

## Women charged with abusing cats

Journal: The Calgary Herald June 19, 1999 pg B14

Authors: Katie Andrews; Edmonton Journal

The SPCA is laying animal-abuse charges against the family who housed 200 dead and dying cats

in Edmonton. Victoria Abolins, 79, and her daughters Lucy, 55, and Anne, 49, were evicted from two rented residences in two days this week for hoarding cats. The society is not interested in going after the women for \$20,000 -- the maximum fine under the Animal Protection Act. It just wants to be sure they will never again own another animal. ``It's up to the Crown to decide whether to proceed with the charge," SPCA special constable Garnet Melnyk told a news conference Friday. Society constables went Friday morning to the motel where the Abolins are staying and read them their rights. Although Anne refused to speak, Melnyk said one of the other women gave a statement. ``We still need to gather statements from a few key witnesses," says Melnyk. Other evidence will come from an autopsy report on the dead cats.

In the next few weeks, a veterinarian specializing in pathology will do an autopsy of the 83 cats that were destroyed. For now, the bodies are being stored in a secured, walk-in cooler. The other 108 animals found dead and in various states of decomposition in the garage have been sealed in a dangerous goods container and will be burned, said SPCA veterinarian Craig Wilkinson. He has concluded they probably died of disease. Feline Infectious Peritonitis, which has a mortality rate near 100 per cent, was rampant in the population. ``There were no broken bones or signs of trauma that would indicate people had been abusing

the cats," Wilkinson says. SPCA officials have made several trips to the original residence to pick up cats caught in baited traps monitored by neighbours.

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## Women charged with animal abuse

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Authors: Edmonton Journal

Two women who shared a Parkallen house with 240 dead and dying felines were charged Friday with animal abuse by the SPCA. Special Const. Clarence Nelson said sisters Lucy and Anne Abolins are each charged with one count of animal abuse and will appear in court Sept. 9. The charges come a month after SPCA and health officers discovered the cats in a house the women rented with their mother. If found guilty, the two women could face fines of up to \$20,000. They could also be prohibited from owning animals.

# SPCA charges women with abuse of animals; Obsessive Ownership; HEALTH CONCERNS

Journal: The Edmonton Journal June 19, 1999 pg B3

Authors: Katie Andrews; Journal Staff Writer

The SPCA is laying animal-abuse charges against the family who housed 200 dead and dying cats in Edmonton. Victoria Abolins, 79, and her daughters Lucy, 55, and Anne, 49, were evicted from two rented south side residences in two days this week for hoarding cats. The society is not interested in going after the women for \$20,000 -- the maximum fine under the Animal Protection Act. It just wants to be sure they will never again own another animal. "It's up to the Crown to decide whether to proceed with the charge," SPCA special constable Garnet Melnyk told a news conference Friday. He confirms society constables went Friday morning to the motel where the Abolins are staying and read them their rights. He said one of the women gave a statement. "We still need to gather statements from a few key witnesses," says Melnyk. Other evidence will come from an autopsy report on the dead cats.

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Melnyk says the SPCA has had calls from cat owners in the areas where the women lived who are concerned about the health of their own animals. Although there is minimal risk to humans, cats could catch one of the communicable diseases that most of the Abolins' cats had. The SPCA always advises people to keep their cats indoors and to let them out only under controlled situations. That advice is particularly important in this case. To help prevent future animal abuse, the society wants the city to endorse improved registration and identification of cats, perhaps by implanting microchips in the animals. Another suggestion has been to charge cat owners more to register animals that have not been spayed or neutered. SPCA executive director Roger Simms says it's more important to ensure pets are receiving proper care, no matter how many are in one house.

