

How I acquired a First Class Passenger List

A while ago I was in New York with my friend Oliver Schwarz from Germany. I wanted to show him the city, so we did the 'standard tour' of the usual sites including several Titanic locations. We had a couple of hours to spare at the end of our trip, so I suggested that we paid a visit to another friend of mine who deals in maritime memorabilia. After pleasantries had been exchanged, my friend said he had something to show me. From his desk, he produced a plastic folder. I immediately recognized it's contents to be a White Star Line First Class Passenger List from a familiar era when they all had the same cover, printed in either blue or green. This one was blue. I was curious to know why he was eager to show me this particular list. I wondered if it featured a well-known passenger, maybe EJ Smith in command or perhaps it was an early example from Olympic.

Nothing however, could prepare me for the sight of the magic seven letters on the inside cover when my friend opened the list: T-I-T-A-N-I-C. I felt like I had been struck by lightning. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would have dismissed it as a fake. But it was absolutely genuine, and Oliver and I were the first Titanic buffs to see it. An opportunity like this would certainly have been something to look forward to, but having it sprung on me without warning was such a shock. I did not know whether to be grateful or upset with my friend.....

In general, contemporary Passenger Lists are rare, but how often does one come across a list from one of the most legendary Atlantic crossings of all time? We learned that it had been found in France. Other than being folded once, it was pristine, in fact in much better condition than surviving lists from other ships of the day and there were no doubts. It was real. To my great astonishment, the list not already been sold or reserved. Naturally, the price was way out of my budget, however very reasonable compared to the sum such a piece could expect to fetch at auction. Viewed from this angle, it was a bargain. I asked my friend to reserve the list for four days.

Poor Oliver. For the remaining time in New York and the journey home, my thoughts revolved around one thing and one thing alone. The List. To my knowledge there are only three First Class lists from Titanic in existence. One is in private ownership and has been bound at some later stage. One belonged to Jack Thayer, having left Titanic in Lifeboat 4 in his mother Marian's coat pocket. This is now in a US-Museum. The list that I had been offered was complete and even contained a glued in sheet of information, specific to Titanic, on the swimming bath, Squash Court and the clothes pressing and cleaning room.

Three days later I was able to call my friend in New York. Another friend had offered me to loan me the money. I knew I would have to sell other parts of my collection in order to pay him back, but this was a once in a lifetime chance. The list fits the profile of my collection perfectly:

- I concentrate on collecting paper.
- I prefer printed, rather than handwritten, items.
- I give priority to White Star Line publications.
- I aim for items produced as close as possible to the sinking, preferably before.

I would certainly never get closer to the sinking than this. I returned from Miami on October 1, 2003 and, the same day boarded another aircraft back to America, this time heading for

Newark. To my great surprise, the flight followed the Titanic's route more than usual, over Cherbourg and Cork; even "The corner" was clearly visible on the screen with the route map. All went well and I met my friend at the airport where he handed over the envelope. Only 15 minutes after the immigration officer had welcomed me to the States, I was queuing up at the Check-in again. Bearing in mind what I had in my hand luggage, I preferred not to sleep. I watched movies and played with the onboard entertainment system "Who wants to be a millionaire". Unfortunately, I didn't beat the computer! I was still nervous when I arrived home, having crossed the Atlantic 3 times in just 33 hours. But there was no way I could sleep. So I went to the printer to discuss the possibility of producing a replica of the list. I felt that this great find should be shared with my fellow Titanic buffs. The original list mentions 318 people in First Class. I decided to limit the replica to 318 copies and put each in a folder containing additional information on missing or wrong names etc. It took me six months, and the assistance of several friends, but by the 92nd anniversary of the sinking a complete First Class Passenger list was available for the first time.

Günter Bäbler, © April 2004
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