



On her harbor rounds, Beverly Noll kibitzes with fishermen in the Crescent City, California Dungeness crab fleet.



# The Life and Times of "CAPTAIN B"

Story and photos by D.B. Pleschner

*From deck hand to skipper of the 65-foot Ashlyne, Beverly Noll has fished shrimp, crab and swordfish from the Mexican border to Canada. After 15 years on the ocean, her femininity and sense of humor are very much intact—living proof that, as she says, "A woman can still be a woman and do this."*



Skipper Beverly Noll relaxes in the captain's chair on the bridge of the F/V Ashlyne, wearing her lucky striped socks.



The crew of the F/V Ashlyne empties the codend on a shrimp trip off the northern California coast.

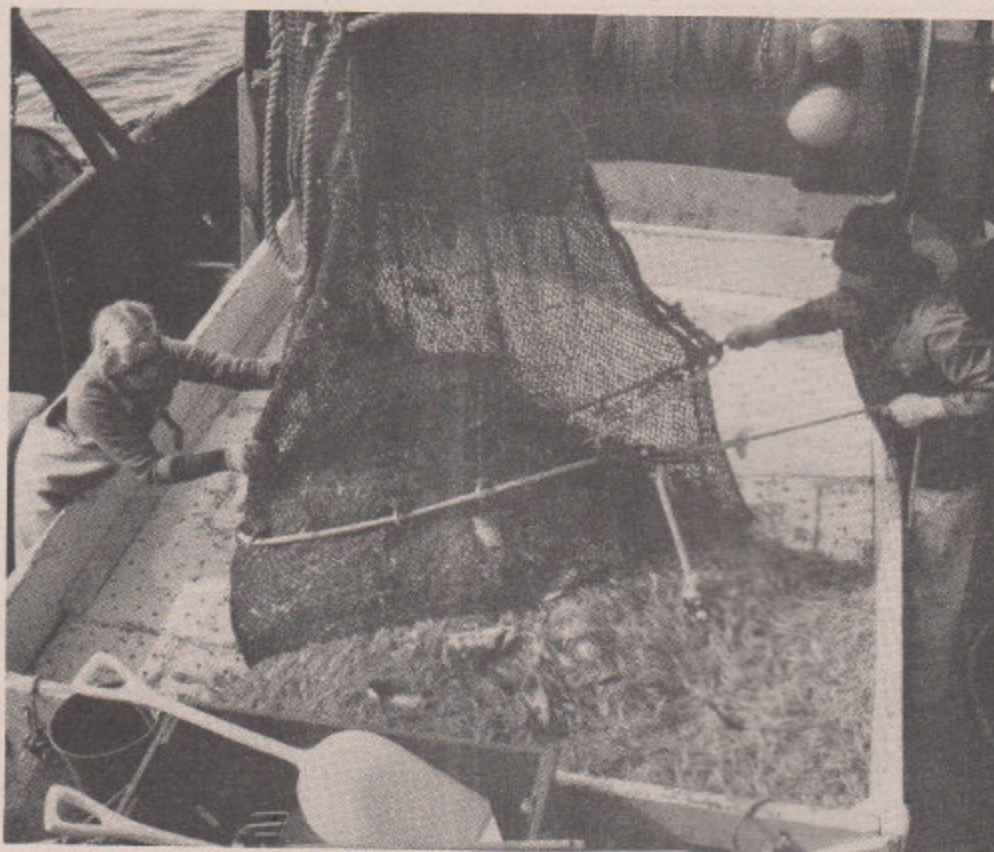
"I've made a lot of jokes about why I'm not home making cookies," Beverly Noll quips. Perched in the captain's chair, the skipper of the blue-hulled, 65-foot *Ashlyne* is in typical good humor, talking about her family life—and now her life alone—fishing. "A fella once told me, after eating my cookies, 'Bev, you'd better stay on the ocean.'" She peels an infectious giggle. The diminutive "Captain B," not much over five feet tall in her customary work shoes—red high-top tennies—is

the only active woman skipper she knows of in the "big boat" shrimp and swordfish fleets running, as she does, from the Canadian border to the tip of southern California. Winding up her last shrimp trip of the 1988 season, she sets course out of Brookings, Oregon into the maw of a building gale, headed home to Crescent City, California. Why would a woman choose to do this? She ponders the question a quick minute before answering, "I like the season hypes. All fishermen are gamblers—

nothing secure, nothing for sure. So, therefore, I must be a gambler."

