

Kathleen Gallagher interviewing Colin Ayers on Sony TCM 5000 EV at Colin's house in Ashleigh St in Rangiora in 2005

Good morning Colin

Good morning Kathleen

Your background?

Is definitely from my beliefs in the Christian faith. It took quite a while for me to make that decision. I spent many many nights worrying about it. My brother also, and we weren't near one another, he was in Wellington and I was in Christchurch. We both came to the same conclusion, quite separately. The Christian faith is quietly opposed through Christ's message to mankind. The law of the jungle was first. Revenge was one reason for war. And then there was a little advance on that. Revenge usually meant what was first acted was increased upon, but then Moses gave his eye for an eye a tooth for a tooth and Christ has given us love. Love your enemies do good for them pray for them. And that's the way out for the world for the whole of humanity. So that God himself can intervene and set up his kingdom.

I was working for a firm in Christchurch, building, I've been in building all my life. I was designing cool stores where food was being prepared and held for forces. After that I was working for another firm in charge of all the steel reinforcing for a big hangar at Wigram. After about a week there I thought what in the world am I doing, making facilities for bombers and for fighter craft and for aeroplanes and so I went to the manager of the firm and said look I'm sorry I have to hand in my resignation and I told him why. But he said you're a Methodist. I said it doesn't mean I can't believe the Christian faith as I see it. Well he said have you got a job to go to? I said no I haven't. He said well come back in the morning there'll be a job for you.

Well then, that was before any court appearance. I didn't write out my defence, no one wrote a copy of it, but Ken wrote one, it was very much the same as mine. My father's reaction, he and my stepmother bought me up in the Christian faith he was quite sympathetic. I knew he was a bit concerned. People have all sorts of ideas what a pacifist is and there were a lot of people who looked down on me but that didn't worry me. I was sent up by the builder in Christchurch to Waitara to where the buildings were being built for storage. I was paymaster for about sixty workers I also had to see that the steel I designed went in properly. One day taking around the pay a man on the saw bench, as I gave him his pay, he hit me in the face, knocked me down, and I got up and said what about hitting me again. He didn't. But there was a lot of tension. I took a boy's bible class at the Methodist Church while I was up there. I had the police come to me, of all the people. I never thought of the police as those who were specially interested in spiritual things, but they're coming around to it by the way. Well I was to stop talking to the boys the way I was teaching them. Well I said I don't think you'd be stopping me. Anyway he went away. He'd probably done something he felt very difficult to do, but there was a lot of pressure behind him I guess to take that action.



Mayor Garry Moore with Colin Ayers awarding Christian Pacifist Society Peace City Award

How long were you up at Waitara?

About two years.

That was during the war was it?

Yes, I came home and married my wife here in Rangiora and went back again and took her.

Up to Waitara. So you were up there until about 1942?

Yes, just about that. Might have been '42 and a half, then we came back to Christchurch.

And what happened then?

Well I changed my job. I left Luneys and I went to Andersons Ltd. I took study at night classes in Christchurch at civil engineering and I was in a position to be able to design. And I had a wonderful time with Andersons right throughout New Zealand on hydroelectric work. Waikato and ones in the South Island too, we had a lot of contracts.

So you designed?

Mainly designing for equipment for the different jobs. One of the jobs I was given was a challenge it had never been done in NZ before. This was well after the war. The war had diminished the shipping. What had til then been shipped out from Europe

America or England - the big turbines, the scroll cases, the draft tubes. All they could do was supply the clap plates. Plates that were formed ready to assemble. They sent the developed drawings out, but they wouldn't guarantee them. So I had to you know twenty one foot scroll case going round and diminishing as it goes into the turbine. Of course the normal way has always been to do it geometrically. Well these were too big to do that we didn't have a loft. Well I said I'll give it a go and do it mathematically. So I shut myself in a room and managed to get through it and the drawings. I didn't have to do the actual drawings. The drawing office did that. I gave them information. I said whatever happens on the site, the engineer must never cut up a plate because he thinks they ought to be cut, because you can't tell if a things right or wrong until you come to put it together. Well he started cutting and we had to sack him and get another machiner. Well those are all my experiences in my work.

