

## TITANIC CENTENNIAL

by Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.  
for the Sunday Gazette

Today, April 15, marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragic sinking of the *Titanic*. The basic facts regarding the event can be summarized in five sentences:

On April 3, 1912, the *RMS Titanic* left Belfast, Ireland, near where it was built at the Harland & Wolff shipyard for J.P. Morgan's White Star Line. After taking on passengers at Southampton, England; Cherbourg, France; and Queenstown, Ireland, the *Titanic* began its maiden voyage on April 10 bound for New York. At 11:40 p.m. on Sunday, April 14, 1912, 375 miles southeast of St. John's, Newfoundland, the *Titanic* sideswiped a large iceberg opening an intermittent stretch of gaps along 300 feet of hull below the waterline, flooding more watertight compartments than the 4 of 16 it could tolerate. *Titanic* sank at 2:20 a.m. on the next day, drowning 1,530 people, mostly men, leaving adrift in lifeboats 705 survivors, mostly women and children. Two hours later, they were rescued by the rival Cunard Line's *S.S. Carpathia* and brought 963 miles southwest to New York to continue their lives as best they could.

### A needless tragedy

The *Titanic* sank 20 years before I was born, but no other tragedy since the dawn of my awareness has so often insinuated itself into the reveries to which I am prone. There is a global community that shares that experience, most of whom because the *Titanic* was the largest, most beautiful, most luxurious ocean liner built in its day, and because it sank on its maiden voyage. To my mind, what is paramount is that its demise, and that of 1,530 unfortunate souls, just should not have happened.

Absent any one of three human errors, *Titanic* would not have hit the iceberg. Binoculars in the crow's nest, left ashore by oversight, would have provided more time for avoidance. If Captain Edward Smith had heeded the eight wireless ice warnings received during the day and taken a slightly longer route at lower speed, the ship would have reached New York. And even with the limited time available after sighting, the berg was avoidable with an optimum steering maneuver, one that a highly experienced captain inexplicably failed to execute.

Two other post-collision factors contributed to the great loss of life. One was the fact that *Titanic* carried only enough lifeboats for a third of those aboard, and many of those available were launched only partially full. The other was the nearby presence of another ship, the Leyland Line's *Californian*, only ten miles away. Although its crew had spotted the *Titanic* and its distress rockets and could have reached the scene in 38 minutes, the ship just steamed away. *Carpathia*, 58 miles away, responded quickly but needed two hours to reach and rescue 705 survivors in lifeboats.

### NY State connections

Five members of the Ryerson family whose summer home was in Cooperstown were on board the *Titanic*. Four survived, but its patriarch, Arthur Larned Ryerson—often described as a “wealthy steel magnate from Philadelphia”—did not, nor did his more famous friend, John Jacob Astor. But the Ryerson family would not have been on board had they not received a telegram that Arthur Ryerson, Jr., age 20, had been killed in an automobile accident in Pennsylvania on April 8.

Albanian Gilbert Tucker, a survivor whose account of the disaster appeared in the *Times Union* of April 19, 1912, died at age 88 and is buried in the Albany Rural Cemetery in Menands.

Two British friends heading for Troy were lost, Thomas Everett and Frederick Shellard. Everett had never been there; Shellard was returning to his home on Jacob Street. Henry Spinner, another of the many men lost, was heading to Gloversville.

Kornelia Andrews, vice-president of the Hudson City Hospital, was returning home with her sister and their niece. All survived, but Kornelia died in Hudson on December 4, 1913. Niece Gretchen Longley died on August 11, 1965, aboard the cruise ship *Constitution* in the Mediterranean.

### **Schenectady connections**

No survivor or victim was a resident of our city or county as of April, 1912, but two listed their intended destination as Schenectady. One was 18-year-old Edward Willey, a farm laborer from Drayton, England, who boarded the *Titanic* at Southampton. He was travelling to Schenectady, possibly to work at one of the many farms in Glenville, Niskayuna, or Rotterdam, perhaps even the Mabee Farm. His body may be one of several unidentified *Titanic* victims who were recovered and buried in one or the three cemeteries in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where 121 victims are interred.

