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The Railroad that Perished at Sea

Rhode Island might have become the eastern terminus of a trans-continental railroad but for the tragic fate of the TITANIC.

BY DAVID PATTEN

THIS is a story of a rich man, a poor man, and a singer of songs. In Rhode Island, a patch here and there of unused land and spots of crumbled concrete blend their memories together.

Charles Melville Hays was a great railroad man. In the years of the building of the West after the Civil War, he went into railroading in his native Illinois. He became general manager of two important systems — the Missouri Pacific and the Wabash.

North of the border in the late 90's some English capitalists were trying to break the hold of the Canadian Pacific on the vast northwestern wheatlands. They were impressed by Hays' accomplishments, brought him to Montreal to manage their Grand Trunk Railway and on January 1, 1910 promoted him to the presidency of that far from prosperous system.

Charles Hays had a vision. Not only would he forge an entrance in upper Ontario to the wheat-growing provinces beyond, but as conditions permitted he would match his great transcontinental competitor with an extension across the Rockies to the Pacific. He already had a warm water port at Portland, Maine, and a lesser one at New London, Connecticut, but he was not content.

He had his eye on a city that was the centre of an important industrial region, originating more traffic than any other point between Boston and New York and that, like Portland, was far within the loop over which the Canadian Pacific reached Halifax when Montreal was icebound. This city was Providence.

Providence Hays would reach by building a railway branching from his Central Vermont at Palmer, Mass. and running 75 miles along the Massachusetts border and down the Blackstone Valley to the head of navigation on Narragansett Bay. By thus cleaving the heart of Southern New England, he would have to reckon with Charles E. Mellen, president of the New Haven, and with Mellen's boss in Wall Street, the great financier, J. P. Morgan.

At the bidding of his master, Mellen for seven years had been building a transportation monopoly in Southern New England. He had spent millions to grab trolley lines and steamship companies. Only an overwhelming public demand could cause him to countenance competition. Charles Hays planned to supply this demand.

The New Haven's political interests in Rhode Island had long been entrusted to the law firm of Tillinghast & Murdock. Frank W. Tillinghast was the most successful lobbyist in the State House. Gambling lords, liquor and brewing barons, the great textile industries, when the need was acute, had benefited from his deftness. Under his guidance, the New Haven had endowed members of the General Assembly with free passes and many other favors.

Hays admired the sagacity of this firm and prevailed upon its junior member, John S. Murdock, to come over to his side. He made Murdock vice president of the Southern New England Railway which would build the line into Providence; gave him a resplendent salary and plenty of money for expenses.

He couldn't have made a better choice. Everyone liked John Murdock. He always had time to idle around Turks Head passing the time of day with friends. Tall, fitting easily into his brown suit, a pipe smoker with a farmerish gait, he was a familiar figure around the centre. At his South County farm he was fond of



Charles M. Hays.

lounging on a stone wall to watch his Holsteins drifting over the pasture and to talk farm-talk with neighbors who happened along.

Hays told Murdock to get a bill through General Assembly chartering the Southern New England and to light fires behind Charley Mellen's back by working up public opinion. To help his vice president, he sent to Providence a public relations man who, again, couldn't have been a better choice.

Cy Warman was an old time railroader with a gift. Born in Illinois, he farmed for awhile, took to the road, reached Salida, Colorado, deep in the Rockies, and got a job in the railroad yards. He became fireman, then locomotive engineer on the Denver & Rio Grande. In his cab he wound among the mountains, and all the time rhymes sang in his head. That was the start of it.

He went to Denver and did some newspapering. Men were building their shacks around a new copper mine and he went there and started a paper of his own. He printed some of his verses and put them together in a slim volume. That was 1892 and here and there people were beginning to speak of him as the "Bard of the Rockies."

In Salida he had met a girl named Myrtle Marie Jones. His first wife died and he went back to Salida and married Myrtle Marie. A famous New York editor, Charles Dana, happened on some of his rhymes and published them in his morning *Sun*. Among them was a lyric entitled *Sweet Marie*. It was Myrtle Marie back in Salida who had inspired Cy to write it. In Tin Pan Alley a composer named Raymond Moore set the words of *Sweet Marie* to music. It sold a million copies within six months:

*Sweet Marie, Come to me;
Come to me, Sweet Marie.
Not because your face is fair,
love, to see;
But your soul, so pure and sweet,
Makes my happiness complete,
Makes me falter at your feet;
— — — Sweet Marie.*

Cy Warman went to New York to enjoy his fame. He sold a railroading story to McClure's and that opened the door to every magazine. But the Big Town palled on him. For 20 years he shifted from place to place, never finding home. Europe, the Orient, Washington, London — and all the time pouring out articles, stories, fact and fiction, verses and songs. Perhaps to appease homesickness, he wrote of railroads and railroadmen, the Old West he had known, the Rockies.

