

'44 train wreck drew quick Oak Ridge response

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | May 29, 2007

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in a series on this topic.

Last week, we introduced the idea that Oak Ridge was unique by being a city formed in the midst of established Appalachian communities.

We noted that from the early months of the Manhattan Project's Clinton Engineer Works, the relationship between Oak Ridge and surrounding communities has often been one of mutual help and support.

A case in point is the July 6, 1944, troop train wreck at Highcliff, Tenn., near Jellico. What happened during those few days has left major lifetime lasting memories of death and injury on those who personally experienced the train wreck — and those who responded to the disaster.

Within hours, Oak Ridge responded to the site with military support for the rescue and recovery effort. Bill Sergeant was a captain in the Army Services Forces, U.S. Engineer Office, Manhattan District, Oak Ridge, Tenn. He, along with several other officers, was summoned to meet the guard officer at the Guard Headquarters of the Clinton Engineer Works. Bill recalls that summons and the ensuing activity that kept him up for the rest of that night and all through the next day, working the disaster of a major calamity that occurred near a small community of Appalachia with few resources to handle such a major event.

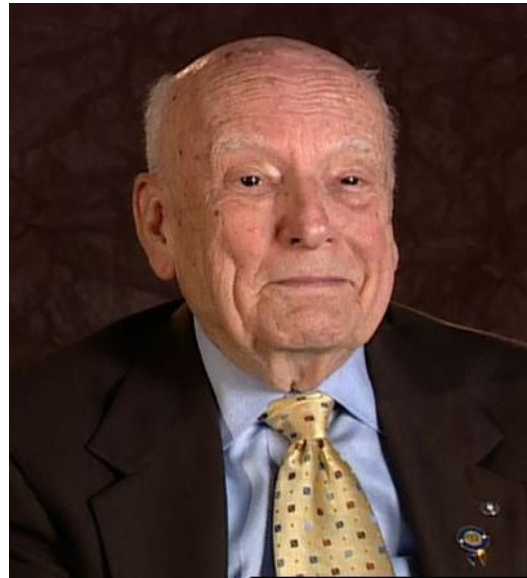
The Manhattan Engineer District troops reached the scene at 3:15 a.m., and at the request of the Tennessee Highway Patrol relieved them of traffic control duties. They also guarded the personal and government property recovered from the wreckage.

The numerous spectators were prevented from interfering with the progress of the rescue and recovery operations. The Manhattan Engineer District's public relations officer was notified and came to the scene to supervise the access given to newspapermen and photographers.

Willard Yarborough was the Knoxville Journal's reporter who was quick to the scene and who documented the first impressions of the enormously confusing sight fraught with tragedy. His account of the response to the accident by the communities included details of the specific people from Highcliff who immediately immersed themselves into the ordeal of sorting the dead from the injured, laying out the dead along the tracks, and taking the injured by automobile to the Jellico hospital.

Ambulances arrived and began taking the injured to other area hospitals as well.

Speculation ran high as to what might have caused such an awful train wreck. Yarborough wrote about the early comments of the troops regarding the speed of the train. He captured the famous words uttered by the fireman, John William Tummins, who gave the newspaperman the simple explanation: "She jumped the tracks."



Bill Sergeant, who in 1944 was a captain in the Manhattan engineer District, personally recalls the tragic scene he witnessed in the early

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Tummins, who was a comparatively young man with a wife and small child, was interviewed by Yarborough on his deathbed. He had sent word to his wife to come to him, but he died at 5 a.m. July 7, 1944, well before she could get there.

On July 15, 1944, the Federal Bureau of Investigation closed the investigation conducted on July 6 through 8, 1944. The case was filed as "UNKNOWN SUBJECT: Wreck of Louisville & Nashville Troop Train No. 47, 3 miles south of Jellico, Tennessee, 7-6-44," with the character of the case listed as "SABOTAGE." Joe Ben Champion gave the synopsis of facts as "L&N Troop Train No. 47 left the track at approximately 9 p.m. on 7-6-44 on a 10 degree curve 3 miles S. of Jellico, Tenn. Investigation indicates cause of accident was the excessive speed of he train. No indication of sabotage."

The 11-page FBI report is extremely detailed regarding the train wreck and the ensuing investigation regarding sabotage. Special Agent Champion and Special Agent In Charge John R. Ruggles interviewed all three surviving crew members, as well as the management of L&N Railroad from the general superintendent of the L&N Railroad, M. H. Lockney, to the chief of the L&N Railroad Police, the wrecker foreman and the division engineer. One confidential informant, "I-1," gave the opinion that the engineer's excessive speed in attempting a dangerous curve caused the wreck.

Two special agents interviewed Dr. J.S. Ausmus at Jellico hospital, where John William Tummins died after being severely scalded by the steam from the wrecked engine. The doctor said that Mr. Tummins was treated for third degree burns but had no skull fracture or other head injury that would impair his mental faculties. He further stated that Mr. Tummins seemed to be very rational at the time the doctor talked with him about the wreck.

