



Above: Dona and Shorty during a rare meal at home. Right: One of Dona's delicious meals served in the field. Below: During winter months, Dona prepares for eight months on the road.

Dona and Shorty met when she was still in high school. He came through her hometown of Selden, Kan., working on his dad's harvesting crew. She was waiting tables at a café. It was a brief meeting, but one that rang a bell of familiarity when they bumped into each other almost 20 years later in a convenience store in nearby Colby, where they now make their home.

Whatever spark was left smoldering caught fire, and soon thereafter they married. It was the second marriage for each. Together they helped raise a total of six children and grow a business.

"This is my sixteenth harvest," Dona says. "I've always gone the summer months. Then 4 years ago, I quit my teaching job and stayed with him through the fall harvest."

Dona's contribution to the operation is in many ways reflective of a long-standing tradition of women working with a custom harvesting crew. She's in charge of the meals—making sure the crew has a hot lunch and then a sandwich for dinner—as well as the grocery shopping and laundry. Yet Dona's role is also emblematic of a break with the past, in that she's more of a partner than many of her predecessors. She sends out invoices, pays bills, works in the field, helps manage the crew and shoulders a lot of the stress of the operation.

"I think a lot of the harvesters view their wives as a partner," says Tracy Zeorian, president of the U.S. Custom Harvesters, Inc. (a trade association) and a combine operator. "They can trust their wives with everything." And, she says, speaking from experience (Tracy runs a custom harvesting business with her husband, Jim), "There's so much stress in the field that it's a relief to have that support and someone to help like that."

Of course, the stress of operating a business can be magnified when working with a spouse. It can cause some

The Taming of the Harvester

Custom cutters have been around since the 1920s, but the industry experienced a surge during WWII, when machinery and labor were in short supply. It was then the harvesters earned a reputation for being rogue bands of men who traveled the country and played as hard as they worked. Such was the subject of the 1947 movie *Wild Harvest*, starring Alan Ladd and Dorothy Lamour.

The industry today has, like many of the farms the harvesters work, become more of a family-oriented business. It still attracts young men from around the world looking for work—some of whom have a wild streak—but bosses like Shorty Kulhanek tend to keep a lid on things.

"A large change over the past 30 to 50 years," says