He built a house in London where he would spend the rest of his days. He was not happy there. He crossed the Atlantic for the last time. In the year the First War broke out he died in a Chicago Hospital.

John Murdock talked in later years about Cy. He would open his eyes wide and look at me and say, "Cy Warman — he wrote *Sweet Marie*." He left with me the impression that he took Cy to gatherings of all sorts and that Cy charmed everyone by singing *Sweet Marie*.

Charles Hays came from Montreal and Murdock was host to him and business leaders at the University Club. The great man gave them facts, holding out the promise of direct passenger service between Providence and Detroit and Chicago and St. Louis, and of a surging traffic in grain from Canada's northwest.

"But," said Murdock, "it was Cy who evoked the dream: a harbor echoing the blasts of mighty ocean liners; wheat pouring in a golden stream from places with such names as Saskatchewan and Athabaska into massive elevators and the holds of vessels; all the romance of a world-flung commerce."

There is nothing like it. Everyone wanted to cover the waterfront.



John S. Murdock.

Charles Mellen had an ear for what was going on. He came to Providence. The room in the State House was so overcrowded that the hearing had to be moved to the House chamber. Mellen listened and then he spoke. He said he was not there to oppose this railroad coming into Providence, but he did not think it fair to oblige the New Haven to share its already congested terminals with a competitor.

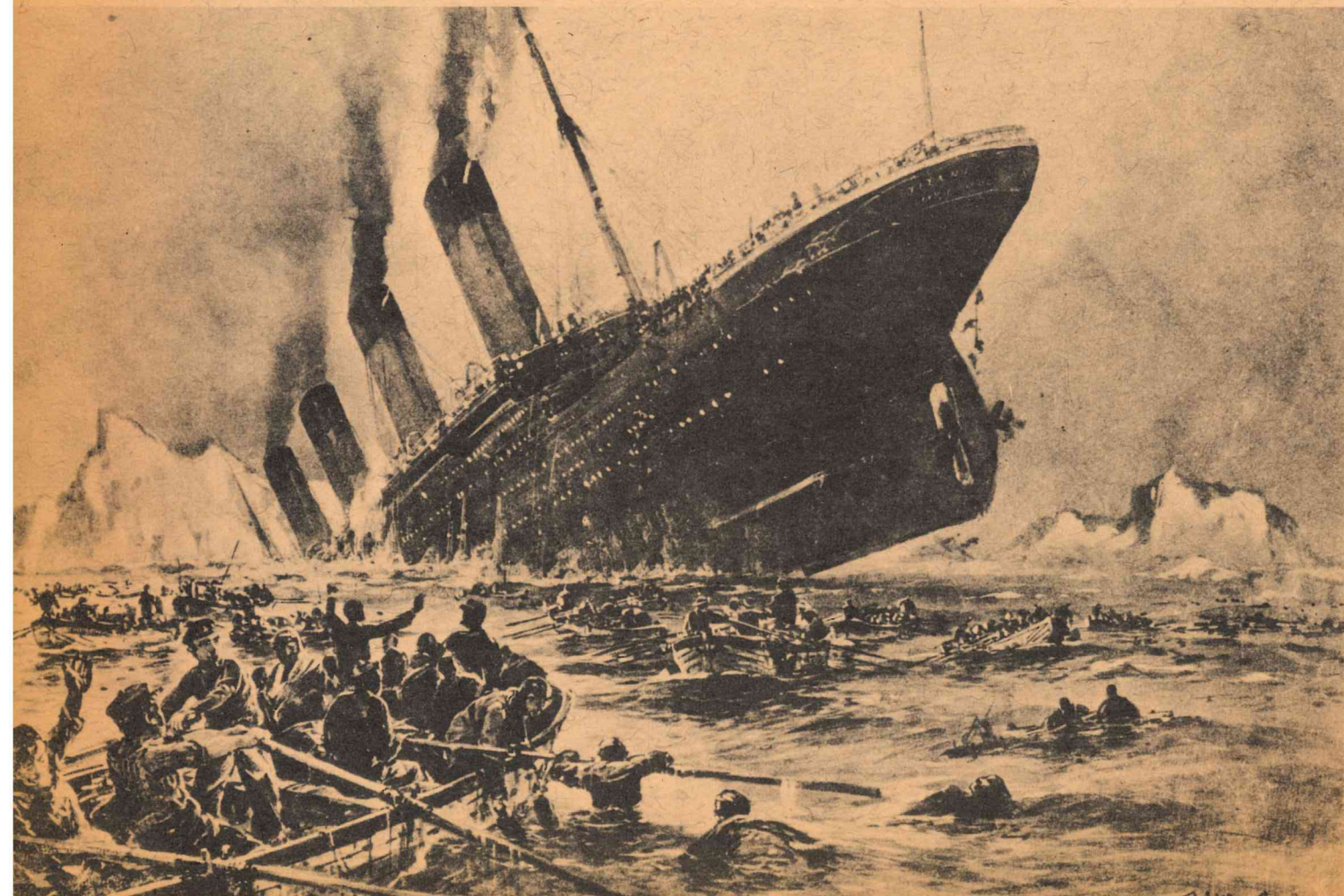
Hays conceded the point. Instead of using the Union Station, he would tunnel Smith Hill in the vicinity of Bath Street and build his own passenger depot. Fields Point he would reach by a loop flung out around the perimeter of the city, starting near Langdon Street, passing around Neutaconkanut Hill, crossing Cranston Street, Reservoir, Elmwood and Allens avenues, and reaching deep water at Ernest Street. As amended, the act passed both branches unanimously and was signed by Governor Pothier, April 12, 1910, almost exactly two years before another momentous event in the history of the Southern New England Railway.

