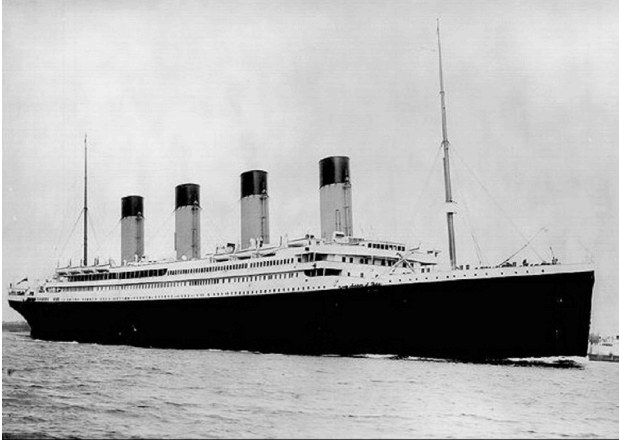


Local Titanic Survivor's Story

Interview Conducted by C. Lawrence Bond 1970
Compiled and Edited by Anne Hills Barrett 2012



On April 15, 1912, the largest marine disaster in history occurred with the sinking of the Titanic and the loss of over 1,500 lives in the frigid waters of the north Atlantic. Over the years, articles, movies, and documentaries have told and re-told the story of the ship's last hours until most of us can recite the basic

premise without much difficulty. This is a unique story of the Titanic; one of the survivors, Mary Conover Lines Wellman, then 16 years old, was aboard Titanic with her mother. Later, after her marriage, she moved to Topsfield, passing away in 1975. Topsfield historian C. Lawrence Bond interviewed Mrs. Wellman in 1970. The following describes her experience of the sinking of the Titanic.

In her own words

My name was Mary Conover Lines and my parents lived in Paris, France, where my father was in business for 19 years and where I was married at the end of the First World War to my husband, Sargent H. Wellman.

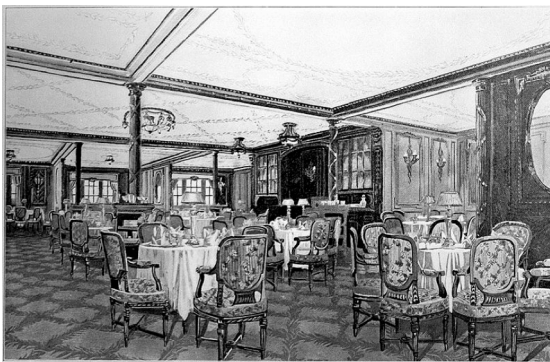
And then we (Mary and her husband) came from Paris to live in Topsfield.



Mary Conover Lines Wellman (right)

Voyage to America

We (Mary's family) had not taken very frequent voyages because, of course, there were little flights - airplanes - and it took, still, at least a week or 10 days on any steamship coming to this country. So that our returns to the United States had been few and far between. But my brother was, in 1912, graduating from Dartmouth College and so we made a great effort to be here as a family. My mother and I came on ahead as my father could not take too long a time away from his work. Just for fun and excitement, my father got a state room for my mother and myself on the new Titanic, which was to make its maiden voyage at that time.



Dining Room Aboard the Titanic

It was a very delightful ship. Of course, it would not have seemed very extraordinary in this day and age. But in that day and age it was a very interesting departure, both in its furnishings, decorations and, above all, in what was greatly touted by the White Star Line, the fact that it was unsinkable. They had a system of bulkheads, which, supposedly, if the ship's outer hull was breached in any place, would contain water in a small space and so permit the ship to carry on. This was greatly talked about and presumably influenced the fact that the British - though they are the most careful sailors and meticulous safety people in the world - completely neglected to afford any means of escape from the ship.

Danger Ahead

It was extremely cold and bright starlight. We had known all day that we were approaching ice. There had been warnings. And there were some discussions going on of

which we heard rumors, and some people overheard these arguments between the captain and Mr. Bruce Ismay, who was the managing director of the White Star Line and who was taking the opportunity to make this maiden voyage on this new ship of his line. Captain Smith wished to go south and go more slowly. We were taking the fastest route to the United States as we wished to make a fast and quick voyage, and this entailed going very far



Titanic Captain Smith

north, just south of Labrador, the rather northernmost passage. I think usually they had tended to go a little bit south of that area. And particularly in view of the ice warnings, many people felt that we should have immediately turned south. But, that was not the decision and, of course, icebergs are peculiar creatures. It so happened that the one we hit was the type that is not quite seen, and it was mostly underwater, so really, no blame can be attached to the first officer who was conning the ship at that point on deck. Because the minute he saw the iceberg, he tried to swerve and avoid it thinking that it was just on the surface. But it was very far below the surface and tore out practically a half of the side of the ship. So that the famous bulkheads, on which they had counted so much to save the ship, proved no use at all. And we were told afterwards, to add to this, that the construction was rather peculiar. The bulkheads were not fastened to the deck above. There was a space between the top of the bulkhead partition and the deck above, where the water could pour through. So, in no time at all, two thirds of the ship were flooded. Immediately, everyone - the officers, of course - knew that she would have to sink.

