

*Ann McGowan's happy journey from her home in Ireland to settle with relatives in Chicago took a fateful turn when she became one of the few survivors of the infamous **Titanic** disaster. After building a successful new life, she kept the story to herself as part of a dark past. But now her family is learning the tale*

A Tragedy's Echo



MARY KAPOLNEK WAS A YOUNG TEENAGER on the North Side of Chicago when she came across an envelope of crumbling newspaper clippings from 1912 tucked in a drawer in her parents' bedroom. It was 1948; two world wars and the Great Depression had long diverted public attention from the ship called *Titanic*, whose disastrous maiden voyage was recounted in the hidden newspaper stories. When Kapolnek asked her mother about the clippings, however, the envelope quickly disappeared back into the drawer. "Oh, that's something that happened a long time ago. You don't need to know," Kapolnek recalls her mother saying.

As it turned out, Kapolnek's mother, formerly known as Ann McGowan, had been on the doomed luxury liner, one of only 178 survivors of the 710 passengers in third class. For most of her life, she refused to discuss the tragedy, even with

her children. "It was a terrible experience," Kapolnek says. "Her aunt died bringing her here."

After her rescue, Ann McGowan came to Chicago, arriving almost catatonic from the trauma, which included the loss of her aunt and ten

▲ *Ann McGowan Straube (inset, in 1978) sailed on the *Titanic* (left) to make a home in Chicago with her Aunt Sarah McGowan Gollogly (pictured to the left of her sister-in-law).*

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other companions who were traveling with them from County Mayo, in western Ireland. The youngest in the group, Ann was just shy of 15 at the time. In the years immediately after the sinking, her family helped her get past the experience, mainly by telling her to move on with her life. Over the years, Ann refused to speak to reporters, never went to any *Titanic* commemorations, avoided the books and the movies about the tragedy. And she did move on, marrying, raising a family of three children, leading a full life, before dying at 92 in 1990.

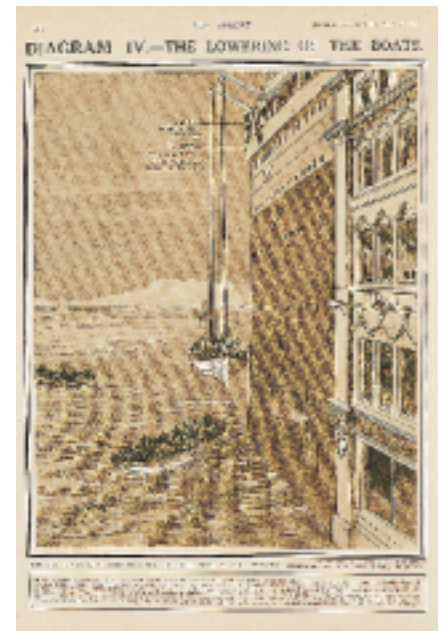
In her final years, Ann found herself surrounded by a large extended family, eventually totaling 11 grandchildren, 26 great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren, and dozens of nieces and nephews. Many of them knew the outlines of Ann's story, knew why Scout field trips on the Chicago River—or any other body of water—had been forbidden for her children. Toward the end of Ann's life, the curiosity of her relatives began to chip away at her silence. On rare occasions, she would respond succinctly to their questions. In 1984, she gave an interview for a newspaper story to a great-granddaughter, disclosing that she had been in one of the first lifeboats to leave the ship.

ANN MCGOWAN STARTED OUT SEEKING TO follow the same path as so many of her relatives from County Mayo, where the potato famine had taken a particularly severe toll. Mayo had been one of Ireland's densely populated counties, but by the early 1900s, more than 100,000 people had died of starvation or disease. "They were just recovering from the years of the famine. Work would have been totally scarce," says Bridie Greavy, a supervisor at the Mayo North Heritage Center in Ballina. "[Leaving] was necessity."

Ann's aunt, Catherine McGowan, who was 28 years older, had grown up in the central Mayo townland of Massbrook, a close-knit community in the Addergoole Parish that had a population of about 1,000. Catherine's parents had lost six children in infancy before her birth. Probate records indicate Catherine and five other children survived. In 1888, according to census records, soon after her parents died, Catherine left Ireland for the United States at age 19, close behind a sister who had settled in Cleve-

land. Catherine soon found work as a domestic servant and bookkeeper. She was able to afford the occasional trip back to Ireland, family members say, where she grew close to Ann.

After moving to Chicago, Catherine found a job in a boarding house near Lincoln Avenue and Addison Street. Her younger sister Margaret "Maggie" McDermott lived around the corner on Ashland Avenue with her husband and their eight-year-old daughter. Still, Catherine missed home, and in 1911 went to Ireland for the holidays, intending to return to the States in the spring.