In a gambling search for a simpler lifestyle, Bev Noll left her "... false eyelashes, high heels and painted fingernails, and bailed out of southern California in 1974," as she puts it, moving to northern California with her husband, surfing legend Greg Noll, and two sons, Tate, then 13, and Rhyn, 11. Landing in Crescent City, Greg "... caught a salmon and that was it," she says. Even though Beverly and the boys got green sick, the Nolls put salmon gear on their erstwhile pleasure boat, a 20-footer, and went trolling out of Crescent City. "We thought it would be a good lesson in economics," Bev reminisces. "We found out there was nothing simple about turning dollars into a boat and vice versa."

Their first year, the Noll family trailered their boat to Coos Bay in a homemade Metro van and lived in a camper on the beach, fishing salmon. In 1975 they moved up to a better



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boat—a 24-footer—and tried crabbing, starting out with five crab rings and two pots, just to catch enough to eat. “There were so many crab—we got so excited,” Bev exclaims, waving her hands in punctuation. Securing a market at a time when markets were scarce, they fished South Beach in Crescent City. “Every time we sold crab, we bought more pots, in increments of 10,” she continues. By the end of season, the Nolls had 75 pots which they ran three times a day. “And every time they came up, they were full.”

Working crab, Greg and Bev fished alone; Greg pulled gear while Bev drove. “I steered for one year and my old man yelled at me the entire season,” she chuckles. The next year, on yet a larger boat, a 43-footer called the *Dela*, the Noll family fished salmon in summer and Greg and Bev again

◀◀ The crew of the F/V *Ashlyne* haul back the net on a blustery day on the shrimp grounds off the California-Oregon coast.

crabbed alone in winter. But this time, Beverly insisted on working the back deck. “The first week was disaster,” she mugs. “I got ropes wrapped around everything.” But she learned. By the end of season in 1977, they had 250 pots: “Working the back deck worked out,” she says. “Actually, I prefer the back deck. It stresses me physically. You have to perform—push yourself to the max. I like that challenge—of doing better than yourself, better than what the ocean wants to let you do.”

**A**t the moment, however, the challenge lies on the bridge. With the *Ashlyne* rolling nearly rail to rail in the trough outside Point St. George, beating a path through 30-knot wind gusts, Captain B suddenly breaks off to study the color sounder. Feed looks good—better than it's looked in days. “I think there's shrimp down there,” she says, rubbing her chin. But to make a set

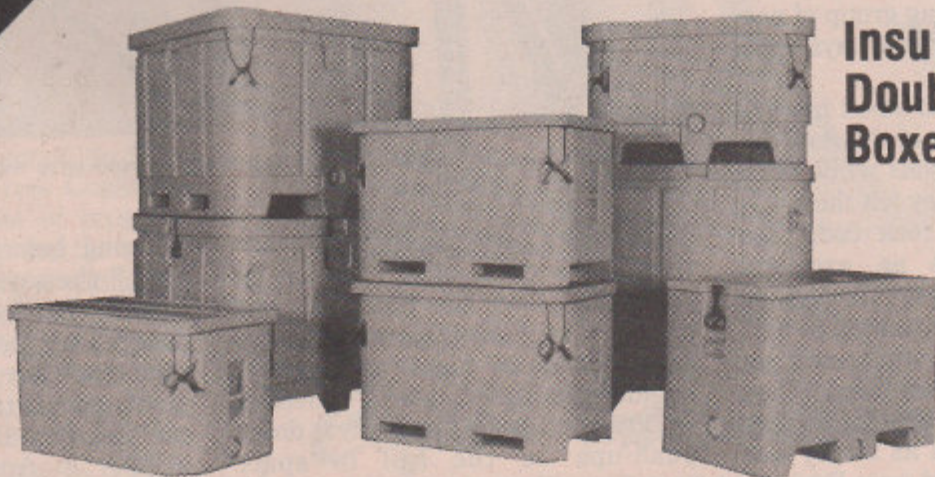
is to lose at least a couple of days' head start readying the boat for swordfish season. Moreover, fishing in this slop is more than risky—it's dangerous. Calling her crew to the bridge, she lays the decision on them: Is the chance of a fatter paycheck worth the time and risk? No! comes a quick reply as the radio crackles to life, one of Bev's fishing buddies ahead of her on the run home, calling to see how she is making out. “You're not gonna try to set in this?” he wants to know, incredulous. “Maybe,” she replies, winking. “Maybe.”

