

ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY

Over dimensional loads are the specialty of this pioneering lady trucker By DEBORAH FENNINGTON (April, 1992).

Debbie Hoffman hauls some unusual freight: tall smokestacks, big boats, oversize waste treatment tanks, huge pieces of construction equipment, immense ductwork that resembles a giant's accordion. "Anything that's wide, high, or long," Hoffman says. But then, Hoffman has never been one to settle for the ordinary.

When she graduated from trucking school in 1970, she was one of only a handful of woman truckers — and one of an even fewer number who was able to make a long-term, successful career as an owner-driver. She wasn't content with an ordinary truck, either; a 1982 Peterbilt, custom-built for the Poconos 500 Truck Race, was her choice. A \$50,000 sleeper with shower, toilet, kitchen and queen-size bed let this grandmother raise her three children, who now have white line fever in their veins.



Hoffman's operation, Double D Truck Specialties of Haines City, Fla., specializes in over dimensional hauling. It's more profitable than regular line-haul, she says, and more of a challenge as well.

"From the moment I graduated truck driving my goal was to be a specialized carrier" says the slim, muscular blonde. "I knew the money was not in general freight. With specialized hauling, I can get \$ 3,500 for a 50-mile haul. I used to have to go to California from New Jersey for the same amount." Of course, to go that 50 miles may take 10 to 12 hours, waiting for utility people to raise power and phone lines, doing some careful maneuvering in tight spots, waiting for escorts, notifying police to block off railroad crossings, etc.

It was a lofty goal for a young woman in the early '70s. Hoffman had married at age 15, and by the time she was 21 had two children and a third on the way.

"He supported me very well," she says. "I had a new house with a new car in the driveway. One day I looked around and thought. What if he stops loving me and leaves? Who's going to hire me with a sixth-grade education?"

Her husband was an owner-driver, so it was not surprising Hoffman opened the yellow pages and called a truck driving school to ask if they took women. What was surprising was the lack of support from her husband. "He said I could never do it," she says.

Friends and neighbors helped Hoffman get a job to pay for the eight week course, and babysat for her. She graduated and had her third child at the same time.

"When I graduated I wasn't going to work," she says, "But being a woman, I got all sorts of media attention — and all sorts of job offers." Newspapers and women's groups regarded her as a pioneer.

The Pete came with one of the earliest Cummins 400 big-cam 3 engines, an Eaton 13-speed transmission, 3.70 rears, and air ride — unusual 10 years ago, but a great advantage in specialized hauling. She later added a Cummins C Brake retarder, a stereo system and a cellular phone. The black, red and blue Imron paint job is one of a kind, and Hoffman has worked hard to keep it looking new.

In 1984 she added a \$50,000 sleeper. A queen-size bed is tucked away on top of the cab, while the normal sleeper space boasts a toilet, shower, sink, microwave oven, refrigerator, and wooden cabinets and drawers for storage galore. A separate generator supplies power to avoid unnecessary idling. "I was raising my kids in the truck," she says. She didn't want her boy or two girls taking showers at truck stops, and she didn't have time to stop often for restroom breaks.

Hoffman hired full-time live-in babysitter to watch her children while she was on the road. This way, she could let her children take turns going out on the road with her for a month at a time. They were allowed to miss school as long as they took their homework. An extra benefit for Hoffman was her own education. She learned while helping them study. "We had fun," says 22-year-old Vicky, who today is a trucker with a young daughter of her own. She has been driving a belly dump for about a year now and hopes to eventually work for her mother.

"They said they'd never drive a truck," Hoffman says of her children. "But they started growing up and thought, 'how can I make good money?'" Hoffman's 25-year-old son, Raymond, is also a trucker and lives in St. Louis. Her youngest daughter 19-year-old Christine, is planning to go to truck driving school.

