UNSINKABLE
TITANIC'S IMPACT ON WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA
BY MICHAEL MILLER
AT THE 1999 KEYSTONE GAMES

in Johnstown, a central attraction for children was a
three-story inflated slide representing the sinking
deck of Titanic. At a Chick-Fil-A in West Mifflin, a
framed illustration depicts the doomed ocean liner
approaching an iceberg in the shape of the fast food
restaurant's mascot cow. In Shadyside and Squirrel
Hill, shoppers can purchase birthday greeting cards
with Titanic-themed jokes. In Wexford, a novelty
store sells “Titanic 1912 Swim Team” T-shirts. At
a craft shop in South Side's Station Square,
a foot-high wooden nutcracker statue
of Titanic's captain grins stoically, a
miniature ship in its fingerless
hands. The unsinkable has be-
come the unthinkable. Titanic
is a popular culture commod-
ity, its modern day jingle far
removed from its original
hymn of tragedy and death. But
88 years ago, Western Pennsyl-
vania's grief rang in sorrowful
harmony with the chorus of a
stunned world.

At least 30 Western Pennsylvan-
ians boarded Titanic, and we know that
less than 10 reached America alive. The precise
number cannot be determined because immigrant
records were poorly kept and countless bodies were
never recovered or were buried at sea unidentified.

Juha Panula was among those who suffered a
devastating blow in his family. His sons (1-year-old
William, Urho 2, Juha 7, Jaakko 14, and Ernesti 16)
and his wife, Maria — all natives of Finland who had
lived in Pennsylvania but were visiting relatives in
Europe — boarded Titanic for their return to Pitts-
burgh. They were to join Juha, who had left Finland
two months earlier and was waiting for them at their
home in Coal Center, near Charleroi. He had spent
most of February and March in 1912 remodeling the
immigrant family's modest home; his wife and chil-
dren were to see it for the first time.

The Panulas boarded Titanic at Southampton,
England, on April 10. Accompanying Maria Panula
and her children on the voyage was Susanna
Riihivuori, a neighbor who was serving as the family
maid. When the luxury liner grazed an iceberg in
the darkness of April 14, the two women
bundled up the children and led them
to the deck. But like some 1,500
others, the group never reached a
lifeboat. Maria Panula was last
seen on deck crying, "I have al-
ready lost a child to drowning
in Finland. Now, should they
all drown here?"

None of their bodies were
found. Juha Panula waited a
week for word that his family
had sailed and died on Titanic. In
the era before class-action lawsuits,
his compensation of about $250
(£150) was, declared Titanic's owner, a
just settlement.

WE WILL RISE TO THE OCCASION

A North Side high school student, Burton
Williams, is credited with bringing news of Titanic's
demise to Pittsburgh, just minutes after reports had
reached New York from the Carpathia, the only ship
to pick up Titanic survivors. The amateur wireless
telegraph operator did not intercept Carpathia's
distress calls — had the weather not been so bad,
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The exhibition was organized by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, in association with The Frick Art & Historical Center. Support for the Pittsburgh exhibition is provided in part by the Pittsburgh Office of Cultural Tourism and by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and PNC advisors.

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Williams claimed, Western Pennsylvania wireless operators would even have heard *Titanic*’s own SOS—but Williams did hear *Carpathia*’s message after it was received in New York and was being re-routed.

Conflicting reports obtained from wireless operators led to the *Pittsburgh Sun*’s erroneous headline of April 15, “*Titanic* is badly crippled.” The paper reported all aboard the liner had been saved and the ship was being towed to Halifax, Nova Scotia, for repairs. But by 2:20 a.m. on April 15, J.J. McCormick & Co., the agents in Pittsburgh for White Star, *Titanic*’s owner, announced that only 700 had survived the sinking. Relatives demanding information besieged McCormick’s Smithfield Street offices, but the firm did not have a passenger list and could not confirm any bookings.

