

POLAR:
THE MOST FAMOUS BEAR OF THEM ALL!

J. JOSEPH EDGETTE

The story of POLAR, the *Titanic* bear, is one that has resulted from a careful blending of history, folklore, legend, and children's literature with an appropriate sprinkling of oral narrative and verifiable testimony and documentation. It is a tale that evolved from a "real life" event that was later set down in writing by Daisy Spedden, the mother of the child whose experience this account recalls. Had it not been for the accidental discovery of an old trunk in the barn of L. H. Coleman, Esq. by his grandson in August of 1982,¹ the life of Polar never would have been told and, subsequently, become known. The purpose of this article is to present the background, evolution, chronology, and afterward of the story of POLAR, the *Titanic* bear.

Before relating the details leading up to the event that catapulted the five-by-two-and-a-quarter-inch stuffed toy into the realm of *Titanic* lore, it is necessary and appropriate to start many years prior even to *Titanic's* own inception as well as Polar's creation. The year was 1902, the town was Giengen an der Brenz, Germany, and the creator of the first *Teddy* bear was a young inventor, innovator, and dreamer named Richard Steiff. He had studied art and was intrigued and captivated by the bears he would observe while sketching them at the Stuttgart Zoological Gardens.² He worked in his aunt's small toy factory, the Steiff Company. After much effort and pleading, he finally convinced Margarete Steiff, a loving but very strong-willed and determined woman, to approve plans to produce his bear. The prototypes were considered to be too large and heavy, not to mention the fact that the mohair used to make them was difficult to obtain. However, later that same year, "Friend Petz" was put on display at the Leipzig Toy Fair in 1902 to test the interest of toy buyers, but it was deemed a complete failure by most who had seen and inspected the newly created stuffed bear toy. Buyers of toys were just not interested in it. This setback would eventually be reversed thanks to the creativity and foresight of the American toy giant, F. A. O. Schwarz.

Frederick August Otto Schwarz, known today as F. A. O. Schwarz and probably the most famous seller of toys in the world, emigrated to the United States from Westphalia, Germany, in 1857, settling in Bal-

timore, Maryland, where he operated a small toy shop until 1870. Moving on to New York, he began in humble quarters on Broadway, opening the Schwarz Toy Bazaar; but by 1880, he had moved to the city's fashionable Union Square business district housing such companies as Tiffany.³ Schwarz quickly established a reputation as having a "toy store with distinction."⁴ With the help of his three brothers, Schwarz kept in constant touch with the major toy sources in Europe. While attending the Leipzig Toy Fair in 1902, F.A.O. Schwarz, unlike other buyers, found the Steiff bear a fascinating toy that had much potential for sales in the United States. According to Jorg Junginger, Steiff's manager of development and Steiff family member, Schwarz "placed an order for 3,000 bears and changed the name to 'Teddy' to help the stuffed animal appeal to American children"⁵ According to folklore, there are two explanations for the origin of the name 'Teddy' as it applies to the toy bears.

In the first it was said that Schwarz had changed the Steiff- given name to 'Teddy' because he was inspired by the President and believed that children who have a greater affinity to the toy with such a moniker.

A second origin has been attributed to the U. S. Navy. It was reported that President Theodore Roosevelt accompanied by a few friends went to Mississippi to hunt wild animals. Having found none a guide came across a small bear. Asked to shoot the bear, the President refused and instructed the guide to release it. Word of this kindness on Mr. Roosevelt's part spread throughout the country. In fact, not long after, political cartoonist Clifford Berryman drew a cartoon depicting the event.⁶ Further, and this is the probable connection to Swartz's origin, it was said that a Brooklyn toy store owner saw the cartoon and asked permission to name the toy bears in his shop "Teddy's Bear." This was to serve as a reminder of Roosevelt's good deed. Permission was given by President Roosevelt.

Both of these origins are plausible and are actually connected. As American folklorist Horace Beck has a habit of saying, "You pays your money, you takes your choice."

According to Steiff Company records, by 1907 they had produced over 974,000 bears, most of which were sold in the United States through the F. A. O. Schwarz Toy Company of New York. In addition to teddy bears in all sizes and kinds, many ancillary items were also made available. These included bear games, clothes, cars, carts, boats, and the like designed for teddy bears. In terms of popular culture, there are currently collectors' organizations and clubs that boast of large memberships. The teddy bear still ranks high among those best sellers in the toy industry.

