



Ray Baldwin's story of

Mary



My mother was named Mary. She was born in 1919 in Mossimin, Saskatchewan, to a young couple Willem and Alexandra Benwick. Willem was barely 20 and had emigrated from the Ukraine in 1915 and immediately entered the employ of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). By 1917 he was able to help his even younger wife immigrate. At that time the CPR had stationed him in Mossimin. And that is where Willem and Alexandra established the first of many homes over their 60 year marriage. Mossimin is also where they began a family. By the end of their lives in 1998 the Benwick family numbered eleven children. By the time she reached school age, Mary's family had settled in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Willem and his friends hand-built the house there and the family, if not Willem, would live in it until 1998. Willem had to travel constantly, so Alexandra raised the family and ruled the roost. Growing up in Moose Jaw was a richly active and colourful experience my Mother would often recount to her three children. Whether it was swimming after school in the Pasqua River, in one's underwear, or riding pigs in a farmer's field – out of sight of the farmer, of course, or whether it was hanging around the Chinese soda shop or dancing with her friends at the Friday school sock hop, as Mary told each story she painted every memory with bright colours and emotional textures.

However, in the 30's childhood was soon replaced by adolescence which itself ended as the Second World War loomed. The teenage boys could talk of nothing but their desire to join the fight, whereas my Mother got a scholarship and moved to Regina to study at the Grey Nuns nursing college. By adulthood, Mary was a strong personality, self-aware, a take-charge woman, and possessing a deep sense of empathy and a clear ethical compass. She felt born to help others and this would drive her the rest of her life.

With her degree in hand she joined the Canadian Armed Medical Corps in 1942 and awaited her posting to the war effort in Europe.

Parenthetically, around that time she met my Dad, Ray Baldwin, a handsome dashing curly-haired RAF Flight Officer. He approached her at a Saturday night dance in Regina. She was cool on the surface, and acted fiercely vague when he said he was teaching at the RCAF airbase not 5 miles from her Moose Jaw home. Still, he was good looking, was "somewhat interesting" she said. But he had something special which lead her to date him more and more frequently. And then they went to war.

Both these young adults, then only 22 and 23, were posted to the joint forces army and air force base in Farnborough, England. Their duties kept them apart. The young couple didn't see one another for over a year, each living in barracks on opposite sides of the town. However, it was during a joint-forces Officer's Dance, they met again. And this time feelings were less vague. From then on, they were largely inseparable – insofar as that is possible for two officers in different armies.

Fortunately, Dad never had to fly in combat. His teaching skills were held in high esteem. That resulted in his being kept in England or Canada to train new pilots. Unfortunately, Mary was posted to a sequence of war hospitals where she saw firsthand the consequences of war – torn, burned, broken bodies and minds of soldiers and pilots who fell in harm's way. This experience wore heavily on my Mother's spirit and values. Thus, following the war and for the rest of her long life she was a vigorous pacifist, opposed to guns, violence and rights violations wherever she saw them.

Following the war, Mary and Ray moved to the pastoral life in County Somerset in west England. Dad worked in a leather factory and Mother raised the first children. But soon recognizing that Canada offered a better future, we three immigrated to the Wilds of north Regina. Mother helped her husband hand-build their first home there. Together they provided a nurturing family environment through the '50s and

'60s. Mary was great at multi-tasking. While continuing her nursing career in Regina, Mother raised three children, and a husband who with her support built a successful career in merchandising.

In 1964, Dad's career required the family move to Toronto where, like most families, the adult children went their individual ways in education, industry and medicine. This raised the opportunity for Mary to go to university and earn two degrees in Fine Arts. The family home became a showplace for sculpting, painting, welding masterpieces, each having its own deep philosophical purpose. Mother, we learned, had things to say well beyond nurturing advice and discipline. The world, politics, poverty, and conflict were fair game for artistic attack.

In their 65th year and now free of parental obligation Mary and Ray moved to Vancouver B.C. to start a new mutual career in retirement, during which they travelled, painted, sculpted and built a comfortable late-life.

Tragically, Mary endured a heart ailment most of her life. She held, as well, doctors in high esteems. This respect for the abilities of modern medicine lead to her end. In her 84th summer Mary went into hospital for corrective heart surgery. Sadly, she never left the recovery room. Decades of heart drugs left her arteries simply too feeble to endure the sutures needed by the operation.

The family, now numbering eight, gathered at a quiet secluded seacoast bay on February 17 2003 to hold a private service and sprinkle Mary's ashes into the Pacific Ocean. The ashes were slow to float away; perhaps Mum was reluctant to leave her family.

She is in our hearts always and is fondly remembered. God Bless you, Mum. You did well.