

Sumner Peace Group History



June Stroud, Jean Thompson, Eric Johnson, Noel Thompson with Mary McAlpine and Marjorie Ockenden (kneeling)



Marjorie Ockenden, Jean Thompson, Muriel Morrison, Elsie Locke 1992

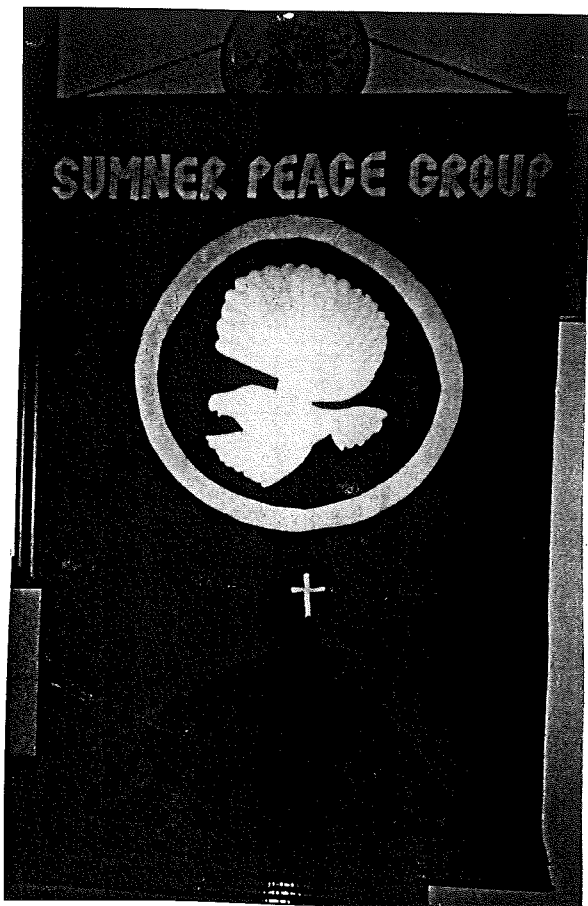
Narrator: Jean Thompson

Written by Linda Persson in 2003

'Its done in my lifetime, its done with my
permission'

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Life Stories and Social Analysis – Soci 340

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This is a copy of the speech made by Jean Thompson at the 20th
anniversary of Christchurch becoming nuclear free, March 15, 2002.

*Twenty years ago Sumner Peace Group played a
significant part in the occasion we are celebrating here
this evening. Dulcie Stocker presented a petition to the
Christchurch City Council signed by 80 members of this
area. We all helped gather these signatures. We
supported our Dulcie with love and enthusiasm.*

*We were a small group mostly in a supportive role. We
raised money by running stalls under the 'Rainbow' and
by direct giving. We lobbied M Ps, attended marches and
rallies as a group, shared information and remained
focussed on issues. Lastly we held regular monthly
meetings for 20 years.*

*We supported and enjoyed taking part in activities by
other groups to raise public awareness. Do you
remember 'give Peace a Dance' – our Cave Rockers
were on the floor for 24 hours – Peace Train to Lyttleton
and Rangiora, Peace rallies in Hagley Park organised by
Larry and his group where we danced to music by
'Herbs', A B C rallies meeting at the totem pole on
Memorial Avenue and supplying desserts for some of
their functions. Our focus was serious but activities were
enjoyable.*

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*We initiated and maintained a correspondence and
shared news with an American Peace Group – The Peace
Coalition of Southern Illinois. In closing I would like to
read part of the letter we received from them earlier this
year.*

Letter from Peace Coalition of Southern Illinois –

*I was sorry to learn that the Sumner Peace
Group has discontinued meeting. We had a long
history of exchanges with your group*

*... .. Our work for peaceful solution and more co-
operative actions from our leaders is more
needed than ever unfortunately.*

*Thank you for writing. Please express our best
wishes to your former members and know that
work for peace will go on as long as it is needed.*

