Alone in a Crowd
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Alone in a Crowd: Women in the Trades Tell Their Stories.

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At eleven, I decided to become a paper boy. They made two cents for every newspaper they delivered, and I was making only thirty-five cents an hour babysitting. No wonder the boys could afford shiny headlights for their three-speed bicycles. I was stuck with fat balloon tires on my baby one-speed bike without a headlight. My path was clear until someone told me, "I'm sorry. We have a policy that girls cannot become paper boys."

At seventeen, I became one of the first female boxboys in the state. The pay beat waiting tables or the old standby, babysitting. With great pride I dressed in my dark shoes, black slacks, white shirt, black bow tie, and red vest—the company uniform for "courtesy clerks," as we were called. That first day of work I discovered one of the economic realities of life. The employer will pit worker against worker if he can get away with it. All of the male boxboys had been called to a meeting the day before and informed that, if they didn't work harder, they would all be replaced by girls. Needless to say, my welcome to the grocery business was less than pleasant.

At twenty-three, I decided I had to find a job that paid better than sewing cuffs on ski parkas in a garment plant or typing forms for an insurance company. The help-wanted section of the newspaper was full of ads for machinists at twice the pay I was making. With no idea about what a machinist did, I enrolled in machine-shop classes at the local vocational-technical school. Being the first woman in the program, I discovered only one bathroom in the shop and it was marked MEN. "No, you cannot tack a sign saying WOMEN on the door when you need to go," I was told. I either had to hold it or find another bathroom.

After a year of holding it, having my tools stolen, and learning
the intricacies of chip-control and backmilling, I was ready to practice the trade. But all that those straight As in trade school got me was “Sorry, we don’t hire girls,” or “Sure, I love to hire girls for sweeping floors.” I had applied at over seventy firms before being hired as an apprentice at a local truck manufacturer. After completing my apprenticeship, I moved on to practice my trade at an aerospace subcontractor, but was fired from that job for union organizing. I then returned to the University of Washington on a union scholarship.

I found it impossible, though, to leave the factory behind. In English classes I wrote essays about blue-collar workers and demanded to know where the working-class women were in literature. In political science classes I wrote essays like “The Implications of a Declining Trade Union Movement on Democracy in America.” I sat through economics classes where questions of cost-benefit analysis and economic efficiency were thinly veiled attacks on workplace safety and the minimum wage. The graphs and charts could not hide the images of my friends with chopped-off fingers and crushed vertebrae.

Finally one of my professors, Alex Gottfried, became curious and asked me about my background. In May 1981, after two hours of my stories about life on the assembly line, he told me that someone should write the stories of women in non-traditional blue-collar work. I laughed and told him that nobody gave a damn about people like us. Three days later I decided to collect those stories.

Objectively, I knew writing a book was a totally crazy thing for me to commit myself to doing. Here I was, a twenty-nine-year-old single parent trying to get a college education while working a part-time shit job to keep food on the table. I knew absolutely nothing about writing a book, much less about getting one published. But I am a very stubborn person and once I make up my mind to do something, that’s all there is to it. I would do things one step at a time.
The first thing I did was tell a lot of people about my decision. That way, even if I lost my nerve, I'd be afraid to back out for fear of losing face. Then I began reading collections of oral histories to get some sense of how they were done. After deciding I had learned enough to keep from embarrassing myself, I met with Ginny NiCarthy, who was completing work on a collection of oral histories about battered women. NiCarthy spent two afternoons patiently explaining the nuts and bolts of being an oral historian—from the wording of publication releases, to asking probing questions without being offensive. “Don’t just ask people what happened in their lives, ask how it made them feel.”

Keeping NiCarthy’s advice in mind, I then turned my attention to the interview questions. I wanted them to serve both as a way to get the women talking and as a guide to provide a unifying structure for all the interviews. The initial questions were fairly straightforward, dealing with the individual’s background and motivations for entering a trade. With these questions I hoped to discover if there was any specific type of woman, say a tomboy for example, who was most attracted to non-traditional blue-collar work. (There wasn’t.) The next group of questions was designed to find out about the woman’s on-the-job experiences—training, finding a job, physical surroundings, using tools, health hazards, unions, socializing with co-workers, discrimination, and so forth. The final series of questions dealt with some of the more complex emotional issues of how non-traditional work affected the woman’s family and self-perceptions.

Once these preparations were completed, I took on the task of finding a cross section of women performing non-traditional work. I shamelessly exploited every contact I had ever made. Friends, acquaintances, union officials, and co-workers were all used as means of meeting women.

