5. Safety First

A piece of the fire box grate from the train engine which exploded in the Gulf Curve wreck

CARLIE DOGGETTE

April 19, 1940, 11:30 pm

Doris Cannon was at the Little Falls High School gymnasium, listening to the school dance band “Rhythm Dukes” finish their sold-out gig for the night. Doris and the other students had paid 25 cents to dance at the gym that night. By 11:30, some students had drifted off into the chilly New York night, many trying to get home before their curfew. Doris was still in the gym when at 11:33 she felt the gymnasium shake and heard an explosion. She heard the shouts from several of her classmates “Accident! Accident!” But just what accident had occurred?

Another student at the gym, Bob McEvoy, thought that a truck must have crashed into the Dolgeville Railroad Bridge, which had happened several times before. Doris and her friends ran down East Main Street toward Ward Street where they found the source of the explosion.

Before the high schoolers lay a disaster scene. The smell of scorched metal filled the air. The only sound was the steam hissing from the destroyed engine. One student nearly stepped on a body that had been thrown from the wreck. In front of the students, 15 train cars were piled up. Overall, 31 passengers were killed and over 100 more were injured. Canon and the other witnesses after the fact would never forget what they saw.

The Gulf Curve

To understand just how impactful the train crash was on the small city of Little Falls, we first must understand

the importance of the railroad itself. The first train passed through Little Falls in 1836 as part of the Utica-Schenectady Railroad. Eleven years later, the New York Central Railroad laid a second track through Little Falls creating the infamous Gulf Curve. With a curvature of just over seven degrees and a length of 856 feet, it was the sharpest bend in the entire New York Central System.

Illustration of the Gulf Curve in Night of Disaster: The New York Central Gulf Curve Wreck by David A. Taylor and Lucinda M. Parker.

Why would a railroad company create a track with such a sharp curve? The answer is simple: the Mohawk River was in the way. When the Gulf Curve was created in 1847, the rail lines were laid to follow the curve of the river as it bent around Moss Island. Regardless, the New York Central marketed the route through the Mohawk Valley as an “amazingly smooth operation.”

The first Gulf Curve crash happened on August 23, 1903. The four-car train, manned by Engineer Robert Lillie and Fireman Thomas Connelly, carried the Sunday New York City newspapers upstate. Both men were killed when the train jumped the tracks in the middle of the Gulf Curve and slammed into the adjacent retaining wall. As a result of this crash a mandatory speed limit of 45 miles per hour was posted at the curve.

“Beware of the Curve” newspaper clipping. Image courtesy of the Little Falls
In 1909, the New York Central Railroad was the first railroad to adopt the slogan “Safety First.” This slogan was posted on signs, buildings, and bridges across the state. The company produced pins and pencils to market its slogan to the masses. A General Safety Agent was hired to drive home the entire campaign. A movie, called “Steve Hill’s Awakening” was produced in 1914 to be used in the Safety First campaign. The Railroad attributed the 273 fewer deaths and 4,030 fewer injuries in 1914 than in 1913 to the Safety First Campaign. Safety appeared to be improving throughout the New York Central Railroad. And the trains traveling through Little Falls appeared to be no exception.

April 19, 1940: Train Crash

“When I drove over the knoll and saw the hospital ablaze with lights, my heart sank. I knew for certainty then that tragedy had struck, and there had been a train wreck of some sort. What prompted me to turn down Ward Street I don’t know, but it was the beginning of a nightmare.”

The New York Central Lake Shore Limited Train No. 19 to Chicago was supposed to leave the Albany Train Station at 9:48 p.m. But on the fateful night of April 19, 1940, the first-class passenger train, under the control of Engineer Jesse Earl, left 21 minutes late at 10:09 p.m. Supposedly trying to make up for lost time, the Lake Shore Limited Train sped around the Gulf Curve at 59 mph – 14 mph over the recommended limit. The locomotive jumped the tracks, flipped onto its right side, and crashed into the stone wall lining the curve causing the cars behind it to accordion into each other and derailing 11 of the 15 cars. The boiler was struck by a protruding rock and caused the explosion that was heard across Little Falls. Engineer Jesse Earl’s watch stopped at 11:33 p.m. – the accepted time of the crash.

