



Rachelle Biggs with her big rig

mother TRUCKERS

BY COLLEEN KANE PHOTOS BY SONYA NAUMANN AND DONNA ALBERICO

Tales of life in the driver's seat from
some true queens of the road

a

WOMAN VISITING

still gets doors held open for her coming and going, draws as much male attention in road-trip jeans as if she'd had a wardrobe malfunction, and can get her hash browns served by a waitress whose name tag reads "Honey." It's like walking into a Tom Waits song, or (less romantically) a den of the kind of potty-mouthed, mudflap-girled, amphetamine-fueled latches whose trucks Thelma and Louise would blow up in effigy.

But at the truck-stop souvenir shop, among the pro-beer and Confederate-flag trinkets are a few bumper stickers and signs with sayings like, "Silly boys, trucks are for girls!" It's evidence of the little-known fact that women—over 160,000 of them—have infiltrated this boys' club and are confidently commandeering the wheels of 80,000-pound trucks from coast to coast. While they only make up about five percent of the truck-

ing workforce, lady drivers have been part of the industry from the get-go. And

they aren't a bunch of intimidating broads with chips on their shoulders, either—they're single women, wives, mothers, and grandmothers, who are all just going about their blue-collar business.

While the appeal for women might not be obvious, trucking is one way to make a decent salary without a college education, as well as to gain freedom from a desk job and see the country. "I couldn't believe they pay you to drive around and listen to music," says Pama Yarbrough, a 48-year-old truck-driving instructor who was a



driver herself for nine years. "I would love it when I would get a dispatch at like 9 p.m. and had all night to drive and get there the next morning. I would just stack up my Jackson Browne tapes and those book-club tapes, eat myself a big meal, get myself a big cup of coffee, and I was ready to go," she laughs.

Because truckers are away from home so much and women often have children or other family to care for, many women drivers don't get into the business until later in life, after a divorce or once their kids are grown, like 47-year-old Nancy Rollins, a good-natured grandmother who is half of a husband/wife driving team. Others get involved in trucking through friends or other family members, like Nancy's friend Tammy Daniels. The 53-year-old, tough-but-sweet granny eased into trucking in the '70s when she was in her 20s by helping her father-in-law with his trucking business.

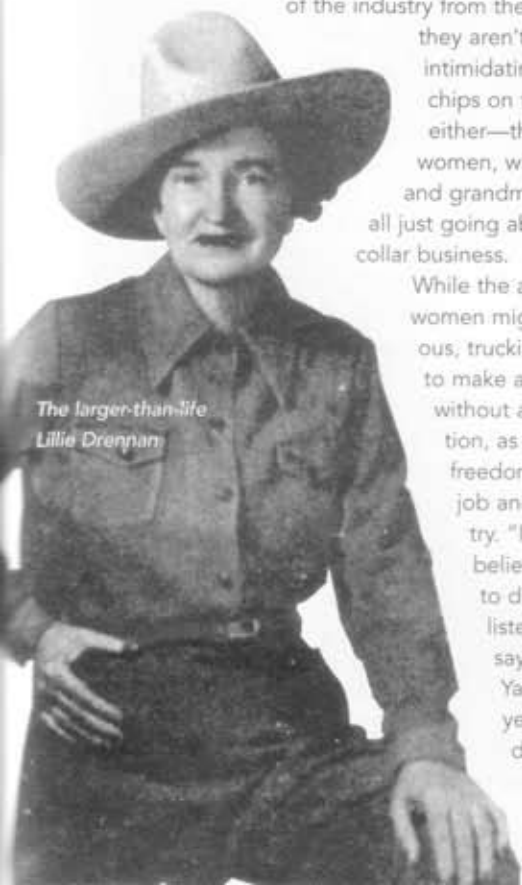
"I couldn't believe they pay you to drive around and listen to music."

And while female truckers don't *all* have chips on their shoulders, a few might have something to prove. Rachelle Biggs, 34, started trucking in her early 20s to spite a male driver who insisted she couldn't do it. "That was all the encouragement I needed," she says.

Women's history in trucking stretches back to 1913, when a company called FWD used six lovelies to show how gosh-darned easy it was to maneuver the first four-wheel-drive vehicles (one of the ladies even drove one cross-country). By the next decade, women began emerging as legit drivers. Still, female truckers continue to cruise below the radar—a call to the American Truck Historical Society yielded exactly zero leads on any trucking women, past or present. Why, they hadn't even heard of Lillie.

