

NOVA SCOTIA VOICE OF WOMEN: A WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE

An interview with Muriel Duckworth and Betty Peterson
By NS VOW members Linda MacDonald and Jeanne Sarson,
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Photograph May, 2008, Betty on the left and Muriel on the right.

The purpose of this interview was to collect memories about women's relationships, especially of Muriel and Betty's relationships and their significance to the early years of the evolution of the Nova Scotia Chapter of the Canadian Voice of Women for Peace (VOW). Being respectful of "Senior Moments" as Betty called possible gaps in memory, more detailed historical information can be located by visiting the Nova Scotia Archives which houses NS VOW files donated by Betty. The NS VOW files, listed under her name, reflect Betty's intense cataloguing of the work of NS VOW women. These are part of 154 files listed by year (1980-2004), also covering peace, social justice, natives, women, and moral economy.

The Nova Scotia Chapter of the Canadian Voice of Women for Peace (VOW)

A few national reflections of the 70s

Muriel pulling out some of her files and Betty wheeling in a cart filled with her scrap books began to reveal the complex identities and activities of women and their relationships in both the national and Nova Scotia levels of the Canadian Voice of Women for Peace and human rights. Papers, photos, newspaper articles and letters presented themselves in varying detail. From the yellowed pages of the 1976 National Annual General Meeting Report ten VOW groups voiced the landscape of VOW women's activism. And a diverse landscape it was with Charlotte McEwen of Ottawa stating their members had held a public meeting on "How can Zionism be a form of racism?" Joy Warner, delivering the Hamilton-Dundas report, spoke of actions taken on racism in Canada and Chile. Dorothy Rosenberg of Quebec discussed fund raising for Dr. Morgantaeler; the Ontario report spoke of the submission Kay Macpherson made to the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry; and Terry Padgham, giving the Northwest Territories report, spoke of the excitement felt by the group when resolutions passed that, for the first time, saw women involved in Status of Women's groups accepting the connection between social issues and international defense spending. Like B.C., which spoke of being active in the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility, most reports also spoke of nuclear connected issues.¹

This was the same year when VOW membership dues cost students \$1.00. Five dollars gave a woman annual regular membership and \$12.00 bought annual sustaining membership. And at the 1976 Council meeting the structure of the Council was changed and each active group was asked to elect a representative and alternative to receive and send information from/to the National Office. Today *Voices* is the national newsletter of the Canadian Voice of Women for Peace. 'Who owns women's work?' was the centre article in the faded spring edition of Muriel's 1995 *Voices*, sharing file space with a relatively new 2002 *BC Voice* published by the BC VOW women's group.

Memories of the beginnings of the Nova Scotia Chapter of VOW

In Nova Scotia it was, Muriel stated, the idea of men who were already involved in the peace movement to engage women in the cause. These men were her husband Jack Duckworth and David Hope Simpson. Why did such an initiative have to come from men? Muriel believes that "nobody thought women had anything to do with peace."

David Hope Simpson approached his wife Peggy who then called Muriel asking that she join her. At the time Muriel remembers thinking "who needs another organization." A thought that probably arose because Muriel was already actively involved in the Home and School movement, a relationship that began as a mother of children in a Quebec

¹ Reports given by Voice of Women Groups in Canada at the National Annual General meeting of Voice of Women, held September 17, 18 and 19th, 1976 near King City, Ontario.

school that had no school library. Muriel went “up and down streets knocking on doors”, gathering signatures, determined to develop a school library. This focus on Home and School activities continued when she and Jack and their three children moved to Halifax in 1947. In 1948 she was hired to be a part-time parent education advisor in the newly formed Adult Education Division of the provincial Department of Education, beginning by co-teaching a course for parents of preschoolers. She remarked on her “big” paycheck of \$500.00 a year!² Presenting topics via Home and School evening meetings, Muriel began working full-time as secretary to the Adult Education Division, turning her attention to setting up literacy programs, doing research, and encouraging others to adapt to rapid social change.³ However, once persuaded that it was important to pursue organizing VOW Muriel held the first meeting of 1960 in her living room. Approximately 20 women attended.

