



Source: Sharon Rowley. Pioneering Boat Captain Rita Gartrell on the Princess

## Remembering Rita

by Sharon Rowley

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If my brother, sister and I wanted to spend the day with our mom on Mother's Day, we had to get up before dawn on a chilly morning and go fishing. David, Patty and I were excited about this planned surprise in 1988, so bundled up warm, grabbed our fishing gear, and quietly left our families to meet at Bob's Sport Fishing on Morro Bay's waterfront. Our mom, Rita Gartrell, was happily surprised when checking in passengers to see her three kids with fishing poles, a bouquet of flowers, and a chorus of "Happy Mother's Day Mom!" At that time, Rita was the captain of the *Shirl-Lee* out of Bob's. Before that, she worked at Virg's Landing for several years.

The thrill of fishing and bringing home fresh rockfish, halibut, salmon and other fish has always been a big draw to Morro Bay. Many landings have come and gone in the past, such as Graham's, Brebes, Mikes, Captain Midnight, Hart's, Bob's, and more. The captains and crews on the many boats over decades have made for

colorful history and memories. In 1979 Rita was the first female to be among the captains that took passengers out for fishing trips on the central coast.

We were grown and had families of our own when our mother started working as a galley girl/deckhand for Virg's Landing in 1968. She later worked at Hittles Landing, where she was encouraged by the owners to try for an ocean operator's license. She got it and ran the *Big Mama I*. About a year later, Hittles sold their 2 boats and closed. Virg's Landing bought the *Big Mama I* and Rita went to work for them. She mostly ran the *Princess* for rockfish and albacore. She developed a big following because anglers had consistent good catches and they loved her friendly, kind spirit.

Over the years, Rita was a mentor to many deckhands, some later became captains. She was also an inspiration to a few women who became captains after her. My daughter, Michele Leary, and I were two of them. She and her brother Brian Rowley got their starts cleaning boats for Grandma Rita, then as deckhands for their parents, John and I.

Rita passed in 1998 before Michele became a third-generation lady captain in 2004 at age 28. Coincidentally, the first boat Michele ran was the *Fiesta* for Virg's, which was formerly the *Big Mama I*, the first boat Rita operated years before.

Michele eventually bought her own boat, renaming it the *Rita G* after her grandmother. She started her own business and paid the boat off in 2 years, but worked too hard wrecking her back. Due to medical issues, she passed in 2012 at age 36. Rita and Michele still go to sea in a way. Virg's bought the *Rita G* and it still takes people fishing today.