

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION

Women's History Month 2006

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2005 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2005 or Spring 2006 to be eligible.

(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor MAX GARLAND Dept. English

Course Number and Name Engl 301 Semester completed

Title of Nominated Work "How to Be A Female Road Construction Worker"

Pick one- CATEGORY:

- Sampson: Undergraduate Research Paper, Undergraduate Project, Graduate

- See X Olson, Kessler, Turell, Belter

(The judges retain the right to reassign categories for all nominated works.)

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**WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 13, 2006.

How to be a Female Road Construction Worker

By Teresa Larson

Get used to waking up early. The first time your alarm goes off at 5:15 a.m. you will, undoubtedly, awake with a start. You will be very confused, for the last time that you woke up this early was . . . well, who even knows if you've ever gotten up this early before. You will stare at your alarm clock as if it is a heavy-duty calculus problem. It will take you a few moments to realize that today is the first day of your new summer job. You are joining the manual labor work force, and you are expected to be there at 6 a.m. Even though it is nearing the June Solstice – the day in the Northern Hemisphere that possesses the most hours of that coveted summer sun – you observe that it is still quite dark at this early, early hour. And today, this is the kind of dark that is spookiest of all. It is a twilight blue, and it forebodingly holds uncertainty for what is to come.

As you groggily brush your teeth and scrub at your face, you wonder if you should wear make-up. After all, it is your first day and you will be meeting new people Decide to go light, swipe on a bit of mascara and cover up those zits with a blob of concealer. Stumble down the stairs (due to the early morning case of sleep inertia), heat up some toast, grab the lunch you prepared last night, and hurry out to your car. As you pull out of the driveway, the sky begins to lighten, and you wonder what this day of road construction has in store for you.

Your first day is scary, since you don't know anyone or anything yet. You will meet your boss while standing warily atop a vast field of sand. He looks like a game show host, with a little Chuck Norris-ruggedness thrown in for effect. You seem to be an afterthought to him, for after you introduce yourself, he remembers that he hasn't allotted

you a task for the day. He wonders what he will do with the new kid – the new *girl*, no less. He decides that there is really no work for you there out “on the field,” and sends you to the shop, where company equipment is stored and maintained. You will spend many days there this summer, so be prepared for a lot of sweeping, cleaning, and organizing. You think: *this may not be so bad, for it isn't really hard manual labor here at the shop at all – it's just boring.*

However, after lunch, the boss makes a frantic call for you. You are needed at the job site you met him at this morning. You will quickly migrate back to that job site, where you stand under the hot mid-day sun that has replaced that misty dark cool of the morning as you listen to your boss tell you that the rest of your day will be spent picking rocks. Someone has made a mistake and trucked in forty loads of dirty sand. *Well, you haughtily intellectualize, isn't all sand dirty?* You will come to find that dirty sand, in this case, means impure – the small grained sand has been hauled in with huge rocks. These rocks could later on compromise the solidarity and support of the road. It is crucial for them to be removed. By hand. By your hands.

This task begins well enough. You can handle bending over and chucking (or in the case of the really big rocks, lugging) the rocks off to the side of the skeleton of the road-to-be. Yet, time keeps passing, and your day just isn't ending. You sneak off to your car to find out what time it is. You find that it is now 6 p.m. You have been on the job for twelve hours, and there is no end in sight. You stand and slowly turn in a circle as you now fully grasp just how *big* this job site is. If you were in a movie, this would be one of those shots where the camera starts in close up on you then slowly pans out and up to reveal how desolate you look in the vast field of dirt. You are, needless to say, getting

very upset. This has been more than you bargained for. You will be hot and dehydrated, but the boss will finally come over and tell you that you can quit for the day, and to come back tomorrow with your rock-picking gloves on.

You are very disheartened after the first day. You now truly understand the importance of water. When you get home that first night, you immediately prepare three giant water bottles to freeze overnight. They will come in very handy tomorrow, not only as a refreshment for the body, but as a refreshment for the soul. You will find that those few seconds in which you are able to take a quick swig of water provide you with the energy and the will to continue with the monotonous and mindless work that is rock picking.

You will learn other new things the hard way as the summer progresses. Make sure to have well-fitting and supportive work boots. If they're too big, your summer will literally consist of the agony of "de-feet". You also come to accept that you will be very tan – but not everywhere. Your face and collar and a good portion of your arms will be darker than they've ever been. However, due to the tan line left behind by those rock-picking gloves, you will look like Mickey Mouse with his white gloves on. And your shoulders and chest and stomach, legs, and feet will remain white. This makes wearing cute summer dresses a challenge. If you want to wear those cute clothes, either learn to use sunless tanner or accept the fact that your body is a paint-by-numbers canvas that somebody forgot to complete.

Your mom will worry about the sun's effects on your youthful skin. She will stress the importance of sunscreen, hats, and sunglasses. It is not until your eyelids are

considerably burnt and tiny wrinkles emerge at the corners of your eyes that you begin to take her seriously. Remember, your mom is usually right.

Finally, you must cope with being consistently covered in a film of dust. You will always smell dirt, as dust will persistently cling to your nose hairs, and tiny mounds of sand will congregate in your ears. Your fingernails won't be clean again for the rest of the summer, but it's okay – it proves that you've been working hard.

After a week or two, you will meet many people, pretty much all male. Road construction workers are a weird crew, but they can provide for some good entertainment as long as you are ready and able to keep up with their playful and good-natured ribbing.

There is Eric, with snow white hair. He is 34, but looks 20 – an oddity being that he has spent the last 15 years of his life out in the sun and dust of a construction site. He is hyperactive and has a nasally laugh. Others describe him as “high on dirt”.

