

Research Project Overview: Joanne Helmer, 1970s-90s.

HIST 3990: Politics in Southern Alberta, 1970s-90s.

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August 15, 2024

Both within Canada as well as Alberta specifically, there exists a perception that Southern Alberta is a hotbed of conservatism. When you think of Alberta, what comes to mind? Stampede, perhaps cowboys, Rodeos, traditional values, beef, and other “Western” topics. However, this sort of perception is just one of many: Alberta is home to a vibrant array of peoples, a significant number of which do not fall under this stereotype! Since time immemorial, the Indigenous Nations of what would later become Treaty Seven have occupied this land; those being the Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Stoney-Nakoda, and Tsuut’ina Nations. As well, Southern Alberta has a rich history of immigrant, disabled, queer, and other marginalized groups. Outside of lived experience, there are also people who simply do not agree with conservative ideals, such as Joanne Helmer, the individual this series of papers are centered around.

Helmer worked at the *Lethbridge Herald* from 1975 to around 2001. During her time there, she covered a multitude of issues, including but not limited to: the completion of the Oldman River Dam in 1992, the Lubicon Cree Land Claims around and during the 1988 Calgary Olympics, unrest around abortion rights, the proliferation of the AIDS virus in Southern Alberta, nuclear disarmament post-Cold War, and general politics such as conversations with premiers and members of parliament. This was partially done through the *Herald’s Face-to-Face* column, of which she wrote hundreds throughout her time at the *Herald*. It was set up so that she would have a face-to-face interview with the subject, in which she posed a question; from there, the conversation flowed. Neither Helmer nor the interviewee would know exactly where the interview would end up.

As part of the History Department at the University of Lethbridge's Joanne Helmer Research Fellowship I have the honour of studying Helmer's time with the *Herald*, in a direction of my choosing. Because of my prior interests and lived experience with political history, I have decided to go in this direction, as you can probably guess! One area in particular that has always intrigued me is the stereotype of "The West" that lives here in Alberta- specifically, the idea that "The West" is built on an unshakable core of (typically conservative) traditions. As someone who does not fit them myself, the history of those who also do not fit is interesting, and vital. Joanne's interviews provide evidence that such people have always existed here, in contrast to the homogenizing white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant settlers evoked when one thinks of "The West." Having grown up in Alberta myself, I have been taught our histories in many ways, from a grade school-level basic understanding to in-depth university courses. One pattern that has remained throughout these various classes however is the idea that Western Canada was "tamed," that great white men came to survive off the sweat of their brow. While that is one facet of prairie history, there are so many other histories to be found here, such as immigration stories and the stories of minorities that often don't make it to public and popular histories. I am extremely grateful to be able to study Helmer and write about her!

Finally, a huge thank you to the sponsor of this research fellowship! As well, I would like to thank my professor and supervisor Dr. Sheila McManus for all of their assistance throughout this project, for agreeing to take it on in the first place, and for being such a great teacher over the years.

Essay One: Joanne Helmer, the Oldman River Dam, and the Environment, from the 1970s-90s.

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This essay is one in a series of six research papers looking at the political climate of Alberta from the 1970s-2000s, through the work of Joanne Helmer, a journalist who worked at the *Lethbridge Herald* during that time. The city now known as Lethbridge is located on traditional Blackfoot land, Southern Alberta. Due to its location, the city and surrounding area are prone to arid weather and have been since before settlers arrived. This area is known as Palliser's Triangle, named the white colonial explorer, John Palliser, that demarcated its boundary in 1862. He would describe this area as relatively useless for agriculture, although there is much farming and ranching activity found in this "triangle" today, with the help of irrigation technology.¹ This is to say that Southern Alberta has been a tricky place to exist permanently in for the settlers that came to live here - arid, high temperatures and therefore a lack of precipitation make farming in particular difficult. One only needs to think back to Alberta's Dust Bowl years to see this in effect. In theory then, a dam built to service the surrounding watershed should benefit everyone, including the Piikani who traditionally lived on that land.² One of the Piikani reservations exists just 12 kilometers below the dam site, meaning life on the reserve was impacted by the dam.³ However, the creation of the Oldman River Dam was messy, to say the least. One columnist at the *Lethbridge Herald*, Joanne Helmer, would cover the debacle between 1987-1998, showing that despite the pervasive myth that Southern Alberta is agriculture and economics first, and environment second, there was a strong community of environmentalists, too.

¹ SA Wolfe, CH Hugenholtz, and Olav B Lian, "Palliser's Triangle: Reconstructing the 'central desert' of the southwestern Canadian prairies during the late 1850s," *The Holocene* 23, no. 5 (May 2013): 699.

² R. C. de Loë, "Dam the news: Newspapers and the Oldman River Dam project in Alberta," *Journal of Environmental Management* 55, no. 4 (April 1999): 288.

³ Jay Hansford C. Vest, "The Oldman River and the Sacred: A Meditation upon Aputosi Pii'kani Tradition and Environmental Ethics," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 25, no. 2 (2005): 572.

The Federal Government began to worry about irrigation capacity in the prairies as early as 1894, and the Oldman River was considered for irrigation as soon as 1910. Over the course of 1919-1922 the Lethbridge North Irrigation District (LNID) would form, and purchase 205 acre right of way, going through the Peigan reserve. However, according to the Peigan, this occurred without their consent, and went against provisions of the Indian Act; this would set up future conflicts, especially because LNID's first attempt at construction, in 1923, occurred on a Peigan burial ground. The 1930s would not be a kind to Alberta farmers, either. By 1935, the *Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act* (PFRA) sought to undo drought and soil drifting; however, World War Two saw these efforts severely limited. Once veterans returned, they would find jobs within PFRA projects, until the federal government dropped the PFRA in the early 1960s, due to a lack of economic viability. In the 1970s LNID had both more land to supply with water, and less water to supply- a tricky position. The Government of Alberta, led by the Social Credit party, established the Environmental Conservation Authority (ECA) in 1970 as well. In practice however, the ECA *had* no authority, only serving in an advisory capacity. This would especially become apparent in 1975, when the Alberta Environmental Department (AED) ignored the findings of the ECA, building a dam on the Red Deer River despite advice pointing elsewhere. On June 14th, 1976, the AED outlined the need for a dam on the Oldman River, met with outcry by two groups: both the farmers who would be displaced by the building, as well as by the Peigan whom "saw the terms of Treaty 7 as meaning they owned the river."⁴

⁴ James Daschuk and Gregory P. Marchildon, "Historical Chronology of the Oldman River Dam Conflict," *Institutional Adaptations to Climate Change*, accessed August 12, 2024, <https://www.parc.ca/mcri/iacc036.php>.

Joanne Helmer's first Face-to-Face article on the Oldman River Dam would come out in the March 16th, 1985 *Herald* publication. This interview was between Helmer and Martha Kostuch, and while it was about the revised 1984 policy regarding the Eastern Slopes of the Rocky Mountains, they still spoke about the (still in proposal at that time) Oldman River Dam. This early interview would hit the nail on the head however, as Kostuch mentioned that: "...no project [made under the revised 1984 policy for land use and development] will be rejected for scientific or environmental reasons... would only be rejected for political reasons." Helmer also reminded the reader that they cannot "...read the new policy carelessly," a good lesson then and now.⁵ This interview was important as this was indeed the case – the Oldman River Dam was not rejected at all, despite the environmental and social impacts it had.

Two years later, in her December 2nd, 1987 column, Helmer talked to John Scott Black, communications officer for the Friends of the Oldman River (FOR) Society, and Roy Jensen, chairman of the Alberta Irrigation Projects Association. The FOR was comprised of landowners downstream from the dam, fishers who did not want the river's habitat changed, and members from the Piikani reserve.⁶ In this edition of Face-to-Face, the trio discussed the potential impact of the Oldman River Dam, which at this point, had already cost \$65 million dollars. Black was against the dam; Helmer quoted him as saying that "...putting an arbitrary price tag on the natural and historic ecosystem..." by a "...government [that] would like nothing better than to back out of the corner it's painted itself into," is not a good enough reason to go forward with the dam construction. Jensen, on the other hand, was for the dam continuing,

⁵ Joanne Helmer, "Face to Face: The Herald's Joanne Helmer chats with environmental advocate Martha Kostuch," *Lethbridge Herald*, March 16, 1985. It should be noted that in Helmer's writing the Piikani are called the Peigan; this has been changed for accuracy in this essay.

