

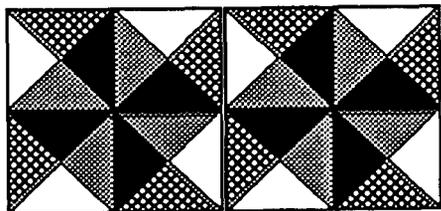
indicated her concern for peace. The central character of the play, Jessie, a wife and mother, embodies this concern. Suffering from marital and family woes, Jessie involves herself with the quilting of a Peace Quilt. The play shows the women of the community at a quilting bee — a “stitch and bitch” as it was known to those attending. Through the conversations, the audience comes to realize that even though the characters are caught up with their own problems, by coming together they are provided with the strength and support to work for personal, communal, and global peace.

The play made its debut in “Standin’ the Gaff” and subsequently was performed at one of Cape Breton’s annual festivals — Festival Bras D’Or — held in the summer. The play not only incorporates messages of working for peace on every level, but also provided opportunity to display the Cape Breton Peace Quilt.

The prospect of touring with the play and the quilt has been put on hold, so for now the quilt hangs on a wall in a church on the North Shore. However, the quilt itself is available to women’s groups and peace groups who wish to display it. For more information on displaying the quilt and/or purchasing a poster, contact: Carol Gibson-Kennedy, Quilters for Peace, R.R. #4, Baddeck, Nova Scotia, B0E 1B0.

The Cape Breton Peace Quilt, as seen on the back cover of this issue of *Canadian Woman Studies*, is a stunning work of art. More than that, however, it is concrete evidence of the creativity that can develop when ordinary people gather together, support each other, and work together for social good.

Bertha Ann MacLean, who is married with two daughters, lives in Leitches Creek, a small community just outside Sydney, Cape Breton. She is the President of Women Unlimited, a local feminist group, and is a founding member of Cooperative Effort for Social Action.



Bomb-Fire for Peace

by *Bertha Ann MacLean*

I was walking through our local mall during this past holiday season, trying to find last minute items and figure out what my children wanted for Christmas. As usual it was my Saturday off, time to spend with my kids. I love our week-ends together when we can share our time. We had all grown bored, though, waiting for the snow to arrive and make the cold weather seem worthwhile.

This particular weekend, Santa Claus was due to make his first appearance in town; a parade was planned for his arrival. The prospect of watching my children’s eyes fill with wonder and hope had me planning our venture into town for days in advance. We would go to the parade and then on to grandmother’s. Finally, we’d go to the mall to see what attracted my daughters’ attention.

The very thought of the day had me grinning from ear to ear, for I am one who looks to Christmas as a time of reflection, a time when I feel love and give love. Memories would overwhelm me when I caught the mere glimpse of Christmas wrapping paper: my grandmother steam-

ing her prized plum puddings and my mother whipping up a batch of hard sauce; my father always surprising me with a present I failed to find before Christmas.

I badly wanted to show these times to my children and somehow make them see more than the glitter and tinsel. I wanted them to feel the love and peace that surrounded them and draw strength from it. We awoke Saturday morning to a down-pour of sleet and rain, but were not disheartened. When the parade was postponed for an hour, I took the opportunity to sit down and watch a Saturday morning television show that had my children’s undivided attention. It was a new show — something to do with a futuristic superman who fought against evil forces. I didn’t like the show. I wanted my children to be able to look to the night sky and see beauty and mystery, not battling spaceships, so I voiced my concerns and rose to shut off the machine.

And then I saw it. A commercial for a revolutionary new toy. One that brings you inside the TV set and allows you to take part in the action. You, too, can now



Paul [left] and Tessa Kendrick, Michael Aucoin and Ben Goetz

Photo: Ted Rhodes

shoot along with the good guys and watch the bad guys you aim for drop dead. This ad was telling my children the joys of killing while they slurped their morning cereal! I switched off the television in disgust and turned my mind to the parade.

But, oh, what a dismal affair that turned out to be. The clowns' make-up ran down their drenched cheeks and my youngest saw visions of her worst nightmare. The postal carriers refused to give my children any candy because they had forgotten their letters to Santa and poor Saint Nick looked as if he had been fished from a soggy swamp.

I dragged my dampened spirit and children back to the car and hoped my mother would renew the joy I had felt only hours ago. Her stories of holidays past and the taste of her Christmas cookies were bound to be uplifting.

She, however, had made different plans. I was somehow surprised not to see her waiting at the door with cookies in hand and the scent of Christmas baking still fresh on her clothes. There was no one home; the only thing left to do was seek out toyland, refusing to let the bleakness of the weather or the happenings of the morning spoil what was left of our day.

