

## William J. Mellors

by Robert L. Bracken

### ***Voyage***

Wednesday 26 March 2008

**A survivor emerges from the mists of time.**



William J. Mellors c. 1925

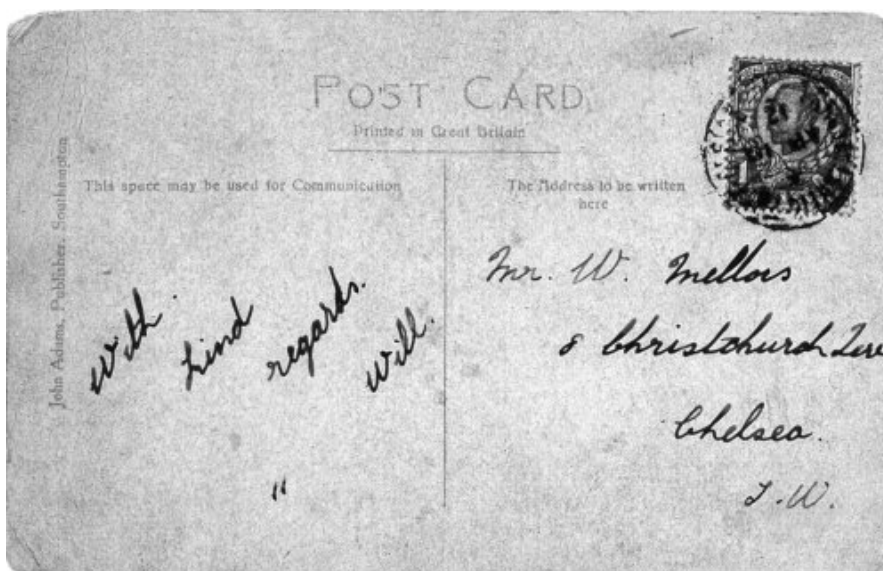
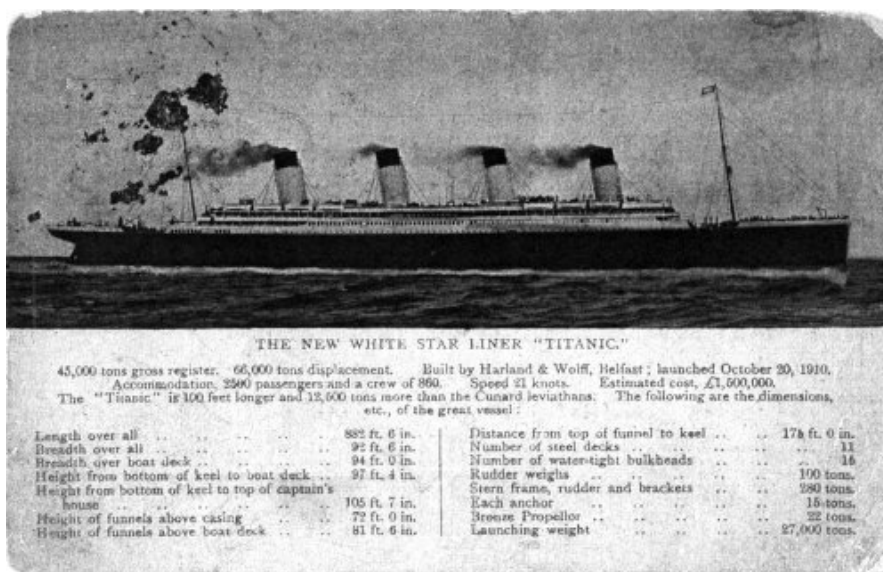
Early last year, I received a phone call from my friend and fellow researcher, Mike Poirier. He knew that I had been researching *Titanic* survivor William J. Mellors and had hit a "dead end" in terms of his post-*Titanic* life. Mike informed me that he had come across the website of The Whitaker Center for Science and the Arts in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which was featuring a *Titanic* exhibit, highlighted by the *Titanic* memorabilia of William J. Mellors. I contacted the exhibit's director, John Elias, who sent me a syllabus of the items on display and the name of the materials' donor, Thomas C. Bell of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, grandson of William J. Mellors. I contacted Tom Bell, who readily shared his grandfather's life with me.