Where were you born?

In Rangiora. My father was born here, my grandfather came here in 1875. He brought his bride from Woodend, where he landed with his parents in 1858, as a boy of twelve.

Where did he come from originally?

Turvy, a little village in Bedfordshire. I visited it with my wife in 1972 and I'm not dead sure but I think I found the home they came from. It was just like they left it. It was a model village at that time when they left it. The squire of the village had built a lot of homes for the workers, the labourers and here it was - marvellous place.

And what about your mother where did she come from?

My mother was born and brought up in Methven. A Duff, was the surname, but her mother was a De Burr from Guernsey. That's why I'm going to Guernsey.

What were the early influences on your life, in the fact that you became a peace person?

Well I very much admired Ormy Burton. Read his book? One of the amazing things about him - he was speaking in Wellington and being imprisoned every now and again. He came down to Christchurch and I went along to hear him and Lincoln Efford too. They had a big impact on my life.

So how old were you when the war broke out?

When it broke out I would have been say , born in 1914, say twenty-five.

So were you part of the Methodist Church?

I was part of the Methodist Bible class Movement from which a lot of boys were turned down.

A very strong group of people. So did you join that in 1930, or when did you join the Methodist Bible class?

Here in Rangiora.

When you were about 15, 20?

I would be 17.

So did you ever get conscripted to go to war?

I got conscripted a little while after the war started.

And what did you do then when you got conscripted?

I had to present myself at Court. They questioned me. I told them what I thought. What I believed in and they said, well stay where you are and go on soldier's pay. I said well that's agreeable with me. I had at that time one child in the family.

You had a son?

Thelma and I had three children, at the time I had one.

Do you think because you had a child that helped you not get sent to the camp?

I don't think so.

You think is just happened to be the particular JP that you got?

I know some COs who did have children they still went to the Camp.

What about from Rangiora?

There was another two or three. A Mr Alec Lane, another boy, when I say a boy, Alec was older than me. Alec was not married and he had a mother, an elderly mother to look after. He was the only one who could support her.

And your brother what happened about your brother?

My brother went to court in Christchurch here, and with four or five others, went to Hautu. I visited him there.

How did you get there?

I went there by train and boat and train. I got off at National Park or near it, and started to walk through to the Camp, a truck came along and stopped and gave me a lift and that was the middle of the night, two o'clock in the morning, and we spent the day with him. He was made cook for the camp. It gave him quite a bit of extra spare time and in that he made a collection of NZ Native plants and trees and bushes, and Jack (Rogers) used to go with him now and again into the bush to get samples.

Did he bring it back down here at the end of the war?

He brought it back down here. He gave it away not long ago, about three years ago to my daughter, she's a zoologist.

When he got sent to the camp did he have children then?

No

So did you when you went to Wellington, did you see Lincoln Efford?

Lincoln Efford was in Christchurch.

Ormond Burton?

No I didn't it was Arch Barrington. There was another one I can't remember. And of course the Riverside community at Nelson I was always sympathetic to them.

Did you go and stay there at any stage?

No, but I knew a lot of the ones who were there.

After the war was over how did you become involved in the Peace Movement?

I was involved in the Peace Movement and a member of the Pacifist Society before the war.

You became a member of the Pacifist Society in the 1930s? What other organisations/movements were you involved with?

That was the one. There was another one the Peace Pledge Union.

Did you join the Peace Pledge Union?

No I didn't.

And so during the forties, you were in the Pacifist Society, and did the Methodist Bible Class Movement go on or did they change?

No the Methodist Bible Class Movement. One of the reasons why they were so strong was they weren't connected with the Methodist Church legally they had a free hand.

They could be truer to what the gospel was saying?

