

Alaska

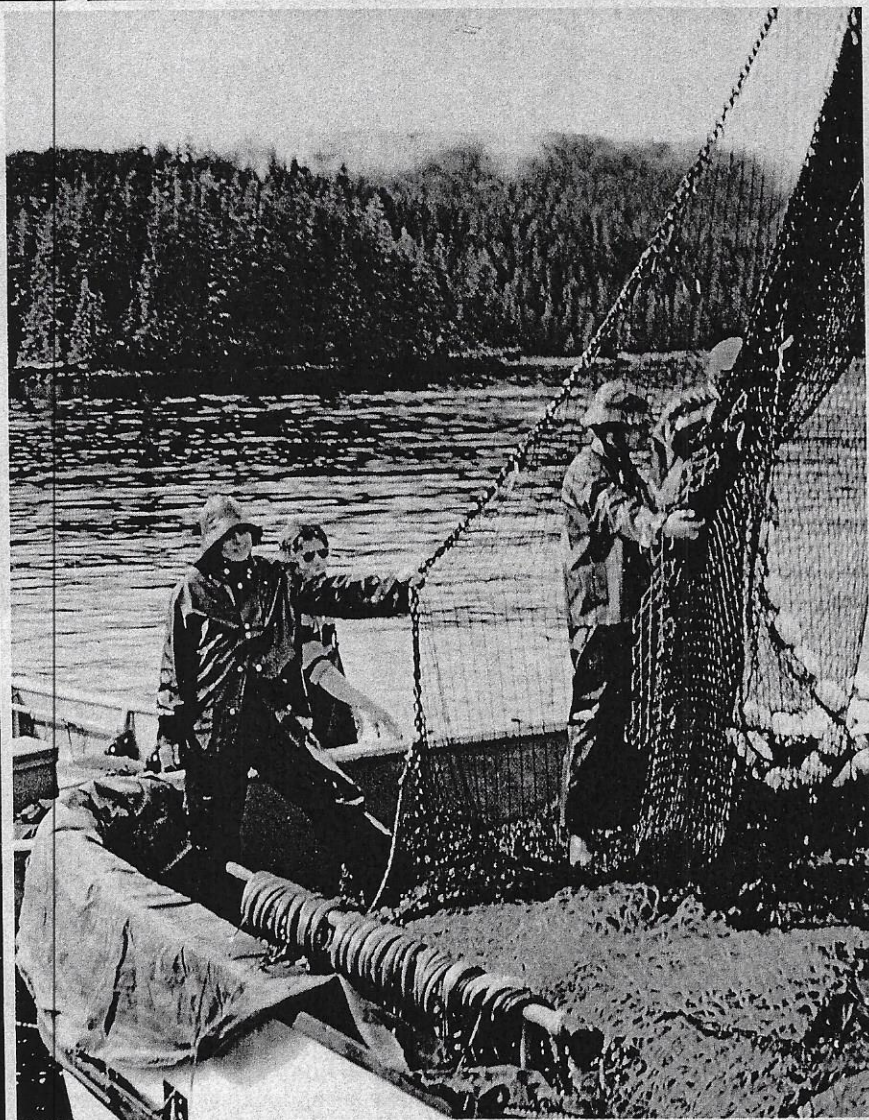
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SLED DOG SEASON IN ALASKA
See pages 4 and 18



By Lynda Bashor; photos by Ken Elverum

FISHERWOMAN



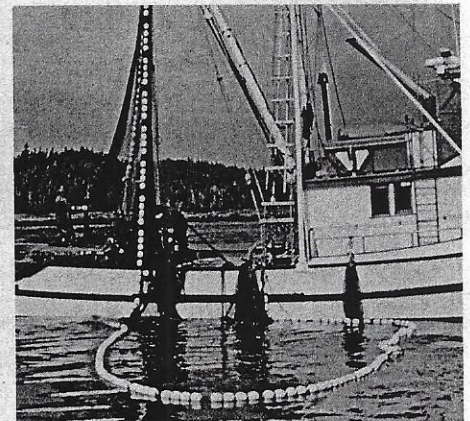
hours; men would spend all their time flirting with me instead of working. Most skippers wouldn't take me seriously.

