

Please return to
 -K- 1943

Ten Months in C. P. S.

It is often asserted that life in Civilian Public Service is not worth while, that men are degenerating, and that the camps resemble concentration camps. Similar statements are made ad infinitum and occasionally ad nauseum. That is the expressed opinion of a small but articulate group in the camps. I am convinced that the large percentage of men feel quite differently.

Perhaps my own experience in C. P. S. illustrates some of the values which accrue to most of us. Writing as objectively as possible, here are some of my personal observations at the end of ten months as a camper.

In that period I have learned to know many men and to consider a large number of them personal friends. Some of these friendships are on an intimate basis, far deeper than most friendships in normal life because of the circumstances which have thrown us together, the problems we have thrashed out together, and the general opportunities for friendship in the close, compact, camp community.

Likewise, I have learned a great deal about myself. Thrust into a new and in many ways utterly different environment, one sees himself in a new light. There is a tendency not to face the disillusioning facts one learns about oneself, and to excuse them by placing the blame on other individuals, on a system, or on conscription. In my worst moments I have done that, in my better moments I have been aware of the weaknesses and some of the strengths which this period has revealed.

I have gained a new sense of vocational direction while here. I do not know specifically where I will be ten years from now, but I do know now what I want to do with my life. That feeling has come from reading, from talks with other campers, and from visitors to the camp, as well as from searching periods on project, oftentimes working alone.

To some extent I think I have grown in my respect for others. It is not easy to live with men who represent as divergent views religiously, economically, politically as the men here do, but it is a great opportunity to develop tolerance and even understanding. It is a broadening and deepening experience to realize how sincere and conscientious many religious fundamentalists and so-called political pacifists are and to have one's lack of knowledge of the Bible or one's awareness of social issues impressed upon one.

I have accumulated considerable information, some of it valuable. Some of this came from other campers in talks on project or in the dorm or on long walks in the evening or Sunday afternoon; some of it from books scanned in spare time; some from visitors to camp. Much of it is sketchy information, pigeon-holed in the back of my mind, such as information on blueberry growing, ring polishing, public opinion polling, railroading, and the history of church music.

More than ever before I have realized the need for spiritual exercise to sustain the initial enthusiasm of a camper and pacifist and to try and approach the ideals one has so glibly talked about. In this area of living, the daily period of group worship has been of tremendous help, as have periods of individual reading, prayer and contemplation.

I have learned much about the value of time, too, in C. P. S. and certain devices for using free time to its fullest extent. High in rank as devices are the contemplation notebook and German dictionary jammed into the hip pocket for quick reference in free moments on project and the leaflet or magazine set aside for use after lunch.

Here, also, I have learned how important it is to have short-term objectives which can be reached.

Patience. I wonder whether I have really learned something about that important quality. Perhaps a little. Changes in administrative rulings, changes in people—changes of all sorts come so slowly and with so much effort that it is easy to be exasperated. Perhaps I have learned a little patience. I hope so.

I have been impressed anew with the ease with which people criticize and the difficulty they find in complimenting organizations and people. Yet how great a lift it gives a person to receive a few words of sincere appreciation for his own work or the work of the organization for which he is expending himself.

Unfortunately, many of the men entering C. P. S. have formed their ideas of Quakers from magazine articles picturing them as supermen. In many cases they have been disillusioned and disappointed to find out how human they are, how fallible. This has been a valuable experience for Friends to see themselves in this new light. At the same time there have been a number of men who have become interested in Friends and have joined the Wider Quaker Fellowship since their entrance into C. P. S., or have signified their intention of closer association with Friends. In most cases they are men who will add immeasurably to the Society as well as gain much from their fellowship with it.

Running a typewriter or writing with chalk or fountain pen is a far cry from swinging an axe or pulling a saw. But the experience of hard labor outdoors has been a good one for me physically and psychologically. A new appreciation of those who earn their living from manual labor is fully as important as the physical benefits such work has brought.

From the Social Actionists I have learned, too. Foremost among the lessons they have taught me are the vigor with which they pursue their program and the sense of group loyalty they have developed, especially between camps. Many times I have wished that those who disagreed with their objectives and methods were as alert and dedicated to their goals as these men. The privilege of sitting down for friendly interchange of ideas with persons with whom I have often been in disagreement has been an important asset of my camp experience.

Over and over again I have been impressed with the way in which one man's efforts and enthusiasm can produce results, whether it is in the formation of a class, ball game, religious service, or any other aspect of camp activities. I wonder what would happen if the latent energy and the energy expended on seemingly unimportant matters in these camps were channelled into constructive camp action.

There are other things I have learned and many, many things I have not learned. These ten months have been among the most demanding, the most difficult and at times the most discouraging months I have ever spent, but as I view them in retrospect they have been the next to the most profitable period of equal length that I have ever spent. C. P. S. to me has not meant a concentration camp or a beloved community, but a dynamic laboratory in pacifist living.

L. S. K.

"If you want to ease the load on your mind, stop watching for the results of your work. Did you ever notice how many people have this dangerous habit? They finish a given undertaking, and then instantly look about to see what has happened."

—JAMES GORDON GILKEY.