⁶ Jack Glenn, *Once upon an Oldman: Special Interest Politics and the Oldman River Dam* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 7.

despite the fact that there could be archaeological remains underneath the site: "...most of them are very deep, they've been underground for thousands of years now and another few thousand wouldn't hurt at all," according to two archaeological societies of Alberta (of which, he could not remember the names). He also mentioned that the potential significant loss of downstream habitat does not matter compared to what would be gained from the dam. I bring this up both to show Black's point of view, that when humans destroy an ecosystem, it is called progress rather than a disaster; as well, that Helmer fought back against Jensen's flippant responses to her questions: she pushed her question about the recreational value of the dam, and why they should "ruin" one area so another can be used.⁷

Later that year, in her September 16th, 1987 article titled "Enough smart retorts, give us some dam answers," she prodded even deeper. She pointed out that the then government ignored its own watchdog advisory, the ECA. She cut into the meat of the issue- that this was not just about irrigation, but about the use of public funds and a lack of answers. In pointing out this, alongside how the then Environment Minister Ken Kowalski expected the public simply to take his word for why the dam needed to continue, Helmer showed that at least on the environmental front there were active voices against this economy-first way of thinking. Specifically, she wrote: "[f]aith and submission belong in church; not in our political system."⁸ This is important to include, as for an opinion like this to be readily available in the public forum means it did exist loudly in Southern Alberta, contrary to perceived stereotypes of Alberta.

Five years later, in her July 8th, 1992 column, Helmer wrote a scathing report of how the planned "Festival of Life," meant to celebrate the opening of the Oldman River Dam, was called

⁷ Joanne Helmer, "Face to Face: Joanne Helmer talks to John Scott Black and Ross Jensen," *Lethbridge Herald*, December 2, 1987.

⁸ Joanne Helmer, "Enough smart retorts, give us some dam answers," *Lethbridge Herald*, September 16, 1987.

off due to vague threats reported to and by Ken Kowalski, the Provincial Public Works Minister at the time. Helmer included that Kowalski "...mutters darkly about a conspiracy involving the United Church, aboriginals, Friends of the Oldman River, and the Alberta Federation of Labor. Some kind of secret meeting was held by those 'networking' groups in Winnipeg that might result in charges being laid. (Only Kowalski could make 'networking' sound like a dirty deed!)." She also added that the government needed to provide more details for the public to believe the threat; "[o]therwise, it looks like they've resorted to a despicable manipulation of public opinion to help them save face when, in fact, the celebration was doomed from the moment the federal review panel report was released in May [1992]." The only "threats" he could name were Martha Kostuch calling the festival a "Celebration of Death," and Milton Born With a Tooth saying he would die to stop the dam. She then decided the "threat" that forced the festival to close was, in fact, a cover-up meant to save face for the Government of Alberta; to give a way out away from possible embarrassment or even charges of racism against the Piikani, who were not listened to or treated fairly during construction of the dam. I have chosen to include this column as it strongly shows that the stereotype of Southern Alberta being farmer-centric does not need to be the only way: she pointed out that "...panel member *Tracy Anderson, a lifelong resident of Southern Alberta and avid irrigation supporter, agreed with that conclusion* [that the Piikani were not treated fairly; italics from Helmer]." Although her conclusion sounds almost like a conspiracy, she was not wrong. Such an event *would* appear to be in bad taste and would certainly fit within the stereotype; that public outcry stopped it from happening shows that the public, or at least part of the public, did not fall into that stereotype.

⁹ Joanne Helmer, "Someone needs to give us more details on 'threats' that doomed Festival of Life," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 8, 1992.

In June, 1995, the so-called “Flood of the Century” would run through rivers in Southern Alberta. Included in the path was everything and everyone along the Oldman River, such as the Piikani Reserve and Lethbridge, among other towns. Helmer would write about it three years later, on March 26th, 1998; specifically, the residents of the reserve, and downstream irrigation farmers. For a bit of background, in 1981 the Alberta government agreed to fix all damages to the reserve by the irrigation system; Devalon Small Legs called it “[a]nother broken promise.” Fabian North Peigan, a band councillor, called on the federal government to use its authority to demand repairs.¹⁰ The fact that Helmer sought to cover the fallout of the 1995 flood three years shows that she, as well as other Southern Albertans, cared about government following through on commitments to Indigenous peoples, a theme that will be covered in another essay.

Shifting to non-Oldman River columns, Helmer covered a story on November 30th, 1994, about the Alberta Wilderness Association, and its fears about privatization of Alberta Parks. Such plans included extra fees on top of the regular park entrance fees, like camping sites and firewood. While the prospective private company would only be in charge of running the park, it was feared that this would be the “precursor to the sale of these sites.” In reporting on these worries, Helmer demonstrated that there was a general knowledge of what could occur if these parks became private; that such privatization could lead to a negative outcome for the environments of said parks, due to campers foraging for firewood instead of paying, among other non-ideal scenarios.¹¹

¹⁰ Joanne Helmer, “Shadows of the flood of ’95,” *Lethbridge Herald*, March 26, 1998.

¹¹ Joanne Helmer, “Wilderness association fears privatization,” *Lethbridge Herald*, November 30, 1994.

Everyone deserves to access the environment. Therefore, when the environment is altered, it is everyone's responsibility to ensure the natural remains. This goes double for land that has been stolen from the Indigenous Nations that have been on it since time immemorial, such as the controversial Oldman River Dam. There is an obligation to the government to use best practices such as environmental impact assessments, as well as consultation with inhabitants, that simply was not followed when the Dam was installed. That there was such a public outcry, Indigenous and settler both, shows that perhaps Southern Alberta was not as conservative and capitalistic as it may have seemed to be.

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Essay Two: Joanne Helmer, The Lubicon Cree Land Claims, Indigenous Self-Governance, and
the 1988 Winter Olympic Games in Calgary, Alberta.

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This essay is one in a series of six research papers looking at the political climate of Alberta from the 1970s-2000s, through the work of Joanne Helmer, a journalist who worked at the *Lethbridge Herald* during that time. The Indigenous Nations of Turtle Island, what we now know as Canada, have been here for time immemorial – for the region that is now Alberta Treaty 7 specifically, they are the Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, Stoney-Nakoda, and Tsuut’ina Nations.¹ Since the “discovery” and settlement of this region however, settlers have often looked on in self-interest first, without regard for those who had lived on this land before them.² The horrors that sprang forth from this selfishness have yet to be fully reconciled to this day. As a settler myself, it is not my place to claim any beginnings of reconciliation; this essay only serves to point out the potential, historical Canadian attitude that Indigenous peoples are any less than white folks, especially before the 21st century, was not the only opinion available. Joanne Helmer, a columnist at the *Lethbridge Herald*, often wrote about the Piikani, the Kainai (although in her writing they are the Peigan and the Blood), and the Lubicon Cree during the 1988 Olympics in Calgary. In her continual attention to these Nations, Helmer showed that this attitude of white people above all was not the only, nor dominant, attitude in Southern Alberta.

As John Bird points out in *Nation to Nation: Aboriginal Sovereignty and the Future of Canada*, despite the numerous recommendations made in the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) of 1996, little has been done by settler Canada in the way of reconciliation.³

¹ “Treaty Texts: Treaty and Supplementary Treaty no. 7.” Government of Canada, last modified August 30 2013, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100028793/1581292336658>

² Bryan D. Palmer, “The Past is Before Us: Capitalism, Colonialism, and Canada, 1500-2023,” *Labour/Le Travail* 93 (Spring 2024), 251.

³ John Bird, Lorraine Land, and Murray Macadam, eds., *Nation to Nation: Aboriginal Sovereignty and the Future of Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 2002), xvii.

