

Bus driver transported 'dead and alive' troops

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | July 3, 2007

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

Last week through the "rest of the story" of Jim Tidwell we saw the lasting and permanent impact the troop train wreck of July 6, 1944 had on Jim for the rest of his life. Now I would like to provide you a first hand account of the bus driver who drove the first bus from Oak Ridge to the train wreck site and picked up "dead and alive" soldiers. He took the soldiers to the hospital in Oak Ridge and then went back again and again during the rest of that night and the next day. The sights and sounds of those long ago bus trips left a lasting impression on that bus driver just as seeing the scene in the river that night changed Jim Tidwell's life forever.

Even today, remembering those bus trips is hard and causes Leon Hatcher to say, "I wish I had never made them bus trips — the memory has stayed with me all my life." Listening to Leon talk about that harrowing experience years ago that is still fresh on his mind made the train wreck more real than ever to me. His daughter, Bobbie, said that he did not talk about the train wreck, hardly at all.

She told him about the series of articles in *Historically Speaking* about Troop Train Wreck and she said he then spoke more about the train wreck than he ever had before. She was amazed by what he told her. She called me to see if I wanted to hear what her dad had to say. She warned me that he might not even want to talk to me about it. I said I would like to try and talk with him, so we left it that I would call back to set a specific time to meet. When I called, Leon himself answered. He was just leaving the house and said he did not have time to talk. I thought, well, that's that. However, he said I should call back the next day, to which I readily agreed.

The next day when I called Leon had already decided when a good time would be for me to come. I suggested in the morning and he said, "Too early, come at 2 p.m." I said OK wondering just what I was getting into. His approach was abrupt and his sentences curt. I later learned that he just talked that way naturally without meaning anything by it and also that Leon's daily routine was to sleep quite late each morning, so he did not want me to interrupt his sleep. When I met him, I found him to be a special person in every way. He was fun to talk to and easy to be with. The interview went really well, once I got past the dog.

When I arrived at Leon's home, his dog, a blond cocker spaniel, was not happy to have a visitor. Barking loudly she hid behind Leon's chair. After finally convincing the dog that I would not harm Leon, he and I began to exchange pleasantries and soon got to his story.

He was discharged from the Army in Houston, Texas, after being shot in the leg by another soldier. They were both doing guard duty when Leon was mistaken for an intruder and shot. After coming back to Knoxville, he needed a job. He learned that Roane Anderson was hiring bus drivers and the Clinton Engineer Works was hiring as well so he decided to apply for a job in Oak Ridge. He was hired by the American Industrial Transportation company even before they had buses.

He was hired as a bus driver, but there were no buses, so he worked as a chauffeur and drove Army officers from the Andrew Johnson Hotel in Knoxville to Oak Ridge. When the first buses were brought to the Clinton Engineer Works, Leon drove the first bus to the airport. It was a green Army bus.



Leon Hatcher recalls painful memories his bus trips to and from the July 1944 Troop train wreck

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After midnight on July 6, 1944, the night of the train wreck, Leon had just returned from a trip to take workers to K-25 when he was pulled off the normal bus route. He was told only to drive the bus to Jellico and to hurry. It was still well before daylight when he left Oak Ridge. His supervisor told him "not to slow down for nothing!" Leon recalls driving the winding and dark road through Clinton, Lake City, Jacksboro and Lafollette and on to the wreck scene along Highway 25W just south of Jellico at Highcliff. What he saw when he got there still haunts his memory today.

The road was nearly blocked with a maze of vehicles and people were everywhere along the road and in the riverbed. There were injured soldiers lying along the roadside. There were dead bodies there, too. When Leon got to this part of his story, he said, "I wish I had never seen that train wreck." Periodically during our time together he repeated that sentence. It was stressful for him to recall the details. We talked for a long while before he could express the details. Leon said, "So many of those soldiers were hurt and some were hurt much more than they thought."

As soon as the bus arrived, people began to load the soldiers on the bus, both dead and alive. They laid the soldiers in the seats of the bus. Soon Leon was told to run the bus as fast as it would go and take his load to the hospital in Oak Ridge.

Leon said, "I didn't stop for nothing. I ran the bus as fast as it would go, crooked roads an all." The soldiers were moaning and with each bump in the road their painful reactions could be heard. Leon, said again, "I wish I had never went." He continued to describe the agony he heard from behind him as he drove the bus at top speed.

When the bus went through the towns in reverse order to get back to Oak Ridge — Lafollette, Jacksboro and then Clinton, the city police in each city had been alerted that there was a bus coming carrying injured soldiers. They waved Leon through every red light and helped him get through each town as quickly as possible. He was running the bus as fast as it would go and still stay on the road.

He went on to say, "The most pitiful thing was at the Oak Ridge Hospital. They took them off the front of the bus and in the emergency door." The doctors were checking to see how bad each soldier was hurt and were selecting the ones to work on first. Leon saw the bodies piling up and the injured waiting to be treated. He may have realized then for the first time just how bad some of the soldiers were injured. He saw some that he knew had died on the way to Oak Ridge.

Again, Leon said, "They loaded my bus with soldiers, both dead and alive. I sure wish I had never seen that train wreck." He then explained that he made four trips to the wreck site each time bringing a load of injured and either dead or dying soldiers to Oak Ridge Hospital.

Today, 63 years after the Troop Train wreck, Leon Hatcher still has difficulty talking about the extreme suffering he was exposed to and the bus trips still remain fixed in his mind as an awful experience. Yet, he speaks with pride of the bus trips, recognizing he was performing a valuable service and may well have contributed substantially to the saving of several lives.

Leon was a young man fresh out of the Army when he was called on to drive his bus to transport injured soldiers. He was strong and healthy. He did his job and did it well. Today, he is in his 80's and is still very alert and thinks the world of his dog. She tried to keep me from taking her picture, but I tricked her, with Leon's help, we got her picture anyway.

Leon and his daughter Bobbie live here in Oak Ridge at the same location where the temporary dwelling unit stood that Leon and his family moved into during the very early Manhattan Project days. The TDU burned in the early 1970s and they have rebuilt on the same site.

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After working for the Manhattan Project, Leon worked for 25 years with the Oak Ridge Public Works Department. He retired from that position in 1985.

Next week we will look at the history of the Steam Dome from Locomotive No. 418, the single and unique artifact of the July 6, 1944 Troop Train Wreck. We will also meet 90-year-old Bertha Trammell, who still lives beside the railroad track as it enters the “Jellico Narrows” of the Clearfork River. She will tell her memory of that night as the doomed train passed just outside her open bedroom window.

Bertha will recount the impression made on her when the train came right by her house just before she heard the loud sound of metal scrapping metal — a high pitched squeal really. She then recalls hearing an even louder and longer crashing sound as the locomotive and first four cars careened into the riverbed hitting huge boulders.