

Locomotive No. 418's steam dome

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | July 10, 2007

EDITOR'S NOTE: Following is part of an ongoing series about the 1944 troop train wreck in Highcliff, Tenn.

My journey of discovery that started with Bill Sergeant's suggestion that I do a story on the July 6, 1944, troop train wreck has resulted in my meeting several most interesting and delightful people. I have learned substantially more about the event than I ever expected to uncover.

Last week's story of Leon Hatcher's difficult recollections about his personal experience, transporting the injured soldiers, was one of the unexpected but very rewarding aspects of my research.

Earlier, the story of Jim Tidwell, likely the very first responder to the wreck — something that also changed his life forever and resulted in his lifelong dedication to those soldiers who lost their lives, especially the 34 individuals identified in the Jellico Veterans Memorial — was told by his son, Mark Tidwell.

This week we will explore the single lasting artifact of the troop train wreck remaining in Highcliff, and how it came to be a flowerpot in Tidwell's yard. Furthermore, Tidwell will share his desires for the artifact's future.

Mark Tidwell has the steam dome from the No. 418 locomotive which pulled the No. 47 L&N Troop Train that wrecked July 6, 1944, at Highcliff, Tenn., as it passed the small town heading into the gorge known locally as the Jellico Narrows. The steam dome that sat atop the locomotive was knocked off by the initial contact with the river bed's enormous boulders. It was not retrieved when the rest of the locomotive and derailed railroad cars were removed from the Clear Fork River's boulder strewn riverbed.

This unusual fragment of the historic troop train wreck is an artifact that has tremendous historic significance. Right now, it continues the role to which it has been relegated for the past several years: It is a flower pot!

There is quite a story tied to this steam dome, as you might imagine. It seems that some time shortly after the train had been removed from the river, the steam dome was noticed lying at the bottom of a pool in the river. John P. Ascher, in his book "She Jumped the Tracks," tells the story by saying on page 35 that Jim Tidwell "... tells of how Elbert Gibson, weeks after the wreck was cleared, with a pair of mules, got the 418's steam dome cover out of the river bottom. Bill Provins acquired it and by 1960 it passed into Hazel Ross' hands."

At the time of his writing this book, Ascher noted, "Glen and Hazel display flowers of the season in their Highcliff front yard, beautifully arranged in 418's inverted dome cover."

Mark Tidwell came into possession of the steam dome after Hazel's death. He provided the following account of the dome's history and possible future: "In my earliest childhood memories (I was born in '64) the steam dome sat at the back of the Chambers' house (later known as the Ross house after Hazel Chambers married Glenn Ross). The gutter from the house ran into the dome and it held a ready supply of water. Chambers had a big German shepherd dog named Prince and he often dipped in the dome on hot days."

"Sometime, and I can't rightly say when, it was moved to the front of the house, where it became a big flower pot," Tidwell stated. "This was probably after Hazel married Ross and he had cleaned up around the house and rearranged things."

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"It got a lot of attention after Ascher wrote the book and the Veterans Monument dedication," Tidwell continued. "Several people tried to buy it from the Rosses. I really can't say for sure why, but Hazel told me one day that upon her death I was to get the steam dome, if I'd promise it would stay in Highcliff, not be sold, and remain part of the community's history."

"She soon went to the nursing home and later passed away. Her husband Glenn never mentioned the dome for a couple of years," Tidwell stated. "Then one day out of the blue he came down and said 'Come help me load up your pot and we'll bring it down here.' That was about 2004 the best I remember. Mr. Ross has been dead over a year now."

"As an aside, my most pertinent memory of Mr. Ross was his fear of ever being cold again. He served in World War II and was a participant in the Battle of the Bulge, where he experienced some of the coldest weather of the last century. He was severely frostbitten and wounded. He would haul his coal in June and July getting ready for the coming winter. Cold weather really and truly scared the man! It was a phobia he took to the grave. The piece of mortar shrapnel in his breastbone at long last worked out and was removed a couple of years before he died."

"Several people have tried to buy the dome from me. But it is not for sale. My wife and I will see in the next few years that it goes to a proper place for display. We would certainly prefer it stay in the Jellico area," Tidwell said. "I just retouched the paint on the L&N 418 logo. I can't say if it is the original paint job or just put on later. Just too many years and too many hands involved."