One newspaper described the pile up stating that the train cars “crumpled like tissue.” Another newspaper reflecting on the crash twenty-eight years later reported “the huge iron creature virtually broke its back. It was torn apart by an explosion that followed. Two cars telescoped, roofs were ripped off others and the remainder were tipped and spilled across the roadbed.”

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Fireman J.Y. Smith and several passengers were thrown from the train. Pipes burst in the train cars, causing them to fill with water. Some passengers feared that the train had leaped into the Mohawk River and those who had not died upon impact would drown as the cars sank. All telephone and light poles in the path of the crash had been destroyed, plunging the scene into darkness. When the boiler exploded, pieces of the engine scattered in all directions.

One newspaper reported it “Laying [sic] on its side like a dying Goliath, the mighty power of the Lake Shore Limited, still hissing with parts ripped from its huge body, scattered in all directions.” In the days following the crash, the remaining engine had to be cut into more pieces to remove it from the track so trains could resume their journeys through the Gulf Curve.

Witnesses after the fact and first responders began to follow the sound of the explosion to the crash site. A resident simply identified as “Lee” remembers: “I never hoped to see such a horrible scene as greeted my eyes as I broke over the top of the embankment...There was a tangled mass of wreckage, hissing steam, screams and

cries of the injured and dying, with practically total darkness.” Lee and others began to pull victims from the wreckage – many of whom were already dead.

The power company came to light up the scene with floodlights. The telephone company set up emergency lines. People from all over Little Falls offered their help and their homes to the injured. Medical professionals from cities beyond Little Falls made their way to the Gulf Curve to help. Edgar Moore marveled at the efficiency of the response to the crash, although he found himself hoping that he would wake up soon and realize this was all just a nightmare. Everyone worked throughout the night to save the injured to remove the bodies from the train.

Engineer Jesse Earl’s lower half was pinned under the wreckage and he knew he was paralyzed from the waist down. When rescuers found him, he was still clinging to the throttle of the locomotive. He stated that he did not know what had caused the wreck. Doctor James Douglas was able to administer drugs to Earl to ease his pain, but he eventually died of blood loss and two fractured legs before rescuers could free him around 2:00 a.m. One of his last words was simply “home.” This train bound for Chicago was supposed to be Earl’s last run before retirement.

When the sun came up the morning after the crash, Doris Cannon returned to the wreck with her classmate Dick Daley. Cannon and Daley were just two out of the thousands of people who came to witness the crash site on the morning of April 20th and the days that followed. Cannon noticed that the entire site was in less of a panic. Everything was happening in an orderly fashion and tarps were being placed over many of the overturned cars. Bodies of the dead were placed in wicker coffins adjacent to the wreck.

Identification of the bodies proved difficult and some passengers were erroneously reported as dead. By Sunday morning only 17 of the 25 bodies had been identified. Officially, 138 people were injured in the crash, many of these requiring medical attention at a hospital. Little Falls Hospital was beyond capacity that weekend, and several injured were transferred to Herkimer Memorial Hospital and Faxton Hospital in Utica. The last death occurred on Friday, April 26 when Mrs. Charles Dyer succumbed to her injuries at the Little Falls Hospital, bringing the official death toll to 31. The last injured passenger to leave the hospital was L.E. Rogers of San Francisco, who was discharged on July 29, 1940. Rogers suffered a concussion and chest contusions.

Little Falls resident Ed Gregorka found his way to the wreck on both the night of and the morning after. Being a professional photographer, Gregorka documented the crash. His photos became the ”gold standard” and were used across the nation in newspapers and magazines. The wreck would be featured in popular publications such as Life and the Wall Street Journal. New York Central sent people to officially document the wreck before it was removed from the Gulf Curve. The main difference to the site from the previous night was that the rescuing was over – it was now time to clean up and evaluate the aftermath.

