Kermit Sheets:

Oh, and you can hear it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible] this reminds you not to do it.

Interviewer #1:

Nick's gonna start crying if you do it anymore. [laughs]

Kermit Sheets:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

That's good. Do that.

00:17:00:00—00:17:53:00

Interviewer #2:

But what I'm saying is, is there's Everson and he's sort of the, the guiding light or he sort of makes it happen, but you have painters, you have theater people, you have poets, you have—

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—all this different stuff. Is that, is that a, is that a creative atmosphere, or does that encourage you to do what you're doing?

Kermit Sheets:

Well some of the arts are more collaborative than other arts are, and so in, in the theater somebody took charge of what kind of setting the performances were set in. So there was a little bit, I know Kemper designed one set and, [laughs] and made furniture out of dismantled lockers, and, and cushions out of something or other, mattresses rolled up, made furniture for "The Canada."

00:17:54:00—00:19:05:00

Interviewer #2:

Compare those two camps. I mean, I know there was some artistic activity going on in Cascade, but was it, when you get to Waldport is it more concentrated, is it more focused or,

what's the difference between them?

Kermit Sheets:

Well, we had space to work in, and there was one building and then, when the press was bought and set up, that was, took up part of that space. And, what else, well there, there was a—

Interviewer #2:

But I'm just thinking more in terms of, not how it physically worked, but how did it feel being with a group of artists as opposed to just in a camp? Did it feel different?

Kermit Sheets:

Well, pretty much, the, the artists in the camp were liberals politically, or even liberals religiously, and the Brethren Church was much more a fundamentalist kind of church, so there wasn't much overlap.

Interviewer #2:

Between art and camp?

Kermit Sheets:

That's right. Yeah. [laughs]

00:19:06:00—00:21:00:00

Interviewer #2:

And I've heard there was some Jehovah's Witnesses in the camp who didn't like it at all too, were there, were there any ones who didn't participate at all?

Kermit Sheets:

Well, they had their, their guns for hunting with, and in, and some of the men, I can't remember whether they actually had their bunks in, in the, what we called dormitories, but they sat around tables and, and played poker, and there was just no communication at all. Another character who did a lot of praying about things came to, where, well I need a little parenthesis here. There were cabins across the highway from the camp, and the highway was Highway One going on up the coast of Oregon. So there was the camp, kind of nestled amongst some trees, and a little driveway to highway one, and across from that were some cabins, and then there was the beach and a beautiful beach down there, and some of the wives rented the cabins, because there wasn't much, there wasn't much tourism, because there wasn't gasoline available, and so we'd have weekend parties in the camps. And, [laughs] and

we were having a hoop, hoopty doing picking up a little bit of beer because we didn't have, in Oregon you had to have coupons to, to buy any liquor, but anyway it was pretty, pretty lively, and outside the window kneeling was one of these religious guys praying for these sinners inside, and we just hooped and hollered about that, 'cause it was so far from, I look back and think the poor [laughs] son of a gun or—

00:21:01:00—00:22:57:00

Interviewer #1:

Did, you know Steve Cary, who came to visit the camp towards the end of the war, said that it was in complete chaos, that, you know, people hadn't made their beds, nothing was cleaned, everything, nobody was, every one was refusing to work—

Interviewer #2:

Well, well the term he, the term he said was, these guys at Waldport were as independent as a hog on ice [laughs].

Kermit Sheets:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

[laughs] Could you talk about what it, what the structure was like of working with a bunch of people, independent spirited people in that situation?

Kermit Sheets:

I don't remember any kind of mess like that. I remember, specifically, that we had army cots, and somebody figured out that if, if you had a, a, a piece, piece of wood like a pencil only bigger around, and there's a name for that kind of—

Interviewer #2:

A dowel, a dowel.

Kermit Sheets:

A dowel, exact— [laughs]. If you had a dowel, you could take one of, one of the bunks and turn it upside down and set the other one on top with dowels going through, because the legs, once were, just hollow at the end, where as the tops curved over to make the head of the bed, or the foot of the bed, that you could make a double bunk. And Bill Eshelman and I had double bunk together, and that gave us a kind of privacy from the aisle that ran down the center of the dormitory. And, we, we turned the lockers, each had a wooden locker, and took

the door off a locker we got somewhere, to make a, a, a desk out of it, nailed it into there, and so that was neat as could be [laughs].

Interviewer #2:

I don't see how they could complain about that.

Kermit Sheets:

No, I don't see, I don't know, maybe.

Interviewer #2:

Well it's all depending on what you're used to I guess.

00:22:57:00—

Interviewer #1:

So was your point in that, that you—

Interviewer #2:

He's saying that it was—

Interviewer #1:

—created your own individual, more person—

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Order, order.

Kermit Sheets:

Right, yeah. So, if there were dorms that I almost never went into, it may have been a mess, I don't remember that.

00:23:12:00—00:24:32:00

Interviewer #2:

So, let's go back to, to Bill Everson, who was a separate, he was sort of a pivotal guy in making the whole camp work. And I know at one point you gave someone an interview where you said, that you thought he didn't like you, or he didn't approve of theater because it was too frivolous, that he was a really serious guy. I mean, how can, how can we understand who Everson was?

Kermit Sheets:

No, I, well, my relationship with Everson was not close, not that there was any pulling away, it, it, it was, poets always intimidated me, in spite of the fact that I may have tried to write poetry and some appeared in the magazines we, we put out, mimeographed and later printed. But, Everson was this established poet who had had two books published before he went to camp, and, so that was due respect. And, my feeling was that, a lot of the men kind of looked in awe of Everson, but I felt that Everson looked at, at me as if I were frivolous [leg slapping sound], there I go again, frivolous.

00:24:33:00—00:24:50:00

Interviewer #2:

Well, you know, one of the, and I like this comment, I forget who you did the interview with, but I read it somewhere. He, it said that you, you saw him as a sort of a Lincoln-like or a Lincoln-esque figure.

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah, he was I think he—

Interviewer #2:

Talk a little—

Kermit Sheets:

—referred to himself as, as the honest poem splitter.

00:24:51:00—00:25:07:00

Interviewer #2:

Would you say that again, I'm sorry. I interrupted you.

Kermit Sheets:

That, Everson referred to himself, as Honest Abe, the poem splitter. Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

I might adjust something first.

Interviewer #2:

And that, that Lincoln—

Interviewer #1:

Wait.

Interviewer #2:

Oh I'm sorry go ahead, yes, go ahead and adjust something first.

[cut]

00:25:08:00—

Interviewer #2:

—that conveys that somehow this guy, he's bigger than life, or he has some sort of, there's something in him that really—

Kermit Sheets:

Well he had an, a, aura. Everson had an aura of homespun grandeur [laughs], something like that. It, it, he, he was not, he didn't effect being an aesthete, it was more that he, he had a reverberating voice that, more of a prophet like, kind of image that Bill carried.

Interviewer #1:

Could you clarify—

Kermit Sheets:

We'd listen to anything, we would listen to anything that Bill said.

00:25:55:00—00:26:07:00

Interviewer #1:

Could we clarify something? There was a fine arts group at Waldport, but the whole camp wasn't artists, was it?

Kermit Sheets:

No, no, no.

Interviewer #1:

No, not at all, right? It was a smaller group of people.

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

Kermit Sheets:

Less than fifty percent, yeah.

00:26:08:00—00:28:21:00

Interviewer #1:

Less than fifty percent. So, well could you describe what your day was like? You weren't sitting around doing art all day.