Mark Tidwell rests his foot on the steam dome from No. 418 locomotive that crashed into the boulders of Clear Fork River

As you can see, the steam dome has a storied past and is a fitting historic artifact of the train wreck. I am sure Tidwell will arrange for a suitable permanent location to house and display the dome.

As part of my research into this story, I wanted to find that steam dome and also wanted to photograph the wreck site for myself. On a Friday afternoon recently I drove to Jellico and took Highway 25W south. About three miles from town a most amazing sight greets one. High cliffs at the top of mountain ridges begin to loom out of the distance and become prominent and impressive the closer you get to the Jellico Narrows.

Not being familiar with the road, I slowly drove into the curves that trace the Clear Fork River as the mountains closed in on the railroad, the river and the highway leaving barely enough room for the three of them to run though the gorge. A couple of cars caught up with me as I slowly searched the road bank for signs of the wreck scene. I soon passed a very small sign no more than a foot square with "train wreck" written on it.

There was a pull-off on the left barely large enough for one car and I had passed it before I recognized what it was.

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So, I continued through the Jellico Narrows with the two cars tight on my rear end. I was looking for a place to turn around. The first wide spot in the road I saw came up on the right and I pulled off the road planning to turn around. Well, the first car behind me pulled off also right behind me. I waited for the second car that was trailing me to pass and then I made a U-turn to head back through the narrows.

The person who had been forced to stop behind me had his head out of the car and his arm raised while saying something to me. I slowed, lowered my window and asked him what he said, thinking he was asking me a question. What he said while shaking his fist at me was "This ain't no turn-a-round." I just said "sorry" and drove off. Guess I had made him mad, but I sure didn't mean to ... I just wanted to get back to the wreck scene.

My reason for telling you this little story is to bring up the fact that Jellico is known as a helpful town. The town uses their response to the 1944 Troop Train Wreck as an example of the spirit of the town, and correctly so. Yet, even in a town known for its helpfulness, it seems there may be at least one less than helpful person.

On the last page of "She Jumped the Tracks" there is an article reprinted from The Advance-Sentinel, published May 23, 1924, where Jellico is said to be the "City with a Soul." Here is an excerpt from that article: "I have seen men and women working through the night some of whom one would not dream of working as they did; with no thought of anything except to relieve the suffering. I have seen them work fifty and sixty hours without stopping at all, served food by the Red Cross among the wreckage while they worked ... I have seen a city with a soul. I am happy that I am a citizen of that city."

Citizens of Jellico, Highcliff, Lake City, Clinton and the military of Oak Ridge all were "cities with souls" in responding to this horrible tragedy in their midst.

Mark Tidwell also told me more about Elmer "Dobey" Chambers, the deputy sheriff of Highcliff, who never drove a car. He also did not let his daughter, Hazel Ross (who gave Mark the steam dome), drive. Mark said that Dobey hitchhiked everywhere he went. Dobey will undoubtedly be the subject of an upcoming *Historically Speaking* column, along with the story of the "Gold Digger" — a .45 caliber pistol with a huge story which even has a slight connection to the train wreck.

Speaking of the "Gold Digger" pistol, Mark also introduced me to the tale of the Jonathan Swift Silver Mine. In the early 1700s, a Frenchman was captured by the Cherokee and saw a vein of silver some where near Jellico, so the story goes.

After three years with the Cherokee, the Frenchman marked the mine's location and escaped the Cherokee. In the mid-1700s, the Frenchman took Swift (a silversmith) with him to relocate the mine. Swift declared the mine the richest he had ever seen. They smelted some of the silver into two horse loads of French crowns and brought them out of the mountains. When they later attempted to relocate the mine, they could not do so.

Swift spent the rest of his life looking for the lost mine, and to this day there are folks who are venturing into the woods around Jellico still looking for the richest silver mine Jonathan Swift ever saw. Yet another future story in *Historically Speaking*!

Next week I would like to give you some additional details from "She Jumped the Track." And lastly, I would like to give you my personal conclusions regarding the actual cause of the terrible troop train wreck.

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