I jokingly referred to the time when I was interviewing as my “have tape recorder, will travel” period. I went to whatever
place the women preferred for the interviews—homes, restaurants, parks, and even once to a sailboat. Even though the entire two- to five-hour conversations were being recorded, most of the women forgot about the machine after a few minutes and were quite candid in discussing their lives. In some instances, I had to edit out highly personal sections.

After transcribing the tapes, my questions were edited out and portions of each interview were woven together into a unified story. What essentially remains is the woman telling her life story in her own voice. I only had to add a few phrases to ease transition between parts. I tried to keep this interference to an absolute minimum because I believe the women are far more eloquent than I could ever be.

To further ensure accuracy, every edited story was sent to the woman interviewed for her approval. She was also given a choice as to whether she wanted her own name or a pseudonym used. In most cases, the woman chose to use her own name. In the seven cases where another name was chosen, the woman felt that either her job or her personal life would be jeopardized if her identity were known. I think those concerns deserve our respect.

The twenty-five women whose stories appear in this collection are a remarkably diverse group. They are employed in some of the Pacific Northwest's most important industries, such as aerospace, shipbuilding, maritime, and forestry; no two are in the same trade. They range in ages from twenty-four to sixty-nine. They are white, black, Asian, Chicana, and native American. They are straight and gay, married and single, and divorced. Some are parents and some are not. For some, being successful in a trade means upward social mobility from minimum-wage jobs and welfare. For others, it was seen as moving down the social scale from a profession. In short, these women are very much like other women, except for the way they choose to earn a living.
Preface

They all come from the Seattle area, but that does not negate the importance of their experiences to people living elsewhere. As several of the women commented, Seattle provides, if anything, a more favorable climate for women entering non-traditional work than many other parts of the country. In general, the Pacific Northwest has a liberal, open social climate with few constraints on personal behavior. In the early 1970s, women’s access to the trades was facilitated by Mechanica, an employment referral service specializing in placing women in non-traditional blue-collar work. Later, some of these functions were taken over by the YWCA and the city’s Office of Women’s Rights. Emotional support and practical advice can be obtained through Women in Trades, a group organized by and for women working in traditional male blue-collar jobs. In addition, both the city and county have affirmative action guidelines for the employment of women on construction projects and in permanent trade positions. Yet I do not mean to imply that crafts-women in Seattle have an easy time of it. Knowing the difficulties encountered by women in this comparatively supportive region, I can only shudder and wonder, “Oh my God, how do women in the rest of the country survive?”

The purpose of this book is threefold. The first function is to help bridge the isolation experienced by women in non-traditional work; often they have almost no contact with each other. This isolation can lead to self-doubts, especially when male co-workers and families are not supportive. I want to let these women know that they are not alone out there. Second, I want to create a real picture for women considering non-traditional blue-collar occupations. Neither horror stories nor romanticism creates an accurate image of this kind of work. Finally, I want to help overcome what my favorite writer, Tillie Olsen, calls “women’s silences of centuries.” Accounts of women’s lives, in particular working-class women’s lives, have not been viewed as worth recording. I believe the opposite is
true, the thoughts and feelings of these women are of the utmost importance to all of us; everyone can learn from the courage of these women, leavened with human frailty.

This book is organized into five sections: Feminism, Occupational Safety and Health, Race, Unions, and Family. The placement of stories into the different sections is somewhat arbitrary. Each of the selections is far too rich in themes to fit neatly within any single category. I did, however, try to organize them according to themes which they especially emphasized. The stories in the Feminism section explore the complex, often ambiguous relationship that women working in non-traditional blue-collar work have with the contemporary women's movement. In the section on Safety and Health, the physical toll this work has taken on many is starkly contrasted with the sense of being supremely fit. The stories in the Race section chronicle what it is like, both as a woman and a member of a racial minority, to be discriminated against. In the Union section, the women talk about how unions can be either a vehicle for bettering their lives or just another male-dominated organization. It is a truism of modern life that the family is undergoing great change, and the stories in the Family section capture what happens to those already transitional families when the woman ventures out into the male world of blue-collar work.

There are two other common themes that appear frequently: the emotional devastation experienced by some is contrasted to the confidence gained by others; the frequently expressed discovery that men's familiarity, ease, and comfort with tools is a great advantage they begin acquiring as toddlers. Probably the most positive theme is the belief that for the first time in their lives, the women can provide for themselves and their families.

The sense of alienation felt by all the women in this collection was so great that it provided one of the main purposes for gathering these stories, and ultimately gave rise to the title of this book. Finally, there is one theme which is so universal, so
pervasive, that it cuts across all accounts and could not be isolated into one specific section. That is the theme of sex discrimination in its multitude of forms. Supervisors, co-workers, families, and the woman's own individual response all play a part in lessening or increasing the discrimination.

One last note—while writing this book, I supported myself by doing non-traditional work, bus driving.