

Lady thrill-seekers wanted – dare to drive an 18-wheeler!

The red sun sinks in the West as I quickly walk across the trucker's parking lot. The smell of urine grossly wafts up from the hot pavement, but for a second I'm jealous of my male counterparts who took the easier, smellier route – getting to the restroom at this truck stop takes way too long on a full bladder.

Each evening it's the same. My trainer, Vernon Colbert, a black owner/operator with Werner Trucking, and I stop for the night after a 10-hour day of driving. After I hit the ladies' showers and eat a truck stop meal, we meet back at the rig, where I hop into the top bunk and Vernon gets ready to take over the wheel for the evening.

Three days into the drive from Philadelphia to San Diego, and I haven't quite gotten used to the long haul yet – this time we've got a load of Harley Davidsons in the trailer. I needed this challenge after my divorce five years ago, and Vernon is showing me how to be a company driver. He's a man of few words, but with lots of experience as an owner/operator. His tractor is a glossy black with the Werner logo proudly emblazoned on the door, as well as the fact that he's an owner and company trainer of newbie drivers such as myself. His cool, calm attitude helps my confidence, as I drive the big rig.

Being self-supporting is an important goal for me. The back of each truck has always had advertisements reading "truck drivers needed," and this is a definite ticket to job security. My family members thought I was crazy, but I thought, if other truckers can do it, so can I.

Further research was even more encouraging -- women now make up over 10 percent of over-the-road (OTR) truck drivers, an increase of almost 30 percent over the 7.89 percent seen in the Women in Trucking (WIT) Association's 2018 survey. The increase came after an industry-wide push to hire more women drivers in response to recent capacity crunches. But the driver shortage is really a problem for the entire supply chain as 71.4% of all freight tonnage is moved on the nation's highways. According to the American Transportation Research Institute, 43% of trucking's operational costs is driver compensation, but as freight volumes increase, the existing driver pool is only more strained.

Currently, DMVs are shut down in 27 states due to the pandemic. And on top of that, commercial driver training schools are also shut down. On April 7, 2020, the Commercial Vehicle Training Association posted on their website that "The closure of various state DMVs and CDL training facilities risks cutting off supply chain on a national level, potentially undermining the country's ability to respond and recover from COVID-19. The Commercial Vehicle Training Association is urging both states and the federal government to take action before it's too late."

Is truck driving worth your time, hard work and dedication? If you look at driver demand, companies are actively seeking women drivers for a number of reasons. A September 2019 report by Freightwaves and the American Transportation Research Institute (ATRI) found that women are not only adequate drivers, but that they are safer drivers than men in most cases. There are strong opportunities ahead, as the country moves past the pandemic, with even more demand for goods and services.

Fortunately, I attended Smith & Solomon in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, before the pandemic. It cost about \$4,400 or so, with a certificate of completion and 160 training hours under your belt at the end of it (which I took at night after my day job). Trucking company recruiters come looking at driving schools

when classes are expected to graduate. They talk about sign-on bonuses, as well as education reimbursement, so the upfront costs get paid back to you if you stay with it.

On my first night, it was obvious there were no other women on this journey with me. Some guys were welcoming, and some wouldn't even look me in the eye, but we all became allies as the training continued. After the first week of classroom instruction, we obtained our driver's permits, and started the road training. Learning to drive on the little streets of Philadelphia was the most helpful training imaginable. If you can drive a big rig on those streets, you can drive anywhere. Keeping that much power under control was easier than expected, but also extremely scary. It's a good thing people mainly respect the big rigs.

Before the driving test began, we had to demonstrate we could do the pre-trip inspection – one of the most important parts of driving a truck. This is where many of the drivers failed the test – you had to physically take the instructor for a tour around the outside of the truck and verbally communicate what you were looking at in the engine and on the rest of the truck. If you proved you could safely address any engine or trailer issues that might come up, you passed that part and went on to the road driving test. If you didn't pass – you went home to try again on another day. I failed my driving test the first time, but was able to pass the whole thing the second time around, and suddenly, I was a CDL-A driver, meaning I had a Commercial Driver's License, could apply to any trucking company, and get a job fast.

