

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS RECEIVED FROM THE
CIVILIAN PUBLIC SERVICE CAMP No. 135 GERMFASK, MICHIGAN

This is the text of a talk given at the M.C.C. administered C.P.S. Camp, No. 28, Medaryville, Indiana, February 18, 1946.

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I have enjoyed very much my visit in your camp here during the past two days. Included in this I especially think of the problems, resolves, aspirations, temptations, etc., that some of us have been able to discuss together. I consider this a privilege to be with you and to learn of you and your camp. Also, I appreciate your evident desire to profit from present experiences and to always improve plans and goals for the future.

Having spent three months in the administration of Camp 135, and the entire life of the camp as an unofficial counselor and advisor to some of the assignees, I believe I can perhaps fill your charge to me this evening, that of giving some observations and conclusions relative to this particular government administered Civilian Camp. I want to also make some applications, in conclusion, pertinent to your camp here.

To give you a description of the camp, I shall begin by classifying the various types of campees. Included in these were neurotics, philosophical, socialistic, political, a number of "4-F'ers", and perhaps some dodgers and the self-styled Free Thinkers. There were also a number of men whom I would classify as Christians in the use of the term as followers of Christ and His teachings.

The purpose of the camp in the initial set-up was to isolate these particular non-cooperators, slow-downers, etc. And in segregating these men, Selective Service hoped to enable the other camps to continue carrying out the program of "Work of National Importance".

Quite a number of the men were admirers and imitators of Mohandis Ghandi of India. Many of their tactics were patterned after his techniques, at least in the initial stages.

My hope had been to appeal to them from a moral responsibility to themselves and each other. To endeavor to give them a moral fortitude, courage, and to strengthen themselves against the inroads, mentally, and spiritually, that persecution and conscription inevitably bring upon people, to give them a triumph, a "song in the dark". One army doctor who called regularly at the camp, after studying and hearing their gripes for some time, made this statement to me. "These men are not abnormal, in fact, they are very normal. If a man under these circumstances of no pay, no dependency allotments, no compensation, etc., still went around the camp and project whistling happily, I would say he was the abnormal man and needed watching." So, according to him, I was perhaps the most insane man there; in being able to find a joy in the midst of sorrows, and rejoicings in the midst of revilings and persecutions. Matt. 5:11, 12.

In fairness to them, I want to say that they were often misunderstood, and misquoted. In fact, the Government Camp Director refused to talk to newspapermen any longer because he was misquoted, or his statements misconstrued so often. Then too, the most frequent representative of Selective Service, a man who was supposed to be a "trouble shooter" almost invariably left the situations more completely disorganized and the assignees more united against the administrators than before. It was seemingly apparent that they sometimes were heckled and aggravated into some of the rash things they did do.

You probably have heard somewhat of the character Corbett Bishop. He perhaps is one of the most commonly known and most widely publicized of the non-cooperators. He was a devotee of Ghandi in his non-violent techniques to obtain his freedom. Although a regular student of the Bible, when I consider his planned endeavors to obtain publicity for his frequent fasts, non-cooperation stunts, etc., I must decide that he was more an imitator than a follower of Christ. I say this because it seemed that he was trying to draw attention to Corbett Bishop, rather than to bring honor to his Master, if Christ were his master. I have heard that he underwent a decided change for the better in his spiritual emphasis, after going through some of the prison experiences before being unconditionally freed to civilian life.

I also am happy to be able to say that their apparent attitude towards me was one of respect and consideration. A number stated their appreciation to me for my stand that I took, for my frankness, and for my sincere interest in their situations and problems. Only once did I suffer from their practices. An aluminum writing board that I used, disappeared. After backtracking myself and searching everywhere, I gave up any hopes of finding the article. The grapevine seemed to work, or the internal pressure brought results, for to my surprise the next day it again appeared on my office desk.

