The following extract is from *A Rare Titanic Family: The Caldwells’ Story of Survival*, published by NewSouth Books. The author, Julie Hedgepeth Williams, heard the story of the Titanic firsthand from her great-uncle, Albert Caldwell, who survived the tragic 1912 shipwreck along with his wife, Sylvia, and infant son, Alden. Albert and Sylvia, idealistic young American missionaries, had taught in a Presbyterian boys’ school in Siam (now called Thailand) for two years. Alden had been born in Bangkok.

Sylvia and Albert were heading home after Sylvia’s health failed. In London, the Caldwells managed to get cancelled tickets on the *Titanic* — they thought the large size of the ship would be good for Sylvia, as she suffered from seasickness. On the boat train from London to the *Titanic*, the Caldwells were surprised to hear everyone describe the *Titanic* as unsinkable. As their fellow passengers explained, the captain could push an electric button in his office and drop watertight doors, thus turning back the sea. Sylvia, however, was skeptical, and when they boarded the *Titanic*, she asked a deck hand, “Is this ship really unsinkable?”

He answered with the most famous — and most erroneous — line ever spoken about the *Titanic*, “Yes, lady. God himself could not sink this ship.”

Albert had a camera and went all over the ship taking pictures, including the engine room. There, he saw stokers shoveling coal into the *Titanic*’s furnaces, which in turn, generated the steam that kept the steamship...
Albert Francis Caldwell, twenty-six, shifted his baby son to one side and peered over the steep side of the ship into… nothing. He could see the vertical hull as it slithered into empty darkness, but he couldn’t even make out the water below. It was utterly black, void — and, well, puzzling. With baby Alden squirming against the cold night air, Albert wondered why they would be putting women and children off in the lifeboats?

Albert tested the ship beneath his feet, one of those things you do unconsciously every time you step on deck, but this time he thought of it. It was, as his unconscious feet always read it, solid. It wasn’t listing. Clearly the ship could not be in any danger. If it were sinking, he’d have tripped over a sloping floor. He’d have heard the rush of water or the screams of panic — all those things you imagine would be evident on a sinking ship. Not one was happening. Clearly, he thought a little crossly, this was a case of overcautious behavior that could result in raw tragedy. Put women and children off in an open boat into an ocean blacker than coal? What a stupid idea!

Albert’s thoughts flew to his wife, Sylvia Mae Harbaugh Caldwell, twenty-eight, and to the little son in his arms, Alden, who had turned ten months old just four days before — no, five days, as surely it was now after midnight. Sylvia was getting over a dire illness and was prone to nausea. If she got into an open boat in the Atlantic, she’d become seasick. And the baby? Their precious Alden was small enough to need constant attention, and at this sleepy hour of the night, they hadn’t been able to find the key to their trunk — and Alden’s warm things were locked in the trunk. Thus the baby was wrapped in a steamer rug. It was warm enough, but it was not his own little coat. Sylvia couldn’t even hold the baby properly, owing to the illness she was still battling. The thought of putting the baby on a lifeboat in this bitter cold without his coat when his seasick mother couldn’t really hang onto him — well, it was preposterous.

It was obvious to Albert what they needed to do. He had made his decision. He would not put his wife and child off on the lifeboat. They would stay on the Titanic.

In the two and a half short years of his married life and career, Albert Francis Caldwell had worn various hats — husband, missionary, teacher, father. On this unforgivingly bitter April night in the North Atlantic Ocean, he was looking at the situation entirely as a good husband and father, protecting his wife and child. What he didn’t realize, as he shivered to a decision in the darkness, was that the hat he needed to be wearing that night was his missionary one. Because at the moment of that fatal decision, what the Caldwell family needed more than a husband or a daddy was a guardian angel — a sweaty, grimy guardian angel covered in coal dust.
Back in Illinois, William and Fannie Caldwell were worrying about their son and daughter-in-law and the grandchild they had never met. They knew, no doubt, that Sylvia was struggling with her health and that she suffered from seasickness. That evening, as they were getting ready for bed, William and Fannie got down on their knees for their regular evening devotions and prayed for the safe return of their son and his family. Albert was not wearing his missionary hat on the night of the sinking, and so, he always thought, it was his parents’ prayers that caused what happened next.

