

Reliving A Tragic Night On The Sea

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Searching for one's roots has become a national pastime. What use to take years to research has become much simpler with the use of computers. Genealogy is no longer the sole intellectual occupation of a few scholars. Anybody can tract the history of their ancestors and one of the pitfalls is finding a family tree populated by scoundrels. But just as often, sprinkled among the branches of quite ordinary people, there may be heroes, too.

Janet Thayer Blicke of Eugene, Oregon found a hero in her family tree and passed the information on to her uncle Keith Thayer of Hanford.

In this case, the hero is the young John Borland Thayer, the fourth to bear that name. Thayer, better known to his family and friends as Jack, was one of the survivors of the Titanic and a sixth cousin to Blicke's father, Calvin Thayer and to her Uncle Keith.

With the release of the blockbuster movie "Titanic," there are many stories being told about that tragedy and among them is the account of Jack Thayer.

Jack even wrote a small, practically pamphlet sized, book about that terrible maritime disaster. The booklet titled "The Sinking of the S.S. Titanic" was published in 1940 and again in 1974 by 7C's Press, Inc., and it contained only 31 pages, including sketches and photos. The author wrote the account primarily as a family record in memory of his father John Borland Thayer III, who lost his life in the disaster. The record has finally reached the West Coast branch of the family after all these years.

If you saw the movie or have read about it you already know that the date was April 14-15, 1912 when the huge "unsinkable luxury liner" hit an iceberg and sank. The ship was carrying 2,208 persons. Only 703 managed to leave the ship in the lifeboats, leaving 1,553 to go down with the ship. Of those left behind, 42 were saved. Jack Thayer was one of the 42.

Going back to the beginning of the story, Jack was only 17 and perhaps it was the fact that he was young and athletic that he survived.

He had boarded the ship for its maiden voyage along with his father, who was then first vice-president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and his mother Marian Longstreth Thayer in Southampton, England. with them was Mrs. Thayer's maid Margaret Flemming. On the crossing, the family had two first-class staterooms.

Heading into the channel out of Southampton, the Titanic broke the moorings of another ship docked nearby. It was the S.S. Oceanic. Suction of the Titanic screws caused the Oceanic's stern to swing out into the channel within a yard or two of striking the Titanic. This near accident, as Jack wrote, was considered an "ill-omen by all those accustomed to the sea."

He describes the luxurious dining and the social conversations with several prominent families as well as

Thomas Andrews, one of the ship's designers; Archie Frost, the builders' chief engineer; at least 20 of his assistants; J. Bruce Ismay, president of the International Mercantile Marine Co. and chairman of the board and managing director of the Oceanic Steam Navigation Co., owners of the White Star Line.

The night of the terrible accident, Jack was about to climb into bed when he felt the ship sway slightly. The ship's engines stopped and voices and running feet could be heard on deck. Jack called to his father that he was going up on deck to see the "fun." His father decided that he would dress and join him.

Although no iceberg was visible they were informed that the ship had hit one. After some milling about on deck, Jack and his father came in from the cold. It was then that they met the designer Andrews, who predicted that he did not "give the ship much over an hour to live."

Jack remarked, "No one is better qualified to know."

At 13:15 a.m. the stewards passed the word for everyone to go below and dress in warm clothing and life preservers. Jack and his father went below to find his mother and her maid fully dressed. They hurried up to the lounge on "A" deck which was fast becoming crowded.

Jack writes, "At 123.45 a.m. the noise on deck was terrific. The now idle boilers were blowing off excess steam through relief valves and the crew was launching distress rockets. Word was passed for women and children to board lifeboats on the port side."

The Thayer party proceeded to the port side of the ship. Jack and friend Milton Long were separated from the rest and they moved to the starboard side of the ship to collect themselves and decide what to do.

At 1:45 a.m. the ship was down at the head and the bow covered with water. Jack and Milton watched as the last boats were loaded. It was a confusing scene and Jack decided against trying for a lifeboat. They witnessed only a few cowardly incidents and many heroic acts.

