

# Rogue state

They've always done things differently here—like declaring independence from Canada. But with every house sale, change is coming to Rathnelly. Scenes from the last days of the republic

**EARLY IN THE MORNING ON MOVING DAY,** I got a phone call from a woman I had never met. She said her name was Marilyn and that she would be my new neighbour on Rathnelly Avenue. She wondered if I wanted her to set out some pylons in front of the house to save a parking space for the van.

The day went downhill from there. The renovation wasn't finished, and half my furniture would not fit through the door. It went back in the van, to storage. When at last I lay down in my uncurtained room, with the street light's glare in my eyes, I thanked Marilyn in my mind. How much worse would it have been if she hadn't called? We'd have been carrying couches down the block.

Actually, I had already met her husband, Rob. When I was scoping out the house, I stood in the backyard looking up at it. A sprightly blue-eyed fellow of indeterminate age ambled off the deck of the house two doors down. He told me with satisfaction that he'd bought his place in the '60s, at a small fraction of the sum I was about to pay.

This was not endearing. But I was to meet Rob again. And again. As I have discovered during four and a half years of residence, you can't go far on Rathnelly without meeting Rob. He keeps a weather eye on the territory from under the brim of his black bicycle helmet. Not long after I moved in that spring, torrential rains began. Rathnelly is tucked under the Avenue Road hill and takes the runoff from the escarpment. Some say there's an underground creek. I'd got so far in the renovations as to lay carpet in the basement. But the door wasn't tight; water rushed in below it. It was midnight. I called the contractor and my son's friends to come and bail. The next morning, Rob was genuinely disappointed. "You should have called me," he said. "I love being woken up in the night for things

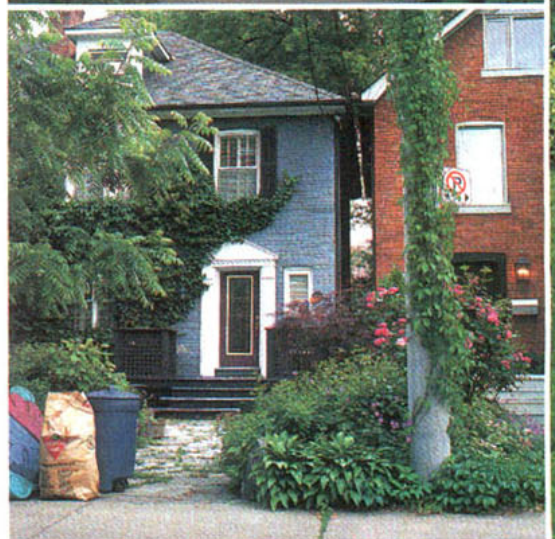
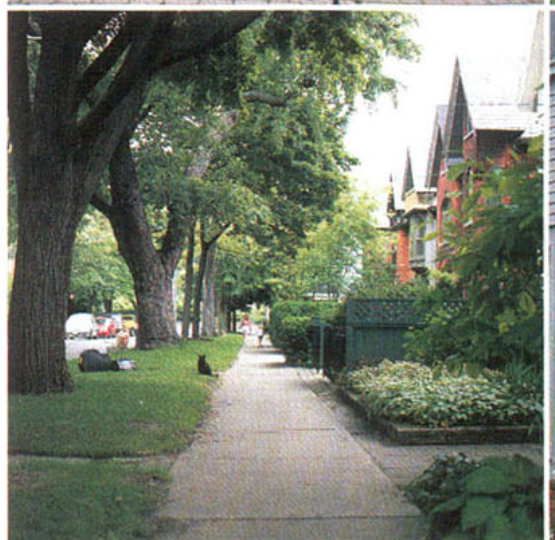
like that." Then he loaned me his wet vac.

That summer, when Rob got out his push mower, I noticed he didn't stop at his property line; he mowed the lawn of the house between his place and mine, too. That house, I was told, had been the home of the Queen of the Republic of Rathnelly. Although Aileen Robertson was no longer with us, her former housemate, Penny Nettlefold, was very much in evidence. I learned that Penny did not inherit the crown; in 1993, the title went to Louise Fisher, who refused to be queen but agreed to the lesser rank of duchess.

I was inducted into the local ways slowly, without a single wink to acknowledge either the ironies of royalty in a republic or any laxity in the more basic laws of the land. Rob or Marilyn—I forget which—told me I was to line up either the front of my car with the front of the tree or the back of my car with the back of the tree. If I did so, all the cars permitted to park on this block would fit perfectly; if I didn't, a crisply worded, typed note would appear under my windshield wiper.