Shalom

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Prologue

Jean's peace background

Jean Thompson has been involved in the peace movement for most of her life. Jean's first memories of why she became involved in peace issues came with her recognition of the injustices of war. It is the violence of such acts, such as war, which Jean personalises and transfers the repercussions as if they happened to her or her family. Jean's first memory of her reaction to the negative side of war was at a young age when:

I often looked and wondered why I became interested in all these things and the only connection I can think back was, we were a poor family and we always had a holiday on ANZAC day. We had no money to go anywhere or do anything so my mother use to dress us up and we use to go and watch the ANZAC parade. Now lots of people were interested in the bands and the military glamour and the medals and all that, by all I could see as a little kid were these lame soldiers, these soldiers in wheelchairs they all had come back with arms missing and that. I don't know why I should be like that...

Later as education progressed and knowledge grew, the illogical allies in the European history which we studied made no sense. The friends in an alliance changed and became enemies. How could a whole country turn its allegiance around in a few years? How could hundreds of people hate and kill a different hundred people?

Jean was born before the end of World War 1, in 1917. During her life, she has witnessed many world atrocities that have caused much social, economic and political suffering. Jean has lived through huge devastating world events, such as: The Great Depression; World War II; the Korean and Vietnam Wars; and nuclear detonations. Jean translates these events into a familial setting for her

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own comprehension. Hence, when Jean had seen an exhibition of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945), at the Christchurch Museum in April 2002, she said that “the terrible thought that the bomb could drop and your own family could be decimated or worse than that they die slowly for the next five years”. The reason this affects Jean so deeply is because she feels responsible for these actions. “For me its done in my life time, its done with my permission”, and as a consequence of these early realisations of injustices led Jean to a lifetime of peace activism.

Life for Jean was not easy in her early years. She was born into a poor family and she felt oppressed and suppressed by the social environment in which she lived. Jean’s mother was a frightened person, “who wanted a family of boys – and I was the big disappointment because I was a girl”. Their mother did not allow Jean or her siblings to socialise with others, which was isolating for the children, and led Jean to believe she lacked basic social skills. The consequence of this for Jean was that she was not a confident person. She had feelings of low self-image that did not change as Jean grew into adulthood, and it has only been in the last decade that Jean has learned to feel better about herself. Because of Jean’s life experiences, she has a perception of herself as an ordinary person, which could not be further from the truth.

Jean was not, and is not, as ordinary as she believes. Jean had, and has, an awareness of some the big social, political and economic issues and injustices, which most ordinary people are not aware of. A consequence of this is that she sought out like-minded people with whom to socialise. It was in this social setting that Jean met her husband, Noel, “(h)e was a conscientious objector so that’s the way I went with all the others who were anti-war so I was anti-war from my 20’s at any rate”. Having opposition views to the majority of the

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population and being a peace person during the war was not an accepted norm of society.

The behaviour, thoughts and actions of peace people who hold/held strong social and moral convictions, and who challenge society, are not the norm. Jean was fighting society at a time when the majority of New Zealanders preferred a homogenous outlook and understanding of the world that was similar to Great Britain's views. Ordinary people want to fit into society and do not voice their opinions on to the majority in society. Jean was then labelled and seen as a person 'outside' of society and was ostracised because of her beliefs. The flip side to this is that Jean rejected society's norms and chose ostracism away from those people who did not share similar morals and beliefs.

Jean Thompson is now 85 years old and has been an active participant in peace activities that led to the changes in New Zealand politics and public policies. It is now acceptable to do and be what Jean spent all her life fighting for as a peace person. This is the story of a woman who sees herself and her life as ordinary but is in fact quite extraordinary. This is Jean's story about her activities in the Sumner Peace Group.

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Chapter 1

Historical background of SPG

For twenty years, Jean was the chairperson and treasurer for the Sumner Peace Group (SPG). What was interesting was when Jean described the activities of the SPG she spoke in the 'we' narrative which made it harder to discern Jean's individual input from others, but this is the way that she expressed herself. The SPG was a tight group of individuals, neighbours and friends, who all worked towards the same goal.

