

Launching the Quint Fleet

By May 1943, new vessel launchings from Twin Ports' shipyards were getting decidedly "old hat." An average of 10 ships every month were launched in Duluth or Superior from the spring of 1942 to the fall of 1944, and residents grew somewhat blase' about what was a twice-weekly event someplace in the harbor.



History's first surviving quintuplets, the 9-year-old Dionne sisters made their first trip outside of Canada in May 1943 to christen five ships launched on the same day at Superior's Butler Shipyards. The event attracted more than 15,000 people and worldwide publicity. (Lake Superior Marine Museum Association Archives, Lake Superior Maritime Collection at University of Wisconsin-Superior)

When the Walter Butler Shipyards began laying plans in the early spring of 1943 for the launch of 17 N-3 cargo ships for the War Shipping Administration, company president Robert Butler suggested a five-ship launch for May. At the time, celebrities, athletes and Hollywood film stars were touring the nation's defense plants, selling Victory Bonds and raising the morale of wartime factory workers. Someone in the Butler offices came up with the idea of inviting Canada's famous Dionne quintuplets to officially christen the five ships.



Five sister ships, N-3 Class coastal freighters, poised for launching on May 9, 1943, at Butler Shipyards. All 255 feet long and 45 feet wide, they were the Moses Gay, Asa Eldridge, Gordon Gates, Bailey Foster and Watson Ferris. (Lake Superior Marine Museum Association Archives, Lake Superior Maritime Collection at University of Wisconsin-Superior, Harold Andresen Photo)

The Canadian government, anxious to demonstrate solidarity with its fighting partner south of the border, agreed to the request, and the date was set for Sunday, May 9, 1943. The promotion was a stroke of genius. The Dionne Quintuplets were the five most famous children in North America. Born to French Canadian parents in Corbeil, Ontario in May 1934, they were the first quintuplets in history to survive.¹ "The Quints," as they soon became known, were taken from their impoverished parents and made wards of the state. They were installed in a modern provincial hospital just down the road from the family home, and they quickly became Canada's biggest tourist attraction.² The Quints' parents, Oliva and Elzire Dionne, waged a bitter custody fight for their daughters, and the girls were returned to the family in early 1943.³

The Quints and their mother, Elzire, arrived in Superior by train on Saturday morning, May 8, 1943. They spent most of the day Saturday aboard their special Pullman car in Superior and were up at 6 a.m. Sunday for an automobile tour of the Twin Ports prior to the 2 p.m. start of the launching ceremonies. When they arrived at Butler's Hughitt Avenue slip for the launch, more than 15,000 people were on hand to witness the event. It was the Quints' first trip outside their native Ontario, and they didn't disappoint their fans. Decked out in red shoes, the 9-year-old girls enthralled the crowd with a chorus of songs in Quebecois to honor their mother's birthday. Then Annette, Cecile, Emilie, Marie and Yvonne stepped to the launching platforms, each wielding a bottle of champagne.⁴ One by one, the *Rodney Baxter*, *Richard Bearse*, *William Brewster*, *William Bursley* and *Ashmun J. Clough* slid into the Butler slip.⁵

The launching of the Quint fleet propelled the Twin Ports' shipbuilding industry to national prominence. Millions of Americans and Canadians listened to the celebration on the national radio networks, and millions more in the summer ahead would see theater newsreels of the launch.⁶ For Robert Butler, the Quints' appearance was an unprecedented coup.⁷ For the residents of the Twin Ports, the Dionne quintuplets provided a weekend of memories that would last forever.

¹ The Dionne Quintuplets, www.schwinger.harvard.edu/~terning/bios/Dionne.html The babies were born prematurely, and the five girls weighted a total of 14 pounds at birth.

² "The Dionne Quintuplets: A Depression-era freak show," www.cnn.com/US/9711/19/dionne.quints/ The hospital was quickly dubbed "Quintland," and more than three million visitors toured the hospital in the late 1930s. Quintland was a more popular tourist attraction at the time than Niagara Falls.

³ Ibid. The Quints were accompanied to Superior by their mother, who celebrated her 34th birthday aboard the train. See Photo Caption, *The Superior Evening Telegram*, May 8, 1943, p.1

⁴ "Dionne Quintuplets in City; Plans for Gigantic Launching Complete," *The Superior Evening Telegram*, May 8, 1943, p.1

⁵ "Walter Butler Shipyards, Inc., Superior, WI, Record of WWII Shipbuilding," p.1. All five vessels were

destined for service with the British merchant marine.

⁶ Gustaf A. Nordin, "15,000 See Quint Launching," *Duluth News-Tribune*, May 10, 1943, p.1

⁷ "Superior Yesterdays - 40 Years Ago – September 15, 1955," *The Superior Evening Telegram*, September 15, 1995. In the postwar years, Butler went on to serve as U.S. Ambassador to Australia and Cuba. He died in New York in 1955,

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