

## **May Quinn, an *Apapa* tabby.**

Agnes May Quinn (1898-1960) was a stewardess with Elder Dempster in 1939. She was sailing just four after Julia finished, so she would have been shipmates with people who had known Julia.

May got the job because she was working as an assistant at the magazine kiosk on Liverpool landing stage. One of her customers suggested 'Why don't you try going to sea? I'll speak for you.'

Maybe she was bored – she'd been doing the job since the early 1920s it seems. But she got the job, and registered as a British Merchant seaman 180552.

In her personal life seagoing was normal. Her paternal grandfather Peter Quinn senior (1824-c1900) had been a ship's carpenter /shipwright.

And she was the daughter of retired ship's hairdresser, Peter Quinn (1864-c1943) who mainly sailed from Furness Withy, Harrison Line and Warren Line.

He seemingly had never influenced her to go to sea. Certainly some dads hated the thought of their girls going on the ships, because of the promiscuity there could be in these groups of lonely men far from home.

May usually lived with her sister's family and dad in Crosby, the Mersey suburb full of shipping clerks and stewards. But at that time she was living closer to the sea, and ironically to Julia Andrews: in Everton's Herschel Street.

When she joined Elders in 1938 she was 40. That was not untypical. Shipping lines preferred women who'd already sown their wild oats. It caused less on-board sexual rivalry amongst the men (the majority of whom were in their 20s.)

Seemingly she made only a few trips, after signing on with the *Apapa* in 30 November 1938.

No, it wasn't that she didn't like ED, it seems. It was Cupid's fault. On the *Apapa* she'd met a steward, Billy Sullivan, (1885- c1957).

We don't know how long Billy had been working for ED, but he'd been a steward way back in 1908 and was still one in 1933. His dad was a mariner too, so maybe the Sullivans were a long-term Elders family.

May was a spinster but used to her sister's three girls and her brother's two daughter. Billy, who was thirteen years older than her, had been a widower since 1930 and had three grown-up children.

May seemingly left the sea after she married in August 1939. Women did leave on marriage, but also the war had begun and many stewardesses left, thinking women should not be in risky situations.

Maybe Billy carried on sailing in the war, for as long as stewards were needed.

In the early 1950s May and Billy they were living near her sister's, at 56 Brownmoor Lane, Crosby, Liverpool. The semi smelt like nothing I'd ever smelt before, but I now think it was cumin or cardoman.

The mantelpiece was decorated with brass vases, presumably that had come back from their travels to West Africa. I still have one.

I can't imagine she'd have been racist, or made unracist by her experiences sailing to and from West Africa. She was more uncritical than that.

She didn't talk about what she'd seen or where she'd sailed to, to our family. It seemingly had not had a big impact on her. Or perhaps the experiences felt unsayable. The name Elders was not a familiar one.

I never had the opportunity to be spellbound, as Julia's grandchildren were.

This Elder Dempster couple were married for eighteen years until Billy died in 1957. May was very keen on sewing and she made money doing alternations to ladies dresses (mainly shortening the voluminous skirts of cotton frocks.) The trimmings became part of a patchwork quilt made by my mum, May's niece.

It was the very absence of information about her time at sea that impelled to research women like her. Silence was a spur. So was seeing her name in the *Apapa* crew list, in Newfoundland's Maritime Archives in the 1990s.

I'm so pleased she's got a place in this Elders project. And I hope many more Elders' women's stories come out as a result of it.