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Article Summary: The April 15, 1912, tragedy of the "unsinkable" *Titanic* is re-visited in this article recounting the stories of the survivors and victims with Nebraska ties. Though Emil Brandeis is the most famous, many others such as "Titanic Carl" Johnson (who settled in Swedeburg, Nebraska) and Victor Halva (who later settled in Wahoo, Nebraska), are included.

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Photographs / Images: Emil Brandeis portrait; "Titanic Carl" Johnson during World War I; cartoon from *Omaha World-Herald*, May 15, 1927, Carl Johnson, August Wennerstrom clinging to wreckage; John Kuhl, speaker of the Nebraska House of Representatives, before sailing on *Carpathia*; Emil Brandeis' watch

# Nebraska Connections



For those who subscribed to a daily newspaper, the shocking news arrived on Monday, April 15, 1912. A short article in the *Sioux City (Iowa) Journal* under the single-column heading, "Ship Titanic Hits Iceberg," only hinted at what was about to become one of the biggest news stories of the century. At first it was believed that all of the passengers were safe. "Passengers Taken From Giant Liner" was the lead story in the Monday evening, April 15 edition of the *Lincoln Star*. The article reported that *Titanic* was making for Halifax, Nova Scotia, under her own power.

By the next day the *Star* found it necessary to amend its previous story with another front-page article: "Giant Liner Titanic, With Most of Her Passengers, is at Bottom of Atlantic." The April 16 evening edition of the *Omaha World-Herald* carried the banner headline: "Fifteen Hundred Die in the Titanic Ocean Horror." The *World-Herald* devoted several columns of its story to Emil Brandeis—the most prominent Nebraskan on *Titanic*'s passenger manifesto. Brandeis's family spent the next two days and nights at the local office of the Associated Press anxiously scanning news bulletins in the hope that Emil's name would be added to the list of survivors. But it was not.

Emil Brandeis was born March 15, 1864, to Mr. and Mrs. Jonas L. Brandeis of Monitowac, Wisconsin. In 1881 the family moved to Omaha, where the el-

By Edward R. Tryon



**Emil Brandeis.** From the Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, owned by KMTV and on permanent loan to the Western Heritage Museum, Omaha.

der Brandeis founded the Boston Store. At the age of seventeen, Emil began working for his father as a clerk, becoming a full partner at the age of twenty-one and assuming control—along with brothers Arthur and Hugo—upon his father's death.

Together they built J. L. Brandeis & Sons into Omaha's largest retail store.<sup>1</sup> Emil was described as "the constructing genius of the family." He was credited with erecting several major buildings in downtown Omaha including the block-long building at Sixteenth and Douglas which housed the headquarters of J. L. Brandeis & Co. until November 1980. He also built and operated the magnificent Brandeis Theater, which stood at the southwest corner of Seventeenth and Douglas until it was demolished for a parking garage in 1959. Plans were on the drawing board for another theater in the 1500 block of Douglas when Emil sailed for Europe in January 1912.<sup>2</sup>

Those who knew Emil best said he was "a man of few words and rapid decisions." He was involved in a number of civic organizations, including the Chamber of Commerce, the Grain Exchange, and the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben. Although his outside interests included athletics, aviation, and yachting, it was said he never neglected business for diversions. Despite his relative prosperity, Brandeis did not live in an ostentatious manner. His residence was in the Kennard Apartments in the 1800 block of Dodge Street. At the time of his death, he was forty-eight years old and unmarried.<sup>3</sup>

On January 17, 1912, Emil left Omaha for his annual trip to Europe. Upon arriving in Rome, he joined his niece, Ruth Stern, and her husband, Irving, who had been married recently and were enjoying their first trip abroad. After traveling with the Sterns through Europe and Egypt, Emil spent some time with a sister who lived in Switzerland. Although expected to return to Omaha around the first of

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May, Emil changed his plans in order to sail on the maiden voyage of the White Star Line's newest floating palace—*Titanic*. In a letter Emil mailed to Arthur Brandeis from Paris, he noted, "I am not traveling with any friends, but there are a great many people going on this boat that I am well-acquainted with."<sup>4</sup>

Nearly 900 feet long and weighing 46,000 tons, *Titanic* was said to be the largest moveable object that had ever been built. Although registered under the British flag and manned by British seamen, *Titanic* was built to appeal to wealthy Americans. Her parent company, White Star Line, actually was a subsidiary of J. P. Morgan's International Mercantile Marine of New York.

John Pierpont Morgan was among the wealthiest and most powerful men of America's Gilded Age. Although Morgan had been in Europe in early 1912 and had reserved one of *Titanic*'s most expensive suites for the trip home, illness forced him to change his plans. As a result John Jacob Astor gained the distinction of being the wealthiest man on *Titanic*.