Impact

So then, this happened about, I would say about half-past 11, 11:30 at night. And it was so very cold that my mother and I had retired quite early, I should think about 10 o'clock or half-past nine, because it was so cold. We went down to our cabin, they had an electric heater in each cabin and it made it more comfortable there and we had gone to bed to keep warm. And then, we heard this, like a big blow on the ship. The engineer on duty was very quick-witted and a very remarkable man, because he immediately started blowing off steam. If he had not, the ship might have blown up. But he saved it and the electric lights went out for a while, but they were able to get those functioning again in a very short time, so that we had light. Of course, the escaping steam made a fiendish noise and the fact that it was extremely cold, I think, kept people from rushing up on deck - at least most of them - to see what was happening. Our cabin steward came by quite shortly after we heard this blow, and said that the captain wished us all to stay in our cabins and not go rushing around the ship. So, unfortunately, my mother and I did not have the imagination or the thought to get dressed. But we stayed as we were told in the cabin. I always thought that he should have come back and told us the truth, rather than say that we should stay in our cabin, but I think, probably, by that time he was too busy doing something else.

I don't think anybody got left in their cabins. I think my mother and I, being just two women alone, were rather timid and didn't feel like rushing out on deck, while probably others were not so timid and had gone up to see what was really happening.

Then, about half-an-hour later, I'd say long about midnight or so, our next-door neighbor came running down to his cabin - he and his son were very delightful people from Hawaii and belonged to one of the families who had settled there as early missionaries and then become interested in many different things in Ireland. This father, I think, was talking to his son - they were rushing around finding their lifebelts. I opened the door to ask what was going on and he said, "My goodness, are you still here? Get up on deck as fast as you can. The ship is sinking." We asked him where the lifebelts were and they were right on top of the little closet space on a pole, which was quite a chore, getting them out of there. But we finally managed and, by that time, it consumed so much time that we thought it best to go up on deck without stopping to get dressed.

So, we went up, putting on as many coats and other outside things, and when we got up, we found that everybody was congregating on the boat deck. They had lowered the boats to the deck below and they had two big barrels of blankets that they had opened up and they were handing out to each person as we moved along. Well, we seemed to be halting for a while and not moving forward very much, so I suggested to my mother that I go back and see if I could rescue a few clothes and we might be able to get dressed properly. So, I rushed down and that's where I remember there were so many flights, so I think we must have been very far down in the ship.

There was a slight moment of panic amongst the people in the second class, who were climbing the ladder - the stairways - to the first-class boats, which they were allowed to do. There was an officer there directing them, and there was a slight moment of panic,

wondering whether they were going to be able to make it, but there was no real panic.

I can't remember (which side of the ship they were on). I'd have to see an account, perhaps, one of the good accounts that have been written, because the boats that were on the upper side, they weren't able to be lowered. That was one of the great tragedies, because they were not lowered in time and, by the time the boat had assumed such a list, they could not be lowered. So we must have been, of course, on the side that was leaning.



Photo of a Titanic Lifeboat Taken from the Carpathia

By the time I got back, I found that the last people were moving up on deck. I thought, "Well, we'd better get up on deck and forget about the clothes." So, we did and we went up and some of the very famous people who were on the ship were in line, walking up the stairs. Mr.

Astor, I remember, was just ahead of us with his young bride, and then we got up on deck and we got handed up the blankets and we got pushed into a boat.

There was absolute quiet. There were very few people speaking, practically none. A few women were crying because their husbands were making them go on the boats when they did not want to. One or two did stay with their husbands, I remember. The orchestra was playing - they never stopped - and they were, of course, like all the officers; they didn't desert their posts. One young man was standing there, the third or fourth officer, helping

us into the boats and, of course, none of these people were saved. A few of the sailors, naturally, were allotted as crew members to the boats so that they, quite properly, took their places.

Abandoning Ship

We got into the boat and our boat was lowered without any mishaps, though there had been others. The boats had never been lowered and when it came to lower them in the actual fact, many of them did not function. No lifeboat drill was given, as is now customary on most ships. We didn't even know where our lifebelts were. Some boats had actually overturned and others were lowered with very spasmodic feedings on the lines so that it was a very perilous progress because a ship of that day is nothing compared to the size of a ship of today. When you stand on the upper boat deck and look down, it's a very long way.

There wasn't even a light. There wasn't any water, any food. There were a couple of oars and that's all. And that was one other complaint that they had, that the lifeboats were not stocked for survival at all. I had with me, as it happened, I had picked up off the table or somewhere, a little flashlight that someone had given me - one of those little bitty ones that they used to have - a penlight. And I had it in my pocket and it was the only thing that we had on the boat to find the oars and find the oar locks and get ourselves organized to try to row. And I had the most terrible time the next day trying to find it.

