



PETROLEUM PIONEERS

Robbie Gries, President of the Geological Society of America, talks to Geoscientist about breaking barriers, learned societies and her geological heroines

Robbie Gries has many 'firsts' to her name – she was the first female President of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, and the first woman to graduate in geology from Colorado State University. Currently President of the Geological Society of America, she visited the Geological Society in May this year to help us mark our centenary of female Fellowship by chairing a panel event on 'Female in the field: Challenges and opportunities.'

'One of my focuses as President of the Geological Society of America has been to try to expand our collaboration with our sister societies' she told Geoscientist following the event, 'and of course, the Geological Society is one of the foremost of these, being the oldest geological society in the world.'

Affirmative Action

Gries founded her company, Priority Oil & Gas LLC, in 1995, and told us she takes pride in her long list of firsts.

'I grew up kind of a tom boy and was comfortable being around male students' (at graduate school in Austin, Texas, Gries was one of two women in a class of 100) 'so I didn't think of it as being different. Graduating as the first woman from CSU was the first time I did something that broke a barrier, and later I was the first woman in the Petroleum Club in Denver, Colorado, the first woman to hold various offices in local societies and so on. They just started accumulating.'

'I felt like it wasn't about me – I was right there at the edge of women coming in, women enjoying the effect of Affirmative Action in the early 1970s and so I felt like I needed to play my role well.'

Anomalies

Gries, like many geoscientists, is fascinated by the early female geologists who fought to be recognised by their peers. We've celebrated many of them this year to mark the centenary – an anniversary which, by

“ I GREW UP KIND OF A TOM BOY AND WAS COMFORTABLE BEING AROUND MALE STUDENTS' (AT GRADUATE SCHOOL IN AUSTIN, TEXAS, GRIES WAS ONE OF TWO WOMEN IN A CLASS OF 100) 'SO I DIDN'T THINK OF IT AS BEING DIFFERENT. GRADUATING AS THE FIRST WOMAN FROM CSU WAS THE FIRST TIME I DID SOMETHING THAT BROKE A BARRIER, AND LATER I WAS THE FIRST WOMAN IN THE PETROLEUM CLUB IN DENVER, COLORADO, THE FIRST WOMAN TO HOLD VARIOUS OFFICES IN LOCAL SOCIETIES AND SO ON.... ”

coincidence, is shared by the AAPG.

'I suggested to the Women's Committee at AAPG we find out who were the first 100 women in AAPG for our 100th anniversary, and when we pulled out the record cards we discovered the first woman member joined in the same year as the Geological Society Fellows – in 1919.'

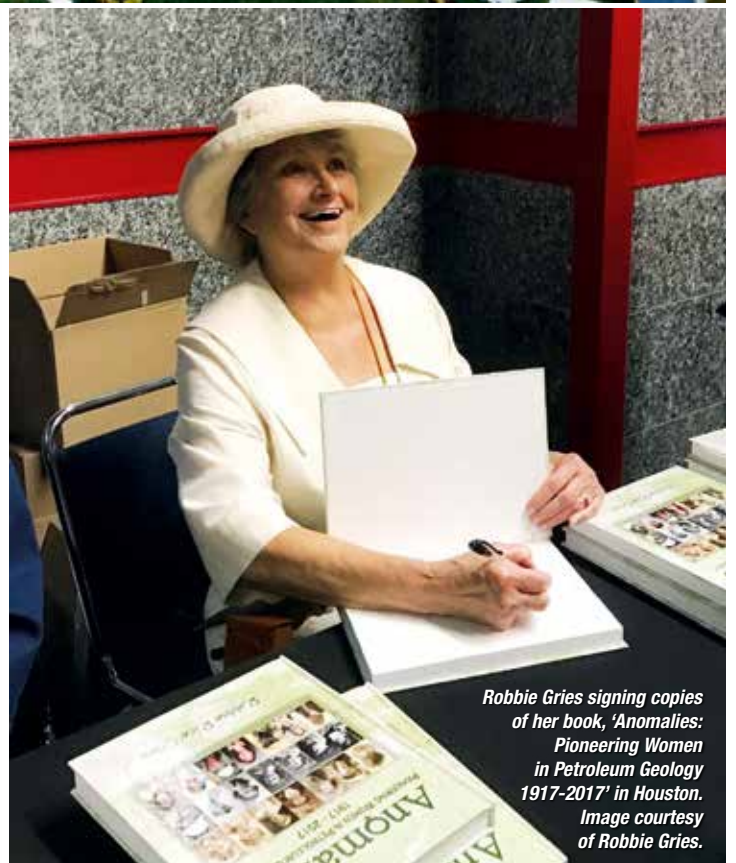
Unlike the Geological Society, this milestone came early in AAPG's history – the organisation was founded in 1917. But their stories echo those of their UK counterparts.