Upon Tom's mother's 2004 death and the subsequent "clean out" of her attic, a treasure trove of *Titanic* memorabilia came to light in a small sealed box. His grandfather's *Titanic* artifacts had been perfectly kept for 90 years. Tom furnished me with copies of fantastic pictures, documents, *Titanic* letters, newspaper articles and personal recollections that enabled me to piece together the amazing life of William Mellors. On a later research trip to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., with Charlie Haas and Jack Eaton, we found pictures and information that William Mellors had furnished for his passports for trips to England during the 'teens, twenties and thirties. Through these primary sources of information, we can at last write the story of William J. Mellors, *Titanic* survivor and unique American.

William John Mellors was born on January 14, 1894 in the Wandsworth section of London, England. He was the first child born to William John Mellors, Sr., a soldier in the British army, and Harriet Mellors (*nee* Stacey) of Motcombe in Dorsetshire. His brother Henry was born in 1898, also in London. Though his parents had married in January 1893 in Wandsworth, London, by 1898 William, Sr. had been sent to service in South Africa during the Boer War. Harriet, with Will and Henry, returned to her birthplace in

rural Motcombe, where they boarded with a former school chum, Martha Butt, whose husband was also serving in South Africa. With his father stationed so far from home during much of young Will's childhood, he grew up without his father's presence and developed a very close and protective relationship with his mother.

Early in 1912, after having served for a year as a personal valet to Sir Frederick Schuster in London, Will decided to seek his fortune in America. Through his cousin, he had secured a job at the Richmond County Country Club at Dongan Hills, Staten Island in New York City. He lists his occupation in his 1912 travel documents as a "gentleman's valet." He traveled to Southampton via the boat train and boarded the mighty *Titanic* the morning of April 10, 1912. He had second-class accommodations and shared his cabin with another young Englishman.



**Postmarked April 10th 1912, aboard Titanic**

Will chronicles his trip on *Titanic*, and later *Carpathia*, through correspondence sent home to his parents at 8 Christchurch Terrace, Chelsea, London West. He sent his father a color postcard of the *Titanic* stationery while *en route* to Cherbourg, France. He tells her, "Everything is so grand that I cannot

express my feelings in words." This probably expressed the feelings of most of *Titanic's* immigrants about the ship's grandeur and accommodations. The close relationship that existed between Will and his mother is very evident in the letter's wording:



April 10, 1912

Dear Mother,

From your

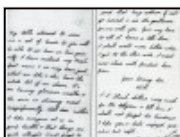
Loving Son

Will

P.S. Look after Kate won't you mother.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

A second letter, also to his mother, was dated April 11, 1912 and written on *Titanic* stationery, *en route* to Queenstown, Ireland.



April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1912

Dear Mother,

Just a line to let you know that I am quite safe and happy. I am enjoying this trip immensley [sic] & am now looking forward to see the coast of old Ireland. They say we shall have some fun at Queenstown for as soon as we arrive the people flock out in skiffs and sell their goods. I am having plenty to eat & have only to press a button & up comes a steward ready to do anything I wish. This morning the steward of my room came in & asked if I wanted my breakfast in bed, so I said no but I should like a cup of ---- & before you could count twenty he had put it by my side & at the same time putting my boots (nicely cleaned) down by my trunk. I have asked my table steward to save me a set of menu's [sic]. So you will be able to see how we live yourself. I have enclosed my breakfast menu & we may have just what we like & else have the whole lot if we choose. We are having glorious weather & the sun is shining most magnifiscently [sic]. Well dear mother I hope everyone at home is in good health & that things are quite allright [sic]. Don't forget

to send that boy's address if not go round & see the gentleman for me will you. Give my love to all at home & tell them I shall write more letters when I get to the other side. I must now close with fondest love from

Your loving Son

Will

P.S. Thank Arthur very much for the telegram & tell him I shall not forget his kindness. I hope you & Kate enjoyed yourselves last night.

Can't you see the ship rolling look at this writing.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

This letter contains rich detail of Will's life on board the *Titanic* and his contacts with his bedroom-and dining room stewards. He seems to have endeared himself to them and, as a result, they gave him special service. His unique physical appeal helped him to make friends wherever he went.

