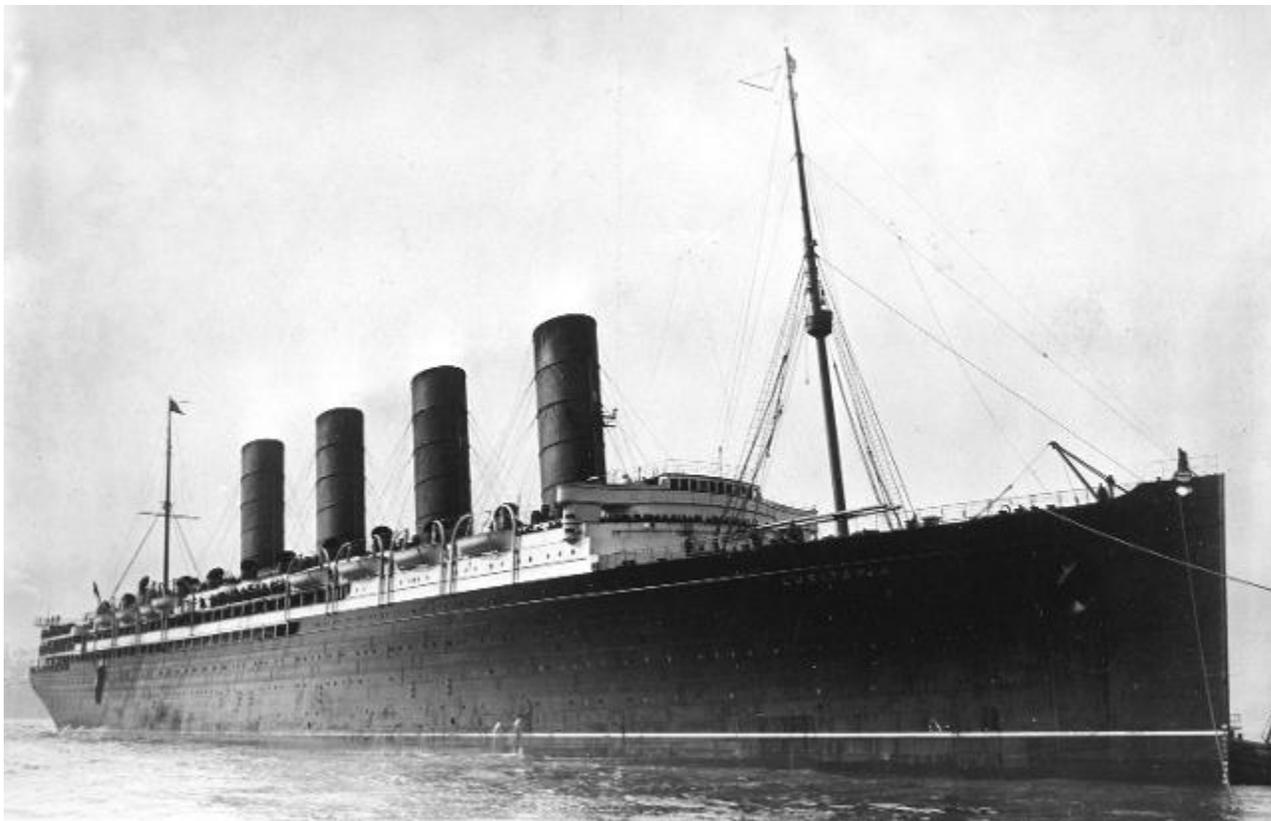


Lusitania Disaster Claimed Lives of Gillespie Youth

by Tom Emery

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Over a hundred years after its destruction, the mention of the Lusitania still evokes a shudder. With a loss of 1,201 lives, it remains among the world's deadliest – and most influential — shipwrecks.

The loss of the British Cunard liner, and the 128 American deaths on board, on May 7, 1915, helped steer the United States into World War I against Germany. There was

a central Illinois connection to the tragedy, one that is mostly forgotten today.

Two youngsters from Gillespie, six-year-old James McKechan and his ten-month-old brother Campbell, lost their lives from the sinking of the Lusitania, joining several dozen other children who were killed on the ship. James went down with the liner and was never found. Campbell survived the initial disaster, only to die four months later from lingering effects of the horrific experience.

