

Central Alberta Feminist Activism: A History

From lived experiences in central Alberta, documented and submitted by
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ISOLATED FEMINISTS/THE BRUNCHIES

We were individual women living in central Alberta who were proud to identify as FEMINIST! We had social and political interests that were manifested in educated activism. We were single/married, divorced, biological sisters, mostly rural, teachers, health workers, educators, artists, world travellers, persons with physical/emotional differences, researchers, students/student tutors/coaches, readers, bakers, business owners, farmers, news reporters, organic food growers, religious leaders, atheists, pagan, parents of gay/lesbian children, immigrants, Alberta and Canadian-born, mixed ethnicities, rich/poor and economically unstable. The geographical range of our central Alberta participants included Innisfail, Red Deer, Ponoka, Rimbey, Pigeon Lake, Westeros, Wetaskiwin, Seba Beach, Sylvan Lake, and Edmonton.

THE BEGINNINGS

The group was initiated by two Alberta feminists: Geraldine Bailey (known as Gerry, 1922-2013), educator and veteran, located at Westeros, Alberta, and also an activist in various Asian countries in the winter months beginning in 1981; and Reverend Lori Crocker, Ministry employee of the United Church of Canada. Lori had moved west from the Maritimes for her Ministry career. The purpose of both women was to create a safe sharing place for women to openly communicate about real issues influencing their lives in a deeply patriarchal society. We freely invited others to join us and offered rides to the meetings.

Regular meetings took place rotationally in our homes/spaces, and sometimes at regional Legions, and public places such as Wok n' Roll in Wetaskiwin. Our Sisterhood planned for gatherings eight times per year, and we often brought luscious brunch food to feast on. We Brunchies would aim for a dedicated meeting time of 11 am, to sit and share personal life greetings, then break for lunch at 12:30. In the afternoon, we would focus on specific/personal concerns where we would debate effective reactions in our areas of concern in our rural communities. The meetings usually were winded-up by 4pm, with sharing of copied resources, books, group pictures, rides, leftovers/garden produce, flowers/seeds, and feminist blessings to follow! Gerry Bailey and Lori Crocker were strong activists and not afraid to challenge the status quo. Rural feminists brought their lived experiences and clear analysis of current realities to their activism, all while acknowledging differences in social and economic life.

Congregations of various faiths in Canada (almost all Christian denominations) were challenged by the specific and bold leadership of the World Council of Churches'

Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998). Paper resources available worldwide stated two of their purposes were “to empower women to challenge oppressive structures in the global community, their country, and their church... and to enable churches to free themselves from racism, sexism, and classism, and from teachings and practices that discriminate against women.” This quote comes from *Groundswell* magazine published by the Canadian Ecumenical Decade Coordinating Group (Women's Interchurch Council, Toronto. About 2/3 of our members would have self-identified as Christian at that time, and in 1996 the United Church was tackling social issues of food insecurity and racism.

Feminists and justice creators, including ourselves, promoted status topics for group discussions by socializing in community groups in our home areas, often under the watchful and domineering influences of male religious leaders. Ministry personnel and church boards were invited to examine board documents and we encouraged congregational habits to be inclusive of women's spiritual choices and involvements. Some rural church congregations were ordered to ignore and/or not participate in theological debates of any kind! The patriarchal power structures were strong.

Who in the Alberta provincial media was paying attention to “threats to religions,” and what influential conservative magazine brought coverage of the topic to public exposure? Answer: Ted Byfield, with his April 1986 *Alberta Report* cover that read “The Feminist Attack on the Bible!” He knew the plans for the Ecumenical Decade were in place. It was ironic to our feminist perspectives that he included the titles of books we had already been reading and passing amongst ourselves, to engage others prior to Decade actions!

Yes, we were well-informed activists! One rural activist disguised her “modern” reading material as brown-paper wrapped meat in the family freezer to avoid the questions of what she was spending their money on and her state of mind.

What national Canadian magazine by 1996 dared to ask the question, with nude female image, “Is God A Woman? A New Female Spirituality Movement Rattles The Old Foundations”? Yes, it was *Maclean's*! Theology schools/universities and Religious Studies programs scrambled to keep up with trends influenced by worldwide exchanges of spiritual materials resources and world meetings with women religious. The debates were primarily centred on comparisons of traditional religious practices, and the depth of spirituality which was providing meaning to individual and collective congregations. The United Churches, Lutheran Churches and Anglican Churches led the way to work through Ecumenical Decade challenges in central Alberta!

There were clear challenges to denominations to assess their worship practice. Women could have their opinions about what it meant to worship. What provides faith and meaning to personal lives, and church communities? Theology facts of the time claimed at least 400 hundred different types of Christianities to choose from. Great questions were asked regarding the ordination of women, of divorced clergy, of lesbian/gay clergy, of lay ministry and pastoral care ministry with institutions other than churches. What about the sharing of power by women within hierarchies/patriarchies or might the power structures

within religions be self-sustaining traps? Were religious origins determined by ancient politics and expansion of printing presses?

