

Women at Sea: In Their Own Words



NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE



Marie Rodell (center) and Rachel Carson (right) aboard *Albatross III*. (Credit: Robert Brigham, NOAA)



Rachel Carson

Rachel Carson “Shattered Precedent”

“No woman had ever been on the *Albatross III*. Tradition is important in the government, but fortunately I had conspirators who were willing to help me shatter precedent. But among my male colleagues who had to sign the papers, the thought of one woman on a ship with some 50 men was unthinkable.”

Rachel Carson, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service employee, author of “The Sea Around Us” and “Silent Spring”

“Sixty years ago, Rachel Carson, who was then working for the Dept. of the Interior (which then included the Bureau of Fisheries as part of the Fish & Wildlife Service), was asked to write a story about the work going on at the Woods Hole lab. Arrangements were made so that she would sail aboard the *Albatross III*. There was another woman who was scheduled to sail with her but at the last minute, couldn't go, therefore Rachel couldn't go either. There's an interesting note written by the Chief Scientist in the cruise results of cruise 11, 1948 . . . the trip that Rachel didn't go on: “The strong relief expressed by practically all members of the scientific staff when they learned that female observers would definitely not accompany this cruise, might be of some interest. Their presence in the intimate confined living quarters set aside for scientists without specific provisions for privacy, would have been resented.” One year later, in 1949, Rachel found another roommate, Marie Roddell, and together they created the opportunity for other women to follow. Rachel went on to write several well-known and nationally recognized books. Marie wrote about her *Albatross* adventure in the October 1950 edition of “Frontiers” magazine. It stated, “We were the first women to spend more than a few hours aboard, and I do not know who was more doubtful about what was to come – the crew, the scientists or we.”

Linda Despres, first female Chief Scientist, bottom trawl surveys



(Credit: NOAA Historical Timeline)

The War Manpower Commission emphasizes the need "for encouraging employees to adapt more fishing jobs to the employment of women ... women can do much of the work in fish processing plants that formerly was considered for men only.



(Credit: NOAA Historical Timeline)

A Changing Culture at Sea

“In 1968, I got my first job in Woods Hole, much to my delight. I would have been happy just xeroxing (women's lib had not yet kicked in!), but I was fortunate enough to end up working up data for Marv Grosslein. After a month or so, he asked if I would be interested in going on a short cruise. I picked my jaw back up off the floor and stammered a quick yes. Judy Penttila and Brenda Byrd also got asked and happily agreed, and then we were assembled in Marv's office for a bit of a talk. Some time before us, a young woman whose name I never found out had gone out, and there had evidently been some indiscretion. The grapevine later told us that she had run off with one of the crew members during some port call (to Alaska, I think!), but I don't know how much of this was exaggeration. At any rate, it put a stop to the women-at-sea idea. Marv told us that we were sort of a ship-test, and that if we messed up, it would mess up women after us for a long time. Only, being Marv, he said it much better than that. We were suitably impressed, and determined to do our very best. The men on the ship were really gracious for the most part, considering what a big change it was for them. Some of them said they liked it better, because their shipmates showered and shaved more, and the ship didn't stink so much! Those who considered us "jinxes" (occasionally heard) just left us alone initially, but most of them came around. *The Falmouth Enterprise* wrote an article (with picture!) about us that summer, but unfortunately I don't have it. Anyway, we must have done OK, because I made two more cruises that summer, and now, it seems there are more women than men on most of them!”

Jean St. Onge Burns, retired

“My first cruise aboard the *Albatross IV* was a gear comparison cruise back in the summer of 1968, along with Jeanne St. Onge and Brenda Byrd. The crew members were friendly, but didn't interact too much with the scientific personnel unless it was work related. It was quite different when I went out on a regular survey cruise as the only female aboard. There was supposed to be another female going too, but at the last moment, she couldn't make it. Herb Stern was the Chief Scientist for that cruise and he gave me his stateroom, while he moved below deck with the other members of the scientific crew. After my first attempt to "sleep" in that stateroom, with the bunk board in, I knew why he said he didn't mind giving me his room. The *Albatross* always did roll a lot! The fishermen and other crew members were all very friendly to me on that cruise, to the



Olga Krylova cuts fish aboard *Albatross IV* during joint US-USSR cooperative fisheries research program, 1967. (Credit: Robert Brigham/ NOAA)

point where it was difficult to find any time alone (except in my room) to sit and read without being interrupted by someone coming over and asking how I was doing. They were all concerned that I was lonely since I didn't have another woman there to talk with. As you mentioned -- I felt like I had been "adopted" by the crew of the *Albatross IV* and that feeling continued through all the many survey cruises that I participated in. I really enjoyed my times at sea aboard the *Albatross* and was grateful for the support that Marv Grosslein, Dick Hennemuth, Herb Stern, and many others gave me through those years. It was on a survey cruise with Herb Stern that I was given the position of Watch Chief -- the first female to serve in that roll on a survey cruise (I think that Ruth Stoddard was the first female Watch Chief on a plankton cruise.).”

Judy Penttila, retired



Ellen Johnson, Sarah Emory and Kris Tholke wait for the catch to come in during the Fall 2008 bottom trawl survey. (Credit: NOAA)

“When I came to the lab in 1973, there were other pioneering women who had preceded me aboard the *Albatross IV*: Ruth Stoddard, Judy Penttila, Pat Gerrior, Susan Eddy, Jeanne St. Onge, Judy Brennan-Hoskins, and Louise Derry. If one wanted to go, three of us had to go because a three-person cabin had to be full. The original Gloucester Italian and New Bedford Portuguese crew members gradually became accustomed to our presence . . . they either ignored us since it was bad luck to have women on board, adopted us as either another daughter or granddaughter, or had less than admirable intentions, which we learned how to quickly deflect. As the original fishermen retired, younger men came on board and I distinctly remember one fisherman being disappointed that the next group of scientists coming aboard were going to be all men. The crew were now used to seeing more women at the lab and at sea and they didn't mind us being around. In 1975, I became the first female Chief Scientist during a bottom trawl survey and it was also the first time women scientists outnumbered the men. . . we were nicknamed the "Magnificent 7 + 6" and it made headlines in the local newspaper! Aboard the *Albatross IV*, women have since worked in the galley, engine room, as deckhands and as officers. . . hundreds of women have sailed on this vessel in the intervening 46 years. . . we had a slow start but we're making a spectacular finish!

Linda Despres, last Chief Scientist



In port, spring 2000: Future NOAA Captain?



Linda Despres, the first female chief scientist on bottom trawl surveys, enters data on a catch of stripers. (Credit: Brenda Figuerido/ NOAA)