The truck is called a tractor-trailer because the tractor is the cab in which the driver sits and sleeps, and the trailer is what we are usually hauling. Day cabs don't have a big back end to them – just a driving seat. But tractors have double bunks in the back and sometimes even a refrigerator, shelves for TVs and radios, and closets for some clothing. Many drivers are on the road for weeks at a time, and they transform those tractors into mini-campers, taking their “stuff” with them.

Many companies advertise for drivers who only need to worry about “drop and hook” -- that means you don't need to load or unload the back trailer. You go to the shipper, drop an empty, and pick up your new load. This makes driving very woman-friendly. There seemed to be a kind of brotherhood among drivers. Women are acknowledged with respect by some, scorned by others, and ignored by a few.

But most of the male drivers I met were kind, very helpful, and sincerely interested to see women breaking into the field. Many drivers have CB radios, but the language can be extremely foul. Most of the drivers now have SiriusXM radio with multiple channels of news, sports, music and comedians to listen to, so you are never bored.

One of the biggest challenges is the bathroom situation, at least it was for me, since I need to go about every two hours. Stopping at a truck stop with your big rig is a time-consuming process. Truck stops vary wildly. There are your mom-and-pop places with just a gas pump and a dirt parking lot and perhaps a tiny diner where you can grab a meal. Then there are the super-star trucking stops -- the Loves, the Pilots, and the Flying J centers – where literally hundreds of trucks come and go, the drivers taking advantage of the opportunity to gas up, grab food or shampoo, truck parts and T-shirts. Many truckers like to hang in the truckers' lounge, where a bunch of guys may sit telling road yarns, or watch TV while the latest golf tournament plays on. But we all sleep in our trucks, and get on the road early the next day.

Driving from Ohio to Kansas on Route 70 was one long highway, with the usual backups near the cities, and long stretches of corn fields, cow pastures, and verdant countryside. In Kansas, the ground changed drastically with enormous hummocks of earth, hilly forests and dramatic emptiness. As we approached Colorado, the roads began to climb, with drastic ups and downs – until there in the distance, the first city lights, with shadowed Rocky Mountains behind, took my breath away. Going up mountains in an 18-wheeler is scary enough – you need to know how to down shift pretty fast when the truck gets below 30 mph. But coming down the mountain, when it's twisting and curving, with 43,000 pounds behind you – well, let's just say you may wish for a drink after that.

After dropping our load in Fort Collins, Colorado, and picking up another, we overnighted in a busy mom-and-pop stop – Johnson's Corner -- known for their cinnamon buns, and headed south toward Arizona the next day, where we followed Route 10 westward. Again, the scenery changed drastically by day five. Long, empty stretches of red rock and desert-like landscapes, sometimes broken by bright green, irrigated food farms. As California loomed larger, we again experienced drastic mountainous ups and downs, until finally, we were over!

Vernon spent some time telling me about how crazy California drivers were. He said that the border guards were pretty strict and that we'd be stopped and maybe even asked for papers. Sure enough, the California troopers checked us out, but we were passed through their checkpoint pretty quickly.

Another time, a driver Vernon was training got so spooked by the California traffic and speeders, he insisted he couldn't do it and wanted off the truck. Vernon tried to talk him out of it but the guy insisted, and went home from California. When our trip finally ended in San Diego, Vernon dropped me off at a hotel, and went to find his family at their home. He picked me up a few days later, and we headed east, toward home.

It's important to realize that truck driving is a lifestyle, not just a job. You work long hours, and are alone a lot. That's why, eventually, I decided that driving was not for me – the loneliness did get to me. But I feel this is still a strong career path with exceptional opportunities for women.