Ben is only 23, but already has three kids. He commutes at least an hour and a half to work each day, but is a hard worker and has climbed his way up to a supervising position, entitling him to even longer hours than your 10 or 11 a day. Because of these factors, he has to miss the July birthday party of his oldest son.

Mike is somewhere in his mid-thirties, but looks much older. He has a kind smile, but he isn't the brightest man. He often tells dirty jokes, and usually, those jokes don't really ever make sense.

Then there is Vern, the old-timer. At 68, he feels as though he has full command over the job and often has falling-outs with the boss. Most people are afraid of him, for he is usually crabby and not afraid to yell. However, he will take a warming to you, for

you are a cute young girl. In fact, before the summer is out, he will ask you if you think it is “badass for an old guy like him to like young girls”. It creeps you out a bit, but since he likes you, he lets you get away with some stuff, so you just smile and try not to let it bother you.

Although there are some that genuinely love their job and seem to have an unnatural affection for dirt, these men will tell you that you are lucky that road construction is only your summer gig. When you tell them your major involves writing, they tell you that you should write a book about road construction. You think that it would not be such a bad idea, for the characters are what usually make a book effective, and you’ve certainly met enough of them this summer.

Road construction is a job that pays extremely well, and as the summer wears on, you understand why. It is *hard*. You are in pretty good shape, but you arrive home each day exhausted. The weather plays its roll in taking a toll on your body. You can handle the lifting and digging and walking and hauling, but the weather is what ultimately makes you dread the job. Partaking in the aforementioned tasks isn’t really all that hard – in comfortable 70 degree weather. On sunny, 95+ degree days, you can’t help but want to give in and search for some retail job in a nearby air-conditioned mall. More than once you will find yourself mumbling the words to that old song: “*Sunshine go away today, I don’t feel much like plaaaaying*”

Also, the jobs that you are assigned may be mind-bendingly boring. These tasks include sweeping or cleaning out trucks down at the shop, or shoveling curbs out on sites. The worst of these atrocities is the dreaded rock-picking. No chore can make you feel

more delirious than stumbling over hills of dirt, searching through double vision for any rocks that look bigger than your fist. You can occupy your mind by singing. You will, however, quickly come to find that you are not the best at remembering lyrics, so you will have to rely on your ability to make up raps and little ditties about road construction.

One thing you will despise is the uncertainty of exactly how long you will be working each day. In the shop, you will usually turn in an eight hour day, while the time you might spend out in the field is always in question. Most days, you will rack up at least ten hours, but you will go crazy because you can never be sure. Weekday plans can never be made, for you will often not see your home during the daylight hours. You will rarely catch that favorite television show that you used to watch religiously every week. Pray for rain days, but they will seldom come.

Be aware of toothless truck drivers with greasy bellies. You will encounter them often, and although your boss may make you feel insignificant, *these* men will notice you. Try to not to let your face turn red when your supervisor approaches and informs you that he overheard the truckers talking on the C.B. radio. "Did you check out the little blonde?" they excitedly snickered. Pick up a shovel. Dig harder, dig faster, and produce bigger piles of dirt under their expectant eyes, prove to them that you're a girl who won't take any shit.

Perhaps the most daunting part of your job is the air of inferiority you feel. You will be assigned the least glamorous tasks. Don't take it personally when some chauvinistic supervisor sends over a dopey older guy with a buck-toothed grin and a Budweiser hat to take over when you are actually assigned a job with some semblance of importance.

Yet, with every piece of liver comes the double chocolate cherry cheesecake for dessert. You will find parts of the job that you will like. There will even be times when you truly feel you know what you're doing – perhaps even better than the guys. You will learn to operate several of the big pieces of equipment. Your official jobs include operating the roller, calculating cuts and fills, and directing and dumping trucks. Some days you will feel very important. Dumping the trucks in the correct place is imperative. If you don't tell those squinty hippo-like truckers the precise time and place to dump, things can be screwed up on the entire job, creating more work for those around you. Don't be afraid to be assertive – yell at the imbeciles if they don't do what you want them to. Even though you're a girl, you know this job site and what needs to happen there better than they do.

Brush up on your math skills – maybe even do some simple adding and subtracting each night, so that you can get real quick. It is your job to measure the earth. Don't screw up here, because it is up to you to make those crucial calculations that indicate where dirt needs to be added or taken away. Don't be ashamed to feel proud when you make these calculations quicker and more correct than your boss or Old Vern.

Wait for the day when you unquestionably feel that you have “mastered your domain.” The day will come when you will be asked to man a site on your own. You will be in charge of everything. It is up to you to begin the life of this parking lot. The trucks must be dumped in the right spot, and you must hurry to the dozer to spread out the dirt. Smile and nod matter-of-factly when the boss stops by to find you operating the

dozer – one of the road construction behemoths. “Where’d you learn to do that?” He will ask. Tell him it was easy.

You will overcome the long hours, tone your muscles, and live with a farmer’s tan. You won’t wear make-up after a while – that just isn’t needed, even when the creepy grinning landscaper on site asks to take a picture with you because he compares with his brother photos of “chicks on the job”. You will learn about the different classes of sand, you will be able to navigate yourself around an entire metropolitan area, and you will acquire effective shoveling skills. Realize that even though you had some crappy jobs, everyone started out somewhere. You proved yourself this summer, not only to your parents and your boss, but to yourself. You made a difference in the creation of eight roads and three parking lots.

Finally, tell new people that you meet what your job is during the summer. Don’t get mad when they ask, “Oh, are you the girl that holds up the stop sign?” You know you’ve done much more.