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Judith E. Cathey

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, tyv231@mocs.utc.edu

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RMS Titanic: Creating an American Obsession

Judith Cathey

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University of Tennessee at Chattanooga History Department

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William M. Kuby

Assistant Professor of History

Thesis Director

Fang Yu Hu

Assistant Professor of History

Department Examiner

John C. Swanson

Professor of History

Department Head

Department Examiner

Introduction

On April 10, 1912, the RMS *Titanic* set sail on what is perhaps the most well-known journey of all time. The massive ship departed from Southampton, England, for New York, New York, at around noon that day. But unbeknownst to everyone at the time, it would never reach its final destination. The *Titanic*, one of the greatest luxury liners of the time, was owned by The White Star line, one of the largest ocean liner companies in the world. The *Titanic* was seen as unsinkable, so much so that it earned the nickname “The Ship that God Could Not Sink.”¹ It had the finest features, the newest advancements of the time, and the best luxuries. The ship was built to be the fastest of its time, and the first class passengers could enjoy this fast voyage from spacious cabins that were the best of their kind. April 10th, 1912, was its maiden voyage, and it was one that everyone thought would make history. On board for this event were 1,343 passengers of all social different classes and 885 crew members, all excited about being the first to ride on the glorious ship.

On April 14th, 1912, the RMS *Titanic* hit an iceberg at approximately 11:40 pm. It sank to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean two hours and forty minutes later. The *Titanic* took 1,517 lives with it. The vast majority of deaths belonged to men, as the lifeboats were loaded with women and children first. There were 1,347 men that died on the *Titanic*. The loss of life was immense.

¹ Joseph Edgette. “RMS *Titanic*: Memorialized in Popular Literature and Culture.” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 39, no. 1 (2006): *General OneFile*.

The extravagance of the ship created an obsession for the American public after it sank. Many wondered how such technological innovation, innovation that represented the culmination of industrialization and the Gilded Age, could fail so horribly. Due to the United States' public demand for more information on the *Titanic*, a variety of media jumped on the story. Newspapers, instant books, newsreels, and even films were produced very quickly in order to fill that demand. The sinking of the ship created the first era of *Titanic* Mania.

However, *Titanic* Mania was not exclusive to 1912. *Titanic* Mania resurged twice more in the United States during the 20th century. The second era is the 1950s, beginning with Walter Lord's book *A Night to Remember*. The third and final era of *Titanic* mania began with the discovery of the ship at the bottom of the ocean in 1985 by an American and French expedition. All three eras saw unique phenomena of attraction to the story of the *Titanic*.

Each era used the *Titanic* to fit specific trends and needs during the time period. The first era was the only period that was directly affected by the tragedy, but that did not stop the people of the other eras from manipulating the story in order to fit their specific needs. In each era, the story is told a little differently, and each generation of consumers is given a new perspective on the disaster, divergent from the narrative told in the previous generation.

This thesis examines the three eras of *Titanic* Mania, and how the tragedy of the *Titanic* has been used and manipulated within American historical memory. In the first era, the era affected directly by the *Titanic*, Americans felt a need for information about the tragedy directly after it happened. Various forms of media jumped at the chance to

profit off of the disaster, creating sources that were not as accurate as they claimed to be. This is contrasted with sources such as the book by Archibald Gracie, author of *The Truth About the Titanic*. Gracie's work was produced slowly in comparison to the media contributing to the first era of *Titanic* Mania, yet it proved to be one of the most accurate sources about the disaster. In the second era, Walter Lord's book *A Night to Remember* is vastly different than the inaccurate sources produced in the first era. Rather, it is similar to Gracie's work. The story of the *Titanic* and its emphasis on loading women and children first onto the life boats provided a lesson to be taught about traditional gender roles, which were emphasized throughout the 1950s. This can be seen even more so in the quickly produced live television show of the same name, based on the book. Both the live television show and the book help to reinforce the idea of traditional gender roles that the 1950s boasted a return to. Both versions of *A Night to Remember* also took advantage of the media forms that were very popular at the time as well. Lord's book was published in *Ladies' Home Journal*, a very popular women's magazine, during a time period where many suburban women were housewives and had more time to read. The *A Night to Remember* television show took advantage of the popularity of the newly developed television and its most popular form of media, the live television show. Finally, the third era began due to the discovery of the *Titanic* at the bottom of the ocean in 1985. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, filmmakers and historians produced works about the *Titanic*. However, in this era, there was also a discussion of what constituted a respectful or disrespectful depiction of the tragedy. Critical distance from 1912 allowed for the immensity of the tragedy to be fully recognized, meaning that many saw sources that may have been accepted in other eras as disrespectful and exploitative. The critical

distance from the disaster also allowed for an important discussion of Gilded Age class disparity that has not been seen in previous eras.

The three different eras also provide an insightful look at the way class has been viewed throughout the twentieth century. Class disparity grew wildly during both the first and third eras of *Titanic* Mania. Both generations put an emphasis on the class of those on the *Titanic*; those of the first era highlighted the wealthy aboard, while the third era stresses the negligence of the third class passengers after the *Titanic* began to sink, resulting in many more lower class lives lost. In an era of conspicuous consumption and a desire for the “American Dream,” one can understand why there was such an emphasis on the wealthy in 1912.² The *Titanic* was simply another form of the wealthy’s conspicuous consumption. In the 1990s, class began to be discussed in a new way due to the changing economic structure of the United States. Lines between the working and middle class were being blurred, and there was new discussions, and criticisms, that arose from the new viewpoint on class, making the criticisms of class shown in films like *Titanic* understandable.³ However, it is interesting to note the lack of emphasis on social and economic class in the second era. While the second era was primarily for the white and middle class, there was no particular emphasis on the class of those aboard the *Titanic*. Perhaps we can credit this to a prosperous postwar economy or the witch hunt for Communists throughout the Cold War; those who criticized the Capitalist class system

² Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865-1905* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ Sherry Linkon and John Russo, “American Media Discourse About Class,” *Amerikastudien/America Studies* 46 (2001).

would have been accused of being Communists. Therefore, the lack of conversation around the class of the passengers provides insight itself.

Each era of *Titanic* mania managed to tell a slightly different story than the last. While each era has the same tragedy and facts to work with, each narrative emphasized different aspects of the disaster that allow it to be looked at differently with every passing generation. When we examine the three eras together, we see how a historical tragedy is ever-changing within historical memory.

Chapter One: *Titanic* Mania in 1912 and 1913

The time period of the *Titanic*'s voyage was an era of many medical, technological, and social advances. The year 1912 sat on the cusp of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. The Gilded Age and industrialization made great changes in the era before the construction of the *Titanic*. The U.S. economy was booming. New technologies were being introduced that had never been seen before. Gilded Age excess and the emergence of a new class of extremely wealthy people emerged with industrialization and brought about a widening wealth disparity. While the new class of rich business tycoons were getting richer, the lower class people they employed in their factories were not.⁴ The name of the era, the Gilded Age, came from author Mark Twain, who wrote a satirical novel called *The Gilded Age* with fellow author Charles Dudley. Twain and Dudley dubbed it the Gilded Age due to the United States "glittering on the outside while rotting at the core."⁵ Many people, including immigrants, began to seek fortune in the United States, whether it be through "get-rich-quick" schemes or the Gold Rush. The "American Dream" of earning one's way to the top was cemented during this time period. Many Americans aimed to be at the top with the other rich corporation owners who boasted of their wealth and the top of the line luxuries only they could afford. The elite class of the time period adopted a new type of showing off their wealth known as conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption was the idea of buying expensive goods in order to show off one's social status. The wealthy felt a need to distinguish themselves from the lower classes with their clothing, transportation, homes,

⁴ Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865-1905* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

and even the food that they ate.⁶ Historian Rebecca Edwards writes of a party thrown by Alva Smith Vanderbilt, a woman who was considered “new money,” as an example of conspicuous consumption:

The party that followed astounded the nation. Having spent \$3 million on the house (roughly equivalent to \$43 million today) the Vanderbilts lavished another quarter-million on food, music, and decoration for the ball. Among the guests was Alva’s sister-in-law Alice, dressed as The Electric Light in an evening gown fitted with gas jets that periodically spouted flames. Other guests appeared as famous royal figures, including Elizabeth I of England and Louis XV of France. The host and hostess dressed as the duc de Guise and a Venetian princess, and their mansion featured bronze sculptures that had once belonged to Marie Antoinette.⁷

This party and others like it received immense coverage in newspapers, showing the American public the colossal amount of money that the elite class had and giving them something to aim for.

The White Star Line was no stranger to conspicuous consumption, and the *Titanic* was built with the habits of the rich in mind. Luxury liners were topics of obsession, and often people would buy tickets to ride one, not caring about the destination.⁸ The *Titanic* was a culmination of this idea of conspicuous consumption; even the richest man in the United States, John Jacob Astor, chose to ride on its maiden voyage. It was a top-of-the-line luxury liner, with the newest technologies in ship building and sailing. Gilded Age excess was represented in the ship’s grandeur for first class passengers. Newspapers bragged of the *Titanic*, boasting about the social elites who were making their way to the United States on the ship, its opulence, and its technological advancements and size.