Quotes from Women's World Council of Churches meetings:

“Hierarchy is not a basis for Spirituality.”

“We are the women whose souls no fundamentalist cage can contain.”

Comparisons between two regional churches in our action areas as feminists: From one pulpit, there were community warnings about an apostate (denier) of Christian beliefs. Discussions revolved around what threat this was to the local area, and if direct action should be taken to interview the person. A few miles away in a different church, religious practice included varieties of music/dancing, leadership in personal wellness, and acceptance of doubters to participate in vibrant theology debates.

Social life was changing dramatically in the same time period of the Ecumenical Decade; there were fewer marriages/more common law relationships, many divorces, increased liquor use at many public events, bingos to raise money for church costs, recreational RVs taking families away from communities for lengths of time, and away from traditional Sunday Church schedules. At times, there was a lack of trained ministry personnel which local churches could/would accept depending on their theology backgrounds and new-age perspectives! Several small churches had to choose to close due to the changing rural influences. This was a blow especially to senior members who had been faithful, long term adherents.

As women's spirituality flourished, decisions were made by women to retain traditional religious practices with wise actions to change from within religions. For example, they volunteered for church committees such as ministry hiring and finance (to know where church offering were spent), explored the use of inclusive language for liturgies, invited guests from theology colleges to update local congregations, and just generally, as female adherents, challenged the male domination of boards in hopes of moving toward equality! Others choose to officially leave Christianity altogether. Many educated, liberated Alberta women like myself did that without regrets.

The word FEMINIST was not heard in public discourse. The connotations in rural areas were not generally positive. Women were expected to live their limited status obediently and quietly according to church doctrines where “heads of households” were always male – those males had power over all family behaviours, including monetary spending. Rural women were rarely respected as equal partners in marriages. Women seldom had equal rights in financial decision-making, and/or personal income sharing. Women's unpaid work was dictated generally by gender and women's opinions were not usually valued in personal relationships and in rural economies.

Gender issues were discussed in rural education. High School principals, most of them male, would encourage female students to go to university to become teachers, nurses,

and office workers. Some principals simply told students, like myself in Grade 11, to “go for your Mrs.” Parents of young males would encourage them to marry teachers and nurses so that those women's earnings could be used to purchase farms and businesses - without the benefit of shared ownership! Banks and Farm Credit agencies, both federally and provincially, would document female partner wages for males' “bottom line” financial statements!

A personal example: The local banker called our hospital employer to tell me and a co-worker to come to the bank to co-sign loans set up, without our knowledge, by our marriage partners, so the bank could collect our wages if they did not repay their loans! My coworker and I refused to go to the bank to co-sign. I was then phoned two times at home by the female assistant bank manager and did not consent to come sign. Then the manager himself called me at home, saying I “should get in to sign.” I did not sign! Repercussion from my refusal: monumental interest charges on all farm accounts for the entire year - which were all paid! Money that should have been used for family living costs went to the greedy banker system.

From the earliest meetings of the Isolated Feminists, we shared common concerns regarding the Conservative Alberta Government's top-down, secretive decision-making! The Old Boys Club meant power over workers, power to influence farm land use (in favour of oil and gas priorities), wholesale development of mining and forestry, and serious water allocations for corporate needs! We struggled under uncontested political and social power to speak out as concerned citizens for actions towards equity and fairness. Under Ralph Klein's leadership, we lived under a one-party system backed with corporate agendas and money (mostly from foreign sources). Public awareness was limited and there was no accountability behind closed Cabinet doors.

In 1993, the National Action Committee Status of Women (1971-2007), under the leadership of Judy Rebick and Huguette Leger and with 550 member groups, prepared a Voters' Guide to educate voters about the political parties' official positions on women's issues across Canada. Rural women sincerely needed this information, instead of promotion pamphlets from those wanting to be elected! Julie White's *Sisters & Solidarity: Women and Unions* was published in 1993, and encouraged women to opt for non-traditional occupations with good wages and protected rights. Our group became aware of our activism in central Alberta on worksite equality reaching all the way to Fort McMurray!

In 1993, Alberta's department of Human Resources Development paid specific attention to the province's stagnant employment realities for women. Then, Augustana University College in Camrose sponsored an Entrepreneurial Program for women. Liz, Isolated Feminist, was one of about of a dozen women who completed the course, but to the best of her knowledge, none of the participants was able to start a new business after this training. By 1995 the Federal Liberal budget slashed spending on women's programs and it appeared that women's issues were again low on the priority list. Women's Studies university programs had funding stopped or drastically reduced! Were educated women too scary for patriarchal governments?

In 1996 we gathered at Gaetz United Church in Red Deer with leadership from the Alberta Federation of Labor to prepare for Women's Marches Against Poverty. Our goals were jobs, and justice and equality, which our sisters across Canada were also campaigning for. We aimed for positives for our lives and our needs being met wherever we lived.