In the spring of 1912 Hays crossed to London to meet with his Grand Trunk directors. Setting out from Southampton on his return, he embarked on a steamer making its maiden voyage to New York. This was the largest and most elegant of all liners and she was expected to make a speed record across the Atlantic. Her name was *Titanic*.

Titanic touched at Cherbourg and Queenstown, then headed out into the North Atlantic. Let us leave Charles Hays, his wife and his wife's maid, enjoying the luxury of this new ocean queen and turn to a man of much humbler station in life whose fortunes were about to interlock strangely with those of Charles Melville Hays.

Joseph D. Kennedy was a news telegrapher. In later years I knew him, an old man, in the Journal Building on Westminster Street, then on Fountain Street. In 1912 he was working for the Associated Press in the Globe Building on Boston's Newspaper Row.

The sinking of the TITANIC as painted by Willy Stoewer. Photo by Brown Bros.



It was Sunday, April 14, a dull night for news. Joe Kennedy served his trick. Near midnight he went into the supply room and opened the package of lunch he had brought from home. While eating, he tinkered with a contraption he and a few friends on the Row had put together.

It was a radio set derived from Marconi's experiments with wireless. As delicately as he could, the old man moved the end of a silver wire over the lump of silicon, trying to find a live nerve. Suddenly he hit pay dirt. He heard a whisper. He wriggled the cat's whisker until the message came stronger. It was the Norfolk navy yard signalling the Charlestown navy yard in Boston. Norfolk was asking the Charlestown operator if he had heard a distress call from the steamer *Titanic*. Charlestown hadn't.

Kennedy bent close, struggling to keep that hairline contact. He heard Norfolk rebroadcast its query. He flung off his ear-receivers and hurried into the news-room where Barry Littlefield, AP's night editor, was taking it easy.

Littlefield smiled. "You're crazy," he said. "That *Titanic* is unsinkable."

"If I'm crazy," said Kennedy, "then the good Lord help that Norfolk operator. He'll be courtmartialed in the morning."

Littlefield dictated a message to AP's news desk in New York and Kennedy tapped it off on his telegraph key. In less than five minutes the wire sprang to life:

"Flash! Flash! Flash!"

An old man, puttering with his cat's whiskers, had jolted into action the news-room of every morning paper on AP's trunk and side wires. He had tipped off the world to one of the greatest stories of the century.

In his book, *AP - the Story of News*, Oliver Gramling told the story of what followed that Flash:

"Other calls from the *Titanic* followed the first burst of distress signals. Kennedy and other staff men hunched at the wireless apparatus (in Boston) and strained ears for the meager bits of information that came through the ether.

"'Come at once, we have struck a berg.'

"'It's a CQD, old man Position 41-46 N; 50-14 W.'

"'Sinking; cannot hear for noise of steam.'

"'Engine room getting flooded.'

"Typewriters rattled out the bulletins. More CQD's, and then the *Titanic's* operator suddenly switched to the newer international call of distress:

"'SOS . . . SOS . . . SOS . . .'

"At 2:17 a.m. the signal stopped."

