

# CRACKING THE TEAK CEILING

It's all the mermaids' fault. According to marine folklore experts, that's why, for centuries, women weren't welcome on most ships. Seamen, a superstitious lot to begin with, believed the mesmerizing powers of women brought on high winds and dead calm ... although there are no recorded instances of both occurring at the same time.

Today, women are welcomed aboard most boats with open arms. Yet, with the women's liberation movement way past its 30th birthday, it's still rare to find a woman in command of a

vessel or, for that matter, working in the marine industry at all.

For example, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 63% of all retail clerks are women, yet only 11% of those in boating sales are female. Ship builders and repairers are 85% male and 15% female. Women workers in water transportation, which includes everything from cruise ships to canoes, make up just 18% of the field.

There are few role models for women who want to work on the water. In fact, until Linda Greenlaw, who captained the fishing boat that dodged "*The Perfect Storm*," was featured in the movie, women captains — or admirals, for that matter — didn't exist in popular culture (except for *Tugboat Annie*.)

But they're out there, and their numbers are growing. At the recent Southern California Yachting Association's 12th annual Women's Sailing Convention in Newport Beach, CA, 300 women spent an entire day learning everything from the rudiments of sailing to diesel engine repair. Unusual for such training events, all the teachers were also women, women who are breaking through the teak ceiling



"Women only" describes both the students and all the instructors — many of them maritime professionals — at this year's Women's Sailing Convention in California. More and more women are working full-time as captains or in related jobs.

that for so long has kept members of the female sex in the galley, making sandwiches and pouring drinks.

## Capt. Laura Tritch



Among those teachers was Capt. Laura Tritch, who holds a U. S. Coast Guard 500-ton masters/ocean license, one of only three women in California who have this certificate. Tritch, who lives aboard her own sailboat in Santa Barbara, is currently the paid, full-time captain on a sleek, well-oiled yacht machine, a 65-foot Azimut named *Lady Angelina*. She's in charge of everything on the boat, from maintenance and engine repair to taking the owner on three-month cruises up and down the West Coast.

Born and raised on a farm in Minnesota, Tritch became an avid sailor on the state's many lakes, racing sailboats and eventually winding up as the first female commodore of her yacht club. Eight years

ago, she moved to California. "Snow and cold are four-letter words," she said, "and in Minnesota the best winds you get are tornadoes." She quickly found a job managing the fleet of boats at the Santa Barbara Sailing Center, which, she notes wryly, "was really a crash course in learning how to repair boats."

Two years later, she took a job as second captain on the *Condor*, a whale-watching, sportfishing, party

cruise boat. "The whale-watchers were easy," she said, "but things could get a bit raucous when I took people out sportfishing or on a party cruise, especially after a few drinks. I learned how to break up fights. I learned how to take not-always-well-meant teasing, and how to dish it out. I also learned everything there is to know about filleting fish and scrubbing up a boat.

"My reward for that hard work was being with the whales — there was nothing I liked so much as taking people out and showing them my critters," Tritch said. "Off Santa Barbara we have humpbacks, blues, sperm whales, brydes, Pacific gray whales, and seven different kinds of dolphins." During that time, Tritch amassed the sea time she needed to qualify for a 500-ton license.

A certified sailing instructor, Tritch can teach almost anything nautical, from splicing rope and knot-tying to tearing down heads and tuning up engines. This expertise and her newly acquired license stood her in good stead for her next job, where she spent 40 days in the South Pacific aboard the *Alaska Eagle*, a 65-foot sail-training vessel operated by Orange

Coast College in Newport Beach.

"I'll bet I fixed the head five times during that cruise. Most of what I've learned in the last eight years has come from just having to get the job done," Tritch mused. "When things go wrong on the water, it's a matter of survival. There's no one but yourself to depend on.

"When I was a little girl, my mother always told me, 'You can do anything you want to do.' Little did she know I would take her seriously," Tritch said. "She's still asking me when I'm going to get a 'real' job." Instead, Tritch is planning to get some more sea time under her belt, so she can stand for the U.S. Coast Guard's 1,600-ton license.

## Capt. Holly Scott



Another Women's Sailing Convention instructor was Capt. Holly Scott, a fifth-generation Californian who has been behind the tiller since she was three years old. After heading (somewhat) east to Colorado for college, she tried a year of teaching. "I couldn't do the inside thing," she realized, and returned to California.

She began her boating career heading the sailing program first for the Girl Scout Council of Orange County and then the Sea Scout base in Newport. After that, she spent the next 13 years running her own painting, varnishing and rigging business, Cats Paw Marine Services. Three years ago she got her Coast Guard license.

