

The Great Shohola Train Wreck Submitted by Thomas K. Gibson

Originally from "Between the Ocean and the Lakes" The Story of the ERIE—by Edward Harold Mott—1899

On July 15, 1864 a locomotive pulling 17 passenger and freight cars moved along the Erie Railroad in southeast New York state. Aboard were 833 Confederate prisoners of war and 128 Union guards. The guards were members of the 11th and 20th Regiments of the United States Veteran Reserve Corps under the command of Captain Morris L. Church. Most of the guards rode in the last three cars, others stood atop boxcars and inside the boxcars. The Confederates were the fourth bunch of prisoners to be sent from Point Lookout, Maryland, to Elmira, New York.

Locomotive Engine 171 moved along the tracks averaging 20 miles per hour. Engine 171 was classified as an "extra" indicating it ran behind a scheduled train. The scheduled train, West 23, displayed warning flags giving the right-of-way to Engine 171. However, Engine 171 was delayed in leaving Jersey City to Elmira while the guards located several missing prisoners and again waiting for a drawbridge. Engine 171 arrived at Port Jervis four hours behind schedule.

The next leg of the trip ran along a single track. This run of track contained sharp curves and ran along the Delaware River. Ahead at Lackawaxen was a junction with the Hawley Branch, a rail spur connection to Honesdale, Pa. At the junction station a telegraph operator Douglas "Duff" Kent was on duty. Kent saw the West 23 pass by during the morning with flags warning of a special "extra" following. Kent was responsible for holding all eastbound traffic at Lackawaxen until the "extra" had gone through. At approximately 2:30 P.M. a coal train Erie Engine 237 with 50 cars stop at Lackawaxen Junction. At the junction John Martin descended from his post in the caboose and entered Lackawaxen Station asking if the track clear to Shohola. His question was answered by Kent, indicating that the track was clear. With this mistake the two locomotives fates were sealed. Martin relayed the information to the Engineer Samuel Hoitt who manned the throttle. Hoitt sent G. M. Boyden the brakeman ahead to open the main switch. The Erie Engine 237 moved onto the mainline and headed east. At 2:45 Engine 171 passed Shohola heading west, only four miles of track between them remained.

Both trains meet at "King and Fuller's Cut". This section of track followed a blind curve where only 50 feet of forward visibility was possible. When the two trains meet only Engineer Hoitt had time to jump clear. When the two trains impacted the troop train's woodtender jolted forward and buckled upright throwing its load of firewood into the engine cab killing Tuttle instantly. Ingram was pinned against the split boilerplate and scalding steam, where he was reported slowly scalded to death in sight of all present. It was said the "With his last breath he warned away all who went near to try to aid him, declaring that there was danger of the boiler exploding and killing them." Inside the cab of Engine 237, Boyden and Pretiss also died in a crush of cordwood and stell. Hoitt and Martin survived.

In 1964, the 100th anniversary of the Shohola wreck, historian Joseph C. Boyd wrote: "...the wooden coaches telescoped into one another, some splitting open and strewing their human contents onto the berm...where flying glass, splintered wood, and jagged metal killed or injured them as they rolled. Other occupants were hurled through windows or pitched to the track as the car floors buckled and opened. The two ruptured engine tenders towered over the wreckage, their massive floor timbers snapped like matchsticks. Driving rods were bent like wire. Wheels and axles lay broken." The troop train's forward boxcar had been compacted and within the remaining mass were the remains of 37 men. Even's saw "headless trunks...mangled between the telescoped cars" and "bodies impaled on iron rods and splintered beams."

At least 51 Confederate prisoners and an official total of 17 Union guards died either on the spot or within a day of the wreck. Thirteen soldiers of the 51st North Carolina Infantry lost their lives in a few seconds. Confederate corpses were laid in rows, the most hideously mangled among them were covered with grass and leaves. The Union dead were wrapped in blankets and set apart from the Confederate. Five Confederate prisoners escaped in the chaos before a cordon of Veteran Reserves could be deployed around the site. Two relief trains were dispatched from Port Jervis by Erie Superintendent Hugh Riddle with railway workers and doctors. Over 100 badly hurt men were moved to Shohola and quartered in the railroad station or the Shohola Glen Hotel. Physicians worked through the night. North Carolina infantryman Albert G. Smith wrote to his wife, "I got heart [hurt] in comeing up hear by the cars runing together but I am not confined. We are fareing very well and are treated very kind, more so then I thought we would be."

Two Confederate soldiers, John and Michael Johnson, died overnight at Shohola. They were taken across the Delaware to a small congregational church in Barryville, New York, and buried there. In 1995 the graves were marked by single stone and a small wooden cross. The dead at King and Fuller's Cut continued to be buried throughout the night until the dawn of the 16th. Not all the bodies could be identified. Confederates were placed four at a time in crude boxes nailed together from the wreckage. The boxes were then lowered into a 75 foot long trench. Toward midnight conventional pine coffins arrived for the Union dead, who were laid in individual graves. By 9:00 A.M. on July 16 four more men had died and were taken to the common grave at King and Fuller's Cut. Within a week of the wreck all surviving prisoners were delivered to Elmira Prison.

Church's official account, dated July 22, 1864, contains a final tally of 787 Confederates delivered to Elmira of the fourth contingent from Point Lookout. An official inquest jury in Pike County was impaneled and found Kent negligent. However, Kent had left at 9:00 A.M. on the 16th and was never heard from again.

