

THE *Titanic*

On Sunday night, April 14-15, 1912, the Royal Mail Steamer *Titanic*, making her maiden voyage from Southampton to New York, with 2224 passengers and crew, struck at full speed an iceberg and went to the bottom of the Atlantic, with a loss of 1513 lives.

As swiftly as the other Muses, the Ballad Muse seized the event. A. E. Perkins, in JAFL xxxv 223, wrote that one week after the disaster he "saw on a train a blind preacher selling a ballad he had composed on the disaster." There is one broadside in the Frank C. Brown Collection dated April 13, 1912! In published collections of American folk song the earliest dating of an orally current ballad about the sinking of the *Titanic* is that in White ANFS 347, which was reported from Alabama and Tennessee in 1915-16. In his head-note to the text White stated, "It apparently belongs to the class of songs . . . composed by and for a professional singer rather than by and for a group." Henry, in JAFL XLIV 111-12; Lomax, in OSC 26-27; and Gardner and Chickering, in BSSM 295, have printed versions of ballads on the *Titanic*. For North Carolina pieces with music, see B and F below.

A

'Sinking of the Great Ship.' From Gaither Miller, a student at Trinity College, November 15, 1914, copied from a broadside attached to type-script. Broadside dated April 13, 1912. At bottom is printed: "Composed and Sold by S. C. Martin, Granite Falls, N. C." A note from Dr. Brown identifies Martin as "a white man, known as 'Coon' Martin." Dr. Brown also notes that the refrain lines point to 'Golden Willow Tree' (Child, No. 286); and it may be added that stanzas 4, 6, and 8 also borrow details from the old English ballad.

- 1 Long about the fifth of March,
When man and wife had to part,
They were sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low,
Oh, they were sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low.
- 2 Just as the *Titanic* sunk down in the sea.
They were singing 'Nearer My God to Thee.'
It struck the iceberg about half past two,
And tore that old *Titanic* middle in two;
Then it sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low.
Then it sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low.
- 3 It was two thousand miles away from land,
And two miles deep to the bottom of the sea,
They sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low,
They sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low.
- 4 They had a little instrument purpose for the use.
Oh, how it drunk that salt water juice;

Then it sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low,
Then it sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low.

- 5 Standing in the door with a bar in his hand,
Demanding the women to come to land,
Or you will be sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low,
You will be sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low.
- 6 Now will you be good as your word,
Will you take me out on board?
Neither will I be as good as my word,
Nor I'll take you out on board,
But I'll sink you in the Lowland Lonesome Low,
Sink you in the Lowland Lonesome Low.
- 7 Wake up, little babies, get out of bed,
The *Titanic* is sinking, you'll soon be dead!
You will be sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low,
You will be sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low.
- 8 If it wasn't for the love I had for women,
I would do them like I done the men;
I would sink them in the Lowland Lonesome Low,
I would sink them in the Lowland Lonesome Low.
- 9 Just as the *Titanic* went down in the sea,
They were singing 'Nearer My God to Thee,'
When they sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low,
When they sunk in the Lowland Lonesome Low.

B

'Destruction of the *Titanic*.' From W. O. ("Bill") Smith, Durham, May 26, 1920. Three printed broadsides and a typescript; with music. Note by Dr. Brown: "Made by W. O. Smith & Irma Smith (da.). Last stanza from Oxford, sung there, found in Oxford by W. O. Smith. Tune motif of 'There Will Be a Hot Time.' Smith acknowledged that he got part of the song from Henderson. Smith drove a horse cab in Durham ca. 1912-1915." The broadside bears no printed date or printed name—only at bottom, in heavy type: 'Price 5 cents—Smith.'

- 1 Come all of you dear people, listen and hear me tell
How that great *Titanic*, that was in its great swell,
It went down on Sunday night in nineteen hundred and
twelve.

Chorus:

Wasn't it sad about the *Titanic*, how it got lost,
Wasn't it sad about the *Titanic*, how it got lost,
Women and children saved their lives,
Husbands parted with their wives,
Wasn't it sad about the *Titanic*, how it got lost?