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## 3 women from house of cats may be in shelter

Journal: The Edmonton Journal June 18, 1999 pg B1/ FRONT

Authors: Katie Andrews; Journal Staff Writer

Faced with no place to stay and little possibility of renting in Edmonton ever again, the three women who lived in the now famous "cat house" are likely in a shelter for now. Given only a few hours' notice they were being evicted from their latest residence, they were left with few options. "There's no place for us to go. I mean, it's not like we are being beaten up by our husbands or anything," Lucy Abolins, 55, said Wednesday, standing in front of the house she had been renting with her mother and sister since Sunday. Lurana and WIN House shelters only take women who are victims of domestic abuse. Women's Emergency Accommodations Centre has a broader mandate and may have accepted the women. The Mental Health Advisory Board had the opportunity to interview the women Wednesday before they left together in a cab in search of a safe place to stay. In situations like these, "we can try and convince them to go to a hospital and get assessed, but there are restrictions under the Mental Health Act," says Randy Kilburn, spokesperson for the Alberta Mental Health Board. These are restrictions the Abolins family was well aware of.

When they were still living in their original residence, they refused entry to anyone who showed up on their doorstep to talk, including paramedics, police, the SPCA and public health officials. Sunday, homeowner Lynn Erbe said he heard the mother, Victoria, screaming from behind a locked door that she was sick. He promptly called Capital Health's senior distress line, as well as the police and the health inspector, who in turn called the SPCA. Cathy Housdorff, regional manager of communications for Capital Health, confirmed that the distress line received a call Sunday regarding Victoria Abolins. The Abolins demanded that the SPCA get a warrant to search the premises, which it did on Tuesday. The same officials were at the scene of the second eviction on Wednesday, trying to get Victoria Abolins checked out by a doctor on the premise that she may be ill because she was living in a house filled with cat excrement and hundreds of diseased cats. The elder Abolins repeated over and over "my enemy kill me, my enemy kill me," as her daughters laced on her shiny white running shoes, after Capital Health inspector Ken Dong told them he had called for an ambulance. One of the three paramedics who arrived on the scene Wednesday said the 79-year-old nearly-blind woman "seemed competent and alert. Unless she is a danger to herself or others, she has a constitutional right to refuse to go to the hospital." In order to take her against her will, "we'd have to call the police to have her arrested under the Mental Health Act," the paramedic said. The act outlines strict criteria that police must abide, Kilburn says. The criteria apparently were not followed. "Nobody has power of attorney over her," the younger sister, Anne, 49, said after the paramedics left empty-handed. "She's an individual. She has legal rights under the Constitution. "Just imagine how they would treat someone who has no idea what their legal rights are." Police or the SPCA have not said whether they will press charges. As for helping the women find a home, Dong said Wednesday "we can only refer them to social services." Housdorff says of Capital Health, "Our role is to help people find an appropriate place to live, but we can't force anyone to use our services."

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## Women who housed hundreds of cats evicted from second home; Out of Home Twice

Journal: The Edmonton Journal June 17, 1999 pg B1/ FRONT

Authors: Katie Andrews; Jason Kirby; Journal Staff Writers

A family of three women found housing 200 dead and dying cats in feces and garbage was evicted for the second time in two days Wednesday. After talking with police and mental-health workers for three hours, the women accepted an offer to stay in an Edmonton shelter while authorities decide what the next step should be. "They destroyed one house, now they're going to destroy this one," the landlord of the family's new residence fumed, when she came to check out whether her tenants were in fact the "cat ladies." After an initial discussion with the sisters, Lucy and Anne Abolins -- who said they