THOROUGHLY MODERN LILLIE

Lillie Drennan, who became the first licensed female trucker in Texas in 1929 and eventually had her own trucking line, was like a Yosemite Samantha: a rootin' tootin', pistol-packin' spitfire, and yes, she even wore a 10-gallon hat on the job. A powerful woman who did not suffer fools gladly, Lillie frequently kicked errant workers up the arse and threatened to



The larger-than-life Lillie Drennan

knock them upside the head with blunt objects. According to her 1946 biography, *Lillie of Six-Shooter Junction*, she was a notorious cusser, so she may even have inspired the term "swearing like a truck driver." A woman in a man's world, Lillie faced her share of resistance from the menfolk, but she wasn't havin' any of it, proving herself regularly by pulling 48-hour shifts with co-drivers.

ed she wasn't licensed to drive a truck just because she was female. Florence informed him that not only was she licensed, but she was also an owner of the truck, and continued on her way. In those days, women were so rare as truckers that truck stops didn't even have showers for them, but as Florence explains, "You didn't bother about bathing every day like you do nowadays." The biggest difference between then and now

was pretty basic. "We had a lot of gravel road out here then. In fact, we didn't have hardly any hard roads at all," she says.

DRIVER'S ED

Depending on the type of trucking they choose, women have widely varying lives on the road. After her last daughter went off to college, Nancy became an "over-the-road" driver, driving across the country with her husband for weeks at a stretch and bunking in the truck's sleeper. ("Local" drivers stay within a few nearby states and get home most nights.) Though at first it was "trial and tribulation," years later it's "kind of a peaceful life," she explains, chalking up the high amount of successful married teams to the unlikelihood of male pairs running together smoothly. "You have a lot less arguments with husband and wife because they know how to deal with each other."

Drivers are only allowed to go for 10 hours at a clip before taking their mandatory 10 hours off, so Nancy has to give the wheel over to her husband after she's finished her turn and try to go to sleep—whether she's tired or not. While this means that the two of them are rarely awake at the same time, Nancy still likes to get domestic on the road. In addition to an LCD flat-screen TV, DVD player, and stereo, Nancy's homey truck is equipped with a mini refrigerator, a microwave, a crock pot, and a toaster oven. "Heck, I cook a roast, potatoes, and carrots. I will fill my crock pot really early in the morn-

ing. By the afternoon, you can cut it with a fork," she says.

Tammy Daniels, 53, has had a more isolated life during her more than two decades over the road. It was hard to get long-distance jobs as a solo driver, she says, so she began running outlaw—meaning she drove for more hours at a stretch than was legally allowed. These days, the laws against that are strictly enforced, so she's had to become a trainer, riding team over the road with beginner drivers, in order to get the better jobs—a situation she considers to be less than ideal. "I'm not married, and it's hard to get someone to ride team because your second seat doesn't make much money. [Then] you're living in this little cracker box with someone you don't know,



Tammy Daniels' crowded cab

Lillie rode off into her final sunset back in '74, but at least one of her groundbreaking contemporaries is still trucking. Eighty-year-old Florence Oberg, one of Nebraska's first lady truckers, began riding team with her husband 57 years ago. "Oh, heavens, I learned how to drive on an old Model A," recalls Florence, who still occasionally drives but mostly works in the office of the family trucking business. Although it was an unusual occupation for a woman, starting out was a breeze. "Out here you have no traffic. You can drive about anywhere, out in the hills or in the pasture and stuff, so you don't have to know all the things in the beginning."

In the '50s, she got stopped by a Wyoming cop who insist-

and when you get mad you can't even slam the door, because it's a curtain," she laughs. Even though she no longer drives alone, Tammy tends to keep to herself. "It probably has a lot to do with when I was running outlaw. You don't want people to know what you're doing; people who flaunt that stuff end up getting caught and getting in trouble."

The solitude of the long-distance driver helped popularize CB radio, but sadly, the rise of satellite radio has caused the

"You do get a lot of comments like, 'For a woman, you can back up really good.' You know it's a compliment, but it's really patronizing."

CB community to shrink. "Before, there was a lotta people talking, and females can always find someone to talk to," Tammy says. "Sometimes you'd travel a long distance with people," she recalls with a smile. "That was really fun when you would get five or six people running down the road talking to each other, just having a good time tellin' jokes—and a good many of the jokes were almost clean!"

Some drivers, however, embrace the therapeutic benefits of being alone. Rachele has been in trucking for 12 years, first

as an over-the-road solo driver, and now as a local driver who also dishes trucking advice on layover.com and in her book *Drivers' ABCs*. After her divorce, she had an office job, no degree, and only saw poverty ahead. "So part of it was a financial motive, and part of it was emotional. I just wanted to run, and I didn't quite realize [that] all that stuff goes with you, and you're just stuck in the truck by yourself, 10 to 15 hours a day, every day, just thinking about things. You can't ignore them, and it helped me tremendously. And it made me grow up."