Handsome young Will also seems to have endeared himself to twelve-year-old Bertha Watt, who was traveling second class with her mother, Bessie Watt, to join their father, James, an architect, in Portland, Oregon. In her correspondence with Walter Lord during the 1960's, she mentions "William Mellors" [sic] fondly. She familiarly calls him "Willie" and tells how she and her mother became friendly with him during the voyage. She related that he had been in the vicinity of Collapsible C on that fateful night and then helped with the launching of Collapsible A until he and all the others forward near the bridge were washed overboard by the giant wave that engulfed that section of *Titanic* during her demise. After climbing aboard the overturned Collapsible A, he helped keep alive Rosa Abbott, the sole female survivor actually plucked from the water, until rescue:

*His was a tragic story. A group were trying to open one of the folding rafts when the ship went down. They never got it properly opened, it was stuck with paint, but nearly 50 people clung to this raft, one was a lady who was traveling 3rd class bringing two teenage boys to a new country for a better life. Her boys, she said, were wonderful swimmers and she must hang on, to join them, as she was sure they would be in a boat, they had jumped & she had watched them swim away. As waves washed over this raft, some would be missing, but Willie helped her hang on.*

Carpathia

It would almost seem she had developed a "schoolgirl crush" on young Willie.

*Titanic* disaster. Though they scrambled aboard different collapsibles from the water, they agreed on most aspects of the tragedy. Barkworth took an instant liking to the young Mellors and shared his cabin on the with him. Upon disembarking, they were both housed at New York's Imperial Hotel on Broadway between 31st and 32nd Streets. Barkworth was quoted as saying he was looking after the young man due to his injuries and was going to be sure he had employment before returning to England. This is another example of how Will endeared himself to most people he met &ndash; a character trait which is

noticeable throughout his life.

The two men are quoted in the following excerpt from the memorial book:

Titanic

*The men gave their names as A. H. Barkworth, justice of the peace of East Riding, Yorkshire, England, and W. J. Mellers [sic], of Christ Church Terrace, Chelsea, London. The latter, a young man, had started for this country with his savings to seek his fortune, and lost all but his life.*

*Mellers, like Quartermaster Moody [sic], said Captain Smith did not commit suicide . . . Titanic broke in two, and bow section first, and stern part last, settled with her human cargo into the sea.*

*Her four [sic] whistles kept up a deafening blast until the explosions, declare the men. The death cries from the shrill throats of the blatant steam screechers beside the smokestacks so rent the air that conversation among the passengers was possible only when one yelled into the ear of a fellow-passenger . . .*

Titanic Titanic

*"I was not far from where Captain Smith stood on the bridge, giving full orders to his men," said Mellers. "The brave old seaman was crying, but he had stuck heroically to the last. He did not shoot himself. He jumped from the bridge when he had done all he could. I heard his final instructions to his crew, and recall that his last words were: 'You have done your duty, boys. Now every man for himself.'*

*"I thought I was doomed to go down with the rest. I stood on the deck, awaiting my fate, fearing to jump from the ship. Then came a grinding noise, followed by two others, and I was hurled into the deep. Great waves engulfed me."*

The excerpt relates Captain Smith's final moments, which have always been a mystery, including his final words to his crewmen, heroically working to the end to launch the last collapsibles to save more of *Titanic*'s passengers. He relates that the steam being released from *Titanic*'s funnels and the deafening blast of her steam exhausts made communication on deck very difficult, and that he was saved in a unique manner. In a letter to his mother dated April 22, 1912, from the Hotel Imperial, he recounted those experiences:



*New York*

*c/o Mr. Hale  
Richmond  
Dongan Hills  
Staten Island*

*Dear Mother,*

*Titanic. But I will not say anything about it until I feel better. I might say I was on the boat when she went down & in fact I went down with the bows but when she rebounded I was blown by the explosion some great distance from the ship & I think it must have been that which stopped me from being drawn down by the suction. But let it be enough to say I was one of the only ten or twelve survivors who remained on the ship & was immersed in water with a temperature of about 31 degrees for six whole hours. But we must thank God I am still alive. I might tell you that all I had belonging to me except for my clothes that is (my grey suit) went down with the boat. I have just a bit of news to tell & that is tell Arthur & Mr. Daniels not to worry about what I promised for they shall have their money next mail. It has cost heaps of money to buy me new clothes again. Dear Mother so sorry cannot write more as the mail is going out. Do not worry over me for you [know] I shall get on.*

*Goodbye for present*

*From your loving Son,*

*Will*

*P.S. Excouse [sic] scribble as my nerves are shattered.*

He declares that, after being washed overboard by the massive wave near the bridge, he was pinned against a ventilator grating on the after side of the forward funnel. This wire grating, similar in appearance to chain link fencing, led directly to a boiler room below. The inrush of water from this wave held him against the grate until a blast of hot air from the funnel shaft sent him hurtling out of the water and flying through the frigid Atlantic air. He landed near the partly submerged Collapsible A, onto which he eventually clambered, crouching precariously until picked up at daybreak.