'We lost 80-90% of them to marriage, as married women were required to quit' Gries says. (There was no requirement for Geological Society Fellows to resign on marriage, but many of those who were employed would have been required to leave their roles – a possibility only eliminated by the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts of 1975.) 'Those who stuck with it were unique, very strong and usually with great accomplishments to their credit – they were just fascinating.'

'When I started my research, I truly didn't think women in petroleum geology went back more than 50

Image courtesy of Robbie Gries.

Denver, Colorado



Robbie Gries signing copies of her book, 'Anomalies: Pioneering Women in Petroleum Geology 1917-2017' in Houston. Image courtesy of Robbie Gries.

► years. When I learned that we went back a full hundred years I started looking into their histories. Some of them were incredible – the remarkable things they discovered and were responsible for, their profound contributions to the economics of petroleum geology - and yet they were totally lost in our history.

'I'd give anything to sit down with them today and hear their truth.'

Such was Gries' fascination with these women's stories that she has since published a book, 'Anomalies: Pioneering Women in Petroleum Geology 1917-2017'.

'I decided there was too much material to let go to waste, so I combined my original idea of looking at today's women with the idea of exploring all those who'd been pioneers in petroleum.'

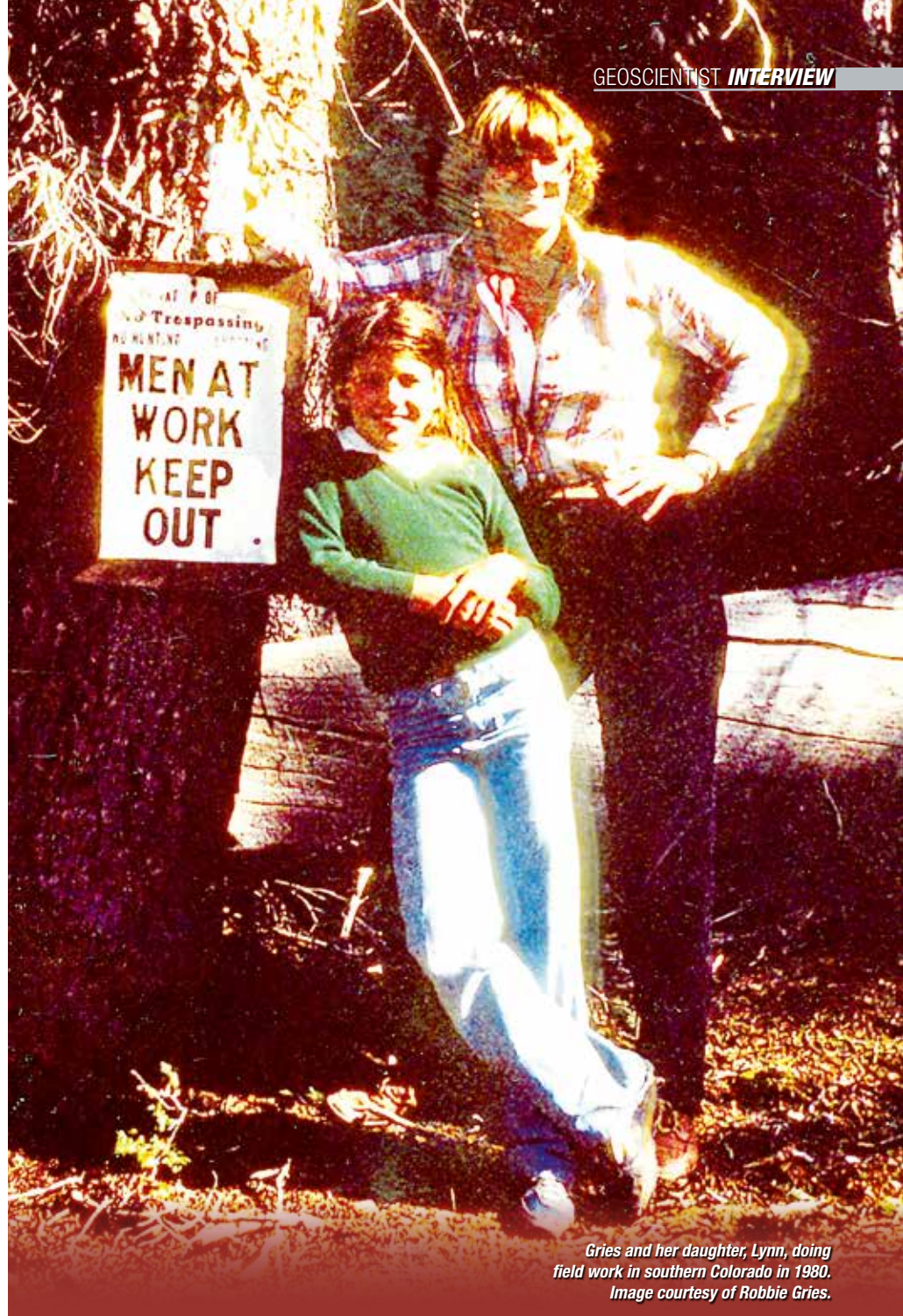
Progress

The Geological Society's anniversary of female membership has been an opportunity to reflect on how much progress has been made over those 100 years – not just for female geologists, but for other underrepresented groups. There is still, though, work to be done.

'Recently the Academies of Science in the US released a study on harassment – both of men and women – and their conclusion in this large survey was that the amount of harassment today is the same as it was in the 1980s. We've seen no improvement – that came as quite a surprise to me.

