



Montana coal mine team down 1 woman



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DECKER — As machine operators and managers went about their business on a recent April day, a melancholy air hung around the offices of Spring Creek Coal Mine just north of Sheridan, Wyo.

Out in the field, Joyce Neal — a woman affectionately known by her co-workers as Granny — was putting in her last shift as a shovel operator after three entire decades

at the mine.

"It's a wonderful job," Neal said during a break that afternoon. "I'm going to be sad when I leave."

At 72 years old, Neal was not only the oldest employee on payroll at Spring Creek, but also one of only 15 women employed at the facility. Nearly 260 people currently make their living at the mine.

A Wyoming ranch girl whose experience working the land led to a familiarity with large machinery, Neal said the Spring Creek environment had always been welcoming for her and the handful of other women she's worked with over the course of her 30 years on the job.

While she can't say for sure why so few women enter the profession, Neal said she imagines that some might be intimidated by the enormity of the machinery they're charged with handling. Still, she said her gender never put her at a disadvantage when it came to fitting in.

"They've taken care of me since the day I came out here," she said. "The people out here are special."

In the hours leading up to the end of her time at the mine, facility managers said Neal played a crucial role in shaping the unique employee culture that developed at Spring Creek in recent years.

"We have (other) people that have the skills Joyce has, but you can't replace the person," said production manager Erik Strom. "She's developed these people to be good, productive coal miners."

Looking back on the years, that's an accomplishment Neal never envisioned for herself.

She came to Spring Creek early in the 1980s, looking simply for a way to provide for her children. Recently divorced, she and her sister both set out looking for work at around the same time. Eventually, Joyce was hired at Spring Creek and her sister took a position down the road at Decker Mine.

The sisters, originally from Meeteetse, learned quickly that mining work suited them well.

"We both are ranch girls and we wanted to be outside," she said.

Starting in the plant, Neal held several positions over the course of her tenure at Spring Creek, but it wasn't until she worked her way into the role of shovel operator that she felt she had finally found her place.

"I love my shovels," she said plainly.

Her enthusiasm wasn't lost on her bosses who, several years ago, promoted her to step-in supervisor for the occasions when the higher-ups were out of town.

Now a resident of Wyola, Mont., Neal's dedication to her profession was the subject of much admiration from management during her final weeks at Spring Creek.

"It's sad," Human Resources Manager Jean Fox said of Neal's retirement. "She's a huge part of this team."

Looking ahead, Neal said she plans on spending her newfound free time gardening, becoming more actively involved with her church and -- perhaps most excitingly -- taking a cruise to Alaska this summer with her sisters.

Still, she knows she'll miss the mine.

"In mining, (your coworkers) become your family," she said. "I come to work, and I'm home."

She said she plans to visit every now and then when she's not off on a new adventure. It's a promise her bosses hope she keeps.

As Neal's time at the mine wound down late last week, they said her legacy will remain forever etched on the history of the facility.

"We're not sure, but we think Joyce may have loaded more coal than any employee at Spring Creek ever," Strom said. "She's the basis of what Spring Creek has always been."