

Where it all began

A look at women's groups in the Canadian mining industry

■ Barbara Caelles

Although historically mining has been an industry dominated by men, written and photographic records dating back to the early 1800s exist indicating that women worked in the coal industry in England and Wales; took part in the California, Alaska, Yukon and BC gold rushes; and have prospected throughout North America since the mid-1800s. In fact, one of Canada's most successful prospectors, the legendary Viola MacMillan, even became the first female president of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada in 1944 — a position she held for two decades.

Despite this background, women entering mining-related careers in the 1960s and early 1970s found themselves the objects of some curiosity, as demonstrated by letters sent in to advice column gurus Ann Landers (*Vancouver Sun*, circa 1974-75; see p. 65) and Dear Abby (*Toronto Sun*, December 1975; see p. 66). *The Northern Miner* found them rare enough to be newsworthy and thus began assigning stories to Nean Allman, the newspaper's first female reporter and first geologist on staff.

"The editor liked my story so much that he suggested I take the women I interviewed out for lunch," recalls Allman. "The four of us who met on that occasion had such a great time that we decided to continue the lunches, which gradually grew as more women began working in the industry. It wasn't called 'Women in Mining' in the early days, though. It was just a lunch between some of the women geologists in town, a chance to meet like-minded souls since there weren't very many women in the industry and most were relatively isolated and

Dear Ann: My husband is a geologist for a major oil company. Recently he had to take a young woman geologist out to an oil well to train her. They were together constantly for three weeks, travelled thousands of miles alone in the car, ate all their meals together, even slept out on the rig.

I'm not worried about the physical attraction, because most women geologists are so ugly they could go lion-hunting with a switch. I do resent the proximity between the two of them for that length of time and have told him so. He swears everything is strictly business.

Why should women who choose to stay home and be wives and mothers have to put up with such stuff just so these liberated women can prove themselves in a man's field?

What about the oil companies? They profess to care about the welfare of their employees. Why not their employees' wives? I wonder how other wives feel about these situations and how they deal with their anxieties.

— Geologist's wife

Circa 1974 – 1975

Answer: For a woman who is "not worried" you sound pretty upset. Cool it, dear. If your husband's job consists of training new crew members, you'd better accept the fact that some of those crew members are female. What you describe is the result of women's insistence that there be no discrimination on the basis of sex. So, we have to take the bitter with the sweet.

P.S. Before I get clobbered by a few thousand lady geologists, I want to go on the record as dissociating myself from that comment about their looks. Please don't put the wife's words in my mouth. I make enough gaffes on my own.

junior, and they never met others across a table doing business."

By 1973, then-president of the Geological Association of Canada (GAC), Ward Neale, drew attention to the fact that, "Out of a GAC membership of 2,000, there are only three dozen female members." In an effort to address this issue, GAC created the Status of Women Geoscientists Committee and appointed Nean Allman to head it. The committee's findings were

published in GAC Information Circular No. 2 in 1976, bringing about an awareness of women working in the geoscience profession.

Early beginnings: a sisterhood was born

Not all of the women's groups were professional organizations, but rather a means for the wives and daughters of those working in the industry to become acquainted. In 1921, the

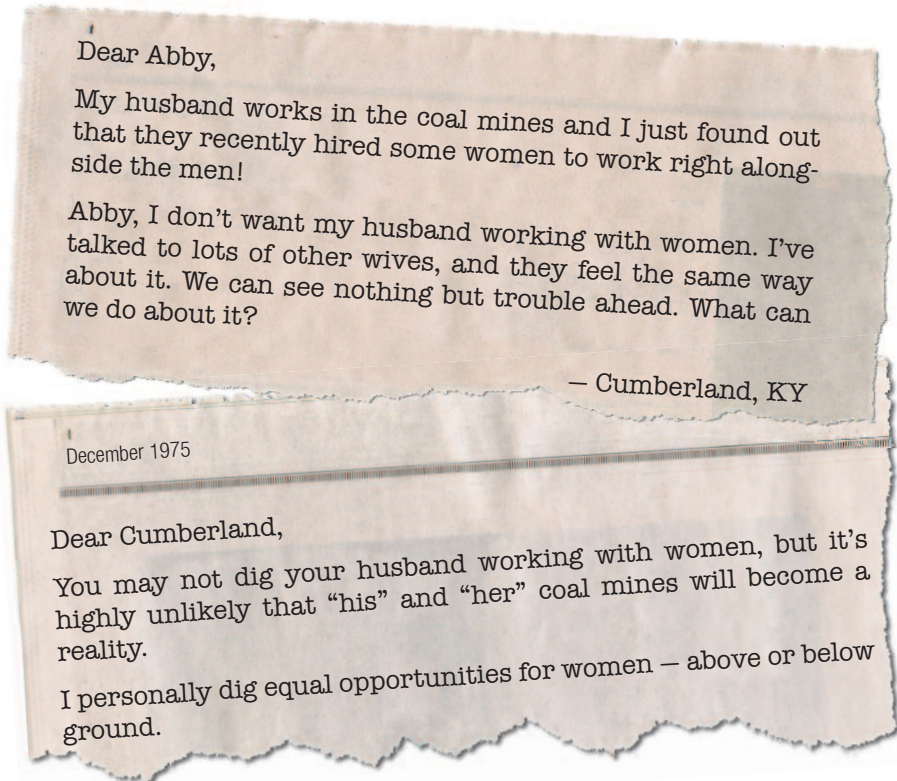
Women's Association of the Mining Industry of Canada — Toronto (WAMIC) was founded by Edith Tyrrell, wife of famed geologist Joseph Burr Tyrrell, "to foster friendship among women connected to the mining industry." The association handed out their first scholarships in 1939 and, in 1964, the WAMIC Foundation was formed to provide scholarships, bursaries and awards to undergraduate students across Canada.