⁶ Ibid, 97.

⁷ Ibid, 97-98.

⁸ Adam Green, “Titanic Fever: Why Then? Why Now?” *Journal of Psychohistory* 26 (1998). 546-562.

Obsession with the RMS *Titanic* in the United States began as soon as reports of the disaster came in. The tragedy of the *Titanic* hit the United States hard. The public had heard of the majestic ship, as newspapers advertised its first class passengers and new features. The public latched onto the *Titanic* disaster; the obsession the public had with the *Titanic* after the ship sank was a phenomenon that had not been seen before. Many popular books, movies, and songs were made about the *Titanic* very quickly after the sinking. Americans created a high demand for information about the sinking.

When the ship sank on that night in April, Americans developed a fascination with it. Anything that mentioned the *Titanic* became instantly popular. But why did this obsession come about? There were many disasters that happened during that time period; they were not uncommon. But what made the *Titanic* diverge from the rest of these tragedies was the way it represented the time period of the 1910s more than any other disaster that occurred then. The *Titanic* disaster represented the culmination of all the advances and the luxuries of this new era. It was supposed to be the fastest, the most luxurious, and the best ship for travel. So when it sank and took so many lives with it, it shocked the United States and the rest of the world to its core.⁹ The newspapers, the books, the newsreels, the feature films, and the music that depicted the *Titanic* allowed people to cope with what had happened. Some sources were better than others at this task. Some were thrown together for the sake of profit, but others were made with the genuine interest of allowing the creators and the consumers to come to terms with one of the greatest disasters of the early twentieth century.

⁹ Green, "*Titanic* Fever." 546-562.

A close examination of varied sources reveals which ones were made for profit and which were made for the sake of coping with the disaster. Oftentimes the sources made for profit were thrown together as quickly as possible, so that they could be manufactured and sent out to the crowds of people that were ravenous for more information about the *Titanic* in a short time span. These sources were typically filled with errors and misleading information. Sources that were less for profit and more for helping people process the disaster tended to be more carefully put together and were not as focused on the mass selling of their product.

This chapter analyzes the newspapers, subscription books, newsreels, feature films, first-hand accounts, and music about the *Titanic* after the ship's sinking. It argues that there is a clear pattern in many sources that indicates that the producer cared more about the monetary gain the disaster of the *Titanic* presented than providing genuine information about the *Titanic*. However, we can see a contrast to these profit seeking opportunists in the first-hand account written by Archibald Gracie and the music about the *Titanic*. These contrasting works highlight the motives behind the sources made for profit even more clearly, reinforcing the overwhelming pursuit of profit in the majority of *Titanic*-related sources.

Newspapers were the first to jump on the story, and they provided the initial information to the public about the disaster. Coverage of the "Millionaires' Express"¹⁰ began before the tragic sinking. Looking through newspaper articles about the *Titanic*

¹⁰ Edgette, "RMS *Titanic*." One of the *Titanic*'s many nicknames was the "Millionaire's Express" because some of the wealthiest people in America were passengers for its maiden voyage.

from April 10th, 1912, one will see titles such as “Greatest Vessel on Maiden Trip.”¹¹ Newspapers boasted about the *Titanic*, calling it the greatest ship ever made, bragging of its size and advancements. *The Greenwood Daily Journal* boasts of the *Titanic*’s size, calling it the biggest vessel afloat and listing its specifications.¹² The *Titanic* was talked about all over the United States, with the maiden voyage covered in newspapers from Greenwood, South Carolina to San Francisco, California. Newspaper coverage before the *Titanic* tragedy had a great effect on how the United States reacted after the sinking. Newspapers called it a ship of the new age, making it the symbol of the new way to travel. Nicknames such as “Queen of the Ocean” and “The Ship That God Could Not Sink” made the *Titanic* well known even before the sinking.

Often in the articles about the *Titanic* before the sinking, writers would list the features of the ship because all of the newest advancements had been put into its construction. The *Marion Weekly Star* reported the *Titanic*’s departure, making sure to mention the “unique features” of the new ship and that the *Titanic* was even faster than its sister ship, the *Olympic*.¹³ First class amenities and passengers were a main focus as well, as *The Marion Weekly Star* speaks of the new, first class suites of the ship, describing them to be very extravagant.¹⁴ Often prominent passengers were listed in articles about the *Titanic*, even articles that had nothing to do with the first class amenities or passengers of the ship. An article from the *San Francisco Call*, titled “Suction of the Latest Biggest Vessel a Peril to Shipping”, states in the last sentence, “The passengers of

¹¹ “Greatest Vessel on Maiden Trip,” *Greenwood Daily Journal* (Greenwood, South Carolina), April 11, 1912. 1.

¹² “Greatest Vessel on Maiden Trip.” 1.

¹³ “*Titanic* Sails on First Trip,” *Marion Weekly Star* (Marion, Ohio), April 13, 1912. 3.

¹⁴ “*Titanic* Sails on First Trip.” 3.

the *Titanic* include many society people, among them Colonel John Jacob Astor and Mrs. Astor.”¹⁵ The entire article was about an accident that nearly happened on March 10th, 1912, when a smaller ship and the *Titanic* almost collided while harbored together. While this article is about the collision, it still listed the elites who would be on the *Titanic* for its maiden voyage. Including the prominent passengers of the *Titanic* at the end of this article would most likely be considered strange to one who had not read any other articles about the *Titanic*. However, the placement of this information does not seem unusual when comparing it with other articles because the focus of the *Titanic* had been put on the extravagance, the advancements, and the popularity of the ship.

The coverage of the *Titanic* greatly affected the feelings that many Americans had after the sinking and helped create the obsession. The bulk of the initial coverage of the tragedy was in newspapers. When the *Carpathia* sailed into New York, carrying all of the survivors of the *Titanic*, there were reporters in tiny vessels surrounding the ship, trying to persuade passengers of the ship to tell them their story with bribes.¹⁶ Every newspaper wanted to be the first to print the tragic story of the *Titanic*, and most would stop at nothing to get it. The potential for profit was too tempting, as most knew that the story would be one of the biggest of the century. The first journalist to get to the story, however, was actually a passenger of the *Carpathia*. Charles F. Hurd, a veteran journalist, interviewed the survivors of the *Titanic* and gathered information. When the

¹⁵ “Suction of Latest Biggest Vessel a Peril to Shipping” *The San Francisco Call* (San Francisco, California), April 11, 1912. 1.

¹⁶ Andrew Wilson, “Shadow of the *Titanic*.” *Smithsonian* 42, no. 11 (March 2012): 32-94.

ship arrived in New York, he threw his story down to a waiting boat. The 5,000 word story was published in the *New York Evening World* the next morning.¹⁷

Large articles about the *Titanic* were not uncommon. Often there were multiple page spreads covering the story. Details were inconsistent between the different newspapers, and sometimes they were not even congruent within the same newspaper. For example, in the April 16th edition of the *Indianapolis Star*, an article title reads “Olympic’s Report Says 1,800 Lives were Lost in Sinking of *Titanic*.”¹⁸ Right under this article, another article title says “Men Perish, Women Survive; 1,304 Lives Lost.”¹⁹ This certainly makes it seem like editors were not concerned with the accuracy of information within these initial reports. Newspapers wanted to be the first to print the story, so they printed whatever information that was available.

The *Titanic* story was not just featured in the geographic areas most affected by the tragedy, such as the East Coast. All across the country, the *Titanic* was making front page headlines. From New York, New York to Honolulu, Hawaii, the majority of the American population knew all about how the *Titanic* sank, the passengers who sank with it, and who was thought to be to blame. In Honolulu, Hawaii, the front page headline of *The Evening Bulletin* on April 26th, 1912 reads “*Titanic* Tragedy was Criminal and Needless.”²⁰ An entire two pages were dedicated to this story in an area where the *Titanic* had most likely not affected the readers of this newspaper at all. Hawaii was only a

¹⁷ Wilson, “Shadow of the *Titanic*.” 32-94.

¹⁸ “Olympic’s Report Says 1,800 Lives were Lost in Sinking of *Titanic*,” *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, Indiana), April 16, 1912. 7.

¹⁹ “Men Perish, Women Survive; 1,304 Lives Lost,” *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, Indiana), April 16, 1912. 7.

²⁰ “*Titanic* Tragedy was Criminal and Needless,” *The Evening Bulletin* (Honolulu, Hawaii), April 26, 1912. 1.

territory of the United States in 1912, but the connection to the *Titanic* most Americans felt could be seen even there. The *Titanic* was a story for the whole of the United States.

