

Shore Residents Recall Fire On Morro Castle 40 Years Ago

By JOSEPH DEITCH

Special to The New York Times

SPRING LAKE—At 3:23 on the morning of Sept. 8, 1934—40 years ago today—an SOS went out from the Morro Castle, an American luxury liner touted as "one of the safest ships afloat."

The vessel, the flagship of the Ward Line, was on the homeward leg of a cruise to Havana, one of her regular "Forget the Depression" voyages to the Caribbean. The maximum fares for these trips of five to nine days were around \$75, and the passengers varied from those lucky enough to have jobs to the socially prominent.

Fire Began in Locker

At 3:24, the ship's radio operator transmitted a final distress signal. There could be no more messages because the Wireless Room had exploded. The Morro Castle was engulfed by fire three miles off Sea Girt and 20 miles from the entrance to New York Harbor. Aboard were 549 passengers and crew.

The last, frantic call for help was incomplete and garbled. One shore station picked it up as: "SOS SOS SOS de KGOV [the ship's call letters] SS Morro Castle afire 20 miles south of. . ."

The fire, which had started in a locker in the Writing

Room, was reported to the acting master of the ship at about 2:46 A.M. A general alarm, turning out all passengers, was sounded about 10 minutes later.

By this time, the Morro Castle was doomed. Eighteen crucial minutes were lost between the discovery of the seriousness of the blaze and the first SOS.

Instead of leadership, chaos and cowardice prevailed. Passengers, cut off from the lifeboats, were on their own; it was the ship's crew members and officers who helped themselves to those boats.

People jumped into the ocean to escape being burned to death, for even the decks were too hot on which to stand. Many who jumped, drowned or were killed. Some passengers swam toward the faint lights on shore.

And it all happened in a raging storm.

The toll: 135 lost, including 86 of 318 passengers and 49 of the 231-man crew. Nearly 30 per cent of the passengers were lost and only 18 per cent of the crew. The disparity was to be a main issue in the official inquiry into the disaster.

Of the survivors, 155 came in at Spring Lake. Today, the ocean here rolls placidly, and most vacationists lolling on

the white sand are unaware of the desperate struggle by the people who sought to get to the same beach 40 years ago. Those who made it had escaped one of the worst disasters in maritime history.

Three Spring Lake residents who had important roles in caring for the survivors, and in getting outside help, recalled the tragedy last week. They were a police officer, a Red Cross Aide and a physician.

Lewis R. Norris, chief dispatcher of the Spring Lake Police Department since 1966, was a patrolman on the force in 1934. On the night of Sept. 7, he reported for work on the midnight-to-8 A.M. shift. He was to spend two hours at the desk and the rest of the time on radio patrol in a Model-T Ford.

"There was a terrible northeaster that night," Norris recounted. "More than the storm, things were pretty normal until we got a call at about 4:30 A.M. from Walter McManus, who lived in a house at Walton and Ocean Avenues."

"Walter reported a ship on fire, which he had seen from a bedroom window. He immediately drove to the beach and saw what looked like a huge hotel on fire. He could see things dropping

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MORRO CASTLE BURNS OFF AS BEYOND SAVING
200 TO 230 ARE LISTED AS DEAD OR MISSING

The Morro Castle Remembered



Lewis R. Norris stands on spot in Spring Lake where first survivors of fire came ashore

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it, especially around the superstructure. The nearby Coast Guard Station told me they saw what was happening, but, due to the storm, they were unable to connect with headquarters in New York City."

Mr. Norris patrolled the beach the rest of the night, peering and listening. At 6:15 A.M., he was informed by radio of a first-aid call from the southern end of the boardwalk. He sped there in time to see a lifeboat beaching in front of the Monmouth Hotel.

The boat contained 15 people: 14 crew members and one passenger, Mrs. Renee Mendez Capote, daughter of the former first Vice President of Cuba.

A Spring Lake first-aid team brought in the survivors, among them a man with an arm almost severed. Four were taken to Fitkin Memorial Hospital (now the Jersey Shore Medical Center) in Neptune and the rest to a first-aid station that was being set up next to Police Headquarters.

A few minutes later, Mr. Norris saw a second lifeboat fighting her way in. This was a motorboat with 20 persons aboard; all except one were crew members.

