

1 United States Senate Inquiry

2 **Source :** <http://www.titanicinquiry.org/USInq/AmInq01Indxa.php>

3 **Testimony of Olaus Abelseth**

4 **3rd class, male, 25 years old, cabin [F] 63 section G, boat A, born in the USA.**

5 *(Testimony taken separately before Senator William Alden Smith, chairman of the subcommittee.)*

6 *(The witness was sworn by Senator Smith.)*

7 Senator SMITH.
How old are you?

8 Mr. ABELSETH.
Twenty-six years of age in June.

9 Senator SMITH.
Did you sail on the [*Titanic*](#)?

10 Mr. ABELSETH.
Yes.

11 Senator SMITH.
From what port?

12 Mr. ABELSETH.
From Southampton.

13 Senator SMITH.
Where had you been?

14 Mr. ABELSETH.
I had been in Norway. I left here last fall.

15 Senator SMITH.
Where do you live now?

16 Mr. ABELSETH.
My home is in South Dakota, where I have my homestead.

17 Senator SMITH.
I wish you would tell the reporter when you first knew of this collision, and what you did, and where you were in the ship. I believe you were a steerage passenger?

18 Mr. ABELSETH.
Yes, sir.

19 Senator SMITH.
In the forward part of the ship?

20 Mr. ABELSETH.
Yes. I was in [compartment G](#) on the ship.

21 Senator SMITH.
Go ahead and tell us just what happened.

22 Mr. ABELSETH.
I went to bed about 10 o'clock Sunday night, and I think it was about 15 minutes to 12 when I woke up; and there was another man in the same room - two of us in the same room - and he said to me, "What is that?" I said, "I don't know, but we had better get up." So we did get up and put our clothes on, and we two went up on deck in the forward part of the ship.

23 Then there was quite a lot of ice on the starboard part of the ship. They wanted us to go down again, and I saw one of the officers, and I said to him: "Is there any danger?" He said, "No." I was not satisfied with that, however, so I went down and told my brother-in-law and my cousin, who were in the same compartment there. They were not in the same room, but they were just a little ways from where I was. I told them about what was happening, and I said they had better get up. Both of them got up and dressed, and we took our overcoats and put them on. We did not take any lifebelts with us. There was no water on the deck at that

time.

24 We walked to the hind part of the ship and got two Norwegian girls up. One was in my charge and one was in charge of the man who was in the same room with me. He was from the same town that I came from. The other one was just 16 years old, and her father told me to take care of her until we got to Minneapolis. The two girls were in a room in the hind part of the ship, in the steerage.

25 We all went up on deck and stayed there. We walked over to the port side of the ship, and there were five of us standing, looking, and we thought we saw a light.

26 Senator SMITH.
On what deck were you standing?

27 Mr. ABELSETH.
Not on the top deck, but on - I do not know what you call it, but it is the [hind part](#), where the sitting room is; and then there is a kind of a little space in between, where they go up on deck. It was up on the boat deck, the place for the steerage passengers on the deck. We were then on the port side there, and we looked out at this light. I said to my brother-in-law: "I can see it plain, now. It must be a light."

28 Senator SMITH.
How far away was it?

29 Mr. ABELSETH.
I could not say, but it did not seem to be so very far. I thought I could see this mast light, the front mast light. That is what I thought I could see.

30 A little while later there was one of the officers who came and said to be quiet, that there was a ship coming. That is all he said.

31 He did not say what time, or anything. That is all he said. So I said to them, we had better go and get the lifebelts, as we had not brought them with us. So my cousin and I went down to get the lifebelts for all of us. When we came up again we carried the lifebelts on our arms for a while.

32 There were a lot of steerage people there that were getting on one of these cranes that they had on deck, that they used to lift things with. They can lift about two and a half tons, I believe. These steerage passengers were crawling along on this, over the railing, and away up to the boat deck. A lot of them were doing that.

33 Senator SMITH.
They could not get up there in any other way?

34 Mr. ABELSETH.
This gate was shut.

35 Senator SMITH.
Was it locked?

36 Mr. ABELSETH.
I do not know whether it was locked, but it was shut so that they could not go that way.

37 A while later these girls were standing there, and one of the officers came and hollered for all of the ladies to come up on the boat deck. The gate was opened and these two girls went up.