Even after the sinking of the *Titanic*, headlines still emphasized the ship's luxury and first class passengers. Passengers believed to be important would have their own headlines, and newspapers highlighted the immense wealth that had been lost in the sinking, for not only was the ship expensive, but so were the first class passengers' belongings.²¹ The high profile passengers of the *Titanic* made the disaster seem that much worse. *The Indianapolis Star* published the "Notables in *Titanic*'s Passenger List"²² on April 16th, 1912. Further into the paper, there are small sections, each dedicated to various prominent passengers on the ship from different cities of the United States. Article titles such as "A.G. Vanderbilt Safe" and "Maj. Butt's Last Visit to Indianapolis is Recalled"²³ appeared in most newspapers. The *Titanic* loss was measured in not just the massive loss of life, but the loss of many prominent passengers' lives. The lower class passengers were not nearly as accounted for and did not make headlines.

Newspaper coverage of the *Titanic* was one of the most widespread sources of information. The news stories of the time molded the way Americans saw the *Titanic* before it ever set sail and made it an object to be marveled at. The high expectation set for the *Titanic* was set by newspapers, and had the *Titanic* not gotten the coverage it did before it set sail, the catastrophe would not have gotten the attention it did. Newspapers shaped the initial reactions after the sinking as well, and had they not covered the story as

²¹ "Wealth Totals Half a Billion" *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, Indiana), April 16, 1912. 7.

²² "Notables in *Titanic* Passenger List" *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, Indiana), April 16, 1912. 6.

²³ "A.G. Vanderbilt Safe" and "Maj. Butt's Last Visit to Indianapolis is Recalled," *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, Indiana), April 16, 1912. 7.

they did, the reaction to the *Titanic* could have been very different. Newspapers jumped on the story so quickly because the sinking of the *Titanic* was one of the biggest news stories of the century, and editors knew that there was an immense profit to be made. Therefore, they did not always worry about the accuracy of information about the *Titanic* they published. This first example illustrates the pattern of profit seeking opportunists seizing on the *Titanic* tragedy. Despite the inaccurate and conflicting information newspapers provided, they continued to be the main source of information about the *Titanic* after the sinking until subscription books about the *Titanic* came out.²⁴

Another major source that covered the *Titanic* disaster was the instant book. Subscription books were books that were sold door-to-door from about 1850 to 1950.²⁵ There were all different kinds of subscription books sold, from novels to informational literature. There were many famous authors who sold their literature by subscription, including Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe.²⁶ Instant books were a category of subscription books that were produced as quickly as possible about big events, such as disasters. Very few subscription books were instant books. The instant books provided more detailed information about notorious events than newspapers, making them popular, as people often wanted as much information as possible about world affairs.²⁷ Therefore, when the *Titanic* sank, it provided the perfect opportunity for publishers seeking profit.

²⁴ Joseph Edgette, "RMS *Titanic*."

²⁵ Jay White, "God's Ark: Subscription Book Publishing and the *Titanic*." *Acadiensis* 28, no. 2 (March 1999): 95.

²⁶ White, "God's Ark." 97.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 95, 97.

Within six months of the *Titanic* disaster, there were four different editions of instant books published.²⁸ The books were extremely popular, with one publishing company boasting that they had sold over 400,000 copies. The books were easily attainable, and a person could buy one for the average price of one dollar.²⁹ Door-to-door salesmen would have copies of the books ready, eager to show their customers the beauty of the book. Indeed, they were made to look impressive because the books were often put on display in the home, rather than read. They were typically cloth bound³⁰ and would have a photograph of the *Titanic* on the front cover.³¹ Edgette describes the first of the instant books to be made, called *The Sinking of the Titanic: Thrilling Stories Told by Survivors*, saying, “Across the top gilded with gold fill were the words, ‘Memorial Edition.’ The cloth cover was light blue with a centered, black-and-white photograph of the lost ship.”³²

The content of the four different editions of the instant books was all very much the same, with distorted first-hand accounts from survivors and questionable reports. All of the four editions included photographs of the *Titanic*, but even those were suspicious, as many of the photographs of the *Titanic* from these books are actually photographs of the *Olympic*, the *Titanic*’s sister ship.³³ Two of the four editions provided a listing of the dead from the *Titanic*. The instant books were all very popular, despite the fact that their information was questionable at best. The quick production contributed to the unreliability of the books. For example, one of the editions of the *Titanic* instant books

²⁸ Edgette, “RMS *Titanic*.”

²⁹ White, “God’s Ark.” 96-97.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 96.

³¹ Edgette, “RMS *Titanic*: Memorialized in Popular Literature and Culture.”

³² *Ibid*.

³³ White, “God’s Ark: Subscription Book Publishing and the *Titanic*.” 98.

has versions that list one editor on the title page and a different one on the spine of the book.³⁴

Publishers of these instant books saw an opportunity for profit from a shocked and mourning population. Many Americans craved more detailed information than the newspapers were providing, so the instant books were the perfect fit for this need, despite their unreliability and their questionable sources. As one publisher boasted, over 400,000 copies of just one edition of the instant books were sold.³⁵ The way the books were decorated and how they were put up as decor in houses also shows that knowing more about the *Titanic* and owning these instant books was something to brag about, a form of conspicuous consumption that the middle class could participate in. The instant books provide an excellent example of the *Titanic* mania that went on after the sinking of the ship, because they were so well known and so well received. Instant books are one of the best examples of the use of the disaster for profit.

Written sources of information were not the only contributors to the *Titanic* craze, however. Shortly after the *Titanic* sank, many filmmakers made newsreels. The first to do this was Jules Brulatour, a director and lover of Dorothy Gibson, who was a passenger of the *Titanic*. The newsreel by Brulatour came out only a week after the sinking on April 22nd, 1912, and featured shots of the *Carpathia* docking in New York, carrying the survivors of the *Titanic*, as well as shots of *Titanic* Captain Edward J. Smith walking on the supposed bridge of the *Titanic*. Brulatour himself called the newsreel “the most famous film in the whole world.”³⁶ Other newsreels came about as well. However, the

³⁴ Ibid, 99.

³⁵ Ibid, 98.

³⁶ Wilson, “Shadow of the *Titanic*.” 32-94.

newsreels never quite stuck to fact, like many other sources about the *Titanic*. There was no film footage on board the *Titanic* because whatever footage had been taken was on the *Titanic* when it sank.³⁷ This prompted the makers of newsreels to use footage of other ships, such as the *Olympia*, as well as footage of Captain Edward J. Smith and other crew members on other ships. Filmmakers would then edit the film to scratch out any signs that may have shown that the ships in the newsreels were not the *Titanic*.³⁸

The pattern of misleading and often phony information about the *Titanic* is on clear display with the newsreels, but they were still very popular. As seen with other examples, the public wanted any information they could get, be it true or false.

Filmmakers, just like journalists and editors of instant books of the time, took advantage of the public's curiosity and turned the tragedy of the *Titanic* into an opportunity for profit.

Filmmakers took advantage of the *Titanic* mania of the time as well by producing feature films as quickly as possible. The first feature film to come out featured the above-mentioned Dorothy Gibson, an actress and survivor of the *Titanic*. Her lover, Jules Brulatour, had used some of her experiences for his newsreel about the *Titanic* that came out only a week after the sinking, and due to the success of the newsreel, he decided to make a silent film starring his lover.³⁹ *Saved From the Titanic* was a film based on Gibson's experience when the *Titanic* sank. Gibson gave an outline of her story and starred in the film as herself. She wore the very same dress that she had been wearing on

³⁷ Richard Howells, "One Hundred Years of the *Titanic* on Film." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 32 (2012). 76.

³⁸ Howells, "One Hundred Years of the *Titanic* on Film." 77.

³⁹ Andrew Wilson, "Shadow of the *Titanic*." 32-94.

the night of the *Titanic*'s sinking for the film.⁴⁰ *Saved from the Titanic* was released only four weeks after the disaster. The silent film received much praise. The Moving Picture News stated "The startling story of the world's greatest sea disaster is the sensation of the country. Miss Dorothy Gibson, a heroine of the shipwreck and one of the most talked-of survivors, tells in this motion picture masterpiece of the enthralling tragedy among the icebergs."⁴¹

Saved from the Titanic was the only major American feature film to be made about the *Titanic* directly after the sinking, but there was a German film that was released in August 1912 in Berlin called *In Nacht und Eis* (In Night and Ice.)⁴² The film was not well known in the United States, but it was the first film to show the band playing "Nearer my God to Thee" while the *Titanic* sank, which is one of the greatest *Titanic* myths.⁴³

The newsreels about the *Titanic*, as well as the feature film *Saved from the Titanic* were both very popular in the United States, and both fit into the pattern of opportunists taking advantage of the *Titanic* craze to make a profit. *Saved from the Titanic* was released as quickly as possible to satiate the public's need for more information about the *Titanic*, but it would not have been had the newsreel by James Brulatour not been so popular.

While many did take advantage of the *Titanic* disaster to gain profit, there were some writers that provided information about the *Titanic* with the intention of helping themselves or others to cope with the tragedy. Archibald Gracie, a passenger on the

⁴⁰ Ibid, 32-94.

⁴¹ Ibid, 32-94.