There were threatening global issues such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Americans push to do nuclear testing in Atlantic waters and dump nuclear waste off the Yarmouth coast. Muriel in preparation for a public meeting was given access to the gym of the school two of her children had attended. She was surprised when approximately 80 like-minded concerned people filled the gym. Women in many provinces began blazing a social justice path that would eventually include 6000 members across Canada.

The NS VOW women organized themselves into two groups - an action group and a study group. Meeting several times a month the study group began reading books on the global issues and to keep abreast locally they nurtured a positive relationship with the press, mentioning Harold Hathaway as a CBC reporter who kept them well informed. Additionally, the NS VOW action group got much news coverage, including on CBC radio. When members of the ruling federal government set foot in NS members worked to get time to speak with them. A Conservative MP, Mr. Green, left his legacy as being a favorite politician to speak with because VOW women considered he was on their side and against war. Muriel, with her background in adult education, was involved in writing letters to political authorities and giving public presentations. A NS VOW newsletter evolved and was distributed throughout the province. During this time small chapters sprouted up outside of Halifax, in Truro, New Glasgow, and in the Valley. Many have faded away.

In 1961, when Muriel was enjoying summer holidays with her adult children at the Duckworth cottage in Quebec, she received a telephone call from the national VOW women’s group in Toronto. Willing to pay her expenses they persuaded her to attend the national VOW meeting in Toronto which had as its agenda the making of the foundational constitution. Muriel became the fourth and last national president of VOW,⁴ a position she held from 1967-1971. Reminiscing briefly on some of the highlights of her time as President as written about by Marion Kearns,⁵ Muriel’s first task in 1967 was to

² Kerans, M. D. (Muriel Duckworth A Very Active Pacifist (p.68). Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

³ Ibid. p. 79.

⁴ McPherson, K. (1987, March). *Persistent voices*, p. 6. (Produced with help from the Lawson Memorial Fund). Toronto: VOW.

⁵ Kerans, M. D. (Muriel Duckworth A Very Active Pacifist (p. 98-101). Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

accept having the Soviet Women's Committee pay her way to Russia to represent VOW during the International Conference of Women for Peace in Moscow. She was one of only two Canadians who joined 225 women from 85 countries. The Canadian government disagreed with the actions of VOW women and considered that they were "soft on communist" thus were accused of being either pink or stupid.

Expanding their activities saw NS VOW women demonstrating against the Vietnam War which was the central conflict that was occurring during her term as president. VOW women supported US draft dodgers and their families who fled to NS. Without finances the VOW women's support was relational, offering friendship and helping the families find housing and support settling into the community.

Muriel remarked being most proud of VOW's 1969 success of raising funds that supported three Vietnamese women, one from the North and two from the South, with two male interpreters, to journey to Canada to meet with VOW women. A women-meeting-women peace-building initiative they traveled across Canada for two weeks giving talks in large and small centers including border centers that permitted American peace groups to attend. Given the times the safety of the women was of concern. So much so that when the group landed at the Duckworth's cottage Vietnamese students from Montreal, fearing for the women's safety, went to the cottage and slept outside on the veranda to provide protection to the women.⁶ A lasting image Muriel holds is when one Vietnamese woman walked over to a border fence in Niagara Falls and placing her hands on the fence she looked across at the US, stating "I don't know why they're killing us, we never did anything to them." During this trip VOW women managed a symbolic peace meeting with American women midway on the peace bridge at Niagara Falls.⁷

In 1971 a second tour of six women and three male interpreters arrived from Laos and North and South Vietnam and spoke of the imprisonment, brutality and torture of women. Their across Canada trip was co-sponsored by VOW and American women's groups.⁸ Back home in NS, Muriel says that most of the telephone calls she received were from older men who didn't agree with the actions of the VOW women.