Kermit Sheets:

No. I think that Bill was on full time as the secretary of the fine arts study group, some such title. But, the rest of the men were on work call, either to go out into the woods, tree planting took place. The majority of the men were out either tree planting, or building forest fire trails, or fighting forest fires. Those were the three main occupations, and in, in Waldport especially tree planting because a lot of that nearby area was fores—forested out, what am I trying to—

Interviewer #1:

Deforested.

Kermit Sheets:

Deforested. But others worked in, in the laundry full time, or worked in the kitchen full time. I went up through the kitchen to where I had, if I remember rightly, a, [laughs] the first position was to be dietitian, that was ordering all, all the kitchen supplies, and, and making up the menus for the week. And then I got the, the prime, best job in the whole camp which was being camp baker. I could do it at night when nobody was in the kitchen, and it wouldn't take quite the whole night, and I could bake enough bread for two days. So, the, when I had that job it was summertime and I'd spend all the daylight on the beach. But all that was work of national importance, mind you.

Interviewer #2:

Well that's what they said right?

Kermit Sheets:

Yes. But they had to have bread, and I could arrange my hours so that's how I did—

00:28:22:00—

Interviewer #1:

Kermit, did you feel that it was, that there, that things fell apart. Towards the end, were people doing their jobs or were people refusing to? The sense I have in a lot of camps, and I'm not quite sure how bad Waldport got, that people stopped cooperating.

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah, well, it, it was breaking down in that way, of not doing the work. Well, there was some walking out, getting jailed. There was some slow down, sure. And, a person would be penalized if they were shown in some way, I don't know, to be slowing down on the work they were supposed to be doing.

00:29:15:00—00:29:37:00

Interviewer #2:

Why, why—

Interviewer #1:

Why, why did that begin to happen? Why were people refusing to work or refusing to cooperate fully?

Kermit Sheets:

I don't know. I didn't. I baked bread, and ordered the menus, made up the menus, and ordered the food.

00:29:38:00—00:30:44:00

Interviewer #1:

Do—

Interviewer #2:

I'm sorry. Well, let's talk about the arts activity in the camp. I mean there were, when we look back, there were people like yourself who really did stuff with theater, there, there was someone like Adrian Wilson who did a lot of wonderful printing, there was Everson who was, who was an established writer and became a greater writer. Did you have a sense that, that this was a really special group of people then? Did you realize that something special and really interesting was happening there?

Kermit Sheets:

Well, yes. I did realize something was happening there. I realized that Broadus Erle, whom we all called Bus Erle, was a fine violinist, and he, he did go, after the war was part of the, was first violinist in the New Music Quartet in Manhattan and from there went to be Concert-Meister of Tokyo Symphony, so he was an artist, out in the [laughs], in the real world.

00:30:45:00—00:31:46:00

Interviewer #2:

But it wasn't just him there was, there was a—

Kermit Sheets:

There were a lot of others. There was Bob Harvey who did a little bit of everything in the arts. I went over to, he had, he and, and his wife Joyce Harvey, Joyce Lancaster, had a cabin on the, a coast there on the beach, and I went over one day, and he was doing three arts, working on three arts at once. He was writing in his journal, he set that aside and picked up his paintbrush and went on with his painting, set that aside and picked up his violin and started playing. 'Cause he and Broadus Erle did do a concert for, there were two violinists and a pianist, and that was Erle's wife, Hildegarde Erle, and that, that was, that was one of the concerts that was done there. And there must have been three or four concerts, music concerts, by the musicians.

00:31:47:00—00:34:27:00

Interviewer #2:

The, the other thing that interests me particularly is that, as you said, Everson got the printing started, and, and printing really sort of caught on in a way that, that you did printing after the war, a lot of different people did. What was it that, that was so special about being able to design a page and print an illustration? What, what did that mean to you, doing, doing the printing?

Kermit Sheets:

Well, unlike a painting, say, your work could go out in copies. And, the other, the performing

artist just couldn't go from there with their violins, nor could we take the play somewhere and perform it, we, we just did it there. But the printing you could send out and we could get people to send back fifty cents [laughs] or a dollar or something like that to get copies of these various publications. We had, Kemper and, I guess, Bill Webb, and I started this magazine and, and, again, it was my lightheartedness to name it "The Illiterati" rather than the literati, we didn't pretend to be illiterati we [laughs], but we, we didn't want to be pretentious and, and went overboard being unpretentious. So, and then Martin Ponch arrived with compost, "Compass" magazine, and, and the little sheaves of paper batch mac poem [?], of poetry came out under what was called the Untide Press. There, there was approved by the administration, weekly, maybe monthly, paper called the "The Tide," we were on the coast, called "The Tide." So then, just to show that everyone didn't approve of that conservative sort of presentation, and religious in a sense, of "The Tide," put out also a little paper called "The Untide." Everything that is not Tide is Untide. And then that became the title of the press that put out the individual magazines, individual pamphlets.

00:34:28:00—00:34:42:00

Interviewer #2:

Well I mean I don't want to give it a significance it doesn't have, but it really seems like there were all these individual people here, but, but that the, the printing and the press and those things really was a way of bringing it together and reaching out.

Kermit Sheets:

Well I think it was. [chair creaking]

00:34:43:00—00:34:59:00

Interviewer #2:

Could you say that? I think—

Kermit Sheets:

I think it was a way of bringing people together and reaching out, because it, it could be done which in a way that performance of music and performance of plays could not be done.

00:35:00:00—

Interviewer #1:

Do you think that your publications gave a sense to conscientious objectors around the country that, that there was a creative element to refusing to fight, that, did it bring the community of COs together nationally in some way?

Kermit Sheets:

I can't per—, personally say what kind of reception was out there about this, except that as it got known a little bit more, more men in other camps would send in for copies of stuff. “Illiterati” went on I think for two issues after the war was over, but it was just in the hands of Kemper Nomland and I think he just, the time was over. He was working as an architect and, and just didn't go on with it. There wasn't anybody else to share the work, he was setting up all the type pretty much.

00:36:04:00—00:36:16:00

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

Interviewer #2:

Well before we finish with the war years though I wanna get the CPS Mikado.

Interviewer #1:

The, “The Mikado,” 'cause I was thinking, the other thing, if you could kind of, 'cause you're our only Waldport person basically, tell, I think Adrian Wilson went on and became—

[cut]

00:36:17:00—00:36:37:00

Interviewer #1:

—learn woodworking in camp and go on to become a great woodworker—

Kermit Sheets:

I should mention, I should mention Adrian Wilson because it, it was not only, he was not only a fine printer, but he was a book designer and for that he won a Mac— what?

Interviewer #1:

Arthur

Kermit Sheets:

MacArthur award, and so he—

00:36:38:00—00:38:18:00

Interviewer #1:

Kemper, I'm sorry, Kermit, could you start that whole thing again, 'cause we were sort of moving cameras around there just as you started.

Kermit Sheets:

I can't quite realize why I haven't mentioned Adrian Wilson before, because Joyce Harvey and her husband separated and Adrian Wilson and Joyce Lancaster, her maiden name, came together to San Francisco and were part, along with me and, to a certain degree, Martin Ponch, the formation of a theater company in San Francisco after the war. So I was very close to Joyce and Adrian for many years there, but it, it was the, the printing at the camp that really stuck with Adrian, although he did go over to Cal and register in the architecture department, but I don't know if he even finished a term. I can't remember that, because he, he was getting, getting known for his fine printing. And he, he got an international reputation by discovering the layouts for very early book imprint, printed book, which I can't recall the title of. But he wrote a whole book on these, on book design in terms of the layout of the pages for this religious book.