Although this essay is written twenty two years after the second edition of this book, much remains the same: Indigenous self governance has yet to be fully realized, and while Indigenous history has begun to be taught in provincial curriculum, there is still so much left to reconcile before any amount of hurt caused by settlers can be left in the past. It is worth noting that the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* would come out in 2015, with many of the same issues brought up in the RCAP.

In the March 24th, 1984 edition of *Face-to-Face* Helmer spoke with Leroy Little Bear, then professor of Native American Studies at the University of Lethbridge, about his attendance at the First Minister's Conference on Aboriginal Rights. Little Bear's point about the Canadian bases for denying Indigenous land ownership - those being by conquest, by treaty, and by the Doctrine of Discovery was important as he showed how none of these legitimately worked: Canadian settlers never conquered many of the Nations found in Canada, as these Nations underwent the treaty process and therefore were not conquered by definition; however, the treaties eventually made were flawed, at best; finally, the Doctrine of Discovery was never intended to apply to Indigenous Nations, instead it only applied to and between European powers. As well, he outlined why reconciliation is still needed, rather than leaving everything in the past - that being, because injustice against Indigenous peoples is encoded into our current laws, it continues to be perpetuated and therefore continues to need to be reconciled.⁴

For the September 7th, 1985, *Face-to-Face* column, Helmer met with University of Lethbridge education professor Phil Lane. Prior to this, Lane was quoted at the Four Worlds Development Project (a project with the goal of eliminating alcohol and drug abuse from North

⁴ Joanne Helmer, "Face to Face: The Herald's editorial writer Joanne Helmer chats with U of L's Leroy Little Bear," *Lethbridge Herald*, March 24, 1984.

American Indigenous communities by 2000) as calling the huge alcohol and drug abuse statistics found amongst Indigenous peoples, that up to 80-95% of them struggled in this way, a genocide. He said that this substance abuse is one way to dealing with the intergenerational trauma caused by European actions, such as Residential Schooling.⁵ Just as with Little Bear's point, this has been picked this out as this kind of statistic still haunts Canada's Indigenous populations today.⁶ As well, it shows that folks in Southern Alberta, despite the stereotype of individualism and settlers first, did care about Indigenous welfare.

When it came time for the 1988 Olympics Calgary, Alberta won the bid to host. However, much of the promotional material considered for use in promoting the games was, in fact, either outright cultural appropriation or used harmful stereotyping of Indigenous peoples, as Christine O'Bonsawin pointed out in their 2010 paper on this topic. This included use of the stereotype of the "...Mountie [Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer], the cowboy, and the Indian" for cultural programming.⁷ As well, the Olympiques Calgary Olympics '88 wanted the medals handed out to show "...winter sporting equipment protruding from a ceremonial headdress [specifically downhill skis, ski poles, sleighs and toboggans,⁸ and], an enormous teepee at McMahon Stadium supporting the Olympics cauldron," and most egregiously, the Calgary Stampede Board suggested that an "Indian attack and wagon-burning" occur as part of the

⁵ Joanne Helmer, "Face to Face: Joanne Helmer chats with Phil Lane, education professor at the University of Lethbridge," *Lethbridge Herald*, September 7, 1985.

⁶ T. Pride et al., "Trauma-informed Approaches to Substance Use Interventions with Indigenous Peoples: A Scoping Review," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 53, no. 5 (October 2021): 460.

⁷ Christine M. O'Bonsawin, "'No Olympics on stolen native land': contesting Olympic narratives and asserting Indigenous rights within the discourse of the 2010 Vancouver Games," *Sport in Society* 13, no. 1 (January 2010): 147.

⁸ K.B Wamsley and Mike Heine, "'Don't Mess with the Relay – It's Bad Medicine' Aboriginal Culture and the 1988 Winter Olympics," in *Olympic Perspectives: Third International Symposium for Olympic Research*, ed. Robert K. Barney, Scott G. Martyn, Douglas A. Brown, and Gordan H. MacDonald (London: Western University, 1996), 173.

opening ceremony.⁹ While this final suggestion did not get the go-ahead, the fact that it was even proposed is shocking. That the many Indigenous Nations that have lived in what is now known as Alberta far longer than any settler were never consulted about how they should have been included in Olympic marketing is little surprise; in using the “Western Hospitality” stereotype, the organizers made Indigenous people nothing more than a foil for the Olympic “cowboy.” As well, Calgary is an oil town – because of this, the ’88 Olympics saw sponsorship by multiple oil companies. While company sponsorship, often motivated by profit, is a sad fact of the Capitalistic climate we find ourselves in, one specific sponsorship would see public contention: an exhibit titled *The Spirit Sings*, shown at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, and sponsored by Shell Canada.¹⁰

As Helmer found out in her interview with Lubicon Cree Chief Bernard Ominayak on February 6th, 1987, the boycott against *The Spirit Sings* was not just about artifact use: the basis for the boycott was instead due to the Lubicon Cree land claim disputes. As Chief Ominayak said, “...the focus should be more on the living human beings here today that might not be there tomorrow.”¹¹ This exhibit was comprised of Indigenous artifacts borrowed from museums around the world; it was ironic in that asking for artifacts from colonial institutions like museums engenders the idea that Indigenous cultures are dead or dying, when that is far from the case.¹² One Nation, the Lubicon Cree who live 50 miles north of Peace River, rightfully took issue with

⁹ O’Bonsawin, “No Olympics on stolen native land,” 147. See also: <https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/calgary-1988/medal-design>

¹⁰ Wamsley and Heine, “Don’t Mess with the Relay,” 174.

¹¹ Joanne Helmer, “Face to Face: Joanne Helmer talks to Lubicon Chief Bernard Ominayak,” *Lethbridge Herald*, February 6, 1988.

¹² Wamsley and Heine, “Don’t Mess With the Relay,” 174.

this exhibit as well as the Olympics as a whole. *The Spirit Sings*, and the Olympics in general, was chosen because it was sponsored by Shell Canada – the same company drilling for oil on Lubicon Cree land; the same company that “control[ed] the whole system [the court system].” This specific land claim battle was waged on the fact that the Lubicon Cree were left out of the treaty signing process in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.¹³ This meant that they still held their Indigenous title for the land, putting the Lubicon Cree in the same situation as the Nations in the Yukon, Northwest Territories and British Columbia: technically still owning their land, but rarely actually consulted about its use. That Helmer sought out this interview and promoted Chief Ominayak’s voice showed a willingness to go against popular public sentiment, against the patriotism expected for the Olympic games – a willingness to stand up for what she believed.

Earlier that year, in Helmer’s January 22nd, 1988 column titled “Disparaging the flame,” she wrote about her “...urge to douse the Olympic flame...” when it was brought to Southern Alberta. She also mentioned how if half of the energy used to organize the Olympic Games went into instead demanding justice from the federal and provincial governments, Indigenous land claims would be settled fast and fair, allowing everyone to move on.¹⁴ While the Lubicon Cree land claims were not the centre of this article, in pointing out the hypocrisy of displaying stolen Indigenous property in *The Spirit Sings* (for profit, no less) to drum up interest and tourism for the ’88 Olympic Games, Helmer showed that even some people of settler background cared at the time. Her article among others drew ire from the public, such as one column titled “Smile Joanne, catch the spirit, share the flame” that asked “[w]hat’s wrong with Joanne Helmer? I can’t imagine anyone reacting so negatively towards something so great and magnificent as the

¹³ Helmer, “Face to Face: Joanne Helmer talks to Lubicon Chief Bernard Ominayak,” *Lethbridge Herald*, February 6, 1988.

¹⁴ Joanne Helmer, “Disparaging the flame,” *Lethbridge Herald*, January 22, 1988.

Olympics! Granted, she says she isn't a sports fanatic, so obviously she knows nothing about the 'Thrill of Victory' or the 'Agony of Defeat.'"¹⁵ This came from so called patriots and sports fans alike – that Helmer published her article, and was *allowed* to publish it, reveals that she did not fall into the stereotype of “traditional Albertan.” In her November 6th, 1989 column, she goes as far to point out the “...irony, that the interlopers [settlers] should need to open their doors to those who were here first!”¹⁶ That is a surprising and striking sentence to see from a white journalist, especially in the late '80s and early '90s. She hit the nail on the head: the settler population of Alberta had, and to this day does, discriminate against our Indigenous neighbours.