A Lifetime Friendship

While Muriel was a founding and committed member of NS VOW pre- and post-presidency making connections with many other like-minded women, Betty Peterson had been a strong activist in the US since the 1940s when she and her husband were Conscientious Objectors to WW II. They belonged to various groups such as the War Resisters League and were also involved with international students and community education. Then came the 50s and the isolation/stagnation of living in what Betty described as "the boring suburbs of big city Chicago". Although in love with her small children she wanted more than to be a "stay-at-home Mom". "What's wrong with me," she thought. "Am I just a malcontent?" But in retrospect she realized that these were

⁶ Ibid, pp. 124-

⁷ Gilchrist, M. (2008, June 7) Email communication.

⁸ Kerans, M. D. (Muriel Duckworth A Very Active Pacifist (p. 130-133). Halifax: Fernwood Publishing

early stirrings of her feministic development that came to life living with Muriel D.! By the early 60s she worked against the war in Vietnam.

Like Muriel, who focused some of her activism efforts on challenging the impacts of racism by joining the NS Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, Betty tutored in Black schools as well as teaching basic skills to the adults. Belonging to the founding group of the South Suburban Human Relations that grew into a large inter-racial group of mostly women they held marches for the integration of schools and housing. They experienced crosses being burnt on lawns and received threatening letters about their children. Police stood guard at their public meetings in case of a riot. Newspapers refused to print the words human rights, only human relations.

In 1975 Betty and her husband Gunnar permanently moved to a little farm in Cape Breton, hoping to live off the land and establish a place where others could join them. Tragedy struck within the year when Gunnar suddenly died. Urged to return to the US by her friends, Betty opted to remain close to her much loved Cape Breton neighbors, their music and the Ceilidhs. Chopping wood, carting water and attempting to keep warm around the old wood stove as the winter winds blew through their un-winterized farm house, Betty at 58 wondered what she was going to do with the rest of her life. When starved for the arts, she interrupted her farmhouse life with trips to Halifax, meeting Muriel through the Quakers.

Similar to Betty, Muriel's life also changed following the death of her husband Jack in 1975. This same year Muriel was encouraged to represent VOW at the unofficial parallel conference to the first UN International Conference on Women introducing the UN's decade of women in Mexico City which was attended by thousands of women from NGOs.⁹ Muriel continued to wear many hats and being a VOW woman was one of these.

In 1980, living in a house owned by her son John, Muriel surprised Betty with a phone call inviting her to share her son's home with her. Hesitatingly Betty decided to take the risk to move to the city and her life changed forever! Just as Betty moved in so to did a Dalhousie student. One of the rental students was Elizabeth May, beginning her first year as a law student. Both Betty and Muriel remember attending Elizabeth's avid environmental talk on spruce budworm spraying. Today Elizabeth is the leader of the Green Party.

NS VOW offered university internship opportunities. Alexa McDonough spent time with Muriel and went on to spend nearly three decades in public service including being a pioneer for women in politics, provincial leader of the NDP from 1980 to 1994 before becoming federal leader from 1995 to 2003.¹⁰ Stepping down in 2003, she remained an MP for Halifax until retiring in 2008.

⁹ Ibid, p. 182.

¹⁰ Maher, S. (2008, June 2). Alexa expected to quit federal politics. *The Chronicle Herald*, A1.

The Golden Years of the 80s

With this move to 6517 Colburg Road (photo) the lives of Muriel and Betty became a flurry of activity. This house developed into a women's center, a Quaker House and a peace center for VOW. Constantly in activism mode – VOW women were outside on the streets and inside with dining room table activism. Intuitive activism included. Suspecting that the Archbishop who lived across the alley from them probably disapproved of whatever was going on in the house, they “invited him over for tea.” He accepted.



Betty says the 1980s were “golden years” of high energy-demanding activism. During the 80's nuclear submarines in the Halifax harbor resulted in many protests by VOW women. VOW “spies” were everywhere, even in the offices which faced the harbor where movement of the ships and subs could be seen and reported by dialing VOW. The dining room table at 6517 became the working surface for making placards protesting the presence of the ships and subs. And where possible, VOW women even boarded some ships to speak with the sailors.

