

After 72 yrs., Titanic survivor talks to press about fatal night

by Kris Kopp

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For 72 years she has kept her memories of that miserable night to herself, always refusing to tell reporters what she saw, what she felt.

"When I came to Chicago they would pester me and pester me," she said of the aggressive reporters who pursued her. "My aunt just wouldn't permit it."

The only people who could coax any information out of her at all were grandchildren writing book reports about the sinking of the Titanic. .

Out now. one of her grandchildren is a reporter and 87-year-old Anne McGowan has agreed to make an exception.

She emerges from her bedroom carrying a package wrapped in orange tissue paper. Inside are yellowed and ragged newspapers from 1912 with screaming headlines such as "Liner Titanic Sinks -- 1300 drowned, 866 saved."

The clippings arouse the memories she has struggled to repress all these years, and as she slowly begins to speak, her eyes grow teary.

McGowan was 15 at the time and traveling with her Aunt Margaret McGowan from Ireland to New York on

the newest luxury liner, the Titanic. It was the largest ship in the world and was reputedly unsinkable. "God or man could not sink this ship," McGowan remembers people saying as they boarded.

"**I FELT SO** sure of the safety -- everybody did," McGowan said. "Wealthy people had waited on lists to get on the ship."

McGowan remembers enjoying the lovely flower gardens and other luxuries on board. She also took part in the activities, even the adult dance on Sunday, April 14. (The memory of her naughtiness makes her giggle.) That's where she was when the confusion began.

"I was at the party, and there were a bunch of drunks there, my aunt wanted me away from the party, but everyone was having so much fun," McGowan said.

She doesn't recall feeling any jolt or bump, but suddenly officers and crew members were rushing around and the word spread quickly that the ship had hit an iceberg.

She asked a crew member if the ship could be saved, and he assured her there was no chance of that.

The Titanic sideswiped the iceberg, which rose 50 to 100 feet above the water, at 11:40 p.m. But it wasn't until 12:05 a.m. that the first orders were given to lower the lifeboats. "'WOMEN AND CHILDREN first,' is what they shouted.

Kris Kopp is a correspondent for The Herald's Neighbor section and granddaughter of Anne McGowan, a survivor of the Titanic disaster of April 15, 1912. As a child, she was in one of the first lifeboats to be lowered.

"'You take her, you take her' -- they just grabbed me the way I was, wearing just a dress and shoes; they would not even let me take my purse," McGowan recalled. "I was just numb and it was so cold out on the ocean."

As her lifeboat descended toward the water, McGowan wondered what was happening to her Aunt Margaret. They had been separated in the confusion, and McGowan was worried about her.

"The whole time in the lifeboats the crew just kept telling me, 'Don't worry, your aunt is in a lifeboat on the other side, and she'll be all right.'"

McGowan was not the only one grieving the possible loss of a close relative. On the ship there were several newly married couples.

"Women wouldn't leave their husbands," McGowan said. "They were screaming, and I could hear gunshots in the background. Apparently, some of the men had tried to dress like women in order to be rescued, and they were shot."

EVEN IN HER LIFEBOAT, men were begging to get in "'Let me in or I'll tip the whole lifeboat,' is what one man said," McGowan said. "Of course, we had to let him in."

While drifting in the lifeboats, the crew suddenly realized that the suction from the sinking ship would draw the lifeboats in, so they tried to get the lifeboat as far from the Titanic as possible "We knew we had to stay far away," McGowan said.

"Oh yes, we wanted to stay far away, and the suction did take a couple of the lifeboats in." While bobbing up and down in the waves, the survivors still could see the ship, and they heard the band still playing "They just kept playing 'Nearer, My God, My God, to Thee,'" McGowan recalled. "Then the ship just busted in half, and that's when all the screaming started. It was just so terrible; I guess a boiler had bust."

THE TEMPERATURE WAS

But at 4 a.m., the first lifeboat floated up to the Carpathia, the ship that had received the Titanic's signals.

From 58 miles away the Carpathia had received the message, "Come at once, we have struck an iceberg," and began steaming to the spot.

By the time McGowan's lifeboat was hoisted aboard the Carpathia, her eyes had begun to bleed, apparently from the salt water and wind, and she was shivering violently.

"By morning we were dripping wet," she said. "We were chilled, but the fright alone was enough to chill our bodies. I didn't know if there was any chance. One ship had already refused to acknowledge the signals before the Carpathia came through. You don't know how awful it was."

Hesitating for a few moments, McGowan brings up the most painful memory of all. She never saw her Aunt Margaret again. She believes her aunt's lifeboat was sucked into the whirlpool created when the Titanic finally sank.

"I am still upset because I don't know what happened to my aunt," she said calmly. "In the newspapers, when we got back, they had her listed as a survivor, but I can't believe that."

IN BOOKS WRITTEN about the Titanic, McGowan's name, along with her aunt's, is listed on the passenger list, but Anne McGowan's name is in Italics, which means she was a survivor. Her aunt's name is in plain type.

McGowan has read some of the many books that have been written about the Titanic and there are some that make her laugh. "There are so many lies," she said with a giggle.

Although she doesn't talk much about surviving the ordeal, she has found that when she docs, many people don't believe her. That doesn't bother her.

"A lot of people tell lies about being on the Titanic," she said. "I don't care if people believe me, because myself know the truth."

Besides taking her aunt and leaving her with some terrifying memories, the sinking of the Titanic also has left McGowan with a great fear of boats and airplanes.

"When I woke up after getting off the Carpathia, a sailor said, 'Look! You can see the Statue of Liberty! Take a good look at the other side, because you will probably never go back there,' he told me, and I said, 'You've got that right, I sure won't.'"

Since that time, Anne McGowan has done all of her traveling by foot, car, train, bike or bus.

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