There was almost a complete lack of governmental representation by women in our provincial legislature and on regional boards and panels! In September of 2003 our Isolated Feminist group meeting appealed directly to Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien to implement a Legislated Proportional Voting system. This system would provide women 40% of the elected positions in Parliament. The material we promoted and used was from Fair Vote Canada – votes equal seats equals Equal Power! Women in Canada have voting privileges but we've always lacked representative rights!

I challenged the political status quo in central Alberta by running for the provincial New Democrats on March 11, 1997 in the riding of Ponoka-Rimbey. The 1997 political expose called *Shredding the Public Interest: Ralph Klein and 25 Years of One-Party Government* written by Kevin Taft clearly described political and social times in Alberta. My vote support was small (just under 10%) but my experience was worthwhile. Our astute activist Janet Walter from Red Deer ran (unsuccessfully) for the New Democrats federally on June 2, 1997.

By the late 1980s, Alberta's provincial debt was at an all time high! Ex-Premier Lougheed had a plan for resource revenue, and saving for a balanced economic future. His fine plan was scuttled by a series of deliberate Alberta Conservative decisions that very negatively impacted Alberta's bottom line! Whose jobs were targeted by the Conservatives for solving the “debt crisis”? The professional nurses and teachers!

In 1993 Klein's budget cutbacks of 20% to health, education and social services shocked rural citizens! Feminists responded with determined actions with citizens and health workers when Klein dictated a plan for a two-tier healthcare system (public, plus private for those who could afford it). The Alberta Conservative government was charged \$1.86 million under the Canada Health Act for their speedy changes to our Alberta system, which eroded equity/Canadian standards! Feminists wrote protest letters and made phone calls to local MLAs. We attended information sessions to plan for in-person protests, complete with posters of concern. With smart leadership from Friends of Medicare and several Unions, we paraded in a large anti-government Stop the Cuts rally in Red Deer.

We drove for miles across central Alberta to gather many participants to attend. An irritated Premier Klein smugly called protestors “Left-Wing Nuts.” Our Daphne and Jim (last names withheld for their privacy) responded to the Premier's taunt by making dozens of "LW Nuts" necklaces for crowd distribution. We continued to use these necklaces to gain interest wherever we went – they were a great starter for informing about alternate things communities could promote.

Some of us participated in the World March of Women in 2000, sponsored by the United Nations. We needed hope, equality, peace and democracy in our own lives and in world contexts. International Women's Day of 2002 was labelled "Women Moving Mountains" to advocate for self and others around topics of racism, anti-violence, and women's talents to enable positive changes for all citizens. Women throughout Alberta were proud to be singing "Bread and Roses" together.

Changes were happening too fast in the province of Alberta. The Conservative choices for health service cuts and the erosion of direct healthcare resulted in a huge discontent among the fed up electorate. Direct job loss to health care workers – the majority of whom were women in rural communities – had serious repercussions! Where were jobs available and how far would we have to drive? The Isolated Feminists participated in a huge rally at our Provincial Legislature in Edmonton in 2009 to bring attention to cuts in Long Term Care services. This protest was energized by rural objections from the entire province! Examples of cuts then were reduced hours of home care services, the closing of beds in care facilities causing distancing issues for vulnerable patients/clients and less community contacts, and the de-insuring of pharmacy products and cost downloading on seniors!

Alberta Health even boldly chained off recently opened hospital wings in central Alberta. Nursing staff and facility care staff were laid-off, and patients were shunted to different facilities with short notice! Community attitudes were depressing and there were no easy solutions. We educated ourselves through information from the Canada Health Coalition and Council of Canadians. Women had to stressfully re-balance their livelihoods to manage career exploitation, and partners working away from homes in oil patches, all as the rural social milieu dramatically changed! The economic impact of loss of wages for professional nurses was a disgraceful government mess and cause for community economic depression.

In Alberta history, did we ever before see the total of job losses for Alberta nurses and caregivers in this time period? The emotional impact to professionals with great pride in community health and the safety of fellow citizens was tremendous. Sudden lack of job opportunities limited their ability to practice what they had university trained for – to provide quality, dependable skilled caregiving!

At Wetoka Health, based in Ponoka, community nurses had provided a large group of caring citizens with exceptional training in Palliative Care. This was a volunteer program to provide in-home assistance for loved ones with chronic conditions such as mental health challenges, AIDS treatments/care, disability changes in individuals, etc. Our regional, comprehensive Health Units were destroyed by unilateral Conservative government funding cuts and heavy-handed decisions made without public input! Rural citizens no longer knew how to access direct health services or if services were being provided locally at all. Citizens/Taxpayers never got a clear community explanation of cuts to services at our Central Alberta Mental Hospital. Patient and family lives were quietly impacted by service cuts. We were never told about the loss of care staff and facility programs. Were more medications being used to replace direct nursing care?

