Local Titanic Survivor’s Story Interview Conducted by C. Lawrence Bond 1970 Compiled and Edited by Anne Hills Barrett 2012 On April 15, 1912, the largest marine disaster in history occurred with the sinking of the Titanic and the loss of over 1,500 lives in the frigid waters of the north Atlantic. Over the years, articles, movies, and documentaries have told and re-told the story of the ship’s last hours until most of us can recite the basic premise without much difficulty. This is a unique story of the Titanic; one of the survivors, Mary Conover Lines Wellman, then 16 years old, was aboard Titanic with her mother. Later, after her marriage, she moved to Topsfield, passing away in 1975. Topsfield historian C. Lawrence Bond interviewed Mrs. Wellman in 1970. The following describes her experience of the sinking of the Titanic. In her own words My name was Mary Conover Lines and my parents lived in Paris, France, where my father was in business for 19 years and where I was married at the end of the First World War to my husband, Sargent H. Wellman. And then we (Mary and her husband) came from Paris to live in Topsfield. Mary Conover Lines Wellman (right) Voyage to America We (Mary’s family) had not taken very frequent voyages because, of course, there were little flights - airplanes - and it took, still, at least a week or 10 days on any steamship coming to this country. So that our returns to the United States had been few and far between. But my brother was, in 1912, graduating from Dartmouth College and so we made a great effort to be here as a family. My mother and I came on ahead as my father could not take too long a time away from his work. Just for fun and excitement, my father got a state room for my mother and myself on the new Titanic, which was to make its maiden voyage at that time. It was a very delightful ship. Of course, it would not have seemed very extraordinary in this day and age. But in that day and age it was a very interesting departure, both in its furnishings, decorations and, above all, in what was greatly touted by the White Star Line, the fact that it was unsinkable. They had a system of bulkheads, which, supposedly, if the ship’s outer hull was breached in any place, would contain water in a small space and so permit the ship to carry on. This was greatly talked about and presumably influenced the fact that the British - though they are the most careful sailors and meticulous safety people in the world - completely neglected to afford any means of escape from the ship. Danger Ahead It was extremely cold and bright starlight. We had known all day that we were approaching ice. There had been warnings. And there were some discussions going on of Dining Room Aboard the Titanic which we heard rumors, and some people overheard these arguments between the captain and Mr. Bruce Ismay, who was the managing director of the White Star Line and who was taking the opportunity to make this maiden voyage on this new ship of his line. Captain Smith wished to go south and go more slowly. We were taking the fastest route to the United States as we wished to make a fast and quick voyage, and this entailed going very far north, just south of Labrador, the rather northernmost passage. I think usually they had tended to go a little bit south of that area. And particularly in view of the ice warnings, many people felt that we should have immediately turned south. But, that was not the decision and, of course, icebergs are peculiar creatures. It so happened that the one we hit was the type that is not quite seen, and it was mostly underwater, so really, no blame can be attached to the first officer who was conning the ship at that point on deck. Because the minute he saw the iceberg, he tried to swerve and avoid it thinking that it was just on the surface. But it was very far below the surface and tore out practically a half of the side of the ship. So that the famous bulkheads, on which they had counted so much to save the ship, proved no use at all. And we were told afterwards, to add to this, that the construction was rather peculiar. The bulkheads were not fastened to the deck above. There was a space between the top of the bulkhead partition and the deck above, where the water could pour through. So, in no time at all, two thirds of the ship were flooded. Immediately, everyone - the officers, of course - knew that she would have to sink. Titanic Captain Smith Impact So then, this happened about, I would say about half-past 11, 11:30 at night. And it was so very cold that my mother and I had retired quite early, I should think about 10 o’clock or half-past nine, because it was so cold. We went down to our cabin, they had an electric heater in each cabin and it made it more comfortable there and we had gone to bed to keep warm. And then, we heard this, like a big blow on the ship. The engineer on duty was very quick-witted and a very remarkable man, because he immediately started blowing off steam. If he had not, the ship might have blown up. But he saved it and the electric lights went out for a while, but they were able to get those functioning again in a very short time, so that we had light. Of course, the escaping steam made a fiendish noise and the fact that it was extremely cold, I think, kept people from rushing up on deck - at least most of them - to see what was happening. Our cabin steward came by quite shortly after we heard this blow, and said that the captain wished us all to stay in our cabins and not go rushing around the ship. So, unfortunately, my mother and I did not have the imagination or the thought to get dressed. But we stayed as we were told in the cabin. I always thought that he should have come back and told us the truth, rather than say that we should stay in our cabin, but I think, probably, by that time he was too busy doing something else. I don’t think anybody got left in their cabins. I think my mother and I, being just two women alone, were rather timid and didn’t feel like rushing out on deck, while probably others were not so timid and had gone up to see what was really happening. Then, about half-an-hour later, I’d say long about midnight or so, our next-door neighbor came running down to his cabin - he and his son were very delightful people from Hawaii and belonged to one of the families who had settled there as early missionaries and then become interested in many different things in Ireland. This father, I think, was talking to his son - they were rushing around finding their lifebelts. I opened the door to ask what was going on and he said, “My goodness, are you still here? Get up on deck as fast as you can. The ship is sinking.” We asked him where the lifebelts were and they were right on top of the little closet space on a pole, which was quite a chore, getting them out of there. But we finally managed and, by that time, it consumed so much time that we thought it best to go up on deck without stopping to get dressed. So, we went up, putting on as many coats and other outside things, and when we got up, we found that everybody was congregating on the boat deck. They had lowered the boats to the deck below and they had two big barrels of blankets that they had opened up and they were handing out to each person as we moved along. Well, we seemed to be halting for a while and not moving forward very much, so I suggested to my mother that I go back and see if I could rescue a few clothes and we might be able to get dressed properly. So, I rushed down and that’s where I remember there were so many flights, so I think we must have been very far down in the ship. There was a slight moment of panic amongst the people in the second class, who were climbing the ladder - the stairways - to the first-class boats, which they were allowed to do. There was an officer there directing them, and there was a slight moment of panic, wondering whether they were going to able to make it, but there was no real panic. I can’t remember (which side of the ship they were on). I’d have to see an account, perhaps, one of the good accounts that have been written, because the boats that were on the upper side, they weren’t able to be lowered. That was one of the great tragedies, because they were not lowered in time and, by the time the boat had assumed such a list, they could not be lowered. So we must have been, of course, on the side that was leaning. By the time I got back, I found that the last people were moving up on deck. I thought, “Well, we’d better get up on deck and forget about the clothes.” So, we did and we went up and some of the very famous people who were on the ship were in line, walking up the stairs. Mr. Astor, I remember, was just ahead of us with his young bride, and then we got up on deck and we got handed up the blankets and we got pushed into a boat. There was absolute quiet. There were very few people speaking, practically none. A few women were crying because their husbands were making them go on the boats when they did not want to. One or two did stay with their husbands, I remember. The orchestra was playing - they never stopped - and they were, of course, like all the officers; they didn’t desert their posts. One young man was standing there, the third or fourth officer, helping Photo of a Titanic Lifeboat Taken