Should Helmer have covered the 1988 Calgary Olympics in the way she did? Despite the backlash she incurred for her opinions about the Olympics, the service she provided in giving an alternate perspective on the Lubicon Cree land claims struggle was invaluable. Through Helmer's writing and attitude towards the conflicts that occurred in and around the '88 Olympics, we can see that the Western (settler) Canadian stereotype of caring for yourself first – the opposite of the espoused "Western Hospitality" marketed toward the world using events like the Calgary Stampede – was not the only worldview present in Southern Alberta at the time.

¹⁵ Dave Rohovie, “Smile Joanne, catch the spirit, share the flame,” *Lethbridge Herald*, February 3, 1988.

¹⁶ Joanne Helmer, “Invisible barrier keeps neighbors apart: It's 'the interlopers' turn to hold a block party,” *Lethbridge Herald*, November 6, 1989.

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Essay Three: Joanne Helmer, Abortion and Women's Rights in Southern Alberta, from the 1970s-90s.

HIST 3990: Politics in Southern Alberta, 1970s-90s.

Dr. Sheila McManus

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001235843

August 15, 2024

This is one essay in a series of six researching Joanne Helmer, a journalist for the *Lethbridge Herald* from the 1970s to the early 2000s, through her columns. Lethbridge, and Southern Alberta in general, has a long-standing stereotype of religiosity – specifically, sects of Christianity, including mainstream and evangelical denominations like Mormonism.¹ While perhaps not as many people present in Southern Alberta fall into this stereotype as it would lead you to believe, there is nonetheless a perceived large religious presence found here.² A large religious presence is fine, of course; that is, until those following it impose their values onto others. In the case of the right to access safe abortion, women’s rights inside and outside of the house, and people who may be outside those religious values however, religious interference leads to debate, and at worst, the making of a harder lived experience.

In her November 5th, 1983 column, Helmer covered the so-called “Canadian League of Rights,” a far-right Christian group. This so-called “League” was a branch of the International League of Rights. Whose rights, you may ask? White, Christian Canadians, apparently. According to the League, the forces of Communism in conjunction with Jewish individuals and the Bolsheviks were working together to dismantle Capitalism and establish a “...unified world government and unified banking system...” – the League, therefore, was created to keep the world divided, as the Christian God intended. Helmer cited a book distributed by the Canadian League, *The Real Holocaust – The Attack on Unborn Children and Life Itself*, a book that claimed the Holocaust, the death of six million Jewish peoples among others, was fabricated to

¹ Richard Sherlock, “Morom Migration and Settlement after 1875,” *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975): 64.

² Erika Dyck and Karissa Patton, “Activists in the ‘Bible Belt’: Conservatism, Religion, and Recognizing Reproductive Rights in 1970s Southern Alberta,” in *Compelled to Act: Histories of Women’s Activism in Western Canada*, ed. Sarah Carter and Nanci Langford (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 198.

make Christians feel bad about being Christian – a so-called “sneak attack on Christianity;” in their opinion, the “abortion holocaust” is instead a “...full-scale frontal assault on western civilization.” She condemned the League and its worldview, writing that it is a “...repeat of that which Hitler exploited. It is extremely dangerous.”³ Given the political climate in North America this essay is being written in, I find it incredibly important to point out how many sides to politics have always been around – and that those who spew hate for others never have anyone but their own best interests in mind. To pull on a specific thread of this column however, the “debate” around the right to access safe abortions is one Helmer followed in her time.

June 23rd, 1984, Helmer interviewed Dr. Morris Shumiatcher, the lawyer for Joe Borowski during the Regina challenge of Canada’s abortion laws. This painted Dr. Shumiatcher as solidly “...small c- conservative...” in Helmer’s words. So small c- conservative, in fact, that he seemed to be against medicare: “[s]o many things can be justified as humanitarianism... [w]hen someone says I’m doing this for your own good, you can forgive that person... The greatest crimes in the world have been committed in the name of humanity.” He went so far as to call government “evil.”⁴ While this attitude is the spitting image of the Alberta or even Prairie provinces in general stereotype of conservatism, the fact that he had someone to fight *against* means others were present to defend a less right-wing way of thinking. That his case lost in Regina shows this idea, as well. This case was specifically under the idea that the therapeutic abortion (abortion due to lack of viability of the fetus or potential harm to the pregnant person’s health) provision in the Criminal Code did not go against the Charter of Rights.⁵ Of course, such

³ Joanne Helmer, “League of Rights Wrong: Tidbits of truth among twisted and tortured ‘facts,’” *Lethbridge Herald*, November 5, 1983.

⁴ Joanne Helmer, “First in a series: Face to Face: The Herald’s Joanne Helmer chats with anti-abortionist lawyer Morris Shumiatcher,” *Lethbridge Herald*, June 23, 1984.

⁵ Beth Palmer, “‘Lonely, tragic, but legally necessary pilgrimages’: Transnational Abortion Travel in the 1970s,” *Canadian Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (December 2011): 639.

an idea also ignored the sheer amount of barriers individuals seeking a therapeutic abortion faced, such as a low physical number of hospitals, gestational limits, and anti-choice medical staff.⁶ Dr. Shumiatcher and his client sought to take this further however, to the Supreme Court, to have them look at the constitution instead. His final point was a rhetorical question, clarifying whether a fetus counts within “everyone” for Section 7 of the Charter of Rights: that everyone has a right to life.⁷ While Helmer remained fairly neutral in her reactions in this column, it seemed like she did not agree with Dr. Shumiatcher; she challenged his logic in multiple places, implying that perhaps she did not feel the same.

Jumping ahead to May 17th, 1986, Helmer interviewed Dr. Heather Morris, a longtime member of the Pro-Life movement. One of the first things Dr. Morris does in this column is call Dr. Morgentaler a liar, one who “...pretends to the public that when a woman was first pregnant abortion just removed a blob of tissue.” Moving past the fact that early abortions do, in fact, just remove a “blob of tissue,” her outright attack on Dr. Morgentaler, the man who would be responsible for the decriminalization of abortion just two years after this article, is striking.⁸ As well, Dr. Morris’s insistence that life begins at conception is one that Helmer tried to offer an alternative idea to, yet Dr. Morris ignored her. She challenged that any basic medical textbook, *written without a bias*, will say life begins at conception; however, I am willing to bet any book that said otherwise would be “biased” to her. In fact, she called abortion an abuse that a woman

⁶ Christabelle Sethna and Marion Doull, “Accidental Tourists: Canadian Women, Abortion Tourism, and Travel,” *Women’s Studies* 41, no. 4 (June 2012): 467-8.

⁷ Joanne Helmer, “Second in a series: Face to Face: The Herald’s Joanne Helmer chats with anti-abortionist lawyer Morris Shumiatcher,” *Lethbridge Herald*, June 25, 1984.

⁸ Rachael Johnstone, *After Morgentaler: The Politics of Abortion in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017), 3.

“... can only achieve that [an abortion] by subjecting another human being to death.”⁹ Without harping on this point too much more, Dr. Morris was set in her ways – Helmer, on the other hand, seemed to have been on the pro-choice side of this conversation, given her protestations.

The choice to abort an unwanted or unplanned pregnancy is not an easy one, without even factoring in social, political and economic stigma that surrounds this procedure now; let alone back in '86. I find it incredibly important to touch on however, as abortion, among the right to other personal medical choices, has experienced an erosion as of late. While not explicitly related, the war on the ability to access safe, respectful transgender healthcare currently seen in Alberta, in my mind, means we could see a similar attack on the right to have an abortion soon. Hopefully a revoking of *any* rights or freedoms does not occur at all.

