

Ninetta Alia Davis: First Female President of RMAG

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Abstract

Aspiring for something better than an ordinary woman's life with career choices limited to stenography, bookkeeping or teaching, Ninetta Alia Davis set a goal of earning \$100,000 (\$2.4MM in 2020 dollars) a year and selected the profession of geological engineering and set her sights on a future in the oil business with a goal of owning her own company. The Great Depression, family care, and, likely, prejudice against women would offer challenges and ultimately defeat her dream, but not her spirit.

Ninetta Davis entered the Colorado School of Mines (CSM) at age 16 and was awarded her degree in petroleum engineering in 1920. She was the second woman to graduate from CSM, and after her graduation, no other woman graduated from the CSM geology department until 1961. A prohibition of women attending Mines had insinuated itself into the school though its charter stated, "The School of Mines shall be open to any inhabitant of the Territory of Colorado without regard to sex or color." That charter was quietly set aside and ignored for four decades.

In 1920 Ninetta went to work for \$150 per month at Midwest Refining Company in Casper, Wyoming. Midwest (the fourth largest producer of gasoline in the US). Casper was a rough boom town. Four years later, she moved to Fort Collins to work for Union Oil of California. However, Union closed the office, circa 1929, leaving her jobless at the very onset of the Great Depression. Ninetta, resilient and resourceful as ever, took a job in Denver as a bookkeeper in the back office of a department store for \$15/week just to get by, and was thankful to have the position.

In 1934, she joined the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) as a specialist in sub-surface geology of oil fields in the western states. She became active in the Rocky Mountain Association of Petroleum Geologists which was founded two years after she entered the oil business. Ninetta served as Secretary-Treasurer, as First Vice-President, and, in 1941, became the first woman to be President—a year they were preparing to host the AAPG 1942 Annual meeting.

In 1944, Ninetta left the USGS and returned to her first love, petroleum geology, joining Shell Oil when they opened a new office in Denver. Her projects included producing complete regional studies, cross sections, isopachs, current drilling activity, penetration charts and much more. Fifteen years later, in 1959, she was required to quit, because of her age (60). She was not happy.

Ninetta Alia Davis never became a millionaire, but she had a richly rewarding professional and volunteer career. Before the term "networking" was coined, Ninetta aptly used this process to continue as a geologist and re-entered the industry after a 19-year hiatus. Though knowledge of her role in RMAG was lost for decades, she blazed the trail for many future female RMAG presidents, beginning 54 years later

with Susan Landon in 2001. In the last 20 years seven women have been president of RMAG.

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