

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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Picture courtesy of Howard Barry

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CENTENNIAL OF THE "CARLYON CALAMITY"

"One of the worst circumstances was the finding of the heads of three persons and no one present was able to tell to which they belonged."

Few people have ever heard of the "Carlyon Calamity" or even Carlyon for that matter. But exactly one hundred years ago Carlyon (now Ashwood) hit the headlines in newspapers far and wide. A disastrous train wreck which remains to day as the worst accident to ever occur in this county killed 18 people and seriously injured 25.

Here now is the interesting story relating to this terrible wreck. The Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg railroad opened for passenger service on June 12, 1876. There were four stations in the town of Carlton; Kent, Carlton Station, Waterport and Carlyon. On Friday, July 27, 1883 the Thousand Island Excursion Flier was switched from the Michigan Central tracks to the R.W. & O. at the Suspension Bridge. Part of the train had been made up in Michigan and Ohio with passengers on their way to the Thousand Islands. As it headed east few stops were made in Western New York. The train was made up of eight sleeping coaches, one passenger coach, a smoking car and baggage car drawn by two engines. The evening of July 27 was most unpleasant as a wild storm of heavy wind and rain was raging. The station agent at Carlyon was on duty from 6:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. before quitting for the day. Sometime after he left, an empty freight car which had been left on a siding near the Carlyon depot, was blown out onto the main track. The engineers of course, expected a clear track and visibility was poor. The excursion train was traveling fast as it flashed by the deserted station a few minutes after nine. The pilot engine was only a few yards from the freight car when the engineer caught sight of it and pulled the reverse lever but it was too late.

According to newspaper accounts at the time, the first engine tore the freight car to peices when it struck and the impact knocked the engine off the track. The second engine was thrown across the tracks and badly damaged. The baggage car was jerked from the rails by the twisting engine and landed on top of it. The passenger car, slammed against the wreck by the following sleepers, exploded into kindling wood. The three forward sleepers were R.W. & O. coaches of light construction, and were followed by five heavy Michigan Central sleeping cars which crushed the lighter cars ahead but were not much damaged themselves. The engineer and fireman of the pilot engine jumped, seconds before the crash and survived. Both crewmen of the second were killed. The crash was heard from some distance around. Passengers from the undamaged coaches under the leadership of a conductor began rescuing the injured in the darkness. People living nearby ran to the scene with lanterns to help. All through the night every available person worked to remove the dead and injured from the debris which effort continued the next day. It was very difficult because the wreckage was such a tangled mess. Physicians were sent from points as far away as Lewiston and Rochester.

The depot was turned into a morgue and bodies placed there until identified and removed by relatives. As there were no hospitals in the county in 1883, the severely injured were taken to homes in the area to be cared for. The only local victim of the wreck was Bernie Bostwick, son of Dr. and Mrs. A.B. Bostwick who happened to live at Carlyon. Bernie has been driven by his father to Lyndonville where he had only moments before, boarded the train. He was a traveling salesman and had intended to return to his Syracuse headquarters. As Dr. Bostwick returned home he was alerted that a wreck had occurred. Bernie was being removed from the wreckage as his father arrived and so was placed in their carriage, but died on the way home.

Uninjured passengers were picked up by trains sent from the east so they could continue on to their destination. Upon the findings of a coroner's jury, the railroad was charged with negligence in not having a watchman on duty until the last train had passed. The local station agent was charged with being negligent in not following clearly stated regulations of the railroad that all cars left on switches must be properly secured before the agent left the station for the night.

A few week after the wreck a report of the investigation by the railroad commissioner was published. It censored the railroad for running such a heavy passenger train at night and said it should have been run in two sections. It also recommended that all passenger coaches and locomotives be equipped with air brakes, that safety switches be installed and that there be more frequent inspections of tracks. So perhaps the wreck at Carlyon had some effect in hastening the adoption of certain safety devices by the railroads.