On March 8th, 1986, Helmer had a column with Terri Marco, the Southern Alberta representative for the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee (ASWAC). Marco talked about women living below the poverty line, solo-parenting, widows stuck living on pensions, and pay equity among other topics. She called all of these “disadvantages” that women were working under that men were not and pay equity specifically a “...fairly controversial issue...” at the time. That the ASWAC even existed at this time showed a concern for women’s welfare, going against the conservative myth Alberta is known for; even more so when it comes to pay equity, not equality, for women’s work. Marco even linked this back into a Capitalistic way of looking at it, in that providing women with equitable wages allows them to spend more money within the economy. She also mentioned that some jobs or fields may need extra incentive to hire and/or

⁹ Joanne Helmer, “Face to Face: Joanne Helmer chats with Dr. Heather Morris, a member of the Pro-Life movement,” *Lethbridge Herald*, May 17, 1986.

train women (such as traditionally masculine jobs in the trades), recognizing a need for women to be included – in Alberta, trades tend to have little space for women.¹⁰ From this it can be seen that even back in 1986, attitudes around who should work what kinds of jobs were shifting, at least within those who supported the feminist point of view. While such a perspective may have been limited to feminists at the time, the roots present indicate, at least, a small number of forward-thinking individuals.

Abortion has been and will remain to be a controversial topic – that is simply the nature of trying to tell someone else what to do or not do with their own body; doubly so when Dr. Morgentaler brought it to a head in 1988, resulting in abortion being decriminalized in Canada.¹¹ The past can often serve as a mirror for the future, and in this case, it shows how the argument against abortion, among other typically small c- conservative arguments, can and will continue to pop up. That it is a continual fight to keep the bodily autonomy of pregnant people squarely within their grasp shows that we must not fall into despair when laws change; the people always have a voice. We just need to continue to use it to advocate for those whose rights are on the line, just like we always have – just as Helmer did in her columns.

¹⁰ Joanne Helmer, “Face to Face: Joanne Helmer chats with Terri Marco, Southern Alberta representative on the Alberta Status of Women Committee,” *Lethbridge Herald*, March 8, 1986.

¹¹ Johnstone, *After Morgentaler*, 3.

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Essay Four: Joanne Helmer, The AIDS Epidemic, and LGBTQ+ Life in Southern Alberta from
the 1970s-90s.

HIST 3990: Politics in Southern Alberta, 1970s-90s.

Dr. Sheila McManus

Joe Gehring

001235843

August 15, 2024

This essay is one in a series of six research papers looking at the political climate of Alberta from the 1970s-2000s, through the work of Joanne Helmer, a journalist who worked at the *Lethbridge Herald* during that time. This time, we look at the historical LGBTQ+ population of Southern Alberta, what life was like for queer individuals socially, and how the HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, respectively) epidemic affected that life – all through Helmer’s writing.¹ This is a difficult topic to research however, due to the stereotype that Southern Alberta is a religious hotspot.² That perception makes it hard to find lived experiences, both due to a lack of recording or records being intentionally lost, as well as a community-based perception that queer folks are not welcome here; this is false of course, but the specter remains regardless. In 1998, a massive win for the queer population in Alberta occurred: in *Vriend vs. Alberta*, it was decided that Alberta’s Individual Rights Protection Act needed to include sexual orientation. Delwin Vriend was fired from his job at Kings College, a religious college based out of Edmonton due to his orientation.³ This discrimination fit well within the stereotype of Alberta’s conservatism, especially given the governing party at the time was the Progressive Conservatives.⁴ Not all of Alberta was this way however: the Alberta Rockies Gay Rodeo Association (ARGRA) was founded in 1991, and seems to go directly against the symbolic cowboy used in “traditional” events like Stampede.⁵ However, disease does not discriminate, gay or straight.

¹ From this point on, the word “queer” will be used instead of LGBTQ+, for ease of writing and reading.

² Richard Sherlock, “Morom Migration and Settlement after 1875,” *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975): 64.

³ Gloria Filax, “Queer Activism and the Severely Normal Agenda in Alberta, 1900-Present: A Continuing Saga,” in *The Gay Agenda: Claiming Space, Identity and Justice, Counterpoints* 437 (2014): 171.

⁴ Gloria Filax, “Issues and Agenda: Producing Homophobia in Alberta, Canada in the 1990s,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 17, no. 1 (March 2004): 88.

⁵ Filax, “Severely Normal Agenda,” 178.

One of Helmer's first columns to mention AIDS was her *Face-to-Face* installment with Hugh McCullum, an editor and publisher of *United Church Observer*, March 26th, 1988. While the history of AIDS and AIDS activism tends to skew towards the United States, the virus was also present in Canada, as can be seen in this column. It is a myth that AIDS was or is a gay man's disease, as it can affect anyone who has sexual intercourse among other spreading vectors; however, it *is* true that the queer community was disproportionately affected and ignored during the epidemic. That it was called an epidemic at all, not a pandemic, is telling. While the mention of AIDS was in passing, McCullum spoke about a United Church theology student who was to be ordained in May of that year, whose partner was lost to AIDS and wanted to minister to AIDS victims. McCullum was exceptionally sensitive to this story, stating that people should have been able to see that "...they're [gay men] not perverts, that they're decent human beings." He also spoke of the backlash the *Observer* received when they published that student's recommendation for ordination on March 4th – by March 17th, they had received 184 hate messages, some even stating they hoped McCullum himself got AIDS.⁶

March 24th, 1990, Helmer wrote an entire column purely about living with AIDS in Southern Alberta. She recounted B's story, having found a shirt in Lethbridge that said, "AIDS kills gays dead." Having been HIV positive at the time, and therefore at risk to develop AIDS, B could not simply walk away from the shirt, a shirt that "...thoughtlessly celebrate[d] the death of another human being." Such a hateful shirt certainly does play into the stereotype of Southern Alberta's strong religious leaning, but the fact that Helmer wrote this column *at all* shows it does not need to be the case in our historical understanding. She even called for "...love and

⁶ Joanne Helmer, "Face to Face: Joanne Helmer talks to Observer publisher Hugh McCullum," *Lethbridge Herald*, March 26, 1988.

understanding...” to support people living with AIDS, though she did also recognise that the medical system often could not, or did not, do very much for those ill people.⁷ According to the Alberta Government’s *Alberta Notifiable Disease Incidence: A Historical Record, 1919-2014*, HIV has only been reportable since May 1998, although HIV and AIDS had obviously been present for at least eight years by 1998.⁸ Helmer also called the wish that AIDS would die out after homosexuality was eliminated by it a “horrid hope.”⁹ She seemed to be an actual ally present at a time where it was more socially acceptable to ignore AIDS related deaths, or even praise them, as B recounted. That she met with B, at a time where many people would have shied away in fear of the unknown; that she called for everyone to accept and help queer folk during such a time of need, both of these are strong proof of Southern Alberta not needing to be as its stereotyped: not only individualistic, not only concerned with only religion, and not only negative about queer people.

Nine years later, for her November 20th, 1999 column, Helmer wrote about the Lethbridge branch of the John Howard Society, and how it was to start distributing free needles and condoms in an effort to reduce AIDS and Hepatitis C infections.¹⁰ While this was not necessarily only for the benefit of the queer population found in and around Lethbridge, it nonetheless helped. Although the John Howard Society mainly focused on the criminal justice system in many countries, it also offered healthcare delivery services with an emphasis on HIV and Tuberculosis prevention, detection and treatment.¹¹

⁷ Joanne Helmer, “Living with AIDS: Love, Understanding a Lifeline,” *Lethbridge Herald*, March 24, 1990.

⁸ Rosa Maheden, Kimberly Simmonds, Theresa Lohman, and Larry Svenson, *Alberta Notifiable Disease Incidence: A Historical Record 1919-2014* (Edmonton: Government of Alberta, 2015), 11.

⁹ Helmer, “Living with AIDS,” March 24, 1990.

¹⁰ Joanne Helmer, “John Howard to start harm reduction service: Free needles, condoms part of agency’s plan to battle AIDS and Hepatitis C,” *Lethbridge Herald*, November 20, 1999.

¹¹ Eric A Lasure, “Who was John Howard?,” *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing & Mental Health Services* 37, no. 8 (August 1999): 46.

