

Basic Detail Report



00023049

Title

Ethel May Sterling and her daughter Margaret Francis Sterling

Date

September 1918

Primary Maker

Samuel J Hood Studio

Medium

Emulsion on nitrate film.

Name

Nitrate negative

History

In the early 20th century, before his career in photojournalism, Sydney photographer Samuel J Hood relied on the income from portraits he took of captains and their families as they came into port in Sydney. The Sterlings were one of the families he photographed. At the

centre of the family, was Captain Edward Robert Sterling, who built his sailing career from modest beginnings as a sailor and progressed to captaincy before finally becoming a shipowner of a famously ill-fated fleet of sailing ships. Captain Edward Robert Sterling was born on 3 October in about 1860 in Sheet Harbour in Nova Scotia, Canada. According to one news report, he ran away from home at the age of nine to begin his career at sea, and by 21 he was a captain. At some point after this and possibly before he migrated to the United States in 1883 he married Helen B Watt (b 1866), also from Nova Scotia and the daughter of a ship's captain. Sterling and his wife were based in Seattle, Washington and had three children: Ray Milton (b 1894), Ethel Manila (b 1895) and Helen Dorothy (b 1896), who was known by her second name. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Sterling plied the timber trade between America, Australia and New Zealand. The family's connection to Australia was so strong, that on 17 December 1916, Ray married Ethel May Francis at St Peters Church in her hometown of Hamilton in Newcastle, NSW. Two years later, their daughter Margaret Francis Sterling was born on 8 August. Hood's series of intimate portraits taken on board E R STERLING between 1910 and 1925 are among his most compelling photographs. Shortly after these photographs were taken, a crippling series of disasters plagued the fleet. In 1922 the four-masted schooner HELEN B STERLING sunk and left Captain Sterling with losses totalling £53,000. In May 1926, Sterling Shipping Co was forced to sell the four-masted schooner ETHEL M STERLING as they were unable to pay for the two 240-horsepower diesel engines they had installed shortly

after it was acquired. In 1927, Sterling's beloved six-masted barquentine E R STERLING encountered icebergs, a heavy gale and a hurricane before arriving in London in a shambles on 28 January 1928. The voyage took a total of nine months and E R STERLING was towed to shipbreakers. In 1929, the six-masted wooden schooner DOROTHY H STERLING was auctioned to the Harbors Board in Adelaide, SA because Sterling could not pay the harbour dues and crew wages. Eventually, the vessel was sold shipbreakers and then the hull was towed to the North Arm of the Port Adelaide River to be abandoned in the Garden Island Ships' Graveyard. Its sister schooner, HELEN B STERLING also had to be sold off. It too ended its days dismantled and stripped of anything of value by shipbreakers. It was set on fire in 1934 in its 'last resting place' in Kerosene Bay, now Balls Head Bay near Waverton in Sydney. Little information is currently available about what happened after this period until E R Sterling's death, possibly in 1943. One newspaper article after the E R STERLING disaster states that the captain had had a 'long and adventurous seafaring life' and 'seemed little the worse for his experiences' ['The Argus', 24 Mar 1928]. Other reports described him in one word – 'heartbroken' ['The Mail', 24 Mar 1928]. Journalists' impressions aside, Captain Sterling was a traditionalist. He could not, in his own words, 'abide steam', he revelled in the 'beauty and mystery of the ships, and the magic of the sea' and he had a profound pride in his vessels and crew. He was of a certain school that bitterly rejected the development of steam-powered vessels and stubbornly stood by his fleet of sailing vessels, with devastating consequences. In the end, Sterling was a man torn between his love for the tall sailing ship and the stark economic reality caused by his unwillingness to embrace the modern age.