

“While the Men Where at War”

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 5.47

Flesch Reading Ease Score: 81.70

Eleanor Travica studies a black-and-white photo of the day shift at the Danube mine in Bovey in 1945. Twenty-four women stand up straight in their overalls and boots, their hair pulled back under scarves or hats, their lunch pails in their hands.

"A lot of peanut butter sandwiches in those lunch pails," she says with a laugh. "'Course there was rationing in those days, you know."

Travica worked at the mine in 1944 and 1945. She worked eight hours straight, with no break for lunch or coffee. She ate while keeping an eye on chunks of iron ore tumbling out of a crusher onto a wide belt. The belt snaked down three stories through the plant where the ore was washed and dumped into railroad cars and shipped to steel plants to the East.

"On each floor they could stop the belt, but only up on the top floor was where they could start it," Travica says. When it went smoothly, all she had to do was watch. If it got jammed up, it had to be stopped and started again.

Other women were responsible for shoveling up the ore that fell off the belt and throwing it back on. That's where the female crew outshone the men, Travica remembers. "Each shift the women made sure that everything was clean under the belts. But when just the men were there, it would spill over until it couldn't drag any more, and then they had to stop to clean it out. So they were thankful for the women," she laughs.

And the women didn't stop there. They washed the windows that were caked with dirt from years' worth of wet iron ore. "And this foreman said to me, 'The first thing I know, you'll be wanting to put curtains up here!'"

Travica's husband worked at another mine. Her sister-in-law took care of their three children. Travica earned 95 cents an hour, "and of course that was good wages in those days," she says with a chuckle.

The only men she saw at the plant were either too young or too old to go to war, "but they were very nice to us women, very nice," she says. "T'aint like today. I can sympathize with these women in those other mines that had a lawsuit, and you hear so much now of harassment. But they were always nice to us."

At least, most of them were. Travica remembers one man who would use his grease gun to squirt grease on the women.

"He thought it was a great joke. So the women thought, 'We'll get even with him someday.' But every time they'd go to do something to him, he'd run to the men's bathroom -- they called it the 'dry' in those days."

Inside the dry was a big round washstand, like a giant bird bath.

"And one day there was a whole bunch of women and we thought, 'We'll get even with him!' A man come out of the dry and said there's nobody in there, so it was okay for us to go in. So we grabbed him and took him and put him in that bird bath, turned the water on him, and he never played no more jokes!"

In the photo of the day shift at the Danube mine, the women are all wearing overalls, heavy jackets, and steel-toed boots. Travica says in those days women usually wore dresses. But in the mine they had to dress like men. Travica is wearing a sturdy wool jacket left by her younger brother when he was killed in the war.

Three of the women in the picture are sisters. Mary Jokinen is dead now, but her sisters Millie Mandich and Zorey Rukavina have lots of memories of the mine.

Millie Mandich had been working as a cook, but when the call went out for women to work at the mines, she jumped at the chance to earn more money. "In those days we didn't have enough money; you had to get out and earn some," she says.

Her brother's wife took care of her four young children while she worked at the Danube mine. Night shifts were the hardest. "I'd take care of the kids all day, sleep a couple of hours, and then get up and do my work," Mandich says.

Zorey Rukavina had the worst job at the Danube -- shoveling the ore back onto the belt when it fell off. It was a never-ending process. "You worked hard but it was fun," she says. The foremen were helpful and easy to work for. "I think they respected the women. We came there to help and I think they respected us for it," she says.

Other women worked outside in the open pit mines. Dorothy Ban and Ann Lendacky are still close friends, 60 years after working together at the Scranton mine in Hibbing.

They were on the track gang. Twelve women and two men laid railroad tracks to transport the ore from the pit to the plant.

"We tamped ties, we spiked ties, we did everything," says Dorothy Ban. "We did just what the men did. We used shovels and sledge hammers to lay the tracks down solid."

Ban says she liked the challenge. "It was something different, something women never did before. And we made good money at that time!"

She remembers plenty of joking around too. "You'd grab your lunch pail, it'd be nailed to the bench. Or you'd open your lunch pail, and someone had put rocks in it."

Ann Lendacky's daughter was born just before her husband shipped out for service in the Pacific. She says she worked in the mine not so much to contribute to the war effort as to make money. "We were young, we came from families that didn't have a lot, and we wanted something for when our husbands came home," she says.

Lendacky wasn't above using connections to get an easier job at the mine. The foreman was an older man who'd been brought over from Serbia by her father, many years earlier. He told the women to pick up a bunch of big, heavy jacks. Lendacky, at just over 100 pounds, didn't think she could manage it.

"So I says, 'Okay, Mr. Zuban.' That was his nickname; it meant 'big teeth.' He says, 'How do you know that name? So I told him my father brought him over from Yugoslavia. He says, 'Why don't you go over and take care of the shovels!' That was about the only experience I had with a man."

When the war was over, the soldiers came back to their jobs in the mines, and the women were sent home. Many of them went back to work in cafes, bakeries and dime stores, earning far less money than they'd earned in the mines.

But most didn't complain. Millie Mandich remembers the mining companies had made it clear from the beginning their jobs were only temporary.

"We were told we'd work during the war, and as soon as the war was over we'd all be laid off, holding no seniority; the men would be back on their jobs," she says.

Looking at the photo of the day shift workers at the Danube mine, Travica remembers the picture was taken the last day the women worked there, in October of 1945.

"One of the men from the office came down and said, 'We're sorry we have to leave you go, but we could never have operated without you,'" she remembers with a smile of satisfaction.

"It was nice to be home again," she says. "But it was an experience a person will never forget. And I was just glad I could do it."