

RAGING

Gracefully

BY SHELLEY MARDIROS



*Where have all the doilies gone
That seniors used to make?
Where have all the cosies gone
Long time ago?*

The Calgary Raging Grannies—a recent addition to the growing ranks of the Raging Granny movement—don't have a lot of time for knitting and sewing. "Not that there's anything wrong with knitting and sewing," Loretta Biasutti hastens to add. "Some of our best Grannies sew." It's just that swimming against the Conservative Calgary mainstream takes up all the spare time available to the members of Alberta's youngest Granny group.

The Raging Grannies—now represented in Edmonton, Lethbridge, Calgary, and in communities across the continent, as well as in Athens, Greece—originated with a group of peace activists in Victoria, B.C., circa

1987. Extenuating Circumstances was a peace group that used street theatre to call attention to the dangers posed by nuclear ships and submarines docking in the Victoria harbour. The group adopted its name when a demonstration at the Esquimalt Naval Base resulted in the cancellation of the base's planned Open House, "due," said the base's press release, "to extenuating circumstances." A movement was born.

Extenuating Circumstances staged creative demonstrations of the nuclear threat. On one occasion, they dressed in welder's helmets, thick gloves, and white lab coats adorned with nuclear symbols, and set out to test for radiation contamination on the causeway outside the Empress Hotel in downtown Victoria. They picked up leaves with tongs, scooped spoonfuls of water from puddles, and vacuumed the statue of Captain Cook with a dustbuster, then "tested" the samples with a "geiger-counter" (metronome), all the while handing out pamphlets containing information from the defence department about the dangers of low-level radiation.

The metamorphosis of Extenuating Circumstances into the Raging Grannies began in late 1986 after one of the members looked around and observed: "Good grief! We're all old women!" From there it was a small step for this creative

group to devise a way of exploiting the stereotype of the irascible old lady for their own purposes. With renewed glee, they descended upon the Salvation Army store to assemble Granny costumes: large flowered hats, feather boas, bright shawls, frilly aprons, whatever props supported the particular persona each woman adopted.

Fran Thoburn, an original and still active Raging Granny, recalls that the first public Granny outing was on February 14, 1987. They turned up at the constituency office of federal MP Pat Crofton, who had been quoted as saying he welcomed nuclear ships in the harbour—they made him feel safe. The Grannies presented him with a giant valentine in the shape of a broken heart and sang new lyrics to the tune of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus":

*Beneath the nuclear umbrella
We're as safe as we can be
Reagan's such a splendid fella
He'll look out for you and me.*

The Victoria Raging Grannies' concern about peace issues, and particularly their focus on the continuing nuclear threat posed by U.S. submarines and carriers to coastal communities, is as strong and creative as ever. A phone call to Raging Granny Alison Acker in early September this year reached her answering machine.

“You have reached the Raging Grannies. We are currently expropriating the island of Pacifica, near Esquimalt Naval Base. Please join us down at the harbour at 1 p.m.”

The next day’s issue of the Victoria Times-Colonist showed a photograph of two Grannies raising their flag—the Canadian flag with a red “Granny rampant” substituting for the maple leaf—on an island so tiny that it disappears at high tide. The action brought attention to the federal government’s unprecedented expropriation of provincial territory at Nanoose Bay, a move taken to ensure continued access by U.S. Navy submarines to the torpedo-testing range off the coast of Vancouver Island.



The Edmonton Grannies

The idea of exposing deadly issues through wit instead of anger has an irresistible appeal. Sprouting from the Victoria root, Raging Grannies groups soon appeared on Salt Spring and Gabriola Islands, in Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Fredericton, Halifax ... the world. The various groups freely exchange songs, adapt lyrics to local concerns, share ideas, and keep in touch through a newsletter, “The Granny Grapevine.” The delightful cartoon figure of an umbrella-wielding Granny created by Art Simons on Salt Spring Island has appeared in Granny songbooks and on Granny business cards across the land.

