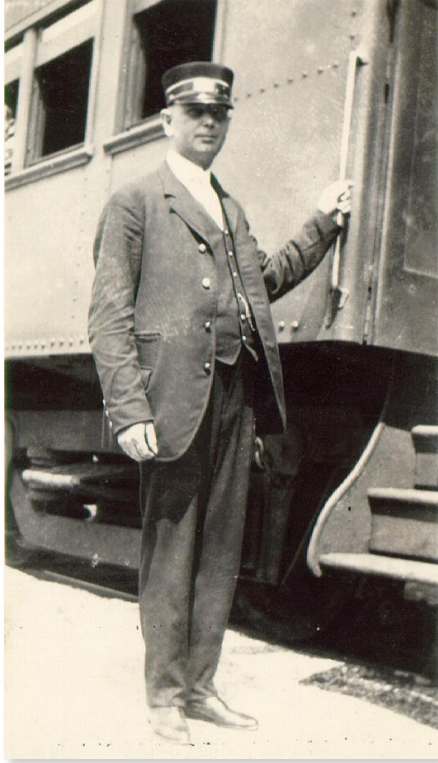


1925 Train Wreck Kills James Banker

Researched & Written by Terry L Sisco



Each year the Primitive Methodist Church of Johnson City, New York set aside a special Sunday in June to celebrate Children's Day and the date selected in 1925 was Sunday, June 14. Ranked somewhere after Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving, Children's Day was a special celebration to recognize and honor the children of the church. The children's choir would sing. Memorized Bible verses would be recited by kids too young to understand the full impact of their message. Some of the older children even got to read something that they had written in Sunday school about their faith.

It was also a day for parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles to marvel at how much cuter, taller, smarter or prettier their child was compared to the others. The week leading up to this special day was spent memorizing lines and rehearsing parts.

There should be no doubt that there is something truly special about granddaughters, especially first granddaughters. On this particular Sunday morning, number Six Theron Street in Johnson City, New York

was full of energy and excitement. First child, first grandchild and first niece, Dorotha Sisco was about to make her debut in the children's program.

Like a favorite doll, Dorotha's two aunts, Lillian and Lorena Banker spent an inordinate amount of time curling and fixing her hair, making certain that she would be the cutest girl in the five-year-old class. Ethel Sisco appreciated her two sister's help dressing Dorotha. She and husband Olin had their hands full getting two year old Leon dressed and ready for church.

Dorotha's grandparents James and Lila Banker had spent the night as they wouldn't have missed this performance for the world. James, a conductor for the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western (D, L & W) railroad line was elated that his schedule worked out so that he could enjoy the festivities and family time together. That is, until sometime after breakfast.



Lila & Lillian Banker

With no phone of their own, the Sisco's relied on their next door neighbor who had a phone to relay messages. At approximately 8:45 a.m., the neighbor came over and advised James that there was an emergency call for him. He had left the neighbor's number as an emergency contact number for work. The caller advised him that he was needed immediately to fill in over the next few days for a fellow conductor who had fallen ill.

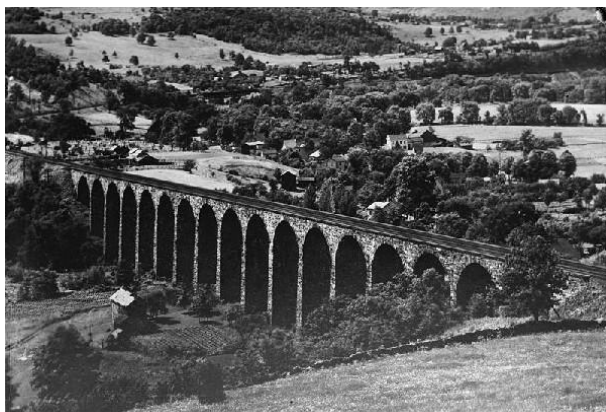
The eastbound passenger train was known as "Extra 1104". It was called Extra because it was a non-scheduled special run of German-Americans on an excursion from Chicago, Illinois to Bremen, Germany.

Each year travel agent Leopold Neumann arranged this trip of mid-western Germans to visit the fatherland from which they or their ancestors had emigrated years earlier. The D, L & W train would take them to Hoboken, New Jersey where they would board transatlantic steamer, "Republic" awaiting to take them the remaining distance to Bremen. The designation of "1104" was given because this was the number permanently assigned to the massive steam engine.

