

# Causes of the 1944 troop train wreck, Part 2

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | July 31, 2007



Clear Fork River today, showing the scene of the troop train wreck near 'Haystack Rock' and a passing train on the curved track above the riverbed

In last week's column, we took a close look at some of the theories that explain the cause of the July 6, 1944, troop train wreck in Highcliff, Tenn. This week, we continue with a report from Mark Tidwell, son of Jim Tidwell, probably the first responder to the wreck. Mark relates the recollections of two people who with connections to the wreck, beginning with those of his neighbor, Buck Parrot.

Mark says, "I talked with my neighbor Buck Parrot. He was just one and a half when the train wrecked. But he remembers as a boy the pistol and the rumors surrounding it, hearing of the man it was taken from, and it being linked in speculation to the derailment.

"I just talked with my 92-year-old great aunt, Jeanette Petrey, on this 63rd anniversary of the wreck. She says, 'Jim Frank (her husband) was hanging out at Hal's Garage (downtown Jellico). He heard all the sirens and shortly thereafter that a troop train had wrecked. They were saying men and tools were needed to free the injured. He came home, gathered up some stuff and took off out there. I never saw him until the next morning. He was absolutely worn out and covered in dirt and grime.

"A few days later he was also covered in poison ivy from going up and down the river bank. He was miserable! I didn't go look until several days later. Jim Frank said it was too crowded and we didn't need to be in the way. There was way too much traffic.

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"Besides that, he had to rest up and go to work after he came home from the wreck. He worked as a shipping clerk at the Wholesale Grocery. When I finally got to go look, the best I can remember is that there was only one, maybe two coaches still left at the scene.

"On July the fourth, two days before the wreck, I was out at Sandy Beach. Harold and Grace Moon, their two girls, and Robert (her son, born in 1938) had a picnic. Oh ... we had fun! Jim Frank was at work and couldn't be there.

"I remember this man walking down the railroad tracks. He was what we called a 'hobo.' He was coming from towards Morley. I have often remembered that man, especially after rumors began to fly about the cause of the wreck. Somebody could have messed with the track. But that's where I was on July the Fourth, 1944. And that's what I remember about the day of the Troop Train Wreck."

So, here is another possible cause, again highly unlikely, but still a possible cause.

Another story from Mark has two people on a motorcycle near the track just prior to the wreck. Mark tells the story: "Ted Barton is a sharp fellow! Snazzy dresser! He had those black and white shoes on today. He must be in late eighties or early nineties. Still drives and carouses around town daily.

"Ted said he was at the theater in Jellico when somebody came by and yelled, 'Two troop trains have hit head-on out in the Narrows!' He and two friends followed the Jellico fire truck out to the scene. He helped tie two ropes onto the rear of the engine to help people up and down the steep, treacherous, rocky bank to the river. He said he had never seen anything before or since so horrible.

"Soldiers were screaming and bleeding and dying. He said Harold Moon was trying to extricate one soldier that kept yelling 'Shoot me! Just shoot me!' Just as quick as they got him out he died. People were frantically wading the river trying to help.

"He said one soldier, after they got him up to the roadway, was hysterical. Ranting, raving, jumping. Ted said two State Troopers, Willard and Godfrey, and Sheriff Rose Kitts, took a blanket and surrounded the fellow and wrapped him up in it to get him calmed down.

"The sight of the bodies being brought up the bank was horrifying to Ted. It was too much for his friends to cope with and they left.

"Later, Ted was at the old Jellico Hospital. This nurse, covered with blood, told Ted she had to have just a little break from the terrible scenes of the dead and injured. They were standing by the hand-pulley-operated elevator when they brought in another soldier that was screaming 'I just want to see my wife and two kids.' He too died just after uttering those words. Ted said that was enough for him. Ted says he even saw some nurses wading out into the river earlier to assist the injured.

"He also says that there was at least a modest search and rumor about two strange men on a motorcycle seen around Sandy Beach and the Highcliff area just before the wreck. As you can see, the 9/11 syndrome of suspecting out-of-the-ordinary people as terrorists is nothing new. World War II certainly kept peoples' suspicions on edge!"

So, here is yet another story about unusual observations being tied to the troop train wreck.

What are we to conclude? What really caused the Troop Train No. 47, pulled by locomotive No. 418, to wreck?

Everyone I have talked to who saw the aftermath of the wreck has strong and clear memories of it. Some readily admit the trauma they saw literally changed their lives as it was like nothing else they have experienced before or since.

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Yet, one can obtain as many different stories of what happened (with the exception of a few basic facts) as there are people telling the stories. Each person has distinct recall of details that are unique to their memory.

Those individuals who might add clarity from their personal experience in the wreck as to the cause are dead. The two key individuals, John C. (Lyles) Rollins, the engineer, and John William Tummins, the fireman, were both killed by the wreck. Rollins died instantly and Tummins died before the night was over. While in the Jellico hospital, he did make some telling remarks to both Dr. J.S. Ausmus and nurse Mrs. William Turnblazer, Jr. His statement was also collaborated by others regarding the excessive speed of the train just prior to the wreck.

Tummins, however, chose to tell the reporter, Yarborough, only that “she jumped the tracks.” This, I believe, was merely an attempt to avoid placing blame on the engineer when Tummins knew full well that anything he said would be published in the newspaper.

As for the German agents, hobos who were in the area, motorcycle riders, etc.: I believe the FBI’s report that states “No Evidence of Sabotage.” However, the people who recall these strange precursor events will not be easily swayed, regardless. And, who knows, stranger things have happened!

Another possible cause is the gauge of the track at the curve was wider than prescribed for that curvature of track. According to the Interstate Commerce Commission’s report, printed in full on pages 74 to 77 of Ascher’s book, the causes of the accident were concluded to be, “a combination of wide gauge of track and excessive speed on a sharp curve.” The ICC report had estimated the speed of the train at 45 mph and the maximum safe speed for that curve as 35 mph. Ascher questions both conclusions of the ICC report.

He goes to considerable lengths to question the locomotive’s fitness, especially the front trucks and their failure to slue (pivot) as needed. His conclusion includes the question, “Why was there no report of inspection of 438’s front truck?”

Ascher also discounts excessive speed. He minimizes the adverse impact of the wide gauge or questions if it was fact. He seems to point more toward the locomotive as possibly having defects that contributed to the wreck.

So, what is my conclusion after all this research? Here is what I have come to believe after my research and discussions with various people who remember that terrible train wreck. I believe the wreck was caused by a combination of things:

- Speed: Tummins’ statement to the Jellico doctor causes me to think the locomotive was traveling in excess of 35 mph;
- Wide gauge of track: documentation seems consistent that the gauge was wider than prescribed;
- Locomotive: Ascher’s book has convinced me that the front trucks may well have been faulty;
- Attitude of Rollins: Again, Tummins’ statement to the doctor causes me to think something was awry with the engineer.

The above four possible contributing factors may have contributed collectively to the wreck. There may well have been others. Rarely is there one single cause for such catastrophes.

I hope you have enjoyed the time spent with the July 6, 1944, troop train wreck. Thanks to Bill Sergeant for the encouragement to do the series. One last thing remains before wrapping up this series. Soon we

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will look at the history of the Red Cross in Oak Ridge and the role the Red Cross had in the 1944 troop train wreck.