

Portholes to Life

Gene Dick

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Every good story begins with a hook. But Gene Dick's tale of a young man surviving the sinking of the battleship *Oklahoma* in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, begins with an improbably long hook—the narrator (a lawyer) interviewing a client. Over time it becomes apparent the client is the author; he then begins telling his story. This forced method of introduction could easily have been excluded.

The ninety-two-year-old author of *Portholes to Life* tells his story as a means of proving his theory that it took uncommon fortitude to live through the “Day of Infamy,” as he did, and that the fortitude was bred into him through several generations of his family. *Portholes to Life*, therefore, is as much his family's story as it is his.

The book begins with the story of a Civil War widow trying to keep her family housed and fed on the American frontier. Much of the remainder of the book is devoted to describing the tribulations of the author's ancestors during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as they made their way across the plains to reach the American Northwest.

Dick's writing is straightforward and easy to follow. He relates the story of an early family wedding: “The perfume of the candles mingled with the fragrant blooms as Nathan led Lucy up the aisle. Approaching the altar, Lucy saw Will in a fine suit, gazing at her with rapt adoration.” He tells about his family's migration, though, almost like a newspaper reporter dispassionately covering a news story. While we don't know how much is true, the stories are very believable.

Gene Dick was born in the Northwest United States and grew up in Southern California before the Second World War. Just out of high school in 1940, he married a local girl and, in need of a job, he joined the Navy. He was assigned to the *Oklahoma* as a medic in August of 1941. He was on duty in the infirmary of the battleship when the Japanese attacked on December 7. How he escaped from the overturned ship is truly a remarkable story, but it comes at the end of the book and is covered in very few pages. The book would have been greatly enhanced if the author had expanded on his combat exploits, both on the fateful date and during the remainder of the war. Gene Dick's tale essentially ends at Pearl Harbor, leaving the reader wanting more.

The cover of the book shows a Conestoga wagon at the bottom of the ocean, perhaps tying together two aspects of the story. But the picture is eerie and uninviting. Surely some other artwork could have been more appealing.

As a first-hand account of a major historical event, Gene Dick's story has broad appeal. It certainly will be of interest to history buffs from late teens and upward.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (July 30, 2012)

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