

## “With the Best of Them”

A lady sailed on the first race to Bermuda, in 1906. Others followed in 1910, and subsequent years. While each could be called “an exceptionally clever yachtswoman,” as a reporter described one of them, most and maybe all also happened to be their skipper’s spouse.

Not so the lone young woman on the 1934 race: Lorna Whittelsey. At 22 that year, she became the first female to be *recruited* to a Bermuda crew.

Young Lorna was already a star. Sailing out of Greenwich, where she was raised, she had won the U.S. women’s championship four times, among other feats. Said The New York Times, in its story on the 1934 race’s start, from New London that year: “Miss Whittelsey has a reputation as a sailor of the first rank, able to trim a sheet or handle a tiller with the best of them.”

Which is why she was summoned, the day before the 24 June start, to join the crew of Philip LeBoutillier’s 54’ yawl *Stormy Weather*.

She knew the new Olin Stephens creation well, having steered her on sail-testing trials that spring. But her Bermuda summons came as a surprise.

The day before the start, Arthur Knapp phoned the Whittelsey house in Greenwich, and got Lorna’s mother to let her do the race. Her father was away. “It’s lucky he wasn’t in town, or else he wouldn’t have let me go,” Lorna recalled in a 1987 interview. “He found out after.” Sam Wakeman had had to drop out of the crew because of an America’s Cup commitment. “So that’s how I got to go; they needed a helmsman.”

Lorna packed hastily and bought “sea boots on the way up to New London.” She got “plenty” of attention there – from other sailors and from folks in town for the Yale-Harvard boat races.

As for the 650-mile race to Bermuda, Rudy Schaefer’s new *Edlu* led the 29-boat fleet, and *Stormy Weather* wound up seventh. But “that was a good race,” Lorna recalled – “worked hard, and had a good time.” Never allowed to go forward or up the mast, she just steered. Wary of seasickness, she stayed on deck nearly all the way to the finish.

Back home that summer, she won her third successive Syce Cup – the Long Island Sound championship – and then her fifth Adams trophy. The women’s national championship series was sailed that year in 30’ Atlantic Class sloops – in the waters off the American Yacht Club in Rye.

-- from the Bermuda Race Recognition evening at AYC, November 2005

Were there any problems with CCA? “The race organizers, they don’t have anything to say.”

(Source: Lorna Whittelsey Hibberd, Draft Oral History 87-18/Y Mystic Seaport, 1987)

It’s my understanding that Lorna had served as helmsman during *Stormy*’s sail-testing trials in the spring of 1934.

### **Allegra Knapp Mertz**

I don’t know the answer to the question whether she was the first female watch officer when she sailed in Gabe (I’m pretty sure that was his first name) Gianni’s *Pacifica* in the ‘60s, but I’ll check it in the Bermuda Race archives, which usually has entry forms for each boat.

### **Jim Mertz**

When did Jim overtake the previous leader in the race to greatest participation? The answer is either 1996 or 1998.

Ed Greeff was that earlier leader, I’m sure. He had a three-race head start on Jim, having raced in 1930, 1932, and 1934, while Jim’s first race was in 1936. Ed sailed in 24 or 25 races (he was unsure in his 1987 oral history at Mystic Seaport). By Jim’s own count, Jim has sailed in 29 races between 1936 and 2004. That indicates that his 26<sup>th</sup> race was in 1998, his 25th in 1996.

I hope this has been helpful

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## American YC and the Bermuda Race

TO: Tim James

FROM: John Rousmaniere (July 10, 2005)

I'm writing the centennial history of the Bermuda Race and can answer the questions you sent Talbot Wilson. In exchange, I hope you will send me your list of American YC prize winners.

### Lorna Whittelsey (Hibberd)

In 1934 Lorna, 22, sailed to Bermuda in the new *Stormy Weather*, skippered by Rod Stephens. This made her the *fourth* woman to sail in a Bermuda sailboat race, and the fifth to go in any race from the U.S. to Bermuda (one woman crewed in a powerboat race). The first sailing woman to go was in the crew of a 28-foot LOA entry in the first race in 1906; the second was in a 75-foot schooner in the fifth race (1910); and the third in a 50-foot schooner in the tenth race (1930). The only time any fuss was made about a woman's participation was in 1906.

When Lorna was interviewed for an oral history at Mystic Seaport in 1987, she had the following to say about that race (this is my summary, with some direct quotes):

Raced to Bermuda in *Stormy Weather* (SW) in 1934. Sam Wakeman was meant to sail in *SW* but was tied up with an America's Cup boat and they needed a helmsman. "My father was out of town, It's lucky he wasn't in town, or else he wouldn't have let me go. He found out after. My mother let me go. Arthur Knapp got permission for me to go from my mother. And Arthur Knapp wasn't racing on *SW*, but Phil Le Boutillier wanted a helmsman. So that's how I got to go; they needed a helmsman."

All the others were men. She wasn't allowed to go forward or up the mast. She steered. She never went below because she was wary of getting seasick.

Asked if she got some strange looks from other boats, she replies, "Oh, plenty. Well, you can see. That was when we used to start off in New London after the Yale-Harvard crews. I didn't know I was going until the day before. . . . We bought sea boots on the way up in New London. But I had a wonderful time. . . . That was a good race, worked hard, had a good time. . . ."