'The percentages in the geological sciences were much lower than for many other professions, which we can be proud of, but it's still something we really need to address. We need to find ways to proactively eliminate it, not just set up a structure for people to report it. At GSA we're developing courses and techniques to teach people – both people in positions of power and young professionals and students – to make everybody aware of what harassment is and how to avoid and react to it, so that we can diminish the number of cases.

'So things have changed over the last 100 years, but we still have big issues to deal with.'



Gries and her daughter, Lynn, doing field work in southern Colorado in 1980. Image courtesy of Robbie Gries.

And are quotas still necessary, or a thing of the past?

'Unfortunately I think we still need them. There's so much talk about not needing it, but I think that we are not ready to just let society develop along its own course, because we still have so many unconscious biases. So often, our bias is to pick someone who is a clone of ourselves – the same age, the same race, working in the same discipline. We need to work hard to turn that around - even the most conscientious people can be susceptible.'

And what of the role of learned societies in this change?

'I think the societies can play a very strong role' Gries says, 'because they

have an entry through their members into so many companies and universities and organisations. And so when a society supports a structure of equality and diversity, and encourages their members to do the same, it helps to educate the entire population of geoscientists.

'If, for instance, you're the only one on your staff to feel that way, you might be more timid about it. But then you go to a Geological Society meeting, and it's brought up as a very important part of being a geologist and a leader – even if you don't have support from elsewhere, you feel stronger.'

Interview by **Sarah Day**