12. Lee to Mr. T. Byron Lally, April 23, 1940. Little Falls Historical Society.
Aftermath

After the train crash, an editorial was published in the Little Falls Evening Times that voiced the opinion of many in the Little Falls community. The article, titled “The Gulf Curve Must Go!” conveys the feeling that in the town, before the crash, people would have welcomed their town being publicized across the country. But a fatal train crash is not the way they wanted this publicity to come to Little Falls. Was this the new normal now? Is this what Little Falls would be famous for? Would the history of the town, from the cheese markets to the canal to the picturesque setting be overshadowed by tragedy? Would future local accomplishments be responded to with only “isn’t that the town where the train crashed?” Soon after the crash the New York Sunday News renamed the Gulf Curve “Death Curve” in a photo caption. The author of “The Gulf Curve Must Go!” writes:

“Fate dealt a cruel and brutal blow, not only to the Lake Shore Limited and its ill-starred crew and passengers, but also to the New York Central railroad, and to this community, which shudders at the recollection of the death and destruction wrought Friday night and the thought of being remembered as the locale of one of the worst railroad wrecks ever to occur in the east.”

The author calls for investigations into the cause of the disaster in the hopes that a similar tragedy can be prevented from ever happening again. But whatever the investigations would reveal, the author places the blame on “Mother Nature.” The Little Falls gorge created a natural challenge when attempting any transportation through the valley, whether by water, car, or train. When the valley was being formed, the bend of the Mohawk River was created in such a way that it would test man in the industrial age.

This challenge presented by nature is not unique to Little Falls or the Mohawk Valley. Nature does not form the land with industrialization in mind. As industry grew and mass transportation of goods and people became a necessity throughout the country, humans faced a dilemma. When encountering a mountain do you build on, around, or through the mountain? When a water drop-off is too steep do you rethink the path of your canal, or do you engineer locks to bring the boats up and down the river? And when the path of your railroad is obstructed by the river do you move the river or bend with the path of the bank?

Little Falls initially benefitted from its natural geography. The river featured a 40 ½ foot drop over a one-mile distance. This drop was perfect for the use of waterpower in the city, which benefitted early industrialization.

“The Gulf Curve Must Go!” urges the state and federal governments, as well as the railroad companies to remove the curve. The wreck is seen as a wakeup call. The danger had been recognized in the past, but no action had ever been taken. Now is the opportunity to change before anyone else must die. The author writes, “As the mighty locomotive and luxury cars of the fast train splintered and piled up in sickening disarray, the Gulf Curve was pronouncing its death sentence.”

Little Falls as a community wanted to make sure that nothing like this would ever happen in their town again.

Almost immediately after the wreck was removed from the tracks, investigations began into the cause of the crash and future of the Gulf Curve. One person who was in the engine of the train at the time of the crash survived. Two days after the crash, Andrew Bayreuther, the traveling fireman, gave an official statement from his hospital bed where he was recovering. He reported that he did not believe that anything was wrong with the engine itself and that they had not been trying to make up time on their journey.

He believed the engineer Jesse Earl had been slow in reducing the speed of the train before the curve causing the derailment. Bayreuther reported that a 14 or 15-pound brake reduction should have been made to successfully navigate the Gulf Curve. Earl had only reduced the brake by 11 or 12 pounds and the train hit the curve at around 60 miles per hour. Other workers on the train reported that they felt the train braking before entering the curve and did not think anything was amiss until the train left the tracks. Engineer Jesse Earl was not able to give any official statements as he died under the wreckage.

On April 22nd, just three days after the crash, the Railroad Company, the Interstate Commerce Commission, and the Public Service Commission all opened investigations into the crash. The Interstate Commerce Commission immediately sent an inspector to Little Falls who produced a 27-page report on the crash. Early investigations into the incident concluded that there had not been an obstruction on the tracks, the locomotive itself did not suffer a mechanical failure, and that the train had been traveling at 59 miles per hour when it derailed.