00:38:19:00—00:39:30:00

Interviewer #1:

Is it fair to say he learned those skills at Waldport or did he come with those?

Kermit Sheets:

I'm very sure that Adrian learned his skills there from Bill Everson, yeah, but I don't think Bill did as much in, in, in the design of printing as Adrian developed. And, well, he, one of the early things he, he did that got some attention was a book on printing for the theater, because he printed up all our programs of the theater company that was organized under the name of The Interplayers. And, that book is very valuable now. And then he, he went on to do these other books. And it was for his, his design, I believe, and book design is called typography, and that was what he got his MacArthur award for.
00:39:31:00—00:40:36:00

Interviewer #1:

Just a little more of, of that whole area, well, what other people learned, became important artists, who learned what they knew in Waldport.

Kermit Sheets:

I mentioned before that Broadus Earl went on with his music, but he was a musician when he came there. I wouldn't say that he, he learned how to play the violin there, not at all. This was

not a school and we, in fact didn't want to be set up as a study, stu—study group, but as a group of artists working together. And, then we formed a theater company. And, and Jerry Rubin went on with his, he and his wife Jan, with weaving and developing new styles of weaving. And, let's see, what else, what other artists?

00:40:37:00—00:41:52:00

Interviewer #2:

I heard Mark Tobey was there for a while, is that true? Or did he come to visit did, did you ever run into Mark Tobey, the painter?

Kermit Sheets:

Did he do those birds on the beach? Yes. He did—

Interviewer #2:

Yes, yeah.

Kermit Sheets:

—he came down and stayed for a while, and built his on lean to down, down on the beach, And one time, the only time I recall spending a period of time with him was when I bummed a ride in, in the old Ford he had to go into Salem, in, in Oregon, and, but he, oh no, there, there was another artist, and I haven't heard a lot from, Clayton Ja—Clayton James, that's right, and his wife, I can't think of her first name, they were both painters, and took to each other with Tobey very much. Because Tobey had, had an oriental aspect to his thinking and beliefs, I'm not sure whether he was Buddhist or, or not, but so did Clayton James and they had a lot in common, other than actual painting.

00:41:53:00—00:41:59:00

Interviewer #1:

Someone said that the—

Camera Crew Member #2:

We should change tapes

Interviewer #1:

Go ahead. Tell, maybe, tell me if this is right or not—

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

00:42:00:00—00:42:34:00

Kermit Sheets:

—art institute. I was just walking up to see if I could go in, and along came a woman towards me and it was Nicholas' widow. And she threw her arms around me, and was just so pleased to see me, for all the years that I'd worked with James and, and, and Nicholas and Margery would come to the apartment that James and I had, so it was wonderful to see her. But, I wasn't close to Nicholas, I just knew him as James' brother and saw him a few times.

00:42:35:00—

Interviewer #1:

Well, he, he wrote a book about his conscientious objector experience—

Kermit Sheets:

Did he really?

Interviewer #1:

—I don't think it was every published?

Interviewer #2:

I've never seen it—

Interviewer #1:

I have it—

Interviewer #2:

Oh. Well maybe we can make a copy—

Kermit Sheets:

Do you have the man—

Interviewer #1:

I have it in my files somewhere. I'll dig it out.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah we'll, we'll make you a copy.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah—

Kermit Sheets:

Oh would you? I'd love to see it.

Interviewer #2:

Can we switch gears now—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—a little bit? Back to Cascade Locks—

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—and the creative live in Cascade, which, which like “The Illiterati” was sometimes tongue in cheek.

Kermit Sheets:

Yes.

00:43:00:00—00:44:11:00

Interviewer #2:

My first exhibit.

Kermit Sheets:

[laughs]

Interviewer #2:

Talk a little bit about how the CPS Mikado came to be.

Kermit Sheets:

Well while I was in Cascade Locks there was entertainment going on and I was sometimes involved in that. And I remember there would be little sketches written and people performing. I remember one of the men, very tall, got all dressed up to be Eleanor Roosevelt and I don't know who wrote what it was, but, I hate war and s—, so does Eleanor, and we won't give up until everybody's dead [laughs], was one of the takeoffs of what was happening up there. And then, I had been in high school in the Gilbert and Sullivan light opera, "The Mikado," and how I thought it would fit into life at a conscientious objector camp I don't know, but I'll, I'll read what the introduction to this is—

00:44:12:00—00:44:16:00

Interviewer #2:

Hold the book up a little bit—

Camera Crew Member #1:

You should bring it up.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, can you hold it up?

Kermit Sheets:

Oh yeah. Thanks.

Interviewer #2:

Are, are you ready?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, that's—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

00:44:17:00—00:45:12:00

Interviewer #2:

OK, go ahead.

Kermit Sheets:

[reads] "'The Mikado in CPS' was presented at the Cascade Locks, Oregon Civilian Public Service camp one weekend in February 1944 as the entertainment for a party attended by young ladies from nearby and far flung communities. Since that occasion, some of the parodies have caught on, and this volume is the answer to requests that those parodies be more easily available. In the performance the lyrics of the last four songs were more or less as Gilbert wrote them, for this published version parodies have been provided. 'The Mikado in CPS' is a satire on the present alternative service for conscientious objectors, in the finale the phrase 'we merrily sing to keep face' wryly expresses the spirit which prompted writing this parody.

00:45:13:00—00:47:29:00

Interviewer #1:

Could you do a [unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member:

[inaudible]

Kermit Sheets:

So, the first of these parodies begins with one of the first of the songs. [reads] "A drafted Seal I. I just received my papers. For which I cut no capers. Now please don't take me wrong in Hollywood. I sang in nearly every nightclub. But now in all this hub-hub, I sing a different song. I sing a different song. Are you in sentimental mood? I'll sigh with you, oh sorrow. On maiden's coldness do you brood, I'll do so too. Oh sorrow, sorrow. I'll share your dreams resigned of girls who were left behind. While men in uniform fulfill the norm. Oh sorrow, sorrow. But a pac—paf—" excuse me, "but a pacifistic sentiment is wanted, a pacifistic balance cut and dried. For wherever CPS camps may be planted, nonviolence, in all its forms, is tried. Our pacifists in CPS assembled never quail, or if they do you'd never guess, and I shouldn't be surprised if Congress trembled before our brave COs or seals in CPS. And if you call for a song of the wood we'll swing our broad axe 'round, with a swing at ho, sing of brotherhood. A furlough's on tap if there's no mishap. Hurrah for the homeward bound. To fell a tree when the high wind blows may tickle a townsman's taste, but the happiest hour a seal knows is when he's gone to his old hometown, with his Gertie on his knees swing ho, and an arm around her waist. A drafted seal I, I'll soon be wearing patches. I'll have to

borrow matches. I'll sing a different song. I'll sing a different song." As you can see that follows a great deal that opening song of nan—Nanki-Poo, with just a few things thrown in to. Do you want more of this?

Interviewer #1:

That's great.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

00:47:30:00—00:49:58:00

Interviewer #1:

Your, your voice, your speaking voice is so good, could, couldn't you sing a little of it?

