Partial justice for tradeswomen

By Sally Mackenzie of the Kootenay Reporter.

Mavis Mitchell is an apprentice machinist at Cominco in Trail. She started her apprenticeship two and a half years ago and was the first woman apprentice hired. KR: What does your work involve?

Mavis: I run a lathe and a milling machine and I rip apart big pumps and gear boxes and stuff like that. KR: What is a milling machine? Mavis: It's like a lathe except instead of the work turning, its your tool that's turning and your material is stationary.

KR: How long is your apprenticeship?

Mavis: Four years. We have to do four months of school and it gets pretty heavy. Lots of math. That is more or less what my job is, comprehending angles. It is sort of an applied physics job. You have to learn the physical properties of metal before you start working on it. And what type of tools to use. When I was starting I didn't understand the tool business at all but I finally got it.

1 am surprised Cominco hasn't hired anymore female machinists. I have asked them several times why they haven't and they say there is no one with the scholastic ability for my trade. You are usually hired on vocational training, what your marks were like in machine shop and industrial science in high really plan on doing this although I did have industrial science, I had math 12 and chemistry 12 and in both subjects I had a B average.

I wanted to do it even when I was in high school. I really like the whole idea of getting paid to learn something. I wanted to go back to school but I didn't know what I wanted to take so I was just sort of wasting away in Rossland for a year and a half. I was tired of being unemployed and crappy wages and all that stuff. I did apply for work at Cominco just to be a labourer but they told me I was too light to even get a job in the tank rooms so I thought 'Oh, I'll never be a machinist.' I was really surprised when they hired me because I was really lightweight then

When I applied for the job they were hiring 12 apprentices and I imagine if they didn't hired and easy to get along with. me there would have been Because I really think they did something flying around down want it to work out. there. I knew they were being ressured by the government to have a woman apprentice by 1980. They hired me eight months before that. I was the trial. the doctor said 'Oh, you're not going to last. You're not big enough or strong enough." So I felt I was under a lot of pressure. I wanted to quit for the first little while because one of the bosses was being really strange. He is retired, but he was just being really strange, like 'it's a man's world' and that sort of stuff. But I couldn't even tell that to other women. I'd say I want to quit and they would look at me like 'What? You're not quitting for something as trivial as that'. So I did stick it out My family was pretty good and stood behind me, and my brothers always let me know they felt what I was doing was pretty good. They always felt a woman was as equal as a man. They were probably the ones that got me interested.

from the guys you were working with when you first started? Mavis: There were a lot of guys that were mad before I got hired. Like 'there is no way I want to work with a woman'. I think they thought I was only there to pick up a husband. After I was there for awhile, most of the guys that were really dead set against me started to become really good friends of

KR: Was there much hostility was really nice. I got accepted at school because those three guys had been working with me for the past year and considered it just normal. It wasn't like I was strange or anything. And it was great because both times I have gone there, there has been another woman machinist going to school at the same time. KR: Do you need a lot of

strength? mine. I get along with everyone Mavis: No, we've got cranes and other people if it is something

easier. The work itself I got the hang of fairly fast. I had lots of help, I never hesitated to ask for help, but it was just feeling so all alone that was the hardest thing. Feeling like I was being tested. I don't get that feeling anymore because they know I can do it and they don't expect too much of me or put me down.

KR: Do you know if Cominco has plans to hire anymore female apprentices?

pressure put on the government to pressure places like Cominco into hiring women.

The union would probably be a really good way to get more women. I don't think they're doing anything though. They should put pressure on Cominco to put in facilities for women. That is another one of their deals they say they are not going to hire women because they don't have facilities. 'It would cost too much to make change rooms, we don't have washrooms and this is one of their copouts. Maybe the union should put pressure on them to have women's facilities everywhere and then they can't use that as an excuse.

The union could put pressure on the Members of Parliament and the government themselves. And maybe going to schools and letting it be known to younger women that are still in high school that this is one of the things they can think about as a career. There probably aren't many girls who apply because they don't think

they can get the job. But I think it will be easier now, especially at places like Cominco where they already have women.

"Out of 3,000 people working at Cominco there are only 40 women in the actual production work."

out of my way to get along. You kind of have to do that when you are working with people. I think it is not any different anywhere. KR: Do you feel under pressure to perform all the time?

