

Alice Evelyn Wilson

Canada's First Female Geologist and Paleontologist, **Alice Evelyn Wilson** was a brilliant geologist and paleontologist who was born on August 26, 1881 in Cobourg, ON. She earned degrees from the Universities of Toronto and Chicago, and dedicated her entire professional life, spanning from 1909 to 1946, to the Geological Survey of Canada. Wilson faced multiple obstacles throughout her career as a woman in a male-dominated field, but she persevered and became an authority on the fossils and rocks of the Ottawa-St. Lawrence Valley.



Source:

https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=13037

With an academic family background, Wilson was drawn to geology from a young age. She spent summers with her family collecting fossils while canoeing and camping. After completing her Honours Bachelor of Arts in languages and history at Victoria College, Wilson began working as an assistant at the University of Toronto's Museum of Mineralogy in 1907. In 1909, she qualified to work for the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) as a clerk, cataloging and labeling collections. Her mentor, Percy Raymond, the GSC's chief paleontologist at the time, encouraged her to take a leave of absence to finish her degree. After completing her degree, she was granted a permanent position with the survey.

Wilson applied for a leave of absence to pursue her doctoral studies in 1915, but her request was denied. Despite several attempts to get permission to study, it wasn't until 1929 that she was granted a PhD from the University of Chicago, thanks to the Canadian Federation of University Women's campaign on her behalf.

Wilson worked at the GSC for her entire career, specializing in invertebrate fossils from the Paleozoic era and studying the stratigraphy of Ontario and Québec. She also initiated studies of Ordovician fauna in the Rocky Mountains and the Arctic. Although she faced discrimination, Wilson refused to let it get in the way of her work. In her own words, "If you meet a stone wall you don't pit yourself against it, you go around it and find a weakness."

Wilson's work and contributions to the geology of Ontario and Québec were recognized by several notable organizations. She became the first Canadian female Fellow of the Geological Society of America in 1936, and the first female Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1938. She was also elected as a Member of the Order of the British Empire in 1935. After her compulsory retirement at the age of 65, Wilson continued to teach paleontology at Carleton College and maintained an office at the GSC until she was 82. She was a trailblazer for women in the field of geology and a true inspiration.

You can read more about this remarkable woman on the **Canadian Encyclopedia** site:

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/alice-evelyn-wilson#>

Or on **Parks Canada**: https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=13037

LOCAL NEWS

Cobourg woman inducted into Canadian Science and Engineering Hall of Fame

Cobourg resident Alice Wilson (1881-1964) was all the talk at Ottawa's Canada Science and Technology Museum this month, as she and two other scientists were inducted into the Canadian Science and Engineering Hall of Fame.

Dr. Wilson, John Hopps (1919-1998) and Willard Boyle (1924-) joined 34 other Canadian scientists, engineers and innovators — including such well-known figures as Frederick Banting, Alexander Graham Bell and Wilder Penfield — who have been recognized by the hall of fame.

Dr. Boyle of Nova Scotia co-invented the charge-coupled device in 1969 which made possible such advances as digital cameras, scanners, fax machines and other technologies which depend on optical imaging.

Dr. Hopps of Winnipeg, Manitoba, invented the heart pacemaker and developed it with others at Toronto's Banting Institute in 1949.

Dr. Alice Evelyn Wilson of Cobourg was the first female geologist in Canada and the first female member of the Royal Society of Canada.

Dr. Wilson came from a Cobourg family where scholarship and the sciences were highly valued. In addition to her love of learning, her childhood was marked by an enjoyment of the outdoor life — canoeing and camping with her family.

Her early interest in the fossils in the limestone formations in the Cobourg area blossomed into a career as an eminent paleontologist, noted for her detailed studies of the fossils and rock of the Ottawa-St. Lawrence Lowlands. Her early outdoor

experience provided her with the skills, enthusiasm, and self-confidence for geological field work.

When she entered Victoria College at the University of Toronto in 1901, she was studying modern languages and history — and expecting to teach, which was one of very few professions open to women. She left school during her last year due to ill health, however. Once she was well enough, she worked in the mineralogy division of the University of Toronto Museum and began her career in geology.

In 1909, she began working at the Geological Survey of Canada in Ottawa as a museum assistant. She would remain there the rest of her life. Even after her 1946 retirement — when the GSC had to hire five people to replace her — she kept her office there and worked daily until 1963.

The important information she gathered on the geology and paleontology of the area around Cornwall was vital for the planning and construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Known as an inspiring teacher, mentor and role model, Dr. Wilson rose above health challenges and formidable social and professional odds.

In 1935, when the government

of R.B. Bennett was looking for a woman in the federal civil service to honour, she was chosen to become a Member of the Order of the British Empire. In 1936 she became a Fellow in the Geological Society of America — and, in 1938, the first woman Fellow in the Royal Society of Canada.

With the 1947 publication of her book *The Earth Beneath Our Feet*, Dr. Wilson completed a long-standing project of sharing her love of geology with children. From 1948 until 1958, she was a much-appreciated lecturer in paleontology at Carleton College (later Carleton University), which conferred upon her an honorary degree in 1960.

After compulsory retirement at the age of 65, Dr. Wilson happily continued her scientific work until months before her death.

The Canada Science and Technology Museum is located at 1867 St. Laurent Boulevard in Ottawa.

Each year, new Hall of Fame members are chosen by a selection committee representing a diversity of science and engineering institutions. Nominations are welcomed from all Canadians, anywhere in Canada. For more information about how to nominate someone, visit the museum's web site.

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