The other person heading to Schenectady was 20-year-old Ellen May "Nellie" Hocking, the fiancée of Schenectadian George Charles Hambly, born in Penzance, Cornwall, England, who had come here to work for ALCO. Ellen Hocking was also born in Penzance, but two years earlier. She travelled on the *Titanic* with her widowed mother, Elizabeth "Eliza" Hocking, her sister, Emily Hocking Richards, a brother, and her two young nephews, George and William Richards. All survived except for the brother, Richard Hocking.

Eliza Hocking's sons Sidney and Richard had immigrated to America in the early 1900s and were living in Akron, Ohio. She was traveling to Akron to live with them and be there for the marriage of Ellen to George Hambly. The Hocking and Hambly families knew one another in Penzance and it was there that George met, courted, and proposed to Ellen. Because of the mourning associated with the disaster, the wedding did not take place until May 14, 1913. Eliza lived in Akron for two years until, still despondent and possibly by her own choice, she was killed by a trolley on April 15, 1914, precisely two years to the day that the *Titanic* disappeared into the depths of the Atlantic.

In Schenectady, Ellen and George Hambly had two sons, William and Robert. Ellen worked at General Electric and later at Ellis Hospital. At various times the Hambly family lived at 337 Avenue B, 435 Avenue A, and 1674 Avenue A. With them or near them at other Schenectady addresses over several years were George's mother Mary, his brother Walter, his sister May, and his sister Lavenia, a cashier at the Wallace Company. George died at age 49 on December 10, 1938, making Ellen a young widow of 47, but she never remarried. At the time of his death, he was a cost accountant for General Electric.

### **Titanic, the Movies**

Films about the Titanic tragedy have appeared regularly over the years, from mid-1912 through the James Cameron movie TITANIC of 1997. In May of 1953, 61-year-old Nellie, a Schenectady resident of 40 years, was a guest of Proctor's Theatre for the TITANIC that starred Clifton Webb and Barbara Stanwyck. At the time, Ellen was living at 2105 Dean Street in Niskayuna. The story of her visit to Proctor's was colorfully told by Jeff Wilkin of the *Gazette* in his Life and Arts blog of October 16, 2008 (*easily found via Google*).

The most accurate *Titanic* movie, because of lack of fictional characters, is the docudrama *A Night to Remember*, the film version of Walter Lord's best-selling book of 1953. If you are reading this in the morning, there is still time to watch it at 2 p.m. this afternoon at the George E. Franchere Education Center at the Historical Society's Mabee Farm Historic Site in Rotterdam Junction. Admission is free.

### **Hambly Genealogy**

Ellen "Nellie" Hocking Hamby died at age 72 on October 14, 1963 in Middletown, NY, while visiting her son William, a building contractor. Her obituary said that she had retired after working for General Electric and Ellis Hospital in Schenectady where she had been living at 1475 Kingston Avenue, and that she was survived by two sons and five grandchildren. Both she and her husband, George Charles Hambly, are buried in Parkview Cemetery. Since 1963 is a mere 49 years ago, there must be several Schenectadians who knew her.

When I inquired to that effect in the March-April issue of our Historical Society newsletter, I received an

excited call from Gioia Ottaviano telling me that living on Avenue B, a block or so away from Nellie when she lived on Avenue A, she knew her!

The Ottaviano family has a fabulous history of its own, of course. Gioia is a highly active and revered member of the Historical Society, Friends of the Library, and several other local organizations. She is the sister of Orazio "Bud" Ottaviano, former City Editor of the *Gazette*, who died in 1998.

An online search revealed that there are many Hamblys living around the country, but none in Schenectady. One entry indicated that an "Alison Hambly" had once lived here, so I emailed: "Alison, would you be the granddaughter of Nellie Hambly, a *Titanic* survivor who lived in Schenectady, NY?"

A scant five hours later, she replied: "Yes, I am. And I love Schenectady, the town where I was born."

Edwin D. Reilly, Jr. is President of the Schenectady County Historical Society and is a regular contributor to the Sunday Gazette opinion page.