

Maryland Railroad Tragedy Remembered

Editor's Note:

The June 24, 1905 edition of "The Democratic Advocate" reported one of the worst railroad accidents in Maryland history. In describing the magnitude of the calamity, the paper declared, "Not since 1863, when parts of the Federal and Confederate Armies passed through here and a cavalry fight occurred in the streets has there been such interest and excitement in Westminster."

The following is a fictional account of that day, which makes use of factual details taken from actual newspaper articles. Photographs of the wreck are courtesy of the Historical Society of Carroll County.

THE RANSOM WRECK

By Sharon B. Schuster
Maryland Correspondent

PATAPSCO, Md. — 'Long about 1905, June 17 to be exact, one of the worst train wrecks in Maryland history occurred at Ransom near Patapsco.

It was a sweltering hot day. The mercury on the thermometer topped 100 degrees by that Saturday afternoon. Looking for an escape from the furnace-like city, heat-wilted Baltimoreans boarded the special #5 train that would rush them to the cool blue mountains of Western Maryland.

George B. Covell was at the throttle that evening. Among those who could truly judge, he was known as a 'Master Knight of the Latch.' he slipped the eighteen sided silver railroad watch from his pocket and saw that they were pushing the 5:00 p.m. scheduled departure.

The conductor, George Buckingham, made his last sweep along the side of the train before he called out the last "Board! All aboard!" He shook his head and reached for his watch fob as he motioned to a young miss who seemed oblivious to the timetable that others lived by. He felt sure that the face of the small intricate watch pinned to her crisp white blouse had rarely seen the light of day. Seeing the hands of his own watch slipping past 5:00, he grabbed the gleaming brass rail of the #5 and pulled himself up onto the steps of the train.

The great smoke stack of the engine belched puffs of thick black smoke as the fireman filled her belly with coal. As the train slowly pulled out of Hillen Sta-

tion, Covell knew he had to give her full throttle to get her back on schedule.

Meanwhile, a clean-up crew was boarding a special double header freight that had been dispatched to pick up a spill at Mount Hope. They were headed home, down the mountain toward Patapsco, to spend the Sabbath with their families.

Fourteen year old E.M. Miller was among the crew, along with his father and three dozen other men. Young Miller loved to work with the floater crew. Most of the men were workers at the Catoctin Furnace, and they worked the railroad when they were needed. They were rugged men, and the comradery that they felt was bound by the times they had seen while working the rails.

On this day, they were hot and sweaty, and dirty and tired. Some climbed wearily into the baggage car for the journey home, and others, the boy among them, perched themselves on top of the train and on the platforms outside. As the freight train's two engines gained speed down the mountain, Miller felt the cool mountain air rush over his hot skin. Perched on the bumper of the baggage car, his eyes scanned the 'jungle', as they often referred to the underbrush along the tracks. He wondered if they would see any 'smoke-bounds' on the tracks. He had heard his father talk of the wayward men who would mix water and canner heat and shake it up and drink it. "That really put them up in the clouds," he would say.

The 'deadheads', as the crew was called, were always full of stories. And this was one of those times that a good tale would make the ride home seem a little shorter. There was talk of good engineers, and the worst they had ever seen, and it all lead up to stories of people killed on the tracks.

Each man's story topped the last. There was talk of suicide attempts and track walkers. Some recounted their first encounters with death on the tracks, while others told of the worst time or the strangest. Wide-eyed, young Miller sat entranced by the details.

"Yessir, we ground him up like mincemeat," ended one story. Another account of death on the rails went like this: "We broke both his arms and legs, and drove one of his ribs right through his heart. He looked just like a bundle of rags." Then there was the story



Although passengers on the #4 escaped serious injury, 26 of the floater crew were killed, 10 severely injured and two slightly injured.

