

Charles Smith: War Hero

The Saint Petersburg Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, (Quakers) has been an activist for justice since its beginning. It is a Quaker practice to “Make Peace Every Day.” Quakers core belief is that God exists within all of us. It is then obvious that to do violence or to tolerate behavior than might end in violence is to do violence to God. For the sake of peace, its members have faithfully sung songs, walked in marches, and carried signs. The meeting even had some members who defied the Internal Revenue Service by refusing to pay the portion of their taxes that went to support the military. (Absolutist; more to follow.) Even with this proud history there is one member in particular that stands out. His name was Charles Smith

As WWII raged on a small group of men made great sacrifices by refusing to participate in the killing. They wanted to participate in the healing. But they also wanted to face the same life-threatening conditions the men who were fighting the war were facing. Charles Smith, the gentle man who sat behind me for so many years, that diminutive man who could always draw upon his remarkable memory and retrieve a poem appropriate to any given situation. That man who loved the silence volunteered to be starved and rehabilitated over a period just short of a year. He and others did it so that the nutritional needs of those emerging from the war, suffering from lack of food over many months could be rehabilitated in the best way possible.

When he left us, his obituary began this way;

Charles David Smith, a 43-year resident of St. Petersburg, FL, passed away peacefully at home after a brief illness on Tuesday, December 25, 2012 in Torrance, CA. Born in Philadelphia, PA, Charles was 95 when he died. A long-time member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Charles loved poetry, the study of philosophy, analysis of investments, and outdoor adventures, especially the summers he spent at Back Log Camp in the Adirondack Mountains. He was educated in public schools in Camden County,

NJ, graduating from Merchantville HS in 1934. He went directly to Strayer's Business School, and was employed by several businesses from 1935 to 1942. He was drafted in June 1943, and served three years in the Civilian Public Service as a volunteer "human guinea pig" in Ancel Keys' study of human starvation.

Charles was a Quaker a conscientious objector (CO.) The American Military draft defines "Conscientious Objector as; "an individual who has claimed the right to refuse to perform military service on the grounds of freedom of thought, conscience, or religion."

Historically speaking having the opportunity to provide, "alternative Service" during wartime was a new idea. In the past COs have never been treated well. The first recorded CO was Maximilianus who was conscripted into the Roman army. I'm not sure how anyone knows that but they say he refused to serve and was executed. His stance was later recognized and he was canonized as Saint Maximilianus. As early as 1575 the Dutch Mennonites were recognized as CO's and could avoid military service for an unknown fee. Roughly 200 years later in 1757 the first legislation was passed in Briton allowing Quakers to refuse to serve.

After the Quakers arrived in America in 1656, they were soon joined by other pacifist groups, primarily the Brethren and the Mennonites. It was the the refusal of these groups to take up arms against the Indians that established these three faiths as peace churches they also set America on a path toward legalized resistance.

Due to the success of the colonies many others settlers arrived with different religious backgrounds. By the time the American Revolution began there were many who rejected the pacifists and subjected many of them to cruel treatment.

The Revolutionary war (1775-1782)

When war broke out some Quakers chose to leave the Society, as, “Free Quakers “some returned to England, and the remainder became known as “Absolutists.” That meant that they would not only refuse to participate in the fighting, they would not pay taxes for war and they would not take an oath of loyalty. For their refusal many were imprisoned for up to two years. Wikipedia reports without reference or explanation that “Quakers lost over One hundred thousand pounds in goods and property as penalties for their stance against the war.”

The other two peace churches were content to serve by paying a fee or performing farm work.

The Civil War

The Civil war brought with it the first national military draft (1863). Prior to the Northern Congress taking over conscription it was managed by the states. The original act said that anyone who could find a substitute or pay a \$300.00 fee could be excused. The following year an amendment to the law was passed allowing those with religious objections to refuse to serve. It is interesting that during the war some meeting houses were used as “sanctuary’s” which prohibited the authorities from making an arrest on the property. It is said many men lived in meetinghouses for years.