Kermit Sheets:

Could I sing? [laughs] I don't know if I can remember the tune to Ko-Ko's, but it, it, it's a lot about the camp and the people in it.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm

Kermit Sheets:

[reads] "As someday it may happen that a victim I must show. I've got a little list. I've got a little list of consc—conscripted [laughs] of conscripted CPS men who might well go 1-A-0, and who never would be missed, who never would be missed. There's the cheerful riser in the dorm who sings a merry note. At six A.M. he grins so gay you'd like to slit his throat. The cook who makes the lunches you consume out in the rain. Of sandwich one and two and three, I'd just as soon abstain. The guy prolonging meetings of all talk, monopolist. They'd none of 'em be missed. They'd none of 'em be missed. Now to briefly mention politics, I'd like, like to show to you the dogmatic socialist. I've got him on the list. Who proves everything by Thomas, Debs, “The Call,” and Krieger [?] too. He never would be missed. He never would be missed. There's the gruesome culture vulture and all others, others of his ilk, who has gone surrealistic in a dressing gown of silk. The fu—fussy vegetarian who faints at sight of stew. He's quite evangelistic and explains it all to you. And of each dish he asks the cooks, of what does this consist? He never would be missed. He never would be missed. Now I must not conclude this list unless I mention here the confirmed religionist. I've got him on the list. He has the only key to truth and universal bliss. He never would be missed. He never would be missed. And there are those who have the plan to rescue all mankind such as, what do you call 'em, thing-a-ma-bob and likewise never mind. The s— s— s— in what's

his name, and also you know who. The task of filling up the blanks I'd rather leave to you. But it really doesn't matter whom you put upon the list. For they'd none of 'em be missed. They'd none of 'em be missed. [ends reading]

00:49:59:00—00:50:42:00

Interviewer #1:

That was great.

Kermit Sheets:

Well that gives a little feeling of the camp and of people who were there that we liked to tease about. Oh well let's see.

Interviewer #2:

What other favorites do you have?

Interviewer #1:

What, what's the tune for that one?

Kermit Sheets:

Pardon?

Interviewer #1:

What tune, what's the tune for the one you just read. What song is that from, in “The Mikado?”

Kermit Sheets:

Well I'll have to look at the words.

Interviewer #1:

Did you say Ko-Ko, is that something? Ko-Ko—

Kermit Sheets:

Yes, he's lord high executioner. For this purpose we had him the lord high assistant associate director

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

00:50:43:00—00:51:44:00

Kermit Sheets:

[reads/sings] "As someday it may happen that a victim I must show. I've got a little list. I've got a little list of conscripted CPS men who might well go 1-A-0, and who never would be missed, who never would be missed. There's the cheerful riser in the dorm who sings a merry note. At six A.M. he grins so gay you'd like to slit his throat. The cook who makes the lunches you consume out in the rain. Of sandwich one and two and three, I'd just as soon abstain. The guy prolo—prolonging meetings of all talk, monopolist. They'd none of 'em be missed. They'd none of 'em be missed. He's got a little list, He's got a little list, and they'll none of them by missed. They'll none of them be missed." [ends reading] It goes too low for me to hit and pretty much too high—

Interviewer #2:

That's great.

Kermit Sheets:

—but that's close to the tune.

00:51:45:00—00:52:57:00

Interviewer #2:

That gives the flavor.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm

Kermit Sheets:

This is "The Mikado" song "My Object All Sublime" [reads/sings] "I am the director of selective service in time of war. Though a major general, my rank's ephemeral, and I'm civilian to the core. It is my very humane endeavor to make each CO understand, a modification of classification would make his fortune expand. My object all sublime. I shall achieve in time. To make the punishment fit the crime, the punishment fit the crime. And see that each CO goes 1-A or 1-A-0. It's just my innocent merriment, my innocent merriment." [ends reading/singing Then the chorus repeats, [reads/sings]"His object all sublime. He will achieve in time. To make the punishment fit the crime, the punishment fit the crime. And see that each CO goes 1-A or 1-A-0. It's just his innocent merriment, his innocent merriment."

[ends reading/singing]

00:52:58:00—

Interviewer #1:

Did your write these? Are these yours Kermit? Did you write this—

Interviewer #2:

You wrote the lyrics. Yeah, you wrote the—

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer #1:

You wrote these. Yeah, that's what I thought.

Interviewer #2:

And, and par, parody is a legitimate exemption to copyright.

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah [laughs]

Interviewer #2:

So no one can sue you.

Kermit Sheets:

[laughs] Well I think they can—

Interviewer #2:

Gilbert and Sullivan is out of copyright anyway.

Kermit Sheets:

—they're over their fifty-six years anyway.

Interviewer #2:

Yes, yes. That's right.

Kermit Sheets:

Oh this is “The Sun and I.” Oh my god it's, it's beautiful, lovely song. It's a soprano so—

Interviewer #2:

Oh, of course.

Kermit Sheets:

And, well, that, that's it. That's enough of that—

00:53:37:00—

Interviewer #2:

Anyway, how, how did, how did the masses respond?

Kermit Sheets:

Well they wanted, wanted copies of it and that, that's the response [laughs] yeah. I answered your question—

Interviewer #2:

I think you did.

Kermit Sheets:

—not supposed to be doing that.

00:53:50:00—00:54:55:00

Interviewer #2:

But, let's, let's maybe move on to the postwar years now.

Interviewer #1:

OK. I just wanted to say Lee McRae liked it enough that she sang one of the whole, one of the numbers on my answering machine for me.

Kermit Sheets:

Oh she did?

Interviewer #1:

Yes [laughs] to let me know that I had to get a hold of this—

Kermit Sheets:

Well, you know, after we'd gone to Cascade Locks, Kemper and I, there, there was a party that young ladies from University of Oregon or Salem, Oregon, or, or some college in, Reed College in, I forgot, in Portland, came down to the camp. And [laughs], Manch Harvey, and Kemper Nomland, and I got all dressed up as three little maids from camp are we, three little co-op maids are we, and sang that song as, as a joke, as a spoof on the girls from university who came down to our camp, yeah. I don't know if they appreciated it.

Interviewer #1:

[laughs]

Interviewer #2:

[laughs] It seemed funny at the time

Camera Crew Member #1:

If they've got a good sense of humor.

00:54:56:00—00:56:02:00

Interviewer #2:

Let's talk a little about the, the years after the war. You, you went to Los Angeles, but soon you, you came back to San Francisco. And it wasn't, it wasn't just you coming to San Francisco, that San Francisco seemed to be sort of a magnet in those postwar years. A lot of creative people, many, many COs, and many other people came together and something, I mean, it was like, there was a group of artistic people in Waldport, but there's something bigger, very similar in San Francisco.

Kermit Sheets:

Oh, yes. I don't think that was the, that was the reason [laughs]—

Interviewer #2:

What was happening in San Francisco?

Kermit Sheets:

I should say, I should make this to say, I don't think that, that the burgeoning in San Francisco of the arts after the war was a reason for our, my moving from Los Angeles up to San Francisco. My moving up there was that that's where the strongest ones who were involved in, in the plays at, at Waldport would not go to Los Angeles, wanted to come to San Francisco, and so, well, I went to San Francisco, 'cause—

Interviewer #2:

But, but you found this real cultural scene there.

Kermit Sheets:

That's right.

00:56:03:00—00:57:11:00

Interviewer #2:

Talk a little bit about what it was like in San Francisco in those years.

Kermit Sheets:

I should know a great deal about what was going on in San Francisco in those years—

Interviewer #2:

Not the people, just what it felt like, you know, the creative atmosphere. What it was like to be young and the war was over and these things were happening.