The boys were part of the family of Robert and Elizabeth McKechan, who were Scottish immigrants living in the Gillespie area. They were seemingly average people who were part of one of the significant events of twentieth-century world history.

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The fiery hostilities of the First World War had been raging for nearly a year in 1915 when Elizabeth, for whatever reason, made the decision to journey back to her native Scotland.

At the time, Elizabeth and her husband Robert had only lived in the United States for eight years. Elizabeth was born on Aug. 20, 1883, in Stevenston, Ayrshire, Scotland, the daughter of a coal miner. She was one of at least ten children, some of whom died young.

In 1903, she married Robert, another twenty-year-old born in Stevenston on March 23, 1883. They remained in Scotland for a few years before joining millions of other Europeans in immigrating to America. On Jan. 6, 1907, the McKechans, along with their two daughters, three-year-old Martha and eleven-month-old Annie, boarded another Cunard steamer, the Carmania, as third-class steerage for the voyage to New York.

They arrived seven days later and made their way to Gillespie. By 1910, they were living in the town's second ward and had been joined by two of Elizabeth's brothers.

Some sources indicate that Robert was the "secretary of a cooperative society conducting a general mercantile."

In 1918, his occupation was given in one account as "traveling salesman." Census records of the era list Robert as a coal miner. Records show that Robert was five-feet-eight inches tall with a stout build, black hair, and blue eyes. Elizabeth, meanwhile, stood five-feet-one with black hair and brown eyes.

In 1909, another child, James, was born, followed by Campbell, in 1914. The boys were considered dual British subjects and American citizens.

On May 1, 1915, Elizabeth and her sons embarked on the Lusitania in New York as second-class passengers on their way to England, reportedly to visit family back in Scotland.

Robert was not on the liner, as he may have stayed behind in Gillespie. Elizabeth, though, was accompanied by another Scottish-born resident with Gillespie connections, Catherine Gill, who had also been born in Stevenston.

Catherine, whose age is variously listed as anywhere from 38 to 43, stood five-feet-four with brown hair and gray eyes. Twice-widowed, she is believed by many to have been a cousin to Elizabeth.

Both women had come from coal-mining families back in Stevenston. Catherine had made the journey back and forth across the Atlantic on multiple occasions, including on another Cunard liner in 1903, when her point of origin was listed as Gillespie. On one voyage from Scotland to New York, she sailed on the Caledonia, which itself would be destroyed in a German U-boat attack in 1916.

Her second husband had lost his life in a mining accident at one of the Superior coal mines near Gillespie on July 14, 1914. Catherine then apparently left the area and lived with several of her brothers as their housekeeper.

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At the time of her maiden voyage in September 1907, the Lusitania was the largest vessel in the world, measuring 787 feet and weighing 31,550 tons, and was one of the grandest liners of its day. Based in Liverpool, she was a hallmark of the famed Cunard line. With a top speed of 25 knots, she could sail away from U-boats, which infiltrated the

Atlantic waters and were a source of diplomatic tension.

On May 7, 1915, the Lusitania, carrying 1,960 passengers and crew, was off the coast of southern Ireland and sailing a straight course at a slow speed of 12 knots. This was a departure from the usual course of action in dangerous waters, full speed ahead in zigzag fashion.

At 2 p.m., the Lusitania was rocked by a torpedo from a German submarine and sank in a mere eighteen minutes. The shot was fired without warning, a breach of international protocol.

During the mayhem as the ship went down, Elizabeth handed James to Catherine Gill. She never saw either one of them again. However, Elizabeth and her younger son, Campbell, managed to survive the sinking by rescue. Their lives, however, would never be the same.

Germany argued that the Lusitania was an armed merchant ship, an exaggerated claim as the vessel carried no arms or troops, and only 5,000 cases of cartridges. Though Germany formally apologized, the sinking was hailed by the German press, and a medal of commemoration was produced in its honor.

