“Nor Must We Forget the Woman Prospector”:
WOMEN IN ARIZONA MINING HISTORY

Prepared for the Fifth Annual SABC Mining Appreciation Event:
Women in Mining—Celebrating a Journey of Success

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Early in the last century, California’s Sunset Magazine spoke eloquently of the contributions of women prospectors to the American mining industry: “Nor must we forget the woman prospector. She scorns high heels and long skirts and all such femininities. Shod with high, stoutly made, thick-soled boots that conceal all the ankle that a short khaki skirt would otherwise disclose, and attired in sombrero and khaki tunic, she tramps over the desert in a most business-like way, and handles a prospector’s hammer as skillfully as her Eastern sisters would handle a fan.”

While left unacknowledged in most mining histories, since the nineteenth century women in Arizona and the West have served as independent prospectors and miners, mining entrepreneurs and investors, mill workers, assayers, and mining engineers. Although saddled with official Bureau of Mines proscriptions that specified “no woman may be employed in any mine” and deep-rooted Cornish superstitions that believed that women in a mine would bring bad luck, these pioneer women would—against all odds—lay the groundwork for equality in the stopes, smelters, and boardrooms.

**THE PROSPECTORS**

Although women prospectors are known to have been present in the California gold fields in 1849, it would be some decades before Arizona would see a large mining boom and, consequently, witness the arrival of the first female prospectors and entrepreneurs. As early as the 1880s, there are reports of “lady prospectors” in Arizona, and documentary records indicate that a certain Mrs. Holly located the San Juan copper property above Safford about 1886. The San Juan was later acquired during the 1890s by another woman prospector, Mrs. H. L. Holborne, who reportedly “tramped through the hills, located claims, and held them as would any ordinary prospector.” The San Juan deposit would never pay off for these pioneer women, but over a hundred years later Freeport-McMoRan developed a large open-pit copper mine over the old San Juan claims.

Around the turn of the last century, attitudes toward women in the workplace slowly began to liberalize, and the number of women prospectors in the West increased greatly, particularly in Nevada, the Yukon, and Arizona. Indeed, almost a hundred women prospectors are known to have worked on the Western American frontier, but owing to gaps in the documentary record, historians estimate as many as three times that number prospected in the West. Of the many nameless Arizona women prospectors, we only know the details of the few who are described in period sources. Jennie Hilton—called “the only active miner of her sex in the United States” in 1896—owned a valuable mine near the Harquahala Mountains in southwestern Arizona, which she sold for $35,000, an enormous sum of money in those days.

“A Woman Miner’s Deal,” Santa Fe Daily New Mexican [Santa Fe, NM], March 13, 1896:1

According to newspaper accounts, Hilton was formerly a schoolteacher but became “fascinated with the life of a prospector and ventured to the farthest boundaries of Arizona and New Mexico.” Other accounts mention a Mrs. Thomas Newlands of Yavapai County, who was described in 1897 as “possessed of rare business ability” and a person that will surely “succeed in mining pursuits.” Other female Arizona prospectors remain anonymous, such as a Hispanic woman in Tombstone who sold a mine in 1904 for $25,000, leading a local reporter to state, “All this reminds us that you can’t always size things up by their looks.”
Of all the women prospectors who worked in Arizona, Nellie Cashman, the “Angel of Tombstone,” and Lillian Malcolm, the “Woman Prospector,” have perhaps achieved the most fame. Cashman, who is also well known for her charitable efforts in mining communities, led a prospecting trip to Baja California during the 1880s and later would find success in the Yukon gold fields. Lillian Malcolm, who incongruously began her career as a New York actress, also traveled to the Yukon in 1898 and began prospecting in search of golden pay dirt. Over the next several decades, the Woman Prospector worked throughout the deserts of Nevada, finding a valuable ledge of copper where few had dared venture before and eventually making her way to Mexico and Arizona. Malcolm, clad in khaki pants and men’s boots, would forcefully state, “There is too much hypocrisy in the sexes... women can endure as much as a man.”
The Entrepreneurs

As early as 1880, there was talk in mining circles of an exclusively women-owned mining corporation known as the *Women’s Mining Company* and associated “permanent bureau of information” for female mining investors in New York City to be known as the *Women’s Bullion Club.*

Durkee, born in 1869, would first try her luck as a schoolteacher and later as an insurance agent before making a fortune in mining in Alaska and Arizona. Her first move as a burgeoning mining magnate was the formation in 1906 of the Alaska Garnet Mining and Manufacturing Company, capitalized at $1,000,000 with a board of directors made up entirely of women. Durkee and her female partners soon found success in marketing garnet waste material for use in the separation of metals in foundries, and in 1914 shipped some 12 tons of garnet, all without the assistance of any male stockholders.

