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MEDIA RELEASE

RCMP women: when man-catchers wore heels

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Canada Day conjures up images of red serge. But Simon Fraser University researcher Bonnie Reilly Schmidt's recent work is casting a spotlight on those RCMP officers who not so long ago also wore skirts, nylons and pumps in their pursuit of criminals.

Until 1990, those were part of the official women's uniform in the RCMP.

Reilly Schmidt, a former RCMP officer who turned in her badge in 1987 after 10 years of service, is now a doctoral student in SFU's department of history. Her PhD thesis, *Women in Red Serge: Female Police Bodies and the Disruption of the Image of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police*, is a history of women in the RCMP.

"My dissertation argues that the arrival of women in policing disrupted the RCMP's masculine image," says Reilly Schmidt, referring to iconic tales of male Mounties' heroic adventures.

"Women did play a very valuable role in the history of the police force, not only since 1974 as uniformed officers, but also before that as wives of officers.

"They were known as the unpaid Mounties. They ran the detachments and took care of prisoners in remote areas. So there has been a lot of participation by women that has been unacknowledged, which contrasts with the historic image we're used to seeing."

Her thesis examines the women's impact on the force, the male Mounties' adjustment, media stereotypes, and the differences between male and female officers' work styles.

"Women negotiate, men use physical force," she says. "You don't need to be 6'4" and brawny to be an effective police officer."

Reilly Schmidt's oral-history fieldwork includes interviews with 20 female Mounties. Six were from the first troop of 32 women, sworn in simultaneously across Canada's time zones on Sept. 16, 1974 so that no one woman could say she was the first female RCMP officer. Reilly Schmidt also interviewed male Mounties and the spouses and children of officers, among others.

In June, she delivered a paper, *The Greatest Man-Catcher of All: Female Mounties, the Media, and the RCMP* at Congress 2011 of the Humanities and Social Sciences. The title was taken from a 1975 *Regina Leader-Post* headline, a reference to the familiar media stereotype that says the Mounties always got their man.

"People don't know very much about women in the RCMP," says Reilly Schmidt. "It's a story that needs to be told and the Canadian public needs to hear it."

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