

A Visit With Russ and Mary Jorgensen



The founding meeting of the Friends Committee on Legislation held at Berkeley Friends Church, May 1952. (Can you help us name the Friends in this photo?)

I had breakfast on a recent morning with Russ and Mary Jorgensen at their cottage at the Monan's Rill community in the hills above Santa Rosa.

They introduced me to Quakers more than thirty years ago when Russ hired me to work with the American Friends Service Committee in San Francisco as the director of the Austin MacCormick Center.

The Center was an experimental half-way house for men who had been in prison. The experience "turned my life upside down" as early Friends would say.

For four years I lived with the kind of people I had been taught to fear as I was growing up. That fear subsided as I experienced the "let us try and see what love can do" side of Quakerism.

I came away deeply convinced that prisons as we know them are institutions that harm human beings and that an enlightened society will experiment energetically to find new ways to deal with crime and justice. And here I am more than 30 years later working with the Friends Committee on Legislation in Sacramento on these same issues.

I asked Russ and Mary about the origins of the Friends Committee on Legislation of California. "In the early fifties there were a number of legislative issues that the AFSC was working on," said Russ, "I thought that there should be a branch of the Friends Committee on

National Legislation out here, so I made a phone call to Raymond Wilson, then the Executive Secretary of the FCNL in Washington and he suggested that we start an FCL without the 'N'.

"Six of us, including Bud Morrisset, Cecil Thomas, and Catherine Gumpertz, met every two weeks at a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco and ironed out what we would do. The AFSC Executive Committee was kept informed. Soon we took a big step and invited Friends Meetings and Churches to get involved. Even if some of the Churches didn't respond, some individuals did."

"We held the founding meeting in May 1952 at the Berkeley Friends Church. We decided to start a new Friends organization, a political counterpart of the AFSC, a state counterpart of the Friends Committee on National Legislation. In October of 1952 the office of FCL opened in the AFSC building on Sutter Street in San Francisco."

Later, back in the FCL office in Sacramento, I looked up the founders' description of the Friends Committee on Legislation. At first it was called the Friends Committee on Legislation of Northern California. In November of 1952 that changed when an Executive Committee was formed in Southern California, under the leadership of Roscoe Warren.

Why FCL?

Here are some excerpts from the original statement of purpose of the Friends Committee on Legislation of Northern California:

"The purpose is to assist members of the Religious Society of Friends and like-minded citizens to contribute effectively toward the formation of important decisions by the ... State Legislature, local governing bodies, and other agencies of ... state and local government.

"The work is undertaken with the conviction that Friends have a responsibility to help in shaping wise legislation, especially in the areas of peace and human dignity. We are moved not by political allegiance to party or platform, but by religious faith which teaches that love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable."

"The Committee will not press its concerns by the political pressure methods of lobbies maintained by groups working in their own narrow interest, but will work in the spirit of Friends to present our point of view to individual officials and to explore with them the problems to be solved, endeavoring to win the assent of reasonable minds and enlist sympathies with the objectives sought. The Committee will not be concerned wholly with achieving immediate results through the passage or defeat

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of particular bills, but will have in mind the values which may be gained by the slower process of interpreting to people in government, over an extended period of time, the moral and spiritual approach to the problems of government and law."

"The Committee Hopes to Be Of Service In Several Different Ways:

Information and Action – Provision of current and accurate information to interested individuals and groups to assist them in reaching judgments about issues and to help them to make an effective presentation of their concerns.

Intervisitation – Aiding Friends and others to establish friendly contact with officials and elected representatives so they may confer on matters of national, state and local policy.

... State Representation – ... [W]hen finances permit, establishment of an office in Sacramento during legislative sessions. [The office] will aid in presenting concerns to ... state legislators and officials and will furnish up-to-date information about legislative happenings.

Community Education – Conduct a grass roots education program on ... state and local issues through the medium of newsletters, special bulletins, meetings and personal contacts.

Local Services – Assistance to individuals and groups in developing effective methods of presenting concerns when problems arise in a locality.

Cooperation – Cooperation with like-minded organizations when interest in issues coincides, and consultation in order to prevent duplication of effort."

Friends Committee on Legislation of California was constructed as much more than a Friends social lobby agency. It envisioned an outreach aimed at involving Friends and those of like mind in a witness with California State Government. It was a huge job for one staff and a committee. Yet the first year they managed to involve more than nine hundred supporters and activists. A massive outreach.

Breakfast with the Jorgensens in the morning on the ridge at Monan's Rill was not just a delightful bit of nostalgia. The future of FCL depends on adding 900 more supporters soon... Will you help? ☛

– Peter Crysdale



Coming to Dinner?

FCL's Northern California Annual Dinner is set for June 4 in Sacramento. Please note that we need your registration by May 21; an additional \$15 will be due for late registrations. If you have not yet received an invitation and would like to attend, contact the FCL office as soon as possible to reserve your place. Call (916) 443-3734, or e-mail fcldevt@cwo.com.

We would be pleased to list you as a dinner sponsor; sponsorships start at \$150 including dinner. Regular dinner tickets are \$60. Supporters of limited means are encouraged to come at the \$35 rate. Supporters may donate seats to others – please do not let price inhibit you from attending.



It promises to be a wonderful evening. We will gather at Congregation B'nai Israel and enjoy a catered dinner and special time with others who support FCL or are getting to know us. Featured speakers Russ and Mary Jorgensen will talk on "Carrying on the Heritage and Spirit of FCL." ☛