There were few precedents to influence these stubborn men. Most women who did work on a boat were part of the skipper's family or else they were there for his personal pleasure. Time and again I heard, "A boat is no place for a woman."

Then I heard about Pat Kristovich, skipper of the *Teresa K*, through Claudia Bell, one of his deck hands. Claudia and I were both 23. She told me that Kristovich was looking for someone to replace his current cook, who also happened to be a woman. The news that he had not one but two women working for him sent me to the docks like a shot. The *Teresa K* proved

Left — Hauling in the seine; the author is at the far left, holding the lead line.

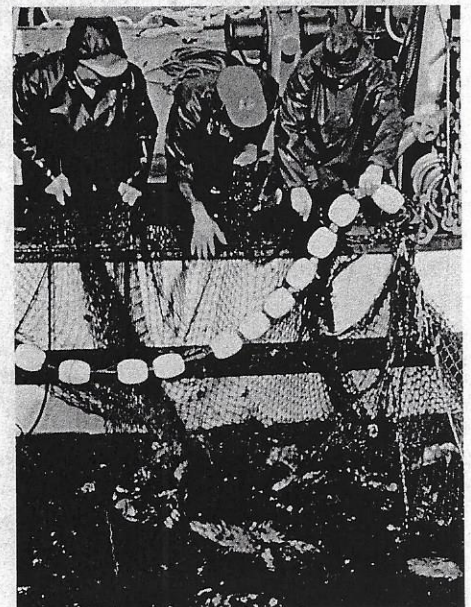
Below — The crews worked strictly on a percentage basis, and there was no way to know if the long hours were worth it until the nets were hauled in (bottom photo) and the salmon were visible — shining like silver dollars.



The worst part about working in a fishing town without being a fisherman was having to say good-bye to my friends as they left to chase salmon in Southeastern Alaska's waters. I waved to them as their boats left, and then waited for their return while working at my own boring, poor-paying job. I followed the gossip and rumors of the fishing industry, for in Petersburg fishing is the major source of income and affects nearly everyone. Whether I worked in one of the three canneries or as a waitress in a bar or coffee shop, I was always surrounded by fishermen.

Mention of small Indian villages, abandoned canneries, secluded bays or wild ocean straits where they fished was enough to make me restless. I wanted to know, to see, to do. So while I worked a long shift in cannery or restaurant, while I prowled the docks and watched boats come and go, I determined that I, too, would go fishing.

But I am a woman, and no one was willing to hire me. Plenty of reasons were given: a woman on a boat is bad luck; wives would file for divorce; crews would mutiny; I wouldn't be able to take the hard work and long



to be a beautiful purse seiner, a commercial salmon fishing boat that carries a 5- to 7-man crew. Captain Kristovich (Cap or Cap'n, as his crew calls him) is stocky and dark-haired, vigorous and with a powerful build that belies 50-odd years spent on or around fishing boats.

I was nervous at our first meeting, since he is a fiery mix of Irish, Indian and Slav, with a reputation as a tyrannical boss. When angry, he becomes a different man from the genial one who greeted me and invited me into the galley for the inevitable mug of black coffee. This was his Mr. Hyde personality; I later came to dread his sudden Dr. Jekyll fits.

When I explained that I was looking for a job, he asked if I had had experience on a boat.

"Oh yes!" I exclaimed. "I had a job on a little two-man boat, but the skipper turned out to be more interested in catching me than catching fish. When I got tired of being chased around the deck, which was pretty small, I jumped ship in Skagway. He paid me \$20 as my share, and it cost me \$25 to get back to Petersburg."

He laughed sympathetically.

"Next I was cook and deck hand on a tender," I continued. The tender was a big old boat that picked up fish from fishing grounds to haul them into the cannery. "The skipper turned out to be a drunk. I nearly wrecked the boat in a storm while he was passed out cold in the galley, snoring away in a plateful of potato salad. Since then I have decided to be more wary before jumping on a boat."

