The Railroad Riots in Pittsburgh

*Saturday and Sunday, April 21st and 22nd, 1877*

by James A. Henderson

Fifty years is a long time when looking backward, yet fifty years when looking forward seems very much longer. Certainly no one could foresee or visualize fifty years ago what that period of time held in store in the way of material development and scientific progress. It has been said and perhaps with exact truth that the present generation has seen more mechanical and scientific achievement than any preceding generation in history, and strange as it may appear, these achievements have resulted in broad benefits without class distinction, whereas in all other periods of time historically recorded, there was a marked difference, in that the benefits of science and art accrued only to a comparative few. The enjoyment, comfort and conveniences directly resulting from the inventive genius of the present generation are broad in their application, in that all classes of our people use and enjoy them. Then again, now that we have these remarkable achievements so commonly used, it is difficult to understand how the industrial, commercial and social affairs of our people were carried on without them. It is only when one has been blessed with a span of life reaching back to those other times that our marvelous progress is so vividly understood and appreciated. The common use of the modern telephone, the availability of ocean cables, the benefits of wireless telegraphy, the general use and application of electricity, aviation, radio, motion pictures and submarines are all still susceptible to greater improvement and more common application and the end is not yet. One can only wonder what the coming fifty years will bring, and if the recent past is a forecast as to the tremendous possibilities of the future, we who will have passed from the scene, can be pardoned if in the passing we feel a little envy for those who are to follow.

It was only fifty years ago when a certain important portion of Pittsburgh's development, as we then knew it,
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passed from the scene under unusual violence. I can recall clearly the events which lead me to the top of the hill overlooking the valley in the vicinity of Twenty-Eighth Street on that memorable and hot July Sunday, where I watched the destruction of valuable property by a vindictive and vicious mob. On the afternoon of Saturday, July 21st, 1877, all kinds of rumors were in general circulation as to the number of people shot down in the Twenty-Eighth Street Yards of the Pennsylvania Railroad by the Philadelphia National Guard Troops that morning shortly after they had arrived in the City.

At that time I lived on Center Avenue, near Soho. After my evening meal, I went to the brow of the hill overlooking the round house property where the Philadelphia Troops had been taken for shelter. The hillside in both directions was covered with men, women and children, all discussing the action of the troops, and what each thought should be done to those troops in retaliation. No one at the moment seemed to be doing anything. I decided to go home after looking things over, as the situation was threatening and portentous of evil. Under the circumstances, anything could happen and I felt quite sure that something would happen shortly. During the night, I heard many groups of people passing and repassing my home.

Daylight arrived with the same tense atmosphere existing everywhere. Something was going to let go but when and where and how were the questions. These questions were on the tongues of all persons one met. I arose early that Sunday morning and looking into the Street noticed that nearly every person I saw was carrying some article, not household goods but packed merchandise of the kind prepared for shipment. I then inquired of several as to what was going on, and was told the mob was looting railroad cars of their contents. I then hastened to the top of the hill overlooking the railroad tracks and could see large numbers of men setting fire to the cars after having first robbed them. People were hurrying up the hill with all kinds of shipping cases, webs of cloth, silk, brooms, hams, bacon, umbrellas, liquors of every kind, in fact every conceivable kind of portable merchandise. I noticed particularly three negroes rolling a barrel up the hill and when near the top the head come out of the barrel, which con-
tained salt instead of sugar, as they believed. The barrel was allowed to run back down the hill. At another place some men were tugging with a barrel and its head came out. They then discovered it contained plaster-paris and not flour, as they thought. Needless to say they rolled it no further. Many women were carrying flour in their aprons and anything else they could get hold of that might be useful or that they thought had a value.

In the meantime the conflagration was increasing in volume and intensity aided continually by large crowds who would shove more and more cars into the burning mass. City Firemen were at work keeping the dwellings and business houses on the north side of Liberty Street from burning due to flying sparks and intense heat and when the firemen turned a hose on a burning car to halt the fire there, the hose was immediately cut by persons in the mob. Next, the crowd moved to the train shed. It was promptly set on fire and then the large Union Depot and the Union Hotel, both in the same structure, began to blaze. The last big building destroyed was the grain elevator that stood at the corner of Liberty and Washington Streets. Washington Street at that time ran up the hill from Liberty Street and it was Washington Street which prevented the fire from going further downtown.

While the mob was carrying on this destruction of property, a group of citizens met at old City Hall in the Diamond, lead by J. R. McCune and James Parke, Jr., Mr. McCune presided. A committee was appointed to confer with the state and county authorities as follows:

John R. McCune, J. H. Rickertson, Marshal Swartzwelder, James I. Bennett, Bishop Tuig, Rev. S. F. Scovel, John F. Dravo, T. C. Jenkins, John S. Slagle, Thomas Armstrong, Andrew Burt and others. A Defense Committee was sworn in by Mayor W. S. McCarthy to do any duty assigned to them. Money was pledged to meet the expenses of this Defense Committee. On Monday morning many citizens enrolled. General James S. Negley was placed in command of all the forces that were gathered together, about 900 men in all. The civic and military force under Colonel Guthrie marched out Liberty Avenue through the burned district on Monday amid the hoots and jeers of the populace, but they were not molested.
Losses due to these incidents amounted well into the millions and Allegheny County paid much of it because of its inability to adequately protect property. A detailed list of railroad equipment alone which was destroyed follows:

272 Box Cars
156 Gondola Cars
44 Caboose "
28 Passenger "
22 Stock "
13 Pullman "
2 Private "
1 Tool "
3 Combination "
1 Pay "

or a total of 542

In addition to the destruction of cars and other railroad equipment and property there was considerable other property destroyed including sixteen buildings situated on what were then known as Faber and Fountain Streets, also on Washington Street. Faber and Fountain Streets at that time paralleled Liberty Avenue, but both have since been effaced by subsequent railroad and city improvements.

This is briefly the story of an historical occurrence in the life of Pittsburgh, which nature and time have kindly effaced without leaving so far as is now discernible any physical or moral scars on our community.