

Train Wreck at Rockfish

This article was published in the March 2004 issue of Backroads and was submitted by Jerry Campbell. Jerry's wife, Joan, said her grandfather, Thomas D. Drumheller, was born in 1891 and lived about a half-mile from the Southern track at Rockfish. He had a vivid memory of this crash and would keep you enthralled with his account. Mr. Drumheller was 94 when he passed away and his memory was good until the end. "The Wreck of the Old '97" occurred later in 1903, which shows what a popular song can do for a tragic accident of this type.

The passenger train, No. 35, was twenty-five minutes behind schedule when it chugged out of the Union Station in Charlottesville, Virginia. It was 2:35 p.m., July 7, 1903, and W. B. Brubeck was making a mistake that would lead to disaster.

Brubeck, the conductor of a Southern Railroad freight train, was twenty miles south at Rockfish. He had just received an operator's message concerning the delay of No. 35.

"No. 35 is an hour and twenty minutes behind schedule," Brubeck yelled to freight engineer, E. C. Hale, who was busy with shifting cars on and off the parked freight train, nodded and pushed the message into his pocket.

It was a standing order that the engineer as well as the conductor was to read the operator's message to verify the information. However, Hale took Brubeck's word for it and simply pocketed the message.

If he had read it, he would have seen that Brubeck was mistaken; the train was only twenty minutes late. But it wasn't to be, and as No. 35 built up speed leaving Charlottesville, it hurdled toward one of the worst train disasters in Virginia's history.

Engineer Charles T. Davis was at the throttle of the ill-fated train. For more than twenty-five years, he had been operating trains over the same route and knew the tracks ahead as well as he knew his Alexandria home.

Fireman Walter Jackson shoveled coal into the engine's firebox as another engineer, James McCormick, relaxed as they left Charlottesville. In railroad jargon, McCormick was "deadheading" until they got to Monroe where he would relieve Davis and continue the run to Spencer, North Carolina.

As Charlottesville slipped out of sight, the freight train at Rockfish had just been shifted from the main track to the siding. Thinking they had plenty of time before No. 35 arrived, no one had bothered to close the switch from the main track to the side track. It was left open.

Returning to their hometown of Knoxville after a honeymoon in Washington D.C. and New York, H. A. Sharpe and his new bride admired the Virginia countryside outside the parlor car window. Feeling the urge to have a cigar, Sharpe excused himself and retired to the smoking car.

George W. Mays of Charlottesville, conductor of No. 35, began moving up from the back cars of the train to get the time box where he kept his report forms. As was the custom, the box was kept on the front seat in the second-class coach.

A passenger noticed a Shriner's button on the lapel of May's coat. Recognizing a fellow Shriner, the man brought this to May's attention and the two engaged in a pleasant conversation about Shriner topics of interest.

Sharpe had just lit his cigar and joined in conversation with a group of men in the smoking coach when No. 35 rounded the bend in the track just before Rockfish. It was a gradual curve, making it necessary for Davis to back off the throttle.

The time was 3:00 p.m. and it can only be imagined what conductor Brubeck and the other railroad men on and near the idle freight train felt as they saw the passenger train sweep into view at nearly seventy MPH. It was reported that Brubeck was so shaken by the catastrophe that ensued that he was later found five miles away in a "crazed condition."

There was no warning as No. 35 slammed headlong into the Southern Railway freight. The impact was tremendous, driving the two engines off the track on opposite sides.

The second-class car in which Mays was making his way for his reports "telescoped" into the leading baggage car with such force that it caused an express car in front of it to buckle up from the tracks.

Driven by the tremendous weight of the cars behind the second-class coach, it was driven under the express car, causing the top to be sheared off at seat level. In seconds, the track junction at Rockfish was a scene of appalling carnage, wreathed in the vapors of escaping steam.

W. A. Ward, a reporter with the Union News in Washington D.C. was one of the few survivors in the second-class coach. Standing at the end of the car when the crash occurred, Ward was hurled through a window. Later he gave this account to a Daily Progress reporter:

"The first thing I saw after my fall was the head of a man hanging from the car window," Ward said. "Nearly twenty people must have been killed in that car."

Upon impact, Sharpe had been violently thrown to the floor of the smoking car. When rescued, Mr. Sharpe was under five men who had died and a rib of one was found protruding through Sharpe's right jaw.

Sharpe, as well as his bride, survived the wreck. Twenty-three others, including Davis and McCormick did not. Much credit was given to Dr. William A. Lambreth of the University of Virginia, the only doctor on the train, for keeping the death toll from being higher.

