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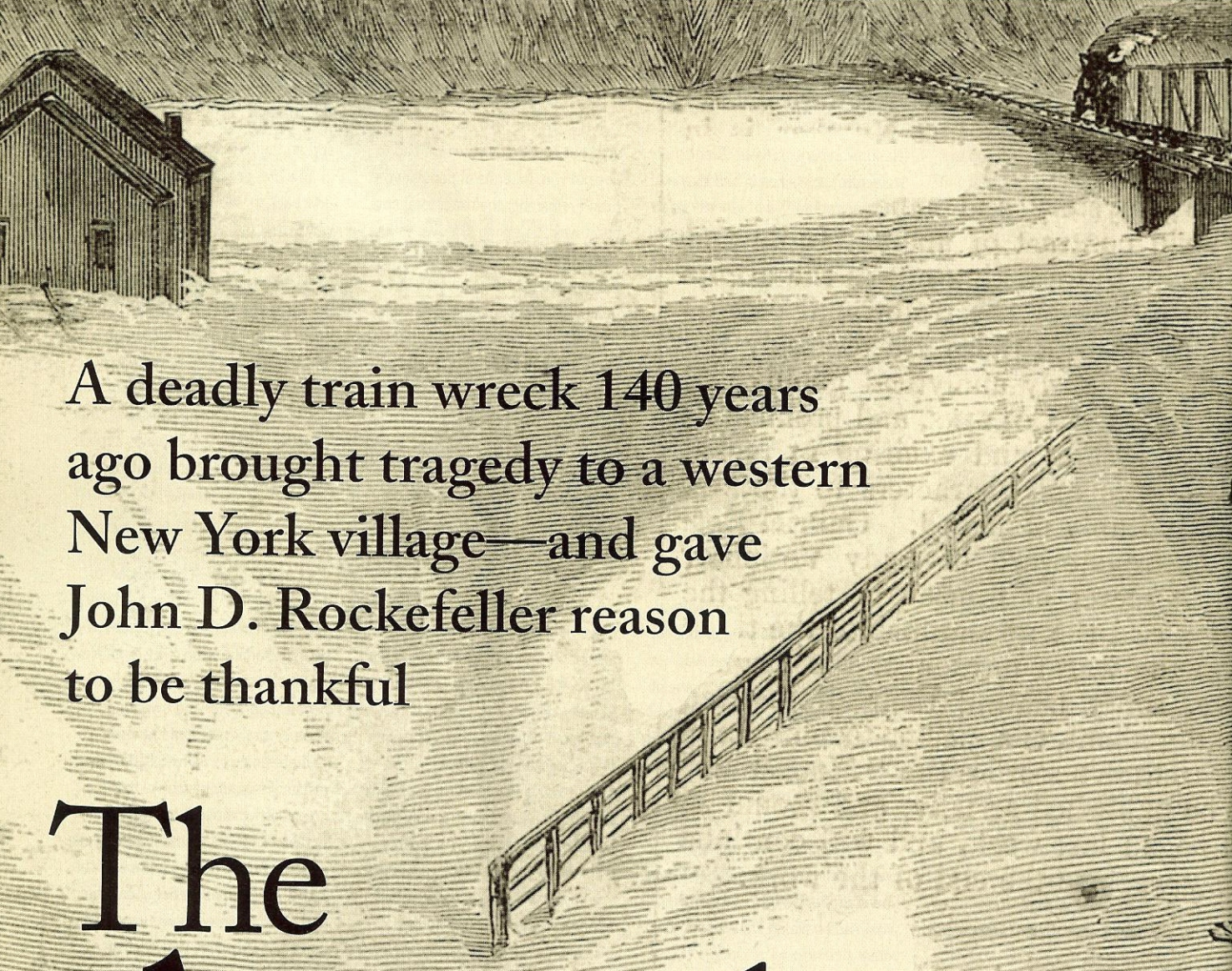
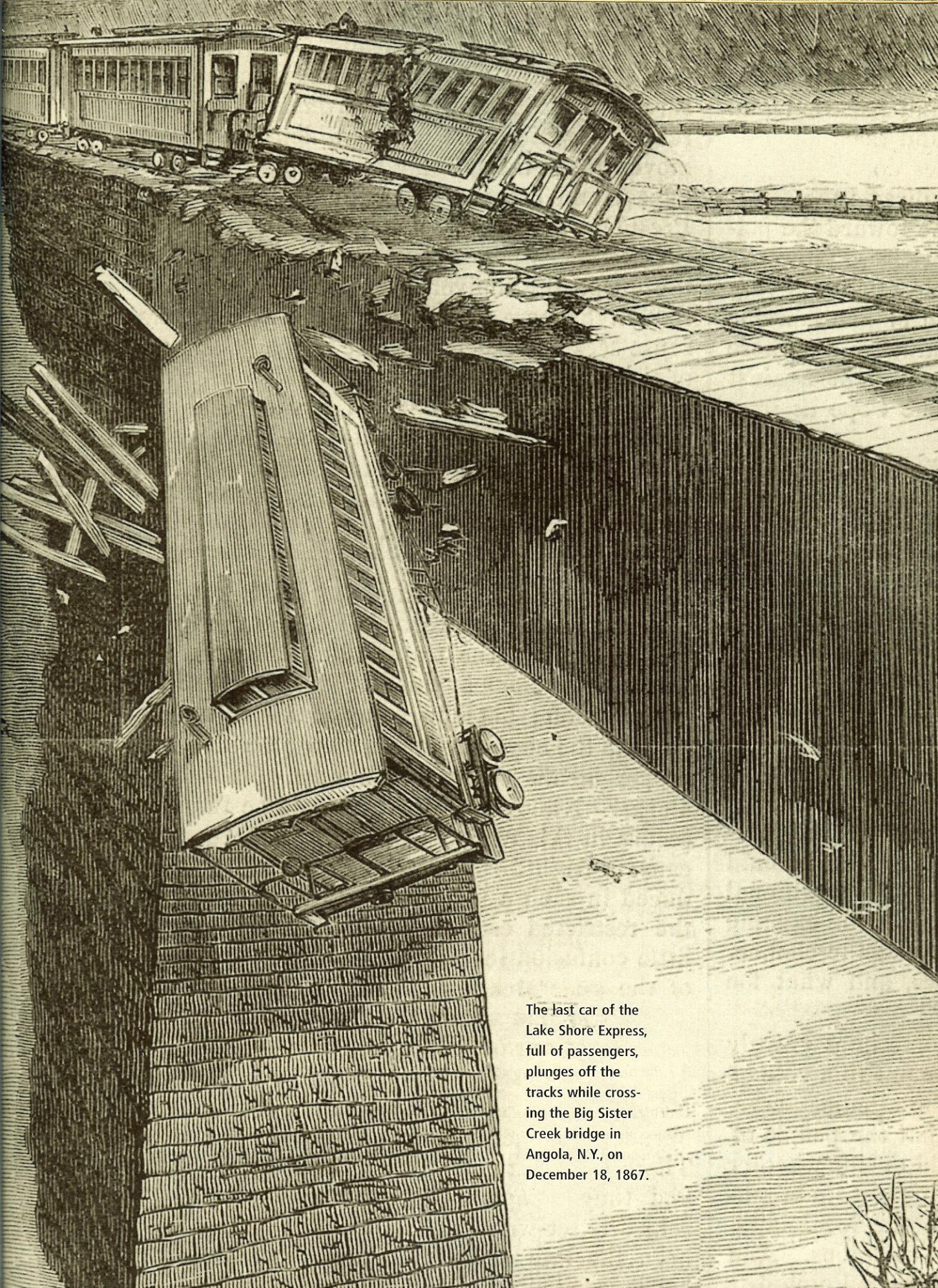


