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Country's worst railroad crash killed 24 people in July 100 years ago



Above and below, July 4, 1910, railroad collision. Copies of photos provided to author by the late George Crout, a Middletown historian.



12 died in 1910 accidents at South Hamilton crossing

County's worst railroad crash killed 24 people in July 100 years ago

Contributed by Jim Blount

Railroad tragedies dominated Hamilton news 100 years ago, topped by Butler County's worst railroad accident. It involved a passenger train and a freight that should have been on separate railroads several miles apart. The July 4, 1910, head-on collision killed 24 people and injured at least 35. Some later reports placed the death toll as high as 36 people.

The northbound Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton (CH&D) freight was on its home track. The southbound passenger train was the Cincinnati Flyer, No. 21. Called the fastest train on the New York Central System (NYC) between New York City and Cincinnati, it had been detoured from its usual route.

Normally, the Flyer would have been on the NYC's Big Four line through Middletown and eastern Butler County. That track was blocked by an investigation of an earlier accident that day near Gano, in the southeastern corner of Butler County. A stranger, not a railroad employee, had been killed there.

That caused the NYC passenger train to be rerouted over the CH&D mainline between Dayton and Cincinnati. At 1:02 p.m. on Independence Day 1910 it plowed into CH&D freight No. 90 about 500 yards north of the West Middletown station near Poasttown. The freight was coming to a stop. The Flyer was flying, 50 to 60 miles an hour.

"The two huge engines were reduced to a pile of worthless junk," a newspaper explained. "The passenger coaches were splintered and broken into an unrecognizable mass of kindling, while along the tracks for 100 yards was strewn a miscellaneous lot of personal property dropped in the wild scramble of the passengers to get out of the coaches."

Pleas for help, mostly by telegraph and telephone, were sent south to Trenton and Hamilton and east to Middletown. There was no radio communications on railroads in 1910. Rescue efforts and the initial investigation were hampered by about 2,000 spectators -- many of them seeking souvenirs -- who gathered at the remote site within an hour.

Surgeons arrived from Hamilton by special train or autos over unpaved roads. An extra train took some of the injured to Hamilton, arriving at about 4 p.m. at the Dayton Street crossing where five local ambulances waited to transport victims the remaining two blocks to Mercy Hospital. Other injured were removed to hospitals in Dayton. There was no hospital in Middletown in 1910.

Some victims died in the Hamilton hospital, the last one eight days after the crash. All but one of the 24 dead were from Ohio, but none resided in Butler County. A Hamilton man, Chester Hagan, was among the injured.

The engineers, both from Cincinnati, survived. The engineer on the Flyer had minor injuries, but was unconscious for about five hours. He couldn't remember if he had jumped or had been thrown from the cab of the steam locomotive. The freight engineer jumped before the crash.

The next morning, workers found a seven-month-old girl alive -- and apparently uninjured -- in a cornfield where she had been hurled by the impact.

Later, investigations attributed the Poasttown tragedy to conflicting orders, but they didn't agree on who had erred.

The freight crew had been informed by a dispatcher at West Middletown that it should be in the Poasttown siding by 1:07 p.m., time enough to enable the southbound Flyer to pass. Based on orders from Dayton, the passenger crew believed it had clear a track to Cincinnati with the freight already on the siding.

The veteran West Middletown dispatcher said he had received a 12:58 order to hold the freight there. But by then 21 of its cars had passed his station, and he realized the collision was imminent. The conductor said he

received the verbal warning from the local agent and was flagging the engineer when the trains collided.

The chief CH&D dispatcher in Dayton confirmed the sequence of events and acknowledged his part in it, but claimed the detoured Flyer's excessive speed and the freight crew's negligence negated the passing plan. After a CH&D investigation, the Dayton dispatcher was fired because, a newspaper said, his "judgment had been poor and if he had acted otherwise, there would have been no crash."

Butler County Coroner John A. Burnett, in a separate investigation, attributed the tragedy to the "carelessness and negligence" of the Dayton dispatcher, the freight crew and the CH&D pilot engineer aboard the NYC passenger train.

Jan. 10, 1910, an engineer was injured when a newspaper train crashed into a freight at Coke Otto (now New Miami). Two weeks later, an engineer and firemen were injured in a spectacular collision and 14-car pileup on the Indianapolis line near Millville Avenue in Hamilton.

Coroner Burnett was busy at other railroad sites in 1910, including the South Hamilton crossing on the CH&D at Central and Pleasant avenues. The angular crossing had been a trouble spot since the railroad opened through Hamilton in 1851.

South Hamilton -- then in the middle of a busy, multi-track switching yard -- was considered Hamilton's most dangerous railroad crossing. Fatalities there increased after industrial and residential development in East Hamilton in the 1890s and the growth of housing in Lindenwald.

The risk was high because rail cars stored on side tracks near the crossing and slow moving switching operations usually blocked the view of fast-moving mainline freight and passenger trains.

Public pressure to build an underpass (costing \$88,000) or an overpass (\$330,000) heightened in 1910 after 12 people died in a series of accidents at South Hamilton. Most victims were in horse-drawn vehicles. Horses outnumbered motorized vehicles by at least five to one in Hamilton that year.

Warning signs at crossings were the unlighted wooden crossbuck, which never changed to indicate impending danger. In 1910, installation of flashing lights and gates -- warning of approaching trains -- were more than 25 years away.

Local rail traffic in 1910 was more frequent than now. At least 60 passenger trains and about 80 freights passed through Hamilton each day. In addition, there were more than 85 electric-powered interurban runs daily to and from the city of 35,279 people.

There was a comical railroad error the morning of Sept. 9, 1910. Former President Theodore Roosevelt, who had served from 1901 until 1909, arrived at 7:20 a.m. on a special Chicago-Cincinnati train on the Pennsylvania Railroad.

About 1,500 people gathered at Fifth and High streets in Hamilton to hear his remarks. He had spoken briefly from the rear platform of an observation car, but obviously had more to say. "Let me say one word about the many babies I see in the audience this morning," TR said.

No one heard that one word, or others. Because of a confused order or signal, the train pulled away before the 26th president completed his speech. Roosevelt seemed unfazed, a newspaper noted, because he "stood on the platform waving adieu to the crowd until he was out of sight around the curve."



Above, a freight car balanced on the tender while the fireman was trapped under a coal pile in this Jan. 24, 1910, accident. An Indianapolis-Cincinnati freight collided with a stalled switch engine at Belt Line Junction, near Millville Avenue. The fireman and engineer on the freight suffered minor damages. Fourteen cars derailed and more than 300 feet of track was ripped out. The freight, traveling at downhill at 60 mph, could not see the stalled switcher because of the curve between Kenworth and Millville avenues in Hamilton.

Comments