Word of the disaster quickly reached Charlottesville and a special train carrying doctors was dispatched to the site of the wreck. Into the night, trains pulled into Union Station carrying the dead and injured.

Mrs. McCormick, wife of the relief engineer, had been told her husband was uninjured and she had brought their five children to meet the train she was told he would be on.

"A man leaped from the train, telling of Mr. McCormick's death and the anguish of the woman and her children was so saddening that hardly a dry eye could be seen in the crowd of several hundred," wrote a reporter.

Throughout the night, the streets of Charlottesville were thronged with people, especially around Perley and Sons' Funeral Home on Main Street where twenty-one victims were taken. The accident had left the people of the city stunned.

The crash shattered lives and hopes. Two days after the catastrophe, eight immigrants, heading for a new life in San Francisco, were interred in the Oakwood Cemetery. Buried along with them was a black man who was the only victim not identified. The Women's Temperance Union of the city scattered flowers over the hapless wayfarers' graves in a final gesture of brotherhood.

Hundreds of Charlottesville's citizens volunteered their strength and their hearts to help where they could. As time went by, the memories of those few dark days in July of 1903 faded. But for a time, this city and others shared the grief and mourned for those who perished in the Wreck of No. 35.

Lynn's Note: Digging into newspaper archives about the tragic train wreck that happened in Rockfish on July 7, 1903, I found an early list of 12 of the 24 dead that were identified and 12 of the 13 that were injured. They are as follows:

The Dead:

Engineer JAMES MCCORMICK, of Charlottesville, Va.

Engineer CHARLES DAVIS, of Alexandria, Va.

THOMAS SHEPPARD, of Charlottesville, brakeman on freight

CHARLES T. GAY, of Charlottesville, fireman on freight

J. E. LOWE, colored, of Baltimore, Md.

CHARLES T. LEITCH, colored, dining car waiter

C. O. OWEN, of Philadelphia, Pa., boiler inspector

ADAM VICOSAVLIEVICH, Austrian boy

BARILANI GUGELMO, Austrian woman

Two unknown Austrian Women

Unknown Mulatto Woman

The Injured:

Engineer E. C. HALE, of Charlottesville, injuries to spine, serious

H. A. SHARPE, of Knoxville, Tn., head and legs bruised and back hurt

TURNER A. HENRY, of Bentonville, Va., injuries to legs, head and shoulder

WALTER JACKSON, colored, of Charlottesville, Va., passenger fireman, legs broken

Four Austrians, all painfully, but not seriously injured

T. G. HUDSON, colored, of Chattanooga, Tn., serious wounds on head

T. E. MERCER, colored, of Washington D. C., arms and legs cut and probably injured internally

J. B. STERETT, colored, of New York, Pullman porter, hands, arms and face cut.

J. W. PAYNE, of Alexandria, Va., baggage master, internal injuries.

Although her name was not mentioned or the extent of her injuries, the bride of Mr. H. A. Sharpe of Knoxville, Tn. was also a survivor. The newspaper article also said that under the direction of Dr. William Lambeth, the trainmen cut through the panels of the baggage and express cars and removed twenty of the dead as well as a score of injured. Traffic at the site was suspended for

eight hours. It was estimated that there were in all probability 120 passengers on the train. W. A. Ward, a Union News agent on the train, whose home is in Washington D.C., was in the fatal coach but escaped. The shock of the collision threw him through a window, breaking his left arm. A special train which went to the scene of the wreck, returned to Charlottesville about 8 o'clock, bringing some of the dead and most of the wounded. Thirteen of the injured were taken to the university hospital, where they were laid on tables and their wounds dressed. Most of the immigrants were Austrians and were bound for points as far distant as California. The freight train at the time of the accident was on the return run from Lynchburg to Charlottesville. Rockfish Station is midway between these points and the track there is a single one. Engineer Hale had orders to get out of the way of the fast passenger train but for some reason that has yet to be explained, the trains came together with a horrible crash and a fearful scene of panic ensued when the occupants of the cars realized what had occurred. Train No. 35, which ran into the freight, left Washington that morning at 11:15, and was made up of an express car, a baggage car, two day-coaches and two pullman cars. The Pullmans formed an early morning New York connection at Washington for Atlanta and the south. The train arrived here at 10:32 a.m. from Boston also connected with No. 35. No. 35 was in charge of Engineer Davis and Conductor Mays. One of the passenger cars of the train was a second-class day coach and the other a vestibule car. Engineer McCormick, who was a passenger on the freight train, was going to Charlottesville to take a train south at the time he met his death. The engineer of the freight escaped without injury. W. B. Brubeck, Conductor of the freight, was reported in critical condition.

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