Kermit Sheets:

I don't know how to talk about the rest of the San Francisco Ren—Renaissance [laughs]. I guess we must be considered part of it. Although we, we, we tended to do more conventional comedies or serious plays than the San Francisco Renaissance was, and we were not doing original plays. We did come to do some after we got to know, after we were there long enough, and got to know some of the writers who were writing in theater form. And, the one that I got to know the best was James Broughton, but it on the basis of my going out to help him work on a film he was making.

Interviewer #2:

But you knew Duncan and you, you knew a lot of the other poets during that period too right?

Kermit Sheets:

That's right, yeah.

00:57:12:00—01:01:23:00

Interviewer #2:

And so there was this—

Kermit Sheets:

That's true.

Interviewer #2:

—something, something special happening there.

Kermit Sheets:

One of the special things that happening, that happened was the most, I can't think of, most, well it came to be the most dangerous, but was, one, one, one of the most daring of my projects with the theater company. There was a poet named Helen Adam who went around with, where there were poetry readings, she'd become very popular with the other poets and with the people who came to hear the poets read. And she would read her poems which, she was Scottish, and had an accent from, 'cause she had grown up in Scotland. And she would do kind of dark, Gothic poems, and there, there was always [laughs] a nearness to death around the corner, and, and the shadows in her corner, and they were dark, dark poems. But there were, there was something delightful about her, her poetry and her, her way of reciting her poet—or reading it that she became very popular. And all during this time she was working with a bit of help from her sister, with whom she lived, on a kind of ballet opera which was named "San Francisco's Burning," and took place, on, on just before the occurrence of the 1906 earthquake which resulted in a great, the great fire in San Francisco. And I got to know her through James Broughton because he went to all of those, I, I was working with him on a film, and he went to all those poetry readings and he read his poetry and he got to know Helen, and she read some of her selections from this, this ballet opera, but she wanted music written for it. And so, through my having gotten to know Ann Halprin, the dancer, which I think she's calls herself, has been calling herself, in recent years, Anna Halprin, and she and her company dancers' workshop performed in our theater. And, and her, and some of her people even performed in a, a review that we gave, a kind of literary comic review. And so she, as [clears throat] her rehearsal accompanist, knew a young composer named Warner Jepson and so I got as much as we had of, of Helen's script and gave it to Warner and he wanted very, very much to do the music. And Helen accepted his doing, but she, she fought it all along the way because, although the, the scenes took place at the two sides of San Francisco which was Nob Hill, society and Barbary Coast of, of the, of the lowlife sort of side of San Francisco, at that time of nineteen six. And so Warner, his music

was a little bit modern, but quite, a, a lot of it, tuneful. And he used different styles, not styles mimicking other composers, but just different forms of, of the music for the lighter upper class crowd, and for the dark side that was in there. And Helen got to where she didn't like that at all. She didn't like it. She wanted it to be like the way she read it.

01:01:24:00—01:01:51:00

Interviewer #2:

De gustibus, right?

Kermit Sheets:

But she was determined that it be put on, and we were in the middle of it and so she stayed playing one of the l—, leading in the sense of, of important characters, although not a long part, the Worm Queen. Which is the figure death.

Interviewer #2:

So listen, one of my—

Camera Crew Member #2:

We need to change batteries.

Interviewer #2:

Oh we need to change batteries?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, yeah, no.

Interviewer #2:

I like—

[cut]

[camera battery change]

01:01:52:00—01:02:55:00

Interviewer #2:

—interests in, in terms of talking about the postwar scene is to, sort of, follow the threads

that are started in the war, so I'm thinking about other people, for example, as well as you going to San Francisco, Adrian Wilson ended up there, Bill Everson really began to flourish. I think the postwar years was when he really—

Kermit Sheets:

Oh, yes.

Interviewer #2:

—made strides. So talk a little about that part of the San Francisco scene too.

Kermit Sheets:

OK. Are you going?

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, yeah, I'm going, yeah whenever.

Camera Crew Member:

[inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

[inaudible]

Kermit Sheets:

Well I'll—

Interviewer #2:

OK, sure.

Kermit Sheets:

—finish up a little bit about. Warner hadn't even finished writing all the music before we started rehearsals, and we rehearsed for a long time there. And Helen Adam was not terribly happy, but she kept with it and we had our opening night and the second night when, this was on a Friday and a Saturday, and the next day she went into Langley Porter and was given a, what is the brain thing? A—

01:02:56:00—01:05:10:00

Interviewer #1:

A lobotomy?

Interviewer #2:

Shock treatments? or—

Kermit Sheets:

Shock, she was given shock treatments and, and was in a hospital for some time after that, because of all this pressure on her, well I say because of, I'm not a doctor. But, she recovered enough to come back and finish the performances. We had someone step in for her for performances, but she came back and she finished it all, but those poets would, none of them came to see it. Duncan didn't come, Jack Spicer didn't come, two more I, I should mention who were close together. And a biography has been written of Jack Spicer and my name appears in it because I betrayed Helen Adam with, with that production—

Interviewer #2:

But, I mean, there was—

Kermit Sheets:

—they hadn't seen.

Interviewer #2:

Well you had Kenneth Rexroth and Ferlinghetti and Corso. There were a lot of poets around there—

Kermit Sheets:

Sure, there were indeed.

01:03:48:00—

Interviewer #2:

And then there was, talk a little bit about Mr. Everson himself, and how he fits into the poetry scene.

Kermit Sheets:

Well, Everson was not so much in San Francisco, he was in Berkeley all the time. And I, I wouldn't say that Everson very much was in the poetry scene after the war. Poets wrote of

their admiration for his work, but he, he would do a whole evening's performance himself rather than being part of the other. And then he, he moved over to Berkeley and, and m—married a Catholic woman. He became a Catholic and he married her, and then because he'd been married before, well he was still married to her and they had to break up and he became Brother Antoninus and used that name for a, a good deal of his writing. And it was a, wasn't until he finally broke with the church and married again, the other one was cancelled out, and really was not a Catholic anymore. That, and then he, he game, he came, the last time I saw Adrian, I mean Kenneth Rexroth, was at the memorial for Adrian Wilson in, in Golden Gate Park in Conservatory of Flowers. But—

01:05:11:00—01:06:17:00

Interviewer #2:

Do you—

Interviewer #1:

Could you repeat, oh, I'm sorry—

Interviewer #2:

—I'm sorry. Do you, do you, I mean there were different people doing different things, but do you, do you really [sounds of microphone adjustment], did you have a sense when you were in San Francisco with theater players that, that, that you were using some of the energy that you developed during the war, that you were carrying on things that you'd been doing in Waldport? Was there a connection?

Kermit Sheets:

Oh very definitely. We, we decided we, we would not do plays as propaganda, but that we would do plays for the, the merit of the theater, as we had done in camp, because the three main plays that we did were one by Ibsen, one by Chekhov, one by Shaw, and none of them had anything to do with war and opposing war. And so, we, we wanted to do provocative theater, in other words, comedies, and dramas, and if tragedies, of ideas. That was our, our highfalutin aim.

01:06:18:00—01:07:27:00

Interviewer #2:

And that brings us to that comment that someone asked you what you would've done if you'd been in a play and—

Kermit Sheets:

[laughs]

Interviewer #2:

—and a submarine had shown up in the middle of San Francisco Bay. Tell us that story.

