Women Enter the Highway Construction Crafts

By Bill Johnson

Virginia Beach, a popular Central Atlantic States resort, has added a new dimension — it is the first site for pre-entry training of 120 women in the highway construction crafts.

This project is the first in a series of Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) — initiated actions to promote equal opportunity for women in the highway construction industry.

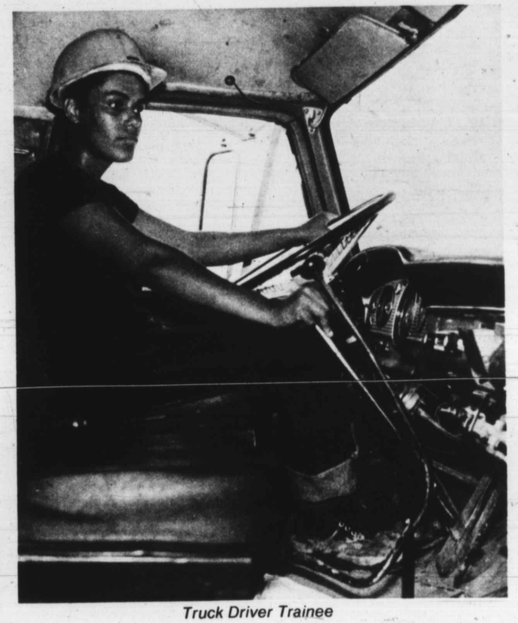
It was launched last July 1 when FHWA awarded a 30-month contract for more than $400,000 to the Northern Vocational Training Company, Cheverly, Maryland, to train 120 women in three areas of highway construction, with 40 women assigned to each craft. They are:

Operating engineers-10 weeks training; off-the-road trucks drivers-5 weeks training; and highway bridge carpenters 6 weeks training.

The first group of 23 trainees (bridge carpenters) graduated in September, and have now entered into the apprenticeship phase of the program.

Federal Highway Administrator Norbert T. Tiemann and other FHWA officials, including Alexander D. Gaither, director, Office of Civil Rights; Wesley S. Mendenhall, director, Office of Highway Operations; Robert J. Harlan, deputy director, Office of Civil Rights, and Martha S. Freeman, Equal Opportunity specialist; along with George W. Krynitsky, project contract manager; and D. A. Larson, president, and Welcome Bryant, vice president and general manager of the Northern Vocational Training Company, traveled to Norfolk, Virginia, the day before the graduation to inspect and interview the women as they approached the end of the first phase of their training.

The trainees spent the first two weeks of training becoming acquainted with the tools of their trade and building their own toolboxes. Each received 11 tools, workbooks, and hard-hats, which they may keep.



Truck Driver Trainee

During the ensuring weeks of training, they learned to construct beams, walls, scaffolds, columns, and simulated basic bridge structure. They were lodged at Holiday Inn-Scope where they received free room and board five days per week. The trainees were given $14 allowance for weekend meals plus $20 a week for necessities.

Concluding a long and vigorous day in which he was interviewed by several television, radio and newspaper reporters, climbed to the top of a simulated bridge structure (and tried his hand at carpentry), and operated a bulldozer, accompanied by two of the trainees, Administrator Tiemann said:

"This has been an illuminating day for me, and abundant proof that when women devote their full energies and talents to a cause or an effort they far exceed that which is expected of them and stop short of nothing less than complete success."

$400,000 program trains 120 women in 3 areas

It was noted that the Federal expenditure amounts to approximately $3,500 for each trainee for the six or 10-week programs, more than enough to send each woman to college for a year. Should one assume from this that the program is a bit extravagant, nothing could be more misleading.

For example, trainee Linda Flakes, 23, of Denver, Colorado, said: "I am not knocking the value of a college degree or one or four years of college work — but when you finish what have you got but a little piece of paper? The college won't get you a job, but this program will. I am sold on it."

The instructors at the carpentry and heavy equipment training sites noted that an air of apprehension prevailed at the beginning of the project. How to cope with such a group of women of different races, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds? Could they acclimate themselves to this new venture of working, dining, sleeping and relaxing together without any serious conflicts?

In a short time, all such concerns vanished. Cecil W. Smith, senior instructor at one of the sites, states it this way: "I soon discovered that these women came here for one thing — to secure the type of training that would qualify them for the work of their choosing. The attitude of the trainees has been phenomenal. Some of the men trainee's attitudes gave the impression that the world owes them a living-not so with the women."

'College won't get you a job, but this program will'

"I am elated over the dedication, the learning capacity, and enthusiasm exhibited by the women in this program. I hope our next group of trainees are of the same calibre," Mr. Smith said.

In talks with the soon-to-be graduates, all agreed that the program is meaningful and gave hope of obtainment to those who had lost belief in themselves.

Thirty-three-year-old trainee Lylyan Letcher, mother of two children and former music major at the University of East New Mexico, had this to say: "I have worked the gamut, you name it, from switchboard operator to traveling saleswoman, and I have never earned over $4.90 an hour. Then along came this opportunity, and now I'll go into the second phase of training as an apprentice with a Minnesota construction company at $6 an hour — its unbelievable."

Trainee Joan Houston of Delaware

Trainees Show Robert J. Harlan of FHWA How It's Done

Sandra Hall of Denver, Colorado, Operates Bulldozer While Jean Melton and Her Sister, Michelle, Look On.

Eighteen year old Nancy O'Connor of Sioux City, Iowa, was attending beautician school and had completed approximately 1,200 hours, but quit to enroll in the program.

"I became tired and bored listening to the tales and woes of an endless stream of customers, and furthermore this program offered a challenge to women. I accepted that challenge," Nancy said.

Another of the carpenter trainees, who will not be identified for obvious reasons, made this statement:

"I wish this program was available years ago. Maybe I would have avoided some of the sordid experiences I've had. This opportunity is the greatest thing that has occurred in my life. Tomorrow I will graduate. It's a fairy tale come true. Can you imagine a few short weeks ago I was completely lost, my life was an empty vacuum. I wasn't going anywhere, still haunted by my childhood experiences. At age 14 I was raped by my stepfather and my mother refused to do anything about it. From that incident my life was a down hill skid-ending in my going to prison," she said.

"I was released and could not find employment. Then I heard the government was funding a program, and I learned later that it was the Federal Highway Administration, to train women in three highway construction skills, carpentry, truck and bulldozer driving. The information that really startled me was the training, transportation, lodging and food was all free. I immediately applied and was accepted, and now here I am on the verge of a new life. God help me, I am going to make it," she added.

Janice Fitchett, Seaford, Delaware, considers her selection for the program a milestone

(Continued on Page 19)

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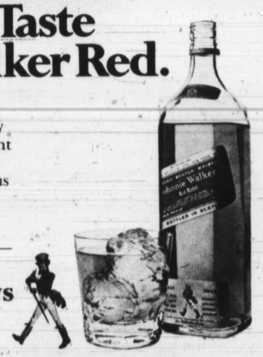

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