

## **Debbie Hoffman is a champion — a fighter for women's rights and a successful independent trucker.**

By Wanda Meadows – Published by American Trucker, August 1984

You shouldn't be in here asking for an application to drive truck for this company, you should be home making babies," remarked Dick LaFone, vice president of Great Lakes Express, to Debbie Hoffman who sat shocked and embarrassed. Earlier, she had walked into LaFone's office hopeful of getting a job with the same outfit as her trucker husband. Instead, she found herself close to tears as the man continued to wail on her with his personal prejudices.

"We have enough crybabies around here in some of the men, let alone hiring a bunch of women. I won't even give you an application and if you don't like it, go see someone in authority with the civil rights department. If they come to see me, I'll tell them just what I've told you," he said belligerently.

Hoffman left the office of Great Lakes that day in 1974, determined on two counts. First, she would follow LaFone's sarcastic advice and file a lawsuit against the company for discrimination, a suit that would be a long time in settling, then—because she felt so alone in her struggle to break into trucking —someday she would organize women drivers to support one another in time of need.

It wasn't until last year that Hoffman could finally take time from her trucking profession to work on the goal she set for herself 10 years ago. In 1983 she started the Women's National Truck Drivers Organization, Inc. (WNTDO), which is structured to promote women drivers on a national scale. Designed to bring about cohesiveness, the group is committed to: act as a representative body within the trucking industry on political and economic issues by keeping its members informed on current topics; dispel hard core prejudice still found in a predominantly male profession; act as an aid and advisory group to individual women who may have professional or personal problems, and offer support any way necessary to give its members confidence and competence in their profession.

"It isn't only major difficulties that produce a need for an association, often; it is the day to day problems that make tough on a woman in this business. It is amazing how many women drivers are wives and mothers. Problems that exist in every working woman's life are greatly exaggerated in trucking. After all, female truck drivers are not sitting six blocks from home in an air-conditioned office with a telephone at their elbows. Often you are thousands of miles away, cooped up in a cab and away from communication for hours on end. Finding solutions to some of the logistics is one of my goals — solutions that allow a woman driver to do her job without worrying about what's going on at home, like babysitting problems, household help and things of that nature."

From the response of other women drivers, the need for such an association is obvious. Incorporated in April of this year, WNTDO already boasts a membership of about 250 women and is looking forward to having 500 by the end of 1984. The broad-based membership is open to any woman trucker— independent, company driver or part of a husband and wife team — who wants to join the group to work towards improving conditions for the female driver. Yet Hoffman admits conditions aren't as difficult today as they were when she applied for her first job and had such a nasty introduction into a man's domain. But even then, there were some companies who were willing to take a chance on

women drivers.

After Hoffman filed her lawsuit against Great Lakes Express, she turned to Wernco, Inc., in Dearborn, Michigan, who encouraged her by giving her a job. "They were very helpful and I hauled bulk cement in a set of doubles for them for over three years. Then my suit against Great Lakes came up and I won my case."

During that period of time, Great Lakes Express had sold out to Branch Motor Express and the new management was not burdened by the same anti woman-driver philosophy exhibited so blatantly by its predecessor. Branch paid Hoffman \$20,000, gave her a job and awarded her three years' seniority with the company as part of the court settlement. She stayed with the company until a year ago, working as an independent owner-operator hauling flatbed steel and also container loads for Branch's import/export division.

Today, she hauls for George Bennett out of McDonough, Ga., carrying heavy equipment and oversized loads to any part of the U.S. Incidentally, George Bennett is owned by Marcia Garrison, another woman who has made good in the industry.

One of Hoffman's most recent cross-country gigs brought her to California. As she unchained a large Ford backhoe, one of two she had hauled from Michigan into the Southern California region, she talked about her career and what has aided her in her success.

For a starter, Hoffman believes in buying what she considers to be the best in equipment and she keeps it in mint condition. Knowing that maintenance is often the secret behind a money-making trucking business, when it comes to mechanical details she is a real stickler. So much so, in fact, she became an expert mechanic herself, partly because she was afraid she would get short-changed by some mechanics who would take advantage of her "because I'm a woman and not expected to know good mechanical work from bad." Hoffman now does all her own service, repairs and even a major in-frame to one of her trucks, which "ran great when I finished with it." This ability alone makes her stand out from the crowd.

Another prime example of her desire to be different is her choice in trucks. In 1982 Hoffman saw the pace truck for the GATR Pocono 500, and it grabbed her instantly. "I m an individual and independent by nature. I don't want to look like everybody else going down the road. I want my truck to reflect my personality. The Pocono pace truck was a one of a kind model."

Hoffman's career in trucking is exemplified in the emblem written along the ideas of her sleeper. "Going First Class" is a motto she has always associated with conducting herself as a professional at all times. It is a point she particularly likes to impart to other women drivers through WNTDO. Certainly, Hoffman is a good representative of today's ever widening group of female derivers working toward an integrated professional truckers' society. Her belief in her own ability is combined with a great deal of daring to be different', a combination typical of most women in the industry today. Like other owner-operators of both sexes, she has weathered the obstacles of little money and no freight and still remains optimistic about the future of the trucking profession and its woman drivers in particular.

I made it, and plan on making it even better before my days in OTR trucking are over," Hoffman said confidently. "I think any woman who is career minded can become a trucker. The secret is, you have to want it bad enough. But that's what makes a good trucker no matter which sex you happen to be. That's just what trucking is all about. And besides,"

Hoffman grinned, "nobody told me trucking would be easy."