Tummins stated that the engineer had become extremely angry when he left Corbin, Ky., and from Corbin to the place of the wreck he gave the engine the throttle. On several occasions, Tummins stated he had cautioned the engineer to slow down. However, Tummins said the engineer paid no heed to him and continued at an excessive rate of speed.

This statement was made to the doctor just before the fireman died.

Mrs. William Turnblazer Jr., a registered nurse at the Jellico Hospital, was also interviewed and stated she was attending Tummins at about 11 p.m. July 6, 1944, when he told her he knew he was dying. During this conversation, Tummins again repeated that the engineer had been driving at a high speed since leaving Kentucky and that he had "again and again" asked him to slow down, but that he refused to do so.

The body of the engineer, who died on impact, was found under water beneath the steam engine. Also killed in the train wreck were 33 of the troops. A large number of the troops (references give a range of between 100 to 200) were injured; the most official reports give the number of the injured at 98.

Many of the injured, especially those with the less serious injuries, were taken to Oak Ridge. To get a flavor of what it might have been like for these soldiers to visit Oak Ridge, the following account by one of the injured solders is provided.

In an e-mail to Phil Lea posted on his Tribute to the Troop Train Web site (www.trooptrain.com), Dick Murtz, one of the soldiers injured in the train wreck, stated in March 2005 that "part of the story ... was our trip to Oak Ridge, Tenn. They loaded us in GI ambulances and we went sailing to the Oak Ridge hospital to recuperate. This was a time when no one had any idea what was there. Not even people working there.

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"Everything in this camp was free to all. The cafeteria had a spread you would not believe. Three choices of meat for breakfast and the other meals were also unreal. I told one of the GI's that I don't know why I heard GI's complaining about the Army food. I found out later when we got to Camp Croft, S.C.

"While I was at Oak Ridge, they asked me if I had met a guy by the name of Red Maddox or Mattox. I said, 'Yes, we talked at the camp in Indiana before we got on the train.' They told me they had two bodies in the morgue that they needed to identify. We got in a staff car and started into town. We stopped at three gates on the way out and got papers at each gate in triplicate. We were told to be back before dark or not to even try to get back in.

"All the bodies were laid out on the floor and so bloated you had a hard time making out facial features. I had to get down and look up the side of the face and I could see the red hair roots and he had a fresh haircut. I gave this to the lieutenant and he said that was fine, now they knew who the other GI was. I saw Red in the Barber Shop in Indiana. This will stick with me the rest of my life."



Ed Westcott photographed the train wreck in 1944 and provided these unpublished images for *Historically Speaking*. Volunteers are shown pulling the injured and dead from the wreckage.

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Many of the known details of this epic train wreck are captured in a book written in 1994 titled "She Jumped the Tracks" by retired railroad executive John P. Ascher. It was the first train wreck causing a passenger fatality on an L&N Railroad in 27 years. Based on the number of fatalities, it is among the 25 worst train wrecks in U.S. history.

One of the first persons to the wreck was a young boy of 16 from Highcliff named Jim Tidwell, who was standing in his yard watching the train go by when the wreck occurred. He quickly rounded up some friends and found some rope that they rigged from the top of the steep cliff to reach the river below. Harold Moon got torches from his Esso gas station to help light the area.

The kitchen car started to burn giving an eerie glow to the whole scene.

Tidwell told of seeing the engineer's body under water and remembers seeing his hair waving in the current. Some of the boys used rocks to build a makeshift dam to somewhat divert the river's flow around the wreckage. Soldiers were pinned in and screaming for help. At first, the only doctor at the scene was Dr. Ned C. Watts.

Dr. Watts didn't know the wreck had occurred until "a young man wearing only underwear briefs who was shouting" flagged him down. Watts' hospital in Jellico had only one phone, so staff went to neighboring houses to call other doctors only to discover that Watts was the only doctor available. He spent several hours as the lone doctor at the wreck. Later, several doctors came to the scene to help and some of the trapped soldiers were administered morphine and plasma while still trapped. The removal of bodies and the injured continued all night and throughout the next day.

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Ed Westcott took this photograph from the river bank at night high above the train wreck. Volunteers are trying to get to the injured and everyone is trying to help

Roe Chance, the railroad signalman at Highcliff, called Clyde McNeil at home. Chance told McNeil that the signal telling him that the troop train had just passed Highcliff had been triggered but had immediately gone out. They both knew what that meant — a train wreck. So, they got the motor cart, a small rail vehicle that ran on a gas engine, and headed toward the train. The first person they saw was the flagman who they observed “was scared to death and, this being his first trip on this route, he did not know where he was.”

Chance and McNeil found that men from Highcliff, most of whom were coal miners and more accustomed than most to responding to emergencies, were already hard at work rescuing the injured. The two of them concentrated on severing a 600-volt live wire at the pole to keep anyone from being electrocuted. Before long, electric lights had been hooked up to help with the rescue efforts.

Next week we will publish the full text of the report on the involvement in the disaster by the War Department, U.S. Engineer Office, Manhattan District, Clinton Engineer Works, Oak Ridge, Tenn.