Exactly, how did Polar become such a notable toy bear? The story continues. Tuxedo Park, New York, was a very upscale community during the early 1900s. One of this community's leading citizens and wealthiest of the families living there included Frederic Spedden, his wife, Daisy, and their son Robert Douglas, who would be known as "Douglas." Mr. Spedden was heir to a very sizeable banking fortune. This young couple devoted their lives to Douglas, their travels, and their pastimes. During the spring, Frederic tended to his business, summers were spent in Bar Harbor, Maine, autumns spent at home, and winters used for travel. Such a routine was not uncommon among wealthy American families during the Edwardian Age. It should be noted that Mrs. Spedden was heiress to the Corning glass fortune as well as an equally lucrative shipping fortune.⁷

Daisy Spedden's sister, Nan, was very fond of little Douglas. In late 1911, the family had decided to visit Algiers and had booked passage aboard the steamship *Caronia*. Prior to her seeing the Speddens off at the docks, Aunt Nanny had visited the F.A.O. Schwarz Company in Manhattan where she purchased a small white Steiff polar bear for Douglas. Before leaving the ship as visitors were asked to disembark, she presented her *bon voyage* gift to the child and asked what he might name it. He responded that it would be called POLAR. Later, the famous bear would be known as POLAR the *Titanic* Bear.⁸

The Spedden's trip to Algiers was a lengthy one that would take them through the Panama Canal area. Little Douglas and Polar were inseparable throughout the journey. The family stayed a few months on the island of Madeira, near Portugal. By mid-March they had arrived on the south coast of France and stayed at Monte Carlo. In early April, Mr. Spedden decided it was time to return home to America. They had booked first class passage aboard another steamship rather than the *Adriatic* whose scheduled departure was cancelled as a result of a coal strike in England. Instead, Mr. Spedden was able to secure first class accommodations aboard the *Titanic*, a new ship that was described as being the greatest ship ever to sail the ocean. Mr. and Mrs. Spedden and Douglas together with Daisy's maid, Helen Wilson, and Douglas' Nanny, Elizabeth Burns,⁹ arrived in Paris the first week in April. Then, by a special train, they made their way to Cherbourg from where they would depart for home aboard the *Titanic*. As first class passengers, the Spedden family shared the company of many other very wealthy American families aboard the "Millionaires Express." Some of the more notable family names were Widener, Astor, Guggenheim, Straus, Brown, Cardeza, Carter, Millet, and Butt, the last being personal attaché to President William H. Taft.

There is only one photograph in existence of little Douglas and his father aboard the *Titanic*, and that shows the boy on deck playing with a spinning top, another toy he had acquired while traveling abroad.¹⁰ The photo was taken during the first day enroute to New York, the final destination that they would eventually—but not aboard the *Titanic*. Another passenger, Father Frank Browne, S.J., had been given a birthday present from his uncle—a ticket aboard the *Titanic* from Southampton to Cherbourg to Queenstown. He left the ship in the Irish seaport as the doomed vessel continued its journey to New York. During his time on the *Titanic*, Father Browne managed to shoot nearly a hundred photos. These pictures are the only ones in existence showing the interior of the great ship and views of life aboard her. Little Douglas was captured on film while playing on deck as his father watched.

The tragic event that transpired on that fateful night of 14 April 1912 off the coast of Newfoundland in the icy waters of the north Atlantic is now history. The major account is well known and has been told and retold for nearly ninety-one years now. It was this foundering of the largest luxury ship of its day that would figure dramatically into the escalation of Polar's notoriety unbeknownst to anyone save his owner, Mrs. Spedden, and a crewman aboard the rescue ship *Carpathia*.

Testimony given before the United States Senate, as part of their official investigation into the loss of the *Titanic*,¹¹ produced revealing information about the sinking that would eventually impact on the story of Polar and Douglas. Once the alarm had been given following the iceberg impact, most of the passengers began to leave their cabins and assemble at or near their predetermined lifeboat stations. The Speddens and their servants were assigned to Lifeboat 3, located on the starboard side of the ship.¹² It became the responsibility of Nanny, Elizabeth Burns, whom Douglas called "Muddie Boons," to care for the young boy during this anxious and fearful experience. (The child had difficulty pronouncing his Nanny's name; thus, the variation.) It has been said that his Nanny woke the sleeping child and told him they were going to take a trip to see the stars and that he would therefore need to wear warm clothing. Once all women and children had been placed safely into the limited number of lifeboats, the men were permitted to join them. Frederic Spedden was one of the fortunate few who was able to join his family aboard lifeboat 3 that fateful night.

Based on witnesses who were passengers in lifeboat 3, it was reported that Douglas slept through the night cradled in the arms of his Nanny. When he woke at dawn, he saw the icebergs all around them and excitedly, as only a child could do, exclaimed, " Oh, Muddie, look

at the beautiful North Pole with no Santa Claus on it."¹³ By 4: 15 A.M. the morning of 15 April 1912, the rescue ship *Carpathia* commanded by Captain Frederick Rostron had arrived at the site and began the careful process of rescuing the survivors. Lifeboat 3 was supervised by able-bodied seaman George Alfred Moore, and it was he who would later place young Douglas into a net that would raise the child to the deck level of the rescue ship.¹⁴ Nets were used to raise the children from the lifeboats for fear they might fall in their attempt to climb the ladders. It would not be until later that morning Douglas would soon realize that Polar had not made it. He had the stuffed toy bear with him in the lifeboat at the time they entered and gotten under way; however, now it was missing.

