

Rosalie Bellefontaine's

# The Mayor of Tent City

- **LENGTH:** 52 minutes (available in four chapters)
- **GRADE LEVEL:** 7 through to post-secondary.

● **SUBJECTS:** Civics, Social Studies, Religion, History, Urban Studies, Supply Teaching, Ethics, Politics, Social Justice, Media Arts.



Canada



## For discussion or essay

1. What are the root causes of homelessness? Why is Karl homeless? Who is to blame? Discuss.
2. "The Thirties taught us that we are our brothers' keepers", says Pierre Berton. What does he mean? Does the community have any responsibility for the needy? Does a "helping hand" make people lazy? What Canadian institutions were born out of the thirties? Why?
3. Karl is called "The Happy Warrior" by Jack Layton. Why? Is Karl happy? Does he win the war?
4. Pierre Berton says, "More money was paid in the early years of the depression to reduce the CPR debt than to take care of the needy". Why was the debt so high? What caused the Great Depression? How do the Dirty Thirties compare with today?
5. If you had a say, how would you structure a community response to social problems like homelessness, unemployment, illness and unhappiness? Discuss large solutions as well as small solutions.
6. "We will always have poverty." Discuss.

## How This Video May Be Shown to a Group

1. Show the video one chapter at a time, followed with related activities. [See above].
2. Show the video in its entirety as a part of the curriculum or as an activity for a supply teacher.
3. Follow the film with an open discussion or written assignment. Give the students a choice of topics. [See above].
4. For Media Arts, discuss the problems associated with covering someone who is in a compromised situation. How did the filmmaker deal with that here? What ethical decisions do you think a filmmaker makes? Filmmakers have a right to do whatever to get "The Story". What rights? And do you agree?

### SYNOPSIS: Chapter One: The Mayor of Tent City

We meet Karl Schmidt, an ex-East German soldier and fruit farmer, who finds himself homeless in Toronto, Canada. Now a small time general contractor, Karl cannot afford an apartment in a major city and is unable to work while living under the restrictions set out in the shelter system. He builds a small cabin on a deserted piece of lakefront property where drifters have camped on and off for years. Pierre Berton describes the conditions during the Dirty Thirties, what caused The Depression, and the lessons Canadians learned from these years.

### Synopsis: Chapter Two: The Happy Warrior

Karl's independence and cheerful nature captures the imagination of the Toronto public. He is not a typical bum. He believes the act of building one's home will help other homeless people to gain a sense of worth. Karl encourages others to come and build. And they do. Karl's success is used to highlight the growing homelessness in the country. Through debt reduction policies, welfare rates had been cut, rent control was loosened and, most importantly, low income housing was handed over to the private sector. The Canadian government stopped building low income housing. Business, finding it unprofitable, did not build either. Pierre Berton points out the economic policies of the Bennett years during The Depression: paying off the CPR debt on the backs of the poor.

### SYNOPSIS: Chapter Three: A Hope in Hell

We visit Tent City and meet some of the residents. Life is charmed yet difficult. While living a peaceful existence on an isolated waterfront property, the cost of living far exceeds Karl's welfare allowance. What little work he does find is hard, and harder to collect. The independent spirit of the residents of Tent City begins to collapse in on itself. Several concrete plans to move Tent City to a permanent site fall through. At a point when community spirit is necessary for growth, it is fragmented. Pierre Berton explains the social programmes that emerged from the Dirty Thirties: Old Age Pension, Welfare, Medi-Care. These programmes were born out of deep suffering and neglect.

### SYNOPSIS: Chapter Four: No Hope in Hell

Tent City has expanded beyond its optimistic origins. Plans to relocate have stagnated in the summer heat and bad elements have moved into the neighbourhood. Karl, underweight and exhausted, hangs an up-side-down Canadian flag on his home: "It's a distress signal. Like in the army. Things are getting out of hand around here. We are living like pigs in a pen." Suddenly, Tent City residents are evicted and a unique housing solution for the chronically homeless is developed. Pierre Berton comments on the strength of the Canadian tax system and the Canadian sensibility learned from The Depression: the need for government to watch over the health of the individual. Karl concludes, "It's a hard life. We have big time help right now for 120 people. But what about the rest?"