John Jacob Astor was a great-grandson of the well-known fur trade entrepreneur bearing the same name. John Jacob No. 1 retired from the American Fur Company in 1834 and multiplied his net worth by investing in New York real estate. Much of the family fortune devolved into the hands of John Jacob Astor No. 4—a man once described as the world's greatest monument to unearned wealth.<sup>5</sup>

The forty-eight-year-old multimillionaire had been divorced in 1909. In September 1911 he married Madeleine Force who, at the age of nineteen, was younger than Astor's eldest son, Vincent. The affair scandalized New York society—including some of the four hundred people Mrs. William B. Astor had identified as everyone worthy of knowing. To escape the wagging tongues of the "social register," the newlyweds spent a romantic winter vacation abroad. When the semi-young couple boarded *Titanic* for the voyage home,

Madeleine was five months into a "delicate condition" with John Jacob No. 5.

Wall Street dubbed *Titanic* "The Millionaires' Special." A wire service story estimated the combined wealth of *Titanic*'s first-class passengers in excess of half a billion dollars. Astor's fortune alone was estimated at \$150 million.



"Titanic Carl" Johnson during World War I. NSHS-A545-26

Others of considerable wealth included Benjamin Guggenheim of the American Smelting and Refining Company, \$95 million; George Widener of the Philadelphia Traction Co., \$50 million; and Isador Straus of R. H. Macy and Co., \$50 million.<sup>6</sup>

The not-so-rich-and-famous included a large contingent of Scandinavian immigrants. Among them was Carl Olaf Johnson, a twenty-one-year-old Swede. Johnson, who was about to be inducted into the Swedish army, slipped out of the country and traveled to Copenhagen, Denmark, "where they don't keep track of mere Swedes."<sup>7</sup> During a two-week stay in Copenhagen, Johnson purchased a ticket to America, where he planned to join his brother,

Eric, on a farm near Swedeburg, Nebraska. After sailing to England on a cattle boat and spending a week carousing around London, Johnson and two companions went to Southampton, where they saw the *Titanic* for the first time. "Sure was some boat," said Johnson. "Never saw anything like it."<sup>8</sup>

The poorest man on *Titanic* may have been twenty-year-old Victor T. Halva of Brno, Moravia, which was then part of Austria. Halva said he first heard of Nebraska, "a place where silver dollars grew on trees," when Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show toured Europe in 1909. Apparently lacking the price of passage to the Cornhusker State, Halva said he slipped aboard *Titanic* with a ticketed acquaintance and then relied on the festive atmosphere to cloak his stowaway status.<sup>9</sup>

*Titanic* was fortunate (or unfortunate as it turned out) to have been going anywhere. British coal miners had been on a lengthy strike and Southampton harbor was full of ships immobilized because of a shortage of coal. Part of the fuel for *Titanic*'s maiden voyage had to be scavenged from the bunkers of other vessels. But shortly before noon on April 10, 1912, *Titanic*'s huge, triple-toned steam whistle announced that departure was imminent. Aided by six tugboats, she eased from her berth a few minutes later, made a ninety-degree turn and began moving slowly down the Test River toward the English Channel.<sup>10</sup>

The liner *New York* was one of several ships tied to a nearby dock because of the fuel shortage. As *Titanic* came abreast of the smaller vessel, the wash from her huge propellers caused thick mooring lines to snap like yarn. The suction created by *Titanic*'s wake caused *New York*'s stern to drift toward a close encounter with the big ship. Captain Edward J. Smith instinctively ordered "full speed astern" and *Titanic*'s 50,000 horsepower engines not only checked her forward progress, but caused her to move back slightly. What appeared to be an imminent collision was averted by less than four feet.<sup>11</sup>

A collective sigh of relief swept through the passengers who lined the decks of *Titanic*. A stranger turned to Mrs. Henry Harris and said, "This is a bad omen. Do you love life?" "I love it," she replied. "Then get off this ship at Cherbourg . . . if we get that far. That's what I am going to do."<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps because of their common interest in show business, Mr. and Mrs. Harris were closely acquainted with Emil Brandeis. Henry Burkhardt Harris was returning to America with a British play he hoped would be a hit in one of his Broadway theaters. But as *Titanic* eased into the English Channel for its first stop at Cherbourg, France, Emil Brandeis was not yet on board.<sup>13</sup>

Because the harbor at Cherbourg lacked docking facilities for ships the size of *Titanic*, it was necessary to ferry the passengers out on specially built tenders. Among the large contingent of wealthy Americans boarding at Cherbourg were Benjamin Guggenheim, Mrs. James J. (the "Unsinkable" Molly) Brown, Charlotte Drake Cardeza, her son Thomas Cardeza, and Emil Brandeis.

*Titanic* featured two super-luxury suites that were expected to carry a price as high as \$4,350 during the peak travel season. J. Bruce Ismay, the managing director of the White Star Line, was said to be in one of the suites, but the question of who was occupying the other suite has been debated for many years.

In a magazine article published in December 1955, Walter Lord said the luxury suite was occupied by Emil Brandeis.<sup>14</sup> But Lord did not mention Brandeis's cabin assignment in his best-selling book, *A Night to Remember*, or in his 1986 sequel, *The Night Lives On*. Other authors reported that the occupants of the second luxury suite were Charlotte and Thomas Cardeza. With two servants, fourteen trunks, four suitcases, and three crates of baggage, the Cardezas presumably needed a great deal of space. Emil Brandeis was traveling alone. The Cardeza ticket was

priced at 512 pounds, six shillings (approximately \$2,500), while Brandeis's ticket—at fifty pounds, nine shillings and eleven pence—was slightly more than \$250.<sup>15</sup>

On Thursday, April 11, *Titanic* made her final stop in Queenstown, Ireland, to pick up additional passengers. The total number of passengers and crew was now 2,228. Upon leaving Queenstown (now Cobh), Captain Smith began navigating a "great circle" route to New York.

