

Operator is first, only woman on road crew

By Vera Sloan

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For 10 years, Dawn Nichols of Colby has been at the Thomas County Road Department shop by 7:30 a.m. weekday mornings to take her place as a road grader operator. As far as she knows, she's the first and only female employee to work with the work crews in the county road department.

Nichols says she grew up around machinery and liked being a "tom boy" when she was a kid.

"My dad worked for Kansas Department of Transportation in Mitchell County when I was young, and I've worked at hard jobs since I was young," she said.

Nichols helped her aunt and uncle on the farm, and worked at J-J Oil, changing tires, changing oil and working on cars until ten years ago when she took on the road grader operator's job with the county.

Most of the time her work is in Rovohl Township, but when the weather isn't right to blade the roads, or she gets caught up, she works with the asphalt crew or does other dirt work.

"I like it all," she said.

She likes to cook too, and loves horses, dirt track car races and NASCAR.

When it's cold and rainy outside, she helps in the shop, changing oil and doing maintenance on the county equipment. But when there's a lot of snow, you'll find her opening roads with the V Plow, or running the loader to move snow.

"We do a whole lot of other work that no one even knows about," Nichols said. "We do road sealing, lay asphalt and the county crews paint the striping for parking at the court house and at the office complex, and we even do cement work too."

The days are long when the crew is on a job, Nichols said, and she's worked nine-hour days in hot weather. She said she's usually glad when it turns cooler.

Nichols is divorced with two kids, a son,



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Nichols worked a lot of hard jobs before joining the county road crew. A Colby native, she has now spent 10 years with the department.

Aaron, who is 16, and goes to school in Goddard, and a daughter, Darla, who works for the Transportation Department.

She says she gets razzed a lot by the guys, but can hold her own. As for staying at her job, she says she doesn't want to burn out, but will stay as long as the boss will let her.

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