I did know this enclave wedged between the railway tracks, the hill, Avenue Road to the east and Poplar Plains Road to the west was *nominally* a foreign country. Like most people, I'd heard of the Republic of Rathnelly—population approximately 400, occupying five streets, namely, Rathnelly, MacPherson, McMaster, Cottingham and Poplar Plains Crescent. It looks like the best of comfy, cozy Toronto: it has big old maple trees, unpretentious houses and great gardens, all clustered around the grassy confines of the High Level Pumping Station, which pushes water to Forest Hill. The republic has a laneway that leads to a "common," where there is a swing set and sandbox, its very own parking lot and a neighbourhood notice board full of rain-spotted ads for shared nannies.

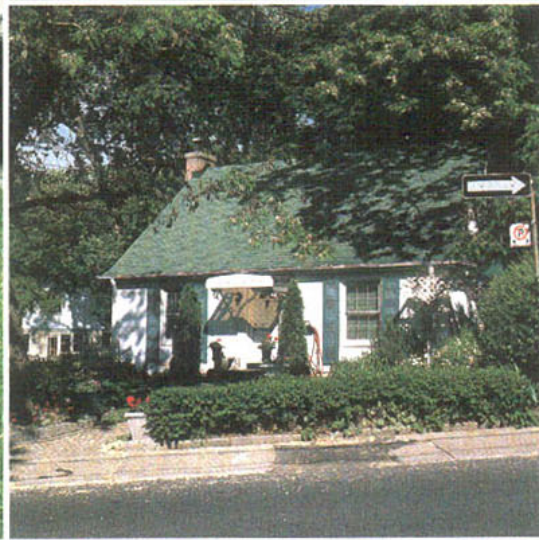
But I didn't know that it was *actually* a







Foreign affairs: the Republic of Rathnelly, once a hotbed of radicals, now resembles the best of comfy, cozy Toronto







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**NEIGHBOURHOODS** continued

foreign country. They do things differently here. I didn't know I had moved into a small piece of urban history, and a hotbed of greying radicals.

**AS WINTER RETREATED, I OFTEN SAW PENNY** Nettlefold walking home across the common, carrying her groceries. Or I would spot her sallying forth by taxi, of an evening. But it was spring before we spoke. I stepped into the backyard, and she was there on the other side of the lilac bush that divides our gardens.

"I have a noxious weed," she confessed dolefully.

She was not kidding. She had—we had—a terrible infestation of grout weed, requiring a joint assault. We have five houses with long gardens stretching west and no fences between them. To improve my end of the garden, Penny and Marilyn shared transplants of obedient and hostas. The lilac was looking sad and needed pruning. The mock orange wasn't doing much either, although Penny remembered it when it was "covered in blossoms." We eventually dug it up and replaced it with a new one, which, by the way, I was told not to purchase at the garden centre on the corner: republicans don't approve of this high-end, cappuccino-serving establishment.

Penny turned 80 last year, and aside from being a serious gardener and an active volunteer for the Canadian Opera Company, she has a memory of these streets going back to 1956. As soon as it was warm enough, hoping for more local lore, my friend Nick—also a republican—and I invited her over to sit in the garden and drink Pimms (something I had never done before, nor have I done it since). Penny's delivery tends to the cryptic and sensational. She told us that the republic had applied to Trudeau for foreign aid. "We even have our own army," she said. "You'll see them march on Rathnelly Day." When is that? we inquired. One day in summer, she said. "We stop the traffic, and we all move our dining tables out into the street." She told a story I really didn't understand about herself and Aileen spraying each other with the hose while she wore a wetsuit. Then, to top it off, she casually mentioned that her mother had lived in the medina in Marrakesh in the 1930s.

"How did your mother come to live in

the medina?" I asked, pretty well blown away by this point.

"She married a marquis," said Penny. "But she didn't like him, so she ran away."

**IT'S AMAZING THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THE** republic. And that's only half of it. Then there are the people who used to live here. Whenever I mention my address, the person I'm talking to trots out a memory. A tennis friend used to come here for lunch with Charity Grant, the former dean of University College at U of T, after every Santa Claus Parade. A woman who has since moved to Port Hope remembers the pond, which used to be south of the pumping station, where the common is now. It had storks and miniature islands.



Neighbourhood watch: the infamous notice board

A writer friend, who shall remain nameless as his antics led to legal issues, grew up here in the '50s and early '60s. He used to work at the Hillside Grocery on Avenue Road, stocking the shelves at night, taking a hit off of every Reddi-Wip pressurized can. And the Filipino nannies tell stories

of how the house on "Pumping Station Lane" is haunted by a woman typing.