On June 11, 1911, the Shohola dead were disinterred and brought to Elmira's Woodlawn National Cemetery where they were laid in another common grave. Their names were inscribed on two bronze plaques affixed to a single stone monument. Names of the Union dead face the cemetery's northern lawn. The Confederate names face south. A completely satisfactory account of men killed in the collision is not available. Estimates range from

60 to 72, not including the two Johnsons from North Carolina who remain in the churchyard at Barryville. The five Confederates who are said to have escaped also can not be accounted for.

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<http://www.shohola.com/trainwreck/>

From "Brass Buttons and Leather Boots: Sullivan County and the Civil War"

This is a first-person account of the Great Shohola train wreck, in which 52 Confederate prisoners of war died in Shohola, Pennsylvania. This is the account of Frank Evans, a survivor of the wreck...after Frank's account is some local color on the wreck.

"It was about the middle of July in 1864. I was in the Union Army, and was one of the guards of 125 soldiers who were detailed to take a lot of Confederate prisoners from Point Lookout, Virginia (ed note: It was really Point Lookout, Maryland) to the prison camp at Elmira, New York, which had just been made ready to receive them. There were ten thousand prisoners in all to be transferred, and this lot was the first installment to be moved. There were about 800 of them. Two guards were stationed on the platform at each end of each car. We got started from Jersey City about 5 o'clock in the morning. I was one of the guards stationed well back on the train, and a lucky thing it was for me that I was so stationed. We passed through the little village of Shohola in the after noon, going something like twenty-five miles an hour. We had a run a mile or so beyond Shohola, when the train came to a stop with a suddenness that hurled me to the ground, and instantly a crash arose, that rivaled the shock of battle, filled that quiet valley. This lasted a moment. It was followed by a second or two of awful silence, and then the air was filled by the most appalling shrieks and wails and cries of anguish. I hurried forward. On a curve in a deep cut we had met a heavily laden coal train, traveling nearly as fast as we were. The trains had come together with that deadly crash. The two locomotives were raised high in the air, face-to-face against each other, like giants grappling. The tender of our locomotive stood erect on one end. The engineer and firemen, poor fellows, were buried beneath the wood it carried. Perched on the reared-up end of the tender, high above the wreck, was one of our guards, sitting with his gun clutched in his hands, dead! The front of our train was jammed into a space less than six feet. The two cars behind it were almost as badly wrecked. Several cars in the rear of these were also heaped together. There were bodies impaled on iron rods and splintered beams. Headless trunks were mangled between the telescoped cars. From the wreck of the head-car, thirty-seven prisoners were taken out dead. The engineer of our train was caught in the awful wreck of his engine, where he was held in plain sight, with his back against the boiler, and slowly roasted to death. That frightful accident occurred about 2 p.m., Friday, July 15, 1864. The cause of the accident was a drunken telegraph operator at Lackawaxen, Pennsylvania, four miles west of the scene of the disaster. The official report of the killed that were buried, places the number at fifty-one Confederate and nineteen Union soldiers. At 9 p.m., a train was sent from Port Jervis with provisions and due to the kindness of the railroad officials, a New York Tribune reporter was permitted to visit the scene. Upon their arrival at Shohola around 10 p.m., they found most of the wounded had been brought to the village and were occupying the freight and passenger rooms and adjoining

platforms. Over sixty injured lay in this locality and several more in the Shohola House [hotel]. The citizens of Shohola and Barryville [New York; across the Delaware River from Shohola] were untiring in their efforts to alleviate the sufferings of the wounded. Men, women and children vied with each other in their acts of kindness. "After viewing the wounded and suffering victims, and having no reason to remain," the Tribune writer, "we passed out among the guard and prisoners who had come through this unhurt. We were now on our way to the actual spot where the collision had taken place." A trench 76 feet long and 8 feet wide was dug, in which to bury the bodies and, according to the Elmira Advertiser, there were 48 Confederate and 17 Unionists buried there. But there are a variety of estimates as to the exact number of casualties, depending on the source. During an inquest held at Shohola, everyone connected with the wreck was exonerated, including Duff Kent, who gave the coal train the right-of-way. He should have known the train carrying the prisoners was on the track. Persistent reports say that he was a drinker and could have been under the influence of alcohol. He did not take the wreck very seriously and according to a story which circulated, he went to Hawly to attend a dance. The next day the publish became so incensed with his actions that Kent left for parts unknown and was never heard from again. The following day the track was cleared and a new train made up to take the prisoners and some of the injured to Elmira. During the night, a heavy guard was placed around the Southerners. Despite this, however, five managed to escape. According to Art Meyers of Narrowsburg, who personally interviewed an old woman many years ago who lived in Yulan at the time and recalled going to Shohola to view the wreckage when she was a very young girl. On the way she and a girl companion encountered two strange men who apparently were escaped prisoners. The dead from the wreck rested in their common grave located between the tracks and the river for 47 years. They were then exhumed in 1911 and taken to Elmira and reburied in the Woodlawn National Cemetery with others from the prison camp. Captain Charles W. Fento, 2nd Cavalry, A.D.C. was in charge. He contacted C.E. Terwilliger, a Port Jervis undertaker. Fred I. Terwilliger, prominent Port Jervis businessman, recalls furnishing boxes for the bodies. Captain Fenton reported to Chief Quartermaster at Governor's Island that 60 bodies were removed. It is apparent that five of the bodies were washed out by the Delaware River waters.