

THE TRAIN WRECK WHERE SANTA CLAUS WAS KILLED

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Recently my mother, who lived in Appalachia, Virginia, died. Her father had been a conductor on the Southern Railroad. When my mother had been a small child, my grandfather had liked to sing sad songs to her, like "The Death of the Drunkard's Lorn Child". He also liked to make her cry with the story of the train wreck in which Santa Clause had been killed. I was surprised to find among her effects a note, which obviously she had left for me to find. Without narrative, on it she had listed the date and crewmen who were involved in the noted train wreck that had occurred inside Natural Tunnel Dec. 24, 1911. What follows is the story of that wreck.

TRAIN WRECK

AN ARTICLE IN "THE BIG STONE GAP POST"
JANUARY 3, 1911

BAD WRECK

Bristol Va. Dec 24 - In one of the most disastrous freight wrecks in the history of the Virginia and Southwestern Railway, three men were killed and two injured at 2 o'clock in the morning. The wreck occurred in Natural Tunnel, near Clinchfield, forty four miles northwest of this city. Railway officials are not positive as to the cause of the disaster, but they attribute it to the falling of a stone from the arch of the tunnel onto the track.

A double header freight train was speeding down the grade in the direction of Bristol when the engines soon after entering the spacious natural opening under the mountain jumped from the track and turned over catching engineer W. S. Adams and two firemen, J. P. Sproles, and Leland Glover under the mass of steel wreckage. Nineteen loaded coal cars piled up in a confused heap behind the wrecked engines, and the northwest entrance to the tunnel was blocked.

The body of Sproles was recovered soon, but it was late in the day before the workmen were able to reach the bodies of Adams, and Glover.

Engineer Adams, who married a sister of former General Manager H. McCue of the Virginia and Southwestern Railroad, is survived by his wife and

eight children.

Fireman Sproles, who was a son of Francis Sproles of Benhams, is survived by a wife and five small children. The bodies were brought to Bristol today, and were prepared for burial at the mortuary of McNeil and Sons.

Engineer Charles Bradley, who occupied the forward engine, miraculously escaped. He was only slightly injured. He says that fireman Sproles was drowned in Stock Creek, being held under the water by the debris.

COMMENT

by the author

There is a lot of Southwest Virginia history touched upon in this simple article. The South Atlantic and Ohio Railroad, completed from Bristol to Appalachia Virginia in 1890, opened up the Wise County coal fields to the world. Its home yards were in Bristol, and most of its employees were from that area. Specifically the stretch of tracks from Benhams to Phillips, just to the west of Bristol, supplied a inordinate number of employees to the S. A. & O. This stretch of land is some of the roughest and poorest that the tracks traversed, and was the last to be settled. Many of the settlers were of German origins. Though it was intensely farmed in the post Civil War period, it is largely abandoned today. It is understandable that many of its young sons saw the coming of the railroad as an opportunity to escape the poverty of this hard country.

In 1910 the S. A. & O Railroad was bought out by the Virginia and Southwestern Railroad, and in 1911 its operations were changed by moving the home yards to Appalachia from Bristol. Indeed, this was the reason that the Town of Appalachia came into being. By late 1911 or 1912 most of these Washington County railroad employees had moved to Appalachia, where their family names are still very common. People who had been neighbors in Washington Co, were neighbors in Appalachia.

From the above article one can tell that the train crews involved in this tragedy still lived in Bristol. Most were from the Benhams, Virginia area. Some of those who survived later lived in Appalachia.

The crew list is rounded out with the names of the conductor, a Mr. Chestnut, and the two brakemen - Ed Swecker and "Bear" Kager. The

German surnames among this list of crewmen are Sproles, Glover, Swecker, and Kager.

Pulling coal trains from Appalachia to Bristol was a difficult task, and a number of procedures were used including the use of a pusher engine stationed at Phillips which coupled onto the rear of the trains that had come from Appalachia and pushed them up "The Gorge" to the top of Walker's Mountain at Benhams; and as was the case in the incident recorded in the newspaper article, two locomotives were sometimes coupled together to form a "double header". This explains why there were two front end crews and only one rear end crew in the wreck of Christmas Eve 1911.

The Valley of the North Fork of the Clinch and the main Clinch Valley are separated by Horton's Summit, and from there the railroad picks up the Valley of Stock Creek, which is the stream that has carved Natural Tunnel out of a mountain. The author of the newspaper article was confused when he said that the train coming down Stock Creek towards Bristol entered "the spacious natural opening" of the tunnel, which he later identified as the "northwest entrance. The majestic natural mouth of the tunnel is the southern entrance, while the northwest entrance is naturally a water siphon completely closed by Stock Creek in high water. The northwest entrance used by the railroad is man made, and is quite constricted. It was within this tight space that the double header, as it roared downgrade beside Stock Creek to its right, wrecked. The crumpling and tumbling of steel and coal within this narrow space must have been terrible. The two engines jumped the track, bucked up against the walls of the tunnel, and then settled into Stock Creek with nineteen coal cars on top of them. This may have been the entire train, as nineteen cars was then near the limit of what it was possible to pull along this line.

One of the men who died on this Christmas Eve was carrying Christmas presents home to his children. Half a century later people referred to this wreck as the one where Santa Claus was killed.

Engineer Charles Bradley, who miraculously survived this wreck, moved to Appalachia, where he lived on Wise Street, and continued to drive engines till the 1940's. The track inside Natural Tunnel continued to bedevil the railroad. Years later, after one of the periodic floodings of Stock Creek had weakened the road bed, another engineer turned an engine over inside the tunnel, and even though he survived, he was maimed by escaping steam. Oddly, his name was "Shorty" Adams; no known kin to W. S. Adams.

Today this stretch of track is part of the Norfolk-Southern Railroad,

and is still very much in use, though the trains no longer go to Bristol, but head on down the Holston River instead.