It was the main reason why. They would discuss things amongst themselves.

They had their own power?

They had their own national magazine.

So did that go on?

That carried on.

For quite a long time?

Yes.

So with the Pacifist Society what did you do? Did you write articles for them?

No I'm not much good at writing. My whole life has been physically active except fifteen years when I was designing. I was going to say the wonderful thing about Ormy (Burton) after all that imprisonment, all those imprisonments and needing to find some job, he took a janitor's job at what is now the Polytech in Wellington and before the year was out, he was head of the college. That's the type of chap he is.

A remarkable person?

Yes. Remarkable. Yet he was a first world war Victoria Cross.

Did he have a sort of charisma about him?

O yeah. And of course he knew the Christian faith backwards. He was a Minister. He was thrown out by the Church, and they had the audacity to ask him back after the War.

So the church sort of changed their position did they after the war on pacifism?

A church is a church it hasn't made up its mind as all churches haven't. No I think that's wrong I think the Seventh Day Adventists are pacifist.

And the Quakers?

Yes and the Quakers, very much so I'm very sympathetic to the Quakers.

The Quakers have been staunch?

Yes right away back in history.

And what about in the fifties and the sixties what sort of you were involved the Rangiora Peace Group - was that in the 70s?

We had a local Peace Group here. One of the things I did and was very happy about. When it came to atomic warfare, bombing, there was a big movement in NZ to declare nuclear free I helped to get the council here to declare Rangiora nuclear Free. There was a big push to get nuclear weapons made illegal. I got a banner made by a very good artist here in Rangiora. It was about, and had it slung across the poles in the main street of Rangiora. I paid for it myself. It was a good banner. It said in effect chemical warfare was already illegal and why not nuclear weapons. Chemical Warfare had already been declared illegal. I put that up and anyway Katie Dewes said we'd like that banner and they took it up to parliament and slung it on the balustrade of the stairs and that where it landed up.

What colours was it?

I think it was white with deep blue underneath. Katie's got it somewhere.

Yes she said Colin's got the most beautiful banner

I've got a photograph of it on the balustrade of the stairs in parliament house.



Colin Ayer's banner hanging in Parliament when the Declarations of Public Conscience were handed to Disarmament Minister Douglas Graham in September 1993

And with the Rangiora city council did you go and meet with them or did you do petitions or how did you?

We weren't meeting much at that time. I pretty well did it by myself.

Just with putting the banner up?

Well I got the council permission to put it up and they put it up.

So once they'd sort of got behind it. That was it.

We'd already got this nuclear free

The Rangiora district – who were the people you were working with at the time in Rangiora?

We had a Peace Group. It had its fluctuations. Mr and Mrs Olwyn King from Goslings Road it was a couple of kilometres from here. They spear headed the peace group and others joined in. There must have been about twenty of us.

And how long did that go for – the Rangiora Peace Group? When did it start?

About three years.

What years would that have been?

That would be mainly after the war. Mainly on the atomic bomb.

So that would have been in the fifties would it have been more?

No I would think more like from '46 to '52.

So did you know Elsie Locke then?

I was a member of it. (CND)

What have been the highlights of your peace work over the years?

The highlight was that banner as far as I personally was concerned. Meeting together, different writers producing pamphlets and details for peace. We shared those sort of things. We organised the council to agree to make it nuclear free that was our main effort. What was happening within NZ was always news within the group with respect to any war issues. I don't think there's anything else about it.

What are some examples of things that you felt were successful?

The Council's agreement.

Has being actively involved in the Peace Movement prevented you pursuing some other goals or directions you might have taken?

I don't think so

How have you strived to live peace in your day to day life?

I try to support all Christian movements. The National Bible College, the School in Christchurch that's run on Christian grounds, the Red Cross, the Fire Brigade, I try to support them with money. I'm not a speaker. I can't get up on my feet and rattle it off. We have a group within the church and we support the needy very much so. Those are the needs I support.

