

Putting Gert where she belongs

ERIN DWYER
KV STYLE

Gertrude Harding stood in the glass greenhouse at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew, England, with broken pots, smashed windowpanes and uprooted rare orchids strewn on the floor.

It was past midnight on Feb. 8, 1913, and outside, the sky thundered.

With her was Lilian Lenton, a fellow suffragette who, earlier in the day, had gone with Harding to Kew Gardens, posing as tourists, to plot their midnight attack. The two had planned to wreak as much damage as they could before being caught.

A year earlier, this 23-year-old from Welsford had been a rambunctious but innocent farm girl, who had just arrived in London, England to live with her sister's family. Now, Harding belonged to the world's most radical group of women – the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) – which had been fighting to get the vote for women for 45 years. When Harding joined in 1912, the union had just entered a new phase, one that involved militancy and property destruction.

"The only attention they could get was by breaking the law," Kelbaugh said.

What followed the orchid trashing were years of subterfuge, disguises and pseudonyms, jiu-jitsu training, and Harding evading Scotland Yard at every turn – all the making of a cinematic movie. And that's been Gretchen Kelbaugh's dream since she first read her great aunt's memoirs more than 20 years ago.

"I feel in a way that she's haunting me – not in a scary way – but in a professional way to get the story out there."

Kelbaugh, an award-winning filmmaker who lives in Quispamsis, has been hoping for years to turn Harding's story into a feature drama so more people could learn of this Canadian political heroine. She has written a screenplay and has been looking for a producer for several years.

In the meantime, she's adapted her aunt's story into a 20-minute play called *Orchids Can Be Destroyed*, staged earlier this month as part of Theatre New Brunswick's



Gretchen Kelbaugh working in her home.

PHOTO: CINDY WILSON/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Extra Reading Series. Now, she's aiming to see it developed into a full theatre production.

"It was great," she said in an interview one day after the Nov. 9 stage reading at TNB Studio in Fredericton.

"It's helped to advance my hopes of getting a full-length stage play."

Kelbaugh was about seven years old when she first heard about her great aunt's exploits in England. Kelbaugh's mother, Peggy, often recounted the stories, including the one about "Auntie Gert" trashing rare orchids at Kew Gardens.

To the young Kelbaugh, however, the stories were perplexing.

"I knew she was a hero, but then I'd look at Auntie Gert, who to me was a very old woman," she recalled. "I just couldn't put the two together –

this dignified little old woman into these stories that sounded like they were from an adventure book."

Harding died in New Brunswick in 1977, at the age of 88. Before her death, she had compiled a scrapbook of her life, with photos, drawings and stories about the six years she worked for the WSPU – a memoir she left to Kelbaugh's mother.

For years, Kelbaugh's mother encouraged her to read the memoirs, but it wasn't until she was 37 years old – after she had given up her teaching career to raise her children and 16 years after Harding's death – that she sat down to peruse its pages. That's when she learned of her great aunt's pivotal role in the WSPU.

After the orchid trashing, Harding became one of the highest ranking and longest-lasting members of

this organization. She worked on the underground newspaper *The Suffragette* and eventually became its editor. She headed up a secret bodyguard of women, trained in jiu-jitsu, to protect their leader, Emmeline Pankhurst – then the most recognized woman in the world – from constant re-arrest by Scotland Yard. And she became the private secretary to Pankhurst's daughter, Christabel, after she was exiled to Paris.

Kelbaugh fell in love with the story. In fact, it was her great aunt's story that pushed her into becoming the award-winning filmmaker she is today.

"As I was learning about the push for the women's vote and Gert's part in it, I saw it as a movie in my mind. I had never thought of myself as a screenwriter but I kept seeing

what to me would be a fabulous movie."

Kelbaugh said Harding's story changed her life.

"She changed me professionally by making me feel the need to spread her story and the story of the other women who pushed for the vote. And personally, she kind of has given me permission to be the strong feminist that I am.

"I feel like it's in my blood."

But first there was a book.

After reading the memoirs, Kelbaugh did more research on the suffrage movement in England and decided to write Harding's biography, *With All Her Might*, which was published by Goose Lane in 1996. The day she finished writing the book she started a screenplay about her life.