Milton talked Jack out of trying to swim to a half-full lifeboat. It wasn't until later that Jack came to the full realization that the water temperature was 28 degrees and most deaths occurred from the freezing cold and not drowning. The stern lifeboats, four on the port and four on the starboard side had already left the ship. One of the first boats to leave carried only 12 people, Sir Cosmo and Lady Duff Gordon and 10 others. Most of the boats were loaded with 40 to 45, with the exception of the last few to go. And they were loaded to full capacity. The boats could hold over 60 people, but the officers were afraid to load them to capacity, fearing that they might have buckled or broken from the weight as they were suspended over the water from 60 feet above.

Jack and Milton did their best to stay away from the crowd of men, hoping to jump clear of the ship and swim away from the suction as it sank. When they finally jumped into the freezing water they were only 12 to 15 feet above the water. Milton was sucked onto a deck below and drowned while Jack, a strong swimmer, was able to push clear of the sinking ship. Later, Jack realized that his watch had stopped at 2:22 a.m.

Jack was struggling and freezing in the water but rather than swim away immediately, he turned for a moment to watch the ship break up. He saw the second funnel break loose and fall into the water in front of him. Again he was sucked under the water.

Later when pieces of the story were put together it was speculated that his father, who was last seen standing under the second funnel, had been struck and killed by it.

When Jack surfaced again he found himself next to a collapsible lifeboat which was floating upside down.

Already there were several men clinging to it. Jack was helped onto the boat and eventually there were 28 men hanging on for their lives before rescue came.

Jack tells of that terrible night on the capsized lifeboat. They had to remain motionless, afraid they would fall into the icy water if they moved at all.

Daylight came and they were finally allowed to untangle themselves from the huddled mass on the boat. With the aid of a whistle they were able to summon other lifeboats to come to their aid. Two lifeboats from the Titanic took the 28 men off their precarious perch and in doing so undoubtedly saved their lives.

In his story, he recalls how the night was shattered for 20 or 30 minutes as those in the water cried for help until they could no longer withstand the cold and exposure. But the partially filled lifeboats standing by never came back to help. It is believed that the survivors were afraid that the boats would be swamped by the people in the water. Whatever the reason, it is hard to understand why they made no move to help.

Jack writes, "How could any human-being fail to heed those cries?" He continues, "The most heartrending part of the whole tragedy was the failure, right after the Titanic sank, of those boats which were only partially loaded, to pick up the poor souls in the water. There they were, only 400 or 500 yards away, listening to the cries, and still they did not come back."

When Jack and his companions were finally taken off the collapsible boat, and the two lifeboats came to the rescue, Jack's own mother was manning one of the oars.

By 7:30 a.m., the Carpathia had arrived on the scene to rescue the survivors. Jack climbed aboard and there was his mother waiting at the top of the ladder. Their joyful reunion was short-lived when they realized that Jack's father had not been among those saved.

Jack writes that he was given a cup of brandy, the first alcohol he had ever had in his life. After a nap he woke up feeling "fit and well, just as though nothing had happened."

When he learned that J. Bruce Ismay, the chairman of the Oceanic Steam Navigation Co., owners of the White Star Line and the Titanic, was on board he searched for him. He found Ismay seated, in his pajamas on a bunk, staring straight ahead, shaking like a leaf.

"I am almost certain," he says, "that on the Titanic his hair had been black with slight tinges of gray, but now his hair was virtually snow white. I have never seen a man so completely wrecked. Nothing I could do or say brought any response."

Jack's perfectly planned life was to return to Haverford School outside of Philadelphia. Upon graduation, according to his father's plan, he was to go to Princeton, From there, London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna where he served an apprenticeship in private and commercial banking houses.

Jack, it appears, did follow the plan for his life but, certainly it was never the same after what happened that fateful night in 1912.

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