- 2 It left the port of London, it was bound for New York shore.
An iceberg struck the vessel, which caused a leaking hole.
The engineer said, 'Captain, no, we cannot reach the goal.'
- 3 It was more than a thousand people who did lose their lives;
There were fathers and mothers, husbands and their wives;
Yet some of them were saved from their watery graves.
- 4 The officers were commanding, 'The women must be saved.'
It wasn't pleasing to male passengers, but yet it did prevail;
Some men had to be shot down, that women might not drown.
- 5 One husband said unto his wife, 'Go take the little boat,
To try and save your own self, for they will be on float.'
'No' (her eyes were filled with tears), 'we've been together
forty years.'
- 6 Upon her he insisted to do just as he said,
But still she lingered to him, waiting for their watery grave.
'I will not leave you for another, we will both go down
together.'
- 7 And yet some were hiding in the little boat;
They laid down in the bottom, thinking their presence
would not be known;
And as little as one would think, from their weight the boat
would sink.
- 8 Now as the boat was sinking, it was sadness to behold.
There was darkness all around them, and it was so very
cold;
The boat was sinking in the sea, the band played 'Nearer
My God to Thee.'

C

'The Destruction of the *Titanic*.' Undated note by Dr. Brown: "This is a copy of the song as it appeared in a broadside printed by The Reformer Publishing Company, a Negro press. It was printed for the 'Rev. J. H. Brown,' who sold copies of the broadside at 5 cents each. There is little probability that Brown had anything to do with the composition; he may have collected fragments of the songs and arranged them as they appear here. Cf. 'Hamlet Wreck.' No original broadside of this particular version has been found in the Collection.

With this version compare those in White ANFS 347 and Lomax OSC 26.

- 1 It was in the month of April,
In 1912:
Will you listen to the story

As I begin to tell?
 How it happened on Sunday night,
 When the ship went out of sight.
 It was sad about the *Titanic* when it got lost.

Chorus:

It was sad about the *Titanic* when it got lost,
 It was sad about the *Titanic* when it got lost.
 Women and children saved their lives;
 Husbands parted from their wives.
 It was sad about the *Titanic* when it got lost.

- 2 It was about two thousand people
 Who have lost their lives.
 There were fathers and daughters,
 And some sons' wives;
 They are in their watery graves,
 And I hope their souls are saved.
 It was sad about the *Titanic* when it got lost.
- 3 They left the shore of London;
 To New York they tried to come.
 An iceberg struck the vessel,
 And she couldn't make the run.
 Many have fallen asleep
 In waters two thousand fathoms deep.
 It was sad about the *Titanic* when she got lost.
- 4 It was commanded by the officers
 To have the women and children saved.
 It was not satisfactory to some,
 Though it did prevail.
 The men saw that they could not be saved;
 So they knelt and prayed.
 It was sad about the *Titanic* when it got lost.
- 5 You have never read it
 In the history of your lives,
 How they separated
 The husbands from their wives.
 But some took their rathers¹
 And agreed to die together.
 It was sad about the *Titanic* when it got lost.
- 6 There were the millionaires and captains
 And mighty men of wealth
 From all over the country
 Who were on the ship that night.

¹ Pronounced *ruthers*.

On there they had to stay ;
 Money could not pay their way.
 It was sad about the *Titanic* when it got lost.

- 7 Have you heard of such destruction,
 How it happened on that night,
 About three o'clock in the morning,
 When the ship went out of sight?
 How sad the band did play
 'Nearer My God to Thee'!
 It was sad about the *Titanic* when she got lost.

D

'The Great Titanic.' Contributed by Miss Fanny Grogan, with a note in her hand: "Written [i.e., written down?] By a friend Fanny Grogan, Zionville, N. C. Written Nov. 30, 1920." With some changes in mechanics as 'written' by Miss Grogan.

- 1 It was on one Monday morning about one o'clock
 When the great *Titanic* began to reel and rock.
 All the people began to cry saying lord I have to die.
 It was sad when that great ship went down.

Chorus:

Oh it was sad when that great ship went down.
 Their were husbands and their wives,
 Little children lost their lives.
 It was sad when that great ship went down.