Thursday 9 May 1912

Richmond County Country Club, N.Y.

Dear Dorothy,

I was so pleased to receive your letter and to find you had not forgotten me. I had intended writing to you before but I was ashamed of my writing.

You see I have no feeling yet from my knuckles to the tips of my fingers owing to having been frozen in the water, and so having heard from you I have got to write. I can assured [sic] you I felt it rather keenly when you left on the Thursday evening without saying good-bye.

Well I am glad to say I am getting along fairly well considering the experience I had on the Titanic.

I did not take any notice of the slight shock caused by the collision. I was asleep at the time it happened, and I just turned over and went to sleep again, about ten minutes later the young chap who shared my cabin with me, came and began to yell out that the ship had struck an iceberg and he thought we were going down. I really thought he was joking and told him so, but was soon convinced of the fact by hearing people running about and shouting on the deck and the engines being stopped.

I soon dressed and got up on deck, to find crowds up there putting on lifebelts and I had about 15 mins hard work tying the women's belts on. It was an awful sight to see the men's faces when the last boat went off.

At this time it was almost impossible to walk on the deck without you [having] caught hold of something owing to the ship heeling right over. We were trying to fix up a collapsible boat when she gave the first signs of going under.

There seemed to be a tremble run through the whole of the ship and the next thing we heard were loud reports inside which I think were the watertight doors giving way and before you could say Jack Robinson there seemed to be mountains of water rushing through the doors, and I was swept away from where I was right against the collapsible boat, and I simply clung on for all I was worth, whilst all this was going on she was going under water and it seemed as if thousands of men were dragging me under with her, when suddenly, her (the forward) nose on which I was, seemed to suddenly rise from underneath the water and I and a few more that were close by cut the ropes that held the boat to the falls (davits) [sic].

There was suddenly an explosion and I found myself whizzing through the water at an awful pace, having been blown away by the explosion. When I came to my senses a few minutes after I looked round and suddenly saw the ship part in the middle with the stern standing several hundred feet out of the water, at this time I was trying to swim away from her, but could not get more than a few yards away and I had as much as I could do to hold myself up from being dragged down with her. But the suction was not so great as I imagined it would be.

After she had gone the sight that met one's eyes was terrible. There were great masses of wreckage with hundreds of human beings fighting amongst hundreds of dead bodies for their lives.

I had been swimming for about 5 mins when a woman caught hold of my coat collar and begged me to save her life. Well Dorothy I felt that I was doomed and the least I could do was to try to keep both of us afloat. I had been holding her up for about (as far as I could tell) 20 minutes when I noticed my hands began to become as swollen as if I had a pair of miniature boxing gloves on and I began to lose my grip of the woman who was almost dead and she must have noticed the fact herself for she began to struggle like a madman and clutched me round the throat with the strength of a man. It was then I noticed she had no life-belt on and I found she was dragging me under the water with her.

I had the most awful fight for life under water as I shall never forget, but eventually I broke away from her and rose at once to the surface. I was so done up with the want of breath that I thought my lungs were affected through holding my breath so long but it did not take so long as it does to tell it. I had not been swimming for long when I was caught hold of by the leg and found a seaman was holding on to me, I tried to kick him off but found my legs were becoming numbed and he held on to me like a leech. I struck at him but he only laughed and began to try to pull me under water. I managed to get hold of him by the hair of his head and push his head under the water. He became almost insensible and I got my feet clear of his hands and when he came to

the surface he began to try and swim alongside of me but I managed to keep clear of him. I suddenly heard a most awful sound like a rattle and he threw up his arms and I knew he was dead. I shall never forget it for I am sure he went mad.