38 We stayed a little while longer, and then they said, "Everybody." I do not know who that was, but I think it was some of the officers that said it. I could not say that, but it was somebody that said "everybody." We went up. We went over to the port side of the ship, and there were just one or two boats on the port side that were lost. Anyway, there was one. We were standing there looking at them lowering this boat. We could see them, some of the crew helping take the ladies in their arms and throwing them into the lifeboats. We saw them lower this boat, and there were no more boats on the port side.

39 So we walked over to the starboard side of the ship, and just as we were standing there, one of the officers came up and he said just as he walked by, "Are there any sailors here?"

40 I did not say anything. I have been a fishing man for six years, and, of course, this officer walked right by me and asked: "Are there any sailors here?" I would have gone, but my brother-in-law and my cousin said, in the Norwegian language, as we were speaking Norwegian: "Let us stay here together." I do not know, but I think the officer wanted some help to get some of these collapsible boats out. All he said was: "Are there any sailors here?" I did not say anything, but I have been used to the ocean for a long time. I commenced to work on the ocean when I was 10 years old with my dad fishing. I kept that up until I came to this country.

- 41 Then we stayed there, and we were just standing still there. We did not talk very much. Just a little ways from us I saw there was an old couple standing there on the deck, and I heard this man say to the lady, "Go into the lifeboat and get saved." He put his hand on her shoulder and I think he said: "Please get into the lifeboat and get saved." She replied: "No; let me stay with you." I could not say who it was, but I saw that he was an old man. I did not pay much attention to him, because I did not know him.
- 42 I was standing there, and I asked my brother-in-law if he could swim and he said no. I asked my cousin if he could swim and he said no. So we could see the water coming up, the bow of the ship was going down, and there was a kind of an explosion. We could hear the popping and cracking, and the deck raised up and got so steep that the people could not stand on their feet on the deck. So they fell down and slid on the deck into the water right on the ship. Then we hung onto a rope in one of the davits. We were pretty far back at the top deck.
- 43 My brother-in-law said to me, "We had better jump off or the suction will take us down." I said, "No. We won't jump yet. We ain't got much show anyhow, so we might as well stay as long as we can." So he stated again, "We must jump off." But I said, "No; not yet." So, then, it was only about 5 feet down to the water when we jumped off. It was not much of a jump. Before that we could see the people were jumping over. There was water coming onto the deck, and they were jumping over, then, out in the water.
- 44 My brother-in-law took my hand just as we jumped off; and my cousin jumped at the same time. When we came into the water, I think it was from the suction - or anyway we went under, and I swallowed some water. I got a rope tangled around me, and I let loose of my brother-in-law's hand to get away from the rope. I thought then, "I am a goner." That is what I thought when I got tangled up in this rope. But I came on top again, and I was trying to swim, and there was a man - lots of them were floating around - and he got me on the neck like that (*illustrating*) and pressed me under, trying to get on top of me. I said to him, "Let go." Of course, he did not pay any attention to that, but I got away from him. Then there was another man, and he hung on to me for a while, but he let go. Then I swam; I could not say, but it must have been about 15 or 20 minutes. It could not have been over that. Then I saw something dark ahead of me. I did not know what it was, but I swam toward that, and it was one of those collapsible boats.
- 45 When we jumped off of the ship, we had life preservers on. There was no suction from the ship at all. I was lying still, and I thought "I will try to see if I can float on the lifebelt without help from swimming," and I floated easily on the lifebelt.
- 46 When I got on this raft or collapsible boat, they did not try to push me off and they did not do anything for me to get on. All they said when I got on there was, "Don't capsize the boat." So I hung onto the raft for a little while before I got on.
- 47 Some of them were trying to get up on their feet. They were sitting down or lying down on the raft. Some of them fell into the water again. Some of them were frozen; and there were two dead, that they threw overboard.
- 48 I got on this raft or collapsible boat and raised up, and then I was continually moving my arms and swinging them around to keep warm. There was one lady [\[Rhoda Abbott\]](#) aboard this raft, and she got saved. I do not know her name. I saw her on board the [Carpathia](#), but I forgot to ask her name. There were also two Swedes, and a first class passenger - I believe that is what he said - and he had just his underwear on. I asked him if he was married, and he said he had a wife and a child. There was also a fireman named [Thompson](#) on the same raft. He had burned one of his hands. Also there was a young boy, with a name that sounded like Volunteer. He was at St. Vincent's Hospital afterwards. Thompson was there, too.
- 49 The next morning we could see some of the lifeboats. One of the boats had a sail up, and he came pretty close, and then we said, "One, two, three"; we said that quite often. We did not talk very much, except that we would say, "One, two, three," and scream together for help.
- 50 Senator SMITH.
Was this collapsible boat that you were in filling with water?
- 51 Mr. ABELSETH.
There was water on the top.
- 52 Senator SMITH.
Were you on the top of the overturned collapsible boat?
- 53 Mr. ABELSETH.
No. The boat was not capsized. We were standing on the deck. In this little boat the canvas was not raised

