

## *Female engineer broke tunnel taboo in 1972*



*This is the muddy tunnel that Janet Bonnema and several reporters walked into in 1972 after Colorado's voters had agreed to amend the state constitution to guarantee equal rights for women. Daily Sentinel collection Loyd Files Research Library Museum of Western Colorado photo*

By Kathy Jordan

When Janet P. Bonnema first stepped into the Straight Creek Tunnel in 1972 no one expected the project to be a defining moment in the women's equal rights movement.

Her story began in November 1970 when Janet, who was living in Georgetown, applied for several job openings with the Colorado Highway Department.

Janet was qualified; she had earned a master's degree in engineering from the University of Colorado, she was under the age of 68, and she had passed the required tests.

Her ordeal began when she received a letter from the Colorado Highway Department addressed to "Mr." Janet P. Bonnema, informing "him" that "he" could be employed at the Straight Creek Tunnel if "he" wanted the job

According to a U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration report, when Janet contacted the Department of State Employment, a staff member advised her not to take the position. The employee told her, "Women are taboo in the mines and tunnels of Colorado. Those workers would flat walk out of that there tunnel and they'd never come back."

The problem with Janet's entering the tunnel came from an old superstition that there is no telling what dangers might result if a woman goes underground.

But Janet went to work for the Colorado Highway Department on the project and worked for 18 months without ever setting foot in the burgeoning tunnel. Colorado Highway Department officials admitted that Janet was qualified for the job and was “doing a great job up there” but said the contractor wouldn’t let any women, not even female reporters, in the tunnel.

However, because she was not allowed in the passage, she could not do her job, which was to plot data gathered from instruments inside the tunnel. She had to depend on her male counterparts to gather the information inside the tunnel for her.

She soon figured “I’d be a lot more useful if I could get the data firsthand, the way male technicians do.”

She was quoted by the Federal Highway Administration as saying, “I am not allowed to do the same work as the male engineering technicians, even though I am physically able, in better condition and have more stamina than many of the male engineering technicians.”

Janet was physically able. She frequently climbed mountains, rode her motorcycle daily to work at the tunnel, was an airplane pilot, and had been captain of the University of Colorado ski team.

Janet didn’t think that superstition against women entering tunnels was a legal reason for her not to do her job.

In July 1972 the United States Department of Transportation, after a yearlong investigation, ruled that the old wives’ tale was not a legal reason to bar women from the tunnel and to do so was to practice sex discrimination.

But the Colorado Department of Highways ignored the ruling. Janet filed a \$100,000 class action lawsuit charging that, in addition to not being allowed to gather the data first hand, she was being denied irreplaceable experience at what her lawsuit called “a unique and highly important engineering project.”

The suit was settled out of court. When Janet filed her lawsuit, she joined a new class of women, mostly white-collar workers, who were seeking jobs where men didn’t welcome them.

On Nov. 9, 1972, Janet strolled into the tunnel after Colorado’s voters had agreed to amend the state constitution to guarantee equal rights for women. As Janet and several women reporters walked into the tunnel a workman shouted “Get those women out of here,” and more than 70 workmen walked off the job.

One worker quit on the spot saying, “they had a woman in the tunnel, and I will not work there for that reason. It’s a jinx.”

Janet paid no attention as she slogged through the mud.

The state estimated that the walkout cost about \$10,000, but, as some observers had predicted, the men returned the next day to complete the job.

Janet died May 9, 2008, in Okeechobee, Fla. She was inducted into Colorado Women's Hall of Fame as a transportation engineer in November 2011.

On April 6, 2011, Colorado State Senator Nancy Spence honored Janet's memory on the Senate floor, saying "without her willingness to stand up to discrimination, generations of women would never have the opportunities they do today."

This is a sidebar:

An interesting tunnel tidbit: The first driver was not Gov. John Love as planned. Marion Wooldridge made history when he was out for a drive, after drinking a little too much, and drove past the sign prohibiting traffic. When he went to court Judge George Gaubatz of Clear Creek County Court dismissed the charge on the grounds that the signs prohibiting traffic at the tunnel entrance weren't adequate.