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Yesterday was when you could find a book about the sinking of the Titanic in most New Bern homes. This sea tragedy, like the death of Floyd Collins in a Kentucky cave many years later, had tremendous impact here and everywhere.

Television comics including Johnny Carson sometimes resort to sick jokes about the Titanic, displaying atrociously bad taste. It wasn't funny when it happened, and remembering the 1,635 who perished, it still isn't funny.

Probably all of the 705 who survived would have gone to a watery grave, but for a young wireless operator of Russian ancestry, who was holding down the midnight watch alone in a midtown New York skyscraper.

He was an employee of the American Marconi Company. During a span of three years he had graduated from the Nantucket Island station, a vital communication link for Atlantic vessels, to night duty in the Manhattan office high above Broadway.

It didn't matter to him where he worked. Solitude gave him a chance, when he caught up on routine traffic messages, to perfect his knowledge of radio, then in its infancy. He could transmit 45 words a minute for an eight hour stretch, something rather astounding.

The date was April 14, 1912. The night was unseasonably cool, and damp. Someone less fond of lonely vigils would have found the weather and surroundings depressing, but he was as contented as he was alert.

Shortly before the stroke of midnight he picked up an SOS flash from the Titanic, a huge White Star liner headed to America from Europe on her much proclaimed maiden voyage.

A thousand miles away, in the North Atlantic, the largest vessel afloat had struck an iceberg and was sinking. The young operator hoped fervently that the faint distress signal was a hoax.

He was sure it wasn't when the desperate call for immediate help came again, moments later. He relayed the Titanic's last known position to other ships in the general area, and contacted newspapers and press services to keep them abreast of any information he received.

For three days and nights the young wireless operator stuck by his key without sleep or relief, determined to complete his task. In tribute to his efficiency, President Taft ordered all other wireless stations along the Eastern seaboard off the air.

Hour after hour, until a Cunard liner, the Carpathia, steamed into New York harbor with the survivors, he relayed messages to rescue ships and issued lists of survivors to an anxious and grieving world.

Those 72 hours, hunched over a wireless key, were without precedent. What sort of human being was this who could fight

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New Bern-Craven County Public Library



"I CAN'T BELIEVE I ATE THAT WHOLE THING."—Photo by Wooten-Moulton Studio.