Jean is a lifelong peace person and when she and Noel moved to Sumner they soon became involved in the local peace politics, becoming founding members of the Sumner Peace Group (SPG) in 1981.

We had just moved into the area and I think it was Kate Brett who organised a meeting in a house somewhere just because it was the threat with all this nuclear stuff and she thought she would like –decided that this was what she would like to do. Now Kate has never gone on with it but she was the catalyst, she brought together the people and from that we had a meeting in the local hall.

Jean did not see the SPG as important as other people's efforts within the peace movement, but just that this group of people were concerned with political issues. Jean claims that most of the members "were just ordinary people". The committee of the SPG began with a small group of six, made up of people who lived in the neighbourhood. The benefit of this group being small was that everyone was easy to contact.

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The SPG operated for twenty years and because of Jean's active senior roles in the organisation, she actually has all of the documentation at her home. The SPG history consists of books, letters, correspondence, minutes, accounting details. The financial records contain all the SPG's intentions for action during its operational time. There is also a large file of correspondence, which the SPG sent and received in its twenty-year history. It was the group's secretary and typist, June Stroud, who had the job of typing the group's letters. The overall success of the SPG was important to Jean and she was prepared to take on a position as an elected officer. The skills that Jean possessed are essential in making the outcomes of a group or an organisation being successful:

I'm very good at organising, you know seeing what has to be done and having a bit of a conscience I said that the one thing that I could contribute was I could look after the finances. I could, I had been a wages clerk, a teacher first and then a wages clerk. I offered to look after the finances and keep their books in order and that is all I offered to do.

The one role that Jean volunteered to do as treasurer was not the only position that she held though. It did not take her long before she was in charge of the SPG because:

[we] sort of kept changing their chairman, you could do it one week and someone else could do it the next month and then someone else could do it the next month, someone else the next month, but that doesn't work. You have to have the position, so in the end I sort of found myself in the position as well as looking after their money also chairing the meetings.

The original group of people, who met under Kate Brett's influence, were a mixture of anti-tour (Springbok rugby tour) activists and peace

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activists. It was not until September 1981 that SPG held its first meeting. At this meeting, they elected officers, and then agreed to “committee meeting[s] one fortnight and the general meeting the next fortnight, because we would endeavour to have a speaker at each meeting”. The bringing in of outside speakers was a focal point of the SPG’s meetings.

The SPG was only a small group of people who were keen to keep the motivation towards their goals going. Jean had a high regard for the speakers who came to orate at the SPG meetings. One of the speakers she referred to as “high powered” and another speaker as “splendid [with] the resonance of - knowledge”. When Jean recalled and described these orators, she did so with more passion and energy, than when describing her other areas of the SPG activities. This was one of the ways Jean perceived the under importance of her and her groups role in the peace movement, compared to the ‘important’ input of other peoples efforts. An example of this is when Jean spoke of Larry Ross, saying that “he has got a wonderful organising power and he has little tentacles that go out - he often used to come to us to speak to our little group cause we often needed gingering up”.

The main function of the SPG was to raise money for specific peace causes. Larry Ross was a peace person who the SPG gave monetary help to for travel expenses, when on peace business. Murray Horton was also a financial recipient of the SPG direct giving system, to help him while he was unemployed (Murray was helped because of the importance of his work within the peace movement). The visual creative side of the peace movement was another supported avenue of the SPG, with Peter Watkins

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given money to help him to produce a peace film (all of these examples
are from the financial records that Jean has kept as the treasurer).

There seemed to be a unique generosity given by the SPG members of
how the money collected helped their chosen exercises:

We believed first of all in direct giving, that is how [we
operated]. If we had a special need for instance, I remember
the Rongelap people needed assistance so we ran a stall or
something like that - but otherwise it was all direct giving. We
had direct giving for all sorts of things, there you are,
Arbuckles visit, when people pledged you see, Wendy Coburn
gave \$5, Marjory gave 10, the Blackers gave \$10, so \$84
[was raised], so we paid to help for Arbuckles visit [Jean
reading from her financial records].