As Sylvia and Albert were waver ing over whether to put Sylvia and Alden into a lifeboat, a cluster of stokers appeared at the deck where the Caldwells now were. Sweaty, covered in black grime, some of them wet with seawater, the men looked like they had been toiling in hell. But for the Caldwells, one of these men was surely their guardian angel, sent, as Albert saw it later, by his parents’ anxious prayers.

Albert was surprised when one of the stokers, perhaps Frederick Barrett, George Beauchamp, James Crimmins, or William Major, looked firmly at him and addressed him by name. “Mr. Caldwell?” It was one of the stokers he had met the day he had taken the photographs at the great ship’s furnaces. The stoker approached, clearly giving Albert an order. “If you value your life, get off this ship,” he said. “I’ve been below, and this ship is going to sink. The ocean is pouring in much faster than the pump can keep up.” The other stokers seconded him by adding, “This boat’s gonna sink. There’s water rushing in the hold below.”

These were startling warnings. The deck was still solid beneath their feet. The Titanic was still unsinkable. The watertight doors were still open in nonchalant tribute to the lack of danger — at least, Albert thought they were. But there was the unmistakable and worrisome truth that women and children were indeed off in the lifeboats. And crewmen who ought to know the truth were insisting that they get off. Albert had been below where these stokers worked, and he could picture the hold that they said was now filling with water.

Albert was trying to balance the dire picture the stokers painted against the sturdy deck beneath him. Albert apparently protested to one of the stokers that the Titanic was so much safer than a lifeboat. It was “so big, and so strongly constructed” that he didn’t believe she would sink. Surely she would float for hours, even days. The stoker doggedly offered an alternative, “Get your family off the boat. If it is still here in the morning, you can get back on.” Suddenly that made sense to Albert. Many years later, he would look back on that moment and say, “I don’t know why I believed him.” Then he’d pause and add, “I’ll always be thankful for praying parents.”

The stoker pointed out Lifeboat 13 right at hand. He sprinted to the gangway door.
and saw that the boat still had room. He called to the men above who were lowering the boat to hold it. Sylvia and Albert reacted instinctively — the lifeboat had stopped specifically for them, so they dropped all their questions and hurried to it. “And the stokers, about a dozen of ’em, a few other men passengers, my wife, and myself got in boat number 13,” Albert summarized years later, thus adding Siam to the worldwide sprinkling of nations represented on Lifeboat 13.

As Albert told it a few days after the shipwreck to a reporter who accosted the family en route home to Illinois, “Lifeboat no. 13 was about to be lowered and Mrs. Caldwell was put into it. She was the last woman left in the group, and I was about to lower the baby down to her when she said, ‘Can’t my husband come, too?’ There being ample room, I was put into the boat with the baby, and then some other men followed.” This account and others like it were important in Albert’s story of survival. So many people, for years to come, would hold male survivors in contempt. But accounts of Albert’s rescue all depicted him being invited or encouraged by the crew to get onto Lifeboat 13.

Of course, some news stories embellished the scene. A colorful account was printed in the New York Sun, enhanced by the reporter’s imagination. According to this story, the Titanic’s lights went out as the Caldwells made ready to leave their cabin, and they had to feel their way by hearing “shouts and sounds of running. The deck all was chaos. He [Albert] remembers that Mrs. Caldwell got into a lifeboat and he stood by with the baby, crowded away by a swirl of humanity. ‘Can’t he put the baby in the boat?’ his wife shrieked and when he reached over with it some one pushed him and he landed at his wife’s feet inside, two other men on top of him.” The competing New York Herald tried to one-up the rival Sun by saying (wrongly) that the Caldwells were thrown from their beds from the “fearful shock” of the collision, and Sylvia, in the darkness and confusion that ensued was “suddenly taken and placed into one of the lifeboats.” Luckily Albert was somehow able to follow and was trying to hand Alden to her, when she called out, “Can’t my husband come aboard with the baby?” The Herald said, “Some one behind him shouted ‘Sure!’ and he was shoved into the boat beside his wife, a couple of other men jumping in on top of him.”