Thursday, Friday, and Saturday were quiet and uneventful. According to Mrs. Harris, "The days passed too quickly. Dinner parties, dancing, auction pools, midnight repasts were indulged in to the Nth degree."<sup>16</sup> Sunday began with breakfast at 8:00 A.M. and passengers could choose from a menu that included a variety of selections ranging from steak and eggs in first class to tripe in third class.<sup>17</sup> After the breakfast dishes were cleared away, worship services were held in various parts of the ship.

After officiating at one service in the second-class lounge and another in steerage, Rev. Thomas Byles spent the afternoon in the library. Although Reverend Byles had never been to America, his parents had once lived in Omaha, where the elder Byles served as a supply pastor of First Congregational Church. But the family later returned to England leaving one son, Winter Byles, in Omaha. While Rev. Thomas Byles was crossing the Atlantic on *Titanic*, brother Winter Byles was preparing to meet him in New York for the wedding of a third brother.<sup>18</sup>

Emil Brandeis spent part of the afternoon entertaining a group of department store buyers in his private suite, while Mrs. Harris joined her husband in an eight-handed poker game on an enclosed deck near the main staircase. Returning to her stateroom to dress for dinner, Mrs. Harris fell down a flight of stairs and fractured her elbow.<sup>19</sup>

Sunday dinner was fit for a king (or at least for the various captains of industry, robber barons, and merchant princes who filled the first-class dining

saloon that evening). The sumptuous feast included salmon with mouselline sauce, filet mignons Lili, lamb with mint sauce, roast duckling, a variety of hors d'oeuvres, exotic desserts, and other delicacies.<sup>20</sup>

Although Mrs. Harris was in considerable pain and encumbered by a heavy cast, she put on her best sleeveless dress and insisted on going to dinner. The Harrises dined with Emil Brandeis, who talked of his recent travels with Ruth and Irving Stern.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the day and into the evening the operators of *Titanic*'s state-of-the-art wireless telegraph received iceberg warnings and relayed them to the officers on the bridge. Instead of taking precautionary measures, Captain Smith kept pushing onward at a speed estimated at more than twenty-two knots (nearly twenty-six land miles per hour).<sup>22</sup>

Shortly before 11:40 P.M., a lookout in the crow's nest spotted a dark object directly in *Titanic*'s path. Instinctively, he gave the rope attached to the warning bell three sharp yanks—signifying danger dead ahead—and then picked up the telephone and reported to the bridge. Quartermaster Robert Hichens immediately threw the ship's wheel "hard-a-starboard" while First Officer William Murdoch slammed the lever of the engine-room telegraph into reverse. But the 46,000-ton *Titanic* could neither turn on a dime nor stop in less than half a mile. Moments later the ship side-swiped a huge iceberg. Water began pouring through a 300-foot gash in her starboard side.

Contemporary reports said *Titanic*'s inch-thick steel plates were "ripped open as if by a giant can opener." Another theory stated that the hull probably buckled inward, causing riveted seams to pop open like a huge zipper. But metallurgic tests on a piece of hull brought up in 1991 found the steel to be extraordinarily brittle, suggesting the hull may have shattered like cheap plastic.<sup>23</sup>

Although the force of the collision

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was estimated at more than one million foot-tons, many of the passengers said they barely felt the impact. Managing Director J. Bruce Ismay noticed a grinding sensation. Mrs. Walter Stephenson said the jolt was insignificant compared to what she had experienced during the San Francisco Earthquake. Thinking the ship might have struck a whale, Spencer V. Silverthorne hurried to the rail just in time to see the fatal iceberg scraping along the starboard side. James McGough watched in amazement as chunks of ice fell through an open port-hole and scattered across the floor of his cabin. Silverthorne and McGough were department store buyers, and perhaps were among those entertained by Emil Brandeis earlier in the day.<sup>24</sup>

According to a survivor identified as "Mr. Greenwald," Emil Brandeis was in the smoking room with "Harris, Taussig, Loyt and Rothschild" at the moment of the collision. While the names "Greenwald" and "Loyt" do not appear on *Titanic's* passenger manifesto, the names W. B. Greenfield, Henry Harris, Emil Taussig, W. F. Hoyt, and Martin Rothschild can be found.<sup>25</sup> Rene Harris recalled, "When the Titanic struck the iceberg, Mr. Brandeis, Mr. Harris and myself rushed to the deck only to be assured by officers that nothing serious had happened to the vessel and to go back to our staterooms. We were standing together discussing the trouble when we were informed by a steward to get lifebelts and go on deck."<sup>26</sup>

Because his cabin was on one of the lower decks near the bow of the ship, Carl Johnson was somewhat closer to the point of impact. According to Walter Lord, "As Johnson got up to see what was causing a mild commotion outside his cabin, water seeped in under the door and around his feet. He decided to dress and by the time his clothes were on, the water was over his shoes."<sup>27</sup> *Titanic's* third-class passenger list included the names Carl Jansson, Carl Jonsson, and Karl Johansson and Lord's reference may or may not have been to the Nebraska Carl Johnson.