One night while engaged in a bull session in one of the barracks, one of the leaders, a lawyer, finally admitted this point, "That if he recognizes the arguments of St. Paul, which I had been using in my discussions with them, then all his philosophy of non-cooperation falls flat". No two of them agreed in their philosophies, nor in their plans. In fact, they seemed to be proud of their individualisms. But when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" the result was anarchy. A complete demoralization of most any good that might have come out of their stay in the community and in their desires for certain ends to be achieved. In fact, this anarchy worked to the complete demoralization of even their own inner selves and ideals. In the year that they were at Germfask, this degeneration became apparent in the methods resorted to, and was more and more noticeable in its downward trend as to scruples. Upon arrival, they prided themselves in the high superiority of their methods over the coercion and dictates of Selective Service. Yet, before they left, we saw them or at least a portion, resorting to threatening letters, force, destruction of property, a deterioration from individualism to rank selfishness. A loss of moral responsibility, and planned effort contributing to the degeneracy of the group. Whether intended, or not, it was apparent in the minds, bodies, and activities. As an illustration, the campees very nobly started a common fund, with no records kept and anyone in need welcome to take from it. After a few weeks it was always empty, and then

upon inquiry, I was quietly informed that a certain element were draining it to continue their nightly card games. Again, certain agitators would foment the unrest and grouches of homesick, dissatisfied men; anything to throw a monkey wrench in the machinery.

If the bull sessions I used to have with them did nothing else, it gave them an outlet for their pent-up feelings. As to the spirit of agitation I became aware that a certain organization which influenced the men mightily through its publications had its office in the eastern U.S., in the same building as the "Youth Congress for Democracy". I believe that only a small percent were communists, yet it is true that the communists are cleverly using any and every disgruntled, dissatisfied person to promote confusion and distrust; Distrust in both the leaders of the churches and of the civil government.

This is perhaps the most important conclusion of all the experience at Germfask. Every experience of life affects us, whether that be prosperity or adversity. We are never the same. Persecutions especially, either embitter, dwarf and sour us, or they mellow and sweeten our natures and personalities. The majority of these men had nothing better to offer, but just to complain and criticize. Men who do not have a moral stamina, and even more essentially, a spiritual foundation, soon degenerate and go down under prolonged persecutions, denials, and frustrations. They soon degenerate in their minds and their motives, going from noble resolves to a simple--"Let me out!" which is a very personal and selfish motive. We note too, that they degenerate in their ideals and in their purity of methods employed.

In conclusion, what lessons can we learn from that experience to apply to the problems of the church administered camps? First, I believe I can assure you that those in the leadership of M.C.C.C.P.S. are endeavoring to make progress in strengthening the weak points, and to remove the undesirable elements, of the plan. In whatever changes may be entered into, let's not move too rapidly, for I am sure you want to take the entire group along with you. Any change should be, not to hurt and harm, but to heal and raise up. Let us look back in history. The French Revolution became out of control, and we are told that the very leaders were destroyed in the thing they had started. This could be also true of those who desire to see changes in C.P.S.. Again, Jesus tells us about a man who had his evil spirit cast out, but did not fill his life with anything better, and in the end he was seven times worse off than heretofore. Garnished and clean, but what of the end?

I am not blind to the implications of conscription, of C.P.S. of the slavery complex; Do we have another plan charted? Let's go slow. Be certain that our good intentions don't go into results seven times worse, and maybe destroy us in the process. At least destroy the better self, that inner spiritual man.

I want to assure you that the church is concerned about you, that she is planning and praying for you, and sincerely desirous that all may be mutually benefitted by this experience through which we are passing. May God bless you to that end.

Testimonials from the lecture given at Medaryville C.P.S. No. 28 on "Observations and conclusions of the Government administered C.P.S. Camp No. 135, Germfask, Michigan".

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"Chester Osborne, paster of a small Mennonite Mission at Germfask, Michigan, made a unique contribution because of his close contact with CPS previously. He not only brought a much appreciated message on Sunday morning, but also analyzed the situation as it exists in a government camp in an informal meeting Monday evening. His experience as camp manager for a period of three months at this government camp has given him an insight, and an understanding of the thinking and problems of CPS men, that few ministers have."

(Quoting from the Camp Publication "The Peace Sentinel" issue of March 1946)

"This is one of the highlights of our lecture series."

(Statement by the Camp Educational Director)