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Chapter 2

Membership and Friendship

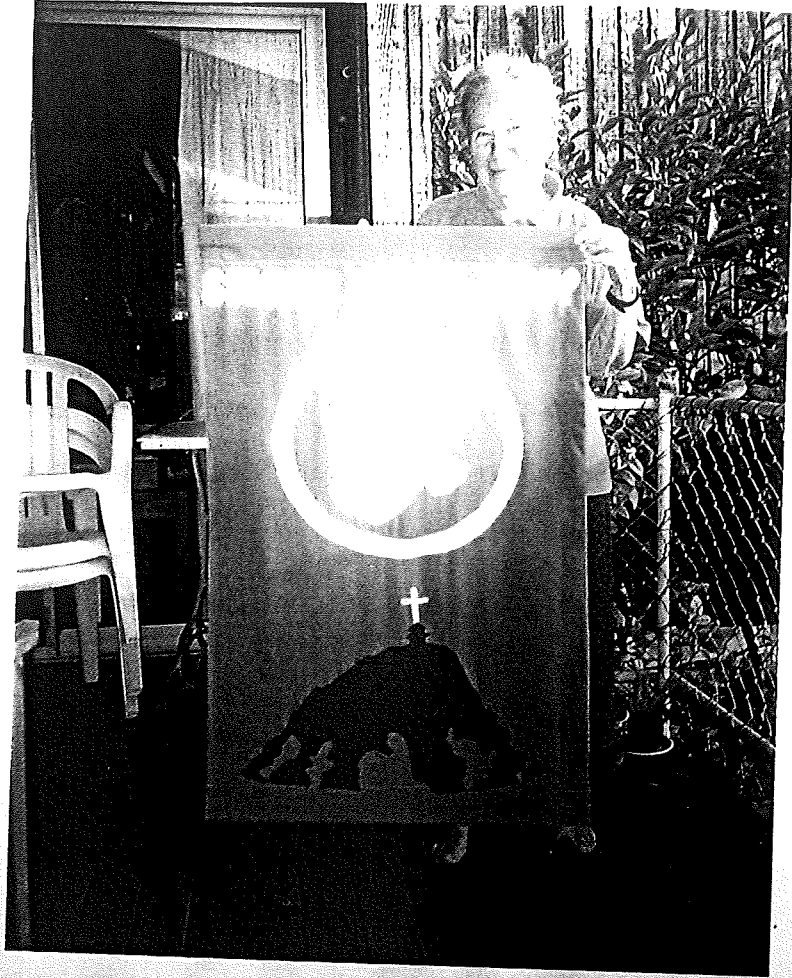
The SPG started of the nucleus of six members but the numbers did grow in a short period of time. Several factors have a correlation to the increase of people joining. The national political climate had changed with a shift towards a popular anti-nuclear stance, and the SPG informed the local people of the existence of the peace group in their area.

Jean was a very active member in making sure that the residents of Sumner were aware of their local peace group, where the SPG met, and at what time, by way of word of mouth and through large signs.

We made a big notice that we met every first Monday of the month but our notice said the Sumner Peace Group meets here on Monday 7.30. I use to hook my little thing underneath the churches big notice. It was there on the Tuesday before the next Monday meeting.

The SPG's main reason for existing was to make people aware of nuclear issues. Jean believed that if people were better informed they would act with moral conviction and, therefore, would want to make changes. The nuclear issue had "high a profile in those days" and the SPG set out to "convince council" to become anti-nuclear. One way of challenging the status quo was to gather signatures from the public who actually wanted change. The SPG members gathered a number of signatures on the anti-nuclear debate from Sumner residents. Dulcie Stocker presented to the council the "petition of 80 signatures that we all helped to gather". The relatively minor activity of gathering signatures could help to alter the big scheme of things.