On April 3rd, 1998, the *Lethbridge Herald* ran columns about *Vriend vs. Alberta*, and the Klein Government's choice not to veto the outcome of the case – that discrimination against queer people because of their orientation went against the Individual's Rights Protection Act (IRPA).¹² It seems to be near impossible to find information about queer history without also finding religious opinions mixed in. Everyone is entitled to their own opinions of course, but when they start to become hurtful opinions, they make everyone's lives harder. When it comes to queer history, some of this can be found as “love the sinner, hate the sin” rhetoric, while others are outright hatred. As McCullum pointed out in his interview, this was often in a hypocritical fashion, wherein queer people are held to a much higher standard than cisgender, heterosexual people.¹³ Such a view did not remain between individuals however: the Social Credit Party formed the Alberta Provincial Government for 35 years, from 1932-1968 – it was based in Christian fundamentalism, which left little room for any queer people whatsoever, among other minority groups. Outside of the government, vitriolic opinions existed in the media, such as the *Alberta Report* (AR), a weekly magazine that often challenged queer rights in the '90s. The AR could be found almost anywhere public, such as schools, doctor's offices, and libraries; copies were even given for free to schools. This put the cause of queer rights in the public eye, but in a negative way. It is not that we sought so-called “special rights” like the AR spouted, but rather the protections already afforded to everyone else.¹⁴ Therefore, when *Vriend vs. Alberta* led the Supreme Court of Canada ruling Alberta needed to protect queer folks in the IRPA, many in

¹² Ron Devitt, “South's gays cheer court ruling against province: But women's federation prepares itself for a battle against the decision,” *Lethbridge Herald*, April 3, 1998.

¹³ Helmer, “Helmer talks to Observer publisher Hugh McCullum,” *Lethbridge Herald*, March 26, 1988.

¹⁴ Filax, “Producing Homophobia in Alberta,” 92.

Provincial Government as well as the *AR* were less than pleased.¹⁵ To that end, use of the notwithstanding clause of the Canadian Constitution was floated, as the Supreme Court voted in favour of Vriend 8-1 but it was eventually decided against.¹⁶ That choice certainly would have been a bad look for the Alberta Government, to directly disagree with such a strong decision; however, the Klein government did announce it would use the clause for “certain areas such as same-sex marriages.” While Helmer did not cover this specifically, the *Lethbridge Herald* did with a positive (or at least neutral) bend to the writing, showing that not everyone in Alberta was against the decision.¹⁷ Despite Alberta’s deep religious stereotypical character, change can and did occur; Vriend’s victory was a victory for all the queer people across Alberta.

In 1989, Premier Don Getty’s nominee for the Alberta senate was Stan Waters, a man who went on record complaining about the “tyranny of minorities” in Canada. Part of this “tyranny” apparently was the view that a gay couple could, in fact, be a family, supported by the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC). Helmer, filling in the concerned public’s position, asked Michelle Falardeau, deputy chief commissioner of the CHRC, if this could result in backlash, as the commission seemed to be “condoning homosexuality.”¹⁸ When the *idea* that two gay people could constitute a family raises enough concern to generate backlash, it does feel that perhaps the Human Rights commission should be involved.

¹⁵ Devitt, “South’s gays cheer court ruling,” *Lethbridge Herald*, April 3, 1998.

¹⁶ Filax, “Producing Homophobia in Alberta,” 112.

¹⁷ Devitt, “South’s gays cheer court ruling,” *Lethbridge Herald*, April 3, 1998.

¹⁸ Joanne Helmer, “Understanding of human rights, like tradition, should evolve,” *Lethbridge Herald*, October 28, 1989.

Being queer in Alberta historically has never been an easy thing. Between the physical distance and therefore ability to access other queer people, the religiosity, and the ironic individualism present here, choosing to be authentically yourself can be a hard decision. When I say ironic, I mean that the stereotypical Albertan exhibits that wonderful southern hospitality: a house host that wants to hear more about you than speak about themselves, who takes you as you are because everyone's a little rough out here in The West. Who does not care about something unless it directly affects them. However, when it comes to queer people, say, asking not to be fired due to their sexuality, suddenly it is "it's fine, just don't shove it down my throat." This can be seen in Helmer's *Face-to-Face* columns regarding queer rights, such as her talk Hugh McCullum regarding a soon-to-be gay minister,¹⁹ or the potential backlash of a gay family spoken about with Michelle Falardeau.²⁰

¹⁹ Helmer, "Helmer talks to Observer publisher Hugh McCullum," *Lethbridge Herald*, March 26, 1988.

²⁰ Helmer, "Understanding of human rights," *Lethbridge Herald*, October 28, 1989.

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Essay Five: Joanne Helmer, Peter Lougheed, and Politics in Southern Alberta from the 1970s-90s.

HIST 3990: Politics in Southern Alberta, 1970s-90s.

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August 15, 2024

This paper is one in a six-part series researching the political climate of Southern Alberta from the 1970s to the early 2000s, primarily through Joanne Helmer's newspaper columns. She worked at the *Lethbridge Herald* during this time, and for several years wrote the *Face-to-Face* section weekly. This entailed a 15–20-minute interview with someone, about various subjects. In this essay, rather than one specific social issue, we will look at Helmer's opinions about the Conservative, Liberal, Reform, and NDP (New Democratic Party) parties, and their actions. This will start with a section about Helmer's various interviews with Peter Lougheed, of which occurred over multiple years, as well as her writings about him after the fact, followed by a smattering of sociopolitical issues, such as underfunding for education, the potential privatization of healthcare, and others. The hope from all of this is to find evidence that Alberta did not fully fit into the pervasive stereotype of conservatism, individualism, and religiosity.¹ That is not to say that any of these are bad, just that historically Alberta has fell into these archetypes, from a public point of view. Finding attitudes, opinions, and events that run counter to them however allow us to understand the history found here to a fuller extent.

Helmer interviewed or wrote about Premier Peter Lougheed at least 5 separate times during her stay at the *Lethbridge Herald*, although she did not fully start writing about him till 1983. Lougheed took over from the Social Credit party of Alberta in 1971.² Alberta was effectively a welfare state, although to put it bluntly, a weird welfare state – one that “reverses” the traditional explanation of such a state. This was in part because the Social Credit party came to power on the heels of the Great Depression, meaning that despite the party's strong right-

¹ Richard Sherlock, “Mormon Migration and Settlement after 1875,” *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975): 64.

² Nelson Wiseman, “The American Imprint on Alberta Politics,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 46.

leaning ideology, an amount of social programs were required regardless. As well, the Social Credit party had a heavy religious bent, with William “Bible Bill” Aberhart’s previous and continued ministry. Despite the party’s intense dislike of social programs, the reality of the state of Alberta’s cities and towns post-Depression meant that like it or not, some amount of welfare needed to exist - this came in the form of the Bureau of Public Welfare, and municipal monetary relief via a social service tax. This relief was “chaotic” however, appearing to be arbitrarily given by unqualified staff. Such a ramshackle method of dispersal would continue on into the late 1950s, after which some reform would occur.³

Regardless, the government and public Peter Lougheed inherited in 1971 was therefore complicated; by 1983, provincial healthcare was somewhat socially funded, and somewhat placed on the user. Lougheed reassured Helmer in her December 17th, 1983 edition of *Face-to-Face* that no one would be without healthcare however, and those who fell within the category to pay for healthcare would pay less than some other provinces. It is important to point out in this column Helmer’s insistence about how “...people who don’t fit into a bureaucratic system and... are going to be without health care.” She brought this up twice, which showed what seems to be a genuine care for those who may otherwise have fallen through the cracks – a concern that went against the stereotype of Albertan individualism. She also pushed him on the Progressive Conservative Party’s choice to cut back on spending in key areas such as education, health care, and social areas.⁴ Her concern for these core social institutions once again showed that although

³ Leslie Bella, “Social Welfare and Social Credit: The Administrators’ Contribution to Alberta’s Provincial Welfare State,” *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue Canadienne de Service Social* 4 (1986): 86-7.