I was afraid I wasn't making a good impression and added confidently, "But I'm a good cook and a hard worker and I know I'll do a good job."

I left feeling discouraged. To my surprise, he called me a week later. Soon I was aboard the *Teresa K* with enthusiasm so great that only my ignorance exceeded it.

I knew nothing about rising in the cold and dark before dawn on the second day of a 4-day opening with aching body, stiff hands, greasy hair, filthy clothes and the certainty of three more 18-hour work days ahead. I knew nothing of long hours, disappointing hauls or boring fishing period closures. I knew nothing about the frustrations and tensions that come from living and working with the same five people week after week.

I knew only that I was determined to succeed at what had so persistently been called a man's job. However, it is one thing to exude confidence in the comfort of a ship's galley and quite another to stand on deck just before the net goes over the stern that first time, knowing that in a few minutes you will be called upon to do a job without fail. I was so nervous I thought I would be sick.

I wondered if we would catch any fish, if the jellyfish would be bad or if I would make a mistake. I felt awkward and bulky in my rain gear, with plastic pants, jacket, hat and rubber boots over my warm clothing. Although the day promised to be clear and calm, the early morning fog hadn't started to lift. I could barely discern a few of the boats around us as we drifted in and out of the heavy mist. Everything seemed eerie and surreal. I wondered what the hell I was doing there.

Cap'n Pat was breaking in a green crew, but I was by far the most inexperienced. Claudia, who had steered me to this job, had been his deck hand for the first time the year before. She was a skinny, vivacious bundle of energy with a constant stream of chatter and boundless enthusiasm for fishing. She talked of being the first woman to skipper a seiner and was anxious to learn all she could from Pat.

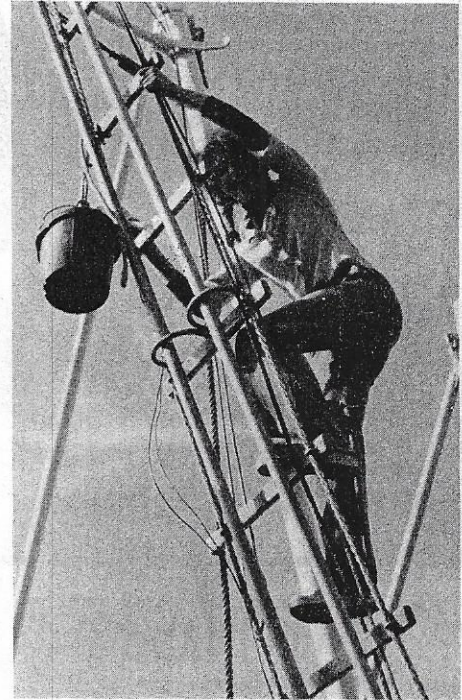
Ivan, who ran the skiff, and Scott, who worked on deck, were two clean-cut, friendly boys who had come with Pat from Seattle without knowing exactly what they were in for. I worked on deck too, but since I also had to cook three meals a day, I got out of a lot of the other chores. I didn't pitch fish from the hold of our boat onto the tender at the end of a fishing day or take the wheel watches on our way back to town.

Although it was a hassle to cook meals between shifts on deck, I welcomed the excitement that came with each set or haul of the net. The first morning, I woke before the rest of the crew at 4:30 to start breakfast. I had the galley cleaned and was ready to work on deck 15 minutes before the official opening time of 6 A.M. We were all tense with anticipation. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I stood beside the captain scanning for jumpers. The splash of a fish's fin breaking water is the vital sign that there may be others beneath the surface.

"There! Jumper! Over to port, coming down the beach!" Claudia jumped up and down, pointing and yelling.

The skipper turned the boat toward shore, checking to make sure everyone was ready. A few hundred yards from the beach he veered off suddenly.

"Let 'er go!" he shouted. Scott pulled the pin that released the skiff from the stern of the boat. The skiff reared away, taking with it one end of the long, deep net — the web, or seine.



Claudia polishing the rigging during a break between shifts; she was a deck hand on the Teresa K, and talked about skippering her own seiner.

