

# Martha's Monthly

Feminist analysis of public policy in Alberta



Martha's Monthly  
June 2009

## HEROS

**Martha has been thinking a lot about heroes and the kind of people that do extraordinary things and get to be called "hero".** There are plenty of stories of people who have leapt into frigid waters to save strangers or ran inside a burning house to rescue a child. Those are great heroes but they are people who often say they didn't have time to consider the danger to them and they just acted on impulse. Martha has met some one recently that strikes her as a different kind of hero – the kind who diligently, day after day, puts her self out to make a change, knowing the toll it takes on her financially and physically. That is a different breed of hero – a super hero, if you will.

On a bright January afternoon this year Martha drove to Turner Valley, AB to meet a super hero. Her name is Roxanne Walsh, but you probably have never heard of her, unless you live in Turner Valley or work for Alberta Environment. Roxanne has been working for five years to ensure that the Government of Alberta, the owners of the Turner Valley Gas Plant, clean up the area, protect the groundwater, and ensure the environment is healthy for area residents. Earth Day Canada has just named Roxanne one of their Hometown Heroes 2009 Finalists for "working tirelessly to ensure the community is returned to healthy environment." (see: [Earth Day](#))

Roxanne took Martha through knee-high snow to the edge of the Sheep River riverbank to see what Roxanne and the other concerned residents have tried to change for so long – a ground-level sour gas flare, just 80m from the main town water intake, that has been burning since 1977. (Martha just has to tell you here how overwhelming the smell of hydrocarbons was on her tour. More than once Martha probed Roxanne, "are you sure we shouldn't call someone – this smells horrible?" To which Roxanne would patiently respond, "this is





normal, for Turner Valley.”) The well site, Dingman No. 2 well, was drilled in 1914 and was just the third well in Alberta so the gas plant is a provincial and national historic site but the AB government has not yet decided what to do with the site and it is currently closed to the public. (See: [AB government](#) and [Calgary Herald report](#)).

Last month, Roxanne and her team were delighted when the flare on Dingman No. 2 was extinguished. Engineers are working to “abandon” Dingman No.2, which means they will contain the well. (The fact that containing it is called abandoning it was confusing to Martha too!) But there are still unresolved concerns for Roxanne and her team. Will the Alberta government commit to a full reclamation of the area so that there is no further concern for public health from groundwater contamination? Will the flare be reignited after the well is abandoned? And will the AB government ever release the details of the 2007 report into the future of the Turner Valley Gas Plant?

Martha has her own concerns because last month the Environment Minister Rob Renner announced that due to the \$12 Million cut backs to his department there would have to be less groundwater and well monitoring. Say what? That is right, the Minister confirms that your drinking water will be tested less often but don't worry, he added, in the short term (1-2 years) this will have no effect. (See: [Cuts to well monitoring story](#)).

Martha really liked Roxanne Walsh and she is a big fan of the selfless work this super-hero has done to ensure that the AB government does the right thing. But Martha is not sure that every little town and village across Alberta will have a Roxanne Walsh waiting to spend five years of her life monitoring water and ensuring the government does testing, releases testing results, and spend tens of millions to contain contaminants. Well water monitoring should not be something that can be just cut by a department or a budget. The Turner Valley Gas Plant is a most egregious example of the problems of old well sites but it is surely not the only contaminated spot in Alberta. We depend on Alberta Environment to monitor the water and not just every few years when there are budget surpluses but EVERY single year.



If Roxanne Walsh and the Turner Valley Gas Plant have taught us anything it should be that governments have a unique role in the protection of the environment and the preservation of the province's history. Does the government of Alberta taken either one of these roles seriously? Cutbacks to water monitoring, sluggish responses to the needs of the residents of Turner Valley,

and indecision with respect to the historic site of the Turner Valley Gas Plant suggest not.

*Let's help Roxanne  
and the people of Turner Valley  
because we all deserve  
good drinking water and  
uncontaminated lands.*

In February 2009, Liberal MLA Laurie Blakeman presented a petition to the Alberta Legislature with over 2000 signatures asking the government **"to ensure... the site is remediated and reclaimed in accordance with Alberta Environment's standards for residential and parkland land use."** The Minister responded to questions by saying that the government had already spent \$11 Million. Estimates are that proper remediation to residential land use would cost tens of millions. And anyone who has sat beside a river knows that things float downstream. If the gas plant land is contaminated then the land downstream (and adjacent) also needs remediation. Of course it will cost money. But take a drive to Turner Valley and tell Martha that the Sheep River and the residents of Turner Valley are not worth it. Martha took a drive to Turner Valley and she met a hero who is fighting for her little town and river.



You can be a hero too by sending a letter to the Premier, the Minister of Culture and Community Spirit (the owners of the land), and to the Minister of the Environment and by cc'ing these letters to the Liberal and NDP Critics. You may use the following letter or write your own. **Send them to [This List](#) :**

[premier@gov.ab.ca](mailto:premier@gov.ab.ca), [calgary.northwest@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:calgary.northwest@assembly.ab.ca),  
[edmonton.centre@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:edmonton.centre@assembly.ab.ca), [medicine.hat@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:medicine.hat@assembly.ab.ca),  
[edmonton.strathcona@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:edmonton.strathcona@assembly.ab.ca),  
[marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca](mailto:marthasmonthly@yahoo.ca).

June 26, 2009

Premier Stelmach  
cc. Minister Renner, Minister Blackett, MLA Blakeman,  
MLA Notley.

Dear Premier Stelmach:

It has been four months since a petition was tabled in the Legislature regarding the remediation and reclamation of the Turner Valley Gas Plant land and area. I am concerned that while the most egregious of the blights on the landscape, the sour gas flare, has been extinguished there is still no plan to remediate the land to residential or parkland standards.



The gas plant site is a national and provincial historic site and its proximity to the town of Turner Valley is unique but I would not consider taking my family to the historic site unless I was sure that the land was no longer contaminated and the water in the Sheep River was safe. It is essential that the land be remediated to Alberta Environment standards.

Please take the steps to begin this important remediation and reclamation. I am aware that it will cost millions of dollars to do so but I think it is important enough to spend the money for the residents of Turner Valley and anyone like me that might consider visiting the historic site.

Sincerely,

YOUR NAME AND FULL ADDRESS