In the '50s, the area was run down and deteriorating. The pumping station was surrounded by a chain-link fence, in case the Germans might sneak in. More than half the homes were rooming houses. But by the end of the decade, the "white painters"—young professionals choosing to live in the city core rather than the suburbs—began moving in. Finding themselves cheek by jowl with the less picturesque, they used their collective wit and savvy to lobby city hall to make the area livable. One house was afflicted with particularly rowdy tenants, who would throw huge parties and then come out and urinate on the front lawns. When a neighbour complained, he got a brick through his window. The landlord asked them to leave. When they didn't, he removed the plumbing. (This may seem paradoxical, given that the objection was to men peeing on the lawn, but, hey, this is the republic.) The strategy worked, and the rowdies moved on.

Sally Bongard, a cultural consultant, bought a "hippie flophouse" on McMaster in 1968. Sixteen people had been living there, one of them in the bathtub. One room was painted black, and others had "wonderful poetry written on the walls." Unbeknownst to her, the previous owners



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## NEIGHBOURHOODS continued

had extended a general overnight invitation to draft dodgers, hippies and cult members. For years, hippies would knock on the back door, asking if they could crash. She received mail from the Church of Scientology until the mid-'80s. She soon became involved with local issues and events. "It's lovely now, but it's tame," says Sally. "It was outrageous then; it was meant to provoke."

Perhaps the most famous anecdote of the republic is the kidnapping incident of 1976. Robin Fraser, a retired lawyer who moved here with his wife in 1961, loves to tell the story. John Craig Eaton was living on Rathnelly with a new wife and his children from his first marriage. A man armed with a sawed-off shotgun crawled in a basement window. He took John Craig and his wife into the bedroom and tied them up, and was about to make off with his 14-year-old daughter, Signy. But John Craig had somehow managed to phone the police.

"I was woken at one a.m. by gunshots," Robin recalls. "I went outside, and I was the only civilian in the street." The armed cops were waiting when the kidnapper burst out the front door. Signy broke free and ran inside while the kidnapper ran down Pumping Station Lane and attempted to dig himself a trench in the park, where he was eventually caught. The next morning, when the street was swarming with reporters, John Craig showed style. As Robin recalls, "He came out the front door in tennis shorts, on his way to the Badminton and Racquet Club. 'No comment,' he said. He got in his Rolls-Royce and drove away."

THAT SAME ROBIN FRASER IS A PAST PRESIDENT of the republic; he has served 10 years total, spanning from the late '60s to last spring. It is he I must call on to put together the pieces of republican history. On a day of sub-zero temperatures, he came to my door without his coat. I recognized him from Rathnelly Day—he's the one who leads the parade, playing his bagpipes and marching through the streets with a ragtag assortment of children and adults behind him. He is armed today not with his bagpipe, thank God, but with maps of the boundaries, the history going back to 1832 and a sheaf of newspaper clippings.

The political action began in the spring of 1962 when, through a casual conversation at the grocery store, some residents discovered that a shopping mall was planned on Avenue Road between McMaster and MacPherson. The residents organized and went to City Hall to fight



it. They got the area "up-zoned" to prohibit more houses being divided. This meant that anyone buying a rooming house had to convert it to a single family dwelling. In 1966, they discovered that something called the Crosstown Expressway was going to cut through the area at the railroad tracks and join the DVP, the Spadina Expressway and the QEW. The fierce republicans beat that and went on to help defeat the Spadina Expressway, which was heading down the ravine straight for them. Since then, freedom has required constant vigilance, because too often, as Robin says, "the goddamn city is asleep at the switch."

The residents decided to use Canada's centennial, July 1, 1967, to galvanize the community. On that day, the ratepayers seceded. They had written first to Queen Elizabeth II, then to Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, then to Premier John Robarts and, finally, to Mayor William Dennison, asking for independence. Nobody wanted to deal with them, so they just declared it.

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know," Robin replied.

**SO IT WAS THAT JULY 1, 1967, BECAME THE** first Rathnelly Day. The residents applied to the city to have the streets closed to traffic and invited Mayor Dennison to hear their demands. They wanted five freedoms: "freedom from want, freedom from being run down by automobiles and bicycles, freedom from unjust taxes, freedom from unwanted zoning and freedom from Toronto." If these requests were not met, they would seize the High Level Pumping Station.

At seven a.m., the Rathnelly Irregulars—a militia into which all children five to 14 had been conscripted—set up the barricades and patrolled the perimeter, armed with an air force of 1,000 balloons. Someone got hold of a brass cannon and put it in front of the pumping station. The Irregulars stormed and liberated the pumping station, giving birth to the rallying cry "Remember the Pump!" When the water main cover in the courtyard was lifted, the disappeared tycoon Ambrose J. Small came out. (Declared legally dead in 1924, he had apparently been hiding in the underground pipes.) Mayor Dennison got into the spirit; mid-afternoon, he stepped out of a limo in a top hat and tails. Tables were moved into the street and everyone ate dinner together, after which there was dancing into the small hours.

