

Getting Started Back Then

Dorothy Sanderson joined Women In Trucking in May. She is an owner-operator from Cannington, Ontario. Here is her story...

As I sit and listen to those who are new or nearly new in the male dominated transportation industry, I think back to the late 1970's when I began team driving with my first husband. At that time women were made to feel very unwelcome and inferior to their male counterparts and treated with disdain and blatant discrimination by drivers, shippers, and receivers. Husbands teaching wives is not always the best scenario. We had some of the liveliest discussions on the road and some days were a struggle.

We were lumber haulers so I learned to tell the different grades of lumber, to watch particleboard shipments very closely for overheating in the center as a fire could start on a hot summer day, and to run like heck when he hollered "chain coming."

Heavy work reminded me of growing up on the farm so I did not find it much different. Being the wife and co-driver was not the hard part, but being the mother also did present some very interesting situations.

Our three girls were very good at folding up the tarps and collecting the chains and binders for their dad and knew at a glance the areas that were not safe for them. Our girls were always in the cab until the chains were over the loads. Safety was paramount on the road.

Children growing up on the road learn discipline and respect for others. A restaurant meal was something that was worked for and earned because they cost so much. Life was a series of picnic tables at rest

areas and in Canada, it was pullovers because truckstops were fewer than they are today. During the school year when I was needed on the road, the girls were left with in-house sitters.



Dorothy Sanderson and her family

Potty time was an "experience" with or without the girls. Many customers were only set up for men and most were so filthy and smelly that I was too scared to use the facilities. Sometimes I was told the room was empty only to find they were WRONG! Often there was no toilet paper. Growing up on the farm, my Granny said that a lady never heads for the potty without backup and boy was she right. Truckstops back then were marginally better, but that depended on the area, with the middle of the Eastern seaboard being the worst and the scariest.

Propositioning and name calling was a part of that era if a woman walked around alone, so I tried not to do it unless absolutely necessary.

Life was not easy, but as a family, we did it.

Dorothy Sanderson in 2007

Written by Sue Dickens

Rubbing shoulders with delegates from around the world, Dorothy Sanderson made sure her passion for trucking was front and centre at the United Steelworkers International Women's Conference (USW) held recently in Toronto, Ontario.

"I was there as the Union Steward for Local 1976 Markham Ontario representing owner/operators at Highland Transport," says Dorothy. "I represented the first-ever female owner/operator to attend this event," she adds with pride.



Dorothy Sanderson in 2007

More than 1,000 women joined in global solidarity and activism at the conference, one of the largest gatherings of working women ever.

The theme of the four-day conference was Women of Steel: Building Power, Taking Action. Conference chair Leeann Anderson, assistant to USW President Leo Gerard, explained to the media beforehand just how the theme reflects the activist role of USW women.

And that is just the message Dorothy worked to get across in her role as a representative from the trucking industry.

"When I told people I was there as the Union Steward for Local 1976 Markham Ont. An owner/operator in the trucking industry ... well, they were shocked," says Dorothy. And they had good reason to feel that way.

Never before has there been a woman trucker at the conference nor has there been a woman Union Steward - representing the owner/operators from that industry.

For Dorothy the event was an opportunity to talk about her life in the trucking industry, which in spite of all its challenges is a decision she has never regretted.

Dorothy was busy every day getting her message across to the international guests who were there from countries such as Canada, Mexico, Sweden, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Argentina, the US Virgin Islands, Sweden, the United Kingdom and Germany.

With issues on the table during the workshops such as how to improve working conditions, stop worker exploitation, improve work-life balance, it was a chance to discuss the factors that affect women in their daily lives.

"I learned a lot and met women from all over the world including a woman from Sweden," says Dorothy. "She works for Volvo trucks. She builds the trucks that I buy."

As well during the conference delegates were active on the streets of Toronto to get people motivated to vote in the Ontario provincial election. But their main focus was to highlight the critical role women play in the USW, how society and governments are failing women and working families, and what actions can be taken as trade unionists to build awareness and power for change.

As part of the topics on the agenda USW President Leo W. Gerard addressed delegates about the Protect Our Kids - Stop Toxic Imports international campaign that was unveiled at the convention.

"We learned a lot about Third World countries and how a lot of the products we buy are made and under what conditions they are made ... and it is dreadful," says Dorothy.

Women Of Steel's objective now is to get the word out about Toxic Toys. "We are focusing on these toxic toys and each one of us who attended that seminar was given a kit to actually test for lead, whether it is on a baby's bib or a child's toy," she explains.

When she wasn't attending the many workshops Dorothy took time to mingle and

network with the delegates, spreading her own message about the trucking industry.

“Why I even got to shake the hand of Elizabeth Edwards, wife of Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards,” she says with a grin.

Other notables at the conference included Vancouver MP Libby Davies, Labour Critic for the New Democratic Party (NDP), one of many featured speakers. Former USW President Lynn Williams and US National Labor Committee Executive Director Charles Kernaghan as well as journalist Arianna Huffington were also among the guest speakers.

Ontario’s NDP Leader Howard Hampton and his wife MPP Shelley Martel were also among the participants.

It should be noted that the USW, the largest industrial union in North America, represents 850,000 workers in the U.S. and Canada employed in the industries of metals, rubber, chemicals, paper, oil refining and the service sector. “This is why we in the Transportation Industry are a ‘curiosity.’ Many people forget that we are the sector that gets their product to market. I remarked to one delegate ‘your shipping dock would be pretty full without us.’ They enter and leave through the ‘front door’ we come to the back.”

But for Dorothy the conference was not only a chance to listen and learn but to share her views as a female owner/operator. Having spent almost 35 years on the road, Dorothy is now the proud owner of a trucking company in Cannington, Ont. Her husband Patrick Gaffney and her son-in-law Neil Cyr both drive for her company. She has come a long way from her early days on the road.



Dorothy Sanderson and her trucks

“I think back to the late 1970s when I began team driving with my first husband. At that time women were made to feel very unwelcome,” says Dorothy. “A lot has changed since then in the trucking industry but we still have a long way to go,” she adds.

Dorothy believes owner/operators need to be unionized but she also thinks many are afraid to do it. “I believe owner/operators are the backbone of the industry and they need to think about unionizing,” says Dorothy, who recently joined the Ontario Trucking Association; but is waiting to pass the Membership Committee. She hopes her involvement with the OTA will see owner/operators get more support from the association.

“I have always been unionized. I’ve been leased to Highland Transport 25 years next March,” she explains. “And it has worked well for me.”

Dorothy has seen it all ... lived a lifestyle most women “could never deal with.”

“Trucking is something you either hate or love. I must admit now that I am more involved with the union I miss many aspects of life on the road ... meeting the people, watching the sun rise in the morning, watching it set while going down the road at night ... and more,” she says.

As far as Dorothy is concerned this is not the best of times for the transportation industry. “It is a terrible time of transition right now. Companies buying other companies now seem to be in it only for the bottom line.”

But she is a fighter and will continue to share her message with anyone who will listen.

“This conference made me realize just how uneducated the average person is about the industry that hauls the freight they produce,” she says.

And for anyone considering making the trucking industry a career, she has a few words of advice she would like to pass along. “If you come into trucking, come into it with an open mind. You are never going to learn everything. There will always be another corner to turn. And remember when one door closes another door opens. Like I said, you either love it or you hate it.”