I had been swimming for about 1 hour altogether when I saw an object a little way off which turned out to be a collapsible boat with about 20 or thirty people clinging to it. I managed after a hard struggle to get on this and found that the sides were broken away and that she was well under water. After a time I saw some of the people gradually dropping down dead one at the time and we had to push their bodies off to keep the raft afloat. Every now and again we were all thrown into the water owing to the boat capsizing and when we climbed back I noticed there were less climbed on.

We suddenly noticed lights on the horizon which turned out to be the *Carpathia* and suddenly she turned round and went out of sight and we thought she had picked the other boats up and missed us. There were then several of our own boats in the distance and we were calling them for about two hours and they answered us back by flashing a green light and blowing whistles but would not put back to save us. There was then only ten or twelve of us left on the raft alive and there were five or six laying dead on the bottom. By this time I had become exhausted and had to let a man I had been holding up fall to the bottom of the raft but he was saved. Eventually we were picked up and taken to the *Carpathia*.

Having been in the water for about six hours and only about ten or twelve saved from 30 to 40 people hanging on the raft, I have since been rather bad through having been frozen from the hips downwards and my hands were the same.

So Dorothy I have told you in a nutshell my experience on the *Titanic*. I hope you will forgive this writing as I am almost asleep on the pen; well I can scarcely hold it. The doctor thinks I shall get the feeling back to my hands etc. as time goes on.

Will you kindly thank Miss Davy for her letter and tell her I will write as soon as I can. I am awfully busy writing letters now.

Well Dorothy you are the first to hear my story in England. I hope you are getting along well and also given up whistling. I must now close hoping to hear from you by return of mail.