⁴ Joanne Helmer, “Face to Face: The Herald’s Joanne Helmer chats with Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed,” *Lethbridge Herald*, December 17, 1983. Lougheed points out that this was just a smaller increase than called for, however, depending on how much the cost of these areas rose over the year, a small enough increase is effectively a cutback.

the province of Alberta may have had a conservative government, not everyone in the populace felt that way.

That next year, in her April 7, 1984 column, Helmer had much to say about Lougheed's turn away from personal campaigning. That being, public sentiment was not quite what he thought it was, and that "[p]erhaps he will not believe it until he goes back to pounding the pavement." Much of this column focused on what was going wrong for the public, in a way that the government seemed not to see: the \$150 ticket price to meet the Premier, expensive convention spaces, the high unemployment rate and the lack of care about it, among others. Particularly Helmer picked up on the theme that, in her opinion, "...Conservatives should not believe what they read in the media but should call their MLAs to get the 'facts.'"⁵ As media herself, Helmer was the group the Premier seemed to want people to ignore – and therefore her criticism of the Lougheed government in this column seemed to ring true.

November 8th, 1986, Helmer interviewed Dr. Mark Sandilands, an associate professor from the University of Lethbridge. The topic of this edition of *Face-to-Face* was university funding – or a lack of. Dr. Sandilands outlines how Canadian universities were seeing significantly less grants per student than many equivalent universities in the United States.⁶ Between the two of them, they went on to work out why things are so expensive, and why it was not worth cutting professor's pay about it. Using this sort of Socratic dialogue, they concluded that "...if private sector funding skews universities in a particular direction, it could be

⁵ Joanne Helmer, "Peter, they'd like to see ya down on the farm," *Lethbridge Herald*, April 7, 1984.

⁶ Joanne Helmer, "Face to Face: Joanne Helmer chats with Dr. Mark Sandilands of the U of L," *Lethbridge Herald*, November 8, 1986.

harmful.”⁷ While Helmer did not do very much talking in this column, it seems she was in support for better funding: this can be seen in that she sought out this interview in the first place.

Canada is not often thought of as a place where extreme right-wing politics occurs. Given that Canada was and continues to be a colonial project in the north of Turtle Island however, it is little surprise that far right, even fascist, groups have popped up. This followed the typical definition of fascism that comes to mind when one hears the word: particularly anti-Semitic, against leftist ideologies, and nationalistic in nature. Prior to World War Two, fascist societies sprang up in Quebec, Toronto, Manitoba, and elsewhere. To zero in on Alberta specifically, the Social Credit Parties in Canada had often been accused of fascist and anti-Semitic beliefs – the Alberta branch was no different.⁸ The vice president of the Alberta party, former mayor and high school teacher named James Keegstra openly taught in his classroom that the Holocaust was a myth, and that Jewish people were out to rule the world.⁹ He was then removed as a teacher in 1983, but not censored by the party.¹⁰ This is of little surprise however, given that the founder of Social Credit, Clifford Hugh Douglas, by 1922 had begun hinting at Jewish people being in control of international finance. While this was occurring in Britian, it is nonetheless important to note as Douglas’s way of thinking inevitably effected the Social Credit Parties of Canada.

⁷ Joanne Helmer, “Face to Face: Joanne Helmer chats with Dr. Mark Sandilands of the U of L,” *Lethbridge Herald*, November 10, 1986.

⁸ Stanley R. Barrett, “Fascism in Canada,” *Contemporary Crises* 8, no. 4 (October 1984): 351-4.

⁹ David R. Elliott, “Anti-Semitism and the Social Credit Movement: The Intellectual Roots of the Keegstra Affair,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies / Etudes Ethniques au Canada* 17, no. 1 (January 1985): 78.

¹⁰ Barrett, “Fascism in Canada,” 354.

William Aberhart, leader of the Alberta Social Credit Party in 1935, often quoted Douglas's ideas, such as the "international financial conspiracy."¹¹

Fifty-nine years later on May 7, 1994, Helmer wrote of a book called *Web of Hate*, about white supremacist organizations in North America. She noted that while the Ku Klux Klan was not as strong in Alberta compared to in Saskatchewan in the 1920s and 30s, they did exist, and were active in cross burnings at the time. As well, she brought up how the 1991 Alberta Human Rights Commission found neo-Nazi activity occurring in the Aryan Nations group at Provost, Alberta. Finally, she quoted the then Municipal Affairs Minister Steve West in his dislike of the Charter of Rights, specifically that "...the [C]harter has caused a lot of problems for Canada..." – a position, she pointed out, that erased "...what kinds of problems would be caused if people were left helpless when facing these fascists. That's a doubly frightening thought." This was a strong statement, especially given that it was in the media at the time. Helmer must have felt for the people who could be the targets if the Charter was removed, anyone "...who is not a white, anglophone, [P]rotestant, heterosexual male."¹² Her word choice here is impeccable, and striking; without speculating, it is clear that she knew at any moment the tide of hate could shift. This column serves to show that the individualistic, conservative Albertan myth is not the only ideology present here, both on the left *and* the right. On the left, a reporter who cared about her audience, who wanted them to stay safe; on the right, literal Nazis, and political groups that inherited such a strong hate.

¹¹ Elliott, "Anti-Semitism and the Social Credit Movement," 79-82.

¹² Joanne Helmer, "Merchants of hate thrive on hard times," *Lethbridge Herald*, May 7 1994.

The public is always going to have differing political opinions – that is the nature of democracy. This can come in the form of which Premier was best, how social issues should have been handled, or economic system. When these opinions started to put the safety of others in jeopardy however, one of the media's jobs is to report on it. Helmer consistently stood up for others in her columns looked at in this paper, be that a lack of representation, underfunding by the government, or outright hate. Her commitment to this shows well that the myth of Albertan individualism was not the default preset for the average Albertan.

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Essay Six: Joanne Helmer, The Cold War, and Nuclear Disarmament from the 1970s-90s.

HIST 3990: Politics in Southern Alberta, 1970s-90s.

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This essay is one in a series of six researching the column work of Joanne Helmer, a journalist for the *Lethbridge Herald*. Helmer wrote the *Face-to-Face* column for a couple years, in which she would conduct a face-to-face interview and record it verbatim. By looking at these interviews, alongside her other work over the years, I hope to find evidence that Alberta historically has not only conformed to the individualistic, religious, and conservative stereotype many folks hold it to today.¹ In this paper, we look at Helmer's response to the Cold War, fought on and off by the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) – although Canada was not formally part of this war, certain events bled over to us anyways. This occurred due to the fact that Canada continues to be both physically and socially attached to America, by trade as well as by the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).² However, the threat of nuclear war hung heavy over the world at large, especially given both side's policy of Mutually Assured Destruction, and it seemed that Helmer was a big proponent of disarmament. Believe it or not, the United States and the USSR actually fought side-by-side during World War Two, although this allyship did not last. Almost immediately after they began to fight, a war pitched as Capitalism versus Communism, West versus East – both sides thought the very world hung in the balance. It is no surprise then that Canadians who were sympathetic towards Communism, Socialism, or those perceived to be communists themselves, would be seen with distrust.

February 2nd, 1985, Helmer spoke with David Wallis, the then secretary of the Alberta branch of the Communist Party of Canada. Alberta has always operated on the basis of the

¹ Richard Sherlock, "Morom Migration and Settlement after 1875," *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975): 64.

² "NORAD History," North American Aerospace Defense Command, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.norad.mil/About-NORAD/NORAD-History/>.

frontier myth, especially in regards to the colonization of Western Canada.³ The rugged man, “taming” the “empty” earth below his feet, living far away from the next sign of life by the sweat of his brow; accentuated by the fact that Canada’s immigration programs sought out specifically white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant men, this was just part of how Alberta gained the social climate it did: the development of that ever-pervasive individualism, concerned with total control of the land around one’s self, and no one else.⁴ This attitude would naturally flow into the paranoia sparked by the Cold War. Right out of the gate, Helmer’s first question related to this myth: she asked how hard it was to even find members for the Communist Party given that “Albertans are inclined more to individualism than communism...”⁵ While this may seem counter to the aim of this essay, it serves to show that an awareness of this myth also existed at the time. Considering how the general public sentiment was then, that Helmer published this interview showed an awareness of the need for alternate points of view during the Cold War.