Speaking in 1916 of the company’s success, a California magazine stated, “True, a few men stockholders have been allowed to edge into the organization, but, to quote one of the officers, ‘they have been well trained and know how to keep their places’.”

Arizona and its mineral riches would soon come to the attention of Durkee, and following a tip regarding a
mining property near Chloride she purchased a number of gold claims and organized the Dardanelles Mining Company in 1916. By the early 1920s, the Dardanelles operation had begun to realize success under the direction of Durkee, and each carload of ore shipped to the Hayden smelter was reported to yield $8,000 each in gold and silver. While the Dardanelles Mining Company would cease operations during the Great Depression, mining entrepreneur Anna Durkee eventually held controlling interests in some 20 mining properties in Arizona.

THE MINING EXPERTS
An 1881 article entitled “A Prospector in Petticoats” describes Alice Berge Clarke as an “assayer and mining correspondent” who recently passed through a course of study at Professor Murdock’s school of assaying and chemistry in Chicago. Clarke, along with numerous other women—including Jennie Hilton in Arizona—attended mining schools during the late 1800s and early 1900s and found success as professional assayers and mining experts. Indeed, a few years after the University of Arizona opened its doors in 1891, Clara Fish Roberts would be the first woman to graduate with a degree in mining from the school. Over the next few decades, a number of other women studied mining at the University of Arizona, including Blanche Elise Lightowler who, in 1944, was the first female graduate of the School.
of Mines. Like earlier generations of women mining professionals, Lightowler still endured discrimination. Once during a school trip to a mine she felt compelled to dress like a man and hide her hair in a hat so that the superstitious miners would not realize that a woman was in the mine. Since that time, hundreds of women have graduated from the School of Mines and pursued successful careers in the mining industry.

TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

With wartime industrial expansion and the draft, sexual segregation of the workplace collapsed for a few short years in Arizona during World War II. With the men off fighting in Europe and the Pacific and the production of strategic minerals such as copper imperative to the war effort, the Bureau of Mines’ prohibitions regarding women in the mining workplace were relaxed. Dozens of women went to work in the mines and the loud, dusty Phelps Dodge mill at Morenci during World War II, where they helped produce the red metal for the war effort. By 1943, some 25 percent of the concentrator workforce was female. With the war’s end, however, most were replaced by returning soldiers. Nevertheless, some women refused to leave and stayed on at Phelps Dodge for decades.

The journey to gender equality was not complete, however, and the old barriers and superstitions regarding women in the mines resumed in the post-war era. Indeed, it would not be until the 1970s that government and union mandates gave women the right to enter the male mining workplace. The journey for women in the mining industry has been a long, winding road, and the pioneering Arizona women prospectors, mine owners, assayers, and mill workers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must be remembered for their contributions to the Copper State. We must not forget the pioneer woman prospector.
4 “Mine Start a Safford Boom,” Arizona Republican [Phoenix, AZ], June 7, 1914:11.
7 “A Woman Miner’s Deal,” Santa Fe Daily New Mexican [Santa Fe, NM], March 13, 1896:1.
8 [No title], Mohave County Miner [Mineral Park, AZ], November 27, 1897:3.
9 “A Woman Miner,” Coconino Sun [Flagstaff, AZ], October 22, 1904:7.
12 Ens, A Beautiful Mine, p. 78.
13 “Lady Miners,” Arizona Citizen [Tucson, AZ], February 14, 1880:1.
17 Brown, More than Petticoats.
19 Brown, More than Petticoats.
21 Brown, More than Petticoats.
22 Brown, More than Petticoats, p. 43.
23 Brown, More than Petticoats, p. 43.
26 Personal communication between Rob Peckham and Mary Poulton, October 3, 2013.
27 Personal communication between Rob Peckham and Mary Poulton, October 3, 2013.

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