A deadly train wreck 140 years ago brought tragedy to a western New York village—and gave John D. Rockefeller reason to be thankful

The Angola Horror

by Charity Vogel



The last car of the Lake Shore Express, full of passengers, plunges off the tracks while crossing the Big Sister Creek bridge in Angola, N.Y., on December 18, 1867.

"The disaster, coming as it did just before Christmas, gripped the imagination of a nation still reeling from the Civil War that had ended two years earlier"

John D. Rockefeller was running late on the morning of December 18, 1867.

When he climbed out of bed in his modest house on Cheshire Street in Cleveland that frigid Wednesday to catch the early morning express to Buffalo, he had business on his mind. Even though it was the holiday season—just a week before Christmas—Rockefeller had decided to make a quick business trip to New York City. He wanted to check on his East Coast operations, where his brother, William, managed the New York offices of Rockefeller & Company.

But he got a late start that morning, which was not like him at all.

Perhaps it had been all the packing. Rockefeller planned to squeeze in some holiday visits with friends and family in New York before returning home for Christmas, so into his suitcases he packed the gifts he intended to give to his relatives and associates there. That done, he sent his bags ahead of him to Cleveland's Union Station, and bid goodbye to Laura, his wife of three years, and Elizabeth, their 1-year-old daughter. He then headed off to catch his train.

Rockefeller was 28, a successful young businessman already widely known in Cleveland and the oil refining industry. A disciplined man, Rockefeller prided himself on hard work and a demanding schedule. He kept a sharp eye toward his own advancement, demanded a lot of others and drove himself harder than anyone. He knew that if he caught the 6:40 a.m. Lake Shore Express, due in Buffalo around 1:30 in the afternoon, he could then take the 6 p.m. New York Central Express, which would deliver him into Manhattan by 7 the next morning, in plenty of time to make full use of the business day.

Although his plans were meticulously arranged, Rockefeller pulled into Cleveland's Union Station just a few minutes too late; his bags made the train but he didn't, and it saved his life.

By missing the Lake Shore Express that morning, Rockefeller escaped one of the worst railroad accidents in 19th-century America—the "Angola Horror," as newspapers subsequently dubbed it. At a little past 3 in the afternoon, while crossing over a high railroad bridge in the western New York village of Angola, the last two cars of the Buffalo-bound express jumped the tracks and tumbled 30 to 50 feet into the icy, treacherous gorge below. Both cars burst into flames, trapping passengers inside and immolating them into blackened heaps of indistinguishable remains. Rockefeller, as a latecomer to the Cleveland station, would have sat in the end car.