The loss of the Lusitania boosted calls for war among an American public divided on the nation’s then-policy of isolationism. With the resumption of unrestricted German submarine warfare and the release of the so-called Zimmerman telegram that outlined Germany’s persuasion of Mexico to join the war against the United States in 1917, the first American troops landed in Europe that June.

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The most noteworthy American name to die on the Lusitania was tycoon Alfred Vanderbilt. The others, of course, were less well-known. The survivors were forced back into their everyday lives, for better or worse.

Elizabeth and Campbell McKeachan eventually returned to the United States, but tiny Campbell still struggled with the lingering effects, including injuries and exposure. He died four months later at a hospital in Litchfield. Some sources list Campbell as the last official victim of the Lusitania tragedy.

On April 21, 1916, the Staunton Star-Times carried news of an “unusual case” that “was filed in the courthouse in Carlinville” six days before. The grieving father, Robert McKeachan, had “filed a claim against the German empire for the death of his child.”

It is noteworthy that a plural was not used, as two of the McKeachan boys had lost their lives from the disaster. It was later reported separately that Elizabeth had enlisted a former Congressman as counsel for the case.

As the McKechan saga played out, the nation was still enraged at the specter of the Lusitania disaster. In mid-April 1917, a complete list of the American fatalities on the ship – including James and Campbell McKechan – was printed in newspapers around the country.

The list may well have been a propaganda move, as part of it was headlined “On British Steamship Lusitania, Sunk Without Warning by German Submarine.” Earlier that month, on April 6, the United States had declared war on Germany.

The U.S. was only in the First World War for around nineteen months, with 4.35 million troops mobilized. Some 50,000 were killed, with 230,000 wounded.

Sadly, those numbers were miniscule compared to the losses worldwide. Estimates of military dead range from 8.5 million to 10 million, including two million Germans, 1.8 million Russians, 1.4 million French, and 900,000 British. Over 20 million troops were wounded.

Civilian deaths were equally appalling, including two million each in Russia and Turkey. Germany suffered 700,000 civilian losses, while Serbia lost 600,000 and Romania 500,000. Many believe the diplomatic errors that resulted from the after-effects of the war led to World War II, where the losses were even higher.

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While parts of the United States reveled in the Roaring Twenties, a massive settlement for the American victims of the Lusitania from the German government was finally decided in Washington in February 1924. The McKechans’ original filing from Macoupin County in 1916 apparently was rolled into it.

During the proceeding, it was argued that Elizabeth McKechan’s “experiences were most distressing” as she “suffered and long continued to suffer mental anguish in an acute form” that had “left its impress on her mind and nervous system.” She also suffered a knee injury “from which she has never entirely recovered.” Before the disaster, Elizabeth apparently was “strong and well, performing without effort all of her own housework.”

Robert McKechan was awarded \$5,000 – the equivalent of about \$90,000 in today’s dollars — while Elizabeth received two awards; the sum of \$12,000 plus an

additional \$1,200 for the loss of personal property that was destroyed in the sinking.

Elizabeth's awards, in today's dollars, were about \$237,000.

With that, the story of the McKechans aboard the ill-fated Lusitania drifted into

obscurity, particularly in their adopted home of southern Macoupin County. Today, nearly 110 years later, it seems that surprisingly few people in the area are aware that a local couple lost two of their beloved children in the Lusitania tragedy.

Robert and Elizabeth McKechan spent the rest of their lives in Gillespie. On June 9,

1916, another daughter, Elizabeth, was born, while another son, Robert, died on Jan. 27, 1919, a day after his birth. He was followed by Jack, who was born on Sept. 6, 1924, and later operated Jack's Cleaners in Gillespie.

Eventually, Robert McKechan held statewide positions with the Progressive Mine Workers of America, a splinter group from the United Mine Workers that has become synonymous with the hotbed of labor rights that defines southern Macoupin history.

By 1926, the family was living at 208 Henry Street in Gillespie, moving to Adams Street by 1930. Robert McKechan died on May 12, 1951, and is buried in the family plot in Gillespie City Cemetery.

Elizabeth McKechan died at Staunton Community Memorial Hospital on Aug. 17, 1957 and also rests in the family plot in Gillespie. Her passing brought an end to

a sorrowful, and overlooked, episode in central Illinois.

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