Kermit Sheets:

Well I was challenged by one actor for my, for my being. He was a very attractive young man who played in, was playing in James Broughton's “True and False Unicorn,” he played the Unicorn, you know. And it, it was a long poem of voices, which I staged, and a tapestry of voices I think he called it. And this young actor and I were sitting up in the apartment which was upstairs from the theater where the Interplayers took place. And he said to me, well there's the bay out there, you can see it right through your window, what if a Japanese submarine came in there and came up, what would you do? I said I'd probably call another rehearsal. And it, it was flippant, but what I was saying was I was devoted to the theater and I wasn't going to try to get out a shotgun and shoot the [laughs], see what could I have done to a submarine anyway—

01:07:28:00—01:09:08:00

Interviewer #2:

Well, but I think the point is that you would, you had your values and your vision and if something happened you would deal with it, but you wouldn't stop what you wanted to do—

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah, yeah, I, that was the point. I wouldn't stop what I was doing—

Interviewer #2:

Did, but—

Interviewer #1:

[Inaudible]

Interviewer #2:

—I'm sorry, but, but again this issue of Waldport and back, what, like, looking back now, does, does that period at Waldport, does it represent a special time for you in terms of what you were able to do and the friendships you made? What, what is, what is looking back on Waldport mean?

Kermit Sheets:

As I look back on wal—Waldport, or the total experience of Cascade Locks and Waldport, but in terms of the arts especially Waldport, the most formative years of my life and the most exciting. And, we, we got so in, involved in the civilian life that we loved that that was where our energies went. And so of course it carried over into when we, we left because that, that we wanted to, to continue it and make it available with performances, so that more people could see what the three plays that we had done, could not be moved about. We would have our theater in wherever, and we chose San Francisco, and have as many performances as the audience would come. The one I mentioned, "San Francisco's Burning," was the next to the longest run of any of the plays that we had. The longest one was "Caligula" by Albert Camus, which is an odd one to be our most popular play.

01:09:09:00—01:09:47:00

Interviewer #2:

Well "Caligula," Camus is not what you'd call an optimistic writer, but I, but I, I get a sense from your feeling that, that you really came out of the camps with a sense of optimism.

Kermit Sheets:

Yes. Well anyway the play ends when Caligula is killed and he breaks awa—now this is the way the play ends, breaks away from the men who've come to kill him and stays, ran towards the foot load, foot lights, yelling I'm still alive and then goes down and dies. Well now there's plenty of message in there for, for about Hitler and whoever. Tyranny is still alive, so it wasn't a play without point to it.

01:09:48:00—01:10:10:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm

Interviewer #2:

But it also represents your feeling coming out of the camps. You're still alive too. Right?

Kermit Sheets:

[laughs] Yes, barely, but I still am.

Interviewer #1:

Did you feel any sense of, here, here you, you're painting this picture of being in the camp and having this exciting experience with other artists, and here are millions of other Americans—

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

01:10:11:00—00:01:13:22:00

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

What's the question?

Kermit Sheets:

Well, it's difficult for me to talk about my feelings about being in, in the camp doing the things that I got satisfaction from, and also development because there were artists who were, were theater people before they came to the camp, who had other ideas about directing actors than I had learned, most, mainly from college experiences, not from, from independent theater company. And so I learned a different way of working with, with actors which was to get as much from them through their impulses than to direct them to do what I thought it ought to be.

Interviewer #2:

But—

Kermit Sheets:

And, and, about the men in, in, in the war who had been drafted, and gone to oppose Nazism, which was actually simply to kill other men, young men who like them were drafted to kill and conquer other countries. What my feelings were about them is it's the thing of doing what you believe in, and find fulfilling, has to start somewhere. And it started with me by saying no. And then I'd go on and do the next thing, you know, and, and what was to do there. And of course I don't like to go, to be recorded saying that they could've said no, any and all of them could have said no. Now over there they may have been killed for saying no, 'cause they didn't have the production we'd go, but if they believe their religion, their predecessors had been killed for believing in their religion. And that's a very cynical attitude, so I don't like to say that is what I felt. I more like to say that I was involved in something I loved doing and I did it, and that's where my interest was, and that's what I thought about it, took up all my time that I was away. And if I'm judged for that [laughs], here I am at eighty-four, well, judge me.

01:13:23:00—01:14:18:00

Interviewer #2:

Well but, like most other people, I, I was a conscientious objector during Vietnam and my mind always, always revisits decisions, you know. Even though I make a decision I always say, was I really right? What would've happened if I'd done something else? Did you, did you think about that? Did it come—

Kermit Sheets:

I think about that now. I think about that now.

Interviewer #2:

What do you, say what do you think about, think about making the dec—

Kermit Sheets:

Was I really right? Yeah, and so my answer is well I, I, I, I thought I was right then. And I've really lived with that ever since. And I'm not going to condemn myself now for all those years.

01:14:19:00—00:15:01:00

Interviewer #1:

But would you do the opposite? Would you say that you feel, I hear you saying they could've said no too, that you feel you did the right thing. That you feel that you made a choice that you would stand by.

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

And on the other hand, so, is it, now I here you kind of saying—

Kermit Sheets:

Oh once and a while it occurs to me. It just occurs to me. Do thoughts come just of their own will into your head? Anybody? Anybody out there?

Interviewer #1:

[laughs]

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

Kermit Sheets:

They do, and so the thought comes into my head, have I ever thought I should've done differently.

01:15:02:00—01:15:27:00

Interviewer #2:

Yeah. It's interesting too because, from my generation, the trick question was always about World War Two, you know, well I know you don't like Vietnam—

Kermit Sheets:

Oh, yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—but what would you have done about Hitler?

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah. Oh.

Interviewer #2:

That's what they would always say in place. You know, and I don't have an answer to that, 'cause I wasn't in that situation.

Kermit Sheets:

Oh. Yeah. You don't have an, why, so you answered I don't know?

Interviewer #2:

I, I like, yeah, I like to think I'd know.

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah.

01:15:28:00—01:15:51:00

Interviewer #2:

But I mean you, you know—

Kermit Sheets:

But I don't have that question asked to me.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Kermit Sheets:

You know, when I do say to someone, now, that I spent the war years in a camp for conscientious objectors. You did? It's mostly a pleased surprise. And, have, have been talked about my courage.

01:15:52:00—01:15:51:00

Interviewer #1:

Do most people you that, when that comes up, are most people unaware that there were conscientious objectors in World War Two? Have you gotten that response?

Kermit Sheets:

Oh yes. Often I've, said I never knew that was going on. Yeah I didn't know that there was a camp program.

01:16:09:00—01:17:15:00

Interviewer #2:

But, but that issue about courage. Talk a little bit about that, that, that saying no actually takes some courage.

Kermit Sheets:

Well I can't say that I believe it was courage that, that prompted me. I drifted into it, 'cause there were people I liked and because, at the time, although I didn't go to church anymore, because I wasn't living with the family and it was all based, by family I mean my parents, it was all based on that family going to church indeed. But, I still at, at the time that, declaring myself a CO, it was done by religious training and belief, which was the exact words that you

had to sign, of your reason for being a CO.

01:17:16:00—01:17:26:00

Interviewer #2:

You're getting a little bit, yeah, you're almost there.

Interviewer #1:

Getting what?

Interviewer #2:

Just, adjust that. He's almost getting a flare in the light.

Interviewer #1:

Oh, I see on his glasses.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[Inaudible]

01:17:27:00—01:17:35:00

Interviewer #2:

I think we're almost done Judy, do you?

Interviewer #1:

I've got a couple a little things I think we didn't quite get to.