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Jean



Jean &
Dulcie

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This small number of signatories in this petition did make a difference in local politics. The Rangiora Peace Group and the Lyttleton Peace Group also presented their petitions to the Christchurch City Council (CCC). The CCC's response to the challenges was a huge success for the local peace activists. In 1982, Christchurch became the first city in New Zealand to be Nuclear-Free. With the success of Christchurch becoming nuclear-free, a trend followed with many of New Zealand's towns and cities following suit. The next step in anti-nuclear fight was monumental, with national success. In 1984, the fourth Labour Government won the general election on a policy mandate of New Zealand becoming nuclear-free. The government was able to pass the anti-nuclear legislation into law in 1987, because of the public support.

The SPG efforts were part of a history-changing machine in New Zealand. The power of non-government organisations (NGO's) was becoming apparent through their successes. Small interest groups did make a difference, even if their efforts may not have appeared significant at the onset. However, Jean often spoke about the insignificance of the SPG, with one of the reasons being that “we didn't ever have high powered people” [in the group] and that their efforts were “more of a supportive role”. Jean believed that the SPG were better at serving ‘the cause’ in a back-up role as she saw her group “were just that little neighbourhood peace group of concerned mostly inarticulate people”.

With success of achieving their main goal, the SPG continued with their meetings and operating as usual. What had become just as important to Jean, and the SPG members as reaching their objectives, was the social

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dynamics within their group. The SPG had become a tight group of friends. Jean said that friendship became the overriding influence and “that is why we were able to continue because we became good friends”.

The main friendships in Jean’s life were with peace people and some of these people were members of the SPG. The word friend has a very special meaning for Jean:

You only meet five people in life that you can say that’s a wonderful person and my good friend. Then you have loads of acquaintances, Dulcie is one of my fingers, June’s one of my fingers, I’m not too sure that my husband would be one of my fingers but never mind, (laugh) that is another story. [Jean mentioned later that the other people were her daughter Janet, Joan Smith and June Stroud].

Jean’s list of only women as her best friends led onto the questioning of gender and the roles of the members of the SPG. With the initial elected officers of the SPG being mainly women, it appeared there were strong roles for the women in leadership positions of the organisation. Jean said of the women, “our strength was homely things like teas and coffees and sandwiches and things”. This disclosure was a surprise to the writer because of an assumption now that the men had an actual leadership role. The men did not have leadership roles or senior offices within the SPG but Jean did find it difficult to talk about the women as strong leaders. However, as the interview continued Jean revealed that:

the men did help us quite a bit - but of course they had to work and we perhaps had more time but I will admit it was mostly the women and I think that’s the way it is with the peace movement.

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Chapter 3

Changes and the end of the SPG

The SPG did not look the same in 2001 as it looked in 1981. The twenty years difference had seen remarkable societal changes, and these changes affected the SPG. The SPG had changed its working format of time, venue and goals, but the original members themselves were not too different. It was the combination of these events that led to the decline and the discontinuation of the SPG in 2001.

In 1981, the peace and anti-tour activists in Sumner met in someone’s home and the members agreed to meet in the church hall. It was easy for small groups to alter its form and function when there were not too many people to consult with. The members of the SPG also shared monetary concerns of paying rent for a venue, which resulted in another change in location, “we found we would rather keep that money and give it to someone else, so we used to meet at either Marjory’s place or my place”. Another change was the time of meetings:

People didn’t want to come out at night so we had a day meeting, and I started by having soup and toast at 12 o’clock and meeting at two. We did that for several months and then people wanted to change so we used to meet at half past two for a cup of tea and a biscuit at the three o’clock meeting. So you see we came down from having a hall, to a house, to an evening meeting to a day meeting, something like a lunch and then just a cup of tea.