With kind regards. I remain

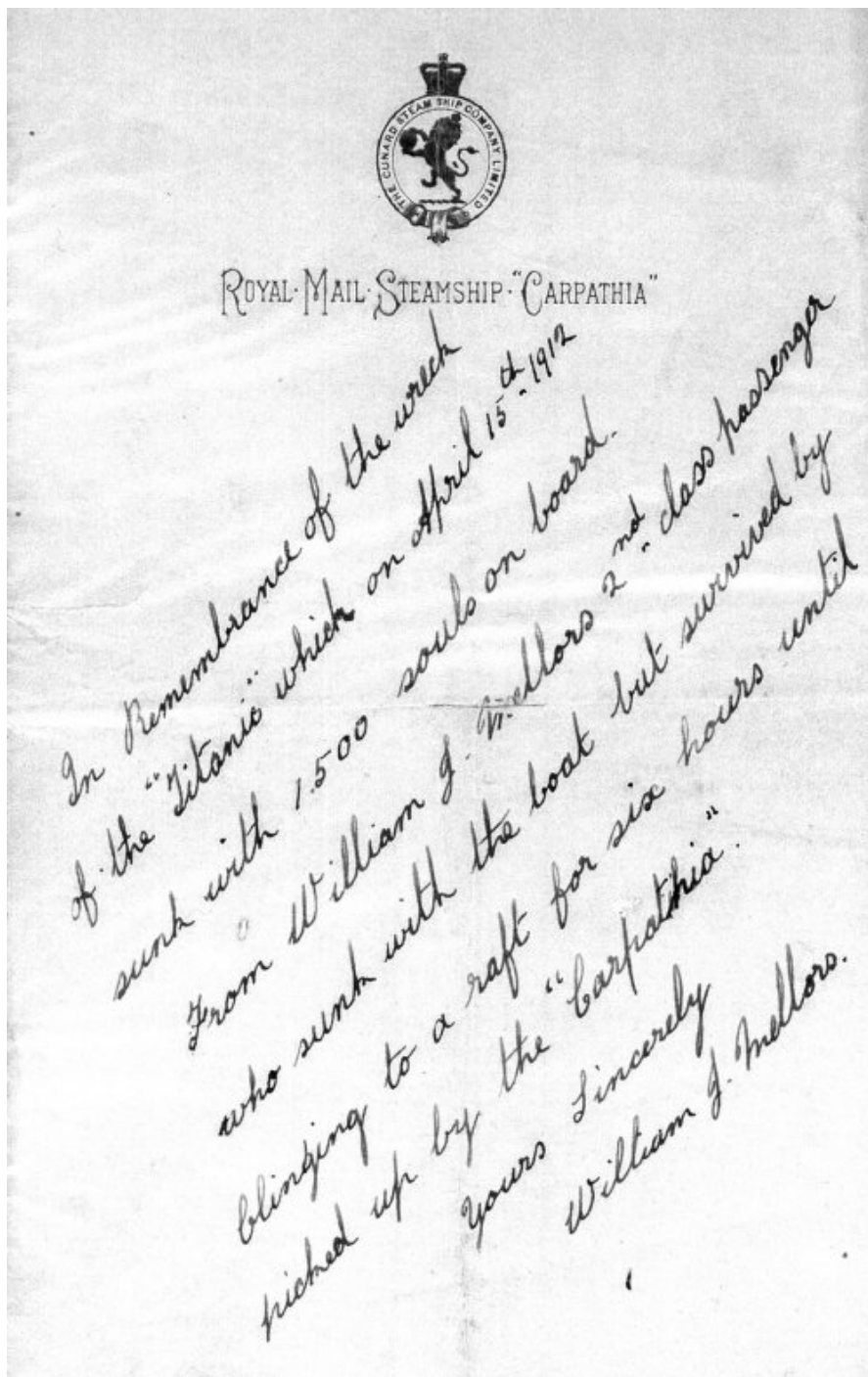
Yours sincerely

William J. Mellors

P.S. Remember me to Miss Gravestock, I do not know her new name and also excuse this rotten writing.

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Mellors also penned a "remembrance" of the 1,500 souls lost in the wreck of the *Titanic* on *Carpathia* stationery. He refers to his second-class status and the manner of his survival:



In Remembrance of the wreck of the "Titanic" which on April 15th 1912 sunk with 1500 souls aboard.

From William J. Mellors 2nd class passenger who sunk with the boat but survived by clinging to a raft for six hours until picked up by the "Carpathia."

Yours sincerely

William J. Mellors

William Mellors had a terrifying experience that fateful night in April of 1912 and is lucky to have survived the ordeal. It took months to regain the use of his frozen fingers, legs and feet.

He put in a claim against the White Star Line with the United States District Court, Southern District of New York for \$5,148, of which \$148 was for loss of belongings and \$5,000 for bodily injuries, medical expenses and inability to work for an extended period of time.

The following excerpt shows a breakdown of the \$148 personal property claim:

SCHEDULE A.

4.00

**Total, \$148.00**

It is very obvious his ordeal in the cold Atlantic waters had taken its toll on this healthy and athletic young man, as is evidenced by the following excerpts from his claim:

...this claimant was thrown into the water at the time of the sinking of said ship, and was only saved by clinging to a capsized boat between the time of the sinking of the ship and several hours later, and this claimant received severe bodily injuries, and was frozen in the legs, feet and arms and other parts of his body, by reason of the exposure to the water and cold, and suffered illness and sustained permanent injuries and incurred expenses for medical treatment, and was incapacitated entirely from work for several months after April 14, 1912, and was partly incapacitated from work thereafter, and by reason of the premises was damaged in the sum of \$5,000, in addition to the damage for loss of property in the sum of \$148, above set forth.

Following his period of recuperation, he went to work at the Richmond County Country Club at Dongan Hills, Staten Island, and then served as a personal valet in New York City until 1915. In 1916, he traveled around the United States as a social entertainer, until signing up to serve in the United States Armed Forces in World War I on June 5, 1917 in Cincinnati, Ohio.

After the war, he was naturalized as an American citizen on June 29, 1918, due to his distinguished war service. He was then living at the Claypool Hotel in Indianapolis, Indiana, where he was working as a salesman. In early 1919, he moved back to New York City and worked in sales for various companies for the next 15 years.



**c. 1930 William Mellors with friends**

He met his future wife, Juanita Veronica Sarber, in New York City in 1919, shortly after his arrival back in the city. The daughter of Charles Augustus Sarber, an Alaska oil wildcatter &ndash; later, an oil dealer &ndash; and his wife, Olive McGrew Sarber, Juanita was born October 8, 1894 in West Virginia and grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, where her father was a contractor.