▲ A 1912 newspaper rendering of the Titanic's lifeboats being lowered during the disaster

Ann, at 14, had already told her family she was ready to go to America to start working. Born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Ann was two when her parents took her and her older brother back to County Mayo. They opened a general store and had five more children. Ann often talked about how she loved the school she and her siblings were in, yet the devastation of the famine made for few long-time economic prospects. Although Ann was too young to emigrate on her own, she was like many teenagers in Mayo: "She wanted to work and make a living," Kapolnek says. It was decided that Aunt Catherine would be her chaperone.

Newspaper accounts later described Catherine's endorsement of America. "Right industriously did she sing the

praises of Chicago at the homes of those she visited in County Mayo,” reported the *Connaught Telegraph*, Mayo’s newspaper of record, soon after the *Titanic*’s sinking. Tony Donohoe, a County Mayo historian who has written books on the Addergoole and nearby Crossmolina parishes, says the emigrant group included nine women and three men in addition to Catherine and Ann McGowan. Most were in their 20s or 30s. “They were the only people in Mayo who went on the *Titanic*,” Donohoe says.

Ship records show that seven of the group, including Catherine and Ann, were headed for Chicago. A few nights before the travelers left, their relatives threw them a party—the sort of event often held for people sailing to the United States. These sendoffs were called “American Wakes,” according to Greavy, “because going to America was worse than death in some ways.” The relatives left behind knew they might never see the emigrants again.

BUILT IN BELFAST, THE *TITANIC* WAS THE talk of much of Ireland, and ticket agents had little difficulty finding people who wanted to travel on an ocean liner billed as unsinkable. “They just got their tickets in Castlebar and took off,” Donohoe says. A ticket in third class cost about \$25 (\$379 in today’s dollars). In all, 2,228 people made the trip, although the *Titanic*’s lifeboats had room for only 1,200. Maritime regulations of the day required only enough lifeboat space for about half of those on board.

The outlines of the *Titanic* story are familiar today: Just before midnight on April 15, 1912, traveling at excessive speed through an ice field, the *Titanic* sliced itself open on its starboard side. Catherine and Ann had been to a party in the third-class general room and were headed for their berths. They didn’t realize there had been a collision; crew members told them, and the degree of danger was not altogether clear. But on the upper decks, senior ship officials soon concluded that the *Titanic* could stay afloat only an hour or two with a 300-foot puncture below the water line. The captain gave the order to put women and children in the lifeboats and told the wireless officers to summon other ships to pick up everyone else. The closest to answer the distress call was the *Carpathia*,

four hours away. To reduce panic, the captain told officers to keep the dire situation to themselves.

Locked gates prevented third-class passengers from wandering into the second- and first-class areas. As the *Titanic* sank, the official order to open them came after most of the lifeboats were gone. In the meantime, third-class travelers were left below to fend for themselves. Their cabins were the first to take on water, which sent many of them to the foot of the stairs in the general room. The scene became increasingly clamorous when stewards ran through the hallways, shout-

Ann’s reaction to the discovery of the *Titanic* in 1985 was to remark, “Well, if they ever find that old purse of mine, I’d like to have it back.”

ing that it was time to get up on deck, and officers at the gates above replied that things still were not ready.

The *Connaught Telegraph* article on the Mayo group says that two men in the party “knew there was a ladder leading to the upper decks. Gathering the women and girls about them, they started for the ladder.” The majority of them followed, but got separated when they became part of a throng who had also figured out how to clamber up from third class. Those who made it to the upper decks could hear the band playing and see that the remaining lifeboats were not yet full.

Ann, who looked even younger than her age, was lifted into a lifeboat with about 40 women and children. After her rescue, she apparently confided to a sister that she had met a boyfriend. “We were always told she had a boyfriend, a sailor who she met on the boat,” says Mary Jane Dodge, one of Ann’s nieces. “He supposedly threw her over the side into a lifeboat, and the aunt [Catherine]—they couldn’t get to her, I guess because everyone was so hysterical.” Third-class passengers were hard-pressed even to get to the boats. “[The *Titanic*] was a rabbit warren of passageways,” says John P. Eaton, author of *Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy*. “It was immensely complex to get through. It took time.”

In the newspaper interview she gave toward the end of her life, Ann said that she was clothed only in a dress and shoes,

and she couldn’t even take her purse. As the boat was lowered and rowed away, Ann repeatedly asked the crew to help find her aunt. “She just seemed sad about the whole thing,” recalls her great-granddaughter Kris Provenzano, the reporter who interviewed Ann for the suburban *Daily Herald*.

After she watched the ship break in half, the saltwater and wind made her eyes start to bleed. The screams of the passengers left on the decks drifted over the water. “It’s like your September 11th; it was a frightful thing,” says Greavy.