Interviewer #2:

Yes, a couple little things, OK, Judy has a couple little things—

Interviewer #1:

I have a couple little things, we're getting close—

Interviewer #2:

We should be out of here by midnight.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Kermit Sheets:

[laughs]

01:17:36:00—01:19:20:00

Interviewer #1:

Too old to cry, what's this thing about too old to cry, hurts too much to laugh, what did—

Interviewer #2:

Oh, oh, that, that's a quote from Adlai Stevenson that has nothing to do with this, forget it.

Interviewer #1:

Oh, OK.

Interviewer #2:

That was what Adlai Stevenson said in 1952 when he lost, they asked him how he felt.

Kermit Sheets:

Oh.

Interviewer #2:

He said, said I'm too old to cry and it hurts too much to laugh.

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah. [laughs]

01:17:53:00—01:19:21:00

Interviewer #1:

About the C—, you said what the CPS Mikado represent when played out against the horrors of war, OK. I think I have the, the whole connection of the, the relationship of pacifism at camp, the community of camp, and what followed in San Francisco. I don't, I don't think we made a connection there, and I think, is there a connection there? Or could you just, very

briefly, synop—you know, put together what, what happened in Waldport and what followed in San Francisco, what's the connection between those two, if any.

Kermit Sheets:

In regard to pacifism?

Interviewer #1:

And or just in b—, if that's true, pacifism, great, if not, how do we see that, that connection? We're trying to make a—

Interviewer #2:

A connection.

Interviewer #1:

—connection between what went on during the war and—

Interviewer #2:

And what happened after the war.

Interviewer #1:

—and the cultural and political legacy of, of what went on after the war. Can you say there's—

Kermit Sheets:

Well, a, a tie was established at Waldport of those who were in the theater activity that became, continued to be very strong in San Francisco, family friends, very close. If some, somebody had trouble with their rent or anything like that we were concerned for each other as you would be with a younger s—, sister or something [sniffs]. And, oh golly I thought that was going to lead somewhere [laughs].

01:19:22:00—01:22:01:00

Interviewer #2:

Well and, and part of that family stuff was, was [laughs]

Interviewer #1:

[laughs] That's great.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Pacifism after the war.

Interviewer #1:

And, and we thought Waldport was going to lead somewhere too, so you got it right there. So, can, you know what you never said, would you consider the people who went, were in Waldport, were they part of the San Francisco Renaissance that followed in San Francisco after the war? Is that accurate to say that?

Kermit Sheets:

I don't think we ever talked about the theater being, and its members being part of the San Francisco Renaissance. If, if they were concurrent, there must have been in the air some give and take. We did a play by Madeline Gleason. We did several things by Broughton. We, Robert Duncan had written a, a Medea which was done at Black Mountain College, and he, he, I don't know where the desire came from first, but there came to be an agreement that he could direct that in, in our theater. And it was cast and it fell apart because the young woman going to play Medea withdrew, as I remember it, and I don't know what else went on behind the scenes. I wasn't in, at what readings and rehearsals there were because I, I was neither asked to be in it and had nothing to do with labor, had rehearsals in the theater for a little bit, and that was all I knew about it, and then it sort of disappeared. Robert and I remained on fairly good terms, because I, I saw him frequently. There was a celebration for James' maybe seventieth birthday at the College of Marin in, in, what is that, Corte Madera?

Interviewer #1:

[inaudible]

Kermit Sheets:

No, San Anselmo. And, I wrote a little jingle and other people wrote little jingles I guess. And, and Robert was there and after I'd read mine he came up and he said, you scamp, what do you mean hanging around us poets and never showing us any of your poetry? Well he was teasing me and he knew I didn't pretend to be a poet, but that's sort of the last memory I have of Robert and that's been, what, fourteen years ago, yeah. And he's de—, of course died since then.

01:22:02:00—01:22:44:00

Interviewer #1:

Having just read someone's PhD thesis that advances this idea, that Waldport evolved, that the Waldport camp alumnus influenced the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat

movement.

Kermit Sheets:

Now who—

Interviewer #1:

I, I'm trying to think of his name.

Interviewer #2:

Matthew.

Interviewer #1:

No. No, no, it's a Yale PhD thesis, Gilbert, I'll think of his name in a minute.

Interviewer #2:

Well people make these connections after the fact—

Kermit Sheets:

Yes, yes.

Interviewer #1:

—you know, they try to establish connections which might or might not be true to the people who were—

Camera Crew Member:

Judy, also he's talking about the theater movement [inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

Right.

Kermit Sheets:

Did I give you a, a senior's paper?

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

Oh, not, yes.

Interviewer #1:

Yes, a senior, it's a senior thesis. I'm sorry.

Interviewer #2:

Yes. I think you gave us it, yeah.

Kermit Sheets:

Senior—

Interviewer #1:

Glenn Wallach.

Kermit Sheets:

Yes.

Interviewer #1:

Glenn Wallach, yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Yes, you gave us that yeah.

Kermit Sheets:

I gave you that, OK.

01:22:45:00—01:23:34:00

Interviewer #1:

Would you, would you agree with some of his, and I don't mean just the theater—

Kermit Sheets:

Gosh, I haven't read it since he gave it to me and that's been twenty years ago.

Interviewer #1:

Oh, has it been that, is it that old? OK, but is, and I don't want you to just limit yourself to your, to the theater people, but the people who came through Waldport, did they have some influence on went, went on in San Francisco after that. Can you, 'cause you're gonna be the only person talking about this in the film. I mean, can you—

Kermit Sheets:

About Waldport?

Interviewer #1

About the relationship of Waldport and San Francisco can we—

Kermit Sheets:

Oh.

Interviewer #1:

—can we honestly make a connection between Waldport and the San Francisco Renaissance. Is there some, some cross-fertilization and some connection that we could make there?

Kermit Sheets:

I can't think of anything to, to, to say which would make that point.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

01:23:35:00—01:24:11:00

Interviewer #1:

Sounds to me like you were all—

Interviewer #2:

Doing different things.

Interviewer #1:

—doing different things, but that you were influencing one another. That you were friends

and reading poetry and that's something to do with that, that cultural awa—activity of that period was influenced by the people who came from Waldport.

Kermit Sheets:

Well one would think so [laughs].

Interviewer #2:

One would think so, well is it OK if we say it if you don't want to say it.

Interviewer #1:

If we say it [laughs]

Interviewer #2:

Thank you.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, we'll say it.

Interviewer #2:

We'll say it, yes, we have your permission. Give us your blessing, father.

01:24:12:00—01:25:10:00

Kermit Sheets:

My mind goes to this biography of Jack Spicer, which is in, in, includes talking about, well, the whole book is about the poets in San Francisco and it's, it's one of the most, what word to use, ornery—

Camera Crew Member #2:

He was an ornery [laughs]

Kermit Sheets:

—attacking each other. They loved words and could use them in very dirty ways [laughs]. Duncan had more gossip about poets than anybody I'd known, and he was always delightful. He was just the funniest thing in the world. And, and it didn't seem to have the kind of tone that this book has, that, because its a biography of Spicer. Spicer, I don't think really had delight in life. Well he disliked his looks, and—

Interviewer #2:

Well he's a different sort of poet though, he's a different sort of—

Interviewer #2:

—hmm?

Interviewer #2:

—Well he's a different sort of poet too, I think, really.

Kermit Sheets:

Yes I think so, yeah.

01:25:11:00—01:25:45:00

Interviewer #1:

There, there's this story, in one of "The Illiterati" I believe, about Henry Miller that I thought, I, I just read it briefly. Is that the story about the kid asking about conscientious objection, when you went to see Henry Miller? I thought that was an interesting story.

