



Brian Atkinson's story of  
**Mary Alice**



Mary Alice Vanvolkenburgh (nee Trumpour) was born April 12, 1924 on a farm outside Adolphustown, Prince Edward County, Ontario. Her ancestor, Paulus Trumpour, was one of the original United Empire Loyalists who fled New England after the American Revolution, wintered in tents outside Quebec City and navigated the St. Lawrence River in open boats to the area around Picton, where they had been deeded land. Mary was proud to be a United Empire Loyalist descendent and attended many UEL functions in the area.

Mary's parents, Herbert and Florence Trumpour, still farmed in the area. Growing up, Mary did farm chores, milked the cows and fed the chickens, but was determined her life would be different. She attended public school locally and high school in Napanee, taking a commercial course. When she graduated in the spring of 1940, women were needed to fill government positions vacated by the men who had gone to war. Mary's entire class wrote federal Civil Service examinations and she was offered a job in Ottawa.

Her parents drove Mary to Napanee when she was just 16, put her on a train to Ottawa, and instructed her to go directly to the YWCA. Being hungry that evening, Mary was directed to a store nearby where she could buy food. Terrified of getting lost, she tore up sheets of paper to leave a trail for the way back. She left Ottawa to return home in 1943.

In Napanee, Mary worked at the C.I.L. nylon plant, a large manufacturing company, and met and married Russell Vanvolkenburgh, a local boy. They had three children, Sylvia, Peggy and Brenda, between 1946 and 1950. Mary continued to work in secretarial jobs, and was extremely proud of her ability to type and take shorthand. In 1971, the marriage broke up. At that time she was employed by the Ontario Provincial Police, and she moved to Toronto to work at their Headquarters.

After 25 years, Mary retired from the OPP in 1989. Her speech, carefully typed and saved, was given at her retirement party to over one hundred OPP members, family and friends. It displays her warmth and sense of humour: "I shall begin by mentioning how pleased I am to have retired Commissioner, Mr. Harold Graham and his lovely wife – Pat – here, and to have four of the five Deputy Commissioners who have worked FOR me here at the head table."

Upon retirement, Mary moved to Kingston to be closer to her roots and her growing family of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Throughout her life, religion was important to her and she devoted much time to assisting in her local parish. However she was a lifelong smoker and developed emphysema. Her health and strength deteriorated and in 2001 she moved to a senior's retirement home in Napanee.

In November 2009, the secret Mary had kept for so long re-entered her life. She received a letter which said in part: "Dear Mary, this Thursday, November 5th, will be my birthday, I will be 67 years old. The Ontario Government has just opened adoption records and I received the news that my name at birth was Michael Arthur Trumpour and my birth mother was Mary Trumpour. I believe that is you. I do hope to hear from you if you wish to have further contact."

"My dear," she wrote in return, "There has never been a day go by I haven't thought of you. All these years I have asked God to take good care of you. I named you Michael Arthur so that we both would have the same initials, M.A.T." She went on to explain how devastated she was to give up her son: "I have so much to tell you. At the Salvation Army Home I was made the night person in the nursery. I used to hold you and talk to you. You were beautiful and leaving you there broke my heart but it just had to be. My parents would have been horrified. No Trumpour had ever brought shame."

Brian (the name given by her son's adoptive parents) arranged to visit Mary, and in January 2010 she met her only son for the first time since his birth in 1942. Several wonderful hours were spent catching up, and Brian promised to return in the summer from his home on Vancouver Island. His final question was: "Will you ever tell your daughters?" I don't know when," she said, "but it will happen." On returning home, Brian received emails from all three of his sisters, thrilled to learn of their older brother. All agreed that keeping the secret had contributed to Mary's failing health, and finally acknowledging it had transformed her.

Over the next few months a family gathering was planned for mid-July at a cottage near where Mary was living. Her children drove from across Canada: from the west coast, from Nova Scotia, and from southern Ontario. While en route, however, they received the news that Mary had fallen and broken her leg, and a few days later heard the sad news that she had died.

The union of Mary's children was bittersweet, and the following day there was a beautiful funeral service at Mary's home church. All four children sat in the front row and there wasn't one of the seventy-five people at the service who hadn't learned of Mary's secret. She had told everyone she knew about her son.

The next day a celebration of Mary's life was attended by twenty-three family members, including children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The following day she was laid to rest in the St. Alban's church cemetery in Adolphustown, where she was born.