Nearly 50 people died and many more were burned and badly injured in the disaster, which—coming as it did just before Christmas—gripped the imagination of a nation still reeling from the Civil War that had ended two years earlier. Accounts of the tragedy, replete with grisly illustrations, filled the pages of newspapers and periodicals across the country for weeks—and prompted calls by the public for safer trains, tracks and rail car heating methods. "The name Angola is, and will forever be, associated with the most fearful Railway slaughter on record," stated the Buffalo *Patriot and Journal* on January 1, 1868. The newspaper offered the hope that "human foresight and ingenuity can prevent such terrible occurrences, in the future, whatever may be the verdict as to the cause of the present calamity."

Rockefeller came across the scene himself when the later train he had taken to Buffalo that day was forced to stop in Angola because of the wreck. He immediately telegraphed Laura from the Angola railroad station. His missive to her was received in Cleveland at 6:25 p.m. "Thank God I am unharmed," it read, "the six forty train I missed had bad accident."

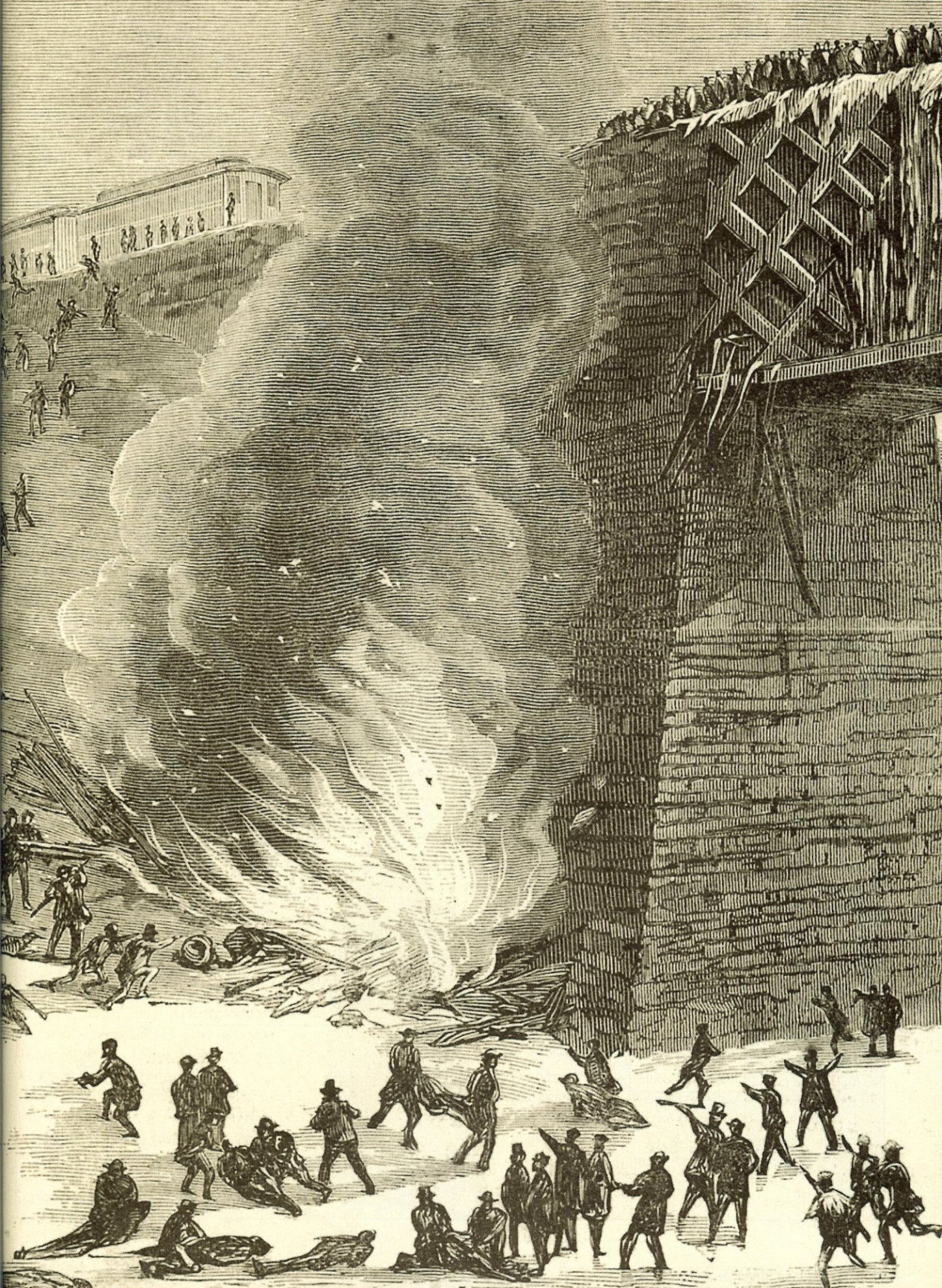
Two days later, in a longer letter to his wife from New York, Rockefeller was more explicit in detailing his "*gratitude* that I did not *remain* in the car with the baggage." Of that baggage, he wrote: "The Christmas presents were burned with the valice [*sic*] and umbrella." But, he added, "Our friends appreciate them as though received."

