

Pioneering Geologist



Photo: Barchfield Productions

Robbie Gries as the President of AAPG.



Photo: Robbie Gries

With her “dare to be different” philosophy and pioneering spirit, Robbie Gries was the first woman to graduate in geology from Colorado State University and the first woman to become AAPG President.

Thomas Smith, Associate Editor

Robbie Gries started and has built her own company, Priority Oil & Gas, by drilling close to proved production as well as buying reserves where infill development is possible. These are the economic realities of the business. However, her heart lies in frontier exploration as “one of the most exciting parts of being a petroleum geologist.” Using resources from successful infill drilling projects, she is once again pioneering frontier plays in Colorado and Wyoming. She has also pioneered, and continues to play, a significant role in advancing women’s position in the oil and gas industry.

Many Firsts

“Becoming the first woman President of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists in 2001 was truly a career highlight for me,” says Robbie.

“Even greater than the honor of being AAPG President, was the opportunity to make a difference in the organization.” Robbie traveled to 44 countries that year promoting geology, petroleum and AAPG. Her proudest accomplishments came in the education and involvement of young people around the world. She helped set up countless student chapters from Trinidad to Viet Nam, from Peru to Eastern Europe. Getting AAPG participation in the first multi-society electronic publication aggregate, GeoScience World, has led to new and expanded education and research opportunities worldwide, especially in universities in developing countries that are literature impoverished.

Prior to becoming AAPG president, Robbie had many firsts “from getting rules changed so I could belong to Sigma Gamma Epsilon, the geology honor society at The University of Texas at Austin, to being one of the two first women to be made members of the Denver Petroleum Club (having experienced incidents of being “kicked out” of some male-only clubs).”

Robbie Gries in the Gebel Duwi desert of eastern Egypt.

Robbie with her vp of operations, Jessica Trevino and office manager Amy McLean during their 2005 drilling program.



Photo: Robbie Gries

Her early career, as well as the careers of her female colleagues, regularly involved such firsts as women became more accepted in the oil and gas world. “I found so much mentoring and support amongst the older male geologists. Their help and training was a positive while working in a primarily male environment, and they always outweighed the negative influences created by a few reluctant to accept change. Having a robust sense of humor helped a lot as well.”

Hard Time Becoming a Geologist

Robbie Gries went to a very small high school in south Texas and never even heard of geology until her sophomore year in college. She drew a chemistry class with a reputed “battle-ax” as a professor, so decided to find another science. Other students mentioned, “geology has a really good instructor”.

Robbie had always collected rocks and minerals when the family traveled and

thought it would be “cool” to learn about that. “I fell in love with the science in the first lectures and switched majors soon thereafter.” Transferring from Del Mar Junior College in Texas to Colorado State University, she became the first female to graduate from that school in geology (1966).

Robbie finished her Masters at the University of Texas at Austin in 1970, the same year she had a baby girl. At this time, she sensed that getting a job as a woman geologist may take some doing. “I never had any professor suggest I interview for a job, even when interviewers were on campus.” She tried teaching for a while and loved it but had little patience for academic politics. It was not until three years later she did try to land a job in the oil patch. She freely admits “it was a wise decision on my part.”

Early Training to Pioneer Thinking

This was 1973, and Robbie landed her first job as exploration geologist with Texaco in

Denver. Her timing was good as this company and all other large oil companies were under the mandate of the Johnson administration for Affirmative Action. They were hiring women to fill their "quotas."

At Texaco, Robbie had great managers, bosses, and mentors; all men, of course, and "they judged the women just like they did their male colleagues—performance, performance, performance??" Those were also the days when women were not allowed to go out on a rig, however, the women geologists managed to turn that around.

"My most exciting frontier play was to discover an unexplored basin beneath a pile of volcanics where some exceptional geologists had predicted we would find nothing but basement."

Her first wellsite experience was in Utah. "The geologist that trained me brought his wife along so she wouldn't be jealous." Robbie found it to be challenging to be a wellsite geologist ("don't we all?") and it was especially so during these years. "Someday I want to write a book! But growing up as a shrimper's daughter, the roughnecks and crews found me fairly unfazed by antics and language. I, in fact, just LOVE being out on the wellsite to this day."

While with Texaco in Denver, Robbie began to look at sediments beneath thrust-ed Precambrian mountain fronts as potential targets. The thinking at the time was that these ranges were vertical uplifts. She developed structural sub-thrust prospects for Texaco. It was not until years later and by other operators, that any of the prospects were successfully developed.

These were boom times for companies, and independents were attracting all the male geoscientists from the majors. Her boss at Texaco quipped "that pretty soon the majors will have only women working as independent companies do not have minority quotas to fill!" It did not take too much time after that before an independent contacted Robbie, offering her a fat raise, car, override, and petroleum club membership.

That company was Reserve Oil Inc. in Denver where Robbie had the liberty to expand on her unconventional exploration ideas. She did field work and acquired acreage on frontier plays in the Idaho portion of the Basin and Range, the Colorado San Luis Valley, the Wyoming Hoback Basin, and many others.

Unfinished Business

There are journeys that can take a geologist back to the origin of life, to the deepest ocean depths, or flying down the side of an active volcano. These are the experiences unique to the discipline. Robbie Gries knows this journey is not always an easy one. In a career that included raising a child, being accepted as a woman in a man's world, enduring business setbacks and highs, she knows all too well what women geoscientists face in the oil and gas world.

"It is very disappointing to see how few women remain in geology and particularly petroleum geology. Twenty-five to thirty years ago women were only 10% of the workforce in petroleum geology (even less in engineering). But then women made up only about 10-15% of the graduate school degrees. Even 10 years ago, women were 30-50% of the graduates, yet the number in our industry did not rise." Women are hired and are amongst the best recruits, but not retained. Robbie feels this creates "a critical workforce problem, as we are dangerously short of young, well educated geologists to meet the resource needs of this planet's population. To lose these excellent young geologists is to waste an enormous human resource and to waste very valuable educations."

It is Robbie's desire to do more to help women geoscientists. "We need to emphasize to companies how important it is for them to create a working environment that promotes retention of women; one that allows women to continue their careers while going through their child-rearing years." AAPG has developed the Professional Women in Earth Sciences (PROWESS) committee to promote solutions to this issue. This committee is sponsoring a session at this year's AAPG annual meeting in Long Beach entitled "Women in the Energy Industry: Developing Negotiation Skills".

Back to the Frontier

Robbie worked as a consultant and developed prospects on her own after leaving Reserve Oil. During the oil slump of the early 90's, she had prospects turned back and deals go sour. She was forced to learn acquisition and started to buy price-depressed properties. After putting together a company merger but leaving after only a year, she formed Priority Oil & Gas and started buying properties in Kansas in 1995. They drilled 40 wells on these properties in 1999, all but one were successes. The next drilling project had 36 wells and, again, only one dry hole.

The success of her small company (consisting of Robbie, the office manager and numerous contract consultants) has led Robbie back to what she loves to do. "I have recently put together two exciting frontier plays. The first is in the Powder River Basin where I now have partners in a 3-D seismic survey and an upcoming well. The second is another frontier play in southwest Colorado." Like Robbie's life, these are sure to be challenges and opportunities.



Photo: Robbie Gries

Robbie with female students at the Nigerian Association of Petroleum Explorationists in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.