



## Tara Bowman: A Woman Rig Hand Values The Teamwork And Money

**Tara Bowman, who roughnecks for Impact Drilling Ltd., considers herself a normal person — five foot eight and 125 pounds when she graduated from high school — who happens to have an unusual job.**

“My girlfriends think it’s pretty cool to work on a drilling rig, especially the money,” says the 27-year-old Albertan. “You have to be willing to try but I can ask for help when I need it. On our crews, everybody helps everyone.”

Bowman, born in Olds, had no family connection to the oilpatch. Her father is a safety and training supervisor with a power transmission utility, her mother runs a housecleaning business. After finishing school, the Lacombe resident grew lilies for seven years in a local greenhouse. She also installed home insulation for nearly a year and worked as a welder’s helper for six months.

Answering a newspaper ad in January 2005, Bowman hired on with Simmons Drilling Inc. in its Lacombe yard. That summer, Simmons sold its Canadian assets to Impact, a newly-launched drilling contractor. Impact immediately began building its own telescoping single rigs at the Lacombe facility, state-of-the-art equipment with automatic pipe handling systems, iron roughnecks and top drives.

“For 10 months, I worked as a shophand and hotshot driver [who delivers urgently-needed parts to rigs in the field],” Bowman says. For a greenhorn, she cautions, a busy rig yard can be overwhelming at first, full of noise, large chunks of steel, heavy vehicles and brusque strangers. But the culture shock usually wears off within a couple of weeks as the activity and people become more familiar.

A new hire normally works for months as a leasehand doing general labour around a rig. On moving up to floorhand, the roughneck starts to handle drill pipe, maintain equipment and mix drilling mud and chemicals. Bowman, however, started directly as a floorhand. Just eight days later, she was promoted to motor-

hand, responsible for looking after engines and other machinery.

Her next step would normally be derrickhand, who traditionally works up the tower (as high as 30 metres above the floor on a triple rig) to guide drillpipe into place. On newer rigs, automatic pipe handling has largely eliminated the need to work up the mast. Derrickhands also look after pumps and the drilling mud system.

Rig crews typically work in 12-hour shifts, each headed by a shift foreman called a driller. Supervising the drillers is the rig manager (“tool-push” is the traditional title), whose position is similar to the captain of a ship. At Impact Drilling, the rig managers in turn report to Kevin Nordin, field superintendent for the company’s drilling fleet.

Nordin estimates that Impact typically retains 70% of its new hires, although no more than half of them are actually suited to the work. “When the industry is short of bodies, sometimes we have to work with what we get,” he acknowledges. “What we need most of all is experienced drillers — they’re the hardest to find.” So a physically fit employee with some mechanical aptitude, a good employment record and potential for future promotion is highly valued by the company.

The Canadian Association of Oilwell Drilling Contractors sets a pay guideline for rig hands. As of October 1, those hourly rates are: leasehand, \$21 per hour; floorhand, \$24.50; motorhand, \$26.50; derrickhand, \$31; and driller, \$37.25. In her previous jobs, Bowman earned \$5 to \$11 per hour. Impact rig crews follow the industry’s usual schedule of two weeks on, one week off. During her work shift, the plentiful overtime pushes Bowman’s pre-tax wages well past \$2,500 per week.

In recent weeks, lower natural gas prices have triggered a drastic reduction in shallow gas drilling, which has idled Impact’s four shallow rigs (purchased from Simmons). Layoffs have resulted, although the company’s medium-depth fleet is heavily booked for the coming winter. The fact that Bowman has been put to work in the yard during the temporary lull is one signal that her managers view her as a keeper. In addition, she’s also being sent on technical courses.

“Everyone has treated me nicely. The guys tease me, I tease them back when I can,” says the Impact motorhand. “From what I hear, the oilpatch used to be a tougher place for a woman to work. For me, it’s all been friendly, I’ve never felt threatened in any way.” She sometimes encounters other women on the drilling leases, mostly as cooks and camp attendants but occasionally in other roles as well. Still single, Bowman says she’d like to have a family later, adding “I’ll take it as it comes.”

One 40-year drilling veteran, speaking on the condition that his name not be used, explains the sector’s need for female hands: “We get male applicants who want to establish careers, which is great. We also attract other young men who don’t think long-term but do want to work, which is good. But we require more, which forces us to hire some guys who are astonishingly irresponsible. Fortunately, technological improvements to our equipment now make it physically feasible to employ women, which will help us to improve the overall calibre of our work force.”

Impact had another female rig hand, a successful worker who was hired by a rival contractor. Industry executives say women are appearing in the oilfield here and there. While the upstream is hardly facing a feminine flood, a trickle seems to have started.