⁴² Richard Howells, "One Hundred Years of the *Titanic* on Film." 77.

⁴³ Ibid, 77.

Titanic who was a well-known author and historian, wrote a first-hand account of the *Titanic* disaster. The narrative was called *The Truth About the Titanic* and was published in early 1913.⁴⁴

Archibald Gracie was seen as a hero of the *Titanic*, a man who had helped many other passengers before worrying about helping himself.⁴⁵ At the beginning of the book, Gracie states “As the sole survivor of all the men passengers of the *Titanic* stationed during the loading of six or more lifeboats with women and children on the port side of the ship, forward on the glass-sheltered Deck A, and later on the Boat Deck above, it is my duty to bear testimony to the heroism on the part of all concerned.”⁴⁶ Gracie’s intention in publishing his experiences with the *Titanic* is visible in this quote. Gracie wanted to tell the stories of the people of the *Titanic* who could not tell their own. Unlike most survivors who just wanted to get past the tragedy, Gracie interviewed other survivors and sought out as much information about the *Titanic* as he could. Gracie tried so hard to be factual in his account that the U.S. Senate used *The Truth About the Titanic* for its investigation into the *Titanic* disaster.⁴⁷

Gracie’s book was extremely popular when published. It became a best seller, and often researchers investigating the aftermath of the *Titanic* would use excerpts from *The Truth About the Titanic*.⁴⁸ Walter Lord, the author of the 1955 *A Night to Remember*, said that Gracie’s book was “invaluable for chasing down who was in what [life]boat.”⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Gracie was not around to see his book become extremely successful.

⁴⁴ Edgette, “The RMS *Titanic*.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Archibald Gracie, *The Truth About The Titanic* (1913). New York: Michael Kennerly. 1.

⁴⁷ Edgette, “The RMS *Titanic*.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Gracie passed away in December of 1912, having only finished his manuscript shortly before, in November of 1912.⁵⁰

Archibald Gracie and *The Truth About the Titanic* provide an excellent example of a source that was not trying to take advantage of the disaster of the *Titanic* for profit. Gracie put so much work into his account because he wanted to tell the story of the passengers of the *Titanic* who did not make it or who had no means of telling their own story. Gracie's book is potentially one of the most true-to-fact popular sources from the time period of the *Titanic*.

Another source that provides a contrast to the profit seeking opportunists is the music made about the *Titanic*. Music has always been a way to reflect on what individuals within a time period cared about, and this was certainly the case with the era of the *Titanic*. Many people wrote songs and sheet music about the *Titanic*, and it helped many to cope with the massive loss of life that happened when the *Titanic* sank. E.V. St. Clair produced the "The Ship That Will Never Return" not long after the disaster.⁵¹ Here is a verse:

Mothers they sobbed in prayer
 As they parted from loved ones there
 Husbands and sons, brave hearted ones,
 On the ship that will never return.

These lyrics and others like them helped humanize the victims of the *Titanic*. When listening to a song like "The Ship That Will Never Return," victims were no longer numbers or a list of names on a piece of paper. They could have been a son or a daughter,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

a husband or a wife, a mother or a father. This is what the music about the *Titanic* helped accomplish.⁵²

Other songs about the *Titanic* include “My Sweetheart Went Down With the Ship,” “The Sinking of the *Titanic* March,” and “A Pleasure Ride to Death Symphony: Descriptive of the *Titanic* Disaster.” Musical selections about the *Titanic* were very popular, and they were quickly produced to be bought by eager customers.⁵³

A lot of profit was made from the music made about the *Titanic*. However, the majority of songs noted that any profit made would go to *Titanic* relief funds.⁵⁴ So while *Titanic*-themed music did raise a lot of money, the music was not made for profit. Rather, it was made and used as a coping mechanism for the shocked public because of such an unexpected, tragic loss of human life.

The *Titanic* was a beautiful ship that provided a wonderful representation for all of the advances of the time period. This is what made it so shocking when it sank. The public flocked to anything made about the *Titanic* after its sinking, and anything that was made about it was immensely profitable. A clear pattern can be seen while looking at sources that covered the sinking of the *Titanic* directly after it sank. Some sources, like newspapers, instant books, and newsreels and feature films, used the *Titanic* story for profit. The creators of these works saw that the public would do anything to find out more about the tragic story of the *Titanic*. This yearning prompted many profit seeking opportunists to produce work that was filled with errors and misleading information, such as passing off photographs of the *Olympic* as the *Titanic*. The public still flocked to these

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

sources though, and made them immensely popular. The information may have been incorrect, but most did not know that. The more information that people had, the easier it was for them to deal with the situation and the massive loss of life.⁵⁵

However, there were works about the *Titanic* that were not made purely for profit. Archibald Gracie's *The Truth About the Titanic* and the *Titanic*-themed musical works are excellent examples of this. Gracie put six months of work into his book, and his effort led to a well-written, factual piece of work that was used by many who researched the *Titanic* in the years after.⁵⁶ The musical works about the *Titanic* were all very popular and made a lot of money, but most works dedicated that money to *Titanic* relief funds.⁵⁷ This indicates that the producers of the *Titanic*-themed music were not focused on the profit they themselves would make but merely wanted to cope with the disaster. No matter the intention behind the creation of the source, each contributed to the *Titanic* mania that followed the sinking of the ship.

⁵⁵ Green, "Titanic Fever." 546-562.

⁵⁶ Edgette, "RMS *Titanic*."

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 2: *Titanic* Mania in the 1950s

Titanic Mania in the 1950s began with the book written by Walter Lord and then was continued with the production of a live television show based on Lord's narrative. The interest in the *Titanic* was not based on a need for information about the catastrophe but rather sprang up out of the work that Lord had written about the disaster. The story was not popular because of a public need of information about the *Titanic* but, but it nonetheless proved an attractive narrative to many Americans. The second era of *Titanic* mania occurred at a time when Americans finally had time for leisure after the Great Depression and World War II. By creating a book and then television show that were considered to be very high quality, Lord and others profited from having good timing. This profit came not from inaccurate sensationalism, but a carefully constructed narrative whose focus was on telling the true story of the night of the disaster. This was a departure from the first era of Titanic Mania. Not only did *A Night to Remember* benefit from a time of more leisure activities in the home, but it also benefited from the emphasis on traditional gender roles throughout the 1950s. Technology had also adapted in order to tell stories like this, with televisions becoming widespread and live television shows being the most popular media of the time. *A Night to Remember* became popular in one of the most complex time periods of American history precisely because it took advantage of the things that made it complex.

The 1950s were a time of regression back to traditional values, rather than the progression away from them that occurred before the end of the World War II.⁵⁸ There

⁵⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

was a heavy emphasis on returning to traditional family values and gender roles in the 1950s; many Americans had rebelled against these things in the generations before.⁵⁹ The 1920s were a time of victory for female activists; the 19th amendment was passed in 1919. Women began to exercise their new freedom in different ways, and this led to the development of the “flapper” and “new woman.”⁶⁰ Then, in the 1930s, focus shifted from becoming a more independent woman to simply trying to survive during the Great Depression. Many women had no choice but to join the workforce in order to support their families. With the 1940s came World War II. War meant not only sending your men to war but also needing a large workforce at home in order to make the supplies required by the military. Many women began to work in factories and other places that were needed during wartime. And while there were a lot of women who went back into the private sphere after the men returned home, historian Stephanie Coontz states that “by 1955, a higher percentage of women worked for wages than ever had during the war.”⁶¹ This was not necessarily true for suburban women, however, and many suburban women filled the traditional role of a housewife.

With the exodus back to the home that occurred after World War II, suburban women of the 1950s often took on the role of the traditional housewife. Suburban women were primarily homemakers whose role was to care for their children and provide a comfortable home for their husbands. Reversion to more traditional gender roles made family life a vital component to the 1950s.⁶² Less than 10% of suburban women were

⁵⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 9.

⁶⁰ In class (need article for this source)

⁶¹ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 59.

⁶² May, *Homeward Bound*, 22-23.

working for wages.⁶³ So while there were many women who were in the workforce in the 1950s, suburban women were the outlier.⁶⁴

But to understand the suburban definition of womanhood, one must understand 1950's suburbia. The 1950s saw an increase in suburbs with the increase of the middle class; middle class men were earning more money than they were before while the rest of the family was able to stay out of the workforce.⁶⁵ Suburbs called Levittowns were developed in order to give veterans of the war affordable housing while equipping them with all of the newest appliances of the town. Levittowns included white picket fences, washing machines, and televisions. The typical suburban family was white, middle class, and relied on the man to be the provider for the family. There was no need for the children of these families to work, and the woman of the household was expected to fulfill her role as a housewife. As stated above, less than 10% of married suburban women were earning wages.⁶⁶

This image of suburbia, with the white picket fences, nuclear families, and traditional gender roles, was painted as the ideal for the United States amidst the worries of the Cold War.⁶⁷ In 1959, Nixon visited Moscow for the American Exhibition, where he conversed with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. According to historian Elaine Tyler May, this is where Nixon's views on suburbia become apparent:

For Nixon, American superiority rested on the ideal of the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members. He proclaimed that the "model" home, with a male breadwinner and a full-time

⁶³ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 64.