The International Women's Peace Petition¹¹ took off in 1981 which VOW women asked Betty to organize. Thrilled, she immersed herself into collecting signatures of women cross-Canada. When all was over, a year later Betty states 250,000 people had signed the petition which was carried in 1982 by Muriel and Betty to New York City for the United Nations Second Session on Disarmament (UNSSOD). A busload of VOW women and others left Halifax and joined the march of a million peace activists and the peace rally in Central Park where Kay Mcpherson spoke. Betty presented the signatures to the Secretary-General of the United Nations; likewise, the Japanese

The Women's Petition for Peace read:

Women stand up for peace!
We are driven to despair by increasing threats of war.
Is there to be any future for our children?
Together we will turn our despair and our anger into strength.
We, the undersigned women of Canada, join with women all over the world to say:

- We will no longer silently accept the mad struggle of the superpowers for military superiority.
- Negotiations for a lasting peace must be resumed at once and lead to action.

We demand:

- Disarmament for a lasting world peace
- An end to the production of fissionable materials for nuclear weapons.
- That the billions spent on war be spent to improve life on earth.

We say no to war! Nous Disons non a la guerre!

¹¹ Taken from a picture of Betty holding up an enlarged copy of the Women's Petition for Peace which also contained the following information:

The Women's Petition for Peace originated in Denmark in February 1980. It was presented to the United Nations Conference on Women in July, 1980 with signatures by 500,000 Nordic women. Since then, it has been taken up by many countries. The new goal is to present 500 million signatures to the second U.N. Special Session on Disarmament in 1982. We Canadian women join our voices with the millions from all over the world in this great chorus for peace.

who were present by the hundreds, many who were survivors of Hiroshima, had millions of anti-nuclear, anti-war signatures.

In the early 80s VOW women joined in with the Coalition Against Nuclear War and Betty and Pat Kipping were off to Brussels to join hundreds of women from many countries who marched in front of NATO calling for peace. Then to Greenham Common in England to support women who were camped out protesting an infamous military base. It was the time of Stop the Arms Race (STAR). And Muriel went to Japan for Hiroshima Day ceremonies.



VOW women activity was everywhere. Protest marches were commonplace in Halifax as it was “dangerous times”. When many supporters turned out VOW women were encouraged and proud as seen in this photo of Muriel on the left clapping and Betty on the right, with hands clasped with “delight”.

VOW supported an Anti-Uranium Campaign, from 81-84, seeking a moratorium on the mining of uranium under the leadership of Donna Smyth and Gillian Thomas. Some VOW women were going into stores and putting Ban-War-Toys stickers on war toys, especially at Christmas. Along with women from New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, a few NS VOW women attended a Women & Militarism weekend, at the ski hostel, Wentworth. Plans for nonviolent training were made including plans for a massive demonstration called Debunk Debert Action.

The year was 1984 and, at the underground shelter in Debert, NS, the patriarchal politics was that all the “big shot” politicians and others of “importance” would gather at the shelter to be safe from attack and fallout. Women and children were to be left at home. As a build-up to a day of protest at Debert, Donna Smith and Gillian Thomas wrote and organized street theatre in Halifax, with five VOW women, NAAGS (Never Again Affinity Group) dressed in black robes of mourning, warning of a nuclear bomb such as Hiroshima. Later and elsewhere, women dressed in white doctor’s coats, carried gigantic syringes to gather the “sperm” of the “big shots” for their Continuity of People Program. More seriously, at the Debert Action itself, the same group in psychodrama, carrying dead and wounded ‘babies’, staggered along the road in disheveled clothes representative of the Hiroshima tragedy. Other women carried bare tree branches reminiscent of that devastation, singing and holding hands in solidarity and in peaceful protest. It was “a show stopper” that gathered press coverage and public support from hundreds of women from Atlantic Canada. Supportive men, some who were fathers stayed home to look after children. And Muriel and Betty remember the hot soup some men made and delivered to the women on that cold day.