Mavis: For the longest time the tour guides used to bring the whole tour down and I was starting to feel 'What is this - the zoo?

Then one of the guys gave them hell because it was starting to impair my work, a tour would come along and I would start falling to pieces. I wanted to turn my lathe off and not do anything while they were there. Now I am kind of used to it.

school. But I was academic, I didn't The first little while I really felt pressured to do good. I don't know why. I probably tried a lot harder than most of the guys. You feel when you are the first you don't want to blow it for everyone else. KR: You haven't had any trouble with guys not wanting to explain stuff to you?

Mavis: No, quite the contrary. Quite a few of them were really glad this was happening. It was sort of a novelty.

When I started, I didn't know which way to turn a bolt to undo it or do it up. A guy I worked with told me to take something apart and I was trying to tighten the bolts to get them off. He said, 'God, don't you know anything about this job?', and I said, 'nope', and he said, 'don't tell anyone.

I think I was sort of handpicked for who I was working with so the people would be amiable

Most of them are good. If I

that is too small for a crane.

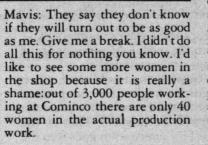
Actually anyone can do it. You have to not mind getting your hands dirty and not be afraid. KR: Why did you decide on machinist?

Mavis: I applied as a machinist because I am a fertile woman and any fertile woman can't work in the lead area in Trail. That eliminated just about every ap-prenticeship down there. I could have been a machinist or an armature winder because both of them are basically in the shop jobs and not considered in the lead

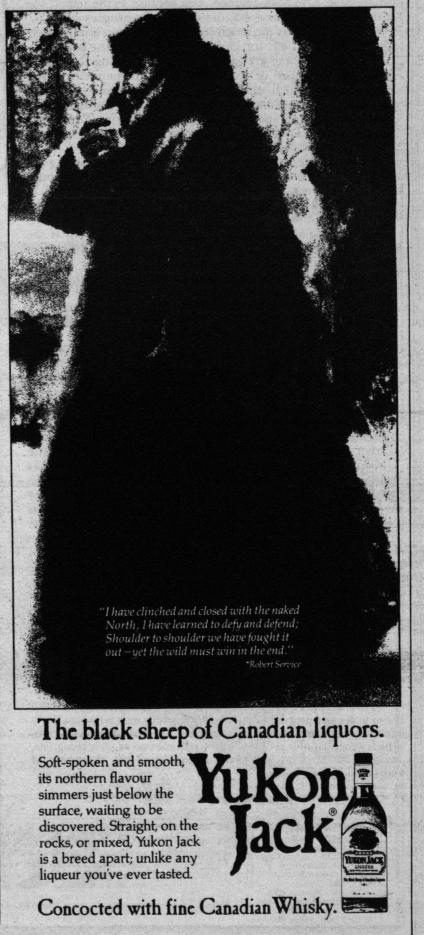
KR: Do you think the lead hazard is legitimate? Supposedly it gives you fetal damage and you will have a mentally retarded child or something like that. I think it affects the guys too. The only way they can make it better is to make those lead areas cleaner so there are better working conditions.

But there are so many areas at Cominco where you are not in the lead, so they can't use that. Like all of the fertilizer plant in Warfield, there is no reason why a woman couldn't work out there. There is no lead up there, there is no lead in central shops, there is no lead in the tank rooms, there is no lead in the melting rooms. There is only the lead area you can't go into and they hold that over your head. Like you can't be an instrument mechanic because you can't go into the lead area, you can't be an electrician because you can't go into the lead area. There are electrical problems all over Cominco and you don't necessarily have to go in the lead areas.

KR: What kind of things would have made it easier for you when you started?



KR: Any idea what can be done? Mavis: I would like to see more



One of my brothers is a steel fabricator another one took a pipe-fitting apprenticeship and they were always talking - "It's too bad a woman can't get a job down there like that".

had a problem, I could just go and tell them and that was it.

I am off to school every year re that. I was the trial. in Vancouver for my appren-They told me I wouldn't last, ticeship. For the first two year I ticeship. For the first two year I another female apprentice at went down with three guys so that Cominco, it would have been

Mavis: If there had been another woman machinist just so that I didn't feel....even if there had been

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