MEN WILL BE BOYS

When a field is mostly male, women drivers are bound to draw attention—and not all of it will be positive. For instance, there's the stereotype that women drivers are no damn good at backing up. Rachele recalls one driver's remark after she backed into a rather difficult dock: "You must have a lotta

moxie, young lady." After someone later explained the old lingo, she realized he was trying to praise her. "You do get a lot of comments like, 'For a woman, you can back [up] really good.' You know it's a compliment, but it's really patronizing."

"A lot of 'em don't think women can handle loading and unloading," Tammy states. "There's plenty of times that I thought a lumber [a worker who unloads trucks] was charging me too much to unload my trailer just because they thought I couldn't do it, so I've done it myself. I know how to throw



freight, OK? So I've had 'em come back when I was about halfway through with a much more reasonable rate."

"It's just that there's a lot of old-school out there," Tammy continues. "You used to always hear people say, 'You should be home takin' care of your husband.' I tell 'em, 'My husband's dead.' And that shuts them up right away." Overall, though, she believes that men in trucking today are more gentlemanly and family-oriented than in the past.

But then there are the dudes who think they're getting sexy on the CB, like when a guy asked Tammy to give him some head. Tammy said, "Why, driver, do you need a new one? Sounds to me like you've got a really big hole in the one you've got." Other drivers chimed in laughing and telling the guy off. "But see, I don't cuss at 'em, I just tell 'em how it is—that they're crude and they're rude, and that's totally uncalled for. I don't get down on the guys for their fun, because trucking was their world. So I let them rule

whole country, and he still remembers the stories."

It isn't just moms who take their kids on the road when they can—Tammy loves taking her grandkids around in the truck when they're on vacation. "My dispatcher's really good about getting me places where I can take them to have fun, so I get paid to go on vacation that way." But for someone without ties, like Pama, getting home is not a priority, nor is making friends. "I would stay out, easy, two months, just 'cause I could. I didn't have children and I wasn't married, I was kinda the restless type. I was standoffish, 'cause you don't really see people again."

Nancy gets home for a day or two fairly often, as she lives near her company's location. Other times, she and her husband will stay out longer, then take a week off to spend with the family. But she also cultivates friendships on the road, using her cell phone or "visiting" with new ones on the CB. Once a sick trucker asked on the CB if anyone had chick-

"If the load has to go, the load has to go. It doesn't matter if your kid is sick. As females, we have a harder time accepting that. Guys, sometimes their work attitude is different."

themselves," she says. But if it's a woman with a foul mouth, Tammy will say something to her. In addition to lot lizards (truck-stop prostitutes) talking dirty on the CB, trucker women occasionally will too, which makes things harder for the gals who want respect. "So there's good women drivers out there and bad, just like there's good men out there and bad."

FRIENDS AND FAMILY PLANS

Keeping up normal relationships is a challenge when you're hardly ever home. "The only sure thing about trucking is nothing is for sure. So you can plan to go home, but you might not get there on time," says Tammy, who usually gets to her son's place, where she lives when not on the road, every two or three weeks. And although the amount of time truckers spend off is flexible, when they aren't running the truck, they aren't making money.

For Rachelle, who stayed out for about a week at a time, leaving her little boy with family was the worst part of driving over the road. "It tore a chunk out of my heart. I wanted to get my load delivered and come back home. I sacrificed a lot of sleep. I just drove and drove. And in hindsight, I was very lucky that I didn't hurt myself or anyone else. For those eight years, I had no social life because I felt so guilty for being away. So I would come home and be with my son, and do nothing else. That is probably the biggest reason women don't get into [trucking]." Often, though, before he was in school, she would take her son on the road. "He has been to Disneyland, the mountains, and the ocean. He has seen the

en broth, so she brought him some. "If you see someone broke down, a lot of times truckers holler, 'Hey, are you OK?' We try to take care of each other," she says. And one Thanksgiving, when Nancy's and Tammy's trucks ran on the same route together, Nancy prepared a full turkey dinner in advance at home and stowed it in the reefer (refrigerated trailer). On the big day, Nancy heated up their proper dinner in the microwave and the friends shared the feast in her truck. "No one was really home with their families, but we got to enjoy each other's company," Nancy says.

HIGHWAY TO THE DANGER ZONE

Truckers put their lives in peril every day, and for a woman on the road, danger comes in many shady variations. Most basic is the risk of accidents, what with four-wheelers carelessly cutting off trucks that can't stop on a dime. "I always think to myself, 'Gosh, I'm a grandma. Why are you doing this to me?'" Nancy says. And spending the night in parking lots comes with its own share of risks.

Rachelle used to keep pepper spray and a knife by her seat. "But I am a fairly small person, so I had to depend on paying attention," she says. One night she parked on a gravel area on I-24 in Tennessee. There were other trucks there, but it was dark and desolate. As she wound down from the day in the sleeper with a cigarette, she noticed a pickup truck arrive and loiter suspiciously behind her truck. Then three guys got out. "I was expecting them to rob me, so I jumped up in the driver's seat in my T-shirt and underwear and took off down

the road. I never slept in my underwear since, because you have to be ready to go."