only had two cats left -- she agreed they could stay. The only hitch was that the landlord, who wishes to remain unnamed, be allowed to drop by periodically to check the inside of the house, which is owned by her son and his wife, who live in Ontario. But when she opened the door to the basement, held shut by a metal hook, she was greeted by the stench of urine and about eight cats, eyes glowing in the rafters and lying on shelves in a dark pantry. "You lied to me," the landlord yelled as she rushed up the stairs. "It'll be cats all over again. Just go! Just go!" She voided the post-dated rent cheques, written by the Abolins' mother Victoria, with a black marker from her purse and handed them to Lucy, 55, who angrily ripped them up. "We'll be gone tonight," Lucy's sister Anne, 49, said as she dropped the key in the landlord's hand. Wearing two sweaters and covered in cat hair, Victoria Abolins, 79, sat hunched over on a milk crate, the only furniture in the house which backs onto Saskatchewan Drive. Sunday morning, the owner and property manager of the Abolins' original residence said they heard Victoria wailing from behind a locked bedroom door, saying she was sick. Paramedics were called to the house Monday and examined Victoria on the back deck. After talking to her and taking her pulse, they respected her wishes to be left alone. She had the same message for three emergency medical technicians who arrived on the scene early Wednesday afternoon. "I don't want to go to hospital. I not do nothing, I live my life," the elder Abolins mumbled, sobbing. Abolins says she gave birth to her only daughters at home and has never stayed in hospital during the 20 years she has lived in Edmonton. She apologized for her heavy accent. "I speak Russian, Polish, Latvian, and I understand Ukrainian, but I never study English in school." She came to Winnipeg as a refugee from Latvia during the Second World War. Anne says her mother, who believes in holistic healing and takes no medication, is healthier than most women her age and there is no reason to hospitalize her. "There hasn't been an accident. She's not lying on the ground, unconscious," Anne said. The women had been ordered to vacate the second house by 6 p.m. Wednesday. Just after 2 p.m., the sisters carried out the family's belongings -- about six duffel bags, a pet carrier and several plastic bags -- and put everything under nearby trees. They returned for their mother and helped the frail woman, her body bent over from arthritis and set her beside the bags. "Are you going to just leave her under the trees?" the landlord asked in an angry voice. "I wish I had a chair for her, but she'll be comfortable. More comfortable than in there," Lucy replied, pointing to the house. While Victoria cuddled her dog Buddy, 17 years old and blind in one eye, the landlord contacted police. Soon after, the Edmonton SPCA, Capital Health workers and the mobile mental-health unit arrived and interviewed the women. SPCA Const. Garnet Melnyk, who took part in the massive cleanup of the family's first residence, watched cats hiding in the tall grass. "Those cats will be better off in the ravine than with them," he said. Police and the SPCA said until they know more about the women's mental fitness, they can't proceed with any charges. "The social agencies are going to put them up for the night and take a good look at them over the next couple of days," said police Const. Larry Langley. "Until then, they kind of fall in the cracks."

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## Cat House mysteries just scratch the surface

Journal: Edmonton Journal July 28, 1999 pg B1 / FRONT

Authors: Liane Faulder

It was the stuff of urban legends, where fiction often overshadows any fact. By the time the Cat House of Parkallen was demolished Tuesday, there was a rumour creeping throughout the district about a mysterious third sister who once lived in the house with the evicted elderly mother and her two daughters, but who vanished and may be buried in the backyard. The truth of it is this: the cat house is a legend worth repeating, but not because of the supposed disappearing deranged or the ghosts of cats haunting the property, their plaintive meows heard late at night. The Cat House of Parkallen is a study in community dynamics, an example of what can be accomplished with a combination of gruesome detail, media attention and politically powerful homeowners. It would be great to say the cat house represents the best of what a community can