Rockefeller, of course, lived a long and productive life after the Angola Horror—and went on to change the course of American history.

Many others, however, died that cold winter day, 140 years ago.

Villagers and passengers run to the scene and try to save those trapped in the burning car at the bottom of the icy gorge.

HARPER'S WEEKLY



December 18 dawned bright, clear and cold: perfect weather for traveling. In Cleveland, Erie, Dunkirk and other stops along the Lake Shore Express line—a route that skimmed the Great Lakes—people climbed out of bed and prepared for their journeys.

William W. Towner, 25, a surveyor from Erie, Pa., had decided to treat himself to a pleasure trip in advance of the holiday. He was leaving on the 10:20 express to New York with two friends, J. Alexander Martin and Edward T. Metcalf, both young professionals from Erie.

Jasper and Eunice Fuller, a young married couple, had recently opened a small general store in Spartansburg, a growing village of 400 in rural Pennsylvania, and they were taking the express to Buffalo to buy new stock for their store. With the long war over, the reunited country was busily scrambling back to its feet. People were relocating from one place to another, opening new businesses, setting up homes and generally getting established in life. The holiday season only accelerated this spirit of movement and activity.

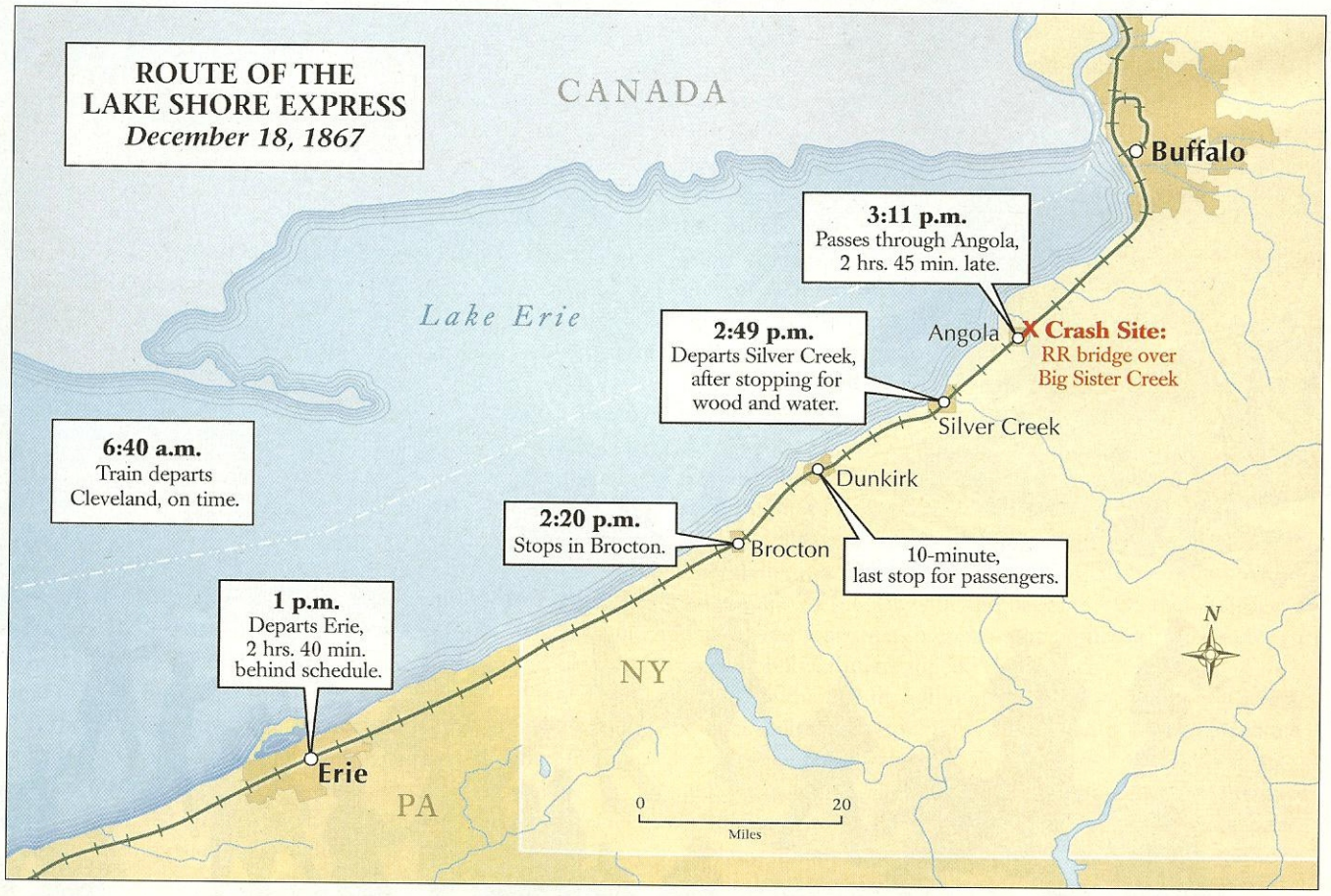
For his part, J.M. Newton, 46, the daytime railroad agent and telegraph operator in Angola, rose early on December 18 and got ready for work. His office in the railroad station was the busiest spot in the bustling rural village, thanks to the trains passing by and the shoppers buying their dry goods, groceries, hardware, medicine and such at Lyman Oatman's general store next door. At a little before 7, Newton settled down at his desk, ready to begin his workday.