On April 27, 1912, Carl Johnson told his own story to C. J. Carlson, who translated it from Swedish and published it in the *Wahoo* (Nebr.) *Wasp*. He also related his experiences to an audience at the Wahoo theater April 29, following the showing of news footage of the *Titanic*.<sup>28</sup> Fifteen years later, Johnson, who was now able to speak English, recited a longer version to a reporter from the *Omaha World-Herald*. Johnson said he had been asleep in his cabin near the bow of the ship when he was awakened by a crash. As he started to go back to sleep, someone knocked on the door and said: "Get up on deck. The ship has struck an iceberg. But there's no danger. The Titanic is unsinkable." Johnson made his way up to the deck, but did not see an iceberg. Finding the air very cold, he returned to his cabin to get his coat. By the time he made his way down several flights of stairs, water was flooding the floor of his cabin. He returned to the deck with nothing but his watch and the clothes on his back.<sup>29</sup>

Victor Halva said he had been sitting in his "favorite saloon" with his chair tilted back in the direction of the bow when the crash came. Finding himself flat on his back in a pool of beer, Halva picked himself up, went outside to see what was going on, and then returned for more refreshments.<sup>30</sup>

For the officers on the bridge, a period of frenzied activity already had begun—and no "liquid fortification" was permitted. Ten minutes after the collision, *Titanic* had taken on fourteen feet of water and was beginning to list to one side. By midnight, Captain Smith learned the ship could not remain afloat and ordered the wireless operators to send out a distress call. Five minutes later an order was given to prepare the lifeboats and to assemble the passengers on the Boat Deck. At 12:25 A.M., Smith ordered the crew to begin loading the lifeboats according to the "law of the sea."

The law of the sea was clear—women and children first—but the interpretation of the law was not. First Of-

ficer William Murdoch, who was in charge of the odd-numbered lifeboats on *Titanic's* starboard (right) side, interpreted the "law" to mean women and children first, but men could enter when there were no women. On the port (left) side Second Officer Charles H. Lightoller interpreted the "law" to mean women and children only, and a boy of thirteen was no longer a child.

The *Titanic* carried fourteen regulation lifeboats with a rated capacity of sixty-five each, two emergency boats with a capacity of forty each, and four Engelhardt collapsibles with a capacity of forty-seven each. Only Captain Smith, his closest officers, and Managing Director Ismay understood the gravity of the situation. Because no immediate sense of urgency was communicated to the passengers, few wanted to abandon the safety of an "unsinkable" ship for a lifeboat that wasn't.

Lifeboat No. 7 was the first to be lowered. With only twenty-eight on board—including twenty women and children, four male passengers, three crewmen, and one Pomeranian dog—it was less than half full. Among the forty in Boat No. 3 were Mr. and Mrs. Henry S. Harper and their Pekinese puppy, "Sun-Yat-Sen." And only two of the twelve in Emergency Boat No. 1 were women.

By 1:15 A.M., the sound of distress rockets being fired and the deck's increasing tilt shocked many passengers out of their complacency. As a result, the higher-numbered lifeboats farther aft were more fully loaded. With seventy on board, Boat No. 11 was overloaded; Boat No. 13 contained sixty-four. Carl Johnson said he and a friend helped two Swedish girls into one of the last remaining boats, but were prevented at gunpoint from joining them.<sup>31</sup>

A similar situation prevailed on the port side, except no male passengers were permitted to fill the empty seats. Boat No 6 was lowered with twenty-eight on board, including Molly Brown, who was seized from behind and forcibly placed into the boat. Boat No. 14 was lowered with sixty. Boat No. 16 was

lowered with about the same number.

Although 10,000 electric bulbs illuminated her interior *Titanic's* boat deck remained shrouded in darkness. As far as most of the remaining passengers were concerned, No. 16 was the last lifeboat; however, Emergency Boat No. 2, Lifeboat No. 4, and the four canvas-sided collapsibles remained unseen and unlaunched near the forward end of the boat deck. But the bow of the ship was sinking rapidly and the forward end of the boat deck—which was supposed to be seventy feet above sea level—was now less than twenty.

Boat No. 2 was lowered at 1:45 A.M. with twenty-five on board. Boat No. 4 had been lowered to "A" Deck, but could not be loaded because the windows of the enclosed promenade barred the way. *Titanic* now had less than thirty minutes to remain afloat and the wives of several of her most prominent passengers—including Mrs. John Jacob Astor, Mrs. George Widener, Mrs. E. B. Ryerson, and Mrs. John B. Thayer—remained on board. After loading the aft lifeboats, Officer Lightoller returned to "A" deck, where the stubborn windows were forced open. Mr. Astor asked to accompany his pregnant wife, but permission was refused. Lightoller also refused to allow thirteen-year-old Jack Ryerson to accompany his mother until Mr. Ryerson interceded. Seventeen-year-old Jack Thayer was well beyond the "official" age of childhood and did not attempt to join his mother. Had they been on Officer Murdoch's side of the ship, all might have been saved, even "Kitty" Astor—the wealthiest dog on *Titanic*—who had been released from her kennel and was running about the deck.