Ivan headed toward shore in the skiff while we raced in the opposite direction, with the net stretched between the two boats. The skipper had to watch for other boats, check the fathometer for depth and compensate for tides and current.

We watched the web pass off the deck, corks popping, lead line clanking, holding our breath for fear of some last-minute foul-up. Even something seemingly as minor as a twist in one of the lines could spell disaster. This time everything went smoothly and the engine slowed for the 20-minute tow with the net curved in a perfect arc between boat and skiff.

Gradually the skiff and boat completed a giant circle. Both ends of the

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FISHERWOMAN

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net were back aboard the *Teresa K*, with the net itself falling like a curtain down through the water. Then Claudia and Scott used the power block to winch the heavy purse line on deck. This purse line ran through heavy metal rings placed at intervals along the bottom of the net. It gathered the net together like drawstrings on a purse. We hoped to have trapped a school of salmon in this purse.

That's when I would get into the act. While the skipper operated the power block that hydraulically hoisted the net out of the water, Claudia, Scott and I stood in the stern piling the web. Each of us was in charge of a section of the web. I was responsible for stacking the heavy chain, or lead line, that weighted the net down in the water. While coiling it loosely around me, I also had to catch the metal rings spaced along it and throw them onto a bar.

This sounds complicated; and it is. That first time I had very little idea what was going on. I had been stationed on deck with my hand gripping the lead line and told to get ready. I was warned not to miss a single ring or else I would foul up the whole operation.

Claudia and Scott were beside me, each hanging onto their section of the net. The power block started. The heavy, dripping net rose slowly out of the water and passed through the block dangling above our heads. As the net fell at our feet, it seemed to come faster and faster, swinging back and forth while swells rocked the boat.

I struggled to keep up while trying to maintain my balance on the piles of slippery net and toss the rings efficiently onto the bar. I didn't dare raise my head for fear of getting a jellyfish in the face. I could see them in the water, getting caught in the net and dragged up with it, oozing through the net like fiery Jell-O being forced through a giant sieve. I renewed my resolution to be stoic but cringed as the first dreadful blob splattered harmlessly at my feet.

Yechh, I thought, and tucked my head further beneath the protection of my sou'wester rain hat.

"No, no!" the skipper yelled. "Keep your eyes open, damn it, and look around! Look alive!"

The captain's Dr. Jekyll side emerged in the tension and excitement of a set. Tempers wore thin and our language grew rough. Luckily, with so much going on, there wasn't much time to worry about mere jellyfish.

My hand grabbed at the net and closed on a handful of disintegrated jellies. I wanted to drop everything and nurse the burning sensation but I didn't dare. Nothing to do but throw the ring on the bar and grab another handful of web. This one was slimy too; once the jellies have begun to die, they ooze all over the coarse, prickly line. I could feel my hands and wrists burning, but there wasn't time to think about it. The net continued to pile up around our feet, and it took all my energy and concentration just to do my part of the job.

Finally the net was on deck and we were ready to haul in the sack — called the "moneybag," or sock — containing the fish. That was always the best part of a set, when the suspense is intensified by our accumulated hopes and frustrations. Were our efforts in vain or had we succeeded in intercepting a school of the fast-moving, valuable salmon?

That set turned out to be like most of those to follow: a couple hundred salmon, several pounds of mixed jellies and some miscellaneous seaweed and debris. Not too bad, not too good. As the salmon spilled out of the moneybag, they reminded me of a cascade of bright silver dollars. None of us worked for a salary, but each received a share for the season.

I was out of breath but satisfied that things had gone smoothly. Now that the excitement was over, my skin began to sting in earnest from the jellyfish, but I knew that everyone was waiting to see how I would react. I also knew anything I did could later be used against me. I forced myself to act non-

chalant, casually dumping a bucket of salt water over my rain gear as I had seen the others do. Then I climbed the ladder onto the top deck, cursing the horrid monsters, the despicable jellyfish, under my breath.

The skipper, who only a few moments before had been working like a fiend beside us, yelling and cursing, returned to the helm. He mopped his sweat-drenched face.

