


First Woman Underground Miner in the Yukon

by Janeane MacGillivray

L'auteure a été la première femme à travailler à l'intérieur d'une mine du Yukon. Elle décrit sa participation dans la lutte contre les lois discriminatoires qu'elle a dû mener afin de rendre cette expérience possible.

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My participation in the struggle for women's equality began when I went to work for a company that serviced gas station pumps in my home town of Nanaimo, B.C. I worked as a girl Friday in the office, making about \$500 per month, while a male student, hired for the summer, made three times as much out in the field. I told the managers I would like to be considered for his job when he went back to school in the fall. I wanted a chance to earn his kind of paycheque. They let me know, unequivocally, that there were office *girls* in the world, and then there were *servicemen*, and that was it. End of conversation.

That was in 1970, the same year the Royal Commission on the Status of Women released its 167 recommendations to the federal, territorial, and provincial governments, and to private business. At that time, some provinces had different minimum wage laws for women and men. And, as I was painfully aware, women working in permanent, full-time jobs earned 59 per cent of what men did.

So I figured out what I wanted—a fat paycheque—and I figured out how to get it. With little formal education, I would have to get dirty in a blue collar, male-dominated job. And finally, I figured out where to do it—in the Yukon, where I'd heard, "The men are men, and the women are too."

I moved north in 1974 and got a job selling tickets on the Whitepass and Yukon train to Skagway. It paid about \$400 a month. I approached my supervisor to see if he would consider transferring me out to Lake Bennett to work on the steel gang, repairing and laying railroad track. Oops, sorry, wrong gender again.

Needless to say, I went looking for other possibilities.

I discovered that Whitehorse Copper Mine had recently hired one or two women to work as labourers in the mill. I applied and got the job—at \$4.25 per hour, or

roughly \$700 per month. I traded high-heeled shoes for steel-toed boots, a pencil for a shovel, and a persistent uneasy feeling that I was being taken advantage of for a new-found self-respect.

That is, until I got my first assignment. My shift boss led me down to the fine ore bin of the mill, handed me a wire brush, and pointed to some graffiti artfully displayed on the concrete wall. The second word was *you*, and the first one started with F and it wasn't feminism. I didn't know if it was a test, a joke, or just part of the job.

I worked my way up in the mill from labourer to filter operator, to grinding operator, to crusher operator. However, I wasn't interested in applying for the top job in the line, flotation operator. I wanted to go underground. Underground workers were paid more (most made a bonus based on their production quotas), but more importantly, I felt the need to respond to yet another inequality.

Women weren't working underground because the Mining Safety Ordinance of the day forbade it. Subsection 10 (2) said that, "No female person shall be employed in underground work in any mine." It was illegal and therefore obviously not on the list of my employment possibilities. However, Subsection 10 (3) said that subsection (2) did not apply if a female "in the course of her studies, spen(t) a period of training in the underground parts of a mine." Well, the company and the union ran mine rescue courses all the time, so I decided to take one. I got to see the 'lay of the land' underground, and met many of the men who were to be my coworkers later.

But it was scary. I have asthma and putting on an oxygen tank didn't exactly appeal to me. But I did graduate and proceeded to fill out my first application for underground work. According to my rejection slip, my bid for work as a miner's helper was unsuccessful because of Article 10 of the Collective Bargaining Agreement. The job went to someone who had more skills and experience than I did. But even if I'd been the only applicant, I still couldn't have been hired because it was still illegal for women to work underground.

Around the same time, the Yukon Status of Women Council was formed, and its members, together with Trudy Vanderburg, an expediter at the mine, were lobbying the MLA from Faro, Stu McCall, to have the "no women underground" law changed. In March, 1975, the Yukon Legislature repealed the offending subsection—two years before the Canadian Human Rights Act was passed, forbidding discrimination on the basis of sex.

I started re-applying for underground work, saving all my rejection slips. Now the problem was not legal, it was logistical. There was a "mine dry" (a common shower

room and change room) for men, but none for women. Although at the time, I offered to use the shift bosses' change area, I would never do that now, realizing more than ever that the company had a clear responsibility to provide facilities for women workers.

Finally, almost a year later, I was successful in my bid for the position of skiptender because no one else applied. I bought my "slicks" (a yellow rain suit), my steel-toed rubber boots, and my new hard hat with ear muffs that made me look like a hard-of-hearing monkey. I was ready to go, but the mine manager said he wanted to see me in his office. He looked down the list of men working underground at the time and said, "I don't think anyone is going to walk off the job when you start work today, but we'll just have to see."

I was aware that many people believed it was bad luck to have a woman underground, but hadn't expected to hear it from the mine manager on my first day. I knew that if anything happened to anyone on that shift, anywhere, I would be found and summarily brought to the surface, never to return.

Well, luckily, nothing out of the ordinary happened to any of the other workers. However, something definitely out of the ordinary was about to happen to me.

I used to be terrified of elevators, and my job of skiptender consisted of running the elevator in the mine shaft. At the beginning of the shift I was to take the men down to one of the main levels, and then proceed to the

bottom of the shaft to load the ore into the skips for hoisting to surface.

Often the ore would get jammed coming down the chute where I was stationed and would have to be blasted out. I began studying to get my secondary blasting ticket. I passed the exam with flying colours. When the Mine's Inspector went to have his secretary type up my certificate, he discovered she'd gone home for the day. He ended up having to type it himself. I have to say I couldn't help but allow myself to feel a certain satisfaction, standing by the secretary's desk, watching him hunt and peck at her typewriter, filling out the first underground blasting permit ever issued to a woman in the Yukon.

Once I had proven to the men that I was there to work my butt off, they accepted me and in the main, supported me. Like them, I worked hard and played hard, and as a result of that experience I came to understand a couple of things.

First of all, men working in dangerous, physically demanding blue collar jobs don't exactly have it easy. Coupled with the stress that comes from these jobs is the expectation that they not talk about their fears or other feelings about the work. It is acceptable to drink hard, and party hard but you may *not* say you're scared. I behaved this way for the two years I was underground, but for a year after I left, every time I heard a story or saw a picture of underground work, I would burst into tears. Many of my co-workers have died since I worked at the mine—most for reasons related to their working lifestyle—from accidents involving alcohol, from heart attacks, from suicide.

As a result, I have a great deal of respect for the men and now a few women who do these types of jobs. The other thing I learned was that no matter how long I was there, nor how hard I worked, there was always the underlying assumption, surfacing only occasionally, that I did not really have a right, nor would I ever really have a right, to be there.

So I felt alone most of the time. That is, until I attended the first ever Yukon women's retreat in Atlin, B.C. There, I discovered many like-minded, living, breathing women who were doing their own pioneering right here in the territory. Some of these women were feeling as isolated in their endeavours as I was, whether in their work, families, or in their communities. And for some of us, when we came together that weekend and discovered the strength in our common experience, it was the start of a lifetime association with the principles and values of a feminist way of life.

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Janet Moore, "Beneath the Mountain" detail from the installation, 1989
Mixed Media on Board, 6' x 4'