A RAILROAD ACCIDENT AND THE STRIKE, 1877

Edited by
Laurie R. Mansell

The following letter was written by the Reverend James Henry Snowden to his future wife, Miss Mary A. Ross of Wellsville, Ohio. Snowden, a graduate of Washington and Jefferson College and the Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, held pastorates in the Presbyterian churches of Huron, Ohio, Sharon, Pennsylvania, and Washington, Pennsylvania. He was also an editor, author, and served in the Chair of Theology at the Western Theological Seminary. The letter was obtained by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania as part of the Virginia Whitman Crandall Snowden Collection. The collection has recently been catalogued and is open to researchers in the Society’s Archives.

The original newspaper account of the accident is also on file along with other original accounts of the railroad strike of 1877. The letter reflects the concern felt by area residents over the violence of the strike. Visible, too, is the common incidence of transportation accidents in the nineteenth century. A lack of a block signaling system caused this mishap. But other difficulties such as poor discipline and rules and equipment malfunctions led to other railroad accidents.

Butler, July 24, 1877

My Darling Mary:

I thought yesterday I would go down to Allegheny, stay over night with Harry and look at the ruins of Sunday’s destruction and view the situation generally. I started from Butler at 3 P.M. During the journey I felt apprehensive of danger. At about 5½ o’clock and

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3 R. V. Bruce, 1877: Year of Violence (Indianapolis, 1959) and Pennsylvania, General Assembly, Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Railroad Riots in July, 1877 (Harrisburg, 1878) are additional authoritative sources on the railroad strike of 1877.

4 Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette, July 24, 1877. He was traveling on the West Penn Railroad.
when about 6½ miles from the city I felt the train suddenly check and caught hold of the seat in front expecting anything to take place. Almost immediately there was a great crash and shock and the car was still. The conductor screamed and everybody got out as soon as possible. I was in the rear car and as the shock was pretty well spent before it reached the back car and I was expecting danger and had hold of the seat, I was not in the slightest injured. I supposed the locomotive had exploded but when I got out I was astonished to find that two trains had run into each other. Four men were killed on our train — fireman baggage master mail agent and a passenger — and one — the engineer was killed on the other. I could scarcely have believed that two engines could have been so instantly reduced to a heap of rubbish and old iron. Our baggage car was literally annihilated, nothing being left of it but the floor and trucks which were driven under the front passenger car. Some of the dead were horribly mutilated — all were killed instantly but the engineer who lived, scalded and one leg torn off, [for] 25 minutes.

The train coming up was a through train for Phil. off the main line which is never blockaded and should have waited for us at Sharpsburg. The dead engineer was held responsible. I was not frightened, for it was all over before any one had time to get frightened but I was thankful and am yet that God in his providence preserved me. I telegraphed back to Butler but the telegram was not received till this morning and the people were very uneasy about me. A train took us to the city — Harry was away seeing his girl — went over to Pittsburgh this morning with Billy Allen — saw terrible desolation — came back to Butler arriving at 1 o'clock — went up town and found myself quite a hero for having been in such an accident — came down to supper and after eating sat down to write to my Precious Darling. I do not think trouble is over yet at Pitts. and I was glad to get out of it. This trouble is getting alarming but I believe it will be suppressed as it ought to be by the stern hand of law. The railroad men may have been oppressed, but I never want to see the day when they can force the Company to increase their wages, not by stopping work, which they have a right to do, but by stopping trains. I do not know whether the mails are running on the C & P yet or not but I want to hear from you often. You are my best treasure.

J. H. Snowden

5 Cleveland and Pittsburgh Railroad.