You could see strained faces on the Row as crowds clustered around every newsboy and hands reached out for the latest Extra. This was true of every Newspaper Row for several days after the *Carpathia* reached New York with the survivors. Out of New York for Liverpool, the Cunarder had come upon the lifeboats as dawn filtered over the North Atlantic.

Only a slight jar as the boat brushed the iceberg, and Charles Hays walked forward on A Deck to watch the steerage passengers below in their horseplay. They were picking up chunks of ice that had crumbled off the berg and fallen on the forward well deck and throwing them at each other.

Suddenly Hays' companion, Major Peuchen, looked up. He had sensed a very slight tilt in the deck.

"Why she is listing! She should not do that. The water is perfectly calm and the boat has stopped."

Charles Hays passed that off: "Oh I don't know; you cannot sink this boat."

An hour later. They are swinging out the lifeboats. Says Hays: "Peuchen, this boat is good for eight hours yet."

(2:10 a.m. Bending over his cat's whiskers in the Globe Building, Joe Ken-

nedy didn't know what was going on in *Titanic's* wireless shack. The deck was sloping hard then. Phillips, the operator, had to fight to keep his set going. He didn't feel the fingers fumbling at his back to loosen his life jacket. Officer Bride saw the stoker at his dirty work and grabbed him, holding his arms behind his back while time after time Phillips slugged the bruiser in the jaw until he knocked him unconscious.)

(2:17 a.m. Kennedy knew when the signal stopped. He didn't know the ship's orchestra was playing *Autumn* . . .)

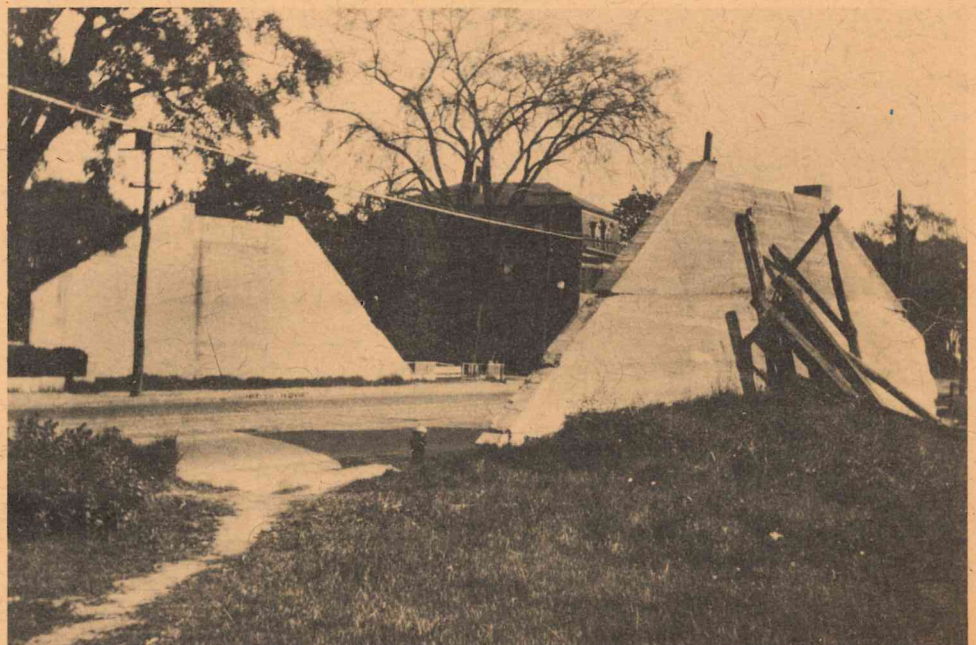
When Lifeboat Number 5 was lowered down *Titanic's* starboard side it held two Providence girls — Miss Helen Ostby and a steerage passenger, Miss Bertha Mulvihill. Miss Ostby was returning from travels on the Continent with her father, Engelhart Cornelius Ostby, a co-founder of the jewelry manufacturing firm of Ostby & Barton. As the lifeboat filled with about 70 persons, Mr. Ostby honored the injunction of Women and Children First and went down with the ship.

The greater part of the record of that night is in Walter Lord's book, *A Night to Remember*. More is in interviews *Providence Journal* reporters had with both women. As the lifeboat dropped down the side, Helen Ostby saw lights in the portholes forward gradually disappearing, then the final plunge. From far away *Carpathia's* rockets were coming nearer, until in that uncanny dawn she was there.

