

Battler for peace and environment

Life for Stan Hemsley included poverty, hunger and war. He was not bitter about those facts, but he was bitter about New Zealand's economic and political course, about environmental degradation, about the drift towards nuclear annihilation.

The long-time Lyttelton protester and activist died on May 1. He was 88.

Hemsley was born in Lyttelton and lived most of his life there. His father, a Londoner, was an orphan who went to sea and jumped ship at Timaru, then walked to Christchurch and found sporadic work on the Lyttelton wharves. He married a French woman. They had 10 children of whom Stan was the ninth.

Hemsley once said of his childhood: "We were very poor but we had plenty of love. It was the same for many families. I found out about poverty early."

Leaving primary school in 1932, Hemsley could not find a job in the Depression so joined a fishing boat to catch fish for the family. He still had no footwear but the crew found him boots. For two years he took no pay, then he received "a couple of bob".

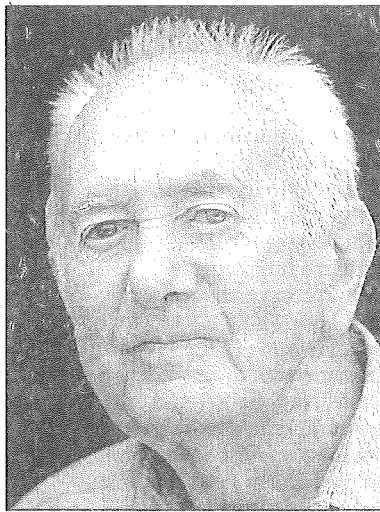
At 18 he went to sea. On more than 70 trips to the Chatham Islands he made lasting friendships with local Maori. He was proud to be "adopted" by a Maori chief.

Hemsley served in the merchant navy around New Zealand and across the Tasman in World War 2. He married Lilian Lloyd in 1944 and they had four children.

When the 1951 waterfront dispute flared, Hemsley, a member of the Seamen's Union, stopped work in sympathy with the watersiders. Once again, he had to manage without an income, only now he had two children.

"I lived in absolute poverty for 151 days. I would never give in," he said.

Hemsley later worked as boilermaker, stevedore, watersider and a welder at Anderson's foundry.



Stan Hemsley

He was an accomplished carpenter-handyman.

Son Trevor says Hemsley had long been interested in environmental and political causes and the peace movement. Retirement, in 1983, gave him the time to become fully involved.

It also gave him the impetus to learn to drive. He bought his first, and only, vehicle, a white Ford Escort van. For the next 20 years "Stan in his van" was a common sight at rallies and demonstrations around the South Island.

Targets of his protests included the chipping of native timber, the US satellite tracking base near Blenheim, and sale of public utilities to foreign owners.

Hemsley was a long-time Labour supporter but was disgusted at the party's economic direction from the 1980s. He opposed "the shambles of MMP" and bemoaned the loss of democracy to an "elected dictatorship". Friend Tom Hay says Hemsley transferred his efforts from helping Labour to supporting environmental and peace movements. He ran a weekly peace stall in Cathedral Square, giving away items promoting a nuclear-free

country. He towed a home-made replica of a nuclear missile behind his van, distributing cautionary pamphlets about nuclear weapons. He wrote many letters to newspapers and politicians.

Larry Ross, of the NZ Nuclear Free Peacemaking Association, says Hemsley was a tireless worker for nuclear disarmament, "a great human being and a kind man".

Murray Horton, of Campaign Against Foreign Control of NZ, says Hemsley was "a very active member" and "an enormous asset" to the movement for many years.

Eugenie Sage, of the Forest and Bird Protection Society, says Hemsley "contributed a huge amount to the community through his work and activism". This included environmental campaigns for West Coast forests and Lake Manapouri.

Trevor Hemsley says his father was a deeply caring man.

"His whole life centred around family. He was deeply involved with family. He spent a lot of time with us kids, building kites and flying them, fishing, building yachts. He spent a lot of time helping other people. He was very generous."

His successes at fishing and gardening kept several households supplied with food. He did not care for wealth or material possessions, Trevor says. During his working life he owned neither car nor bicycle, but walked everywhere. He loved the mountains and bush. He walked the Milford Track in his 60s and made it seem like a stroll.

Trevor Hemsley says his father instructed his sons to build his coffin from pinus radiata because he disapproved of using native timber. They carried out his wish — and thus was he buried.

● Stanley Horace Hemsley, born Lyttelton, November 20, 1918; died Christchurch, May 1, 2007. Survived by wife Lilian, daughters Dawn and Susan, sons Trevor and Stephen, eight grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

—Mike Crean