⁶⁴ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 59-64.

⁶⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*,

⁶⁶ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 64.

⁶⁷ May, *Homeward Bound*, 22-23.

female homemaker, adorned with a wide array of consumer goods, represented the essence of American freedom.⁶⁸

In other words, being a traditional housewife was to be American and to be a true capitalist. Many Americans saw this as a contrast to Soviet women, who were seen to be “hard-working” and involved in politics. For an American woman to be either of these would be considered communistic, and anyone who promoted the idea would be held under suspicion of being a communist. Not only did the idea of suburbia represent the American Dream, it represented capitalism, and to be anything but a capitalist during the 1950s was dangerous.⁶⁹

Along with the rise of suburbia, there was a rise in new technology. The television was becoming popular quickly and much more accessible to the public. In 1948, 500,000 homes had televisions. By 1952, that number had risen to 19 million.⁷⁰ And by 1960, 87% of American homes had televisions. The most popular form of television was the live television show. Live shows were filmed in a theater and were broadcast live. They were often dramas, and television studios invested more money in their live television shows than their pre-recorded shows because live television was seen as high-brow entertainment. Pre-recorded shows were seen as low brow and not as well produced. Meanwhile, live television shows drew much larger audiences.⁷¹

Another large source of entertainment for people in suburbia were magazines. Women were often targeted with magazines such as *McCall's* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. These magazines were extremely popular among women and greatly influenced female

⁶⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁶⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*,

⁷⁰ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 65.

⁷¹ James L. Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948-1961*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2007).

readers of the 1950s. Stephanie Coontz states “[These magazines] reached a much higher percentage of female readers than they do today and accounted for a much larger segment of what women read.”⁷²

Both ladies’ magazines and television strove to perpetuate the idea of the new American Dream of suburbia. As Coontz states, “television portrayed an idealized white middle-class male-breadwinner family as the norm.”⁷³ The same went for women’s magazines. Coontz also states that “women’s magazines became more traditionalist on marriage and gender roles during the 1950s.”⁷⁴ Both television and women’s magazines were idealizing the idea of the traditional gender roles for women, and suburban women were the ones who could fill those shoes. These ideas were seen as American, and this was another vital concept of the 1950s. People wanted to prove their patriotism, and to be patriotic was to live in the perfect American Dream household. There were magazines that were considered to be “highbrow” that did question traditional gender roles for women, such as *Harper’s Weekly* and *Atlantic Monthly*. Consequently, these magazines were kept under constant suspicion of having communist sympathies.⁷⁵

The 1950s were a complex time period with many different factors contributing to American culture. This was the context for the comeback of *Titanic* Mania, which made its own contribution to American popular culture of the 1950s. Walter Lord’s book, *A Night to Remember*, was published in 1955. Lord wanted his narrative to focus on telling a truthful narrative of what really happened on the night of April 14, 1912. To do this,

⁷² Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 65.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 65.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 67.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 66.

Lord interviewed more than 60 survivors of the *Titanic*.⁷⁶ Lord's way of storytelling is enthralling; he creates his narrative by telling each part of the night from a different perspective. The final result is a work crafted so well that historian John Welshman states "[the book] is still the benchmark against which all subsequent books about the disaster have to be measured."⁷⁷ Not only has Lord's work been extremely influential on all works about the *Titanic* written after 1955, it was also the first book written about the disaster since 1913. *A Night to Remember* was used by many *Titanic* researchers, including James Cameron when he was making the film *Titanic* (1997).⁷⁸ When Lord wrote his book, his audience was a new generation that had yet to be exposed to the wonders of the infamous ship.

While the most popular sources in the first era of *Titanic* mania relied on quick production and limited attention to substantiated information, the opposite began to happen in the second era. *A Night to Remember* (1955) was popular because it was authentic. The wonders of the *Titanic* were new to this generation, and with so much time between the disaster and the production of Lord's book, there had been plenty of time to gather the facts. Lord did everything possible to make his work factual; one critic from *Entertainment Weekly* would even call it "many a researcher's *Titanic* bible."⁷⁹ Lord included a diagram of the ship, a list of passengers that denoted who survived and who did not, and a multitude of photographs. The photographs included photographs of onboard the ship, the passengers, and even notes written by victims that were given to

⁷⁶ John Welshman, *Titanic: The Last Night of a Small Town*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 281.

⁷⁷ Welshman, *Titanic*, 281.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 282.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 282.

survivors.⁸⁰ Reviews of *A Night to Remember* (1955) ranged from calling it “one of the most exciting books of this or any other year” to “the most riveting narrative of the disaster.”⁸¹

Clearly, Lord’s writing style and emphasis on the truth aided in making *A Night to Remember* very popular, but Lord benefited from more than just his writing style. The popularity of *A Night to Remember* was very much a product of the time period in which it was written. The 1950s were a decade where Americans had much more leisure time than before. As explained above, there was no more depression and no more war; therefore families had more time to spend at home, and Americans were indeed spending this time at home. The beginning of the Cold War marked an exodus back into the home for many families. It was a time period of reclusion in the home. Therefore, forms of entertainment such as books and TV shows was more popular than activities for which families had to leave their houses.⁸² Not only was it a period when Americans had more leisure time, but they also had more money to spend on leisure items such as books. Lord’s book was produced in 1955 and then the TV show was modeled after it in 1956; this was the ideal time to take advantage of this trend.

A Night to Remember’s popularity also relied on the traditional gender roles that were idealized in the United States at the time. While the *Titanic* is largely seen as a story of disaster, that story of the disaster contains an undercurrent of the traditional gender roles that were followed so strongly in the United States at the time, and Lord’s book capitalizes on this. Passengers were loaded onto life boats with the women and children

⁸⁰ Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1955).

⁸¹ Welshman, *Titanic*, 282.

⁸² May, *Homeward Bound*.

first, and then if there was space left the men would take it.⁸³ This concept is very important because there were not enough lifeboats on the ship for everyone. Therefore, by accepting that he was getting on the lifeboat last, a man knew that he had a lot higher possibility of dying. This can be seen when Lord describes men forcing their wives to board the lifeboats and leave them behind.⁸⁴ This was not always how it worked while loading the lifeboats, but it was followed for much of the process. The masculinity of the man rested on his willingness to die for the woman and her child. If a man was not willing to die to save women and children, then he was emasculated. For example, in Walter Lord's book, instead of simply saying the name of a man who boarded a lifeboat before many women and children, he mentions that he brought along his Pekingese dog and male Egyptian servant.⁸⁵ It was not that the women were deemed more important; it was that being a woman meant one was seen as more fragile and less capable of saving herself. The aspect of parenthood and child rearing also comes into play as well. Saving the children meant saving their mothers with them; fathers were deemed less important than the mothers. The lifeboat loading process fit into the idealized traditional gender roles of the 1950s that many wished to perpetuate, and Lord's book capitalizes on this.

A Night to Remember also benefitted from good exposure to the right crowd. The book was very well marketed, and it was also included in magazines that were largely popular at the time.⁸⁶ Both *Reader's Digest* and *Ladies' Home Journal* published condensed versions of Lord's work in their magazines. *A Night to Remember* was published in *Ladies' Home Journal* in the November issue of 1955, the month the book

⁸³ Lord, *A Night to Remember*, 51.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 62-65.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 69-70.

⁸⁶ Welshman, *Titanic*, 282.

came out. This pushed it to the correct audiences; white, middle class readers who were living the American Dream with the woman as the housewife and the man as the primary breadwinner. *Ladies' Home Journal* was known for being an "important influence in shaping women's understanding of 'normality.'"⁸⁷ The magazine often contained articles that praised domesticity. Other titles of articles from the same issue that featured the condensed version of Lord's work include "Diary of Domesticity" and "Making Marriage Work."⁸⁸ Publishing the condensed version in *Ladies' Home Journal*, an influential magazine for women in the 1950s, targeted the perfect audience for *A Night to Remember* and left them wanting more. The audience of *Ladies' Home Journal* was large, and the magazine made a lot of money from advertising revenue. In 1948, the advertising revenue of one issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* was \$2,677,260.⁸⁹ In 1964, *Ladies' Home Journal* boasted over 15 million readers.⁹⁰ The amount of exposure that something mentioned in the Journal could gain was exponential, and *A Night to Remember* benefitted from this exposure.

The live television show produced in 1956 that was based on *A Night to Remember* (1955) displayed the same elements as the book. However, with the help of visual aids, these elements were even more prominent. Archibald Gracie, one of the most renowned survivors of the *Titanic*, is revered as one of the greatest heroes of the disaster. Gracie made it his goal to save as many as he could the night of the disaster and spent it aiding all of the women that he could in getting to and on the lifeboats. This was one of

⁸⁷ Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 65.

⁸⁸ "Diary of Domesticity" and "Making Marriage Work," *Ladies Home Journal*, November 1955.