Lucrative contracts with Catholic Covenant Health dictated what health services would be offered under their religious ethic codes! There were strict objections to and prevention of options for family planning, especially with regard to sterilisation (known through personal experience). The majority of doctors employed from other countries were of the Catholic religion. Though many family doctors supported the individual health needs of their patients, they were not permitted to provide options for family planning because of the Catholic religious administration at all of our rural hospitals in Alberta. This continues in several respects to our present day!

Example: one of our feminist members, accompanied by her husband, was told by her experienced physician that a sterilization to cease childbearing would cause her to be unstable in mind, and she would perhaps need to be sent to a mental hospital for care! She would no longer be a "normal" woman/wife! This family lived on a low-income budget already but she had an opportunity for part-time employment which would not happen if she were to become pregnant again! How easy it was to limit the choices and freedoms of rural women!

Family requests at our local clinics for birth control provisions for sexually active teens were denied. Families resorted to city trips for fair access to sexuality education or choices from Planned Parenthood facilities. Teen pregnancies were increasing, as were sexual disease numbers, and sexual exploitation of children in their family homes provided high numbers of provincial Alberta statistics. Rural community service agencies were compiling statistics on such things for public awareness!

Jobs in education were also a victim of "debt reduction." Schools were community hubs everywhere in our Province, but professional teaching jobs were targeted as well. School board money was chopped and forced student learning priorities to be shifted in response. Fewer teachers were to be hired, and grades often had to be sectioned into two grades per classroom. There was severe tension between principals and staff, with "warnings" to staff to keep quiet publicly about the repercussions of the cuts! The social-emotional impact on our professional educators was one of the most stressful situations we in the Isolated Feminists had ever experienced (almost half of our group were retired teachers). Why was opposition to teacher job cuts so muted at this time? The majority of school board members were male, and the majority of principals were male, and Conservative. Political influence was deep! There were muttered assurances that cuts would not be made for long periods.

We made phone calls/sent letters of concerns, all to no avail! Women had always coped so why not use those skills now to facilitate government dictates? Money was suddenly cut for our valuable education resource staff, like teacher aides. So the remaining teachers had to teach with split grades, and students with special learning requirements received less attention. There was school resistance to allowing volunteers to assist – the political party line was to be enforced within schools. The terms "muzzled" and "quiet" meant don't dare to speak out! There was for sure a depressive state among educators and for those of us with deep respect for learning and fairness. Rural citizens never got full cost

accounting of those job losses for teachers/teacher aides. What does it mean financially to suddenly lose your job part way through your career? Union activism happened mainly in larger cities and they did try to rally provincial opposition. Their signs said "Education Should Not be a Debt Solution." Teachers in rural Alberta were already challenged with supporting their students in changing family dynamic situations! Rural Alberta did not have enough social workers and their file load was heavy.

Alberta education students ready for graduation could not find jobs, and many left the province because there were so few jobs. We University of Alberta staff and education students marched to the legislature in Edmonton wearing T-shirts which said "United We Stand Because Teachers Care," in 2002!

The University of Alberta Board of Governors - behind closed doors - at that same time, approved a tuition increase by 3.65%! This was the largest tuition increase in Canada, over 200% since 1993. We as students and parents had to ask what educational restrictions such increases had on equitable entrance to higher education. What percentage of students could afford this rising tuition?

Ron Ghitter (b. 1935), Calgary lawyer and politician, offered this in *Edmonton Social Planning* magazine, a perspective of the time period: "The 1990s will be remembered as a stressful period in Alberta's history...we discover while governments reduce support for social development, education, health care, and preventive programs, we discover that there has never been a time when people needed those programs more."

Rural feminists were learning, too, from the university experiences of our children/grandchildren, which revealed current academia perspectives. Hierarchies and patriarchies reigned in most of those settings and focused actions were urgently needed to change the dynamics and ensure equality for a professional career education for all students and tuition-paying parents!

AGRICULTURAL ISSUES

Agriculture was the basis of our rural economies and was quickly being replaced when oil and gas companies invaded our properties with challenging contracts for land owners to sign on to. Who was there to fairly advise farmers/local businesses to be cautious when facing corporate manipulations and governing economic policies?

Our group discussed what sustainable agriculture should look like: prioritizing wildlife habitat, resisting urban development of farm land, and using scientific research to prevent polluting of soil, water and air. The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women published a report in 1987, called "Women in Agriculture." This report was a quality primer for rural women to examine rural experiences, to get a clear understanding of the entire agriculture industry and economic realities (their own, their community's, and food systems livelihoods). Shortly after this report came out, I was personally provided Job Record Sheets to record my mixed farming activities; things like machinery driving, cattle checking, and grain hauling, for example, were to be recorded. The sheets

were used to provide tax information. The record sheets were made available through Alberta Home Economists in our region. Several Isolated Feminists were members of the Women of Unifarm. They gave input to rural justice topics, including the Matrimonial Property Act, Rural Child Farm Safety, Health Surveys, and material for submissions to Alberta Agriculture and Rural Affairs.

