
Pioneering Women in Petroleum Geology...The Deep and Real History

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GCAGS Explore & Discover Article #00123*

http://www.gcags.org/exploreanddiscover/2016/00123_gries.pdf

Posted September 13, 2016.

*Abstract published in the *GCAGS Transactions* (see footnote reference below) and delivered as the Women in Geosciences Breakfast presentation at the 66th Annual GCAGS Convention and 63rd Annual GCSSEPM Meeting in Corpus Christi, Texas, September 18–20, 2016.

ABSTRACT

If not recorded, vast annals of history are lost. Pioneering women in petroleum geology entered the field very shortly after men became valued and accepted in the oil exploration...and women were first employed the year the American Association of Petroleum Geologists was founded! This was encouraged because so many men were conscripted or volunteered for World War I. And this was before women's suffrage!

Women became subsurface geologists at a time when the tools of the trade were rocks (no electric logs, no seismic, no paleontology) and surveying equipment. Interestingly, some of the greatest men in the profession were responsible for hiring, training, promoting, and keeping women in this career—names like Sidney Powers, Everette DeGolyer, George Matson, Alex McCoy, Wallace Pratt, and E. T. Dumble.

Required to quit, usually, when they married...only single women survived, some as entrepreneurs, some as well site geologists, and some in corporate management. The rare company, Amerada Petroleum, welcomed married women to continue working.

Women soon after World War I were responsible for the biggest technological advancement in exploration...working out stratigraphy with micropaleontology...which, still without well logs and seismic, became absolutely essential.

World War II created new opportunities again for women to enter the field and they did in droves. With the onset of electric logs and seismic, women could venture into exploration using the newest technology. But again, careers were discouraged after the war, both when women married and also because a new social order was developing...a powerful social dynamic of putting the “little ladies” back in the home “free of the burden of working”—the June Cleaver era. For the next thirty years it was a struggle for a woman to get an exploration job...and if they did, it always came bundled with menial tasks and inferior pay.

In the early 1970s, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) threatened oil companies with denying them federal leases if they did not have a “diversity” plan for hiring women and other minorities. An immediate response resulted in the hiring of great numbers of women. Affirmative Action actually worked and had lasting affects. Within a very few years women thought they were only hired for their brains! And by then, they probably were. But, the world had long forgotten the smart women who were the real pioneers.