

Affirmative action paves 'pioneers' trail

By ARLENE VANDERLEUN

They don't travel in covered wagons or cook over a fireplace. But they are pioneers just the same—blazing a trail for the women who follow in their footsteps.

They are women—few in number now, but growing—who have jobs previously reserved for men. In recent years, the women's liberation movement and affirmative action have nudged women into job territories once inhabited by men only—corporate boardrooms, city council chambers, hard-hat construction sites and the skilled trades.

Although they come from widely different backgrounds and fields, these "pioneers" have some commonly held personality traits and characteristics:

- They don't consider themselves exceptional, but simply want to do a good job.
- They usually feel they must work twice as hard as their male colleagues to be considered equals.
- Men sometimes feel uncomfortable with the women's status (and salary).
- They like their jobs and are eager for advancement.

IN BLUE COLLAR trades, much of the impetus for recruiting women comes from labor department quotas or "goals" for hiring women and minorities by companies involved in federal or federally funded projects. These companies must actively recruit women and minorities in order to qualify for federal dollars.

For instance, a recent article in the *Building Tradesman*, a construction union newspaper, reported that federal guidelines for apprentice programs require a 17.8 per cent female enrollment in their next round of classes. That figure represents half of the 35.6 per cent female work force in the six counties adjacent to Detroit.

A spokeswoman for the Greater Detroit Building Trades Council said the industry will have a hard time meeting these goals through normal growth and attrition. Moreover, while many women inquire about apprenticeship in one of 17 programs offered, few actually bother to sign up.

While there may be few women in the building trades, females are beginning to line up for apprenticeship classes offered by the auto industry.

Genevieve Dotson, 37, takes pride in her job as the only female apprentice millwright at the Chevrolet Spring and Bumper Plant in Livonia.

Now in the second year of her four-year program, Mrs. Dotson says she loves her work.

CLAD IN baggy coveralls, safety glasses and sensible shoes, Mrs. Dotson manages to maintain her femininity with a soft voice and perfectly manicured fingernails, protected by work gloves.

Her millwright duties take her to all areas of the plant, where she repairs furnaces, adjusts conveyor belts and generally keeps the machinery humming.

It's heavy, hard work. "Some people have said this is no job for a woman," said Mrs. Dotson. But she has heavy equipment to do most of the lifting, and tools provide strength and leverage.

Why would a woman want to be a millwright?

It was money—and the financial security it brings—that prompted Mrs. Dotson a year ago to check into the possibility of applying for an apprentice job. She was working as a plant sweeper earning \$6.00 an hour.

The prospect of increasing that

hourly wage to \$9 after a four-year training program was tempting to a woman whose husband was totally disabled by heart attacks a few years ago.

Mrs. Dotson studied algebra and geometry in preparation for the math that would be included on a General Motors apprentice test.

She later took the test and completed an oral interview. Based on the results, she was accepted for the apprentice program. "I was elated but apprehensive," said Mrs. Dotson.

Of several skilled trades choices (truck repair, electrician, pipefitter, plumber, tinsmith, welding and others), Mrs. Dotson selected the millwright trade.

"The test is very competitive," said Ron Vranesh, a personnel supervisor at the Chevrolet plant in Livonia. Points also are given for education and related skills.

Mrs. Dotson is one of 14 apprentice millwrights and the only female in the millwright program. Currently there are seven female apprentices.

Her work week includes on-the-job training with work under the supervision of a journeyman electrician, as well as millwright theory and related job skills.

"I love my job and I love going to school," said Mrs. Dotson.

Company-paid tuition is just one of her benefits. She also is entitled to a liberal insurance and sick pay plan, as well as a tool allowance.

Most of all, she has her coveted security. "If anything happened (at Chevrolet) I could go anywhere and get a job," said Mrs. Dotson.

She feels there isn't anything unusual about a woman reading blueprints and repairing equipment.

"Reading and using a tape measure and blueprint isn't much different from measuring and cutting a piece of cloth by a pattern," said Mrs. Dotson.

"If a woman wants to get on an apprentice program, she should be willing to do what men are doing," she continued. "I want to do a better job because I'm a woman."