Bertha Mulvihill never forgot the loneliness of that daybreak. She was on her way back to Providence to marry Harry Noon. She had come over from Ireland as a young girl but had gone back in 1911 to visit her family in County Athlone and to make her trousseau. That crossing had been a portentous one: she had sailed from New York in the steerage of a luxurious liner named *Lusitania*. Boarding *Titanic* at Queenstown for her return to America, she brought the "beautiful handmade, elegantly packed trousseau" which she had spent almost nine months in making and was never to wear.

Harry was waiting in New York. They were married and lived in the Mount Pleasant section, finally at 28 Wyndham Avenue. To her grandchildren she would tell the story of that night. She died in Our Lady of Fatima Hospital, Oct. 15, 1959. He had died 13 years before.

Although for hours they were together in Lifeboat Number 5, Helen Ostby and Bertha Mulvihill Noon never met.



These Grand Trunk abutments are still to be seen on Cranston St. at Pavilion Avenue.

From her lifeboat Mrs. Charles Hays saw in the darkness other boats drawing near. Over and over she called, "Charles Hays, are you there?" If she called out to her maid, she heard no answer, either. Husband and maid were among the 1502 lost.

John Murdock was the residuary legatee of Charles Hays' vision. Surveys had been completed and a good deal of construction done, especially in Massachusetts. Hays had laid out the road in no niggardly fashion. Not one of the nearly 100 crossings was to be at grade. In 1914 the outbreak of war in Europe disorganized money markets, curtailed manpower. All work on the S.N.E. had to be suspended.

The war over, Murdock pleaded for another chance. He asked for a one year's extension of the company's charter. At a hearing in the State House in the winter of 1921, he said over \$6,000,000 had been spent and another \$5,000,000 would be forthcoming once money markets brightened up. Business leaders backed him up — all but one.

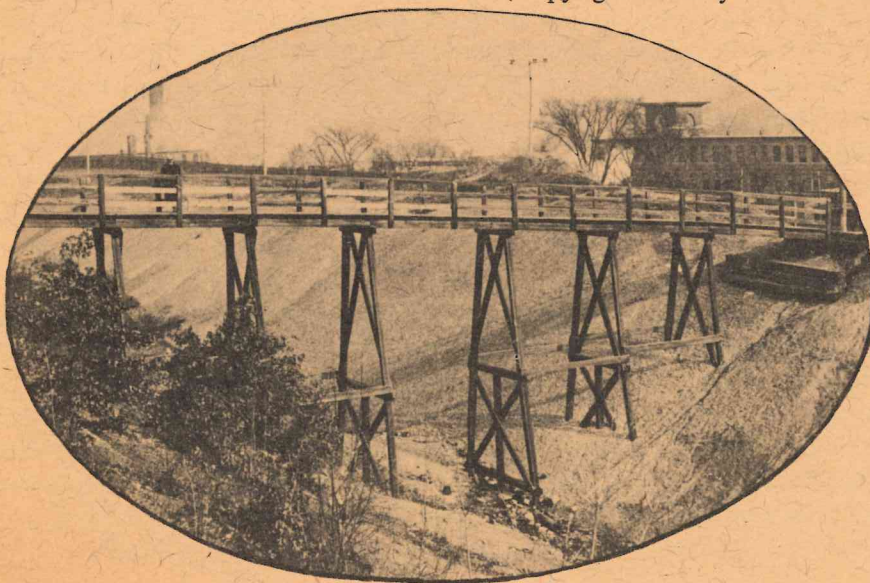
Henry F. Lippitt, a man of great influence, former U. S. Senator and head of the great Manville textile industries, had once supported the project, but now insisted conditions had changed. "Railroads," he said, "were hurting from competition by autos and trucks and Rhode Island must cherish and nourish the railroad that it has . . . we must forget this soapbubble, this chimera."

Murdock got his charter extended but immutable fate was on Henry Lippitt's side. The Grand Trunk itself fell victim to financial troubles. The Canadian government took it over, divested it of unprofitable branches, pushed the main line towards the Pacific. It had become the Canadian National now and was in politics. Every suggestion that it spend money on terminals in the States brought a howl from Halifax and St. John.

In his day, the vision of Charles Melville Hays may have been achievable. In that event he would have broken the two historic barriers that insulated New England from the rest of the continent. He would have outflanked the Hudson River and penetrated the international boundary with meaningful traffic. But two of the greatest of man-made calamities intervened, and a newcomer among man-made inventions played its part — the internal combustion engine.

By 1928 the whole thing flickered out. Steel bridges rusted away, concrete abutments crumbled. Some proposals were made for the state to take over the wreckage and try to find a buyer. Nothing came of them and under court authority the receivers began auctioning off the roadbed.

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*Grand Trunk Railway trestle at
Lonsdale.*