



The Titanic Goes Down Again

by Richard Warren

Since the age of 10, John Whitman, now 47, has been completely consumed by the legend and the romance behind the "unsinkable" Titanic, the ocean liner that struck an iceberg on its maiden voyage in 1912, sending 1500 people to the bottom of the Atlantic. There have been worse maritime disasters, but none has achieved the mythological status of the Titanic, whose apocalyptic ending has entranced millions for decades.

And that goes double for Whitman, who has devoted years of his life to memorizing every facet of the tragedy. He has traveled the world tracking down every available artifact he can lay his hands on, bringing them home to Sidney, Ohio. Until recently, much of the memorabilia was housed in the Titanic Memorial Museum surrounded by a sea of corn in the farmlands outside Sidney. The museum was the only one in the world dedicated to the tragedy, and nearly 400,000 people from 19 countries had made pilgrimages there since the doors opened in 1986.

In April, however, Whitman closed the museum, disgusted by what he perceived as lack of cooperation from the local community and the state of Ohio's Department of Travel and Tourism. Especially galling to him was their refusal to erect a sign on I-75 near the Sidney exit. "They said we needed a minimum of 200,000 visitors a year to put up a sign," Whitman said. "Hell, if I'd had 200,000 people a year, I wouldn't have needed a sign!"

He has merged his collection with that of RMS Titanic, the owners of items salvaged from the wreck several years ago. Starting in October, the combined collection will make a world tour and eventually will be permanently housed in New York. RMS Titanic has retained Whitman as a consultant.

Whitman is planning to stay in Sidney until he finishes a Titanic "theme park," a 1912 vintage European village reflecting the many places from which the Titanic's passengers hailed. He envisions the village as one full of shops and homes, all authentic to the period, and all somehow related to the Titanic.

Currently, the village contains a pub, ice cream parlor, doctor's office, hardware store, printer's office, a newsstand, Bank of Scotland, real estate and attorney's offices, and more. Whitman is quick to point out that 90 percent of the Titanic's passengers were immigrants, not the glamorous upper crust popularized in film versions. He feels it's important for people to learn what the Europeans left behind and looked forward to in coming to the New World.

He has lofty goals for his eclectically conceived village. Pointing to a stand of trees on

the horizon, he declares it will someday be engulfed by his 1912 metropolis.

He beguiles his listeners with the legend's mystique. Whitman enjoys the religious component of the story—the possibility that it was a divine judgment, a punishment for the effrontery of declaring the ship unsinkable. In its last moments, the Titanic, going down by the bow, raised up perpendicular to the water and hung there, suspended, for nearly five minutes, "like a giant finger pointing at the heavens and saying 'God, thy will be done,'" Whitman said. "I know I'm obsessed," he admits. "I'm building an entire town dedicated to the Titanic. I guess you could call it a historical/hysterical collision."

With all the maniacal energy of a revival preacher, he will rattle off every conceivable fact about the Titanic—the number of gallons of paint it took to cover it, the number of pets saved in the lifeboats, even the number of eggs that went down with the ship. He cites seldom-heard statistics such as the speed in miles per hour that the iceberg had been moving, making him believe it was the iceberg that struck the Titanic and not the other way around.

Whitman's own art works are displayed in the museum along with every conceivable book and magazine article on the subject, movie posters and stills of the Hollywood sagas, blueprints, models, and even a Titanic CD and "Raise the Titanic" board game. He has constructed dioramas depicting the size of the ship compared to the iceberg and set up a series of clocks with hands frozen to time the key events during the two hours and 40 minutes it took the ship to die.

Perhaps the most chilling items are the ones that came off the ship—articles of clothing worn by the survivors on that freezing April night. There is a tea service another survivor carried off the ship. The notes with the displays answered some questions, but left you hanging on others. Not a clue, for example, as to why anyone would carry a tea service into a lifeboat. Next to another display, a tabloid headline screams, "Titanic Survivor Found on Iceberg;" there is, however, a brief note reading "Not True." Just in case you had any doubts.

Ask Whitman about the popular legends—he'll debunk some myths and verify others. There was no man dressed as a woman, no playing of *Nearer My God to Thee* as the ship went down, but yes, there was more than one ship close enough to have rescued everyone. Ask him about the German ship that the Titanic deliberately did not contact.

Go see Mr. Whitman's village. But be sure he's the one who shows it to you.