John B. Thayer was a vice-president of the Pennsylvania Railroad. But, according to an article that appeared in the *Laurel Advocate* and other weekly Nebraska newspapers, Thayer may have had a Nebraska connection: "Were Former Nebraskans—J. B. Thayer, whose name appears in the lists of passengers aboard the ill-fated *Titanic*, was president of the old Standard Cattle

Company that at one time bought up thousands of acres of Dodge county land around Ames, Nebraska, and raised cattle for a while, later building the Leavitt sugar factory."<sup>32</sup>

Four canvas-sided Engelhardt collapsibles remained. Collapsible "C" was hooked to the empty davits of Boat 3 and lowered from the starboard side at 1:40 A.M. One of the occupants was the White Star Line's managing director, J. Bruce Ismay. He was severely criticized in the press for choosing *not* to go down with J. P. Morgan's ship.

By 2:00 A.M., *Titanic* had twenty minutes to remain afloat. Her bow was submerged and the ship was taking on water at an increasing rate. Officer Lightoller ordered members of the crew to stand with arms linked around Collapsible "D"—which was now hanging from the davits of Boat No. 4—ostensibly to keep panicked men from rushing the boat.

Accompanied by her husband (and possibly Emil Brandeis), Mrs. Harris had gone from boat to boat—refusing to board—until only one remained. Wearing a life jacket over her white fur coat, Rene Harris finally climbed into Collapsible "D" and sat down near the stern. "Mr. Brandeis insisted on Mr. Harris accompanying me aboard the lifeboat, saying that I had a broken arm and would need the assistance. . . . Both assisted me on board and made me as comfortable as possible. We were ready to lower when Mr. Harris was informed that the women first rule was prevailing under all circumstances. He joined Mr. Brandeis on the ill-fated ship."<sup>33</sup>

The canvas-sided lifeboat was lowered with twenty-five passengers and two crew members, who were assigned to row. Rene Harris recalled, "Mr. Brandeis kept saying encouraging words to me as our boat was being lowered, saying that they would join us later. . . . I seem to see both men now standing side by side, smiling and waving to me as our boat drew away. It was about ten minutes after we left the *Titanic* and were about 200 yards away

when we heard a deafening roar. . . . [and] the stern seemed to rise up and fall sharply beneath the water. Then I knew that Mr. Brandeis and my husband had gone to their watery grave."<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, August Wennerstrom witnessed a horrifying scene near the stern. Wennerstrom—one of the Swedes who boarded at Southampton with Carl Johnson—watched as hundreds of the remaining steerage passengers gathered in a circle around Father Byles, "praying, crying, asking God and Mary to help them." They remained in prayer as a great wave overwhelmed them when the ship went down.<sup>35</sup>

As *Titanic's* stern rose in the air at an increasingly sharp angle, Wennerstrom lost his footing and slipped into the sea. Fortunately he splashed down close to Collapsible "A." Carl Johnson dodged a rolling piano and leaped over the rail shortly before *Titanic* broke apart and disappeared at 2:20 A.M. He found himself struggling in the water among more than fifteen hundred screaming passengers. Breaking free of the desperately grasping hands that threatened to pull him under, Johnson swam until he found a piece of floating debris large enough to support his weight.<sup>36</sup> Although Johnson later maintained that he and Wennerstrom remained clinging to a floating plank until they were picked up the next morning, evidence suggests there were no survivors other than those who found refuge in a lifeboat.<sup>37</sup>

While slightly more than seven hundred survivors were shivering in the lifeboats and the rest were freezing to death in the water, the 13,000-ton Cunard liner, *Carpathia*, was racing to the rescue. *Carpathia* was bound for the Mediterranean when *Titanic's* distress call was picked up and relayed to Captain Arthur H. Rostron. Rostron immediately brought the ship around and began making preparations for the rescue. By cutting off cabin heat and all other non-essential demands for steam, Rostron was able to wring nearly seventeen knots out of a vessel rated at only

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thirteen. The fifty-eight miles separating the two ships was covered in three and one-half hours.<sup>38</sup>

The first survivors were picked up shortly after 4:00 A.M. While the more able-bodied scrambled up *Carpathia's* side on rope ladders, the less able were raised on boatswain's chairs and the children were hoisted aboard in canvas bags. One woman, who was thought to be nursing an infant under her fur coat, was found to be harboring a small dog.