In the South; Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren and Nazarenes were specifically exempted with the understanding that they would find a substitute or pay 500.00. During the Civil war the price of a horse or a Unions soldiers annual wage was \$110.00. Many people could not pay and could not find a substitute. They

were imprisoned, tortured, sometimes executed and sometimes fled to the vast wilderness to the west.

World War I

By the rise of world war one there were many other religious groups who claimed to be pacifist and wanted to be recognized as CO's. When the USA entered the war there were 3989 men who declared themselves CO's. They were all sent to military camps around the USA. When they arrived, 1300 took noncombatant military positions 1200 were given farm furloughs, (working far from home) 450 went to prison and 99 went with the AFSC to France to help rebuild.

There were however Absolutists who went to Alcatraz and Leavenworth they were held there even after the war was over.

World War II

During WWII more than thirty-four million American Men ages 18 to 44 were drafted into service, of them there were 72,354 who applied for CO status. Of those applicants, 25,000 accepted non-combat positions such as cooks and medics, and 27,000 failed the physical exam. In the end 6,086 men three quarters of which were Jehovah's witnesses went to jail. The remaining 12000 men entered the Civilian Public Service (CPS). CPS was a program proposed designed and administered by the Historic Peace Churches. Their goal was to, "do work of National importance." The CPSers worked at a variety of jobs. Some worked in forestry some in agriculture. Many worked in prison and psychiatric hospitals and are credited creating great improvements in treatment and rehabilitation. Others, including Charles, volunteered to be human Guinea pigs. Some offered themselves to be used in experiments regarding infectious diseases frostbite, fly abatement and others. Charles volunteered to be voluntarily starved to emaciation.

He reported to the University of Minnesota with 400 other volunteers. That original group was quickly reduced to one hundred. Those who remained, including Charles were subjected to extensive physical and psychiatric testing. Charles was one of thirty-six that made the final cut.

The following is a link to a short documentary video;

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iH5htWIwo0&t=34s>)

They would be participants in an experiment that would last nearly a year. First, they would spend twelve weeks being studied to find a mental and physical baseline. Then they would enter a 24-week starvation phase. This was for them more difficult than anticipated. They became depressed, they argued amongst themselves and two of them dropped out of the program altogether. Each participant had their weight reduced by 25% of their normal. For Charles that brought him down to 99 pounds. To the participants surprise the third and final phase of rehabilitation was in many ways even more difficult than the starvation phase. This was owed to the fact that no matter how much they ate they had no relief from the pain of hunger. This continued long after they returned to society.

For Charles his witness for peace did not end there. He became a "Seagoing cowboy," which meant he worked with other Quakers to send livestock to Europe. Perhaps that's another story.

His obituary ends this way;

He then attended Swarthmore College, followed by graduate school at Cornell University. He taught Economics and History of Western Civilization (1950-1968) at Cornell University, Wabash College, the University of Florida, and Florida Presbyterian College (renamed Eckerd College) in St. Petersburg. He went on to become a consultant in municipal finance at William R. Hough and Company in St. Petersburg until his retirement in 1983. He then became a

member of the Academy of Senior Professionals at Eckerd College, 1983-2006. In 2006, the Smiths moved to Torrance to be near family. After his passing, his ashes were returned to the Adirondack Mountains. Charles is survived by his wife of 59 years, Mary Hervey Smith of Torrance, CA, formerly of Geneva, NY; his four children: Barbara Foster of Herefordshire, England; Kathryn (Gregory Brown) Smith of Central Square, NY; Laurence (Suiko Fukushima) Smith of Seal Beach, CA; Patricia (David) Lewis of Torrance, CA; one nephew, and five grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his parents, Charles and Jean Smith, and his brother, Truman. The family would like to thank the many people who sent their sympathies and remembrances of Charles.

That thin, small gentle poet that sat just behind me for all those years was a very big man indeed.

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