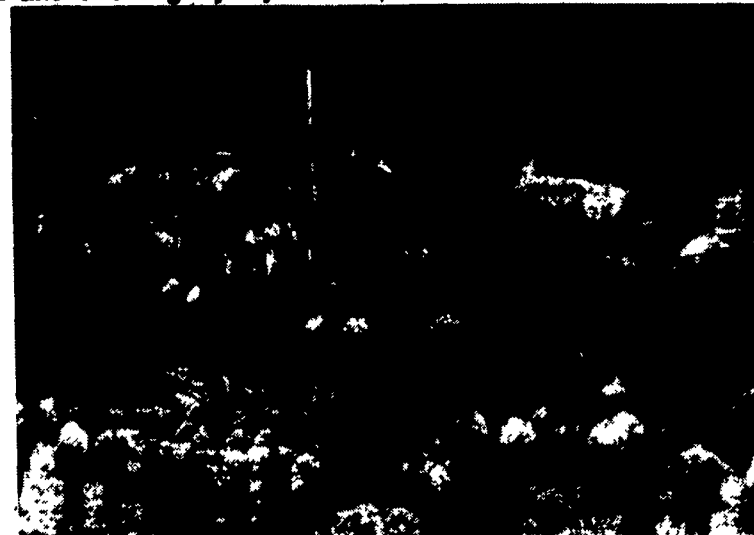
of the priest who was walking along the tracks with his back to the train. "The engineer didn't see him, and later he thought he hit a dog or something. One of the crew said when the train hit that priest, he flew up in the air like a ball, about two or three hundred feet. Some say he went straight to heaven."

The stories had taken them to the Gorsuch Road switch where the freight train was to pull over and wait for three west-bound passenger trains to go by. The train slowed to an eventual halt and the crew jumped down and rested on a pile of railroad ties on the siding.

By this time, the #5 Through Passenger train was speeding toward the mountains with 80 passengers already feeling cooler than when they stepped onto the train back at Hillen Station. Covell was a true 'throttle artist.' They said he could move a train with less coal and less water than anyone, and hardly lift the coal off the stack. He checked his watch again and seemed pleased with the train's progress, but he had to maintain better than 30 miles per hour to discharge his passengers by the scheduled 6:03 p.m.

The crew of the now resting freight passed the time with more talk of trains. They watched as the Blue Mountain Express streaked by. They talked about how pretty she was, with each spoke of the driving wheels painted yellow, and the rods polished and buffed to catch the sunlight. It ran in two sections that day. At the end of the hour's wait, the Union Bridge Accommodation passed them.

Maybe they thought the third train was the #5. Maybe they didn't realize that the Express had



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run in two sections that day. Whatever the reason, the crew accounted for the three trains that they had been waiting for and they hopped back on the freight to continue their journey down the mountain. As the train got back on the main track, a flagman waved to one of the crew and pointed to his watch, but the crewman motioned him to get on board.

Thinking that the crewman knew the schedule better than he, the flagman dismissed his concerns and hopped on the train.

The fireman of the freight fed coal into the firebox like a fevered man. He shoveled so hard and so fast that his teeth dropped onto the shovel and he threw them into the furnace before he knew what happened. But he kept on shoveling. Soon the boy, young Miller, heard the engines popping and cracking through the wooded bottoms. They would soon be coming up on Patapsco.

"Patapsco." That's the way the people who lived there said it. Miller thought of the times when he rode the train to school and the conductor would announce Patapsco as "Paradise, Paradise! Next stop Paradise!" Anyone who knew anything about Patapsco knew it wasn't exactly Paradise. One good thing about it was that it meant they would be closer to home.

The 'quailing' of the whistle jolted Miller back from his day-dreaming. The train was speeding down the track at over thirty miles per hour. It was 5:57. They were making good time.

Some say he heard the whistle

of the freight, and some say he saw the freight rounding the bend at Ransom. No one will ever be sure. George B. Covell went to his death with his hand at the brake. He could have jumped to save his life, but he put the lives of his passengers above his own. He threw on the brake, blew the whistle and threw her into reverse. But, the freight rounded the bend and the two trains collided with a crash that was heard for a mile and a half away.

Young Miller jumped from the bumper just in the nick of time. The passengers on the #5 escaped serious injury, but 26 of the floater crew were killed, ten severely injured and two slightly injured. They said there was a postal clerk on board the passenger train whose legs were broken. He had in his possession a mail bag and refused to surrender it until an official representative of the Post Office arrived. Some say there was a great amount of money on the train that disappeared.

The wreck was a heap of twisted metal twenty or thirty feet high. The next day, the Sabbath, crews were still digging through the wreckage. Young Miller, dry-eyed and fearless, helped to identify the dead, among which was his father. The engineers of both trains were killed. Covell's body was crushed like jelly, but his eighteen sided silver watch was still running.

Victims of the Ransom Wreck were fitted with the finest coffins, and each was adorned with a basket of flowers. George B. Covell was buried on his birthday.

Homestead
Notes

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