⁸⁹ Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 23.

⁹⁰ Coontz 65

the more emphatic narratives of the show.⁹¹ In contrast to Gracie's masculine display of selflessness in a time of chaos is a first class passenger who was portrayed as less altruistic than Gracie. This passenger is the same one as mentioned in Lord's book with the Pekingese dog and male servant. He boarded the boat before many women and children, and the manner in which he was portrayed boarding the boat fit feminine stereotypes of the time, with delicate movements. After showing this non-masculine character, the camera goes to a mother and child who were unable to get on a lifeboat; the producers implied that this mother and her daughter were going to die on the sinking ship.⁹² The survival of the woman and her daughter relied on this man's conformity to the traditional male gender role of protector, and he failed them. We see his actions contrasted once again with Gracie deciding with his friend that they would go down with the ship. Despite his impending doom, Gracie was cheerful about saving so many women and children and fulfilling his role as protector.⁹³ By showing Gracie's masculinity and desire to assist women and children, the live television show serves as a way to educate men on their roles as protectors of the family.

The television show also benefitted from the popularity of the television at the time. Televisions were a new technology that spread very quickly in the early 1950s, and many were mesmerized with the idea of a live television show. Live television shows were seen to be the more "highbrow" form of entertainment, and *A Night to Remember* was no exception.⁹⁴ In fact, it seemed to be the cream of the crop. The show did not

⁹¹ "A Night to Remember – Television Version," *YouTube*, 06 September 2014, <https://youtu.be/8X5w7CpvBAG>.

⁹² "A Night to Remember – Television Version," *YouTube*.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ William Boddy, "Hollywood Moves into Primetime: Hollywood and the Television Industry in the 1950s," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 4, JSTOR.

benefit from any use of new technology or graphics, but it did capitalize on the aspects of a live television show that made them attractive to viewers. The show was praised by critics for its record breaking number of speaking roles; the show had over 100, an astounding number for this media at the time.⁹⁵ Over 28 million people tuned into the show when it was first broadcast,⁹⁶ and as soon as it ended NBC's switchboards lit up with calls asking for them to do it again.⁹⁷ The *New York Times* held high praise for the show, calling it "technically brilliant," "perhaps the most impressive single feature," and saying the director and crew deserved "the highest commendation."⁹⁸ Not only did he praise the technical, acting, and directing prowess of the show, but he also praised the "emotional tension and terrifying suspense" the show invoked.⁹⁹ Another writer made the argument that live television shows like *A Night to Remember* that are done exceptionally well could even replace film. The article was titled "TV Show on 'Titanic' Hailed as Masterpiece," and its author argued that live television shows were cheaper than film, and shows like *A Night to Remember* demonstrated that they could be better quality than film.¹⁰⁰

The story of the *Titanic* was handled very differently in the 1950s than it was in the first era of *Titanic* Mania. Rather than focusing on the disaster and the public's desire for knowledge about it, this era focuses on using the story to fit the needs and desires of

⁹⁵ John Crosby, "TV Show on 'Titanic' Hailed as Masterpiece," *Hartford Courant* (Hartford, Connecticut), 08 April 1956.

⁹⁶ Welshman, *Titanic*, 283.

⁹⁷ "Tonight – See it Again 'A Night to Remember' ... Indeed!" *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, California), 02 May 1956.

⁹⁸ Jack Gould, "TV: Last Hours of Titanic: Tense, Technically Brilliant Portrayal of Tragedy Offered on Kraft Show," *New York Times* (New York, NY), 29 March 1956.

⁹⁹ Gould, "TV: Last Hours of Titanic."

¹⁰⁰ John Crosby, "TV Show on 'Titanic' Hailed as Masterpiece," *Hartford Courant* (Hartford, Connecticut), 08 April 1956.

the 1950s, which was completely unrelated to the disaster itself. As we will see, the same phenomenon will occur in the third era of Titanic mania during the 1980s and 90s, but with different needs to be met. Lord's book provided not only entertainment but entertainment that fell into the prevalent narrative of traditional gender roles. The book capitalized on the lack of sources about the *Titanic* and the climate of the 1950s. The live television show did much of the same thing while also capitalizing on a form of media that was extremely popular during the time. Televisions were new, exciting, and viewers desired stories that would captivate them. Rather than this era being about a need for information about the *Titanic* and then people producing them, Walter Lord *created* the need with his book. Ironically, Lord's work of nonfiction was more factual than the sources from 1912 that were intended to inform the public on the disaster. However, it is interesting to note that Lord pulled from Archibald Gracie's *The Truth About the Titanic* for information about the *Titanic*, one of the few accurate sources from the first era. *Titanic* mania of the 1950s is perhaps the strangest phenomenon of the three eras, as it seemed to appear out of nowhere. The 1912-13 obsession was perpetuated by the disaster itself, and the *Titanic* was popular in the 1980s and 90s due to the American-French expedition team finding the wreckage at the bottom of the ocean in 1985. *Titanic* Mania of the 1950s only seemed to be stirred on by Lord's work, but nevertheless, it still greatly contributed to making the RMS *Titanic* the household name it is today.

Chapter 3: *Titanic* Mania in the 1980s and 90s

The final era of *Titanic* Mania began with the discovery of the *Titanic* at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean in 1985. When the *Titanic* wreckage was discovered by a French and American expedition, there was a rush for information about it similar to the first era. The era produced the most well-known film about the ship, James Cameron's *Titanic*, and other sources such as *Secrets of the Titanic* and *Return to the Titanic... Live*. Controversy on how to respect the site and the lives lost was rampant throughout the 1980s and 90s, and it was a controversy that spread across the Atlantic Ocean. The United States Congress attempted to strike an agreement with various countries to prevent salvaging of the site, but none was struck and the Oceanographic Institute of France (IFREMER) sold the salvage rights. Many Americans were critical of IFREMER and their selling of *Titanic* salvage rights, while many others took their own opportunity to profit off of the *Titanic* wreckage, such as James Cameron and *National Geographic*. While the French were criticized, these sources were widely praised and very successful. *National Geographic's* documentary on the *Titanic* was its bestselling VHS to that point, and James Cameron's *Titanic* remained the highest grossing film for years after its release. A live television show called *Return to the Titanic... Live* was broadcast from Paris in 1987, but it received heavy criticism compared to the previous two. Observing each of these sources, we can see a line drawn between what was seen as a respectful depiction of the tragedy and what was not. Both Cameron and *National Geographic* were able to earn the public's approval by staying on the right side of the line, while others fell on the wrong side.

The film innovation of the 1990s allowed directors to create films that gave viewers an experience they had never seen before, and *Titanic* was the champion of these innovations. It was the most expensive film ever made, with Cameron spending an estimated \$200-285 million dollars, but it was also the highest grossing one. One review of the film recalls the pleasure of it deriving from its effects and image making, saying the effects “give the movie its soul.”¹⁰¹

However, this film is more than its technical attributes. Cameron’s *Titanic* is about a real ship, with 1,534 passengers who died when it sank. As we have seen throughout this paper, the *Titanic* has been commercialized ever since its sinking, but here, in this era, the line drawn between profiting on the backs of those deaths and memorializing the human life lost is more prominent than ever. With decades separating them from the disaster, many people from the 1980s and 1990s looked back with a new historical perspective on the accident. We see this not only with Cameron’s film, but also with the discovery of the ship at the bottom of the ocean in 1985. When it was discovered, many people wanted to get their hands on the site and its valuables, but the United States Congress quickly tried to set guidelines on what could be taken and who could take it, with the backing of many members of the American public. On one hand, to disturb the site would be to disrespect the lives lost, and on the other, the site presented an unprecedented opportunity to study and educate. However, to understand the complex climate going on around the release of the movie, documentary, and live television show, we must go back to when the *Titanic* was found at the bottom of the ocean in 1985. This was the beginning of the third era of *Titanic* mania.

¹⁰¹ Chris Hewitt, “‘Titanic’: Romeo and Juliet Get Wet,” *Anniston Star*, 18 December 1997.

On September 3, 1985, the *New York Times* reported that the hulk of the *Titanic* had been found off the coast of Newfoundland by an American and French expedition.¹⁰² The ship was found 12,000 feet under the ocean's surface, by the United States' new unmanned submarine, the *Argo*, which was undergoing its test run. Many expeditions before had tried and failed to find the *Titanic*'s ruins, but it was the American *Argo* that succeeded.¹⁰³

The question of what to do with the *Titanic*'s remains became a very controversial topic in the years after 1985. Different parties debated who had the right to salvage the *Titanic* and whether or not it was correct to do so in the first place. When the *Titanic* was found in 1985, the American expedition decided not to salvage any of the remains of the *Titanic*.¹⁰⁴ This decision was made in order to respect the lives lost, and the United States wished to insure that the wreckage of the *Titanic* would be respected. In 1986, the United States government attempted to go into negotiations with Canada, France, and the United Kingdom in order to protect the ship from being salvaged, but the other countries showed little interest.¹⁰⁵

In 1987, IFREMER, who were with the United States' team when the expedition found the *Titanic* in 1985, decided to sell salvage rights to the company Titanic Venture. These salvage rights meant that Titanic Venture had the full rights to salvage artifacts from the ship and whatever was taken was the property of Titanic Venture, a very profitable yet controversial task. This angered many in the United States, and in August

¹⁰² William J. Broad, "Wreckage of the Titanic Reported Discovered 12,000 Feet Down," *New York Times*, 03 September 1985.

