

Chapter XVII

THE CONTROVERSY LIVES ON

Two major inquiries took place following the loss of *Titanic*. The first began in America on Friday, April 19, 1912, when a subcommittee of the United States Senate Committee on Commerce started to take testimony from J. Bruce Ismay, who was the Managing Director of the White Star Line and a *Titanic* survivor. The second major inquiry, conducted in Britain, began on Thursday, May 2, 1912, with a review of the order for a formal investigation into the loss of *Titanic* by the Board of Trade. The first witness called before the Wreck Commissioner's Court the following day was *Titanic*'s lookout Archie Jewell.

With regard to witnesses from *Californian*, only three were called before the US Senate inquiry in America, all on Friday, April 26, 1912. They were Second Donkeyman Ernest Gill, who was followed later that day by Captain Stanley Lord, and then by Wireless Operator Cyril Evans. In addition to these three *Californian* witnesses, influential input regarding the possible whereabouts of *Californian* was provided to the Senate investigation by US Navy Captain John Knapp of the Bureau of Navigation's Hydrographic Office on Saturday, May 18, 1912.

Appearing before the British Wreck Commission inquiry from *Californian* were seven witnesses.¹ First to testify was Captain Stanley Lord, who was followed by Apprentice James Gibson, and then by Second Officer Herbert Stone on Tuesday, May 14, 1912. The next to testify were Third Officer Charles Groves, followed by Chief Officer George Stewart, and then by Wireless Operator Cyril Evans on Wednesday, May 15, 1912. The last witness from *Californian* to be called was Second Donkeyman Ernest Gill on Tuesday, June 4, 1912.²

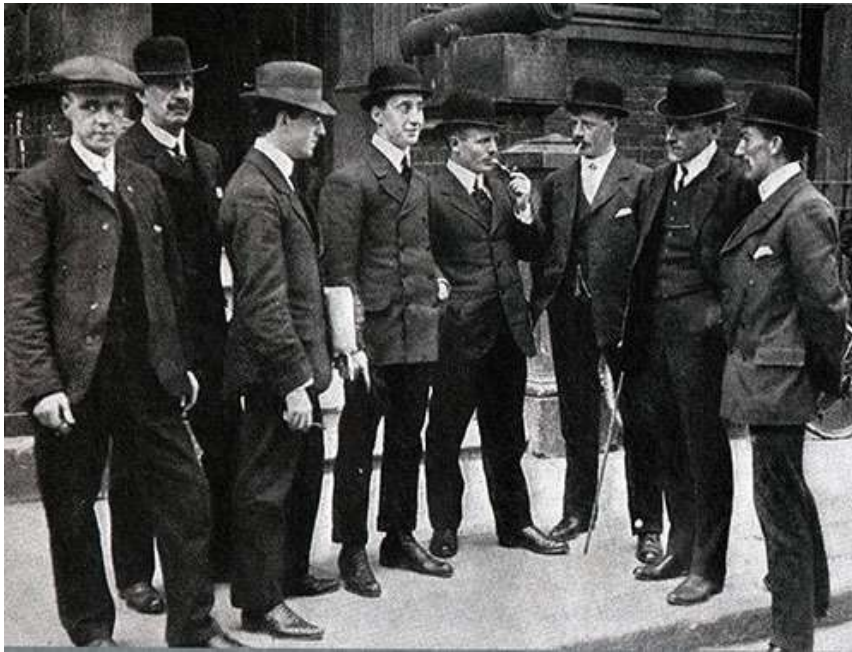


Figure 17-01. Crewmembers of the SS *Californian* outside Scottish Hall, May 1912. (Left to right: Fireman George Glenn, Donkeyman William Thomas,³ Wireless Operator Cyril Evans, Apprentice James Gibson, Second Officer Herbert Stone, Seaman William Ross, Third Officer Charles Groves, and Chief Officer George Stewart. [The Illustrated London News.]

The US Senate Committee on Commerce issued its report on its findings regarding the *Titanic* disaster on May 28, 1912. Contained in that report was a paragraph entitled, “Steamship *Californian*’s Responsibility,” that critically addressed the role of the SS *Californian* and her captain on the night of the disaster:

“The committee is forced to the inevitable conclusion that the *Californian*, controlled by the same company, was nearer the *Titanic* than the 19 miles reported by her captain, and that her officers and crew saw the distress signals of the *Titanic* and failed to respond to them in accordance with the dictates of humanity, international usage, and the requirements of the law. The only reply to the distress signals was a counter signal from a large white light which was flashed for nearly two hours from the mast of the *Californian*. In our opinion such conduct, whether arising from indifference or gross carelessness, is most reprehensible, and places upon the commander of the *Californian* a grave responsibility. The wireless operator of the *Californian* was not aroused until 3.30 a.m., New York time, on the morning of the 15th, after considerable conversation between officers and members of the crew had taken place aboard that ship regarding these distress signals or rockets, and was directed by the chief officer to see if there’s anything the matter, as a ship had been firing rockets during the night (p. 736). The inquiry thus set on foot immediately disclosed the fact that the *Titanic* had sunk. Had assistance been promptly proffered, or had the wireless operator of the *Californian* remained a few minutes longer at his post on Sunday evening, that ship might have had the proud distinction of rescuing the lives of the passengers and crew of the *Titanic*.”

In addition to this paragraph in the body of the report, the report also had as an attachment a copy of a speech delivered by Senator William Alden Smith, chairman of the subcommittee, that addressed the role of *Californian* and her captain. (See Appendix U for the complete text of that part of Senator Smith’s speech that dealt with *Californian*.) In that speech, Senator Smith stated what he thought about the evidence that was presented to the committee, and the failing of *Californian* and her captain to go to the aid of a vessel in distress:

“Had he [Captain Lord] been as vigilant in the movement of his vessel as he was active in displaying his own signal lamp, there is a very strong probability that every human life that was sacrificed through this disaster could have been saved...The conduct of the captain of the *Californian* calls for drastic action by the Government of England and by the owners of that vessel, who were the same owners as those of the ill-fated ship.”

In essence, Senator Smith was convinced that Stanley Lord was guilty of a misdemeanor, and that punitive action was warranted.

The conclusions that came out of the US Senate investigation were highly influenced by the testimony and submissions of Captain John Knapp of the US Navy Department’s Bureau of Navigation. (See Appendix T.) Knapp presented his own views of the situation in the Atlantic on the 14th and 15th of April 1912 as it pertained to the positions of various vessels and fields of ice. He even created a “hypothetical” position for *Californian* so it would match the testimony and affidavit of Ernest Gill, *Californian*’s