- 2 When they were building the ship they said what they
 would do,
 That they said they would build a ship that water would
 not go through.
 But God with the [power?] in his hand showd the would
 it could not stand.
 It was sad when that great ship went down.
- 3 When the ship left England a making for the shore,
 The rich had declared that they would not ride with the
 Poor ;
 So they put the poor below so they would be the first to go.
 It was sad when that great ship went down.
- 4 You know it was ofel out on the sea.
 The people were singing nearer my god to thee.
 Some were homeward bound, sixteen hundered had to
 dround.
 It was sad when that great ship went down.

- 5 The people out on the water was along ways from home,
And their friends didn't know that their time had come.
Death came ridding by, sixteen hundred had to die.
It was sad when that great ship went down.
- 6 When Paul was out on the water with his people all around
The lord said not one of them should drown.
If you will trust and obey He will save you all today.
It was sad when that great ship went down.

E

'The Ship Titanic.' Contributed by Miss Nancy Lineberger, Shelby, Cleveland county, March 1940. Three stanzas and chorus. Corresponds to 2 and 3 of D, above, with some differences in spelling—"Titanic" and "Engle-land."

- 3 Now they all got afraid, and they started to plee,
When the band struck out with 'Nearer My God to Thee.'
The Captain tried to wire, but the lines were all on fire.
It was sad when that great ship went down.

F

'The Sinking of the *Titanic*.' From Macie Morgan, Stanly county; undated. With a number of verbal differences, this corresponds to D, stanzas 1, 2, 3, 5, and chorus. Line 1 of stanza 3 reads "When they heard the sighing" for "When the ship left England" in D.

G

'The Sinking of the *Titanic*.' From W. Amos Abrams, Boone; undated. One stanza and chorus, closely similar to D 1 and chorus.

H

'God Moved on the Waters.' Transcribed by Dr. Brown from the singing of Will ("Shorty") Love, Trinity College janitor, c. 1920. Recorded by "Shorty" Dec. 9, 1939. Music.

Chorus:

God moved on de waters
On April the fifteenth day;
He just moved on the waters,
And de people had to run and pray.

- 1 De rich dey had decided
Dat dey would not riduh wid de pore.
Dey placed de pore on de deck of de ship
And de pore was de first to go; but

Chorus:

- 2 'Twas on one Monday morning
Just about one o'clock
When de iceberg struck de *Titanic*
And it began to reel and rock; but . . .

- 3 Those people were enjoying themselves,
Of de trouble dey had no dream,
When de iceberg struck the boat,
Prayed 'Nearer My God to Thee'; [but] . . .
- 4 When the large boat was in building,
They said what dey could do;
They said that dey could build one boat
That the water wouldn't ever break through; but . . .
- 5 Women tried to save dey children,
Husbands tried to save dey wives,
But after all dey hard struggles
More than fifteen hundred died; for . . .
- 6 My people, let me say to you,
It's nothing but a thing of naught
To say what you yourself will do
And never give God a thought; [for] . . .
- 7 You read about that mighty ship,
In nineteen hundred and twelve,
That moved upon the mighty seas
And landed those people in hell; [for] . . .

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THE WRECK OF THE *Huron*

Though the editors have not found any evidence for the authorship of 'The Wreck of the *Huron*,' they have placed it among the North Carolina ballads because it celebrates an event that occurred on the North Carolina coast, and it was known by at least three residents of that region.

On the night of November 23-24, 1877, the U. S. S. *Huron*, under orders to Cuba for a coastal surveying expedition, was steaming through a seventy-mile gale off the coast of North Carolina. About one o'clock, probably as a result of faulty navigation in the stormy weather, she stranded two miles off Life-Saving Station No. 7, near Oregon Inlet. That station had "not yet been ordered to active work." Counts of the lives lost range from 98 to 106. (See *New York Times*, November 25-28, 1877; also *Annual Report of the Operations of the United States Life-Saving Service for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1878* [Washington: G. P. O., 1878], pp. 19-20.)

A

Contributed by Miss Edna Harris, without date or address, but with this note: "Mrs. Pollie Harris, my mother, sings it, and she heard it from her mother and aunt."

In another undated note, apparently referring to this ballad, L. W. Anderson of Nag's Head wrote: "Here is another source of many, many