She studies the ocean for a long time after the call, then picks up the thread of conversation: In 1978, flush with success, the Nolls planned to build a new boat. “This boat was for sale, 65 x 18½-foot steel hull with a 12V Jimmy, so we bought it—jumped in with both feet. We renamed it *Ashlyne*,” Bev says. The Nolls had never been dragging, but despite the consensus that dragging would be too rough for a woman, they wanted it to

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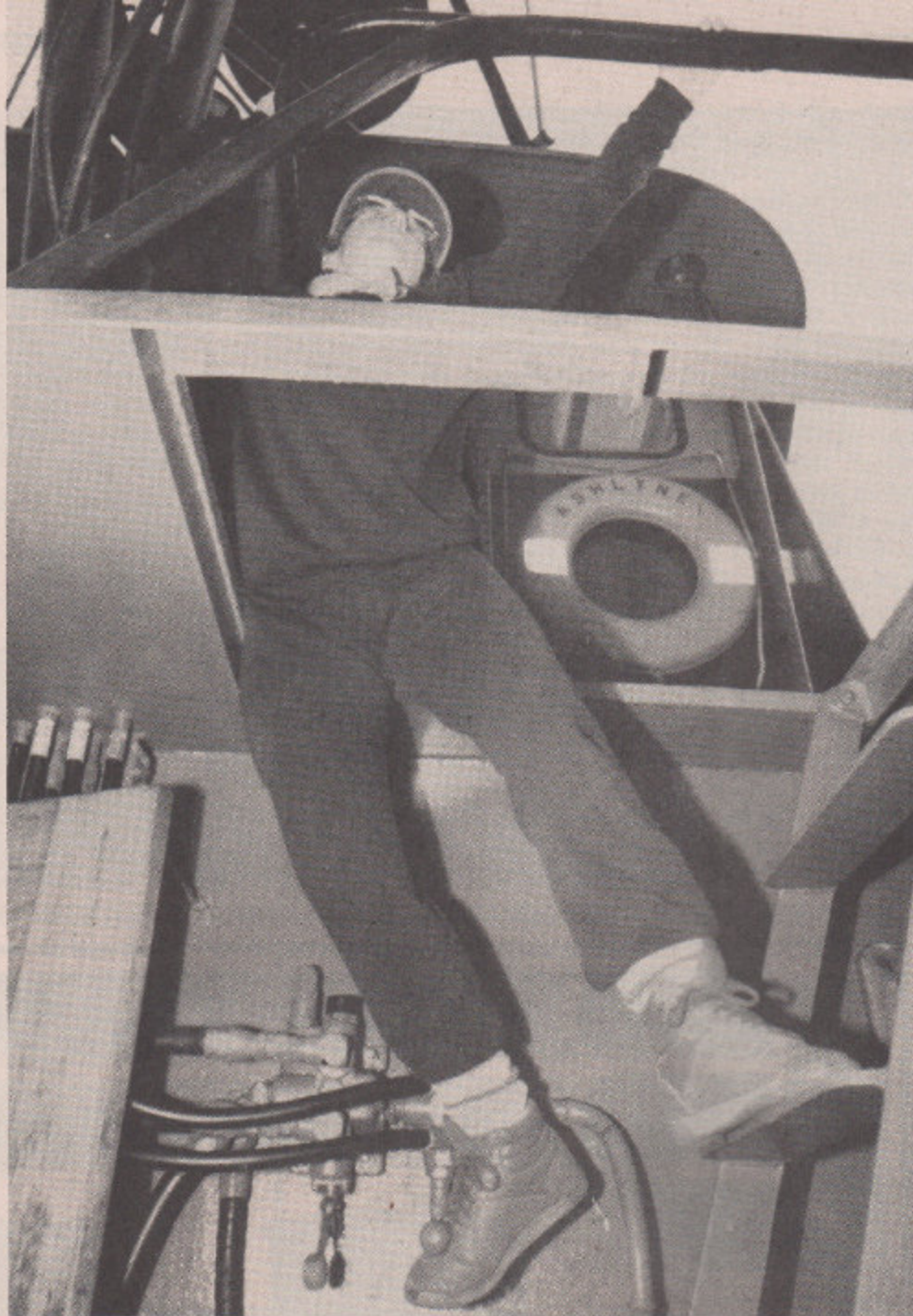
be a family operation, so they proceeded anyway. "It turned out that dragging was no big deal," she goes on. "Greg was a perfectionist about everything. He was responsible for putting the boat together. I was shy at first asking questions, I thought I was supposed to know. After a while I got over that."

