

The "S.S. CRANFORD" and the Tale of one of her Sailors

by Bill Curtis

This is the story of Cranford's second sea going steam ship. It's a story that begins with its construction, and continues with its voyages, one of its crew, and its final disposition.

The S.S. Cranford was born out of the expected need for a merchant fleet that would support Britain's entry into the war with Germany in 1914. Britain's lifeblood of war materials would have to flow from ports all over the world, and the United States merchant fleet was too old and inadequate for the task. President, Wilson was aware of this, and formed the US Shipping Board to authorize the building of fleets of freighters and tankers.

Forty-five (45) shipbuilding companies were given contracts to start producing the necessary ships. One was the Carolina Shipbuilding Company headed by Lorenzo Dilks. Lorenzo lived in Cranford at 16 Hampton Street and was a member of our Township Committee. In 1918, he resigned from the Committee and moved to Wilmington North Carolina to oversee the building of 12 US Shipping Board ships at his shipyard. Lorenzo had recently been recognized as the innovator responsible for speeding up the building of steel ships by having the steel suppliers fabricate and deliver all the pieces ready to be riveted together at the shipyard.

Lorenzo's shipyard was tasked with building 8 freighters of 9,750 tons each, and 4 tankers of 6,000 tons, each. Strangely enough, the first freighter was named "Cranford". Well, not exactly strange, since Lorenzo lived in Cranford for many years while commuting to New York City working in the steel fabricating business. Another reason was that, during WW1, Cranford's residents so exceeded their Liberty Bond quota that Lorenzo petitioned the US Shipping Board to name his first ship "SS Cranford".

She was launched September 1, 1919, and was fitted out and ready to sail in 1920, born of a need for shipping during the World War, which, fortunately, was now over. She began her career sailing the peaceful oceans under the Lykes Steamship Company Line as a very modern ship compared to the ships sailing before her and with her. The Cranford had the latest triple expansion oil-fired steam engines, and all the ship innovations available at the time. The crew normally numbered between 37 and 39 men composed of a Captain, his Officers, Crewmen, and Cook.

The Cranford was born of a war, and now in 1939, world affairs were again threatening war. We're going to follow one young man who became a member of the S.S. Cranford's crew in order to tell here wartime history.

His name was William Litvin, also known as Willie, born June 5, 1915 to Morris, a tailor, and Jennie Rein, in Baltimore - both Russian immigrants. Willie graduated Washington DC Central High in 1930, and in 1935 married Helen Fishbein on December 22. We hear no more from Willie until the 1940 Census. Willie, Helen, and their 3-year-old son Benjamin are now living in Washington DC, renting an apartment for \$42.50 a month. Willie is an upholsterer.

In 1940 there was nothing but War talk; it was in all the papers and on everyone's mind. Willie and Helen were especially concerned. Suppose Willie were to be drafted - every Male 21-35 was

required to register for the draft. Service was supposed to be for only one year. But suppose we actually went to war, then what? Who would take care of Helen and Benjamin? How could they pay their rent when military pay was only \$50.00 a month?

Willie told Helen that he heard from a friend that, if he were to join the Maritime Service, he'd be exempt from the draft and military service. That he'd sail on freighters or tankers, and when his ship came into a port like Baltimore, he could leave his ship and come home for up to 30 days, then board another ship. That would be much better than being drafted and going away until the war was over; that might take years. He and Helen agreed, and we believe Willie joined the Maritime Service about October 21, 1941.

Thus began Willie's career as a seaman. Recruits were trained in 15-week schools set up by the Coast Guard which taught the trades necessary to run a ship. There were deck hands, cargo handlers, engine room firemen, engine room wipers, and water tenders; there were numerous trades both above and below decks. Willie was selected for the cook and baker school. Upon completion of the school, the trainees would advance in pay to \$54.00 a month. Every recruit, regardless of the weather, exercised daily in manning, lowering, and rowing the school's lifeboats. This last skill should have been an omen of things to come.