Trailing behind Engine No. 1104 were two coaches and five Pullman sleeping cars, all of steel construction. All 182 passengers, mostly from Chicago were aboard and the porters were loading the final bags for the Monday, June 15, mid-morning departure. The Chicago travel agency had nailed large banners on the sides of the cars emblazoned with "See the Old Country Again."

Under the grey Chicago skies that threatened rain, one can imagine the care-free group of German-Americans leaning out of the windows waving good-bye as No. 1104 and its seven cars gradually strained and shuttered as it pulled away from the station.

Leaving Chicago, the excursion travelled westward to Buffalo, New York where it made a scheduled stop allowing the passenger an opportunity to see and experience the mighty Niagara Falls. As the trip continued, the rains grew heavier as the train entered the Binghamton, New York area. The bad weather was probably never noticed by the passengers in the excitement of their adventure. The drizzle grew into a heavy rain by late-afternoon as the train entered the Binghamton, New York area.

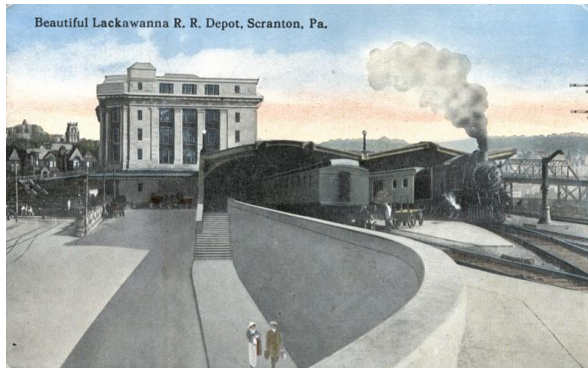


The bad weather was probably never noticed by the passengers now a few hours into the excitement of their adventure. Children were likely running through the aisles or exploring their little sleeping compartment on the Pullmans. Some of the adults were perhaps sitting around in the coach cars in animated discussion about finally returning to the old country. Others stared out the windows enjoying the panorama as the train swept along the

The Starucca Bridge

scenic Susquehanna River, passing by the lush green farmlands and crossing one of the marvels of modern engineering, the historic Starucca Bridge in Lanesboro, Pennsylvania.

The rains subsided about twenty miles down the tracks from Binghamton in New Milford, Pennsylvania. Within forty-five minutes the train would be making a stop in Scranton for fuel and a fresh crew.



Two experienced railroad men took charge of the train at the Scranton station. Up front, Engineer Loomis was in charge assisted by a “fireman” whose job it was to shovel coal into the firebox of the engine, maintain the steam pressure of the boiler and to keep the cylinders on the drive wheels oiled while the train was underway. Conductor James Banker, now into his second day filling in for the ill co-worker was responsible for the seven cars, the D, L, & W employees, the

cargo and most importantly, its passengers. He was assisted by a head brakeman along with a flagman by the name of Judge who was stationed in the rear of the train. There were also several porters on the Pullman sleeping cars.

This final portion of the trip would take them southeast from Scranton through Moscow, Gouldsboro, and Pocono Summit. It would then continue down through the Delaware Water Gap at East Stroudsburg crossing the Delaware River exiting Pennsylvania into New Jersey. From there it would head on an easterly route through Hackettstown, Morristown and on into Hoboken where the passengers would board their awaiting ships. The rains intensified as the train left Scranton at approximately 10:15 pm.

Hackettstown, New Jersey is nestled among the historic Revolutionary War farm towns and villages with names such as Great Meadows, Liberty and Washington. It marks the halfway point between the agrarian tranquillity of Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania to its west and the modernity of New York City fifty-two miles to the east.

The same storm front that drenched Binghamton hours earlier stretched all the way east to the Atlantic Ocean. Hackettstown was hit with a violent thunderstorm the evening of Monday, June 15. A lick of lightning made a direct hit on the Williams and Hibler Lumberyard (now the site of Blue Ridge Lumber). The ensuing fire, fuelled by the stacks of lumber lit the dark night sky of Hackettstown like a flickering candle lights a darkened room. Most of the townsfolk worked unsuccessfully to quell the blaze that eventually burned the lumberyard to the ground. Yet, unbeknownst to anyone, the storm had also set the stage for another, more deadly disaster.

The Rockport Crossing is the point where the D, L, & W track crosses rural Hazen Road in Rockport, New Jersey. In 1925, the state completed the purchase of 492 acres for a pheasant farm where Hazen Road slopes steeply towards the tracks.

