

# Causes of 1944 Troop Train Wreck, Part 1

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | July 24, 2007

In the course of research into the July 6, 1944 Troop Train wreck in Highcliff, TN, I have found many unusual stories. Not the least of which is the story of the “Gold Digger” – a Colt 45 caliber pistol. Mark Tidwell gave me a round of ammunition from that pistol when I visited him to learn about the story of the locomotive # 418 steam dome. He said that the pistol had been used by Deputy Sheriff Elmer “Dobey” Chambers, father of the lady who left instructions that Mark should have the steam dome after her death.

In the days just before the troop train wreck, Dobey had noticed a strange car periodically being left parked for long periods of time on Highway 25W near the “Narrows.” Those who saw the man driving the large sedan from a distance commented to the deputy that it was unusual to find a young able-bodied man who was not in the war. So, this stranger was suspicious to the town folks just by being there.

Dobey did not drive a car, nor did he let his daughter drive. He hitch-hiked everywhere he needed to go or he walked. On this occasion, he walked to the spot on 25W where the car had been left parked for some time. As he was looking inside the car, he heard the buzz of a bullet as it passed very near his head and smacked into the hood of the car. He quickly ducked behind the car and then several more shots were heard coming from across the river. Not knowing the full strength of the attack, Dobey decided to get help. He quickly went back on the road to the town of Highcliff.

He got a posse and also picked up his Marlin 30-30 caliber carbine and together they went back to the car. It was still sitting in the same spot. They waded the river and soon located a lone stranger on the hillside. Dobey used his 30-30 carbine to disarm the stranger. The stranger, who later would be recalled by some as a possible “German agent”, admitted to shooting at Dobey. He said he thought Dobey was just someone trying to steal his car. Dobey did not wear any kind of uniform, just a black suit.

When the trial was held for the stranger, he denied owning the pistol. Deputy Dobey kept the pistol and used it for the rest of his career. After the train wreck in the “Narrows,” when there was lots of talk about sabotage, some connected the large sedan, the shooting stranger, the timing of the appearance of the stranger and the location within the “Narrows.” This caused those looking for a conspiracy to make the stranger into a German agent who was there to cause the train wreck.

They concluded that he “must have been messing with the tracks.” You will recall that the FBI report determined there was no evidence of conspiracy or sabotage. Of course, as with all conspiracy theories, facts do little to abate the propagation of a good potential conspiracy.

Dobey always held that the stranger was really looking for the lost “Jonathon Swift Silver Mines” or maybe digging for gold in the cliffs above the river there in the “Narrows.” Thus, the pistol became known as the “Gold Digger” for its association with the treasure hunting stranger who might have been a “German agent” according to some.

So, there is one possible cause of the accident, however unlikely. Let’s look at some others.

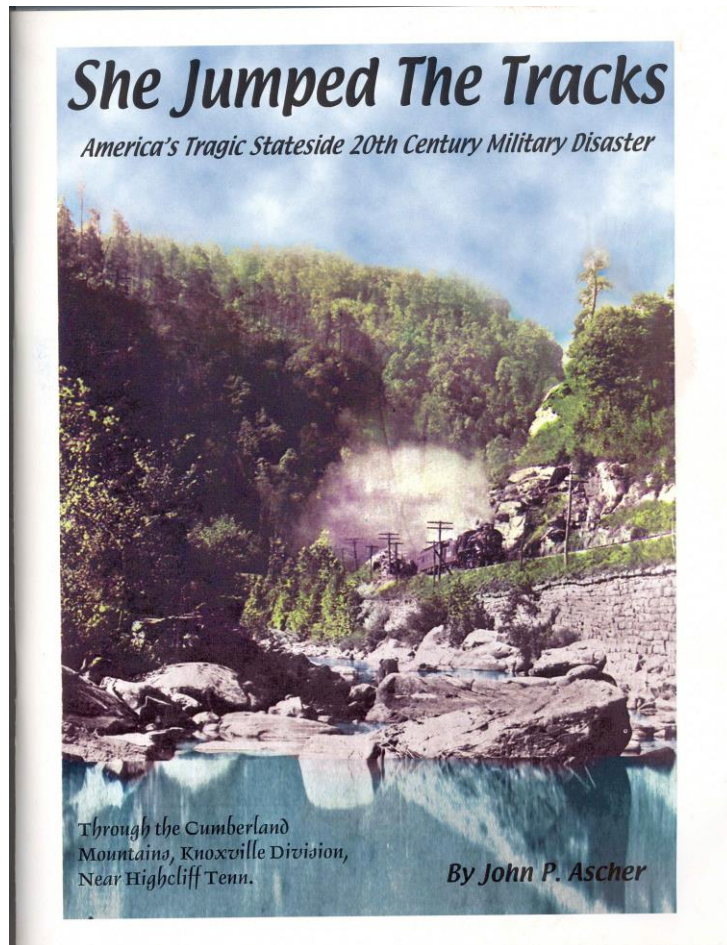
In John P. Ascher’s book, *She Jumped the Tracks*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, published in 2004, he has added a section to the back cover titled, “Cause of the Wreck.” Here he states, “Section C herein, pages 62 – 83, offers details leading to the following conclusion: ‘Wide (track) gage is the only professional assessment...’ This in itself was insufficient cause.”

John continues, “In recent years, we have been exposed to terrorism, our Axis enemies were not above such operations during World War II. In fact, their overseas battlefield operations were well supplemented by sinking of American ships as well as stateside acts of aggression against troop trains.

“Local Campbell County citizens have related to the author that a German-national worker was performing repairs to the track-side home at Highcliff. Following the wreck, he disappeared.

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*She Jumped the Tracks*, by John P. Ascher, provides a wealth of information on the troop train wreck

"For years, responsibility for the train wreck was placed on engineer Rollins. The allegation that he was speeding is untrue. Rollins died in the wreck. It is well proven that he was not speeding.

"About 36 hours after the accident, a Federal source emphasized that the wreck's cause was not sabotage. The very fact that this announcement was hastily made, before a professional investigation was conducted, is suspect in itself.

"By August 22, 1944, when the investigation was released, a number of contributing factors were omitted...particularly regarding the locomotive.

"After all, it was the locomotive that first derailed and at any speed a foreign object placed at a critically vulnerable spot would have touched off the fatal event!

"There is ample reason to assert this to be so and has not been specifically refuted.

So, this conclusion to the cause of the wreck drawn by John P. Ascher at the close of his book, leaves me with more questions than answers.