Over the years, the concept flourished. Sally Bongard tells of the Rathnelly Winter Games during which neighbours built a giant phallus in ice on the lawn. That

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## NEIGHBOURHOODS continued

was the day Penny Nettlefold stood outside with a harpoon and got soaked with a hose. When the cannon fired, she was unveiled as an Inuit ice sculpture. Another year, there was the tug-of-war that closed down Avenue Road. They held Expo in Rathnelly, with each house representing a different nation: Puerto Rico (34 Rathnelly) was a rain forest with a waterfall cascading off its roof.

Robin leafs through the official papers: here is the letter to Prime Minister Trudeau in 1969, asking for foreign aid for the playground equipment (\$123), and the reply from Trudeau's secretary, advising against war. Clearly the residents had made up their mind to control their turf. When the Milnes Coal Company abandoned its property at the edge of the railroad track, the residents' association got the area turned into a parking lot. When Metro Works drained the pond, they succeeded in getting the area turned into a park.

As Robin puts it, "The characters who lived here at the time were innovative and funny and loved doing this stuff." I see a quote in the files from a former resident, Sheila MacDonald, who summed it up this way: "We aim to be as silly as possible without being stupid."

As I go through the papers, I find one that Robin hasn't mentioned. It is called "A Declaration of Interdependence," and I give you the whole thing.

*We, the undersigned, do solemnly affirm that we are and shall remain firmly dependent on one another as friends and neighbours in every aspect of our dwelling together. We further do declare that we are ever prepared to assist each other in time of need and to be kind and cheerful always, both in time of need and in prosperity.*

In classic republican form, there are no signatures.

**TODAY IN THE REPUBLIC, THE RADICALS ARE** still "on guard," in Robin Fraser's words, against development, dumb city decisions, too many cars and anything that might threaten the boundaries. There is a proposed 11-storey condo development on MacPherson west of Poplar Plains Road. And the garden centre still makes the executive uneasy. But renewal comes with each house sale to a young couple, drawn to the area because of the good schools and the park nearby. We watch them repaint and wonder how on earth they can afford to live here. Both parents earn, so the common is criss-crossed by nannies and professional dog walkers.

Doesn't it all sound lovely? Perhaps

too lovely. But never fear, feelings still run high. It is never quite peaceful in the republic. It just looks that way.

Which is why I love it.

Take the community notice board. After 9/11, someone pinned up a paper copy of the American flag and, beside it, a homily printed in bold black ink on white paper: "God bless America," it read. (Presumably the author of this was carried away with sister feeling for that other republic.) "Pray for those who have been lost... Pray for those who grieve..." I don't know how many days this was there, under the notice about a missing scooter; but long enough, thought one distraught new mother. She—or maybe her sympathetic husband—came along and, with coloured push pins, stuck a piece of yellow lined paper in the middle of the flag. The words were written in red ink: "Stolen from car: breast pump, bottle sterilizer. If found, call..."

I paused over that one, overcome with sister feeling myself. Who on earth would steal a breast pump, and how mean can you get? A stolen breast pump guarantees two things: a woman with painfully engorged breasts and a squalling baby. But the next commentator did not share my compassion. He—it had to be a man—scrawled over the yellow sheet in black marker, "What kind of an asshole posts this crap over the American flag?"

There's still an edge, a lawless side to the place. Another case in point: the skunk. Unwritten rules of the republic state that cats are free to migrate between gardens but children and dogs are not. I learned this from the serious gardener at the far end of our back expanse. My dog, Rosie, a great dog, since deceased, had difficulty with this.

The skunk lived two houses up, under Rob's garden shed. Whenever I opened the back door, Rosie would go roaring out and canter through Penny's perennial bed, and Marilyn's too, and go berserk in the way only Kerry blue terriers can, trying to flush out the skunk. A couple of times she succeeded, with unfortunate results. I had to lather her with two giant tubes of toothpaste. I reported the skunk to Rob, assuming that like most normal Torontonians he'd want to get rid of it. But a crafty look came on his face, a steely glint to his eye. He said something like, "Rosie should learn."

"But..." I said, not seeing the point.

He smiled benignly.

Then I got it. I had a dog. He had flower beds. He also had a skunk, as a deterrent. He was *harbouring* the skunk. It was then I began to suspect he was not a republican but an anarchist. ■