By midafternoon, the Lake Shore Express, now a couple of hours behind schedule, reached western New York, where two men waited on the platform in the small village of Brocton. Benjamin Franklin Betts, a 39-year-old wood dealer in Brocton on business, struck up a conversation with the other man—his identity since lost—and the two of them hit it off so well that they took dinner together.

At 2:20, when the express finally whistled into the village and pulled up to the station, Betts and his friend said goodbye to each other and climbed aboard the train. Betts chose to sit in a forward car. His friend boarded the train's last coach car, packed full of people.

The train once again began to move. It consisted of four passenger cars—three first-class and one second-class, each holding about 50 people—plus three or four baggage cars. It also contained several potbellied stoves to heat the coach cars, and kerosene lamps mounted on the walls to give light.

Stephen W. Stewart was easily the most prominent figure on the express that day; president of the Oil Creek Railroad, he had founded a bank in Corry, Pa. Also on board were Charles



Lobdell of La Crosse, Wis., an editor at the *Daily Republican*; Eliakim B. Forbush of Buffalo, an attorney returning from a case he had won in Cincinnati; and Isadore Mayer, a New York theatrical agent.

At least one honeymooning couple rode the express: 21-year-old Granger D. Kent of Grand Island, N.Y., and his new wife were on their way home. Also onboard were two engaged men headed toward their betrothed and their weddings.

The hours of the early afternoon slipped past uneventfully on the train. Betts, sitting in his seat in the forward car, sank into a reflective state as the train chugged through the winter landscape. He would later describe his mood as daydream-like, lulled by the muted scenery passing outside the window.

At Dunkirk, N.Y., the express stopped for 10 minutes, and a few passengers boarded, the last to do so. At the small village of Silver Creek, the train stopped again, briefly, only to take on wood and water.

At 2:49, Silver Creek telegraph operator George P. Gaston noted the departure of the Lake Shore Express from his station. He messaged ahead to Newton, the agent in Angola: The express was on its way.

Ahead of the train lay Angola, with its small wooden depot, and just beyond that a bridge—a plain wood-and-concrete truss span—over Big Sister Creek. Only 2½ years earlier, this bridge had borne the funeral train of Abraham Lincoln as it traveled a stunned, war-weary nation on its way toward the slain president's burial place in Illinois.

Now, Newton, standing at the window of his Angola telegraph office, watched the express as it steamed through the village, 2 hours and 45 minutes behind schedule. It was moving at about 28 miles per hour, Newton later testified—well within a typical range of speed.

On his routine rounds, Conductor Frank Sherman worked his way through the end car of the express. Sherman, a Buffalo resident, would later recall seeing Stewart, the railroad president, sitting in his usual spot in the last seat of the train.

At 3:11 p.m., Sherman opened the door of the end car, stepped through it and began making his way forward through the second-to-last car. At the same time, Dr. Frederick F. Hoyer, a country physician, walked from the second-to-last car into the one in front of it, a move that most likely saved his life.

"At 3:11 there was a terrific jarring sensation, prompting Betts to bolt from his seat. Sherman gave the signal for down brakes"

Also at 3:11, Benjamin Betts felt the first sensations of something amiss—a "trembling motion," then "a relief, as if a connection had been broken." There was a terrific jarring sensation, prompting Betts to bolt from his seat. As he did, a shrill whistle rang out as Sherman gave the signal for "down brakes."

But it was too late. The last two cars of the Lake Shore Express had begun to topple, helplessly, from the railroad tracks.

The cause of the Angola Horror was simple, and deadly. As the express chugged toward the bridge, it ran over a "frog" in the track located 606 feet past the depot building. One of the wheels on the end car, possibly a wheel with a flaw or defect, hit the frog—the crossing point of two rails, a normal part of a switch in the tracks—in such a way that it jarred the wheel loose, causing it to vibrate back and forth. This friction, rail officials later noted, damaged a span of track between the depot and bridge.

Still, all might have been well—the accident possibly averted—if the train's vibrating, off-center wheels had not hit a metal spike 21 feet past the frog, which threw the end car further off balance. The train sheared the head off the spike, chief engineer of the Buffalo and Erie Railroad Peter Emslie later testified, and at that moment the fate of the express' end car was sealed. It jumped the tracks.

Potbellied coal or wood stoves could heat the cars to a comfortable temperature, although experienced travelers made a dash for the intermediate seats—not too close to or too far from the stove. After the Angola Horror, railroads devised safer heating methods for their cars.

Once the end car derailed, it began to rock back and forth, slowly and then more quickly—a wobbly, lurching movement that sent the passengers into a panic. They tried to run toward the front of the train, but the rocking motion made it difficult. People were thrown around like rag dolls; some were trampled, others smothered.