up. We tried to raise the canvas up but we could not get it up. We stood all night in about 12 or 14 inches of water on this thing and our feet were in the water all the time. I could not say exactly how long we were there, but I know it was more than four hours on this raft.

54 This same boat I was telling about -

55 Senator SMITH.
The sailboat?

56 Mr. ABELSETH.

Yes; when the *Carpathia* came she was picked up. There were several boats there then. It was broad daylight and you could see the *Carpathia*. Then this boat sailed down to us and took us aboard, and took us in to the *Carpathia*. I helped row in to the *Carpathia*.

57 Senator SMITH.
Did you see any icebergs on that morning?

58 Mr. ABELSETH.
We saw three big ones. They were quite a ways off.

59 Senator SMITH.
I want to direct your attention again to the steerage. Do you think the passengers in the steerage and in the bow of the boat had an opportunity to get out and up on the decks, or were they held back?

60 Mr. ABELSETH.
Yes, I think they had an opportunity to get up.

61 Senator SMITH.
There were no gates or doors locked, or anything that kept them down?

62 Mr. ABELSETH.
No, sir; not that I could see.

63 Senator SMITH.
You said that a number of them climbed up one of these cranes?

64 Mr. ABELSETH.
That was on the top, on the deck; after they got on the deck. That was in order to get up on this boat deck.

65 Senator SMITH.
Onto the top deck?

66 Mr. ABELSETH.
Onto the top deck; yes. But down where we were, in the rooms, I do not think there was anybody that held anybody back.

67 Senator SMITH.
You were not under any restraint? You were permitted to go aboard the boats the same as other passengers?

68 Mr. ABELSETH.
Yes, sir.

69 Senator SMITH.
Do you think the steerage passengers in your part of the ship all got out?

70 Mr. ABELSETH.
I could not say that for sure; but I think the most of them got out.

71 Senator SMITH.
Did that part of the ship fill rapidly with water?

72 Mr. ABELSETH.
Oh, yes; I think that filled up; yes. There was a friend of mine told me that he went back for something he wanted, and then there was so much water there that he could not get to his room.

73 Senator SMITH.
Were the three relatives of yours from Norway lost?

74 Mr. ABELSETH.
Yes; they were lost.

- 75 Senator SMITH.
You never saw them after you parted from them at the time you spoke of?
- 76 Mr. ABELSETH.
No, sir.
- 77 Senator SMITH.
Do you know how many people there were in that lifeboat that you were in?
- 78 Mr. ABELSETH.
I could not say for sure; but there must have been 10 or 12. They got saved off this raft. There was one man from New Jersey that I came in company with from London. I do not know what his name was. I tried to keep this man alive; but I could not make it. It was just at the break of day, and he was lying down, and he seemed to be kind of unconscious; he was not really dead, and I took him by the shoulder and raised him up, so that he was sitting up on this deck.
- 79 Senator SMITH.
He was sitting on a seat?
- 80 Mr. ABELSETH.
He was just sitting down right on the deck. I said to him, "We can see a ship now. Brace up." And I took one of his hands and raised it up like that (*illustrating*), and I took him by the shoulder and shook him, and he said, "Who are you?" He said, "Let me be. Who are you?" I held him up like that for a while, but I got tired and cold, and I took a little piece of a small board, a lot of which were floating around there, and laid it under his head on the edge of the boat to keep his head from the water; but it was not more than about half an hour or so when he died.
- 81 Senator SMITH.
That is all. We are very much obliged to you.
- 82 (Witness Excused.)
- 83 Bas du formulaire