By the time the *Pittsburgh Post* and *Sun* ran the first of several extra editions that day, Pittsburgh Mayor William Magee had requested all flags in the city be flown at half-staff. The Duquesne Club was the first to comply. Mayor Magee also appealed for help in establishing a survivor relief fund. “I know the people of Pittsburgh too well,” the mayor said in his proclamation, “to believe that they would not allow any other city to outdo them in a work of charity or mercy.”

Mayor Magee chose the Union Trust Co. to administer the fund—among the nation’s first. Nearly $10,000 was raised, often $1 at a time. The *Post* reported Andrew Carnegie contributed an additional $5,000. Pittsburgh’s churches, led by Trinity Church, organized another drive for funds. A Rabbi Levi told the *Post*: “If the survivors are in dire distress, I know we will rise to the occasion in a liberal manner.”

Pittsburghers gathered by the hundreds at the *Post*’s offices for fresh news of the tragedy, waiting for a list of survivors. Fate spared at least two notable Pittsburghers. Steel tycoon Henry Clay Frick canceled his booking after his wife sprained her ankle in Italy. A.V. Davis, then president of Alcoa, had booked passage but decided to lengthen his European vacation.
A dozen other area families received miraculous news of loved ones who survived. Among them were Edith Junkins, wife of Dixie Cup Co. founder William Thompson Graham of New York, and her daughter Margaret. (They were saved because Col. Washington A. Roebling, engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge and Pittsburgh's Sixth Street Bridge, had helped them into a lifeboat; Col. Roebling perished.)

D.M. Kirk was saved. Erik Jussila, 32, had visited Finland and was returning home to Monessen. He survived only because his cabin mate woke him in time to find a life jacket. Jussila plunged into the freezing water and was later picked up by a lifeboat.

Another Monessen resident, Helga Hirvonen, claimed to have shared a lifeboat with J. Bruce Ismay, the director of the White Star line, who was universally reviled for escaping the tragedy. Mrs. Hirvonen, her 3-month-old baby, and her brother Eino Lindqvist, also of Monessen, survived. Other survivors included Sylvia Mae Harbaugh, born in Pittsburgh, who was traveling with her husband, Albert Caldwell; the couple taught at the Bangkok Christian College for Boys in Siam (now Thailand). They also managed to save their 10-month-old son.

For many Western Pennsylvania families, however, news of the sinking would be crushing.

This was especially true for families in the thriving industrial towns of the Monongahela River Valley southeast of Pittsburgh. Pekka Hakkarainen, 28, and his wife, Elin, 24, had been married for three months and were traveling third-class to their new home in Monessen. When the Hakkarainens heard the ship hit the iceberg, Pekka left the cabin to investigate. An hour later, when he had not returned, Elin made her way to the upper deck. She searched for Pekka, but an officer guided her to a lifeboat. Her husband's body was never found; Elin was compensated £50.

Alexander Harris served in the British navy for 16 years and was sailing to Pittsburgh to visit his
brother, Will. The reunion never happened. Mr. and Mrs. Fred Kenyon were returning to Pittsburgh from a trip to Paris. She survived; he did not. John Flynn's death left his wife, Mary, in Pittsburgh with six children. Kalle Edvard Makinen and his wife, Ida, were traveling from Finland to Glassport. Ida survived, but Kalle's body was not recovered. Uniontown newlyweds Lucien P. Smith and Mary Eloise Smith were returning from a honeymoon in Egypt. Lucien died in the sinking, but Mary returned to Uniontown to bear his son, Lucien P. Smith III. George Wick, his wife Mary, and daughter Natalie, relatives of J.D. Rhodes, president of the National Car Wheel Co. of Pittsburgh, were separated during the confusion as Titanic sank. Mary later said she saw George waving from the ship's railing, but his body was not recovered.

One Pittsburgh couple played a passive role in the tragedy. Margaret and Walter Laird were honeymoon passengers on the Baltic, which cabled a warning to Titanic. In their telegraph message, Baltic officers pinpointed the location of the huge iceberg that sent the liner to the bottom of the Atlantic.