One of the most troublesome aspects is that people are constantly driving really badly—and that includes other truck drivers. "If you get angry every time, you will never stop being angry. You just got to go with the flow and keep a light heart," says Rachele. When Tammy's rig was hit at a fuel island by another truck that took off, she chased it down the road, telling the driver on the CB, "I know my truck is faster than yours, you might as well stop, you're not getting away." She stayed in hot pursuit until a cop pulled them over. (It was about \$200 worth of damage, but in the now-highly regulated world of trucking, the drunk-driving charge ended his career.)

Unlike a lot of other drivers, Tammy carries no weapons. "I depend on God to watch over me, and He's done a pretty good job so far. I'm not sayin' innocent people don't get hurt, but [if I carried a gun] I'd probably end up shooting myself in the foot."

KEEP ON TRUCKIN'

Among lady truckers, long-timers like Tammy are not the norm. A lot of women who once drove over the road later scale it down to local or non-driving jobs, or leave the biz altogether. Nancy observes that trucking has no paid holiday time, and it's also the only industry that the labor department is not really involved with. But overall, she says, "Every day is a new adventure. Sometimes it's not the adventure you want. Like last night we were in a horrific snowstorm in Wyoming. So you really don't plan too much when you drive truck. You just kind of fly by the seat of your pants."

"It's a hard life; it really is," adds Tammy. "It's not that it's that hard to drive a truck itself. The life is difficult. You don't have the normal social life or personal life." And it's all so transient. "It's like camping, only on an all-the-time basis," she observes. Early in her career, when her truck got stolen and trashed, she recalls, "I had a nice radio and had it all fixed up nice, and now I don't care anymore because it could be gone in a heartbeat, so why put so much effort into it." Five years from now, Tammy's financial responsibilities will lighten. For her "retirement," she plans to run solo again, just not as hard. She wants to earn enough to get her own residence, so then the grandkids can visit her in her own house.

"There is a burnout factor," says Rachele. "If the load has to go, the load has to go. It doesn't matter if your kid is sick. As females, we have a harder time accepting that. Guys, sometimes their work attitude is different. I have spent way too many Christmases at truck stops, and you look around and there are all these really depressing people. [You think] 'Oh my God, we live in a nightmare.'"

On the other hand, Rachele points out, "It really gets in your blood. You have so much time to get from point A to point B, and if you want to take a nap in the afternoon, and can afford the time, you can do that. Nobody's breathing over your shoulder, and there is no time clock. It is up to you to get there, and that is a good thing." ■

starTRUCKERS

Lady truckers have kept a low profile in pop culture, with the exceptions mostly occurring during the trucker heyday of the '70s, when truckin' gals became the subjects of foreign films, a sexploitation flick, and even a porn film. Here are our top five pop-culture trucker gals:

5 B.J. AND THE BEAR
On the '79 - '81 trucker/chimp buddy series, B.J.'s friend Tommy was a lady trucker, but things didn't really get rolling girl-style until the 1981 two-hour special *B.J. and the Seven Lady Truckers*. Watch the hijinks when seven women drivers are hired to work for B.J., including twins (no joke: Randi and Candi Broughs as "Geri" and "Teri") and introducing Judy Landers as "Stacks" (also, unfortunately, not joking). P.S. If you couldn't tell from their names, they are all hot and have Farrah hair.

4 WILLA
This 1979 made-for-TV melodrama chronicles a troubled woman determined to be a trucker against all odds (parental alcoholism, spousal abandonment, raising children). It's just like a Lifetime Original Movie, but with trucks.

3 FLATBED ANNIE & SWEETIEPIE: LADY TRUCKERS
Another TV movie from 1979, this one is more in the *Thelma and Louise* buddy-flick vein. The two gals team up to fill in for Sweetiepie's hubby after he gets taken out of commission by a gunfight. Intrigue ensues in the form of cocaine contraband. Uh-oh! The white lines aren't just on the highway!

2 CHARLIE'S ANGELS
In 1979, even the Angels got truckin' fever! The TV Guide ad for "Angels Go Trucking" read, "All roads lead to danger...when the Angels become cross-country truckers to track down the mysterious hijacker of a \$1,000,000 cargo!" They are also hot and have Farrah hair. No Farrah, though—she'd already moved on to crazier pastures.

1 LARGE MARGE
It was 20 years ago today that the ghost of this lady truck driver picked up a hitchhiking Pee-wee Herman in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and terrified him so much that he may have messed his undersized gray suit.



"Be sure and tell 'em
Large Marge sent ya!"