Vicky was a young teen when she went along on her mother's first over dimensional haul. Hoffman's truck was one of a team of four hauling modular parts of a medical clinic, 15-feet, 1-inch high, from Oregon to West Virginia. The other team members (all men) liked to party late into the night and get a late start the next morning, she says. That didn't exactly match up with her hard-working schedule, so she went on alone.

Before long, Hoffman stopped at an overpass that was marked 14-feet, 6 inches. She was on the side of the road letting air out of her air-ride bags and tires to help get the needed clearance when the other team members caught up. Open-mouthed, she watched the others come flying by — and clear the overpass. What she didn't know was the road underneath had been dug out for more clearance, but the clearance warning was never changed. "I thought they were going to smash into it," she says.

Hoffman had the last laugh though. Sometime later, she came across an overpass that was too low. Because she had been studying the fine print on her permits, nervous about her first job, she remembered instructions saying to "ramp it" at this exit number. So she did just that, going up and over the intersection. The other three trucks, she found out later, all smashed into the overpass.

On that first load, she ran into another problem. She was snowed in on Cabbage Mountain, which had been shut down to wide loads by a blizzard. "When they did open it, they shouldn't have," she says. "My first time downhill on mountain, and it was solid ice, gusts of wind, and no guardrail. I had this huge load, and I didn't dare touch my brakes. That was when I realized how professional you have to be to set the load safely where it has to be — and how big these loads really are."

But hauling those big loads was exactly what Hoffman wanted to do. "Seeing those big loads go down the road always fascinated me, so I'd get on the CB and holler (at the drivers of the loads)," she says "when I found out how much money they got for doing this, I was really interested."

In 1988, Hoffman sold everything she owned and moved to Florida. She was tired of cold weather, it was after she moved to the sunny South that she really got involved in specialized hauling.

"I love my job," she says. "It's a challenge; it's always different."

Today, Hoffman hauls to 48 states as an agent for Cheetah Transportation of Mooresville, N.C. When a company calls with a load, she gets the dimensions and then plans a tentative route. She finds out how much it's going to cost for permits, etc., then makes a bid.

Once she gets the load assignment, a permit company arranges permits and faxes them to her office (a renovated four car garage.)

But just because you have permits for a state doesn't mean you're free and clear, Hoffman says. "It's a driver's responsibility. You travel at your own risk. If you get on a road not big enough, it's your problem, even if the state told you to go that way."

Her most difficult load, she says, was a 100-foot-long smokestack. "Making my turns, the tractor would be way down the street by the time the trailer even started making the turn," she says. Then there's the physical effort involved. "It's rough work," she says, throwing chains and binders, making sure the load is secured properly.

"I couldn't say 'No, I'm scared,'" she says. "But I was scared."

Hoffman's first job was good training for her later career in more ways than one. The Michigan native hauled bulk cement at night in an 11-axle "Michigan Train," grossing 161,000 pounds. She made \$14.96 an hour starting pay, thanks to the Teamsters union. But her boss didn't really want a woman driver, she says, and assigned her equipment that broke down constantly. She watched the mechanic closely, and learned a lot about taking care of a truck. "That guy actually did me a favor," she says. "If it weren't for that, I wouldn't have the ability I do today to find short."

In 1977 Hoffman bought her first truck, and started hauling double containers from Detroit to New Jersey. A year and a half later, she bought a cab over. Then in 1982, she stopped in at Poconos Peterbilt to buy some chrome. She ended up buying a new truck: a Peterbilt 359, custom-built to be a pace truck for the Poconos Peterbilt Bobtail 500 race.

"All I could do was picture myself driving down the road in that nice, pretty truck," she says. "When I divorced my husband (1980), I told him, 'I'm going to have the most beautiful truck on the road.'" The Pete came with one of the earliest Cummins 400 big-cam 3 engines, an Eaton 13-speed transmission, 3.70 rears, and air ride — unusual 10 years ago, but a great advantage in specialized hauling. She later added a Cummins C Brake retarder, a stereo system and a cellular phone. The black, red and blue Imron paint job is one of a kind, and Hoffman has worked hard to keep it looking new.