**Juanita Mellors (nee Sarber) c.1918**

William and Juanita were married in the fall of 1920 and their only daughter, Virginia Violet, was born in 1921 in New York City. They lived at the Hargrave Hotel at 112 West 72nd Street during their married life in New York, and it is here that young Virginia grew up. The family lived in the city until 1935. At that time, William became the associate editor of the *National* magazine and the family moved to the Detroit area, settling in suburban Highland Park, Michigan, where Virginia graduated from high school and met and married her husband, Charles Bell, in 1942.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

No. 2793342

TO BE GIVEN TO THE PERSON NATURALIZED

**CERTIFICATE OF NATURALIZATION**

Petition, Volume 25 Number 3152

Description of holder: Age, 25 years; height, 5 feet, 1 inches; color, white; complexion, fair; color of eyes, blue; color of hair, brown; visible distinguishing marks, none; Name, age, and place of residence of wife, none; Name, ages, and places of residence of minor children, none.

NOTE - AFTER SEPTEMBER 22, 1922, HUSBAND'S NATURALIZATION DOES NOT MAKE WIFE A CITIZEN.

ORIGINAL

United States of America  
Southern District of Ohio

Be it remembered that WILLIAM JOHN MELLORES of the County of Madison State of Indiana who previous to his naturalization was a subject of the British Empire having applied to be admitted a citizen of the United States of America pursuant to law, and as a regular home of the District Court of the United States hold at Cincinnati on the 30th day of July in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and 18 the court having found that the petitioner intends to reside permanently in the United States, and that he had in all respects complied with the Naturalization laws of the United States, and that he was entitled to be so admitted, it was thereupon ordered by the said court that he be admitted as a citizen of the United States of America.

SEAL

In testimony whereof the seal of said court is hereunto affixed on the 19th day of June in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and 29 and of our Independence the one hundred and fifty-third.

*Harry T. Rabe*  
CLERK U. S. DISTRICT COURT, S. D. O.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOR



Mellors c. 1930



Mellor's with his  
grandson Thomas  
c.1947



Virginia Mellors  
c.1927



Virginia with her  
father William in the  
1940s

William continued his work for the *National* and was its editor by World War II's end. The magazine's purpose was to combat un-American activities in the United States. With William Mellors as its spokesman, the *National* furnished the Dies Committee (later the U.S. House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee) with hundreds of pages of evidence that the committee used to investigate supposedly un-American activities during the 1940's. The Dies Committee, headed by Representative Martin Dies, never received the notoriety its Senate counterpart under Senator Joseph McCarthy did in the 1950's. Mellors, however, became actively involved in his magazine's fight against

the "isms" (fascism, Communism and Nazism) and made frequent trips across the nation, utilizing his eloquent speaking ability to rouse crowds of loyal Americans against those evils. He became known as the "ism" expert and produced facts and figures which emphasized the "hidden power" of the Communist Party in the United States. He cautioned Americans to be aware of the subtle undercover work being carried out by these organizations in all regions of the U.S.

William Mellors' illness and later death resulted in the *National* decline in popularity during the 1950's and, by the decade's end, it had ceased publication.

William and Juanita had continued to live at 20 Tyler Avenue in Highland Park until William's death from lung cancer on July 23, 1948 at the relatively young age of 54. His remains were cremated and placed in the columbarium niche in Evergreen Cemetery's mausoleum in Detroit, Michigan.

Juanita went to live with their daughter Virginia and family in Syosset on Long Island, New York, after William's passing, joining her beloved husband in death just seven years later on December 15, 1954 at the age of 60. Her cremated remains were placed alongside William's in Detroit.

William John Mellors lived his dream of "finding his fortune in America." Disembarking from the *Carpathia* with nothing but the clothes on his back, he became editor of the *National* , fighting un-American groups and activities across the country. He used his oratory eloquence to combat the evil "isms" which he believed permeated American life during the 1940's and provided the U.S. government with powerful evidence to fuel its probe of un-American activities.

Who knows what the future could have held for William John Mellors had his life not been tragically cut so short? He certainly made an impact on America during his lifetime.

We often hear that *Titanic's* story is complete and that all is known about this monumental disaster. But this story readily shows that attics and closets of old homes can hold a treasure trove of *Titanic* memories and new information about *Titanic's* people and their lives after the disaster.

The quest continues. Those dusty old attics still may provide more clues to *Titanic's* secrets, keeping us spellbound for years to come.

*[Editor's note: Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are from the Robert Bracken collection, courtesy of Thomas C. Bell.]*

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Courtesy of Robert Bracken

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