The 80s was also the era when lesbian women, as well, were coming out with strength and leadership; their efforts were supported under the umbrella of NS VOW. NS VOW supported and wrote for Pandora Women’s Magazine in NS and in the early 90s helped to fundraise for a lawsuit brought against Pandora.

Costuming re-emerged. For another infamous rally, Betty rushed to her Cape Breton farm to get her scythe, renowned as the best one in her community. Back to Halifax, she transformed herself into the “Grim Reaper”, dressed in a black coat with her scythe over her shoulder and wearing a Ronald Reagan mask. So far so good, until a policeman spotted her garb, landing her in the back seat of his patrol car: “No dangerous weapons on city streets!” Fearing confiscation of her scythe, she promised not to “cut anyone’s head off” and emerged from custody, smiles all around. Scythe safely in her car, she continued protesting.



1984-85 saw the development of the Pentagon Party Poopers or Against Military Industrial Expansion (AMIE), consisting of VOW women and others. Militarism was expanding globally. Word was received that a “secret” meeting was being held at the old Halifax Nova Scotian Hotel called by US military and business leaders to get Canadian business men to start building weapons of war. During a VOW rally outside, a group of women and some men crept inside the hotel, sat down outside the meeting doors and began to sing peace songs. Because Betty was an American citizen she did not dare join the women inside for fear of arrest and deportation. And arrested they were; carried off in the police van while the crowd surrounded the hotel, singing and protesting. Charged with resisting arrest and public mischief to public property, 16 were arrested and temporarily jailed. VOW helped raise money to hire lawyer Anne Derrick and when the women were sentenced to one day in jail, time served, and the jammed courtroom broke into cheers!

On June 5, 1985, a week-long Women’s International Peace Conference unfolded at Mount Saint Vincent University under the leadership of Marion Kerans and a large VOW committee. Its roots began at a meeting held in Toronto where 26 Canadian women’s groups from across Canada agreed to participate and help sponsor the conference. Monies were raised plus a grant proposal submitted to the federal government; this was successful with \$450,000.00 coming from the Department of External Affairs. These monies were used, for example, to help bring 30 Canadian women of color to the conference which was attended by 350 women from 33 countries. The conference activities literally took over Mount St. Vincent University. Following the conference Marion stated she got the idea to “make the UN come alive” for VOW women. Sharing her idea with Ann Gertler who remarked, “if you will do it I will.” The following year Ann took Marion under her wing for the week in New York, introducing Marion to many of her UN connections.¹²

Meanwhile through Betty’s ongoing work with native peoples, VOW women became involved with the Innu of Labrador and the low flying NATO planes from the Goose Bay Air Base that were frightening women, children and the elderly living out on their hunting grounds. To protest there was a march on Citadel Hill, proclaiming it to be a peace hill, not a military one. Balloons filled with helium were floated 100 feet into the air to show the height (tree-top) of these planes zooming over the Innu. And when the

¹² Telephone conversation with Marion Kerans, June 5, 2008.

NATO Ministers met in Halifax in 1986 there were huge demonstrations with five or six Innu coming down from northern Labrador to speak. Sleeping bags kept them warm overnight; many Haligonians joined them.

Challenged again in the mid 90s by the same NATO issues VOW women learned that Federal Environment Assessment Review Hearings (FEARO) were required in order to continue and enlarge the NATO Base at Goose Bay in the face of strong objections from the Innu Nation. VOW applied for and received a \$6000.00 grant to prepare and present a brief on the negative effects of the low flying planes on the Innu. VOW member Marie Hammond was hired to research and write the brief. Betty was the volunteer coordinator of the project with a VOW Advisory Board. For a year and one-half they worked but in the end their brief and those of the Innu and others were not heard.

It seems that NS VOW women were everywhere during the 1980s with Betty collecting protest pins from everywhere she went. This is her favorite – Aging hippies against the bomb!