Kermit Sheets:

Did I say in the story that he asked about conscientious objection—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah the kid comes out, out of the cl—, out of the room and says, you're a conscientious objector. Do you know the story I mean? Where you visit Henry Miller.

Kermit Sheets:

Well I know the story exists. I can't remember what's in it.

Interviewer #1:

You don't, OK.

Kermit Sheets:

No.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah there was one thing, yeah why don't we just stop for a minute, at one point somebody I guess it's in the Everson book, they said at one point they tried to get—

[cut]

01:25:46:00—01:26:09:00

Kermit Sheets:

Well he could both—

Interviewer #2:

Start it again.

Kermit Sheets:

—approve to write to and I was one of them, so I have a correspondence with Bill.

Interviewer #2:

Did you save any of those letters?

Kermit Sheets:

I think so.

Interviewer #1:

Ooo.

Interviewer #2:

Well, I'd love to see them if—

Kermit Sheets:

Oh.

Interviewer #2:

—if you could find some of those letters, that'd be really nice.

Kermit Sheets:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

Yes, we'd like to see those. Did you—

Interviewer #2:

Sometimes, sometimes when people write a letter right then it sort of, you know, looking back—

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—filter stuff, but then it's direct and—

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—I think you get something else out of the letters.

01:26:10:00—01:26:22:00

Interviewer #1:

So you have his letters to you?

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

You don't have copies of your letters to him. You have his letters to you.

Kermit Sheets:

Well I'm not sure. I'm sure I have his letters to me—

Interviewer #2:

That'd be great, that'd be great to see.

Interviewer #1:

That's fine.

—I'm not sure if I kept copies of those I sent to him.

01:26:23:00—01:28:37:00

Interviewer #1:

Two tidbits. Did you know Lew Ayres at Cascade Locks?

Kermit Sheets:

Yes—

Interviewer #1:

Oh could you talk about that?

Interviewer #2:

Tell us a little bit about Lew.

Kermit Sheets:

[laughs] One, there was one day when the whole camp, except those I guess who were pre—, preparing the meals, went, went out to have some experience, given some training in bui—building fire trails, stop the fire from going from one place to the other. And, so the whole group of us were d—divided up into three smaller groups, and they take a group out, and the rest of us were just left to do whatever until they came back and took another group out. Well during, while one of the groups was out, that I wasn't part of, I was, some of the guys set up a touch football game going up on a, on a meadow that was up there, and along with Kemper and a couple the guys I was watching that game. I've never played any sports whatsoever, but some ridiculous impulse struck me. I jumped to my feet and ran out in, in the middle of the field, and the guy who was carrying the ball I guess put his hand up like that, and I ran into it. I was wearing glasses, the glasses broke, glass got in my eye, and Lew Ayres, who had been doing the T.V. doctor somebody or other series, do you remember?

Interviewer #1:

Film, “Doctor Kildare.”

Kermit Sheets:

Yes, Doctor Kilgare [sic] series. Somebody yelled doc for, for dic—called for Doctor Kilgare, and they came over to me, and he took me back to camp and into the infirmary, and took little pieces of glass out there. And he was promptly made the infirmarian [laughs] of the camp, to take care of guys on slowdown or whatever, who were not working and were in bed. That's my Lew Ayres story, and that's how close I've known to him—

Interviewer #1:

Tell—

Kermit Sheets:

—his fingers in my eyes.

Interviewer #2:

—Tell it one more time from where you run out on the field—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah tell it one more—

Interviewer #2:

—Tell, tell us the story one more time.

Interviewer #1:

It's “Doctor Kildare.”

Kermit Sheets:

“Doctor Kildare.”

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

01:28:38:00—01:29:24:00

Kermit Sheets:

Start where?

Interviewer #2:

So start, you'd never played sports in your life—

Kermit Sheets:

OK. Well I'd never played any sports in my life. The only thing I ever did was skiing down a hill one, one, a couple of winters with a friend. And I was just watching the game going on and some idiocy had me jump to my feet and run out in the field, and the guy with the ball put his hand up like that and I ran smack into it, and got my eyes filled with little bits of glass, and my glasses broken. Someone else yelled, call for Doctor Kilgare, and Lew Ayres came over and became my eye doctor 'til he got the glass out. And it wasn't long before that that he went 1-A-O and was, was gone.

01:29:25:00—01:30:26:00

Interviewer #1:

He wasn’t there very long, right? He was there just—

Kermit Sheets:

Some months, yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Do you remember anything else about him? Charlie Davis told us about everybody wearing a scarf around their neck and saying they were putting on Ayres 'cause he wore a scarf—

Kermit Sheets:

Well [laughs], I would think—

Interviewer #2:

I think so, I think so.

Kermit Sheets:

—it was teasing him rather than being their joining the fad.

Interviewer #2:

Are you getting any lens flare Vicente? Cause it's in the lens—

Camera Crew Member #2:

I can't see it, but—

Interviewer #1:

Did you, Kermit did you have any personal experience with being harassed for the position you took? Well, did anyone ever give you any, a hard time—

Kermit Sheets:

I n—while I was in the camps I never had anyone harass me whatsoever [laughs], and I can't remember ever having any since, or before. No, no—

Interviewer #1:

You were—

Kermit Sheets:

The closest coming to it was this actor saying, what would you do if a Japanese submarine came in. That wasn't harassment. He was a nice guy. He liked me. He just wanted to know, yeah.

Interviewer #1:

I wouldn't consider that harassment, that's just curiosity.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

Kermit Sheets:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

I think we're done, I think we're done.

01:30:27:00—01:31:38:00

Interviewer #1:

There was one other, oh, any, know anything about KPFA, about Lew Ayers—Lew, Lew—

Interviewer #2:

Lew Hill, and—

Interviewer #1:

—Hill—

Kermit Sheets:

Well, I knew about it starting. I knew they were COs. I knew they were from Southern California. I knew that they, they needed, they, they circulated requests for contributions just to get some of the, the money that was needed to get a radio station started, and I sent in a ten dollar check I think. I didn't have any money. And that's all. The only other situation was our production of “San Francisco’s Burning” went over there and were recorded and was played on KPFA, and they still have the tape for that. I got a copy of it, and I believe that the, the composer for “San Francisco's Burning” still has my copy of the tape that KPFA made.

Interviewer #1:

Who's that?—

Kermit Sheets:

The, the sound is not very good on—

Interviewer #2:

You could find it in the Pacifica Archives though—

Interviewer #1:

But that could be useful yeah, is it in the Pacifica Archive there [inaudible] archive—

Kermit Sheets:

Yes it should be.

Camera Crew Member #2:

You think Warner Jepson has it?

Kermit Sheets:

Yes.

01:31:38:00—01:32:35:00

Interviewer #1:

You know him?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Warner Jepson's an acti—I don't know if he's still active composer. Is he active?

Kermit Sheets:

Yes, he is. He's been doing quite a little bit. In fact we, we've had a kind of standing date. I have a friend from the college days who was a very close friend of Jane, my wife, who comes over every Saturday to see, from San Francisco, to see my wife in the hospital, and then we meet there and go out for lunch. And she said she'd been talking to him, and he wanted to, to come and take that trip out with us, but it's never occurred so I haven't seen him since we were at his house and a, a student from an eastern college, I think maybe in Albany, New York, was writing either a master's, I guess a master's thesis on Helen Adam, the com—the, the librettist and story writer for “San Francisco's Burning.”

Interviewer #2:

Hmm.

Interviewer #1:

I think we've got it.

Interviewer #2:

That's good.

[cut]

01:32:35:00