The survivors began steaming toward New York on the *Carpathia* with three Mayo travelers on board: Ann, Anna Katherine Kelly, age 20—who was also going to Chicago—and one other person. Back in County Mayo, “[News of the 11 deaths] devastated the parish completely,” says Tony Donohoe. “There was a lot of tears in the Parish of Addergoole for a long time after.”

IN CHICAGO, MAGGIE McDERMOTT WAS among the throng of relatives making inquiries at the White Star Line’s local office on North LaSalle Street. There was little definitive news on Ann or Catherine McGowan (or anyone else in third class). Ann McGowan and Anna Kelly were hospitalized briefly in Manhattan, then took a train to Chicago, helped financially by the Red Cross. Anna Kelly joined her family at an Old Town boarding house.

Ann McGowan went to her aunt Maggie McDermott’s apartment, with the press in hot pursuit. On April 28, 1912, the *Chicago Record-Herald* wrote: “They cannot say a word to Annie McGowan about anything that happened at all, can the McDermotts. They fear the child will lose her mind, and Mrs. McDermott dares not cry or sob, though the heart of her should burst, nor ask a question of how Kate died and what she said, but must smile and show cheer, for fear the child will lose her wits. They have the doctor for her all the time, and it’s a sad house the McDermotts have this day and all days now.”

Ann was suffering from “nervous shock,” according to the liability claim filed a year later on her behalf against the *Titanic*’s owners. It said she had trouble seeing, and the effects of frostbite to her legs, feet, and ears made it hard to hear or walk. “She has been physically unable to

provide for her own support, and has therefore been compelled to look to friends and relatives for her support and maintenance.” The claim sought \$25,000 in personal-injury damages and \$612 for the loss of her property.

Under the limited-liability protection measures granted to the White Star Line, the final payout in 1916 for all passengers was \$663,000, which met only a small percentage of the nearly \$19 million in claims filed in the U.S. courts. Some third-class passengers were allegedly told they were entitled to collect \$25 from the White Star Line in exchange for not filing claims against the company. Many of them, including Anna Kelly and Ann McGowan, would later remark to reporters they didn't feel they had a choice. There is no record that any compensation went to Ann. Although many claimants refiled in England, she let it go. “I think she wanted to put it out of her mind,” Kapolnek says.

Catherine McGowan's death wasn't confirmed until later that summer, among the very last of those lost at sea. Her estate filed for \$10,900, but had to settle for \$100 to cover “loss of baggage,” according to Cook County probate records. Family relics, a gentleman's suit, mink furs, and a silverware set were listed among the possessions she was carrying. After attorney and court fees, her family received \$54.98 from the White Star Line—in today's terms, about \$720.

Aunt Maggie and her younger sister in Chicago, Sarah McGowan Gollogly, became Ann's chaperones. “Both Aunt Maggie and Aunt Sarah were very hard-working ladies,” Kapolnek says. They told Ann not to think about the tragedy, to move on, as she and her family had done through other hardships. “My mother was a very religious lady,” Kapolnek says. “Her whole family was very religious. She felt that there was a reason she was saved and her aunt wasn't.”

Titanic relief funds helped Ann go to boarding school for a year, and she had lots of family to help her recover. Aunt Maggie, who had two children of her own, was widowed shortly after the sinking. Aunt Sarah, who had a son, was married to a merchant marine whose work on the Great Lakes kept him away for long stretches of time. Soon enough, five of Ann's six siblings came over from County Mayo.

By the end of World War I, the aunts,

their children, and Ann were all in neighboring apartments on Lill Avenue in Lincoln Park. Ann went to secretarial school a few blocks away to learn typing. She also got a job inspecting speedometers. Like their older sister Catherine, the aunts Maggie and Sarah got into the boarding-house business along Lincoln Avenue. Theirs also teemed with Irish immigrants staying a day, a week, a month, and they survived by not getting too attached to their tenants. “If they got drunk and they got fired, they were out of there,” says Sarah's grandson Dennis Gollogly.

ON APRIL 27, 1921, ANN MARRIED RAY

Straube, a plumbing contractor for R. J. Powers downtown. “He was very easygoing; everybody loved my father,” says Kapolnek. Ann and Ray's first daughter, Frances, was born in 1922; Jacqueline, “Jackie,” came two years later; and Mary arrived in 1935. When the clatter of new transportation systems got to be too much, Ann and her family moved to a two-flat at Winnemac Avenue and Rockwell Street in 1946. “She never left it without the beds made and the dishes done,” Kapolnek says. The five-foot-two, 115-pound Ann, who kept a soft Irish accent, became known around the neighborhood as something of a disciplinarian. “If you weren't home by 9 p.m., my mother would come looking for you,” Kapolnek says. “When she told you to do something, you did it.”