Mrs. Dotson prefers working with men. "Men are easier to work with

'Federal guidelines for apprentice program require a 17.8 per cent female enrollment in their next round of classes. That figure represents half of the 35.6 per cent female work force in the six counties adjacent to Detroit. —Building Tradesman, construction news-paper

than women," she said. "They are willing to explain things. They accept me."

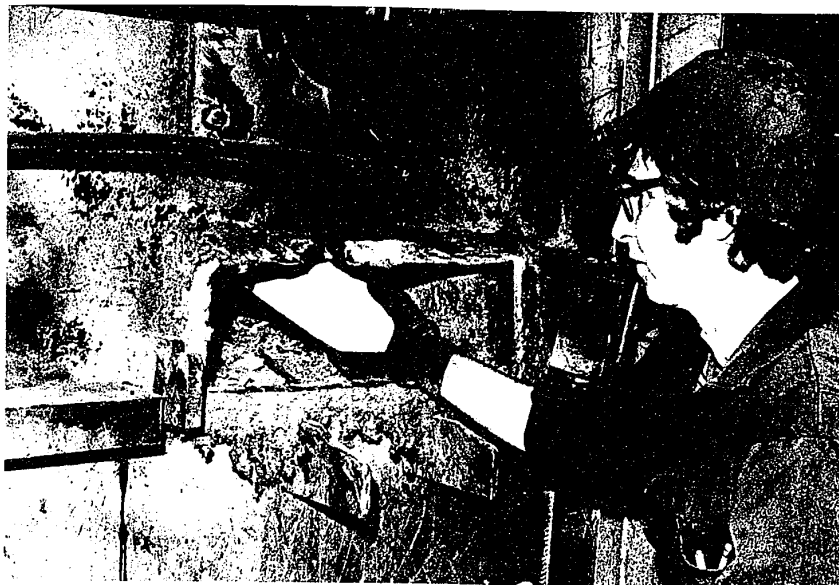
That occupational exclusiveness may be changing, however. She senses that other females in the plant are watching to see how well she copes with her job.

In a sense, she is paving the way for other women who may follow in her footsteps.

"I think they were tickled for me when I joined the apprentice program."

FOR JANE LONG of Garden City, apprenticeship is a thing of the past. Ms. Long, 28, received her journeyman electrician's card after five years of preparation that included 7,328 hours of on-the-job training and 576 hours of classroom study.

Ms. Long is one of 41 electricians at



Genevieve Dotson is an apprentice millwright. She receives on-the-job training in repairing and maintaining equipment, as well as attends classes. (Staff photo by Art Emanuel)

Fisher Body in Livonia and the only woman among them.

Actually, she never intended to become an electrician. She began working at Fisher Body in 1972, after graduating from Eastern Kentucky University with a bachelor's degree in physical education.

"I was going to work just long enough to get money for a master's

But Ms. Long isn't resting on her laurels. She has plans.

"I'm trying to set realistic goals," said Ms. Long. These goals include possibly pursuing a degree in safety engineering.

"With my electrical knowledge and background in health, I think safety engineering is a good possibility."

She has advice for women who are following in her pathway.

"Never stop pursuing education, even if you don't know what you want to do," advises Ms. Long. "It's getting competitive. There are hundreds of applicants (for apprentice programs)."

WOMEN ALSO are inching up the ladder in the world of white-collar jobs.

Pam Evans, 24, is controller of the 12-store Sentry Drug Stores, Inc. chain headquartered in Romulus. As controller, she supervises the bookkeeping operations, inventory control and, ultimately, the financial stability of the corporation.

Ms. Evans, now of Westland and formerly of Troy, has moved rapidly in her world of numbers, profits and losses. For the past five years she has worked full-time and carried a heavy classload at Walsh Institute of Business. Prior to joining Sentry last year, she was a bookkeeper and financial assistant.

"Working opened my eyes. I was exposed to high earnings," said Ms. Evans. "I know that I'm capable of earning money but material things aren't everything."

Her upward mobility often was tinged with pain and uncertainty.

Married at 19 to a mechanic, she found herself trying to downplay her education and ambitions for getting ahead.

"I avoided advances and pro-

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