Several of us feminists attended the Parkland Conference in Edmonton in 1996 and cheered as our Alberta agriculture scientist Sharon Rempel championed actions by women: “I find it difficult to separate out the issues of women's rights or cultural knowledge because when I think of food security I know every day around the world, it is women who face the responsibility of feeding the family...Choose actions that honour our Humanism and 'Her' in all of us.”

Feminists regularly participated as Food Bank volunteers in our oil rich province! We spoke out against the growing inequities and noted that Food Banks were meant to be temporary solutions to food insecurities. As Frances Moore Lappe said, “Hunger is not caused by a scarcity of food but by a scarcity of democracy.”

The Alberta Status of Women published two provincial reports on Women Against Poverty in 1991 and 1996. The Isolated Feminists took part in local inputs to these reports as well as focusing on report recommendations for actions within our rural communities. Egregious undermining of our Alberta Status of Women Action Committee occurred, manipulated by political agendas that cut funding! Our two provincial regional offices of ASWAC were forced to close. Once again, rural feminists had to promote our equality agendas regionally, a true loss for our provincial activism that resulted in a lack of information for Alberta women!

Rental/housing costs were the reason citizens in Alberta could not afford food each month or their other basic needs. Food Bank demand increased in our rural areas, including the need to feed many children. Saskatchewan organic farmer and professor Nettie Wiebe became head of the National Farmers Union in 1995, after being the Women's President of the organization beginning in 1988. Her lived perspectives with small organic production was a strong contrast to the large corporate and industrial agriculture that was happening! Downsizing the number of family farms impacted rural Alberta life in a negative way.

Brunchie co-founder Gerry Bailey sent worldly perspectives from winters in Asia where she discussed the concerns of local Indonesian families about US testing of genetically-modified rice with built-in BT pesticides on their local fields. World Social Forums provided citizens with facts to dispute the corporate agendas and desecration of our natural environments. Janet Walter, who died in September 2023 at the age of 91, reported from her personal international experiences, and warned central Albertans about the agendas of multinational agreements. These agreements were made for the entrenched wealth goals of corporations, not for equity in the lives of world citizens for social justice. Janet had a keen interest in world events and how they relate to our Canadian lives and economies. She attended three World Forums in three countries: the 1995 UN

World Conference on Women's Equality in Beijing, China; the World Social Forum in Mumbai, India (with a focus on world banks and US imperialism); and the World Social Forum in Port Allegro, Brazil, where she represented the National Farmers Union, being a very active farmer in central Alberta herself. Returning to Alberta after these conferences, Janet used her teaching talents to coordinate and present public education events throughout Alberta. Where else would citizens get world information related to the topics of human awareness and livelihoods? The majority of Isolated Feminists were from farm backgrounds and/or still making a living from agriculture. We had several opportunities to hear talent public speaker, Dr. Vandana Shiva in Edmonton. Dr. Shiva had earned her PhD in quantum physics in Canada. As a proud eco-feminist, writer, and science philosopher, Dr. Shiva challenged attendees to focus attention on food production, and to question what was happening in Canada as methods of farming changed to industrial-scale agriculture. She urged participants to take strong action against the corporate control of seeds and plants, like Monsanto, the corporation leading patenting of seeds. Corporations were changing food growing habits and moving them away from traditional healthy, regionally-grown grain and vegetables. Dr. Shiva organized rural women's groups in India to ensure that traditional crops would continue to be grown and seeds would be saved locally in Seed Banks to ensure availability and food for their families. She wrote and published books to provide funds for bio-activism throughout India. Many discussion came out of her presentations and we let out local counties know that we had awareness of how GMO seeds should be restricted to prevent contamination in our fields and gardens. We could not believe that our present seed availability would be restricted – 60% of world seeds are sold by only four companies! Rural Saskatchewan farmers Percy and Louise Schmeiser had their local crop invaded by GMO canola and in 1998 were sued by Monsanto for using some of that crop seed! Our Canadian Supreme Court found them guilty but they were not fined. Their farm suffered monetary loss from having to pay legal fees. We personally knew local farmers who sent some help to Percy and Louise, and thought it was terrible how corporations could have so much agricultural control in Canada. Percy and Louise Schmeiser were awarded the Right Livelihood Award by Sweden in 2007. Watch "Seed – The Untold Story" and the 2020 film "Percy" for more information on that.

What warnings from Alberta dieticians/home economists/physicians were being ignored regarding food quality and fast-food advertising? What local county representatives and government MLAs took actions to educate ordinary citizens to question greed, and the degeneration of healthy eating with ecological sensibility? The Isolated Feminists did not see local politicians acting on behalf of constituents. We did not hear from members of the male dominated Alberta legislature regarding representation for women. MLAs showed up in summer parades and on election tours to get funding for their comfortable, politically-ingrained status, in spite of ignoring equality challenges which were being voiced across our country!

