

MARY WILBURN, OLDEST SURVIVOR OF TITANIC, DIES

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Mary Davis Wilburn, 104, oldest known survivor of the Titanic disaster, died peacefully Wednesday at Community-General Hospital, leaving behind unpleasant memories of death and terror in the North Atlantic. She was one of the lucky 800 survivors who lived to tell the story.

"When I get blue," she once said, "I live through the whole darn thing once again. I think I don't know why I'm living. It could just as easily have been me."

Mrs. Wilburn, formerly of 156 Bertram Place, was born in London, England, and lived in Syracuse most of her life. She was the widow of John Wilburn, who died in 1972. In recent years, she had received much publicity and her story was told and retold to historians, reporters and anyone else who would listen.

Three-quarters of a century had not marred her vision of her experiences as she watched the "unsinkable" Titanic disappear below the surface of the cold ocean.

Mrs. Wilburn, then 28-year-old Miss Mary Davis, was on a vacation cruise on April 14, 1912 when the world's largest ship struck an iceberg, killing 1,517 people.

Clad only in her nightgown and shawl, and clutching a baby that had been given to her by a man on board, she was thrown into a lifeboat as the great ship sank. "It was a terrible thing," she recalled. "I was so sorry about the old people."

"I threw a coat on over my nightgown and put on some shoes. Then I gathered up a few trinkets, and things my parents had given me," Mrs. Wilburn said. She then began making her way through passageways and up stairways to the hurricane deck, where the lifeboats were lashed. But halfway there, a sailor ran by, hitting Mrs. Wilburn painfully in the shoulder with his life jacket. Years later she said "I still feel it now and again. And then I realized we left our life jackets in the cabin."

Leaving an older woman to go on, Mrs. Wilburn said she ran back to the cabin for the jackets. Hers came in handy minutes later. On the hurricane deck, a sailor helped the older woman into the last life boat. "He didn't see me," Mrs. Wilburn recalled, "and after he put her in, he yelled 'Lower, away!'"

"Then he turned and saw me. But by this time, the boat was this far away," she said, holding her frail hands about two feet apart. "So he picked me up--it's the honest truth--and threw me in."

But his aim was off. Mrs. Wilburn struck the side of the lifeboat with her knees and fell into the freezing ocean. "The people on the boat grabbed me and pulled me in," she said.

Mrs. Wilburn said she could not forget the screams of dying passengers as the ship's porthole lights disappeared row by row beneath the 28-degree waves. The lifeboat crew sang "Pull for

the Shore, Sailors," so they wouldn't have to hear the cries, she said.

Until the end, she recalled, the ship's orchestra continued to play "Nearer My God to Thee." "I can hear it like it was being played now," she added.

As the night passed, the sea became littered with bodies. "The dead came up holding children in their arms. The poor people never had a chance. There weren't enough lifeboats," Mrs. Wilburn said.

During the night the survivor's hopes rose and fell as other liners appeared. "But none of them picked us up. They didn't want to come into the zone because of the ice," she said.

Eventually, the liner "Carpathia" rescued her and others. When it reached New York, Mrs. Wilburn was greeted by her sister and brother-in-law, whom she originally had set out to visit.

A few months later, White Star Lines, which owned the Titanic, offered free passage back to England for survivors. Mrs. Wilburn accepted, but soon returned to the United States.

She eventually met and married John Wilburn, an American sailor who served in the Navy during World War I. He later operated a hardware store in Tottenville, on Staten Island. In later years, the Wilburns moved to Syracuse because they had relatives here.

Mrs. Wilburn was a life member of the Order of Eastern Star in Tottenville, Staten Island. She was a Red Cross volunteer many years.

Surviving are a son, Carl of Syracuse; two grandchildren, Robert of Liverpool and Carol Robinson of Brewerton; and five great grandchildren.

Services will be at 1 PM Friday at Loretto Geriatric Center Chapel. Burial will be in White Chapel Memory Gardens, DeWitt. There are no calling hours.

Arrangements are by Butler-Badman Funeral Home.

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