Today she holds two enviable boat-related jobs. From Monday through Friday she works as Director of Vessel Donations for the Southern California Marine Institute (SCMI) and on weekends she is captain of the 73-foot gaff-rigged schooner *Dirigo II*, which takes passengers from Long Beach to the Catalina Islands.

"The *Dirigo II* was built in the 1930s, and it takes a lot of grunt work to operate it — you need five people just to raise the main," she said. "Any of the passengers who are interested in helping out get plenty of opportunities. Even better, if they take one of our special learn-to-sail classes in the off-season, they get the opportunity to crew on the *Dirigo II* during our regular cruises — a great way to get a free, expense-paid trip to Catalina and hone your sailing skills at the same time." This is her third season as captain; last year her daughter, Katie, 14, joined the crew.

As much fun as she has heading the *Dirigo II*, Scott's day job at SCMI, scouting all over California for donated boats, seems equally fulfilling. "We have 50 to 100 boats donated each year — everything from dinghies to a 95-foot powerboat. The coolest part of my job is, once they're donated, I get to drive all these weird boats back to SCMI and then fix them up so we can sell them. It's like having a box of puppies — you get so attached to them and then you have to find them a good home. It's especially great when a young family buys one of our boats; you can imagine the fun they'll have with it," Scott said.

It hasn't been easy breaking into a man's world, Scott reported. "As dumb as it sounds, that prejudice against women is still there," she said. "It took awhile for me to get men to pay attention to what I was saying. My best advice is to have a sense of humor and be good at what you do. If you don't know what you're talking about, you're lost."

## Michele Rae



WSC seminar leader and BoatU.S. member Michele Rae knows all about breaking into a man's world. She's doing it in Australia, which, she said, is "super macho" compared to the U.S. Just last year she packed up her house in California, sold her furniture and moved aboard a 41-foot sailboat in Ayr, a village on the coast of Queensland. Recently, she received her Inshore Skippers and Coxswain license in Australia, the equivalent of the U.S. Coast Guard's "six-pack" license.

If you'd asked Rae 13 years ago whether she could see herself living on a boat, much less living in Australia, she would have laughed. She didn't even know how to sail. She was a licensed private investigator who had recently moved to California from the Midwest with her husband.

"I was so excited about living in California, because I figured I would finally learn how to sail, something I'd wanted all my life. Even though my husband wasn't interested, I started taking sailing classes. Once I learned the bow from the stern, I just started showing up at the pier to crew for beer can races," she said. "I usually bought my way onto the boat with a pan of lasagna."

Rae honed her sailing skills in San Francisco's weekend racing circuit. In 1998, four years after her husband was killed in a freak accident at work, she was asked to crew in the Hobie world championship off the coast of Queensland. "We did horribly in the race, but I fell in love with the little town of Ayr where the race was held. Life there revolves around swimming, sailing and diving. All of a sudden it came to me: 'If not now, when?'" she said.

"When" turned out to be a year later, when she bought her boat and moved aboard. The beginning was difficult. "Single women living aboard their boats in Australia are even less common than they are in the U.S.," she said. "At first people thought I was out to steal someone's husband. Then they thought I was gay. Now, they've begun to accept me as the 51-year-old person I am. I can tell it's getting better because now, when I ask a guy at the dock a question, he doesn't get condescending or reel off the information so fast I can't understand him," she reported.

Rae is planning a six-month shake-down cruise, buddy boating with another single-hander, to New Zealand or the Solomon Islands. "I admit it would be fun to have company on my own boat," she said, "but I've learned you have to go forward on your own. My boat name, *Dayenu*, really explains how I feel. It's Hebrew for 'Had God done far less than this, it would still be more than enough.' And it is."

## Women on the Web

BoatU.S. is committed to expanding the role of women in boating. A new Web site, BoatUS.com/women, has been launched as a resource for women interested in learning more about on-the-water opportunities available to them, whether sailing, racing, powerboating or fishing.

BoatUS.com/women also includes the BoatU.S. Women's Forum, moderated by *BOAT/U.S. Magazine* managing editor Elaine Dickinson, one of the many female managers and active boaters at BoatU.S.; a women's boating store; and links to many other boating-related organizations for women. The Web site highlights some of the nation's best women's boating and fishing training programs and seminars, including the SCYA Women's Sailing Convention.

To help us tailor our efforts to encourage more women to get into boating, visit the site and fill out the opinion survey, or e-mail your suggestions to [women@boat.us](mailto:women@boat.us). ■

— By Becky Squires