The Brunchies celebrated International Women's Day wherever we lived in Alberta, sometimes in local areas, at times in large numbers in our cities. For example, in Edmonton we marched from the university campus with posters demanding fair pay, rights for persons with disabilities, childcare spaces across our province, and Union

attention to wage gaps showing that women were earning only 63 cents to every dollar earned by men!

A Parkland Institute report of 2015 by Kathleen A. Lahey entitled *The Alberta Disadvantage: Gender, Taxation, and Income Inequality* provided astute citizens with the facts. The report recommended restoring stability to provincial revenues through graduated tax rate reforms, and the elimination of corporate tax credit schemes. A very important section was offered in respect to the enacting of effective low-income policies which would have made a comprehensive difference to thousands of Alberta citizens. The Isolated Feminists again made phone calls to local politicians, wrote letters to local papers, and informed congregations and service clubs of the actions that needed to be taken to remedy inequities in our rural areas.

We challenged local papers and the CBC to provide positive agriculture/economic news and not just drought conditions, cattle diseases, and price stresses for our products! Rural radio stations, almost all US owned, reported farm news and entertainment primarily for male consumption. Who owned those stations and what did they promote? Why would women expect anything but weather reports, machinery/truck ads, notice of farm sales/auctions, farm chemical promotions, and beer gardens and rodeos? Where was the national political responsibility to fairly fund CBC? Rants by Raging Grannies in Alberta had kept the topic current through their activism. Liz's project for Humanities 101 at the University of Alberta was "You and Me and CBC!" Compared to other democracies, our national network CBC was seriously underfunded for years and into the present! It was our feminist evaluation that Albertans' media indifference about who owns the media we're exposed to led to a pathetic ignorance of democratic realities. The average rural Albertan/politician did not care about the US monopoly of our media channels, especially when it came to Canadian news. Alberta was flooded by the American entertainment industry. Where were chances for our local talents, and for varieties in music appreciation? Albertans had to fight hard to keep our CKUA radio station, a gem in the middle of our province, financed by donations and threatened by government ignorance.

Greyhound bus services to large areas of rural province was cut quickly, leaving big gaps between rural and urban transportation options. Employment was quickly affected as nurses and care workers were regularly busing to rural facilities for work. Car-pooling options had to suffice, which was stressful for workers with different schedules. We needed those workers and the majority were women. Municipalities became more isolated and this did not seem to be a concern for Conservative MLAs. Persons without cars had to depend on others for transportation to medical appointments. Family gatherings became harder to arrange, especially visits for senior citizens. The Travel Alberta signs were a mockery for regional inhabitants without vehicles.

The Isolated Feminists recognized the urban/rural media gaps and found that there was little interest in connecting on issues regionally, as though we were not all in same provincial.

Several Brunchies subscribed regularly to our Canadian feminist magazine published in

Manitoba, *Herizon*. The publishing wisdom of Jackie Flanagan in her *Alberta Views* magazine consistently provided current issues for discussion and opinions for our provincial political education. Thankfully, the Alberta Department of Agriculture and rural colleges brought dissemination of country facts and views through professional District Home Economists, and District Agriculturists who provided programs and newsletters of much value to rural residents. They introduced the new legislation of the provincial Matrimonial Property Act (1978), largely due to the work of the feminist and activist, Alberta lawyer Halyna Freeland. It was a fact that property in marriage was not just owned by men but was a shared asset of the couple, and included issues related to children in marriage. Rural activists watched men sit in cross-armed stony silence when the Act was presented in public meetings. If women were gaining rights, what rights were men losing?

Some women were not allowed to attend those sessions but were later provided information by other community members or family members in. How hard it was for many women to get access to lawyers! It was even harder to access financial records/bank information. What progress towards equality was being made where we worked and lived? In the same era in Alberta history, large government expenditures were directed by activists for women's rights for safe shelters/staff, to house women and children who were experiencing family violence. Ineffective court orders for spousal/child support put financial hardships on hundreds of Alberta women. Alberta statistics of family violence were very high, and Regional Family Community Services could barely keep up with demands for housing, counselling, and safe protection. The long distances that needed to be covered in rural areas by police meant women and children in violent situations were less likely to receive help quickly. Several individual Brunchies served on boards to support shelters, and to provide needed counseling services. We took actions to direct women to increase their safety and secure them legal support, we transported families to safety on a volunteer basis, we kept confidences which may have saved lives, and we sat with them in courts. When the legal changes were made for the RCMP to lay assault charges against physically abusive partners in the early 1970s, women would perhaps not be punished for asking for help. The legal change was not widely reported to the general public so we wrote to local papers to describe the new provincial rules, creating awareness and giving hope to isolated women.