The Washington Post featured an imaginative scene, worthy of the cover of any modern romance novel. In that account, Sylvia was “one of the prettiest girls in Colorado” and was “said to have been the last woman to leave the sinking Titanic.” She was indeed pretty, but she wasn’t the last woman off, only the last on
Lifeboat 13. However, it made for a dramatic story, showcased by a theatrical sub-headline: “Mrs. A. F. Caldwell Carried by Husband From Titanic.” Albert was holding the baby along with his wife in the fanciful story. Albert’s romantic gesture, the newspaper said, saved his life because it won him a spot in the lifeboat. In fact, the newspaper’s headline set forth the myth that Albert and all male survivors would fight the rest of their lives by suggesting that men were not normally allowed off the ship. The headline blared dramatically, “WIFE AS HIS PASSPORT.”

Although Albert was safely now in the lifeboat, “safe” was no one’s adjective of choice at the moment. As Sylvia told it, “It seemed that fate toyed with our lives all thru that awful night, a succession of narrow escapes from death coming in rapid sequences.” The lifeboat jerked down toward the water at uneven angles, tipping forward and then backward. Sylvia said dramatically that they had to hold onto the sides of the boat to keep from being pitched out. Then they had to contend with water pouring from the Titanic’s condenser pumps, gushing in a forceful stream three or four feet in diameter right in the path of Lifeboat 13. Everyone began screaming to the crew to stop lowering,
The oars were lashed tightly to the lifeboat's side with twine — and people were sitting on them besides — so the task was none too easy. The cascading water created a freezing spray. By the time Lifeboat 13 struck the Atlantic, at least some of the passengers were quite wet. Given the nearly unbearable temperature, it was a miracle, Sylvia thought, that the Caldwells didn’t so much as catch cold.

And then the confounded mechanical parts of the lifeboat did not work as expected. As Albert described it many years later, “When we got down to the water, we couldn’t get loose from the block and tackle. There was a lever at the center of the boat that was supposed to pull to loosen the block and tackle, but it was all gummed up with paint.”

Meanwhile, Lifeboat 15 was being lowered, and Lifeboat 13 was directly beneath it, having been pushed under it in the frenzied effort to avoid the roaring water from the condenser pumps. This was quite alarming. Everyone on 13 was yelling for the men lowering the boats to stop, but 15 kept coming. No one could hear them over the roar of the water. Fifteen “would have crushed us and all would have been lost,” Sylvia said, recalling the terror of seeing the bottom of 15 coming far too close. People reached up with their hands on the bottom of 15 in a futile gesture to stop it as others tried frantically to release 13 by the jammed mechanism. At first the crewmen lowering 15 were “heedless of our shrieks and terror,” as Albert put it. But then, thankfully, “The men above realized what was happening, and they held the boat over our heads,” he recalled.

For the second time that night, a stoker played guardian angel to the Caldwells and others — and this time, to everyone on Lifeboat 13. Stoker Frederick Barrett and an able seaman, Robert Hopkins, took out knives — Sylvia thought one of the knives was handed down from 15 — and sawed away at the ropes that still stubbornly bound 13 to the Titanic. Barrett had to tread across several women in the boat to get to the ropes, but in the moment of crisis, no one complained. At last, 13 was set free. Relieved, Sylvia noted that the boat “slid away in the nick of time, another perilous escape.”

Julie Hedgepeth Williams knew Albert Caldwell well. Albert and Sylvia Caldwell divorced in 1930, and in 1936, Albert married Williams’ great aunt.

“It’s ironic that I was never related to Sylvia,” Williams admitted, “because today, I dress as Sylvia and perform a one-woman show about the Titanic from her point of view. I’m surprised how much more I’ve learned about the Titanic, looking through Sylvia’s eyes.”

For example, the Caldwells and others couldn’t open a door to a staircase leading to the lifeboats, so most of the party climbed a crew ladder to get to the right deck. Sylvia was ill and too weak to climb, but an officer called to her to climb up. When she announced she could not, he arranged for her to be pulled up on a rope ladder. Moments later, as the Caldwells approached Lifeboat 13, an officer — almost certainly the same one — ordered Albert onto the lifeboat to hold Alden. By then, the officer was aware that Sylvia was suffering from weakness and that Albert was needed to carry the baby.

The officer was probably James Moody. “I’m glad to find out, through Sylvia’s eyes, what a hero that officer was,” Williams said.