A Blue-Collar Guy

By Lee Farren

Don Kendall is blade patching a deteriorating section of U.S. Highway 395 south of Ukiah. He inches the grader forward, following the dump truck as it spills fresh asphalt onto the road. He lowers the blade set below the grader's midsection and works the material into the surface. Steam rises around the cab, obscuring his view.

"When the smoke and steam come up while you're paving, you have to work more by feel, and knowing where you're at," Don says.

He doesn't mind. An old hand at the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), Don is doing what he likes best—running the grader on a paving job.

ODOT job has provided good career for Don Kendall

"It's a big job, and when you're done you can look back at it and say, 'I did that,'" Don says.

The crew that works out of ODOT's Ukiah/Long Creek station covers 110 miles—220 lane miles—of highway, from Nye Junction south to Long Creek on U.S. Highway 395, from Long Creek to Hamilton on the Kimberly-Long Creek Highway, and from the Ukiah Junction to Camp Elkanah on State Highway 244.

Don began working for ODOT when he was a junior in high school. During the school year he cleaned the shop after school, greased and oiled the trucks and did any other little projects that came up. He had his chauffeur's license and occasionally ran a piece of equipment the mile down the road and back again to warm it up.

"Janitor and grease monkey," Don says. "I started at the bottom, way down there."

He spent two summers out on the road, flagging and patching. He remembers the generosity of the older men, and how sometimes they would get off a piece of equipment and give him a chance to run the roller on a paving job, scoop material from the ditch or broom the road.

After Don graduated from Ukiah High School in 1979, he spent two years earning a degree in body and

Opposite page, *an ODOT snow plow heads up U.S. Highway 395 on its way toward Battle Mountain.* ***Above,*** *Don Kendall at the controls of the grader, his favorite piece of equipment.* ***Left,*** *Don, right, shares a joke with John Thompson. The two are patching the pavement on a section of U.S. Highway 395 south of Ukiah.*

fender work from Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton. He met Karen there, and they married in 1982.

Back in Ukiah, Don went to work in the woods as a faller.

"That's what my dad did," he says, "and that's what I grew up doing: packing gas and oil cans. I've run chainsaws my whole life."

When the logging slump hit in the mid-1980s Don, the youngest logger and lowest in seniority, was always the first to be laid off.

He decided he needed something more secure, especially now that he had a family, so he applied for another stint with ODOT.

"I took a big pay cut to go to work for the state, but I could see it would be a better deal," he says. "There aren't many loggers out there anymore."

Don started again in the fall of 1984, plowing snow—lots of snow. The late 1980s saw some of eastern Oregon's snowiest winters. The crew needed Don when he signed on.

He remembers one of the plow operators driving with him a couple of miles to the sand shed and back to the station, where he handed the plow over to the new hire.

Don recalls his words: "Keep it out of the ditch."

"And I did," Don says.

He worked the night shift that first winter, and for the seven winters that followed.

"We had more snow then," he says. "A lot of times we were fighting the wind. It gets really interesting out along the Horn when the wind comes up. But we've always kept that road open."

Cape Horn—where U.S. Highway 395 snakes out in a long, narrow curve along a ridge on the north flank of Battle Mountain—is famous for bad weather. Winds hit the exposed section of highway from all directions, blowing snow up over the road.

In the winter, ice and snow make the steep drop-offs especially perilous.

Don's scariest moment came on the Horn. One winter about 15 years ago he was driving the plow north, fighting the wind and barely able to see through the blowing snow. He thought he was getting too close to the bluff on the inside of the curve and decided to stop. As he did he felt the front end of the plow drop a little. Then the wind shifted, and all he could see in front of him was stars.

"My front end was over the edge," he says. "It's a good thing I stopped."

Don and other ODOT employees sometimes find people stuck along the highway, especially in the winter. The plows are equipped with flares, first aid kits, fire extinguishers, tow chains and "wreck ahead" signs. When they see an accident, the operators first sand past the site to keep other vehicles from sliding, then park in a safe spot and offer assistance. They can call a wrecker or ambulance and set up traffic control.

"I'll help anybody if they're out there broke down," Don says. "I'll try to do whatever I can."

Don likes the variety of working for ODOT. He likes shaping the ditches, making sure the water drains and bringing the material out. His favorite piece of equipment is the grader. He says a grader operator has a lot of responsibility for getting the job done right.

"I'm a blue-collar worker," he says, "and this has been a good job. I've worked with a lot of good people." ■