In 1975, the Greater Vancouver Mining Women's Association (GVMWA) was formed as a "fellowship organization for spouses of people connected with the mining industry." By 1977, it had evolved into a charitable organization whose mandate was to raise public awareness of mining through education. Over the years, members have raised a considerable amount of money to support scholarships, science fair awards and a minerals education program. GVMWA also organized a Student Networking Evening for six years until Lynn Anglin and the Association for Mineral Exploration of BC took it over and made it an integral part of the annual Mineral Exploration Roundup.

CIM also played a role in promoting women's groups early on. At its annual conference in 1977, CIM held its first technical session geared specifically towards women, "Effects of mining community living and isolation," which attracted a crowd of more than 400 people. Today, CIM holds a Women in Mining Forum and Reception each year as part of its annual conference and has a Women in Mining column in each issue of *CIM Magazine*.

Women in Mining groups

Across the country, informal gatherings



evolved into more structured groups. The handful of geologists that used to meet for lunch grew throughout the 1980s and 1990s and eventually became Women in Mining (WIM) Toronto.

WIM Vancouver had its beginnings in 2002 when Diane Gregory and I met at a Mineral Exploration Group

(MEG) lunch and decided it was the right time to try to form a group similar to the one that existed in Toronto. Within a few months, a 20-name email list grew to over 100 names, and today stands at over 400.

In addition to WIM Canada (the only national non-profit organization), WIM networking groups have also formed in Manitoba, Northern

WIM groups around the world

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Ontario, Quebec (WIM Val-d'Or) and Saskatchewan.

Giving back

While networking remains the primary goal of WIM groups, many women also feel a profound sense of wanting to give back to the community, to educate others about their work, and to help out in some tangible way.

In 2007, a team made up of WIM Toronto members took part in the Weekend Walk to End Breast Cancer and raised over \$200,000 to become the top fundraising team. That same year, WIM Vancouver organized a cross-Canada team in the Run for the Cure and raised over \$30,000. Two years later, the team was the 15th highest grossing fundraiser in Canada, and just this past year, WIM Vancouver won the CIBC Corporate Spirit Award for being the top fundraising team (raising nearly \$50,000) at the Vancouver Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation CIBC Run for the Cure.

Fundraising efforts carried out by WIM groups began generating considerable publicity. At a monthly luncheon in Toronto following the 2007 Weekend Walk to End Breast Cancer and Run for the Cure, the scheduled

teleconference attracted calls from Brazil, the United States and England. We suddenly became aware of the existence of other WIM groups around the world, as well as individuals inspired to set up groups where there were none.


In terms of education, WIM Vancouver has worked in tandem with Sheila Stenzel, director of the Mineral Resources Education Program of British Columbia, Mining Association of BC, to promote geosciences by offering high school students the opportunity to complete a short work term with a mining company. The group has also taken a leadership role in mentoring. Most recently, at the University of British Columbia's Women in Science (WISE) 2010 Career Evening, WIM Vancouver members spent one-on-one time with

students, offering advice on how to prepare for a career in science and engineering.

Here to stay

From a single association in the 1920s to an ever expanding network, these groups continue to provide guidance and leadership to young women, and contribute substantially to their communities and charitable causes. To learn more about how you can become a member, please consult the sidebar for a complete list of groups around the globe.

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Author

Barbara Caelles is a professional geoscientist with 40 years of experience in the mining industry. She was an exploration field geologist before turning to consulting to balance her profession with motherhood. She is a founding member of the Vancouver Women in Mining.

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OTHER WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

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