

## DRIVING FOR TRADITION - WOMEN TRUCKERS' OCCUPATION MOTIVES

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. It is common to assume that women choosing careers in non-traditional, male-dominated occupations are different from other women. They have been called pioneers, innovators, and libbers by social scientists, media people, & some of the lay public (Stromberg & Harkess 1978; Stead 1978; Riemer 1979). Such terms appear to assume that women who choose unconventional work careers must be motivated by unusual circumstances or social deficits. These women may be portrayed as oddities or strange characters. The explanations often center on unconventional early socialization, prevailing sex role confusion, or role crisis stemming from felt failure in a conventional role, as in divorce (Ritzer 1977; Bell 1979). We present another view, and suggest that some women embark on a nontraditional career in a struggle to maintain traditional order in their lives. Driving an 18-wheeler cargo truck does not necessarily break with tradition, but may rather embrace tradition.

**WOMEN TRUCKERS** The trucking industry is but one occupation with an influx of women. In 1970 about 513 women were employed as drivers in the trucking industry (Nelson 1971). In 1978 that estimate increased to 16,000, or 4 percent of the entire truck driving population of about 400,000 (Overdrive Sept 1978 63). But this figure includes all drivers, from local and short haul to cross-country drivers. It included 4-wheel delivery vans, 10-wheel farm and dump trucks and 18-wheel tractor and trailer rigs. We will focus on women truckers who haul pay loads cross-country driving 18-wheel tractor rigs. We exclude women who drive only within a radius of 100 miles. We want to explain the occupation motives

of cross-country women truckers and influences which lead them into long-distance trucking.

. Women truckers have gone largely unnoticed by social scientists, although they represent a clear and extreme contradiction to traditional views of women workers. The work of a cross-country trucker demands stamina, self reliance and independence (Thomas 1979; Stearn 1975; Tak 1971; Hollowell 1968). Their routine can require driving in all types of weather and terrain over several days, with only irregular sleep in cramped quarters behind the truck cab. Restaurant food and infrequent bathing is combined with the constant danger of roadway accidents, harrassment by rowdy male drivers, and health problems such as backache, bursitis, and hemorrhoids, from driving, loading and unloading.

. The communication media distort the picture of long-haul woman truckers, and portray them as a novelty - either tough and unfeminine, or as beautiful and inept. Adriensue (Bitsey) Gomes is pictured as holding a pushrod in a ready position, as if to strike someone, and is described as "a pain in the axle to a traditionally macho industry (Time 1976 100). A 1978 television program showed a woman trucker as incapable of loading her truck without the help of several eager males (KAKE-TV Wichita Nov 14 1978). Television movies also foster these myths. Women truckers are made out as a feminine "hood" (Flatbed Annie), an overly feminine fluff (Sweetie Pie), and a woman who does not need or want men (Willa). . The male cross-country trucker gets similar treatment. He may be shown as pill popper and dope smoker, a divorced loner who hates 4-wheelers, or a rash driver with 5.9 fatal accidents per million miles (Constable 1979).

**METHOD** This is "opportunistic research" (Riemer 1977). The first author had prior experience with the trucking industry, married 10 years to a trucker with 3 million

miles of long distance driving. Constant communication on the trucking industry, and frequent experience as a rider on cross-country hauls increased this familiarity, and facilitated sampling and data verification.

. We used the triangulation method (Webb et al 1966; Denzin 1970) An open-ended questionnaire was mailed to women truckers throughout the country, by a combination of employer assistance, radio announcements on trucker stations, verbal and posted truck-stop solicitation, use of trucker publications such as Land Line, and Owner-Operator, and snow-ball sampling. Ninety women truckers returned usable questionnaires, and many added letters with personal notes of their experience. This data was supplemented with focused interviews with 100 male and 10 female truckers at 3 central truck stops in Denver Colorado and Kansas City Missouri. The first author also traveled on many cross-country hauls as an observer. Since all geographic regions of the United States are represented by women truckers with from 6 months to 45 years of driving experience, we believe that they fairly represent the nation's women truckers.

**SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS** Women truckers in the sample are primarily white (96%), married (69%), and middle class. They range from 21 to 61 years of age, and most had at least a high school education, but 21% had 4 years of college, and 5% had graduate degrees. Experience in trucking ranges from 6 months to 45 years, but the average is 3 years, and the average age is 35. Some have been divorced (20%), and the majority (72%) have had children.