One of *Carpathia's* passengers was John Kuhl of Randolph, Cedar County, Nebraska. He was en route to Europe for a tour of Italy, Austria, Germany and England. Although Kuhl slept as Captain Rostron zigged and zagged through the iceberg-studded waters, he was awakened by the noise of the rescue. Despite efforts to restrict *Carpathia's* passengers to their cabins, Kuhl witnessed the entire operation: "The work of getting the passengers over the side of *Carpathia* was attended by the most heart-rending scenes. Babies were crying, women were hysterical, and the men stolid and speechless. Some of the women were bare-footed and without headgear."<sup>39</sup> Later Kuhl watched as several who died aboard *Carpathia* were buried at sea. Kuhl had been elected to the Nebraska Legislature in 1906, where he represented the counties of Cedar and Pierce for three terms and served as Speaker of the House in 1911. When *Carpathia* returned to New York with the *Titanic's* survivors, Kuhl was interviewed by a reporter, who managed to get a few details wrong. The story, which was published nationwide, said Kuhl was on a honeymoon cruise—a statement that caused a great deal of gossip in Randolph. Friends speculated that the legislator had eloped with a Randolph teacher who apparently couldn't be located. The rumor mill was not silenced until Kuhl returned to Nebraska in mid-July. He was still a bachelor.<sup>40</sup>

*Carpathia*, designed to carry a maximum of 750 passengers and with a large number of honeymooning couples aboard, did not have enough food, bed-



A cartoon in the May 15, 1927, issue of the *Omaha World-Herald*, portrayed Carl Johnson, August Wennerstrom, and an unidentified man clinging to a piece of wreckage after *Titanic* went down.

ding, or supplies to accommodate the 705 refugees from *Titanic*. After considering all options and consulting with Bruce Ismay, Captain Rostron decided to return to New York. Kuhl and other male passengers gave up their state-rooms to the survivors, while many of the female passengers donated clothing or made clothing from blankets. According to Carl Johnson, "Everything that could be done for our comfort was done."<sup>41</sup>

When *Carpathia* arrived in New York on Thursday, April 18, Mrs. Arthur Brandeis, Emil's sister-in-law, was there to meet it. But even the small hope that Emil might be among the survivors was dashed when he did not disembark with the others. She sought out Rene Harris the next day.

Mrs. Harris seemed to be the only person with information about Emil. But by the time she was able to talk, her shipboard shock had turned to anger: "Fifteen hundred people were not drowned on the *Titanic*; fifteen hundred people were murdered," she said. "That's the story, the true story of this awful wreck and I shall tell the world the second I am able."<sup>42</sup> Believing that her husband died because of negligence on the part of the White Star Line



John Kuhl, speaker of the Nebraska House of Representatives, a few years before he sailed on *Carpathia*.  
NSHS-L514

for not supplying sufficient lifeboats, or on the part of Captain Smith for ignoring the ice warnings, Mrs. Harris later filed a one million dollar claim for damages. But the total amount paid to all of the survivors was \$663,000—a paltry sum even in 1912. Forced to fend for herself, Mrs. Harris made another fortune in the theatrical business, but lost it when the stock market crashed in 1929. She died in poverty in 1969.

Memorial services for Emil Brandeis were held on the stage of the Brandeis Theater in Omaha at 10:00 A.M. on Sunday, April 21. The cavernous stage was draped in black crepe and covered with flowers. Because Emil's body had not been recovered, a large portrait replaced the usual coffin. The service, which began with an invocation by Rabbi Frederick Cohn and closed with a benediction by Rev. John Matthews, featured six addresses and eulogies by prominent Nebraskans including Senator Gilbert Hitchcock. As the standing-room-only crowd filed out of the theater, an orchestra played "Nearer My God to Thee."<sup>43</sup>

The life insurance companies of America were quick to exploit the disaster. The April 28 Sunday edition of the *Omaha Bee* featured a three-quarter-page advertisement calling attention to how quickly the National Fidelity and Casualty Company of Omaha had paid Emil's \$20,000 death benefit. Under the heading "Titanic Victim Aetna-ized," a small ad on the front page of the *Laurel Advocate* for April 25 noted that Brandeis also carried two Aetna life insurance policies in the amount of \$25,000, with a double-indemnity clause in case of steamship accident: "When you want life or accident insurance see W. W. Collins and buy it from the largest company in the world."

The morning after the disaster the *Californian* conducted a cursory search of the vicinity, but recovered no bodies. It was feared that *Titanic's* life jackets had performed as badly as her watertight compartments and that the missing passengers had been sucked down

with the wreckage of the ship.

*Titanic* went down in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, and debris and floating bodies were visible for weeks. Although thirteen of the twenty lifeboats had been recovered by *Carpathia*, the steamer *Royal George* reported passing an empty lifeboat. On May 13, two hundred miles from the spot where *Titanic* went down, her sister ship, *Oceanic*, picked up Collapsible A. Inside were three decomposed bodies; all were buried at sea.

Even before *Carpathia* returned to New York with the 705 fortunate survivors—including some of the wealthiest widows and orphans in the United States—the New York office of the White Star Line made arrangements with the Commercial Cable Company to charter one of its ships to recover as many bodies as possible. Her equipment augmented with most of the spare undertaking supplies in the Maritime Provinces and her hold filled with crushed ice, the cable ship *Mackay-Bennett* steamed out of Halifax Harbor on Wednesday, April 17. Recovery operations began on Saturday.

The body count was much larger than anticipated. The simple wooden coffins that lined the deck were soon filled and the embalming supplies nearly exhausted. Of the 306 bodies recovered, only 190 were brought to shore. The others were buried at sea. The next-of-kin were outraged. Captain F. H. Lardner explained, "No prominent man was recommitted to the deep. . . . It seemed best to bring back the dead where the death might give rise to such questions as large inheritance and all the litigation."<sup>44</sup> Thus the social distinctions that existed in life were maintained even in death.

