

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.

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. 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 hand-picked for who I was working with so the people would be amiable and easy to get along with. Because I really think they did want it to work out. Most of them are good. If I had a problem, I could just go and tell them and that was it. I am off to school every year in Vancouver for my apprenticeship. For the first two year I went down with three guys so that

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?
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?
Mavis: They say they don't know if they will turn out to be as good as me. Give me a break. I didn't do all this for nothing you know. I'd like to see some more women in the shop because it is really a shame: out of 3,000 people working at Cominco there are only 40 women in the actual production work.

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

KR: Was there much hostility 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 mine. I get along with everyone down there. Mind you, I almost go

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.

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KR: Any idea what can be done?
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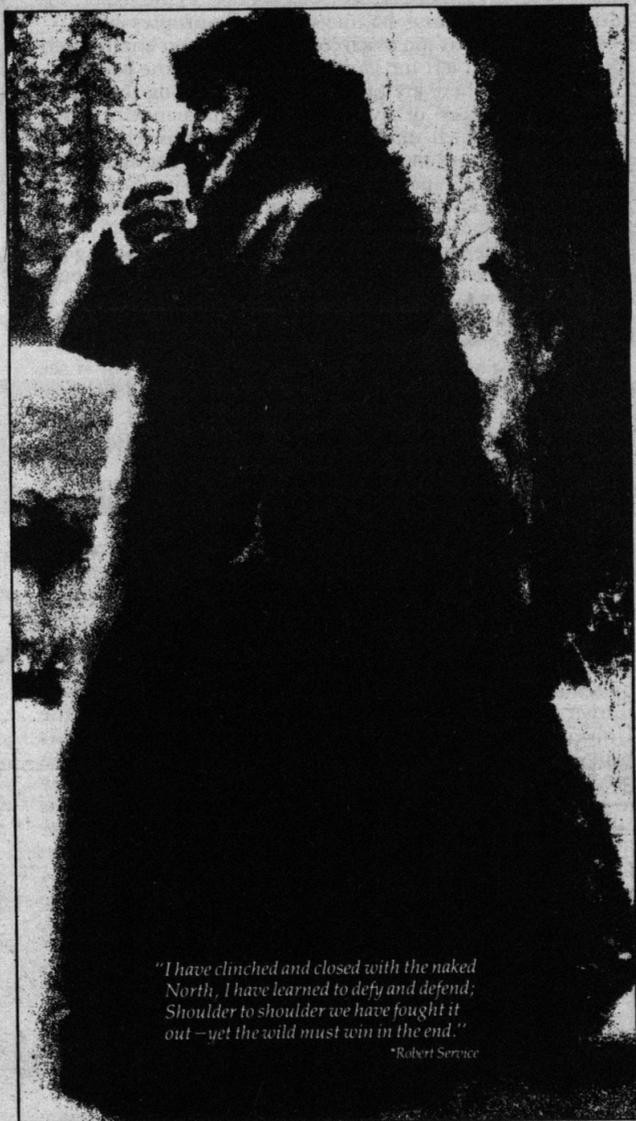
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