Unfortunately, when they had tried to evacuate the ship, right after the first moment when they realized that there was no way of saving her, people refused to go in the boats. So, consequently, there were two or three boats that left with very few people, which was most unfortunate, of course. We tried to hang around the ship after we were lowered,

hoping that we could pick up a few people who might have been able to escape from the current when the ship went down, but our sailors - the men who were manning the ship - were very unwilling to approach any nearer, because they said there would be a terrific suction.

At Sea

It was a very dark night. I mean, there were stars, but you couldn't see anything. And we had no idea where we were. We saw the ship go down, of course, and there was a terrific roar which occurred when it did so. And after that - it must have been about 1:00 or 1:30 - after that, we just shouted around. We didn't know, no one told us whether there would be any rescue, whether they had been able to contact any ships. And it made one realize that the Marconi, which was the new invention of the age, was a very remarkable thing and that, unfortunately, not enough ships had it. Maybe some of those ships which might have come to our aid did not have it installed and others did not have a round-the-clock operator - a man was just on in the daytime and went to bed at night so that the signals were not received by many ships.

I couldn't say that I saw them (the lights of the SS California, a nearby ship that failed to respond to Titanic's distress signals), but there's no question that she was there. And that always was an unanswered question of, "Why didn't she come?" Because, finally, when no answer was given to the Marconi, the Titanic sent off a lot of rockets and the answer was that they just thought we were having a celebration. And it was really pretty ironic.

It was about four hours (the time between the sinking of the Titanic and their rescue). First we were

in complete darkness. We couldn't see any and couldn't hear any (boats). Several people in the boat were, naturally, quite hysterical, but one such woman, had left her husband on Titanic and she was pretty upset. And it was a very interesting coincidence that this was in 1912 and in 1914 I met her at a French hospital where I was serving as a nurse's aide and she remembered my name and she came up to me and she said, "Oh, Mademoiselle, what a terrible life. I left my husband on Titanic and now my fiance is at the front." So she had no luck...

About 4 o'clock in the morning was really a very wonderful sight. That was when we saw the iceberg and, if you've ever been in the far north, you get a very white light just inside dawn, it's sort of a very pearly white effect. And right around us there were five enormous white icebergs and the whole sea was covered with floe ice. And then we could see two or three little specks in the distance, which were other boats. When, to our great joy, about an hour later, we saw the Carpathia and that, of course, was a very wonderful moment because we saw ourselves sitting out there in a sea of ice with no where to go.

Rescue

Well, we had a most marvelous welcome by the Carpathia. I don't think any of the accounts that have been written have ever given enough credit to the captain of the Carpathia, Captain Rostron, who made this mad dash, driving his ship 'til they thought



Millionairess and Titanic survivor Margaret Brown presenting Carpathia Captain Rostron with a cup in gratitude for his heroic rescue of the Titanic survivors

the boilers were going to burst. And the people who were on it were extremely nice. They were mostly people, not very wealthy, who had taken the Carpathia, which was a slower boat, to Europe. Many of them were school teachers who were having sabbatical leave. They had not terribly much clothing with them, not much luggage when you compared all of the magnificence on the Titanic, but they just turned themselves inside out to help us and gave us extra clothing - taking it practically off themselves to give to us. They doubled-up in their cabins in order to give some people space, though some of us slept on dining room tables and benches. But these great people shared everything with us. And then, they turned around and took us to New York. They were almost a third of the way to Europe, and yet they made no complaints. The boat turned around and took us into New York. And we ate up all their food, I know, when we were just approaching New York on the last day. It was getting quite late and I went and asked the dining room steward if I could have a cracker, a biscuit, and he said, "Oh, madam, there isn't a biscuit left." So it was about time we got to New York.

A very fair number of all the classes on the boat managed to be rescued. I know the great



Astor Perished Aboard Titanic

thing that I would always question is whether it was right to say always "women and children first," because the men are very valuable people and, of course, it's very hard to say why they should be left behind. But I wouldn't say that there was any differentiation between the number of people saved in the different classes. (In answer to whether important people were given preferential treatment) I wanted to bring out the fact that

people in the third class got just as good treatment as somebody like Mr. Astor (Astor did not survive) and it was really remarkable. I think the British are to be very greatly commended on their handling of that aspect of it.

There have been, of course, a tremendous number of safety rulings and one of the great things that were given so much promise in the Second World War which we call sonar was born right after that disaster. The British developed it exactly for that purpose, to sound for icebergs. And when we came on another trip later, perhaps after the First World War, the captain quite proudly showed us all the equipment which they had for sonar findings. And then, of course, boat drills and all the things which all came in after that.

(Asked about recovering from such an ordeal) Well, of course, it was a little difficult because we landed in the United States in a month that crawled with relatives and going to a great many different affairs, as my brother was graduating college and various other things and there were friends that we hadn't seen for years, so that it wasn't possible to entirely put it behind you at once. I guess it wasn't until we got back to Paris that we were able to really resume a normal life.

People were rather too much taken up with pride over this new boat and its wonderful features and all that and I often think that, sometimes, pride does go before a fall.