

Cab company family affair

(Continued from 1D)

claims, and secondly, they do not like working in an environment having no other males with whom to socialize.

"I've hired men who come here thinking that because we're women alone we're all sex-hungry and they'll be able to take over and run things. Well, I've worked too hard for this business to turn it over to some man for a dinner or a little sweet-talk.

"When they come to work for me, they find out I'm tougher than they thought, so they don't stay." Finding responsible drivers, with good driving records, is one of her most difficult problems. Mrs. DeWaele hopes to find a driver like her present dispatcher, Ms. Young, whom she calls a "gem." "I had to go through 40 or 50 people before I finally found someone who really took to the job," she states.

"I don't really care if a person is a man or a woman, but if it's a man, he has to be a high-minded man. I don't want any bearded, lamb-chopped men who don't take pride in their work. I've had to fire some men who did things like give free rides to all the pretty girls. These types only work so they don't have to babysit while their wives are working, you know."

IWA MAE DEWAELE did many things before she decided to start a cab company: ran a five-operator beauty salon, worked in a department store, and even delivered phone books door to door.

But when her legs, both already injured in two separate accidents, became too arthritic to allow her to work on her feet any longer, she knew she had to find another occupation. But, for awhile, she was unable to work at all. "A person starts to feel inadequate when she doesn't work after awhile. I was beginning to think I was ready for the junk heap."

A chance remark to a cab driver about her five trips to California to see her two sons prompted the driver to inquire if she had ever thought about driving a cab. This simple inquiry, coming at a very timely period in Mrs. DeWaele's life, set her in motion toward a new occupation.

"When that cab driver said that," she relates, "I thought, 'Gee, I can do that — I've been driving all my life.' Up to that time, I had driven 25 years without a single ticket."

She began by driving for other cab companies until various circumstances finally brought her to the decision to start her own company. One reason was that she felt she could make more money on her own. "I figured no one would ever pay me what I was worth," she states.

She purchased her present house on Rochester Road for the purpose of running the cab company out of her home. However, she soon discovered that her area was not zoned for precisely the kind of business operation under which a taxicab company is classified. This was the beginning of a two-year battle for re-zoning. When she finally won the zoning changes she needed, she had little more than \$300 left of her savings.

Mrs. DeWaele's competitors gave her fleecing cab company "six months" before it went out of business, Mrs. DeWaele relates. "They were waiting for me to fall on my face."

But, at the end of her first year, she was operating "in the black," a source of amazement to other cab companies male owners. "That's unheard of," one complimented.

AT FIRST, the other local cabs were resentful of Mrs. DeWaele's added competition, feeling that she would be "stealing" some of their business.

Laughing at this idea, Mrs. DeWaele states, "There's more than enough business for everyone around here. Barbara and I both work about 20 hours a day, six days a week and I still send plenty of business to the other companies when we can't handle it."

The foundations of the new cab company were formulated by a process of trial and error. "I've made a lot of mistakes learning this business," she states, "But all I know to do is get out there and work and stick to it."

"We're still not what you'd call 'professionals,' I suppose, and probably we never will be. But we have too much fun to worry about being businesslike."

"There were times when I would forget to turn my meter on, and my daughter would get after me — 'Mama, you're going to go broke.'"

"I've learned, but sometimes it cost me a lot of money in the meantime."

Ninety percent of the time, claims Mrs. DeWaele, she sleeps right in the living room (which is also the office) so that she can quickly answer the calls that come

in the middle of the night. "This is an emergency business," she explains. "Many late calls are police calls, and I usually have to get out right away."

Does she ever have any customers who don't like riding with a woman cabbie?

"Oh, sure. One man wouldn't get into my cab at the airport at first. But, I was the only one available so he came with me anyway. When he got out, he said that a woman cab driver wasn't as bad as he had thought she would be. He even gave me a \$5 tip," Barbara DeWaele relates.

Some of the regular customers become almost like personal friends. One man occasionally rides along as "protection" for Barbara when she must answer the late calls. Most of the time, however, Mrs. DeWaele insists on taking those calls herself.

Some of the senior citizens from two local homes like to drive around on runs with either Mrs. DeWaele or her daughter when they are picked up because "they don't have anything to do anyway."

"And I'm not one of those people who thinks the customer is always right," she announces. "Sometimes a customer may want you to drive too fast or something and you just have to tell them to sit back, relax and shut-up."

ONE OF HER most frustrating and expensive problems, claims Mrs. DeWaele, is the constant mechanical maintenance and repair on her cabs. She claims that poor or dishonest work from garage mechanics is a continuing source of frustration and profit-drain.

"All my profits go into upkeep and repair work. Then when those mechanics are through fixing my cabs, you can't even tell the difference. Sometimes I have to take a cab right out of one garage and put it into another because I know the mechanic didn't do a good job. I come from a long line of mechanics, and I know when a cab is in good running order."

In self-defense, the two women have learned to do much of their simple maintenance work and minor repairs. They change the oil, put in the transmission fluid and change and focus the headlights, for example.

Barbara DeWaele didn't become actively involved in her mother's business until two years ago when the cab company became so large that she decided to quit her job as a bookkeeper to help out.

They now try to organize the cab rigs so that, as much as possible, one or the other has some personal time, or at least enough to rest and eat occasionally.

Mrs. DeWaele explains their working relationship. "I know my shortcomings. Barbara is the better business woman, so she handles that end."

But I've got more guts than either brains or money. I keep this thing together, and make it work. I'm the boss and everybody accepts that, although they know they are free to speak up and disagree with me.

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