The end car also began to pull heavily on the train. As the Lake Shore Express steamed over the Big Sister bridge, the end car uncoupled from the train. It felt like something popping loose, passengers remembered, after the jarring of the derailment. Once free of the train, the car plummeted down into the creek, flipping over several times before coming to a shuddering stop on the icy gorge floor.

Meanwhile, the second-to-last car, pulled off balance, continued to hold

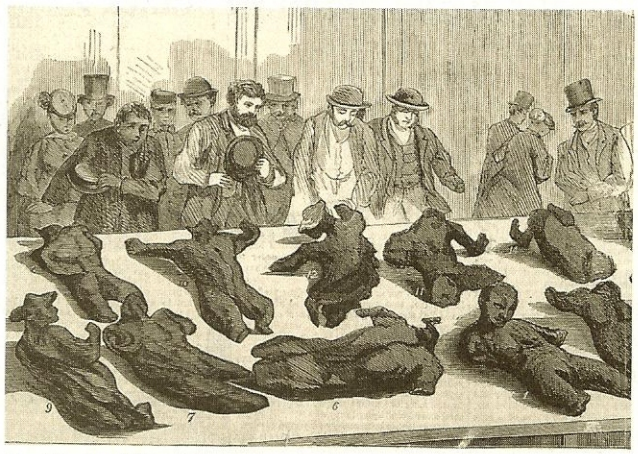
NEW YORK STATE RAILROAD REPORT, 1856

the track for a few more moments. It managed to shakily cross the 160-foot-long railroad bridge; then it began—just barely—to climb the opposite embankment.

But the motion of the end car's uncoupling proved to be too much. The second-to-last car came off the tracks and tipped over, and then rolled and tumbled back down the embankment, into the gorge. Passengers were thrown about like twigs, and most were injured—many severely. Robert M. Russell, a Civil War veteran from Tennessee, who had served in the Confederate army under General Nathan Bedford Forrest, was battered so badly that it wasn't clear whether he would live or die; he survived.

Not so, the passengers in the end car. Those who lived through its tumble into the gorge had, by this time, begun to burn.

"The screams of the dying lingered for close to five minutes, eyewitnesses said, before silence fell over the snow"



Families and friends search for loved ones among the charred remains laid out at the Soldier's Rest Home in Buffalo, N.Y. The corpses were numbered and described in minute detail.

The potbellied stoves had come loose during the plunge, shaking fire and red-hot coals all over the inside of the car. Kerosene from the gas lamps fed the flames, which consumed the car's plush upholstery and dry wood like kindling. "I saw the coals of fire from the stove scattered all over the car," recalled Angolan Josiah Southwick, a farmer and justice of the peace who witnessed the disaster from his home on a rise above the creek. He ran to help, but was stopped by the intense heat. "Inhaling the flames," Southwick later said, "I was obliged to go back."

He wasn't alone. Many villagers who ran to the scene of the wreck would report the smell of flesh in the air, and the screams of the dying as the car burned. "The car was all in flames," said John Martin, proprietor of a tin shop, who himself pulled five people from the inferno. "I could not see them," Martin said, "I could hear them." The Erie *Observer* reported the tragedy: "The hideous, remorseless flames crackled on; the shrieks died into moans, and moans into silence more terrible, as the pall of death drew over the scene."

The screams of the dying lingered for close to five minutes, eyewitnesses said, before silence fell over the snow.

Betts, in a forward car, had hopped off the still-moving train and ran as hard as he could back toward the creek. Bracing himself in the snow, he made his way down to the two cars, which were lying some yards apart from one another on the icy creek bed.

Betts ran to the badly smashed end car. It was lying upside down, spun around so that one end pointed toward the bridge abutment, and the other tilted upward. Betts spotted a man hanging half out of the car, his arms waving wildly; he grabbed him and began to pull with all his strength, trying to pry the man loose.

The force of the fall had splintered the wooden car into bits, and the final impact of the descent had rammed everything in it—seats, belongings, men, women and children—into a dense mass of flesh and fabric and wood. "The bank was steep, and it was with great difficulty we could work around the car," Betts would recall during the official inquest. "The lower end of the car was an indiscriminate mass of broken seats, passengers, timber."

In the brief moment in which he stared into the interior of the car, Betts recognized a face looking back at him. With a sick feeling, Betts realized it was the same man he had dined with in Brocton that afternoon. The man was looking at him piteously and crying out for rescue.

Benjamin Betts looked down at the man he held in his own arms—a stranger, who hung suspended between life and death. He began to pull. The man came free of the wreckage and was passed along, hand to hand, down a line of rescuers to safety.

And then Betts saw that the fire had begun in earnest. He turned to see if he could save his friend from the Brocton station, trapped in the mass of flesh and wood. But it was too late. The man was being consumed by the fire; then he was gone.

Young John D. Rockefeller, in the letter he penned to his wife after the wreck, acknowledged that he had narrowly escaped death. He credited a favorable Providence with his survival, underlining thickly the words in the letter he sent her. "I do (and did when I learned that the first train left) regard the thing," Rockefeller wrote, "as the *Providence of God*."

It wasn't hard to see why. Only three of the 50 or more people in the end car of the train had survived. Indeed, Rockefeller knew that he would have sat in this car, had he arrived at the Cleveland station on time.

