

Littrell worked her way into tool-and-die industry

By CHUCK STINNETT *The Gleaner*

Lorna Littrell was born at a time, in the 1950s, when American society was in transition concerning women in the workplace.

"Only when a world war created a severe shortage of workers were women encouraged to get out into the work world," Littrell said, "But they were still expected to carry on with home duties as if that were their only job."

"Women had one foot in Ozzie and Harriet's living room and one foot in the secretarial pool," Littrell said during one of the Henderson Chamber of Commerce's Good Morning Henderson breakfasts earlier this summer.

Women have increasingly expanded their role in the work force. But even today, few have penetrated what she called the "boys' club" that is the tool-and-die industry.

"The tool-and-die industry has historically been a skill that has been handed down from father to son. It was hard, even as a man, to get your foot in the door, unless you knew someone," Littrell said.

Her husband, Darrell, "had to beg to be given a chance to learn the trade," she said. "He wanted out of the housing projects and was not only fascinated by the craft, but knew that it would make him a good living."

"When I met Darrell I had no idea about this industry," she said. "A tool, as far as I knew, was a hammer or a screwdriver. Die was something you used to tie-die a T-shirt or your hair. I had a lot to learn."

Lorna learned the old-fashioned way--through work.

To earn some extra money for a vacation years ago, Darrell brought home a large block of steel with grooves cut all over the surface. It was an unfinished die that would be used to manufacture computer boards for IBM "back when a computer was the size of a room," she said.

The grooves had been cut using the then-new technology of electrical discharge machining. But the rough edges had to be polished to a diamond finish.

"The grooves were very small and there were a lot of them," Lorna recalled.

"Every night, for weeks, after the kids were in bed, we would sit in the garage and take a hone and hand-polish those grooves."

It was her first exposure to the kind of work her husband did.

Eventually, Darrell had an opportunity to start his own company, Sunrise Tool and Die. He had a partner: Lorna.

"I never thought I would be the owner of a business that is traditionally an all-male business," she acknowledged.

At the time, she was working full-time at a bank, and did bookkeeping for Sunrise at night and on weekends.

"Within a few months, it became too much and I came to work at the shop full time," she said. "Gone were the days of heels and suits. My perfume was replaced by the distinct smell of oil and grease" of the industrial drills, lathes and other metal-working equipment in the shop.

"I never knew each day whether I would be answering the phone, polishing steel or driving a truck to pick up supplies," Littrell said. One day she might be cleaning the shop's bathroom; the next day, she could be delivering a mold to a customer in Illinois.

"In the early days, Darrell split his time between trying to meet with customers and increase business and running machines," she recalled. "There were several nights that he and I spent the entire night at the shop so he could get a mold finished on time. I stayed because I was afraid he would fall asleep and hurt himself, bleed to death, and no one would find him until the next day. He was my 'penny stock,' and I had to make sure nothing happened to him!"

"The shop environment was still a man's world," with Snap-on Tools girlie calendars and rough language, she said.

"A mold shop was an oily, greasy, smelly, loud place, with a lot of testosterone flying around," as she put it.

But Lorna believes she has left a mark on the Sunrise shop floor, such as by improving safety procedures and helping design and develop the company's quality control system that has achieved ISO 9001:2000 certification.

Lorna said she "never tried to put gingham curtains" on the windows. She tried to ignore the girlie pictures and the rough language.

"But," she said, "I think I have brought a little civility to the place."

With today's computer controlled machining equipment, Littrell believes there are greater opportunities for women in the tool-and-die industry.

And Littrell, who was a founding member of the board of regents of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, encourages students to consider pursuing technical fields such as machine tool technology.

Today, Littrell and her sister-in-law own another business, Full House Properties, that buys, rehabilitates and sell houses.

As for Sunrise, "I am thankful that I have a husband who has treated me as an equal partner from day one, and who has valued me for what knowledge I bring to the business."

In the early days, they agreed that should something happen to Darrell, the company should be shut down.

But, she said, "several years ago, he looked at me and said, 'I think you could run this place, if something happens to me.'

"Well, I don't want to think that will ever happen," she said. "But he couldn't have said anything nicer."