The mall was crowded with cranky and tired people, all in a hurry to be somewhere else. When at last we arrived at the most favored toy store, my heart was lifted by the squeals of delight that sprang from my children. Aisles and aisles of every talking, walking, singing, blinking doll and animal imaginable. I gasped, however, when I caught a glimpse of the prices. \$198 for a doll! With my husband unemployed and me working for minimum wage, there is no way we could afford such gifts. I distracted the children as best I could and moved our cart onward to find cheaper items for their Christmas lists.

As we maneuvered through narrow, awkward rows, I noticed the way the toys seemed to be arranged separately for boys and girls. There were rows of toys that beckoned to the girls with their pretty pink packaging and cutesy displays, but the aisles designated for traditional boys' toys seemed dark and foreboding. Everything was grey or black and there were toys littered all over the floor. There were robots, spaceships with missiles, and guns. Lots of guns. It was scary to watch my two year-old pick up the latest fashion

in toy guns and know how to use it. She pointed the barrel at her sister's head and pulled the trigger.

That image is one I will not forget and is what made me finally decide to say no to the cheap, shameless celebration that Christmas was becoming. I would not become troubled, hurried, or bothered. I would not let my children be overcome by the commercialism of Christmas and I would especially not stand for this offensive display of war toys. I was appalled to watch my child fondle a gun as naturally as she had once fondled my breast.

I packed up my kids and headed for the exit. I was determined that my children would remember this Christmas as a time of love, hope, peace on earth, good will to all people.

But it was December 12, less than two weeks away from Christmas and I had no idea what I should do. I called my good friend Joanie Andrews. She had always wanted to organize a bonfire to gather together those people opposed to war. She hoarded away gifts and presents of war toys given to her son, saving them for fuel for the fire. Why not plan a festive "bomb"-fire, we thought, where friends and strangers could meet and allow the warmth of the season into their hearts.

Joanie went to work finding the right people to talk to and I sat down to write our public service announcements and press releases. The response Joanie received from the city was overwhelming. The fire chief agreed to supervise the burning of our fire and the recreation department allowed us the use of a central ballpark, strategically located across the street from our local mall.

The writing of the press releases proved to be a more difficult task. We didn't want to appear radical or destructive, but rather wanted the event to highlight peace and compassion, especially for our children. We chose not to focus on the burning of the toys, which some would see primarily as destructive or adding toxic fumes to the air. We chose instead to canvas for any donations — from kindling to war toys — for the fire.

The bomb-fire was scheduled for December 19. The media had to be contacted and Joanie and I braved what turned out to be a three-day snowstorm to seek out all facets of the local media. The first radio station we approached granted us an interview and was so taken with the story that

they ran excerpts from our interview in every news broadcast that day. The rest of the radio stations ran our public service announcements. A friend of Joanie's returned a favor and printed a feature article on our fire in the next issue of the most popular local newspaper. It was too late to get television coverage because they needed two week's notice.

Within hours of our initial contact with the media, we received money from peace activist Marion Mathieson to buy candles. On her suggestion, we contacted Rev. Margaret Collins, who is active in Ploughshares, and were given dozens of brochures on war and war toys.

We were now only two days from the lighting of our fire and as yet we didn't have enough wood to serve as toothpicks. Joanie again came to the rescue and went gathering scraps of lumber from wherever she could find it.

The snow finally stopped. On the morning of December 19 there were bright skies. By 6 p.m., the appointed time, we were ready, having ironed out all the last minute details. It was a beautiful crisp evening but the wind was howling and temperatures dropped way below zero.

Joanie astonished herself more than anyone when she lit the fire with one lone match. The winds fanned the spark and, in what seemed like seconds, a glorious bomb-fire flickered before us. My children huddled around the fire to warm their hands and noses before they returned to play with the other children gathered there. One little boy excitedly raced up to the fire and, with wide-eyed glee, announced he had been waiting all day to burn his gun. He threw his toy into the flames and watched as it melted to a black, sticky lump.

Forty or more people weathered the cold and the wind to share in the moment, and the sight of fire-shadows dancing on the freshly fallen snow was wonderful. We lit candles, sang carols, laughed, cried, and felt strengthened by the fact that we had not lost hope, that we had acted on our convictions.

Joanie and I know we accomplished what we set out to do. She burned the war toys at a fire she had envisioned for so long and I gave my children a memory on which to build. And those who witnessed the blaze were comforted and warmed by a fire generated by one single thought: peace on earth, goodwill to all.