As the venue and changed, the membership numbers did not alter greatly. At the height of its popularity, the SPG still only had twenty members. The main

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nucleus of the SPG was a small, tight network of friends, who were no longer working in paid employment. Jean said that they tried to interest people but that “no young people joined”. Jean reflected that this was probably to do with issues of the time and that young people were taking up options such as travel, and having families, which she surmised as being more appealing than joining a peace group. Jean spoke quite acceptingly of the realistic state but also found it hard to reconcile with the possibility that people “weren’t interested in what sort of a world their children were inheriting”. In addition, there was the absence of church groups and religious people in the community, from the SPG. Jean said that she believed that “they found we were not part of their church and therefore they didn’t come” to the SPG meetings.

Another major factor is that the original members of the SPG were now becoming elderly and members started dying. Jean reviewed a section of her records, of the official SPG books, where she started listing members who had died and when. Hence, we can see that no young people joined the SPG, the older members did not leave by choice, but as a part of nature’s course. It was inevitable that the organisation would eventually end.

The final issue that led to disbanding the SPG was Jean’s health in that: “my eyes deteriorated which prevented me from continuing to keep accounts and read letters. I wrote to the group my resignation to which no one offered to take over, so we disbanded”. The SPG had their last meeting and disbanded on 12 February, 2001.

The SPG is no longer an active organisation. From 1981 to 2001 a small nucleus of peace activists met twice a month to identify issues to support, organise a way to support the raised issues, and to fulfil requirements to its

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necessary ends. In doing this, the SPG became a tight network of friends. Their friendship served a purpose of its own and became a feature of the SPG, as well as the peace agenda all the members shared from the beginning. The aging membership of the SPG was the main reason why the group disbanded, after twenty years.

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Epilogue

From ordinary to extraordinary

Jean Thompson was a leader within the SPG. She held the positions of chairperson and treasurer during its entirety. Jean has lived her life as a peace person because if “you are a pacifist you have to bring that into your own life”. However, Jean did not come from a pacifist familial background, which meant that a huge learning curve was necessary to live a life that was not familiar. Jean’s familial base was also not conducive towards informing and educating children on world events and alternative available. Her mother wanted a family of boys, “and I was a big disappointment – a girl”, while her father was alcoholic and not overly available.

Without a history conducive towards the life that Jean wanted to have for herself and her family, a new life was created. Marrying a conscientious objector removed Jean further from her family because “the day I was married the family disapproved of it terribly, my Grandmother spat at me. You know I was so confident and enthusiastic in those days it didn’t matter a bit”.

With the separation from her family, Jean soon found ways of protecting herself with a small nucleus of similar minded people. When Jean and Noel started their own family there was now the new dilemma of “how to produce non-aggressive people”. Educational and informational material was rare on “what you need to do without smacking children or forcing them or having them crying all over the place”. Jean and her small network of friends were able to do what they could for their children at home. They were creating a safe, positive environment for their children, but this was not a societal universal.

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Institutional violence was the norm when Jean’s children were at school and “it was a bit of a shock when our children went to school and were subjected to getting the strap because it meant so much to more to me than perhaps other people”. Jean and other like-minded parents actively fought to have corporal punishment, as a form of discipline, removed from the school that their children attended. However, not all parents felt the same way about the physical abuse of children. Jean did not share the same opinion as the majority of society at the time.

Jean also believed that everybody, including children, should be informed on the facts of life and important political, social and economic issues.

Jean’s main influence in providing information was that she did not want her daughter to grow up afraid and not knowing what was happening to herself, as happened to her. Jean gave her daughter and the neighbours children, information when they asked for it, or when it was important that they know something:

so I did try to inform as it was everybody’s right to be informed. But most of our neighbours didn’t in fact, and I got a bit of a bad name for telling children things they didn’t need to know [she said cynically].

Jean Thompson has had an extraordinary life. The moral and ethical issues that Jean has challenged and wanted changed have actually changed. No longer is Jean ostracised for her excessive ideas of how to bring up children, her anti-nuclear thoughts, education without violence and other issues. Mainstream society has changed and Jean and like-minded people are no longer isolated, labelled and stigmatised as they were. What Jean had fought so hard to do through education and information the majority in society now accept as a norm.