Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE3992

Alfonsi, Teresa (Tess) Vera

(1907 - 1986)

Born	19070622, Oneta Lombardy Italy
Died	19860423, White Cliffs New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Businesswoman, Miner

Summary

Tess Alfonsi was the first woman miner in Broken Hill, New South Wales.

Details

Teresa Bazzica was born in the small village of Oneta, Italy, and migrated to Australia in 1915 at the age of 8. Her father had migrated three years earlier and worked as a fitter and turner in Western Australia. From 1921 Tess was living in South Australia, using her knowledge of 23 Italian dialects to work as an interpreter, but she subsequently moved to Broken Hill. There she found work at a bar and met German mine-worker Louis Kumm. The pair were married in 1927.

With Lou, Tess camped out beyond Broken Hill and began mining for mica using a hammer-tap drill. Living off rabbits and kangaroo-tail soup, they slept in a humpy made from potato sacks sewn together. After weeks of toil they had packed five tons of mica into bags ready to sell, but the entire haul was stolen as it awaited collection in a mule cart by the road. Almost defeated, the Kumms began mining again – this time for feldspar and, once they realised its value, for beryl. They founded the Triple Chance Mine and were rewarded with success. A stone cottage replaced the humpy. Often left to guard the mine alone, Tess used her .303 rifle to fend off snakes and claim-jumpers alike, and she survived several explosions and mine accidents.

Lou Kumm was a hard worker but a heavy drinker and in 1954, he and Tess were divorced. Ten years later Tess married her foreman, Dominic Alfonsi (also spelt Alfonzi or Alfonso in contemporary reports). She continued her work, opening a total of 23 mines in New South Wales with several more in South Australia and, at one time, supplying 90% of the nation's feldspar requirements.

In 1975, N. Saddington of the *Australian Lapidary Magazine* profiled Tess Alfonsi and 'couldn't resist asking her what she thought of women's liberation. The answer was a gentle snort. She has done a so-called man's job for nearly 50 years and her reply was, "Anyone can do anything they want to; there is no such word as can't. A woman may not be able to do some things as well as some men, but she should still go ahead and do it".' The following year, a correspondent for *Woman's Day* was reporting with disbelief that 'she's only 1.5 metres tall and weighs little more than 59 kilos. Yet Tess Alfonzi is tougher than a buffalo and hardier than the salt bush that grows by her home'. By then nearly 70 years old, Tess was still wielding 'a hefty pick and a geologist's hammer' to crush and sort various grades of ore, and driving a front-end loader. She was, wrote *Woman's Day*, the only woman in Australia to operate her own mine.

Tess and Dominic Alfonsi retired to White Cliffs, New South Wales. Catholic by faith, Tess was community-minded and did a great deal of work for the New South Wales Spastic Council. In 1980 she was awarded the Order of Australia. From 1987, she was honoured by the presentation of an award in her name to an outstanding female student undertaking mine-related studies at the Broken Hill TAFE College.

Published resources

Magazine article
Tess of Broken Hill: Lady with a Pickaxe, Allison, Col, 1976

Profile on Mrs Tessie Alfranso [sic], Saddington, N., 1975

At 66, she's still a hard, rock miner, Perry, John, 1973

Newspaper Article
Don't Tangle with Tess, 1981

Alfonsi collection on display soon at Sulphide Street Station Rail Museum, 1977

Alfonso-Kumm [sic] - Quiet Wedding, 1964

The Hill's 'Annie' gets her gun, Lapsley, John, 1977

Book
Some Outstanding Women of Broken Hill and District, Camilleri, Jenny, 2002

Site Exhibition
Unbroken Spirit: Women in Broken Hill, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/bh/bh-home.html

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Theresa Alfonzi interviewed by Murray Walker [sound recording]

Broken Hill Social History Project [sound recording]

Outback Archives, Broken Hill City Library
Alfonsi/Alfonzi, Tess

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