"Well kid," he asked jovially, "what'd ya think of it?"

"Oh, I guess I'll get the hang of it after a while," I replied cautiously.

"Jellies were extra hot today, weren't they?" he grinned delightedly. "Aren't always so bad, you know."

"Must have made a special effort for my first day. Want a cup of coffee?"

"Jellies put on a real show for you kid! You oughta feel honored."

"Oh . . . I do . . . I do," I replied sarcastically.

Then, as I was disappearing down the ladder, he winked. "You'll do all right."

From him that was big praise.

Only when I had reached the haven of the galley did I admit to myself just how bad the jellyfish had been. Still, there was nothing to do about it. I had heard various remedies suggested but nothing I tried worked as well as ignoring the pain. Long after I had become inured to the other irritants involved in seining, the jellyfish continued to plague me. They came to symbolize all that was painful and difficult that summer.

Whenever I was tempted to complain, I had only to remember what had happened to Joy, the previous cook. She was a middle-aged hippie, vegetarian and health food nut who fixed granola and soybean spaghetti instead of meat and potatoes. The basically conservative fishermen recoiled when she paraded around the docks dressed in long, flowing skirts, patched and transparent blouses and colorful scarves.

The last straw came when a strand of jellyfish had flipped into the galley door and slapped Joy's face. My shipmates imitated her theatrics with gusto. They rolled on the floor. They covered their faces with their hands and moaned. They writhed in agony, crying, "My eyes, my eyes! Oh my God, I'm going blind!" They had ridiculed her mercilessly, especially the skipper who couldn't stand anything he saw as a weakness.

Although I never met her, I learned an important lesson from her unfortunate example: accept *all* the hard-

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ships involved in taking on a so-called man's job. As the summer progressed, there were many times when I had to remind myself of this.

Most problems I had to face were those all seiners have to cope with, regardless of sex. With five to seven people living and working aboard a 50- to 60-foot boat, there are always problems. Everyone suffers from total lack of privacy, personality conflicts, shortened tempers, boredom, frustration, loneliness.

Fishermen naturally band together. Whether moored in Ketchikan or in some secluded cove, we were probably surrounded by familiar boats. We formed a mobile community that was both friendly and stifling.

In town or out on the fishing grounds, I spent most of my time sitting around the galley table of one boat or another, drinking cup after cup of coffee and exchanging fish stories. I discovered that men are incorrigible gossips; nothing escaped their notice or was beneath comment. Being somewhat of a novelty (I'm tempted to say oddity), I was a prime source of entertainment. They tried endlessly to embarrass me, but as long as the teasing was in fun, I didn't mind. They respected me for being able to take it, and give it back.

Nothing, *nothing* was private. The radio, which was our life line to shore and to other boats, was also a devastatingly effective supplement to the ever-present grapevine. We monitored it 24 hours a day for the information and entertainment it provided.

I'll never forget the time I overheard my skipper chatting with his friend on another boat. I had known my love life was a matter of universal interest but was aghast to hear them discuss my latest date over the air as the entire fishing fleet cruised out of town.

"Hey, Pat," Mike was saying, "Did you get your cook back in time?"

"Oh yeah, she came tripping in just in time to get breakfast started," my loyal skipper replied. I screamed and lunged for the radio. It was a gross exaggeration.

"I must say my skiffman isn't good for much of anything today," the other skipper continued.

I was dancing around Pat, trying to snatch the microphone away. He swatted me away like a mosquito. "I don't know what that skiffman did to her, but damn if she didn't lose a contact lens." He winked at me. I could have killed him. How did he know, anyway?

I wondered how many other boats

were tuned in to this latest installment of the current *Teresa K* soap opera. My worst fears were confirmed as a third party came on the air.

"I wonder if that's all she lost?" the stranger joked, and laughter crackled through the air.

I gave up. Further protest on my part would have fired them up more. I just laughed with them. Maybe some women would take offense at that kind of kidding, but to me it was just a part of the lifestyle. They let off steam by talking about everyone, and I figured I had to accept my share. As soon as they learned that I could take it in stride, they eased up.