She learned that the act of fishing is the simplest part of going fishing: There's vessel maintenance—gear, engine, hydraulics; personnel—crew, service people; ocean elements... "Everything has to mesh so you can untie the boat—then you go fishing," she says, chuckling. Then there's the savvy—the knowledge of species and ocean—local knowledge. Highline fishermen put it all together, "... they make fishing be something." Beverly Noll has done it, too. "Yeah, but I don't always make it click," she admits.

"I have consummate respect for fishermen who can put it together, and I regret it when someone complains that 'Fishing is all I know,'" she declares. "If anyone analyzed what it takes [to be a fisherman]—they know machinery and people, can sell a product, have stamina and discipline, can react in crisis—they could go anywhere and do anything. Fishermen are very qualified individuals," she adds, grinning unabashed at the spontaneous pep talk. "They're an interesting group of people and I like them. You always know where you stand."

Where Beverly Noll stood in 1978 was on the back deck of the *Ashlyne*, running it with her sons while Greg Noll ran the boat. They felt their way into dragging, first rock cod, then shrimp. "1978 was an excellent shrimp year," Bev says. "We decided shrimp was where we wanted to be." They also crabbed in winter and got into driftnetting swordfish. When Greg finally hired an alternate skipper to take his place, and as family was replaced with unrelated crew, Bev continued to work the back deck.

"I considered myself a good deck hand," she says. "After I gained confidence in myself, I wasn't afraid to say how I wanted things done—metic-



Compensating for her height, Beverly Noll finds an innovative way to operate the deck winches on the F/V *Ashlyne*.

ulous, with a particular order to everything." As deck boss, she was as perfectionist as her husband. And tireless. The *Ashlyne* shrimped by day and prawned by night, and Beverly handled half the load, shoveling 75,000 pounds in three days, doing push-ups on the rail in spare moments. "I was in top shape and could easily work a three-day trip, grab six hours of sleep and go back for another three days," she remarks, adding, "A skipper is a better skipper if he has been a good deck hand."

"Long before I began to run the boat," she says, "Greg gave me confidence that I could handle it." She dragged her feet until the fall of 1984, then made her first solo trip as skipper. Greg and the boys went crabbing that fall, then Bev went shrimping as skipper in April 1985. After hard times and scratch fishing during the El Nino years, the ocean was beginning to recover. Resources were on the upswing—for the first time in three years, things were looking good. Nonetheless, in the fall of 1985, the

Nolls lost the *Ashlyne* through PCA seizure.

