

## Mary Johnston

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During World War 2, with many men absent from home in the armed forces, and industries becoming more productive, women began taking over jobs traditionally done by men. In 1943 and 1944, over 400,000 women worked in various services, and a further 373,000 had jobs in manufacturing. Of these, about 260,000 worked directly in the munitions industries. Women worked in shipyards, smelters and made up 30% of the workforce in Canada's aircraft industry.

Here in Ottawa, the male labour force was thinning out drastically. At Ottawa Neighbourhood Services, donations were collected from homes in the area. Initially, manager Harold Mayfield used a rented horse and cart, but later spent \$40 to purchase a used truck to make the rounds. By 1943 he had two trucks.

When one of the drivers left, he was unable to find anyone to replace him. He advertised the job, and to his amazement, a woman applied for the position. Mary Johnston lived in the immediate vicinity, and had many years of driving experience. She took great delight in driving and had worked as a chauffeur and companion for women who disliked driving their own cars. Harold had never heard of a woman truck driver, and refused to hire Mary. When no one else applied for the position and situation was becoming desperate, he contacted her and offered to hire her. Mary was very excited to accept.

In addition to driving the large truck, Mary was expected to go into the homes and businesses on her route, and carry out the large sacks of clothing, paper and other donations, and load them into the truck. Harold doubted that she could handle the heavy work, so on her first day he sent one of his employees, a young man, to help her out. He quickly discovered that Mary was quite capable of handling both the driving and the heavy loads, so from then on she was happily on her own.

Mary's route covered several different neighbourhoods, including the Glebe, Ottawa South, Ottawa West, Hintonburg and Mechanicsville. Harold was enormously impressed with Mary's ability. In an interview with a reporter from the Ottawa Evening Citizen, he said that if the second driver had to leave his employment, he would not hesitate to consider a woman for the position. Mary told the reporter "Now that I have found a way to replace a man who is fighting for our country, I can happily combine pleasure with duty".

Much has changed these days. A variety of positions and training is available to women in local and long distance trucking, bus driving, and operating heavy equipment. Today in Canada, although women make up only three percent of professional truck drivers, support and encouragement can be found through organizations such as Trucking HR Canada and many others. These groups provide courses, mentoring, training and resources to women like Mary who are interested in a career in trucking. But back in 1943, these benefits weren't available so Mary had to prove that women could drive a truck as well as the man

she replaced. In doing so she helped to pave the way for other women to perform non traditional work, and proved herself one of many Hintonburg trailblazers.