

He Survived the Sinking of the Tuscania

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

While researching last week's article on the Frank Herfort Cannery, my Sauk County Historical Society resources (including Bill Schuette) made available a family letter to Frank from his son Randall, a Corporal in the American Expeditionary Forces of World War One.

Along with 20 other young Baraboo men, Herfort was en-route on the ship Tuscania to the 1917-18 American effort in World War One when it was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland. Thankfully all 21 Baraboo men survived the harrowing experience, but some 200 young American men lost their lives in the cold winter waters.

At the request of his father Frank, young Randall Herfort soon wrote home in detail how he escaped from the doomed ship. In an article several years ago in this column, we alluded to the sinking of this ship, but this new and detailed account presents a very personal view of the tragedy.

Randall was well below on his bunk on Deck E when a "thunderous explosion wracked the ship" and threw him off the bunk. Quickly listing to starboard, the ship's lights now failed, and the men had to find their way up to the lifeboat deck in darkness, using the ship's ladders. Despite the panic and excessive crowding, the men were "all orderly and no fighting... though jammed together very tight, and I was in the jam."

Despite the ship already listing, Herfort finally reached his lifeboat station, finding it overfilled. Swinging by a rope to another deck, he coolly lit a cigarette and pondered his choices. Entering the water as had many was not a good choice, since one could last but four or five minutes in the cold February waters around Ireland.

Luckily a partially filled raft appeared, and he swung down on the rope, only to find that the raft was upside down and therefore had no oars or other navigation equipment. It was essential to move away from the sinking ship, for when it sunk it would create a suction in the surface which would draw the raft down also.

Somehow they drifted clear. Herfort continues: "We heard the cries of struggling men in the water shouting for help, but having no oars we were powerless to assist in saving any of those unfortunate boys. In some cases it seemed as though they must have been almost within reach of our raft. We could not see them, as before stated we were in total darkness.

This part was certainly heartrending, and words cannot express the feeling. There was not a word spoken (among us), and finally the cries and shouting ceased." Herfort was in luck, however, for the raft drifted near what turned out to be a British trawler. A rope was thrown on which they climbed to safety.

When the trawler could find no more survivors, it began to move. "Pulling away from the scene and reflecting on their narrow escape, "there was not a sound from anyone on board and utter silence prevailed. No doubt everyone as well as myself was thinking of the fate of his comrades."

During all of these events, Herfort says he saw no one that he knew. What he didn't know was that by good fortune, all of the Baraboo men had survived, each with his own story. The bond that was formed resulted in an organization which would last a lifetime, well known in Baraboo in subsequent years as the Last Man Club.

Besides comradeship, the club involved a bottle of whiskey, never opened, for the last man alive. Until well into the late 1960's, the Tuscania survivors met regularly, and became leaders in the community. A national association of Tuscania survivors had their annual meeting in Baraboo one year.

A previous article, with additional information and the names of the other 20 local men can be found in my "Baraboo and Sauk County", volume II, page 539, in most libraries in the county.



Leon Braun photo collection

An ambulance was a common sight later for the 21 Baraboo survivors of the torpedoed ship. That's Pete Byers, driver of the ambulance.