Entering New Eras

And speaking about the bomb, there continued to be strong protests that climaxed in the late 90s when Dr. Sylvia Keet of Physicians for Global Survival and Betty from VOW, with a few men from Veterans Against Nuclear Arms (VANA), spearheaded efforts to have the Halifax Metro Council endorse an international statement calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons via the UN. With a balcony full of supporters, to their surprise, the motion passed unanimously with the proviso that this did not mean a curtailment of nuclear subs in the harbor – success they realized came one step at a time!

Many women continued to be very active during the 90s, beginning with protests against the signs of a coming of the Gulf War. Betty speaking of her frustration called for a vigil of protest at the Day of Renewal in 1990. She went home, made a sign, went down and stood outside the city library and began a one-hour vigil that lasted 87 days. Gradually crowds of supporters weathered rain, sun, and even the cold of Christmas Day with her. The Serbian crisis and rape of Bosnian women saw VOW women, Women in Black, on vigil in 1993-94, each carrying a placard with a letter that spelled out “No Rape of Bosnian Women”. There were ‘Marches Against Poverty’ and a year long commitment preparing for the Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995.

As well, in that year Halifax was preparing for the G7 Summit. Representing VOW, Betty joined with others to plan an Alternative People’s Summit which unfolded with the take over of the Halifax Commons by many NGOs and social justice groups for 10 days. Exhibits, demonstrations, educational meetings, entertainment featuring Aboriginal drummers, singing, dancing and speakers were the beginnings of the tradition of Alternative Summits to follow the G7, now the G8. 1995 also saw the boycott of French wines in protest against France’s nuclear testing. VOW women and others, dressed in crazy clothes, sang protests songs on the sidewalk and street. Boycotting wines was not a

new tactic; dressed in black, VOW women stood in front of the Nova Scotia Liquor Commission to boycott the sale of South African wines to protest of Apartheid in 1983 and '84.

From the mid-90s to 2001, Sheila Zurbrigg led VOW women and many other individuals and groups championing against the sanctions in Iraq. After 9/11, 2001 VOW has vigiled with and for Muslim women friends who had also worked for peace. Since the late 80s, social action groups began to recognize that there were few single issues anymore. This inter-relatedness led to “coalition activism” as a form to address critical issues. VOW has been involved in them all protesting: nuclear, apartheid, war, sanctions, violence including torture of women in various countries, human rights and equality of women, to name a few, and for a moral economy and fair trade.

In these latter years a core group of NS VOW women have dedicated their expertise, time and energy to maintaining VOW's presence, namely: Carolyn Green, Mary Rigby, Andrea d'Sylvia, Sandy Greenberg and Ruth Bishop. We realize we have not identified all the VOW women by name however they too must be celebrated for their strength in relationships that has and does made VOW's activist possible. Muriel was the fourth and last President of VOW before VOW evolved into coordinators and steering committees.¹³ Today NS VOW is guided by a steering committee, the women are: Janet Maybee, Ruth Bishop, Sarah Morgan, Elinor Reynolds, Angella MacEwen, and Alexis MacDonald

Discussing the evolution of Nova Scotia VOW, Muriel and Betty spoke of how different times are now. Today's VOW members respond to the issues differently with Betty voicing her thoughts that the demands of women's paid employment and advanced education taxes women's available activism time. Over everything else they expressed their faith in women coming together with determination, commitment, hope, joy and good humour to work for peace, social justice and sisterhood.

Our goal for walking down memory lane was to seek insights from Muriel Duckworth and Betty Peterson about the developmental and early years of NS VOW. As stated, exact information on the NS VOW women's movement can be found in the files held by the Nova Scotia Archives. Please seek these out.

In closing, we share Muriel's statement that the women of Nova Scotia VOW could not speak about peace and ignore human rights, so human rights and peace were dual focuses for the NS chapter of VOW. We leave you with a visual sign of peace, Muriel's favorite pendant that spells out peace in the form of a dove, shown here.



¹³ Mcpherson, K. (1987, March). *Persistent voices*, p. 6. (Produced with help from the Lawson Memorial Fund). Toronto: VOW.