MARY COREY'S SECRET

Mary Miller Corey was eight months pregnant when she died, a fact never before reported in the countless volumes of Titanic lore. Mary, known as “Mayme” to her family, was a 34-year-old school teacher born and reared in Pittsburgh’s Elliott neighborhood. She taught fifth-graders in Room 9 of Westlake School, at Lorenz Avenue and Crucible Street.

During the mid-1980s, as the discovery of Titanic’s wreck site reawakened interest in the tragic saga, a former student, Carl Koch, talked about Corey with a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reporter. “She was a good teacher,” he said. “But in those days they didn’t use married teachers, so she ended her career by getting married.”

Her suitor, Percy Corey, worked for the Indio-Burma Petroleum Co. and was sent to Yangon on business (formerly Rangoon, the capital of Burma, which is now Myanmar.) During August in the year before the crash, Mary went to India and married Percy. She stayed for a long honeymoon, and became pregnant. Lillian Wehner-Hoffman, daughter of Mayme’s sister Lydia Miller Wehner, possesses letters Mayme and her husband sent from Rangoon in October 1911:

“We live in a five-room bungalow in a town of about 10,000 people, a great many natives, and we can see boats go up and down the Irrawadi River. There are many lepers... who sit along the street begging,” Mayme wrote. “It is not so lonely as I thought. Have other bungalows near me and a very nice neighbor, a girl from Kentucky. She is just 21 years old but very well educated and quite refined.”

The woman was Claire Bennett (Mrs. Frank Karnes), also of Pittsburgh. Mr. and Mrs. Karnes were frequent companions of the Coreys.

In a letter dated November 4, 1911, Percy relates that “Mayme is feeling much better now and is getting fat so much so that her dresses are too small.” In her letters, Mayme complains of boredom and homesickness: “Haven’t anything much to do, having five servants, a cook, a boy to clean the house, a boy to wait on the table and a woman to wait on me. We get mail every Thursday and last week I got 14 cards from pupils at school. It made me feel good but when I didn’t get one from home I felt like having a good
cry. Don’t forget to have someone at home write me every week.”

Sara Miller, Mayme’s mother, who lived in Pittsburgh, told her daughter to have her baby abroad, but Mayme wanted her child to be born in America. She and Claire Bennett booked passage to America on the steamer Philadelphia, but a coal miners’ strike in England forced the cancellation of their trip and they were switched to Titanic (a fate shared by hundreds of other victims). They boarded on April 10 in Southampton, England. Assuming Mary Corey Miller became pregnant in August or September 1911, she would have been seven or eight months along when she sailed from England.

Lawrence Beesley, a fellow second-class passenger, published an account of his experience later in 1912. In The Loss of the S.S. Titanic, Its Story and Its Lessons, Beesley describes how Mary and Claire spent their last day alive, Sunday, April 14:

“The library was crowded that afternoon, owing to the cold on deck. But through the windows we could see the clear sky with brilliant sunlight that seemed to auger a fine night and a clear tomorrow, and the prospect of landing in two days, with calm weather all the way to New York. Close beside me were two American ladies, both dressed in white, young, probably friends. One is a schoolteacher from America,
a graceful girl with a distinguished air heightened by a pair of pince-nez. From time to time as they talk, a child broke in on their conversation and insisted on their taking notice of a large doll in her arms.”

Of the 90 second-class women on Titanic, only seven died; Mary and Claire were both among them. Their bodies were never recovered. At first, the lack of a body, and erroneous headlines in Pittsburgh newspapers that claimed Titanic was crippled but no fatalities had occurred, provided hope to Mary’s Pittsburgh family. Her brother, Percy Miller, traveled to New York to meet her, should she arrive. His regular telegrams to the family related that he spoke to dozens of survivors, trying in vain to piece together his sister’s final hours.

Finally, on April 23, 1912, the family held a memorial service in its Steuben Street home. The service also included honors for Claire Bennett. (Her husband, by an equally cruel twist of fate, had died in India of smallpox just a few days after her departure—which she never knew.) The Pittsburgh Sun reported the grieving scene: “The mother has adopted the mourning garb, as have (Mary’s) several sisters. The father, John Miller, was closeted with Reverend W. L. Garges. The youngest sister was red-eyed and sighed audibly a number of times, but the older sisters preserved a dignified calm.”