The inspections also revealed that Engine No. 5315 had made a successful trip from Syracuse to Albany less than twelve hours before it jumped the tracks of the Gulf Curve. Engineman Lasher had been in charge of this trip and reported after the crash that he had not experienced any difficulties stopping at any of the 17 stops on his route to Albany. Air Brake Inspectors Farley, Murtha, and Krichman inspected the engine while it was in Albany. The engine passed all tests and only required one adjustment, which should not have affected the braking capabilities.

Several people have offered unofficial and unsolicited theories as to what they believe caused the crash. One theory states that the roadbed under the tracks had been weakened by the heavy rains and thawing ice. Others believed that the water levels in the boiler were a contributing factor, but this was proven untrue, as the boiler exploded as a result of the crash, not causing it. Other people believed that the engineer suffered a heart attack, but this would appear unlikely as he was alive and conscious for up to three hours after the crash.

17. Ibid.
On June 5th, the director of the commission, S.N. Mills, traveled to Little Falls to write a more in-depth and technical report. On June 13, the Interstate Commerce Commission officially stated that the cause of the crash was the engineer failing to reduce the speed of the train then closing the throttle too abruptly. After Mills’ report was published, the commission instituted a proceeding with the goal of removing the curve.

The New York Central pushed back against removing the curve apparently due to the cost of the endeavor. The company argued that as long as trains successfully reduced their speed on the curve, a crash would not happen again. In July 1940, the company refused to adhere to the public service commission’s recommendations to lower the speed limit around the curve to 40 miles per hour and lower the maximum age of engineers to 60 years.

On December 19, 1940, the Little Fall's newspaper, *The Evening Times*, reported that the public service commission held a hearing on removing the Gulf Curve to “minimize the hazard to the operation of trains.” The commission’s goal was to show that the curve was too dangerous for trains to navigate. Questions arose as to whether the commission had the legal authority to force the removal of the curve. But eventually, despite the New York Central’s protests, it was determined that the Gulf Curve should be removed not only to make it safer but to make the route faster.

**Moving the River**

Illustration of the relocation of the Mohawk River Channel. Image courtesy of the Little Falls Historical Society.

What would follow would be a multi-million-dollar project that spanned seven years. As many as 135 people worked on the construction that cost over two million dollars in the 1940s, or equivalent to nine million today. Although the decision to move the Gulf Curve was made in 1940, the new railroad tracks would not be opened

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until November 19, 1947. The major construction project had to be put on hold during the Second World War. Before the reconstruction of the curve, thousands of GIs were safely transported on this route to New York City without incident.

The project involved altering the path of the Mohawk River. A new channel would be excavated on the northeastern side of Moss Island – which involved demolishing part of the island with dynamite. A dam was erected to block the flow of the river into the new channel during construction. The western end of the channel was blocked by a natural rock formation. A Coffer-dam was created on the eastern end and blasted away when construction was completed. The new channel of the Mohawk River would be 20 feet deep, 600 feet long, and 150 feet wide. The rock that was blasted from Moss Island formed the new embankment of the river.

Now, in the 21st century, if you were to walk down the Mohawk River in Little Falls you would never know that a train wreck that claimed 31 lives had happened right where you are standing. The path of the river and the side of Moss Island look natural to the unknowing visitor. The New York Central no longer carries passengers across

the state, having been replaced by Amtrak, the Thruway, and planes. A Gulf Curve Train Wreck Monument on the side of the highway marks the location of the wreck.

In the 1940s, humans changed the environment. Originally, following the natural bend in the Mohawk River was the best option for the path of the railroad. But as our needs change we continue to modify the environment. We blasted part of an island, moved a river, and built a rail line that better suited our needs. We need to move forward, understanding the impact our industry and actions have on nature in the past, our present, and our future.