

## history

# Women in the underground

*Pam MacQuarrie-Higden led the way in breaking mine gender barrier*

Northern News Services

Back in the 1930s, there was a tiny silver mine at Great Bear Lake.

It was just a small hole in the ground, but it made newspaper headlines when the mine boss led a delegation of visitors into its depths. It was a holiday so the mine was closed and the miners were out of camp on a bender.

The mine had welcomed tourists before, but these were not your typical class. They were women, including a female correspondent with the *Edmonton Journal*, who wrote "Mine Superstition Defied, Women Enter Great Bear Pit."

It may seem ridiculous today, but it was not long

## MINERS' Tales

Ryan Silke is a local historian who is working on a book on mining history in the Northwest Territories.

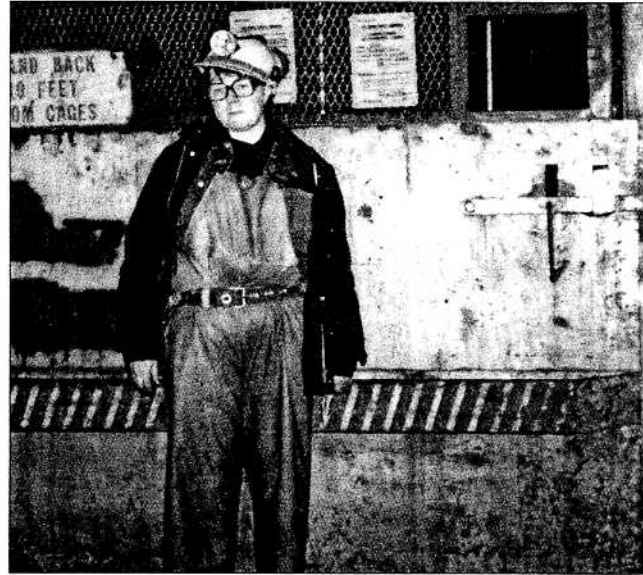


ago that your typical miner still had his doubts about a woman's place underground, believing that it was bad luck. The superstition was enforced by many mines up until the 1950s, when it became more acceptable to have women visit the underground. But even the official mining regulations of the day made it clear: no women shall be employed in underground labour.

Pam MacQuarrie-Higden

was the first woman to work underground in Yellowknife. The labour situation had changed dramatically by the 1970s and mining companies were experimenting with female labour beyond clerical and office-type duties.

Pam's geologist father, William MacQuarrie, was killed in an accident at Con Mine in 1950. She was also the granddaughter of famous surveyor John Anderson-Thomson. Pam



(Photo courtesy of the NWT Mining Heritage Society)

**Pam MacQuarrie-Higden, seen here in 1984, got into the mining trade, first at Giant Mine in 1975 and then Con Mine in 1979. Pam worked most of her career as a cage tender at Con.**

was well known in the mining community, so they decided to give her a chance.

Things got off to a rocky start. Pam's first job was security at Giant Mine in 1975. One day she walked into the shaft headframe, and there were two miners waiting for the cage.

"They just walked out," she said, of the miners' protest

that a woman had entered the "sacred" shaft building. It was a challenge to dispel the belief that women shouldn't work underground. The reasons, according to Pam, were that females had a different build. "We don't have the upper strength like the guys," said Pam.

But new studies suggested that women were easier on

equipment, better focused on a job, and missed less time from work. The Pine Point lead/zinc mine began to hire women drivers for the haul trucks, and Con Mine trained four women to run the hoists in 1980. Not underground work, true, but the start of a new trend.

Pam began work at Con

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# Times have changed in the mines

Women, from page A20

Mine in 1979 as a first aid attendant and later as a cage tender. The cage tender is responsible for signaling all movements of the shaft cages. Regular communication between the cage tender and the person running the hoist is maintained using bell codes.

Even in 1981, when Pam started underground, she faced discrimination.

"The guys didn't like me

working underground," said Pam.

"A bunch of them tied wrapped my lunch pail one time ... then they had an idea to put my Suzuki jeep in the cage and put it underground but the shaft crew figured they'd all get fired."

Work as a cage tender is demanding, and Pam had to prove she was fit for the job. The Robertson Shaft saw a lot of wear and tear, and rock bursts damaged the shaft. It was also very hot and humid in the mine, and it was normal for min-

ers at its very bottom to strip down to their underwear, hard hat and belt. It could also be very wet in some areas.

"The water in there was so caustic I had to put on cream before going underground otherwise I would rash up," says Pam.

The caustic water rotted the shaft guides, requiring major maintenance over the years. As part of the shaft crew, Pam spent the better part of her career fixing up the shaft. This involved replacing the guides, rockbolting the walls, and changing the hoist cables. She also worked in the mill, first aid, and security, receiving good experience in all aspects of the mining

industry. Power outages were common at the mine, and if you were travelling in the cage at the time, it just stopped. But not before a very big bounce.

"That was one carnival ride you never had to pay any money for," said Pam.

When Con finally closed in 2003, Pam was still running the cages. She was in fact one of the last three people to travel underground. On the

final day, Nov. 28, she travelled with two shift bosses to salvage fire extinguishers, acetylene bottles, and do a final check of the mine. She also collected a few old shaft signal boards, the legend that lists the different code signals she had used at the mine in her 20-year career.

Pam summed it up: "I enjoyed my mining career. For me it was much more interest-

ing and challenging than if I had stayed in nursing. It just shows that women can work underground."

Women enjoy opportunities through a variety of jobs in today's mining industry. We have come a long way since the earliest days of mining in the NWT, when the only way to sneak a woman underground was to make sure your miners were off drunk somewhere!

**"The guys didn't like me working."**