. Many of the women truckers came from families connected with trucking. They report that male relatives were truckers serving as role models, and sometimes as teachers for them. The family influence is illustrated by two sisters who had their own truck. Their father owned 2 trucks, and their

mother drove a truck, both with the father, and alone. Both women dated truck drivers, and learned to drive from them (Overdrive, 1979). Most women learned to drive from their husband or boyfriend, but 26% learned trucking at a truck driving school. Six percent claimed to be self-taught.

. Nearly all of these women had been in other kinds of work prior to trucking, mostly in traditional women's jobs, such as telephone operator, clerk, secretary, waitress, and factory worker. Fifteen percent indicated experience in non-traditional jobs, such as police officer, farm worker, bus driver, first mate on a shrimp boat, and jump saw operator in a saw mill. Eighty percent of the women truckers team with another driver, nearly always (96%) with their husband or boyfriend.

#### WHY WOMEN TRUCK

. The most frequent reason given by women truckers for driving an 18-wheel tractor and trailer rig cross-country was to be with their husband or boyfriend (46%). Typical answers were: To be with my fiance .. to see my husband more than twice a month .. to learn about his business. Some coupled this desire with a stated need to be a contributing member of the relationship. One woman said she was helping her husband make a living for both of them. Another said, "To be with my husband, and to be useful." Some expressed need to enjoy spending time:

".. spending 24 hours a day with my husband. I love it .. I enjoy operating that rig .. I'm proud of it." Some chose trucking at a financial sacrifice. One woman said: "I have a degree in personnel management from De Paul University, and am a first level manager with the Bell Telephone Company. But I am retiring at age 27 to join my husband, and intend to be the best co-driver my husband could have!" Other women in this situation include a registered nurse, speech pathologist, state lobbyist, and marketing director.

. For most of these women it was most important to maintain a traditional marriage and family relation. Children are rarely carried cross-country, but it has been reported. These women truckers do have longings for a permanent home and family life. Some indicated that they love trucking, but would enjoy traditional home life with husband and children. One trucking couple works for a company that allows them time at home after each weekly run, so the woman can keep up her home and family life, and still drive. Other women mentioned several reasons for trucking. Most emphasize the freedom that this occupation brings, for seeing the country and for meeting new people. It offers an independent lifestyle which many of these women value. As one said: "In what other occupation could I make as much money, see as much country, meet as many people, and have as much fun as I do?"

. In a related theme, these women express dislike for working conditions typical in traditional female jobs. Being confined to an office with little autonomy is a factor for some. Monti Tak (1975 75) points out this love of freedom of the open road: "I enjoy traveling and seeing new sights and faces. I feel closed in, working indoors. I like being able to feel the wind in my face and see the sun come up. When I hear the scream of a diesel on the night wind, I know I wouldn't be happy anywhere else. Despite all the odds against the trucker, when there's a good load on the trailer, and that 318 is putting out the most beautiful music in the world, I wouldn't trade places with anyone."

**IMPLICATIONS** Women cross-country truck drivers do not appear to be "pioneers", "libbers", or "innovators". For most, the choice to truck incorporates conventional social values. They are traditionalists who hold strong feelings for family unity and spouse. This motivates them to lose the advantage of domestic life for endless

travel with the one they love.

. The impact of this career decision raises certain questions for women entering other male dominated and non-traditional jobs. For example, male sponsorship is a critical element for women entering and succeeding in male dominated occupations (Ritzer 1977; Stead 1978). But we do not know the extent to which a marital or love relation entered in the sponsor relation and the motivation of women who chose long-distance truck driving.

. Sex role socialization literature supports our claims. Women are socialized to appreciate social relations and emotional attachments more than men. Men are socialized to appreciate instrumental and goal seeking aspects of social action. For them, tasks and their accomplishment take precedence over socio-emotional relations (Ritzer 1977; Ireson 1978; Bell 1979). The historical literature also supports these findings. Pioneer women who chose to cross the uncertain prairie in their Conestoga freight wagons did not wish to conquer the unknown frontier. Their husbands sought this. But their women rode along and drove the team and helped with the work (Sprague 1972; Jeffrey 1979).

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