

Mothers In Arms

By Liisa Atva

My mother once held up a train. Not singlehandedly, she was with the *Raymur Mothers* “gang.” Raymur Place, in East Vancouver, was British Columbia’s largest low-income public housing project – 400 families, mostly single mothers and their children. In 1971 we were one of those families.

To get to the local high school, I had to cross a busy train track, a key railroad into the Port of Vancouver. Trains, so long that you couldn’t see the end, would stop on the tracks often for half-an-hour at a time. I soon learned that being late for school on account of the trains was no excuse. “They didn’t just build those tracks last night,” said the school officer as she handed me a late slip. But being a typical teenager, I had a hard time getting out of bed in the mornings and invariably faced a dilemma – wait for the train to move, risking a late mark, or climb between the boxcars. I tried the climb once, but a sudden jerk of the train evoked the tale about a boy who’d lost half his foot, and I scrambled back down.

However, further north on the tracks, across from the elementary school, children often climbed onto the trains. Worried that it was only a matter of time before someone was injured, a group of concerned mothers wrote letters, made phone calls, and attended meetings at City Hall. Frustrated that their concerns were ignored, they went door to door in Raymur Place enlisting support from the other mothers, including mine. On January 6, 1971 a dozen mothers blockaded the tracks, shutting down rail business to the Port. The mothers soon had the attention of the City, the railway and the media.

The blockade came down within hours when the railway agreed not to run trains while children were going to and from school – a promise soon broken. The mothers returned with tents, prepared to stay until their requests were met. They camped on the tracks for three days until they were slapped with an injunction –with the threat of jail time. The mothers went to court prepared to defend themselves – none of them could afford a lawyer. Luckily, a lawyer who happened to be in the courtroom at the time offered his help free of charge and was successful in having the injunction dismissed on a technicality. Facing further costly delays until another injunction could be obtained, the railway agreed to post a \$50,000 security bond to be held until an overpass was built.

Those were exciting times – Raymur Place was in the news! Ordinary people – our mothers – were taking a stand. It was a lesson in empowerment, and I like to think that it had an impact on me. Although I’m quiet and unassuming, I’ve always been able to stand up for myself.

The overpass is still there today, a reminder of what the Raymur Mothers accomplished. They went on to open a food co-op at Raymur – the closest grocery store was eleven blocks away and most Raymur residents did not have cars – and successfully lobbied for a community centre and gym. Raymur had been built with very little playground facilities for the hundreds of children.

In the fall of 2014 I had the pleasure of meeting several of the Raymur Mothers who started it all. I'd been invited, along with several other children of Raymur, to share my experiences for a dramatized version of the story being retold as a musical play. (Thank-you to Bob Sarti for his words, Bill Sample for his music, and director Jay Hamburger.)

I listened as the Raymur Mothers reminisced; how they stood together on the tracks, arm in arm, feeling the vibration as a train approached, so scared that they were shaking. But they held their ground, refused to move, and stopped that train. Today they are dignified, strong women, some who went on to careers helping others, all humble about what they accomplished.

When I lived in Raymur, there was a stigma attached to it – we were seen as the “poorest of the poor.” Once when a guy I'd met at a party gave me a ride home, he said incredulously, “You live here? I'm afraid to let you out of the car.” He never ventured back. I distanced myself from Raymur as soon as I could, moving away as soon as I finished high school. Later, during university, and in my professional career, coming from Raymur wasn't something I bragged about.

But over the years, something in me changed. I was drawn back to the neighbourhood to volunteer. I started to talk about it. I began to write about it. And as I watched the play with several Raymur Mothers and children – all of us teary-eyed by the end – I realized that I was proud to be from Raymur.