He told Laura as much in his letter. "We certainly should have been in the burned car as it was the only one that went that we could have entered at the time we would have arrived at the sta-

Uncovering the Horror

I found the Horror in my own backyard. A few years ago, when I took a walk to a creek in my hometown of Angola N.Y., the narrow gorge jogged something in my memory: I remembered, dimly, having heard about a train wreck there.

Nobody seemed to know about a wreck, and its invisibility bothered me, so I decided to see what I could find out. Old newspapers brought the disaster, the 1867 Angola Horror, to life. For more than two years, I combed the papers, read dusty volumes of railroad history and turned brittle pages in antique periodicals. Then a friend who's a Rockefeller buff mentioned that *Titan*, the John D. Rockefeller Sr. biography by Ron Chernow, made glancing reference to an 1867 train accident that Rockefeller had narrowly missed when he was a young man. Could it have been the Horror?

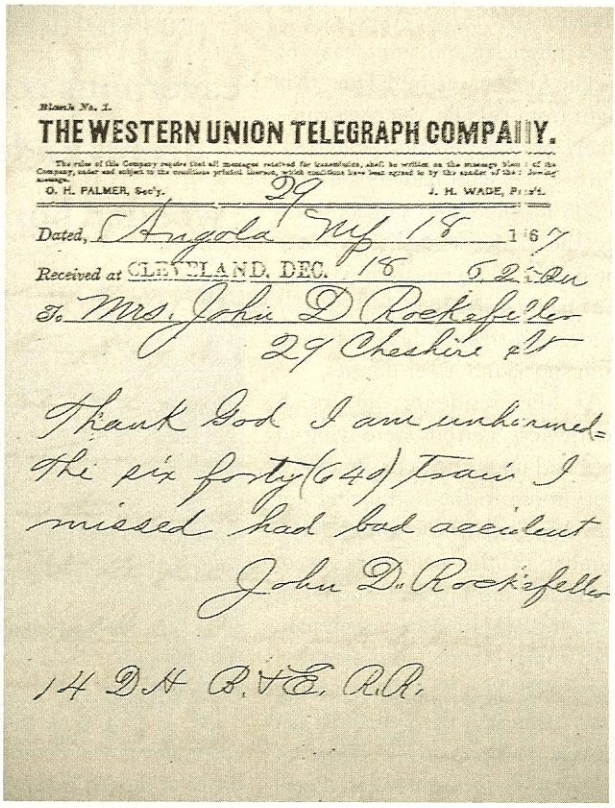
I contacted the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y., and made my queries. It unearthed Rockefeller's telegram, which located him in Angola at 6:25 p.m. on December 18, 1867—the same date as the Angola train wreck! It also had a letter written to his wife dated two days later that made specific reference to the accident and to his earlier telegram:

"I will not by letter, rehe[a]rse particulars of the accident, but hope to viva voce [orally], as early as Wednesday next....You no doubt rec'd my telegram sent at 6 p.m. 18th from Ongola [*sic*]."

Immense wealth and power were still in John Sr.'s future when he wrote those messages, and that helps to explain why his brush with the doomed train has up to now been little more than a forgotten chapter in his early life.

Even Rockefeller's closest family members were unaware of the incident. I contacted John Sr.'s only surviving grandson, David Rockefeller—who was born 48 years after the Horror occurred—to ask him personally about whether his grandfather had ever mentioned it. David, then 95, said that he spent lots of time talking about the past with his grandfather, but the Angola disaster never came up. "I have never heard of it, and my grandfather never mentioned it that I can recall," he commented. "I wish that it were otherwise."

For me, the story of the Angola Horror, and its connection to a towering figure in American history, became a story not only of loss and grief but also of survival and hope. Today, there is no historical marker at the creek, no gravesite for the victims, and the event seems to have been forgotten inside the village as well as out of it. Perhaps with the telling of this story—coming 140 years after the wreck—the poor souls who rode the Horror train will at long last be remembered and maybe, in some small way, mourned. **C.V.**



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THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY.

The rules of this Company require that all messages received for transmission, shall be written on the message blanks of the Company, under and subject to the conditions printed thereon, which conditions have been agreed to by the sender of the following message.

O. H. PALMER, Sec'y. J. H. WADE, Pres't.

Dated, Angola Dec 18 1867

Received at CLEVELAND, DEC. 18 5 2 P.M.

To Mrs. John D Rockefeller
29 Cheshire St

Thank God I am unharmed=
the six forty(6.40) Train I
missed had bad accident
John D. Rockefeller

14 D H B.V.&E. R.R.

John D. Rockefeller realized his good fortune at having not caught the 6:40 train, and immediately telegraphed his wife when he arrived in Angola after the accident. At 28, Rockefeller was not widely known outside Cleveland.

tion," he wrote. "I am thankful, thankful, thankful."

Stewart, the railroad president, was among the victims burned to death in the end car, along with Lobdell, the editor, and the Fullers of Spartansburg.

The honeymooning Kents died together. The wedding band that Granger had presented his bride—inscribed with her initials, still legible on the gold—survived the flames. Their bodies were identified, more than a week later, by the luggage claim tickets found on their remains.