Alberta’s first Raging Grannies donned bonnets and flowered skirts in Edmonton in 1992 and soon found themselves part of the vast unofficial opposition to Ralph Klein’s policies of cutbacks to seniors’ benefits, education, health care and social services. To the tune “No John, No John, No John, No,” they sang:

*In “the Ledge” there sits a Tory
Who has caused us much distress
What he wants is private health care
Shall we answer No or Yes?
Oh... No Ralph, No Ralph, No Ralph, No*

Writing and singing songs to satirize the proposed privatization of Edmonton Telephones, Alberta liquor stores and aspects of the health care system, the Grannies were amazed at how well they were received, even at venues that are not exactly hotbeds of revolution.

When they were asked by the RCAF to sing at a national reunion held in Edmonton, they began to appreciate the “Trojan horse” quality of grannihood. Here was a group of women, many of whom had been active in peace organizations all their lives, being invited to express their ideas to a gathering of military veterans! Louise Swift says “The Raging Grannies works better than other organizations. We’re outspoken and we tell the truth, but the message is more acceptable because we’re dressed up and singing.” At the RCAF reunion, the audience responded with applause and laughter to the Grannies’ warm-up songs, written for the occasion and sung to tunes like “Tipperary.” Betty Mardiros recalls, “There was a slight cooling of enthusiasm when we sang our anti-war songs, but after the performance a number of the military wives came up to us and quietly said, ‘It was wonderful to hear those songs against war; when we say that sort of thing to our husbands, they don’t seem to get it.’”

The Edmonton Raging Grannies make an effort to accept invitations to places or organizations where a warm reception isn’t guaranteed. They have sung at the Camrose fair, to a Mayerthorpe church assembly, to a women’s conference in Hinton, to Girl Guide leaders in central Alberta, and to teachers in southern Alberta. Even in the conservative heartland of the province, they often find cheering audiences who are concerned about government cutbacks and privatization and are glad to hear someone speaking out.

Wendy McDonald, a former public health nurse whose eyes sparkle with humour and mischief, says she could hardly wait to join the Grannies. “When I first heard about them 10 years ago, I knew that’s what I wanted to be when I retired, and



The Calgary Grannies



The Lethbridge Grannies

I hoped that there would be a group in Edmonton. It's perfect for me because it gives me something positive to do with my anger. Besides—it's fun."

One engagement that did promise a receptive audience was the Parkland Institute's 1998 forum on the future of public health care, where the Grannies wowed guest speaker Ralph Nader. He promptly wrote and published a full-page article praising The Edmonton Raging Grannies as "an astounding instrument of social protest." "They raked over provincial politicians and corporations bent on bringing pricey, corporate-managed care—the kind Americans endure—to Canada."

At the forum, the Grannies had sung, to the tune of "You're in the Army, Mr. Jones":

*We live in Alberta, Mr. Klein.
We don't think that everything is fine.
We have sent you postcards and letters galore,
Don't you get to see your mail anymore?
If you do, why don't you pay us any heed?
Could it be that you have never learned to read?
If that is the case, we'll suspend disbelief
And present our protest now in this big brief!!*

The "brief" was a gigantic pair of men's boxer shorts with the message KEEP MEDICARE PUBLIC on one side, and NO PRIVATE PARTS on the other.

The Klein cuts of 1993 had one positive effect: they spawned a Raging Granny group in Lethbridge. Retired teacher Sylvia Campbell saw the Edmonton RGs when she attended a demonstration outside the Legislature buildings. Back in Lethbridge she gathered a few like-minded friends who formed their own Granny group and started to write songs. In common with other Grannies, they share a concern for the broad issues of peace,

environment and social justice, but their side-interests range from feedlots to consumerism. To the tune of "It Had To Be You":

*I have to buy more
Of things in the store.
I stroll through the mall
Things big and small —
I want them all.*

...

*I want bigger cars
New sofas and bars.
I want always to see
The things on TV
Belonging to me.*

Campbell says, "When we get together as Raging Grannies, we learn about issues. Some of us started with an interest in one issue, but then broadened to many other issues from contact with the Grannies. We have come to realize it's all of a piece—MAI, gender issues, human rights, environment."

Calgary was the third Alberta group to join the Granny network, in July 1998, and it differs from most of the other groups in having a younger membership, many still in the work force. They have a connection with the Victoria Raging Grannies. Betty Donaldson, a professor of Women's Studies at the University of Calgary, taught canoeing to some of the Victoria Grannies so they could paddle out to U.S. submarines with flowers for the crew and the message to "come and have tea with us, boys, but take your war toys home."

