

Survivor Of Titanic Disaster Tells Of Grim Experiences

by Stan Slome

Vineland Times Journal

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It was around midnight on April 14, 1912. The luxury liner "titanic", the finest passenger vessel afloat was on her maiden voyage from Southampton, England, To New York. The ship collided with an iceberg off Newfoundland in the fog and sank.

In the disaster 1117 persons lost their lives. Soon next month a motion picture dealing with that tragedy will reach the screen in most major cities. There is one man in Vineland who knew of that "Titanic" disaster personally. He is Thomas Oxenham of Helen ave, near Grant.

A passenger on his way to America from England, Oxenham, now 63 years old, remembers that ill-fated night as if it were only yesterday.

"I had been in my bunk, two decks below the main deck about 10 minutes when I noticed that the engine had stopped," Oxenham recalls. "That the engine had stopped was noticeable because it had been pounding away since it had left Southampton on April 10. "I lay there awhile and said to a friend of mine, Walter Harris, 'what's the matter? The engine stopped.'"

Oxenham said that Harris didn't think anything was wrong, but Oxenham, suspicious, got out of his bunk anyway.

"I slipped on my pants and Prince Albert coat (I still have it) and went out the passageway. I ran into one of the crew members and he told me that all the xxxx was that they were probably having a boat drill."

Oxenham, not satisfied with the reply, said he went on the boat deck and noticed crew members starting to pull the canvas off the life boats. "This struck me funny. A boat drill at midnight?" he said.

Confusion Everywhere

As told by Oxenham, the crew began closing down the companionways, more and more persons came on deck and then confusion mounted.

"Officers started running around, shouting orders", Oxenham stated. "I knew it was no boat drill then. They started to issue life belts and put women and children into the boats, holding the men back, the wives didn't want to leave their husbands, but most of them did. Even then most of the people didn't think anything was wrong."

Oxenham said that the "Titanic" started to list, but not too much. "The boats were being lowered one after the other. The sixth or seventh boat being lowered turned over and spilled screaming persons into the ocean while the ship continued to roll over.

"Then all hell broke loose. There was screams and more confusion. I waited until the last boat was down, walked around, talked with a young fellow I knew by the name of John B Thayer and made my way aft (towards the stern)," said Oxenham.

Still on the boat deck, Oxenham said he looked over a rail and this was what he saw:

The Vineland survivor told how he and the other persons clinging to the boat watched the "Titanic" in it's death agony about 60 yards away.

"She upended and went down bow first. There was no suction – or none that I could feel." He said.

Men Prayed

"I saw a ring of people-mostly men-and in the centre were two men of the Gospel and they were praying.

There were about 30 or 40 of them, and the people started singing 'Nearer My God to Thee.'"

Oxenham walked some more, he said, and met an artist he had become aquatinted with on the ship, a Mr Stanford, and they talked about what had happened.

"Then the boat started to go down faster and Stanford and I went to the port side and we both jumped overboard. We were swimming around for about 20 minutes when we bumped into an overturned boat, the next thing I knew was straddling the boat and Stanford had disappeared. Later on, about five or six persons were holding onto the boat," Oxenham said.

Criticizes Film

After floating around for about an hour, Oxenham said he and the others were picked up by a lifeboat and at about 9 A.M. the next day the ship, "Carpathes," which had turned around to go to the rescue while on it's way to Europe, picked them up.

Oxenham has a score to settle with the motion picture version of the disaster. He saw a preview of the film on Ed Sullivan's TV show and criticized it.

"There was no band playing an accompaniment to 'Nearer My God To Thee'. It was

impossible for a band to play because all the instruments were below in the quarters and the hatches were battened down," he explained.

Another point Oxenham takes issue with is the depicting of John Astor, the financier who died in the ship sinking, as a hero.

Astor No Hero

"He didn't give up his place in a boat to a woman with a child in her arms," Oxenham said. "I don't believe he ever got on deck because most of the people who were drowned were below deck when everything was battened down."

On the voyage Oxenham said he met Astor, who gave him a message to deliver to the financiers son, Vincent. For some reason, Oxenham said, Vincent Astor refused to see him in New York and the Vineland still has it "in his head."

Asked what was the real reason for the "Titanic" hitting the iceberg, Oxenham stated that the ship was 80 miles off it's course and that the bergs had broken in the Arctic about two weeks ahead of schedule.

"There was a warning about two hours before the "Titanic" struck the iceberg," he said. "A man was assigned to keep taking the temperature of the water and it was getting colder and colder. By the time the lookout saw the iceberg, it was too late."

The "Titanic" was equipped with bulkheads and equipped with electric controls in case of an accident, Oxenham said, but these were of no use because the force of the crash buckled the bulkheads and they couldn't be closed.

Oxenham, after holding down many jobs, settled in Vineland in 1924 and now works at the Dorchester Shipyard. He has many memories, but the titanic disaster will always remain uppermost in his mind.

Courtesy of Delia Mahoney

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ONE SURVIVOR REACHES HOME OF BROTHER

Hudson Observer

Saturday 20 April 1912

Thomas Percy Oxenham, 22 years old, brother of Charles Oxenham, of 966 Tonnele avenue, New Durham, is now resting after his frightful experience in the Titanic wreck. He came from Pondersend, Eng., to live with his North Hudson relative.

Just how his rescue was brought about he does not know, but says the last he remembers was being half pushed, half carried to a lifeboat. A chum, Walter Harris, married secretly in England some time ago, was with him until he reached the lifeboat. Then the two were separated. Harris has not been found. He leaves a young wife and child in England.

Considerable difficulty was experienced by the Hudson Observer representative in getting any information from the Oxenhams. The brother at first would not permit conversation with the survivor. He finally demanded that the questioning cease, for the good of the young man. He declared that rest was needed by him, and told him he had been picked up by the Carpathia, clad only in a night shirt. The survivor spoke but briefly and did not seem to remember a great deal of what had happened.

"My mind is in a daze," he said. "The whole thing is like a terrible dream. I cannot think the Titanic is so deep down in the sea. All that happened seems to me to have taken place years ago

"I remember my Chum Walter Harris being with me. We were second cabin passengers and one of the stewards awakened us after the crash. We got to the deck somehow, and then I forget what happened. After that I woke up in a boat. All of the other horrible things that happened have been described in the papers. I do not want to talk. I need a long rest and will say nothing until I feel better. The shock and exposure have done me up awful bad."

After the survivor's brother had indicated that the reporter had better depart, he stood for a time at the door.

"I do not think his mind has been affected permanently. He has periods

of melancholy and forgetfulness at intervals. He must have a good rest, and I am going to see to it that he does. I had to get clothes for him before he left the Carpathia," Charles Oxenham said.

Finally, when pressed with some further questions, Oxenham smiled.

"You are trying to pump me now. I have met your sort before."

He was asked if any of the officials of the steamship company had induced his brother not to talk of the wreck. He flatly refused to discuss the matter, and would not reply to a query as to whether or not anyone connected with the concern had "seen" his brother.

Courtesy of Mark Baber

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