

My love-freight relationship: A daughter recalls her adventures on the road with her mother

By [Rita Oakes](#) UPDATED: 20:03 GMT, 9 October 2010



The daughter of Britain's first female long-distance lorry driver, Rita Oakes (right) had a unique childhood, travelling the length and breadth of the UK with her mother for up to 100 hours a week. Here she explains why she wouldn't have had it any other way...



Rita's mother Rita Jane in her lorry, 1960

My mother Rita Jane was really very beautiful and, as a young woman, she won the Miss Nottinghamshire title. She had brown eyes, long, dark, wavy hair, a lovely athletic figure and a wide, mobile mouth, always laughing and giggling. She was interested in everything. She looked like the film star Rita Hayworth, so in a way it's surprising that she became the country's first female long-distance lorry driver. But she did, and it was a big part of my childhood, as I was always nipping off from school to accompany her.

She began driving after my father Eugene set up as a potato merchant in the early 1950s. He was from Poland and had escaped to Britain at the beginning of the Second World War, eventually joining the RAF as a Spitfire pilot. He was shot down twice over France. He escaped the first time, but the second time ended up in a prisoner-of-war camp, where his mistreatment later caused him to suffer terrible nightmares.

They met after the war at the Palais de Danse in Nottingham, which is where my mother was from, and married in the city's cathedral in 1947 – she was 19 and my father was 27. Because everything was in such short supply, she wore a dress which she had got from a theatrical costumier, but they made a lovely couple.

I was born just over a year later and must have been three or four when we moved to a ten-acre plot of land near Market Rasen and my father set up his own business – RJ&E Novak – taking Lincolnshire potatoes over the Pennines to market in Manchester, in a little red, bull-nose Austin lorry. He grew a few potatoes himself, but mainly just bought and sold them. When the business started to do well, he got another lorry and simply asked my mother to begin making deliveries as well. He showed her a map and said, 'Look, Rita, here's Manchester. You've got to be there at 5am.' And that was it. I don't think she'd passed a driving test.



Rita Jane before her lorry-driving days in 1950



Rita's father Eugene in the cockpit during the Second World War

She regularly worked 100 hours a week – as did my father – setting off at 3am each day, often in the pouring rain and snow, with icy winds blowing in from Russia.

And potatoes are a particularly demanding sort of load to carry, packed in hundredweight bags that she lifted and stacked just like any man would. If it was cold and frosty, she had to cover the whole lot in straw, put two or three sheets across the bags and then rope everything down.

I suppose she could have refused, but it was exciting to her, something different from the norm, and she was never cut out to be a traditional housewife. She was hopeless at cooking and sewing, hated any form of housework, and made sure she never sat next to women who were discussing domestic duties.

From the very start she loved everything about lorry driving, and would work uncomplainingly for as many hours as she had to.

When I think of the life we had, I think of it with gratitude and, as I get older, I realise how privileged I was

There were no motorways through the Pennines in those days – only a tortuous road, totally unprotected on one side, with steep drops in parts. The lorries were very noisy and under-powered; they had poor lights, and the brakes often didn't work. Drivers carried wooden chocks so that if the brakes failed, they could throw them to somebody to put behind the wheels, to stop them from rolling downhill. There was no power steering, no heating, no radios or CD players, no comforts for the driver whatsoever. My father had a wooden cab, which sounds medieval now, but they were highly prized then because they were warmer than the metal cabs, which had thin walls and were bitterly cold and draughty. I always went with one or other of my parents, and they would make up a bed for me in the cab with a pillow and an eiderdown.

To carry potatoes you had to have something called a C Licence displayed in the window of the cab. If you wanted to carry anything else, you had to have an A Licence, which was expensive –

about £1,000, I think – and my parents didn't have that sort of money. So my mother, who was really good at art and would have loved to have been an artist, simply drew one.

That entitled her to take any load she wanted and do what's known as 'tramping' – going round the country dropping off one load and picking up another. So, for example, she'd sell her potatoes in Manchester, then take newsprint up to Glasgow, then pick up jam in Dundee, or fish in Aberdeen, and so on. She'd take timber from Immingham docks to Wales, or fish from Grimsby to a pet-food factory in Peterborough, or transport huge concrete pipes for construction projects all over the country. She was often away for three or four days at a time.



Rita (far right) with her mother, sister Yasmin and brother Sheehan in 1988

I used to go with her whenever I could and we had terrific fun on the road together. Sometimes we'd stay in b&bs, but mostly we'd sleep in the wagon. I can remember going down to London one day and she said, 'Shall we go and see if the Queen's in?' and we went round the roundabout in front of Buckingham Palace, which lorries weren't supposed to do. She told me: 'If a policeman starts to shout and wave his arms about, just look the other way.'

If it was snowing she wouldn't say, 'Oh dear, we'll be off the road'; she'd attach a rope to the lorry and drag me along as if I was on skis. Nowadays people would go mad if they saw that, wouldn't they?

We only ever saw one or two other women driving lorries, and they would have been farmers' wives taking hay to the next farm, or something like that. So everywhere my mother went people would point at her. In any town or village I would see people in the wing mirrors as we passed

by saying to each other, 'That was a woman.' And when we got to any building site or factory, the men would all be nudging each other and giggling and showing off and pretending to punch each other. Then they would walk up and down smiling at her, dropping something so they could start a conversation.

Things started to deteriorate between Mum and Dad when I was 11. They split up, the firm went bankrupt and everything was sold off. No blame was attached to my mother, so she was able to start trading again and, in her early 30s, she set up with a lorry paid for by her father. She remarried and went on to have four more children. She built up a specialist muck-shifting firm, Truckers Clearing, driving eight-wheeler tipper trucks, which she loved, and she drove for McAlpine, Fairclough Construction, French Kier, Norwest Holst, Balfour Beatty and John Laing – all great big firms. But, after her accountant failed to file the correct VAT returns, she ended up losing the firm, her house and everything she'd made. The firm owed very little really, just £40,000. She continued to do bits and bobs after that and was driving regularly until she was 67, although not full time. She died in 2006 at the age of 79.

When I think of the life I had with my mother, I think of it with gratitude and love. Until my parents divorced I'd been an only child, and was very much protected and loved. It was a happy setup and, as I get older – I'm 62 now – I realise how privileged I was. I learned so much simply from travelling all over the country with her. It was always so fascinating. I did a bit of lorry driving myself but never considered doing it as a career, and decided instead to train to be a nurse. When I applied, I was told it was 'very unusual' to see somebody with 'lorry driver's mate' listed as their previous job.

As told to John Koski