

memories of a miner

irene ryan

irene e. ryan

Irene E. Ryan, born in the first decade of the 20th century, was a woman of firsts.

She was the first female aviator in the Territory of Alaska to fly solo, and the first woman to graduate from the New Mexico School of Mines. From her early years, it was clear that the woman born in Boston, Mass., in 1909 as Irene Esther Irvine was no ordinary individual.

After all, this was a woman for whom the Governor of Alaska ordered that flags be lowered to half-mast when she died in 1997.

Hers is a story of adventure and extraordinary achievement – all at a time when women, as a rule, didn't fly planes, become geological engineers, or run for public office. And so it was that a young Irene Irvine, fresh out of high school, was working in Border, Texas, as a bookkeeper for a construction company. As part of her job, she

often flew with her boss to construction sites, and that's when she first fell in love with flying. Meanwhile, an aviator uncle in Alaska regaled her with stories about the region, enough to entice her to move to Anchorage at age 22.

She arrived in Alaska with \$25 in severance pay from the construction company, and began her life of adventure.

First, she found work, beginning as a waitress and later as a bank teller. Irene began flying lessons at Merrill Field east of Anchorage, and on June 23, 1932, she was certified as the first female aviator in the territory to solo.

Whatever she saw from the open cockpit of her plane, flying over a still-primitive land once owned by Russia and inhabited by indigenous peoples, Irene wanted to learn more. She left the country now known as The Last Frontier to study geology at the New Mexico School of Mines.

It was there she met fellow



student John Edward “Pat” Ryan, who was studying geological engineering, the man who was to become her husband, business partner and political sounding board. The couple married on Feb. 19, 1938, and when she graduated from the School of Mines the following year, it was as Irene E. Ryan, the first woman to earn a diploma from the

school founded under a Territorial Legislature. Pat Ryan graduated in 1940.

Perhaps it was the still-lingering element of frontier that was part of New Mexico that drew her to Socorro and the School of Mines. Taking classes by and with a population made up entirely of men, must have been valuable early experience for what

was yet to unfold.

Accordingly, the Ryans's



Irene and John (Pat) Ryan, 1939

Ryan was an early pioneer in balancing marriage, work, motherhood and public service, long before the term “working mother” was coined. In February 1941, she gave birth to the couple's first child, Marcella. A month later, the couple moved back to Alaska, where their second daughter, Patricia, was born.

Sandi Sumner wrote an excellent book, *Women Pilots of Alaska*, that profiles 37 female aviators including Irene Irvine Ryan. The following history is from Sumner's book.

daughter, Marcella, recalled that the young family lived at Merrill Field in a 10-foot-by-10-foot tarpaper shack her father had built, before moving into an unfinished cabin in town. The cabin had no running water, and the family would trek into Anchorage once a week for Finn baths. Irene washed diapers in a bucket and hung them to dry over her daughter's stroller, while taking Marcella to the babysitter.

At the start of World War II, Irene was working for the Civil Aeronautics Authority (now the Federal Aviation Administration)

developing airfields in the territory, a job considered a wartime essential. Post-war, she designed Anchorage International Airport, among a host of others.

Dinner-table conversation centered on politics, and in the book, Marcella remembered people sitting around the table talking about the future of Alaska and its people. Among the family's treasured mementos are posters for the Kennedy-Johnson presidential ticket in 1960. Pat Ryan couldn't be politically active because he had a federal Civil Service job, but he encouraged his wife to do so.

And she did. Ryan was active in the Alaska Democratic Party, and served in the 1955 and 1957 Alaska Territorial House of Representatives, and the 1959 Alaska State Senate.

The information that follows was culled from an obituary on Ryan published in the *Anchorage Daily News*, which reads like an entry for Who's Who, or the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Ryan practiced as a consulting civil, mining, geological and petroleum engineer. She not only worked for a number of entities, but also owned her own consulting firm. From 1970 through 1974, she was commissioner of the Department of Economic Development for the state of Alaska, under Gov. William Egan. Legislators had a great deal of respect for Ryan's expertise in the extractive industries, atypical of a male-dominated governmental body.

Among the many projects to her credit is the construction of the military pipeline from Skagway through Canada through Fairbanks. Ryan, with her husband, also developed and built a housing subdivision in Anchorage.

She was a member of the Alaska Petroleum Section of the American Institute of Mining Engineers, Alaska; Miners Association, American Society of Civil Engineers, American Society of Professional Engineers,

American Society of Women Engineers, American Association for the Advancement of Science Arctic Institute, National Association of Geology Teachers, the Resource Development Council, and Commonwealth North.

Ryan also collected a number of honors, including an honorary doctorate of science degree from Alaska Pacific University in 1985, Alaskan of the Year in 1986, and her fellowship in the Society of Women Engineers.

In *Women Pilots of Alaska*, daughter Marcella said her mother was happiest in jeans and a wool shirt,

working at a mining site or taking core samples at a drill site.

Former Alaska Attorney General John Havelock once said, "It was really extraordinary that a woman could make her way in a man's world, in a man's topic." Irene later said, "I have found that the best way to be accepted on equal ground is just to go ahead and quietly do the job at hand."

She may have done her work quietly, but her achievements continue to reverberate.

New Mexico Tech is proud to have Irene E. Ryan among its corps of extraordinary graduates.



Irene and John (Pat) Ryan

The Irene E. and John E. "Pat" Ryan Papers, on repository with the University of Alaska, Fairbanks; Alaska Polar Regions Collections & Archives, document the couple's lives and work in Alaska from 1930 to 1997. A subgroup of the series (Irene E. Ryan Papers, 1939-1997) contains her unpublished autobiography as well as short biographical essays and notes about her life. The materials also include a 1939 catalog from the New Mexico School of Mines, diaries, calendars, appointment books and address books.

In one box are photo albums from Mrs. Ryan's tenure as Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Economic Development, her trip to Russia and China as a member of the U.S. Society of Women Engineers People to People delegation in 1986, family photos and an album documenting a birthday celebration for Governor Egan.

Her files cover such seminal issues of the time as statehood, energy resources, the Alaska pipeline, and the D-2 provision of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Mr. Ryan's records mainly include correspondence, client and subject files related to his work as a consulting engineer.

The archives in Alaska contain records that document their lives and work in Alaska. Irene's papers make up the bulk of the collection and include some personal papers, calendars, and photographs as well as correspondence, notes, and reports generated from her work in politics and as a consulting engineer. Although her work in the Alaska Democratic Party is well-documented, there are few records from her service in the Alaska legislature. The collection does include Ryan's reading files during her time in the legislature and as Commissioner of Economic Development.