

ROCHESTER WOMAN TELLS OF TITANIC SINKING IN 1912

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Mrs. John Black Barely Reached Last Boat To Leave Ship, And Tiny Craft Was Nearly Drawn Into Great Vortex

by Samuel B. Covey

"No, I am not averse to another ocean voyage, although I have not been on one since, for I realize that the sinking of the Titanic was the world's greatest marine disaster and its like probably never will happen again."

Such was the declaration of Mrs. John Black of 11 Kay Terrace, the only Rochesterian who survived the Titanic disaster, as she looked back over the 19 years that have elapsed since the world's largest steamship collided with an iceberg and went to her doom, carrying 1,517 souls with her, on the night of April 14, 1912.

Mrs. Black, then Miss Lillian Bentham, 17, was returning with a party of 11 from a trip to Europe. Only two others of her party were rescued, Mrs. Lillie Renouf of Elizabeth, N.J., and Miss Emily Rugg of Wilmington, Del. With these she frequently corresponds. Mrs. Renouf's husband, two brothers and a cousin went down with the ship.

"Although the passengers were being taken off in the lifeboats, I did not think the Titanic was going to sink," said Mrs. Black. "It was so big, so magnificent, that I did not think it possible. I had gone to my stateroom and it was just before the last of 12 lifeboats put off that one of the young men in my party rushed to my stateroom and told me to hurry on deck, that the ship was going down."

Just In Time To Escape

"I reached the deck with him just in time to get into the boat before it was lowered from the davits. I recall that the officer on deck shouted to the seaman in charge of the lifeboat to pull away quickly, that the Titanic was going down, and the suction would pull us under. A man jumped from an upper deck and landed in our boat just as we pulled away."

"We had just moved a few yards from the giant ship when she was broken by the explosion of her boilers and sank in two sections. The suction did pull us back toward the great hole in the water the ship left as she plunged. But we kept afloat, a frail craft loaded with women and children, with the exception of the seaman in charge and the man who had jumped."

"The greatest horror of the experience was the eight hours we spent floating about until we were picked up by the Carpathia. At first the sea was smooth as glass but it was literally dotted with human forms swimming, clinging to wreckage, fighting to climb into the lifeboats. Most of them were lost."

Lifeboats Separated

"Toward morning the wind freshened, and the boats, which had been lashed together, tossed dangerously and crashed against one another, so they were cut apart. Then the lifeboats separated and drifted in all directions."

Mrs. Black said the women and children in her boat suffered extremely from cold and exposure and that most of them were hysterical.

"For my part, I began to realize that I had lost nothing compared to others, who had been compelled to see their relatives and friends go down with the Titanic. There was a French woman there, too, who was very much possessed. I helped the seaman with the oars and did what I could to comfort the others."

"Toward morning we came upon one of the collapsible canvas boats, in a sinking condition, with about 20 men on it. They were huddled together, stiff and cold, absolutely helpless. In their midst was an apparent millionaire, dressed in evening clothes and a fur coat and wearing a life preserver. He had been to a gay party in the first cabin the night before and was gloriously intoxicated. He did not seem to realize the situation and was having the time of his life."

Took Men In Boat

"I helped the seamen pull those 20 men into our boat, which already had more than 30 in it. We had to pile them on the bottom of the boat, like so many sacks of flour, because they were unable to do anything to help themselves. The boat was very much overloaded when the task was finished."

Mrs. Black said the boat drifted on with the wind, which had kicked up considerable sea, until sunrise.

"That was the most beautiful sunrise I have ever seen," she continued. "The sun came up like a great ball of fire, casting its rays on a large iceberg behind us, causing the berg to glisten like gold. And then, far off in the distance, we saw smoke, thin and indistinct at first, but gradually coming nearer. Then we made out what it was. It was a ship, answering the SOS call. It was the Carpathia."

"Talk about your thrill of a lifetime. To me, and I guess to all of the others in that boat, that was the most wonderful ship in the world."

"Then our hearts sank with terrible fear as the ship disappeared. We were sure we were lost. But it came into view again and hope revived. Several times it did that. We did not know at that time that the Carpathia was steaming about the ocean, picking up the survivors from the different lifeboats that had been so widely scattered."

Lifted On Deck

"It finally came to our boat and we were lifted on deck. They used ropes with a seat on it for the adults. The children were pulled up in rope baskets. We were given every care on the Carpathia, and it must have been a task for that ship to get us all back to New York, for the Carpathia is a small boat and was greatly overcrowded."

News dispatches of 19 years ago cited Mrs. Black as one of the heroines of the disaster. Books published concerning it tell of her sacrifice in taking off her coat and giving it to an unprotected man.

"I had two coats and could spare one," she said modestly. "One of those men was virtually dead when we pulled him into our boat. Seven of them died from exposure."

Mrs. Black has been married 13 years. With her and her husband lives her mother, Mrs. Mary J.

Bentham, who spent many anxious hours after the sinking of the Titanic, news dispatches having reported her daughter as both a survivor and a victim. Mrs. Black says she suffered no ill effects of her experience and was all right a few hours after she had shaken off the effects of the cold and exposure.

"But I would not care to go through it again; perhaps next time I would not be so fortunate," she said.

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