The grieving child shared his sad realization with his nanny and his mother. A couple of the crew from the *Carpathia* also tried to comfort him, but it was to no avail. As was standard procedure aboard any rescue vessel, Captain Rostron ordered all of the then empty lifeboats to be brought aboard and stowed safely for the long, arduous trip to New York. A hook on the end of a line was put through the eye bolt at the front of a lifeboat, and it was then hoisted aboard the ship.

In so doing, each of the miniature boats would stand on end while being raised through the air. Many of the articles would fall from the boat into the water below; however, when lifeboat 3 had cleared the railing and was being lowered into its new position, a small water soaked stuffed toy rolled out onto the deck at the feet of a crewman.¹⁵ According to Mrs. Spedden's later conversation with the man, he leaned down, picked it up, squeezed the excess water from it, and stuck it into his pocket. He had intended to take it home to his child. Later that day, the crewman came across Douglas who was still upset at the loss of Polar. In a conversation with the boy the crewman suddenly realized what he had retrieved from the deck beneath lifeboat 3. Douglas and Polar had been happily reunited. He too had been saved.

Mr. Spedden sent a Marconigram (the newest type of wireless telegram of its day) from the *Carpathia* to relatives in Connecticut on the 18th of April that informed them the family was safe and would be arriving in New York the following night.¹⁶ Once having arrived at the White Star Line wharf in New York, the family was taken to the Waldorf Astoria, along with many others from first class, to spend the night before departing for Tuxedo Park the next day. It is interesting to note that the Astor family arranged transportation from the ship's terminal to their hotel for many of the first class passengers that were rescued by the *Carpathia*. Later, Mr. Spedden would participate in the awarding of a silver trophy to Captain Rostron and silver medals to mem-

bers of his crew in appreciation for the kindness and professionalism they showed during the terrible tragedy that had befallen them on the *Titanic*.

Once the family had returned to their home, life returned to the normalcy they had had prior to their most recent catastrophic trip. Daisy took a photograph of Douglas at Christmas in 1912 showing him standing next to a table on which can be seen Polar. They planned to travel again after the holidays that year and then return to Maine that following summer. The next year as a Christmas surprise for Douglas, his mother decided to write a small book that would feature Polar (the *Titanic* Bear) recounting his own creation, purchase, and life with Douglas including his fate by nearly becoming a *Titanic* victim. She entitled it MY STORY, Christmas 1913. In addition to the text she did the illustrations herself. This short manuscript would be published as a children's book in 1994, eighty-one years later.¹⁷

Daisy and Frederic would experience one more great tragedy, perhaps the worst imaginable, the death of Douglas in the late summer of 1915 at Grindstone Neck Winter Harbor, Maine. According to the Death Certificate, the cause of Douglas' death was "concussion of the brain-struck by automobile."¹⁸ As a matter of fact, Douglas was the first recorded fatality resulting from an automobile accident in the state of Maine. According to the accident report, the youngster attempted to retrieve a tennis ball, emerging suddenly from some thick shrubbery close to the side of the road. When he did, he collided with the car. Unconscious, he was taken to his home where he succumbed to head injuries sustained from the accident. The boy died on the 8th of August, 1915, at the age of nine years, eight months, and nineteen days. He is buried in the Corning family plot at Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York.

It has been said that Daisy never again had the same zest for life following the tragic loss of her son, Douglas. In 1947 her husband Frederic died of a heart attack while diving into a pool in Palm Beach, Florida. His body was cremated.¹⁹ Following his death, Daisy discontinued keeping her diaries, but she did continue her interests in photography and travel. Three years later Daisy died at her home in Tuxedo Park on February 11, 1950, at age 78, following a brief illness.²⁰ She was interred in the Corning family plot at Greenwood Cemetery along side her son Robert Douglas.

Following the death of Daisy, a trunk containing her diaries, ephemera, and 24 photograph albums was left to her cousin, Jane Foster Coleman. The trunk was stored in the barn on the family farm and actually forgotten²¹ (Jane was the grandmother of L. H. Coleman, III.)

L. H. Coleman, Esq. asked his grandson L.H., III to clean out the old barn. The trunk was given to the younger Coleman on his 21st birthday in 1985. Earlier, in 1963, the Titanic Historical Society was founded in part to preserve the history of the *Titanic* and ocean liner travel in general. Aware of this mission, young Coleman donated copies of Daisy's STORY along with some photographs of family members to the Society in August of 1985²² By 1992 it was suggested to young Coleman that the STORY would make a great book for children. The title was changed to POLAR THE TITANIC BEAR, and it was published in 1994. Since then it has sold more than 250,000 copies.²³

To help launch the release of the book, the Strieff Company produced 1912 replicas of the Polar bear, together with a certificate of authenticity that the original was once owned by Douglas Spedden. The book will ensure that the memory of this child will live on just as the memory of the *Titanic* never fades.

From its origin in Germany to its home in America and subsequent adventures, a little stuffed toy polar bear became the impetus for the story of **Polar the Titanic Bear**. It is a piece of non-fiction that has successfully and creatively blended history, legend, folklore, and children's literature while simultaneously presenting a human interest story of top quality.

NOTES

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