Bev hired an attorney and filed an appeal; the countersuit was in litigation for almost one year, claiming the seizure stemmed from bad faith and bad banking practices. In September 1986 the Nolls won their case. But the hard-fought victory exacted a price: While Bev got back on the *Ashlyne*, Greg chose to stay with the *Dela*. The legal fight drained Beverly physically, emotionally and financially. To operate a boat properly requires working capital—more than she had at the time. So she sold the *Ashlyne*, then leased it back so she could do the job right.

"The tremendous support I received from the entire fishing community gave me the feeling that I must have done a good job," Bev remarks. Why so much support? Posing the rhetorical question, she speculates, beaming, "Maybe I smile a lot. Maybe people felt badly because they know how much I love this boat—it's home." Pensive for a moment, she adds, "Once in a while someone resents me captaining a nice boat—but that's their problem. For the most part, I'm treated very well. I have no problem—I'm not trying to prove anything. It's a matter of making a living—survival. And somewhere along the line, I carved a little niche of respect."

Maybe part of the respect came from Captain B's extracurricular activities. For years she has spearheaded the Crescent City chapter of the West Coast Fishermen's Wives Coalition, engaged in a multitude of projects. With Coast Guard help and the sponsorship of the Coalition, she initiated an annual, summertime safety and first aid course, including CPR, hypothermia and at-sea survival. Strong-arming fishermen to attend, she would tell them, "I'm not doing this for you—I'm doing it for me so if I go down, you can find me and save me."

Beverly also roused the community against offshore oil drilling, again working through the Fishermen's Wives Coalition. She helped organize the Crescent City Seafood Festival,

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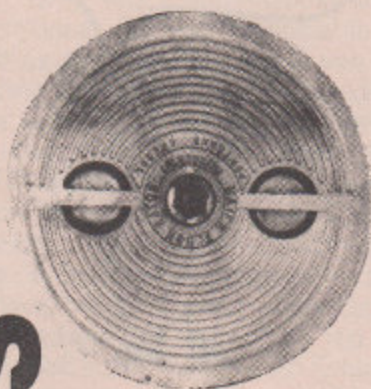
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The F/V Ashlyne lies in its slip on fishermen's row at the harbor in Crescent City.

sponsored by Del Norte Fishermen's Marketing Association and Commercial Fishermen's Wives, to build rapport between the fishing community and city. And she's an eloquent salesman, luring beach-bound women (and men) into politics. "I'm a rabble rouser—a pied piper," she says with a giggle. "I get out and stir everybody up. Fishermen duck when they see me coming because they know I'm going to ask for something." When a project is rolling under its own steam, Captain B takes off on another fishing trip.

No doubt she earned a measure of respect through sheer determination, besides the fact that she holds her own in production, working in male-dominated fishing groups. She remembers one particular swordfish trip—a huge fish was caught in the net and when son Rhyn tried to horse it through the fair leads, the net ripped and the fish slid through the hole, winding up

floating alongside the boat, held there by gaff, buoy stick—anything and everything available. "It was a Chinese fire drill," Bev laughs. She wound up prone on deck with her arms shoved through the scuppers, attempting to harness the swordfish's tail with a rope sling. "I wasn't going to lose that fish!" She didn't—and it dressed out at over 500 pounds.

Still chuckling at the memory, Beverly jumps down from the captain's chair to adjust course. Again ensconced, red tennies propped against the wheel, she remarks, "Out here, you could blame every problem you have on being a woman. I don't think that way—to me it's just doing a job. Maybe women feel they're unable to move forward because they lack the physical strength, hydraulic and mechanical knowledge." Hands waving emphatically, she adds, "I hope it helps them to know that there are tricks—ways around the lack of strength and

knowledge. They can do it."

Pushed, angry, determined, Bev learned to move weight by sliding objects, using leverage points. She gained leverage on a wrench by using a cheater. And she learned to ask for help. "There are many ways a woman can compensate; there are many things she can do on a boat—take care of the engine room, for example. Watch and learn. A woman has the advantage because she's not 'supposed to know.' Men don't mind helping—I get a lot of help from a lot of different guys," she comments, adding, "Don't be afraid to say you don't understand. Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty."