People Jump

"I asked about the situation on the ship," Mr. Norris said. "They said that people were jumping off the back amid total confusion. Including the two that I saw, five lifeboats landed in Spring Lake over the next five hours. The third, fourth and fifth boats also had mostly crew in them.

"It was disturbing to see the firehouse and first-aid station filled with these men. Some had kissed the ground when they got off the boats. Under the supervision of Dr. Louis F. Albright, we treated 155 passengers and didn't lose one, although 40 were sent to the hospital."

Aid squads came from Avon, Bradley Beach, Belmar, Manasquan, Point Pleasant, Neptune, Matawan, Dunellen and Somerville. Last rites for over bodies washed ashore were recited by the Rev. and Thomas Riley of St. Catherine's Roman Catholic Church in Spring Lake.

Father Riley spoke for the faiths that morning.

Another resident who calls the tragedy vividly is Miss Madelaine Clancy. At the time, she was secretary of the Spring Lake Red Cross and assistant to the town's police chief, who also held the title of Director of Social Welfare.

Using Federal grants, the Red Cross bought surplus clothing for Spring Lake. Miss Clancy directed the distribution of the clothing, which was stored in her cellar.



Dr. Louis F. Albright directed medical aid for the ship's survivors.

awakened at 3 A.M. by a tremendous explosion that rang to the window, Clancy saw a red glow at sea. It is something the Coast Guard will take care of, she thought.

Three hours later, Mr. Norris advised Miss Clancy of the disaster and of the need to give clothing to people swimming ashore and brought by boat. She got to the first-aid station at 6:30 on Saturday morning and worked straight through to Sunday night. Spring Lake "opened its heart" to all who came in from the ship and made available 75 of its homes to those survivors who did not need hospital care.

An Obvious Conclusion

Other Red Cross nurses in the vicinity and nurses on vacation were ordered to the scene, or had volunteered. About noon, it hit me that the Morro Castle's crew comprised most of the survivors," Miss Clancy recounted and another couple were on their way home from a party when he got word of the disaster. He was on hand as the first two lifeboats came in.

"Although weak, these people were in surprisingly good shape," Dr. Albright said. "They were blessed with a favorable current and with a water temperature of about 70 degrees. Many were just blown in. I was astounded at the number of people who successfully swam or were washed in, considering the storm.

"In our house, we sheltered a girl who was on a lifeboat. She had leukemia and had a month to live. As a last, sad fling, she and her sister had gone on the Morro Castle cruise. The sick girl came ashore; her sister was lost."

The man stood at the door.

"I have found my son," he said.

Later, Miss Clancy went to the makeshift morgue in Sea Castle. The man stood at the door.

watching Miss Clancy without letup for many hours, and with a brace on one of her ailing knees. He shook his head as he watched her feverish activity. Then he said, "Madelaine, why the heck don't you go home and get some rest?"

Miss Clancy looked up and replied: "You ought to know me, Dr. Albright, I can work as long as you can." And then she burst into tears.

Some crew members received surprisingly good fits in donated clothing. One stubby man told Miss Clancy that his "new" suit fit better than his "best suit," which was on the ship.

A woman who came ashore with no clothes on became indignant at an offer of assistance. She was a heavy-set person, as was Miss Clancy's mother.

Miss Clancy handed her one of her mother's prettiest possessions, a percale dress with embroidered edges. The woman glared at it.

"I have never worn cotton," she sniffed, drawing an Army blanket around her.

Cited in Proclamation

Miss Clancy is now 79 years old and a resident of a nursing home. She had two special visitors not long ago. They were Edward J. Heine, Mayor of Spring Lake, and John M. Sylvester, the town's Police Chief. In appreciation of unusual devotion to duty to the Morro Castle's survivors and to the community, they gave her a framed proclamation issued by the Mayor and the Council.

Dr. Albright and Mr. Norris have been similarly honored.

Dr. Albright directed the emergency work of 110 doctors and nurses between Point Pleasant and Asbury Park and was in medical charge of the Spring Lake first-aid station. He remembered that he and his wife and another couple were on their way home from a party when he got word of the disaster. He was on hand as the first two lifeboats came in.

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