

BACK IN TIME

Titanic sinking hit home

By **DICK SHEARER**

James Van Billiard, the highly respected burgess of North Wales and his family had great expectations in the early spring of 1912. One of their sons, Austin, his wife and their six children would soon be coming home from Europe after 11 years abroad.

It was exciting news for James who had developed a regional reputation as owner of the North Wales Granite Works. Twenty-three year-old Austin left the country in 1900 to work as an electrician at the Universal Exposition in Paris.

It was there that he met an Englishwoman, Maud Murray; they married within a few months and visited North Wales on their honeymoon in 1901.

By 1906 Austin and Maud had two sons and were bound for the diamond mines of central Africa where he reportedly amassed a small fortune. But living conditions were harsh for the young family and they headed to London with intentions to return to the states.

Austin Van Billiard advised his father they would be coming home sometime that spring. It seemed likely their arrival would be delayed a bit because Maud had just given birth to their sixth child in February.

But Austin apparently decided to surprise mom and dad. He and his two eldest sons, James William and Walter John, chose to come ahead of the rest. They booked third class passage on the Titanic.

You can guess the outcome, but the details are worth retelling 100 years after the fact.

Word spread quickly around the world that on



FAMILY TRAGEDY: Austin Van Billiard with his wife, Maud, above. Below, sons James and Walter, who died with their father on the Titanic.



April 15 the jewel of the British cruise ship fleet struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic carrying 1,500 souls to their deaths. Back in North Wales, James Van Billiard closely followed the events as they unfolded in the newspapers. He was interested but not overly concerned. After all, Austin predicted they wouldn't be leaving for a few more weeks.

When the manifest of passengers was published the name "Billiard" appeared on it. James thought it a coincidence, but just to play it safe he wired London. Maud confirmed that Austin, James William and Walter were aboard. James had to break the news to his wife, Phoebe.

About this time, survivors were being brought from Nova Scotia to New York City where anxious families congregated in hopes of finding loved ones. Among the disappointed on-lookers was Monroe Van Billiard, Austin's brother, who lived in North Brunswick, N.J.

As might be expected, primitive communications didn't help matters. It was later learned that the bodies of Austin and Walter along with 133 others were recovered by a search ship around May 1 and sent to Halifax. Austin had with him at least a dozen large uncut

diamonds with which he likely planned to start a new business in this country. He reportedly stored others in the ship's safe.

James William's body was never found. It is speculated that the boys chose to stay with their

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Father, two sons go down with the ship

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father rather than board a lifeboat.

The following week father and son were laid to rest in the Whitemarsh Memorial Cemetery near Flourtown. James Van Billiard fashioned an imposing granite monument to mark their gravesite. James William's name is also included on the stone.

Maud eventually settled in North Wales in 1915, and raised their four surviving children there. She died Jan. 17, 1968 at age 94, having never remarried. She is buried alongside Austin and Walter.

The Titanic tragedy was not the only one suffered by the Van Billiard family. A daughter, Iva died in 1920 at age 32 of pneumonia. And James passed away in 1931 at age 74 after suffering an attack of sunstroke in his garden.

Monroe, the son who waited in vain at the pier, moved back to North Wales and became the town's first letter carrier in 1920.

Information for this story was compiled from issues of the Lansdale Reporter, the Montgomeryville Spirit and numerous Titanic-related websites.

Maud describes life with Austin

On the following page is an autobiographical letter written by Maud (Murray) Van Billiard in 1958, 10 years before her death at Christ Church Hospital (Home) in Philadelphia.

The letter describes her 11-year marriage to Austin and the family's travels through Africa in search of diamonds and other precious stones. Austin carried some of the diamonds on the ill-fated voyage to the United States but none were ever recovered by the family.

The letter was provided by Robert Bell, one of Maud's grandchildren, to Joanne Matthews of the North Wales Historic Commission. We thank her for sharing it with us.



THE VAN BILLIARD GRAVESITE NEAR FLOURTOWN.

PROSPECTING FOUND MY HOME
BY
MAUD HELEN VAN BILLIARD

October 1958

You who read this brief of my life in finding peace, security and happiness will, I am sure, reflect with me as I did with one of our residents and your Editor and be thankful with me for the finding of happy living within the walls of Christ Church Hospital.

My name is Mrs. Maud Helen Van Billiard. I am the daughter of William and Elizabeth Murray, born in London, April 13th, 1873. When I was 18 months old my parents moved to Paris where I grew up as a young girl and was educated in the Paris schools. For a short time I was employed in a Paris Emporium. It was in 1900 that I met my sweetheart Austin Van Billiard who was from nearby North Wales, Pa., his father being burgess of the village. He was at that time building Exhibits for the Paris Exposition. My family made their home in the British-American Colony. We were married in 1901 and honeymooned to America where I met my husband's family and our first boy was born. Both of us being adventurous and interesting in prospecting, we embarked to London and Paris visiting relatives and friends. As we read and learned more of South Africa we decided to sail for Cape Town, and prospect for diamonds, working our way along the Vaal River, through Belgian Congo, stopping wherever the ground looked favorable for finding the precious stones.

This journey necessitated a very crude form of living. We lived for days in thatched roof huts held together with bamboo. Cooking and bathing facilities were arranged in small round huts. Let me tell you how we made our bread. The dough was mixed in a large iron pot, and left for the sun to raise. We loved that bread, it was really good. Our laundry was washed against the rocks by the natives. Our wagon from the United States stood us well, but frequent storms and hurricanes drove us for shelter within caves and crevices, which had been dug by former prospectors. Traveling through this virgin country required carrying limited supplies. The natives helped in all the heavy work while Mr. Van Billiard would dig and locate the diamonds.

Our prospecting was successful and we continued north to Rhodesia. From there we entrained for Elizabethville. There we found our children were the only white ones in the village. At that time our family consisted of four boys and one girl. After a short stay here we decided to return to London, this being a three weeks trip. My husband, having successfully contacted diamond brokers in New York City, booked passage for himself and the two older boys on the Titanic.

Tragic as it was in the loss of my three dear ones, my life has been built around raising my remaining family of four. After a long rest we came to the United States and settled in North Wales.

I have been a resident of Christ Church Hospital for five and one-half years. My hobby is knitting, dressing dolls, and making stuffed animals. These hobbies I developed since I came to the Home. Today at 85 I am content and happy to be here where I pursue my hobby, relive the memories of my life in the Belgian Congo, and enjoy visits from my family.