Rural women endured many types of financial discriminations. Generally, women did not have their own bank accounts, and most were not allowed credit card use with partners. Female partners were seldom shown financial records of farms and businesses. Farms and real estate in general were seldom offered in intergenerational succession to daughters. Several Bunchies had heard of women getting an unpleasant financial surprise when a partner suddenly died and the wife discovered the bank owned everything, including their home and animals! Banks were managed by men, and women had to get partner and or parents signatures to borrow money. Rural economists in agriculture were aware of women's financial challenges and provided them confidential advice and legal referrals to Alberta Farmers Advocate to assist women to claim their rights and stand for fairness in relationships. Many rural women did not have driver's licenses (sometimes by choice, others due to partner's control of vehicle use) and they were expected to stay

home to meet all family needs of the household. Brunchies made impromptu stops to check on reclusive women to ensure they were okay, sometimes offering garden produce, health advice, or rides.

ENVIRONMENTAL INTERESTS

We discussed many issues related to this. What is a description for “farming land” and what respectful productions should be adhered to? What protection from chemical application drifting must be mandated for organic production, allergy/health conditions, and community standards of mutual respect? What are farm rights when dealing with oil/gas monopolies and government addiction to oil production income? We had discussions about Wiebo Ludwig (1941-2012) and his conflicts with the oil and gas industry. He challenged the government to be honest in their reporting. Several of us challenged fracking and its effects on local water wells. Our questions were seldom taken seriously until other landowners in our province joined together to bring more media attention to the issue. Counties needed some serious educating regarding free-wheeling oil/gas rights and responsibilities, especially when MLAs advised to just proceed with the status quo in our rural jurisdictions.

LIST OF OUR SPECIFIC ACTIVISMS

One of us progressed with dedicated land tenure with accurate records and pride! Land covenants were/are a means by which the land must legally be farmed according to enforceable terms, both in the present and future.

One Feminist purchased acreages to purposely ensure that land would be left in its natural state, including no permits for oil/gas lines! Documented reports from federal land protection agencies describe the values of unique flora/fauna on the protected private properties.

Several Brunchies took community actions to plot community gardens, and activate Farmers Markets locally. There was general concern that there was a serious degeneration of basic nutritional requirements and health effects on all ages and pollution was noted.

City activism by Kim (last name withheld) and Liz helped to provide a community garden in a schoolyard in central Edmonton in 2008/09, an example for other regions to educate and participate with populations of all ages in the growing of healthy vegetables for personal use and community sharing.

Liz continued food-growing activism on privately owned property, sharing Indigenous planting seasons with the Metis owner and youthful participant growers.

Some of our produce supported a United Church Food Bank project in the university area of Edmonton. A sign there said "A Woman's Place is Everywhere!"

Our Brunchie Lois Soderstrom started a local rural paper recycle program, taking loads of paper to Edmonton. Lois won the first Alberta Emerald Award for local activism in 1992 and we were all so proud of her!

Our Brunchie professional artist Donna (last name withheld) incorporated rural flora into designs for sale, bringing awareness to rural ditches that didn't require the killing pesticides/herbicides applications which counties seemed to be addicted to! Several Brunchie members posted signage to prevent roadside spraying of slough and various other property areas. This was not always appreciated by county employees! We were noticing the decline of bees/hornets in our hedges and there was no need to spray.

One of our western lake area Isolated Feminists produced a document to protect shore-line areas from human encroachment/sewage disposal issues, etc.

Personal planning and action by Isolated Feminist Donna took the form of a straw-bale residence and gallery in the Battle Lake area. Foresight, creativity, and perseverance made this personal accomplishment one to be super proud of! Brunchies enjoyed their regular meetings/brunches with Donna in her monumental site. Community support in that area was exceptional.

Gerry Bailey, nee Broadribb, received the Governor General's Persons Award in 1990, in recognition of her longtime feminist activism, and as an advocate for international women's rights!

Who notices that orphanages in other countries such as Korea and Cuba appeal to Canadians for funding to meet basic needs of children? The caring Brunchies did for sure! Gerry had arranged for free rehabilitation care from the Cuban health system. She ignored the US embargo and got on with showing appreciation to Cuba by collecting used computers and supplies for children (minus any Barbie dolls). Her worldly connections got the planeload to Cuba and for free.

This seems like an appropriate place to acknowledge the several male Feminists who were partners to our Isolated Feminists and who shared/supported our campaigns. They constructed a whole lot of signs for different protests and brought others to protest in our home areas especially, they confronted employers of teachers and nurses to make sure we were not alone in our justice-making, financed and filled our tanks with gas to make sure we were ready/prepared for our actions, and they marveled at the scope of our caring and actions. The majority of our partners were well-read persons who contributed to letter writing, etc. as well.

