

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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ACCIDENTS

"We can give ourselves to love and life. We can bring parents, children, friends into our affection and care. We can sweep the world into the circle of our commiseration. The sorrow and death of everyone becomes our death and sorrow. Our own troubles fade to insignificance. We are saddened by all that passes, saddened by all that lives...What is long and what is short? A day can be longer than forever, and a year less than the blink of an eyelid when it is gone. Yet the death of the aged is more easily borne, while the death of a youth is an affront to our need, and we say, "This would not be."

Kenneth L. Patton

Tragedy has struck an unmerciful and inconceivable blow which has shattered the lives of several local families. I did not personally know Erin Johnson, Bryan Johnson, Brandimarie Starkweather or Kara Cascino who were fatally injured in a September 18 three-car collision at the intersection of Route 104 and Transit Road. I am, however, acquainted with several survivors of the deceased. What do you say? What can you do? Many must feel this same kind of helplessness that I do. Yet whether or not we know them, we all empathize with the survivors' heart felt sorrow. Unfortunately this tragic event is not just a bad dream, but reality. A reality seemingly with no purpose with an unwitting penalty to those closest to the victims. As human beings we long for pleasure, plenty and longevity of years. When tragedy strikes, our delusion is broken. Yet we must accept tragedy for in the depths of the human psyche it creates maturity. To never have experienced tragedy makes us less human. If we were not human we surely could not experience the complexity and tragedy of untimely deaths. We know that time has a way of mellowing the immediate harshness of loss. Yet as truth seekers and grievers we always ask the perennial question, Why? Which condolences do not answer.

Tragedy has struck us innumerable times before. Since this is a history column, let me hereby briefly mention several catastrophic accidents from Orleans County history. As you read these accounts, imagine the amount of grief incurred.

On September 28, 1859 a huge crowd of people gathered on the Main Street Bridge in Albion to watch a tight-rope walker cross the canal. At about

5:15 p.m. when the acrobat had just begun, the bridge instantly collapsed in the water carrying with it around 250 people and ten horses. Fifteen people were either killed or drowned in this awful melee and many others were injured.

The accident which killed the most people at one time in our county happened on July 27, 1883. This occurred at Carlyon, now Ashwood, on the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg Railroad. A train made up of eight sleeping coaches, one passenger coach, a smoking car and a baggage car was being drawn by two engines heading east when it collided with an empty freight car which had blown off a siding onto the main track after dark. The three forward cars were of light weight construction and were followed by five heavy weight sleeping cars which crushed the lighter ones upon impact. The only local victim was Bernie Bostwick, a young man who had just boarded the train in Lyndonville. In all, eighteen people were killed and twenty-five more were seriously injured. We must remember that back then there were no ambulances and no hospitals, only doctors. The railroad depot was turned into a morgue and people spoke of this accident for years as "the Carlyon Calamity."

Another sad accident which occurred in our county happened on Sunday, March 7, 1915 at Knowlesville. Alfred J. Skinner picked up his three daughters from Sunday School, Mildred 18, Helen, 12 and Dorothy 10, along with Marion Harding 14 and her brother Herschel Harding 10. Proceeding southward in an open touring car, Mr. Skinner crossed the B L and R rail crossing near the Methodist Church. At that very moment an express trolley traveling at a high rate of speed smashed into the auto breaking it in half and instantly killing Mildred and Helen Skinner and Marion and Herschel Harding, the only children of Mr. and Mrs. Chester Harding.

There are several common denominators in all the above accidents. Like most accidents, they occurred instantly, were tragic, causing untold grief and emotional suffering for the survivors. Perhaps the impact of last week's accident and these other examples will serve to remind us just how fragile human life really is.

"Vibrant courage triumphs over grief"