

“Women Enter the Mines”

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 5.61

Flesch Reading Ease Score: 82.34

The mining towns of northern Minnesota are small and remote, and they boom and bust with the mines. In bad years, thousands of people are laid off. Schools close, and people move away. But in boom years, the mines offer the best jobs on the Range, with good pay and benefits. So it's no wonder women wanted those jobs.

They got their chance in the 1970s, after the federal government sued a group of steel companies for race and sex discrimination. Some of those companies owned mines in northern Minnesota. And the mines started hiring women.

(Many people on the Iron Range believe that Eveleth Mines was forced to hire women as a result of this lawsuit. But the company that managed Eveleth Mines, Oglebay Norton, was not a party to the suit. Former executives and the current owners of the mine in Eveleth declined to comment on tape, but it appears that Eveleth Mines began to hire women in response to an upswing in business that led to an increased need for labor.)

The first company to hire women was US Steel.

Lynn Sterle got a job at the Sherman Mine, which was owned by US Steel, in 1975. “My dad just asked would I like to work in the mine,” she says. “And I said ‘Whatever, I’ll give it a try.’ And I started on my 19th birthday.”

Sterle started in the pellet plant, a huge, dark building where machines many stories high crush the ore and make it into pellets.

“It was unreal,” she says. “Because living up here as a child, your folks work in the mine. You don’t know what they actually do. You never step foot in a mine. You have no concept of what your dad does, you know. And it was scary. Just the immenseness of the equipment and the noise and trains and rocks coming down conveyor belts. It’s just a constant droning.”

Sheila Packa remembers the noise, too. She got a job at US Steel’s Minntac mine in 1975. Like Sterle, she was 19 years old. “It was my first job after the root beer stand,” she says.

“When I first got hired I thought, maybe I could do this as a career and not go back to school. I wasn’t there for more than a week before I decided, no. This is not the kind of job for me.”

Packa worked in a part of the mine where there were 200 men and seven women. When the men saw a woman in a hardhat and safety glasses, they stared.

“No matter where you were in the plant, at any time in your shift, if you took a smoke break or if you walked from one floor to the other, someone would make a comment,” Packa says. “You had this feeling of being watched all the time.”

She says her second day on the job, the general foreman told her that someday there would be two wage scales at the mine: one for men, and one for women who couldn’t do men’s work. Men asked her if she wore a bra. They propositioned her.

By the end of the summer, Packa called in sick to work every day rather than going back. She couldn’t stand the atmosphere, and the work was mind-numbing. But there were women who thrived on the work and shrugged off the harassment. Lynn Henderson got a job at US Steel in 1976, and loved the physical labor.

“I was always kind of a tomboy, so I just really fit in,” she says.

Henderson says her dad told her she’d have to take some grief if she wanted to work with men. And she did. “I had my butt pinched many times,” she says. “Or breasts bounced up, or... ‘You got a nice set of stacks.’ They were just the kind of guys with small brains, very insensitive. Trying to get rid of the women.”