As for the trio of friends from Erie—Towner, Martin and Metcalf—they had taken seats together, and all three were burned to the point of disfigurement. Towner was identified and claimed by his brother, brother-in-law and a doctor who came from Erie to recover his remains. Metcalf's body was returned to his family and friends in Erie on Christmas Day. "The body of C.T. [*sic*] Metcalf, of Erie, Penn., had been recognized among the burned carcasses by a tooth on the left side of the mouth lapping over to the right," reported *The New York Times* on December 21.

Martin, on the other hand, was so badly charred that he was placed into a wooden case at the scene, along with other remains, for sorting and identification. Some time later, at the Soldiers' Rest Home in Buffalo, Martin's friends were at last able to identify what they hoped was his body; they took it away with them.

Darkness fell quickly over the smoking scene of the wreckage,

TOP: JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVE; BOTTOM: TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

as villagers tended to the victims. Supervising this effort was Dr. Romaine J. Curtiss, Angola's talented physician and, until teams of backup doctors arrived later that night from Buffalo, the chief caretaker of the train's wounded. Curtiss, 27, who had served as a Union hospital ship surgeon during the Civil War, checked over the bodies of the burnt, dispatched the badly wounded to nearby homes and treated those suffering from shock and lesser injuries.

At the residence of Josiah Southwick, "persons were lying in beds and upon the floor, in almost every room in the house, and not only Mr. Southwick's family, but a number of the neighbors...were kindly and most patiently doing all in their power to assuage their pain and make them comfortable," noted *The New York Times* on the 21st. Indeed, the villagers of Angola received much praise in the press for their quick and determined response to the tragedy.

The bodies of the dead were carried to the Angola depot. There they were boxed, sometimes two or three to a casket, and sent by funeral train to Buffalo. The Soldiers' Rest Home, the Tifft House and the National Hotel all served as temporary morgues where relatives and authorities could view them. "A large number of people lined the walks while the bodies were being carried out of the depot, and a most respectful silence was preserved," reported *The New York Times*.

Zachariah Hubbard, a carpenter from Port Dalhousie, Ontario, was among those taken to the Soldiers' Home. A passenger in the end car, Hubbard had died two hours after he was pulled from the wreck, his upper torso intact and uninjured, the entire lower half of his body burned "to ash." Later, his ring of keys was found in the wreckage and reunited with his body.

A memorial service for all the victims took place inside Buffalo's Exchange Street depot three days before Christmas, on December 22. During the service, the choirs of the city's churches came together to sing a hymn—"I would not live alway," taken from the Book of Job—that resounded mightily off the cavernous ceilings of the depot, under which 19 plain wooden boxes lay in neat rows.

Afterwards, the boxes were buried in Forest Lawn, a rolling, lushly treed cemetery on the edge of Buffalo. Railroad officials claimed 19 people lay in the boxes; passenger lists, had they been kept, would have indicated that far more unidentified and unclaimed victims presumably lay in the coffins as well. Cemetery records hedged on this point, and listed only two names for the 19 burial spaces, probably feeling less than confident about the accuracy of the identifications.

No one, in the end, knows exactly how many victims of the Angola Horror were laid to rest that day.

"The memorial hymn resounded mightily off the cavernous ceiling of the Buffalo depot, under which 19 plain wooden boxes lay in neat rows"

Today, no marker identifies the spot of the train wreck. This photo of the Big Sister Creek railroad bridge, in Angola just south of the present-day Mill Street bridge, was taken on December 18, 2005, the 138th anniversary of the accident.

Drive over Big Sister Creek in Angola today, and you'd never know that it had been the scene of anything important. No marker identifies the spot of the Angola Horror train wreck. The same is true of Forest Lawn; a simple sign once marked the spot where the unknown victims were buried, but it fell down, or was taken down, some decades ago. It has never been replaced.

John D. Rockefeller went on to form the Standard Oil Company within three years of the Angola tragedy. By the early 1880s, Rockefeller—perhaps influenced by his brush with disaster—was selling oil products specifically designed to make rail travel safer. An 1883 advertisement for his Mineral Seal 300 Fire Test Burning Oil claimed superiority "to all other burning oils in this respect, withstanding a heat of 300 degrees before igniting, for which reason it is especially adapted for use in Railway Coaches and Passenger Steam Boats."

Another ambitious young American also took lessons from the Angola disaster: George Westinghouse. Shocked by train wrecks of his day, Westinghouse was determined to find a quicker and safer way of stopping rail cars in an emergency. The result was an invention that revolutionized train travel: the air brake. By 1893 the federal government made air brakes and automatic couplers mandatory on trains in the United States, a change that cut the accident rate on the nation's rails by 60 percent.

Meanwhile, Benjamin Betts—wood dealer, wreck survivor and unlikely hero—became a well-respected engineer and architect. Betts died at 65 and was lauded after his death for his contributions to bridge design—including the first cantilever bridge over the Niagara River, a span that drew international acclaim. Having seen one bridge cause such suffering, Betts dedicated much of the rest of his life to making them safer, stronger and more beautiful. He always regretted that he had been unable to do more. ❑

T. J. PIGNATARO