Joseph Snyder's house sat about three and one-quarter miles from the Hackettstown train station not far from the Rockport Crossing. Having spent most of his evening watching the lumberyard blaze from his home, Joseph was surprised when he looked at his pocket watch and it read 2:23 a.m. On his way to retire for the evening he could see the headlamp of Extra 1104 approaching from a distance. As it got closer he noticed that the tender, the small car just behind the engine that carries the supply of coal seemed to be oddly derailed.

The recommended speed for trains through this section of track is seventy miles per hour. Due to the poor weather, Engineman Loomis was travelling at approximately fifty miles per hour when his engine No. 1104 began to derail from the track twisting out of control. There was no way for him to see or know that the torrential downpour had washed debris across the track at the Rockport Crossing. With the tracks covered with five to six inches of dirt and gravel there was nothing to keep the steel wheels of the front engine truck, the first set of wheels of the engine on the tracks. At 2:24 a.m. the engine ploughed through the crossing but the pony tender with its wheels off the track clutched the frogs of a switch derailing the engine and causing the coach cars to jump the tracks and begin a staccato bone jarring tap dance along the wooden ties of pine and oak.

The forward inertia twisted and tossed the steel frames of the cars as if they were mere toys. Loomis never had time to apply the brakes. At 2:25 am, on the morning of Tuesday, June 16, 1925, engine 1104 came to rest on its side. The first two cars, the coach cars filled with fifty people decoupled and came crashing across the steam engine.

The first car came to rest across the boiler of the engine while the second coach car came to rest across the rear of the boiler. The impact of the collision practically ripped all of the steam fittings and valves away from the boiler permitting the pressurized steam and hot water to spew upward like a geyser into the two passenger cars resting above. A New York Times article later appropriately dubbed the first coach car as the "Death Car."



Joseph Snyder sounded the alarm by telephone and then, with his wife rushed to the aid of the victims. Lyman Gulick, another farmer rode half clad in his automobile to Hackettstown, two miles away and summoned physicians and ambulances from there and other towns.

With little rest from fighting the earlier fires at the Williams and Hibler Lumber Yard, the citizens and doctors of Hackettstown rushed to aid the victims of this horrific accident. Arriving to the hissing and whistling sounds of the pressurized steam escaping its boiler, No. 1104 appeared in the dark as a moaning, writhing, dying behemoth. They were aghast at what they found. The suffering was intense.

Using sheets and pillows appropriated from the Pullman cars, the citizen rescuers struggled to bring the slightest bit of the comfort to those scalded by the steam. One man jerked a roll of bills from his pocket and begged Joseph Snyder to kill him ending his misery. Only a few trainmen and passengers were killed instantly. One woman was decapitated. The others went through hours of agony before they succumbed to their injuries.



Those that could be transported were taken to the hospital in Easton, Pennsylvania twenty-five miles to the southwest of Hackettstown. Others were transported to hospitals in, Dover and Morristown as there was no hospital in Hackettstown. On June 17, police were forced to draw up lines around the Easton hospital as hundreds of grief stricken relatives caused a near riot in an effort to ascertain any information about their loved ones.

Grand-daughter Dorothea Sisco Thomas remembers hearing the story that James Banker was seen walking down the tracks with his conductor's lantern aglow, perhaps in a state of shock from severe scalding shouting, "My God, would someone please help me." James Nathaniel Banker died nine days later on June 25, 1925 at the age of fifty-two.



Mr. and Mrs. John Pfeiffer, an elderly couple from Hold Corss, Iowa, riding in the front of the first coach miraculously survived with only a few bruises. Other survivors told of a slightly scalded Chicago woman who limped moaning through the wreckage until she found her missing purse.

A total of fifty passengers died, some from the impact of the crash, most from being scalded by the inescapable steam. Of the five crew members, only Flagman Judge survived as he was positioned at the rear of the train.

An investigation into the accident by the W. P. Borland, Director of the Bureau of Safety for the Interstate Commerce Commissions found that it was just that...an accident. There was no blame to be placed, no fingers to be pointed as all had done their jobs appropriately. It was deemed an act of God.



Rockport Crossing 2014

Today, the Rockport Crossing near Hackettstown, New Jersey is peaceful and quiet. In the area of the pheasant farm on Hazen Road near the crossing there is a simple garden to mark the site of the crash that happened generations in the past. In the garden is a brass plaque memorializing the final stop of engine No. 1104 and honouring the souls that were lost that early Tuesday morning of June 16, 1925.