Willie apparently made a number of short voyages after leaving the cook and baker school and was in the port of Baltimore when the freighter Cranford arrived Feb. 12, 1942. He signed on as the second cook and again made some short voyages until about May 3rd, when the Cranford set out to sea for a 17,089 nautical mile voyage to two ports. The first was Cairo Egypt, where it loaded 1,600 tons of cotton bales onboard. While in port, Willie sent a Radiogram dated May 30th to Helen. "Love and Kisses William Litvin".

The Cranford's next port, after transiting the Suez Canal, was Cape Town, South Africa to take aboard 6,600 tons of Chrome ore. The cargo loaded aboard, the Cranford rounded the tip of Africa sailing NNW on the placid South Atlantic, bound for New Orleans, Louisiana.

Keep in mind that all this time the Cranford was sailing alone at 10 knots an hour, traveling waters known to be harboring German U-Boats. The Cranford was armed with one 3" deck gun, and 4-50 Cal. and 2-30 Cal. machine guns. Manning the guns were 8 US Navy, Armed Guard Sailors.



Early in the hostilities, U-Boats would surface and warn the crews of merchant ships to leave their ships before sinking them with gunfire. Once our shipping was armed, it became too dangerous for the U-Boats to surface and warn the crews. Thus began torpedoing without warning. The torpedo could come day or night, resulting in huge losses of life among the crews. It must have been nerve-racking for the crews. But day after day of peaceful sailing lulled the men's fears, and all was calm aboard the Cranford.

It was July 30th and the Cranford was slowly plodding northwards in the South Atlantic Ocean approaching Barbados, with only 8 more days until she would reach New Orleans. The sea was like glass, the weather balmy, many of the crew were lazing on deck enjoying the sun, watching the flying fish take off flying away from the ship, and talking and smoking, or snoozing. Willie was in the galley starting to prepare supper for 47 men. As cook, Willie's days were entirely taken up with food preparation and cooking for the crew.

This voyage was comprised of only two ports and about 72 days at sea. The crew had no change in their daily routines other than the short time spent ashore in Cairo and Cape Town. Therefore, their meals were the high point of days otherwise filled with the boredom associated with so much time spent at sea. Willie's meals and a good Captain made for a happy ship. Willie had just cleared the lunch dishes away and noticed it was 2 PM. Time to get started on dinner. He went deep into the lower deck where the refrigerators that held meats and vegetables were, and found the stew meat, potatoes, onions, and carrots that were to become his special beef-stew. They would take a long time cooking, so he knew he'd better get moving. Burdened with the food he headed for the ladder up.

THEN - a huge explosion lifted the Cranford almost clear of the water. **TORPEDO!** Almost immediately the ship headed down by the bow. In 3 minutes the Cranford was gone, hastened by the weight of the heavy chrome ore.

Thirty-six (36) survivors abandoned the ship by lifeboat, or swam to wreckage and life rafts that had drifted free.

The sub, the U-155, surfaced, and in English, questioned the survivors as to the ship's name, destination, and cargo. Two injured American sailors were taken aboard the sub and treated. The sub Commander gave the course and distance to Barbados, a towline to link the rafts and lifeboat together, and two cans of water to the survivors. Nine (9) crew and 2 Navy men were missing.

The survivors drifted for some hours, and by good luck, a Spanish Tanker appeared on the horizon, spotted the little group, and headed for them. It landed them in Curacao on Aug.3rd.

On Aug 6th Helen Litvin received the following Telegram:

"The Navy Department deeply regrets to inform you..."

Willie was listed as missing. "It was his first long trip," Helen said to a newsman interviewing her. "About a year ago he decided that he had to do something to help in the War, and so he joined the service. But I know he can't be gone."

Thus began the widowed life of young Helen Litvin and her little boy Benjamin. Later Benjamin's daughter, Shayna Litvin, would grow up hearing of her Grandfather's death in the War, but wanted to know more. She would provide me with documents about her Grandfather Willie. Using those and other sources, I've put Willie's short life together in a story of just one casualty of World War II, and the death of his ship, the S. S. Cranford, July 30, 1942. I've shared information I uncovered with Shayna Litvin.