¹⁰³ Broad, "Wreckage of the Titanic Reported Discovered 12,000 Feet Down."

¹⁰⁴ Elia, Ricardo J. "*Titanic* in the Courts," *Archeology* 54, No. 1, 2001, 54.

¹⁰⁵ Elia, "*Titanic* in the Courts," 54.

of 1987, the U.S. Senate approved legislation to stop the sale of *Titanic* artifacts in the United States. The legislation even forbade any showing of artifacts by a for-profit institution, allowing only not-for-profit institutions to showcase anything recovered from the *Titanic*. Senator Lowell P. Weicker even went so far as to call the French expedition to recover artifacts the “crassest of commercial ventures.”¹⁰⁶ Survivor Eva Hart labeled the salvors “fortune hunters, vultures, and pirates.”¹⁰⁷

Such controversy about the *Titanic* also made its way into the judicial sphere. There were many court cases over who exactly had the right to salvage artifacts throughout the 1980s and 90s. The Titanic Venture did not keep salvage rights for long; in 1987, they sold their rights to a company called RMS Titanic, Inc. (abbreviated RMST). In 1992, a company called Marex sued in the district of Virginia for salvage rights, claiming it had found the ship first, but did not win the case. In 1993, RMST petitioned for exclusive salvage rights, and a Norfolk court issued a temporary warrant granting them “sole custodian of the wreck, site, and artifacts.”¹⁰⁸ Then in 1994, the court made RMST the “salvor-in-possession of the *Titanic* and sole owner of any items recovered from the site.”¹⁰⁹ However, they would only keep this status if they remained “in possession,” meaning that they had to have expeditions every one to two years. In July of that year, the RMST recovered over 1,000 artifacts from the site.¹¹⁰ Because of the RMST’s salvage efforts, the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Canada began to negotiate an agreement on the *Titanic*. An independent salvor by the name John

¹⁰⁶ Callahan, Christopher, “Senate Would Ban Display, Sale of *Titanic* Artifacts,” *The Anniston Star*, 04 August 1987.

¹⁰⁷ Elia, “*Titanic* in the Courts,” 54.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 54.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 54.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 54.

Joslin challenged RMST as the sole salvor and requested to go down to the *Titanic* and photograph it in 1996, but the Norfolk courts issued a temporary injunction prohibiting him from photographing the site. Later that year, they enjoined any third party groups from photographing the site.¹¹¹ In 1998, the courts decided that RMST was allowed to prevent people from visiting the site to photograph it, but this ruling was reversed in 1999.¹¹² Clearly, there has been much controversy over who had the right to photograph, salvage, or benefit from the *Titanic* wreckage in the courts. Artifacts, photographs, and film of the ship were extremely profitable, and whoever controlled salvage rights benefitted greatly.

The controversy did not stay in the courts. Questions of how matters about the *Titanic* should be handled were very debated topics, with anyone who was not deemed “respectful” labeled cheap by the viewers at home, and was looked down upon in the public eye. It seemed as if in the 1980s the realization that a significant amount of people had died occurred to many more people than in the previous generation of *Titanic* mania. In 1986, the writer Carol Hyde wrote an article for the *Oceanus* Magazine that was reprinted in newspapers called “Sinking of the Titanic: Recovery of the Dead.” The article recounted the untold story of the recovery of the dead from the ocean a few days after the sinking. Using strong language, Hyde painted a dismal picture of the floating dead bodies. At one point, she described what workers on the recovery ship saw:

During the middle watch, the first bodies were sighted. It was agonizing. Many of them were crushed and disfigured beyond recognition. Some women were found with infants locked in their arms. Others bodies, faces distorted with terror, clung

¹¹¹ Ibid, 54.

¹¹² Ibid, 55.

to objects they had grasped in their anguish. Still others looked calm, as if asleep.¹¹³

Hyde's description of the dead bodies is extremely bleak, and in the beginning, she emphasizes that the story of the recovery of the dead bodies has not really been told, saying that it was "overshadowed" by the Titanic survivors.¹¹⁴ In previous eras, the emphasis was on the survivors and the elites who survived or sank with the ship.

However, in this new era, there was more of a focus on the entirety of the lives lost. As Hyde said, the stories of the bodies left behind had never been covered before, but since there was a larger emphasis on the entirety of lives lost in this era, it was now something many believed needed to be told.

Sources grappling with the question of how to handle the *Titanic* site and the tragedy it represented moved to television as well. After the discovery of the *Titanic* wreckage, there were two key documentaries that were released on television in 1987. The first, *Secrets of the Titanic*, was produced by *National Geographic*. Originally released on VHS in 1986, it was shown on television in March of 1987. The *New York Times* praises the documentary in its review, stating that it:

Stimulates our sense of wonder in a leisurely unfolding of the story of the disaster, and the researchers' quest as well. The production evokes the mood of the Gilded Age right up to the moment of the Titanic's sailing, with pictures taken aboard in 1912; it also manages to inspire awe at the challenges surmounted by the researchers. Viewers may find themselves sharing the emotions of Mr. Ballard's crew: so ecstatic at the moment when they finally located the ship, then suddenly stunned into silence at the realization of the enormity of the tragedy that killed 1,523 people when the great ship went down.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Carol Hyde, "Sinking of the Titanic: Recovery of the Dead," *Daily Sitka Sentinel*, 21 July 1986.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Collins, Glenn, "Disaster at Sea; Secrets of the *Titanic*," *New York Times*, 10 May 1987.

In other words, the *New York Times* praised the documentary's imagery, its accuracy to the time period, and its respect of the tragedy. However, this is contrasted starkly with the television special *Return to the Titanic... Live*. The special was broadcast live after RMST recovered some artifacts from the wreckage. The most prominent artifact of the special was a safe, which was opened live on television. However, the special was sprinkled with cheap attempts at mysticism. The host, actor Telly Savalas, sewed wild conspiracy theories about what actually sank the *Titanic*; two of these theories include a cursed mummy and an explosion that was covered up for insurance purposes. The special received reviews that were not so favorable. The *Washington Post* called it "a night to forget," claiming the show even "made Paris look cheap."¹¹⁶ The *New York Times* stated that the decision by the United States Congress to prohibit "altering, disturbing, or salvaging" anything from the *Titanic* site was the correct one after seeing the television special.¹¹⁷ So what made the difference between the two specials? Both showed the *Titanic*, and both used the shipwreck and the lives lost with it for profit.

The difference is the line drawn between what is respectful or disrespectful and where the source falls on this spectrum. *Return to the Titanic* creates a certain mysticism around the *Titanic* and at times questions why the ship really sank, choosing fictional stories over facts. *Secrets of the Titanic* is the opposite, relying on facts and footage of the shipwreck in order to tell the story of the *Titanic*. *Secrets of the Titanic* can be used for educational purposes. Seeing the ship, knowing its Gilded Age glory, and then seeing the wreck at the bottom of the ocean provides a jolt of reality and humility to the viewer.

¹¹⁶ Ken Ringle "'Titanic.. Live' A Night to Forget," *Washington Post*, 29 October 1987.

¹¹⁷ John Corry, "TV Review: Safe from *Titanic* Opened," *New York Times*, 29 October 1987.

Gilded Age excess, class divides, and hubris were the reason for the wreckage. This, to viewers at home, gave justice to those who lost their lives. *Return to the Titanic* relied on conspiracy theories and a presentation that was extremely showy, rather than the somber tone many believed should be used when discussing a disaster such as the *Titanic*.

Furthermore, *Secrets of the Titanic* also provided an educational experience for viewers. Not only did it showcase the technology that was used to get the footage of the *Titanic* in the first place, but its narrative showed the Gilded Age lavishness that the *Titanic* embodied. Then, after revealing the *Titanic*'s prestige, it showed the ship at the bottom of the ocean, completely contrasting the beautiful images of the ship before it sank with the aftermath. Robert Ballard, leader of the U.S. mission to find the site and interviewed in *Secrets of the Titanic*, said about finding the ship when speaking to *The Washington Post*:

Then someone said it's 2 a.m. and the *Titanic* sank at 2:30 and all of a sudden it hit all of us. And we went out on the deck. And it was like there were bodies all around us -- rowboats over here and people crying for help and the {steamship} California over there, in sight but not coming to help. And it just hit me like a sledgehammer.¹¹⁸

Ballard stated that he knew all about how many people had died, but before he found the ship, it was just an "abstraction."¹¹⁹ This is what the discovery of the ship and its appearance on television through specials such as *Secrets of the Titanic* did for many people, which is why so many found *Return to the Titanic... Live* to be tasteless. As quoted from the *New York Times* above, one reviewer said that *Secrets of the Titanic* made viewers realize "the enormity of the tragedy."¹²⁰ *Secrets of the Titanic* sought to

¹¹⁸ Ken Ringle, "Robert Ballard, Beyond the *Titanic*," *The Washington Post*, 21 March 1987.

