Up Front

Neighborhood Stories
By Bette McDevitt

Tragedy hits the Cleveland to Pittsburgh Express, 1941

On the snowy evening of March 16, 1941, the Cleveland to Pittsburgh Express train, known as the Buckeye, sped smoothly along the bank of the Ohio River, passing Baden in Beaver County, when, as Life Magazine wrote in the March 31, 1941, issue, “it suddenly leaped from the rails and strewn its cars along the icy shore in howling heaps of agony and steel.”

Of the 122 passengers, five were killed and 114 were taken to hospitals. Three passenger cars and a baggage car fell into the icy river, while a sleeper and lounge car remained on the tracks. “Like a powerful searchlight, the blaze from the Jones & Laughlin plant’s Bessemer converter [across the river in Aliquippa] lit up the scene and aided rescue workers—and news cameramen—considerably,” wrote the reporter for the Pittsburgh Press who covered the scene.

The scene of the derailment was lit by the mill furnaces across the river in Aliquippa.
A tattered photocopy from Life Magazine was the start of the author’s investigation.
Hunt Wreckers of P. R. R. Express

Federal, State and Railroad Officials Press Inquiry Into Ohio River Plunge

BADER, PA., March 17—A hunt for saboteurs blamed for the Pennsylvania Railroad passenger train wreck in which five were killed and 14 injured last night was started today by Federal, State and railroad agencies.

The Cleveland to Pittsburgh express, passing through a blinding snowstorm at a mile-minute speed, struck a loose rail a mile from the Ohio River community and hurled from the tracks.

The locomotive and tender over turned, and the five cars plunged down a fifty-foot embankment. The baggage car and a day coach plunged into six feet of water and the others rolled to the river's edge. Only three of the 147 passengers and eleven crewmen escaped injury or death.

The dead were:

A. K. Weigel, 57 years old, of Alliance, Ohio, the engineer, who was crushed by coal from the tender.

Harry Kinnard, 49, of Pittsburgh, a B. E. R. employee.

Donald McDonald, nine-month-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Elizabeth McDonald of Alliance, Pa., who was seriously burned. He is in the hospital.

Mrs. Emma Sagefield, 27, of Pittsburgh.

Conrad Lobel of Cleveland, a railroad conductor, who was "dead-heading" on the train.

Among the injured were G. S. Jones, 26, of 564-11th Street, Jeannette; M. A. Dumas, 1, of Tunnel Porters, Cathedral Catholic, 322 of Jefferson; W. A. Blackman of 309 Railroad Street, Brooklyn, his wife, daughter, and son-in-law, and Wilbur Clenthouse of Johnstown, Pa., a student of Princeton University.

E. W. Smith, vice president of the railroad, asserted that "definite evidence of sabotage" had been discovered and announced that a $1,000 reward had been posted for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the persons responsible.

"The train was wrecked deliberately was established upon inspection of the track," he said.

"All spikes on both sides had been pulled from the outside rail and to the river. One end of the rail is the rail that is facing the coming locomotive, was moved twenty-two inches. The bolts had been removed from the spike bars."

Renual McKee, in charge of the FBI office in Pittsburgh, promulgated "a complete investigation."

The local story even made The New York Times.
The cause of the wreck was also illuminated. According to reports in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Pittsburgh Press, it was sabotage. The Post-Gazette wrote, “After a four-hour investigation in the sleet and snow of a near blizzard, [Pennsylvania Railroad] Vice-President F.W. Smith stated positively that ‘all spikes had been pulled from the entire length of one splice bar, and the rail was lifted…. The saboteur was careful not to break the signal wire.’” A crowbar, perhaps used to remove the track, was found on the river embankment.

But why a trainload of innocent passengers? Investigators and railroad officials testified at a government hearing that they believed the alleged saboteurs had intended to destroy an earlier train but ran out of time.1 Only 18 minutes before, the Manhattan Limited passed through carrying 44 Russian engineers en route to Washington and New York, and 18 U.S. servicemen headed for Trenton, New Jersey, and probably deployment overseas.

Dr. Philip Jenkins, a professor of history and religious studies at Penn State, wrote about the incident in Hoods and Shirts: the Extreme Right in Pennsylvania, 1925-1950, “The railroad authorities were certain that tampering had been involved, but the political motive was less apparent. Some writers focused on ‘fifth columnists’ spread out across the country, with a concentration on Pittsburgh because of its steel and coal industries.”

The term fifth columnist, which originated in the Spanish Civil war, refers to people who clandestinely undermine a nation from within, usually to aid an external enemy. Jenkins wrote that “fifth column panic” was common in the years leading up to and during World War II. During the late 1930s, Pennsylvania was home to several of the countless far-Right sects that flourished in the Depression. As a European war approached in 1939, it was an obvious question whether these domestic groups might actively support the Nazi or Fascist cause in time of war by engaging in sabotage or even launching a guerrilla war on American soil.

As far as can be determined, no one was prosecuted in this case, and we may never know exactly what happened. What we do know is that some people showed great courage during the accident. The train fireman, C.H. Millburn of Alliance, Ohio, slightly injured in the wreck, knew that a freight train was due to pass within a half hour, and as the Post-Gazette reported, “might plough through scores of injured and dazed passengers wandering along the roadbeds. He ran and stumbled ahead against the snow and wind, as rapidly as possible and flagged the freight before it could add to the horror of the saboteurs’ work.” The Pittsburgh Press reported that not all the heroism was confined to the scene of the accident. “At 3 a.m., a motorist drove up to Allegheny General Hospital, skidded to a stop and rushed in. ‘Do you need any blood donors?’ he asked.” Ordinary people become heroes in extraordinary times.


Bette McDevitt is a freelance writer who has written many feature articles for this magazine, including “Miners Clinics” in the Fall 2009 issue.