do when it pulls together. But in reality, communities in Edmonton's inner city have been pulling together for years to rid their neighbourhoods of derelict homes, with nowhere near the results enjoyed in Parkallen. While there are numerous derelict homes in Norwood or McCauley in an arguably worse state than the cat house -- charred, teetering structures which are a threat to the community -- it takes months, even years, to get action. Ed Laboucane of the Norwood-based Community Action Project says a home that was demolished recently in the inner city took 18 months to work its way through the bureaucracy. In contrast, the cat house was discovered, condemned and knocked to the ground, the earth all but sown with salt, within six weeks. "Something in (Parkallen) would receive more prompt attention," acknowledges Laboucane. "And you wouldn't see a derelict house standing for long in an area like Riverbend, for example. Part of the problem is that in the last 10 to 15 years, the inner-city communities have been seen as a dumping ground." Parkallen community organizer Lorna Stefanick acknowledges her neighbourhood had advantages which worked to raze the cat house quickly. "This is not a case of slum landlord in rotten area of town renting out to low-income people," says Stefanick, a University of Alberta professor of political science. "This is a story of a lovely neighbourhood ... and it turns out there are hundreds of cats, the worst case of animal abuse in Edmonton's history." The "bizarre" nature of the story meant there were numerous angles to capture media attention, comments from animal lovers and advocates for the mentally ill alike -- not to mention horrendous pictures. "We had all those things working in our favour," says Stefanick, who will use the cat house as a case study in upcoming classes. "There was the mobilization of constituencies who might otherwise flip the page in the paper, and the fact that we are a middle-class, desirable neighbourhood and have a lot of university professors who live in the area and aren't intimidated by doctors from Capital Health or other officials." There were other mitigating factors, too, she adds. "If you happen to be a single mother on welfare and are already marginalized, you're an easy person to ignore." You can be sure an impoverished single parent wouldn't command the attention of the cat house mortgage holder, the Bank of Montreal, another key player in this story. The bank was under no obligation to do anything about the cat house. Sure, the Capital Health Authority approached the bank, along with the property owner, to request cleanup or demolition. But that order had little legal clout, according to bank spokesperson, Derral Moriyama. "We did this because this is an appalling situation and the Edmonton community has treated the bank very well," says Moriyama, Edmonton vice-president of the bank. The move was a no-lose proposition. It was good public relations, plus when the property sells, the bank may be able to reclaim the \$20,000 in clean-up fees from the home's owner. So now it's over. Unless the hand of the missing third sister bursts from the ground, just like in Carrie, we're probably not going to hear much about this story again. But some issues don't go away. What happens, long-term, to the women of the cat house and others like them -- the chronically hard-to-house? Also, isn't it about time to bring in a cat bylaw? Finally, is there an easier way for people without political clout and media savvy to make their neighbourhood a better place, too? While residents of Parkallen return to their middle-class lives, the larger questions lurk.

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## Women ruined second house, says landlord: But not guilty of fraud, court finds

Journal: Edmonton Journal July 27, 1999 pg B3

Authors: Kerry Powell; Legal Affairs Writer

When three women were evicted in June for harbouring a horde of diseased cats, it wasn't the first time they had left a landlord with an expensive mess. In provincial court Monday, Victor Lam described the horror he discovered in his Belgravia rental house in October 1994 when Lucy Abolins and her family skipped out after almost five years there. The putrid smell in the home near the University of Alberta was overwhelming, he said. Some of the carpet had been torn up and floorboards were loose. There was garbage and discarded furniture littered through the house and garage. Lam said it cost him more than \$20,000 to make the house livable again. His only compensation was the Abolins' \$850 damage