¹¹⁹ Ringle, "Robert Ballard, Beyond the *Titanic*."

¹²⁰ Collins, "Disaster at Sea; Secrets of the *Titanic*."

educate people about the disaster, while *Return to the Titanic* sought to dramatize and embellish it.

Cameron's *Titanic* balances very precariously on the line between dramatizing the 1,534 victims of the *Titanic* and showing them in a somber, respectful tone that educates people on the tragedy. While viewers witness the fictional relationship of Jack and Rose and their escapades around the ship, they also feel the tragedy and loss of the ones who sank with it. Cameron created these characters in order to allow the audience to have an emotional connection to the tragedy. Rather than making a documentary that created no emotional ties to any particular character, Cameron chose to create the characters so that his audience would "fully experience the tragedy of *Titanic*."¹²¹

Despite there being a dramatization and fictionalization of the *Titanic* in the film, Cameron still focused on every other part of his film being historically accurate. The *New York Times* spoke of the film: "Sets match old photographs right down to the sculpture and woodwork; costumes incorporate fragments of vintage clothing; even the silver White Star Line ashtrays had to be right."¹²² Cameron's obsession with creating the perfect replica of the *Titanic* clearly translated on screen. Many reviews spoke of being transported back into the Gilded Age, the effect Cameron wished to create. One review called the sinking scene both "aweful and awful," as it showed how "spectacular [the *Titanic*] was."¹²³ While Cameron's film was a dramatization of the tragedy, it showcased both the beauty and the catastrophe.

¹²¹ Edna Lim, "Displacing *Titanic*: History, Spectacle, and Hollywood," *Interdisciplinary Literature Studies* 5, no. 1, 2003.

¹²² Janet Maslin, "Film Review; A Spectacle as Sweeping as the Sea," *New York Times*, 19 December 1997.

¹²³ Chris Hewitt, "'Titanic': Romeo and Juliet Get Wet," *Anniston Star*, 18 December 1997.

Cameron's film also presents a critique of the *Titanic* and Gilded Age class divisions that had not been seen in the previous eras of *Titanic* Mania. With a critical distance of 85 years, Cameron's criticism of the class divisions and the superior status of the wealthy on the *Titanic* over others who were less fortunate was showcased in his portrayal of the first class. Contrasting the rich, arrogant, and dangerous Cal Hockley with the witty and true gentleman Jack Dawson is only the beginning of Cameron's commentary. Throughout the film, the elite passengers are showcased as judgmental and stuffy, while the lower class passengers are shown to be accepting and willing to have more fun. When the *Titanic* hits the iceberg and the lifeboats begin to be loaded, the rich passengers are allowed to go first, and the lifeboats are not loaded to capacity in order to make the first class passengers more comfortable. Cameron emphasizes that not only were there not enough lifeboats, but they were only being loaded to half capacity. This really did happen when the ship sank in 1912, but neither the first nor second era of *Titanic* Mania brought up this issue. Cameron's film was the first popular film that focused on the class discrimination that made this a tragedy that killed many more people of lower classes. Even Cameron jokingly says himself the film "[holds] just short of a Marxist dogma."¹²⁴ Cameron's *Titanic* provides an important historical reflection on Gilded Age class divisions, something not mentioned in previous eras.

This criticism of class divisions and the wealthy came at an interesting time. With Ronald Reagan as president, trickle-down economics was applied to the United States throughout the 1980s. Known as Reaganomics, Reagan's economic plans cut taxes for the rich, expecting the wealth to eventually "trickle down" to the poor. Reagan cut taxes

¹²⁴ Maslin, "Film Review; A spectacle as Sweeping as the Sea."

on the wealthy while increasing the national defense budget. The United States' budget deficit rose from \$914.3 billion in 1980 to \$2 trillion in 1986. Not only did Reagan's tax cuts make the deficit soar, they also widened the wealth disparity between the extremely wealthy and the poor, further harming not only the poor but also the middle class.¹²⁵ Like in the Gilded Age, many were rushing to get-rich-quick, except this time the West was Wall Street. With the rush to Wall Street and unbridled capitalism came scandals, and this harmed the country and projected a bad image on the wealthy even further.¹²⁶ Ironically, historian Gil Troy compares the perpetrators of the Wall Street scandals of the 1980s to the robber barons of the Gilded Age.¹²⁷ Perhaps James Cameron was doing the same with his commentary on the class divisions in his film. Both the era of the *Titanic* and the decade directly before Cameron's film debuted were times of widening wealth disparity, the poor suffering while the elite profited.

Handling a disaster with a death toll of 1,534 victims must be done with care and respect to the lives lost. What is considered respectful and what is not is an ever changing decision made by the public that can be seen in a source's success and its reviews. Public opinion drew a line between what was considered respectful and what was not, depending on a source's purpose. *Secrets of the Titanic* was a documentary that aimed to shed light on the sunken ship and the disaster that surrounded it. There were no thrills or extras added to the documentary such as the conspiracy theories in *Return to the Titanic... Live*. *Secrets of the Titanic* served to inform people of the disaster, the ruins of the ship, and the technology that was able to find it. *Return to the Titanic*, on the other hand, served to

¹²⁵ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 223.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 228-9.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 229.

create a mysticism and conspiracy around the *Titanic*, emphasizing the wealth on board with its opening of the safe and other treasures, rather than a commentary on the tragedy. *Titanic* by James Cameron balances on the careful line between the two, fictionalizing the event while at the same time informing people of the disaster. However, Cameron's film also brings in the criticism of the *Titanic*'s class divisions. Cameron's film creates a narrative that focuses not only on the immense amount of lives lost but also on the tragedy of its discrimination against lower class passengers.

The third era of *Titanic Mania* was created by the discovery of the ship at the bottom of the ocean. Had the ship never been found, the public's interest in the *Titanic* may never have been revived, and James Cameron may have never been the household name that he is today. Cameron and others capitalized on the discovery; scientist Robert Ballard, who found the *Titanic*, was bombarded with fame when he found the ruins. Ballard wrote a book about his discovery that was printed in seven different languages and was continuously offered speaking invitations, in which he received up to \$10,000 a piece.¹²⁸ This era saw the largest realization of the lives lost, and it was also the era that fully cemented the *Titanic* into the memory of the American public, truly making it one of the largest household names in American popular culture.

¹²⁸ Ringle, "Robert Ballard, Beyond the *Titanic*."

Conclusion

The story of the *Titanic* has been molded and formed into a different narrative to fit each passing generation's needs. The facts stay the same; the ship has always belonged to the White Star Line, it has always sunk on April 14th, 1912, and it has always taken 1,536 victims with it. However, the way in which the story has been told has changed with each separate era. Producers of the first era simply wished to tell a story that had directly affected the United States at the time, whether it was a factual representation or not. They emphasized the elite aboard the *Titanic*, contributing to the culture of conspicuous consumption. Producers of the second era wished to tell the story, but did so in a manner that suited the needs of the 1950s. This meant an emphasis on "women and children first" rather than scattered facts. And finally, with the third era, the retelling of the story changed once again. Now, instead of an emphasis on how the lifeboats were loaded or a rush to provide information, there was a clear critical distance that provided an important reflection on the disaster and its consequences, specifically the deaths of over 1,500 passengers, many of them being lower class. One critic emphasized the class disparity shown in the film *Titanic*, stating, "Instead of 'women and children first,' it was more like 'Tycoons and billionaires first.' That disparity leads to the stark, horrifying finale, which gives the movie the weight and brutal force of tragedy."¹²⁹

With each decade comes a new way to analyze history, and this includes disaster. Tragedy is always devastating, but that does not mean that the way in which it is studied and understood does not change. Each generation provides a separate lens for a story to be scrutinized with, and American historical memory of a subject changes with each

¹²⁹ Chris Hewitt, "'Titanic': Romeo and Juliet Get Wet."

changing of the glass consumers are looking through. No matter the generation, the RMS *Titanic* has become a household name as a consequence of the mania that surrounded it in three separate eras. Historian Andrew Green states, “Indeed, the disaster has become so invested with mythical status -- it’s been said that the name *Titanic* is the third most widely recognized word in the world, after ‘God’ and ‘Coca-Cola’ -- that it almost seems to be a constant, an event that repeats itself on a never-ending loop.”¹³⁰ Green’s statement is certainly true. The *Titanic*’s sinking will always be considered one of the worst disasters in world history, and American writers and filmmakers have made sure that no one will ever forget “The Ship That God Could Not Sink.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ Andrew Green, “*Titanic* Fever: Why Then? Why Now?” 546-562.

¹³¹ Edgette, “RMS *Titanic*.”

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