Is that the local Rangiora Methodist Group?

O no it's the local combined churches effort in Rangiora. One of the banks is happy for folk to leave stuff there food or money.

What sustains you within the struggle for peace?

My belief in what is true to Christ's teachings. That's the spring of all my life.

Is there anything you'd like to say to young people who are involved in the peace movement today?

I'd like to say that the greatest thing that has ever happened in the world is that God sent his Son to tell us what God is like. I've just made an effort to read the Bible right through again and you know the old testament is absolutely contrary to the New Testament and talk about repeating. I can't believe the things that were said in the Old Testament that God said this and that. Quite contrary to what Christ revealed to us. I believe that someday His kingdom will be set up. A lot of the groups right throughout the world are far more sympathetic to helping people than ever before in history. So a lot of the good things that have come to mankind have come through because of Christ. And I would say to the young people find out what God has for you what he wants you to do Find it, search for it. I've spent a lot of time singing in my life and one of the wonderful things, some of the oratorios. The Oratorio of Elijah there's a tenor solo on that I love.

When you went to Hautu, what do you recall about going to visit your brother there? What do you recall about the camp?

Well in the daytime except for Ken and another one there, the boys weren't about the place. I haven't got any – it was mainly to insure him and to find out how he was getting on. And I was happy that he seemed to be alright. As far as the camp was concerned I can't remember much about it.

And what was the weather like?

It was alright. Coming back I don't know how many kilometres it would have been might have been eight or nine. Anyway that same truck came back.

It appeared?

Yeah. Picked me up and took me right to Taumarunui. And I caught the train back. I've had a lot of experiences in my life and all sorts of things. O this was quite a bit before the war, a firm I was working for the one that I resigned from, were building the Men's hospital in Hanmer and I had a little Austin Car and I was down to Rangiora for the weekend because we were living in a camp up there. Charlie Luney's brother was working up there too. And the weekend I needed petrol and I didn't realise I had to get some until it was too late. Anyway we decided to go to pick up petrol at Amberley. I could have got as far as Waipara I think. Anyway going along between Amberley and Waipara I said to Jack I'll stop the next car. The headlights you wouldn't know what was behind the headlights. It was a truck and I asked him have you got any petrol? He said yes I've got a forty gallon drum in the back and I've got a pump.

So it was all that you wanted and more.

Amazing things happen. I can't remember much about the visit.

In the last ten or twenty years have you had much involvement with the peace movement?

I've kept my connection with the Pacifist Group. They've stopped now. Not quite sure if they've made a decision about it or not, but I kept that subscription up.

And the Christchurch Peace movement?

The Peace Foundation up in Auckland I get that and there is a group there at the Art Centre. I've pulled in at the Arts Centre three or four times just to browse around.

Anything else?

I'd like to say how much my step-mother made in my life because of her Christian understanding. The Methodist church in Rangiora she ran a very youthful group they called Limbs. And the main emphasis of her teaching was that there was no greater power upon earth than the power of love, and as a group of ones ranging from six to twelve year olds it made a great impression on my life - it's always been with me the knowledge that that is so.

And your step mother she used to teach in the group?

Yes we'd have bible readings and hymns and so but she died in 1939 just before the war. I'd left home in fact we'd all left home my two sisters were married and Ken was away in Wellington. He had no hope of getting out of camp he was employed by the government as an accountant but we finally joined together later in life in 1955 and worked as partners in building. Well my father was a builder and I think I was in charge of a building in the second year of my apprenticeship. So I've got a lot to be thankful for.

And your stepmother, did she know about you and Ken that you were going to be?

No that was after. You see my true mother - they were a family of Methodists in Methven and my grandfather was superintendent of the Sunday School. So I had a big background of Methodism.

Even though they didn't all know they were training you for being a Pacifist as well

"But you're a Methodist!" I laughed at that.

It's about the forgiveness inside it you talked about the revenge thing, it undercuts it?

Yes, yes