The Unstoppable Alice Payne, P.Geo.

“Be versatile in your education. Diversify. Get a broad background. Seek mentors to help you along the way. And don’t give up. Never give up.”

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Hammering away with her rock hammer on a field trip to Jasper in the early 1960s.

The Dean of Women was threatening to expel her.

It was 1961 and Alice Payne, a third-year geology undergrad at the University of Alberta, had signed up for the annual class field trip to the mountains. The one-week outing was a vital part of her structural geology course—a chance to learn hands-on skills she’d need for employment.

The problem? She was the only female on the list.

Going on the field trip simply wouldn’t be proper.

Determined to take part, young Alice borrowed a tent and convinced some girlfriends to come along as chaperones.

She was not expelled, approval was granted, and she headed off to Cranbrook, B.C., to study rock outcrops and mapmaking.

It wasn’t the last time she would face barriers as a female geologist. But nothing would stop her from doing what she loved.

“One of the biggest challenges I faced in my career was the idea that women had no place in this business. But I never thought of quitting. I knew I could do it,” says Payne, reflecting on a 35-year career as a mining and petroleum geologist.

Her vocation took her from the backwoods to the boardrooms. Payne was the first female president of the Canadian Society of Petroleum Geologists.

It all started in her childhood. Payne’s father owned a gold mine in Yellowknife and nurtured her curiosity for geology. He let her tag along on prospecting expeditions and gave her lessons in how to stake a claim. Payne was thrilled when her dad convinced superstitious miners to let her go underground so she could get a close-up look at gold veins.

“That’s where I got the bug,” she says. “I thought I’d be a prospector, too.”

While attending school in Edmonton, she was advised by a guidance counsellor to seek a more suitable profession. Perhaps teaching or nursing?

Annoyed, Payne left his office more determined than ever to live her own story and not someone else’s.

After graduating with her geology degree in 1962, she sent out resumes signed only A.V. Payne. Employers wouldn’t screen her out for being a woman. Her strategy got her interviews, but no job offers.
“I was so naïve. Nobody would hire a woman to work in the field,” Payne remembers.

She was excited to accept a job in Ottawa at the Geological Survey of Canada. But the survey would only let her analyze rocks in a lab. She’d heard that one before.

Payne soon decided to go back to university to complete a master’s degree in geological age dating. Her research took her into the wilds of Ontario, all the way up to the Arctic. She thought the extra experience might help her land her dream job.

When it didn’t, she did what any enterprising geologist would do. She started her own company.

Great Slave Lake mapping: Alice Payne, P.Geol., with her professors, a cook and a field trip assistant, take a break while on a field trip to the east arm of Great Slave Lake in the mid 1960s.

Over the next 15 years, she got married, raised two children, and did small mining contracts, everything from gypsum and coal exploration to mapping bedrock for Syncrude’s new tailings pond dam.

“I did many interesting things and I had fun doing them,” she says.

Times and attitudes slowly changed.

In 1979, Payne decided to look for more stable work, accepting a job offer from Gulf Canada in Calgary. Not only could she do field trips, but they were in places like Florida and the Bahamas. Utilizing her mining background, Payne developed new ways to search for petroleum. Her talent was recognized with promotions into supervisory roles and then management.

A long-time volunteer with the Canadian Society of Petroleum Geologists, she was encouraged to run for president in 1992. To her surprise she won, becoming the first female president in the society’s 65-year history.

After retiring from Gulf in 1995, Payne returned to consulting for several more years. Among her other achievements, she wrote a book about her father, served on APEGA Council, and helped found the Alberta Science and Technology Leadership (ASTech) Foundation.

She also helped found Operation Minerva, a mentoring program that helps young women explore STEM careers.

Payne’s advice to female geologists today? It reflects her own experience. And it’s timeless:

“Be versatile in your education. Diversify. Get a broad background. Seek mentors to help you along the way. And don’t give up. Never give up.”

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