Mary’s uncle, the Reverend R. A. George, made national news at the service when he charged Titanic’s owners with murder. “God was not responsible for this appalling disaster,” he said. “He provided a clear night and a smooth sea. The officers of the ship had been warned of icebergs, they had been warned in time, but no attention was paid. The speed of the vessel was not decreased. This disaster will cause the shipbuilder to start all over again to endeavor to build a craft that is safe, but too late to prevent the murders which have caused all the civilized world to mourn.”

Soon after the service, Mary’s mother suffered a nervous breakdown and temporarily left Pittsburgh.
The family chose not to reveal Mary's pregnancy, and her lost child has been a secret for nearly 90 years.

Even the rediscovery of Titanic did not shake loose the secret. In 1985, days after the ship's wreckage was discovered in the Atlantic, Mary's sister, Lydia Miller Wehner, told the Post-Gazette she was upset over the probe. "My sister's down there," she said. "And I don't want her disturbed."

THE GREATEST STORY IN HISTORY

A week after the sinking, more than 40 Pittsburgh churches held memorial services. While rabbis and bishops delivered solace and comfort, the local press posted some odd takes on the disaster. A sports cartoon in the Post celebrated the end of a Pirates losing streak by showing a ballplayer leaping from the sinking Titanic onto the life raft of an 8-2 victory over Kansas City. The Post, which called the disaster "the greatest story in history," ran Titanic editorials for a month. From the Pittsburgh Courier: "Negroes who consider their poverty a curse may find comfort in the fact that they were not wealthy enough to take passage on the Titanic. Every adversity has its virtue."

One cause taken up by the Pittsburgh papers had tangible results. The Carnegie Hero Fund at first declined to issue medals for the victims of the sinking, saying the...
scene of the disaster was too far away from the U.S. coast. But after several scoldings from the newspapers, the fund changed its collective mind and placed a gold medal in the National Museum in Washington, D.C. The medal was dedicated to “the sublime self-sacrifice displayed by the passengers, officers and crew of the Titanic.”

The Carnegie medal was one of a steady stream of monuments, statues, and proclamations designed to ensure the legacy of Titanic and its victims. And while the ship itself has entered our culture’s permanent myth pool, the 1,500 lost are increasingly more difficult to hear over the din of crass exploitation. The T-shirts, plastic models, and greeting cards in local gift shops keep alive the symbol of Titanic, but few Western Pennsylvanians probably realize the direct impact the ship’s sinking had on numerous families in the region.

DOCUMENTS
Original letters from Mary Miller, dated Oct. 1911.

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Steven Biel, Down With The Old Canoe, W.W. Norton, 1996.

THE SADDEST TOWN

BY CASSANDRA VIVIAN

SEVENTEEN PEOPLE LISTED MONESSEN AS their final destination on the SS Titanic’s original manifest. That made the small mid-Mon Valley community of 12,000 souls the most devastated victim of the Titanic tragedy in Pennsylvania, and arguably the most devastated community in the entire United States.

In Monessen, the Titanic story belongs primarily to the Finnish community. Situated about 25 miles south of Pittsburgh on the banks of the Monongahela River, Monessen in 1912 was a boomtown that had one of the largest Finnish communities in the United States. They lived in Finn Town, an area of the city dominated by Knox, Motheral, and Clarenton avenues and crossed by Chestnut, Fourth, and Sixth streets. The Finns gave the community the famous Louhi Band, a Nobel scientist, and an opera singer. Of the 17 Titanic passengers, 13 of them were Monessen Finns.

Monessen’s Titanic passengers sailed from Finland on the ship Polaris on April 3, 1912, and were all scheduled to sail on the Titanic on April 10.

Pekka and Elin Hakkarainen’s tickets were from Hanko, Finland, to Monessen, Pennsylvania. They paid 315 Finnish marks for each ticket. The Hakkarainens listed their exact destination as 401 Motheral Avenue, the home of their friend Mrs. John