Before Kapolnek turned two, her mother and father bought a summer cottage on the shores of Paddock Lake in southern Wisconsin. “There would be six of us sleeping on the porch,” a grandson, Tom Komay, recalls of the summer nights without air conditioning. But during the day, even as everyone else was boating, swimming, and splashing about to keep cool, Ann kept away from the water.

A Night to Remember, Walter Lord's groundbreaking book on the *Titanic*, came out in 1955, but Kapolnek says her mother wouldn't read it. When Tom Komay was a teenager in the 1960s, he asked his grandmother why. “I told her, ‘Well, your name is in it.’ She said, ‘Well, I don't care. I can write my name anywhere I want.’”

Jack McGowan, Ann's nephew, recalls a family dinner in Cleveland at which Ann “talked about how there was a big party [on the ship]. She sort of blamed the captain for the big party and for not watching

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out for the icebergs.” The U.S. Senate inquiry of the sinking drew the same conclusion, citing the captain’s “indifference to danger” as the cause of the crash.

When Ann’s widowed daughter Frances became sick with tuberculosis and went to a sanitarium in 1953, Ann and her husband assumed the parenting of Frances’s three teenage sons. By 1965, Ann had lost both her daughter and her husband. Aunt Maggie, who by that time resembled something of a Civil War nurse, her wiry frame weary from battle fatigue, sometimes reported for baby-sitting duty. Her sidekick Sarah Gollogly had died in 1942. Aunt Maggie herself died in 1971.

FINALLY, IN 1984, 72 YEARS AFTER THE SINKING, Ann agreed to a newspaper interview—fittingly enough, with a relative, Kris Provenzano (who was then named Kris Kopp), a 20-year-old journalism student at Columbia College Chicago and a part-time reporter at the *Daily Herald* in Arlington Heights. Ann took her old newspaper clippings out of the drawer. She talked about the luxury on the ship and the commotion after the collision and the terrible scene in the lifeboats. She quoted one man as saying, “Let me in or I’ll tip the whole lifeboat.” (“Of course, we had to let him in.”) And she talked about feeling betrayed when she realized that her aunt was not all right. “The whole time in the lifeboats, the crew just kept telling me, ‘Don’t worry, your aunt is in a lifeboat on the other side, and she’ll be all right.’”

A year after that interview, the discovery of the *Titanic* 12,000 feet underwater in the North Atlantic made headlines around the world. A grandson, Tom Komay, recalls Ann’s reaction: “Well, if they ever find that old purse of mine, I’d like to have it back.” (Exactly who owns the *Titanic*’s artifacts—recently appraised at \$72 million—is the subject of a court battle that may finally go to trial later this year.)

In the late 1980s, Ann spent a year living in Wisconsin, with her daughter Jackie. Tom Komay and his wife lived a few blocks away, and once they became regular card players, Ann started to open up about the horror she saw the night of the sinking. “There were people naked, screaming, trying to get out,” Komay recalls her saying. “There were more than a thousand people who knew they were

going to die.” Briefly she talked about Catherine. “She said her aunt was going to take care of her when they got back, but she died trying to help her. She said she loved her very much.”

Ann McGowan Straube died at Kapolnek’s home in the Portage Park neighborhood on January 30, 1990, at the age of 92. Brief obituaries in England and the United States noted that she was one of the *Titanic*’s oldest survivors. Seven years later, the blockbuster James Cameron movie was released. “I wish it had come out when she was alive,” says Kapolnek. “Maybe she would have talked more about it.” Two years later, Kapolnek went to the exhibition of *Titanic* artifacts at the Museum of Science and Industry. That’s when she bought her first books about the ship, but she saw nothing specific on the passengers from County Mayo.

THROUGHOUT HER LIFE, AFTER HER EXPERIENCE on the *Titanic*, Ann refused to travel by boat or plane and as a result, she never saw Ireland again. But she did like to talk about growing up in Massbrook. Two years ago, Kapolnek made her own trip to Ireland. She went to see her granddaughter Colleen, a college exchange student studying in Galway. She took another granddaughter along, and the three of them then navigated the winding roads north to County Mayo.

The family farm was long gone, but Kapolnek and her grandchildren stopped in what she hoped was the town of Massbrook. There were no signs, so she knocked on the door of one of the few houses. A man responded and told Kapolnek she had indeed reached Massbrook. “I stood there for a long time and we just talked,” Kapolnek recalls. When she remarked that her mother had been on the *Titanic*, the man said the old church just down the road had something new inside that she would want to see.

Kapolnek and her granddaughters drove on. Inside the church, Kapolnek found it on a wall. “It was a plaque—not a big plaque, maybe two feet by a foot and a half.” County historian Tony Donohoe had helped to oversee the memorial, which had been completed only a month before. “The plaque had my mother’s name on it,” Kapolnek says. “It lists the names of the passengers from that area who were on the *Titanic*.” Fourteen in all. ■