The Calgary Grannies are more theatrical than some other groups, each adopting a specific persona that is expressed in her costume and performance shtick—from Western Granny in cowboy boots to Spice Granny in gold lamé and high heels. Undercover Granny appears at public performances in dark sunglasses and a black snood, not least because she works at a major downtown firm where "a lot of our clients are the very people I'm railing against."

They see their task as one of raising awareness—about the effects of budget cuts to education, the danger of privatizing health care, and the problems of poverty in a wealthy society. Kitchen Granny Loretta Biasutti admits that Calgary may not be the most fertile field for their ideas. "There is still a sizable portion of the population who don't believe there's poverty in Calgary."

Still, they have hope for the future. They have already made four classroom visits "to increase kids' sense of social awareness and to inspire them to action." And, by the by, they might also be shattering illusions about the

older generation. "Part of our power is playing between the stereotype granny image and our subversive message."

This fall, the Calgary group organized a weekend "un-convention" at Mt. Engadine Lodge so that Grannies from all three Alberta groups could meet to exchange ideas, experiences and songs in a mountain retreat.

Along with a performance workshop, a structured discussion of issues in Alberta, and a presentation and discussion about the underlying principles of the Raging Grannies, the sixteen participants from across the province had a chance to meet each other and share stories in an informal atmosphere.

Sylvia Campbell regaled the un-convention with her lively account of the time the Lethbridge Grannies were arrested in a shopping mall by two rookie security guards. It was Christmas time and the group had gone to the mall to sing songs against war toys when the two young guards rushed over and told them to leave. As the Grannies made their way down the mall toward the exit, they

began to sing as they walked, and the security guards promptly decided to detain them. Sylvia recounts the "keystone cops talking to each other on walkie-talkies from about eight feet apart, while trying to herd six garrulous Grannies through a maze of winding passages in the bowels of the mall to the security office", then noticing that two of the original eight Grannies had "escaped" (having been ahead of the main group and unaware of the "arrest"). The remaining Grannies crowding in and around the tiny office couldn't contain their giggles at the officious puffery of the young guards, who telephoned the police for back-up. When the guard told the desk sergeant that they had the Raging Grannies in custody, the guffaw of laughter coming over the telephone line could be heard across the room.

Someone in the mall had taken photographs of the arrested Grannies and alerted the *Lethbridge Herald*, which published the story. Calgary CBC picked it up and interviewed the Grannies, who told such an amusing tale that National CBC had them on "As It Happens" the

following night. The Lethbridge campaign against war toys was broadcast across the country, along with the Raging Granny version of "Jingle Bells":

*GI Joe, GI Joe is back in the stores again,
Telling kids that Might is Right
And war is without pain.*

If the Raging Grannies had any doubts about whether their good-natured social activism was being heard in the halls of power, their doubts were allayed last fall when the

RCMP Public Complaints Commission released to the APEC inquiry secret documents containing defence department "threat assessment" reports.

There, among "anti-Canadian" organizations that the military thought posed a risk during the APEC summit meetings, were the Anglican Church, Amnesty International, the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development—and

the Raging Grannies! Of course, political cartoonists and humorists grabbed the knitting ball and ran with it.

It seems appropriate, in the International Year of the Older Person, that the place of long-haired hippies as threats to the social order has been taken up by gray-haired grannies, bringing humour, originality and the light of public attention to the serious issues of the day. If the symbol of the upraised fist has been replaced by that of an upraised umbrella, the fight for peace, environmental protection and social justice remains as vigorous as ever.

As the Kananaskis Un-convention of 1999 concluded, 16 seriously funny women packed away bonnets and aprons, exchanged e-mail addresses, and laced hiking boots to trudge through a foot of early-season snow to their cars. They drove in a convoy behind a four-wheel-drive truck down the snow-laden Smith-Dorrien road. Not a doily in sight. ☺

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Raging Grannies at Alberta Un-convention, September 1999. Front row (left to right): Fran Cofell, Loretta Biasutti, Gerry Dyck, Tove Engebretsen, Jean Rogers. Middle row: Donna Dale, Evie Tomlinson, Vera Stevens, Joyce Meyer. Back row: Louise Swift, Susan Stratton, Wendy McDonald, Betty Mardiros, Sylvia Campbell, Mildren Mayberry.