

## JAMES DYER ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

**Interviewee:** James Daniel Dyer

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### ABSTRACT

#### *Biography*

James Daniel Dyer was born in Whittier, California, in 1910. After attending a Methodist youth conference and seeing a vision of Christ, James felt compelled to register as a conscientious objector based on his religion before the attack on Pearl Harbor. During World War II, James was assigned to the Civilian Public Service camp called Camp Coleville to do “work of national importance.” At that camp he worked on a fire suppression crew and as a radio operator, among other roles. He went on to pursue a career in the social services and remained involved with the Methodist Church in Arcadia, California, as its local historian.

#### *Summary*

In this interview, James recalls his decision to become a conscientious objector, working at Camp Coleville, and his feelings regarding his service there. He also discusses the attitude of the Church and the general public toward conscientious objectors, and the relationship between servicemen and conscientious objectors.

#### *Keywords*

*conscientious objector, draft board, Selective Service, Methodist, Whittier, California, Civilian Public Service, Camp Coleville, Forest Service, Pearl Harbor*

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03:23 – Forming a Peace Deputation team; performing program at local churches

05:10 – Registering with Methodist Peace Commission as a CO in 1940

06:50 – Attitude toward COs; almost fired for registration status after Pearl Harbor

07:45 – Refused a job by chairman of the board because of CO status

08:15 – Drafted into Camp Coleville in Antelope Valley

09:00 – Decision to be a CO respected by first draft board secretary, not by second

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11:28 – Mother’s story of family coming to the U.S. to avoid Austrian draft

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15:04 – Support within Methodist Church; the Friendly Fellowship group

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1:06:16 – Reflecting on CO experience; would still choose to be a CO instead of the service;  
consequences of blindly following orders  
1:11:01 – Importance of perspective and understanding the world from “the other guy”

## **STORY TRANSCRIPTS**

### **Story 1: A Vision of Christ [00:10 – 03:05]**

My age brought me into the early ‘30s as a person out of work during the Depression. And I thought quite a bit about going into the Marines. A friend of mine with whom I played basketball was going into the Marines. But I never got around to signing up or anything like that.

Then, in November of 1935, I went to a conference of Methodist youth, with the western region of the Methodist church—that was the old Methodist Episcopal church at Fresno. At that time, I had been leading singing in a lot of groups, so I was leading singing up there, and one of the songs that we sang was “I Ain’t Gonna Study War No More.”

Then, on the Sunday while we marched down to the park, Dr. Roy L. Smith was the preacher, and he certainly challenged us as to the meaning of war and what it does to people. Also, it was very impressive, during this sermon of his, there was an overflight of B-17s—I think it was anyway, it was Army airplanes—flew over the park. In fact, he had to stop the sermon because of the noise. I didn’t think much about it. There was a group of us that had gone up together from Whittier to Fresno, and my feeling was that, “Okay, so what? That’s an idea.”

But coming back south of Bakersfield—now, this may seem very strange, and it’s still strange to me. I have no explanation for it; I do not believe that it was a mirage. But sitting in the front seat of the car, of Cliff Smith’s car, I said to the fellas, “I’ve come to the decision that I must be a CO.” And I didn’t say why, but as we were going up the grade on old [Route] 99 up towards the Grapevine, on top of Mount Pinos, I saw a vision of the head of Christ. Nobody else saw it. But this made an impression on me, and led to my making that statement to those other five fellas in the car with us.

## **Story 2: Attitudes Towards Conscientious Objectors** **[06:25 – 08:09]**

I was registered in Los Angeles in 1940 when they had everybody registered, everybody in the certain age groups. But my residence was in San Bernardino, and I held that residence so that my draft board was in San Bernardino rather than Los Angeles or even Whittier.

In 1941, I was director of a boy's group at the Pasadena Presbyterian Church, and I had had an agricultural classification for a while. But then after or right around the time of Pearl Harbor, I was reclassified to 4-E. The classification, of course, came out on postcards, and the mail came into the front desk and everybody picked it up.

The manager, who was the manager of the church at that time, brought the mail in to me and said he disagreed with my stand. And he said, "As far as I'm concerned, you'll not work here." But he didn't have the say. But I left at the end of the year. That was my first experience with that.

My second experience was that I had applied for a job later on, in early '42, out of San Bernardino. And the chairman of the board for that job found out that I had not given up my CO position. She said, "Well, you can't work for us."

## **Story 3: Wasted Talent?** **[31:33 – 33:05]**

I know that some people walked out of camp.

DN: *Why?*

Because they felt it was not using their talents. I mean, these are people who could've been used in many ways. They were college professors; they were ministerial students who could've been doing some good. I'm not talking about propagandizing in terms of peace, but using their talent. And the less they knew about them, the better off the Selective Service felt.

This is reflected, probably—when the program first started—why COs were to be placed anywhere. There was a shipload of them going to—I don't recall now; this is very dim in my mind—but they were going to serve overseas. I think some of them were going to China. And the Congress passed a bill saying that the COs could not serve outside of the territorial United States. So, they turned around the ship and brought them back. Well, one of those who was on board that ship became so disgusted with the whole thing that he changed his CO status and became an Army lieutenant.

**Story 4: Strikes at Camp Glendora**  
**[40:24 – 41:49]**

There were strikes at Glendora. These were guys who were striking because they hadn't been released. The Glendora strike came after the war was over, and they were still holding them.

DN: *What did they do in the strike?*

Refused to work.

DN: *And that was it, they just refused to work? They stayed, but they refused to work?*

Well, they'd walk out; they'd go to jail. Some of them went to jail anyway because they brought charges against them. They were convicted in the federal courts here in Los Angeles.

DN: *Convicted of what?*

Of disobeying orders. In other words, you did not have freedom. The Selective Service had the say of you. They had they say of your life, just like they had the say of any soldier or any serviceman.

**Story 5: Relationship with Servicemen**  
**[50:42 – 51:38]**

One thing I need to say was the relationship between servicemen and COs. We had servicemen come there and stay at camp. They also stayed with us at Reno at the spike camp. And there was a very good relationship.

These were PFCs [Private First Class]. These were not the guys with the Eagles, and so on and so forth. And they were very understanding that the COs had taken this stand, although they didn't agree with it always. But they would discuss rationally, and not from a prejudicial standpoint. I just wonder about how *their* C.O. [Commanding Officer] felt about it if they knew some of the conversations these guys were carrying on.

**PHOTO CAPTIONS**

**Current 1**

Portrait of James Dyer taken the day of his interview (Photo Credit: Dorothy Nichols)