

A capital connection

Don Butler begins our commemorative coverage of the Titanic's sinking with the story of a man who, though he went down on the fated ship a century ago, is still making his mark on Ottawa - and the country - today

By Don Butler, Ottawa Citizen April 7, 2012

Shortly before retiring to his first-class cabin on the Titanic on the night of April 14, 1912, Charles Melville Hays offered a fellow passenger a chillingly timely prophecy about the intense trans-Atlantic steamship rivalry then under way between the White Star, Cunard and Hamburg-American lines.

"The time will come soon," Hays told Col. Archibald Gracie, "when this will be checked by some appalling disaster."

An hour later the Titanic hit an iceberg, and within three hours, the 55-year-old Hays and 1,513 other souls were dead. As an Ottawa Journal headline indelicately put it a day after the sinking: "Men of international fame perished like rats in a trap."

Hays, an American by birth, was perhaps the best known of the 82 Canada-bound passengers who lost their lives on the Titanic's maiden voyage (48 others survived). He was president of the Grand Trunk Railway, builder of Ottawa's Château Laurier Hotel and the city's new central train station and the driving force behind the country's second transcontinental rail line, then under construction.

Though a resident of Montreal, Hays was a familiar figure in Ottawa, travelling here often for meetings with the prime minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, in furtherance of his ambitions for the Grand Trunk.

During his 15 years as a Grand Trunk executive, Hays often crossed the Atlantic for meetings with the London-based company's board. In a February 1904 letter to Hays, his predecessor as Grand Trunk president, Sir Charles Rivers Wilson, commended him for the "zeal and courage which brings you across the Atlantic in this inclement season at the call of duty."

It was business that brought him to England in March 1912, accompanied by his wife, Clara, their second daughter, Orion, 28, and Orion's husband, Thornton Davidson, a 32-year-old stockbroker and former hockey player with the Montreal Victorias. He'd also brought his wife's maid, Anne Perreault, and his 23-year-old personal secretary, Vivian Payne, to whom Hays had become a surrogate father after Payne's father died when he was 13.

After an agreeable month abroad, Hays and his party were invited to return to North America on the Titanic as guests of J. Bruce Ismay, the chairman of the White Star Line, which owned of the mammoth ship.

Ottawa lawyer Gavin Murphy, a Titanic buff and author of a book about Hays, Ottawa's Titanic Connection, says Hays and Ismay were hoping to strike a deal that would see White Star encourage immigrants to travel across Canada on Grand Trunk trains and the railway promote White Star as the preferred ocean line.

Hays had other reasons to return when he did. One of his daughters, Louise, was dealing with a difficult pregnancy in Montreal and he wanted to be at her side. And his jewel, the Château Laurier, was scheduled to open in Ottawa on April 26.

The ship sailed April 10, 1912, with Hays' party booked into four firstclass cabins on the promenade deck. For four days, they enjoyed the Titanic's sumptuous comforts. The iceberg ended that abruptly at 11: 40 p.m. on April 14.

Hays and Davidson wrapped their wives in furs, led them to the secondlast lifeboat and saw them off. According to Alan Hustak's 1998 book, Titanic, The Canadian Story, Hays told his daughter Orion not to worry. "This ship is good for eight hours, and long before then help will arrive."

It appears Hays truly believed that. In its April 19 edition, the Ottawa Journal reported that Maj. Arthur Peuchen, a wealthy resident of Toronto and fellow passenger who survived the sinking, had said Hays "expressed no fear that he would be lost by remaining on board the ship."

Hustak writes that Hays planned to go back to their staterooms to condense their belongings into two of three bags he wanted to transfer to the anticipated rescue vessel. His daughter Orion was so reassured by his demeanour, he reports, she didn't even think about kissing her father or husband goodbye.

In fact, the ship went down at 2: 20 a.m. on April 15, less than three hours after striking the iceberg. Clara Hays, Orion Davidson and Anne Perreault were rescued by the Cunard Line's RMS Carpathia, but Hays, Davidson and Payne were among the many who went down with the ship.

Initially, though, newspapers reported that Hays had been saved. But by noon on April 16, the Journal informed its readers that Grand Trunk officials appeared to have given up hope. "No message of any kind had been received from their president, Mr. Hays, and it was felt that if he were alive, he would communicate with them," the newspaper reported.

The tragedy postponed the opening of the Château Laurier and Ottawa train station for five weeks. When the two buildings finally opened on June 1, 1912, it was without ceremony.

At 6 a.m. on April 26, the S.S. Minia, a Nova Scotia cable ship chartered by White Star to search for victims, recovered Hays' body. The day before, in tribute to its lost leader, the entire Grand Trunk system had fallen silent from 11: 30 a.m. till 11.35 a.m.

At the Grand Trunk Central Station in Ottawa - draped, like the Château Laurier, in purple and black - "engines stopped dead on the tracks punctually at the given time," the Journal reported.

"Gangs of men working on the building, working in the yards, silently laid down their tools and sat down. Telegraph instruments ceased their incessant chatter. No typewriters clicked in the offices. The army of men employed in the Château Laurier and on the contracts on the plaza paused to pay tribute to the great chief."

Hays is buried at Montreal's Mount Royal Cemetery. His tombstone reads: "We are a different people and we are a better people because this man lived, and worked, and loved, and died." His wife, Clara, died in 1955 at age 96. She never remarried and is buried with her husband.

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