deposit. Lam told court he complained to police after Lucy Abolins' rent cheque bounced and he learned that she and her family -- sister Anne and mother Victoria -- had moved out without giving any notice. Abolins was charged with fraud under \$1,000 in the case, but the police couldn't find her at first and she wasn't arrested until August 1998. The petite 55-year-old represented herself on the charge Monday, with some assistance from the judge, and from her sister, who sat in the spectator section. Abolins' eyesight is so poor she had to stand within three feet of witnesses to see them in the courtroom. Her defence was successful. The judge agreed she couldn't be guilty if she didn't intend to write the bad cheque. Court earlier heard the Abolins women didn't come under the public spotlight until June when they were evicted from their Parkallen rental home. The SPCA and health officers removed almost 250 dead and diseased cats from the home, which was knee-deep in some places with feces, urine and garbage. The Parkallen house at 6234 112A St. is scheduled for demolition today. Lam told court Monday he rarely saw the inside of his house in Belgravia while the Abolins family was living there. When Lucy Abolins' \$850 rent cheque bounced in October 1994, he went to the house to talk to them and found it vacated. He let himself in and discovered the filthy, stinking mess inside. Abolins didn't deny the cheque had bounced. She testified that when she wrote it, she had expected to be living in the house that month. But a few days later, she decided to leave and join her mother and sister, who had moved to a new home. She told court she forgot about the cheque for a few days. When she remembered, she knew there wasn't enough money in her account to cover it, but she didn't think it mattered. Her thinking at the time was that she didn't need to pay rent if she wasn't living there, she testified. Besides, according to her understanding of tenancy law, Lam could use the damage deposit to cover that month's rent, she said. The deposit wasn't needed to pay for damages because there were none, she insisted. She said she only left "the odd thing" behind -- some clothing and furniture. She said she thought Lam could sell her things or offer them to some of his inner-city tenants. If he couldn't use them, he could call her. When Lam didn't call, she said she assumed everything was OK. "So I was kind of upset when, years later, it was a fraud charge. Why didn't he ask for the money first?" The judge said that he suspected Abolins' understanding of the law is probably wrong, but he accepted her explanation for the bad cheque. He said he found her sister Anne to be "very hostile and very arrogant," but that didn't change his conclusion. "I'm satisfied she did not intend to defraud Mr. Lam," he said. He said he would leave the question of damages to civil courts. Abolins, who had become increasingly agitated as the trial went on, bowed and repeatedly thanked the judge. Outside court, Abolins said her family has been living in shelters since the incident, but recently found a new place to live. In an interview, Lam also said outside of court that he couldn't rent the house for almost a year after the Abolins moved out. Because of the "awful stink," no cleaning company was willing to take on the job, he said. He had to leave all the windows open over the winter and then hire cleaners. Lam said he didn't know Lucy Abolins was one of the women from the now-infamous Parkallen cat house, but was not surprised. "I hope all the landlords don't rent to them anymore."

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## Cat ladies' obsessive-compulsive: Animal hoarders suffer the same disorder billionaire Howard

### Hughes did

Journal: The Halifax Daily News September 6, 1999 pg 15

EDMONTON (CP) -- They are called the cat ladies. Three women in a feces-strewn house in Edmonton, the stench

overpowering, with 250 dead and dying cats. A nurse facing animal cruelty charges in Saskatoon after 72 cats are seized from her home. A woman in Windsor, Ont. A house full of cats. People with more animals than they can properly care for have an obsessive-compulsive disorder, says Dr. Lorne Warneke, head of psychiatry at Edmonton's Grey Nuns Hospital. Obsessive-compulsives become fixated on something and can't bear to part with it. Some might hoard newspapers stacked so tightly there is no room to move. Others pack away balls and balls of string. Others lives in houses with stinking mounds of garbage. "One of the many things people could hoard would be animals," Warneke said. Howard Hughes It's the same mental illness that caused billionaire Howard Hughes to collect his own urine in jars stacked high in his hotel rooms during his reclusive years. Sometimes it is just one thing and other times a combination, said Warneke, which explains why houses with dozens of cats are often filled with garbage and newspapers as well. "The anxiety that drives them to hang on to these things ... is so strong that they are unable to appraise the situation like they normally would." Marion French's case might be slightly different. The Edmonton woman was sent to a mental hospital last month after animal welfare workers found eight cats in her house and more outside. There are reports up to 30 dead ones were found in her van. But the hospital declared French, 83, mentally and physically fit and released her. She is temporarily living with a kindly neighbour along with six of her cats reclaimed from the animal shelter. "Ninety per cent of the time they are women between the ages of 45 and 60," said Rick West of the British Columbia SPCA in Victoria. Dr. Gary Patronek is part of a team studying animal hoarding at the Tufts Centre for Animals and Public Policy at Tufts University in North Grafton, Mass. He said there aren't a lot of answers yet about what makes animal hoarders tick. Could be dementia He agrees obsession-compulsion is probably a large part of it, but adds there could be dementia or organic brain disease as well. Women are often involved, but not always. Sometimes it is a man or a couple. And the animals aren't always cats. "You'll see this happen with everything, from horses on down," Patronek said. "There was a case in Chicago where a woman had a whole menagerie ... and they took out a wolf and a baboon from a townhouse."

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