*Mackay-Bennett* returned to her berth in Halifax on April 30—almost two weeks after the disaster. The coffins were filled with the bodies of identified first-class passengers; the others were packed in ice in the cable hold. The remains were taken to a Halifax ice rink to be processed and shipped home. The

unidentified and unclaimed can be found today in the cemeteries of Halifax.

The first body to be claimed was that of John Jacob Astor. Like many others it was in poor condition and could be identified only by personal effects. Also recovered was the body of third-class passenger Ernest G. Danbom. Among his effects were a gold watch, an opal and ruby ring, a bracelet, a lady's watch, a diamond ring, a check for \$1315.79 drawn on the Security National Bank of Sioux City, Iowa, a jewel case, \$266 in paper money and \$30 in gold.

Seventy-five years later, Danbom's personal inventory prompted speculation. One writer on the disaster speculated that Danbom was a jewel thief or gambler traveling under an assumed name, but he was neither.<sup>45</sup> Instead he was a prominent physician of Stanton, Iowa, a small town approximately fifty miles southeast of Council Bluffs. Ernest and Sigrid Danbom were returning home after an eighteen-month Scandinavian honeymoon, bringing with them their five-month-old baby. Also traveling with the Danboms were Mrs. Anders Andersson (a sister of Mrs. Danbom), her husband, and their five children. With the exception of Dr. Danbom, none of the bodies was recovered.<sup>46</sup>

The loss of the Danbom and Andersson families would appear to cast doubt on one of the main conclusions of both the American and the British investigations of the disaster. Despite statistics showing that only forty-six percent of third-class females were saved, as compared to ninety-seven percent of first-class females and eighty-six percent of females in second class, both investigations concluded there was no discrimination among the classes. The disproportionate loss of life was attributed in part to the fact that few third-class passengers could speak English and presumably could not understand directions.<sup>47</sup> But Danbom was an American physician, whose parents lived in Iowa and who had relatives in Axtell, Nebraska. If Dr. Danbom was sufficiently

## A Titanic Disaster



Emil Brandeis's watch. Courtesy Western Heritage Museum, Omaha.

conversant in English to practice medicine, it seems likely that he should have been able to understand the gravity of the situation and the need to get the two women and six children in his entourage into a lifeboat.

The body of Emil Brandeis was among the first to be recovered. An article in the *Randolph Times* reported that \$16,000 in cash was found on his

person. Three days before the "funeral ship" returned to Halifax the family received a telegram from Mrs. Arthur Brandeis: "Emil identified. Body on Steamer Mackay-Bennett. Have directed it forwarded to Omaha from Halifax."<sup>48</sup>

For one reason or another, it was decided to have Emil's body cremated. Cremation was a relatively new funeral custom and extremely rare in Nebraska.

The *Omaha Sunday Bee* ran a feature article explaining the procedure. "Ashes to Ashes Becomes Literal Fashion," said the *Bee*.<sup>49</sup> But it was a fashion that had not yet reached the Cornhusker State and it was necessary to have the remains cremated in Chicago. Emil's ashes were then returned to Omaha, where private services were held, and the ashes buried with his parents at Pleasant Hill Cemetery.<sup>50</sup>

Carl Johnson, who had lost his suitcase and all of his worldly goods, arrived in New York wearing clothing made from surplus *Carpathia* blankets. Under the auspices of the Salvation Army, he was given a new suit, a derby hat, and a railroad ticket to Wahoo. Even before *Mackay-Bennett* arrived in Halifax with the body of Emil Brandeis, the man later known as "Titanic Carl" Johnson had found a temporary home with brother Eric, who was working on a farm near Swedeburg.

Victor Halva, who said he had been picked up by a lifeboat full of women, spent three and one-half weeks in a New York hospital and then boarded a train for Lynch, Nebraska, where he completed his recovery at the home of an uncle. Both Johnson and Halva had been motivated to leave the old country by the threat of imminent "greetings" from their local draft boards. Ironically, both men found themselves inducted into the U.S. military when the country entered World War I five years later. After the Armistice was signed, Johnson returned to Wahoo, where he worked as a builder until he died on March 23, 1978.<sup>51</sup> Halva eventually settled in O'Neill, and worked as an electrical contractor until his death on December 4, 1958.<sup>52</sup> With no direct descendants to mourn his passing, the memory of Emil Brandeis—Nebraska's most prominent *Titanic* victim—soon faded.

*Titanic* still lies 12,460 feet below the surface of the North Atlantic. "Safe from Sea Ghouls" said an article in the *Sioux City Journal*, April 4, 1912. "No human hand will ever reach into *Titanic's* resting place." And none did until Robert

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Ballard found her in 1985. Since then the mechanical hands of several remote-controlled submersibles have removed more than 4,000 artifacts from *Titanic's* grave. One that did not lie at the bottom of the Atlantic was Emil Brandeis's watch, which was recovered with his body and is now in the collections of Omaha's Western Heritage Museum.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 19, 1912.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 16, 17, 1912; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Apr. 18, 1912.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Marcus, *The Maiden Voyage* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 16, 1912.

