

## *Clerks Column*

Chuck Fager

I was sorry to hear of the death of Asa Watkins. I met him a few years ago at a reunion conference of World War Two Cos. He was lively and lucid then; but the ranks of that generation have been thinning steadily.

I listened raptly as Watkins described his alternative service. He was first sent off to CPS camps like so many others. Later he was reassigned to work in a mental hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia.

This was before Williamsburg was, well, "Williamsburg," and like the many other Cos who volunteered for such service, Watkins was initially apprehensive about where he was headed. In those days American mental hospitals were, by and large, pretty dreadful places, where patients were mainly warehoused and forgotten, often grossly mistreated, and had a reputation for violence to themselves and others (How much better are they today? That's a topic for another article.)

Watkins was much like other COs of his era: anxious to do something useful instead of picking up a gun, and willing to take risks in behalf of his values. But he differed from his colleagues in one respect: he was an artist. His early work had been influenced by the Surrealism which was still in vogue. The gloomy wards and buildings of Williamsburg, peopled by patients sick with tuberculosis, distracted by delusions, and almost all abandoned by friends and family, fit that sensibility all too well.

Soon enough, to pass the time during long 12 hour shifts, Watkins was bringing out his sketchbook and working to portray the atmosphere of the place, and the lonely, afflicted people kept there. The result became what he called the Williamsburg Drawings, and they are a key part of Asa Watkins' artistic legacy.

After the war, Watkins settled in northern New Jersey, joined Summit Meeting there, and worked as an artist in special education.

We have a few of his sketches here. But technologically au courant readers don't need to settle for these few samples. Asa Watkins and his Williamsburg drawings were featured in the recent PBS documentary, "The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It." And PBS has a special website for this video, on which you can find, not only more of Asa's sketches, but even a video conversation with him.

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To see several images in this PBS web gallery, go

to: [www.pbs.org/itvs/thegoodwar/gallery.html](http://www.pbs.org/itvs/thegoodwar/gallery.html)

The video clip of Watkins talking about his experiences and his work is

at: [www.pbs.org/itvs/thegoodwar/vid\\_watkins.html](http://www.pbs.org/itvs/thegoodwar/vid_watkins.html)

On a different site, there's an image of a sculpture/hanging created by a young student with Asa Watkins' help. It is at: [www.valweb.org/joerusso/joerusso.htm](http://www.valweb.org/joerusso/joerusso.htm)

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