

Ellen's Quest

By Gary Bricken, rpm Magazine

Sometimes when we take a fresh look at old situations a creative idea comes along. The trucking industry, which is about 100 years old now, has long been the domain of men, not just behind the wheel but throughout every level of the industry. Sure there have been a few women drivers, dispatchers, recruiters and even trucking company owners but by and large they were an anomaly not the norm. Most, but not all, of the women this writer has encountered in this industry up until about 15 years ago were there more by accident than design. Their husbands, fathers or boy-friends had taught them to drive or run a small company then left the picture for various reasons. Or they worked in the office somewhere doing the unglamorous but necessary paperwork.

The trucking industry as a whole knew there was a problem with attracting women into the industry, and the driver shortage, and improvements in equipment in the early 90's opened up the possibility that this could be an attractive industry for women finally if the conditions were right. But there were many mountains to climb in this venture from getting truckstops to accept changes to better accommodate women to adjusting the industry's mindset about where women really belonged.

Unfortunately other forces were at work during this time that set back plans to bring more women into the industry. The nation as a whole was experiencing fantastic job growth in many areas and companies of all types were offering better economic packages to women than ever before. And the mindset of our industry was still stuck in the male dominated past where interactions between drivers, owners, dispatchers and mechanics were definitely unattractive to people unfamiliar with the unspoken codes of conduct in our unique world. But time and progress changes all things eventually. All this industry needed was a visionary to see the potential of women in the industry and a few brave pioneers to try the waters and come up with solutions to challenge of getting more women to look at trucking as a viable career choice. All it would take is one person at the right time to do the job.

Over the past dozen years Ellen Voie, from central Wisconsin, has delved into the problems facing women in our industry and felt that everybody was looking at the whole picture wrong. The women were there, in every part of the industry, just not behind the wheel, in huge numbers. But moving freight is a highly complex job, it's a team effort, and women were definitely a big part of the team when you stood back and looked at the industry in the big picture. In March of this year Voie formed Women in Trucking, dedicated to bringing together women from all parts of the industry to share experiences, network, develop and locate new opportunities and most importantly raise awareness of the contribution that women make to the world of trucking.

In her own words Voie says, "Our first goal is to encourage more women to consider the trucking industry, not just truck driving, as a career choice. Secondly we want to work at eliminating the barriers to women, like the availability of restrooms and toiletries for women on the road, and get equal recognition for women drivers when it comes to driving awards and the like. Very often women solve problems quietly and accomplish their work without much fanfare and because they don't generate much noise their accomplishments are overlooked. What really surprised us in this undertaking was the number of men who joined, in fact almost a quarter of membership, which is over 500 in less than six months, are men who value our contributions and understand the challenges we face daily."

Asked about the current focus of her effort's Ellen adds, "Our biggest goal is to have one thousand members when we hit our first anniversary next March. Our programs include providing speakers at conventions, trade shows and at company forums. Eventually we may even have our own convention. Right now we are developing newsletters, educational information and working in discount products and fuel cards for our members. As more people join us I am very sure new ideas will come forward with the accompanying talent necessary to take us into areas we haven't even thought of yet. This is an exciting thing, it's beginning to take on its own life and the final shape and form will come from the membership as it should."

Ellen has spent the past 25 years of her life working to accumulate the experience and necessary educational skills simply to make a significant contribution to lives of the drivers that keep this country moving. She started her career in 1978 while working during the day in the shipping department of a central Wisconsin company that made material handling equipment. At night she earned a degree in Traffic and Transportation Management that led to her becoming a transportation consultant to carriers in central Wisconsin.

Next it was Bachelors Degree in Communication in 1994 followed by a Master's Degree in the same field in 1999. Over time additional avenues opened for Ellen thanks to her educational pursuits. Her Master's Thesis focused on the complex identities of women married to professional drivers. This was an invaluable look deep inside the family structure of our industry that revealed new dimensions in understanding the wives of the men behind the windshield of America's trucks. Just a year after Ellen received here Master's Degree she became the Executive Director of Trucker Buddy in 2000. Over the next 6 years Voie helped Trucker Buddy move to a new level of respect and acclaim. But growth, be it for a company or an individual sometimes demands change. Accumulating education and experience is really like storing up energy to be used for even greater tasks ahead. Her recent work as the Retention Manager for Schneider National set a precedent in driver relations that will automatically create a mandate for other companies to follow in learning about the reasons drivers leave and examining the current methods for driver retention. This kind of effort will eventually improve the quality of life for drivers everywhere.

With Women in Trucking Ellen Voie has taken on a big challenge, but she has done that before and very successfully too. A lot of people have gone down this path and broken their pick in process. But Ellen knows this and in this writer's opinion, has found some new steel for her pick that probably won't break anytime soon.

For more information about Women in Trucking, visit their website at www.WomeninTrucking.org, and see if you are ready to take the challenges ahead with Ellen and her crew.