<sup>7</sup> "Titanic Carl Johnson and the Tale He Lived to Tell," *Omaha World-Herald*, magazine section, May 15, 1927. A copy of this article was supplied to the author by Howard Manstedt of Wahoo, Carl Johnson's nephew.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Halva seems to have cloaked his status well. His name has not been found on any published list of passengers, nor on a list of survivors picked up by *Carpathia*. Halva's story was told in an article, "Vic Halva Remembers Titanic," *The Frontier*, O'Neill, Nebraska, May 8, 1952, and in his obituary, also in *The Frontier*, Dec. 11, 1958. Both clippings supplied to the author by Halva's son, Fred T. Halva of Denver.

<sup>10</sup> John P. Eaton and Charles A. Haas, *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy*, 2d. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1994), 76.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Rene Harris, "Her Husband Went Down With the Titanic," *Liberty Magazine*, Apr. 23, 1932, 26–32.

<sup>13</sup> Marcus, *Maiden Voyage*, 20–21.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Lord, "Maiden Voyage," *American Heritage* 7 (Dec. 1955): 103.

<sup>15</sup> Eaton and Haas, *Triumph and Tragedy*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, "Her Husband Went Down," 27.

<sup>17</sup> Eaton and Haas, *Triumph and Tragedy*, 97, 116.

<sup>18</sup> *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, Apr. 17, 1912; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Apr. 17, 1912.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, "Her Husband Went Down," 27.

<sup>20</sup> Eaton and Haas, *Triumph and Tragedy*, 132–33. The weekly bill of fare for third-class passengers is given on p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, Apr. 20, 1912.

<sup>22</sup> *Loss of the Steamship Titanic, Report of a Formal Investigation Attending the Foundering on 15th April 1912 of the British Steamship Titanic of Liverpool . . .* (New York: Dorset Press, rpt. 1987).

<sup>23</sup> Robert Gannon, "What Really Sank the Titanic," *Popular Science*, Feb. 1995, 49–55.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955, 1976), 35–39.

<sup>25</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 20, 1912; Jay Henry Mowbray, *Memorial Edition: Sinking of the Titanic* (Harrisburg, Penn.: The Minter Co., 1912), 281–87.

<sup>26</sup> *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, Apr. 20, 1912.

<sup>27</sup> Lord, *A Night to Remember*, 48.

<sup>28</sup> *Wahoo Wasp*, May 2, 1912; *Wahoo Democrat*, May 2, 1912.

<sup>29</sup> "Titanic Carl Johnson," *Omaha World-Herald*, May 15, 1927.

<sup>30</sup> Al Darr, "Stowaway's Tale Recalls Tragedy of Liner Titanic," *Grand Island Daily Independent*, Mar. 28, 1958.

<sup>31</sup> *Wahoo Wasp*, May 2, 1912.

<sup>32</sup> *Laurel Advocate*, Apr. 25, 1912.

<sup>33</sup> *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, Apr. 20, 1912.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Wyn Craig Wade, *The Titanic: End of the Dream* (New York: Rawson-Wade Publishers, 1979), 256.

<sup>36</sup> *Wahoo Wasp*, May 2, 1912; *Wahoo Democrat*, May 2, 1912; "Titanic Carl Johnson," *Omaha World-Herald*, May 15, 1927.

<sup>37</sup> The earliest reference to Johnson's survival was a short note in the Apr. 25, 1912, *Wahoo Wasp* that said Johnson floated on a door until picked up by a lifeboat. This story is consistent with a list of survivors in Eaton and Haas, *Triumph and Tragedy*, 342, which has Johnson being rescued from Collapsible "A". In all subsequent accounts, Johnson maintained he clung to a floating plank or door until *Carpathia* arrived. Given the water temperature of twenty-eight degrees, it is unlikely Johnson could have survived under those circumstances. He may have determined that all male survivors in lifeboats might be suspected of cowardice. But there was no cowardice associated with spending the night clinging to a door in the ocean.

<sup>38</sup> Rostron's report to general manager, Cunard Steamship Co., Apr. 19, 1912, cited in Mowbray, *Memorial Edition*, 199–200.

<sup>39</sup> *Randolph Times*, Apr. 25, 1912.

<sup>40</sup> *Laurel Advocate*, May 2, 1912; *Randolph Times*, July 11, 1912.

<sup>41</sup> "Titanic Carl Johnson," *Omaha World-Herald*, May 15, 1927.

<sup>42</sup> *Lincoln Star*, Apr. 21, 1912.

<sup>43</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, Apr. 22, 1912; *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, Apr. 22, 1912.

<sup>44</sup> Mowbray, *Memorial Edition*, 261–62.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Davie, *Titanic: The Death and Life of a Legend* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 227.

<sup>46</sup> *Lincoln Star*, Apr. 30, 1912.

<sup>47</sup> *Loss of the Steamship Titanic* report, 39–40

<sup>48</sup> *Randolph Times*, May 9, 1912; *Omaha Daily Bee*, Apr. 28, 1912.

<sup>49</sup> *Omaha Sunday Bee*, May 5, 1912.

<sup>50</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 4, 1912.

<sup>51</sup> *Wahoo Newspaper*, Mar. 30, 1978.

<sup>52</sup> *The Frontier*, Dec. 11, 1958.