Helmer interviewed Dr. Jim Garrison for the December 1st, 1984 *Face-to-Face* column, about the effects of war on the mental health of civilians. Depending on who you asked, the Cold War could have been kicked off by numerous events – for Canada however, what thawed the ice was the defection of Igor Sergeyevich Gouzenko, in 1945. He was a junior officer of the Soviet military intelligence branch but decided to give up a significant amount of information such as Soviet codebooks and his own knowledge. This led to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police

³ Amy von Heyking, “Teaching Prairie Pasts in 20th-Century Alberta and Saskatchewan Schools,” *Prairie History*, no. 12 (Fall 2023): 16.

⁴ Shanti Fernando and Jen Rinaldi, “Seeking Equity: Disrupting a History of Exclusionary Immigration Frameworks,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Études Ethniques au Canada* 49, no. 3 (2017): 13-14.

⁵ Joanne Helmer, “Face to Face: The Herald’s Joanne Helmer chats with Alberta’s Communist Party secretary,” *Lethbridge Herald*, February 2, 1985.

(RCMP) arresting nearly 40 suspects, and convicting 18, for taking part in the Soviet espionage apparatus.⁶ This set North America ablaze with emotions, some good and some bad; as Dr. Garrison pointed out, the overwhelming amount of information that was thrown at the public about nuclear war and potential fallout, as well as the "...prospect of Soviet domination," was enough to terrify. For the people in control of this information, as well as military research and development, Helmer asked: "[w]hy do reasonably intelligent people support a continued arms race?" Such a line of questioning showed an awareness for her that the arms race was not needed, a bold line of thinking to publish in a time where freedom of the press only went so far. As she pointed out, "...when you start suggesting there might be something wrong with the competitive drive and the making of arms for profit, that there might be another way to do things, immediately people become suspicious you may not be a pure democrat or a pure capitalist."⁷

Suspicion of Communism was extremely common in Canada starting after The Gouzenko Affair and would remain even after the official end of the Cold War. The RCMP sought and detained anyone who seemed not to fully fit within the pure Democrat, and pure Capitalist box Helmer described. This included the Second Wave Feminism movement in Canada, as well as many queer folks just living their lives.⁸ The search for individuals with perceived "character weaknesses" that could supposedly be used for blackmail by Soviet agents went far beyond national security and into personal persecution.⁹ Therefore, in choosing to

⁶ Jacques Richardson, "Failure of foresight: had the Cold War more than one origin?," *Foresight: the Journal of Future Studies, Strategic Thinking and Policy* 12, no. 1 (2010): 73.

⁷ Joanne Helmer, "Face to Face: The Herald's Joanne Helmer talks with 'Russian Threat' author Dr. Jim Garrison," *Lethbridge Herald*, December 1, 1984.

⁸ Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt, *Just Watch Us: RCMP Surveillance of the Women's Liberation Movement in Cold War Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 4.

⁹ Gary Kinsman, "'Character Weaknesses' and 'Fruit Machines': Towards an Analysis of The Anti-Homosexual Security Campaign in the Canadian Civil Service," *Labour/Le Travail* 35 (Spring 1995): 134.

publish this edition of *Face-to-Face*, Helmer opened herself up to possible personal backlash in the pursuit of showing that the average Canadian was not so different from the average Soviet during this time; that perhaps the “rather be dead than red” way of thinking did not need to exist at all. This goes to show that even during such a time of duress, not all Albertans or Canadians fit into the ideal nationalistic, patriotic, individualistic and conservative mold.

November 26th, 1983, Helmer would interview Anne Williams, the then secretary-treasurer of the Vote Yes Nuclear Disarmament Coalition. The loss of human life at any scale is a tragedy. Therefore, when the ability to take millions of these lives in an instant arrives, it is in everyone’s best interest to *at least* limit its use. While the nuclear cat cannot be placed back in its bag, Mutually Assured Destruction insured that civilians lived in fear every single day. As both Helmer and Williams pointed out, the American push for more and better missiles, specifically the Cruise and Pershing II missiles, turned up the heat for the Cold War. If nuclear weapons were to be launched, Canada and much of Europe would be caught in the crossfire; the affect on nations outside of the direct periphery would not be much better.¹⁰ The existence of a “Vote Yes” group in Southern Alberta means that enough people were against the war for the group to form, also meaning that enough people did not subscribe to the ideal of war – showing a difference from the individualistic mentality Albertans supposedly had.

Earlier that year, October 18th 1983, Helmer described the war as an “...insane nuclear arms race with the goal of bankrupting the Soviet system and ridding the world of

¹⁰ Joanne Helmer, “Face to Face: Joanne Helmer chats with Anne Williams of Lethbridge’s Vote Yes group,” *Lethbridge Herald*, November 26, 1983.

communism[sic].” While she agrees that nuclear deterrent had worked thus far, she notes that “...we must now get those weapons under control.”¹¹

In a strikingly strong sentence given the socio-political climate at the time, four years later in her June 16th, 1987 column, Helmer wrote that “Canada’s hands are not clean so this bow to the god of war is just one more nail in the coffin, so to speak.” This was in reference to the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, specifically that Canada did not include a clause that kept it from becoming part of the American defensive shield – that meaning, if nuclear weapons were launched, Canada would have been in the line of fire. She went on to point out the hypocrisy of the Canada and Soviet Union relationship, that being a sudden “discover[y of] *the Soviet Threat* [Helmer’s italics]” by the Canadian Government. Helmer also applauded Mikhail Gorbachev’s *glasnost* campaign, his movement to significantly increase the openness of government to Soviet citizens, stating that his 18 month moratorium on nuclear testing, among other policy changes, was “quite astonishing.”¹²

May 5th, 1984, she interviewed retired American Air Force Colonel Don Clark, picking up more on the hypocrisy found in the Cold War. While they speak about American military efforts, this is nonetheless important as Canada, and the world, would be caught in the fallout. As Helmer points out, a significant portion of the Cold War’s arms race had less to do with actual war, and more with a grand showdown between the forces of Communism and Capitalism: that “...this is a campaign to destroy the Soviet system, as much as anything.” This reasoning was also part of the arms buildup – the ability for the West to be “...not on the defensive at all. It is

¹¹ Joanne Helmer, “It is the duty of every human being to save the human race from nuclear war,” *Lethbridge Herald*, October 18, 1983.

¹² Joanne Helmer, “The Beatty White Paper: Lower-priced options ignored,” *Lethbridge Herald*, June 16, 1987.

on the offensive.”¹³ If nothing else then, it seemed that Helmer did not support the cause or methods of the Cold War. In fact, she called on the Federal Government to “...put some more political muscle into its advocacy of nuclear arms control.” Such a suggestion in 1987 could get one called a Communist *at best*, so Helmer’s columns show that an Albertan was willing to stand up for what she believed in – even if it went against the general wishes of the population. Considering the prairie provinces exported vast amounts of uranium used in these nuclear weapons, advocating for disarmament and therefore a slowing of that particular job market and economy would not be a popular action.¹⁴

War can often bring out what matters most to an individual, population, or nation, and the Cold War was no different. As can be seen through Helmer’s columns over the course of the war, Canadians had differing priorities: the Federal Government was concerned about potential traitors and therefore focused on security over individual rights, as well as the continued production of American missiles; some in the general populace held the “rather be dead than red” mentality, while others leaned towards the Communist ideology at personal risk; finally, at the individual level, mental health in the face of theoretical nuclear annihilation was at a premium. Although sentiment was against more left-leaning policies, there was a strong pro-disarmament group in Lethbridge, showing that not everyone in Southern Alberta was pro-Cold War. Such a sentiment also shows that Alberta was not as conservative as it has been stereotyped to be.

¹³ Joanne Helmer, “Face to Face: The Herald’s Joanne Helmer chats with retired U.S. Air Force Colonel Don Clark,” *Lethbridge Herald*, May 5, 1984.

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