

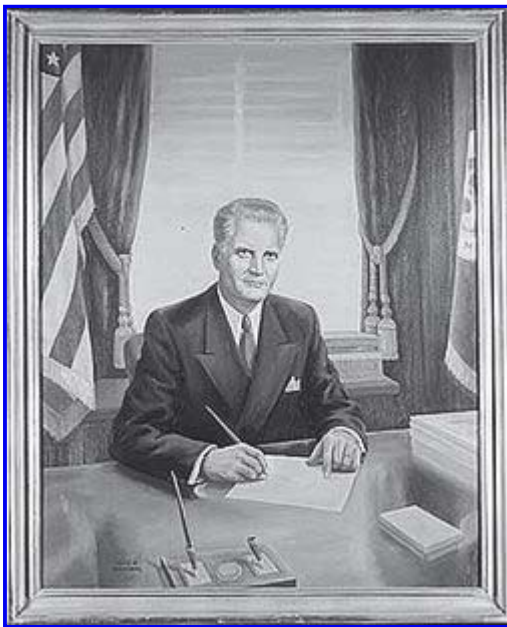
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## **Conscientious objectors, media exposés, and institutional reform brought change for many**

by [Luther Granquist](#) // May 10th, 2010

*Editor's note: Access Press uses its 20th anniversary issue history note to salute others who have used the news media to call for change.*

During World War II, more than 3,000 conscientious objectors (COs) worked without pay in Civilian Public Service units established in 43 state mental hospitals and 15 state training schools, none of which were in Minnesota. In some of the institutions they encountered horrific conditions—severe overcrowding, gross lack of adequate staff, the stench of feces and urine in wards with dozens of naked men, brutality, and hundreds of patients with nothing to do. In a recent book, *Acts of Conscience: World War II, Mental Institutions, and Religious Objectors*, Steven J. Taylor recounts their efforts to make a change in the lives of the patients they served. They reported abuse. They complained to the superintendents of the institutions. They described what was happening in the institutions to local religious leaders and the local press.



. Taylor relates how COs at Cleveland State Hospital, realizing that their complaints and reports to the superintendent were fruitless, informed Rev. Dores Sharpe, the executive director of the Cleveland Baptist Association, and Walter Lerch, a reporter for the *Cleveland Press*, about conditions and abuse in that hospital. Sharpe and Lerch created such a stir with this information that the CO unit was disbanded, but the two of them continued to publicize conditions at the institution. Sharpe ultimately became the foreman of a grand jury whose report caused the superintendent to resign and prompted other changes at the institution.

The CO units in other states conducted similar campaigns with similar effect. They realized, however, that needed reforms on a broader scale would not happen with local press coverage alone. They worked with Albert Q. Maisel, whose article, “Bedlam 1946” in *Life* magazine included pictures, some taken by the COs, with labels of Neglect, Nakedness, Idleness and Despair. Maisel, on the basis of reports from the COs and his own observations, described abysmal living conditions in state mental hospitals around the country.

Shortly before the *Life* magazine article appeared, Albert Deutsch, another journalist the COs contacted, published similar pictures and stories in *PM*, a New York newspaper.

In 1947, the National Mental Health Foundation, an organization founded by COs, published the COs’ own observations from their work in mental hospitals in *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*, by Frank L. Wright, one of the COs.

Deutsch’s book-length description of state mental hospitals in *The Shame of the States*, appeared in 1948. The COs achieved one of their goals—to bring the horrors that they had seen before the public. Their actions also prompted changes in some of these institutions, as Maisel reported in “Scandal Results in Real Reforms,” in *Life* in November 1951.

In October 1946, the Minnesota Unitarian Conference, in response to charges of deplorable conditions in “various recent publications” and to reports from state hospital patients and employees that similar conditions existed in Minnesota, established a Committee on State Hospitals for the Mentally Ill. That committee and the Minnesota Mental Hygiene Society brought these issues to Gov. Luther Youngdahl. Youngdahl had devoted

only three sentences, really platitudes, to mental health programs in his January 1947 inaugural address. By March 1947, however, he had established an advisory committee to find solutions to problems in the institutions. Later that year he asked the Unitarian committee to bring him facts about conditions in the institutions. The committee employed Justin Reese, one of the COs who had been instrumental in bringing conditions at Cleveland State Hospital to the attention of Lerch and Rev. Sharpe. He and his wife, Christine Conway Reese, spent December 1947 investigating conditions in Minnesota's seven state mental hospitals.

Their work provided the factual underpinnings for a highly critical report submitted to Youngdahl in March 1948. By that time Youngdahl had seen the institutions for himself. For half an hour on WCCO Radio on the evening of May 5, 1948 he told Minnesota citizens of the anguish he felt while visiting the state hospitals. He described the "herds of patients, lined up in chairs, sitting against walls, doing absolutely nothing ...."

A week later, the *Minneapolis Tribune* published "Minnesota Bedlam," a series of 10 articles by Geri Hoffner with photographs by Arthur Hager. Hoffner and Hager, with Youngdahl's approval and cooperation, had toured Minnesota's seven state mental hospitals. The pictures and articles confirmed what the Governor had said. Youngdahl named Reese executive secretary of his Citizens Mental Health Committee.

With the public support gained through Hoffner's articles and Reese's aggressive organizing, Youngdahl persuaded the legislature to increase funding for the state institutions by millions and to make major changes in policy in the Mental Health Act of 1949. By November 1950 Hoffner and Hager could report in "Minnesota Bedlam Revisited" in the *Minneapolis Tribune* that big steps had been taken to improve conditions in the hospitals, although the progress was uneven and spotty.

Taylor concludes that the COs who exposed abuses in the nation's mental hospitals and organized a national reform movement "did not, in fact, make lasting changes in the care of people with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities in America." The point of their story, he wrote, was that "they tried to make a difference," that their acts of conscience were "inherently worthy and deserving of praise," and that they should be "remembered and honored."

The actions taken by the Minnesota Unitarian Conference, by Justin Reese, by Geri Hoffner and Arthur Hager, and by Governor Luther Youngdahl did not create a perfect mental health system. But their joint efforts to try to benefit humanity are worthy and deserving of praise. And we should remember and honor a governor who concluded his radio address in May 1948 with an "appeal to the soul and conscience of our citizens for the things which are required to bring hope and comfort to those most forgotten of all people—our mentally ill fellow citizens ...."

The pictures from Maisel's "Bedlam 1946" are available on the DD Council website at [www.mnddc.org/parallels2/prologue/6a-bedlam/6abedlam.html](http://www.mnddc.org/parallels2/prologue/6a-bedlam/6abedlam.html) His article is there at [www.mnddc.org/parallels2/prologue/6a-bedlam/bedlam-life1946.pdf](http://www.mnddc.org/parallels2/prologue/6a-bedlam/bedlam-life1946.pdf). Out of Sight, Out of Mind is available at [www.disabilitymuseum.org/lib/docs/1754card.htm](http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/lib/docs/1754card.htm)

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