I had to struggle constantly to be accepted on my own terms. In the end, my associates, the ones who became my friends, treated me as an equal. The others — the men who viewed any woman who hung around the docks as a sex object — well, if they weren't willing to change their minds, I ignored them.

Unfortunately, there are still only a few women who seine for a living, and all of us have had to fight against being stereotyped. It was hard to be accepted as an individual, but by really asserting myself, by saying "This is the way I am — like it or leave it," I eluded their preconceptions.

I had to learn a lot of skills, but so does any green hand. Most is just common sense and the willingness to work hard. Work itself is highly valued in Alaska. I found that most men are willing to accept anyone, regardless of race, sex, religion, politics or personal quirks, if he or she is a good worker.

Some of the notoriety of being a female deck hand was fun, I'll admit; but some wasn't. Sometimes in Ketchikan I danced until dawn to a local rock band in a club full of friends and dance partners. Other nights I cried myself to sleep in my bunk down in the stuffy, dark fo'c'sle.

When everything went smoothly, seining was a pleasure. We had sunny days when work went well and we even caught a lot of fish. Other calm days seemed to exact their price by refusing to fill our net.

Then there were the really bad days. Heavy rain and gale winds and wicked swells would set the dishes clattering and our stomachs lurching. Every step would necessitate a frantic lunge to grab for support. Sometimes weather would change suddenly halfway through a set. Then we'd work frantically to haul in the gear while the deck bucked and heaved. On such days we did most of the work on hands and

knees, hanging onto the heaving net as it swung dangerously.

The uncertainty is the most difficult, and sometimes the most rewarding, aspect of seining. Fishermen never know from one moment to the next what to expect. Through it all everyone is sustained by a foolish and irrational optimism that the next set, the next opening, the next spot, or even the next year, will bring in the big bonanza.

Several times we got together with other crews for potluck dinner on the deck of one of the boats. We'd barbecue a salmon saved from our last trip and tell stories. If we were lucky, someone would bring out a guitar or perhaps a tape deck. I suppose passing tourists thought us picturesque. But a lot of that time I was only feeling lonely and at loose ends.

The summer was full of good and bad times. I always tried to remind myself that at least I was learning something new. The positive attitude that I tried to maintain throughout paid off, and not just monetarily. In the complicated process of becoming a fisherwoman, I tended to forget that eventually there would be an adequate paycheck to reimburse me for my pains.

I may be crazy (and what fisherperson isn't?) but I enjoyed seining for more than just the financial benefit. I couldn't have put up with it otherwise.

It's difficult to articulate these fringe benefits without sounding corny or overly romantic. It has something to do with memories that I'll cherish long after I've forgotten just how horrible jellyfish were: the sun rising majestically above the fog-shrouded mountains; a whale spouting and thrashing alongside our boat in a storm-wracked sea; a night spent in quiet companionship with several other boats in a secluded bay, playing cribbage or listening to the radio; walking on deck in the still, black night to watch the horizon gradually expand with shimmering sheets of pale white aurora light that slowly filled the heavens — and perhaps our own lives — with some measure of serene illumination.

Such are the interludes of contentment that I'll never forget, even though they were always too short. After a peaceful spell, the weather inevitably turned bad. Or I'd get jellyfish in my eye when I was already cross and tired after a difficult day. Or the soup would burn. Or the skipper would yell at me.

There were a lot of times when I would have quit, except that we were miles from shore, or would have

broken down in hysterical tears, except that the web was already flying out over the stern for the next set. Somehow, in spite of all the ups and downs, events would get back on course as though that was another function of our compass.

No matter how hard the day had been, evening would eventually fall. After a late dinner, we'd all sit around the galley table trying to unwind enough to snatch a few hours of sleep before getting up to begin all over again. I'd pull a pan of brownies out of the oven and the sweet smell would fill the boat and give us comfort. Scott and Ivan would scorch their mouths on the hot brownies, and Claudia would exclaim, "Right-on, Cookie!"

The Cap'n would pound my back so hard it would bring tears and say, "You know what kid? You're not so bad after all . . . no matter what they say." □