Notwithstanding that advice, Captain B's cardinal rule is, 'Don't forget to be a woman.' "A woman's attitude about herself on the ocean determines the attitude of others," she says. "Men like a woman to be a woman. You can maintain femininity and still function. I don't always look like a lady, but I always try to act like one—I am one." With a mischievous smile, she acknowledges, "Men like to tease. It helps to have a good sense of humor—in this business a woman really needs a sense of humor. That's the only way she'll survive in fishing."

Musing over ocean relationships, Beverly once wrote this passage:

"...Teasing and flak serve a purpose. They relieve the man's tension because she is in his territory. They relieve her tension because she doesn't always do everything right the first time around. Laughter is a great panacea."

"I feel that the more I'm teased, the more I'm liked," she remarks, adding, "Why you do this life has no bearing on your sex. On the ocean there is no gender: A fisherman is a fisherman. I am a fisherman—I don't like the word fisherperson."

She lapses into silence, watching the wind-tossed waves wash the window of the bridge while the *Ashlyne* plows slowly homeward. Finally she admits,



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Safely home without incident, Captain B races through the days, readying the *Ashlyne* to go driftnetting. On her way offshore to join the swordfish hunt with her group, she finds an area where conditions look particularly good for thresher shark. All alone, she makes a set: That night she pulls in 54 fish. "I almost left it—I had sword on the brain," Bev reveals later over the phone. "I thought I should run outside—I was torn—the big boys were outside. I was ready to run, then I asked myself, 'Why are you leaving a dollar?' I stayed another night and caught 159 more fish." Chuckling with delight, she says, "I fished three days all alone before somebody busted me." Finally, another fisherman on his way offshore spotted the *Ashlyne*. "Fish were lying all over the deck," Bev says, "and this fisherman is running circles alongside, watching more fish come over the rail, and he's shaking his head. All he can say is 'Jesus Christ!'"

**T**he fisherman told Bev she was fishing on the cold side of the edge—normally fish congregate on the warm side. "But I didn't move," she says. "I saw the feed and bait and worked it. That was fun. I just got lucky—I wore my lucky striped socks." She wound up with 300-plus fish in three days, the highlight of a season otherwise characterized by breakdowns. "We broke every trip until December—all net reel problems," she comments, adding that her season was "fair," considering. . .

Her lease up, Beverly Noll got off

the ocean in March 1989. "My family doesn't want me out there," she says. Son Rhyn asked her to help him put together a surf shop he is establishing in Crescent City, featuring a new line of surfboards with Greg Noll's old logo. Announcing the opening of the venture, the local press headlined, "The legend lives on." The retail store, which Bev is organizing, also will carry Greg Noll surfwear among the hot styles. "This is the first time in 18 years I've had to stay in one spot all day," Bev comments. "I'm learning all about track lighting—I had to make a re-entry into the 9-to-5 world." With a little giggle, she adds, "I'm not sure I can do this."

**C**aptain B is searching for a boat so she can use her swordfish permit again in 1989. "I'd like to participate in the swordfishery, if not on the *Ashlyne*, then on another platform," she says. Beverly recently got invited into another swordfish group and didn't know it. "It was unanimous—and one of the better groups," she adds, pleased at the offer. "I had to tell them I don't have a boat under me now." Moreover, she enjoys fishing with her old group, but with the secrecy of the swordfish game, she'd have to choose one or the other. Faced with a potential dilemma, she says, "I figured I wouldn't worry about it 'til I get a boat."

"Fishing is the great escape," she sighs. "The reality of land life doesn't exist on the ocean. But now," she notes, amazed, "I find I don't have headaches and cramped shoulders. I didn't miss the anxiety and hype of getting ready for shrimp this year—but I've been busy, too busy to go to work. 10 years ago, if I'd been skipper and knew then what I know now, I think I could have given it a run—competed well. I don't like to lose. But now my head is turning in other directions." She chuckles softly. "I may want to walk away gracefully at this point and know I did the best I can do. Maybe it's time for a change," she allows. "We'll see. We'll see." **PF**