Rural community areas were faithfully served by dedicated women like our member Daphne (last name withheld)! She was always keeping up with community needs and organising events. Daphne was hostess for a formal bridal shower for young member Kim - yes, Isolated Feminists knew how to celebrate happy life events! We participated with member Eda (last name withheld) in writing letters of support for Amnesty

International prisoners who needed compassionate activism. Member Betty (last name withheld) kept us updated with the services and devices offered through Canadian National Institute for the Blind to assist many people with personal sight changes. Liz participated in solidarity with two active Peace Groups in the Lacombe and Ponoka areas. Teachers were dedicated to promoting making-peace projects for schools and connecting with other educators who were doing the same. The Raging Grannies, some with wartime military experiences, visited with us rurally and addressed other local issues such as health care and food security for all. One of our local members moved to Edmonton to enjoy participating with members there. The group was senior activism at its best! Gerry loved to swim and enjoyed the lake sites, like Pigeon Lake, near to her rural residence. She noticed that many children had no swimming abilities! Beginning the early 1970s, she organized swimming programs regionally, giving jobs to trainers, and safe water recreation for dozens of families.

Liz marched in Edmonton in the largest, inclusive, Peace Promotion demonstration in Alberta history to prevent Canadian involvement in the Middle East conflict. Letters and phone calls to county offices did not always get reasonable answers - they had rules and wanted enforcement! The Isolated Feminists could not get satisfactory answers for the volume of water being removed from slough/lake areas to be used for oil/gas production. We had questions about waste management regionally. We said that beavers should be allowed to live/produce at rural locations; their dams were natural! We made calls about the careless use of recreation vehicles which trespassed properties and damaged creek/river flows/banks. Loss of wetlands through ignorance in human behaviours was shameful to see. One of our members cooperated with the government for the provision of recreation space for group enjoyment for persons with physical needs southwest of Westeros.

The Women in Agriculture November 1987 report named "Growing Strong" provided impetus for farm women to examine personal experiences in relation to their social, legal and economic status. Rural Alberta had (and has) quality university educated agriculture staff. Home Economists hosted Alberta Women's Week at Olds College in 1975 and for several years following, complete with childcare and recreation for kids so rural women could have a break from farm duties and pressures. Conservative government cutting of those rural support entities struck an insulting blow to agriculture across all Alberta communities. Where were educated resources for schools and 4-H clubs to teach basic sewing, nutrition, cooking techniques, and household management? Populations of very young married couples lacked support from living in rural communities away from their original home areas. For example, information on how to garden in different soil zone and/or make clothing for young families (our farm neighbor sent a sewing machine to her distant daughter who was not close to any large shopping area) was required.

METHODS OF ACTIVISM

We wrote letters to MLAs and to weekly newspapers

We made up and signed petitions and drove them to other sites for actions

We marched in small and large groups in many communities

We spoke at rallies and cheered for speakers in solidarity
We made/printed placards and distributed them widely
We designed t-shirts and hat logos and asked for donations to cover their costs
We brought issues for social and political attention to boards, group meetings, city and townhalls
We created protest art to bring attention to social causes and needs
We joined other protestors to act in solidarity to common people interests
We read and exchanged books on political and social issues
We quit jobs because we could not take sexism/power over human needs
We left support of causes when we could not take the patriarchy/hierarchy of suffocating systems
We started groups around special topics to protect nature, land, water, and soil
We cried together when we had family/friend losses
We feasted at Brunchie gatherings as we exchanged home grown food and tasty recipes and leftovers
We reported pathetic government actions and protested in solidarity
We celebrated effective communication which made lives better in our Alberta.

BIG CORPORATE TAKEOVERS AFFECT RURAL AREAS

What ensued was more invasion of Canadian values with small cities and large towns consenting to appropriation of Main Street philosophies to distance American corporate stores, many of them owned by the same entities. Entitlements of property development were granted to businesses like Walmart to economically "island" themselves in shopping regions not connected to "Downtown." The Brunchies wanted to know the history of our Main Street independent businesses and wondered when the facts would be told of the personal losses of that time. At the present the economic fallouts to our main streets remains secret! Corporate US greed seriously affected Canadian economics!

CONCLUSION

In the July/August 2015 issue of *Alberta Views*, there was article called "People's Government" which succinctly described the political changes The Isolated Feminists experienced in solidarity and celebrated with thousands of citizens. Our new Premier, Rachel Notley, was a New Democrat. "It took 44 years, 7 Premiers and 12 majority governments but the takeover has finally happened," the article said. "Ralph Klein's Alberta was a province of extremes, with Canada's lowest corporate taxes, lowest minimum wage and flattest income tax." The election of Rachel Notley as Premier was a life highlight for us as Isolated Feminists in central Alberta! Our meeting following that election was one of the best sharing times we ever experienced, as we celebrated our steady march toward social justice and equality!

I'd like to thank the sustaining and supportive activism of the Camrose Case Manager for Changing Ways, Kari Cameron, which was essential to completing this history. My limited computer/technology skills, along with health challenges, made it feel impossible to complete at times, so thank you, Kari.